

Sharpe's Christmas

Richard Sharpe, #13

by Bernard Cornwell, 1944-

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Part 1

The two riflemen crouched at the edge of the field. One, a dark-haired man with a scarred face and hard eyes, eased back the cock of his rifle, aimed, but then, after a few seconds, lowered it. "Too far away," he whispered. The second was taller than the first and, like his companion, wore the faded green jacket of the 95th Rifles, but instead of a Baker rifle, he carried a curious volley gun of seven barrels. "No good trying with this," he whispered, hefting the huge gun, "only works at close range."

"If we get too close they'll run," the first man said.

"Where can they run to? It's a field, for God's sake."

"So we just walk up and shoot him?"

"Unless you want to strangle the sod."

Major Richard Sharpe lowered his rifle's flint. "Come on, then," he said, and the two men stood and walked gingerly towards the three bullocks. "You think they'll charge us, Pat?" Sharpe asked.

"They're gelded, sir!" Sergeant Major Patrick Harper offered. "Got about as much spark as three blind mice."

"They look dangerous to me," Sharpe said. "They've got horns."

"But they're missing their other equipment, sir. They can't sing the low notes, if you follow me," Harper said, then pointed to one of the bullocks.

"He's got some fat on him, sir. He'll roast just fine." The chosen bullock, unaware of its fate, watched the two men.

"I can't just shoot it!" Sharpe protested.

"It's Christmas dinner, sir," Harper encouraged his commanding officer.

"Proper roast beef, plum pudding and wine. We've got the plums and we've got the wine, sir, so all we need is the beef and the suet."

"Where do you get suet?"

"Off the bullock, of course. It's sort of stacked around the kidneys, so it is, but you'd best shoot the poor beast first. It's kinder."

Sharpe walked closer to the animal. It had large, brown, sad eyes. "I can't do it, Pat."

"One shot, sir. Imagine it's a Frenchman."

Sharpe lifted the rifle, cocked it and aimed straight between the bullock's eyes. The animal gazed at him ruefully. "You do it," Sharpe said to Harper, lowering the gun.

"With this?" Harper held up the volley gun. "I'll blow its head off!"

"We don't want its head, do we?" Sharpe said. "Just its rumps and suet. Go on, do it."

"Not very accurate, sir, not a volley gun. Good for killing Frogs, it is. But not for slaughtering cattle."

"So have the rifle," Sharpe said, offering the weapon.

Harper gazed at the rifle for a second, but did not take it. "The thing is, sir," the huge Irishman said, "that I drank a drop too much last night. My hands are shaky, see? Best that you do it, sir."

Sharpe hesitated. The Light Company had set their hearts on a proper Christmas dinner: bloody roast beef, gravy thick enough to choke a rat and a brandy-soaked pudding clogged with plums and suet. "It's daft, isn't it?" he said. "I wouldn't think twice if it was a Frog. It's only a cow."

"Bullock, sir."

"What's the difference?"

"You can't milk this one, sir."

"Right," Sharpe said, and aimed the rifle again. "Just hold still," he ordered the bullock, then crept a half-pace closer so that the gun's blackened muzzle was only a few inches from the coarse black hair. "I shot a tiger once," he said.

"Go on, sir, kill it."

Sharpe gazed into the beast's eyes. He had put wounded horses out of their misery and shot enough rabbits in his time, but somehow he could not squeeze the trigger. And then he was saved from having to shoot at all because a small, high eager voice hailed him from the field's far side.

"Mr. Sharpe, sir! Mr. Sharpe!"

Sharpe lowered the rifle's cock, then turned to see Ensign Charles Nicholls rustling over the grass.

Nicholls had only just arrived in Spain and went everywhere at a tumultuous pace, as if he feared the war might get away from him.

"Slow down, Mr. Nicholls," Sharpe said.

"It's Colonel Hogan, sir," Ensign Nicholls panted, "he wants you, sir. He says it's the Frogs, sir. He says we've got to stop some Frogs, sir, and it's urgent."

Sharpe slung the rifle on his shoulder. "We'll do this later, sergeant major," he said.

"Yes, sir, of course we shall."

The bullock watched the men go, then lowered its head to the grass. "Were you going to shoot it, sir?" Nicholls asked excitedly.

"What do you think I was going to do?" Sharpe asked the boy. "Strangle it?"

"I couldn't shoot one," Nicholls admitted. "I'd feel too sorry for it." He gazed at Sharpe and Harper in admiration, and no wonder, for there were no two men in Wellington's army who were more admired or feared. It was Sharpe and Harper who had taken the French Eagle at Talavera, who had stormed through the breach of blood at Badajoz and cut the great road at the rout of Vitoria.

Nicholls hardly dared believe he was in their battalion. "You think we're going to fight, sir?" he asked eagerly.

"I hope not," Sharpe said.

"No, sir?" Nicholls sounded disappointed.

"It's Christmas in three days," Sharpe said. "Would you want to die at Christmas?"

"I don't suppose I would, sir," Nicholls admitted.

The ensign was seventeen, but looked fourteen. He wore a second-hand uniform coat on which his mother had sewn loops of tarnished gold lace, then turned up the yellow-tipped sleeves so they did not fall down over his hands.

"I was worried," Nicholls had explained to Sharpe when he arrived at the battalion just a week before, "that I would miss the war. Awful bad luck to miss a war."

"Sounds like good luck to me."

"No, sir! A fellow must do his duty," Nicholls had said earnestly; and the ensign did try very hard to do his duty and was never discouraged when veterans of the regiment laughed at his eagerness.

He was, Sharpe thought, like a puppy. Wet nose, tail up and raring to bare his milk teeth at the enemy.

But not at Christmas, Sharpe thought, not at Christmas. He hoped Hogan was wrong and that the Frogs were not moving, for Christmas was no time to be killing.

"You probably won't have to fight," Colonel Hogan said, then sneezed violently. He pummeled his nose with a giant red handkerchief, then blew scraps of snuff from the map. "It could be a rumour, Richard, nothing but rumour. Did you shoot your bullock?"

"Never got round to it, sir. And how did you know we were going to shoot one, anyway?"

"I am the peer's chief of intelligence," Hogan said grandly, "and I know everything, or almost everything. What I don't know, Richard, is whether these Frogs are going to use the east road or the west, so I have to cover both, or rather the Spaniards will block the east road and you and your merry men will guard the west. Here."

He stabbed a finger down and Sharpe peered at the map to see a tiny mark close to the French frontier, and next to it, in Hogan's extravagant handwriting, the name Irati. "You'll like Irati," Colonel Hogan said. "It's a nothing place, Richard.hovels and misery, that's all it is and all it'll ever be, but that's where you're going." Because maybe the French were going there. Wellington's victory at Vitoria had thrown Napoleon's armies out of Spain, but a handful of French forts still remained south of the frontier and Hogan's spies had learned one of those garrisons was about to attempt an escape into France. The garrison planned to march at Christmas, in the hope that their enemies would be too bloated with beef and wine to fight, but Hogan had got wind of their plans and was setting his snares on the only two routes that the escaping garrison could use.

One, the eastern road, was by far the easier, for it entered France through a low pass, and Hogan guessed it was that route the French would choose. But there was a second, a tight, hard, steep road, and that had to be blocked as well, so the Prince of Wales's Own Volunteers, Sharpe's regiment, would climb into the hills and spend their Christmas at a place of hovels and misery called Irati.

"There's more than 1,000 men in the fort at Ochagavia," Hogan told Sharpe, "and we don't want Boney to get those men back, Richard. You have to stop them."

"If they use the western road, sir."

"Which they probably won't," Hogan said confidently, "but if they do, Richard, stop them. Kill me some Frogs for Christmas. That's why you joined the Army, isn't it? To kill Frogs. So go and do it. I want you out of here in an hour."

In truth, Sharpe had not joined the Army to kill Frogs. He had joined because he was hungry and on the run from the constables. And once a man had taken the shilling and pulled on the King's coat, he was reckoned safe from the law. And so Private Richard Sharpe had joined the 33rd, fought with them in Flanders and India. And at Assaye, a bloody battlefield between two rivers where a small British army had trounced a vast Indian horde, he had become an officer.

That was almost ten years ago and he had spent a good many of those years fighting the French in Portugal and Spain. Only now he fought in a dark green coat, for he was a Rifleman, though by an accident of war, he now found himself commanding a battalion of redcoats. They had once been called the South Essex, but now they were the Prince of Wales's Own Volunteers, though on this dank, grey morning they were anything but willing. They were comfortable in their Spanish billets, they liked the local girls, and none was of a mind to go soldiering in a cold Spanish winter.

Sharpe ignored their displeasure. Men did not join the Army to be comfortable, but to fight. They marched on the hour, 422 men swinging east out of the town and down into the valley.

It had begun to rain heavily, filling the small ditches that edged the fields and flooding the furrows left in the road by the big guns. No one else in the Army was moving, just Sharpe's regiment that was going to plug a gap in the high mountains to stop the Frogs escaping.

Not that Sharpe believed he would fight this Christmas. Even Hogan was not certain the French would march, and if they did, they would probably choose the other road, the main road, so all Sharpe expected was a long march and a cold Christmas.

But King George wanted him to be at Irati, so to Irati he would go. And God help the Frogs if they went as well.

COLONEL Jean Gudin watched as the tricolor was lowered. The fort at Ochagavia, that he had commanded for four years, was being abandoned and it hurt. It was another failure, and his life had been nothing but failure.

Even the fort at Ochagavia was a failure for, as far as Gudin could see, it guarded nothing. True, it dominated a road in the mountains, but the road had never been used to bring supplies from France and so it had never been haunted by the dreaded partisans who harried all the other French garrisons in Spain.

Time and again, Gudin had pointed this out to his superiors, but somewhere in Paris there was a pin representing the garrison of Ochagavia stuck into a map of Spain and no one had been willing to surrender the pinprick until now, when some bureaucrat had suddenly remembered the fort's existence and realised it held 1,000 good men who were needed to defend the homeland.

Those men now made ready for their escape. Three hundred were Gudin's garrison and the others were fugitives who had taken refuge in Ochagavia after the disaster at Vitoria. Some of those refugees were Dragoons, but most were

infantrymen from the 75th Regiment who paraded in the fort's courtyard beneath their Eagle and under the eye of their irascible chef de battalion, Colonel Caillou. Behind the 75th, clustered around two horse-drawn wagons, was a crowd of women and children.

"The women," Caillou rode his horse to Gudin's side. "I thought we agreed to abandon the women."

"I didn't agree," Gudin said curtly.

Caillou snorted, then glared at the shivering women. They were the wives and girlfriends of Ochagavia's garrison and, between them, had almost as many children, some no more than babes in arms. "They're Spaniards!" he snapped.

"Not all of them," Gudin said. "Some are French."

"But French or Spanish, they will slow us down," Caillou insisted. "The essence of success, Gudin, is to march fast. Audacity! Speed! There lies safety. We cannot take women and children."

"If they stay," Gudin said, "they will be killed."

"That's war, Gudin, that's war!" Caillou declared. "In war, the weak die."

"We are soldiers of France," Gudin said stiffly, "and we do not leave women and children to die. They march with us."

Gudin knew that all of them, soldiers, women and children alike, might die because of that decision, but he could not abandon these Spanish women who had found themselves French husbands and given birth to half-French babies. If they were left, the partisans would find them, they would be called traitors, they would be tortured and they would die. No, Gudin thought, he could not just leave them.

"And Maria is pregnant," he added, nodding towards an ammunition cart on which a woman lay swathed in grey army blankets.

"I don't care if she's the Virgin Mary!" Caillou exploded. "We cannot afford to take women and children!" Caillou saw that his words were having no effect on the grey-haired Colonel Gudin, and the older man's stubbornness inflamed Caillou. "My God, Gudin, no wonder they call you a failure!"

"You go too far," Gudin said. He outranked Caillou, but only by virtue of having been a colonel longer than the infantryman.

"I go too far?" Caillou spat in derision. "But at least I care more for France than for a pack of sniveling women. If you lose my Eagle, Gudin," he pointed to the tricolor beneath its statuette of the Eagle, "I'll see you face a firing squad."

Gudin did not bother to reply, but just walked his horse towards the gate. He felt an immense sadness. Caillou was right, he thought, he was a failure.

It had all begun in India, 13 years before, when Seringapatam had fallen, and since then, nothing had gone right. He had not received one promotion in all those years, but had gone from one misfortune to the next until now he was the commander of a useless fort in a bleak landscape. And if he could escape? That would be a victory, especially if he could take Caillou's precious Eagle safe across the Pyrenees, but was even an Eagle worth the life of so many women and children?

He smiled down at his Sergeant. "You can open the gate. And once we've left, sergeant, light the fuses."

"The women, sir?" the sergeant asked anxiously. "They are coming?"

"They're coming, Pierre."

The Dragoons left first. It was dusk. Gudin planned to march all night in the hope that by dawn he would have left any partisans far behind. Until then, he had hardly been worried by the fearsome Spanish guerilleros, but those savage men had few French enemies left in Spain and were closing on the remaining enemy fortresses like vultures scenting death.

Gudin had spread a rumor that he intended to march his garrison to join the beleaguered French troops in Pamplona, and he hoped that might keep the partisans away from the road that led northwards, but he doubted the rumor would work.

His best hope lay in marching at night, and God help any of his men or women who could not keep up, for they would face a terrible, slow death. Some would be burned alive, some flayed, some, but no, it did not bear thinking about.

It was not war as Gudin understood it, it was butchery, and what galled Gudin most was that the guerilleros were only doing to the French what the French had done to the Spaniards.

The infantry marched through the gate behind their Eagle. The women followed.

Gudin stayed to watch the sergeant light the fuses, then he spurred away from his doomed fort. He paused a half-mile up the road and turned to watch as the fire in the fuses reached the charges set in the fort's magazines.

The night blossomed red and a moment later the sound of the explosions punched through the damp darkness. Flames and smoke boiled above the fort's remains as the heavy guns were tumbled from their emplacements. Another failure, Gudin thought, watching the great fire rage.

"If my Eagle is lost," Colonel Caillou said, "I shall blame you, Gudin."

"So pray that the British have not blocked the road," Gudin answered. The fort was a dark mass of stone in which streaks of fire glowed bloody red.

"It's partisans I worry about, not the British," Caillou sneered. "If the British are on the road, then General Picard will come from behind and they will be squeezed to death."

For that was the plan. General Picard was marching south from St. Jean Pied-de-Port. He would climb the French side of the Pyrenees to make sure the frontier pass was open for Gudin's men, and all Gudin needed to do was survive the forty kilometres of tortuous winter road that twisted up from Ochagavia to the pass where General Picard waited.

At a place of misery in the mountains, at a place called Irati.

SHARPE said, "It's not such a bad place." And it was true that in the fading evening light Irati was picturesque. It was a village of small stone houses, little more than huts, that lay in a sheltered valley at the junction of two high streams and clustered about a big tavern, the Casa Alta, that provided shelter for folks traveling the high pass. "Can't see why anyone would want to live here, though," he added.

"They're mostly shepherds," said Captain Peter d'Alembord.

"Shepherds! That's fitting for Christmas," Sharpe said. "I seem to remember something about shepherds. Shepherds and wise men, isn't that right?"

"Quite right, sir," d'Alembord said. He could never quite get used to the idea that Sharpe had received no education at all other than being taught to read while he was a prisoner in India.

"A fellow used to read the Christmas story to us in the foundling home,"

Sharpe remembered. "A big, fat parson, he was, with funny whiskers. Looked a bit like that sergeant who caught a bellyful of cannister at Salamanca. We had to sit and listen, and if we yawned, the bugger used to jump off the platform and clout us round the face with the Holy Book. One minute it was all peace on earth, the next you were flying across the floor with a thick ear."

"But at least you learned your Bible stories."

"Not there, I didn't. I learned those in India. I worked with a Scottish colonel who was a Bible-thumper." Sharpe smiled at the memory.

He was walking north, climbing the road that led from Irati towards the nearby French frontier. He had already found a place south of the village where the battalion could stop the escaping garrison and he wanted to be certain that no Frogs were lurking at his rear.

"You liked India?" d'Alembord asked.

"It was a bit hot," Sharpe said, "and the food was funny, but yes, I liked it. In India I served under the best colonel I ever had."

"Wellesley?" d'Alembord asked.

"Not Nosey, no," Sharpe laughed. "He was good, Nosey, but just as cold then as he is now. No, this man was a Frog. Long story, Dally, and I don't want to bore you, but I served with the enemy for a bit in India. On purpose, it was, all official. Colonel Gudin, he was called." Sharpe smiled, remembering. "He was very good to me, Colonel Gudin. He even wanted me to go back to France with him, and I can't say I wasn't tempted."

D'Alembord smiled. He wished Sharpe would tell the story of Colonel Gudin, but he knew it was hopeless trying to get reminiscences out of Major Sharpe. He had seen other men try to learn how Sharpe had taken the French Eagle at Salamanca, but Sharpe would just shrug and say anyone could have done it. It was just luck, really, he happened to be there and the thing was looking for a new owner.

Like hell, d'Alembord thought. Sharpe was quite simply the best soldier he had ever known or would know.

Sharpe stopped at the head of the pass and pulled a telescope from a pocket of his green jacket. The telescope's outer barrel had an ivory cover and an inscribed gold plate that read in French, "To Joseph, King of Spain and the Indies, from his brother, Napoleon, Emperor of France." Sharpe trained the expensive glass northwards to search the misted slopes across the border. He saw rocks, stunted trees and the glint of a cold stream tumbling from a high place, and beyond a fading succession of mountain peaks.

A chill, damp, hard land, he thought, and no place to send soldiers at Christmas time. "Not a Frog to be seen," Sharpe said happily, and was about to lower the glass when he saw something move in a cleft of rock on a distant slope. The road ran through the cleft and he held his breath as he stared at the narrow gap.

"What is it?" d'Alembord asked.

Sharpe did not answer. He just gazed at the split in the grey stone from which an army was suddenly appearing. At least it looked like an army. Rank after rank of infantry trudging northwards in dun grey coats. And they were coming from France. He handed the telescope to d'Alembord. "Tell me what you see, Dally."

D'Alembord aimed the glass, then swore quietly. "A whole brigade, sir."

"Coming from the wrong direction, too," Sharpe said. Without the telescope he could not see the distant enemy, but he could guess what they were about. The garrison would be escaping on this road and the French brigade had been sent to make sure the frontier was open for them.

"They'll not make it this far tonight," Sharpe said. The sun had already sunk beneath the western peaks and the night shadows were stretching fast.

"But they'll be here tomorrow," d'Alembord said nervously.

"Aye, tomorrow. Christmas Eve," Sharpe said.

"An awful lot of them," d'Alembord said.

"Barrels," Sharpe answered.

"Barrels, sir?" d'Alembord gazed at Sharpe as though the major had gone mad.

"That tavern in Irati, Dally, has to be full of barrels. I want them here tonight, all of them."

Because tomorrow there would be an enemy behind and an enemy in front, and a road to hold and a battle to win. At Christmas time.

Part 2

GENERAL Maximillien Picard was an unhappy man. His brigade was late. He had expected to be at Irati by midday, but his men had marched like a herd of lame goats. By nightfall, they still had one steep-sided valley to cross and a precipitous hill to climb, and so he punished them by making them bivouac in the valley.

He knew they would hate him for that, but let them. Most were conscripts who needed to be toughened, and a night among the cold rocks would help scour the mother's milk from their gullets.

The only fuel for fires was a few stunted trees in the hollows where the winter's first snow had drifted, but most of the conscripts had no idea how to light a fire from damp, tough wood, and so they suffered. Their only food was rings of hard bread they carried on strings about their necks, but at least the stream offered plenty of clean, cold water.

"Another fortnight and it'll be frozen," said Picard.

"As bad as Russia," consented Major Santon, his chief of staff.

"Nothing was as bad as Russia," Picard said, though in truth he had rather enjoyed the Russian campaign. He was among the few men who had done well, but he was accustomed to success. Not like Colonel Gudin, whose garrison he now marched to rescue. "Gudin's a useless piece of gristle," Picard said.

"I never met him."

"Let's hope you meet him tomorrow, but knowing Gudin he'll mess things up."

Picard leaned to his fire and lit a pipe. "I knew him way back. He promised well then, but ever since India." Picard shrugged. "He's unlucky, that's what Gudin is, unlucky, and you knew what the Emperor says about luck, it's the only thing a soldier needs."

"Luck can turn," Santon observed.

"Not for Gudin," Picard said. "The man's doomed. If the 75th hadn't taken refuge with him, we'd have left him to rot in Spain."

Santon looked up the dark northern slope. "Let's hope the British aren't waiting for him up there."

Picard sneered. "Let them. What will they send? One battalion? You think we can't blast our way through a battalion? We'll put our grenadiers up front and let them shoot some rosbifs for breakfast. Then, we'll occupy Irati. What's there?"

"Nothing," Santon said. "A few shepherds."

"So it's mutton and shepherd girls for Christmas," Picard said. "A last taste of Spain, eh?"

The general smiled in anticipation. Irati might be a miserable hovel on the frontier, but it was an enemy hovel and that meant plunder. And Picard rather hoped there would be rosbifs guarding the small village, for he reckoned his conscripts needed a fight. Most were city boys too young to shave and they needed a taste of blood before Wellington's army spilled across the Pyrenees into the fields of France. Give a young soldier the taste of victory, Picard reckoned, and it gave him a hunger for more.

That was the trouble with Colonel Gudin. He had become used to defeat, but Picard was a winner. He was a short man, like the Emperor, and just as ruthless; a soldier of France who had led a brigade through the slaughter-snows of Russia and left a trail of Cossacks to mark his passing.

In the morning, if any rosbifs dared oppose him, he would show them how a veteran of the Russian campaign made war. He would give them a Christmas to remember, a Christmas of blood in a high, hard place, for he was General Maximillien Picard, and he did not lose.

"DOESN'T seem right somehow," Sharpe said, "fighting at Christmas."

"Tomorrow's Christmas, sir," Harper said, as if that made today's fight more acceptable.

"If we do fight today, keep an eye on young Nicholls. I don't want to lose another ensign," Sharpe said.

"He's a nice, wee lad," Harper said, "and I'll keep an eye on him, so I will."

Ensign Nicholls was standing at the centre of Sharpe's line beneath the regiment's twin colours. The Prince of Wales's Own Volunteers were 50 paces back from the frontier that was marked only by a cairn of stones, just far enough back so that any Frenchman coming from the south could not see them beyond the crest. Behind them, on the Spanish side of the frontier, the pass ran gently down towards the village, while in front of the battalion the slope fell away steeply. The road zig-zagged up that slope and the enemy brigade would have a foul time climbing into Sharpe's muskets.

"It'll be like shooting rats in a pit," Harper said happily, and so it would, but the enemy brigade could still be a nuisance. Its very presence meant Sharpe had to

keep his battalion on the frontier, leaving only a picquet to guard the road south of the village.

Captain Smith commanded that picquet and he would give Sharpe warning if the escaping French garrison came into sight. But what would Sharpe do then? If he marched his men south the French brigade would climb the slope and take him in the rear, while if he stayed on this high crest the garrison troops would appear in the valley behind him. He just had to hope that the garrison did not come today.

There was still no sign of the French who had camped in the deep valley beyond the frontier. They would be bitterly cold by now, cold and scared and damp and unhappy, while Sharpe's men were as comfortable as they could be in this miserable place. Except for the sentries, they had spent the night inside Irati's fire-warmed houses where they had made a decent breakfast from twice-baked bread and sour salt beef.

Sharpe stamped his feet and blew on his cold hands. When would the French come? He was not really in any hurry, for the longer they delayed, the more hope he had of keeping them out of the village all day, but he had a soldier's impatience to get the grim business done. Grim, at least, for the French, for Sharpe had set them a trap on the road.

The road twisted down from the frontier into a small hanging combe that overlooked the deeper valley where the French had spent their uncomfortable night. In that smaller valley which the dawn now touched with a grey, damp light, there were twenty-one big wine barrels. The barrels were arranged in several groups of three and each group blocked the narrow track up which the French must come.

Above the barrels, hidden among the rocks, were fifteen riflemen. The French hated riflemen. They did not use the rifle, reckoning that it took too long to load, but Sharpe had learned to love the weapon. It might be slow in battle, but it could kill at give times the range of a smoothbore musket and he had more than once seen a handful of riflemen turn a battle's fate.

Sharpe turned and stared south. He could not see Irati, for the village was well over a mile away and his picquet a half-mile further away still, and he suddenly worried that he would not hear Captain Smith's warning shots. But it was too late to change the arrangements. So stop worrying, he told himself. No point in fretting about what you cannot change.

"Enemy, sir," Harper said softly, and Sharpe wheeled around to gaze down the road.

The French had come. Not many yet, just a half company of grenadiers, the elite of the enemy infantry, because they wore high bearskin hats with a yellow grenade badge, though none, he saw through his telescope, flaunted the high red plume on their hats. French grenadiers were very protective of that plume and on campaign they liked to keep it in a leather tube attached to their bayonet sling.

"Thirty," he counted the men as they appeared, "forty, forty-five. All grenadiers, Pat."

"Sending their best up front, are they?"

"Got them worried, we have," Sharpe said. The grenadiers had stopped at the sight of the barrels. Some of them gazed up the steep slope beyond, but the Prince

of Wales's Own Volunteers were well hidden, and Sharpe and Harper were concealed behind the frontier cairn.

An officer came to the front of the grenadiers, stared at the barrels for a minute, then shrugged and walked forward. "It's his lucky day," Sharpe said.

The grenadiers hung back as their officer approached the strange obstacle. He was cautious, as any man would be on the Spanish frontier, but the barrels looked innocent enough.

He stooped to the nearest, sniffed at the bung, then drew his sword and worked the tip of its blade into the cork plug. He levered the tight bung free and then stooped to sniff again. "He's found the wine," Sharpe said.

"Let's hope they stop and drink it, sir."

The grenadiers, assured that only barrels of cheap Spanish tinto barred their path, surged forward. More soldiers were appearing over the lower crest and they too rushed to join the unexpected booty. Men tipped the first three barrels over and stabbed at their lids with drawn bayonets, while a group of grenadiers ran to take possession of the second line of barrels.

"For what they are about to receive," Sharpe said.

Two of the second line of barrels contained nothing but stones. But the third, the middle barrel, was half-filled with gunpowder from Sharpe's spare ammunition. It was mixed with small, sharp stones and, above it, balanced on a stave that Rifleman Hagman had carefully nailed into place, was a coiled strip of burning slow-match.

None of the grenadiers noticed the small holes that had been drilled into the barrel to feed oxygen to the fuse, they just smelt wine and so kicked over the barrel.

For a second Sharpe thought the trap had failed, then suddenly the narrow valley vanished in a cloud of grey-white powder smoke pierced with livid flame.

The smoke churned in the small combe, hiding the carnage made by the explosion. Then, as the damp wind began to carry the powder smoke northwards, the sound rolled up the slope. It was like a clap of thunder magnified by the echo that beat back from the valley's far side. Once the echo had gone there was just a strange silence in the hills.

"Poor bastards," Harper said, for the smoke was clearing and he could see the bodies scattered on the road. Some were still, some crawled blindly, some just twitched. Then the rifles opened fire. Sharpe's riflemen did not miss their mark at that close range. They fired from behind the rocks high on either side of the small valley. First, they picked off the surviving officers, then the sergeants. By the time each greenjacket had fired two rounds, the French had vanished from the small valley. They had fled back over its lip, leaving behind a dozen dead and a score of wounded men. The battle for Irati had begun.

IN ONE way, Colonel Jean Gudin had been untypically lucky, for not one partisan had troubled his column on its dark road north, but in every other way his usual ill fortune had prevailed.

First, one of the dragoon horses had stumbled on a frozen rut in the road and broken its leg. By itself, it was no great accident, and the poor beast was put out of its misery swiftly enough, but in the dark the commotion caused a long delay.

The carcass was finally hauled from the road and the column had trudged on, only to have the dragoon vanguard take a wrong turning a few kilometres further on.

That, at least, was not Gudin's fault, any more than an injured horse was his fault, but it was typical of his luck. It was almost dawn by the time the column had turned itself about and found the right track winding up towards the high pass. By then, Gudin had surrendered his horse to one of his lieutenants who had a fever and could hardly walk.

Colonel Caillou was fuming at the delay. He had never, he claimed, in all his service as a soldier, seen such ineptitude. A halfwit could do better than Colonel Gudin. "We are supposed to be at the pass by midday," he insisted. "We shall be lucky to be there by nightfall."

Gudin ignored the colonel's ranting. There was nothing to be done, except press on and be thankful that the guerilleros were all asleep in their beds.

In three days' time, Gudin reflected, he could be back at a depot in France.

He would be safe. And so long as no British troops waited at the frontier he should save Caillou's Eagle and so spare himself the firing squad.

It was just after dawn that the next accident occurred. The column was dragging two wagons, one carrying the heavily pregnant Maria and the second loaded with what small baggage the garrison had managed to rescue from the fort. The axle of that second wagon broke and suddenly the horses were dragging stumps of splintering wood across the rutted road. Gudin sighed.

There was nothing for it but to abandon the wagon with all its precious possessions; small things, but the property of men who owned little.

He did let his men rifle through the baggage to retrieve what they could carry, and all the while Caillou cursed him and said it was time-wasting.

Gudin knew that was true and so, before all the packs could be hauled off, he ordered the wagon to be shoved off the road. With it went his books, not many, but all of them dear to Gudin. They included his diaries from India, the careful record of those long, hot years when he had thought he could drive the British out of Mysore. But the redcoats had won and nothing had been the same since.

Gudin often thought of India. He missed it; the smells, the heat, the colour, the mystery. He missed the gaudy panoply of Indian armies marching, he missed the sun and the savagery of the monsoon. In India, he thought, I had a future, but after it, none.

And sometimes, when he was feeling sorry for himself, he blamed it all on one young man whom he had liked, an Englishman called Sharpe. It had been Sharpe who had caused that first great defeat, though Gudin had never blamed him, for he had recognised that Private Richard Sharpe had been a natural soldier. How the Emperor would love Sharpe. So much luck.

Now there was another Sharpe, an officer in Spain whose name haunted the French, and Gudin sometimes wondered if it was the same man, though that seemed unlikely for few British officers came from the ranks and, besides, this Spanish Sharpe was a Rifleman and Gudin's Sharpe had been a redcoat. Yet still Gudin hoped it was the same man for he had liked young Richard Sharpe, though in truth he suspected that he was long dead. Not many Europeans had survived India. The fever got them if the enemy did not.

Gudin walked on, his diaries left behind, musing on India and trying to ignore Colonel Caillou's insults. The pregnant girl was crying and the garrison surgeon, a fastidious Parisian who had hated serving in the Pyrenees, claimed she would die if he did not cut her open.

"The baby is sideways," he told Gudin. "It should be headfirst."

"If you cut her, she'll die," said Gudin.

"So?" The surgeon despised soldiers' women. "She'll die if I don't cut her."

"Just keep her alive as far as Irati," Gudin said, "and there you can operate."

"If she lives that long," the surgeon muttered, and just then a dull rumble sounded from the mountains ahead. It sounded like distant thunder, but there were no storm clouds over the peaks and a second after the rumble had faded the small wind brought the crackle of musketry.

"You see," Caillou spurred back down the column with a look of spiteful triumph. "There's enemy ahead."

"We don't know that," Gudin said. "That sound could have come from anywhere."

"They're waiting for us," Caillou said, pointing dramatically towards the hills. "And if we'd abandoned the women, we'd be there already. It's your doing, Gudin. I promise if my Eagle is lost, the Emperor will know it's your doing."

"You must tell the Emperor whatever you wish," Gudin said in resignation.

"So leave the women here now. Leave them," Caillou insisted. "March to the guns, Colonel. Get there before dark."

"I will not leave the women," Gudin said. "I will not leave them. And we shall be at Irati long before nightfall. It is not so far now."

Colonel Gudin sighed and walked on. His heels were blistering but he would not retrieve his horse, for he knew the lieutenant's need was greater than his.

Nor would he abandon his men's women, and so he kept going and tried to blot out Caillou's nagging voice and the awful, haunting screams of the pregnant girl.

He was not a prayerful man, but as he climbed towards the distant sounds of the guns, Gudin did pray. He prayed that God would send him a victory, just one small victory so that his career would not end in failure or a firing squad. A Christmas miracle, that was all he asked, just one small miracle to set against a lifetime of defeat.

GENERAL Maximilien Picard bulled his way through the panicked troops to stand at the mouth of the small valley. He could see the dead grenadiers, the smashed barrels and, beyond them, the other barrels waiting in the road. A rifle bullet snapped past his head, but Picard ignored the threat. He was charmed. There was no one alive who could spoil that luck.

"Santon!" he snapped.

"Sir?" Major Santon resisted the urge to crouch.

"One company up here. They are to destroy the barrels, with volley fire, you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"And while they're doing that, send the voltigeurs up the slopes."

The general waved to where puffs of white smoke betrayed the position of the riflemen. He did not know they were riflemen, and if he had he might have shown

more caution, but he believed the ambush had been set by partisans. But whoever it was, they would soon be chased out of their lairs by the French light infantry.

"Do it now!" Picard snapped. "We don't have all day."

He turned away and a bullet plucked at his cloak, flicking it out like a banner caught by the wind. Picard turned back, looked to find the newest patch of musket smoke, and lined a finger to it. "Bastards," he said as he walked away, "bastards."

Who would now get a lesson for Christmas.

"BUGLER!" Sharpe called, and the thirteen-year-old boy came running out of the battalion to stand behind his major. "Sound the retreat," Sharpe ordered, and saw Patrick Harper lift a quizzical eyebrow. "The Frogs will send their voltigeurs up the valley sides," Sharpe explained. "No point in our riflemen hanging around while they do that. The lads have done the damage."

The bugler took a deep breath, then blew hard. The call was a triple call of nine notes, the first eight stuttering on one note, the last flying high up the scale. The sound of the bugle echoed from the distant hills and Sharpe, gazing through his telescope, saw the cloaked French general turn back.

"Again, lad," Sharpe told the bugler.

The bugle call was sending two messages. First, it was telling the riflemen to abandon their positions and climb back to the ridge, but it was also telling the French that they faced an enemy more formidable than partisans. They were facing trained infantry, veteran troops, and when Sharpe was certain that the Frenchman was staring up at the ridge in an effort to catch sight of the bugler, he turned and shouted at the Prince of Wales's Own Volunteers.

"Talio! By the right! Forward," a pause, "march!"

They stamped forward in perfect order, a line of men two ranks deep beneath their bright colours.

"Talio!" Sharpe shouted as they reached the ridge's crest. "Halt! Fix bayonets!"

Sharpe was putting on a display for the French. The enemy had been bloodied, they had been panicked, and now they faced a long, steep climb up a bare, cold hill to where they could see the redcoats of Britain and the long glitter of seventeen-inch bayonets.

Ensign Nicholls came to stand by Sharpe. "What are we doing, sir?"

"We're giving the Frogs an invitation, Mr. Nicholls. Seeing if they're brave enough to come up and play."

"Will they?"

"I doubt it, lad," Sharpe said. "I doubt it."

"Why not, sir?"

"Because they're about to be given a demonstration, lad, that's why. Sergeant Major?"

"Sir?" Harper acknowledged.

"Three rounds, Sergeant Major, platoon fire, and I want it fast."

"Yes, sir."

The range was much too great for a smoothbore musket, but Sharpe did not have a mind to kill any more Frenchmen today. He had already killed too many for his liking. Christmas should be peace on earth, not broken bodies on a hard road, so he would show the French exactly what waited for them at the hilltop.

He would show them that they faced veterans who could fire their muskets faster than any other troops on earth. He would show them that to climb the hill was to enter hell and, with any luck, they would decline the invitation.

"Stand back, Mr. Nicholls," Sharpe said, and steered the ensign back through the waiting ranks. "Now, Sergeant Major!"

Harper ordered the men to remove their bayonets and load their muskets and, when they were ready, he took a deep breath. "Number four company!" he shouted. "Number five company! Fire!"

The two centre companies fired together. The muskets slammed back into their shoulders, and a dirty bill of powder smoke spat across the crest.

No other orders were given, but as soon as the centre companies had fired, the platoons on either side pulled their triggers. Each company was split into two platoons, and each platoon waited for the one inside them to fire before firing themselves. To the watching French it must have looked as though the smoke was rippling out along the high, red line.

But any troops could fire one round in a pretty ripple. What would but fear into the French was the speed with which the second bullet was fired. Sharpe noted with approval that the centre companies were all reloaded before the ripple of musket fire had reached the battalion's outer flanks. Those flanks fired and within a heartbeat the centre companies had fired again, and again the ripple spread outwards as the men in the centre dropped their muskets' heavy butts onto the stony ground and ripped the top from new cartridges with their teeth.

The second staggered volley of musket balls whistled out into the void and then the third followed without a pause. It had been a marvelous display, the best infantry in the world showing what it did best, and if that promise of slaughter did not give the enemy pause, then nothing would.

But Picard was not a man to heed a warning, and Sharpe, watching from the crest, saw the French preparing to come forward again.

And just then, far to the south from where the picquet watched the road leading into Spain, a musket fired and Sharpe spun around. He knew the other enemy was coming.

Part 3

"CAPTAIN d'Alembord!" Sharpe shouted.

"Sir?"

"You take over here, Dally," Sharpe said, "and I'll take your horse."

The French brigade was forming a column. It could mean only one thing, that they planned to attack straight up the hill. But before advancing their leading rank fired musket volleys at the fifteen remaining wine barrels that blocked the road, the remnant of Sharpe's ingenious and deadly trap.

None of the barrels contained gunpowder, for Sharpe had possessed only a limited supply, but the French were not to know that. Their volleys cleared the road while their skirmishers climbed the small valley's side to chase away riflemen who had already retreated. It would take an hour, Sharpe reckoned, before this

brigade was in a fit state to advance, and when they did he doubted it would be with much enthusiasm, for they knew what was waiting for them.

But another thousand Frenchmen were coming from the south in their desperate attempt to escape from Spain, and those men knew they must fight through the pass if they were ever to reach home, and their desperation could make those thousand men far more dangerous than the brigade. Sharpe now rode back through the village to where a picquet watched the enemy approaching from the south.

"They're still a long way off, sir," Captain Smith reported nervously, worried that he had summoned Sharpe too soon.

"You did the right thing," Sharpe reassured him as he drew out his telescope.

"What's happening back there, sir?" Smith asked.

"We showed the Frogs a trick or two, but they still seem to want a fight. But don't worry, they won't be spending their Christmas here." He could see the French refugees now. There were mounted dragoons up front, infantry behind, and one wagon, no guns and a crowd of women and children in the middle.

"That's good," Sharpe said quietly.

"Good, sir?" Smith asked.

"They're bringing their women, captain, and they won't want them hurt, will they? It might even persuade them to surrender." Sharpe paused, his eye caught by a metallic gleam above the infantry's dark shakos. "And they've got an Eagle!" Sharpe said excitedly. "That would make a nice Christmas present for the battalion, wouldn't it? A French Eagle! I could fancy that."

He collapsed the glass and wondered how much time he had. The column was still a good two hours marching away, which should be enough.

"Just watch them," he told Smith, then he pulled himself back into d'Alembord's saddle and rode back to the frontier. It was all a question of timing now.

If the brigade attacked the hill at the same time as the garrison approached the village, then he was in trouble, but when he was back at the northern ridge he saw to his relief that the enemy had already cleared the road of the barrels and that their voltigeurs were spreading out on the slope to herald the attack. The voltigeurs' job was to advance in a loose, scattered line and harass the redcoats with musket fire. To prevent this, Sharpe sent his own skirmishers into battle.

"Mister d'Alembord! Light Company out! Pick off those voltigeurs." The French were brave, Sharpe thought. As brave as could be, but also stupid.

They knew volley fire waited for them, but their general would not back down without more blood and Sharpe was ready to give it to him. He had already guessed that the enemy was inexperienced, because the voltigeurs were not forcing home their attack, but trying to stay out of range of the deadly rifles. They were just children, he thought, snatched from a depot and marched to war. It was cruel.

The French column advanced behind the voltigeurs. It looked formidable, but columns always did. This one was thirty files wide and sixty ranks deep: a great solid block of men who had been ordered to climb an impossible slope into a gale of fire. It would be murder, not war, but it was the French commander who was doing the murdering. Sharpe called in his Light Company, then sent them back to

join Smith's picquet. If the French Dragoons rode ahead of the approaching garrison then the riflemen could pick off the horsemen.

"But you stay here," Sharpe told d'Alembord. "I've got a job for you."

The column lost its cohesion as it tried to cut across the corners of the zig-zagging road. They were getting close now, little more than a hundred paces away, and Sharpe could see the men were sweating despite the day's cold.

They were wearing, too, and whenever they looked up they saw nothing except a group of officers waiting on the crest. The line of redcoats had pulled back out of sight of the enemy, and Sharpe did not plan to bring them forward until the very last moment.

"Cutting it fine, sir," d'Alembord observed.

"Give it a minute yet," Sharpe said. He could hear the drums in the column's centre now, thought whenever the drummers paused to let the men shout "Vive l'Empereur!" the response was feeble. These men were winded, wearing and wary.

And only fifty paces away.

"Now, Sergeant Major," Sharpe said, and he stepped back through the advancing ranks and tried not to feel sorry for the Frenchmen he was about to kill.

"Fire!" Harper shouted, and this time the whole line fired in unison so that their bullets smacked home in one lethal blow. "Platoon, fire!" Harper shouted before the echo of the volley had died away. "From the centre!"

Sharpe could see nothing of the enemy now, for they were hidden behind a thick cloud of grey-white powder smoke, but he could imagine the horror. Probably the whole French front rank was dead or dying, and most of the second rank, too, and the men behind would be pushing and the men in front stumbling on the dead and wounded, and then, just as they were recovering from the first volley, the rolling platoon fire began. "Aim low!" Harper shouted. "Aim low!"

The air filled with the rotten-egg stench of powder smoke. The men's faces were flecked with burning powder scraps, while the paper cartridge wadding, spat out behind each bullet, started small, flickering fires in the grass.

On and on the volleys went as men fired blindly down into the smoke, pouring death into a small place, and still they loaded and rammed and fired, and Sharpe did not see a single man in his own regiment fall. He did not even hear a French bullet. It was the old story, a French column was being pounded by a British line, and British musketry was crushing the column's head and flanks and flecking its centre with blood.

Sharpe had posted a man wide of the line so that he could see past the smoke.

"They're running, sir! They're running!" the man shouted excitedly. "Running like hell!"

"Cease fire!" Sharpe bellowed. "Cease fire!"

And slowly the smoke cleared to show the horror on the winter grass. Blood and horror and broken men. A column had met a line. Sharpe turned away. "Mister d'Alembord."

"Sir?"

"Take a white flag and ride to the southern road. Find the garrison commander. Tell him we broke a French brigade and that we'll break him in exactly the same manner if he doesn't surrender."

"Sir! Sir! Please sir!" That was Ensign Nicholls, jumping up and down beside d'Alembord. "Can I go with him, sir? Please, sir. I've never seen a Frog. Not close up, sir."

"They've got tails and horns," d'Alembord said, and smiled when Nicholls looked alarmed.

"If you can borrow a horse," Sharpe told the ensign, "you can go. But keep your mouth shut! Let Mister d'Alembord do the talking."

"Yes, sir," Nicholls said, and ran happily away while Sharpe turned back to the north. The French had broken and run, and he doubted they would be back, but he was not willing to care for their wounded. He had neither the men nor the supplies to do that, so someone would have to go down to the enemy under a flag of truce and offer them a chance to clear up the mess they had made.

Just in time for Christmas.

Colonel Caillou watched the two red-coated horsemen approach under their flag of truce and felt an immense rage surge inside him. Gudin would surrender, he knew it, and when that happened Caillou would lose the Eagle that the Emperor himself had presented to the 75th.

He would not let it happen, and so, in a blind fury, he drove back his spurs and galloped after Gudin.

Gudin heard him coming, turned and waved him back, but Caillou ignored him.

Instead he drew his pistol. "Go back!" he shouted in English to the approaching officers. "Go back!"

D'Alembord reined in his horse. "Do you command here, monsieur?" he asked Caillou in French.

"Go back!" Caillou shouted angrily. "We do not accept your flag. You hear me? We do not accept it. Go!" He leveled the pistol at the younger officer who held the offending flag of truce, a white handkerchief tied to a musket's ramrod. "Go!" Caillou shouted, then spurred his horse away from Gudin who had moved to intervene.

"It's all right, Charlie," d'Alembord said. "He won't shoot. It's a flag of truce." He looked back to Caillou. "Monsieur? I insist upon knowing if you command here."

"Just go!" Caillou shouted, but at that moment Nicholls's horse stumbled a pace forward and Caillou, overwhelmed with rage for the anticipated shame of surrender, pulled the pistol's trigger.

The white flag toppled slowly. Nicholls stared at Caillou with a look of astonishment on his young face, then he turned in puzzlement to gaze at d'Alembord. D'Alembord reached out a hand, but Nicholls was already falling.

The bullet had broken through one of the gold laces his mother had sewn onto his jacket and then it had pierced his young heart.

Caillou seemed suddenly shocked, as if he had only just realized the enormity of his crime. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. Instead, a second pistol sounded and Caillou, just like Nicholls, toppled dead from his horse.

Colonel Gudin put his pistol back in its holster. "I command here," he told d'Alembord in English. "To my shame, sir. I command here. You have come to offer terms?"

"I have come to fetch your surrender, sir," d'Alembord said, and saw from Gudin's face that he would get it. The battle was over.

SHARPE heard of Nicholls's death while he was still watching the French take their dead from the northern slope. He swore when he heard the news, and then he stalked back to the village with pure bloody murder in his head.

A group of unarmed French soldiers stood nervously outside the tavern, and he pushed his angry way through them and then kicked open the door. "What bastard Frenchman dared killed my officer?" he shouted, storming into the room with one hand on the hilt of his heavy cavalry sword.

A tall, grey-haired French officer stood to face him. "The man who killed your officer is dead, monsieur," the Frenchman said. "I shot him."

Sharpe stopped and stared. His hand fell from the sword and his mouth dropped open. For a second he seemed unable to speak, but then he found his voice.

"Colonel Gudin?" he asked in amazement.

Gudin smiled. "Oui, Caporal Sharpe."

"I'm a major now, sir," Sharpe said, and he stepped forward with his hand outstretched, but Gudin ignored the hand and instead clasped Sharpe in both arms and kissed him on both cheeks. D'Alembord watched, smiling.

"I knew it was you," Gudin said, his hands still on Sharpe's shoulders. "I'm proud of you, Sharpe. So very proud." There were tears in the colonel's eyes.

"And for your officer who died, I am sorry. There was nothing I could do."

The door from the kitchens opened and Daniel Hagman poked his head through.

"Need more towels, Captain," he said to d'Alembord.

"What the hell are you doing, Dan?" Sharpe asked.

"Delivering a baby, sir," Hagman said, as if that was the most natural thing in the world for a Rifleman to be doing on Christmas Eve. "Isn't the first baby I've done, sir. The Frog doctor was going to cut her open, and that would have killed her, but I'll see her right. It's no different from slipping a lamb into the world. Thank you, sir." He took the proffered rags from d'Alembord and ducked back into the candlelit kitchen.

Sharpe sat. D'Alembord and Gudin had started on the wine, so he poured himself a mug and took a long drink. "So what am I going to do with you?" he asked his old colonel.

Gudin spread his hands. "I could choose to fight you, I suppose, but if I do, I lose. So I fear I am your prisoner again." The colonel looked at d'Alembord.

"He took me prisoner in India, and he was only a corporal then."

"That was a long time ago, sir, a long time ago." Sharpe poured more wine and pushed the wineskin towards the colonel. "And how have you been since, sir?"

"Not well, Sharpe, not well," Gudin confessed. "You see I am still a colonel, just as I was then. It seemed that after Seringapatam I could do nothing right."

"I'm sure that's not true, sir. You were the best officer I ever had."

Gudin smiled at the compliment. "But I have had no luck, Sharpe, no victories."

"So tell me about it, sir. It's the night before Christmas, a good night for a story. So tell me."

So Gudin did.

GENERAL Maximilien Picard sulked. He sat by a miserable fire in the deep, cold valley listening to the moans of his wounded and knew that he had been well beaten.

He had scented defeat from the moment he had seen the demonstration volley the British had flaunted from their high ridge, but Picard had always thought he was a lucky man and he had hoped that his good luck would serve to drive his column up the hill and through the thin British line. But the column had been shattered and his conscripts, instead of tasting victory, were now more fearful than ever.

He drank from a brandy flask. It was three o'clock on Christmas morning, but he could not sleep. The skies had cleared, so that the Christmas stars were bright, but General Picard felt nothing but gloom. "Gudin's doomed," he said to his chief of staff Major Santon. "If we couldn't break those bastards, what hope does he have?"

"None, sir," Santon said.

"I don't mind losing Gudin," Picard said, "but why must we lose Caillou? Now there's a soldier for you. And if we lose Caillou, Santon, you know what else we lose?"

"The Eagle, sir."

"The Eagle," Picard said, and flinched. "We will have lost one of the Emperor's Eagles." His eyes filled with tears. "I do not mind defeat, Santon, he said untruthfully, "but I cannot bear the loss of an Eagle. It will be taken to London and flaunted in front of that fat prince. An Eagle of France, gone to captivity."

Santon said nothing, for there was nothing to say. To a soldier of France there was no shame like losing an Eagle. The birds might be nothing more than little bronze statuettes poised on a staff from which the tricolour flew, but they had all been touched by the Emperor and they were all sacred to France.

And in the dark hills above them, an Eagle was in desperate danger.

"I can bear anything," Picard said, "except that."

Then, from above them, all hell broke loose.

To the defeated French brigade in the deep valley it sounded like a battle to end the world. True, there was no artillery firing, but the experienced soldiers claimed they had never heard musketry like it. The volleys were unending, and the crash of those musket blasts was magnified and multiplied by the valley's echoing walls. They could hear faint screams and shouts, and sometimes a bugle call but, above it all, and never ending, the hammer sound of muskets. There was volley after volley, so many that after a while the sound became continuous; a deep grinding sound like the creak of a hinge on the gate of hell.

"We should go up and help," Picard said, rising to his feet.

"We can't, sir," Santon insisted, and he pointed up to the crest where a line of British soldiers still stood guard. The moon was unsheathed from the clouds, and any Frenchman trying to climb the slope would be a sitting target for those riflemen. "Gudin must fight on his own," Santon said.

And Gudin must have been fighting, for the musketry, instead of fading, grew in intensity. Picard reckoned it must be Caillou who fought, for surely poor old Gudin could never fight a battle like this. Every now and then a brief glow showed in the sky, betraying where a group of muskets flamed together, and soon the heavy,

foul-smelling smoke spilled over the pass's lip to drift down the slope. And still the splintering volleys ground on.

UP IN THE PASS, Sharpe loaded his rifle. He did it quickly, trained to the intricate motions by a lifetime of soldiering, and when the gun was loaded he raised it to his shoulder, held the muzzle high into the sky, and pulled its trigger.

"Faster!" he shouted, "faster!" And all around him redcoats and greenjackets peppered the sky. They fired volley after volley at the stars and, in between the volleys, they whooped and screamed like demons.

"I pity any poor angel up there tonight, sir," Patrick Harper said to Captain d'Alembord. "He'll lose a few wingfeathers, so he will." And then Harper fired his volley gun at the moon and down in the valley the deafened French gasped, thinking that at last the artillery was joining the fight.

"Faster!" Sharpe shouted. "Vite! Vite!" A group of French soldiers pulled their triggers, scattering a volley towards the snow on the highest peaks.

Daniel Hagman walked calmly through the chaos and noise. "It's a girl, sir!" he shouted at Colonel Gudin.

"A girl?" Gudin said. "I thought, on Christmas Day, it might be a boy."

"It's a pretty little girl, sir, and she's just fine and so is her mother. The women are looking after her, and she'll be ready to move in a while. Just a while."

Sharpe had overheard the news and grinned at Gudin. "A cold night to be born, colonel."

"But she'll live, Sharpe. They'll both live. That's what matters."

Sharpe fired his rifle at the stars. "I was thinking of the baby Jesus, colonel. His birth must have been cold as hell."

Gudin smiled. "I think Palestine is a warm country, Sharpe, like India. I doubt the first Christmas was cold."

"At least He never joined the Army, sir. He had more sense." Sharpe rammed another bullet in his rifle, then walked down the boisterous line of soldiers.

Redcoats and Frenchmen were mixed together, all of them firing like maniacs into the star-bright sky. "Faster!" Sharpe shouted. "Come on, now! Faster! You're celebrating Christ's birth! Make some effort! Vite! Vite!"

It took a half-hour before Maria and her newborn child could be laid in the wagon where they were cushioned with blankets and swathed in sheepskins. The new baby had gifts: a Rifleman's silver button, a broken ivory boot-hook that a redcoat had lifted from the battlefield of Vitoria, and a golden guinea that was a present from Peter d'Alembord.

When the mother and child were comfortable, the wagon driver whipped his horses northward, and all the Spanish women and children whom Gudin had tried so hard to save fell in behind the lumbering vehicle. They climbed the gentle pass, and the French troops who had been shooting at the stars fell in around them as the wagon passed. A hundred Frenchmen joined the women, all of them from Gudin's garrison, and their colonel was the very last man to join the procession.

"Here, sir," Sharpe said, and he stepped forward and offered Colonel Gudin the Eagle.

Gudin stared at the trophy. "Are you sure, Sharpe?"

Sharpe grinned. "I've already captured one, sir. I don't need another."

Gudin took the Eagle, then hugged Sharpe and kissed him farewell.

"After the war, Sharpe?" he said huskily. "I shall see you after the war?"

"I hope so, sir. I do hope so."

There was one last charade to mount. The men guarding the frontier ridge fired their muskets, then ran in pretended panic as Gudin's small procession approached.

And from the valley below, General Picard watched in amazement as a small group of Frenchmen appeared at the ridge's crest. They were only a few men, a mere handful, less than a tenth of those he had expected, but they had fought their way through; they had even brought a wagon through.

And then Picard saw a golden glint shine above the dark shapes who fired back at the ridge behind them and he raised his telescope and stared intently, trying to track down the elusive gleam, and suddenly there it was. It was the Eagle. He could see its spread wings and its banded flag.

"They've brought the Eagle!" Picard shouted. "They've saved the Eagle!" And his defeated men began to cheer.

The firing in the high pass died slowly to leave a layer of gunsmoke lingering above the road. The riflemen and redcoats grinned. They had enjoyed the nonsense. None had wanted to spend Christmas in this high country that was so far from their beef and plum-pudding, but the expedition had turned into a game.

It was a pity about Ensign Nicholls, of course, but what had he expected?

Everyone knew that Mister Sharpe was fatal for ensigns, but at least Mister Nicholls was to be buried in France. Sharpe had insisted on that. The boy had come to fight the French and, for all eternity, he would hold a tiny scrap of captured French soil.

But no one else had died. No one else had even taken a wound, and the regiment had turned back a whole French brigade, while in the village, under the guard of the Grenadier company, 900 French prisoners waited to be marched back into Spain and captivity.

But one hundred Frenchmen went free. One hundred Frenchmen, their women, their children, their colonel and an Eagle. They went free because Sharpe, to help an old friend, had given that friend a victory, and Sharpe now watched Gudin's men go down the slope, and he saw the men of the defeated brigade run up to greet them. He heard the cheers and, in the silver moonlight, framed in the lens of his telescope, he saw the brigade officers cluster around Colonel Gudin.

Unlucky Gudin, who, on Christmas morning 1813, had saved an Eagle and fought his way to freedom. Colonel Jean Gudin, a hero at last.

"Do you think they'll ever find out that it was all faked?" Harper asked.

"Who'd ever believe it?" Sharpe asked.

"No one, I suppose," Harper said, and then, after a pause. "A happy Christmas to you, sir."

"And to you, Patrick."

"I suppose it'll be mutton for dinner?"

"I suppose it will. We'll buy a few sheep and you can kill them."

"Not me, sir. You, sir."

Sharpe laughed, and then turned south towards the village. It was Christmas morning, a crisp, clean, new Christmas morning, and his men were alive, an old

friend was a hero and there would be mutton for dinner. It was Sharpe's Christmas.

