CHAPTER XIX

OPERATIONS IN THE EAST AND SIEGE OF SAN SEBASTIAN

June, July 1813

REILLE, by skilful manœuvring, had rallied his troops at Betonio, on the left bank of the Zadora, to the north-west of Vittoria. From thence, though threatened on all sides, he had fought his way to Metanco, on the Pamplona road, always covering the retreat. On the 22d June the allies followed the convoy which had moved off towards Bayonne on the previous morning. A sufficient force was left in Vittoria, and the rest of the army went in pursuit of Joseph. On the morning of the 22d Reille had thrown himself across their line in front of Salvatierra. There he had halted till the fugitives had gone on, and then he continued his march as the rear-guard. Joseph had sent orders to France to make arrangements for the reception of the beaten army, and then Reille had orders to march on the Bidassoa with part of the army of Portugal. The rest of it was under Clausel. For himself, with the armies of the south and the centre, the King was to cross the Pyrenees by the defiles of St Jean Pied de Port.

Foy, who then had his quarters at Bilbao, was left isolated and endangered. When the news of the disaster reached him, he took his decisions promptly. He was a good general, though a ruthless administrator. Graham,

with Longa and the Gallicians under Giron, was racing to cut off his retreat into France. But Graham had to cross various parallel ridges, whereas Foy had the advantage of the high road. Yet he barely saved himself by the skin of his teeth where the two lines of march intersected. Knowing that the passes of Guipuzcoa were undefended, he had called in the garrisons of Biscay and pressed forward for Tolosa, on the Bayonne road, whither the convoys that had escaped from Vittoria were hastening. Uniting himself to Maucune's escort before Tolosa, he boldly offered battle, but was slowly forced back by superior numbers. Again he offered battle in front of the town, but when his flank was turned he again retired, and Tolosa was taken. That happened on the 25th, and on the 1st of July he had gone over the Bidassoa, his rear-guard being sharply engaged with Giron's Gallicians at the bridge of Belchite. There he was brought into touch with Reille. Guns and ammunition had been sent forward from Bayonne, and so 25,000 good men were in position behind the line of the Bidassoa.

Clausel, on the other flank of the French, was in a somewhat less perilous position. In case of the worst, he had Suchet and the army of Aragon to fall back upon. He had been advancing to the help of Joseph when the tidings of Vittoria reached him. He withdrew to Logroño, where he halted till the 25th. Then he made a forced march to Tudela, whence he had hoped to escape into France. But a friendly Alcalde having warned him that he was intercepted, he re-crossed the Ebro and marched on Zaragoza, sending Suchet intelligence of his arrival there with 15,000 men. As it happened, that message only misled Suchet, for Clausel was gone again before their armies could be united. Meanwhile Hill had been pressing the main body, and had seized the passes

from Roncesvalles to St Estevan. Wellington proposed to besiege Pamplona, and had actually landed stores and siege-trains at Deba, a small port to the west of San Sebastian. For the victory of Vittoria was followed by the strategic evolution which changed his base from the Bay of Lisbon to the more accessible Bay of Biscay, where there were excellent harbours from Corunna to Passages. But when the guns had been landed, news came from the east coast which induced him to re-embark them and postpone the siege of Pamplona.

Suchet, generally successful alike in warfare and administration, and sanguine of the future as his imperial master, had held on to his command with indomitable firmness. It might have been better for him ultimately had he complied with the wishes of the usurper and added his army to the others before the decisive battle. Holding to Valencia, Wellington's plans had provided him ample occupation, and if Murray had had anything of the best qualities of his chief, the campaign in the east would have had a different issue. Murray had been instructed to attack Tarragona. Towards the end of May an expedition sailed from Alicante, numbering nearly 15,000 men. The French had sighted it from Valencia as it sailed by, but on the 3d June the disembarkation was effected. The siege was begun and fire opened on the outworks. The French outside were not inactive. Suchet, breaking up his camp on the Xucar, made forced marches to Tortosa, sending at the same time orders to Decaen to advance to the relief of Tarragona from Barcelona. Murray did not want a wise counsellor. Whittingham, who commanded a Spanish brigade, urged him to leave the Catalans to cover the siege while he crushed Decaen with superior forces. Murray did not accept the suggestion, but continued to dally with the siege as if time were of little

value. When he heard that Suchet was approaching with 12,000 men on the one side, and Decaen with 8000 on the other, he showed exceptional promptitude, but in the wrong direction, and not only abandoned the siege operations, but all his heavy artillery and stores. Moreover, he acted in the face of strong protests from Admiral Halliwell. Sir John was court-martialled for the proceeding, but leniently reprimanded for a simple error of judgment. The consequence of that precipitate embarkation was to cause the retreat of Copons and his Catalonians to their mountains, while Decaen countermarched on Barcelona. The campaign thenceforth resolved itself into a dilatory game of cross-purposes. Murray re-landed part of his infantry to cover the uncompleted embarkation of his cavalry and field guns. Then, taking alarm again at the menace of Suchet's movements, and learning or suspecting that Decaen had withdrawn, he landed once more to fight the Marshal. But Suchet, hearing in turn of Decaen's withdrawal, had no mind to risk anything for a barren victory. Again Sir John decided to re-embark after consulting a council of war.

That very day, as it chanced, Lord William Bentinck arrived from Sicily. He accepted the council's decision; and the blowing up of the coast fort at the Col de Balaguer told Suchet, to his great relief, that the immediate danger was over. He and Lord William received almost simultaneously the news of Vittoria. That battle relieved Valencia from the invasion, as Salamanca had liberated Andalusia. Suchet, picking up or calling in his scattered garrisons, prudently determined on retiring to Zaragoza, where he expected to find Clausel. It was the apprehension of that junction which had constrained Wellington to defer the attack on Pamplona. But events in Aragon were soon to restore his freedom of action.

Clausel had made no long stay at Zaragoza. Mina, indefatigable as ever, was menacing his communications. It was said, besides, that he was swayed by the desire to place his vast booty in safety. If that were so, his hopes were disappointed. Leaving his guns behind, he hurried off to France by way of Jaca, and as the guerrillas swarmed down upon him while threading the passes, the bulk of the plunder had likewise to be abandoned.

Mina united his forces to those of General Duran, the commandant of Lower Aragon, for the deliverance of the faithful Zaragoza. The battered fortifications had been in some measure restored, and it was strongly garrisoned under General Paris; nevertheless, the long *enceinte* and ill-repaired breaches laid it open to assault, and it was said that the citizens to a man were ready to rise in aid of the liberators. Mina for once counselled caution; the veteran Duran was eager and impatient. There was sharp fighting, with sundry sorties. At last, in the second week of July, Paris, despairing of succour from Suchet, and having booty of his own to secure, blew up the bridge and moved off in the night. His orders had been to join the Marshal if he were driven to evacuate. But finding the road to Mequinenza impracticable, he was compelled to follow Clausel's line of retreat by Huesca and Jaca. So Suchet lost a second body of auxiliaries on which he had confidently relied, and Zaragoza, after four years of oppression, though shorn of its splendour and laid in ruins, passed back into the hands of the Spaniards. Suchet, resigning himself to the sacrifice of Aragon, withdrew with his remaining garrisons into Catalonia, the last stronghold of the invaders. He had lost the line of the Lower Ebro, nor could he support his troops in the barren neighbourhood of Tortosa, which was

open besides to descents from the sea. There could no longer be any apprehension that the siege of Pamplona would be interrupted by efforts from the east. Nor were considerations of time of much importance, so the blockade of the place was entrusted to the Spaniards, while Lord Wellington turned his attention to the capture of San Sebastian.

San Sebastian has been termed the Gibraltar of the north; it is accessible only by a sandy isthmus resembling 'the Spanish lines.' To the west is the harbour; on the other side flows the tidal estuary of the Urumea. The town is commanded by the castle hill, and behind the citadel is the eminence of Orgullo, which was to play an important part in the defence. Foy, on his retreat, had strengthened the garrison, and now it numbered nearly 4000, commanded by Emmanuel Rey. The place had stood sundry sieges in its time, but the fortifications had been neglected, for the invaders had never dreamed of being driven back upon it. Rey lost not a moment in repairing the defences, and when the Spaniards came in sight of them, the hillside and the town walls were seen to be swarming with workmen. The Spaniards had no siege-train, and could only establish a blockade, till Graham came up with the 5th Division. The 1st Division, under General Howard, were covering the great road from Irun, and supporting a Spanish corps which watched the Lower Bidassoa. Operations were commenced with promptitude, for time was rightly considered so precious that Graham defeated his purpose by neglecting due precautions. An indispensable preliminary to the reduction of the fortresses was to drive the defenders from their post of St Bartolomeo, advanced some 700 yards before the town. There was

a massive convent there, with an unfinished redoubt. A feigned attack was pushed too far, and the assailants were repulsed with serious loss. After sundry unsuccessful attempts, the convent was fired with red-hot shot, but the flames were extinguished as often as they broke out, and the French still made good the position, covered by a storm of shot and shell from their batteries. Finally recourse was had to the bayonet. The defenders were driven out and followed up to the glacis, the pursuers suffering severely on their return.

The possession of St Bartolomeo was a great step gained. The weakest point of the defence was at the works confronting the isthmus. They could be enfiladed from the low range of the Chofre sandhills on the right bank of the river. There batteries had been thrown up on the night of the 17th, so as to take the town defences in reverse. One of the two was established in a crowded cemetery; the coffins and corpses were used in the construction; the sights were revolting as the stench was intolerable. Nevertheless, we are reminded of the proverb, *à la guerre comme à la guerre*, for the soldiers did their cooking over fires made of coffin wood. The scheme of attack was inspired by Major Smith, who had distinguished himself by the defence of Tarifa. Sir Richard Fletcher, the veteran of Torres Vedras, who was in command of the engineers, heartily concurred. It was approved by Lord Wellington, and should have succeeded had not Graham, irresolute in council as he was bold in action, got perplexed amidst a multitude of conflicting advisers.

There were two attacks: one was directed on the front, the other from the batteries on the right bank. On the 21st the front was partially breached, though

the besieged cut the ramparts behind and retrenched them. But when the parallel across the isthmus had been completed, a discovery was made which ought to have caused the fall of the fortress. Driving the parallel had laid bare a subterraneous water-course. Lieutenant Reid, of the Engineers, crawled forward till stopped by a door at the counterscarp of a horn-work. He came back to suggest the formation of a mine, which might fill the ditch and make a way up the counterscarp.

On the 22d the batteries beyond the Urumea had opened a very practicable breach on the eastern flank. It was advised that it should be stormed next morning, when light and tide would serve, but unfortunately subsequent orders were given to make a second breach to the left. Still more unfortunately, a Spanish civil engineer had directed attention to the walls to the right of the main breach, which were weaker than elsewhere. His information was correct, and they quickly gave to the guns, but the triple breaches subsequently led to dire confusion. Moreover, by the delay in widening this second breach, invaluable time was lost. The morning of the 25th was finally appointed for the assault, and three fatal mistakes were made. In the first place, it was made in the dark, though in adopting Major Smith's plans, Wellington had insisted that the assault must be delivered in daylight; in the second, in place of being made at low water, the tide was already mounting fast; in the third, the defences dominating or raking the breaches had been left almost uninjured. The attack was advanced to an hour before daybreak, on account of the rising of the tide. The distance of the uncovered approach from the trenches on the isthmus to the breaches was 300 yards. The

column stumbled in the dark along a strip of shelving beach, slimy with seaweed; every gun on the heights had been depressed to bear upon them; stones and burning beams were hurled down, and they were enfiladed by incessant discharges of grape or musketry. At that moment Reid's mine was sprung, with even more than the expected effect. The counterscarp and glacis came down in a landslip; the defenders of that part of the works were panic-stricken. A rush would have carried the gap and the Portuguese were ready; but no ladders were forthcoming. The garrison quickly recovered from their alarm, and the opportunity was gone.

Meanwhile two gallant officers, with a handful of men, had gained the top of the main breach. But all below was in wild confusion. Those who should have supported them were running back, nor could they be rallied by any efforts of their officers, and that handful of heroes perished. The discomfiture of the first column involved the failure of the second, destined to pass in rear of it to assail the further breach. With the dawning the whole was over. There was a loss of 45 officers and 800 rank and file in killed, wounded, or missing.

That day Lord Wellington arrived from Lesaca. He would have widened the second breach and renewed the attack, but scarcity of ammunition compelled him to defer it; and the intelligence of the enemy's dispositions, which reached him immediately afterwards, induced him to withdraw the heavy guns, change the siege to a blockade, and turn his attention elsewhere.

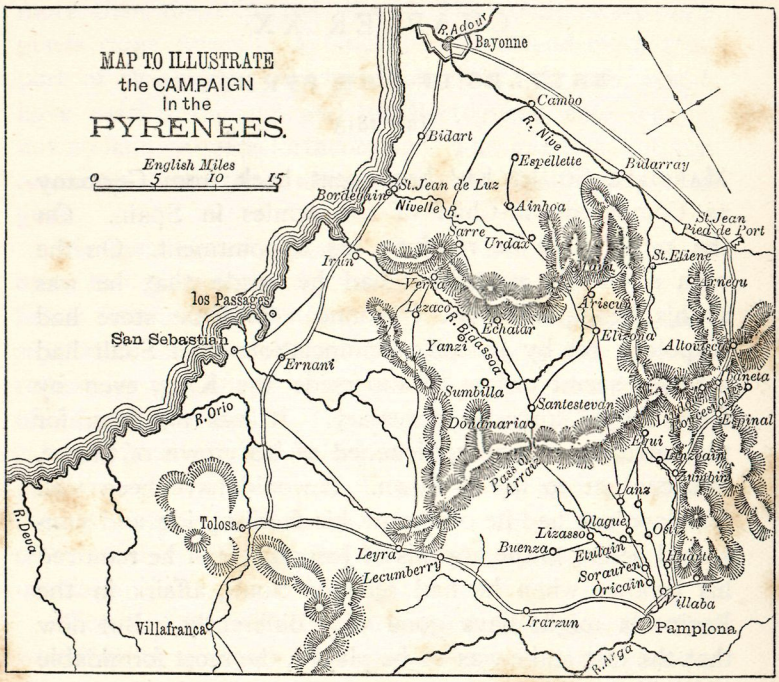
CHAPTER XX

BATTLES OF THE PYRENEES

July 1813

MARSHAL SOULT had been sent back from Germany as Commander-in-Chief of the armies in Spain. On the 1st of July he received his appointment. On the 13th so much expedition had he made that he was at his headquarters at Bayonne. So little store had Napoleon set by Joseph's denunciations that Soult had actually secret orders to supersede the King, even by force should force be necessary. It was needless, for the intrusive monarch, sickened of his crown of thorns, was content to lay it down. It would have been well for Napoleon had he overcome his family pride and consented before to the appeals of Joseph. Had he removed his brother when he had recalled Soult, affairs in the Peninsula might have gone very differently. But now that the last stake was to be played, the most formidable of Wellington's opponents was to be again pitted against him, and Soult came south with every inducement that could stimulate his ambition and justify his master's flattering choice.

As he had travelled with extraordinary rapidity, he acted with amazing promptitude and success. He found the demoralised wrecks of three broken armies. In a few days he was facing the menacing enemy with a


MAP TO ILLUSTRATE
the CAMPAIGN
in the
PYRENEES.
English Miles
0 5 10 15
R. Adour
Bayonne
Cambo
R. Nive
Bidart
Espellette
Bidarray
St. Jean de Luz
Bordeaux
Nivelle R.
Ainhoa
St. Jean Pied de Port
Sarre
Urdax
Irun
St. Etiene
Vera
Los Passages
Lizaco
R. Bidassoa
Echalar
Ariscun
San Sebastian
Yanzi
Elizondo
Ernani
Sumbilla
Santesteban
R. Orio
Donamaria
Pass of Arraz
Lanz
Tolosa
Olague
Lizasso
Buenza
Leyra
Elulain
Lecumberry
Sorauren
Oricain
Villaba
Villafranca
Irarzun
Pamplona
R. Arga
R. Deva

fairly-disciplined force, numbering nearly 80,000 with the colours. It was no fault of his that a considerable part consisted of raw and unwilling conscripts. But, on the other hand, he was supported by levies of national guards drawn from the mountaineers, well used to hardships and thoroughly familiar with their mountains. Such auxiliaries were eminently desirable. For the theatre of war was a hilly quadrilateral, the corners being the fortresses, all held by the French, of Bayonne and St Jean Pied de Port, Pamplona and San Sebastian. South of the Nive it was traversed by the parallel rivers of the Nivelle and the Bidassoa, which was the Spanish boundary; across it, and diagonally, but trending southward to the west, ran the main ridge of the Pyrenees. On either side of that ridge were lateral spurs, locking the narrow entrances to rugged valleys, and all the ranges could only be crossed by *cols*, as the French call them—*puertos* in the Spanish speech—always difficult of approach, and not unfrequently virtually impassable. The French Marshal had one great advantage. Behind his screen of mountain and river he could move with facility on excellent roads. Whereas, on the Spanish side, direct communication could only be maintained by the mountain tracks that were often shrouded in mists. The only alternative was by making some circuitous détour when each hour might be of the last importance.

On the 14th—the day after his arrival—Soult was already making his dispositions. In a mere sketch of those infinitely intricate operations it is almost impossible to be both succinct and satisfactory. It will be seen that the frontier takes a turn almost at right angles at St Jean Pied de Port, running thence nearly north to Bayonne. Briefly, Soult's extreme left was at St Jean

under Clausel. D'Erlon guarded the centre. To his right was Reille, overlooking Vera. The reserve, under Villatte, watched the Bidassoa from Irun down to the mouth of the river, and two supporting divisions of cavalry were distributed on the Nive and Adour. All along that line of nearly sixty miles the French were confronted by the allied forces, generally comparatively weak in numbers, but holding positions of exceeding strength.

San Sebastian was considered tolerably safe, as, notwithstanding a nominal blockade, it had never lost its sea communications. But Pamplona might soon be reduced to extremity, and Soult decided on a supreme effort for its relief. With that object he began throwing bridges over the Bidassoa, that Wellington might turn his attention in that direction. Meantime he had been accumulating stores at St Jean. And then, being masked by a continuous line of scouts and skirmishers, he quietly shifted his strength to the east. His design was, by surprise and overwhelming numerical superiority, to force the strong mountain positions and march on Pamplona, rallying Paris with the garrison of Zaragoza, who were still halted at Jaca. Time and surprise were of supreme importance, but the weather was against him. The rains had flooded the streams and broken the roads. His troops were delayed or had to make long détours, and it was only on the 24th, instead of four days previously, that he had assembled all his forces at St Jean. Then no further time was lost, and he commenced operations on the following day. Probably he had counted the chances beforehand, and decided that the ordinary rules of war might be overridden by special circumstances. Certainly his whole scheme was based on a defiance of Napoleon's

grand principle, that in mountain warfare, *il faut se faire attaquer et ne jamais attaquer.* But the inevitable accidents of war were against him, for as he had been first delayed by the rains he was afterwards baffled by the fogs.

The famous battles of the Pyrenees began with the attack on General Byng's post at the historical pass of Roncesvalles. For on the 24th 60,000 men were gathered to force the pass of Roncesvalles and that of Maya to the west. At Roncesvalles the fighting was at 5000 feet above the sea-level. Byng had been warned and was ready, but the numbers opposed to him were overwhelming. Cole, who commanded the supports, rode up at noon, but his men had been left far behind. Meanwhile Reille was advancing along a parallel ridge against the Spaniards of Morillo. When he attained the main heights his orders were to turn to the right and operate against the rear of Hill, who was on guard at Maya. He lost his bearings in the mists, or was misled by his guides, and descending instead into one of the southern valleys, fell into the rear of Clausel and for the time was altogether out of the fighting. At nightfall Cole still held the mountains, but his right had been turned, and with 10,000 men he was threatened by thrice that number in Soult's six divisions. Consequently he withdrew in the darkness to positions equally strong, and Soult, as the result of that sanguinary day had gained only ten miles out of thirty.

Reille's column had gone astray, nor were there satisfactory reports from D'Erlon. Soult deferred following up the attack for another day, a mistake as it proved, and a great misfortune for him. For a time Cole, was unsupported, and his men were worn out. The delay till the 27th gave them time to rest, and the scattered

forces of the allies had then effected their junction. The French attack on the right had been no more decisive, for though D'Erlon, surprising the general rather than the troops, had forced all the passes in front of him, and established himself in dominating positions, yet, over-estimating the forces showing front to him, he failed to press his advantage. General Stewart had been charged with the defence of the passes of Maya, Lessessa and Aretesque. D'Erlon's real object was the main pass of Maya, but his columns moving forward from Urdax could be seen by the British outposts. On the other hand, the French advance on Aretesque was concealed by an intervening hill, and their men had crowned the crest before the British pickets were aware of them. Thus, while the pickets holding the Maya and the supporting companies were attacked in front, they were assailed simultaneously by the heads of the columns who had gained a footing on the ridge of Atchiola, which runs at right angles to the road traversing the Maya. Fearfully overmatched, they made good the ground; supports were hurried up, and the Maya was still maintained, although the defenders were falling fast, and one battalion of the 92d was almost annihilated. Repulsed at one point or another, the French always rallied again in gathering masses. When General Stewart came up, the Lessessa and Aretesque had been lost, and soon after the troops were forced back from Maya, leaving a Portuguese battery to the enemy. Towards evening it seemed that abandoning the Atchiola ridge would be inevitable, for the ammunition had given out, and the soldiers, when they had emptied their pouches, were hurling stones down upon their assailants. Then the situation was saved by the almost simultaneous arrival of night and succours. Stewart bivouacked on the hotly-

contested ridge, and D'Erlon concentrated on the Col de Maya. Yet, both at Roncesvalles and Maya, the passes had been seized, and on the whole the day had gone decidedly against the allies. But Reille had blundered; D'Erlon was inert; Soult, as was his habit, was over-cautious, and everything still remained in suspense.

Soult had so ably masked his movements towards his left that Wellington had been misled as to his purpose. The French Marshal, as we have seen, had confirmed the misapprehension by throwing pontoon bridges over the Lower Bidassoa. Knowing what Soult did not—that San Sebastian was now in greater straits than Pamplona—he fancied Soult was operating for the relief of the former fortress. Consequently, when the news of these battles in the Pyrenees surprised him, he was at Hill's head-quarters in the Bastan valley. Losing not a moment he hurried eastward, arriving at the centre of action, as often before, at the critical moment. All his plans seemed on the point of being baffled. The garrison of Pamplona and the besiegers had been alike informed that Soult was advancing victoriously to its relief. Abispal was preparing to raise the blockade, and was already spiking his guns. The garrison, in successful sallies, had stormed some of the batteries. Already the siege would have been at an end, had it not been for Carlos D'España. Picton, who had formed a junction with Cole, had commenced a retreat, despairing of Pamplona and abandoning the intention of covering it. In fact Abispal's alarm was by no means unwarranted, for the enemy was closing in around him. Cole had passed Pamplona, and Picton was following him, when Wellington came galloping into the village of Sauroren, situated somewhat to the eastward of Pamplona. From thence he saw Clausel's column advancing along the ridge of Zabaldica.

He saw at the same time that Picton's troops in the Lanz valley must be cut off. Springing from his saddle he scribbled an order, and despatched it by Lord Fitzroy Somerset, the only staff officer who had kept pace with his chief's hunter. As Somerset rode out at one end of the village street, the French light cavalry dashed in at the other: Wellington had barely time to save himself and reach his troops. Never was anything more 'touch and go.' But Picton, turned sharply aside from Huarte, took up a position on the ridge crossing the Lanz and Zubiri valleys, and so effectually screened Pamplona. The opposing forces were confronted on opposite heights, flanked on either side by a river. The generals were so near to each other that Wellington from his standpoint could distinguish the figure and even the features of Soult. Then ensued a most dramatic incident. When the presence of the allied commander was recognised, loud cheers, taken up by battalion after battalion, rang along the whole length of the line. Wellington looked across to his opponent and ejaculated in audible soliloquy, 'Yonder is a great commander but a cautious one, and he will delay his attack to ascertain the cause of those cheers; that will give time for the 6th Division to come up, and I shall beat him.' So it proved. The French attack was only begun at noon, when Clausel, covered by swarms of sharpshooters rushing down the valley, had turned Cole's left. At that moment the 6th Division, appearing from behind a ridge, formed in order of battle across the French front. It was a repetition of the stroke made by Soult at Salamanca, and he never retrieved the false move. The French who had sought to encircle the allies were encircled in turn, for, assailed simultaneously on either flank, they were pushed back by the front onset of the 6th Division, though fiercely

Rouillard., pinx. Walter F. Colls, Pk. Sc. Maurin, Lith.

Marshal Soult