

Extracts from the book "A Ship of the Line" (Captain Hornblower) by CS Forester (1938)

..... The fall of Rosas would indeed be a resounding success if it could be achieved. As a town with practicable communication with the sea it could hardly be retaken by the French now that there was a strong English squadron on the spot to sustain it. It would be a constant threat to the French communications, a base where Spanish armies from anywhere in the Peninsula could be thrown on shore, of such importance that the Seventh Corps would be bound to cease their attempts at the conquest of Catalonia and concentrate all their strength on the task of retaking it or observing it. But it was Spanish information that there was no French field army within reach. It was a Spanish promise to bring Rovira down from Olot to effect a siege, and a Spanish promise to have transport animals ready to drag the siege train from the landing point.

But with Leighton set upon it, there was nothing for it but to go through with the affair wholeheartedly. If everything went right, they would win a great success, and although Hornblower had never yet heard of a combined operation of war in which everything went right, he could still hope for one, and draft his arrangements for the landing of the siege train from the fleet in accordance with that hope.

Two nights later the squadron came gliding in the early darkness, with the hills and cliffs of the Cape Creux peninsula looming faintly in the distance, to drop anchor together off the sand cove beside Selva de Mar which had been agreed upon as the best place for landing. Four miles to the westward was the battery at Llanza; five miles to the east was the battery on the end of Cape Creux, and six miles due southward, across the root of the long peninsula of which Cape Creux forms the tip, lay the town of Rosas.

"Good luck, sir," said Bush, looming up in the darkness of the quarterdeck as Hornblower made ready to go down into his barge.

"Thank you, Bush," answered Hornblower. The punctilious 'Mr' could be dropped occasionally in unofficial speeches of this sort. But the fact that he found his hand sought and gripped by Bush's large horny one was an indication that Bush took the most serious view of the impending operation.

The barge took him quickly over the placid water which reflected the numberless stars overhead; soon the noise of the gentle waves breaking on the sandy beach was louder than the subdued rumbling of the landing force in process of embarkation. A sharp challenge came from the beach to the approaching boat; it was pleasant to hear that it was worded in Spanish, which made it appear much less likely that it was a French force posted there to oppose a landing, and probable that it was the party of guerilleros who had been promised. Hornblower stepped ashore, and a group of cloaked figures, just visible in the starlight, came down the beach towards them.

"The English captain?" asked one of them in Spanish.

"Captain Horatio Hornblower, at your service."

"I am Colonel Juan **Clarós**, of the third tercio of Catalan migueletes. I bid you welcome in the name of Colonel Rovira."

"Thank you. How many men have you here?"

"My tercio. That is to say a thousand men."

"How many animals?"

"Fifty horses and a hundred mules."

Villena had promised that all northern Catalonia would be swept for draught animals for the siege train.

There were four miles of hill paths and a mile of flat plain to be covered between here and Rosas - it would take fifty horses to drag one of the two and a half ton twenty-four pounders over rough country. Had there been fewer animals than this Hornblower would have refused to move, but the Spaniards had provided the barest minimum necessary.

"Take the barge back," said Hornblower to Longley. "The landing can proceed."

Then he turned again to **Clarós**.

"Where is Colonel Rovira?"

"He is over beyond Castellon, closing in on Rosas."

"What is his force?"

"He has every Spaniard able to carry arms in northern Catalonia, Captain, except for my tercio. Seven thousand men at least."

"H'm."

That was exactly according to plan. The army was to be under the walls at dawn, and to be joined as quickly as possible by the siege train, so that the battering could start without delay immediately upon the alarm being given. There was only the barest minimum of time available to reduce Rosas before the main French army could come up from Barcelona. Hornblower felt that he must make every effort to carry out his part of the programme, since the Spaniards were adhering so closely to theirs.

"Have you any patrol watching Rosas?" asked Hornblower.

"A squadron of regular cavalry. They will give the alarm if any sortie comes from the fortress."

"Excellent."

He would not be able to get the guns far from the beach before dawn, and by that time Rovira would have hemmed Rosas in, while any hitch would be reported by the cavalry. It was a good piece of organisation. Hornblower felt he had misjudged the Spaniards, or perhaps these Catalan irregulars were better soldiers than the ordinary Spanish army - which was not unlikely.

The steady splash of oars heralded the approach of the boats of the squadron; the leading ones were up to the beach and the men in them came tumbling out, stirring up a faint phosphorescence in the water. The white crossbelts of the marines showed up in startling contrast with their red coats, which appeared black in the faint light.

"Major Laird!"

"Sir!"

"Take a party to the top of the cliff. Post your pickets where you think best, but remember your orders. Allow nobody out of earshot."

Hornblower wanted to have a solid disciplined force out as a screen in front of him, not trusting Spanish precautions against surprise, but in darkness, and with three languages - Spanish, Catalan, and English - in use, he did not want to risk any muddle or misunderstanding. It was the sort of minor technical difficulty which could not be appreciated by an admiral without experience. The long boats with the guns were grounding far out in the shallows. Men were already hauling into position the rough landing pontoon of spars

lashed into rafts, the outer sections buoyed up by casks, which Hornblower had had prepared. Cavendish, the first lieutenant of the Pluto, was doing this part of the work thoroughly well and without troubling Hornblower for orders.

"Where are the horses and mules, Colonel?"

"Up above."

"I shall want them down here shortly."

It was only a matter of minutes for most of the material to be brought ashore, even though a thousand rounds of shot for the twenty-four pounders - a hundred rounds per gun, one day's consumption - weighed over ten tons. Three hundred seamen and three hundred marines, working under naval discipline, could land ten tons of shot, and the necessary powder barrels, and the beef and bread for one day's rations, in no time worth mentioning. It was the guns which presented the greatest difficulty. The first of the ten twenty-four pounders was only now being coaxed on to the pontoon, for it was a desperate business to run it up the brief ramp from the platform built on the thwarts, where it had been precariously perched during its passage from the ship, over the boat's gunwale. The pontoon sank under its ponderous weight until its surface was awash. Two hundred men, thigh deep in water, toiled on the dragropes which were attached to the gun, and floundering and splashing, their feet seeking foothold in the soft sand below and finding none, they gradually hauled the thing towards the beach.

Like all guns Hornblower had ever seen, it behaved with a pigheaded obstinacy that might have been instigated by infernal powers with a perverted sense of humour. Although it had been fitted, by Hornblower's orders, with specially large trucks to make it more easy to surmount inequalities of surface, it caught and stuck, over and over again, in its passage over the spars. Handspikes and crowbars were handled diligently in the dark by Cavendish and his men to coax it over the inequalities. And then it would slew round, with Cavendish bellowing to the men to avast, for fear lest the maddening thing should run clean off the platform in the water alongside; only when it had been pushed and heaved straight again could the men tail on to the dragropes once more. There were ten of these guns; Hornblower reflected, and four miles of paths, uphill and down, over which they had to be dragged.

He had had the base of the pier prolonged over the sand by further rafts of timber laid out there, right up to where the sand gave place to the rock bottom of the steep combe which seamed the cliff here and led to the summit. The horses and mules, each with a man at its head whose rags were obvious in the darkness, were waiting here in a great herd, but of course the Spaniards, although they knew they had come to drag guns, had provided no sort of harness for the operation.

"Here, you men," said Hornblower, turning to a waiting group of sailors. "There's plenty of line over there. Harness up these horses to the gun. You can find some spare canvas if you look for it."

"Aye aye, sir."

It was quite fantastic to see what seamen could turn their hands to. They fell to work with a will, knotting and tying. The English words they used may have sounded strange to the Spanish horses' ears as they wheeled the animals into position, but they seemed to be effective enough. Even the horse-holders, gabbling Catalan, pushed and shoved until they were more help than hindrance. Whinnying and clattering in the darkness - barely relieved by the light of a dozen lanterns - the puzzled brutes were got into line. Rope collars padded with canvas were slipped over their heads, rope traces were passed back to the eyebolts in the gun carriage.

"Avast!" roared one of the sailors just as the strain was beginning to come on. "This beggar's got his starboard leg over the line."

By the time the second gun had reached the water's edge they were ready to start hauling up the first. Whips cracked and sailors shouted. The horses plunged as they sought foothold in the sand, but the gun began to move, with a vast creaking and cracking of timber under the trucks. The movement was spasmodic and jerky, and when they began to breast the steep slope of the combe it died away altogether. Twenty Spanish horses, underfed and undersized, could not haul that gun up the slope.

"Mr Moore," said Hornblower, irritably. "See that that gun is hauled up."

"Aye aye, sir."

A hundred men on dragropes as well as twenty horses managed it, aided by a party behind with crowbars to help over the worst inequalities and to sprag the wheels with rocks at moments when neither men nor horses could pull for another second. Hornblower felt he had really accomplished a great deal when he stood on the summit, with dawn creeping out of the sea, and looked at the line of ten guns, and the mountain of stores, which had been all dragged up in the course of the night.

The gradual coming of the light enabled him to look about him. Down below was the golden beach, dotted with details of the landing party, and beyond that the blue sea, with the ships of the squadron rolling to their anchors. On his own level the summit of the peninsula stretched in a rocky, uneven expanse before him. Over to his right the rock broke completely through in a vast table-topped hill, but southward, in the direction of Rosas which he would have to follow, a narrow goat path wound through the low scrub of arbutus bushes. **Clarós** beside him was revealed as a lean man, sunburnt to the colour of tobacco, with a long black moustache above an excellent set of white teeth, which he displayed in a smile.

"I have a horse for you, Captain."

"Thank you, Colonel. That is very kind of you."

There were a few brown figures creeping dispiritedly about the rocks; in the dips between the low crests there were brown masses which were just beginning to disintegrate in the sunlight from huddles of sleeping men into sleepy groups, who, still clutching their blankets about them, moved aimlessly here and there. Hornblower regarded his allies with a disfavour which was not diminished by the fact that it was exactly what he had anticipated, and which was intensified by his sleepless night.

"Would you be so kind," he said, "as to send a message to Colonel Rovira, telling him that we are about to march on Rosas, and that I hope to reach there with at least some of the guns at noon?"

"Certainly, Captain."

"And I must ask you for the help of your men in the transport of my guns and stores."

Clarós looked more dubious at that, and more dubious still when he was told that of his men four hundred would be needed to help with the guns while another four hundred would have to carry a twenty-four pound cannon ball each all the way to Rosas. Hornblower overrode his objections a little crossly.

"And after that, Colonel," he said, "they will have to return here for more. I was promised a sufficiency of pack animals; if you do not supply me with four-legged ones, I must use those with two. Now, if you please, I want to get the column started."

Ten horses or mules to every gun, with a hundred men at the drag-ropes. A hundred men ahead to labour on the task of improving the path, rolling rocks out of the way and filling up holes. Four hundred men carrying cannonballs, some of them leading the packmules with gunpowder kegs slung over their backs. **Clarós** looked still more askance when it became apparent that every man of his tercio would be at work, while Hornblower proposed to leave two hundred of his marines free of any labouring duty.

"That is how I wish it arranged, Colonel. If you do not like it, you can try to find a Spanish battering train."

Hornblower was determined upon keeping a substantial portion of his disciplined force closed up and ready for an emergency, and his determination was obvious enough to silence **Clarós'** protests.

There was already an outcry behind them where the mules were being loaded up. Hornblower strode over with **Clarós** at his heels, to find a Spanish officer threatening Gray with a drawn sword, his ragged guerilleros behind him handling their muskets.

"What's all this? What is happening here?" demanded Hornblower, first in English and then in Spanish. Everybody turned to him all speaking at once, like schoolboys in a playground dispute. The officer's explosive Catalan was almost incomprehensible to him, and he turned to listen to Gray.

"It's like this, sir," said the master's mate, displaying a lighted cigar in his hand. "This Dago lieutenant here, sir, he was a-smoking this while we was loading up the mules. I says to him, very respectful, sir, 'No smoking in the magazine, sir,' but he didn't take no notice, not understanding, maybe. So I says to him, I says, 'No smokingo, magazine, señor,' an' he just blew out a puff of smoke and turned his back on me. So I took away his cigar, an' he drew his sword, sir."

Clarós had at the same time heard his officer's explanation, and **Clarós** and Hornblower faced each other.

"Your sailor has insulted my officer," said **Clarós**.

"Your officer has been very foolish," said Hornblower.

It seemed like an impasse.

"Look, sir," said Gray, suddenly. He pointed to one of the barrels swinging against the ribs of the patient mule who bore it. It was slightly stove, and a thin black trickle of powder had run from it. There was powder on the mule's flank, powder on the ground. The danger of fire was obvious, must be obvious even to a Catalan. **Clarós** could not suppress a half smile as he looked.

"My sailor acted hastily," said Hornblower, "but I think you will admit, Colonel, that he was in part justified. He will tender a profound apology, and then, perhaps, you will issue strict orders against smoking near the powder."

"Very well," said **Clarós**.

Hornblower turned to Gray.

"Say to the officer 'God save our gracious king, señor.' Say it humbly."

Gray looked startled.

"Go on, man," said Hornblower testily. "Do what I say."

"God save our gracious king, señor," said Gray, in a tone that was at least unnatural, if not humble.

'The man wishes to express to you his profound regret for his rudeness,' explained Hornblower to the officer, and **Clarós** nodded approvingly, spat out a couple of brief orders, and turned away. The crisis was over, and no feelings hurt on either side. The sailors were grinning and cheerful, while the Catalans looked proudly down upon the lighthearted barbarians.

CHAPTER XVIII

Captain Hornblower checked his horse on the top of the last of the hitherto interminable rocky undulations. The August sun was blazing overhead, and innumerable flies plagued him and his horse and his companions. At his side rode **Clarós**, behind them Longley and Brown sat uneasily their rawboned Rosinantes along with the three Spanish staff officers. Far back along the path was a solid block of scarlet. Major Laird had his marines formed up as an advance guard, while here and there on the grey-green hills scarlet dots showed where he had posted pickets as a precaution against surprise. Farther back still could be seen a caterpillar of men, naked to the waist, labouring at their task of improving the path for the guns, and beyond that a sort of multiple caterpillar with a black dot at the end showed where the first gun had reached. In five hours it had travelled little more than three miles. Hornblower, looking up at the sun, saw that he had an hour and a half left in which to keep his appointment - in which to haul his guns over a mile of rock and over a mile of the plain which lay below him. He felt a twinge of conscience at the thought that he would probably be a little late with the first of the guns, and he certainly would not be able to open fire against the walls before five or six o'clock in the evening.

There below him, a mile away but seemingly much nearer in the clear air, lay the town of Rosas. Hornblower could recognise all the features of the place which his map indicated. To the right was the citadel - from his elevated position Hornblower could see the pentagonal outline of its grey ramparts, with the blue sea behind. In the centre was the town itself, a single long street lying close to the shore, with a line of earthworks guarding it on the landward side. To the left was the high tower of Fort Trinidad on the other flank. The weakest point was undoubtedly the centre, but it would be of little use assailing that, as the citadel and the Trinidad could hold out independently. The best course would be to take the bull by the horns and breach and storm the citadel by an attack delivered from close by the water's edge. The town could not be held if the citadel fell, although the Trinidad might cause further trouble.

Hornblower had allowed his thoughts to run away with him. He had been so busy planning the reduction of Rosas that he had not even noticed the general peacefulness of the scene. The tricoloured flags flapped idly from the flagstaves in the citadel and the Trinidad, and they were the most warlike things in sight. There was no sign on the bare plain of any besieging army. Meanwhile it could only be a question of hours before the garrison discovered how near to them lay a valuable convoy, and how weak was the force guarding it.

"Where is the army of Catalonia?" Hornblower demanded angrily, of **Clarós**. He received a deprecatory shrug of the shoulders.

"I do not know, Captain."

To Hornblower it meant that his precious convoy, and his far more precious landing party, were strung out over three miles of country within easy reach of any column which the governor of Rosas might send out.

"You told me Colonel Rovira was marching on Rosas last night!"

"He seems to have been delayed."

"The messenger - the one you said you would send at dawn - has he returned?"

Clarós, by a raising of his eyebrows and a jerk of the head, passed this question on to the chief of staff.

"He did not go," said this officer.

"What?" said Hornblower in English. He had to fight down his bewilderment and struggle with his dazed senses in order to speak Spanish again. "Why not?"

"It would have put the officer to unnecessary trouble," said the chief of staff. "If Colonel Rovira comes, he

comes. If he cannot, no message of ours will bring him."

Hornblower pointed over to the right. In a fold of the hills a line of some fifty picketed horses and a few groups of seated men indicated the position of the squadron of cavalry which had been watching the town since yesterday.

"Why did they not report that Colonel Rovira had not arrived?" he demanded.

"The officer commanding had my orders to report when he did arrive," answered Clarós.

He was showing no signs of indignation at the barely concealed contempt in Hornblower's expression, but Hornblower kept his rage in hand for a little longer in his endeavour to keep the enterprise alive.

"We are in a very considerable danger here," he said.

Clarós shrugged his shoulders again at the Englishman's timidity.

"My men are used to the mountains. If the garrison comes out to attack us we can get away by goat paths over there," he answered, pointing away to the precipitous sides of the mesa in the distance. "They will never dare to follow us there, and if they did they would never catch us."

"But my guns? My men?"

"In war there is always danger," said Clarós loftily.

Hornblower's answer was to turn to Longley.

"Ride back at once," he said to the boy. "Halt the guns. Halt the convoy. Halt every man on the path. Nothing is to move a yard farther without orders from me."

"Aye aye, sir."

Longley wheeled his horse round and clattered off; the boy had somewhere learned to ride well before coming to sea. Clarós and his staff, Hornblower and Brown, all watched him go, and then turned back to face each other. The Spaniards could guess what were the orders that had been given him.

"Not a gun or a man of mine will stir," said Hornblower, "until I see Colonel Rovira's army on the plain there. Will you be good enough to send a message to him now?"

Clarós tugged at his long moustache and then gave the order to his staff; his junior officers argued sulkily with each other before one of them took the note written by the chief of staff and set off with it. Clearly no one relished the prospect of a ride of perhaps twenty miles under a hot sun in search of Rovira's column.

"It is nearly the hour for dinner," said Clarós. "Will you have my men's food served out to them, Captain?"

Hornblower's jaw dropped at that. He had thought nothing more could surprise him, and he was proved wrong. Clarós' tobacco-brown face gave no indication that he thought there was anything other than what was strictly ordinary in his assumption that his thousand men were to feed on the stores laboriously landed from the squadron. It was on the tip of Hornblower's tongue to refuse pointblank, but he stopped to consider. He guessed that if they were not fed, Clarós' men would simply melt away in search of food, and there was still a faint chance that Rovira might arrive and the siege be taken in hand. For the sake of that chance, it was as well to make this concession and make the most of the few hours granted them before their presence should be discovered.

"I will give orders for it," he said, and the dignified colonel's expression showed no change at either demanding or receiving favours from the Englishman with whom he had just been on the verge of quarrelling.

Soon sailors and Catalans were all of them eating heartily. Even the squadron of cavalry smelt food from afar, like vultures, and rode hastily back to job in the feast, leaving only an unhappy half dozen to continue the watch over Rosas. Clarós and his staff seated themselves in a group ministered to by orderlies. And as was to be expected, comida was followed by siesta - after a vast meal every Spaniard stretched himself in the shade which the shrub afforded, and snored, flat on his back, with a Peninsula disregard for the flies which buzzed over his open mouth.

Hornblower neither ate nor slept. He dismounted and gave his horse over into Brown's charge, and then hobbled up and down on his hill top looking down at Rosas, with his heart full of bitterness. He had written carefully to the admiral to explain the reason of his halt - carefully, because he did not want to belong to the type of officer who sees difficulties at every turn - and the answer had simply enraged him. Was it not possible, Leighton had asked in his reply, to attempt something against the fortress with the fifteen hundred men he had in hand? Where was Colonel Rovira? The tone of that question indicated that Hornblower was somehow at fault regarding Rovira's non-arrival. Captain Hornblower must remember the need to work in the closest and most cordial co-operation with England's allies. The squadron could not possibly continue to supply Rovira's force with food for long; Hornblower must tactfully call Colonel Rovira's attention to the need of drawing upon his own sources of supplies. It was highly important that the arrival of the British squadron should be signalled by a great success, but on no account was any operation to be undertaken which might imperil the safety of the landing party. Leighton's letter was a completely futile piece of writing, having regard for the present facts, but a Court of Inquiry who knew nothing of them would consider it eminently sane and sensible.

"Begging your pardon, sir," said Brown, suddenly. "The Froggies down there is on the move."

Startled, Hornblower looked down at Rosas. There were three serpents issuing out of the fortress - three long narrow columns of troops creeping out on to the plain, one each from the citadel, the village, and the Trinidad. A hoarse shout from the Spanish cavalry picket proclaimed that they had seen the same phenomenon; the little party left their post and rode headlong back to the scattered Spanish army. Hornblower went on staring for two more minutes; the columns showed no sign of ending, but wound on interminably out of the fortifications. Two were heading towards him, while the one from the citadel was taking a different route, off to his right, with the dear intention of cutting off the Spanish retreat to the mainland. Hornblower's eye caught the flash of musket barrels in the sunlight; still the columns were winding out - there must be a thousand men at least in each. The Spanish information which had estimated the garrison's strength at two thousand as a maximum must be as faulty as all the rest.

Clarós came clattering up with his staff to gaze out over the plain. He paused only for an instant to take in the significance of what he saw - every man with him pointed simultaneously to the outflanking column - and then he wheeled about and spurred back again. As he wheeled his eyes met Hornblower's; they were expressionless as ever, but Hornblower knew what he intended. If he abandoned the convoy and marched his men with all haste for the mesa, he could just get away in time, and he was set upon it. Hornblower knew in that instant that there was not the least use appealing to him to cover the retreat of the convoy, even if the Catalans were steady enough to fight a rearguard action against greatly superior numbers.

The safety of the landing party was dependent solely on its own exertions, and there was not a moment to be lost Hornblower scrambled on to his horse - the heads of the French columns were well out on to the plain now, and some would be soon ascending the steep escarpment of the plateau - and dashed back after Clarós. Then, as he neared the place where Major Laird had his marines already drawn up into line, he checked the pace of his weary horse to a sober trot. It would never do to display too much haste or anxiety. That would only unsteady the men..... End of extracts