

ribs, piercing his tunic and forcing him to cry out with pain. He fell back from it and tugged at the interlacing boughs between him and the log-wall, fighting them with his left, pressing them aside, now attempting to leap them, now to burst through them with his weight. The wall jetted flame through its crevices, and the boughs held him fast within twenty yards of it. He could reach it easily (he told himself) but for the staff he carried, against which each separate twig hitched itself as though animated by special malice.

He swung himself round and forced his body backwards against the tangle; and a score of men, rallying to the colours, leapt in after him. As their weight pressed him down supine and the flag sank in his grasp, he saw their faces—Highlanders and redcoats mixed. They had long since disregarded the order to hold their fire; and were blazing away idly and reloading, cursing the boughs that impeded their ramrods. A corporal of the 46th had managed to reload and was lifting his piece when—a twig perhaps catching in the lock—the charge exploded in his face, and he fell, a bloody weight, across John's legs. Half a dozen men, leaping over him, hurled themselves into the lane which John had opened.

Ten seconds later—but in such a struggle who can count seconds?—John had flung off the dead man and was on his feet again with his face to the rampart. The men who had hurried past him were there, all six of them; but stuck in strange attitudes and hung across the withering boughs like vermin on a gamekeeper's tree—corpses every one. The rest had vanished, and, turning, he found himself alone. Out in the clearing, under the drifted smoke, the shattered regiments were re-forming for a second charge. Gripping the colours he staggered out to join them, and as he went a bullet sang past him and his left wrist dropped nerveless at his side. He scarcely felt the wound. The brutal jar of the repulse had stunned every sense in him but that of thirst. The reek of gunpowder caked his throat, and his tongue crackled in his mouth like a withered leaf.