

SECOND TO NONE.

A Military Romance.

VOL. II.

BY

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SECOND TO NONE.

CHAPTER I. MARCH TO DOL.

The city of St. Malo was now more closely reconnoitred by the commander-in-chief, as well as by General Elliot, the quartermaster-general, and other officers, who were unanimously of opinion that, from its vast strength, a long time—a month at least—must elapse before it could be reduced; and as the heavy cannon and mortars requisite for such a siege were yet on board the fleet, the idea of any assault upon the place should be relinquished, more especially as French troops were advancing against us from Normandy, Maine, and Anjou.

The approach by land to the small isle of Aaron on which it is situated is by a mole or causeway, three-quarters of a mile in length, by fifty-four feet in breadth. and this was daily covered by the tide with slimy weeds.

The approach by sea was narrow, well defended by batteries, and was otherwise dangerous to vessels venturing within gunshot. On the north St. Malo was quite inaccessible, in consequence of the height of the rocks and strength of the fortifications which crown them. The city was crowded with fugitives from the adjacent country, from which they had retired by order of the noblesse, magistrates, and echevins, to whom the Duke of Marlborough* sent a notice, that if the peasantry did not return peaceably to their houses, he "would set fire to them without delay."

* His Grace was Charles Spencer, fifth Earl of Sunderland, who succeeded to the honours of his illustrious grandfather, John Churchill, the great captain of Queen Anne's wars.

He also published a manifesto making known "to all the inhabitants of Brittany, that the descent on their coast with the powerful army under our command, and our formidable armament by sea, was not made with the intention of making war on the inhabitants, except such as should be found in arms, or should otherwise oppose the just war which we were waging against His Majesty the most Christian King.

"Be it known, therefore," continues the manifesto, "to all who will remain in peaceable possession of their habitations and effects, that they may stay in their respective dwellings, and follow their usual occupations; and that, excepting the customs and taxes which they pay to the King, nothing will be required of them in money or merchandise but what is absolutely necessary for the subsistence of the army, and that for all the provisions they bring in ready money shall be paid, &c. Given from our headquarters at Paramé, June 7."

While the British general threatened destruction unless the peasantry returned, the French authorities, on the other hand, threatened to hang all who obeyed, so between them the poor Bretons were likely to have a fine time of it.

Our troop was now ordered to accompany a regiment of foot which was detached to Dol, a long march by steep old roads that went straight up one hill and down another.

The day which succeeded that night of destruction at St. Servand and St. Solidore was beautiful. The sun of June was warm and glowing, and brightly it shone on the bluff rocks and embattled walls of St. Malo, on the masses of charred wreck that floated by

the isle of Aaron; on the dense old forests in the foreground, the blue hills whose wavy outline towered in the distance, and on the blue sea that stretched away towards the shores of England; on the quaint old chateaux of the noblesse perched on rocks that overhung the mountain torrents, and on the picturesque hovels of their vassals that nestled under their protection, for vassalage yet lingered in primitive Brittany.

These poor cottages, built of rough and unhewn stone, and plastered with mud, we generally found to be abandoned by the inhabitants at our approach. In some places we passed stacks of slowly-burning wood smouldering by the wayside; but the poor charcoal-burners had lied when our drums woke the echoes of the mountain road.

"It is certainly not pleasant to find oneself in the character of an invader!" said Charters, as we rode leisurely on.

When we proceeded further, we found the farms abandoned, the villas deserted and stripped of all that was most valuable. Goats no longer grazed on the heathy mountain slopes, or cattle in the verdant meadows; all had been driven off to forest recesses, to conceal them from us; yet never was there less mischief done to private property by an invading force than by us on this occasion.

During a halt near an ancient church, Jack Charters, observing the earth at the root of a tree to have been recently disturbed, thrust his sword into it, and about eighteen inches below the surface found all the sacred vessels of the altar, tied up in a tablecloth. There were three elaborately chased gold chalices, a patine, and several silver salvers and cruets. Our troops were making merry on the discovery of this plunder, when Charters, who never forgot his

forfeited position, and felt himself still a gentleman, restored the whole to the curé of the church, who came to beg it of us.

Soon after, an officer of one of our foot regiments found near a chateau a quantity of silver plate, worth several hundred pounds, concealed in the same manner. This officer sent the plate to the chateau, from which the proprietor was absent (for indeed he was no other than Captain the Chevalier de Boisguiller, who was making himself so active against us), together with a letter, purporting that he had restored the treasure, as we came not to war on the people, but the government of France. In proof of this, in many instances our men shared their scanty rations with the poor and needy whom they found by the wayside, and who trusted us.

Rumour of such acts as these having preceded us, we were kindly, even warmly received by the people of Dol, which is an ancient episcopal city surrounded by time-worn fortifications, and situated in the midst of what was then a marshy plain. Its mediæval streets are quaint and narrow, with picturesque gables and carved gablets that almost meet from either side of the way.

We entered it without opposition, after a fourteen miles' march, and to our surprise the bells of the cathedral rung a merry peal in our honour. A contribution was levied on the city exchequer, and there we passed the night after posting guards at all the gates and outposts beyond. The duty apportioned to the light troop of the Scots Greys was solely to furnish patrols on the various roads leading to Dol, to prevent a surprise, for as yet we knew not exactly what troops were in Brittany.

About daybreak on the following morning, I formed one of a party that patrolled the highway in the direction of St. Aubin du

Cormier. Cornet Keith commanded, and Sergeant Duff and Corporal Charters were with us. Each officer and man carried oats for his horse in a bag, and a bundle of hay trussed up in a net behind the saddle. We were only eleven in all.

Keith was a brave but inexperienced young officer, who had joined our corps from Richmond's Foot in consequence of an incident which made some noise in the service at the time.

Richmond's regiment enjoyed the unfortunate reputation of bring a duelling one. Indeed, there was scarcely an officer in it who had not, at some time or other, paraded, and killed or wounded his man; thus Keith, soon after joining it as a raw ensign, was informed by the captain of the Grenadiers, "a fire-eater," that another officer had treated him in a manner deserving severe notice, and that "after *what* had taken place"—the usual dubious, but constant phrase on such occasions—he of the Grenadiers would gladly act as his friend; *but* that if Keith omitted to parade the insulter duly by daybreak on the morrow, it would be noticed by the whole corps, and hopeless "Coventry" would be the result.

Keith was unable to perceive that he had been in the least insulted; but knew in a moment that his would-be friend had no other object in view than to test his courage and arrange a duel, a little luxury the corps had not enjoyed for two months past. He perceived also, that to maintain his own reputation, the fatal pistol *must* be resorted to; but as he had no intention of fighting an innocent man who had never offended him, he threw his leather glove in the face of the Grenadier, called him out, and shot him through the lungs as a lesson for the future, and soon after obtained a transfer to the Greys, when we were cantoned among the villages of the Sussex Coast, hunting for smugglers.

We were riding leisurely in file, through a narrow lane, about two miles from Dol. It was bordered by wild vines, and shaded by chestnut trees. The grey daylight was just breaking; the pale mist was rolling in masses along the mountain slopes, and the sweet odour of the bay myrtle and of the wild flowers came on the morning breeze from the marshes that lay between us and the city.

Save the tinkling of some chapel bell for matins among the mountains all was still, and we heard only the hoofs of our horses and the clatter of their chain bridles; but judge of our astonishment when wheeling out of the narrow lane upon the highway that led direct to Dol—the path by which we could alone return—we found in our front a party of French Light Horse, forty at least of the same Hussars we had encountered in the night near St. Solidore; and the moment we came in sight they began to brandish their sabres, and to whoop and yell in that manner peculiar to the French before engaging, while many shouted loudly—

"Vive le Roi! à bas les Anglais!"

CHAPTER II. A SKIRMISH.

Our young Cornet Keith never for an instant lost his presence of mind, for he came of a brave stock, the old Keiths of Inverugie; thus he was a near kinsman of Marshal Keith, who fell at the head of the Prussian army on the plain of Hochkirchen.

"We must charge and break through those fellows," said he, coolly and rapidly, "or we shall all be taken and cut to pieces."

"I fear, sir, it is impossible to break through," said Sergeant Duff, as he cocked his holster pistol.

"Nothing of this kind is impossible to the Scots Greys!" replied the young officer, proudly.

"Lead on, sir; and we shall never flinch," said Charters, with a flushing cheek.

"Keep your horses well in hand, my lads," cried Keith. "We may not *all* be killed—so prepare to charge! spur at them—fire your pistols right into their teeth, and then fall on with the sword. Forward—charge—hurrah and strike home!"

We received a confused discharge of pistols from those French Hussars. One of our horses fell and crushed his hapless rider. In the next moment we were right among them—firing our pistols by the bridle hand, and hewing right and left, or fiercely giving point to the front, with our long straight broadswords, beneath the weight of which their short crooked sabres were as children's toys. Here

Big Hob Elliot cut a Hussar's sword arm clean off, by a single stroke, above the elbow.

Still they were too many for us. There was a brief and most unequal hand to hand conflict amid the smoke of our pistols, and red sparks sprang high as the steel blades met and rung. Cornet Keith clove one Hussar to the eyes, ran a second through the breast, and being well mounted on a magnificent grey horse, broke through the press of men and chargers, and effected a retreat or flight—which you will—to Dol.

Six others, of whom Jack Charters and Hob Elliot were two—succeeded in following him; but three perished under the reiterated blows of more than twenty sabres, while I, separated from the rest, had my horse thrust half into a beech hedge by the pressure and numbers of the enemy, whose leader, a brilliantly attired hussar officer, with a white scarf across his shoulder, and golden grand cross of St. Louis dangling from its crimson ribbon at his breast, attacked me with great vigour.

Finding that I was quite his equal with the sword, he drew a pistol from his saddle-bow and fired it straight at my head. By a smart use of the spurs and bit, I made my horse rear up; thus the bullet entered his neck and saved me. Then in its agony the poor animal made a wild plunge, and bursting through the mob of hussars who pressed about me, rushed along the road with such speed that I was soon safe, even from their carbines, and found myself alone and free, without a scratch or scar.

On, on flew the maddened horse, I knew not whither. There was a gurgling sound in his throat, and with every bound the red

blood welled up and poured from the bullet-wound over his grey skin, which was drenched with the flowing torrent.

I lost my grenadier cap as he flew on, past cottages of mud and thatch, and chateaux with turrets, vanes, and moats; past wayside wells and votive crosses, and past those tall grey monoliths and cromlechs that stud so thickly all the land of Brittany; past fields of yellowing buckwheat and thickets of pale green vines, till, at a sudden turn of the road, near an ancient and ruinous bridge that spanned a deep and brawling torrent, he sank suddenly beneath me, and fell heavily on the ground.

Disengaging myself from the saddle and stirrups, I proceeded to examine the horse's wound. His large eyes, once so bright, were covered now with film, and his long red tongue was lolling out upon the dusty road. My gallant grey was in his death agony, and thrice drew his sinewy legs up under his belly and thrust them forth with convulsive energy. At the third spasm, when I was stooping to examine the wound, his off fore hoof struck me like a shot on the right temple, inflicting a most severe and stunning wound, and I sank senseless and bleeding beside him.

Half-an-hour probably elapsed before perfect consciousness returned. Then I found my face so plastered by the blood which had flowed from my wound, that my eyes were almost sealed up by it, and my hair, which was curled (as we wore it so, and *not* queued, like the troops of other corps), was thickly clotted also.

In the *mêlée*, or race, I cannot remember which, I had lost my sword and pistols, so concealment was my first thought; my second, anxiety to reach Dol or the camp at Paramé. How either was to be achieved in a country where my red uniform marked me

as a mortal foe and invader, to be shot down—destroyed by any man, or by any means—was a point not easy to solve. Moreover, I knew not the language of Brittany, in only some districts of which French is spoken.

I left my dead grey—poor Bob, for so he was named—with a bitter sigh; for daily, since I became a soldier, had the noble horse fed from my hand, and he knew my voice as well as the trumpet call for "corn" or "water."

I walked along the road unsteadily, giddy, faint, and ill. After proceeding about a quarter of a mile, I came upon a four-wheeled wain laden with straw, and standing neglected, apparently, by the wayside. No horses were harnessed to it, and no driver or other person was near. It seemed to offer, until nightfall, a comfortable place of concealment. I clambered up, and, nestling down among the straw, tied my handkerchief round my contused head to stop further bleeding, and in a few minutes after, overcome by the sleepless patrolling of the past night, the excitement and peril of the recent conflict, the long and mad race run by my dying horse—a race perhaps of twenty or thirty miles, for I knew not the distance—the pain of the wound his hoof had given me, and the consequent loss of blood, I fell into a deep and dreamless stupor, for I cannot call it sleep.

While I was in this state, it would seem that the proprietor of the wain had come hither, yoked thereto a pair of horses, and, all unconscious that there was anything else there than straw, forage for the cavalry of the most Christian King—least of all a "sacré-Anglais"—in the wain, drove leisurely and quietly off, I knew not whither, as I neither stirred nor woke.

CHAPTER III. HUSSARS AGAIN.

Evening had come on before I was awake, and, on looking upward, saw above me the green leafy branches of some great trees. Then, on peeping from my nest amid the straw, I found, to my very great astonishment, that the wain was not in the same place where I had entered it, but that it was now at the end of a long and stately avenue, and close to an embattled wall, in which there opened an arched gateway surmounted by a coat of arms carved in stone.

I was about to investigate this circumstance further, when the sound of voices near me, or apparently immediately under the huge wain, made me shrink down and lie still and breathless to listen.

"Come, come, *mon ami*, don't lose your temper, for I assure you that you have none to spare," said a female voice.

"Bah! you always laugh when I kiss you, Angelique," replied a man, reproachfully; "why is this?"

"Because, Jacquot, your moustaches tickle me."

"You are always rather too ticklish between the nose and chin," retorted the other.

"Perhaps so, when Monsieur de Boisguiller and his hussars are here."

"*Pardieu*, if this be the case, then I shall go back to St. Malo, to dine with the fat cits and dance with their pretty daughters."

"You? Ha! ha!"

"Laugh as you may, mademoiselle: the coachman of Monsieur le Curé of St. Solidore, who holds the consciences of half the province in his keeping, is not without some importance at St. Malo, be assured."

"*Que cons êtes bon!* (what a simpleton you are!) Kiss me and say nothing more."

A certain remarkable sound followed; then the lovers, apparently reconciled, passed through the archway, and I could perceive that the man was no other than Jacquot Tricot, who had driven the *d'esobligeant* of the old Curé of St. Solidore, and that his companion was a pretty and piquant young Bretonne, with fine features and coal-black eyes, and having her dark hair dressed back *à la marquise*, under a tall white cap of spotless linen.

She wore a tight red bodice, with its armholes so large that at the back only an inch or two of the stuff remained between the shoulders; but under this she had a pretty habit-shirt, which fully displayed the swelling form of her fine bust and shoulders. Her ample but short black skirt, embroidered with silver, announced, after the Breton custom, that she was not altogether dowerless, and by her high instep, smart ankle, and taper leg, no one could doubt that Angelique was a charming dancer.

I am thus particular in describing this girl, who was a piquante little country beauty, full of queer Breton exclamations, because our acquaintance did not end here.

My wound was very painful. I felt weak and light-headed; but the consciousness that other concealment was necessary made me look about for a new lurking-place.

On one side of the avenue there opened a spacious lawn; on the other lay a lake, and above the embattled wall and gateway the turrets of a chateau were visible in the sunshine. In the middle of the lawn grew a thicket of shrubs or dwarf trees. My course was soon determined on—to reach the thicket and remain there concealed till nightfall, and trust the rest to Providence.

I dropped from the summit of the straw-laden wain, and, passing quickly through the line of lofty trees, was about to hurry across the lawn, when I heard a shout uttered by many voices, and found myself within fifty paces of a strong party of French Hussars, who had picketed their horses near the avenue, and were quietly enjoying, *al fresco*, a meal which had no doubt been sent to them from the chateau. It was quite a military picnic, as they were all lounging on the grass, around cold pies, fowls, tarts, and bottles of wine, with their jackets open, their belts and pelisses off.

So busy had they been with their jaws, that their tongues had been silent hitherto, and thus I knew nothing of a vicinity so dangerous, until it was too late to retreat.

Being defenceless, my first thought was to advance confidently and surrender myself as a prisoner of war; but, on seeing that while some rushed to their holsters to procure pistols, others snatched up their sabres, with cries of—

"Down with the Englishman! *Sacré Dieu!*"

"Shoot him down!"

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