Corporal Sam

by

"Q"

(A.T. Quiller-Couch)

CORPORAL SAM

AND OTHER STORIES

CORPORAL SAM

AND OTHER STORIES

BY

"Q"

(A. T. QUILLER-COUCH)

LONDON

SMITH, ELDER & CO., 15, WATERLOO PLACE

1910

PRINTED BY
WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED,
LONDON AND BECCLES.

CONTENTS

CORPORAL SAM

I

Sergeant David Wilkes, of the First (Royal) Regiment of Foot—third battalion, B Company—came trudging with a small fatigue party down the sandy slopes of Mount Olia, on the summit of which they had been toiling all day, helping the artillerymen to drag an extra 24-pounder into battery. They had brought it into position just half an hour ago, and already it had opened fire along with another 24-pounder and two howitzers mounted on the same rocky platform. The men as they descended heard the projectiles fly over their heads, and paused, distinguishing the scream of the shells from the dull hum of the round-shot, to watch the effect of the marksmanship, which was excellent.

Northwards, to their right, stretched the blue line of the Bay, where a single ship-of-war tacked lazily and kept a two-miles' offing. The smoke of the guns, drifting down on the land-breeze from the summit of Mount Olia, now hid her white sails, now lifted and revealed them in the late afternoon

sunshine. But although blue held the upper heavens —cloudless blue of July—the sunshine that reached the ship was murky, almost copper-coloured; for it pierced through a cloud of denser smoke that rolled continuously along the western horizon from the burning houses of San Sebastian.

Sergeant Wilkes and his men, halting on the lower slope of the mountain where it fell away in sand-dunes to the estuary of the Urumea, had the whole flank of the fortress in view. Just now, at half-tide, it rose straight out of the water on the farther bank—a low, narrow-necked isthmus that at its seaward end climbed to a cone-shaped rock four hundred feet high, crowned by a small castle. This was the citadel. The town, through which alone it could be taken by force, lay under it, across the neck of the isthmus; and this again was protected on the landward side by a high rampart or curtain, strengthened by a tall bastion in its centre and covered by a regular hornwork pushed out from its front. So much for the extremities, seaward and landward. That flank of the place which it presented to the sandhills across the Urumea was clearly more vulnerable, and yet not easily vulnerable. Deep water and natural rock protected Mount Orgullo, the citadel hill. The sea-wall, for almost half its length, formed but a *fausse braye* for the hornwork towering formidably behind it. Only where it covered the

town, in the space between citadel and hornwork, this wall became a simple rampart; stout indeed and solid and twenty-seven feet high, with two flanking towers for enfilading fire, besides a demi-bastion at the Mount Orgullo end, yet offering the weak spot in the defences.

The British batteries had found and were hammering at it; not the guns upon Mount Olia, which had been hauled thither to dominate those of the citadel, but a dozen 24-pounders disposed, with a line of mortars behind them, on the lower slope above the estuary, where an out-cropping ridge of rock gave firm ground among the sand-dunes. The undulating line of these dunes hid this, the true breaching battery, from view of Sergeant Wilkes and his men, though they had halted within a hundred yards of it, and for at least an hour the guns had been given a rest. Only, at long intervals, one or other of the mortars threw a bomb to clear the breach—already close upon a hundred feet wide—driven between the two flanking towers. It was behind this breach that the town blazed. The smoke, carried down the estuary by the land-breeze, rolled heavily across the middle slopes of Mount Orgullo. But above it the small castle stood up clearly, silhouetted against the western light, and from time to time one of its guns answered the fire from Mount Olia. Save for this and the sound of falling timbers in the town, San Sebastian kept silence.

"Wonder what it feels like?"

Sergeant Wilkes, not catching the meaning of this, turned about slowly. The speaker was a tall young corporal, Sam Vicary by name and by birth a Somerset lad—a curly haired, broad-shouldered fellow with a simple engaging smile. He had come out with one of the later drafts, and nobody knew the cause of his enlisting, but it was supposed to be some poaching trouble at home. At all events, the recruiting sergeant had picked up a bargain in him, for, let alone his stature—and the Royals as a regiment prided themselves on their inches—he was easily the best marksman in B Company. Sergeant Wilkes, on whose recommendation he had been given his corporal's stripe, the day after Vittoria, looked on him as the hopefullest of his youngsters.

"Feels like?" echoed the sergeant, following the young man's gaze and observing that it rested on the great breach. "Oh! 'tis the assault you mean? Well, it feels pretty much like any other part of the business, only your blood's up, and you don't have to keep yourself warm, waiting for the guns to tire. When we stormed the San Vincenty, now, at Badajoz——"

Some one interrupted, with a serio-comic groan.

"You've started him now, Sam Vicary! Johnny-raws of the Third Battalion, your kind attention, pray, for Daddy Wilkes and the good old days when

pipeclay *was* pipeclay. Don't be afraid, for though he took that first-class fortress single-handed, you may sit upon his knee, and he'll tell you all about it."

"It's children you are, anyway," said the sergeant, with a tolerant smile. "But I'll forgive ye, when the time comes, if ye'll do the Royals credit—and, what's more, I'll never cast up that 'twas but a third battalion against a third-class place. Nor will I need to," he added, after a pause, "if the general makes a throw for yon breach before clearing the hornwork."

"I wasn't thinkin' of the assault," explained the young corporal, simply, "but of the women and children. It must be hell for them, this waitin'."

The same voice that had mocked the sergeant put up a ribald guffaw.

"Didn't the general give warning," it asked, "when he summoned the garrison? 'I've got Sam Vicary here along with me,' he said, 'and so I give you notice, for Sam's a terror when he starts to work.'"

"If you fellows could quit foolin' a moment——" began Corporal Sam, with an ingenuous blush. But here on a sudden the slope below them opened with a roar as the breaching battery—gun after gun—renewed its fire on the sea-wall. Amid the din, and while the earth yet shook underfoot, the sergeant was the first to recover himself.

"Another breach!" he shouted between the

explosions, putting up both hands like a pair of spectacles and peering through the smoke. "See there—to the left; and that accounts for their quiet this last hour." He watched the impact of the shot for a minute or so, and shook his head. "They'd do better to clear the hornwork. At Badajoz, now——"

But here he checked himself in time, and fortunately no one had heard him. The men moved on and struck into the rutted track leading from the batteries to camp. He turned and followed them, in a brown study. Ever since Badajoz, siege operations had been Sergeant Wilkes's foible. His youngsters played upon it, drawing him into discussions over the camp-fire, and winking one to another as he expounded and illustrated, using bits of stick to represent parallels, traverses, rampart and glaçis, scarp and counterscarp. But he had mastered something of the theory, after his lights, and our batteries' neglect of the hornwork struck him as unscientific.

As he pursued the path, a few dozen yards in rear of his comrades, at a turn where it doubled a sharp corner he saw their hands go up to the salute, and with this slight warning came upon two of his own officers—Major Frazer and Captain Archimbeau —perched on a knoll to the left, and attentively studying the artillery practice through their glasses. The captain (who, by the way, commanded B Company) signed to him to halt, and climbed down

to him while the fatigue party trudged on. Major Frazer followed, closing his field telescope as he descended.

"What do you say to it?" asked Captain Archimbeau, with a jerk of his hand towards the great breach.

"It can be done, sir," Sergeant Wilkes answered. "Leastways, it ought to be done. But with submission, sir, 'twill be at wicked waste, unless they first clear the hornwork."

"They can keep it pretty well swept while we assault. The fact is," said Major Frazer, a tall Scotsman, speaking in his slow Scots way, "we assault it early to-morrow, and the general has asked me to find volunteers."

"For the forlorn hope, sir?" The sergeant flushed a little, over the compliment paid to the Royals.

Major Frazer nodded. "There's no need to make it common knowledge just yet. I am allowed to pick my men, but I have no wish to spend the night in choosing between volunteers. You understand?"

"Yes, sir. You will get a plenty without travelling outside the regiment."

"Captain Archimbeau goes with us; and we thought, Wilkes, of asking you to join the party."

"You are very good, sir." There was hesitation, though, in the sergeant's manner, and Major Frazer perceived it.

"You understand," he said coldly, "that there is no obligation. I wouldn't press a man for this kind of service, even if I could."

The sergeant flushed. "I was thinkin' of the regiment, sir," he answered, and turned to his captain. "We shall have our men supportin'?—if I may make bold to ask."

"The Royals are to show the way at the great breach, with the 9th in support. The 38th tackle the smaller breach. To make surer (as he says), the general has a mind to strengthen us up in the centre with a picked detachment of the whole division."

Sergeant Wilkes shook his head. "I am sorry for that, sir. 'Tisn't for me to teach the general; but I misdoubt all mixin' up of regiments. What the Royals can do they can best do by themselves."

"Hurts your pride a bit, eh, sergeant?" asked the major, with a short laugh. "And yet, my friend, it was only yesterday I overheard you telling your company they weren't fit to carry the slops of the Fifth Division."

"It does 'em good, sir. A man, if he wants to do good, must say a trifle more than he means, at times."

"You *can* trust 'em, then?"

"And that again, sir—savin' your presence—would be sayin' more than I mean. For the lads, sir, are young lads, though willing enough; and young lads need to be nursed, however willing. As between you

and me, sir"—here he appealed to Captain Archimbeau—"B Company is the steadiest in the battalion. But if the major takes away its captain, and upon top of him its senior sergeant—well, beggin' your pardon, a compliment's a compliment, but it may be bought too dear."

"Wilkes is right," said the major, after a pause. "To take the both of you would be risky; and unless I'm mistaken, Archimbeau, he thinks you will be the easier spared."

"I haven't a doubt he does," agreed Captain Archimbeau, laughing.

"But I do not, sir." The sergeant seemed on the point to say more, but checked himself.

"Well?"

"It's not for me to give an opinion, sir, unless asked for it."

"I ask for it then—your plain opinion, as a soldier."

"An officer's an officer—that's my opinion. There's good and bad, to be sure; but an officer like the captain here, that the men can trust, is harder spared than any sergeant: let alone that you can easily spread officers too thick—even good ones, and even in a forlorn hope."

"He wants my place," said Captain Archimbeau; "and he salves my feelings with a testimonial."

"As for that, sir"—the sergeant conceded a grin

—"I reckon you won't be far behind us when the trouble begins. And if the major wants a good man from B Company, you'll agree with me, sir, that yonder he goes." And Sergeant Wilkes jerked a thumb after the tall young corporal, a moment before the sand-hills hid his retreating figure.

II

THE assault had been a muddle from the start.

To begin with, after being ordered for one day (July 23rd) it had been deferred to the next; on reasonable grounds, indeed, for the town immediately behind the great breach was burning like a furnace; but it gave the troops an uneasy feeling that their leaders were distracted in counsel. Nor, divided by the river, did the artillery and the stormers work upon a mutual understanding. The heavy cannon, after a short experiment to the left of the great breach, had shifted their fire to the right of it, and had succeeded in knocking a practicable hole in it before dusk. But either this change of plan had not been reported to the trenches, or the officer directing the assault inexplicably failed to adapt his dispositions to it. The troops for the great breach were filed out ahead of the 38th, which had further to go.

Worst of all, they were set in motion an hour before dawn, although Wellington had left orders

that fair daylight should be waited for, and the artillerymen across the Urumea were still plying their guns on the sea-wall, to dissuade the besieged from repairing it in the darkness. To be sure a signal for the assault—the firing of a mine against the horn-work—had been concerted, and was duly given; but in the din and the darkness it was either not heard or not understood.

Thus it happened that the forlorn hope and the supporting companies of the Royals had no sooner cleared the trenches than their ranks shook under a fire of grape, and from our own guns. There was no cure but to dash through it and take the chances, and Major Frazer, waving his sword, called on his men to follow him at the double. Ahead of them, along the foot of the seawall, the receding tide had left a strip of strand, foul with rock and rock pools and patches of sea-weed, dark and slippery. Now and again a shell burst and illuminated these patches, or the still-dripping ooze twinkled under flashes of musketry from the wall above; for the defenders had hurried to the parapet and flanking towers, and their fire already crackled the whole length of the strand.

Sergeant Wilkes, running a pace or two behind the major, slipping and staggering at every second yard, was aware—though he could not see him—of young Corporal Sam close at his shoulder. The lad talked to himself as he ran: but his talk was no more

than a babble of quiet unmeaning curses, and the sergeant, who understood how the lust of fighting works in different men, did not trouble to answer until, himself floundering up to his knees in a salt-water pool, he flung out a hand for support and felt it gripped.

"Damn them!" The corporal, dragging him to solid foothold, cast a look up as a shell burst high overhead, and his face showed white with passion in the glare of it. "Can't any one *tell* them there's no sense in it!"

"Take it easy, lad," panted the sergeant, cheerfully. "They're bound to understand in a minute, hearin' all this musketry. Accidents will happen—and anyway they can't help seein' us at the breach. Look at the light of it beyond the tower there!"

They floundered on together. The tower, not fifty yards away, jetted fire from every loophole; but its marksmen were aiming into the darkness, having been caught in a hurry and before they could throw down flares. As the sergeant rushed to get close under the wall of it, a bullet sent his shako whizzing; but still he ran on, and came bareheaded to the foot of the breach.

It ran down to the foreshore, a broadening scree of rubble, ruined masonry, broken beams of timber—some of them smouldering; and over the top of it shone the blaze of the town. But the actual gap

appeared to be undefended, and, better still, the rubbish on the near side had so piled itself that for half the way up the stormers could climb under cover, protected from the enfilading fire. Already the major had dropped on hands and knees and was leading the way up, scrambling from heap to heap of rubbish. Close after him went an officer in the uniform of the Engineers, with Corporal Sam at his heels. The sergeant ducked his head and followed, dodging from block to block of masonry on the other side of which the bullets spattered.

"Forward! Forward the Royals!"

The leaders were shouting it, and he passed on the shout. As yet, not a man had fallen on the slope of the breach. Two, more agile than he because by some years younger, overtook and passed him; but he was the sixth to reach the summit, and might reckon this very good work for a man of his weight. Then, as he turned to shout again, three more of the forlorn hope came blundering up, and the nine stood unscathed on the summit of the gap and apparently with none to oppose them.

But beyond it—between them and the town, and a sheer twenty feet below them, lay a pool of blazing tar, the flames of which roared up against their faces.

"Forward the Royals! Ladders—ladders! Oh, for your life, forward with the ladders!"

The major started the cry. Corporal Sam, taking

it up, screamed it again and again. In the darkness, behind and below, the sergeant heard Captain Archimbeau calling to his men to hurry. One ladder-bearer came clattering up; but the ladders were in six-foot lengths, and a single length was useless. Nevertheless, in his rage of haste, Corporal Sam seized it from the man, and was bending to clamp it over the pit, when from the parapet to the right a sudden cross-fire swept the head of the breach. A bullet struck him in the hand. He looked up, with the pain of it, in time to see Major Frazer spin about, topple past the sergeant's hand thrust out to steady him, and pitch headlong down the slope. The ladder-bearer and another tall Royal dropped at the same moment.

"Hi, sergeant!" spoke up the young Engineer officer very sharply and clearly, at the same time stepping a couple of paces down from the ridge over which a frontal fire of bullets now flew whistling from the loopholed houses in the town. "For God's sake, shout and hurry up your men, or our chance this night is gone."

"I know it, sir—I know it," groaned Wilkes.

"Then shout, man! Fifty men might do it yet, but every moment is odds against. See the swarm on the rampart there, to the right!"

They shouted together, but in vain. Four or five ladder-bearers mounted the slope, but only to be shot

down almost at their feet. The Engineer officer, reaching forward to seize one of the ladder-lengths and drag it behind a pile of masonry under which he had taken cover, and thus for an instant exposing himself, dropped suddenly upon his face. And now but Sergeant Wilkes and Corporal Sam were left clinging, waiting for the help that still tarried.

What had happened was this. The supporting columns, disordered by the scramble along the foreshore, arrived at the foot of the breach in straggling two's and three's; and here, while their officers tried to form them up, the young soldiers behind, left for the moment without commanders and exasperated by the fire from the flanking tower, halted to exchange useless shots with its defenders and with the enemy on the rampart. Such fighting was worse than idle: it delayed them full in the path of the 38th, which now overtook them on its way to the lesser breach, and in five minutes the two columns were inextricably mixed, blocking the narrow space between wall and river, and exposed in all this dark confusion to a murderous fire.

At length, and though less than a third of his men followed him, Captain Archimbeau led the supporters up the breach; but by this time the enemy had packed the ramparts on either side. No soldiery could stand the hail of musketry, grape, and hand-grenades that rained upon the head of the column.

It hesitated, pushed forward again, and broke some fifteen feet from the summit, like a spent wave. Then, as the Royals came pouring back, Lieutenant Campbell of the 9th, with all that could be collected of his picked detachment, forced his way up through the sheer weight of them, won clear, and made a fling for the crest. In vain! His first rush carried him abreast of the masonry under which Sergeant Wilkes and the corporal clung for cover. They rushed out to join him; but they had scarcely gained his side before the whole detachment began to give ground. It was not that the men fell back; rather, the apex of the column withered down as man after man dropped beside its leader. He himself had taken a wound. Yet he waved his sword and carried them forward on a second charge, only to reach where he had reached before, and be laid there by a second bullet.

Meanwhile the Royals, driven to the foot of the slope, were flung as a fresh obstacle in the path of the 38th still striving to press on for the lesser breach. From his perch halfway up the ruins, Sergeant Wilkes descried Captain Archimbeau endeavouring to rally them, and climbed down to help him. The corporal followed, nursing his wounded hand. As they reached him a bugle sounded the recall.

The assault had failed. At the foot of the breach

a soldier of the 4th Regiment, mad with rage, foamed out a curse upon the Royals. Corporal Sam lifted his bleeding fist and struck him across the mouth. The sergeant dragged the two apart, slipped an arm under his comrade's, and led him away as one leads a child. A moment later the surge of the retreating crowd had almost carried them off their feet. But the sergeant kept a tight hold, and steered his friend back every yard of the way along the bullet-swept foreshore. They were less than halfway across when the dawn broke; and looking in his face he saw that the lad was crying silently—the powder-grime on his cheeks streaked and channelled with tears.

III

"I DON'T understand ye, lad," said Sergeant Wilkes.

"Fast enough you'd understand, if you'd but look me in the face," answered Corporal Sam, digging his heel into the sand.

The two men lay supine on a cushion of coarse grass; the sergeant smoking and staring up at the sky, the corporal, with his sound hand clasping his wounded one behind his head, his gaze fixed gloomily between his knees and across the dunes, on the still unrepaired breach in San Sebastian.

A whole fortnight had dragged by since the

assault: a fortnight of idleness for the troops, embittered almost intolerably by a sense that the Fifth Division had disgraced itself. One regiment blamed another, and all conspired to curse the 'artillery—whose practice, by the way, had been brilliant throughout the siege. Nor did the gunners fail to retort; but they were in luckier case, being kept busy all the while, first in shifting their batteries and removing their worst guns to the ships, next in hauling and placing the new train that arrived piece-meal from England; and not only busy, but alert, on the watch against sorties. Also, and although the error of cannonading the columns of assault had never been cleared up, the brunt of Wellington's displeasure had fallen on the stormers. The Marquis ever laid stress on his infantry, whether to use them or blame them; and when he found occasion to blame, he had words—and methods—that scarified equally the general of division and the private soldier.

"Fast enough you understand," repeated Corporal Sam, savagely.

"I do, then, and I don't," admitted Sergeant Wilkes, after a pause. The lad puzzled him; gave him few confidences, asked for none at all, and certainly was no cheerful companion; and yet during these days of humiliation the two had become friends, almost inseparable. "I've read it," the sergeant pursued, "in Scripture or somewhere, that a man what

keeps a hold on himself does better than if he took a city. I don't say as I understand that altogether; but it *sounds* right."

"Plucky lot of cities we take, in the Royals," growled Corporal Sam. He nodded, as well as his posture allowed, towards San Sebastian. "And you call that a third-class fortress!"

"Accidents will happen." Sergeant Wilkes, puffing at his pipe, fell back philosophically on his old catch-word. "It takes you hard, because you're young; and it takes you harder because you had fed yourself up on dreams o' glory, and such-like."

"Well?"

"Well, and you have to get over it, that's all. A man can't properly call himself a soldier till he's learnt to get over it."

"If that's all, the battalion is qualifyin' fast!" Corporal Sam retorted bitterly, and sat up, blinking in the strong sunlight. Then, as Sergeant Wilkes made no reply, or perhaps because he guessed something in Sergeant Wilkes's averted face, a sudden compunction seized him. "You feel it too?"

"I got to, after all my trouble," answered Sergeant Wilkes, brusquely.

"I'm sorry. Look here—I wish you'd turn your face about—it's worse for you and yet you get over it, as you say. How the devil do you manage?"

Still for a while Sergeant Wilkes leaned back

without making reply. But of a sudden he, too, sat upright, drew down the peak of his shako to shade his eyes, and drawing his pipe from his mouth, jerked the stem of it to indicate a figure slowly crossing a rise of the sandhills between them and the estuary.

"You see that man?"

"To be sure I do. An officer, and in the R.A.—curse them!—though I can't call to mind the cut of his jib."

"You wouldn't. His name's Ramsay, and he's just out of arrest."

"What has he done?"

"A many things, first and last. At Fuentes d'Onoro the whole French cavalry cut him off—him and his battery—and he charged back clean through them; ay, lad, through 'em like a swathe, with his horses belly-down and the guns behind 'em bounding like skipjacks; not a gun taken, and scarce a gunner hurt. That's the sort of man."

"Why has he been under arrest?"

"Because the Marquis gave him an order and forgot it. And because coming up later, expecting to find him where he wasn't and had no right to be, the Marquis lost his temper. And likewise because, when a great man loses his temper, right or wrong don't matter much. So there goes Captain Ramsay broken; a gentleman and a born fighter; and a

captain he'll die. That's how the mills grind in this here all-conquering army. And the likes of us sit here and complain."

"If a man did that wrong to me——" Corporal Sam jumped to his feet and stared after the slight figure moving alone across the sandhills.

Had his curiosity led him but a few paces further, he had seen a strange sight indeed.

Captain Norman Ramsay, wandering alone and with a burning heart, halted suddenly on the edge of a sand-pit. Below him four men stood, gathered in a knot—two of them artillery officers, the others officers of the line. His first impulse was to turn and escape, for he shunned all companionship just now. But a second glance told him what was happening; and, prompt on the understanding, he plunged straight down the sandy bank, walked up to a young artillery officer and took the pistol out of his hand. That was all, and it all happened in less than three minutes. The would-be duellist—and challenges had been common since the late assault—knew the man and his story. For that matter, every one in the army knew his story.

As a ghost he awed them. For a moment he stood looking from one to the other, and so, drawing the charge, tossed the pistol back at its owner's feet and resumed his way.

Corporal Sam, who had merely seen the slight

figure pass beyond the edge of the dunes, went back and flung himself again on the warm bank.

"If a man did that wrong to me——" he repeated.

IV

CERTAINLY, just or unjust, the Marquis could make himself infernally unpleasant. Having ridden over from headquarters and settled the plans for the new assault, he returned to his main army and there demanded fifty volunteers from each of the fifteen regiments composing the First, Fourth, and Light Divisions—men (as he put it) *who could show other troops how to mount a breach.* It may be guessed with what stomach the Fifth Division digested this; and among them not a man was angrier than their old general, Leith, who now, after a luckless absence, resumed command. The Fifth Division, he swore, could hold their own with any soldiers in the Peninsula. He was furious with the seven hundred and fifty volunteers, and, evading the Marquis's order, which was implicit rather than direct, he added an oath that these interlopers should never lead his men to the breaches.

Rage begets rage. During the misty morning hours of August 31st, the day fixed for the assault, these volunteers, held back and chafing with the reserves, could scarcely be restrained from breaking

out of the trenches. "Why," they demanded, "had they been fetched here if not to show the way?"—a question for which their officers were in no mood to provide a soft answer.

Yet their turn came. Sergeant Wilkes, that amateur in siege-operations, had rightly prophesied from the first that the waste of life at the breaches would be wicked and useless until the hornwork had been silenced and some lodgment made there. So as the morning wore on, and the sea-mists gave place to burning sunshine, and this again to heavy thunder-clouds collected by the unceasing cannonade, still more and more of the reserves of the Fifth Division were pushed up, until none but the volunteers and a handful of the 9th Regiment remained in the trenches. Them, too, at length Leith was forced to unleash, and they swept forward on the breaches yelling like a pack of hounds; but on the crest-line they fared at first no better than the regiments they had taunted. Thrice and four times they reached it only to topple back. The general, watching the fight from the batteries across the Urumea, now directed the gunners to fire over the stormers' heads; and again a cry went up that our men were being slaughtered by their own artillery. Undismayed by this, with no recollections of the first assault to daunt them, a company of the Light Division took advantage of the fire to force their way over the rampart on

the right of the great breach and seize a lodgment in some ruined houses actually within the town. There for an hour or so these brave men were cut off, for the assault in general made no headway.

It must have failed, even after five hours' fighting, but for an accident. A line of powder-barrels collected behind the traverses by the great breach took fire and blew up, driving back all the French grenadiers but the nearest, whom it scattered in mangled heaps. As explosion followed explosion, the bright flame spread and ran along the high curtain. The British leapt after it, breaking through the traverse and swarming up to the curtain's summit. Almost at the same moment the Thirteenth and Twenty-fourth Portuguese, who had crossed the river by a lower ford, hurled themselves over the lesser breach to the right; and as the swollen heavens burst in a storm of rain and thunder, from this point and that the besiegers, as over the lip of a dam, swept down into the streets.

"Treat men like dogs, and they'll behave like dogs," grumbled Sergeant Wilkes, as he followed to prevent what mischief he might. But this, he well knew, would be little enough.

V

CORPORAL SAM VICARY, coming up to the edge of the camp-fire's light, stood there for a moment with a white face. The cause of it—though it would have been a sufficient one—was not the story to which the men around the fire had been listening; for the teller, at sight of the corporal, had broken off abruptly, knowing him to be a religious fellow after a fashion, with a capacity for disapproval and a pair of fists to back it up. So, while his comrades guffawed, he rather cleverly changed the subject.

"Oh, and by the way, talkin' of the convent"—he meant the Convent of Santa Teresa, a high building under the very slope of the citadel, protected by its guns and still held by the enemy, after three days' fighting—"do any of you know a small house to the left of it, with only a strip of garden between? Sort of a mud-nest it is, like a swallow's, stuck under overhang o' the cliff. No? Well, that's a pity, for I hear tell the general has promised five pounds to the first man who breaks into that house."

"But why, at all?" inquired a man close on his right.

"I know the place," put in another; "a mean kind of building, with one window lookin' down the street, and that on the second floor, as you might

say. It don't look to me the sort of house to hold five pounds' worth, all told—let be that, to force it, a man must cross half the fire from the convent, and in full view. Five pounds be *damned!* Five pounds isn't so scarce in these times that a man need go there to fetch it for his widow."

The corporal was turning away. For three days San Sebastian had been a hell, between the flames of which he had seen things that sickened his soul. They sickened it yet, only in remembrance. Yes, and the sickness had more than once come nigh to be physical. His throat worked at the talk of loot, now that he knew what men did for it.

"The general ain't after the furnitcher," answered the first speaker. "It consarns a child."

"A child ain't no such rarity in San Sebastian that anybody need offer five pounds for one."

"What's this talk about a child?" asked Sergeant Wilkes, coming in from his rounds, and dropping to a seat by the blaze. He caught sight of Corporal Sam standing a little way back, and nodded.

"Well, it seems that, barring this child, every soul in the house has been killed. The place is pretty certain death to approach, and the crittur, for all that's known, has been left without food for two days and more. 'Tis a boy, I'm told—a small thing, not above four at the most. Between whiles it runs to the window and looks out. The sentries have seen

it more'n a dozen times; and one told me he'd a sight sooner look on a ghost."

"Then why don't the Frenchies help?" some one demanded. "There's a plenty of 'em close by, in the convent."

"The convent don't count. There's a garden between it and the house, and on the convent side a blank wall—no windows at all, only loopholes. Besides which, there's a whole block of buildings in full blaze t'other side of the house, and the smoke of it drives across so that 'tis only between whiles you can see the child at all. The odds are, he'll be burnt alive or smothered before he starves outright; and, I reckon, put one against the other, 'twill be the mercifuller end."

"Poor little beggar," said the sergeant. "But why don't the general send in a white flag, and take him off?"

"A lot the governor would believe—and after what you and me have seen these two days! A nice tender-hearted crew to tell him, 'If you please, we've come for a poor little three-year-old.' Why, he'd as lief as not believe we meant to *eat* him."

Sergeant Wilkes glanced up across the camp-fire to the spot where Corporal Sam had been standing. But Corporal Sam had disappeared.

VI

ALTHOUGH the hour was close upon midnight, and no moon showed, Corporal Sam needed no lantern to light him through San Sebastian; for a great part of the upper town still burned fiercely, and from time to time a shell, soaring aloft from the mortar batteries across the river, burst over the citadel or against the rocks where the French yet clung, and each explosion flung a glare across the heavens.

He had passed into the town unchallenged. The fatigue parties, hunting by twos and threes among the ruins of the river-front for corpses to burn or bury, doubtless supposed him to be about the same business. At any rate, they paid him no attention.

Just within the walls, where the conflagration had burnt itself out, there were patches of black shadow to be crossed carefully. The fighting had been obstinate here, and more than one blazing house had collapsed into the thick of it. The corporal picked his way gingerly, shivering a little at the thought of some things buried, or half-buried, among the loose stones. Indeed, at the head of the first street his foot entangled itself in something soft. It turned out to be nothing more than a man's cloak, or *poncho*, and he slipped it on, to hide his uniform and avoid explanations should he fall in with one of the patrols; but the feel of it gave him a scare for a moment.

The lad, in fact, was sick of fighting and slaughter —physically ill at the remembrance and thought of them. The rage of the assault had burnt its way through him like a fever and left him weak, giddy, queasy of stomach. He had always hated the sight of suffering, even the suffering of dumb animals: and as a sportsman, home in England, he had learnt to kill his game clean, were it beast or bird. In thought, he had always loathed the trade of a butcher, and had certainly never guessed that soldiering could be—as here in San Sebastian he had seen it—more bestial than the shambles.

For some reason, as he picked his road, his mind wandered away from the reek and stink of San Sebastian and back to England, back to Somerset, to the slopes of Mendip. His home there had overlooked an ancient battlefield, and as a boy, tending the sheep on the uplands, he had conned it often and curiously, having heard the old men tell tales of it. The battle had been fought on a wide plain intersected by many water-dykes. Twice or thrice he had taken a holiday to explore it, half expecting that a close view would tell him something of its history; but, having no books to help him, he had brought back very little beyond a sense of awe that so tremendous a thing had happened just there, and (unconsciously) a stored remembrance of the scents blown across the level from the flowers that lined the dykes—scents of mint and

meadowsweet at home there, as the hawthorn was at home on the hills above.

He smelt them now, across the reek of San Sebastian, and they wafted him back to England—to boyhood, dreaming of war but innocent of its crimes—to long thoughts, long summer days spent among the unheeding sheep, his dog Rover beside him—an almost thoroughbred collie, and a good dog, too, though his end had been tragic. . . . But why on earth should his thoughts be running on Rover just now?

Yet, and although, as he went, England was nearer to him and more real than the smoking heaps between which he picked his way, he steered all the while towards the upper town, through the square, and up the hill overlooked by the convent and the rocky base of the citadel. He knew the exact position of the house, and he chose a narrow street—uninhabited now, and devastated by fire—that led directly to it.

The house was untouched by fire as yet, though another to the left of it blazed furiously. It clung, as it were a swallow's nest, to the face of the cliff. A garden wall ran under the front; and, parallel with the wall, a road pretty constantly swept by musketry fire from the convent. At the head of the street Corporal Sam stumbled against a rifleman who, sheltered from bullets at the angle of the crossing, stood calmly watching the conflagration.

"Hullo!" said the rifleman, cheerfully; "I wanted some more audience, and you're just in time."

"There's a child in the house, eh?" panted Corporal Sam, who had come up the street at a run.

The rifleman nodded. "Poor little devil! He'll soon be out of his pain, though."

"Why, there's heaps of time! The fire won't take hold for another half-hour. What's the best way in? . . . You an' me can go shares, if that's what you're hangin' back for," added Corporal Sam, seeing that the man eyed him without stirring.

"Hi! Bill!" the rifleman whistled to a comrade, who came slouching out of a doorway close by, with a clock in one hand, and in the other a lantern by help of which he had been examining the inside of this piece of plunder. "Here's a boiled lobster in a old woman's cloak, wants to teach us the way into the house yonder."

"Tell him to go home," said Bill, still peering into the works of the clock. "Tell him we've *been* there." He chuckled a moment, looked up, and addressed himself to Corporal Sam. "What regiment?"

"The Royals."

The two burst out laughing, scornfully. "Don't wonder you cover it up," said the first rifleman.

Corporal Sam pulled off his *poncho*. "I'd offer to fight the both of you," he said, "but 'tis time wasted

with a couple of white-livers that don't dare fetch a poor child across a roadway. Let me go by; *you*'ll keep, anyway."

"Now look here, sonny——" The first rifleman blocked his road. "I don't bear no malice for a word spoken in anger: so stand quiet and take my advice. That house isn't goin' to take fire. 'Cos why? 'Cos, as Bill says, we've *been* there—there and in the next house, now burnin'—and we know. 'Cos before leavin' —the night before last it was—some of our boys set two barrels o' powder somewheres in the next house, on the ground floor, *with* a slow match. That's why *we* left; though, as it happened, the match missed fire. But the powder's there, and if you'll wait a few minutes now you'll not be disapp'inted."

"You left the child behind!"

"Well, we left in a hurry, as I tell you, and somehow in the hurry nobody brought him along. I'm sorry for the poor little devil, too." The fellow swung about. "See him there at the window, now! If you want him put out of his pain——"

He lifted his rifle. Corporal Sam made a clutch at his arm to drag it down, and in the scuffle both men swayed out upon the roadway. And with that, or a moment later, he felt the rifleman slip down between his arms, and saw the blood gush from his mouth as he collapsed on the cobbles.

Corporal Sam heard the man Bill shout a furious

oath, cast one puzzled look up the roadway towards the convent, saw the flashes jetting from its high wall, and raced across unscathed. A bullet sang past his ear as he found the gate and hurled himself into the garden. It was almost dark here, but dark only for a moment. . . . For as he caught sight of a flight of steps leading to a narrow doorway, and ran for them —and even as he set foot on the lowest—of a sudden the earth heaved under him, seemed to catch him up in a sheet of flame, and flung him backwards—backwards and flat on his back, into a clump of laurels.

Slowly he picked himself up. The sky was dark now; but, marvellous to say, the house stood. The mass of it yet loomed over the laurels. Yes, and a light showed under the door at the head of the steps. He groped his way up and pushed the door open.

The light came through a rent in the opposite wall, and on the edge of this jagged hole some thin laths were just bursting into a blaze. He rushed across the room to beat out the flame, and this was easily done; but, as he did it, he caught sight of a woman's body, stretched along the floor by the fireplace, and of a child cowering in the corner, watching him.

"Come and help, little one," said Corporal Sam, still beating at the laths.

The child understood no English, and moreover was too small to help. But it seemed that the

corporal's voice emboldened him, for he drew near and stood watching.

"Who did *this*, little one?" asked Corporal Sam, nodding toward the corpse, as he rubbed the charred dust from his hands.

For a while the child stared at him, not comprehending; but by-and-by pointed beneath the table and then back at its mother.

The corporal walked to the table, stooped, and drew from under it a rifle and a pouch half filled with cartridges.

"Tell him we've *been* there." He seemed to hear the rifleman Bill's voice repeating the words, close at hand. He recognized the badge on the pouch.

He was shaking where he stood; and this, perhaps, was why the child stared at him so oddly. But, looking into the wondering young eyes, he read only the question, "What are you going to do?"

He hated these riflemen. Nay, looking around the room, how he hated all the foul forces that had made this room what it was! . . . And yet, on the edge of resolve, he knew that he must die for what he meant to do . . . that the thing was unpardonable, that in the end he must be shot down, and rightly, as a dog.

He remembered his dog Rover, how the poor brute had been tempted to sheep-killing, at night, on the sly; and the look in his eyes when, detected at length,

he had crawled forward to his master to be shot. No other sentence was possible, and Rover had known it.

Had he no better excuse? Perhaps not. . . . He only knew that he could not help it; that this thing had been done, and by the consent of many . . . and that as a man he must kill for it, though as a soldier he deserved only to be killed.

With the child's eyes still resting on him in wonder, he set the rifle on its butt and rammed down a cartridge; and so, dropping on hands and knees, crept to the window.

VII

EARLY next morning Sergeant Wilkes picked his way across the ruins of the great breach and into the town, keeping well to windward of the fatigue parties already kindling fires and collecting the dead bodies that remained unburied.

Within and along the sea-wall San Sebastian was a heap of burnt-out ruins. Amid the stones and rubble encumbering the streets, lay broken muskets, wrenched doors, shattered sticks of furniture—mirrors, hangings, women's apparel, children's clothes—loot dropped by the pillagers as valueless, wreckage of the flood. He passed a very few inhabitants, and these said nothing to him; indeed, did not appear to see him, but sat by the ruins of their houses with faces

set in a stupid horror. Even the crash of a falling house near by would scarcely persuade them to stir, and hundreds during the last three days had been overwhelmed thus and buried.

The sergeant had grown callous to these sights. He walked on, heeding scarcely more than he was heeded, came to the great square, and climbed a street leading northwards, a little to the left of the great convent. The street was a narrow one, for half its length lined on both sides with fire-gutted houses; but the upper half, though deserted, appeared to be almost intact. At the very head, and close under the citadel walls, it took a sharp twist to the right, and another twist, almost equally sharp, to the left before it ended in a broader thoroughfare, crossing it at right angles and running parallel with the ramparts.

At the second twist the sergeant came to a halt; for at his feet, stretched across the causeway, lay a dead body.

He drew back with a start, and looked about him. Corporal Sam had been missing since nine o'clock last night, and he felt sure that Corporal Sam must be here or hereabouts. But no living soul was in sight.

The body at his feet was that of a rifleman; one of the volunteers whose presence had been so unwelcome to General Leith and the whole Fifth Division. The dead fist clutched its rifle; and the sergeant

stooping to disengage this, felt that the body was warm.

"Come back, you silly fool!"

He turned quickly. Another rifleman had thrust his head out of a doorway close by. The sergeant, snatching up the weapon, sprang and joined him in the passage where he sheltered.

"I—I was looking for a friend, hereabouts."

"Fat lot of friend you'll find at the head of *this* street!" snarled the rifleman, and jerked his thumb towards the corpse. "That makes the third already this morning. These Johnnies ain't no sense of honour left—firing on outposts as you may call it."

"Where are they firing from?"

"No 'they' about it. You saw that cottage—or didn't you?—right above there, under the wall; the place with one window in it? There's a devil behind it somewheres; he fires from the back of the room, and what's more, he never misses his man. You have Nick's own luck—the pretty target you made, too; that is unless, like some that call themselves Englishmen and ought to know better, he's a special spite on the Rifles."

The sergeant paid no heed to the sneer. He was beginning to think.

"How long has this been going on?" he asked.

"Only since daylight. There was a child, up yonder, last night; but it stands to reason a child

can't be doing this. He never misses, I tell you. Oh, you had luck, just now!"

"I wonder," said Sergeant Wilkes, musing. "I'll try it again, anyway." And while the rifleman gasped he stepped out boldly into the road.

He knew that his guess might, likely enough, be wrong: that, even were it right, the next two seconds might see him a dead man. Yet he was bound to satisfy himself. With his eyes on the sinister window —it stood half open and faced straight down the narrow street,—he knelt by the corpse, found its ammunition pouch, unbuckled the strap and drew out a handful of cartridges. Then he straightened himself steadily— but his heart was beating hard—and as steadily walked back and rejoined the rifleman in the passage.

"You have a nerve," said the rifleman, his voice shaking a little. "Looks like he don't fire on redcoats; but you have a nerve all the same."

"Or else he may be gone," suggested the sergeant, and on the instant corrected himself; "but I warn you not to reckon upon that. Is there a window facing on him anywhere, round the bend of the street?"

"I dunno."

The rifleman peered forth, turning his head sideways for a cautious reconnoitre. "Maybe he *has* gone, after all——"

It was but his head he exposed beyond the angle of the doorway; and yet, on the instant a report

cracked out sharply, and he pitched forward into the causeway. His own rifle clattered on the stones beside him, and where he fell he lay, like a stone.

Sergeant Wilkes turned with a set jaw and mounted the stairs of the deserted house behind him. They led him up to the roof, and there he dropped on his belly and crawled. Across three roofs he crawled, and lay down behind a balustrade overlooking the transverse roadway. Between the pillars of the balustrade he looked right across the roadway and into the half-open window of the cottage. The room within was dark, save for the glimmer of a mirror on the back wall.

"Kill him I must," growled the sergeant through his teeth, "though I wait the day for it."

And he waited there, crouching, for an hour—for two hours.

He was shifting his cramped attitude a little—a very little—for about the twentieth time, when a smur of colour showed on the mirror, and the next instant passed into a dark shadow. It may be that the marksman within the cottage had spied yet another rifleman in the street. But the sergeant had noted the reflection in the glass, that it was red. Two shots rang out together. But the sergeant, after peering through the parapet, stood upright, walked back across the roofs, and regained the stairway.

The street was empty. From one of the doorways

a voice called to him to come back. But he walked on, up the street and across the roadway to a green-painted wicket. It opened upon a garden, and across the garden he came to a flight of steps with an open door above. Through this, too, he passed and stared into a small room. On the far side of it, in an armchair, sat Corporal Sam, leaning back, with a hand to his breast; and facing him, with a face full of innocent wonder, stood a child—a small, grave, curly-headed child.

VIII

"I'm glad you done it quick," said Corporal Sam.

His voice was weak, yet he managed to get out the words firmly, leaning back in the wooden arm-chair, with one hand on his left breast, spread and covering the lower ribs.

The sergeant did not answer at once. Between the spread fingers he saw a thin stream welling, darker than the scarlet tunic which it discoloured. For perhaps three seconds he watched it. To him the time seemed as many minutes, and all the while he was aware of the rifle-barrel warm in his grasp.

"Because," Corporal Sam pursued with a smile that wavered a little, half wistfully seeking his eyes, "you'd 'a had to do it, anyway—wouldn't you? And any other way it—might—'a been hard."

"Lad, what *made* you?"

It was all Sergeant Wilkes could say, and he said it, wondering at the sound of his own voice. The child, who, seeing that the two were friends and not, after all, disposed to murder one another, had wandered to the head of the stairs to look down into the sunlit garden shining below, seemed to guess that something was amiss after all, and, wandering back, stood at a little distance, finger to lip.

"I don't know," the corporal answered, like a man with difficulty trying to collect his thoughts. "Leastways, not to explain to you. It must 'a been comin' on for some time."

"But *what*, lad—*what?*"

"Ah—'what?' says you. That's the trouble, and I can't never make you *see*—yes, make you *see*—the hell of it. It began with thinkin'—just with thinkin'—*that first night you led me home from the breach.* And the things I saw and heard; and then, when I came here, only meanin' to save *him*——"

He broke off and nodded at the child, who catching his eye, nodded back smiling.

He and the corporal had evidently made great friends.

But the corporal's gaze, wavering past him, had fixed itself on a trestle bed in the corner.

"There was a woman," he said. "She was stone cold; but the child told me—until I stopped his

mouth, and made a guess at the rest. I took her down and buried her in the garden. And with that it came over me that the whole of it—the whole business—was wrong, and that to put myself right I must kill, and keep on killing. Of course I knew what the end would be. But I never looked for such luck as *your* coming. . . . I was ashamed, first along, catching sight o' you—not—not ashamed, only I didn't want you to see. But when you took cover an' waited—though I wouldn't 'a hurt you for worlds —why then I knew how the end would be."

"Lad," said the sergeant, watching him as he panted, "I don't understand you, except that you're desperate wrong. But I saw you—saw you by the lookin' glass, behind there; and 'tis right you should know."

"O' course you saw me. . . . I'm not blamin', am I? You had to do it, and I had to take it. That was the easiest way. I couldn' do no other, an' you couldn' do no other, that bein' your duty. An' the child, there——"

Sergeant Wilkes turned for a moment to the child, who met his gaze, round-eyed; then to his friend again.

But the corporal's head had dropped forward on his chest.

The sergeant touched his shoulder, to make sure; then, with one look behind him, but ignoring the

child, reeled out of the room and down the stairs, as in a dream. In the sunny garden the fresh air revived him and he paused to stare at a rose-bush, rampant, covered with white blossoms against which the bees were humming. Their hum ran in his head so that he failed to notice that the sound of musketry had died down. An hour before it had been death to walk, as he did, under the convent wall and out into the street leading to the lesser breach. The convent had, in fact, surrendered, and its defenders were even now withdrawing up the hill to the citadel. He found the lesser breach and climbed down it to the shore of the Urumea, beside the deserted ford across which the Portuguese had waded on the morning of the second assault. Beyond it shone the sandhills, hiding our batteries.

He sat down on the bank and pulled off boots and socks, preparing to wade; but turned at a slight sound.

The child had followed him and stood halfway down the ruins of the breach, wistful, uncertain.

In a rage, as one threatens off an importunate dog, Sergeant Wilkes waved an arm. The child turned and slunk away, back into San Sebastian.

THE COPERNICAN CONVOY

[*The story is told by Will Fleming, of the Inner Temple, Barrister-at-law, and sometime Cornet of the 32nd Troop of Horse in the Parliament Army, then (December, 1643) quartered at Farnham, on the Hants border.*]

I

I DARE say that, since the world began and men learned to fight, was never an army moderately prosperous and yet fuller of grumblers than was ours during the latter weeks of November and the first fortnight of December, 1643. In part the blame lay upon our general, Sir William Waller, and his fondness for night attacks and beating up of quarters. He rested neither himself nor his men, but spent them without caring, and drove not a few to desert in mere fatigue. This was his way, and it differed from the way of my Lord Essex, who rather spilled his strength by lethargy and grieved over it. 'Twas notorious these two generals loved not one another: and 'tis not for me, who never served under Essex, to take sides. But I will say this for General Waller—that he spared himself as little as any common soldier;

never forgot the face of a good servant; and in general fed his men well and hated arrears of pay like the devil.

Nevertheless, and hate it though he might, our pay was in arrears. Moreover, apart from their fatigue of marching and counter-marching, the bulk of our infantry had been drawn from the London train-bands —the Red Westminster regiment and the Auxiliaries, Green and Yellow, of London City and the Tower Hamlets; tradesmen, that is to say, who wearied to be home again with their wives and families after six months' separation, and others (such as the White Regiment of Auxiliaries) freshly drafted, that had scarce got over the remembrance of parting. These regiments, too, comprised many score of apprentices, whom Parliament allowed to count their time of military service as though it had been spent with their masters: and as apprentice and master marched side by side, and it often fell that the youngster won promotion, with leave to order his elder about, you may guess there were heart-burnings. Add to this that it kept these good citizens chafing to note how often (and indeed regularly) advancement passed them over to light on some young gentleman of family or "imp," as they growled, "from the Inns of Court."

We lay—in horse and foot some five thousand strong—well centred in and about the town and castle

of Farnham, with a clear road to London behind us and in front a nearly equal enemy planted across our passage to the West. You may take a map with ruler and pencil and draw a line through from Winchester to Oxford, where the King kept his Court. On the base of it, at Winchester, rested General Hopton's main force. North and east of it, at Alton, my Lord Crawford stood athwart the road with sufficient cavalry and Colonel Bolle's regiment of foot; yet farther north, Basing House, with my Lord of Winchester's garrison, blocked the upper path for us; and yet beyond, Sir Edward Ford's regiment held the passes of the hills toward Oxford; so that for the while, and in face of us, messengers, troops, even artillery, might pass to and fro without challenge.

This line of defence, though it forestalled us on every road, was weak in that it drew out Hopton's strength and attenuated it at too great distances. This our general perceived, and nursed himself for a sudden blow.

Now I must mention that with the entry of December there fell the beginning of a cruel frost, that lasted six weeks and was enough to make this winter memorable without help of wars or bloodshed. At the first we all hailed it, as hardening the roads, which for a month had been nigh impassable: and either commander took speedy advantage of it—

Hopton to make a swift diversion into Sussex and capture Arundel Castle (which was but a by-blow, for in a few weeks he had lost it again), and our own general to post up with his short, quick legs to London, where in two days he had wrung from Essex good reinforcements, with promise of pay for the troops and a consignment of leathern guns—a new invention and extremely portable. By the evening of December 5th he was back among us and dispatching us north, south, and east to keep the enemy jumping while our supplies drew in.

It was one of those night skirmishes or surprises that brought me promotion. For on the evening of December 10th our troop, being ordered out to beat up the neighbourhood of Odiham, on the way fell in with a half-squadron of the Lord Crawford's cuirassiers, and in the loose pistol-firing we took five prisoners and lost our cornet, Master John Ingoldby. The next day we rested; and that morning, as I sat on a rusty harrow by the forge close beside Farnham Church and watched the farrier roughing my horse, our Sergeant-Major Le Gaye, a Walloon, came up to me and desired me to attend on Colonel Stuckey, who presently and with many kind expressions told me that I was chosen to fill the room of the dead cornet.

Now this was flattering: and you may think with what elation of mind I took it, being eager and young (in fact, scarce turned twenty). But almost it jumped

beyond my ambitions at the time. I was one of five sergeants of the troop, the unripest among them and already accounted lucky. I knew well that this advancement had passed them and reached me less for my deserving than because our colonel preferred to have his commands carried by men of decent birth. I knew the whole army to be sore already over fifty like promotions; and foresaw grumbling.

"I bear ye no malice"—this was the way that Roger Inch took it, our senior sergeant. "But you'll allow 'tis disheartening to be set aside for a lawyer-fellow that, a year ago, had never groomed horsehair but on his own wig." And so—but less kindly—the rest of my fellow-sergeants expressed themselves.

None the less they were ready enough, that evening, to join in drinking to my new honours. The place was the Bear Inn, in Farnham; the liquor, warmed ale; and I paid the scot. Towards midnight Sergeant Inch had so far forgot his rancour as to strike up his song of "Robin and the Night Owl"—"Robin," I should explain, being the Earl of Essex, and the "Night Owl" our own general, so nicknamed for his activities after dark.

We broke no regulations by this revelry, being allowed by custom, after a night in saddle, to spend the next as we chose, provided that we kept to quarters. For me, though I had done better in bed, snatching a little sleep, the time was past for seeking it. A

piquet of ours had been flung out to westward of the town, on the Alton Road, and at twelve o'clock I was due to relieve it. So I pushed the drink around, and felt their grudge against me lessening while Sergeant Inch sang—

"Robin's asleep, for Robin is nice;
Robin has delicate habits;
But 'Whoo!' says the grey Night Owl—once, twice,
And three times 'Whoo!' for the little shy mice,
The mice and the rats and the rabbits,
'Who-oo!'"

At the close of every verse he mimicked an owl's call to the life—having in his young days been a verderer of the New Forest, on the edge of Bradley Plain; and at the end of his third verse, in the middle of a hoot, was answered by a trumpet not far away upon the road to Alton.

At the sound of it we sprang up, all of us, and two or three ran out into the street: for the beating up of quarters had become a bad habit with the two armies, useless as the most of us thought it. The night outside was freezing villainously: it struck chill into me after the hot room and the ale-drinking. The moon, as I remember, was high, shedding a soft foggy light down the roadway: and there, by the inn doorway, I stood for a minute or two, with my hand on my sword, peering and listening. To right and left, and from behind me, came sounds of men moving in their billets to the alarm and waiting, as I was waiting. But no

noise of attack followed the first summons; and by-and-by I drew back as a brisk footfall broke the hush and came hurrying down to the doorway of the Bear, where it halted.

"Is that you, Fleming?" said the voice of old Price, our Welsh quartermaster. "Then turn out quick to the West Gate! The enemy has sent in a trumpet in form, and you are to convey him up to the Castle."

Without delay I fetched my roan mare from the stable, mounted, and rode out beyond the West Gate to a point where the little river Wey runs close alongside the high-road. There I found the trumpet in converse with our piquet, and took stock of him by aid of the sergeant's lantern. He was a blackavised, burly fellow, with heavy side-locks, a pimpled face, and about the nose a touch of blue that, methought, did not come of the frosty air. He sat very high in saddle, upon a large-jointed bay, and wore a stained coat that covered his regimentals and reached almost to his rowels. A dirty red feather wagged over his hat-brim. As I rode up he greeted me with a jovial brotherly curse, and hoped—showing me his letter—that we kept good drink at the Castle. "And if so," he added, "your little William the Conqueror may keep me so long as he has a mind to."

I told him, as we rode back and into Farnham, that Sir William, as a rule, made quick dispatch of business.

"He made pretty quick dispatch of it at Lansdowne," said my Cavalier, and started trolling a catch—

> "Great William the Con,
> So fast he did run,
> That he left half his name behind him!"

Perceiving him to be an ill-bred fellow, and that to answer his jeering would be time wasted, I turned the talk upon his message.

"The Lord Crawford sends for an exchange of prisoners?" I hazarded.

"The Lord Crawford does not waste a man of my talents in swapping of prisoners," was the response. "And when Orlando Rich takes the road and risks his health on such a night as this, you may be sure 'tis on business of moment."

I questioned him no further. We rode through the park (the sentries taking my password), and came to the guard-room of the Castle, where, as we dismounted, the general's quartermaster lounged out and called for a couple of men to take our horses. Then, learning that my companion brought a message from Lord Crawford, he made no delay but led us straight to the general's room.

Though the clock in the corner had gone midnight, the general sat in a litter of papers with a lamp at his elbow and his legs stretched out to a bright sea-coal fire. With him was closeted Colonel

Pottley, of the London train-bands, and by the look of the papers around them they had been checking the lists (as two days later there was heavy court-martialling among the newly arrived drafts and cashiering of officers that had misbehaved in Middlesex).

"You come from the Earl of Crawford?" asked the general, not rising from his chair, but holding out a hand for the letter.

The messenger presented it, with a good soldierly salute; and so stood, pulling at his moustachios and looking fierce.

"Your name?"

"Sergeant Orlando Rich, of the Earl's Loyal Troop."

The general broke the seal, ran his eye over the paper, and let out a short laugh.

"His lordship sends me his loving compliment and prays me to spare him a runlet of sack or of malvoisy, for that his own wine is drunk out and the ale at Alton does not agree with his stomach."

"Nor with any man's," corroborated Sergeant Rich.

"He promises to send me a fat ox in exchange, and—" the General glanced to the foot of the scrawl, turned the paper over, and found it blank save for the name and direction—"and that, it seems, is all. No talk of prisoners. . . . Truly an urgent message to send post at midnight!"

"If you had seen his lordship's condition——" murmured Sergeant Rich.

"His lordship shall have a full hogshead; but not by you;" the General shot a shrewd glance at the man and bade me step outside and summon the quartermaster who waited in the corridor. "Quartermaster," said he, "convey this visitor of ours to the kitchens. Give him what meat and wine he demands. Let him depart when he will and carry as much as he will—under his skin. Meantime order out three of the pack-nags, and tell the cellarer to fetch up six firkins of the sack sent down to me last Thursday by Mr. Trenchard. Have them slung, a pair to each horse, and well secured—for the roads are slippery. And you, Master Fleming——"

I saluted; flushing, perhaps, a little with pleasure that he remembered my name.

"Do you mount guard to-night? Then we must find you a substitute. What say you to convoying this wine, with a trumpet, to my Lord Crawford? You may choose half a dozen of your troop to ride with you. The road to Alton cannot easily be missed; and, if it could—why, these night sallies are the best of training for a young soldier. I doubt, Master Fleming, that since this morning, when I promoted you cornet, you have heard talk that glanced upon your rawness, hey? Well, here is a chance for you to learn. For my part I call no man a finished

campaigner until he can smell his way through a strange country in the dark. You fancy the errand? Then go, and prosper: and be sure my Lord Crawford will treat you kindly, when he has once tasted my wine."

II

THE stroke of one in the morning, sounding after us from Farnham clock through the fine frosted air, overtook us well upon the road. I had made speed, and so had the quartermaster and cellarer. As for Sergeant Orlando Rich, if he had not achieved speed he had at least made haste. Before I started my pack-horses from the guardroom door the cellarer came to me and reported him drunk as a fly; and stepping into the great kitchen for a slice of pasty, to fortify me against the night's work, I saw my hero laid out and snoring, with his shoulder-blades flat on the paved floor. So I left him to sleep it off.

A fellow of the general's own guard helped me lead my horses to the door of the Bear, and there I tumbled out my substitute, and six passably good troopers I had chosen to take with me. They were Carey, our youngest sergeant, and as good-natured a fellow as I knew; Randles, who stood well for advancement to the post my own promotion had left vacant; and four other privates—Shackell, Wyld,

Masters, and Small Owens (as we called him), a Welshman from the Vale of Cardigan. To prime them for the ride I called up the landlord and dosed them each with a glass of hot Hollands water; and forth we set, in good trim and spirits.

For two miles after passing our piquet we ambled along at ease. The moon was low in the south-west, but as yet gave us plenty of light; and the wind—from the quarter directly opposite—though bitter and searching, blew behind our right shoulders and helped us cheerfully along. Our troubles began in a dip of the road on this side of the hamlet of Froyl, where an autumn freshet, flooding the highway, had been caught by the frost and fixed in a rippled floor of ice. We had seen duly to the roughing of our own chargers; and even they were forced at this passage to feel their steps mincingly; but the pack-horses, for whom I had only the quartermaster's assurance, had been handled (if indeed at all) by the inexpertest of smiths. The poor beasts sprawled and slithered this way and that, and in the end, as if by consent, came to a pitiful halt, their knees shaking under them. So they appeared willing to wait and tremble until morning: but on my order Randles, Owen, and Masters, dismounting, led them and their own horses, foot by foot, on to sure ground.

For a mile beyond, and some way past Froyl, was safe going if we avoided the ruts. But here the moon failed us; and when Carey lit a lantern to help, it showed

us that the carriers had no stomach left in them. One, though the froth froze on him, was sweating like a resty colt. The other two, if we slacked hold on their halter-ropes, would lurch together, halt, and slue neck to neck like a couple of timid dowagers hesitating upon a question of delicacy.

It was here that there came into my head the ill-starred thought of leading them off the road and through the fields close alongside of it on our left hand. The road itself I knew pretty well, and that it bore gradually to the left, all the way to Alton. Carey, whom I consulted, agreed that we could find it again at any time we chose. So, and without more ado, we opened the next gate we came to, and herded the beasts through.

The first two fields, being stubble, served us well; and the next, a pasture, was even better. Beyond this we had some trouble to find a gate, but at length Masters hit on one a little way out of our course, and it led to a wide plowland, freshly turned but hard-frozen, in the furrows of which our horses boggled a good deal. We pushed across it, holding our line in a long slant back towards the loom of the tall hedge that (as we agreed) marked the course of the highway. On the far side of the plow this hedge ran down hill towards us and more sharply than I had reckoned: yet before regaining it we had to cross another pasture. I was the surer that this must

be the road because of a light that shone straight ahead of us, which I took to be the direction of Holibourne village. I should mention, too, that on our left all the way the ground descended in an easy slope, but the frost had bound the little river running below and held it silent.

Sure enough on the far side of the pasture we came to a gate, and Shackell, who was leading, announced that the high-road lay beyond. But a minute later he called to us that this could not be: it was too narrow, a mere lane in fact; and with that, as we pressed up to the gate, the mischief happened.

The cause of it was a poor starved jackass, that had been sheltering himself under the lee of the hedge, and now, as we all but trampled him, heaved himself out of the shadow with a bray of terror. The sound, bursting upon us at close quarters, was as a stone hurled into a pool. Round went our horses' rumps, and up went heels and hoofs. I heard Little Owens cry aloud that his nose was broken. "Catch hold of the pack-beasts!" I shouted, as they shied back upon us, and two were caught and held fast—I know not by whom. The third, the resty one, springing backwards past me, almost on his haunches, jerked his halter wide of my clutch, and in a moment was galloping full flight down the slope.

With a call to the others to stand steady and wait for me, I wheeled my mare about and rode off in

chase, to round him up. The almost total darkness made this hunting mighty unpleasant; but I knew that, bating the chance of being flung by a mole-hill, I had my gentleman safe enough. For, to begin with, he must soon find the pace irksome, with two firkin casks jolting against his ribs; and at the foot of the descent the river would surely head him off. To be sure it was frozen hard and he might have crossed it dry-footed, but the alders on the bank frighted him back, and presently I had him penned in an angle between hedge and stream. Here, as I slowed up and advanced to coax him, from out of the darkness behind him there broke suddenly a shouting and pounding of hoofs, and close in front of me (but hidden by the hedge) a troop of horsemen clattered down from the farther slope and up the lane where my comrades were gathered.

If for a moment I doubted what it all might mean, a couple of pistol-shots, followed by a loose volley that mixt itself with oaths and yells, all too quickly put this out of doubt. My men were being charged, without question or challenge, by a troop of the enemy, while separated by a quarter of a mile of darkness and stiff rising ground from me, who alone carried their credentials. Little need to say in what hurry I wheeled my mare about to the slope, struck spur, dragged my trumpet loose on its sling and blew, as best I could, the call that both armies accepted for

note of parley. Belike (let me do the villains this credit), with the jolt and heave of the mare's shoulders knocking the breath out of me, I sounded it ill, or in the noise and scuffle they heard confusedly and missed heeding. The firing continued, at any rate, and before I gained the gate the fight had swept up the lane.

I swung out upon the hard stones and dashed after it. But the enemy, by this, had my fellows on the run, and were driving them at stretch gallop. To worsen my plight, as I pursued I caught sound of hoofs pounding behind and, as it seemed, overtaking me; supposed that a horseman was riding me down; and, reining the mare back fiercely, slued about to meet his onset. It proved to be the poor pack-horse I had left in the valley! He must have galloped like a racer; but now he came to a halt, and thrust his poor bewildered face towards me through the darkness. Commending him to the devil, I wheeled about once more and struck spur; and as I galloped, he galloped anew behind.

This diversion had cost me a good fifty yards. I knew well enough that the lane sooner or later must lead out into the high-road, and made sure that if my fellows gained it first they would head back for Farnham. (What would befall me I left to Providence!) But some two or three of the enemy must have raced ahead and cut off that retreat; for when

I came to it the way to the right lay open indeed, but the whole welter was pounding down the road to the left, straight for Alton. Again I followed, and in less than two hundred yards was pressing close upon three or four of the rearmost riders. This seemed to me good opportunity for another call on my trumpet, and I blew, without easing my speed. On the sound of it, one of the dark figures in front swung round in saddle and fired. I saw the flash and the light of it on his gorget and morion: and with that, the bullet glancing against my mare's shoulder, she swerved wildly, leapt high, and came down with forelegs planted, pitching me neck-and crop out of saddle upon the frozen road.

III

Doubtless the fall stunned me; but doubtless also not for more than a few seconds. For I awoke to the drum of distant hoofs, and before it died clean away I had recovered sense enough to take its bearing in the direction of Farnham. Strangely enough, towards Alton all was quiet. Sitting up, with both hands pressing my head, for just a moment I recognized the gallop for my own mare's. Another beat time with it. I asked myself, why another? She would be heading for home—wounded, perhaps—scared certainly. But why with a companion? . . . Then, suddenly,

I remembered the poor pack-beast; and as I remembered him, all my faculties grew clouded.

Or so, at least, I must suppose; for of the sudden silence on the Alton road I thought not at all. What next engaged me was a feeling of surprise that, of my two hands pressed on my temples, the right was cold, but the left, though it met the wind, unaccountably warm—the wrist below it even deliciously, or so it felt until rubbing my palms together I found them sticky, with blood.

The blood, I next discovered, was welling from a cut on my left temple. Putting up my fingers, I felt the fresh flow running over a crust of it frozen on my cheek; and wondered how I might staunch it. I misdoubted my strength to find the lane again and creep down to the river; and the river, moreover, would be frozen. For a certainty I should freeze to death where I lay, and even more surely on the road back to Farnham I must faint and drop and, dropping, be frozen. With that, I remembered the light we had seen shining ahead of us as we crossed the fields; and staggered along in search of it, after first groping for my morion, which had rolled into the hedge some paces away.

For a while, confused in my bearings, I sought on the wrong hand; but by-and-by caught the twinkle of it through a gate to the left, and studied it, leaning my arms on the bar. The house whence it

shone could not be any part of Holibourne village, but must stand somewhere on high rising ground across the valley. I might reckon to reach it by turning back and taking the lane in which we had been surprised: but this meant fetching a long circuit. I was weakening with loss of blood, and—it coming into my mind that the river below would be hard—I resolved to steer a straight line and risk obstacles.

As it turned out, there were none, or none to throw me back. At the stream-side, holding by an elder-bough, I tested the ice with my weight, proved it firm, crossed without so much as cracking it, and breasted a bare grassy slope, too little to be called a down, where a few naked hawthorns chafed and creaked in the wind. Above it was an embankment rounded like a bastion, up the left side of which I crept—or, you might almost say, crawled—and, reaching the top, found myself close under the front of a dwelling-house.

It was coated with whitewash, the glimmer of which showed me the queer shape of the building even in the darkness. It consisted of two storeys, both round as pepper-pots. Above the first ran a narrow circular thatch, serving as a mat (so to say) for the second and smaller pepper-pot. I could not discern how this upper storey was roofed, but the roof had a hole in it, from which poured a stray ray of

light. Light shone too, but through a blind, from a small window close under the eaves. The lower storey showed none at all.

I rapped on the door. There came no response, though I waited and listened for a full minute. I rapped again and shouted; and was about to challenge for the third time, when the threshold showed a chink of light. Muffled footsteps came down the passage, and with much creaking the bolts were undrawn.

"Who knocks?" demanded a man's voice, somewhat shrill and querulous. "Cannot a poor scholar rest in peace, and at this time o' night?"

"In the name of Charity!" I urged.

He flung the door open and stood with a hand-lamp held high, surveying me; a little old man, thin as a rat, in skull-cap, furred gown and list slippers. The lamp shone down on his silvered hair and on a pair of spectacles he had pushed up to the edge of his cap; and showed me a face mildly meditative from the brow down to the chin, which by contrast was extremely resolute.

"More soldiers!" he observed testily. "The plague take it that they and the meteors must choose the same night to drop from heaven! How many of you, this time?"

I answered that I was alone, and would have added a word on my plight; but this, beneath the lamplight, he could not miss perceiving, for my face

and the left shoulder of my buff coat were a mask of blood.

"H'm!"—he cut me short. "It may sound to you unfeeling: but if Heaven persists in sending me soldiers I had rather physic than feed them": and with that he stood aside as inviting me to enter. Be sure I obeyed him gladly, and, stepping inside, rested my hand for a moment against the jamb of a door that stood open to the right. The ray of his lamp, as he held it near to examine me, gave me a glimpse of the room within—of a table with cloth awry, of overturned flagons lying as they had spilt their wine-stains, of chairs and furniture pushed this way and that.

"So your predecessors have left me," said the old gentleman, catching the direction of my gaze and nodding. "Whether or no they have left me enough for the morning's breakfast is a matter my servant must discover when he comes over from Holibourne at daylight."

"They were Malignants, sir, as I guess: the Earl of Crawford's men."

"Devil a groat care I what you call them, or they call themselves! I study the heavens and take no heed of your sublunary divisions. But they have eaten and drunk me out of house and home; at that hour, too, when the most meteors were predicted: and what is worse they invaded my garret in their clumsy

jack-boots, and have thrown my Orchestra Cœli out of gear. I was mending it when you knocked. By the way," he added more kindly, "I can go on mending it while you wash your wound, which will appear less horrid when cleansed of all this blood. I have a fire upstairs, and hot water. Come."

He closed the outer door and, taking me gently by the elbow, half-supported me up the stairway, which was little better than a ladder, and led direct to the strangest room I have ever set eyes on.

It was circular—in diameter perhaps twelve feet—with a high conical roof. The roof had an inner lining of wood, and through a hole in it—where a panel had been slid back—a large optic-glass, raised on a pivot-stand, thrust its nose out into the night. Close within the door stood an oaken press, and beside it, on a tripod, a brazier filled with charcoal and glowing. A truckle-bed, a chair, and two benches made up the rest of the furniture: and of the benches one was crowded with all manner of tools—files by the score, pliers, small hammers, besides lenses, compasses, rules, and a heap of brass filings; the other, for two-thirds of its length, was a litter of books and papers. But the end nearest to the working-bench had been cleared, and here stood a mighty curious intricate mechanism of wheels and brass wire and little brass balls, with fine brass chains depending through holes in the board. My host flung a tender