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978-1-108-05401-0 - Adventures in the Rifle Brigade in the Peninsula, France and the Netherlands, from 1809 to 1815

John Kincaid

Excerpt

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A D V E N T U R E S

IN THE

RIFLE BRIGADE.

CHAPTER I.

Joined the Rifles. Walcheren Expedition. A young Soldier. A Marine View. Campaign in South Beveland. Retreat to Scotland.

I JOINED the second battalion rifle brigade, (then the ninety-fifth,) at Hythe-Barracks, in the spring of 1809, and, in a month after, we proceeded to form a part of the expedition to Holland, under the Earl of Chatham.

With the usual Quixotic feelings of a youngster, I remember how very desirous I was, on

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the march to Deal, to impress the minds of the natives with a suitable notion of the magnitude of my importance, by carrying a donkey-load of pistols in my belt, and screwing my naturally placid countenance up to a pitch of ferocity beyond what it was calculated to bear.

We embarked in the Downs, on board the Hussar frigate, and afterwards removed to the Namur, a seventy-four, in which we were conveyed to our destination.

I had never before been in a ship of war, and it appeared to me, the first night, as if the sailors and marines did not pull well together, excepting by the ears; for my hammock was slung over the descent into the cockpit, and I had scarcely turned-in when an officer of marines came and abused his sentry for not seeing the lights out below, according to orders. The sentry proceeded to explain, that the *middies* would not put them out for him, when the naked shoulders and the head of one of them, illuminated with a red nightcap, made its appearance above the hatchway, and began to take a lively share in

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the argument. The marine officer, looking down, with some astonishment, demanded, “ d—n you, sir, who are you ?” to which the head and shoulders immediately rejoined, “ and d—n and b—t you, sir, who are you ?”

We landed on the island of South Beevland, where we remained about three weeks, playing at soldiers, smoking *mynheer's* long clay pipes, and drinking his *vrouw's* butter-milk, for which I paid liberally with my precious blood to their infernal musquittos ; not to mention that I had all the extra valour shaken out of me by a horrible ague, which commenced a campaign on my carcass, and compelled me to retire upon Scotland, for the aid of my native air, by virtue of which it was ultimately routed.

I shall not carry my first chapter beyond my first campaign, as I am anxious that my reader should not expend more than his first breath upon an event which cost too many their last.

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CHAP. II.

Rejoin the Regiment. Embark for the Peninsula. Arrival in the Tagus. The City of Lisbon, with its Contents. Sail for Figuera. Landing extraordinary. Billet ditto. The City of Coimbra. A hard Case. A cold Case, in which a favourite Scotch Dance is introduced. Climate. The Duke of Wellington.

I REJOINED the battalion, at Hythe, in the spring of 1810, and, finding that the company to which I belonged had embarked, to join the first battalion in the Peninsula, and that they were waiting at Spithead for a fair wind, I immediately applied, and obtained permission, to join them.

We were about the usual time at sea, and indulged in the usual amusements, beginning with keeping journals, in which I succeeded in

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inserting two remarks on the state of the weather, when I found my inclination for book-making superseded by the more disagreeable study of appearing eminently happy under an irresistible inclination towards sea-sickness. We anchored in the Tagus in September;—no thanks to the ship, for she was a leaky one, and wishing foul winds to the skipper, for he was a bad one.

To look at Lisbon from the Tagus, there are few cities in the universe that can promise so much, and none, I hope, that can keep it so badly.

I only got on shore one day, for a few hours, and, as I never again had an opportunity of correcting the impression, I have no objection to its being considered an uncharitable one; but I wandered for a time amid the abominations of its streets and squares, in the vain hope that I had got involved among a congregation of stables and outhouses; but when I was, at length, compelled to admit it as the miserable apology for the fair city that I had seen from the harbour, I began to contemplate, with astonishment, and

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no little amusement, the very appropriate appearance of its inhabitants.

The church, I concluded, had, on that occasion, indulged her numerous offspring with a holiday, for they occupied a much larger portion of the streets than all the world besides. Some of them were languidly strolling about, and looking the sworn foes of time, while others crowded the doors of the different coffee-houses; the fat jolly-looking friars cooling themselves with lemonade, and the lean mustard-pot-faced ones sipping coffee out of thimble-sized cups, with as much caution as if it had been physic.

The next class that attracted my attention was the numerous collection of well-starved dogs, who were indulging in all the luxury of extreme poverty on the endless dung-heaps.

There, too, sat the industrious citizen, basking in the sunshine of his shop-door, and gathering in the flock which is so bountifully reared on his withered tribe of children. There strutted the spruce cavalier, with his upper-man furnished at the expense of his lower, and look-

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ing ridiculously imposing: and there—but sacred be their daughters, for the sake of *one*, who shed a lustre over her squalid sisterhood, sufficiently brilliant to redeem their whole nation from the odious sin of ugliness. I was looking for an official person, living somewhere near the Convent D'Estrella, and was endeavouring to express my wishes to a boy, when I heard a female voice, in broken English, from a balcony above, giving the information I desired. I looked up, and saw a young girl, dressed in white, who was loveliness itself! In the few words which passed between us, of lively unconstrained civility on her part, and pure confounded gratitude on mine, she seemed so perfectly after my own heart, that she lit a torch in it which burnt for two years and a half.

It must not detract from her merits that she was almost the only one that I saw during that period in which it was my fate to tread war's roughest, rudest path,—daily staring his grim majesty out of countenance, and nightly slumbering on the cold earth, or in the tenantless

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mansion, for I felt as if she would have been the chosen companion of my waking dreams in *rosier* walks, as I never recalled the fair vision to my aid, even in the worst of times, that it did not act upon my drooping spirits like a glass of brandy.

It pleased the great disposer of naval events to remove us to another and a better ship, and to send us off for Figuera, next day, with a foul wind.

Sailing at the rate of one mile in two hours, we reached Figuera's Bay at the end of eight days, and were welcomed by about a hundred hideous looking Portuguese women, whose joy was so excessive that they waded up to their arm-pits through a heavy surf, and insisted on carrying us on shore on their backs! I never clearly ascertained whether they had been actuated by the purity of love or gold.

Our men were lodged for the night in a large barn, and the officers billeted in town. Mine chanced to be on the house of a mad-woman, whose extraordinary appearance I never shall

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forget. Her petticoats scarcely reached to the knee, and all above the lower part of the bosom was bare; and though she looked not more than middle aged, her skin seemed as if it had been regularly prepared to receive the impression of her last will and testament; her head was defended by a chevaux-de-frise of black wiry hair, which pointed fiercely in every direction, while her eyes looked like two burnt holes in a blanket. I had no sooner opened the door than she stuck her arms a-kimbo, and, opening a mouth, which stretched from ear to ear, she began vociferating “ *bravo, bravissimo!*”

Being a stranger alike to the appearance and the manners of the natives, I thought it possible that the former might have been nothing out of the common run, and concluding that she was overjoyed at seeing her country reenforced, at that perilous moment, by a fellow upwards of six feet high, and thinking it necessary to sympathize in some degree in her patriotic feelings, I began to “ *bravo*” too; but as her second shout ascended ten degrees, and kept increasing

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in that ratio, until it amounted to absolute frenzy, I faced to the right-about, and, before our *tête-à-tête* had lasted the brief space of three-quarters of a minute, I disappeared with all possible haste, her terrific yells vibrating in my astonished ears long after I had turned the corner of the street; nor did I feel perfectly at ease until I found myself stretched on a bundle of straw in a corner of the barn occupied by the men.

We proceeded, next morning, to join the army; and, as our route lay through the city of Coimbra, we came to the magnanimous resolution of providing ourselves with all manner of comforts and equipments for the campaign on our arrival there; but, when we entered it, at the end of the second day, our disappointment was quite eclipsed by astonishment at finding ourselves the only living things in a city, which ought to have been furnished with twenty thousand souls.

Lord Wellington was then in the course of his retreat from the frontiers of Spain to the lines of Torres Vedras, and had compelled the