Sharpe's Fury

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Extract

PART ONE

The River

CHAPTER 1

You were never far from the sea in Cadiz. The smell of it was always there, almost as powerful as the stink of sewage. On the city's southern side, when the wind was high and from the south, the waves would shatter on the sea wall and spray would rattle on shuttered windows. After the battle of Trafalgar storms had battered the city for a week and the winds had carried the sea spray to the cathedral and torn down scaffolding about its unfinished dome. Waves had besieged Cadiz and pieces of broken ship had clattered on the stones, and then the corpses had come. But that had been almost six years ago and now Spain fought on the same side as Britain, though Cadiz was all that was left of Spain. The rest of the country was either ruled by France or had no government at all. *Guerrilleros* haunted the hills, poverty ruled the streets and Spain was sullen.

February, 1811. Night time. Another storm beat at the city and monstrous waves shattered white against the sea wall. In the dark the watching man could see the explosions of foam and they reminded him of the powder smoke blasted from cannons. There was the same uncertainty

about the violence. Just when he thought the waves had done their worst another two or three would explode in sudden bursts and the white water would bloom above the wall like smoke, and the spray would be driven by the wind to spatter against the city's white walls like grapeshot.

The man was a priest. Father Salvador Montseny was dressed in a cassock, a cloak and a wide black hat that he needed to hold against the wind's buffeting. He was a tall man, in his thirties, a fierce preacher of saturnine good looks, who now waited in the small shelter of an archway. He was a long way from home. Home was in the north where he had grown up as the unloved son of a widower lawyer who had sent Salvador to a church school. He had become a priest because he did not know what else he should be, but now he wished he had been a soldier. He thought he would have been a good soldier, but fate had made him a sailor instead. He had been a chaplain on board a Spanish ship captured at Trafalgar and in the darkness above him the sound of battle crashed again. The sound was the boom and snap of the great canvas sheets that protected the cathedral's half-built dome, but the wind made the huge tarpaulins sound like cannons. The canvas, he knew, had once been the sails of Spain's battle fleet, but after Trafalgar the sails had been stripped from the few ships that had limped home. Father Salvador Montseny had been in England then. Most Spanish prisoners had been put ashore swiftly, but Montseny was chaplain to an admiral and he had accompanied his master to the damp country house in Hampshire where he had watched the rain fall and the snow cover the pastures and where he had learned to hate.

And he had also learned patience. He was being patient

now. His hat and cloak were soaked through and he was cold, but he did not stir. He just waited. He had a pistol in his belt, but he reckoned the priming powder would be sodden. It did not matter. He had a knife. He touched the hilt, leaned on the wall, saw another wave break at the street's end, saw the spray dash past the dim light from an unshuttered window and then heard the footsteps.

A man came running from the Calle Compañía. Father Montseny waited, just a dark shadow in dark shadows, and saw the man go to the door opposite. It was unlocked. The man went through and the priest followed fast, pushing the door open as the man tried to close it. 'Gracias,' Father Montseny said.

They were in an arched tunnel that led to a courtyard. A lantern flickered from an alcove and the man, seeing that Montseny was a priest, looked relieved. 'You live here, Father?' he asked.

'Last rites,' Father Montseny said, shaking water off his cassock.

'Ah, that poor woman upstairs.' The man made the sign of the cross. 'It's a dirty night,' he said.

'We've had worse, my son, and this will pass.'

'True,' the man said. He went into the courtyard and climbed the stairs to the first-floor balcony. 'You're Catalonian, Father?'

'How did you know?'

'Your accent, Father.' The man took out his key and unlocked his front door and the priest appeared to edge past him towards the steps climbing to the second floor.

The man opened his door, then pitched forward as Father Montseny suddenly turned and gave him a push.

The man sprawled on the floor. He had a knife and tried to draw it, but the priest kicked him hard under the chin. Then the front door swung shut and they were in the dark. Father Montseny knelt on the fallen man's chest and put his own knife at his victim's throat. 'Say nothing, my son,' he ordered. He felt under the trapped man's wet cloak and found the knife, which he drew and tossed up the passageway. 'You will speak,' he said, 'only when I ask you questions. Your name is Gonzalo Jurado?'

'Yes.' Jurado's voice was scarce above a breath.

'Do you have the whore's letters?'

'No,' Jurado said, then squealed because Father Montseny's knife had cut through his skin to touch his jawbone.

'You will be hurt if you lie,' the priest said. 'Do you have the letters?'

'I have them, yes!'

'Then show them to me.'

Father Montseny let Jurado rise. He stayed close as Jurado went into a room that overlooked the street where the priest had waited. Steel struck flint and a candle was lit. Jurado could see his assailant more clearly now and thought Montseny must be a soldier in disguise because his face did not have the look of a priest. It was a dark, lantern-jawed face without pity. 'The letters are for sale,' Jurado said, then gasped because Father Montseny had hit him in the belly.

'I said you will speak only when I question you,' the priest said. 'Show me the letters.'

The room was small, but very comfortable. It was evident that Gonzalo Jurado liked his luxuries. Two couches faced an empty fireplace above which a gilt-framed mirror hung. There were rugs on the floor. Three

paintings hung on the wall opposite the window, all showing naked women. A bureau stood under the window that looked onto the street and the frightened man unlocked one of its drawers and took out a bundle of letters tied with black string. He put them on the bureau and stepped back.

Father Montseny cut the string and spread the letters on the bureau's leather top. 'Is this all of them?'

'All fifteen,' Jurado said.

'And the whore?' Father Montseny asked. 'She has some still?'

Jurado hesitated, then saw the knife blade reflect candlelight. 'She has six.'

'She kept them?'

'Yes, señor.'

'Why?'

Jurado shrugged. 'Fifteen are enough? Maybe she can sell the others later? Perhaps she is still fond of the man? Who knows? Who understands women? But . . .' He had been about to ask a question, then feared being hit for speaking out of turn.

'Go on,' Father Montseny said, picking out a letter at random.

'How do you know about the letters? I told no one except the English.'

'Your whore made confession,' Father Montseny said.

'Caterina! She went to confession?'

'Once a year, she told me,' Father Montseny said, scanning the letter, 'always on her patron saint's name day. She came to the cathedral, told God about her many sins, and I granted her absolution on his behalf. How much do you want for the letters?'

‘English guineas,’ Jurado said, ‘fifteen letters, twenty guineas each.’ He was feeling more confident now. He kept a loaded pistol in the bureau’s bottom drawer. He tested the mainspring every day and changed the powder at least once a month. And his fear had subsided now that he understood Montseny really was a priest. A frightening priest, to be sure, but still a man of God. ‘If you prefer to pay Spanish money, Father,’ he went on, ‘then the letters are yours for thirteen hundred dollars.’

‘Thirteen hundred dollars?’ Father Montseny responded absently. He was reading one of the letters. It was written in English, but that was no problem for he had learned the language in Hampshire. The letter’s writer had been deeply in love and the fool had committed that love to paper. The fool had made promises, and the girl to whom he had made the promises had turned out to be a whore, and Jurado was her pimp, and now the pimp wanted to blackmail the letter writer.

‘I have a reply,’ the pimp dared to speak without invitation.

‘From the English?’

‘Yes, Father. It’s in here.’ Jurado gestured at the bureau’s bottom drawer. Father Montseny nodded his permission and Jurado opened the drawer, then yelped because a fist had struck him so hard that he reeled backwards. He hit the door behind him which gave way so that he fell on his back in the bedroom. Father Montseny took the pistol from the bureau drawer, opened the frizzen, blew out the powder and tossed the now useless weapon onto one of the silk-covered couches. ‘You said you had received a reply?’ he asked as though there had been no violence.

Jurado was shaking now. ‘They said they would pay.’

'You have arranged the exchange?'

'Not yet.' Jurado hesitated. 'Are you with the English?'

'No, thank God. I am with the most holy Roman church. So how do you communicate with the English?'

'I am to leave a message at the Cinco Torres.'

'Addressed to whom?'

'To a Señor Plummer.'

The Cinco Torres was a coffee house on the Calle Ancha. 'So in your next message,' Father Montseny said, 'you will tell this Plummer where to meet you? Where the exchange will take place?'

'Yes, Father.'

'You have been very helpful, my son,' Father Montseny said, then held out a hand as if to pull Jurado to his feet. Jurado, grateful for the help, allowed himself to be pulled up, and only at the last second saw that he was being hauled onto the priest's knife which slashed into his throat. Father Montseny grimaced as he wrenched the blade sideways. It was harder than he had thought, but he gave a grunt as he slashed the sharpened steel through gullet and artery and muscle. The pimp collapsed, making a noise like water draining. Montseny held Jurado down as he died. It was messy, but the blood would not show on his black cloak. Some blood drained through the floorboards where it would drip into the saddler's shop that occupied most of the building's ground floor. It took over a minute for the pimp to die, and all the while the blood dripped through the boards, but at last Jurado was dead and Father Montseny made the sign of the cross over the pimp's face and said a brief prayer for the departed soul. He sheathed his knife, wiped his hands on the dead man's cloak, and went back to the bureau. He found a great stack of money

in one of the drawers and he pushed the folded notes into the top of his left boot and then he bundled up the letters. He wrapped them in a cover he took from a cushion and then, to ensure they stayed dry, he put them next to his skin beneath his shirt. He poured a glass of sherry from a decanter and, as he sipped it, he thought about the girl to whom the letters had been written. She lived, he knew, just two streets away and she still had six letters, but he possessed fifteen. More than enough, he decided. Besides, the girl was almost certainly not at home, but servicing a client in one of Cadiz's more palatial bedrooms.

He blew out the candle and went back into the night where the waves broke white at the city's edge and the great sails boomed like guns in the wet dark. Father Salvador Montseny, killer, priest and patriot, had just ensured the salvation of Spain.

It had all begun so well.

In the moonlit darkness the River Guadiana lay beneath the South Essex's light company like a misted streak of molten silver pouring slow and massive between black hills. Fort Joseph, named for Napoleon's brother who was the French puppet on the throne of Spain, was on the hill closest to the company while Fort Josephine, named after the Emperor's discarded wife, lay at the top of a long slope on the far bank. Fort Joseph was in Portugal, Josephine was in Spain, and between the two forts was a bridge.

Six light companies had been sent from Lisbon under the command of Brigadier General Sir Barnaby Moon. A coming man, Brigadier Moon, a young thruster, an officer destined for higher things, and this was his first independent command. If he got this right, if the bridge was

broken, then Sir Barnaby could look to a future as shining as the river that slid between the darkened hills.

And it had all begun so well. The six companies had been ferried across the Tagus in a misted dawn, then had marched across southern Portugal which was supposedly French-held territory, but the partisans had assured the British that the French had withdrawn their few garrisons and so it proved. Now, just four days after leaving Lisbon, they had reached the river and the bridge. Dawn was close. The British troops were on the Guadiana's western bank where Fort Joseph had been built on a hill beside the river, and in the last of the night's darkness the ramparts of the fort were outlined by the glow of fires behind the firestep. The encroaching dawn was dimming that glow, but every now and then the silhouette of a man showed in one of the fort's embrasures.

The French were awake. The six British light companies knew that because they had heard the bugles calling the reveilles, first in distant Fort Josephine, then in Joseph, but just because the French were awake did not mean they were alert. If you wake men every day in the chill darkness before dawn they soon learn to carry their dreams to the ramparts. They might look as though they are staring alertly into the dark, ready for a dawn attack, but in truth they are thinking of the women left in France, of the women still sleeping in the fort's barrack rooms, of the women they wished were sleeping in the fort, of the women they could only dream about, of women. They were dozy.

And the forts had been undisturbed all winter. It was true there were *guerrilleros* in these hills, but they rarely came close to the forts which had cannon in their

embrasures, and peasants armed with muskets quickly learn they are no match for emplaced artillery. The Spanish and Portuguese partisans either ambushed the forage parties of the French troops besieging Badajoz thirty miles to the north or else harried the forces of Marshal Victor who besieged Cadiz a hundred and fifty miles to the south.

There had once been five good stone bridges crossing the Guadiana between Badajoz and the sea, but they had all been blown up by the contending armies, and now there was only this one French pontoon bridge to provide a link between the Emperor's siege forces. It was not used much. Travel in Portugal or Spain was dangerous for the French because the *guerrilleros* were merciless, but once every two or three weeks the pontoon bridge would creak under the weight of a battery of artillery, and every few days a despatch rider would cross the river escorted by a regiment of dragoons. Not many local folk used the bridge, for very few could afford the toll and fewer still wanted to risk the animosity of the twin garrisons which were, as a result, mostly left in peace. The war seemed far away, which was why the defenders manning the ramparts in the early morning were dreaming of women rather than looking for the enemy troops who had followed a goat track from the darkened heights into the blackness of the valley to the west of Fort Joseph.

Captain Richard Sharpe, commander of the South Essex light company, was not in the valley. He was with his company on a hill to the north of the fort. He had the easiest job of the morning, which was to create a diversion, and that meant none of his men should die and none should even be wounded. Sharpe was glad of that, but he was also aware that he had not been given the easy job as

a reward, but because Moon disliked him. The brigadier had made that plain when the six light companies had reported to him in Lisbon. 'My name's Moon,' the brigadier had said, 'and you've got a reputation.'

Sharpe, taken aback by the offhand greeting, had looked surprised. 'I do, sir?'

'Don't be modest with me, man,' Moon had said, stabbing a finger at the South Essex badge which showed a chained eagle. Sharpe and his sergeant, Patrick Harper, had captured that eagle from the French at Talavera and such a feat, as Moon had said, gave a man a reputation. 'I don't want any damn heroics, Sharpe,' the brigadier went on.

'No, sir.'

'Good plain soldiering wins wars,' Moon had said. 'Doing mundane things well is what counts.' That was undoubtedly true, but it was odd coming from Sir Barnaby Moon whose reputation was anything but mundane. He was young, only just a year over thirty, and he had been in Portugal for little more than a year, yet he had already made a name for himself. He had led his battalion at Bussaco where, on the ridge where the French had climbed and died, he had rescued two of his skirmishers by galloping through his men's ranks and killing the skirmishers' captors with his sword. 'No damned Frog will take my fusiliers!' he had announced, leading the two men back, and his soldiers had cheered him and he had taken off his cocked hat and bowed to them from the saddle. He was also said to be a gambler and a ruthless hunter of women and, because he was as wealthy as he was handsome, he was reckoned a most successful hunter. London, it was said, was a safer city now that Sir Barnaby was in

Portugal, though doubtless there were a score or more of Lisbon ladies who might give birth to babies who would grow up to have Sir Barnaby's lean face, fair hair and startling blue eyes. He was, in brief, anything but a plain soldier, yet that was what he required of Sharpe and Sharpe was happy to oblige. 'You need make no reputation with me, Sharpe,' Sir Barnaby had said.

'I'll try hard not to, sir,' Sharpe had said, for which he had received a foul look, and ever since Moon had virtually ignored Sharpe. Jack Bullen, who was Sharpe's lieutenant, reckoned that the brigadier was jealous.

'Don't be daft, Jack,' Sharpe had said when this was proposed.

'In any drama, sir,' Bullen had persevered, 'there is only room for one hero. The stage is too small for two.'

'You're an expert on drama, Jack?'

'I am an expert on everything except for the things you know about,' Bullen had said, making Sharpe laugh. The truth, Sharpe reckoned, was that Moon simply shared most officers' mistrust of men who had been promoted from the ranks. Sharpe had joined the army as a private, he had served as a sergeant and now he was a captain, and that irritated some men who saw Sharpe's rise as an affront to the established order. Which, Sharpe decided, was fine by him. He would create the diversion, let the other five companies do the fighting, then go back to Lisbon and so back to the battalion. In a month or two, as spring arrived in Portugal, they would march north from the Lines of Torres Vedras and pursue Marshal Masséna's forces into Spain. There would be plenty enough fighting in the spring, even enough for upstarts.

'There's the light, sir,' Sergeant Patrick Harper said. He was lying flat beside Sharpe and staring into the valley.

'You're sure?'

'There it is again, sir. See it?'

The brigadier had a shielded lantern and, by raising one of its screens, could flash a dim light that would be hidden from the French. It glowed again, made faint by the dawn, and Sharpe called to his men. 'Now, lads.'

All they had to do was show themselves. Not in ranks and files, but scattered across the hilltop so that they looked like partisans. The object was to make the French peer northwards and so ignore the attack creeping from the west.

'That's all we do?' Harper asked. 'We just piss around up here?'

'More or less,' Sharpe said. 'Stand up, lads! Let the Crapauds see you!' The light company was on the skyline, plainly visible, and there was just enough light to see that the French in Fort Joseph had registered their presence. Undoubtedly the garrison's officers would be training their telescopes on the hill, but Sharpe's men were in great-coats so their uniforms, with their distinctive crossbelts, were not visible, and he had told them to take off their shakos so they did not look like soldiers.

'Can we give them a shot or two?' Harper asked.

'Don't want to get them excited,' Sharpe said. 'We just want them to watch us.'

'But we can shoot when they wake up?'

'When they see the others, yes. We'll give them a green-jacket breakfast, eh?'

Sharpe's company was unique in that while most of its men wore the red coats of the British infantry others were

uniformed in the green jackets of the rifle battalions. It was all because of a mistake. Sharpe and his riflemen had been cut off from the retreat to Corunna, had made their way south to the forces in Lisbon and there been temporarily attached to the red-coated South Essex and somehow they had never left. The greenjackets carried rifles. To most people a rifle looked like a short musket, but the difference was hidden inside the barrel. The Baker rifle had seven grooves twisting the length of its barrel and those grooves gave the bullet a spin which made it lethally accurate. A musket was quick to load and fast to fire, but beyond sixty paces a man might as well shut his eyes rather than take aim. The rifle could kill at three times that range. The French had no rifles, which meant Sharpe's greenjackets could lie on the hill, shoot at the defenders and know that none of the infantry inside Fort Joseph could answer their fire.

'There they go,' Harper said.

The five light companies were advancing up the hill. Their red uniforms looked black in the half-light. Some carried short ladders. They had a nasty job, Sharpe thought. The fort had a dry ditch and from the bottom of the ditch to the top of the parapet was at least ten feet and the top of the parapet was protected by sharpened stakes. The redcoats had to cross the ditch, place the ladders between the stakes and climb into the musket fire of the defenders. And, worse, face cannon fire as well. The French cannons were undoubtedly loaded, but with what? Round shot or canister? If it was canister then Moon's troops could be hit hard by the first volley, while round shot would do much less damage. Not Sharpe's problem. He walked along the hilltop, making sure he was

silhouetted against the lightening sky, and miraculously the French were still oblivious of the four hundred men approaching from the west. 'Go on, boys,' Harper muttered, not speaking to all of the attacking troops, but to the light company of the 88th, the Connaught Rangers, an Irish regiment.

Sharpe was not watching. He had suddenly been seized by the superstition that if he watched the attack then it would fail. Instead he stared down at the river, counting the bridge's pontoons, which were dark shadows in the mist that writhed just above the water. He decided he would count them and not look at Fort Joseph until the first shot was fired. Thirty-one, he reckoned, which meant there was one pontoon every ten feet for the river was just over a hundred yards wide. The pontoons were big, clumsy, square-ended barges across which a timber roadway had been laid. The winter had been wet all across southern Spain and Portugal and the Guadiana was running high and he could see the water seething where it broke on the pontoons' bluff bows. Each boat had anchor chains running into the river and spring lines tensioned between the neighbouring barges across which the heavy baulks ran to support the chesses, the planks that made the roadway. It probably weighed over a hundred tons, Sharpe reckoned, and this job would not be over until that long bridge was destroyed.

'They're dozy bastards,' Harper said in wonderment, presumably speaking of Fort Joseph's defenders, but still Sharpe would not look. He was staring at Fort Josephine across the river where he could see men clustered about a cannon. They stepped away and the gun fired, belching a dirty smoke above the river's thinning mist. It had fired

a round of canister. The tin can, crammed with bullets, tore itself apart as it left the cannon's muzzle and the half-inch balls whipped the air about Sharpe's hilltop. The boom of the cannon rolled and echoed up the river valley. 'Anyone hit?' Sharpe called. No one answered.

The cannon's fire only made the defenders of the nearer fort stare at the hill more intently. They were aiming one of their own cannon now, trying to elevate it so that the canister would scrape the skyline. 'Keep your heads down,' Sharpe said, then there was a dull rattle of musketry and he dared to look back at the attack.

It was almost over. There were redcoats in the ditch, more on ladders, and even as Sharpe watched he saw the redcoats surge over the parapet and carry bayonets at the blue-uniformed Frenchmen. There was no need of his rifles. 'Get out of sight of that damned gun,' he shouted, and his men hurried off the crest. A second cannon fired from the fort across the river and a musket ball plucked at the hem of Sharpe's greatcoat and another drove up a flurry of dew from the grass by his side, but then he was off the hilltop and hidden from the distant gunners.

No gun fired from Fort Joseph. The garrison had been taken utterly by surprise and there were redcoats in the centre of the fort now, and a panicked stream of Frenchmen was running from the eastern gate to cross the bridge to the safety of Fort Josephine on the river's Spanish bank. The musket fire was slowing. Maybe a dozen Frenchmen had been captured, the rest were fleeing, and there seemed to be scores of them running towards the bridge. The redcoats, screaming their war cries in the dawn, carried bayonets that encouraged the panicked flight. The French tricolour was hauled down

before the last of the attacking troops had even crossed the ditch and wall. It had all been that quick.

'Our job's done,' Sharpe said. 'Down to the fort.'

'That was easy,' Lieutenant Jack Bullen said happily.

'Not over yet, Jack.'

'The bridge, you mean?'

'Got to be destroyed.'

'The hard bit's done, anyway.'

'That's true,' Sharpe said. He liked young Jack Bullen, a bluff Essex boy who was uncomplaining and hard-working. The men liked Bullen too. He treated them fairly, with the confidence that came from privilege, but it was a privilege that was always tempered by cheerfulness. A good officer, Sharpe reckoned.

They filed down the hill, across the rocky valley, over a small stream that fell cold from the hills and so up the next hill to the fort where the ladders were still propped against the parapet. Every now and then a petulant gun fired from Fort Josephine, but the balls were wasted against the earth-filled wicker baskets that topped the parapet. 'Ah, you're here, Sharpe,' Brigadier Moon greeted him. He was suddenly affable, his dislike of Sharpe washed away by the elation of victory.

'Congratulations, sir.'

'What? Oh, thank you. That's generous of you.' Moon did seem touched by Sharpe's praise. 'It went better than I dared hope. There's tea on the boil over there. Let your lads have some.'

The French prisoners were sitting in the fort's centre. A dozen horses had been found in the stables and they were now being saddled, presumably because Moon, who had marched from the Tagus, reckoned he had earned the

privilege of riding back. A captured officer was standing beside the well, disconsolately watching the victorious British troops who were gleefully searching the French packs captured in the barracks. 'Fresh bread!' Major Gillespie, one of Moon's aides, tossed Sharpe a loaf. 'Still warm. The bastards live well, don't they?'

'I thought they were supposed to be starving?'

'Not here they're not. Land of milk and honey, this place.'

Moon climbed to the eastern firestep which faced the bridge and began looking into the ready magazines beside the guns. The artillerymen in Fort Josephine saw his red coat and opened fire. They were using canister and their shots rattled on the parapet and whistled overhead. Moon ignored the balls. 'Sharpe!' he called, then waited as the rifleman climbed to the rampart. 'Time you earned your wages, Sharpe,' he said. Sharpe said nothing, just watched as the brigadier peered into a magazine. 'Round shot,' Moon announced, 'common shell and grapeshot.'

'Not canister, sir?'

'Grapeshot, definitely grapeshot. Naval stores, I suspect. Bastards haven't got any ships left so they've sent their grapeshot here.' He let the magazine lid drop and stared down at the bridge. 'Common shell won't break that brute, will it? There are a score of women down below. In the barracks. Have some of your fellows escort them over the bridge, will you? Deliver them to the French with my compliments. The rest of your men can help Sturridge. He'll have to blow the far end.'

Lieutenant Sturridge was a Royal Engineer whose job was to destroy the bridge. He was a nervous young man who seemed terrified of Moon. 'The far end?' Sharpe asked, wanting to be sure he had heard correctly.

Moon looked exasperated. 'If we break the bridge at this end, Sharpe,' he explained with exaggerated patience as though he were speaking to a young and not very bright child, 'the damn thing will float downstream, but will still be attached to the far bank. The French can then salvage the pontoons. Not much point in coming all this way and leaving the French with a serviceable pontoon bridge that they can rebuild, is there? But if we break it at the Spanish end the pontoons should end up on this bank and we can burn them.' A barrel-load of canister or grapeshot hissed overhead and the brigadier threw Fort Josephine an irritated glance. 'Get on with it,' he said to Sharpe, 'I want to be away by tomorrow's dawn.'

A picquet from the 74th's light company guarded the eighteen women. Six were officers' wives and they stood apart from the rest, trying to look brave. 'You'll take them over,' Sharpe told Jack Bullen.

'I will, sir?'

'You like women, don't you?'

'Of course, sir.'

'And you speak some of their horrible language, don't you?'

'Incredibly well, sir.'

'So take the ladies over the bridge and up to that other fort.'

While Lieutenant Bullen persuaded the women that no harm would come to them and that they must gather their luggage and be ready to cross the river, Sharpe looked for Sturridge and found the engineer in the fort's main magazine. 'Powder,' Sturridge greeted Sharpe. He had prised the lid from a barrel and now tasted the gunpowder. 'Bloody awful powder.' He spat it out with a grimace.

‘Bloody French powder. Nothing but bloody dust. Damp, too.’

‘Will it work?’

‘It should go bang,’ Sturridge said gloomily.

‘I’m taking you over the bridge,’ Sharpe told him.

‘There’s a handcart outside,’ Sturridge said, ‘and we’ll need it. Five barrels should be enough, even of this rubbish.’

‘You’ve got fuse?’

Sturridge unbuttoned his blue jacket and showed that he had several yards of slow match coiled around his waist. ‘You just thought I was portly, didn’t you? Why doesn’t he just blow the bridge at this end? Or in the middle?’

‘So the French can’t rebuild it.’

‘They couldn’t anyway. Takes a lot of skill to make one of those bridges. Doesn’t take much to undo one, but making a pontoon bridge isn’t a job for amateurs.’ Sturridge hammered the lid back onto the opened powder barrel. ‘The French aren’t going to like us being over there, are they?’

‘I wouldn’t think so.’

‘So is this where I die for England?’

‘That’s why I’m there. To make sure you don’t.’

‘That is a consolation,’ Sturridge said. He glanced across at Sharpe who was leaning, arms folded, against the wall. Sharpe’s face was shadowed by his shako’s peak, but his eyes were bright in the shadow. The face was scarred, hard, watchful and thin. ‘Actually it is a consolation,’ Sturridge said, then flinched because the brigadier was bellowing in the courtyard, demanding to know where Sturridge was and why the damned bridge was still intact. ‘Bloody man,’ Sturridge said.