

CHAP. action as auxiliaries, to occupy part of the enemy's force, and to  
 XV. complete his destruction in case of victory.

1808.

December.

*They advance  
 against M.  
 Soult.*

According to the information which Romana could obtain, Soult's corps consisted of about 9000 infantry and 1000 horse; but that General, apprehending that some attempt would be made against him, had applied for reinforcements, and without waiting for them, called to his assistance the nearest troops; he had thus brought together about 18,000 men, who were posted behind the river Carrion. Every arrangement was made for attacking him, and orders were issued accordingly, . . . never more welcome to a British army. The convents in Sahagun were prepared for the reception of the wounded; and the soldiers confidently anticipated a glorious victory. Their general was less sanguine. "The movement I am making," he said to Mr. Frere, "is of the most dangerous kind. I not only risk to be surrounded every moment by superior forces, but to have my communication with Galicia intercepted. I wish it to be apparent to the whole world, as it is to every individual of the army, that we have done every thing in our power in support of the Spanish cause, and that we do not abandon it until long after the Spaniards had abandoned us." The truth is, that nothing had been done; but he was disgusted with the Spanish Government, and he had no faith in the people: his own judgement would have led him to fall back from Salamanca; and he only advanced because he knew what would be the feelings of the English nation, if its army had retired without attempting any thing. Offended with Mr. Frere, for having given his opinion, when he himself had asked it, he did not deem the suggestion of that Minister, as to making a stand at Astorga, worthy of consideration. It was at once rejected, as futile; and he advanced against this detachment of the French, "bridle in hand," as he himself

said, and expecting to "have a run for it," . . . not thinking that any possible benefit could result from a victory, but seeking a reason which might appear valid to the people of England for abandoning the peninsula, and for leaving Spain and Portugal to their fate. . . "It was necessary to risk this army," he said, "to convince the people of England, as well as the rest of Europe, that the Spaniards had neither the power nor the inclination to make any efforts for themselves. With respect to the cause, it will probably have no effect. Even if I beat Marshal Soult, it will be attended with no other effect than the character it will attach to the British arms."

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At the hour appointed, the whole force was under arms; the right column had begun its march, and the rest were in high spirits, expecting the word of command: . . . just at this time came a letter from Romana, with intelligence that the French were advancing from Madrid, either to Valladolid or Salamanca; and information to the same purport was received by other messengers, and also, that considerable reinforcements had arrived at Carrion from Palencia. Orders were immediately issued that the troops should go back to their quarters, and by daybreak next morning be again under arms. "In my life," says one who was present, "I never witnessed such an instantaneously-withering effect upon any body of living creatures! A few murmurs only were heard, but every countenance was changed, and they who, the minute before, were full of that confidence which ensures victory, were at once deprived of all heart and hope." The next morning General Hope fell back to Mayorga, on the road to Benevente, with his own division and with General Fraser's. Sir David Baird was ordered to pass the river Ezla at Valencia de San Juan: on Christmas-day the Commander-in-chief followed General Hope, with the reserve and the light brigades; and the cavalry, under Lord Paget, followed the reserve

*The French  
endeavour  
to surround  
the British  
army.  
Dec. 23.*

*Sir J. Moore  
begins his  
retreat.*

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on the 26th. When Sir John Moore apprized Romana that he should fall back, he told him that if he were pursued he should stop and offer battle: and in a second communication from Sahagun he said, that if he were pressed after crossing the Ezla, he should have no objection to try an action. But he had made up his mind to lose some of his baggage, and not to fight, if he could avoid it. Astorga was to be his rallying point: there he informed Romana he should stand, as his retreat from thence, if necessary, would be secure, and he should be in the way to receive the supplies and the reinforcements which he expected from England. At the worst, he could defend himself, and, with Romana's aid, defend Galicia. "You may rest assured," he added, "that I shall not retreat a foot beyond what is necessary to secure my supplies from being intercepted. . . You will find no inclination in me to abandon the Spanish cause." But his dispatches from Benevente, on the 28th, show that this intention, if it had ever been seriously entertained, was soon abandoned; and as for the reinforcements, he had already countermanded them in his feeling of despair. His force, he said, when he reached Astorga, would be about 27,000; Romana could not have above 8000. The troops moving against him he estimated at not less than 50,000; and it was said that Buonaparte himself was coming, with 10,000 of his guards. His real purpose was not to stop longer at Astorga than to secure the stores, and then retreat to Villa Franca, where he had been told there was a position. Romana had intimated to him, some time ago, his intention of retiring into Galicia by this route, but Sir John begged it might be left open to the English, being the only communication they had for their retreat or supplies.

From the 22d to the 24th, Soult received such reinforcements as made his army superior to the British. Junot, with the army

which had been transported from Portugal to France, had advanced to Palencia, and threatened their right flank. Buonaparte was hastening from Madrid, with his imperial cavalry, and all the disposable force in that quarter. The force under Lefebvre was counter-ordered from the road to Badajoz, and directed toward Salamanca. The retreat of the British upon Portugal was thus cut off. Of the numbers advancing against him Sir John Moore was not informed; and so little idea was there of flying when he began his retreat, that it was determined to carry off the prisoners; and they were accordingly stowed in covered waggons. A thaw came on the day when they first fell back; on the following it rained without intermission: the soil in that part of the country is a heavy loam, and the roads were above a foot deep in clay. The proclamations of the French travelled faster than the British army: these were, as usual, full of promises which would not be fulfilled, and menaces which would. They were come, they said, to deliver Spain; to emancipate the people from the yoke of a tyrannical nobility and a fanatic priesthood. All persons who remained quiet in their houses, or who, having forsaken them, speedily returned, should receive no injury; but otherwise, whatsoever belonged to them should be confiscated. Unhappily, the conduct of our people now began to give effect to these hand-bills. The soldiers were indignant with the Spaniards for their apparent supineness; they were exasperated by the conduct of some poor wretches, whose carts had been pressed to carry the sick and wounded, and who, as many of them as could, had taken their mules, and run away in the night, because the movements of a retreating army exposed themselves to imminent danger, and their beasts to certain destruction. Weary and disheartened, in want of rest and food, disappointed in their confident hopes of victory, and indignant at turning their backs upon an enemy

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of the troops.*

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whom they would so eagerly have met in the field, it was a relief for them to vent these feelings, in the shape of anger, upon the only objects within their reach. In this temper they began to plunder and commit havoc wherever they went; and the officers, many of whom already murmured at the rapidity of the retreat, and were discontented with the total silence which the Commander-in-chief maintained respecting his future measures, did not exert themselves as they ought to have done, to prevent these excesses.

*Passage of  
the Ezla.*

*Dec. 26.*

Sir David Baird, who took the shorter line to Astorga, by way of Valencia de S. Juan, effected his march without molestation. The sick and wounded, following the same track, halted at the latter place, to pass the night. Hardly had they been provided with the necessary food, and laid to rest, before the alarm was sounded, and they were again hurried into the waggons. The night was cold, misty, and exceeding dark, and the Ezla was to be crossed some little distance from the town. They were not provided with pontoons. The ford is dangerous, because of the rapidity of the stream, occasioned by two narrow banks of shingles, which form an angle in the middle; and at this time the river was fast rising, from the melting of the snow upon the mountains. A serjeant's guard had been left by Sir David on the opposite bank, to assist the waggons in passing, and skuttle two ferry-boats, when they had effected their passage. They kindled a fire with grass and rushes, for the sake of its light, but the materials were wet, and the wind soon extinguished it. A Spanish muleteer attempted to guide them over the ford: his mule tripped in the mid stream, he was thrown, and saved by a soldier, when just in the act of sinking. Perilous, however, as the ford was, the passage was accomplished, without other loss than that of some baggage-waggons, which broke down.

Sir John Moore, meantime, with the other division of the army, reached Benevente, and there found it necessary to issue general orders, which reflected severely upon the conduct both of his men and officers. "The misbehaviour of the column which had marched by Valderas exceeded," he said, "what he could have believed of British soldiers. He could feel no mercy towards officers who neglected, in times like these, essential duties, nor towards soldiers who disgraced their country, by acts of villany towards the people whom they were sent to protect." Alluding then to the discontent which was manifested at the hurry of the retreat, and the mystery which was thrown over their proceedings, he said "it was impossible for the General to explain to his army the motives of the movements which he directed; he could, however, assure them, that he had made none since he left Salamanca which he did not foresee, and was not prepared for; and, as far as he was a judge, they had answered the purposes for which they were intended. When it was proper to fight a battle he would do it, and he would choose the time and place which he thought most fit. In the meantime, he begged the officers and men to attend diligently to discharge *their* parts, and leave to *him*, with the general officers, the decision of measures which belonged to them alone." Strong as this language was, it had no effect, and the havoc which had been committed at Valderas was renewed at Benevente. The castle there is one of the finest monuments of the age of chivalry; we have nothing in England which approaches to its grandeur: Berkeley, Raby, even Warwick and Windsor are poor fabrics in comparison. With Gothic grandeur, it has the richness of Moorish decoration; open galleries, where Saracenic arches are supported by pillars of porphyry and granite; cloisters, with fountains playing in their courts; jasper columns and tessellated floors, niches, alcoves, and seats in the walls, over-arched in various forms, and enriched with every grotesque adornment of

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General orders issued at Benevente.

Dec. 27.

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 XV. It belonged to the Duke of Ossuna ; and the splendor of old  
 1808. times was still continued there. The extent of this magnificent  
 December. structure may be estimated from this circumstance, that two re-  
 giments, besides artillery, were quartered within its walls. They  
 proved the most destructive enemies that had ever entered them :  
 their indignant feelings broke out again, in acts of wanton mis-  
 chief ; and the officers, who felt and admired the beauties of this  
 venerable pile, attempted in vain to save it from devastation.  
 Every thing combustible was seized, fires were lighted against  
 the fine walls, and pictures of unknown value, the works, per-  
 haps, of the greatest Spanish masters, and of those other great  
 painters who left so many of their finest productions in Spain,  
 were heaped together as fuel. The archives of the family for-  
 tunately escaped.

*Affair of  
 cavalry on  
 the Ezla.  
 Dec. 28.*

The soldiers had, however, here an opportunity of displaying  
 a spirit more becoming them as Englishmen. Soon after the  
 rear of the army had marched into the town, an alarm was given  
 that the enemy were on the opposite heights. In an instant all  
 was on the alert ; every man hastened to his place of rendezvous ;  
 the cavalry poured out of the gates : . . the plain in the opposite  
 direction was covered with fugitives, and the streets were filled  
 with women bewailing their fate, and calling upon the Saints  
 and the Virgin for protection. The French, seeing with what  
 alacrity they would be encountered, looked at our men from the  
 heights, and retired. It was towards evening, and as the enemy  
 were so near, orders were given to destroy the bridge. This was  
 effected about daybreak the following morning ; and it was sup-  
 posed that their progress was for a while impeded. The troops  
 again continued their retreat, and the whole of the infantry and  
 heavy artillery had departed, when intelligence arrived that the  
 French were again appearing, and that their cavalry were in the  
 act of passing the Ezla : . . they had found a ford about three

*Dec. 29.*

hundred yards below the bridge. Lord Paget and General Stewart were still in the town. The picquets of the night, under Lieutenant-Colonel Otway and Major Bagwell, were sent down; the cavalry were ordered to repair to their alarm posts; and many volunteers came forward. Lord Paget hastened to the spot: he found four squadrons of imperial guards already formed, and skirmishing with the picquets; other cavalry were in the act of passing. The 10th Hussars were sent for: as soon as they arrived, General Stewart placed himself at the head of the picquets, and charged the enemy. The French gave way, and repassed the ford more expeditiously than they had crossed it. They formed again on the other side, and threatened a second attempt; but three pieces of horse artillery, which now came up, were stationed near the bridge, and opened a fire upon them, that did considerable execution. About seventy prisoners were taken: among them General Lefebvre Desnouettes, Commander of the imperial guard of cavalry. The loss of the enemy could not be ascertained: it was variously guessed, from 60 to 200. Ours was about 50 in killed and wounded. It was reported that Buonaparte was on the heights during this action.

The ardour of the French was manifestly damped by this fresh proof of British valour; and they continued their pursuit at such respectful distance, that the rear of the army, which had been engaged with them, reached Bañeza that night unmolested. The next day the Commander-in-chief reached Astorga. This was the rallying point, and here they found about 5000 men of Romana's army. That army was literally half naked and half starved; a malignant typhus fever was raging among them, and sixty or seventy were sent daily to the hospitals. About this number, however, were fit for service. Romana arrived there the same day. The first intimation that the French were advancing to interpose between Portugal and

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Sir John  
Moore  
reaches  
Astorga.

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the British army had been received from him; but it was his opinion that that information ought to have produced no change in Sir John Moore's intentions. The intended attack, he thought, ought still to have been made; Soult might have been beaten in time to fall upon the corps which was coming to reinforce him, and by the success which prompt and vigorous measures would have ensured, they should have become masters of Leon and Castille. To his utter astonishment he now found that there was no intention of making a stand at Astorga, part of the British army being already on the way to Villafranca, and a regiment of cavalry all that was left on the side of Bañeza. He went therefore to the British Commander, and represented to him the propriety of facing the enemy where they were, a point from whence they had always a secure retreat by the passes of Manzanal and Foncebadon, . . . passes so strong that a small force might maintain them against any numbers. He represented to him also, that the park of artillery was at Ponferrada, where also the hospitals were established, and there were magazines of corn; that in Villafranca there were more than 2000 sick, with hospital stores and depôts of arms, and therefore it was of the utmost consequence to defend the Bierzo. But Sir John Moore replied, that he had determined upon retiring into Galicia, because his troops required rest. He desired that the high road of Manzanal might be left to him, saying, he would defend that and the principal entrance to Galicia by Villafranca; and that Romana might take the Foncebadon pass, and enter by way of the Val de Orras and Puebla de Sanabria. And here a proof of Spanish magnanimity was given by these half armed, half naked, and half famished men, for such they literally were. A malignant fever was raging among them, and long fatigue, privations, and disease, made them appear more like an ambulatory hospital than an army. Under such circumstances it might have been supposed they would have sought

*Honourable  
conduct of  
Romana  
and his  
army.*