

"Captain Gordon," said he, addressing one of them, "despatches requiring immediate perusal have just been brought by this officer."

Before the sentence was finished the door opened, and a short slight man, in a gay undress coat, with a white cravat and a cocked hat, entered. The dead silence that ensued was not necessary to assure me that he was one in authority; the look of command, his bold, stern features presented; the sharp piercing eye; the compressed lip; the impressive expression of the whole face, told plainly that he was one who held equally himself and others in mastery.

"Send General Sherbrooke here," said he to an aide-de-camp. "Let the light brigade march into position," and then turning suddenly to me, "whose despatches are these?"

"General Murray's, sir."

I needed no more than that look to assure me that this was he of whom I had heard so much, and of whom the world was still to hear so much more.

He opened them quickly, and, glancing his eye across the contents, crushed the paper in his hand. Just as he did so, a spot of blood upon the envelope attracted his attention.

"How's this! you are wounded!"

"No; sir; my horse was killed——"

"Very well, sir; join your brigade. But stay, I shall have orders for you. Well Waters, what news?"

This question was addressed to an officer in a staff uniform, who entered at the moment, followed by the short and bulky figure of a monk, his shaven crown and large cassock strongly contrasting with the gorgeous glitter of the costumes around him.

"I say, who have we here?"

"The Prior of Amarante, sir," replied Waters, "who has just come over. We have already, by his aid, secured three large barges——"

"Let the artillery take up position in the convent at once," said Sir Arthur, interrupting. "The boats will be brought round to the small creek beneath the orchard. You, sir," turning to me, "will convey to General Murray—But you appear weak. You, Gordon, will desire Murray to effect a crossing at Avintas with the Germans and the 14th. Sherbrooke's division will occupy the Villa Nuova. What number of men can that seminary take?"

"From three to four hundred, sir. The padre mentions that all the vigilance of the enemy is limited to the river below the town."

"I perceive it," was the short reply of Sir Arthur, as placing his hands carelessly behind his back, he walked towards the window, and looked out upon the river.

All was still as death in the council: not a lip murmured; the feeling of respect for him in whose presence we were standing, checked every thought of utterance, while the stupendous gravity of the events before us, engrossed every mind and occupied

every heart. I was standing near the window; the effect of my fall had stunned me for a time, but I was gradually recovering, and watched with a thrilling heart the scene before me. Great and absorbing as was my interest in what was passing without, it was nothing compared with what I felt as I looked at him upon whom our destiny was then hanging. I had ample time to scan his features and canvass their every lineament. Never before did I look upon such perfect impassibility: their cold, determined expression, was crossed by no show of passion or impatience. All was rigid and motionless, and, whatever might have been the workings of the spirit within, certainly no external sign betrayed them; and yet what a moment for him must that have been! Before him, separated by a deep and rapid river, lay the conquering lions of France, led on by one second alone to him, whose very name had been the *prestige* of victory. Unprovided with every regular means of transport, in the broad glare of day, in open defiance of their serried ranks and thundering artillery, he dared the deed. What must have been his confidence in the soldiers he commanded! what must have been his reliance upon his own genius! As such thoughts rushed through my mind, the door opened and an officer entered hastily, and whispering a few words to Colonel Waters, left the room.

"One boat is already brought up to the crossing-place, and entirely concealed by the wall of the orchard."

"Let the men cross," was the brief reply.

No other word was spoken, as turning from the window, he closed his telescope, and followed by all the others descended to the court-yard.

This simple order was enough; an officer, with a company of the Buffs, embarked, and thus began the Passage of the Douro.

So engrossed was I in my vigilant observation of our leader, that I would gladly have remained at the convent, when I received an order to join my brigade, to which a detachment of artillery was already proceeding.

As I reached Avintas all was in motion. The cavalry was in readiness beside the river: but as yet no boats had been discovered, and, such was the impatience of the men to cross, it was with difficulty they were prevented trying the passage by swimming, when suddenly Power appeared, followed by several fishermen. Three or four small skiffs had been found, half sunk in mud, among the rushes, and with such frail assistance we commenced to cross.

"There will be something to write home to Galway soon, Charley, or I'm terribly mistaken," said Fred, as he sprang into the boat beside me; "was I not a true prophet when I told you, 'We'd meet the French in the morning?'"

"They're at it already," said Hixley, as a wreath of blue smoke floated across the stream below us,