

Welcome to the Sight, my Halloween short story for 2023. It's freely available on my website so please share as much as you like. The story has been released a little late this year, because it is so closely linked to my most recent book and works better if it is read afterwards.

An Unattainable Stronghold, which is book 8 of the Peninsular War Saga, tells the story of the early battles of the Pyrenees. It was a confusing time, with both Wellington and Soult trying to manage their troops along a badly stretched line. Different parts of the line were defended by different divisions and it was not always easy for the commanders to know what was happening elsewhere.

Because of the way I construct my books, it wasn't possible to cover every single battle of this part of the war. I now have British, Spanish and French heroes to follow which has given me far more scope, but my characters all belong to real life divisions and it would be unrealistic to send a major-general or chef-de-battalion racing around the countryside so that he can appear at every battle or skirmish.

History plus a bit of imagination enabled me to place characters at the storming of San Sebastian and even at the bridge at Vera but there was no way I could get any of the main protagonists to the Battle of Sorauren. I was sorry about this because I've been there and it's an interesting battlefield. Running through a list of characters in my head afterwards, wondering if I could have done better, I suddenly realised that I had an excellent opportunity after all. Lord Wellington was at Sorauren with his staff members which meant I had just the man for the job.

This is not a traditional ghost story. There are probably many ghosts on a battlefield but my characters are far too busy to notice them. Instead I've delved into some of the history of the Basque region to find a tale that I could link to the present. I hope you enjoy it.

The story is dedicated to my friend Janet and her beautiful dog Bella, who are both eagerly waiting to hear more about Lord Wellington's puppies.

The Sight

27th July 1813

It was an eventful ride from Almandoz to join the army on the slopes above Sorauren. They rode twenty miles through difficult country in appalling weather. The road was poor and Lord Wellington set a fast pace.

Captain Richard Graham was used to long rides in miserable conditions and had no difficulty keeping up. During a brief early morning stop, eating dark rye bread and salty bacon in a warm farmhouse kitchen, he reminisced with Lord Fitzroy Somerset about the misery they had endured during their ride to Cadiz at the end of the previous year. Both men kept a wary eye on Lord Wellington and talked in low tones. His Lordship was worried, as well as being tired and cold, which meant that his temper was uneven and he was likely to snap at them for chattering like idiots. There were several other staff members around the table, including Wellington's quartermaster-general, Colonel George Murray. For the most part they ate in

exhausted silence.

Wellington had been surprised in the middle of his plans for the current campaign by the news that the French, under Marshal Soult, had crossed the border and engaged Allied troops up in the high passes at Maya and Roncesvalles. Wellington had been focused on blockading Pamplona and besieging the coastal town of San Sebastian, but as news came in of the new threat he had shifted his attention with his usual speed and mobilised his staff members without a moment's hesitation and without the least concern for comfort or safety.

Richard was accustomed to both danger and discomfort but, like all the headquarters staff, he preferred not to incur the wrath of Lord Wellington in one of his periodic bouts of temper. He and Somerset broke off their conversation the moment his Lordship turned a frosty glare in their direction. Just as they were finishing their hasty meal, a messenger arrived, soaked and splashed with mud, Wellington took the letters from him and stood in the middle of the kitchen reading them. The farmer's wife moved around the men, glaring occasionally at the puddle forming on her flagged stone floor, as the messenger awaited his Lordship's response.

Eventually Wellington looked up. "Bring writing materials immediately, Somerset. I need to send orders to Hill and to Alten. It seems that Picton has been forced to retreat further than I had expected, but this intelligence is so vague. I hope to rendezvous with General Long in person before we reach the lines. He must know more than he has written here."

He slapped the letter irritably on the table and sat down to read a second missive while Somerset, who was his Lordship's military secretary, brought the requested writing materials. Richard, feeling rather sorry for the farmer's wife whose kitchen had been abruptly commandeered, shepherded the rest of the men outside. It had finally stopped raining and there was even a weak sun becoming visible between the clouds. Richard found a rickety bench for the tired cavalry trooper who had brought the letters and went to arrange food for him and to make sure Wellington's two grooms had been given breakfast. It was not really his job to manage provisions for the journey but when Wellington was under pressure he tended to forget such trifling matters as food and rest. Richard firmly believed that both men and horses worked better if they were properly fed and chose to take responsibility for the party.

He was rubbing down his horse in the muddy farmyard when he was joined by Somerset, who was holding a letter.

"Sorry Richard, he wants this delivered to Pack as soon as possible. Are you all right to take it?"

Richard took the orders. "Of course. It'll be a relief to get away from him to be honest. I'm surprised you didn't volunteer yourself."

"There were several volunteers, believe me. The risk of running into French cavalry patrols in the hills is nothing compared to another hour of listening to him snapping our heads off. He asked for you specifically. He said that he trusts you not only to deliver the orders without getting lost or distracted but also to get any reply back to him in a timely manner. He then made a complimentary remark about your horse, while not failing to remind us all that it had been looted at Vitoria."

Richard broke into a laugh. He ran his hand affectionately down the smooth grey neck of his new gelding. "He knows perfectly well I didn't steal this horse. I bought him from an officer of the 43rd."

"And he bought it from two soldiers of the 112th who definitely stole it from King Joseph's baggage train."

"Undoubtedly. That's why I've named him Joseph. But his Lordship cannot prove any of that."

"He's just jealous that he didn't spot that auction before you did. We're all a bit envious to be honest, he's very handsome."

"He really is. I was showing him off to General van Daan last week and he told me that if I ever want to sell, I'm to give him first refusal. I shan't though. Any further orders?"

"Just get a reply from Pack, even if it's no more than an acknowledgement that he's read and absorbed every one of his Lordships dictates about the route he should take and the management of his baggage wagons. You know how he is if he doesn't get an answer."

"I'll tell Sir Denis, don't worry. If necessary I'll write it myself and get him to sign it."

“Good man. Take care, Richard. There actually are cavalry patrols out there and Lord Wellington is right. We really don’t have enough information yet. We’re heading towards Ostiz and then south towards Sorauren. I hope you make it back to us before nightfall.”

The weather remained unsettled. By the time Richard reached the Sixth Division he had ridden through a thunderstorm followed by a brief spell of bright sunlight. A sharp wind sent clouds scudding across a blue sky. Sir Denis Pack greeted him cheerfully and provided hot tea while he read Wellington’s letter. Richard saw the Irishman’s lips twitch into a smile.

“God love the man, did he think I’d try to haul the guns and the baggage wagons over the heights? How long does he think I’ve been doing this? Will he want a reply, do you think?”

“You know Lord Wellington, sir.”

Pack groaned and waved to an orderly to bring pen and ink. He perched on a folding stool, hunched over a battered leather lap desk, and grumbled under his breath as he penned a response. Richard wrapped his cold hands around the tin cup and hoped the rain would hold off for his return ride.

Pack read his short note then folded it, not bothering to search for a sealing wafer. Richard gave his empty cup to the orderly and went to take the letter.

“I’ve told him I’ll await his orders at Olague, Graham. I’ll keep them on the alert and ready to march at a moment’s notice. I won’t let the officers bring their fancy baggage and I won’t drop any guns over the mountain side. Is there anything else I need to say that will keep him happy?”

“You could try telling him Soult is on his way back to France, sir.”

“Soult will be soon enough, my boy. His Lordship is an exasperating meddler on campaign but I’d back him any day against whatever Soult has in mind. Somewhere near Sorauren, you think?”

“Based on the intelligence we have so far, sir, but that could change. He’s still waiting for further news of General Picton.”

“As far as I know, Picton’s scuttling all the way back to Pamplona but he’ll have to stop eventually. Don’t tell him I said that, by the way.”

Richard grinned. He liked Sir Denis Pack, who was a good battle commander with an irreverent sense of humour.

“I won’t, sir. Wouldn’t want to see pistols at dawn with General Picton.”

“Jesus Christ, I’m far too old for that nonsense these days and if Picton isn’t, he ought to be. Though I used to think he and Craufurd would have come to blows one day if Robert had survived long enough. Off you go, Captain Graham. Follow his Lordship’s advice yourself and keep an eye out for French patrols, though I must say we’ve seen nothing of them so far.”

Richard took his advice and kept a wary eye on the upper slopes, going carefully around any woodland which might have acted as cover for enemy troops. He saw no sign of them, though the condition of the road suggested that an army had marched this way very recently. Richard was suddenly very sure that a battle was coming and he badly wanted to reach Lord Wellington in time.

After surveying the area, he took a short cut across several sloping meadows, boggy after recent rain. The road here ran through a heavily wooded area for half a mile and Richard decided he would not take the chance. He could not be more than three miles from the village of Sorauren where he hoped to catch up with Wellington’s party and he wondered if that might also mean French pickets or stragglers in the vicinity.

The grass was muddy and hard-going and the horse slipped several times. Richard reined him in firmly. He and Joseph were still getting to know one another but the horse seemed very sure-footed so far. He was a beautiful animal, by far the best horse Richard had ever owned and he had no intention of risking a broken leg in an over-hasty descent to reach a battle which might not even happen today.

He reached a proper path with some relief and turned Joseph down towards the valley where he could rejoin the main road. There was a stone cottage on the left, set back from the

path. It had a weathered tiled roof, a walled garden plot for growing vegetables and herbs and a larger enclosure behind it where a cow and several goats grazed peacefully. Some chickens scratched about in a wooden fenced area outside a rickety shed.

As he passed the cottage, Richard saw movement out of the corner of his eye. A woman appeared, straightening up from behind the wall, a basket in her hand. She looked equally astonished to see him so close but Joseph was more startled than either of them by the sudden movement. He gave a squeal of alarm and reared up so abruptly that Richard was taken completely unawares. He felt himself falling and his only thought was that he had no wish to lose his new horse. Twisting the reins around his gloved hand, he landed heavily in a particularly muddy rut on the uneven road.

For a moment he could not move. The impact had driven all the breath out of him. He lay very still, trying to work out if he was hurt, but it was difficult to think straight when he could not take a proper breath. Richard tried desperately to draw air into his lungs but for a long agonising moment nothing seemed to work and he felt as though he was suffocating.

Unexpectedly he felt hot breath on his face and then a little snuffling sound. Joseph's wet nose touched his cheek then his forehead and then the horse blew fully into his face. Richard flinched back instinctively and suddenly he could move again. He took in air in a great whoosh.

"Here, let me take him or he will step on you," a voice said in Spanish. "Of course you will not understand me, so..."

"I understand you perfectly Señora," Richard said in the same language. "I will hold him. He's very strong and..."

She did not bother to reply, just removed the reins from his hand before he could stop her. He felt a jolt of pain in his wrist and up his arm as he sat up. She had led Joseph a few feet away and was holding his bridle, talking softly to him. The horse seemed calm again and Richard decided she knew what she was doing and took stock of his own injuries.

There was nothing too serious apart from his right wrist which was very swollen. His back ached badly and there was a lump on the back of his head where it had hit a broken piece of stone in the road. He was also covered in mud, which had soaked through his clothing. Richard bent to retrieve his hat, wincing a little. He brushed some of the mud off it and went to collect his horse.

"Thank you for your help, Señora."

She turned to survey him from bright brown eyes in a weathered face. She was probably in her fifties, a thin woman in a black gown and shawl. Her dark hair was peppered with grey and worn in a neat chignon.

After a long, considering look, the woman turned towards the cottage. "Juan, come here. Take the officer's horse and give him some water."

A boy of about eleven raced around from the back of the cottage. He stopped abruptly at the sight of Richard, then looked at the woman.

"English?"

"Yes. But he speaks Spanish, so do not be cheeky. Come inside, sir. I will look at your wrist."

"It's very kind of you Señora, but I am in a hurry."

"Your kind are always in a hurry. If you hurry with a broken wrist, you will fall off again and this time you will not hold him. My boy understands horses, he'll take care of this one."

Richard hesitated but she had already handed the bridle to the boy. He watched for a minute and decided that Joseph would be safe enough so he followed the woman into the cottage, looking around him curiously.

It was a typical Basque cottage although rather bigger than most. There was only one room on the ground floor, combining kitchen and living quarters. Above was a sleeping loft which was accessed by a fixed wooden ladder. A fire burned in the grate and there was something cooking in a pot suspended over the blaze.

One end of the room seemed to be set up as a still room, with a wooden bench bearing pots and jars and a big stone pestle and mortar. Bunches of herbs and strings of vegetables hung from the wooden beams giving the room a heady fragrance. There was a door on the opposite

side which looked as though it led to a small lean-to. An animal, possibly a donkey, could be glimpsed through partially open door.

Richard inhaled deeply, enjoying the scent of the herbs. The woman smiled as if she understood then beckoned him to the fire. He sat on a stool and obediently held out his wrist for her inspection. She prodded and examined and told him to move his fingers. He did so, wincing.

“I do not think it is broken but it is a bad sprain. I will bind it up to give support while you ride. There is a salve I make with rosemary and hot peppers. It will ease the pain and help with the swelling. You should rest it, but you are a man. I know you will not.”

Richard could not help laughing. She reminded him of his long dead wife Sally and his recently acquired fiancée, Honoria, both of whom would have scolded him.

“I’m sorry. You’re being very kind, but I have to ride on as soon as possible. I’ve letters to deliver.”

He wondered immediately if he should have mentioned his mission but decided that he would be safe enough here. There was no sign that this neat cottage had ever been invaded by a French soldier and there was no reason for this woman to betray him. She gave no response to his explanation, but helped him to remove his muddy coat and hung it before the fire, then carefully rolled back his shirt sleeve.

The strong smelling salve felt warm on his skin. She was generous with the application and Richard wondered briefly what Lord Wellington would say when he arrived smelling like an East India spice chest but he decided he did not care. It felt wonderful and he watched appreciatively as she wound undyed linen strips firmly about his wrist.

As she did so, the boy Juan reappeared. The woman looked at him enquiringly.

“I have tied him up and given him hay and water. And I used old Fredo’s brush to get some of the mud off him. He is a lovely horse.”

“Thank you, lad,” Richard said warmly. “His name is Joseph and he’ll be very grateful. As am I, to both of you. You should be proud of your son, Señora.”

“Grandson,” the woman said with a sad little smile. “My daughter died of the birth and the menfolk were taken years ago by the army. We do well enough here alone. One day, no doubt, Juan will wish to leave, but not yet. There, how does that feel?”

Richard tested it. “Much better, thank you.”

“I’ll give you a small jar to take with you. Use it until the swelling goes.”

“Only if you’ll let me pay for it.”

She laughed again and spread her hands. “I’ve little use for coins, but if you insist, Señor. We live by barter here. Goods and services and people pay well.”

“It looks as though you’ve avoided the French army as well.”

“Oh they’ve been past. I’ve tended their sick from time to time, but they don’t trouble me much. Some of the villages haven’t been so lucky.”

“I know,” Richard said soberly. “I suppose you’re quite isolated here. Unless somebody told them or they happened to take this path, you’re easy to miss.”

“They are afraid,” Juan said scornfully. “The villagers told them Grandmama is a witch and they think she will curse them.”

Richard blinked in surprise. The woman rolled down his sleeve carefully over the bandages and got up. She fetched a bottle from a shelf above the herb bench, poured some liquid into a small iron pan and set it in a ring above the fire to heat.

“It is a tea made from ginger and a local tree bark. Very good for pain. Drink some before you go. Your coat will be dry soon. Juan, take it outside and brush the mud off.”

The boy obeyed and Richard took the pottery cup and sipped the steaming liquid.

“A witch?” he enquired with interest.

She looked amused. “A harmless local legend, Señor. My family have lived here for many generations. The knowledge is passed down from mother to daughter, though I shall be the last. Herbs and remedies and some skill with healing. I act as midwife and, when needed, I lay out the dead.”

“A wise woman.”

“Is that what you call it, back in your home?”

“I’ve heard the name used.” Richard did not mention that he had also heard superstitious villagers mutter other words and make signs against the evil eye as such women passed by. Folk stories could both protect and persecute, but in these modern times at least it went no further than some name calling and a level of social isolation. He had no sense of that here and he suspected that this woman was a valued member of her rural community.

“Well I’m grateful for your wisdom, Señora. And my manners are so poor, I’ve forgotten to ask your name.”

“It is Maria Xarra, Señor. My husband was Martinez, a shepherd, but once he died I chose to return to my family name.”

“Señora Xarra, thank you.” Richard finished the tea and handed her the cup as Juan returned with his coat. The boy had done a surprisingly good job of removing the worst of the mud and it was only slightly damp. Richard thanked him and accepted his grandmother’s help to ease the coat over his injured wrist. Despite his accident, the little interlude had been curiously restful and he was almost glad it had happened.

Taking out his purse, he counted several coins into her hand. She seemed genuinely reluctant to take them. Richard folded her work-roughened hand over them firmly.

“Please,” he said. “I want to.”

“We can spend them on schooling, Grandmama,” Juan said excitedly. Richard turned to look at him in surprise.

“You go to school?”

“The priest runs a small school in the church once a week. Juan is learning to read and write. I never did, so I’m no use to him, but a boy should learn. It’s expensive though and I don’t often get paid in coin. Thank you, Señor. It will go to good use.”

Richard bit back a rude remark about a man of God charging children for a few hours teaching, though from her clipped tone, he suspected Señora Xarra agreed with him. He had a sudden thought.

“Juan, before I go, will you bring me the cloth bag out of Joseph’s saddle bag? You can’t miss it.”

The boy sped away and came back with the knapsack. Richard rummaged through it and took out a battered wooden box. He set it on the table and opened it. Both the woman and the boy came to look.

“It’s a portable writing set. There are a couple of pens and an ink pot. This little knife is to trim the pen with. And these are my note tablets. I don’t need them, I can beg some more from Colonel Somerset. We all share such things out here because we’re always either losing our baggage or getting separated from it. Please take it Juan, as a gift. You need to practice.”

The child’s eyes were huge. He looked apprehensively at his grandmother as though asking for permission to accept. The woman nodded.

“It is a generous gift, Señor. Thank you. Juan, put it away carefully in the pantry so that the ink does not spill. With this money, I will be able to buy more when needed and you will learn faster.”

Juan carried the box away as if it was a fragile treasure and Richard smiled as he watched him.

“You’re raising a fine boy Señora. I wish I had more time, I’d help him myself.”

“You have given him something precious, Señor. Juan will bring the pot of salve for you. Have you children of your own?”

“Not yet. My first wife died, but I’m betrothed to a very lovely lady. I hope we’re fortunate. I want a family.”

“You should tell his fortune, Grandmamma,” Juan said, bouncing back with a small sealed jar. He wrapped it carefully in a scrap of cloth and placed it in Richard’s worn knapsack. Richard smiled at him and shot an amused glance at the woman.

“Do you also tell fortunes, Señora?”

“It is foolishness, nothing more. On festival days, the girls pay a trifle for me to tell them the name of their future husband. It is never hard to guess the name they wish to hear.”

Richard laughed aloud. “I’ve seen it done at county fairs at home as well.”

“But Grandmamma does have the Sight,” Juan argued. “All her family had it. A long

time ago, Graciana Xarra was burned for being a witch in Logroño.”

Richard stopped laughing. He stared at Señora Xarra in considerable surprise. “Is that true, Señora?”

“It is ancient history,” the woman said lightly. “As you said, Señor, ignorant people believe in folk tales. Two hundred years ago they went a little mad in these lands and my ancestress had the misfortune to be one of six or seven who paid the price. It does not happen any more. The Inquisition – which is abolished anyway, since Bonaparte – prefers persecuting Jews and Conversos to witches. Nobody believes in such matters these days.”

“It’s still a tragic story, Señora.”

“It must have been terrible,” the woman said simply.

“But she does have the power,” Juan insisted. “Everybody knows. Not just the silly girls at festival time, but the others. Even the village elders come to her for advice.”

Richard found he could smile again. “That may well be because she is a very wise woman, Juan. No magic involved. I wish my fiancée could meet you both. I shall tell her about you in my next letter.”

“When you get some more paper and ink,” Señora Xarra said. She was smiling too.

Richard held out his left hand. “Goodbye and thank you both again. Juan, I don’t know the custom here, but in England we shake hands like this with our friends as a greeting and a farewell.”

The boy complied, looking pleased. Richard turned to the woman and after a moment’s hesitation she took his hand. She held it for much longer than he had expected and when she released it, she looked suddenly grave.

Outside, Juan brought forward a wooden stool to help Richard mount more easily without putting too much strain on his wrist. The woman carried the knapsack and put it into his saddlebag herself, fastening the strap carefully.

“It is nonsense as you say, Señor. The boy believes and so do some of the villagers. All the same...”

Richard stared at her puzzled. She gave a little self-deprecating smile. “Sometimes it comes to me. I do not look for it. It is just like a picture. A flash of something. Often it is of no use, since I do not understand it myself.”

“You saw something?” Richard asked. He felt foolish saying it, but her expression was so serious.

“When you took my hand just now. There was a man in a grey coat on a bridge. Writing something. He wore a hat – this kind of shape.” She sketched a bicorn hat with her hands.

Richard frowned. The picture she drew was surprisingly effective and he realised he was visualising Lord Wellington, bent over his writing tablets to issue a new set of orders. He wanted to ask more but before he could do so, she said:

“That is all. It will probably be nothing, but there is much danger. If you see him on the bridge, you must get him away very fast. He trusts you.”

Richard felt an odd little shiver which had nothing to do with the sharp breeze. She did not seem to expect a reply. She stepped back and lifted a hand in farewell. Richard gave a little bow and began to turn Joseph towards the path.

“And Señor...do not climb the hill of Spain. You may not survive it and I wish you to go back to that pretty girl of yours and have many children. Goodbye.”

He looked back once over his shoulder. They both stood at the garden gate, waving. Richard waved back. The little cottage looked very isolated against a spectacular backdrop of rolling hills and sharply defined ridges climbing up to the mountains beyond. Richard could not help smiling. If he tried to follow her advice and not ascend any Spanish hills in this country, he would go nowhere at all.

Richard found Colonel Murray in the village of Ostiz, with some of General Long’s cavalry. Murray greeted him with some relief and asked about his bandaged wrist. Richard explained briefly.

“You’ve only just missed him,” Murray said. “It’s confirmed that Picton had to abandon Zubiri last night and has taken up a position just to the north of Pamplona. The enemy is marching as we speak and there are a lot of the bastards. There’s going to be a battle, though I’ve not heard any firing yet. Did you reach Pack?”

“Yes. I need to get this letter to his Lordship in case he wants me to take orders back.”

“They’ll come through me if he does. He left me here to coordinate. Get yourself off then but don’t kill yourself trying to catch up, you’ll find him easily enough once he reaches the lines. He and Somerset were riding hell for leather, they’ve probably already left the others behind.”

Richard grinned and saluted. He turned Joseph back towards the road and set off at a gallop southwards down the narrow valley. The country opened out on the approach to Sorrauren and for the first time, Richard could see Allied troops massing on the hills above the village. He slowed his horse and trotted down towards the river, running his eyes over the slopes. He could see red-coated British battalions, forming up alongside Spanish and Portuguese troops.

Through his frantic intelligence gathering of the past twenty-four hours, Richard had established that Sir Lowry Cole’s Fourth Division had retreated from a vulnerable position in the high pass at Roncesvalles and combined with General Picton’s Third Division en route. Picton had originally intended to make a stand on the heights of San Cristobel just before Pamplona but Cole had persuaded him instead to defend a higher ridge along the hill of Oricain. Richard had carried several of the letters between the various sections of the army and suspected that Picton’s vagueness about his decision and his precise location had been a major factor in Lord Wellington’s irritability. His Lordship preferred to control every aspect of a campaign and lack of information drove him mad.

Richard surveyed the troops as he rode down towards the river. Cole had taken up a position on the northern slopes of the hill. A spur at the north-eastern corner was occupied by what looked like Spanish troops. Along the rise and fall of the ridge, he could see British and Portuguese brigades drawn up with their light companies and skirmishers at the front and the main troops just behind the crest of the hill. He thought Wellington would approve. He could not see Picton’s division, but according to Murray it was deployed to the rear of the main position.

Richard could see activity on the stone bridge over the river as he set Joseph to a steady trot down towards the village. There were several men at the far end of the bridge, most of whom seemed to be villagers. As he drew closer however, he could see two horses. An officer sat mounted on one of them, holding the bridle of the other. The second man wore a sober grey frock coat and a neat cocked hat and he was bending over the stone wall of the bridge. He appeared to be writing something.

Richard pulled hard on the reins, startling Joseph into a little whinny. The scene was so familiar that it took him a moment to realise that he had not in fact seen it before, merely heard it described by the Spanish woman. He turned Joseph quickly, scanning the surrounding hillside. Now he could see French troops for the first time; cavalry troopers upon the crest of a ridge opposite to that occupied by the Allied troops. He wondered if Wellington knew they were there. Richard was certain that Fitzroy Somerset had seen them; he could tell by the younger man’s agitated manner.

Some of the villagers seemed to be talking to Wellington, trying to warn him of the danger. The Commander-in-Chief did not look up and gave no sign of having heard them at all. Richard looked around again. The dragoons were still a long way off and posed no immediate danger but he felt an absolute certainty that danger existed.

He did not try to analyse his sudden illogical fear but simply dug in his heels, urging Joseph forward into a fast canter. They took the slope down to the bridge at speed and the sound of thudding hooves finally made Wellington look up.

“Graham!” Somerset said. It came out as a gasp of relief. “Thank God you’re here.”

“Have you letters for me, Captain?” Wellington demanded, bending over his task again.”

“Later. You need to get off this bridge, my Lord. The French are coming into the village.”

“They are not yet so close...”

“They bloody are. You need to move.”

Both men stared at him in astonishment. Wellington opened his mouth to ask a question, but Somerset interrupted him, something he would never normally have done.

“Let me have it, sir. If it’s not clear to Murray, I can explain the rest.”

Wellington’s eyes were scanning the village. There was still no sign of a Frenchman closer than the adjoining ridge. Richard opened his mouth to yell again, but abruptly, Wellington folded his orders and gave them to Somerset.

“Ride,” he said. “Fast. If you delay you’ll be cut off and I’ll have to send them the long way around which is an extra four leagues.”

Somerset shoved the letters into his satchel and wheeled his horse. “Richard, get him out of here,” he yelled, and was gone, galloping back up the road at full stretch.

Richard turned to look at Wellington who was already swinging himself into the saddle. He shot Richard a puzzled look then turned his horse into the village and cantered down the main street. Richard fell in behind him. About half-way along, he twisted in the saddle to look back and felt a little shock running through him at the sight of four French troopers trotting into the village.

“Sir, move!” he bellowed.

Wellington picked up the urgency in his voice and did not hesitate. He set spurs to Copenhagen’s flank and pushed him into a full gallop. Richard looked around once more to see the troopers beginning to pursue and kicked Joseph to follow. They raced out of the village, hearing shouts of encouragement from the Spanish villagers as they made their escape.

The steep track out of Sorauren led up to the tiny chapel of San Salvador at the top of the hill. It occurred to Richard suddenly that Cole’s men, deployed along the ridge, had not yet seen Wellington and would have no idea of the identity of the approaching riders. He risked another look behind him, but the French had stopped at the edge of the village. He could see other troops filing into the streets now and the villagers had disappeared within doors. There was no further attempt to follow Wellington, though Richard suspected that if they had known who it was on the stone bridge they would have moved a lot faster.

Once he was sure that there was no danger of pursuit, Richard slowed down to a decorous trot, allowing Wellington to pull ahead. Partly, it was because his wrist ached from his recent exertions but he also thought it would be good for the troops to see their chief riding in alone. He knew the moment some of the skirmishers recognised Wellington because they raised a cry, which swept on through the lines.

“Douro! Douro!”

The cry was picked up by the Fourth Division and the cheering grew louder as Wellington cantered up to Ross’s brigade. He reined in and took out his telescope, turning it onto the French troops which were beginning to deploy on the opposite ridge. Richard trotted up just as General Ross drew his horse up alongside Wellington’s.

“It’s good to see your Lordship. We have been discussing it all morning and we’re inclined to believe that Soult is considering an attack.”

Wellington did not lower his telescope. He gave an expressive shrug. “We shall see, Ross. It is just as likely that I shall attack him, but I need to speak to my officers and see how the troops are set up first. We need not concern ourselves about a surprise attack; they are not close to being ready. Captain Graham.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“I believe I owe you my gratitude for your quick thinking on the bridge. It appears, General Ross, that Captain Graham is able to see approaching enemy dragoons when they remain invisible to everybody else. Do you have a letter for me, Graham? And what the devil have you done to your wrist? I forbid you to gallop like a madman again today or you will break your neck and I may have need of your mystical powers again before we kick Soult out of Spain.”

“They will be at your disposal, my Lord.”

Handing over the letter, Richard could not help smiling; though now that the danger was past he felt oddly unsettled by what had just happened. He had no belief in fortune telling

and knew that Señora Xarra's surprisingly accurate prediction was pure coincidence but he was grateful to her nevertheless. If she had not put that picture into his head he would never have thought to chase Wellington off the bridge so precipitately and the French might well have caught up with him.

There was no battle that day. Wellington, with Richard beside him, surveyed the ground and inspected the troops but made few changes to Cole's arrangements. He moved O'Donnell's Spanish troops off the knoll and replaced them with the 40th Foot from Anson's brigade, along with two other Spanish battalions. He also sent out further orders to Pack, telling the messenger to take the long way round as the village, including the bridge, was now occupied by the French. Richard's offer to take the messages had been firmly refused.

He was touched and a little surprised by his commander's gruff concern for his injury. Wellington was not known for his sympathetic nature and nobody hearing his blunt observations on Richard's carelessness would have imagined that he felt anything other than exasperation, but his actions told another story. He insisted that Richard be relieved of any further messenger duties and summoned his own surgeon to examine the injury. The doctor inspected the swollen wrist. The swelling had reduced considerably since earlier in the day and Richard mentioned his curious encounter with the Spanish wise woman.

To his surprise, Dr Long grunted then asked to inspect the salve. He sniffed it suspiciously.

"Did it help?"

"Yes. Do you know why?"

"No earthly idea, but we'll put some more on before I bind it up. They're invaluable, some of these women with their herbal remedies. Ever met General van Daan's wife?"

"Yes. They're both friends of mine."

"Extraordinary woman. Utterly terrifying. Some of her ideas are mad but she gets good results. She'd probably like your Spanish wise woman."

"I thought that at the time," Richard said.

"During winter quarters I came across her teaching young Mrs Smith how to set stitches in a sabre cut on a leg of pork. Poor Smith was hovering in the background looking absolutely appalled."

Richard gave a splutter of laughter. "I wish I'd seen it."

"There, that feel all right?"

Richard tested the wrist. "Yes. Thank you, Doctor."

"Try and rest it. Which might be easier said than done if his Lordship decides we'll fight today."

"We're not going to fight now," Richard said, looking up at the rapidly darkening sky. "Visibility is too poor. I think it's going to rain."

He was proved right within the hour. Wellington shared a scratch meal with his staff while torrential rain battered against the canvas of his tent. He was still writing orders to the scattered commanders of his army and one by one his ADCs collected their allotted letters and went out into the storm to ride the long way round to Pack, Hill, Alten and Dalhousie. Richard watched them go sympathetically but also with relief.

Richard slept poorly on the hard ground, partly because of the thunderstorm and partly because his wrist ached so badly. By morning the weather had cleared and it was bright and sunny, giving Wellington excellent visibility from his chosen command post at the top of the Oricain heights. Richard sat on his horse beside him and wondered if the French had any idea how clearly their troops could be seen moving from one position to the other.

Pack brought the Sixth Division up by mid-morning and Wellington sent Richard with orders for their deployment. The arrival of additional troops seemed to be the signal for the

French attack and the sound of gunfire could be heard from the direction of Madden's brigade. It was desultory at first; the stuttering fire of tirailleurs fanning out in a skirmish line. Gradually it increased in volume and intensity and was followed by the crash of artillery. Neither side had many guns but the French had four howitzers trained on the knoll to the left of Wellington's line, which was occupied by the 40th and two Spanish battalions.

The noise intensified and dark smoke began to roll across the battlefield. The main French assault came in columns, crossing the hollow at the foot of the slope and then beginning to climb steadily. Richard was back with Wellington and watched them come. They were making use of an unusual number of skirmishers, presumably to keep the Allied troops occupied while the columns made their way up the steep slope.

Initially it seemed to be working as the first French brigade to reach the top made a fierce attack on General Ross's men. Richard glance sideways at Wellington. The Commander-in-Chief's steady gaze was fixed on the combat. Already the cacophony was deafening but Wellington looked as though he was conducting an inspection on a parade ground. The howitzers boomed out, muskets crashed and the French surged up towards the crest of the hill.

"Now," Wellington said very softly, and as if they had heard him, there was a rush of redcoats as Ross's fusilier brigade charged into the French flank, yelling some kind of unintelligible battle cry. The ascending French seemed completely unprepared for the savagery of the attack and within minutes they were retreating, racing back down the hill leaving many dead and wounded behind them.

The pattern repeated itself across the whole of the ridge. On several occasions a determined French attack forced Wellington's men back and even established a foothold on the crest but they were driven back by charging troops from the second line. Wellington remained in place, directing operations. Often in battle, he liked to take orders to his various commanders in person and Richard was used to chasing his chief as he rode around the battlefield, but he understood why Wellington was not doing that today. The clear weather and excellent vantage point made it unnecessary and the hilly countryside would make galloping a risky proposition.

Twice Richard was sent out with messages, sending the 27th and 48th infantry from Anson's brigade crashing into the French flank in a surprise attack. He was then sent back to bring in Byng's brigade which was in reserve at the rear. Riding over the rough ground mostly one-handed was difficult but these were all short journeys. Wellington had sent his other ADCs on longer missions and Richard did not mind. He preferred to have something useful to do.

When he rejoined his chief, he found him in conversation with a young Spanish soldier. Wellington's Spanish was fairly good, though not as good as his French. Richard walked Joseph close enough to hear. His Lordship dismissed the man with a wave and turned to Richard.

"Ammunition," he said briefly. "It's not being sent down fast enough, I don't think the muleteers wish to get that close to the battle. One of the NCOs from the 7th has just managed to drag a couple of mules down to that section of the line, but there's a problem up on the knoll with the 40th and the Spanish."

"I'll go," Richard said. "I can reach it from the far side, they're only attacking from the front, probably because of our gun battery to the south."

"Very well, Captain, but ride over to the gunners first, if you please, to tell them to cease fire. It is bad enough that you will be at risk from the enemy howitzer, but you shall not be shot down by our own artillery."

Richard set off, wishing briefly that he was not riding Joseph. The horse was fast and sure-footed but he had not yet ridden him into battle and would not have chosen today to test his mettle.

He quickly realised that he need not have worried. Joseph was clearly battle-hardened and did not hesitate amidst the noise and smoke and the shrieking of howitzer fire overhead. Richard thought that the horse seemed far calmer than he was. He galloped to where Captain Sympher commanded Cole's divisional gun battery to give him Wellington's message, then made his way up to the rear of the action to find a Spanish muleteer with enough courage to accompany him into the fray.

The man he chose was a stocky, bearded Spaniard who seemed inclined to argue against the mission until Richard drew his pistol and threatened to shoot him. The mule, laden with

casks full of ball cartridge, was even less enthusiastic and did not respond to threats. Eventually several other muleteers came forward to shove the animal into motion. Once on the move, it went so quickly that it almost dragged its handler down the slope and along the back of the ridge towards the steep knoll. Richard rode behind to make sure that neither man nor beast turned and fled.

The 40th infantry and two Spanish battalions occupied a steep spur at the far left of Wellington's line. It had come under heavy attack earlier in the afternoon and at one point the Spanish lines had given way, but the assault had been beaten back by well-organised and lethal volleys of musket fire from the 40th. Since then they had been holding their own very well, but ammunition was obviously in short supply. Richard passed a party of Spanish soldiers who were speedily and systematically going through the pouches of dead and wounded men to find more.

Another screech overhead was followed by an explosion on the far side of the ridge. Richard flinched but the shell landed a long way from the lines of battle and did no damage. As the muleteer halted his recalcitrant animal, a cry went up from an officer of the 40th and men came racing forward to help. Two Spanish infantrymen began working on the straps and the mule was relieved of its burden. The men used rocks and muskets to smash or lever the casks open and hands snatched at cartridges. A line was formed along the ridge to pass the ammunition faster and there was a renewed blaze of firing onto the advancing French.

Richard turned to the muleteer. "Well done. Now get yourself out of here, you've done your job."

The Spaniard did not hesitate but scrambled inelegantly astride his mule and set off back the way he had come. Richard looked over at the fighting men. He felt an irrational urge to join them but knew that he would be far more useful as a messenger in case there was further need. He turned Joseph back towards the path.

They had only gone a few steps when there was a burst of firing much closer at hand. Richard twisted in the saddle to look and saw that a section of French infantry had managed to break through the Spanish line and gain the crest of the knoll. They were directly behind him and he knew that a mounted officer would present an excellent target.

A Spanish officer bellowed an order and men charged in from the right, slamming into the head of the French column. Muskets crashed from both sides as Richard kicked Joseph into a gallop. He would not usually have risked it on ground like this, but he had no choice.

Abruptly, he felt something hit him in the back, once and then again, as if he had been punched hard. It drove him forward over the horse's neck. For several seconds he was bewildered as to what had struck him. Then the pain knifed into him and began to spread through his upper body in waves of agony and Richard realised he had been shot.

Along with the pain came immediate and terrifying weakness. He felt as though he was about to fall from the saddle and his muddled brain was sure that if he did so, he would be dead. He was weak and both hands felt strangely numb so he could not grasp the reins. All he could think of to do was to put both his arms about the horse's neck. He could feel the animal shaking with fear and with his face pressed against Joseph's smooth neck and rough mane, he could smell sweat and leather tack. He could also smell blood and he knew it was his.

Another horse would have been panicked into throwing his rider but Joseph made no attempt to shake him off. Instead, he set off at a fast canter down the slope. Richard could not hope to control him, so he let the horse take charge and prayed that wherever the terrified animal took him, it would not be into the centre of the battlefield.

12th August 1813

Richard awoke in darkness and lay very still, listening to his own breathing. It was not the first time he had regained consciousness but it was probably the first time that he had felt genuinely clear-headed. He savoured the feeling.

All of his recent memories were of pain and blood and fever and the filth of army field

hospitals. A surgeon had dug out the bullets and dressed the wounds. He was an English surgeon and there was no mention of a prison camp which suggested that Wellington had been victorious on the ridge above Sorauren. That was about as much as Richard could comprehend.

He had been thrown around in a supposedly sprung hospital wagon until he had longed for death and as the two bullet wounds festered and his temperature soared he could remember begging for pen and paper so that he could write to Honoria. They were brought to him but he was too weak to write properly and he cried at the thought of her misery when they told her of his death. It was less than a year since she had lost her beloved father and he knew she was praying for the end of the war so that he could come home and they could be married. He could not bear to be the cause of breaking that gallant spirit all over again. The surgeon shook his head over Richard's distress and bled him again.

Everything changed after Lord Wellington made an unexpected visit to the dingy little room in a farmhouse where Richard awaited death. There was another wagon which was considerably more comfortable though his wounds opened up again on the journey and he was barely conscious when he was carried into this room.

He had vague memories of his wounds being inspected, cleaned and dressed again and of a crisp female voice issuing orders for his care. For a moment he thought of the Spanish woman and felt his injured wrist. The swelling had gone down and it was no longer painful which suggested that he had been laid up with this wound for several weeks.

He was lying in a real bed, propped up slightly with pillows and the window was open a little. Silvery moonlight made patterns on wooden floor boards. He could make out the shape of a wooden trunk and a chair. A small table held a jug, a pottery cup and what looked like several medicine bottles.

Richard was thirsty. He tried to push himself further up into a sitting position but the pain was so bad that he cried out. As he lay back, sweating with agony, he heard quick footsteps and then the door opened.

"Lie still, Captain Graham. You're doing very well but you're not ready to ride into battle just yet and if my wife finds out you've been making the attempt you'll regret it."

"General van Daan. Where the hell am I? What happened?" Richard's voice cracked a little. He felt suddenly panicky at how little he could remember.

"Calm down, Richard, you're safe and she's fairly sure you're going to make it, though she wasn't so convinced a week ago. Do you want some water? You can sit up a bit more. Let me help you."

Richard allowed the other man to ease him into a sitting position and took the cup of water gratefully. Van Daan went to collect an oil lamp, lit two candles then lowered his tall form into the chair.

"Thank you, sir. I'm sorry. I'm a bit confused."

"It's not surprising. When they brought you here ten days ago our surgeon thought we were going to lose you. You were in a field hospital for a few days after they operated on you. They were going to send you down to one of the hospitals in Vitoria but Lord Wellington went to visit you and heard the surgeon say that he didn't think you'd make it alive. He consulted my wife and they decided you'd be better off back at headquarters. You're in Lesaca."

"Are you billeted here?"

"No, we're back over at Vera. I was invited to dine at headquarters and we stayed up late so they found me a bed. I was just about to settle down for the night. I'm glad I decided to stay, mind. I can give a report to Nan and I suspect she'll be over to check on you personally tomorrow. She reluctantly deputised the nursing to your orderly and one of Wellington's servants. It looks as though they've followed her instructions very well."

"Did we beat Soult?"

"Very thoroughly. He's back over the border and Wellington is making plans for another assault on San Sebastian. Do you remember the battle?"

Richard frowned, dragging up memories with an effort. "Sorauren?"

"That's the one. I wasn't there, but I'm told you were something of a hero. You'd been running errands for his Lordship all day and then you took off to haul an ammunition mule to the troops on Spanish Hill. You were successful too, but the French made a final rush and you

were shot as you were riding out.”

“I remember. I tried to hold on, but I couldn’t control him. I’d injured my wrist the previous day.”

“You were also bleeding like a stuck pig from two bullet wounds. There’s some damage to your shoulder blade which you’ll feel for a while and the second one broke a rib.”

“Where did they find me?”

“Don’t you remember? That looted horse of yours took you back up to the top of the ridge, to Wellington’s command post. I don’t know what you paid for him, Richard, but it was money well spent.”

“Joseph?” Richard said in astonishment. “Do you mean he’s all right? He didn’t ride off?”

“He’s currently eating his own weight in hay in our horse lines. You won’t be riding for a while, but I’ve told Wellington I’ll arrange for both your horses and the rest of your baggage to be transported home. You’ll be travelling from Santander as soon as you’re well enough.”

“Home?” Richard felt a sudden rush of anxiety. “Home? Oh my God, Honoria? They didn’t write to her, did they? When I was...when they thought I was...?”

“Calm down, lad. That letter would be the responsibility of your commanding officer and you can’t think he’d have written anything to worry her until he was sure. He delegated the task to my wife and she sent off a very reassuring letter a few days ago when she was feeling a lot more confident. I’ll make sure they bring you writing materials tomorrow and you can write to her yourself.”

Richard relaxed. “Thank you, sir.”

“Right, you need to get some sleep. And so do I. I’ve been playing chess with Lord Wellington and it’s exhausting. I’ll call in tomorrow before I set off. It’s good to see you on the mend, Richard.”

Van Daan helped him to lie down again then extinguished the candles and picked up the lamp. He was on his way to the door and Richard was so tired that he was almost asleep when a thought occurred to him and jerked him wide awake again.

“Sir, wait. What was it called again?”

“What was what called?”

“The hill. That knoll out to our left where I was hit.”

“I’ve no idea if it has a name locally. The chap who told me the story called it Spanish Hill, but I assumed that was because during the battle it was defended mainly by the Spanish with a bit of help from the 40th. Or perhaps it was called that before. Does it matter?”

Richard stared at him through the darkness, his thoughts a jumbled whirl. “No,” he said finally. “I just thought I’d heard it before, that’s all. Goodnight, sir.”

October 31st 1813

The journey to the coast and the subsequent sea voyage tried Richard severely and he knew, as he waited to disembark, that he was in no fit state for an immediate coach ride to London. He was desperate to see Honoria but reluctantly decided that he needed to find a comfortable hotel in Southampton and rest for a few days.

His orderly had remained with the army, but Morrison, his groom, had travelled with him. His nursing care was rough and ready but Richard was glad of him. He arrived on the bustling quayside feeling weak and exhausted. Morrison hurried away to see to his baggage and search for a cab and Richard found a broken packing case and eased himself down on it with relief. It had been more than two years since he had left England to take up a post on Wellington’s staff and it seemed very strange to be back.

Lost in his thoughts, he was only vaguely aware of the elegant carriage which had pulled up at the edge of the road behind him. Morrison was approaching with his portmanteau while a sailor followed carrying his small trunk and a closed wicker basket. Richard watched

them approach. He thought Morrison looked delighted with himself which probably meant he had located a cab and possibly an inn. The sailor lowered the trunk and Morrison handed him a coin.

“Sir, you’ll never believe it. I just met...”

“Richard.”

He rose and turned in astonishment. She had just stepped down from the carriage with the aid of a servant and was coming towards him, her hands held out in welcome. Richard took both of them and lifted one after the other to his lips. He could not take her into his arms so publicly but he could not take his eyes from her face.

“Honorina, I cannot believe you’re here. How in God’s name did you know?”

“Of course I knew, you ridiculous man. I received details of your transport from Mrs van Daan and I have been haunting the shipping office for days; they are heartily sick of me. Oh my dear, how are you? I’ve been so worried. You’re so thin and pale.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Never be sorry. You’re home and you’re whole and I am not letting you out of my sight for a long time. Get into the carriage while Morrison and my groom see to your luggage. Then you may kiss me properly.”

He obeyed, forgetting his weakness the moment he was in her arms. It did not occur to him even to ask where they were going until the carriage was underway and it dawned on him that they were unchaperoned and could not possibly be travelling all the way to London like this.

“Well I would not give a fig as you perfectly well know,” his fiancée told him firmly when he mentioned it. “But as it happens we are not going to London at all for a while. Mother and I have rented a house just outside Lyndhurst. It is no more than eight miles and the horses are well rested.”

“You’ve rented a house?”

“Yes. I’m sorry that I did it without consulting you, Richard. You may not know that I have exchanged several letters with Mrs van Daan. She did not tell me immediately how close you were to dying. I’m grateful for that, I would have fretted myself into a fit and not been able to do anything about it. But when it became clear that you would recover and must come home, she asked if there was anywhere quieter we could go. She thought that London might not be the best place for you to recover. We’d already talked about finding a country home. We’ll do that together, love, when you’re ready. But I decided that in the meantime, we would rent somewhere. I do hope you don’t mind.”

“I’ve never been more relieved in my life,” Richard said. “The thought of another long journey appals me. Honorina, it’s so wonderful to see you. You’re so beautiful. I think I’d forgotten how lovely you are. Kiss me again, would you?”

She moved into his arms. They kissed for a long time and then she settled comfortably against him, enquiring carefully to make sure she was not hurting him. Richard decided he did not care if she did. Holding her made him feel whole again.

They did not talk for a while, content just to be together. Richard dozed a little, exhausted after the voyage and woke with a start to find that she had settled him with a pillow and a woollen rug. He removed the rug, laughing.

“I feel like an elderly relative who always gets chilled in the carriage.”

“You are not at all elderly, Richard. Just not very well. You’re going to have to put up with me fussing over you a little, I’m afraid. I am still reeling at how close I came to losing you.”

Richard took her hand and kissed it. “Fuss as much as you like. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Can you tell me what happened, or is it too soon?”

“I can tell you everything I remember. There are a few weeks after I was wounded which are a bit of a blur.”

“I’d like to know.”

He described the events leading up to the battle. For a while during his illness, his memories even of that had been confused but they were clear again now. She listened

attentively and asked intelligent questions. Richard realised that there had been times during the journey when he had worried that he and Honoria might feel awkward with each other, at least at first. They had corresponded very regularly but had not seen each other since their hasty betrothal seven months earlier. He need not have worried. Being with her was like coming home.

He had not intended to mention his odd experience with the Spanish wise woman but he found himself telling her the story of Señora Xarra's extraordinary prophecies. He was relieved that she did not laugh openly at him or even ask questions. When his story was done she leaned forward and kissed him very gently.

"You've had such a terrible time, love. Thank God you're home."

"You probably think I sustained a blow to the head at the same time."

"Your Spanish soothsayer?"

"It's crazy. I don't know why I told you."

"Because you love me and can tell me anything. Richard, I neither know nor care what it was. Perhaps there really were two remarkable coincidences. Or perhaps there is something in that woman...in her family history...that defies our understanding. If that is the case, I'm glad you took it seriously enough to get Lord Wellington off that bridge."

"I wish I'd taken it seriously enough not to ride up Spanish Hill. Though I'd no idea it was called that at the time."

"Even if you had, and you'd believed her, you'd still have gone. Because he asked you to and because you will do anything for that man."

Richard studied her lovely face. "Not any more," he said. "I've watched so many officers struggle back from sick leave before they're ready. I'm not doing that. I'm going to recover at my leisure, marry my beautiful fiancée and buy a house in the country. He'll win this war perfectly well without me."

"I'm happy to hear it," Honoria said, snuggling comfortably against him again.

They were silent for a while then Honoria shifted and sat up. "What on earth is that noise?"

Richard listened and realised with a qualm that there was a piece of information he had not yet shared with his betrothed.

"Honoria, do you like dogs?"

Honoria stared at him in astonishment. "Of course I like dogs. Why?"

"Do you remember the basket that Morrison was carrying?"

"Is there a dog in it?"

"Yes. A puppy."

His love did not hesitate.

"On the back, with the luggage?" she demanded indignantly. "Richard, what were you thinking? Stay there. At this moment, I think I can make more noise than you."

There was a confused and very noisy interlude while an exuberant puppy was transferred from the luggage to the carriage. Richard watched, utterly enchanted, as his beloved cuddled, stroked and played with the puppy. Eventually the animal fell asleep on Honoria's lap leaving hairs all over her pelisse. Honoria was smiling blissfully.

"What is her name?"

"Bella. Mrs van Daan named her. We can change it if you like."

"No, it's perfect. She is so beautiful. Richard, why have you brought a puppy home? Not that I have any objection but it is so unlikely."

"It was something of an accident. Lord Wellington's prized hunting greyhound had an unintended encounter with that hairy carpet belonging to the Van Daans. They were looking for homes for the puppies and while I was recovering in Lesaca, Mrs van Daan brought this lady to visit me. I'm not sure how it happened but she ended up travelling to Santander with me. And somehow, she really helped when I felt unwell during the journey. I'm sorry. I should have asked."

"Don't be silly, she is wonderful. And so are you, Captain Richard Graham. I love you so much."

Richard held her close, leaned back against the comfortably padded seats and allowed

himself to daydream of a future that did not include gunfire and marching in the rain and the bloody scenes of war. He fell asleep again contentedly, thinking only of Honoria.