CHAPTER 1

Mister Sharpe was in a bad mood. A filthy mood. He was looking for trouble in Sergeant Harper's opinion, and Harper was rarely wrong about Captain Sharpe, and Sergeant Harper knew well enough not to engage his Captain in conversation when Sharpe was in such a black temper, but on the other hand Harper liked to live dangerously. 'I see your uniform's been mended, sir,' he said cheerily.

Sharpe ignored the comment. He just marched on, climbing the bare Portuguese slope under the searing sun. It was September 1810, almost autumn, yet the heat of late summer hammered the landscape like a furnace. At the top of the hill, another mile or so ahead of Sharpe, stood a barn-like stone building next to a gaunt telegraph station. The station was a black timber scaffolding supporting a high mast from which signalling arms hung motionless in the afternoon's heat.

'It's a rare nice piece of stitching on that jacket,' Harper went on, sounding as though he did not have a care in the world, 'and I can tell you didn't do it yourself. It looks like a woman's work, so it does?' He inflected the last three words as a question.

Sharpe still said nothing. His long, straight-bladed cavalry sword banged against his left thigh as he climbed. He had a rifle slung on his shoulder. An officer was not supposed to carry a longarm like his

men, but Sharpe had once been a private and he was used to carrying a proper gun to war.

'Was it someone you met in Lisbon, now?' Harper persisted.

Sharpe simmered, but pretended he had not heard. His uniform jacket, decently mended as Harper had noticed, was rifle green. He had been a rifleman. No, he still thought of himself as a rifleman, one of the elite men who carried the Baker rifle and wore the dark green instead of the red, but the tides of war had stranded him and a few of his men in a redcoat regiment and now he commanded the light company of the South Essex who were following him up the hill. Most wore the red jackets of the British infantry and carried smoothbore muskets, but a handful, like Sergeant Harper, still kept their old green jackets and fought with the rifle.

'So who was she?' Harper finally asked.

'Sergeant Harper,' Sharpe was finally goaded into speaking, 'if you want bloody trouble then keep bloody talking.'

'Yes, sir,' Harper said, grinning. He was an Ulsterman, a Catholic and a sergeant, and as such he was not supposed to be friends with an Englishman, a heathen and an officer, but he was. He liked Sharpe and knew Sharpe liked him, though he was wise enough not to say another word. Instead he whistled the opening bars of the song 'I Would that the Wars Were all Done'.

Sharpe inevitably thought of the words that accompanied the tune; 'In the meadow one morning, all pearly with dew, a fair pretty maiden plucked violets so blue', and Harper's delicate insolence forced him to laugh aloud. He then swore at the Sergeant, who was grinning with triumph. 'It was Josefina,' Sharpe admitted.

'Miss Josefina now! How is she?'

'She's well enough,' Sharpe said vaguely.

'I'm glad to hear that,' Harper said with genuine feeling. 'So you took tea with her, did you, sir?'

'I took bloody tea with her, Sergeant, yes.'

'Of course you did, sir,' Harper said. He walked a few paces in silence, then decided to try his luck again. 'And I thought you were sweet on Miss Teresa, sir?'

'Miss Teresa?' Sharpe said, as though the name were quite unknown to him, though in the last few weeks he had hardly stopped thinking about the hawk-faced girl who rode across the frontier in Spain with the partisan forces. He glanced at the Sergeant, who had a look of placid innocence on his broad face. 'I like Teresa well enough,' Sharpe went on defensively, 'but I don't even know if I'll ever see her again!'

'But you'd like to,' Harper pointed out.

'Of course I would! But so what? There are girls you'd like to see again, but you don't behave like a bloody saint waiting for them, do you?'

'True enough,' Harper admitted. 'And I can see why you didn't want to come back to us, sir. There you were, drinking tea while Miss Josefina's sewing, and a fine time the two of you must have been having.'

'I didn't want to come back,' Sharpe said harshly, 'because I was promised a month's bloody leave. A month! And they gave me a week!'

Harper was not in the least sympathetic. The month's leave was supposed to be Sharpe's reward for bringing back a hoard of gold from behind enemy lines, but the whole of the light company had been on that jaunt and no one had suggested that the rest of them be given a month off. On the other hand Harper could well understand Sharpe's moroseness, for the thought of losing a whole month in Josefina's bed would make even a bishop hit the gin.

‘One bloody week,’ Sharpe snarled, ‘bastard bloody army!’ He stepped aside from the path and waited for the company to close up. In truth his foul mood had little to do with his truncated leave, but he could not admit to Harper what was really causing it. He stared back down the column, seeking out the figure of Lieutenant Slingsby. That was the problem. Lieutenant bloody Cornelius bloody Slingsby.

As the company reached Sharpe they sat beside the path. Sharpe commanded fifty-four rank and file now, thanks to a draft from England, and those newly arrived men stood out because they had bright-red coats. The uniforms of the other men had paled under the sun and were so liberally patched with brown Portuguese cloth that, from a distance, they looked more like tramps than soldiers. Slingsby, of course, had objected to that. ‘New uniforms, Sharpe,’ he had yapped enthusiastically, ‘some new uniforms will make the men look smarter. Fine new broadcloth will put some snap into them! We should indent for some.’ Bloody fool, Sharpe had thought. The new uniforms would come in due time, probably in winter, and there was no point in asking for them sooner and, besides, the men liked their old, comfortable jackets just as they liked their French oxhide packs. The new men all had British packs, made by Trotters, that griped across the chest until, on a long march, it seemed that a red-hot band of iron was constricting the ribs. Trotters’ pains, that was called, and the French packs were far more comfortable.

Sharpe walked back down the company and ordered each of the new arrivals to give him their canteen and, as he had expected, every last one was empty. ‘You’re bloody fools,’ Sharpe said. ‘You ration it! A sip at a time! Sergeant Read!’

'Sir?' Read, a redcoat and a Methodist, doubled to Sharpe.

'Make sure no one gives them water, Sergeant.'

'I'll do that, sir, I'll do that.'

The new men would be dry as dust by the time the afternoon was done. Their throats would be swollen and their breath rasping, but at least they would never be so stupid again. Sharpe walked on down the column to where Lieutenant Slingsby brought up the rear-guard. 'No stragglers, Sharpe,' Slingsby said with the eagerness of a terrier thinking it had deserved a reward. He was a short man, straight-backed, square-shouldered, bristling with efficiency. 'Mister Iliffe and I coaxed them on.'

Sharpe said nothing. He had known Cornelius Slingsby for one week and in that week he had developed a loathing for the man that verged on being murderous. There was no reason for that hatred, unless disliking a man on sight was good reason, yet everything about Slingsby annoyed Sharpe, whether it was the back of the man's head, which was as flat as a shovel blade, his protuberant eyes, his black moustache, the broken veins on his nose, the snort of his laughter or the strut of his gait. Sharpe had come back from Lisbon to discover that Slingsby had replaced his Lieutenant, the reliable Robert Knowles, who had been appointed Adjutant to the regiment. 'Cornelius is by way of being a relation,' Lieutenant Colonel the Honourable William Lawford had told Sharpe vaguely, 'and you'll find him a very fine fellow.'

'I will, sir?'

'He joined the army late,' Lawford had continued, 'which is why he's still a lieutenant. Well, he was breveted captain, of course, but he's still a lieutenant.'

'I joined the army early, sir,' Sharpe had said, 'and

I'm still a lieutenant. Breveted captain, of course, but still a lieutenant.'

'Oh, Sharpe.' Lawford had sounded exasperated. 'There is no one more cognizant of your virtues than I. If there was a vacant captaincy . . .' He left that notion hanging, though Sharpe knew the answer. He had been made into a lieutenant, and that was something of a miracle for a man who had joined the army as an illiterate private, and he had been breveted a captain, which meant he was paid as such even though his true rank remained lieutenant, but he could only get the real promotion if he either purchased a vacant captaincy or, much less likely, was promoted by Lawford. 'I value you, Sharpe,' the Colonel had continued, 'but I also have hopes for Cornelius. He's thirty. Or maybe thirty-one. Old for a lieutenant, but he's keen as mustard, Sharpe, and has experience. Lots of experience.' That was the trouble. Before joining the South Essex Slingsby had been in the 55th, a regiment serving in the West Indies, and the yellow fever had decimated the officers' ranks and so Slingsby had been breveted a captain, and captain, moreover, of the 55th's light company, and as a result he reckoned he knew as much about soldiering as Sharpe. Which might have been true, but he did not know as much about fighting. 'I want you to take him under your wing,' the Colonel had finished. 'Bring him on, Sharpe, eh?'

Bring him to an early grave, Sharpe had thought sourly, but he had to hide his thoughts, and was still doing his best to conceal the hatred as Slingsby pointed up to the telegraph station. 'Mister Iliffe and I saw men up there, Sharpe. A dozen of them, I think. And one looked as if he was wearing a blue uniform. Shouldn't be anyone up there, should there?'

Sharpe doubted that Ensign Iliffe, an officer newly

come from England, had seen a thing, while Sharpe himself had noticed the men and their horses fifteen minutes earlier and he had been wondering ever since what the strangers were doing on the hilltop, for officially the telegraph station had been abandoned. Normally it was manned by a handful of soldiers who guarded the naval Midshipman who operated the black bags which were hoisted up and down the tall mast to send messages from one end of Portugal to the other. But the French had already cut the chain further north and the British had retreated away from these hills, and somehow this one station had not been destroyed. There was no point in leaving it intact for the Frogs to use, and so Sharpe's company had been detached from the battalion and given the simple job of burning the telegraph. 'Could it be a Frenchman?' Slingsby asked, referring to the blue uniform. He sounded eager, as if he wanted to charge uphill. He was three inches over five feet, with an air of perpetual alertness.

'Doesn't matter if it is a bloody Crapaud,' Sharpe said sourly, 'there's more of us than there are of them. I'll send Mister Iliffe up there to shoot him.' Iliffe looked alarmed. He was seventeen and looked fourteen, a raw-boned youngster whose father had purchased him a commission because he did not know what else to do with the boy. 'Show me your canteen,' Sharpe ordered Iliffe.

Iliffe looked scared now. 'It's empty, sir,' he confessed, and cringed as though he expected Sharpe to punish him.

'You know what I told the men with empty canteens?' Sharpe asked. 'That they were idiots. But you're not, because you're an officer, and there aren't any idiot officers.'

'Quite correct, sir,' Slingsby put in, then snorted.

He always snorted when he laughed and Sharpe suppressed an urge to cut the bastard's throat.

'Hoard your water,' Sharpe said, thrusting the canteen back at Iliffe. 'Sergeant Harper! March on!'

It took another half-hour to reach the hilltop. The barn-like building was evidently a shrine, for a chipped statue of the Virgin Mary was mounted in a niche above its door. The telegraph tower had been built against the shrine's eastern gable which helped support the lattice of thick timbers that carried the platform on which the Midshipman had worked his arcane skill. The tower was deserted now, its tethered signal ropes banging against the tarred mast in the brisk wind that blew around the summit. The black-painted bladders had been taken away, but the ropes used to hoist and lower them were still in place and from one of them hung a square of white cloth and Sharpe wondered if the strangers on the hilltop had raised the makeshift flag as a signal.

Those strangers, a dozen civilians, were standing beside the shrine's door and with them was a Portuguese infantry officer, his blue coat faded to a colour very close to the French blue. It was the officer who strode forward to meet Sharpe. 'I am Major Ferreira,' he said in good English, 'and you are?'

'Captain Sharpe.'

'And Captain Slingsby.' Lieutenant Slingsby had insisted on accompanying Sharpe to meet the Portuguese officer, just as he insisted on using his brevet rank even though he had no right to do so any longer.

'I command here,' Sharpe said laconically.

'And your purpose, Captain?' Ferreira demanded. He was a tall man, lean and dark, with a carefully trimmed moustache. He had the manners and bearing of privilege, but Sharpe detected an uneasiness in the

Portuguese Major that Ferreira attempted to cover with a brusque manner that tempted Sharpe to insolence. He fought the temptation and told the truth instead.

'We're ordered to burn the telegraph.'

Ferreira glanced at Sharpe's men who were straggling onto the hill's summit. He seemed taken aback by Sharpe's words, but then smiled unconvincingly. 'I shall do it for you, Captain. It will be my pleasure.'

'I carry out my own orders, sir,' Sharpe said.

Ferreira scented the insolence and gave Sharpe a quizzical look. For a second Sharpe thought the Portuguese Major intended to offer him a reprimand, but instead Ferreira nodded curtly. 'If you insist,' he said, 'but do it quickly.'

'Quickly, sir!' Slingsby intervened enthusiastically. 'No point in waiting!' He turned on Harper. 'Sergeant Harper! The combustibles, if you please. Quick, man, quick!'

Harper glanced at Sharpe for approval of the Lieutenant's orders, but Sharpe betrayed nothing, and so the big Irishman shouted at the dozen men who were burdened with cavalry forage nets that were stuffed full of straw. Another six men carried jars of turpentine, and now the straw was heaped about the four legs of the telegraph station and then soaked with the turpentine. Ferreira watched them work for a while, then went back to join the civilians who appeared worried by the arrival of British soldiers. 'It's all ready, sir,' Harper called to Sharpe, 'shall I light her up?'

Slingsby did not even give Sharpe time to answer. 'Let's not dilly-dally, Sergeant!' he said briskly. 'Fire it up!'

'Wait,' Sharpe snarled, making Slingsby blink at the harshness of his tone. Officers were expected to treat each other courteously in front of the men, but

Sharpe had snapped angrily and the look he gave Slingsby made the Lieutenant step backwards in surprise. Slingsby frowned, but said nothing as Sharpe climbed the ladder to the mast's platform that stood fifteen feet above the hilltop. Three pock marks in the boards showed where the Midshipman had placed his tripod so he could stare at the neighbouring telegraph stations and read their messages. The station to the north had already been destroyed, but looking south Sharpe could just see the next tower somewhere beyond the River Criz and still behind British lines. It would not be behind the lines for long, he thought. Marshal Masséna's army was flooding into central Portugal and the British would be retreating to their newly built defensive lines at Torres Vedras. The plan was to retreat to the new fortifications, let the French come, then either kill their futile attacks or watch them starve.

And to help them starve, the British and Portuguese were leaving them nothing. Every barn, every larder, every storehouse was being emptied. Crops were being burned in their fields, windmills were being destroyed and wells made foul with carcasses. The inhabitants of every town and village in central Portugal were being evicted, taking their livestock with them, ordered to go either behind the Lines of Torres Vedras or else up into the high hills where the French would be reluctant to follow. The intention was that the enemy would find a scorched land, bare of everything, even of telegraph ropes.

Sharpe untied one of the signal ropes and pulled down the white flag that turned out to be a big handkerchief of fine linen, neatly hemmed with the initials PAF embroidered in blue into one corner. Ferreira? Sharpe looked down on the Portuguese Major who was watching him. 'Yours, Major?' Sharpe asked.

'No,' Ferreira called back.

'Mine then,' Sharpe said, and pocketed the handkerchief. He saw the anger on Ferreira's face and was amused by it. 'You might want to move those horses,' he nodded at the beasts picketed beside the shrine, 'before we burn the tower.'

'Thank you, Captain,' Ferreira said icily.

'Fire it now, Sharpe?' Slingsby demanded from the ground.

'Not till I'm off the bloody platform,' Sharpe growled. He looked round one last time and saw a small mist of grey-white powder smoke far off to the southeast. He pulled out his telescope, the precious glass that had been given him by Sir Arthur Wellesley, now Lord Wellington, and he rested it on the balustrade and then knelt and stared towards the smoke. He could see little, but he reckoned he was watching the British rearguard in action. French cavalry must have pressed too close and a battalion was firing volleys, backed up by the cannons of the Royal Horse Artillery. He could just hear the soft thump of the far-off guns. He swept the glass north, the lens travelling over a hard country of hills, rocks and barren pasture, and there was nothing there, nothing at all, until suddenly he saw a hint of a different green and he jerked the glass back, settled it and saw them.

Cavalry. French cavalry. Dragoons in their green coats. They were at least a mile away, in a valley, but coming towards the telegraph station. Reflected sunlight glinted from their buckles, bits and stirrups as Sharpe tried to count them. Forty? Sixty men perhaps, it was hard to tell for the squadron was twisting between rocks in the valley's deep heart and going from sunshine to shadow. They looked to be in no particular hurry and Sharpe wondered if they had been sent to

capture the telegraph station which would serve the advancing French as well as it had served the British.

'We've got company, Sergeant!' Sharpe called down to Harper. Decency and courtesy demanded that he should have told Slingsby, but he could barely bring himself to talk to the man, so he spoke to Harper instead. 'At least a squadron of green bastards. About a mile away, but they could be here in a few minutes.' He collapsed the telescope and went down the ladder and nodded at the Irish Sergeant. 'Spark it off,' he said.

The turpentine-soaked straw blazed bright and high, but it took some moments before the big timbers of the scaffold caught the flame. Sharpe's company, as ever fascinated by wilful destruction, looked on appreciatively and gave a small cheer as the high platform at last began to burn. Sharpe had walked to the eastern edge of the small hilltop, but, denied the height of the platform, he could no longer see the dragoons. Had they wheeled away? Perhaps, if they had hoped to capture the signal tower intact, they would have decided to abandon the effort when they saw the smoke boil off the summit.

Lieutenant Slingsby joined him. 'I don't wish to make anything of it,' he said in a low tone, 'but you spoke very harshly to me just now, Sharpe, very harshly indeed.'

Sharpe said nothing. He was imagining the pleasure of disembowelling the little bastard.

'I don't resent it for myself,' Slingsby went on, still speaking softly, 'but it serves the men ill. Very ill indeed. It diminishes their respect for the King's commission.'

Sharpe knew he had deserved the reproof, but he was not willing to give Slingsby an inch. 'You think men respect the King's commission?' he asked instead.

'Naturally.' Slingsby sounded shocked at the question. 'Of course!'

'I didn't,' Sharpe said, and wondered if he smelt rum on Slingsby's breath. 'I didn't respect the King's commission,' he went on, deciding he had imagined the smell, 'not when I marched in the ranks. I thought most jack-puddings were overpaid bastards.'

'Sharpe,' Slingsby expostulated, but whatever he was about to say dried on his tongue, for he saw the dragoons appear on the lower slope.

'Fifty or so of them,' Sharpe said, 'and coming this way.'

'We should deploy, perhaps?' Slingsby indicated the eastern slope that was dotted with boulders which would hide a skirmish line very efficiently. The Lieutenant straightened his back and snapped his boot heels together. 'Be an honour to lead the men down the hill, Sharpe.'

'It might be a bloody honour,' Sharpe said sarcastically, 'but it would still be bloody suicide. If we're going to fight the bastards,' he went on, 'then I'd rather be on a hilltop than scattered halfway down a slope. Dragoons like skirmish lines, Slingsby. It gives them sword practice.' He turned to look at the shrine. There were two small shuttered windows on the wall facing him and he reckoned they would make good loopholes if he did have to defend the hilltop. 'How long till sunset?'

'Ten minutes less than three hours,' Slingsby said instantly.

Sharpe grunted. He doubted the dragoons would attack, but if they did he could easily hold them off till dusk, and no dragoon would linger in hostile country after nightfall for fear of the partisans. 'You stay here,' he ordered Slingsby, 'watch them and don't do

anything without asking me. Do you understand that?'

Slingsby looked offended, as he had every right to be. 'Of course I understand it,' he said in a tone of protest.

'Don't take men off the hilltop, Lieutenant,' Sharpe said, 'and that's an order.' He strode towards the shrine, wondering whether his men would be able to knock a few loopholes in its ancient stone walls. They did not have the right tools, no sledgehammers or crowbars, but the stonework looked old and its mortar was crumbling.

To his surprise his path to the shrine door was barred by Major Ferreira and one of the civilians. 'The door is locked, Captain,' the Portuguese officer said.

'Then I'll break it down,' Sharpe answered.

'It is a shrine,' Ferreira said reprovingly.

'Then I'll say a prayer for forgiveness after I've knocked it down,' Sharpe said and he tried to get past the Major who held up a hand to stop him. Sharpe looked exasperated. 'There are fifty French dragoons coming this way, Major,' Sharpe said, 'and I'm using the shrine to protect my men.'

'Your work is done here,' Ferreira said harshly, 'and you should go.' Sharpe said nothing. Instead he tried once more to get past the two men, but they still blocked him. 'I'm giving you an order, Captain,' the Portuguese officer insisted. 'Leave now.'

The civilian standing with Ferreira had taken off his coat and rolled up his shirtsleeves to reveal massive arms, both tattooed with fouled anchors. So far Sharpe had taken little notice of the man, other than to be impressed by his imposing physical size, but now he looked into the civilian's face and saw pure animosity. The man was built like a prizefighter, tattooed like a sailor, and there was an unmistakable message in his

scarred, brutish face which was astonishing in its ugliness. He had a heavy brow, a big jaw, a flattened nose, and eyes that were like a beast's eyes. Nothing showed there except the desire to fight. And he wanted the fight to be man to man, fist against fist, and he looked disappointed when Sharpe stepped a pace backwards.

'I see you are sensible,' Ferreira said silkily.

'I'm known for it,' Sharpe said, then raised his voice. 'Sergeant Harper!'

The big Irishman appeared round the side of the shrine and saw the confrontation. The big man, broader and taller than Harper, who was one of the strongest men in the army, had his fists clenched. He looked like a bulldog waiting to be unleashed, and Harper knew how to treat mad dogs. He let the volley gun slip from his shoulder. It was a curious weapon, made for the Royal Navy, and intended to be used from the deck of a ship to clear enemy marksmen from their fighting tops. Seven half-inch barrels were clustered together, fired by a single flintlock, and at sea the gun had proved too powerful, as often as not breaking the shoulder of the man who fired it, but Patrick Harper was big enough to make the seven-barrel gun look small and now he casually pointed it at the vast brute who blocked Sharpe's path. The gun was not cocked, but none of the civilians seemed to notice that. 'You have trouble, sir?' Harper asked innocently.

Ferreira looked alarmed, as well he might. Harper's appearance had prompted some of the other civilians to draw pistols, and the hillside was suddenly loud as flints were clicked back. Major Ferreira, fearing a bloodbath, snapped at them to lower their guns. None obeyed until the big man, the bare-fisted brute, snarled at them and then they hurriedly lowered their flints,

holstered their weapons and looked scared of the big man's disapproval. All the civilians were hard-looking rogues, reminding Sharpe of the cut-throats who ruled the streets of East London where he had spent his childhood, yet their leader, the man with the brutish face and muscled body, was the oddest and most frightening of them. He was a street fighter, that much was obvious from the broken nose and the scars on his forehead and cheeks, but he was also wealthy, for his linen shirt was of fine quality, his breeches cut from the best broadcloth and his gold-tasselled boots were made from soft expensive leather. He looked to be around forty years old, in the prime of life, confident in his sheer size. The man glanced at Harper, evidently judging the Irishman as a possible opponent, then unexpectedly smiled and picked up his coat which he brushed down before putting on. 'What is in the shrine,' the big man stepped towards Sharpe, 'is my property.' His English was heavily accented and spoken in a voice like gravel.

'And who are you?' Sharpe demanded.

'Allow me to name Senhor . . .' Ferreira began to answer.

'My name is Ferragus,' the big man interrupted.

'Ferragus,' Ferreira repeated, then introduced Sharpe. 'Capitão Sharpe.' He offered Ferragus a shrug as if to suggest that events were beyond his control.

Ferragus towered over Sharpe. 'Your work is done here, Captain. The tower is no more, so you may go.'

Sharpe stepped back out of the huge man's shadow, sideways to get around him and then went to the shrine and heard the distinctive sound of the volley gun's ratchet scraping as Harper cocked it. 'Careful, now,' the Irishman said, 'it only takes a tremor for this bastard to go off and it would make a terrible mess of your shirt,

sir.' Ferragus had plainly turned to intercept Sharpe, but the huge gun checked him.

The shrine door was unlocked. Sharpe pushed it open and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust from the bright sunlight to the shrine's black shadows, but then he saw what was inside and swore.

He had expected a bare country shrine like the dozens of others he had seen, but instead the small building was heaped with sacks, so many sacks that the only space left was a narrow passage leading to a crude altar on which a blue-gowned image of the Virgin Mary was festooned with little slips of paper left by desperate peasants who came to the hilltop in search of a miracle. Now the Virgin gazed sadly on the sacks as Sharpe drew his sword and stabbed one. He was rewarded by a trickle of flour. He tried another sack further down and still more flour sifted to the bare earth floor. Ferragus had seen what Sharpe had done and harangued Ferreira who, reluctantly, came into the shrine. 'The flour is here with my government's knowledge,' the Major said.

'You can prove that?' Sharpe asked. 'Got a piece of paper, have you?'

'It is the business of the Portuguese government,' Ferreira said stiffly, 'and you will leave.'

'I have orders,' Sharpe countered. 'We all have orders. There's to be no food left for the French. None.' He stabbed another sack, then turned as Ferragus came into the shrine, his bulk shadowing the doorway. He moved ominously down the narrow passage between the sacks, filling it, and Sharpe suddenly coughed loudly and scuffed his feet as Ferreira squeezed into the sacks to let Ferragus past.

The huge man held out a hand to Sharpe. He was holding coins, gold coins, maybe a dozen thick gold coins, bigger than English guineas and probably adding

up to three years' salary for Sharpe. 'You and I can talk,' Ferragus said.

'Sergeant Harper!' Sharpe called past the looming Ferragus. 'What are those bloody Crapauds doing?'

'Keeping their distance, sir. Staying well off, they are.'

Sharpe looked up at Ferragus. 'You're not surprised there are French dragoons coming, are you? Expecting them, were you?'

'I am asking you to go,' Ferragus said, moving closer to Sharpe. 'I am being polite, Captain.'

'Hurts, don't it?' Sharpe said. 'And what if I don't go? What if I obey my orders, *senhor*, and get rid of this food?'

Ferragus was plainly unused to being challenged for he seemed to shiver, as if forcing himself to be calm. 'I can reach into your little army, Captain,' he said in his deep voice, 'and I can find you, and I can make you regret today.'

'Are you threatening me?' Sharpe asked in astonishment. Major Ferreira, behind Ferragus, made some soothing noises, but both men ignored him.

'Take the money,' Ferragus said.

When Sharpe had coughed and scuffed his feet he had been making enough noise to smother the sound of his rifle being cocked. It hung from his right shoulder, the muzzle just behind his ear, and now he moved his right hand back to the trigger. He looked down at the coins and Ferragus must have thought he had tempted Sharpe for he thrust the gold closer, and Sharpe looked up into his eyes and pressed the trigger.

The shot slammed into the roof tiles and filled the shrine with smoke and noise. The sound deafened Sharpe and it distracted Ferragus for half a second, the half second in which Sharpe brought up his right knee into the big man's groin, following it with a thrust of his

left hand, fingers rigid, into Ferragus's eyes and then his right hand, knuckles clenched, into his Adam's apple. He reckoned he had stood no chance in a fair fight, but Sharpe, like Ferragus, reckoned fair fights were for fools. He knew he had to put Ferragus down fast and hurt him so bad that the huge man could not fight back, and he had done it in a heartbeat, for the big man was bent over, filled with pain and fighting for breath, and Sharpe cleared him from the passage by dragging him into the space in front of the altar and then walked past a horrified Ferreira. 'You got anything to say to me, Major?' Sharpe asked, and when Ferreira dumbly shook his head Sharpe made his way back into the sunlight. 'Lieutenant Slingsby!' he called. 'What are those damned dragoons doing?'

'Keeping their distance, Sharpe,' Slingsby said. 'What was that shot?'

'I was showing a Portuguese fellow how a rifle works,' Sharpe said. 'How much distance?'

'At least half a mile. Bottom of the hill.'

'Watch them,' Sharpe said, 'and I want thirty men in here now. Mister Iliffe! Sergeant McGovern!'

He left Ensign Iliffe in nominal charge of the thirty men who were to haul the sacks out of the shrine. Once outside, the sacks were slit open and their contents scattered across the hilltop. Ferragus came limping from the shrine and his men looked confused and angry, but they were hugely outnumbered and there was nothing they could do. Ferragus had regained his breath, though he was having trouble standing upright. He spoke bitterly to Ferreira, but the Major managed to talk some sense into the big man and, at last, they all mounted their horses and, with a last resentful look at Sharpe, rode down the westwards track.

Sharpe watched them retreat then went to join

Slingsby. Behind him the telegraph tower burned fierce, suddenly keeling over with a great splintering noise and an explosion of sparks. 'Where are the Crapauds?'

'In that gully.' Slingsby pointed to a patch of dead ground near the bottom of the hill. 'Dismounted now.'

Sharpe used his telescope and saw two of the green-uniformed men crouching behind boulders. One of them had a telescope and was watching the hilltop and Sharpe gave the man a cheerful wave. 'Not much bloody use there, are they?' he said.

'They could be planning to attack us,' Slingsby suggested eagerly.

'Not unless they're tired of life,' Sharpe said, reckoning the dragoons had been beckoned westwards by the white flag on the telegraph tower, and now that the flag had been replaced by a plume of smoke they were undecided what to do. He trained his glass further south and saw there was still gun smoke in the valley where the main road ran beside the river. The rear-guard was evidently holding its own, but they would have to retreat soon for, further east, he could now see the main enemy army that showed as dark columns marching in fields. They were a very long way off, scarcely visible even through the glass, but they were there, a shadowed horde coming to drive the British out of central Portugal. *L'Armée de Portugal*, the French called it, the army that was meant to whip the redcoats clear to Lisbon, then out to sea, so that Portugal would at last be placed under the tricolour, but the army of Portugal was in for a surprise. Marshal Masséna would march into an empty land and then find himself facing the Lines of Torres Vedras.

'See anything, Sharpe?' Slingsby stepped closer, plainly wanting to borrow the telescope.

'Have you been drinking rum?' Sharpe asked, again getting a whiff of the spirit.

Slingsby looked alarmed, then offended. 'Put it on the skin,' he said gruffly, slapping his face, 'to keep off the flies.'

'You do what?'

'Trick I learned in the islands.'

'Bloody hell,' Sharpe said, then collapsed the glass and put it into his pocket. 'There are Frogs over there,' he said, pointing southeast, 'thousands of goddamn bloody Frogs.'

He left the Lieutenant gazing at the distant army and went back to chivvy the redcoats who had formed a chain to sling the sacks out onto the hillside which now looked as though it were ankle deep in snow. Flour drifted like powder smoke from the summit, fell softly, made mounds, and still more sacks were hurled out the door. Sharpe reckoned it would take a couple of hours to empty the shrine. He ordered ten riflemen to join the work and sent ten of the redcoats to join Slingsby's picquet. He did not want his redcoats to start whining that they did all the work while the riflemen got the easy jobs. Sharpe gave them a hand himself, standing in the line and tossing sacks through the door as the collapsed telegraph burned itself out, its windblown cinders staining the white flour with black spots.

Slingsby came just as the last sacks were being destroyed. 'Dragoons have gone, Sharpe,' he reported. 'Reckon they saw us and rode off.'

'Good.' Sharpe forced himself to sound civil, then went to join Harper who was watching the dragoons ride away. 'They didn't want to play with us, Pat?'

'Then they've more sense than that big Portuguese fellow,' Harper said. 'Give him a headache, did you?'

'Bastard wanted to bribe me.'

'Oh, it's a wicked world,' Harper said, 'and there's me always dreaming of getting a wee bribe.' He slung the seven-barrel gun on his shoulder. 'So what were those fellows doing up here?'

'No good,' Sharpe said, brushing his hands before pulling on his mended jacket that was now smeared with flour. 'Mister bloody Ferragus was selling that flour to the Crapauds, Pat, and that bloody Portuguese Major was in it up to his arse.'

'Did they tell you that now?'

'Of course they didn't,' Sharpe said, 'but what else were they doing? Jesus! They were flying a white flag to tell the Frogs it was safe up here and if we hadn't arrived, Pat, they'd have sold that flour.'

'God and his saints preserve us from evil,' Harper said in amusement, 'and it's a pity the dragoons didn't come up to play.'

'Pity! Why the hell would we want a fight for no purpose?'

'Because you could have got yourself one of their horses, sir,' Harper said, 'of course.'

'And why would I want a bloody horse?'

'Because Mister Slingsby's getting one, so he is. Told me so himself. The Colonel's giving him a horse, he is.'

'No bloody business of mine,' Sharpe said, but the thought of Lieutenant Slingsby on a horse nevertheless annoyed him. A horse, whether Sharpe wanted one or not, was a symbol of status. Bloody Slingsby, he thought, and stared at the distant hills and saw how low the sun had sunk. 'Let's go home,' he said.

'Yes, sir,' Harper said. He knew precisely why Mister Sharpe was in a bad mood, but he could not say as much. Officers were supposed to be brothers in arms, not blood enemies.

They marched in the dusk, leaving the hilltop white

and smoking. Ahead was the army and behind it the French.

Who had come back to Portugal.

Miss Sarah Fry, she had always disliked her last name, rapped a hand on the table. 'In English,' she insisted, 'in English.'

Tomas and Maria, eight and seven respectively, looked grumpy, but obediently changed from their native Portuguese to English. '"Robert has a hoop,"' Tomas read. '"Look, the hoop is red."'

'When are the French coming?' Maria asked.

'The French will not come,' Sarah said briskly, 'because Lord Wellington will stop them. What colour is the hoop, Maria?'

'*Rouge*,' Maria answered in French. 'So if the French are not coming why are we loading the wagons?'

'We do French on Tuesdays and Thursdays,' Sarah said briskly, 'and today is?'

'Wednesday,' said Tomas.

'Read on,' Sarah said, and she gazed out of the window to where the servants were putting furniture onto a wagon. The French were coming and everyone had been ordered to leave Coimbra and go south towards Lisbon. Some folk said the French approach was just a rumour and were refusing to leave, others had already gone. Sarah did not know what to believe, only that she had surprised herself by welcoming the excitement. She had been the governess in the Ferreira household for just three months and she suspected that the French invasion might be the means to extricate herself from a position that she now understood had been a mistake. She was thinking about her uncertain future when she realized that Maria was giggling because Tomas had just read that the donkey was blue,

and that was nonsense, and Miss Fry was not a young woman to tolerate nonsense. She rapped her knuckles on the crown of Tomas's head. 'What colour is the donkey?' she demanded.

'Brown,' Tomas said.

'Brown,' Sarah agreed, giving him another smart tap, 'and what are you?'

'A blockhead,' Tomas said, and then, under his breath, added, '*Cadela*.'

It meant 'bitch', and Tomas had said it slightly too loudly and was rewarded with a smart crack on the side of his head. 'I detest bad language,' Sarah said angrily, adding a second slap, 'and I detest rudeness, and if you cannot show good manners then I will ask your father to beat you.'

The mention of Major Ferreira snapped the two children to attention and a gloom descended over the schoolroom as Tomas struggled with the next page. It was essential for a Portuguese child to learn English and French if, when they grew up, they were to be accounted gentlefolk. Sarah wondered why they did not learn Spanish, but when she had suggested it to the Major he had looked at her with utter fury. The Spanish, he had answered, were the offspring of goats and monkeys, and his children would not foul their tongues with their savage language. So Tomas and Maria were being schooled in French and English by their governess who was twenty-two years old, blue-eyed, fair-haired and worried for her future.

Her father had died when Sarah was ten and her mother a year later, and Sarah had been raised by an uncle who had reluctantly paid for her schooling, but refused to provide any kind of dowry when she had reached eighteen, and so, cut off from the more lucrative part of the marriage market, she had become

a nursery maid for the children of an English diplomat who had been posted to Lisbon and it was there that Major Ferreira's wife had encountered her and offered to double her salary if she would school her two children. 'I want our children to be polished,' Beatriz Ferreira had said.

And so Sarah was in Coimbra, polishing the children and counting the heavy ticks of the big clock in the hall as, Tomas and Maria took turns to read from *Early Joys for Infant Souls*. '"The cow is sabbler,"' Maria read.

'Sable,' Sarah corrected her.

'What's sable?'

'Black.'

'Then why doesn't it say black?'

'Because it says sable. Read on.'

'Why aren't we leaving?' Maria asked.

'That is a question you must put to your father,' Sarah said, and she wished she knew the answer herself. Coimbra was evidently to be abandoned to the French, but the authorities insisted that the enemy should find nothing in the city except empty buildings. Every warehouse, larder and shop was to be stripped as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard. The French were to enter a barren land and there starve, but it seemed to Sarah, when she took her two young charges for their daily walks, that most of the storehouses were still full and the riverside quays were thickly heaped with British provisions. Some of the wealthy folk had gone, transporting their possessions on wagons, but Major Ferreira had evidently decided to wait until the last moment. He had ordered his best furniture packed onto a wagon in readiness, but he was curiously reluctant to take the decision to leave Coimbra. Sarah, before the Major had ridden north to join the army,

had asked him why he did not send the household to Lisbon and he had turned on her with his fierce gaze, seemed puzzled by her question, then dismissively told her not to worry.

Yet she did, and she was worried about Major Ferreira too. He was a generous employer, but he did not come from the highest rank of Portuguese society. There were no aristocrats in Ferreira's ancestry, no titles and no great landed estates. His father had been a professor of philosophy who had unexpectedly inherited wealth from a distant relative, and that legacy enabled Major Ferreira to live well, but not magnificently. A governess was judged not by how effectively she managed the children in her care, but by the social status of the family for whom she worked, and in Coimbra Major Ferreira possessed neither the advantages of aristocracy, nor the gift of great intelligence which was much admired in the university city. And as for his brother! Sarah's mother, God rest her soul, would have described Ferragus as being common as muck. He was the black sheep of the family, the wilful, wayward son who had run away as a child and come back rich, not to settle, but to terrorize the city like a wolf finding a home in the sheep pen. Sarah was frightened of Ferragus; everyone except the Major was frightened of Ferragus, and no wonder. The gossip in Coimbra said Ferragus was a bad man, a dishonest man, a crook even, and Major Ferreira was tarred by that brush, and in turn Sarah was smeared by it.

But she was trapped with the family, for she did not have enough money to pay her fare back to England and even if she got there, how was she to secure a new post without a glowing testimonial from her last employers? It was a dilemma, but Miss Sarah Fry was not a timid young woman and she faced the dilemma,

as she faced the French invasion, with a sense that she would survive. Life was not to be suffered, it was to be exploited.

'"Reynard is red,"' Maria read.

The clock ticked on.

It was not war as Sharpe knew it. The South Essex, withdrawing westwards into central Portugal, was now the army's rearguard, though two regiments of cavalry and a troop of horse gunners were behind them, serving as a screen to deter the enemy's forward cavalry units. The French were not pressing hard and so the South Essex had time to destroy whatever provisions they found, whether it was the harvest, an orchard or livestock, for nothing was to be left for the enemy. By rights every inhabitant and every scrap of food should already have gone south to find refuge behind the Lines of Torres Vedras, but it was astonishing how much remained. In one village they found a herd of goats hidden in a barn, and in another a great vat of olive oil. The goats were put to the bayonet and their corpses hurriedly buried in a ditch, and the oil was spilled onto the ground. French armies famously lived off the land, stealing what they needed, so the land was to be ravaged.

There was no evidence of a French pursuit. None of the galloper guns fired and no wounded cavalrymen appeared after a brief clash of sabres. Sharpe continually looked to the east and thought he saw the smear of dust in the sky kicked up by an army's boots, but it could easily have been a heat haze. There was an explosion at mid morning, but it came from ahead where, in a deep valley, British engineers had blown a bridge. The South Essex grumbled because they had to wade through the river rather than cross it by a roadway, but if the bridge had been left they would

have grumbled at being denied the chance to scoop up water as they waded the river.

Lieutenant Colonel the Honourable William Lawford, commanding officer of the first battalion of the South Essex regiment, spent much of the day at the rear of the column where he rode a new horse, a black gelding, of which he was absurdly proud. 'I gave Portia to Slingsby,' he told Sharpe. Portia was his previous horse, a mare that Slingsby now rode and thus appeared, to any casual onlooker, to be the commander of the light company. Lawford must have been aware of the contrast because he told Sharpe that officers ought to ride. 'It gives their men something to look up to, Sharpe,' he said. 'You can afford a horse, can't you?'

What Sharpe could or could not afford was not something he intended to share with the Colonel. 'I'd prefer they looked up to me instead of at the horse, sir,' Sharpe commented instead.

'You know what I mean.' Lawford refused to be offended. 'If you like, Sharpe, I'll cast about and find you something serviceable? Major Pearson of the gunners was talking about selling one of his hacks and I can probably squeeze a fair price from him.'

Sharpe said nothing. He was not fond of horses, but he nevertheless felt jealous that bloody Slingsby was riding one. Lawford waited for a response and, when none came, he spurred the gelding so that it picked up its hooves and trotted a few paces ahead. 'So what do you think, Sharpe, eh?' the Colonel demanded.

'Think, sir?'

'Of Lightning! That's his name. Lightning.' The Colonel patted the horse's neck. 'Isn't he superb?'

Sharpe stared at the horse, said nothing.

'Come, Sharpe!' Lawford encouraged him. 'Can't you see his quality, eh?'

'He's got four legs, sir,' Sharpe said.

'Oh, Sharpe!' the Colonel remonstrated. 'Really! Is that all you can say?' Lawford turned to Harper instead. 'What do you make of him, Sergeant?'

'He's wonderful, sir,' Harper said with genuine enthusiasm, 'just wonderful. Would he be Irish now?'

'He is!' Lawford was delighted. 'He is! Bred in County Meath. I can see you know your horses, Sergeant.' The Colonel fondled the gelding's ears. 'He takes fences like the wind. He'll hunt magnificently. Can't wait to get him home and set him at a few damn great hedgerows.' He leaned towards Sharpe and lowered his voice. 'He cost me a few pennies, I can tell you.'

'I'm sure he did, sir,' Sharpe said, 'and did you pass on my message about the telegraph station?'

'I did,' Lawford said, 'but they're busy at headquarters, Sharpe, damned busy, and I doubt they'll worry too much about a few pounds of flour. Still, you did the right thing.'

'I wasn't thinking of the flour, sir,' Sharpe said, 'but about Major Ferreira.'

'I'm sure there's an innocent explanation,' Lawford said airily, then rode ahead, leaving Sharpe scowling. He liked Lawford, whom he had known years before in India and who was a clever, genial man whose only fault, perhaps, was a tendency to avoid trouble. Not fighting trouble: Lawford had never shirked a fight with the French, but he hated confrontations within his own ranks. By nature he was a diplomat, always trying to smooth the corners and find areas of agreement, and Sharpe was hardly surprised that the Colonel had shied away from accusing Major Ferreira of dishonesty. In Lawford's world it was always best to believe that yapping dogs were really sleeping.

So Sharpe put the confrontation of the previous

day out of his mind and trudged on, half his thoughts conscious of what every man in the company was doing and the other half thinking of Teresa and Josefina, and he was still thinking of them when a horseman rode past him in the opposite direction, wheeled around in a flurry of dust and called to him. 'In trouble again, Richard?'

Sharpe, startled out of his daydream, looked up to see Major Hogan looking indecently cheerful. 'I'm in trouble, sir?'

'You do sound grim,' Hogan said. 'Get out of bed the wrong side, did you?'

'I was promised a month's leave, sir. A bloody month! And I got a week.'

'I'm sure you didn't waste it,' Hogan said. He was an Irishman, a Royal Engineer whose shrewdness had taken him away from engineering duties to serve Wellington as the man who collected every scrap of information about the enemy. Hogan had to sift rumours brought by pedlars, traders and deserters, he had to appraise every message sent by the partisans who harried the French on both sides of the frontier between Spain and Portugal, and he had to decipher the despatches, captured by the partisans from French messengers, some of them still stained with blood. He was also an old friend of Sharpe, and one who now frowned at the rifleman. 'A gentleman came to headquarters last night,' he said, 'to lodge an official complaint about you. He wanted to see the Peer, but Wellington's much too busy fighting the war, so the man was fobbed off on me. Luckily for you.'

'A gentleman?'

'I stretch the word to its uttermost limits,' Hogan said. 'Ferragus.'

'That bastard.'

'Illegitimacy is probably the one thing he cannot be accused of,' Hogan said.

'So what did he say?'

'That you hit him,' Hogan said.

'He can tell the truth, then,' Sharpe admitted.

'Good God, Richard!' Hogan examined Sharpe. 'You don't seem hurt. You really hit him?'

'Flattened the bastard,' Sharpe said. 'Did he tell you why?'

'Not precisely, but I can guess. Was he planning to sell food to the enemy?'

'Close on two tons of flour,' Sharpe said, 'and he had a bloody Portuguese officer with him.'

'His brother,' Hogan said, 'Major Ferreira.'

'His brother!'

'Not much alike, are they? But yes, they're brothers. Pedro Ferreira stayed home, went to school, joined the army, married decently, lives respectably, and his brother ran away in search of sinks of iniquity. Ferragus is a nickname, taken from some legendary Portuguese giant who was reputed to have skin that couldn't be pierced by a sword. Useful, that. But his brother is more useful. Major Ferreira does for the Portuguese what I do for the Peer, though I fancy he isn't quite as efficient as I am. But he has friends in the French headquarters.'

'Friends?' Sharpe sounded sceptical.

'More than a few Portuguese joined the French,' Hogan said. 'They're mostly idealists who think they're fighting for liberty, justice, brotherhood and all that airy nonsense. Major Ferreira somehow stays in touch with them, which is damned useful. But as for Ferragus!' Hogan paused, staring uphill to where a hawk hovered above the pale grass. 'Our giant is a bad lot, Richard, about as bad as they come. You know where he learned English?'

'How would I?'

'He joined a ship as a seaman when he ran away from home,' Hogan said, ignoring Sharpe's surly response, 'and then had the misfortune to be pressed into the Royal Navy. He learned lower-deck English, made a reputation as the fiercest bare-knuckle fighter in the Atlantic fleet, then deserted in the West Indies. He apparently joined a slave ship and rose up through the ranks. Now he calls himself a merchant, but I doubt he trades in anything legal.'

'Slaves?'

'Not any longer,' Hogan said, 'but that's how he made his money. Shipping the poor devils from the Guinea coast to Brazil. Now he lives in Coimbra where he's rich and makes his money in mysterious ways. He's quite an impressive man, don't you think, and not without his advantages?'

'Advantages?'

'Major Ferreira claims his brother has contacts throughout Portugal and western Spain, which sounds very likely.'

'So you let him get away with treason?'

'Something like that,' Hogan agreed equably. 'Two tons of flour isn't much, not in the greater scheme of things, and Major Ferreira persuades me his brother is on our side. Whatever, I apologized to our giant, said you were a crude man of no refinement, assured him that you would be severely reprimanded, which you may now consider done, and promised that he would never see you again.' Hogan beamed at Sharpe. 'So the matter is closed.'

'So I do my duty,' Sharpe said, 'and land in the shit.'

'You have at last seized the essence of soldiering,' Hogan said happily, 'and Marshal Masséna is landing in the same place.'

'He is?' Sharpe asked. 'I thought we were retreating and he was advancing?'

Hogan laughed. 'There are three roads he could have chosen, Richard, two very good ones and one quite rotten one, and in his wisdom he chose this one, the bad one.' It was indeed a bad road, merely two rutted wheel tracks either side of a strip of grass and weeds, and littered with rocks large enough to break a wagon or gun wheel. 'And this bad road,' Hogan went on, 'leads straight to a place called Bussaco.'

'Am I supposed to have heard of it?'

'A very bad place,' Hogan went on, 'for anyone attacking it. And the Peer is gathering troops there in hope of giving Monsieur Masséna a bloody nose. Something to look forward to, Richard, something to anticipate.' He raised a hand, kicked back his heels and rode ahead, nodding to Major Forrest who came the other way.

'Two ovens in the next village, Sharpe,' Forrest said, 'and the Colonel would like your lads to deal with them.'

The ovens were great brick caves in which the villagers had baked their bread. The light company used pickaxes to reduce them to rubble so the French could not use them. They left the precious ovens destroyed and then marched on.

To a place called Bussaco.