HENTY GEORGE ALFRED

UNDER WELLINGTON'S COMMAND: A TALE OF THE PENINSULAR WAR

George Henty

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Содержание

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Preface

As many boys into whose hands the present volume may fall will not have read my last year's book, With Moore in Corunna, of which this is a continuation, it is necessary that a few words should be said, to enable them to take up the thread of the story. It was impossible, in the limits of one book, to give even an outline of the story of the Peninsular War, without devoting the whole space to the military operations. It would, in fact, have been a history rather than a tale; and it accordingly closed with the passage of the Douro, and the expulsion of the French from Portugal.

The hero, Terence O'Connor, was the son of the senior captain of the Mayo Fusiliers and, when the regiment was ordered to join Sir Arthur Wellesley's expedition to Portugal, the colonel of the regiment obtained for him a commission; although so notorious was the boy, for his mischievous pranks, that the colonel hesitated whether he would not get into some serious scrapes; especially as Dick Ryan, one of the ensigns, was always his companion in mischief, and both were aided and abetted by Captain O'Grady.

However, on the way out, the slow old transport, in which a wing of the regiment was carried, was attacked by two French privateers, who would have either taken or sunk her, had it not been for a happy suggestion of the quick-witted lad. For this he gained great credit, and was selected by General Fane as one of his aides-de-camp. In this capacity he went through the arduous campaign, under General Moore, that ended at Corunna.

His father had been so seriously wounded, at Vimiera, that he was invalided home and placed on half pay; and in the same battle Captain O'Grady lost his left arm but, on its being cured, returned to his place in the regiment.

At Corunna Terence, while carrying a despatch, was thrown from his horse and stunned; and on recovering found that the British had already embarked on board the ships of the fleet. He made his way to the frontier of Portugal, and thence to Lisbon. He was then appointed to the staff of Sir John Craddock, who was now in command; and sent in charge of some treasure for the use of the Spanish General Romana, who was collecting a force on the northern border of Portugal. Terence had orders to aid him, in any way in his power, to check the invasion of Portugal from the north.

Of this order he took advantage when, on the way, the agents of the junta of Oporto endeavoured to rob him; attacking the house where he and his escort had taken up their quarters with a newly-raised levy of two thousand five hundred unarmed peasants. By a ruse he got their leaders into his hands, and these showed such abject cowardice that the peasants refused further to follow them, and asked Terence to take the command of the force.

He assented, formed them into two battalions, appointed two British orderlies as majors, the Portuguese officer of his escort lieutenant-colonel, and his troopers captains of companies; put them in the way of obtaining arms and, by dint of hard drill and kindness, converted them into an efficient body of soldiers. Finding that little was to be expected from Romana's force, he acted as a partisan leader and, in this capacity, performed such valuable service that he was confirmed in the command of his force, which received the name of the Minho regiment; and he and his officers received commissions for the rank they held in the Portuguese army.

At Oporto he rescued from a convent a cousin, who, at the death of her father, a British merchant there, had been shut up by her Portuguese mother until she would consent to sign away the property

to which she was entitled, and to become a nun. She went to England to live with Terence's father, and came into possession of the fortune which her father, foreseeing that difficulties might arise at his death, had forwarded to a bank at home, having appointed Captain O'Connor her guardian.

The present volume takes the story of the Peninsular War up to the battle of Salamanca, and concludes the history of Terence O'Connor. My readers will understand that, in all actions in which the British army took part, the details are accurately given; but that the doings of the Minho regiment, and of Terence O'Connor as a partisan leader, are not to be considered as strictly historical, although similar feats of daring and adventure were accomplished by Trant, Pack, and other leaders of irregular forces.

G. A. Henty.

Chapter 1: A Detached Force

"Be jabers, Terence, we shall all die of weariness with doing nothing, if we don't move soon," said Captain O'Grady; who, with Dick Ryan, had ridden over to spend the afternoon with Terence O'Connor, whose regiment of Portuguese was encamped some six miles out of Abrantes, where the division to which the Mayo Fusiliers belonged was stationed.

"Here we are in June, and the sun getting hotter and hotter, and the whisky just come to an end, though we have been mighty sparing over it, and nothing to eat but ration beef. Begorrah, if it wasn't for the bastely drill, I should forget that I was a soldier at all. I should take meself for a convict, condemned to stop all me life in one place. At first there was something to do, for one could forage for food dacent to eat; but now I don't believe there is as much as an old hen left within fifteen miles, and as for ducks and geese, I have almost forgotten the taste of them."

"It is not lively work, O'Grady, but it is worse for me here. You have got Dicky Ryan to stir you up and keep you alive, and O'Flaherty to look after your health and see that you don't exceed your allowance; while practically I have no one but Herrara to speak to, for though Bull and Macwitty are excellent fellows in their way, they are not much as companions.

"However, I think we must be nearly at the end of it. We have got pretty well all the troops up here, except those who are to remain at Lisbon."

"I see the men," O'Grady said, "but I don't see the victuals. We can't march until we get transport and food, and where they are to come from no one seems to know."

"I am afraid we shall do badly for a time in that respect, O'Grady. Sir Arthur has not had time, yet, to find out what humbugs the Spaniards are, and what wholesale lies they tell. Of course, he had some slight experience of it when we first landed, at the Mondego; but it takes longer than that to get at the bottom of their want of faith. Craddock learnt it after a bitter experience, and so did Moore. I have no doubt that the Spaniards have represented to Sir Arthur that they have large disciplined armies, that the French have been reduced to a mere handful, and that they are only waiting for his advance to drive them across the frontier. Also, no doubt, they have promised to find any amount of transport and provisions, as soon as he enters Spain. As to relying upon Cuesta, you might as well rely upon the assistance of an army of hares, commanded by a pig-headed owl."

"I can't make out, meself," O'Grady said, "what we want to have anything to do with the Spaniards for, at all. If I were in Sir Arthur's place, I would just march straight against the French and thrash them."

"That sounds well, O'Grady, but we know very little about where the French are, what they are doing, or what is their strength; and I think that you will allow that, though we have beaten them each time we have met them, they fought well. At Rolica we were three to one against them, and at Vimiera we had the advantage of a strong position. At Corunna things were pretty well even, but we had our backs to the wall.

"I am afraid, O'Grady, that just at present you are scarcely qualified to take command of the army; except only on the one point, that you thoroughly distrust the Spaniards.

"Well, Dick, have you been having any fun lately?"

"It is not to be done, Terence. Everyone is too disgusted and out of temper to make it safe. Even the chief is dangerous. I would as soon think of playing a joke on a wandering tiger, as on him. The major is not a man to trifle with, at the best of times and, except O'Flaherty, there is not a man among them who has a good word to throw at a dog. Faith, when one thinks of the good time one used to have at Athlone, it is heartbreaking."

"Well, come in and refresh yourselves. I have a bottle or two still left."

"That is good news!" O'Grady said fervently. "It has been on the tip of me tongue to ask you, for me mouth is like an oven; but I was so afraid you would say it was gone that I dare n't open me lips about it."

"To tell you the truth, O'Grady, except when some of you fellows come over, there is not any whisky touched in this camp. I have kept it strictly for your sergeants, who have been helping to teach my men drill, and coaching the non-commissioned officers. It has been hard work for them, but they have stuck to it well, and the thought of an allowance at the end of the day's work has done wonders with them.

"We made a very fair show when we came in, but now I think the two battalions could work with the best here, without doing themselves discredit. The non-commissioned officers have always been our weak point, but now my fellows know their work very fairly, and they go at it with a will. You see, they are all very proud of the corps, and have spared no pains to make themselves worthy of it.

"Of course, what you may call purely parade movements are not done as they are by our infantry; but in all useful work, I would back them against any here. They are very fair shots, too. I have paid for a lot of extra ammunition; which, I confess, we bought from some of the native levies. No doubt I should get into a row over it, if it were known; but as these fellows are not likely ever to fire a shot against the French, and it is of importance that mine should be able to shoot well, I didn't hesitate to do it. Fortunately the regimental chest is not empty, and all the officers have given a third of their pay, to help. But it has certainly done a lot of good, and the shooting has greatly improved since we came here."

"I have been working steadily at Portuguese, Terence, ever since you spoke to me about it. One has no end of time on one's hands and, really, I am getting on very fairly."

"That is right, Dicky. If we win this campaign I will certainly ask for you as adjutant. I shall be awfully glad to have you with me, and I really do want an adjutant for each battalion.

"And you, O'Grady?"

"Well, I can't report favourably of meself at all, at all. I tried hard for a week, and it is the fault of me tongue, and not of meself. I can't get it to twist itself to the outlandish words. I am willing enough, but me tongue isn't; and I am afraid that, were it a necessity that every officer in your corps should speak the bastely language, I should have to stay at home."

"I am afraid that it is quite necessary, O'Grady," Terence laughed. "An adjutant who could not make himself understood would be of no shadow of use. You know how I should like to have you with me; but, upon the other hand, there would be inconveniences. You are, as you have said many a time, my superior officer in our army, and I really should not like to have to give you orders. Then again, Bull and Macwitty are still more your juniors, having only received their commissions a few months back; and they would feel just as uncomfortable as I should, at having you under them. I don't think that it would do at all. Besides, you know, you are not fond of work by any means, and there would be more to do in a regiment like this than in one of our own."

"I suppose that it must be so, Terence," O'Grady said resignedly, as he emptied his tumbler; "and besides, there is a sort of superstition in the service that an adjutant should be always able to walk straight to his tent, even after a warm night at mess. Now, although it seems to me that I have every other qualification, in that respect I should be a failure; and I imagine that, in a Portuguese regiment, the thing would be looked at more seriously than it is in an Irish one; where such a matter occurs, occasionally, among men as well as officers."

"That is quite true, O'Grady. The Portuguese are a sober people and would not, as you say, be able to make the same allowance for our weaknesses that Irish soldiers do; seeing that it is too common for our men to be either one way or the other.

"However, Ryan, I do hope I shall be able to get you. I never had much hopes of O'Grady; and this failure of his tongue to aid him, in his vigorous efforts to learn the language, seems to quite settle the matter as far as he is concerned."

At this moment an orderly rode up to the tent. Terence went out.

"A despatch from headquarters, sir," the trooper said, saluting.

"All right, my man! You had better wait for five minutes, and see if any answer is required."

Going into the tent, he opened the despatch.

"Hooray!" he said, as he glanced at the contents, "here is a movement, at last."

The letter was as follows:

"Colonel O'Connor will at once march with his force to Plasencia; and will reconnoitre the country between that town and the Tagus to the south, and Bejar to the north. He will ascertain, as far as possible, the position and movements of the French army under Victor. He will send a daily report of his observations to headquarters. Twenty Portuguese cavalry, under a subaltern, will be attached to his command, and will furnish orderlies to carry his reports.

"It is desirable that Colonel O'Connor's troops should not come in contact with the enemy, except to check any reconnoitring parties moving towards Castello Branco and Villa Velha. It is most necessary to prevent the news of an advance of the army in that direction reaching the enemy, and to give the earliest possible information of any hostile gathering that might menace the flank of the army, while on its march.

"The passes of Banos and Periles will be held by the troops of Marshal Beresford and General Del Parque, and it is to the country between the mountains and Marshal Cuesta's force, at Almaraz, that Colonel O'Connor is directed to concentrate his attention. In case of being attacked by superior forces, Colonel O'Connor will, if possible, retreat into the mountains on his left flank, maintain himself there, and open communications with Lord Beresford's forces at Banos or Bejar.

"Colonel O'Connor is authorized to requisition six carts from the quartermaster's department, and to hand over his tents to them; to draw 50,000 rounds of ball cartridge, and such rations as he may be able to carry with him. The paymaster has received authority to hand over to him 500 pounds, for the payment of supplies for his men. When this sum is exhausted, Colonel O'Connor is authorized to issue orders for supplies payable by the paymaster to the forces, exercising the strictest economy, and sending notification to the Paymaster General of the issue of such orders.

"This despatch is confidential, and the direction of the route is, on no account, to be divulged."

"You hear that, O'Grady; and you too, Dicky. I ought not to have read the despatch out loud. However, I know you will keep the matter secret."

"You may trust us for that, Terence, for it is a secret worth knowing. It is evident that Sir Arthur is going to join Cuesta, and make a dash on Madrid. Well, he has been long enough in making up his mind; but it is a satisfaction that we are likely to have hot work, at last, though I wish we could have done it without those Spaniards. We have seen enough of them to know that nothing, beyond kind words, are to be expected of them and, when the time for fighting comes, I would rather that we depended upon ourselves than have to act with fellows on whom there is no reliance, whatever, to be placed."

"I agree with you there, heartily, O'Grady. However, thank goodness we are going to set out at last; and I am very glad that it falls to us to act as the vanguard of the army, instead of being attached to Beresford's command and kept stationary in the passes.

"Now I must be at work. I daresay we shall meet again, before long."

Terence wrote an acknowledgment of the receipt of the general's order, and handed it to the orderly who had brought it. A bugler at once sounded the field-officers' call.

"We are to march at once," he said, when Herrara, Bull, and Macwitty arrived. "Let the tents be struck, and handed over to the quartermaster's department. See that the men have four days' biscuit in their haversacks.

"Each battalion is to take three carts with it. I will go to the quartermaster's department, to draw them. Tell off six men from each battalion to accompany me, and take charge of the carts. Each battalion will carry 25,000 rounds of spare ammunition, and a chest of 250 pounds. I will requisition

from the commissariat as much biscuit as we can carry, and twenty bullocks for each battalion, to be driven with the carts.

"As soon as the carts are obtained, the men will drive them to the ordnance stores for the ammunition, and to the commissariat stores to load up the food. You had better send an officer in charge of the men of each battalion.

"I will myself draw the money from the paymaster. I will go there at once. Send a couple of men with me, for of course it will be paid in silver. Then I will go to the quartermaster's stores, and get the carts ready by the time that the men arrive. I want to march in an hour's time, at latest."

In a few minutes the camp was a scene of bustle and activity. The tents were struck and packed away in their bags, and piled in order to be handed over to the quartermaster; and in a few minutes over an hour from the receipt of the order, the two battalions were in motion.

After a twenty-mile march, they halted for the night near the frontier. An hour later they were joined by twenty troopers of a Portuguese regiment, under the command of a subaltern.

The next day they marched through Plasencia, and halted for the night on the slopes of the Sierra. An orderly was despatched, next morning, to the officer in command of any force that there might be at Banos, informing him of the position that they had taken up.

Terence ordered two companies to remain at this spot, which was at the head of a little stream running down into an affluent of the Tagus; their position being now nearly due north of Almaraz, from which they were distant some twenty miles. The rest of the force descended into the plain, and took post at various villages between the Sierra and Oropesa, the most advanced party halting four miles from that town.

The French forces under Victor had, in accordance with orders from Madrid, fallen back from Plasencia a week before, and taken up his quarters at Talavera.

At the time when the regiment received its uniforms, Terence had ordered that twenty suits of the men's peasant clothes should be retained in store and, specially intelligent men being chosen, twenty of these were sent forward towards the river Alberche, to discover Victor's position. They brought in news that he had placed his troops behind the river, and that Cuesta, who had at one time an advanced guard at Oropesa, had recalled it to Almaraz. Parties of Victor's cavalry were patrolling the country between Talavera and Oropesa.

Terence had sent Bull, with five hundred men, to occupy all the passes across the Sierras, with orders to capture any orderlies or messengers who might come along; and a day later four men brought in a French officer, who had been captured on the road leading south. He was the bearer of a letter from Soult to the king, and was at once sent, under the escort of four troopers, to headquarters.

The men who had brought in the officer reported that they had learned that Wilson, with his command of four thousand men, was in the mountains north of the Escurial; and that spies from that officer had ascertained that there was great alarm in Madrid, where the news of the British advance towards Plasencia was already known; and that it was feared that this force, with Cuesta's army at Almaraz and Venegas' army in La Mancha, were about to combine in an attack upon the capital. This, indeed, was Sir Arthur's plan, and had been arranged with the Supreme Junta. The Junta, however, being jealous of Cuesta, had given secret instructions to Venegas to keep aloof.

On his arrival at Plasencia, the English general had learned at once the hollowness of the Spanish promises. He had been assured of an ample supply of food, mules, and carts for transport; and had, on the strength of these statements, advanced with but small supplies, for little food and but few animals could be obtained in Portugal. He found, on arriving, that no preparations whatever had been made; and the army, thus early in the campaign, was put on half rations. Day after day passed without any of the promised supplies arriving, and Sir Arthur wrote to the Supreme Junta; saying that although, in accordance with his agreement, he would march to the Alberche, he would not cross that river unless the promises that had been made were kept, to the letter.

He had, by this time, learned that the French forces north of the mountains were much more formidable than the Spanish reports had led him to believe; but he still greatly underrated Soult's army, and was altogether ignorant that Ney had evacuated Galicia, and was marching south with all speed, with his command. Del Parque had failed in his promise to garrison Bejar and Banos, and these passes were now only held by a few hundreds of Cuesta's Spaniards.

A week after taking up his position north of Oropesa, Terence received orders to move with his two battalions, and to take post to guard these passes; with his left resting on Bejar, and his right in communication with Wilson's force. The detachments were at once recalled. A thousand men were posted near Bejar, and the rest divided among the other passes by which a French army from the north could cross the Sierra.

As soon as this arrangement was made, Terence rode to Wilson's headquarters. He was received very cordially by that officer.

"I am heartily glad to see you, Colonel O'Connor," the latter said. "Of course, I have heard of the doings of your battalions; and am glad, indeed, to have your support. I sent a messenger off, only this morning, to Sir Arthur; telling him that, from the information brought in by my spies, I am convinced that Soult is much stronger than has been supposed; and that, if he moves south, I shall scarce be able to hold the passes of Arenas and San Pedro Barnardo; and that I can certainly spare no men for the defence of the more westerly ones, by which Soult is likely to march from Salamanca. However, now you are there, I shall feel safe."

"No doubt I could hinder an advance, Sir Robert," Terence said, "but I certainly could not hope to bar the passes to a French army. I have no artillery and, though my men are steady enough against infantry, I doubt whether they would be able to withstand an attack heralded by a heavy cannonade. With a couple of batteries of artillery to sweep the passes, one might make a fair stand for a time against a greatly superior force; but with only infantry, one could not hope to maintain one's position."

"Quite so, and Sir Arthur could not expect it. My own opinion is that we shall have fifty thousand men coming down from the north. I have told the chief as much; but naturally he will believe the assurances of the Spanish juntas, rather than reports gathered by our spies; and no doubt hopes to crush Victor altogether, before Soult makes any movement; and he trusts to Venegas' advance, from the south towards the upper Tagus, to cause Don Joseph to evacuate Madrid, as soon as he hears of Victor's defeat.

"But I have, certainly, no faith whatever in either Venegas or Cuesta. Cuesta is loyal enough, but he is obstinate and pig headed and, at present, he is furious because the Supreme Junta has been sending all the best troops to Venegas, instead of to him; and he knows, well enough, that that perpetual intriguer Frere is working underhand to get Albuquerque appointed to the supreme command. As to Venegas, he is a mere tool of the Supreme Junta and, as likely as not, they will order him to do nothing but keep his army intact.

"Then again, the delay at Plasencia has upset all Sir Arthur's arrangements. Had he pressed straight forward on the 28th of last month, when he crossed the frontier, disregarding Cuesta altogether, he could have been at Madrid long before this; for I know that at that time Victor's force had been so weakened that he had but between fourteen and fifteen thousand men, and must have fallen back without fighting. Now he has again got the troops that had been taken from him, and will be further reinforced before Sir Arthur arrives on the Alberche; and of course Soult has had plenty of time to get everything in readiness to cross the mountains, and fall upon the British rear, as soon as he hears that they are fairly on their way towards Madrid. Here we are at the 20th, and our forces will only reach Oropesa today.

"Victor is evidently afraid that Sir Arthur will move from Oropesa towards the hills, pass the upper Alberche, and so place himself between him and Madrid; for a strong force of cavalry reconnoitred in this direction, this morning."

"Would it not be as well, sir," said Terence, "if we were to arrange some signals by which we could aid each other? That hill top can be seen from the hill beyond which is the little village where I have established myself. I noticed it this morning, before I started. If you would keep a lookout on your hill, I would have one on mine. We might each get three bonfires, a hundred yards apart, ready for lighting. If I hear of any great force approaching the defiles I am watching, I could summon your aid either by day or night by these fires; and in the same way, if Soult should advance by the line that you are guarding, you could summon me. My men are really well trained in this sort of work, and you could trust them to make an obstinate defence."

"I think that your idea is a very good one, and will certainly carry it out. You see, we are really both of us protecting the left flank of our army, and can certainly do so more effectually if we work together.

"We might, too, arrange another signal. One fire might mean that, for some reason or other, we are marching away. I may have orders to move some distance towards Madrid, so as to compel Victor to weaken himself by detaching a force to check me; you may be ordered, as the army advances, to leave your defiles in charge of the Spaniards, and to accompany the army. Two fires might mean, spies have reported a general advance of the French coming by several routes. Thus, you see, we should be in readiness for any emergency.

"I should be extremely glad of your help, if Soult comes this way. My own corps of 1200 men are fairly good soldiers, and I can rely upon them to do their best; but the other 3000 have been but recently raised, and I don't think that any dependence can be placed upon them, in case of hard fighting; but with your two battalions, we ought to be able to hold any of these defiles for a considerable time."

Two days later, Terence received orders to march instantly with his force down into the valley, to follow the foot of the hills until he reached the Alberche, when he was to report his arrival, wait until he received orders, and check the advance of any French force endeavouring to move round the left flank of the British. The evening before, one signal fire had announced that Wilson was on the move and, thinking that he, too, might be summoned, Terence had called in all his outposts, and was able to march a quarter of an hour after he received the order.

He had learned, on the evening he returned from his visit to Sir Robert, from men sent down into the plain for the purpose, that Cuesta's army and that of Sir Arthur had advanced together from Oropesa. He was glad at the order to join the army, as he had felt that, should Soult advance, his force, unprovided as it was with guns, would be able to offer but a very temporary resistance; especially if the French Marshal was at the head of a force anything like as strong as was reported by the peasantry. As to this, however, he had very strong doubts, having come to distrust thoroughly every report given by the Spaniards. He knew that they were as ready, under the influence of fear, to exaggerate the force of an enemy as they were, at other times, to magnify their own numbers. Sir Arthur must, he thought, be far better informed than he himself could be; for his men, being Portuguese, were viewed with doubt and suspicion by the Spanish peasantry, who would probably take a pleasure in misleading them altogether.

The short stay in the mountains had braced up the men and, with only a short halt, they made a forty-mile march to the Alberche by midnight. Scarcely had they lit their fires, when an Hussar officer and some troopers rode up. They halted a hundred yards away, and the officer shouted in English:

"What corps is this?"

Terence at once left the fire, and advanced towards them.

"Two Portuguese battalions," he answered, "under myself, Colonel O'Connor."

The officer at once rode forward.

"I was not quite sure," he said, as he came close, "that my question would not be answered by a volley. By the direction from which I saw you coming, I thought that you must be friends. Still, you might have been an advanced party of a force that had come down through the defiles. However, as

soon as I saw you light your fires, I made sure it was all right; for the Frenchmen would not likely have ventured to do so unless, indeed, they were altogether ignorant of our advance."

"At ten o'clock this morning I received orders from headquarters to move to this point at once and, as we have marched from Banos, you see we have lost very little time on the way."

"Indeed, you have not. I suppose it is about forty miles; and that distance, in fourteen hours, is certainly first-rate marching. I will send off one of my men to report who you are. Two squadrons of my regiment are a quarter of a mile away, awaiting my return."

"Have you any reason to believe that the enemy are near?"

"No particular reason that I know of, but their cavalry have been in great force along the upper part of the river, for the last two days. Victor has retired from Talavera, for I fancy that he was afraid we might move round this way, and cut him off from Madrid. The Spaniards might have harassed him as he fell back, but they dared not even make a charge on his rear guard, though they had 3000 cavalry.

"We are not quite sure where the French are and, of course, we get no information from the people here; either their stupidity is something astounding, or their sympathies are entirely with the French."

"My experience is," Terence said, "that the best way is to get as much information as you can from them, and then to act with the certainty that the real facts are just the reverse of the statements made to you."

As soon as the forces halted a picket had been sent out; and Terence, when the men finished their supper, established a cordon of advanced pickets, with strong supports, at a distance of a mile from his front and flanks; so as to ensure himself against surprise, and to detect any movement upon the part of the enemy's cavalry, who might be pressing round to obtain information of the British position. At daybreak he mounted and rode to Talavera, and reported the arrival of his command, and the position where he had halted for the night.

"You have wasted no time over it, Colonel O'Connor. You can only have received the order yesterday morning, and I scarcely expected that you could be here till this evening."

"My men are excellent marchers, sir. They did the forty miles in fourteen hours, and might have done it an hour quicker, had they been pressed. Not a man fell out."

"Your duty will now be to cover our left flank. I don't know whether you are aware that Wilson has moved forward, and will take post on the slopes near the Escurial. He has been directed to spread his force as much as possible, so as to give an appearance of greater strength than he has."

"I knew that he had left his former position," Terence said. "We had arranged a code of smoke signals, by which we could ask each other for assistance should the defiles be attacked; and I learned yesterday morning, in this way, that he was marching away."

"Have you any news of what is taking place on the other side of the hills, since you sent off word two days ago?"

"No, sir; at least, all we hear is of the same character as before. We don't hear that Soult is moving, but his force is certainly put down as being considerably larger than was supposed. I have deemed it my duty to state this in my reports, but the Spaniards are so inclined to exaggerate everything that I always receive statements of this kind with great doubt."

"All our news–from the juntas, from Mr. Frere, and from other quarters–is quite the other way," the officer said. "We are assured that Soult has not fifteen thousand men in condition to take the field, and that he could not venture to move these, as he knows that the whole country would rise, did he do so.

"I have no specific orders to give you. You will keep in touch with General Hill's brigade, which forms our left and, as we move forward, you will advance along the lower slopes of the Sierra and prevent any attempt, on the part of the French, to turn our flank.

"I dare say you do not know exactly what is going on, Colonel O'Connor. It may be of assistance to you, in taking up your position, to know that the fighting is likely to take place on the line between

Talavera and the mountains. Cuesta has fallen back, in great haste, to Talavera. We shall advance today and take up our line with him.

"The Spaniards will hold the low marshy ground near the town. Our right will rest on an eminence on his left flank, and will extend to a group of hills, separated by a valley from the Sierra. Our cavalry will probably check any attempt by the French to turn our flank there, and you and the Spaniards will do your best to hold the slope of the Sierra, should the French move a force along there.

"I may say that Victor has been largely reinforced by Sebastiani, and is likely to take the offensive. Indeed, we hear that he is already moving in this direction. We are not aware of his exact strength, but we believe that it must approach, if not equal, that of ourselves and Cuesta united.

"Cuesta has, indeed, been already roughly handled by the French. Disregarding Sir Arthur's entreaties, and believing Victor to be in full retreat, he marched on alone, impelled by the desire to be the first to enter Madrid; but at two o'clock on the morning of the 26th of July, the French suddenly fell upon him, drove the Spanish cavalry back from their advanced position, and chased them hotly. They fled in great disorder, and the panic would have spread to the whole army, had not Albuquerque brought up 3000 fresh cavalry and held the French in check, while Cuesta retreated in great disorder and, had the French pressed forward, would have fled in utter rout. Sherbrooke's division, which was in advance of the British army, moved forward and took up its position in front of the panic-stricken Spaniards, and then the French drew off.

"Cuesta then yielded to Sir Arthur's entreaties, recrossed the Alberche, and took up his position near Talavera. Here, even the worst troops should be able to make a stand against the best. The ground is marshy and traversed by a rivulet. On its left is a strong redoubt, which is armed with Spanish artillery; on the right is another very strong battery, on a rise close to Talavera; while other batteries sweep the road to Madrid. Sir Arthur has strengthened the front by felling trees and forming abattis, so that he has good reason to hope that, poor as the Spanish troops may be, they should be able to hold their part of the line.

"Campbell's division forms the British right, Sherbrooke comes next, the German legion are in the centre, Donkin is to take his place on the hill that rises two-thirds of the way across the valley, while General Hill's division is to hold the face looking north, and separated from the Sierra only by the comparatively narrow valley in which you have bivouacked. At present, however, his troops and those of Donkin have not taken up their position."

The country between the positions on which the allied armies had now fallen back was covered with olive and cork trees. The whole line from Talavera to the hill, which was to be held by Hill's division, was two miles in length; and the valley between that and the Sierra was half a mile in width, but extremely broken and rugged, and was intersected by a ravine, through which ran the rivulet that fell into the Tagus at Talavera.

Chapter 2: Talavera

On leaving the Adjutant General, Terence–knowing that Mackenzie's brigade was some two miles in advance on the Alberche river, and that the enemy was not in sight–sent off one of the orderlies who accompanied him, with a message to Herrara to fall back and take up his station on the lower slopes of the Sierra, facing the rounded hill; and then went to a restaurant and had breakfast. It was crowded with Spanish officers, with a few British scattered among them.

As he ate his food, he was greatly amused at the boasting of the Spaniards as to what they would accomplish, if the French ventured to attack them; knowing as he did how shamefully they had behaved, two days before, when the whole of Cuesta's army had been thrown into utter disorder by two or three thousand French cavalry, and had only been saved from utter rout by the interposition of a British brigade. When he had finished breakfast, he mounted his horse and rode to the camp of his old regiment.

"Hooroo, Terence!" Captain O'Grady shouted, as he rode up, "I thought you would be turning up, when there was going to be something to do. It's yourself that has the knack of always getting into the thick of it.

"Orderly, take Colonel O'Connor's horse, and lead him up and down.

"Come on, Terence, most of the boys are in that tent over there. We have just been dismissed from parade."

A shout of welcome rose as they entered the tent, where a dozen officers were sitting on the ground, or on empty boxes.

"Sit down if you can find room, Terence," Colonel Corcoran said. "Wouldn't you like to be back with us again, for the shindy that we are likely to have, tomorrow?"

"That I should, but I hope to have my share in it, in my own way."

"Where are your men, O'Connor?"

"They will be, in another hour, at the foot of the mountains over there to the left. Our business will be to prevent any of the French moving along there, and coming down on your rear."

"I am pleased to hear it. I believe that there is a Spanish division there, but I am glad to know that the business is not to be left entirely to them. Now, what have you been doing since you left us, a month ago?"

"I have been doing nothing, Colonel, but watching the defiles and, as no one has come up them, we have not fired a shot."

"No doubt they got news that you were there, Terence," O'Grady said, "and not likely would they be to come up to be destroyed by you."

"Perhaps that was it," Terence said, when the laughter had subsided; "at any rate they didn't show up, and I was very pleased when orders came, at ten o'clock yesterday, for us to leave Banos and march to join the army. We did the forty miles in fourteen hours."

"Good marching," Colonel Corcoran said. "Then where did you halt?"

"About three miles farther off, at the foot of the hills. We saw a lot of campfires to our right, and thought that we were in a line with the army, but of course they were only those of Mackenzie's division; but I sent off an orderly, an hour ago, to tell them to fall back to the slopes facing those hills, where our left is to be posted."

"You are a lucky fellow to have been away from us, Terence, for it is downright starving we have been. The soldiers have only had a mouthful of meat served out to them as rations, most days; and they have got so thin that their clothes are hanging loose about them. If it hadn't been for my man Doolan and two or three others, who always manage, by hook or by crook, to get hold of anything there is within two or three miles round, we should have been as badly off as they are. Be jabers, I have had to take in my sword belt a good two inches; and to think that, while our fellows are well-

nigh starving, these Spaniards we came to help, and who will do no fighting themselves, had more food than they could eat, is enough to enrage a saint.

"I wonder Sir Arthur puts up with it. I would have seized that stuck-up old fool Cuesta, and popped him into the guard tent, and kept him there until provisions were handed over for us."

"His whole army might come to rescue him, O'Grady."

"What if they had? I would have turned out a corporal's guard, and sent the whole of them trotting off in no time. Did you hear what took place two days ago?"

"Yes, I heard that they behaved shamefully, O'Grady; still, I think a corporal's guard would hardly be sufficient to turn them, but I do believe that a regiment might answer the purpose."

"I can tell you that there is nothing would please the troops more than to attack the Spaniards. If this goes on many more days, our men will be too weak to march; but I believe that, before they lie down and give it up altogether, they will pitch into the Spaniards, in spite of what we may try to do to prevent them," the Colonel said. "Here we are in a country abounding with food, and we are starving, while the Spaniards are feasting in plenty; and by Saint Patrick's beard, Terence, it is mighty little we should do to prevent our men from pitching into them. There is one thing, you may be sure. We shall never cooperate with them in the future and, as to relying upon their promises, faith, they are not worth the breath it takes to make them."

As everything was profoundly quiet, Terence had no hesitation in stopping to lunch with his old friends and, as there was no difficulty in buying whatever was required in Talavera, the table was well supplied, and the officers made up for their enforced privation during the past three weeks.

At three o'clock Terence left them and rode across to his command, which he found posted exactly where he had directed it.

"It is lucky that we filled up with flour at Banos, before starting, Colonel," Bull said, "for from what we hear, the soldiers are getting next to nothing to eat; and those cattle you bought at the village halfway, yesterday, will come in very handy. At any rate, with them and the flour we can hold out for a week, if need be."

"Still, you had better begin at once to be economical, Bull. There is no saying what may happen after this battle has been fought."

While they were talking, a sudden burst of firing, at a distance, was heard.

"Mackenzie's brigade is engaged!" Terence exclaimed. "You had better get the men under arms, at once. If the whole of Victor's command is upon them, they will have to fall back.

"When the men are ready, you may as well come a few hundred feet higher up the hill, with me. Then you will see all over the country, and be in readiness to do anything that is wanted. But it is not likely the French will attempt anything serious, today. They will probably content themselves with driving Mackenzie in."

Terence went at once up the hill, to a point whence he could look well over the round hills on the other side of the valley, and make out the British and Spanish lines, stretching to Talavera. The troops were already formed up, in readiness for action. Away to his left came the roll of heavy firing from the cork woods near the Alberche and, just as his three officers joined him, the British troops issued pell mell from the woods. They had, in fact, been taken entirely by surprise; and had been attacked so suddenly and vigorously that, for a time, the young soldiers of some of the regiments fell into confusion; and Sir Arthur himself, who was at a large house named the Casa, narrowly escaped capture. The 45th, however, a regiment that had seen much service, and some companies of the 60th Rifles presented a stout front to the enemy.

Sir Arthur speedily restored order among the rest of the troops, and the enemy's advance was checked. The division then fell back in good order, each of its flanks being covered by a brigade of cavalry. From the height at which Terence and his officers stood, they could plainly make out the retiring division, and could see heavy masses of French troops descending from the high ground beyond the Alberche.

"The whole French army is on us!" Macwitty said. "If their advance guard had not been in such a hurry to attack, and had waited until the others came up, not many of Mackenzie's division would have got back to our lines."

It was not long before the French debouched from the woods and, as soon as they did so, a division rapidly crossed the plain towards the allies' left, seized an isolated hill facing the spur on to which Donkin had just hurried up his brigade, and at once opened a heavy cannonade. At the same time another division moved towards the right, and some squadrons of light cavalry could be seen, riding along the road from Madrid towards the Spanish division.

"They won't do much good there," Terence said, "for the country is so swampy that they cannot leave the road. Still, I suppose they want to reconnoitre our position, and draw the fire of the Spaniards to ascertain their whereabouts. They are getting very close to them and, when the Spaniards begin, they ought to wipe them out completely."

At this moment a heavy rattle of distant musketry was heard, and a light wreath of smoke rose from the Spanish lines. The French cavalry had, in fact, ridden up so close to the Spaniards that they discharged their pistols in bravado at them. To this the Spaniards had replied by a general wild discharge of their muskets. A moment later the party on the hill saw the right of the Spanish line break up as if by magic and, to their astonishment and rage, they made out that the whole plain behind was thickly dotted by fugitives.

"Why, the whole lot have bolted, sir!" Bull exclaimed. "Horse and foot are making off. Did anyone ever hear of such a thing!"

That portion of the Spanish line nearest to Talavera had indeed broken and fled in the wildest panic, 10,000 infantry having taken to their heels the instant they discharged their muskets; while the artillery cut their traces and, leaving their guns behind them, followed their example. The French cavalry charged along the road, but Sir Arthur opposed them with some British squadrons. The Spanish who still held their ground opened fire, and the French drew back. The fugitives continued their flight to Oropesa, spreading panic and alarm everywhere with the news that the allies were totally defeated, Sir Arthur Wellesley killed, and all lost.

Cuesta himself had for some time accompanied them, but he soon recovered from his panic, and sent several cavalry regiments to bring back the fugitives. Part of the artillery and some thousands of the infantry were collected before morning, but 6000 men were still absent at the battle, and the great redoubt on their left was silent, from want of guns.

In point of numbers there had been but little difference between the two armies. Prior to the loss of these 6000 men, Cuesta's army had been 34,000 strong, with seventy guns. The British, with the German Legion, numbered 19,000, with thirty guns. The French were 50,000 strong, with eighty guns. These were all veteran troops, while on the side of the allies there were but 19,000 who could be called fighting men.

"That is what comes of putting faith in the Spaniards!" Bull said savagely. "If I had been Sir Arthur, I would have turned my guns on them and given them something to run for. We should do a thousand times better, by ourselves; then we should know what we had to expect."

"It is evident that there won't be any fighting until tomorrow, Macwitty. You will place half your battalion on the hillside, from this point to the bottom of the slope. I don't think that they will come so high up the hill as this; but you will, of course, throw some pickets out above. The other wing of your battalion you will hold in reserve, a couple of hundred yards behind the centre of the line; but choose a sheltered spot for them, for those guns Victor is placing on his heights will sweep the face of this hill.

"This little watercourse will give capital cover to your advanced line, and they cannot do better than occupy it. Lying down, they would be completely sheltered from the French artillery and, if attacked, they could line the bank and fire without showing more than their heads. Of course, you will throw out pickets along the face of the slope in front of you.

"Do you, Bull, march your battalion down to the foot of the hill and take up your post there. The ground is very uneven and broken, and you should be able to find some spot where the men would be in shelter; move a couple of hundred yards back, then Macwitty would flank any force advancing against you. The sun will set in a few minutes, so you had better lose no time in taking up your ground.

"As soon as you have chosen a place go on, with the captains of your companies, across the valley. Make yourselves thoroughly acquainted with the ground, and mark the best spots at which to post the men to resist any force that may come along the valley. It is quite possible that Victor may make an attempt to turn the general's flank tonight. I will reconnoitre all the ground in front of you, and will then, with the colonel, join you."

The position Terence had chosen was a quarter of a mile west of the spur held by Donkin's brigade. He had selected it in order that, if attacked in force, he might have the assistance of the guns there; which would thus be able to play on the advancing French, without risk of his own men being injured by their fire.

Bull marched his battalion down the hill and, as Terence and Herrara were about to mount, a sudden burst of musketry fire, from the crest of the opposite hill, showed that the French were attempting to carry that position. Victor, indeed, seeing the force stationed there to be a small one; and that, from the confusion among the Spaniards on the British right, the moment was very favourable; had ordered one division to attack, another to move to its support, while a third was to engage the German division posted on the plain to the right of the hill, and thus prevent succour being sent to Donkin.

From the position where Terence was standing, the front of the steep slope that the French were climbing could not be seen but, almost at the same moment, a dense mass of men began to swarm up the hill on Donkin's flank; having, unperceived, made their way in at the mouth of the valley.

"Form up your battalion, Macwitty," he shouted, "and double down the hill."

Then he rode after Bull, whose battalion had now reached the valley and halted there.

"We must go to the assistance of the brigade on the hill, Bull, or they will be overpowered before reinforcements can reach them.

"Herrara, bring on Macwitty after us, as soon as he gets down.

"Take the battalion forward at the double, Bull."

The order was given and, with a cheer, the battalion set out across the valley and, on reaching the other side, began to climb the steep ascent; bearing towards their left, so as to reach the summit near the spot where the French were ascending. Twilight was already closing in, and the approach of the Portuguese was unobserved by the French, whose leading battalions had reached the top of the hill, and were pressing heavily on Donkin's weak brigade; which had, however, checked the advance of the French on their front. Macwitty's battalion was but a short distance behind when, marching straight along on the face of the hill, Bull arrived within a hundred yards of the French. Here Terence halted them for a minute, while they hastily formed up in line, and Macwitty came up.

The din on the top of the hill, just above Bull's right company, was prodigious, the rattle of musketry incessant, the exulting shouts of the French could be plainly heard; and their comrades behind were pressing hotly up the hill to join in the strife. There was plainly not a moment to be lost and, advancing to within fifty yards of the French battalions, struggling up the hill in confused masses, a tremendous volley was poured in.

The French, astonished at this sudden attack upon their flank, paused and endeavoured to form up, and wheel round to oppose a front to it; but the heavy fire of the Portuguese, and the broken nature of the ground, prevented their doing this and, ignorant of the strength of the force that had thus suddenly attacked them, they recoiled, keeping up an irregular fire; while the Portuguese, pouring in steady volleys, pressed upon them. In five minutes they gave way, and retired rapidly down the hill.

The leading battalions had gained the crest where, joining those who had ascended by the other face of the hill, they fell upon the already outnumbered defenders. Donkin's men, though

fighting fiercely, were pressed back, and would have been driven from their position had not General Hill brought up the 29th and 48th, with a battalion of detachments composed of Sir John Moore's stragglers. These charged the French so furiously that they were unable to withstand the assault, although aided by fresh battalions ascending the front of the hill.

In their retreat the French, instead of going straight down the hill, bore away to their right and, although some fell to the fire of the Portuguese, the greater portion passed unseen in the darkness.

The firing now ceased, and Terence ordered Bull and Macwitty to take their troops back to the ground originally selected, while he himself ascended to the crest. With some difficulty he discovered the whereabouts of General Hill, to whom he was well known. He found him in the act of having a wound temporarily dressed, by the light of a fire which had just been replenished; he having ridden, in the dark, into the midst of a French battalion, believing it to be one of his own regiments. Colonel Donkin was in conversation with him.

"It has been a very close affair, sir," he said; "and I certainly thought that we should be rolled down the hill. I believe that we owe our safety, in no small degree, to a couple of battalions of Spaniards, I fancy, who took up their post on the opposite hill this morning. Just before you brought up your reinforcement, and while things were at their worst, I heard heavy volley firing somewhere just over the crest. I don't know who it could have been, if it was not them; for there were certainly no other troops on my left."

"They were Portuguese battalions, sir," Terence said quietly.

"Oh, is it you, O'Connor?" General Hill exclaimed. "If they were those two battalions of yours, I can quite understand it.

"This is Colonel O'Connor, Donkin, who checked Soult's passage at the mouth of the Minho, and has performed other admirable services."

"You may as well make your report to me, O'Connor, and I will include it in my own to Sir Arthur."

Terence related how, just as he was taking up his position for the night along the slopes of the Sierra, he heard the outbreak of firing on the front of the hill and, seeing a large force mounting its northern slope, and knowing that only one brigade was posted there, he thought it his duty to move to its assistance. Crossing the valley at the double, he had taken them in flank and, being unperceived in the gathering darkness, had checked their advance, and compelled them to retire down the hill.

"At what strength do you estimate the force which so retired, Colonel?"

"I fancy there were eight battalions of them, but three had gained the crest before we arrived. The others were necessarily broken up, and followed so close upon each other that it was difficult to separate them; but I fancy there were eight of them. Being in such confusion and, of course, unaware of my strength, they were unable to form or to offer any effectual resistance; and our volleys, from a distance of fifty yards, must have done heavy execution upon them."

"Then there is no doubt, Donkin, Colonel O'Connor's force did save you; for if those five battalions had gained the crest, you would have been driven off it before the brigade I brought up arrived and, indeed, even with that aid we should have been so outnumbered that we could scarcely have held our ground. It was hot work as it was, but certainly five more battalions would have turned the scale against us.

"Of course, O'Connor, you will send in a written report of your reasons for quitting your position to headquarters; and I shall, myself, do full justice to the service that you have rendered so promptly and efficaciously. Where is your command now?"

"They will by this time have taken up their former position on the opposite slope. One battalion is extended there. The other is at the foot of the hill, prepared to check any force that may attempt to make its way up the valley. Our line is about a quarter of a mile in rear of this spur. I selected the position in order that, should the French make an attempt in any force, the guns here might take them in flank, while I held them in check in front."

The general nodded. "Well thought of," he said.

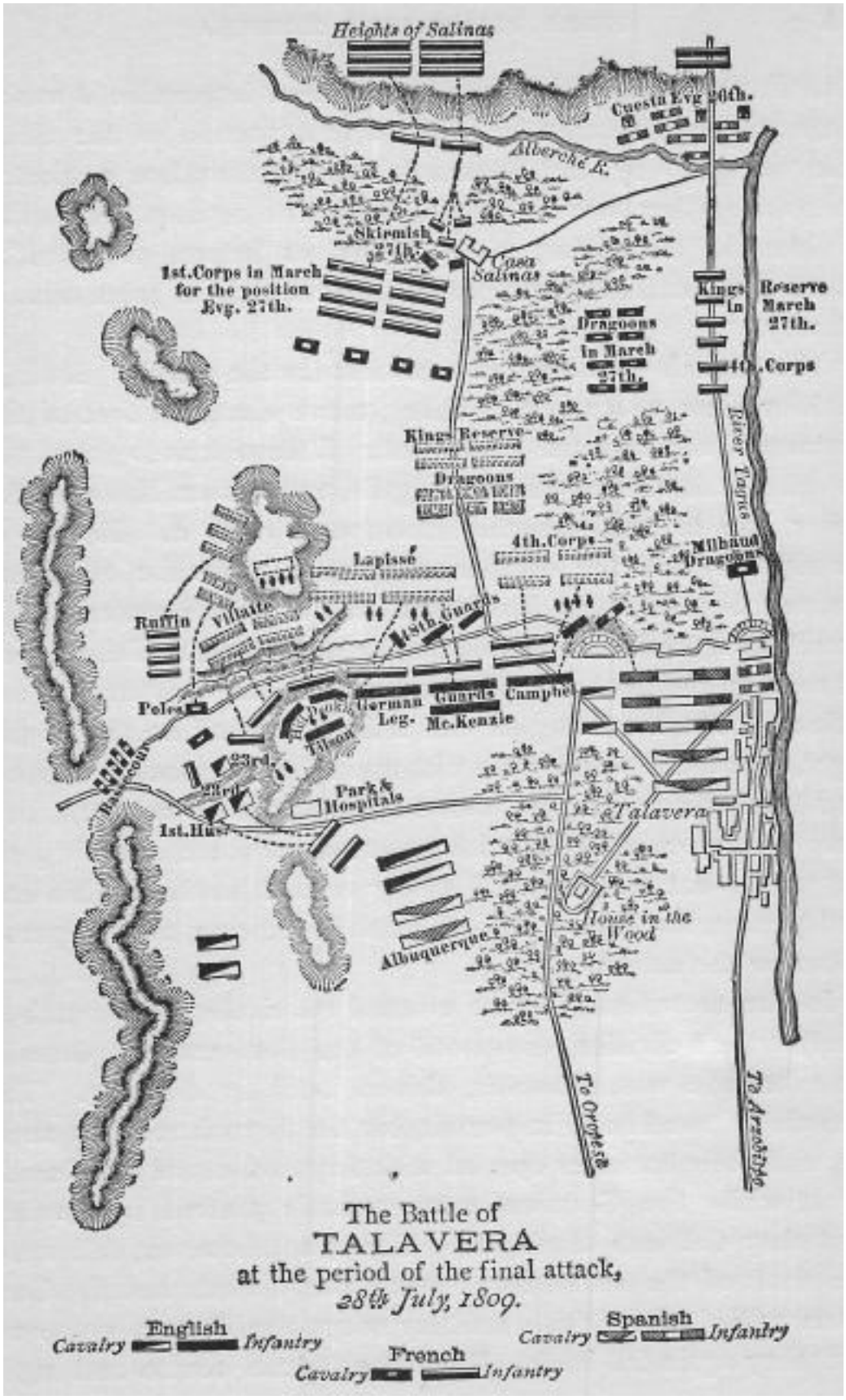
"And now, Donkin, you had better muster your brigade and ascertain what are your losses. I am afraid they are very heavy."

Terence now returned across the valley and, on joining his command, told Herrara and the two majors how warmly General Hill had commended their action.

"What has been our loss?" he asked.

"Fifteen killed, and five-and-forty wounded, but of these a great proportion are not serious."

Brushwood was now collected and in a short time a number of fires were blazing. The men were in high spirits. They were proud of having overthrown a far superior force of the enemy, and were gratified at the expression of great satisfaction, conveyed to them by their captains by Terence's order, at the steadiness with which they had fought.



At daybreak next morning the enemy was seen to be again in motion, Victor having obtained the king's consent to again try to carry the hills occupied by the British. This time Terence did not leave his position, being able to see that the whole of Hill's division now occupied the heights and,

moreover, being himself threatened by two regiments of light troops, which crossed the mouth of the valley, ascended the slopes on his side, and proceeded to work their way along them. The whole of Macwitty's battalion was now placed in line, while Bull's was held in reserve, behind its centre.

It was not long before Macwitty was hotly engaged; and the French, who were coming along in skirmishing order, among the rocks and broken ground, were soon brought to a standstill. For some time a heavy fire was exchanged. Three times the French gathered for a rush; but each time the steady volleys, from their almost invisible foes, drove them back again, with loss, to the shelter they had left.

In the intervals Terence could see how the fight was going on across the valley. The whole hillside was dotted with fire, as the French worked their way up, and the British troops on the crest fired down upon them. Several times parties of the French gained the brow, but only to be hurled back again by the troops held in reserve, in readiness to move to any point where the enemy might gain a footing. For forty minutes the battle continued; and then, having lost 1500 men, the French retreated down the hill again, covered by the fire of their batteries, which opened with fury on the crest, as soon as they were seen to be descending the slope.

At the same time the light troops opposed to Terence also drew off. Seeing the pertinacity with which the French had tried to turn his left, Sir Arthur Wellesley moved his cavalry round to the head of the valley and, obtaining Bassecour's division of Spanish from Cuesta, sent them to take post on the hillside a short distance in rear of Terence's Portuguese.

The previous evening's fighting had cost Victor 1000 men, while 800 British had been killed or wounded; and the want of success then, and the attack on the following morning, tended to depress the spirits of the French and to raise those of the British. It was thought that after these two repulses Victor would not again give battle, and indeed the French generals Jourdan and Sebastiani were opposed to a renewal of hostilities; but Victor was in favour of a general attack. So his opinion was finally adopted by the king, in spite of the fact that he knew that Soult was in full march towards the British rear, and had implored him not to fight a battle till he had cut the British line of retreat; when, in any case, they would be forced to retire at once.

The king was influenced more by his fear for the safety of Madrid than by Victor's arguments. Wilson's force had been greatly exaggerated by rumour. Venegas was known to be at last approaching Toledo, and the king feared that one or both of these forces might fall upon Madrid in his absence, and that all his military stores would fall into their hands. He therefore earnestly desired to force the British to retreat, in order that he might hurry back to protect Madrid.

Doubtless the gross cowardice exhibited by the Spaniards, on the previous day, had shown Victor that he had really only the 19,000 British troops to contend against; and as his force exceeded theirs by two to one, he might well regard victory as certain, and believe he could not fail to beat them.

Up to midday, a perfect quiet reigned along both lines. The British and French soldiers went down alike to the rivulet that separated the two armies, and exchanged jokes as they drank and filled their canteens. Albuquerque, being altogether dissatisfied with Cuesta's arrangements, moved across the plain with his own cavalry and took his post behind the British and German horse; so that no less than 6000 cavalry were now ready to pour down upon any French force attempting to turn the British position by the valley. The day was intensely hot and the soldiers, after eating their scanty rations, for the most part stretched themselves down to sleep; for the night had been a broken one, owing to the fact that the Spaniards, whenever they heard, or thought they heard, anyone moving in their front, poured in a tremendous fire that roused the whole camp; and was so wild and ill directed that several British officers and men, on their left, were killed by it.

Soon after midday the drums were heard to beat along the whole length of the French line, and the troops were seen to be falling in. Then the British were also called to arms, and the soldiers cheerfully took their places in the ranks; glad that the matter was to be brought to an issue at once, as they thought that a victory would, at least, put an end to the state of starvation in which they had for some time been kept. The French had, by this time, learned how impossible it was to surmount

the obstacles in front of that portion of the allies' line occupied by the Spaniards. They therefore neglected these altogether, and Sebastiani advanced against the British division in the plains; while Victor, as before, prepared to assail the British left, supported this time by a great mass of cavalry.

The French were soon in readiness for the attack. Ruffin's division were to cross the valley, move along the foot of the mountain, and turn the British left. Villatte was to guard the mouth of the valley with one brigade, to threaten Hill with the other, and to make another attempt to carry it. He was to be aided by half the division of Lapisse, while the other half assisted Sebastiani in his attack on the British centre. Milhaud's dragoons were placed on the main road to Talavera, so as to keep the Spaniards from moving to the assistance of the British.

The battle began with a furious attack on the British right, but the French were withstood by Campbell's division and Mackenzie's brigade, aided by two Spanish columns; and was finally pushed back with great loss, and ten of their guns captured; but as Campbell wisely refused to break his line and pursue, the French rallied on their reserve, and prepared to renew the attack.

In the meantime Lapisse crossed the rivulet and attacked Sherbrooke's division, composed of the Germans and Guards. This brigade was, however, driven back in disorder. The Guards followed hotly in pursuit; but the French reserves came up, and their batteries opened with fury and drove the Guards back, while the Germans were so hotly pressed, by Lapisse, that they fell into confusion. The 48th, however, fell upon the flank of the advancing French; the Guards and the Germans rallied, the British artillery swept the French columns, and they again fell back. Thus the British centre and right had succeeded in finally repelling the attacks made upon them.

On the left, as the French advanced, the 23rd Light Dragoons and the 1st German Hussars charged the head of Ruffin's column. Before they reached them, however, they encountered the ravine through which the rivulet here ran. The Germans checked their horses when they came upon this almost impassable obstacle. The 23rd, however, kept on. Men and horses rolled over each other, but many crossed the chasm and, forming again, dashed in between the squares into which the French infantry had thrown themselves, and charged a brigade of light infantry in their rear. Victor hurled two regiments of cavalry upon them and the 23rd, hopelessly over matched, were driven back with a loss of 207 men and officers, being fully half the number that had ridden forward. The rest galloped back to the shelter of Bassecour's division.

Yet their effort had not been in vain. The French, astonished at their furious charge, and seeing four distinct lines of cavalry still drawn up facing them, made no further movement. Hill easily repulsed the attack upon his position, and the battle ceased as suddenly as it had begun, the French having failed at every point they had attacked.

Terence had, on seeing Ruffin's division marching towards him, advanced along the slope until they reached the entrance to the valley; and then, scattering on the hillside, had opened a heavy and continuous fire upon the French, doing much execution among their columns, and still more when they threw themselves into square to resist the cavalry. He had given orders that, should Ruffin send some of his battalions up the hill against them, they were to retire up the slopes, taking advantage of every shelter, and not to attempt to meet the enemy in close contact. No such attack was, however, made. The French battalion most exposed threw out a large number of skirmishers, and endeavoured to keep down the galling fire maintained from the hillside; but as the Portuguese took advantage of every stone and bush, and scarcely a man was visible to the French, there were but few casualties among them.

The loss of the British was in all, during the two days' fighting, 6200, including 600 taken prisoners. That of the French was 7400. Ten guns were captured by Campbell's division, and seven left in the woods by the French as they drew off, the next morning at daybreak, to take up their position behind the Alberche.

During the day Crauford's brigade came up, after a tremendous march. The three regiments had, after a tramp of twenty miles, encamped near Plasencia, when the alarm spread by the Spanish

fugitives reached that place. Crauford allowed his men two hours' rest and then started to join the army, and did not halt until he reached the camp; having in twenty-six hours, during the hottest season of the year, marched sixty-two miles, carrying kit, arms, and ammunition–a weight of from fifty to sixty pounds. Only twenty-five men out of the three regiments fell out and, immediately the brigade arrived, it took up the outpost duty in front of the army.

Terence was much gratified by the appearance, in general orders that day, of the following notice:

"The general commander-in-chief expresses his warm approbation of the conduct of the two battalions of the Minho regiment of Portuguese, commanded by Colonel O'Connor. This officer, on his own discretion, moved from the position assigned to him, on seeing the serious attack made on Colonel Donkin's brigade on the evening of the 27th and, scaling the hill, opened so heavy a fire on the French ascending it that five battalions fell back, without taking part in the attack. This took place at the crisis of the engagement, and had a decisive effect on its result."

At eight o'clock a staff officer rode up, with orders for the Minho regiment to return at once to the pass of Banos, as the news had come in that the enemy beyond the hills were in movement. Terence was to act in concert with the Spanish force there, and hold the pass as long as possible. If the enemy were in too great strength to be withstood, he was given discretion as to his movements; being guided only by the fact that the British army would, probably, march down the valley of the Tagus.

If Soult crossed, "his force," the order added, "was estimated as not exceeding 15,000 men."

Chapter 3: Prisoners

On the 31st of July Terence reached the neighbourhood of Banos and learned, from the peasantry, that a French army had passed through the town early on the preceding day. No resistance, whatever, had been offered to its passage through the pass of Bejar; and the Spanish at Banos had retreated hastily, after exchanging a few shots with the French advanced guard. The peasantry had all deserted their villages, but had had some skirmishes with small foraging parties of cavalry. Several French stragglers had been killed in the pass.

Hoping to find some of these still alive, and to obtain information from them, Terence continued his march for Banos; sending on two of the best mounted of the Portuguese horsemen, to ascertain if there was any considerable French force left there. He was within half a mile of the town when he saw them returning, at full speed, chased by a party of French dragoons; who, however, fell back when they saw the advancing infantry.

"What is your news?" Terence asked, as the troopers rode up.

"Banos is full of French troops," one of them replied, "and columns are marching down the pass. From what I can see, I should think that there must be 16,000 or 20,000 of them."

In fact, this was Soult's second army corps–the first, which had preceded it, having that morning reached Plasencia, where they captured 400 sick in the hospitals, and a large quantity of stores that had been left there, from want of carriage, when the British army advanced. Terence lost no time in retreating from so dangerous a neighbourhood, and at once made for the mountains he had just left.

Two regiments of French cavalry set out in pursuit, as soon as the party that had chased the Portuguese troopers entered Banos with the news that a body of infantry, some 2000 strong, was close at hand. They came up before the Portuguese had marched more than a mile. The two battalions were halted, and thrown into square. The French rode fearlessly down upon them, but were received with so hot and steady a fire that they speedily drew off, with considerable loss. Then the regiment ascended the hills and, half an hour later, halted.

"The question is, what is to be done?" Terence said to Herrara and his two majors. "It is evident that, for once, the information we obtained from the Spaniards is correct, and that Soult must have at least 30,000 men with him. Possibly his full strength is not up yet. By this time the force that passed yesterday must be at Plasencia, and by tomorrow may be on the Tagus, and Sir Arthur's position must be one of great danger. Putting Cuesta and the Spaniards altogether aside as worthless, he has, even with that brigade we saw marching in soon after we started, only 22,000 or 23,000 men; and on one side of him is Victor, with some 40,000; on the other is Soult, with perhaps as many more. With starving and exhausted troops his chances are small, indeed, unless he can cross the Tagus. He might beat one marshal or the other, but he can hardly beat the two of them.

"The first thing to do is to send two troopers off, with duplicate despatches, telling Sir Arthur of Soult's passage. He might not otherwise hear of it for some time, and then it might be too late. The peasantry and the village authorities will be too busy carrying off their effects, and driving their animals to the hills, to think for a moment of sending information. That is evidently the first thing to be done.

"Until we see what is going to happen, I don't think we can do better than cross the Sierra, and encamp at some spot where we can make out the movements of the French on the plain. At the same time we can keep an eye on the road to Plasencia, and be able to send information to Sir Arthur, if any further bodies of French troops come down into the valley. Our position is evidently a dangerous one. If the news has reached Sir Arthur, he will have fallen back from Talavera at once. Victor will no doubt follow on his heels, and his cavalry and those of Soult will speedily meet each other. Therefore it will be, in all ways, best to see how matters develop themselves before moving down into the plain."

Accordingly two of the troopers were sent off with information that 15,000 French were already in the valley, and that as many more would be there on the following day. Then the regiment marched across the Sierra and took post high up on the slope, with Plasencia ten miles away on the right, and the spires of Oropesa visible across the valley.

On the following day another army corps was seen descending from Banos to Plasencia, while a large body of troops marched from that town to Navalmoral, thus cutting off the retreat of the British by the bridge of boats at Almaraz. Clouds of dust on the distant plain showed that a portion, at least, of the Allied Army had arrived at Oropesa; and bodies of French cavalry were made out, traversing the plain and scattering among the villages. Two more troopers were sent off with reports, and warned, like the others, to take different routes, and make a wide circuit so as to avoid the French, and then to come down upon Oropesa. If the troops there were British, they were to deliver their reports to the general in command. If it was occupied by Spaniards, they were to proceed to Talavera and hand them in at headquarters.

On the following day, still another army corps marched down to Plasencia, raising Soult's force to 54,000. On that day Cuesta, who had undertaken to hold Talavera, retreated suddenly; alarmed by Victor's army making an advance, and leaving to their fate the 1500 British wounded in the hospital. These, however, were benefited by the change. They had been dying of hunger for, although there was an abundance of provisions in Talavera, the inhabitants refused to sell any to the British, and jealously concealed their stores in their houses. Nor would Cuesta do anything to aid them; and thus the men who had fought and suffered for the Spanish cause were left to perish, while there was abundance around them. The conduct of the Spaniards, from the moment the British crossed the frontier to the time of their leaving Spain, was never forgotten or forgiven by the British troops, who had henceforth an absolute hatred for the Spanish, which contributed in no small degree to the excesses perpetrated by them upon the inhabitants of Badajos, and other places, taken subsequently by storm.

The French, on entering Talavera, treated the British wounded with the greatest kindness, and henceforth they were well fed and cared for.

The first report sent by Terence reached Sir Arthur safely, ten hours after it was sent out, and apprised him for the first time of the serious storm that was gathering in his rear; and he had, without an hour's delay, given orders for the army to march to Oropesa, intending to give battle to Soult before Victor could come up to join his fellow marshal. The second report informed him of the real strength of the army towards which he was marching, and showed him the real extent of his danger. So he at once seized the only plan of escape offered to him, marching with all speed to Arzobispo, and crossing the Tagus by the bridge there, Cuesta's army following him. As soon as the Tagus was passed, Crauford's brigade was hurried on to seize the bridge of boats at Almaraz, and prevent the French from crossing there.

Fortunately, Soult was as ignorant of the position of the Allies as Sir Arthur was of his and, believing that the British were following Victor and pressing forward towards Madrid, he had conducted his operations in a comparatively leisurely manner. Therefore, it was not until the British were safely across the Tagus that he ascertained the real state of affairs, and put himself in communication with Victor.

On the morning following the crossing Terence was apprised, by a note sent back by one of the troopers, of the movement that had taken place. It was written upon a small piece of paper, so that it could be destroyed at once, by the bearer, if he should be threatened with capture, and contained only the following words:

"Your report invaluable. The Allied Army moves to Arzobispo, and will cross the Tagus there. You must act according to your judgment. I can give no advice."

"Thank God the British army has escaped!" Terence said, after reading the despatch to his officers; "now we have only to think of ourselves. As to rejoining Sir Arthur, it is out of the question; the valley is full of French troops. Ney has joined Soult, and there are 100,000 Frenchmen between us

and our army. If I had any idea where Wilson is, we might endeavour to join him, for he must be in the same plight as ourselves. Our only chance, so far as I can see, is to cross their line of communications and to endeavour to join Beresford, who is reported as marching down the frontier from Almeida."

"Would you propose to pass through Banos, Colonel?" Herrara asked. "The mountains there are almost, if not quite, impassable; but we might get a peasant to guide us."

"I don't like going near Banos, Herrara. The French are almost sure to have left a strong body there, and the chances are against our finding a peasant; for the inhabitants of all the villages, for ten miles round, have almost certainly fled and taken to the hills.

"I think it would be safer to follow along this side of the Sierra, cross the road a few miles above Plasencia, then make for the mountains, and come down on the head of the river Coa. Beresford is probably in the valley of that river. We are more likely to find a guide, that way, than we are by going through Banos. We shall have tough work of it whichever way we go, even if we are lucky enough to get past without running against a single Frenchman."

"Would it not be better to wait till nightfall, Colonel?" Bull asked.

Terence shook his head.

"There is no moon," he said; "and as to climbing about among these mountains in the dark, it would be worse than running the risk of a fight with the French. Besides, we should have no chance whatever of coming across a peasant. No, I think we must try it as soon as it gets light, tomorrow morning. We had better dress up a score of men in peasant clothes; and send them off, in couples, to search among the hills. Whoever comes across a man must bring him in, whether he likes it or not. The Spaniards are so desperately afraid of the French that they will give us no information, whatever, unless forced to do so; and we shall have even more difficulty than the British. There must have been thousands of peasants, and others, who knew that Soult had come down upon Plasencia; and yet Sir Arthur obtained no news.

"There is one comfort: there can be little doubt that Soult is just as much in the dark as to the position of the British army."

By nightfall three peasants had been brought in. All shook their heads stolidly, when questioned in Portuguese; but upon Terence having them placed against a rock, and twelve men brought up and ordered to load their muskets, one of them said, in Spanish:

"I know where a path across the mountains leaves the road, but I have never been over the hills, and know nothing of how it runs."

"Ah! I thought you could make out my question," Terence said. "Well, you have saved the lives of yourself and your comrades. Take us to the path, tomorrow, and set us fairly on it; and you shall be allowed to go free, and be paid five dollars for your trouble."

Then he turned to Bull.

"Put four men to guard them," he said, "and let the guard be changed once every two hours. Their orders will be to shoot the fellows down, if they endeavour to make their escape. They are quite capable of going down into Plasencia and bringing the French upon us."

At daybreak they were on the march and, two hours later, came down into the valley through which the road from Banos ran down to Plasencia. They had just crossed it when the head of a column of cavalry appeared, coming down the valley. It at once broke into a gallop.

"How far is it to where the path begins to ascend the mountains?" Terence asked, holding a pistol to the peasant's head.

"Four miles," the man replied sullenly, looking with apprehension at the French.

Terence shouted orders to Bull and Macwitty to throw their men into square, and as they had been marching, since they reached level ground, in column of companies, the movement was carried out before the enemy arrived.

The French cavalry, believing that the battalions were Spanish, and would break at once, charged furiously down upon them. They were, however, received with so heavy a fire that they drew off discomfited, leaving many men and horses on the ground.

"They are a strong body," Terence said quietly to Bull, in the centre of whose square he had taken up his position. "I should say there are 3000 of them, and I am afraid they are the head of another division."

"Yes, there are the infantry coming down the valley. We must press on, or we shall be caught before we get into the hills."

The battalions were soon in motion but, immediately they started, the cavalry prepared to charge again.

"This will never do, Bull. If we form square every time, we shall be delayed so much that the infantry will soon be up. You must do it now, and quickly; but we will start next time in column, eight abreast; and face the men round in lines, four deep either way, if they charge again."

The French, this time, drew off without pressing their charge home; and then, trotting on, took their place between the Portuguese and the mountains.

"Form your leading company in line, four deep, Bull. The column shall follow you."

The formation was quickly altered and, preceded by the line, to cover them from the charge in front, the column advanced at a rapid pace. The cavalry moved forward to meet them, but as the two parties approached each other the line opened so heavy a fire that the French drew off from their front, both to the right and left. Bull at once threw back a wing of each company, to prevent an attack in flank; and so, in the form of a capital T, the column kept on its way. Several times the French cavalry charged down, compelling them to halt; but each time, after repulsing the attack, the column went on.

"It would be all right if we had only these fellows to deal with," Terence said to Bull, "but their infantry are coming on fast."

The plain behind was, indeed, covered with a swarm of skirmishers, coming along at the double.

"We must go at the double, too, Bull," Terence said, "or they will be up long before we get to the hills. We are not halfway yet. Keep the men well in hand, and don't let them fall into confusion. If they do, the cavalry will be down upon us in a minute."

The cavalry, however, were equally conscious of the importance of checking the Portuguese, and again and again dashed down upon them, with reckless bravery; suffering heavily whenever they did so, but causing some delay each time they charged.

"I shall go back to the rear, Bull. Mind, my orders are precise that, whatever happens behind to us, you are to push forward until you begin to climb the hills."

Then, without waiting for an answer, he galloped back.

Although the column pressed on steadily at the double, the delay caused by the cavalry, and the fact that the French infantry were broken up–and able, therefore, to run more quickly–was bringing the enemy up fast. Herrara was riding at the head of the second battalion, and to him Terence repeated the instructions he had given Bull.

"What are you going to do, Colonel?" the latter asked.

"There is some very broken ground, a quarter of a mile ahead," he replied. "I intend to hold that spot with the rear company. It will be some little time before the French infantry will be able to form and attack us; and the ground looks, to me, too broken for their cavalry to act. As soon as I can see that you are far enough ahead to gain the hill, before they can overtake you again, I shall follow you with the company; but mind, should I not do so, you must take the command of the two battalions, cross the mountains, and join Beresford."

He galloped on to Macwitty, who was riding in the rear, and repeated the order to him.

"Well, Colonel, let me stop behind with the company, instead of yourself."

"No, no, Macwitty. It is the post of danger and, as commanding officer, I must take it. It is a question of saving the two battalions at the cost of the company, and there is no doubt as to the course to be taken. Do you ride on at once, and take your post at the rear of the company ahead of this, and keep them steady. Here come their cavalry down again on the flank."

There was another charge, three or four heavy volleys, and then the French drew off again. The bullets of their infantry were now whistling overhead.

"A hundred yards farther," Terence shouted, "and then we will face them."

In front lay an upheaval of rock, stretching almost like a wall across the line they were following. It was a sort of natural outwork, pushed out by nature in front of the hill, and rose some fifty feet above the level of the plain. There were many places at which it could be climbed, and up one of these the track ran obliquely. Hitherto it had been but an ill-defined path, but here some efforts had been made to render it practicable, by cutting away the ground on the upper side, to enable laden mules to pass up.

Terence reined up at the bottom of the ascent, and directed the men to take up their post on the crest; the leading half of the company to the right, and the other half to the left of the path. Before all were up the French light troops were clustering round, but a rush was prevented by the heavy fire that opened from the brow above, and the company were soon scattered along the crest, a yard apart.

In five minutes some two thousand French infantry were assembled. A mounted officer rode some distance to the right and left, to examine the ground. It was evident that he considered that the position, held by 200 determined men, was a formidable one. Lying down, as they were, only the heads of the Portuguese could be seen; while a force attacking them would have to march across level ground, affording no shelter whatever from the defenders' fire, and then to climb a very steep ascent. Moreover, the whole force they had been pursuing might be gathered, just behind.

After another five minutes' delay, half a battalion broke up into skirmishers; while the rest divided into two parties, and marched parallel to the rocks, left and right. Terence saw that these movements must be successful for, with 200 men, he could not defend a line of indefinite length. However, his object had now been achieved. The descent behind was even and regular, and he could see the column winding up the hill, somewhat over half a mile away. Of the French cavalry he could see nothing. They had, after their last charge, ridden off, as if leaving the matter in the hands of their infantry.

He ordered the bugler to sound the retreat, in open order; and the Portuguese, rising to their feet, went down the gentle slope at a trot. They were halfway to the hills when the long lines of the French cavalry were seen, sweeping down upon them from the right; having evidently ridden along the foot of the steep declivity, until they came to a spot where they were able to ascend it.

At the sound of the bugle the rear company instantly ran together and formed a square and, as the French cavalry came up, opened a continuous fire upon them. Unable to break the line of bayonets, the horsemen rode round and round the square, discharging their pistols into it, and occasionally making desperate efforts to break in. Suddenly the cavalry drew apart, and a battalion of infantry marched forward, and poured their fire into the Portuguese.

Terence felt that no more could be done. His main body was safe from pursuit, and it would be but throwing away the lives of his brave fellows, did he continue the hopeless fight. He therefore waved a white handkerchief, in token of surrender; shouted to his men to cease fire and, riding through them with sheathed sword, made his way to the officer who appeared to be in command of the cavalry.

"We surrender, sir," he said, "as prisoners of war. We have done all that we could do."

He could speak but a few words of French, but the officer understood him.

"You have done more than enough, sir," he said. "Order your men to lay down their arms, and I will guarantee their safety."

He ordered his cavalry to draw back and, riding up to the infantry, halted them. Terence at once ordered his men to lay down their arms.

"You have done all that men could do," he said. "You have saved your comrades, and it is no dishonour to yield to twenty times your own force. Form up in column, ready to march."

The commander of the cavalry again rode up, this time accompanied by another officer.

"The general wishes to know, sir," the latter said in English, "who you are, and what force this is?"

"I am Colonel O'Connor, holding that rank in Lord Beresford's army; and have the honour to be on the staff of Sir Arthur Wellesley, though at present detached on special service. The two battalions that have marched up the hill are the Minho regiment of Portuguese, under my command. We were

posted on the Sierra and, being cut off from rejoining the British by the advance of Marshal Soult's army, were endeavouring to retire across the mountains into Portugal, when you cut us off."

The officer translated the words to the general.

"Tell him," the latter said, "that if all the Portuguese fought as well as those troops, there would have been no occasion for the British to come here to aid them. I have never seen troops better handled, or more steady. This cannot be the first time they have been under fire."

Terence bowed, when the compliment was translated to him.

"They fought, General, in the campaign last year," he said, "and the regiment takes its name from the fact that they prevented Marshal Soult from crossing at the mouth of the Minho; but their first encounter with your cavalry was near Orense."

"I remember it well," the general said, "for I was in command of the cavalry that attacked you. Your men were not in uniform, then, or I should have known them again. How did you come to be there? For at that time, the British had not advanced beyond Cintra."

"I had been sent with a message to Romana and, happening to come across this newly-raised levy, without officers or commander, I took the command and, aided by two British troopers and a Portuguese lieutenant, succeeded in getting them into shape; and did my best to hold the pass to Braga."

"Peste!" the general exclaimed. "That was you again, was it? It was the one piece of dash and determination shown by the Portuguese, during our advance to Oporto, and cost us as many men as all the rest of the fighting put together.

"And now, Colonel, we must be marching. Major Portalis, here, will take charge of you."

In a few minutes the French cavalry and infantry were on their march towards Plasencia, the Portuguese prisoners guarded on both sides by cavalry marching with them; their captain being, like Terence, placed in charge of an officer. The Portuguese marched with head erect. They were prisoners, but they felt that they had done well, and had sacrificed themselves to cover the retreat of their comrades; and that, had it not been for the French infantry coming up, they might have beaten off the attacks of their great body of cavalry.

On their arrival at Plasencia, the troops were placed in a large building that had been converted into a prison. Here were some hundreds of other prisoners, for the most part Spaniards, who had been captured when Soult had suddenly arrived.

Terence was taken to the quarters of General Foy, who was in command there. Here he was again questioned, through the officer who spoke English. After he translated his answers to the general, the latter told him to ask Terence if he knew where Wilson was.

"I do not, sir," he replied; "we were together on the Sierra, a fortnight ago, but he marched suddenly away without communicating with me, and I remained at Banos until ordered to march to the Alberche. We took part in the battle there, and were then ordered back, again to support the Spaniards at Banos; but Marshal Soult had marched through the pass, and the Spaniards had disappeared before we got there. We remained among the mountains until yesterday when, hearing that the British had crossed the Tagus, and seeing no way to rejoin them, I started to cross the mountains to join Lord Beresford's force, wherever I might find it."

"General Heron reports that the two battalions under your command fought with extraordinary steadiness, and repulsed all the attempts of his cavalry to break them; and finally succeeded in drawing off to the mountains, with the exception of the two companies that formed the rear guard. How is it that there is only one officer?"

"They were, in fact, one company," Terence said. "My companies are each about 200 strong, and the officer captured with me was its captain."

"General Heron also reports to me that your retreat was admirably carried out," General Foy said, "and that no body of French veterans could have done better.

"Well, sir, if you are ready to give your parole not to escape, you will be at liberty to move about the town freely, until there is an opportunity of sending a batch of prisoners to France."

"Thank you, general. I am ready to give my parole not to make any attempt to escape, and am obliged to you for your courtesy."

Terence had already thought over what course he had best take, should he be offered freedom on parole, and had resolved to accept it. The probabilities of making his escape were extremely small. There would be no chance whatever of rejoining the army; and a passage, alone, across the all-but-impassable mountains, was not to be thought of. Therefore he decided that, at any rate for the present, he would give his promise not to attempt to escape.

Quarters were assigned to him in the town, in a house where several French officers were staying. These all showed him great courtesy and kindness. Between the English and French the war was, throughout, conducted on honourable terms. Prisoners were well treated, and there was no national animosity between either officers or men.

When he went out into the town one of the French officers generally accompanied him, and he was introduced to a number of others. He set to work, in earnest, to improve the small knowledge of French that he possessed and, borrowing some French newspapers, and buying a dictionary in the town, he spent a considerable portion of his time in studying them.

He remained three weeks at Plasencia. During that time he heard that the army of Venegas had been completely routed by Victor, that Cuesta had been badly beaten soon after crossing the Tagus, and Albuquerque's cavalry very roughly treated. Five guns and 400 prisoners had been taken. Ney had marched through Plasencia, on his way back to Valladolid to repress an insurrection that had broken out in that district; and on his way met Wilson, who was trying to retreat by Banos, and who was decisively beaten and his command scattered.

Terence was now told to prepare to leave, with a convoy of prisoners, for Talavera. He was the only British officer and, being on parole, the officer commanding the detachment marching with the prisoners invited him to ride with him, and the two days' journey was made very pleasantly.

At Talavera he remained for a week. The Portuguese prisoners remained there, but the British who had been captured in Plasencia, and the convalescents from the hospital at Talavera–in all 200 strong, among whom were six British officers–were to march to the frontier, there to be interned in one of the French fortresses.

The officer who had commanded the escort, on the march from Plasencia, spoke in high terms of Terence to the officer in charge of the two hundred men who were to go on with them. The party had been directed not to pass through Madrid, as the sight of over two hundred British prisoners might give rise to a popular demonstration by the excitable Spaniards, which would possibly lead to disorder. He was therefore directed to march by the road to the Escurial, and then over the Sierra to Segovia, then up through Valladolid and Burgos. The escort was entirely composed of infantry and, as Terence could not therefore take his horse with him, he joined the other officers on foot.

To his great surprise and joy he found that one of these was his chum, Dick Ryan.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Dicky!" he exclaimed.

"Well, yes, I am as pleased as you are at our meeting, Terence; but I must own that the conditions might have been more pleasant."

"Oh, never mind the conditions!" Terence said. "It is quite enough, for the present, that we both are here; and that we have got before us a journey that is likely to be a jolly one. I suppose that you have given your parole, as I have; but when we are once in prison there will be an end of that, and it is hard if, when we put our heads together, we don't hit on some plan of escape.

"Do you know the other officers? If so, please introduce me to them."

As soon as the introductions were completed, Terence asked Ryan where he had been wounded.

"I was hit by a piece of a French shell," the latter replied. "Fortunately it did not come straight at me, but scraped along my ribs, laying them pretty well bare. As it was a month ago, it is quite

healed up; but I am very stiff still, and am obliged to be very careful in my movements. If I forget all about it, and give a turn suddenly, I regularly yell; for it feels as if a red-hot iron had been stuck against me. However, I have learned to be careful and, as long as I simply walk straight on, I am pretty well all right.

"It was a near case, at first; and I believe I should have died of starvation if the French had not come in. Those brutes of Spaniards would do nothing whatever for me, and I give you my word of honour that nothing passed my lips, but water, for three days."

"Perhaps it was a good thing for you, Dicky, and kept down fever."

"I would have run the chance of a dozen fevers, to have got a good meal," Ryan said indignantly. "I don't know but that I would have chanced it, even for a crust of bread. I tell you, if the French had not come in when they did, there would not have been a man alive in hospital at the end of another forty-eight hours. The men were so furious that, if they could have got at arms, I believe everyone who could have managed to crawl out would have joined in a sally, and have shot down every Spaniard they met in the streets, till they were overpowered and killed.

"Now, let us hear your adventures. Of course, I saw in orders what good work you did, that day when you were in our camp, against the French when they attacked Donkin. Some of our fellows went across to see you, the morning after the big battle; but they could not find you, and heard afterwards, from some men of Hill's division, that you had been seen marching away in a body, along the hills."

Terence then gave an account of the attack by the French upon his regiment, and how he had fallen into their hands.

"That was well done, Terence. There is some pleasure in being taken prisoner, in that sort of way. What will become of your regiment, do you suppose?"

"I have no idea. Herrara may be appointed to the command. I should think that most likely he would be, but of course Sir Arthur may put another English officer at its head. However, I should say that there is no likelihood of any more fighting, this year. Ney's corps has gone north, which is a sign that there will be no invasion of Portugal at present; and certainly Sir Arthur is not likely to take the offensive again, now that his eyes have been thoroughly opened to the rascality and cowardice of the Spaniards; and by next spring we two may be back again. We have got into so many scrapes together, and have always pulled through them, that I don't think the French will keep us long.

"Have you stuck to your Portuguese, Dicky?"

"I have, and am beginning to get on very fairly with it."

"That is right. When we get back I will apply for you as my adjutant, if I get the command of the regiment again."

Chapter 4: Guerillas

The marches were short, as many of the prisoners were still weak and, indeed, among their guard were many convalescents who had recently been discharged from the hospital at Toledo, and who were going back to France. The little column was accompanied by four waggons, two of which were intended for the conveyance of any who should prove unable to march; and the others were filled with provisions for consumption by the way, together with a few tents, as many of the villages that would be their halting places were too small to afford accommodation for the 400 men, even if every house was taken up for the purpose. Although the first day's march was only twelve miles, the two empty waggons were quite full before they reached their halting place; and many of the guard had placed their guns and cartridge boxes on the other carts.

It was now the middle of August, and the heat in the valley of the Tagus was overpowering. The convoy, however, had marched at six in the morning; and halted at eight, in the shade of a large olive wood; and did not continue its march until five in the afternoon. The night was so warm that the English prisoners, and many of their guards, preferred lying down in the open and throwing the blanket (with which each had been furnished) over him to keep off the dew, to going into the stuffy cottages, where the fleas would give them little chance of rest.

On the third day they arrived at the village of Escurial. The next morning they began to mount the pass over the Sierra, and slept that night in an empty barracks, at Segovia. Here they left the main road leading through Valladolid and took one more to the east, stopping at small villages until they arrived at Aranda, on the Douro. Thence they marched due north, to Gamonal.

They were now on the main road to the frontier, passed through Miranda and Zadorra, and began to ascend the slopes of the Pyrenees. The marches had, for some days, been considerably longer than when they first started. The invalids had gained strength and, having no muskets to carry, were for the most part able to march eighteen or twenty miles without difficulty. Four had been left behind in hospital at Segovia, but with these exceptions all had greatly benefited by steady exercise, and an ample supply of food.

"I could do a good deal of travelling, in this way," one of the officers said, as they marched out from Miranda. "Just enough exercise to be pleasant; no trouble about baggage or route, or where one is to stop for the night; nothing to pay, and everything managed for you. What could one want for, more?"

"We could do with a little less dust," Dick Ryan said, with a laugh; "but we cannot expect everything."

"Unfortunately, there will be an end to our marching, and not a very pleasant one," Terence said. "At present, one scarcely recognizes that one is a prisoner. The French officers certainly do all in their power to make us forget it; and their soldiers, and ours, try their best to hold some sort of conversation together. I feel that I am making great progress in French, and it is especially jolly when we halt for the night, and get the bivouac fires burning, and chat and laugh with the French officers as though we were the best friends in the world."

The march was, indeed, conducted in a comfortable and easy fashion. At starting, the prisoners marched four abreast, and the French two abreast at each side; but before a mile had been passed the order was no longer strictly observed, and the men trudged along, smoking their pipes, laughing and talking, the French and English alternately breaking into a marching song. There was no fear of the prisoners trying to escape. They could, at night, have got away from their guards easily enough; but there was nowhere for them to go, if they had done so. The English, smarting from the cruelty and ill faith of the inhabitants of Talavera and the Spanish authorities, felt a burning hatred of the Spanish; while the Spaniards, on their side, deceived by the lying representations of their Juntas, had no love whatever for the English, though ready enough to receive money and arms from them.

On leaving Zadorra, the French officer in command said to Terence:

"Now, colonel, we shall have to be more careful during our marches, keeping a sharp lookout at night. The country here is infested by guerillas, whom all our efforts cannot eradicate. The mountains of Navarre and Biscay are full of them. Sometimes they are in bands of fifteen or twenty strong, sometimes they are in hundreds. Some of them are at ordinary times goatherds, shepherds, muleteers, and peasants; but a number of them are disbanded soldiers–the remains of armies we have defeated and broken up, and who prefer this wild life in the mountains to returning to their homes. Our convoys are constantly attacked, and have always to be accompanied by a strong guard."

"As we have no waggons with us, I should think that they would hardly care to molest us," Terence said.

"That renders it less likely, certainly, colonel; but they fight from hatred as much as for booty, and no French soldier who falls into their hands is ever spared. Generally they are put to death with atrocious tortures. At first there was no such feeling here and, when my regiment was quartered at Vittoria, some three years ago, things were quiet enough. You see, the feeling gradually grew. No doubt some of our men plundered. Many of the regiments were composed of young conscripts, with very slight notions of discipline. Those from the country districts were, as a rule, quiet lads enough; but among those from the towns, especially such places as Toulouse, Lyons, and Marseilles, were young scoundrels ready for any wickedness, and it is to these that the troubles we now have are largely due.

"Of course the peasants, when they were able to do so, retaliated upon these marauders. The feeling of hatred grew, on both sides. Straggling parties of our men were surrounded, captured, and then hung, shot, or burnt alive.

"Then, on our side, villages were destroyed and the peasants shot down. Lately, that is, after the defeats of their armies, numbers of fugitives took to the hills, threw away their uniforms, obtained peasants' dresses, and set up as what they called guerillas, which is only another term for bandits; for although their efforts are chiefly directed against us, they do not hesitate to plunder their own people, when they need provisions, and are a perfect scourge to all the villages among the hills between the Bay of Biscay and the Mediterranean. Of course, they are strongest along the line of communication with France; but it may be said that, roughly, where there are mountains there are guerillas, though there are but few of them along the hills we crossed between the valley of the Tagus and that of the Douro.

"This is for two reasons: in the first place, there are very few villages, and they would have difficulty in maintaining themselves; and in the second place, because hitherto Leon and Old Castile, on the north of the Sierra, have always been under different commands to that in the Tagus valley, and therefore there has been but small communication between them, except by messengers with despatches from Madrid. The passes have scarcely been used and, indeed, in winter they are practically altogether impassable; except that along the valley of the Ebro. We found that to our cost, when we marched with Napoleon to cut off your British General Moore. We lost nearly two days getting through them, and the delay saved your army."

"Yes, it was a very close thing," Terence said. "As I have told you, I was with Moore; and if the troops from the south had come up but six hours earlier, it would have gone very hard with us."

"It was an awful time," the officer said, "and I think our army must have suffered quite as much as yours did. Soult's force was reduced fully to half its strength, when he first arrived on that hill near Corunna. Of course the stragglers came in rapidly, but a great number never returned to their colours again–some died of cold and hardship, others were cut off and murdered by the peasantry. Altogether, we had an awful time of it. Your men were, in one respect, better off than ours; for your stragglers were not regarded with hostility by the peasants, whereas no mercy was shown to ours."

"Yes, major, one of the battalions that fought at Talavera was entirely composed of men who had straggled in the retreat, and who afterwards succeeded in gaining the Portuguese frontier."

That evening they halted, for the night, at a small village high up in the passes. The French officer took every precaution against surprise. Twenty sentries were placed at various points round the village; and as many more were posted, in pairs, three or four hundred yards farther out.

At three in the morning, several shots were fired. The troops all got under arms, and parties were sent out to the outposts. At two of these posts both the sentries were found stabbed to the heart. At others men had been seen crawling up towards them, and the shots that had aroused the troops had been fired. The outposts were recalled to the village, and the soldiers remained under arms until morning.

As soon as it was daybreak a scattered fire opened from the hills on either side of the valley, and it was evident that these were occupied by strong parties. The villagers, on being questioned, denied all knowledge of these bands; but under threats said that they had heard that Minas, with a very strong force, was in the neighbourhood, and that the Impecinado had been reported to be among the hills between the pass and that of Roncesvalles.

"What strength do you put them down at, colonel?" the major asked Terence.

"I should say, from what we can see of them, that there must be four or five hundred on each hill."

"They must have had information from their spies at Zadorra, colonel, and half a dozen bands must have united to crush us.

"Diable, that was a good shot!" he exclaimed, as his shako was struck from his head by a bullet. "That is the worst of these fellows. They are uncommonly good shots. You see, almost all these mountain men are accustomed to carry guns, and the charcoal burners and shepherds eke out a living by shooting game and sending it down to the towns."

"What are you thinking of doing, major?"

"I shall hold the village," the latter replied. "We might get through the pass, but I doubt whether we should do so; and if we did, my men and yours would suffer terribly. Can I rely upon your fellows keeping quiet?"

"I think so. At any rate, we will all go round and order them to do so."

There was, however, no necessity to impress this on the men. Two of them had already been wounded by the guerillas' fire.

"Why, sir," one of them said, "if we had but muskets here, we would turn out and help the French to drive those fellows off. The French have behaved very well to us, while the Spaniards did their best to starve us to death; and there ain't one of us who wouldn't jump at the chance of paying them out."

"All right, men!" said Terence. "I agree with you, as to the treatment you have received; however, we are not here to fight. We are prisoners, and have nothing to do with the fray, one way or the other; though I don't mean to say that I should not, myself, be glad to see the French beat the guerillas off."

The other officers found the same spirit among the soldiers they questioned.

"I quite agree with them," one of the officers said, "and if there were muskets handy I would not mind leading them, myself, if it were not for the uniform. Sir Arthur would scarcely be pleased if, among all his other worries, he got a despatch from the central Junta, complaining that a large number of innocent peasants had been killed by English troops, fighting by the side of the French."

Gradually the guerillas drew in towards the village, taking advantage of every stone and bush, and rarely giving a chance to the French infantry. Their aim was exceedingly accurate and, whenever a French soldier showed himself from behind a hut to fire, he was fortunate if he got back again without receiving a bullet.

"This is getting serious," the French major said, coming into the cottage where the English officers were gathered. "I have lost thirty-eight killed and wounded, already. I have had the wounded carried into the church, and some of your men are unloading the provision waggons, and taking the

contents inside. They have requisitioned every utensil that will hold water in the village. No doubt we shall be able to hold out there till some other detachment comes along the road."

"I think that it is a very good plan, major," Terence said. "They would hardly be able to carry it by assault, unless they burnt down the door; and you ought to be able to prevent them from doing that."

Half an hour later, the whole French force was collected in the church. As soon as the Spaniards found what had happened, they speedily entered the village; and opened fire from every window giving a view of the church, and from loopholes that they quickly made in the walls.

Terence noticed that, when the British soldiers entered the church, most of them carried heavy staves. A sergeant came up, and saluted.

"We have had four men killed and eight wounded, sir. The men declare that they are not going to stand still and see the French murdered by these fellows, and I doubt if any orders will keep them back."

"Very well, sergeant. I will speak to them, presently.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, to the other officers, "three of you are senior to me in our own army and, though I own that I don't know how matters should stand, holding as I do Lord Beresford's commission as colonel, I am perfectly willing to place myself under the orders of whoever may be senior of you."

"I believe I am the senior," one of the captains said; "but I should imagine that Lord Beresford's commission would, for the time, rank just as if it had been signed by our own authorities. Moreover, you are on Wellesley's staff. You have seen more service out here than any of us, and I think that you are certainly entitled to the command; though really, I don't see what we can do, in our uniforms."

"I quite agree with you, Captain Travers, and therefore my proposal is that we shall all take them off, and fight in our shirt sleeves. The guerillas will then not be able to affirm that there were any men in English uniforms assisting the French."

"I think the idea is an excellent one," Captain Travers said.

"Then in that case I will act upon it;" and Terence went up to the English soldiers, who were standing in a group in the middle of the church.

"I am sure you quite understand, my men," he said, "that it would never do for you to be fighting, in British uniforms, against the Spaniards; otherwise, I leave the matter in your hands. But I may mention that it is the intention of myself, and the other officers, to defend this church without our coats and caps. If any of you like to do the same, of course you can join us. I give no orders whatever on the subject, but you see that it would get rid of the inconvenience of soldiers, in British uniforms, fighting against the Spaniards."

The men answered with a shout of satisfaction, mingled with laughter and, in less than a minute, the scarlet uniforms had disappeared. The muskets of the French killed and wounded were appropriated, and the rest of the English prisoners seized their clubs.

For some hours the fight continued and, from the roof of the church belfry and windows, a hot fire answered the incessant fusillade of the Spaniards. The French and English officers were obliged, constantly, to impress upon the men that they must husband their ammunition; as there was no saying how long they might be besieged before a detachment, strong enough to turn the scale, arrived.

"Maintain a fire heavy enough to make them keep at it. Their ammunition is likely to run short as soon as ours, and there is not much chance of their being able to replenish it. But don't fire at random. Let every bullet tell. Take a steady aim at the windows through which they are firing."

Late in the afternoon the fire of the guerillas slackened a good deal, and it was evident that their leaders were enjoining them not to waste their ammunition. As it became dark, the officers gathered again in the body of the church. The total loss had risen to thirty-two killed and fifty wounded, the English casualties being about a third of the whole.

"It is a heavy loss," the major said, "and I have noticed that, as the fire slackened, the proportion of men hit has been larger. I suppose that they are only keeping their best shots at work."

"I should fancy," Terence said, "that if we were to make a sortie, we could scatter them altogether. As soon as it is dark we might get out by that sacristy door at the rear. They gave up the attack on that side some time ago, as they could not get any shelter; and when they found that was so, they betook themselves to houses where they were better covered. If we were to go out noiselessly and sweep round the village; so as to fall upon it in two bodies, one at each end; they will take us for a body of troops just arrived. Even if they do hear us, as we go out, we can go straight at them; and should, I have no doubt, be able to clear the place with a rush.

"The only thing is, major, I should be glad if your soldiers would take off their coatees, too, so that there would be nothing to distinguish our men from yours. What do you think?"

"I think that it will be much the best plan," Captain Travers said. "In the first place, it is probable that they will try to burn us out, tonight; and we could not hope to prevent their piling faggots against the doors, in the dark. For that reason, alone, I think that it will be much better to attack them than wait for them to attack us.

"We need only leave some twenty of the less seriously wounded men to guard the place. When we sally out, the guerillas will have plenty to do without making an attack on the church. I certainly think that we are not likely to lose so many lives in a sortie as we should do in the defence, here, against a night attack."

"I certainly am of your opinion, colonel," the French major said; "and if you and your men will join us, I have no doubt that we shall be able to clear the village."

As soon as it became quite dark, the men on the roof were all called down; with the exception of one or two, who were ordered to continue to fire from various spots there and in the belfry, so that the Spaniards should not discover that the garrison had been withdrawn. Then the French were drawn up, and divided into two parties. The English who had muskets were told off, in equal numbers, to each of these parties; as were those who had nothing but their clubs. The major then ordered his soldiers to take off their coats, and to leave their shakos behind them.

The French major took the command of one party, and asked Terence to take command of the other. This he declined.

"No, sir, it is better that one of your own officers should be in command. We will divide ourselves between the two parties."

The major now impressed upon his men the necessity for absolute quiet, and for marching as lightly and silently as possible. The English officers gave similar instructions to their men. It was arranged that, when the door was opened, the two parties should issue out simultaneously, two abreast; so that if the alarm was given before all were out, they would be able to turn right and left, and attack in both directions at once. A French lieutenant was appointed to remain in the church, and command the little garrison of wounded men.

Those who sallied out were to stoop low as they went, and were to keep a few paces apart. Some hangings in the church were pulled down and torn up into strips, with which the men were directed to muffle their boots.

There was no mistaking the ardour with which the soldiers prepared for the sortie. Both English and French were indignant at being pent up by a foe they thoroughly despised, and were eager to be at the enemy. The casualties added to their wrath; one of the French officers had been killed, and another hurt seriously; while three of the English had also been wounded, though in each case but slightly.

The bolts of the door were noiselessly drawn, and that of the lock forced back; then the two little parties stole out, in the order in which they had been directed. The guerillas had just begun to fire heavily, as a prelude, Terence had no doubt, to a serious attack upon the church. Fortunately there were no houses at the back of the church, and no shout indicated that the party were seen. They therefore kept together, until fifty or sixty yards from the door; then they separated, and continued their way to the ends of the village to which they had been, respectively, assigned.

Then at one end of the village a French trumpeter sounded the charge, and two drummers at the other beat the same order, vigorously, and with loud cheers they rushed down the street, the French and English alike shouting. It had been arranged that, while the French held their way straight on, shooting down the Spaniards as they poured out into the street, the British should break up into small detachments, burst their way into the houses, and overpower the enemy there. They found the first houses they entered deserted, and the soldiers uttered exclamations of impatience as they heard the heavy roll of firing in the main street. As they approached the centre of the village, however, they came upon a number of the Spaniards rushing from their houses.

The men who had arms opened fire at once upon them, while those with clubs dashed forward, levelling the panic-stricken guerillas to the ground with their heavy blows, and arming themselves with their muskets and bandoleers. Thus the firing soon became general, and the Spaniards, struck with utter dismay, and believing that they had been attacked by a heavy column that had just arrived, speedily took to headlong flight, most of them throwing away their arms as they fled. In some of the houses there were short but desperate conflicts but, in a quarter of an hour after the first shot was fired, there was not a guerilla remaining alive in the village, upwards of a hundred and fifty having been killed; while on the side of their assailants only some fifteen had been killed, and twenty-eight wounded.

They soon formed up in the street, and were told off, in parties of twelve, to the houses in the outskirts of the village. Three in each party were to keep watch, by turns, while the rest slept. An English officer was to remain in charge on one side of the street, and a French officer on the other. The rest went back to the church, whose doors were now thrown open.

"I thank you most heartily, gentlemen," the French officer said, to Terence and to the other British officers, "for the immense service that you have rendered us. Had it not been for your aid, our position would have been a very precarious one, before morning. As it is, I think we need fear no further interruption. We are now all armed; and as, with the wounded fit for work, we are still three hundred strong, we should beat off any force likely to attack us; though indeed, I have no belief that they will rally again. At any rate, their losses have been extremely heavy; and the streets were completely strewn with guns, so that I doubt whether half of those who got away have carried their weapons with them."

The next morning, indeed, it was found that in all about 400 muskets had been left behind. All that remained over, after arming the British soldiers, were broken up and thrown down the wells. Enough provisions were collected, among the houses, to furnish the whole with three or four days' rations. The dead were buried in a field near the village, those wounded too severely to march were placed in the waggons; and the rest, who had now resumed their uniforms, set out in high spirits. They were in the same order as before, but the prisoners were told to carry their muskets at the trail, while the French shouldered theirs; so that, viewed from a distance, the British should appear unarmed.

"That has been a grand bit of excitement, Terence," Dick Ryan said gleefully to his friend, as they marched along together. "Those fellows certainly fight a good deal more pluckily than the regular troops do. It was a capital idea to make all the men take off their uniforms, for I don't suppose the Spaniards, even for a moment, dreamt that we were among their assailants; at any rate, they have no proof that we were.

"You really must get me as your adjutant, Terence. I see there is very much more fun to be got out of your sort of fighting than there is with the regiment. I am very pleased, now, that I stuck to Portuguese as you advised me; though it was a great bore, at first."

"I hope, Dicky, we sha'n't find, when we get back in the spring, that the corps has been turned over to Beresford as part of his regular command; for I must say that I quite appreciate the advantage of independence.

"Well, this business ought to do us some good. No doubt the major will report, in warm terms, the assistance we have rendered him; and we shall get good treatment. Of course, some of their

prisons must be better than others and, if they will confine us in some place near the frontier, instead of marching us half through France, it will make it all the easier for us to get away. It is not the getting out of prison that is the difficulty, but the travelling through the country. I am getting on well with my French, but there is no hope of being able to speak well enough to pass as a native. As for you, you will have to keep your mouth shut altogether, which will be mightily difficult."

"You will manage it somehow, Terence. I have no fear of you getting me through the country. It is getting out of the country that seems, to me, the difficulty."

"There is one thing, Dicky. We need be in no hurry about it. There is little chance of fighting beginning for another six or seven months and, directly we come to the end of our march, wherever it may be, we must begin to pick up as much French as we can, from our guards. In three or four months I ought, at least, to be able to answer questions; not perhaps in good French, but in French as good as, say, a Savoyard workman or musician might be able to muster."

"Oh, Lor'!" Dick Ryan said, with a deep sigh, "you don't mean to say that I must begin to work on another language, just after I have been slaving, for the last six months, at Portuguese?"

"Not unless you like, Dicky. I can either start alone, or with someone else who has some knowledge of French; but I am not going to run the risk of being recaptured by taking anyone with me who cares so little for liberty that he grudges three or four hours' work, a day, to get up the means of making his escape."

"Oh, of course I shall learn," Ryan said pettishly. "You always get your own way, Terence. It was so at Athlone: you first of all began by asking my opinion, and then carried out things exactly as you proposed, yourself. Learning the language is a horrid nuisance, but I see that it has to be done."

"I expect, Dicky, you will have to make up as a woman. You see, you are not much taller than a tallish woman."

"Well, that would be rather a lark," Ryan said; "only don't you think I should be almost too good-looking for a French woman?"

"You might be that, Dicky. It is certainly a drawback. If I could get hold of a good-sized monkey's skin, I might sew you up in it."

"A bear skin would be better, I should say," Dick laughed; "but I don't think anyone would think that it was a real bear. I saw a chap with one once, at Athlone: no man could open his mouth as wide as that beast did; and as to its tongue, it would be four times as long as mine. No, I think the woman idea would be best; but I should have to shave very close."

"Shave!" Terence repeated, scornfully. "Why, I could not see any hair on your face with a magnifying glass. If that were the only drawback, the matter could be arranged without difficulty."

Without farther adventure, they crossed the mountains and came down to Bayonne. At each halting place where French troops were stationed, the British prisoners were received with warm hospitality by them, when they learned from their comrades that the British had fought side by side with the French against the guerillas, and had saved them from what might have been a very serious disaster. The French shook hands with them warmly, patted them on the shoulders, with many exclamations of "Braves garcons!" and they were led away to cafes, and treated as the heroes of the day, while the officers were entertained by those of the garrison.

At Bayonne they and their escort parted on the most cordial terms, the French exclaiming that it was a shame such brave fellows should be held as prisoners; and that they ought to be released at once, and sent back in a ship, with a flag of truce, to Portugal.

The major, after handing over the soldiers to the prison authorities, took Terence and the other British officers to the headquarters of the governor of the town; and introduced them to him, giving him a lively account of the fight with the guerillas, and the manner in which the prisoners, armed only with clubs and the muskets of the soldiers no longer able to use them, had made common cause with the French and, joining them in the sortie, defeated the Spanish with heavy loss. The governor expressed, courteously, his thanks to the officers for the part they had taken.

"I shall forward Major Marcy's report to headquarters, gentlemen, and shall be happy to give you the liberty of the town on parole. I have no doubt that, if no other good comes of your adventure, you will be placed among an early list of officers to be exchanged."

"I am very much obliged to you, general," Terence said, "but I and Lieutenant Ryan would prefer not to give our parole. I don't say we are likely to make our escape but, at any rate, we should like to be able to take any opportunity, if we saw one."

The general smiled.

"Of course, it must be as you like, sir; but I think that you are wrong. However, at any time, if you like to change your minds, I will give instructions to the officer in command of the prison to release you, immediately you give your parole not to leave the town."

The matter had been talked over on the march, and the others now expressed their willingness to give their parole. They had told Terence they thought he was wrong, and that it would be impossible to make an escape, as it would be necessary to traverse either the whole of Spain or the whole of France before he could find any means of rejoining the army; and that, before long, they might be exchanged.

"I don't think there is a prospect of an early exchange," Terence said. "There cannot have been many prisoners taken, during this short campaign; and I don't suppose there will be any talk of exchanges, for some time to come. I am particularly anxious to get back again, if I possibly can, as I am afraid that my regiment will be broken up; and that, unless I get back before the campaign begins in spring, I shall not get the command again. So I mean to get away, if I can. Anyhow, I would just as soon be in prison as walking about the streets of Bayonne. So I have quite made up my mind not to give my parole."

The officers all returned to the prison quarters assigned to them; the difference being that those on parole could go in and out as they chose, and could, at will, take their meals in the town; while Terence and Ryan were placed together in a room, with a sentry at the door, whose instructions were to accompany them whenever they wished to go beyond the door and to walk in the prison yard, or on the walls surrounding it.

Chapter 5: An Escape

"Well, here we are, Terence," Ryan said cheerfully, as the door of their cell closed behind them; "and now, what next?"

"The next thing is to look round, Dick. Other matters can wait. One cannot form the remotest idea as to the possibilities of an escape, until one has found out everything about the place. I should say that it will be quite soon enough to discuss it, in another couple of months.

"Now, as to the room; there is nothing to grumble at here. Two truckle beds, not altogether luxurious in appearance but, at any rate, a good deal softer than the ground on which we have been sleeping, for months past. A couple of chairs, designed for use rather than comfort; but which will do to sit on, while we take our meals, and at other times we can use the beds as sofas. A good-sized piece of carpet, a table, and what looks like a pudding dish to wash in.

"Things might have been better, and they might have been a great deal worse. As to our food, we must reserve comment until they bring us some.

"Now, as to funds, I had only twenty-five crowns on me when I was captured. You were rather better off, as you had ten pounds in gold and eight crowns in silver. You see, had we given our parole like the others, and gone in for luxurious feeding outside, our stock would soon have given out; and money is an essential for carrying out an escape, when that escape involves perhaps weeks of travelling, and certainly disguises of different kinds. We have not a penny too much for that, and must resolve to eschew all luxuries except tobacco, and perhaps a bottle of wine on Sundays."

"Our windows, as you observe, are very strongly barred. They look westward, but that range of buildings opposite prevents our getting a view of the sea. One thing is evident, at once: that it is no manner of use for us to think of cutting through those bars, or dislodging them; for we should only, on lowering ourselves, be in the courtyard, and no nearer escape than we were before we began the job. It is a good thing to get at least one point off our mind.

"Now, Dick, before we go further, let us make an agreement that we will always talk in French. I know enough of it to be able to assist you, and it will be an amusement, as well as a help, to accustom ourselves to talk in it."

"All right," Ryan said, resignedly; "but I bargain that, for an hour a day, we drop it altogether. It will be an awful nuisance; and one must give one's tongue a rest, occasionally, by letting it straighten itself out a bit."

The door now opened, and one of the warders entered with two large bowls of broth, a fair-sized piece of the meat from which it was made, a dish of vegetables, a large piece of bread, and a bottle of wine.

"This is your supper, messieurs. In the morning you have coffee and a piece of bread; at twelve o'clock a meal like this, with a bottle of wine between you."

"Thank you," Terence said cheerfully, "that will do extremely well. Are there any other British officers here?"

"None, except your comrades. There were some naval officers here last week, but they have been sent into the interior. We do not have many prisoners here. Those captured at sea, by warships or privateers, are generally taken to Brest and, so far, we have not had many of your nation sent from Spain. There are Spaniards, sometimes, but they do not count. Those that are taken are generally drafted into the Spanish corps of our army."

"Can we buy tobacco?" Terence asked.

"Certainly, monsieur. There is a canteen in the courtyard. It is open from eight till nine o'clock in the morning, and from five to six in the evening. But you are not allowed to get things in from the town; but nevertheless–" and he smiled, "–as your comrades are on parole, doubtless, should you

need anything beyond what is sold in the canteen, it may chance that they may bring you just the things you want."

"Thank you. You had better get something from the canteen for yourself," Terence said, handing him a crown.

"Thank you, monsieur. I have heard, from the soldiers who came in with you, that you fought bravely with them against the Spanish brigands; and they think that it is very hard that you and your companion should be shut up here, after having proved such good comrades. I have a cousin among them. He, like myself, is a native of Bayonne and, should it be in his power, I am sure that he and his comrades would do anything they could for Monsieur–as far, of course, as their duty as French soldiers will allow them."

"Thanks. By the way, what is your name?"

"Jean Monier, monsieur."

"Well, Jean, will you please tell your cousin that I am obliged to him for his goodwill? It was a pleasure to fight side by side with such brave soldiers and, should an occasion offer, I will gladly avail myself of his services. The detachment is not going farther, is it?"

"No, monsieur. They will remain here for perhaps two or three months, till the good French air has invigorated them; then they will join some column marching south again. There is nothing more that you will want tonight, monsieur?"

"No, thank you, Jean. Good evening!"

"Good evening, good sleep!" and the warder retired.

"What is all that jabber about, Terence?"

"Very satisfactory jabber, and jabber that is likely to lead to a very good result. A cousin of his is one of the guard that came down with us. He has told this warder about our fight, and asked him to say that he and his comrades were very angry at our being shut up here; and as much as said that they would aid us to escape, if it was in their power, so we may consider that our first difficulty is as good as arranged. No doubt in a short time they will be put on regular garrison duty, and will take their turn in furnishing prison guards. This warder is evidently ready to do anything he can, so that we may look upon our escape from prison as a matter of certainty. I don't suppose that, in any case, the guard is a very vigilant one; for they would not expect that prisoners of war here would try to escape. At Verdun, and other prisons within a few days' journey of the frontier, it would be different."

"Well, that is good news, Terence, though I see myself that our difficulties will really begin only when we get out. There is no doubt that the fight with the guerillas was a lucky thing for us. I would not have missed it for anything, for I must say there was much more excitement in it than in a battle, at least as far as my experience of a battle goes. At Talavera we had nothing to do but stick up on the top of a hill, watch the French columns climbing up, and then give them a volley or two and roll them down the hill again; and between times stand to be shelled by Victor's batteries on the opposite hill. I cannot see that there is any fun about that. This fight, too, has turned out a very good thing for us. I expect we should not have been so well treated if it had not been for it, and the fact that some of these French soldiers are ready to give us a helping hand is first rate.

"You see, it is all your luck, Terence. There never was such a fellow for luck as you are."

"There is no doubt about that," Terence agreed. "Now, Dick, you must really break into French."

"Tomorrow morning will be time enough for that," Ryan said, in a tone of determination. "I want to talk now, really talk; and I can't do that in French, especially after what you have just told me. By the way, I don't see, myself, why we should make this journey through France. Why not try to get a boat, and land somewhere on the coast of Spain?"

"I have been thinking of that, Dick; but it seemed to me, before, altogether too difficult. Still, if we can get help from outside, I don't know why we should not be able to manage it. We should have to go some distance along the Spanish coast, for there are sure to be French garrisons at Bilbao and

Santander; but beyond that I should think we might land at any little village. Galicia must certainly have been evacuated by the French, for we know that Ney's corps were down in the Tagus valley; and I should think that they cannot have any great force in the Asturias. The worst of it is, we have not got enough money to buy a boat; and if we had, the soldiers could hardly bargain with a fisherman for one. Of course, if we were free we might arrange with a man to go with us in his boat, and pay him so much for its hire, for three or four days."

"We might make our way down the river, and steal one, Terence."

"Yes, we might do that, but it would be a heavy loss to some poor fellow. Well, I shall look forward to the morning, when we can go out and see all about the prison arrangements."

"Then you have given up the idea of waiting for two months before you do anything, Terence?" Ryan remarked.

"Certainly. You see, these French convalescents may be marched back again, in another month's time and, at present, our plans must be formed upon the supposition that they are ready to help us. It would never do to throw away such an opportunity as that. It would be little short of madness to try and get out, unless we had disguises of some sort. My staff officer's uniform, or your scarlet, would lead to our arrest at the first village we came to.

"Besides, before this news one was willing to wait contentedly, for a time, till some good opportunity presented itself. Now that we have such an unexpected offer of assistance, the sooner we get out of the place the better."

The next morning they went out into the courtyard of the prison. The soldiers who had been captured with them were walking about in groups; but the sentry who accompanied the two British officers led them through these, and took them up to the top of the wall surrounding the prison.

"Messieurs," he said, "when the others are shut up you can go where you please, but my orders are that you are not to communicate with your soldiers."

He then fell back some distance, and left them free to wander about on the wall.

From this point they had a view over the city. Bayonne was a strongly fortified place, standing on the junction of the Nive and Adour, and on the south side of the latter river, two miles from its mouth. The Nive ran through the town, and its waters supplied the ditches of the encircling wall and bastions. The prison was situated on the Nive, at some three or four hundred yards from the spot where it entered the Adour.

"I should say this quite decides it," Terence said, when they had made the circuit of the walls, upon which sentries were placed at short intervals. "Once out of the town the river would be open to us, but it would be next to impossible to pass those semicircles of fortifications on both sides of the town. You can see the masts of the craft lying at the quays and, though I should not like to rob a fisherman of his boat; I should not feel the smallest scruple in taking a ship's boat, which would be, comparatively, a small loss to the owner. The worst of it would be that, directly we were found to be missing, and the owner of the boat reported its loss, they might send out some of their gunboats in search of us, and we should very soon be overtaken."

Discipline was not very strict in the French army, except when in an enemy's country; and the sentries, knowing well that there was really no occasion for watchfulness, answered willingly the questions that Terence asked them as to the names of places within sight.

"It must be rather tedious work for you, on the wall here," Terence said to one whose post was shielded by a building close by, from observation from below.

"Very dull," the soldier said, "and we shall be glad enough when we are relieved and marched into Spain. Here we are doing no good. There is no chance whatever of the prisoners attempting an escape, for if they did get out of here they could get no further; but they say that we shall not stop here long, and we shall be heartily glad when the order comes. They say the convalescents who came in yesterday will take over the prison duties next week."

Terence's motive for speaking to the men was to discover whether they were forbidden to talk, and it was satisfactory to find that, if there was such a rule, it was by no means strictly observed. Leaning on the parapet, he and Ryan stood for some time looking at the sea. There were many fishing boats dotting its surface, and the tapering masts of two schooners could be seen near the mouth of the river.

"I have no doubt that they are privateers," Terence said. "They have just the appearance of that fellow we captured on the way out. One would not have much chance of getting far in a boat, with those fellows after us.

"It seems to me that, if it could possibly be managed, our safest plan would be to lie quiet in the town for a week or so, after we got out; then it would be comparatively safe to get hold of a boat and make off in it."

"Yes, if that could be managed, it certainly would be the safest plan. If we changed our minds about making off by sea, we might then be able to pass out through the fortifications, without question. Of course, they would be vigilant for a short time after we were missing; but I suppose that, at ordinary times, the country people would go in and out unquestioned, just as in any other town for, with no enemy nearer than Portugal, there could be no occasion whatever for watchfulness."

Terence and his companion had seen nothing of their friends on parole, as these, they found, although lodged in prison for their own convenience, were not permitted to have any communication with the other prisoners. Ten days after they arrived at Bayonne, the warder, who had, since he first spoke to them, said nothing beyond the usual salutations, remarked carelessly:

"The soldiers who came down with you took up the prison duties last night. My cousin told me to say that you will know him, and four or five of his comrades of the 72nd of the line, all of whom are thoroughly in agreement with him, by their saying as you pass them:

"'The morning is fair, Colonel.'

"To any of them you can speak, when you find an opportunity of doing so, unobserved."

"Thank you; but will it not be safer for them were you to carry my messages?"

"No; I cannot do that," the warder said. "I think that it is quite right that my cousin, and his comrades, should do anything in their power to aid those who stood by them when attacked; but I wish to know nothing about it. It must be between you and them, for I must be able to swear that I had no hand in the matter, and that I locked you up safely, at night."

"You are quite right, Jean. It is much the best plan that it should be so. I certainly should not, myself, like to know that in making my escape I might endanger the life of one who had acted simply from kindness of heart; and trust that no suspicion, whatever, will fall upon you. I thank you most heartily for having brought me the message from your cousin, and for the goodwill that you have shown us."

When Terence and Ryan went out as usual, after breakfast, all the sentries they passed saluted, as if to one of their own officers. They of course returned the salute, and made a cheery remark to each, such as "Rather a change, this, from our work up in the hills, lad," to which each gave some short and respectful answer, three of them prefacing it with the words: "The morning is fair, mon Colonel ".

Two of these had the number of their regiment on their shako. The other, who had a deep and scarcely-healed scar over the ear, only wore a forage cap, having evidently lost his shako when wounded.

"What do you mean by saluting a prisoner," a French staff officer, when he was passing, angrily asked an old soldier. "You have been long enough in the service, surely, to know that prisoners are not saluted."

The soldier stood at attention.

"Monsieur le Capitaine," he said, "I am not saluting a prisoner. I am saluting a brave officer, whose orders I have obeyed in a hard fight, and to whom I and my comrades probably owed our lives. A mark of respect is due to a brave man, whether a prisoner of war or not."

The officer passed on without answering and, arriving at headquarters, reported the circumstances to the general.

"I am not surprised, Captain Espel," the latter replied, with a slight smile. "A French soldier knows how to respect bravery, and in this case there is little doubt that, but for the assistance of their prisoners, it would have gone very hard with that detachment. That young officer who, strangely enough, is a colonel, was a prisoner when he fought side by side with these men; and it is but natural that they scarcely regard him as one, now. He has refused to give his parole, and I am afraid he means to try to make his escape. I am sorry for, should he do so, he is sure to be captured again."

The third one of the 72nd men, the one with a forage cap, chanced to be posted at the point of the wall that was not overlooked and, after he had repeated the formula agreed upon, Terence said to him:

"You are one of those lads who sent me a message that you would assist me, if you could."

"That is so, mon Colonel. You assisted us when we were somewhat hotly pressed, and tis but good comradeship to repay such a service, if one can. We have been thinking it over and, although it would not be difficult for you to escape from here, we do not see how you are to be got out of the town."

"That is the difficulty I see myself," Terence replied. "We could not hope to pass through the circle of fortifications and, were we to take a boat and make off, we should be pursued and recaptured, to a certainty; for of course, as soon as our escape was known, there would be a hot search made for us.

"There are two things needed. The first is disguises. The second is a shelter, until the search for us slackens, after which it would be comparatively easy for us to make off."

"What sort of disguises would you want, monsieur?"

"If we go by land, peasant dresses; if by water, those of fishermen. We have money, which I can give you to purchase these."

"That we could do for you, monsieur, but the hiding place is more difficult. However, that we will see about. I am a native here, and have of course many friends and acquaintances in the town. When we have made our plans I will let you know. I will manage that, when it is my turn for duty, I will always be posted here; and then I can tell you what is arranged, and give you whatever is necessary to aid you to make your escape. My cousin, Jean Monier, will shut his eyes; but he will not do anything himself, and I think that he is right, for of course he will be the first to be suspected.

"As for us, it will be no matter. Everyone knows how you stood by us, and they will guess that some of us have had a hand in it; but they will never find out which of us was chiefly concerned. I expect that soon we shall all be taken off this prison duty, for which we shall not be sorry, and sent back to Spain with the first detachment that comes along; but after all, one is not so badly off in Spain, and certainly Madrid is a good deal more lively than Bayonne."

"I suppose," Terence said, nodding towards their guard, who was standing a few paces away gazing over the country, "he knows nothing about this."

"No, monsieur, we have kept it to just the men of our own regiment; but all feel the same about your being kept a prisoner, and there is no fear of his telling anyone that you spoke to one man more than another, when it is found out that you have escaped. Still, it might be as well that you should not speak to me again, until I tell you that it is a fine morning; for although all our own men can be trusted, if any of the regular prison warders was to notice anything he would not be slow in mentioning it, in hope of getting promotion."

Accordingly Terence made a point of only passing along that part of the wall once a day, and merely saying a word to the soldier, as he did to others, on the occasions when he was on duty.

Ten days later the man replied to his salutation by remarking that it was a "fair day." It happened that the man told off to guard them on this occasion was another of the 72nd; there was therefore nothing to be feared from him.

"I have arranged the matter, monsieur," the soldier said. "My sister's husband, Jules Varlin, will shelter you. He is a fisherman, and you can be safely hidden in the loft where he keeps his nets and gear. He is an honest fellow, and my sister has talked him over into lending his aid so far and, although he has not promised it yet, I think we shall get him to go down the river with you, so as to reply if you are challenged. You can put him ashore a mile or two along the coast.

"Now as to the escape, monsieur. Here is a sharp saw. With it you can cut round the lock of your door. There are two outside bolts, whose position I dare say you have noticed; by cutting a hole close to each of them, you can get your hand through and draw them. Here is a short-handled augur, to make a hole for the saw to go through.

"There are four sentries at night, in the courtyard. We shall manage to get all our men on duty, tomorrow evening. Our sergeant is a good fellow and, if he guesses anything, will hold his tongue; for I have heard him say, more than once, that it is monstrous that you should be kept a prisoner.

"Therefore you need not be afraid of them. They will take care to keep their eyes shut. I shall be on sentry duty here, and will get the disguises up, and a rope. When you have got down I shall let the rope drop, and you will carry it off and take it away with you; thus there will be no evidence where you descended.

"Here are two sharp files, with which you can cut through the bars of your window, and remove some of them; then it will not be known whether you escaped that way, or down the stairs; and the men on sentry in the courtyard at the bottom cannot be blamed because, for aught the governor will know, you may have gone out through this window into the other courtyard, and got over the wall on that side; so they would have no proof as to which set of men were negligent.

"No doubt we shall all be talked to, and perhaps kept in the guardroom a few days, but that won't hurt us; and soldiers are scarce enough, so they will hardly keep ten or twelve men long from duty. There are not enough in the town, now, to furnish all the guards properly; so you need not worry about us.

"I will give you instructions how to find my sister's house, tomorrow night. You must not escape until you hear the bell strike midnight. Our party will relieve guard at that hour. You see, we have four hours on duty and, as you may have gone either on the first watch, the second, or the third, they will not be able to pitch on us more than on the others; so that, in fact, the blame will be divided between forty of us. You will, of course, put on your disguises over your uniforms, and destroy your clothes, when you get to Jules' house."

"I thank you very warmly, my good fellow, for running all this risk for me. Here are two hundred francs to pay for the disguises."

"That will be more than enough," the soldier said. "Jules put it down at a hundred and fifty."

"Things may cost more than he expects. At any rate, please hand these to him. I can arrange matters with him when I see him.

"Then at about a quarter past twelve we will sally out. We will walk on now, lest any of the warders should happen to notice that we have been a long time on this part of the wall."

Ryan had understood but little of what was happening and, when Terence told him what had been arranged, he exclaimed:

"Well, after this, Terence, I will never say a word against a Frenchman. Here are these soldiers going to run a lot of risk, and a certainty of getting into a row for us, merely because we did the best we could against those wretched Spaniards; and without getting any reward whatever, for they must know that prisoners are not likely to have any money to spare about them."

"Quite so, Ryan; and what is more, if I had a hundred pounds in my pocket, I would not offer them a penny; for certainly they would take it as an insult if I did so. They would feel that it would be a sort of bribe and, though they are ready to help us as comrades, I am sure they would not do it for money. I sincerely hope they won't get into any serious row. As he said, authorities won't be able to tell which party was on guard at the time we went, and they could hardly put the whole of them

under arrest–at least, not keep them under arrest. No doubt there will be a close search in the town for us, but there is little fear of our being discovered.

"Our dangers won't begin until we are fairly afloat. I know nothing about sailing. I have rowed a boat many a time, at Athlone; but as for sailing, I have never once tried it."

"Nor have I," Ryan said. "But I suppose there is no difficulty about it. You put up the sail, and you take hold of the rope at the corner, and off you go."

"It sounds all right, Dicky, and I dare say we shall manage to get along, somehow; but these things are not half as easy as they look. Now we had better have four or five hours' sleep this afternoon, for I expect it will take us the best part of the night to file through the bars. You must not cut quite through them, but just leave them so that we can finish them off in a short time, tomorrow night."

"But the warder might notice them?"

"He is not likely to look very sharply, Dicky; but at the same time, it is just as well not to put too great a strain on his loyalty. We will keep a piece of bread over from our supper, work it up into a sort of paste, fill up any cuts we make, and rub it over with dirt till it well matches the bars. Certainly they have planned the affair capitally, so as to throw doubt as to which way we descended, and so divide the blame between as many of the sentries as possible."

It took four hours' work, that night, to get through the bars. They were most careful not to let any of the filings fall outside for, had any of them dropped into the courtyard below, they might well catch the eye of a warder; and in that case an examination of all the windows of the rooms above would certainly be made, at once. Before the warder's visit the next morning, the holes had been filled up with bread worked into a putty and smeared over with dust; which so nearly matched the bars that it could not be observed, except by a careful examination.

The next day they abstained from saying more than a passing word to any of the French soldiers. They waited, after being locked up for the night, for two or three hours; and then began their work at the door. The saw was a very narrow one and, when they had made a hole with the augur, they found no difficulty in cutting the wood; therefore they thought it was well to leave that for the last thing, and so betook themselves to their files, and soon removed enough of the bars to enable a man to crawl through. Then they returned to the door, and had cut round the lock, and made holes through which they could pass their hands to draw back the bolts, a short time before the clock struck twelve.

Then they went to the window, and listened. They heard the bells strike midnight, and then a stir below, as the sentries were relieved. Waiting for a few minutes, until all had become quiet again, they drew back the bolts, took off their shoes, and went noiselessly down the stairs.

The night was very dark and, although they could hear the tread of the sentries in the courtyard, they could not make out their figures. They crossed the yard, keeping as far as possible from the sentries. They had no doubt that all would happen as arranged; but there was, of course, the possibility that at the last moment some change might have been made; and it was, in any case, as well that the men there should be able to declare, honestly, that they had seen no one.

They were glad when they reached the archway leading to the stairs that led to the top of the wall. Mounting, they kept along by the parapet, stooping so that their figures should not show against the sky for, dark as it was below, they might have been noticed had they not done so. Presently they saw the sentry.

"Diable, messieurs!" he said in a low tone, as they came up to him, "you gave me a start. I was expecting you, but I did not hear your footsteps nor see you and, had you been enemies, you might very well have seized and disarmed me before I could give the alarm.

"Well, here are your clothes."

They soon pulled the blue canvas leggings over their breeches, and over these the high boots, in which their feet felt lost. A rough blouse and a fisherman's oilskin cap completed the disguise. They put their boots into the capacious pockets in the blouses, and were then ready to descend. They had left their shakos in their cell when they started.

While they had been putting on their clothes, the sentry had fastened the rope and lowered it down.

"We are ready now, Jacques," Terence said. "Goodbye, my good friend. We shall never forget the kindness that you have shown us, and shall remember with gratitude, all our lives, how a party of French soldiers were ready to show themselves good comrades to men who had fought by their sides, even though the two nations were at war with each other. We shall always feel a kindness towards the French uniform, in future; and if you or any of your comrades of the 72nd should chance to fall into British hands, and you can send word to me or to Mr. Ryan, I can promise you that we will do all we can to have you released at once and sent back, or to aid you in any other way."

"We have done but our duty to brave comrades," the soldier said.

"Now, as to where to find my cousin. You will go down that street below, and take the third turning on the right. That will lead you down to the wharves. Keep along by the houses facing them until you come to the fourth turning. It is a narrow lane, and there is a cabaret at each corner of it. My cousin's house is the twelfth on the left-hand side. He will be standing at the door. You will say to him as you pass, 'It is a dark night,' and he will then let you in.

"Don't walk as if you were in a hurry: fishermen never do that. It is not likely that you will meet anyone, but if you do, and he sees two fishermen hurrying, it will strike him as singular; and when there came news of two prisoners having escaped, he might mention the matter, which might lead to a search in the right quarter."

"Will you go first, Ryan, or shall I?" Terence said.

"Just as you like."

"Well, then, you may as well go, as then I can talk with this good fellow till it is my turn."

Ryan shook the soldier's hand heartily, took hold of the rope, slung himself over the parapet, and began the descent. Terence and the soldier leaned over, and watched him until they could no longer make out the figure with certainty. As soon as the tension on the rope slackened, Terence grasped Jacques' hand, said a few more words of thanks, and then followed his companion. As soon as he reached the ground he shook the rope and, a minute later, it fell on the ground beside him.

He coiled it up, and then they started down the street. Following the instructions that they had received, in ten minutes they reached the end of the lane.

"We were to throw away the rope, were we not?" Ryan said.

"Yes, but now we are here, there can be no use in our doing so. If a length of rope were found lying in the road, people would wonder who had thrown it away; besides, it is a good stout piece of new rope, and may be of use to the fisherman."

Counting the doors carefully as they went along, they came to the twelfth where, before they reached it, the red glow from a pipe showed that a man was standing outside.

"It is a dark night, mate," Terence said in a low tone, as he came up to him.

"That is right," the man replied; "come in."

He stood aside as they entered, closed the door behind them, and then lifted a piece of old canvas thrown over a lighted lantern.

Chapter 6: Afloat

Jules Varlin held the lantern above his head, and took a good look at his visitors.

"You will pass very well for young fishermen, messieurs," he said, "when you have dirtied your faces and hands a bit, and rubbed your hair the wrong way, all over your head. Well, come in here. My wife is waiting up to welcome you. It is her doing that you are here. I should not have agreed, but what can one do when a woman once sets her mind upon a thing?"

He opened a door. A woman rose from her seat. She was some years younger than her husband.

"Welcome, messieurs," she said. "We are pleased, indeed, to be able to return the kindness you showed to my brother."

The fisherman grunted.

"No, Jules," she said, "I won't have you say that you haven't gone willingly into this. You pretended not to, but I know very well that it was only because you like to be coaxed, and that you would have done it for Jacques' sake."

"Jacques is a good fellow," her husband replied, "and I say nothing against him; but I don't know that I should have consented, if it had not been for you and your bothering me."

"Don't you believe him, monsieur. Jules has a good heart, though he likes pretending that he is a bear.

"Now, monsieur, I have some coffee ready for you."

"I need not say, madam," Terence said, "how truly thankful we both are for your and your husband's kindness, shown to us strangers; and I sincerely hope that you will have no cause to regret it. You may be sure of one thing: that if we are recaptured, we shall never say how our escape was effected, nor where we were sheltered afterwards; and if, after the war is over, we can find an opportunity of showing how grateful we are for your kindness, we shall not miss the chance."

"We are but paying the service you rendered to Jacques, monsieur. He tells me that, if it had not been for the aid the British prisoners gave them, that probably those Spanish bandits would have captured the church during the night; and we know that they never show mercy to prisoners."

The coffee was placed on the table and, after drinking it, the fisherman led them to a low shed in the yard.

"We could have done better for you," he said apologetically, "but it is likely that they may begin a search for you, early in the morning. This yard can be seen from many houses round about, so that, were you to sleep upstairs, you might be noticed entering here in the morning; and it is better to run no risks. We have piled the nets on the top of other things. You will find two blankets for covering yourselves there. In the morning I will come in and shift things, so as to hide you up snugly."

"We shall do just as well on the nets as if we were in bed," Terence laughed. "We are pretty well accustomed to sleep on the hard ground."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.