

to secure their retreat under protection of the British to Coruña and Ferrol. But Romana and his forlorn band were too high-minded to attach themselves as a burden upon those allies with whom they had so lately expected to co-operate in honourable and hopeful enterprise; and they assented without hesitation to the British General's desire. Romana only requested that the British troops might no longer be permitted to commit disorders which even in an enemy's country ought never to be allowed; it must have been painful indeed for Sir John Moore to have heard of such excesses, and still more painful to feel, that in a retreat so hasty as this was intended to be, it was impossible to prevent them.

The troops had been assured, at Benevente, that they were not falling back upon Coruña, but that their march was only to secure a more favourable position: . . . no affirmations could make the soldiery believe this; and when Sir John Moore reached Astorga, and issued his orders, it was too manifest that they were not retreating, but flying, before the enemy. Ammunition wag-gons were burnt here, and an entire depôt of entrenching tools abandoned, so that the army was thus deprived of a most important means of impeding the enemy's progress. The position at Villa Franca, which the Commander-in-chief had formerly mentioned in his dispatches, was no longer thought of. Two brigades, under General Craufurd, were detached, by way of Orense, to Vigo, to which port Sir John had ordered empty transports to be sent for him, supposing it to be the best point of embarkation. This detachment preceded Romana in the line which he expected was to have been left for him; and when he and his forlorn band, after halting only one night, took their way toward Orense, they found the country stripped of the means of subsistence upon which they had reckoned. General Fraser and his division were immediately sent forward, with orders to

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*Sir John
Moore pur-
sues his re-
treat.*

CHAP. proceed to Lugo; he was followed by General Hope and Sir
 XV. David Baird, and their instructions were to make forced marches
 1808. to the coast. "With respect to me and the British troops," said
 December. the Commander, in his official letter, "it has come to that point
 which I have long foreseen. . . From a desire to do what I could,
 I made the movement against Soult: as a diversion, it has
 answered completely; but as there is nothing to take advantage
 of it, I have risked the loss of the army for no purpose. I have
 no option now but to fall down to the coast as fast as I am able.
 . . We must all make forced marches, from the scarcity of pro-
 visions, and to be before the enemy, who, by roads upon our
 flanks, may otherwise intercept us."

The Bierzo. It appears evident, from these expressions, that Sir John
 Moore was not well informed of the nature of the country through
 which he was about to retreat. Westward of Astorga, two great
 ranges of mountains trend from north to south: Puerto del Ra-
 banal, Cruz de Ferro, and Foncebadon, are those of the eastern
 branch; those of the western are the Puerto del Cebrero, Puerto
 del Courel, and Puerto del Aguiar; they meet, on the south,
 with the Sierra de Sanabria, the Sierra de Cabrera, and the
 Montes Aquilianos. The tract which these mountains inclose is
 called the Bierzo: from summit to summit it is about sixteen
 leagues from north to south, and about fourteen from east to
 west. The whole waters of this amphitheatre have but one
 opening; they are collected into the river Sil, and pass, through
 a narrow gorge, into the Val de Orras, in Galicia. . . The centre
 is a plain of about four square leagues. There is scarcely in
 Europe a more lovely tract of country, certainly no where a more
 defensible one. The main road, one of the finest in Europe, is
 that of Manzanal; that of Foncebadon also leads into the Bierzo;
 there is no third ingress, and from Villa Franca toward Coruña
 the only way is that of the Puerto Cebrero; both the former

passes lead along defiles, where, as Romana observed three months before this miserable retreat, a thousand men might stop the march of twenty times their number: and beyond Villa Franca there is no lateral road. Sir David Baird's army had travelled this road; they supposed that it could not possibly be intended to fall back beyond that point. But the Commander saw no security till he should reach the coast; there he hoped to find transports ready, or to take up some defensible position till they arrived. The same difficulties which affected him must affect his pursuers. It was not probable that all the numbers which were now marching against him would follow him the whole way; and once on the coast, it was his determination not to be molested by any thing like an equal force:.. "it is only while retreating," said he, "that we are vulnerable." His sole object now was to bring off the army, .. to effect this he had already destroyed great part of the ammunition and military stores, and now left behind many of the sick.

The mountain-tops were covered with heavy clouds, and the roads knee-deep in snow. Provisions, in a country where the natives are not rich enough at any time to lay by a store, can never be abundant, and what there were, had already been exhausted by the repeated march of troops, English and Spaniards. The little order with which such food as could be found was issued out, occasioned waste, and thereby increased the evil. The men, half famished, half frozen, and altogether desperate, were no longer in any subordination. They forced their way into the houses where their rations should have been served, seized it by force, frequently spilling the wine, and destroying more than they could carry away. This was not all:.. pillage could not be prevented. Houses and villages were burning in all directions; but when they thus acted as enemies, they were

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*Disorders
committed
by the
troops.*

CHAP. treated as such ; and many of them were put to death by the
 XV. peasantry, in revenge, or in self-defence.

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December.

*Buonaparte
 stops at As-
 torga.*

Buonaparte pursued in person no farther than Astorga : he left Marshal Ney with 18,000 men to keep that part of the country in subjection ; and assigned to Marshal Soult, with 23,000, what he called the “glorious mission of destroying the English army, . . . pursuing them to their point of embarkation, and driving them into the sea.” Marshal Soult’s was an easy task : he had only to follow the English just close enough to keep them at the pace at which they set out, and not come near enough to make them turn and stand at bay : fatigue would do his work more surely than the sword. From Astorga to Villa Franca del Bierzo is fifteen leagues, about sixty English miles ; the road for the first four leagues is up the mountain, but through an open country. Having reached the summit of Foncebadon, you enter into some of the strongest passes in Europe. It would scarcely be possible for an invading army to force their way here, against a body of determined men. These passes continue between two and three leagues, nearly to the village of Torre ; from thence, through Benvibre and Ponferrada, nothing can be finer than the country, and the circle of mountains which binds it in. But never, in the most melancholy ages of Spanish history, had a more miserable scene been represented, than was now to be witnessed here. The horses of the retreating army began to fail, and this, in great measure, for want of shoes and shoe-nails. There was no want of iron to hammer new ones : there are iron-works near Villa Franca, and enough might have been procured, had there been time allowed. As soon as these noble animals foundered, they were shot, lest the enemy should profit by them. The rain continued pouring, . . . the baggage was to be dragged, and the soldiers were to wade through half-melted snows, . . . the feet

of the men as well as of the beasts began to fail, . . . more waggons were left behind, . . . more ammunition destroyed along the way ; and when the troops reached Villa Franca, they were in such a state, that several experienced officers predicted, if this march against time were persevered in, a fourth of the army would be left in the ditches, before it was accomplished. More magazines and carriages were here destroyed. Some of the men abandoning themselves now, as knowing that if they proceeded they must die of cold, hunger, and weariness ; they got into the wine cellars, and, giving way to desperate excess, were found dead when the French entered the town. When the General marched with the reserve from Benvibre, he left a detachment to cover the town, while parties were sent to warn the stragglers of their danger, and drive them out of the houses, . . . for the place was filled with them, near a thousand men of the preceding divisions having remained there, all abandoned to despair, and most of them to drunkenness. A few were prevailed upon to move on ; the greater number were deaf to threats, and insensible to danger, till the rear-guard was compelled to march. A small detachment of cavalry still covered them, and did not quit the town till the enemy approached, and then the road was filled with stragglers, armed and unarmed, mules, carts, women, and children. . . . Four or five squadrons of French cavalry compelled the detachment in the rear to retire, and pursued them closely for several miles, till General Paget, with the reserve, repulsed the pursuers. As the French dragoons galloped through the long line of these wretched stragglers, they slashed them with their swords to the right and left, . . . the men being so insensible with liquor that they neither attempted to resist nor get out of the road. Some of these men having found their way to the army, mangled as they were, were paraded through the ranks, to show their comrades the miserable consequence of drunkenness at such a time.

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*Skirmish at
Cacabelos.*

Jan. 3.

*Retreat
continued
from Villa
Franca.*

The Spaniards at Villa Franca would not believe that the French were advancing; through so strong a country, and in so severe a season, they thought it was impossible. Sir John Moore, however, well knew that he was pursued, and he was afraid of halting, lest the enemy should get in his rear, and intercept him at Lugo; an apprehension which could not have been entertained, had he been acquainted with the country. The troops, therefore, were hurried on: the artillery and head-quarters went foremost; General Baird's column, and the cavalry, under Lord Paget, covered the rear. The advanced guard of the enemy, under General Colbert, were close at their heels: Merle's division joined them on the 3d; and on the afternoon of that day they ventured to attack the rear-guard at Cacabelos. They were repulsed by the dragoons and riflemen. General Colbert received a ball in his forehead, and fell; he was an officer of great promise, and of so fine a person, that Canova is said to have called him the modern Antinous. Having thus once more shown the enemy what they could do in battle, the rear of the army, reluctantly and almost broken-hearted, continued their retreat.

From Villa Franca to Castro is one continued ascent up Monte del Cebrero for about fifteen miles, through one of the wildest, most delightful, and most defensible countries in the world. The road is a royal one, cut with great labour and expense in the side of the mountain, and following all its windings; . . . for some part of the way it overhangs the river Valcarce, a rapid mountain stream, which falls into the Burbia near the town, and afterwards joins the Sil, to pass through the single outlet in the gorge of the Bierzo. Oaks, alders, poplars, hazels, and chestnuts grow in the bottom, and far up the side of the hills: the apple, pear, cherry, and mulberry are wild in this country; the wild olive, also, is found here; and here are the first vineyards

which the traveller sees on his way from Coruña into the heart of Spain. The mountains are cultivated in some parts even to their summits, and trenches are cut along their sides, for the purpose of irrigating them. Even those writers whose journals were written during the horrors of such a flight noticed this scenery with admiration. It was now covered with snow:..there was neither provision to sustain nature, nor shelter from the rain and snow, nor fuel for fire, to keep the vital heat from total extinction, nor place where the weary and foot-sore could rest for a single hour in safety. All that had hitherto been suffered was but the prelude to this consummate scene of horrors. It was still attempted to carry on some of the sick and wounded: the beasts which drew them failed at every step; and they were left in their waggons, to perish amid the snow. "I looked round," says an officer, "when we had hardly gained the highest point of those slippery precipices, and saw the rear of the army winding along the narrow road.. I saw their way marked by the wretched people who lay on all sides expiring, from fatigue and the severity of the cold:..their bodies reddened in spots the white surface of the ground." The men were now desperate: excessive fatigue, and the feeling of the disgrace there was in thus flying before the enemy, excited in them a spirit which was almost mutinous:..a few hours' pause was what they desired, an opportunity of facing the French, the chance of an honourable and speedy death, the certainty of sweetening their sufferings by taking vengeance upon their pursuers. A Portugueze bullock-driver, who had faithfully served the English from the first day of their march, was seen on his knees amid the snow, with his hands clasped, dying in the attitude and act of prayer. He had at least the comfort of religion in his passing hour. The soldiers who threw themselves down to perish by the way-side gave utterance to far different feelings with their dying breath: shame

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CHAP. and strong anger were their last sentiments; and their groans
 XV. were mingled with imprecations upon the Spaniards, by whom
 1808. they fancied themselves betrayed, and upon the generals, who
January. chose rather to let them die like beasts than take their chance
 in the field of battle. That no horror might be wanting, women
 and children accompanied this wretched army:.. some were
 frozen to death in the baggage-waggons, which were broken
 down, or left upon the road for want of cattle; some died of
 fatigue and cold, while their infants were pulling at the ex-
 hausted breast:.. one woman was taken in labour upon the
 mountain; she lay down at the turning of an angle rather more
 sheltered than the rest of the way from the icy sleet which drifted
 along;.. there she was found dead, and two babes, which she
 had brought forth, struggling in the snow:.. a blanket was thrown
 over her, to cover her from sight, .. the only burial which could
 be afforded, .. and the infants were given in charge to a woman
 who came up in one of the bullock-carts, .. to take their chance
 for surviving through such a journey.

*Treasure
 abandoned.*

While the reserve were on this part of the road, they met
 between thirty and forty waggons filled with arms, ammunition,
 shoes, and clothing, from England, for Romana's army. There
 was no means of carrying them back:.. such things as could be
 made use of were distributed to the soldiers as they passed,
 and the rest were destroyed. Indeed, the baggage which was
 with the army could not be carried on: nearly an hundred
 waggons, laden with shoes and clothes, were abandoned upon
 this ascent. The dollars, too, could no longer be dragged along:
 had the resolution of sacrificing them been determined upon in
 time, they might have been distributed among the men: in this
 manner, great part might have been saved from the enemy, and
 they who escaped would have had some little compensation for the
 hardships which they had undergone:.. they were now cast over

the side of the precipice, in hopes that the snow might conceal them from the French : . . many men are supposed to have been lost, in consequence of having dropped behind, for the hope of recovering some of this money. Dreadful as this march appeared to those who beheld the wreck of the army strewing its line of road, it was perhaps still more so for them who performed it in a night stormy and dark, wading through sludge and snow, stumbling over the bodies of beasts and men, and hearing, whenever the wind abated, the groans of those whose sufferings were not yet terminated by death.

From the summit of this mountain to Lugo is nearly twelve leagues. There are several bridges upon the way, over glens and gills, which might have impeded the pursuit, had they been destroyed. One, in particular, between Nogales and Marillas, is the most remarkable work of art between Coruña and Madrid. This bridge, which is called Puente del Corzul, crosses a deep ravine: from its exceeding height, the narrowness of its lofty arches, and its form, which, as usual with the Spanish bridges, is straight, it might at little distance be mistaken for an aqueduct. Several of those officers who knew the road relied much upon the strength of the ravine, and the impossibility that the French could bring their guns over, if the bridge were destroyed. Grievous as it was to think of destroying so grand a work, its destruction was attempted; but, as in most other instances, to no purpose; whether the pioneers performed their office too hastily, or because their implements had been abandoned upon the way.

The different divisions had been ordered to halt and collect at Lugo. Sir John Moore was now sensible of the impossibility of reaching Vigo, the distance was double that to Coruña, the road was said to be impracticable for artillery, and the place itself offered no advantages for embarking in the face of an enemy. The brigades, however, of Generals Craufurd and Alton

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*The army
collects at
Lugo.*