

The Last Sentry

The journey from England to Spain was beset with problems and delays, and on arrival in Oporto, when it became obvious that due to a particularly unpleasant voyage, the officers' horses would not be fit to travel for some days, Lieutenant-Colonel Philip Norton listened with half an ear to the complaints of the other five officers who had arrived with him on the *Sally-Anne* and was silently relieved. A week of almost constant sickness had left him feeling weak and exhausted, and he found himself a comfortable inn, ensured that his groom, his valet and his horses were well-cared for and went to bed.

Philip was on his way to take up a new command, in charge of the first battalion of the 115th. He should have joined the regiment during the previous year, but within days of the confirmation of his promotion and transfer to a new regiment, his personal life had fallen apart with terrifying speed, leaving Philip floundering in the chaos of his deceased father's affairs and heartbroken after the death of his young wife in childbirth. He had written to his new brigade commander, guiltily aware that he would miss this campaigning season, and had dreaded the response. It had been kinder than Philip had expected and had given him a good impression of the commander of the third brigade of the light division, making him all the more eager to settle his affairs and get back to his job.

Settling his affairs had taken some time. The death of the Honourable Thomas Norton had come as a shock, though not a grief, to his only son. Norton had died as he had lived, half-drunk and throwing his horse over a fence on the hunting field. Philip was in London, making arrangements for his journey to Portugal while awaiting the birth of his third child. Emma had been well through the pregnancy, and was her usual placid self when Philip apologetically told her that he would need to post down to Hampshire to be with his mother and sister, and to help arrange the funeral.

"Go, Phil. If the baby comes, it comes, it isn't as though this is the first time I've done this. I'm sorry I can't come with you, since I know it will be hard for you, but I shouldn't travel this close to my time."

Philip kissed her warmly. "I'm so sorry, Em, and you're an angel. I'll be back as soon as I can, I promise."

Emma was dead before Philip reached his family estate, having gone into early labour the day he left. The child died with her, leaving Philip alone to manage his two small sons, his mother who was apparently prostrated with grief over a husband who had never been faithful to her, and a sister of twenty trying to conceal her fears for the future.

Mrs Norton raised herself from her bed at the news of the death of her daughter-in-law and made her pronouncement.

"Dearest, it is terribly sad, of course, but it is not as though it was a love-match, after all. Indeed, I have never understood why...however, your duty is now clear. With your father gone, and your two little boys motherless, you will naturally sell out and come home. Nobody would expect anything else."

Philip bit his tongue and took himself from the room. He knew that she was right, and that the army would fully understand and support his decision to sell out. His father's affairs were in disarray, and he had no idea how his wife's money was settled. He had married Emma in full understanding that she was looking for a place in society that her late father's situation could not provide. In return, she had agreed to pay his family's debts and purchase his promotions.

Philip respected his wife's clear-sighted practicality and insisted that she settle her considerable fortune on their sons when they were born, with a dowry set aside for his sister, Amelia, and a comfortable jointure for his mother should she be widowed. He had asked the lawyers, during the negotiation of the marriage settlement, to ensure that Emma's personal fortune remain with her, well out of reach of his feckless father and grasping mother. Philip had made a marriage of convenience to secure his future, but he was not greedy and he had no wish to watch his family bleeding his wife dry.

Emma's will was a shock, and brought with it a fresh flood of grief, as Philip listened to the lawyer's dry tones and understood that alongside the agreed provisions, she had left him a wealthy man. He cried bitter tears alone in his room, hoping that she had known how much she had come to mean to him. Philip had hoped for friendship in this unlikely marriage, but instead, they had fallen in love, and he read, in those brief lines of her final testament, her firm and abiding affection and trust.

It made his job much easier, although no less tedious and painful. Philip told neither his mother or his sister of his unexpected prosperity, merely assuring them that there was money to support them. Amelia, as he had expected, was relieved and grateful, while his mother was visibly discontented. She was furious at Philip's announcement that he intended to rent out the London house for the foreseeable future, and even more so, when he informed her that when his sister was ready to return to town for another Season, she would do so under the care of her aunt.

"I hope you're happy with that, Ammie. I know you didn't much enjoy London last year. I'd hoped that once the baby was born, you could try again with Emma, but..."

"So did I, Philip. Please don't worry, I'm thankful. I've no wish to do the round of balls and parties just now, I couldn't think of it. Ignore Mama, she would be angry whatever you did."

"I can't give her free rein to run through Emma's money in London."

"You should not, she is very comfortably provided for. At present, I am happier at Hanley. And you, dear brother, will be happier back in the army."

"I will. My new commander has been very generous with my furlough, which makes me all the more determined that I will get back as soon as I have sorted out the chaos of my father's affairs and paid his debts. I am trusting you to look after Tom and Ned for me, they'll have Miss Carling and Nurse, but they're going to miss Emma so much, she was..."

"She was the best mother ever, and I envied them. I'll do everything I can for them, Phil. Just don't do anything foolish. I know how much you loved her, I couldn't bear it if..."

"I give you my word. As far as any soldier can. Take care of yourself, Ammie."

After the turmoil of family drama, it was bliss to don his uniform and to think only of transport and kit and billets and the new campaigning season ahead. Even the misery of the voyage gave Philip something to think about other than Emma. It was eleven months since her death and Philip had begun to believe that he was recovering, but away from England's shores, he missed, all over again, the weekly routine of writing to her.

From Oporto, Philip joined a supply convoy travelling towards army headquarters on the Portuguese-Spanish border. His fellow officers were all veterans of the Peninsula, having been home either on furlough or sick leave. Along with the wagon train of weapons and medical supplies, there were a hundred and eighty reinforcements for the 43rd and 112th, so the officers travelled at marching pace. To Philip, suddenly eager to join his battalion, it felt painfully slow, and he was not at all surprised when they reached the commissary office in Pinhel to discover

that Lord Wellington had marched his army into Spain three days earlier.

“There’s a supply depot in Ciudad Rodrigo, sir,” Captain Jones said helpfully. “Only a day’s march from here. Lord Wellington sent instructions that all reinforcements and supply wagons are go there, where he’ll have left orders for them.”

Ciudad Rodrigo was a small cathedral town situated at the top of a rocky rise on the right bank of the River Agueda. Philip knew it was one of the key fortresses along the Portuguese-Spanish border, and two of his companions had been present when Lord Wellington’s army had stormed the town at the beginning of the previous year in a bloody engagement. Philip and the other officers were greeted by Colonel Muir, a depressed-looking Scot in his fifties, who commanded the district supply depot and looked as though he would rather be somewhere else.

“Aye, I’ve orders for you, I’ve got details of the quickest and safest route for you to follow to catch up with the light division, it seems you’re expected.”

“I have been for some time,” Philip admitted. “Will the supply column be taking the same route?”

“The supply column is my problem now, Colonel Norton, don’t worry your head about them. The reinforcements, now - that’s another matter. You’ll be staying a few days to rest the horses, I’m guessing?”

Philip eyed him suspiciously, sensing an unwelcome request. “One or two, maybe, but I don’t want to delay longer than I have to, sir. My brigade commander has been incredibly generous in granting extensions to my furlough to sort out my late father’s affairs, I don’t want him to think I’m taking the long way round.”

“Van Daan? He’s not in my good books just now, he poached two of my best officers on his way out, blast him. He doesn’t deserve that I do him a favour, the thieving bastard, but I’m going to. I’m asking if you’ll wait a few more days, Norton. We’re expecting another draft of reinforcements for the 110th within the week.”

“Can’t they follow when they arrive?”

“The thing is, Colonel, we’ve been having a lot of problems with discipline among troops making their way back to their regiments. Half the time, they either don’t have an officer with them at all, or the officers are young and inexperienced, or from a different regiment and don’t really give a damn about them looting the local population. Wellington’s furious about attacks on Portuguese and Spanish farms and villages. You’ve got a few officers with these drafts for the 43rd and 112th, but they’re all very junior, and they tend to take a casual attitude to their duties on the march. If they’ve a colonel of the 115th to supervise them, it’s very unlikely any of the men will try sloping off to raid a wine cellar or rape the farmer’s wife.”

“Jesus, is it as bad as that?”

“On occasion.” Muir eyed Philip thoughtfully. “And not just among the enlisted men. I don’t know if the gossip has reached you yet, Colonel Norton, but...”

“If you’re referring to the murder of Major Vane, I received a very full letter from Major-General van Daan,” Philip said. “A terrible business.”

“Aye, it was. Did you know him?”

“Never met the man in my life, I’m new to the 115th, I transferred in for promotion. And I believe Vane did the same. I’d never wish a man dead, Colonel, but I find myself thankful that I don’t have to manage an officer like that in my battalion.”

“Aye, his conduct wasn’t right, that’s for sure. All the same, a lot of the officers I’ve spoken to, don’t think it’s right that his murderer escaped the death penalty. Sets a bad example to the men.”

Philip did not particularly want to get into a pointless argument with a senior officer, so he said:

“So you’d like me to wait until the rest of the light division reinforcements arrive and march them up to the lines?”

“I think your brigade commander would appreciate it, Colonel. We can make you comfortable here, you can join our mess.”

Philip could see the sense of it, and firmly quashed his frustration at yet another delay. Now that he was formally, if temporarily in command of the new troops, he went to inspect their bivouac outside the city walls, gave strict instructions to the NCOs about leave passes and behaviour and rounded up the few junior officers who would be marching with him, to remind them of their obligations. His duty done, he decided to make the most of his enforced leisure to see something of the town and the surrounding area.

Ciudad Rodrigo was a walled city, dominated by its solid medieval cathedral. Narrow streets opened up into wide squares with houses and churches built in mellow local stone, and although there were still many signs of the destruction of the previous year, the citizens had already made good progress with rebuilding damaged houses and there was scaffolding up at several of the fine churches. Philip could see damage to the walls and tower of the cathedral caused by artillery, and the Spanish garrison of the town were out daily to supervise work parties who were close to completing the repairs to the town walls, where Wellington’s guns had blown two enormous breaches in the ancient stonework.

It was hot during the day, and Philip rode out with one or two of the Spanish officers to shoot game in the countryside. None of them had been present during the siege, and seemed more interested in complaining about delayed pay and poor leadership in the Spanish army than talking about the recent history of the town. Muir, when applied to, was more helpful, and provided Philip with Sergeant Griffith from his department. Griffith had lost an arm and an eye during the storming and proved a willing guide, walking out to the Greater and Lesser Teson with Philip, to explain the placement of Wellington’s troops and the direction taken by the storming parties.

Dinner was a protracted affair, with a good deal of wine and brandy, and afterwards Philip developed a habit of going for an evening walk through the pretty cobbled streets of the town and up onto the walls. The sentries along the walls were all Spanish, and Philip thought that they seemed to take a relaxed attitude to their duties, although he supposed that with the French a long way off, they probably had little to do other than drink, smoke and complain. He spoke Spanish fairly well from his time in South America, and he stopped to chat to them, listening to their stories of battles fought and friends lost and wives and families left behind.

Philip lingered late one evening, watching the sun go down from the Citadel, colouring the slate roofs of the outlying villages with a dazzling palette of rose gold and brilliant orange. He had drunk a little too much wine in the company of some Spanish officers in Colonel Muir’s cosy dining room and realised it was becoming a habit. It was too comfortable here, and felt a long way from the war. Philip walked around the walls to clear his head, pausing to look out over the old Roman bridge and smiled at himself as he realised he was willing the new troops to march in over the bridge, leaving him free to do his job.

Further around the walls, he climbed down a flight of steep stone steps and stood looking up at the repaired section of wall where the men of the light division had fought and died on that bloody night in January. The different colour brickwork reminded Philip of a scar, and he felt a connection standing here, even though he had not been present and his new battalion had

not even been part of the light division at that point.

Walking back along the walls to his billet, Philip noticed that the sentries were out of position again. He had observed it several times, and although they were not his men, and the town was in no danger of attack, it irritated him as a breach of discipline. Four or five men were grouped together, a lazy spiral of cigarillo smoke rising into the air, while only one man, dressed in a dark cloak, stood in position above the breach. Philip paused to watch him, standing completely immobile looking out over the countryside. He did not appear to have his musket with him, and Philip wondered if he should go back and speak to the man, but decided against it.

Philip remembered the incident the following afternoon at the dinner table. He was seated beside Colonel Ramirez, determinedly avoiding a third glass of port, when Colonel Muir said:

“Are you still having trouble with the men on the northern wall, Ramirez?”

Ramirez rolled his eyes expressively. “Always, Colonel. Only last week, I have two men on a charge for deserting their post. I tell them that if Lord Wellington comes back, he will have them shot for their cowardice. I hope to make an example of them, so that we have no more problems.”

“Cowardice?” Philip said, surprised. “Surely it can’t be that, they’re miles from the French lines with the whole of Lord Wellington’s army in between. Perhaps they’ve just got sloppy, sir. I admit, I walk the walls most evenings, and they’re often not in position, particularly along that wall. They tend to gather together in groups, smoking and talking. I suppose they’re bored, but you’re right, it’s poor discipline.”

“They are not afraid of the French, Colonel Norton, they are afraid of the ghosts.”

Philip spluttered on the last of his port and set his glass down. It was immediately refilled. “Ghosts? Surely you’re not serious?”

“I am not serious, Colonel,” Ramirez said. “Me, I do not believe in ghosts. But my officers tell me that the men complain that sometimes they hear things up there after dark. Screams and cries and the echoes of guns that have not fired since that night.

Muir snorted, reaching for the bottle. “Drunken bastards. If they’re hearing things that aren’t there, they’re coming from the bottom of a bottle, if you ask me.”

“I have told my officers to search them for drink, Colonel, and they assure me they go on duty sober.”

“Over-imaginative, then. A lot of you Spaniards are, I believe.”

Philip blinked at what felt like an astonishing lapse in good manners. He shot an apologetic look at Ramirez, and was relieved that the Spanish colonel seemed amused rather than offended. He winked at Philip, then said smoothly:

“It is possible, I suppose, Colonel, but we do not pay them to feed their imagination with ghostly tales. I will tell my officers to make frequent inspections again.”

“There was one man up there last night,” Philip said. “You’re right, sir, the others were all huddled further round by the steps, but one brave soul didn’t mind the ghosts, he was standing right above the breach. Although it looked as though he’d forgotten his musket, I couldn’t see it.”

“On sentry duty without his weapon?” Muir said scathingly. “Wouldn’t catch an English sentry doing that.”

Philip wished he had not spoken. “He probably had it, sir, he might have just leaned it against the wall while he was having a smoke and forgotten to pick it up. Look, why don’t I take a walk around there after dinner and have a chat with the men? They might speak more

freely to me, given that I'm not their commanding officer."

Ramirez studied him thoughtfully for a moment, then gave his charming smile. "Thank you, Colonel, it is a kind offer. I fear, if they do not improve, I will be obliged to take more drastic action against them."

It was pleasantly cool as Philip began his nightly circuit of the walls. The Spanish sentries had grown used to the sight of him by now, and greeted him cheerfully, although without the formal salutes and springing to attention he would have expected from an English garrison. Philip took his time, stopping to chat. One group on the eastern wall offered him a drink from a bottle concealed in a coat pocket, and Philip took a swig, then reminded them pleasantly that their own officers might not be so tolerant.

It was beginning to grow dark as he approached the section of the northern wall above the lesser breach, and Philip could neither see nor hear the sentries. He paused, listening, peering ahead into the dim light. This entire section of the wall appeared to be unguarded, and Philip quickened his step. He had been inclined to take a light-hearted view of the Spanish garrison's dislike of manning this section of the wall at night, but to find no guards at all was beyond a joke.

It was cooler now that darkness was falling, and there was a faint summer mist. Staring ahead in search of the missing guard, Philip caught his foot on a jutting piece of masonry and stumbled a little, catching the edge of the wall to steady himself. The fall brought him up short. The ramparts were not high, and it would be easy for a man to tumble over the edge. Philip made his way forward again, but more cautiously.

The sound of footsteps made him pause again. Clearly somebody was up here after all, although Philip still could not see him. He wondered if it was the lone sentry once more, the stocky figure who seemed the only member of the garrison willing to patrol this part of the wall. Philip waited, as the footsteps came towards him, puzzled by his inability to see the man. The steps were firm and confident, and were growing very close. It was not yet fully dark, and Philip could easily see through the mist, but there was no sign of the Spanish sentry.

A sudden breeze ruffled the feather in Philip's hat, and he felt it, cool on his face. The footsteps were inexplicably fading again, as though a man had walked briskly past him and onwards down the walkway, but there was nobody there. For a moment, a shiver ran through Philip, then he heard voices from below. Going to the inside edge of the walkway, he peered over, and thought he understood. The foot of the wall was paved all the way up to the next bastion, and the footsteps must have been below him, the sounds distorted by an echo in the quiet evening air. Philip grinned at his momentary superstitious folly and ran lightly down the bastion steps, surprising the Spanish guards who were huddled in the shelter of the small tower passing a bottle between them. They turned in surprise at Philip's abrupt descent from above, and one put the bottle behind his back. Philip was suddenly angry.

"To attention!" he barked, in Spanish. "Give me that bottle, that you're so pointlessly trying to hide. Why aren't you at your posts?"

There was a scramble into line, and Philip held out his hand and took the bottle. "You have deserted your posts," he said. "I am not your officer, it is not my job to walk the wall and ensure you do your duty, but I am here to tell you that Colonel Ramirez is well aware that you are not where you should be. He has declared that it is enough, and your officers will be checking on you each night. If you continue this way, you are going to be disciplined, possibly flogged. I will not be here to see it, I will be leaving in a few days, but it is sad that I leave with such a poor impression of Spanish troops. You - step forward. What is your name?"

“Garcia, sir.”

“What’s going on, Garcia?”

The Spaniard threw out his hands in a dramatic gesture. “It is not our fault, Colonel. Time and again we tell the officers that we cannot be on that part of the wall at night. All other places, we will guard. From this bastion to the further tower only. But they will not change the location of the sentry posts.”

“Why can’t you be on that wall?”

“Because of what we see and hear, Colonel. That place belongs to the ghosts, it is not for men.”

“Nonsense,” Philip said firmly. “At least one of your men has been up there, I’ve seen him twice now, the man in the dark blue cloak. Clearly it holds no fears for him.”

There was a long, awkward silence. Then Garcia said:

“He is not one of our men, Colonel, and he has no reason to fear a ghost.”

The tone of his voice brought a momentary chill to Philip, but he mentally brushed it aside. “Well, if he isn’t one of yours, it must be one of the townspeople,” he said. “Either way, it isn’t a ghost.”

“How do you know it is not, Colonel?”

“Because I don’t believe in ghosts, Garcia. And a ghost isn’t a good enough reason for you to shirk your duty. I’m going to talk to Colonel Ramirez, but I’m warning you, you’ll need to improve your behaviour if you don’t want to get into trouble. For tonight, get yourselves back up there. One picket at the top of this bastion, the other along the wall at the further tower.”

Garcia sprang to attention and gave a dramatic salute. “Yes, Colonel. That, we can do.”

Philip watched them go, not sure whether to laugh or be irritated, but the Spanish garrison was not really his problem. He walked back to his billet, giving the bottle to a surprised old man who was smoking on his doorstep, and grinned at the extravagant thanks and blessings that followed him up the narrow lane as the man realised it was more than half full.

A message arrived as Philip was writing a letter to his brigade commander the following day, to say that the new troops had arrived. Philip finished and sealed the letter quickly, and sent his groom to add it to the daily post, then took himself out to the bivouac by the Agueda, to ensure that the new men had set up camp properly and had rations. There were six junior officers from various regiments who would join him on the march to Wellington’s lines, and Philip ran an experienced eye over the camp, spoke to one or two of the NCOs and decided that it would be a fairly easy command. Most of these men were new recruits, and although there would be the usual sprinkling of troublemakers, either criminals who had come through the courts into the army, or simply men who found it hard to learn discipline, there would be no time for idleness on the march. Philip gave orders to his juniors to make regular inspections of the camp, ordered a forty-eight hour rest period before the march and went to see the quartermaster to make sure that rations would be issued. Once he was on the move, Philip wanted to reach the army as quickly as possible.

Philip dined with Colonel Muir and some of the Spanish officers, who drank enthusiastic toasts to his journey and his new posting. Going outside into the warm evening air, he hesitated. Knowing he would be on the road in two days, he had asked both his valet and his groom to check his kit and his horses, and to let him know if he needed to make any last minute purchases. He wrote to his brigade commander informing him of the date of his departure, and wrote a dutiful letter home to his mother and his sister, and missed once again, the writing of a long letter to Emma, filled with army news and gossip and the trivia of his daily life. For the

first time since arriving in Ciudad Rodrigo, Philip felt lonely, and he realised he was longing to reach his new battalion, to get to know his fellow officers and to make friends with the easy facility which was an asset in the shifting relationships of army life. Philip recognised the importance of this extended journey, as a pause between his old life and his new, but it had gone on for too long and he wanted it done with.

Almost without thinking, Philip passed his billet and walked down into the Plaza Mayor, where lanterns hung outside every shop and tavern and the people of Ciudad Rodrigo went about their business as though no war had ever touched them. Philip knew that after the bloody fighting in the breaches, the English and Portuguese troops had run wild for a while, looting the town and terrorising its inhabitants. Returning the smiles of men and women at the sight of his red coat, he marvelled at their resilience and their forgiveness.

Philip was approaching the cathedral, when the sight of another red coat made him pause. No leave passes had been granted to the English troops, as Philip wanted them sober and fit to march. The officers were free to wander through the town unless they were on duty, but this was not an officer. Philip stopped and surveyed the man. He was of medium height and compact build, with curly dark hair, and the insignia on his coat told Philip that he was a sergeant.

Philip stood watching with considerable interest, laced with admiration, as the sergeant went through the process of bartering with the elderly Spaniard selling wine from a market trestle. It was clear that the sergeant spoke Spanish fairly well, and it was equally clear that this was not the first time he had done this. Most of the newly arrived troops were raw recruits, but there was a sprinkling of old hands returning from sick leave, and after ten minutes, three bottles of wine had been neatly stowed in the battered pack, and Philip was certain that this man was not new to this.

The sergeant seemed in no hurry to return to camp. With his purchases made, he wandered through the market, stopping at a food stall to buy a hot tortilla wrapped in vine leaves, which he ate as he paused to watch a juggler giving a performance outside the convent. Philip stopped too, and looked up at the windows of the house. He was not surprised to see a flutter of white at the window, proving that the novices were not above enjoying a glimpse of the outside world. He also observed that the sergeant looked up as well, noticed the girls, and gave an impudent wave, sending them scuttling away in maidenly confusion, and probably, if they were unsupervised, a fit of irreverent giggles.

Philip realised that he was delaying approaching the sergeant, because he was enjoying watching the man. There was something about him which spoke of happiness, and a sheer love of life, and Philip was reluctant to end his illicit holiday too soon, although he was definitely going to. He kept his distance, shadowing the sergeant through the town, until it was growing very dark. The townspeople were beginning to gather their children and their purchases and head for home, and some of the shopkeepers were putting up their shutters. By now, the sentries on the walls would have changed over and Philip wondered if the deserted stretch of the northern wall was properly manned tonight.

It was clear that the sergeant was in no hurry to get back to camp. He stopped at a tavern and sat outside with a cup of wine for a while, watching the people of Ciudad Rodrigo head home to their beds with a benign expression. Philip hesitated for a moment, then gave in to his baser self, slipped into the tavern, and bought his own cup of wine, then walked outside and approached the sergeant's bench from behind.

"Lovely evening for it, Sarge, mind if I join you?"

"Not if the next drink's on you, my dear, it's good to..."

The sergeant broke off as Philip walked to the bench opposite him and set down his drink. The expression on his thin, pointed face almost made Philip laugh out loud. He scrambled to his feet, tripping over the bench, managed to right himself and stood rigidly to attention, saluting, staring straight ahead, his dark eyes fixed on a point above Philip's head.

"Sir. Very sorry, sir, I didn't know it was you. Many apologies."

"I'd rather guessed that, Sergeant. Sorry to disturb you, but I wanted to see your leave pass. One of the officers clearly didn't understand my orders about no leave granted, I need to see who signed it."

The sergeant shifted his gaze to Philip. Philip held out his hand and waited, and the sergeant did not disappoint him. He clapped his hand to his breast pocket, then shoved both hands into coat and trouser pockets, rummaging industriously. Coming up empty, he reached for his pack, opened it, and rustled around inside it, skilfully concealing the clink of bottles. Eventually he looked up, wide-eyed.

"Well I don't know how I've done that, Colonel, but it looks like I've lost it," he said, and his voice was rich and mellow with the rounded vowels of the West Country. "Maybe I left it in my tent, but I don't think so, I've got an excellent memory, and I'm sure I picked it up. Now, I wonder if some thieving brat has picked my pocket for me in this crowd, knowing I'm new here and taking advantage..."

Philip held up his hand. He was enjoying the performance, and recognised in the sergeant a natural comedian, but he did not have all night. "That's enough, Sergeant, you'll have me weeping into my wine cup in a minute. Name and rank?"

"Sergeant Nick Coates, sir, 110th second company. Was under Captain Elliott, but I've been away for a while now."

"Wounded?"

"Aye, sir. At Badajoz. Been convalescing ever since."

"That's a long convalescence, Sergeant Coates."

"It was a bad wound, sir. More than one. They bayoneted me in the chest as I reached the top of the ladder, then I broke an arm and a leg when I hit the ground."

"Christ, you're lucky to have survived that with all your limbs."

"We've good doctors in the 110th, sir."

"And now you're on your way back and thought you'd give yourself a night off as a treat. Don't start searching for the leave pass again, it never existed. What I do want to know is where you got the money for three bottles of good wine. Have you been looting, Coates?"

"No, sir." Coates hesitated, then took the plunge. "Not my money, sir. It's more of a commission."

"A commission? For whom?"

"A gentleman, sir, new to Spain, and with none of the language. They'll fleece the youngsters something awful, sir, when they first get here."

Philip was beginning to understand. "So you did have permission."

"Informally, sir."

"Which officer?"

"I don't rightly know, sir. They're not my officers, you know, and he didn't approach me directly. One of the men brought the money and said I could keep the change as an incentive to get a good price. They must have heard I'd been out here before and could speak Spanish."

Philip shook his head. "I suppose if I asked you to point out the soldier in question..."

"Not one of my men, sir, I didn't know him. They all look very much alike, don't they. I

was to put the wine outside the officers' billet, I was just on my way to do that, sir. Sorry I'm not more help."

Philip studied Coates for a long moment. "I think you know bloody well who ordered that wine," he said softly. "Do you think he realised that you could end up flogged and demoted if you got caught?"

Shrewd dark eyes met his. "Oh yes, sir, I expect the young gentleman knew that all right. But I didn't have to say yes, of course."

"Why did you, you bloody fool?"

Coates looked around the darkened square, where only the taverns remained well lit, men sharing wine on rough benches outside. "I liked this place. Met a girl here. Army hospitals weren't that much fun, and it was a bloody awful journey, mopping up puke from the new lads and running out of food on the march because the greenhorns don't know the ropes. I fancied a night out, sir. Didn't expect to get caught."

Philip managed to bite back a grin at the other man's matter-of-fact tones. Picking up his cup of wine, he sat down. Coates remained standing to attention. Philip waited for at least two minutes.

"All right, Sergeant. Sit down and drink your wine, and then we'll walk back to camp together, I want to check on them. When I leave, I'll take those bottles and deliver them personally, with a word or two about using the NCOs as errand boys and hanging them out to dry afterwards. Next time, make the young bleater give you a permission slip and then you're covered, and it'll be him that'll get the bollocking."

Coates stared at him in astonishment, then lowered his compact form onto the bench with a broad grin. "Thank you very much, sir. Your very good health. I'm guessing this is not your first time out here either, you're not new at this."

"By no means, Coates, but not out here. Alexandria, Walcheren, Ireland and Naples, with a spell in South America, which is why I was able to admire your bartering so thoroughly."

Coates sipped the wine. "It's good that you're going to Van Daan's brigade, sir, you'd get cashiered anywhere else, drinking with the NCOs like this."

"I don't usually drink with the NCOs, Sergeant, so don't get any ideas. It's my night off. And besides, you looked as though you were enjoying yourself."

Coates looked up and grinned. "I was, sir. Am I on a charge?"

"Not this time, although you were a bloody idiot. But I'm looking for experienced men to help out on this march, since I seem to have been landed with two hundred and fifty raw recruits and half a dozen officers so wet behind the ears they need a nursemaid. I will do you a deal, Sergeant Coates. I will forget all about this little escapade, and in return, I get your unqualified support in getting these sorry specimens up to Lord Wellington's army."

Coates studied him for a moment, then picked up his cup and raised it. "Sir, you have yourself a deal."

"Excellent. You can start tonight. On the way back to camp, I want to walk via the walls. The Spanish are having trouble with ghosts."

"Ghosts, sir?" Coates sounded bewildered. "What ghosts?"

Philip explained, and Coates seemed to enjoy the story. They sat late into the evening. Philip was aware that his conduct in drinking with an NCO was reprehensible and would bring at best a stern reprimand and at worst, a conduct charge, but there were few English officers presently in Ciudad Rodrigo, and those would be up in the mess with Colonel Muir. Philip had missed his friends in the regiment badly and Coates, although only a sergeant, was intelligent,

very funny and shrewd. Philip was careful to keep some distance, but enjoyed Coates' colourful account of his entry into the army seven years earlier, through the agency of a magistrate in Truro.

"Smuggling was it, Sergeant?"

"I prefer to call it free trading, sir. It was my job to provide the gentlemen with their port and their brandy and the ladies with their silks and tea."

"And sugar?"

"No, sir, I didn't deal in sugar, on account of the slaves. Nasty business, slavery."

Philip stared in astonishment. "A Cornish smuggler who is an abolitionist? I might need another drink to hear this story, Coates."

"It's not a long one, sir, though I'll happily stand you another drink. I was fifteen and on my father's boat, running brandy and tea into a cove near Marazion when we picked up a body in the water. Younger than me, he looked, half-starved and beaten bloody, poor little beggar."

"Oh Christ. Slaver gone down?"

"Not as such. Runaway page boy, caught in Plymouth and sold back to the West Indies. He could remember life on the plantations, preferred to drown himself."

"He was alive?"

"Yes, sir. Algy, his name was. Crewed that boat with me for nigh on ten years, until we got picked up on a run from Roscoff, and after a spell in gaol found ourselves with the choice of the army, the navy or a trial which could have ended much worse. Algy chose the navy, safer for him. Often wonder how he got on, he was a good mate, was Algy."

"It sounds as though you were too. Right, come on. Time to earn your parole all over again, Sergeant Coates. Let's get up there and put the fear of God into those sentries, then I will take the officers' wine and let them know I want a word with them in the morning."

"You could always confiscate it, sir. Good wine, that."

"You were born to be hanged, Coates. Get moving."

There was no sound or movement along the town walls. This late, the sentries were in position, huddled together for warmth and companionship, the air around them hazy with cigar smoke. Philip paused by each group in turn as they saluted and spoke a few words. It was the last night he would do this, and he hoped he was making enough noise to get the sentries on the northern wall into position so that he could give a favourable report to Colonel Ramirez. They approached by the small bastion, and Philip was pleased to see four men, albeit on the wrong side of the tower, muskets shouldered. They looked grim and miserable, but they were there, and he stopped to compliment them on their fortitude, although he was aware that he could not see the next picket.

The night was very clear, with a full moon, and Philip heard the clink of bottles from Coates' pack as the sergeant followed him onto the wall above the breach. He wondered suddenly if this place held painful memories for Coates, but the sergeant showed no signs of discomfort.

Further along the wall, Philip caught sight of a lone figure and immediately recognised him. He knew by now that the man was not one of the garrison, but must be a townsman, probably from one of the houses directly below the wall, who came up each night for a breath of fresh air before bed. Philip had not been this close to him before, and as he drew nearer, he realised that what he had thought was a cloak, was actually a dark blue caped great coat. He wore a simple bicorn hat, and Philip wondered if he was in fact an officer, either on sick leave or visiting, although he was surprised he had not met him during his week in the town, as the

English officers all knew each other socially.

Behind him, Coates echoing footsteps stopped abruptly. Philip paused and looked round in surprise. The sergeant's face was clearly illuminated in the moonlight, and his expression chilled Philip to the bone. The thin face wore an expression of utter terror, the dark eyes wide, and Coates was backing up so fast that Philip sprinted to grab him by the arm, worried he might tumble backwards over the low parapet. He realised as he grasped Coates, that the sergeant was shaking violently.

"Sergeant, what the hell is wrong with you? Look stand here for a moment and catch your breath. Are you ill?"

"No. No, no, no, no. It can't be. He's not here, he's not here. He's dead. He's bloody dead, I saw them bury him."

Understanding was slow to dawn, and by the time Philip understood, the brisk footsteps along the walkway were coming close. Suddenly, he was afraid as well, and it took all his courage to turn around to see what had caused the sergeant's sheer terror. The sight was so ludicrously normal that Philip felt completely disoriented.

For the first time, he could see the face of the stocky man who guarded the lesser breach every evening, and although there was nothing spectral about it, it was formidable. He was not old, possibly in his fifties, with very dark hair under his hat, and a pair of piercing dark eyes under thick, beetling brows. His complexion was swarthy, as though he had spent many days in the saddle under the hot Spanish sun, and he walked with deliberate authority, his sword belt jingling slightly as he moved. There was a sense of power and controlled energy about him, and Philip found himself standing to attention and saluting even before he saw the glimpse of a red jacket beneath the swinging coat. Unquestionably this was a senior officer.

The man turned to look at him as he passed. Dark eyes flickered over Philip, as though to check that he was correctly turned out, and then the officer nodded in approval and saluted. He walked past the shivering sergeant without comment. Philip watched his retreating back, feeling as though he had just passed an inspection from a difficult commanding officer, and turned to Coates.

Coates was white in the pale moonlight, and looked as though he might be sick. Philip took him firmly by the arm. "Come on, Sergeant, let's get you off this wall before you kill yourself. No, don't try to speak. We'll go back to my billet and if necessary, I'll call the surgeon."

Philip waited until they were inside his warm little room. He pushed Coates into a chair and went for brandy then realised that he had run out. Making a mental note to send Barlow, his valet, to buy more before the march, Philip went to the sergeant's pack and removed one of the bottles of wine. He poured for both of them and set a glass down in front of Coates.

"I'm going to get cashiered, drinking with a sergeant twice in one day. If I'd not been with you earlier, Coates, I'd have thought you were half-sprung already, but you're clearly not. What happened, were you ill?"

Coates was beginning to regain his colour. He drank half a glass of wine without taking breath and set it down, then looked up at Philip.

"Thank you, sir. Sorry. Must have taken a turn. Won't happen again. I'll leave the wine here, you can give it to the gentlemen in the morning."

He made as if to rise, and Philip pushed him firmly back into the chair and refilled his glass. "What happened?"

"Permission not to talk about it, sir?"

"Not granted. What were you on about - he's dead. Who's dead, Coates? Was it the breach

- did you lose friends up there?"

The sergeant drank more wine and did not reply. Philip sat down and sipped his own wine. "Look, I understand. I know what it can do to you sometimes, although we all pretend it doesn't affect us. I don't need the details, Coates, but if this is something..."

"You said you'd served in South America, sir," Coates said abruptly. "Mind me asking when?"

"I was with Beresford during the first invasion, but I developed fever and was sent home, so I missed the worst of that shambles. What on earth has that to do with anything?"

"Because he was out there afterwards. Major-General Craufurd. But you won't ever have seen him."

Understanding flooded through Philip along with a chill of horror. He stared blankly at Coates, not wanting to believe what he was saying. "Don't be funny, Sergeant, I'm not..."

"Did it look as though I was joking up there, sir?" Coates said furiously. "It was him. I know him, I've seen him a thousand times. I served in the 110th and we fought under him at Fuentes d'Onoro and at the Coa, and in a dozen skirmishes out on the border. And before then, I marched in his column during Moore's retreat. I saw that bastard flog the skin off a starving man's back for stealing a turnip and then give the same man the remains of his own rations later in the day. I was out there, climbing over dead and dying men into the breach last year and I saw him go down. I was at his burial, at the foot of the wall, in the breach. I know him. It was Craufurd."

Philip believed him. He sat in silence, drinking wine, shocked and feeling slightly shivery. Neither man spoke until Coates set down his empty glass and got to his feet. He saluted.

"Permission to return to camp, sir."

"Granted. Don't go that way again."

"I'm going nowhere near it, sir."

"Get your kit and the men organised, Sergeant, and be ready to march out the day after tomorrow. I'm counting on you to make my life easier along the way."

"My word on it, Colonel." The Cornishman hesitated. "Sir?"

"What is it?"

"I'd prefer not to speak of this to anyone else, sir."

Philip gave a small, grim smile. "Not a chance of it, Sergeant. They'd think I was mad. Look - are you absolutely sure? It couldn't have been another man? A trick of the light, maybe you were thinking about Craufurd up there?"

"I saw him, sir. As clearly as I can see you now." Coates shook his head. "He was a bloody good general, his men thought the world of him. I'd have been glad to see him again, but he shouldn't have been there."

Philip thought about it. "I'm not sure about that, Sergeant. Maybe he should."

The following day was taken up with preparations for the march, and by dinner time, Philip was fully packed and had inspected the men and the baggage wagons, spoken to the Spanish guide allocated to him and said farewell to his hostess. He dined in the mess as usual, but rose early from the table, as he hoped to be on the road at dawn and did not want to set off with a hangover. Colonel Muir shook his hand and wished him well, and Philip was engulfed in a wave of handshakes and good wishes from both English and Spanish officers.

When Colonel Ramirez shook his hand, he said:

"Did you visit my idle sentries last night, Colonel?"

"I did," Philip admitted. "I've been thinking about it, Colonel, and it's possible the problem

is easier to solve than we thought. It seems there's one stretch of that wall that they hate to patrol. It's right above where the breach was, and I'd guess they imagine horrors when they're up there. Perhaps if you moved the pickets a little further apart to either side of that stretch, they'd be better behaved."

Ramirez studied him thoughtfully. "It is an interesting idea, Colonel Norton. I will think about it. Goodbye, and good luck."

Outside the mess, Philip hesitated. He had things to do still, but the wall was there, still and quiet in the sleepy late afternoon air. After a long moment, Philip turned away from his billet and walked down to the small bastion, going up the steps onto the wall. He walked along the stretch between the two small towers, then turned and walked back again. Nobody was there, but it was early, and he would not expect to see a ghost in broad daylight.

The thought made Philip smile, it was so ridiculous. He turned again, to go down the steps, and saw him immediately, the stocky figure in the dark coat and hat, staring out over the countryside to the position where almost eighteen months ago, the light division had formed up, ready to storm the walls of Ciudad Rodrigo.

Philip did not move or speak. After a moment, Major-General Robert Craufurd turned towards him and began his brisk, confident march along the walkway until he reached Philip. As before, he turned his head to look at him, and Philip straightened and saluted. It should have felt ridiculous, saluting a man who was not and could not be there, but Philip did not care. Whatever shadow of Black Bob Craufurd that lingered on in the place where he had fallen, deserved his respect.

Craufurd returned the salute with the same quirk of his lips, and walked past Philip. After a moment, the footsteps could no longer be heard. Philip turned to look, but both the bastion and the walkway were empty once more.

It was barely light when the two hundred and fifty men formed up under their temporary officers and set off at a brisk march around the outside of Ciudad Rodrigo towards the Salamanca road. Philip rode at the head of the small column, with the walls rising to his right, bathed in rose pink and golden rays from the awakening sun. The repaired wall was clearly visible, looking more than ever like a scar, and Philip looked up and was not surprised to see the lone figure standing above it, watching them leave. He reined in to allow the troops to march past him, until he was at the back of the column. Unobserved, he took off his hat, and saluted for a long, silent moment. Then he replaced it and cantered forward to the head of his men, setting his horse and his thoughts firmly towards Wellington's distant army.

