

British Battles

on Land and Sea.

THE CASTLE OF ALICANTE, 1709.

While the war was thus being waged in Flanders, the contest for the throne of Spain between Phillip, Duke of Anjou, and Charles, son of Leopold I, was continued with varying success; and in that strife the defence of the castle of Alicante by an old English regiment and one composed of foreign refugees, against more than 12,000 French and Spanish troops, presents a remarkable instance of fortitude and obstinate bravery.

Admiral Sir George Byng, by order of Admiral Sir John Leake, had taken Alicante by storm, in August, 1706, compelling the governor, Colonel Count Mahoney, an Irish soldier of fortune, to capitulate, after he had been severely wounded and had 160 of his guns which faced the sea dismounted by the British fleet. But he had defended himself with such bravery that honorable terms were given him; and marched out at the head of 130 dragoons (thirty of whom were Irishmen), the sole survivors of this force, with four pieces of cannon, and lighted matches.

Major-General Richard Gorges was now entrusted with the defence of Alicante, a post of great importance, its harbour being one of the best in Valencia. It stands nearly in the centre of the bay, on a narrow peninsula, which abuts into the sea, and, like its fortress, the city is of vast antiquity.

On April 15 Gorges succeeded Arthur, Earl of Donegal, in command of the regiment afterwards known as the 35th or Dorsetshire. He erected an additional defence to Alicante, called Gorge's Battery, between the castle and the town; and the first duty performed by its guns, was a funeral salute in honour of Marcus, Viscount Dungannon, who died at Alicante. He was colonel of an English regiment which is no longer in existence, and was son of Colonel Marcus Trevor, who was said to have wounded Oliver Cromwell at the battle of Marston Moor.

Major General Michael Richards was appointed Governor of Alicante on the recall of Gorges to England. He was a Catholic, and consequently was greatly esteemed by the Valencians, "though to give him his own he behaved extremely well in all other respects," says Carleton in his "Memoirs." He was a brigadier of the year of the Revolution; and, as Catholics were not then allowed to hold such high rank, we must conclude that Richards adhered to the religion of his forefathers in secret.

Alicante was now invested and besieged by a strong force under Chevalier d'Asfeld, afterwards Marquis and Marshall of France. He had with him 12,000 French and Spanish troops, with a strong train of artillery. The castle was surrounded and the city blockaded by sea and land; but the defence of both by the two regiments of Hotham and Sybourg became one of the most brilliant feats of the war. Night and day the breaching batteries played upon Alicante, which at last was deemed no longer defensible, so on the night of the 3rd of December, 1708, the troops retired into the castle, which had been deemed impregnable since the days of the Moors.

Incredible were the exertions now made by the soldiers of the two regiments to protract the defence until the arrival of a relieving fleet; and, to procure water they sank three deep cisterns in the solid rock on which the fortress stands.

On the 5th of April, 1705, six regiments of infantry were raised in England. One of these was commanded by Sir Charles Hotham, Bart., M. P. for Beverly, an officer who had served in the wars of King William, and who died in 1723, a general, or colonel of the eighth or King's. He embarked with his regiment for Spain, and served with it at Alicante when the battle of Almanza was fought; but he must have left it soon after, as during the disastrous siege we are about to narrate it was commanded by Lieut.-Col. Edward Thornicroft.

The regiment of Colonel Fredrick Sybourg was chiefly composed of French Protestant refugees, was one of seven such corps then in our service. These were the French dragoons under Lieut.-Col. La Fabrique, and the infantry of Brigadier Vimare, Colonels Fontjulian, La Bathe, Sybourg, Blosset, and Count de Nassau d'Auverquerque, who was killed at the battle of Almenara, in Spain, in 1710.

Colonel Sybourg personally commanded his battalion in Alicante; his Lieut.-Col. was Balthasar d'Albon, Francis Vignioles was major, and Bernard Richon was chaplain.

The Chevalier d'Asfeld, after he had made some progress in blocking up these solitary regiments in the castle of Alicante, saw that it was impossible to attempt with success an assault; the elevation of the old fortress was too great for breaching-guns to effect it. He therefore resolved to undermine the solid rock, and blow the castle and its garrison into the air together.

This scheme was deemed quite impracticable by General Richards and his officers, and they confidently awaited the arrival of the naval squadron, under Sir Edward Whitaker, from Barcelona. In the meanwhile, by shot and shell, musketry and hand-grenades, they did all in their power to destroy the French sappers, and also endeavoured to counter-mine their work. The working parties of the Chevalier toiled day and night at their task; and numerous bands of sturdy Valencian peasantry were pressed into his service to aid them.

Twelve weeks of peril and unremitting toil were necessary to complete the mine; and when filled it was charged with 1,500 barrels of gun powder and other combustible materials.

By sound of drum, on the 2nd day of March, 1709, the castle was formally summoned to surrender, and a safe and honorable convoy so far as Barcelona was promised to the regiments of Hotham and Sybourg, with all their arms, colors and baggage, if they capitulated within three days, and thus prevented the total destruction of the fortress and themselves. And to this offer the Chevalier added a solemn threat that if once the mine was sprung, no mercy or quarter would be shown any officer or man who escaped the explosion.

The Chevalier d'Asfeld, to prove that he was in sad earnest, requested General Richards to come in person or to send certain officers, to see for themselves the formidable nature of the mine beneath the garrison, and the terrible fate that inevitably waited them. This invitation was accepted by Lieut.-Col. Thornicroft, of Hotham's Regiment and Captain Page, an English engineer in the service of King Charles.

They descended into the mine accompanied by the Chevalier, who requested them to examine it as closely as they pleased. They did so, and on their return reported to General Richards "that if their judgement did not deceive