

"!Tention"

Chapter One.

To save a Comrade.

A sharp volley, which ran echoing along the ravine, then another, just as the faint bluish smoke from some hundred or two muskets floated up into the bright sunshine from amidst the scattered chestnuts and cork-trees that filled the lower part of the beautiful gorge, where, now hidden, now flashing out and scattering the rays of the sun, a torrent roared and foamed along its rocky course onward towards its junction with the great Spanish river whose destination was the sea.

Again another ragged volley; and this was followed by a few dull, heavy-sounding single shots, which came evidently from a skirmishing party

which was working its way along the steep slope across the river. There was no responsive platoon reply to the volley, but the skirmishing shots were answered directly by crack! crack! crack! the reports that sounded strangely different to those heavy, dull musket-shots which came from near at hand, and hardly needed glimpses of dark-green uniforms that dotted the hither slope of the mountain-side to proclaim that they were delivered by riflemen who a few minutes before were, almost in single line, making their way along a rugged mountain-path.

A second glance showed that they formed the rear-guard of a body of sharpshooters, beyond whom in the distance could be made out now and then glints of bright scarlet, which at times looked almost orange in the brilliant sunshine—orange flashed with silver, as the sun played upon musket-barrel and fixed bayonet more than shoulder-high.

The country Spain, amidst the towering Pyrenees; the scarlet that of a

British column making its way along a rugged mule-path, from which those that traversed it looked down upon a scene of earthly beauty, and upwards at the celestial blue, beyond which towered the rugged peaks

where here and there patches of the past winter's snow gleamed and sparkled in the sun.

Strategy had indicated retreat; and the black-green, tipped at collar and cuff with scarlet, of England's rifle-regiment was covering the retiring line, when the blue-coated columns of the French General's division had pressed on and delivered the wild volleys and scattered shots of the skirmishers which drew forth the sharp, vicious, snapping reply of the retreating rear-guard.

"At last!" said one of the riflemen, rising from where he had knelt on one knee to take cover behind a bush, and there stand driving down a cartridge with a peculiarly sharp, ringing sound of iron against iron, before finishing off with a few heavy thuds, returning the bright rod to its loops, and raising the pan of the lock to see that it was well primed with the coarse powder of the day.

"Yes—at last!" said his nearest comrade, who with a few more had halted at a subaltern's command to wait in cover for a shot or two at their pursuing foe. "Are we going to hold this place?"

"No," said the young officer. "Hear that, my man?" For a note or two of a bugle rang out sweet and clear in the beautiful valley, suggesting to one of the men a similar scene in an English dell; but he sighed to himself as it struck him that this was a different hunt, and that they, the men of the —th, the one rifle-regiment of the British Army, were the hunted, and that those who followed were the French.

A few more cracks from the rifles as the retreat was continued, and then the French musketry ceased; but the last of the sharpshooters obtained glimpses of the blue coats of the French coming quickly on.

"Have you sickened them, my lads?" said the young officer, as he led his

men after the retreating main body of their friends.

“No, sir,” said the young private addressed; “they seem to have lost touch of us. The mule-track has led right away to the left here.”

“To be sure—yes. Then they will begin again directly. Keep your face well to the enemy, and take advantage of every bit of cover.—Here, bugler,

keep close up to me.”

The sturdy-looking boy addressed had just closed up to his officer’s side when, as they were about to plunge into a low-growing patch of trees, there was another volley, the bullets pattering amongst the branches, twigs and leaves cut from above the men’s heads falling thickly.

“Forward, my lads—double!” And the subaltern led his men through the trees to where the mountain-side opened out a little more; and, pointing with his sword to a dense patch a little farther on, he shouted, “Take cover there! We must hold that patch.—Here, bugler!—Where’s that boy?”

No one answered, the men hurriedly following the speaker at the double; but the young private who had replied to the subaltern’s questions, having fallen back to where he was running with a companion in the rear, looked over his shoulder, and then, startled by the feeling that the boy had not passed through the clump, he stopped short, his companion imitating his example and replying to the eager question addressed to him:

“I dunno, mate. I thought he was with his officer. Come on; we don’t want to be prisoners.”

He started again as he spoke, not hearing, or certainly not heeding, his comrade’s angry words—

“He must be back there in the wood.”

Carrying his rifle at the trail, he dashed back into the wood, hearing, as he ran, shouts as of orders being given by the enemy; but he ran on right through the clump of trees to where the mule-path meandered along by

the edge of the precipice, and lay open before him to the next patch of woodland which screened the following enemy from view.

But the path was not unoccupied, for there, about fifty yards from him, he caught sight of his unfortunate young comrade, who, bugle in hand, was just struggling to his feet; and then, as he stood upright, he made a couple of steps forward, but only to stagger and reel for a moment; when, as his comrade uttered a cry, the boy tottered over the edge of the path,

fell a few yards, and then rolled down the steep slope out of sight.

The young rifleman did not stop to think, but occupied the brief moments in running to his comrade's help; and, just as a volley came crashing from the open wood beyond the path, he dropped down over the side, striving hard to keep his feet and to check his downward progress to where he felt that the boy must have fallen. Catching vainly at branch and rock, he went on, down and down, till he was brought up short by a great mossy

block of stone just as another volley was fired, apparently from the mule-track high above him; and half-unconsciously, in the confusion and

excitement of the moment, he lay perfectly still, cowering amongst the sparse growth in the hope that he might not be seen from the shelf-like mule-track above, though expectant all the while that the next shot fired would be at him.

But, as it happened, that next shot was accompanied by many more; and as, fearing to move, he strained his eyes upward, he could see the grey smoke rising, and hear the sound of a bugle, followed by the rush of feet, and he knew that, so far, he had not been seen, but that the strong body of the enemy were hurrying along the mule-track in full pursuit of his friends.

"Just as if I had been running," muttered the young rifleman; and he stole his left hand slowly upwards, from where he was lying in a most awkward

position, to rest it upon his breast as if to check the heavy beating of his heart.

“Ah!” he panted at last, as with strained eyes and ears he waited for some sign of his presence behind the advancing enemy being known.

“Where’s that boy?” he muttered hoarsely; and he tried to look about without moving, so as not to expose himself to any who might be passing along the rocky ledge.

The next minute the necessity for caution was emphasised, for there was a hoarse command from somewhere above, followed by the heavy tramp of feet which told only too plainly that he was being cut off from his regiment by another body of the enemy.

“I couldn’t help it,” he said. “I couldn’t leave that poor fellow behind.”