

vera that 12,000 rations had been ordered at Fuente Duenas for the 28th, and 24,000 at Los Santos on the same day, for a French army, which it was supposed was on its march to the Puerto de Baños. Cuesta upon this discovered some anxiety respecting that post, and proposed that Sir R. Wilson with his corps should be sent thither. This could not be assented to, for his corps was stationed in the mountains towards Escalona, still keeping up a communication with the people of Madrid, . . . an advantage too important to be foregone. Of this Cuesta appeared sensible; yet he could not be prevailed upon to send a detachment from his own army; and Sir Arthur, considering that they had no other grounds for believing this was the point which was threatened than that the rations were ordered, which might be a feint, and hoping too that the troops already there might prove sufficient, and even that the news of his late victory might deter the French from proceeding, did not press the Spanish general farther that day. Night brought with it the anxious feeling that a point had now become of prime importance, concerning which he could not be satisfied that proper means had been taken for its defence; and in the morning he again pressed Cuesta upon the subject, urging him to detach thither a division of infantry, with its guns, and a commanding officer on whom he could rely. "Certainly," he declared, "he never would have advanced so far, if reason had not been given him to believe that pass was secure. The division would not be missed at Talavera; if it arrived in time it would perform a service of the greatest moment; and even if the enemy should have crossed the mountains before its arrival, it would then be in a situation to observe him." But Cuesta was not to be persuaded. That day and the following elapsed; on the third came tidings that the French had entered Bejar; and then the Spanish general dis-

CHAP.
XXIV.

1809.

July.

*Intelligence
of Soult's
advanc.*

July 31.

CHAP. patched Bassecourt with a force which might have sufficed had
XXIV. it been sent in time.

1809.

August.

*Soult oc-
cupies Pla-
sencia.*

Mortier began his march from Salamanca on the 27th, Soult followed on the 30th, Ney two days afterwards, all taking the same route. The advance fell in with the Marquess de la Reyna's out-posts at La Calzala, and pursued them to Bejar and Col de Baños. The two battalions on which Cuesta had relied before the appearance of danger, consisted of only 600 men, supplied with twenty rounds of ammunition! Even this was more than they employed; they attempted to blow up the bridge called Cuesper de Hombre, and failing in that, retired without firing a shot. The battalions of Bejar dispersed as soon as they saw the enemy. Yet such was the strength of this position, that the very sight of the Spaniards delayed Mortier's march, in consequence of the dispositions which he thought it necessary to make for forcing it if it had been defended, and he did not enter Plasencia till the first of August. The occupation of that place was of the greatest importance; the French had now intercepted Sir Arthur's communication with Portugal, and were enabled to manœuvre upon his rear if he advanced toward Madrid, or remained at Talavera.

*Sir Arthur
marches a-
gainst him.*

Cuesta now proposed that half the British army should march against Soult, while the other half maintained the post at Talavera. Sir Arthur said he was ready either to go or stay with the whole British army, but he would not divide it; the choice was left to him, and he preferred going, thinking his own troops were most likely to accomplish the object of the march, perhaps even without a contest. It appears that he was not aware of the enemy's force: Cuesta estimated it at twelve or fourteen thousand, and Sir Arthur did not at that time suppose it to be larger. He preferred the alternative of going for another reason

also, feeling it of more importance to him that the communication through Plasencia should be opened than it was to the Spaniards, though highly important to them also. The movements of Victor in front induced him to suppose that the enemy, despairing of any better success at Talavera than they had already experienced, intended to fall upon Sir R. Wilson, and force a passage by Escalona: thus to act in concert with Soult between the Alberche and the Tietar. Sir Robert also felt himself seriously menaced, and some letters which he intercepted gave him sufficient information to ascertain that these were the plans of the enemy; he therefore informed the British General that he should remove his artillery to St. Roman, occupy the Panada with 300 men, a strong height behind Montillo with 600 more, from whence there was a good retreat to St. Valuela, and return with the rest to a position, in readiness either to occupy Valuela, or obey such instructions as he might receive. In this state of things, Sir Arthur perceived how possible it was that Cuesta might be forced to quit Talavera before he could return to it, and this made him uneasy for his hospital. At all events, he thought it too far advanced. He therefore entreated Cuesta to make a requisition for carts, and remove the wounded as expeditiously as was consistent with their safety, by first sending them to an intermediate station at no great distance, from whence they might gradually be passed to the place which should ultimately be fixed upon. He wrote to Bassecourt, requesting that he, with that division which had been dispatched to secure the passes after they had been lost, would halt at Centiello, and watch the vale of Plasencia; and he again recommended to the Spanish commander, that Venegas should be ordered to threaten Madrid by the road of Arganda, that being the only means whereby it was possible to alarm the enemy, and make him divide his forces.

CHAP.
XXIV.
1809.
August.

CHAP.
XXIV.

1809.

August.

Aug. 3.

Cuesta determines to follow Sir Arthur.

Having thus taken every precaution, he marched to Oropesa, with the intention of either compelling Soult to retreat, or giving him battle. At five in the evening he learned that the enemy were at Naval Moral, not more than eighteen miles distant; thus having placed themselves between him and the bridge of Almaraz, as if they meant to cut off his retreat across the Tagus. An hour afterwards dispatches came from Talavera, inclosing an intercepted letter from Jourdan to Soult, wherein the latter was told that the British army was at least 25,000 strong, and yet he was ordered to bring it to action wherever he could find it; from this Cuesta inferred that Soult could not have less than 30,000 men, and this was the precise number at which the friar, on whom the letter had been found, stated his army. But the most grievous part of the intelligence was, that Victor was again advancing, and had reached St. Olalla, and that Cuesta, seeing himself threatened both in front and in flank, and apprehending the British would require assistance, was determined to march and join them. Painful as it was thus to abandon the wounded, he considered that he must have abandoned them if he were driven from the position, and that position being now open on the left, he did not think himself able to maintain it. Sir Arthur immediately wrote to represent that the danger was far less imminent than Cuesta apprehended; the enemy, he thought, were not likely to attack Talavera, nor to occupy the British long. It would be time to march when they knew that the French had forced their way at Escalona, or were breaking up from St. Olalla. Victor was certainly alone, and Sebastiani and the Intruder occupied by Venegas. At all events he urged him to delay his march till the next day, send off his commissariat and baggage before him, and halt in the woods till the wounded were arrived at the bridge of Arzobispo. Soult's force, he said, was certainly overrated.

Sir Arthur's mistake upon this subject arose from his being ignorant that Mortier had formed a junction with this army. He supposed that it consisted only of the corps of Soult and Ney, who had brought out of Galicia 18,000 men, the remains of 36,000 with which they entered that country. Cuesta, however, was better informed; and he himself altered his opinion of the enemy's force when he considered the positive orders which the Intruder had given for attacking the British army, supposing it to consist of 25,000 men. Cuesta had not asked Sir Arthur's advice, and did not wait to receive it: he left Talavera before it reached him, marched all night, and joined the British at Oropesa soon after daylight on the 4th. His apprehension of danger to himself was well founded: it was not without great exertions and heavy loss that the combined armies had repulsed the French at Talavera; well, therefore, might he despair of withstanding them alone if they returned to the attack. But the danger which by this hasty retreat he averted from himself, he brought upon Venegas and Sir Arthur; and the latter, in addition to the mortification of having his wounded fall into the hands of the enemy, saw himself exposed to an attack in front and in rear at the same time by two armies, each superior to his own. It was absolutely necessary to retreat, otherwise nothing but two victories could extricate the troops from their perilous situation, and they were little capable of extraordinary exertions, not having had their full allowance of provisions for several days. The bridge of Almaraz had been destroyed, and when the Marques de la Reyna abandoned his post at the pass, he made for this point, with the intention of removing the bridge of boats that had been placed there; the boats indeed might be still in the river, but it was thought impossible to reach Almaraz without a battle. If he moved on to give the enemy battle, the French from Talavera would break down the bridge of Arzo-

CHAP.
XXIV.
1809.
August.

*Cuesta joins
the British.*

*They re-
treat across
the Tagus.*

CHAP. bispo, and thus intercept the only way by which a retreat was
 XXIV. practicable; the same danger would be incurred if he took a
 1809. position at Oropesa. Nothing remained, therefore, but to cross
 August. at Arzobispo, while it was yet in his power, and take up a de-
 fensive post upon the Tagus: the sooner a defensive line should
 be taken, the more likely were the troops to be able to defend
 it. On the day, therefore, that Cuesta formed his unfortunate
 junction, Sir Arthur retreated by this route, and crossed. Cuesta
 followed on the night of the 5th.

*Col. Mac-
 kinnon re-
 moves some
 of the
 wounded.*

Sir Arthur had left Colonel Mackinnon in command at Talavera with the charge of the sick and wounded, amounting, with those attached to the hospital, to about 5000 persons. On the evening of one day the charge had been given him, and on the next at noon Cuesta informed him that Soult was at Plasencia with 30,000 men, and that Victor was in his front, only six leagues distant; the monk who discovered their plans, being the bearer of a letter from the Intruder to Soult, was in the room: it was his intention to retire at dusk with the Spanish army and join Sir Arthur, and the hospital had better be got off before that time. Colonel Mackinnon had been instructed, in case of such necessity, to make for Merida by way of the Puente del Arzobispo: but it was with difficulty he could procure from Cuesta seven waggons to remove a few of the wounded. There was no alternative but to recommend those whom there was no possibility of removing to the honour and humanity of the French commanders; and Colonel Mackinnon, who had lived in France, and was in every respect one of the most accomplished officers in the British army, did this in a manner which was believed to have had great effect in obtaining for them the humane and honourable treatment they received. All who were able to march were ordered to assemble at three that afternoon, and proceed to Calera that night, . . a town which the French had

completely destroyed. The next day they were overtaken at Arzobispo by the British army, and instead of passing the night there, as had been intended, were ordered to proceed. Forty bullock-cars were added to their means of transport, but in such ill repair for some of the worst roads in the world, that only eleven of them reached Deleitosa. A more difficult six days' march could hardly be conceived, and the difficulty was of a kind more trying to a brave and feeling mind than danger. There was only a commissary's clerk to provide for them, and the runaway Spaniards were plundering the small magazines in all the villages. Reports that the French had crossed the Tagus, and were in their front, alarmed his men, who were in no condition for the field, and many of them took to the mountains. Mackinnon mustered his force in a convent near Deleitosa; it consisted then of 2000 men, and these he conducted to Elvas, without magazines, with no assistance from the magistrates, who, on the contrary, sometimes evinced a hostile disposition; and with such want of humanity on the part of the people (made callous by selfishness, and selfish by necessity), that he was often obliged to use violent means, or the men must have been starved.

The British army was now stationed at Deleitosa, whence they could defend the point of Almaraz and the lower parts of the Tagus. Cuesta remained at Arzobispo; but so little in concert with Sir Arthur, that he moved his head-quarters, and suffered three days to elapse without sending him any information of his plans or movements. On the night of the 7th he removed to Peraleda de Garbin, leaving two divisions of infantry and Alburquerque's division of cavalry to defend the passage of the river. This was an imprudent measure, for the enemy were in force on the left bank; they had already attempted to win the bridge, and were now erecting batteries. The bridge was barricaded, and defended by several batteries with embrasures con-

CHAP.
XXIV.
1809.
August.

*Defeat of
the Spaniards at Arzobispo.*

CHAP.
XXIV.

1809.
August.

Aug. 8.

*Operations
de M. Soult,
524.*

*Naylies,
174.*

*Naylies,
175.*

ned by a covered way, and upon these works the general relied with such confidence, that he thought he might safely withdraw the greater part of his army to more convenient quarters. Cuesta ought to have understood the nature of this post; he had been blamed for abandoning it in the former part of the year: satisfied, however, with having fortified the bridge, he never thought of examining whether the river might not be fordable. Mortier, who commanded the corps of the French which led the pursuit, erected batteries to call off the attention of the Spaniards, while he ordered the chief of his staff, Dombrowsky, with two good swimmers, to sound the Tagus. His officer of engineers had observed, that when the Spanish horse were brought to drink they went some way into the river; trial was made where this indication promised some hope of success, and a good ford, passable even for infantry, was found there, not two hundred yards above the bridge and the Spanish batteries. Soult, who had now come up, resolved to effect the passage in the heat of the day, when the Spaniards would be taking their mid-day sleep, and might be surprised. He calculated upon a carelessness which he was sure to find. The Spaniards relied upon the river for their defence, never having deemed it needful to ascertain how far it might be relied on: the passage was accomplished almost as soon as they were aware of the attempt; the works of the bridge were taken in the rear, some of the Spanish artillerymen were cut down at their guns, and others, in a manner not to be justified by any laws of war, were compelled to turn them upon their countrymen; the works were presently demolished, and the way opened for Girard's infantry. Alburquerque's cavalry were reposing under some trees, a short league from the scene of action; at the first alarm they hastened to support their countrymen; and their charge was made with such resolution and effect, that Soult is said to

have thought of firing grape upon them through his own men, as the only means of repelling them. But succours came to the French in time for preventing this atrocious expedient; and the Spaniards, horse and foot alike, retreated, or rather fled through a mountainous country, which favoured their escape, leaving their ammunition, their baggage, and the whole of their artillery. The slain were estimated by the French at 1600 men, most of whom were cut down in a pursuit from which the enemy returned with every man his sabre red with blood. Some of the French were drowned in the passage, their other loss was trifling. The same frightful circumstance as at Talavera occurred after the action; the herbage took fire; the wind spread the flames far and wide, among stubble, dry shrubs, and groves of ilex and of olives; . . . on all sides the cries of the wounded were heard; and through the night muskets which the fugitives had thrown away went off, cartridges took fire, and cassoons of artillery exploded.

CHAP.
XXIV.1809.
August.*Naples,*
177.*Movements*
of Marshal
Ney.

The commonest precaution might have saved the Spaniards from this defeat, in which, though the loss of men was not great, that of artillery and ammunition was considerable, and the moral effect upon the troops of more importance than either. It seems, indeed, that Soult advanced to Arzobispo in the sole hope of profiting by the negligence of the Spanish commanders to strike some such blow; for the enemy had no intention at this time of carrying the war into Extremadura, finding Almaraz too well defended, and the fords, which were said to exist below the bridge, impassable. Ney had formed the design of crossing them, and taking possession of the defiles of Deleitosa and Xaraicejo, thus to cut off the retreat of the English toward Portugal; but those points were secured by Sir Arthur, as well as the passage of the river, and the French Marshal was ordered back to Salamanca to secure that part of the country, in concert with Kellermann, against the Duque del Parque and the Conde

CHAP. de Noroña, who had been prevented from occupying the enemy
 XXIV. on that side for want of artillery and cavalry; the former, how-
 1809. ever, was now beginning to act on the offensive. Ney began
 August. his march on the 9th to the Puerto de Baños, in his way towards
 Old Castille; and this brought him in contact with Sir Robert
 Wilson.

*Action with
 Sir R. Wil-
 son at the
 Puerto de
 Baños.*

When the British commander left Talavera, Cuesta's advanced guard was in communication with Sir Robert, and that officer was informed of the intended retreat of the Spaniards, that he might in like manner fall back. But he was advanced too far for this to be practicable; after a long march through the mountains, he found himself, on the night of the 14th, six leagues from Arzobispo; the high road between Oropesa and Talavera was to be crossed, and Victor was in possession of Talavera; thinking it, therefore, too late to reach Arzobispo, he determined to move by Puerto de San Julien and Centinello, and cross the Tietar toward the mountains. On the 11th he reached Baños, and had set out the following morning on the road of Grenadilla, to restore by this route his communication with the allied armies, when a cloud of dust was perceived on the road of Plasencia, and a peasant assured him it proceeded from a body of the enemy. Readily believing what was so probable, he turned back, and took post in front of Baños, placing 200 Spanish infantry under Colonel Grant in advance of Aldea Nueva. The enemy's chasseurs and voltigeurs advanced in considerable bodies under General Lorset; and Grant, after a resistance in which the Spaniards demeaned themselves gallantly, was compelled to fall back. The French then attempted to cut off Sir Robert's own legion, which was posted between Aldea Nueva and Baños: he had strengthened his position by every means which the time allowed, so that they could only advance gradually, and with severe loss from the fire of musketry which was