Chapter 56

CONCLUSION

In the meantime the French army continued its march, and on the 5th of June it entered Milan.

There was little resistance. The fort of Milan was invested. Murat, sent to Piacenza, had taken the city without a blow. Lannes had defeated General Ott at Montebello. Thus disposed, the French army was in the rear of the Austrians before the latter were aware of it.

During the night of the 8th of June a courier arrived from Murat, who, as we have said, was occupying Piacenza. Murat had intercepted a despatch from General Melas, and was now sending it to Bonaparte. This despatch announced the capitulation of Genoa; Masséna, after eating horses, dogs, cats and rats, had been forced to surrender. Melas spoke of the Army of the Reserves with the utmost contempt; he declared that the story of Bonaparte's presence in Italy was a hoax; and asserted that he knew for certain that the First Consul was in Paris.

Here was news that must instantly be imparted to Bonaparte, for it came under the category of bad news. Consequently, Bourrienne woke him up at three o'clock in the morning and translated the despatch. Bonaparte's first words were as follows:

"Pooh! Bourrienne, you don't understand German."

But Bourrienne repeated the translation word for word. After this reading the general rose, had everybody waked up, gave his orders, and then went back to bed and to sleep.

That same day he left Milan and established his headquarters at Stradella; there he remained until June 12th, left on the 13th, and marched to the

Scrivia through Montebello, where he saw the field of-battle, still torn and bleeding after Lannes' victory. The traces of death were everywhere; the church was still overflowing with the dead and wounded.

"The devil!" said the First Consul to the victor, "you must have made it pretty hot here."

"So hot, general, that the bones in my division were cracking and rattling like hail on a skylight."

Desaix joined the First Consul on the 11th of June, while he was still at Stradella. Released by the capitulation of El-Arish, he had reached Toulon the 6th of May, the very day on which Bonaparte left Paris. At the foot of the Mont Saint-Bernard Bonaparte received a letter from him, asking whether he should march to Paris or rejoin the army.

"Start for Paris, indeed!" exclaimed Bonaparte; "write him to rejoin the army at headquarters, wherever that may be."

Bourrienne had written, and, as we have seen, Desaix joined the army the 11th of June, at Stradella. The First Consul received him with twofold joy. In the first place, he regained a man without ambition, an intelligent officer and a devoted friend. In the second place, Desaix arrived just in the nick of time to take charge of the division lately under Boudet, who had been killed. Through a false report, received through General Gardannes, the First Consul was led to believe that the enemy refused to give battle and was retiring to Genoa. He sent Desaix and his division on the road to Novi to cut them off.

The night of the 13th passed tranquilly. In spite of a heavy storm, an engagement had taken place the preceding evening in which the Austrians had been defeated. It seemed as though men and nature were wearied alike, for all was still during the night. Bonaparte was easy in his mind; there was but one bridge over the Bormida, and he had been assured that that was

down. Pickets were stationed as far as possible along the Bormida, each with four scouts.

The whole of the night was occupied by the enemy in crossing the river. At two in the morning two parties of scouts were captured; seven of the eight men were killed, the eighth made his way back to camp crying: "To arms!"

A courier was instantly despatched to the First Consul, who was sleeping at Torre di Galifo. Meanwhile, till orders could be received, the drums beat to arms all along the line. A man must have shared in such a scene to understand the effect produced on a sleeping army by the roll of drums calling to arms at three in the morning. The bravest shuddered. The troops were sleeping in their clothes; every man sprang up, ran to the stacked arms, and seized his weapons.

The lines formed on the vast plains of Marengo. The noise of the drums swept on like a train of lighted powder. In the dim half-light the hasty movements of the pickets could be seen. When the day broke, the French troops were stationed as follows:

The division Gardannes and the division Chamberlhac, forming the extreme advance, were encamped around a little country-place called Petra Bona, at the angle formed by the highroad from Marengo to Tortona, and the Bormida, which crosses the road on its way to the Tanaro.

The corps of General Lannes was before the village of San Giuliano, the place which Bonaparte had pointed out to Roland three months earlier, telling him that on that spot the fate of the campaign would be decided.

The Consular guard was stationed some five hundred yards or so in the rear of Lannes.

The cavalry brigade, under General Kellermann, and a few squadrons of chasseurs and hussars, forming the left, filled up, along the advanced line, the gap between the divisions of Gardannes and Chamberlhac.

A second brigade, under General Champeaux, filled up the gap on the right between General Lannes' cavalry.

And finally the twelfth regiment of hussars, and the twenty-first chasseurs, detached by Murat under the orders of General Rivaud, occupied the opening of the Valley of Salo and the extreme right of the position.

These forces amounted to about twenty-five or six thousand men, not counting the divisions Monnet and Boudet, ten thousand men in all, commanded by Desaix, and now, as we have said, detached from the main army to cut off the retreat of the enemy to Genoa. Only, instead of making that retreat, the enemy were now attacking.

During the day of the 13th of June, General Melas, commander-in-chief of the Austrian army, having succeeded in reuniting the troops of Generals Haddich, Kaim and Ott, crossed the Tanaro, and was now encamped before Alessandria with thirty-six thousand infantry, seven thousand cavalry, and a numerous well-served and well-horsed artillery.

At four o'clock in the morning the firing began and General Victor assigned all to their line of battle. At five Bonaparte was awakened by the sound of cannon. While he was dressing, General Victor's aide-de-camp rode up to tell him that the enemy had crossed the Bormida and was attacking all along the line of battle.

The First Consul called for his horse, and, springing upon it, galloped off toward the spot where the fighting was going on. From the summit of the hill he could overlook the position of both armies.

The enemy was formed in three columns; that on the left, comprising all the cavalry and light infantry, was moving toward Castel-Ceriolo by the Salo road, while the columns of the right and centre, resting upon each other and comprising the infantry regiments under Generals Haddich, Kaim and O'Reilly, and the reserve of grenadiers under command of General Ott, were advancing along the Tortona road and up the Bormida.

The moment they crossed the river the latter columns came in contact with the troops of General Gardannes, posted, as we have said, at the farmhouse and the ravine of Petra Bona. It was the noise of the artillery advancing in this direction that had brought Bonaparte to the scene of battle. He arrived just as Gardannes' division, crushed under the fire of that artillery, was beginning to fall back, and General Victor was sending forward Chamberlhac's division to its support. Protected by this move, Gardannes' troops retreated in good order, and covered the village of Marengo.

The situation was critical; all the plans of the commander-in-chief were overthrown. Instead of attacking, as was his wont, with troops judiciously massed, he was attacked himself before he could concentrate his forces. The Austrians, profiting by the sweep of land that lay before them, ceased to march in columns, and deployed in lines parallel to those of Gardannes and Chamberlhac--with this difference, that they were two to the French army's one. The first of these lines was commanded by General Haddich, the seeond by General Melas, the third by General Ott.

At a short distance from the Bormida flows a stream called the Fontanone, which passes through a deep ravine forming a semicircle round the village of Marengo, and protecting it. General Victor had already divined the advantages to be derived from this natural intrenchment, and be used it to rally the divisions of Gardannes and Chamberlhac.

Bonaparte, approving Victor's arrangements, sent him word to defend Marengo to the very last extremity. He himself needed time to prepare his game on this great chess-board inclosed between the Bormida, the Fontanone, and Marengo.

His first step was to recall Desaix, then marching, as we have said, to cut the retreat to Genoa. General Bonaparte sent off two or three aides-de-camp with orders not to stop until they had reached that corps. Then he waited, seeing clearly that there was nothing to do but to fall back in as orderly a manner as possible, until he could gather a compact mass that would enable him, not only to stop the retrograde movement, but to assume the offensive.

But this waiting was horrible.

Presently the action was renewed along the whole line. The Austrians had reached one bank of the Fontanone, of which the French occupied the other. Each was firing on the other from either side of the ravine; grape-shot flew from side to side within pistol range. Protected by its terrible artillery, the enemy had only to extend himself a little more to overwhelm Bonaparte's forces. General Rivaud, of Gardannes' division, saw the Austrians preparing for this manoeuvre. He marched out from Marengo, and placed a battalion in the open with orders to die there rather than retreat, then, while that battalion drew the enemy's fire, he formed his cavalry in column, came round the flank of the battalion, fell upon three thousand Austrians advancing to the charge, repulsed them, threw them into disorder, and, all wounded as he was by a splintered ball, forced them back behind their own lines. After that he took up a position to the right of the battalion, which had not retreated a step.

But during this time Gardannes' division, which had been struggling with the enemy from early morning, was driven back upon Marengo, followed by the first Austrian line, which forced Chamberlhac's division to retreat in like manner. There an aide-de-camp sent by Bonaparte ordered the two divisions to rally and retake Marengo at any cost.

General Victor reformed them, put himself at their head, forced his way through the streets, which the Austrians had not had time to barricade, retook the village, lost it again, took it a third time, and then, overwhelmed by numbers, lost it for the third time.

It was then eleven o'clock. Desaix, overtaken by Bonaparte's aide-de-camp, ought at that hour to be on his way to the battle.

Meanwhile, Lannes with his two divisions came to the help of his struggling comrades. This reinforcement enabled Gardannes and Chamberlhac to reform their lines parallel to the enemy, who had now debouched, through Marengo, to the right and also to the left of the village.

The Austrians were on the point of overwhelming the French.

Lannes, forming his centre with the divisions rallied by Victor, deployed with his two least exhausted divisions for the purpose of opposing them to the Austrian wings. The two corps--the one excited by the prospect of victory, the other refreshed by a long rest--flung themselves with fury into the fight, which was now renewed along the whole line.

After struggling an hour, hand to hand, bayonet to bayonet, General Kaim's corps fell back; General Champeaux, at the head of the first and eighth regiments of dragoons, charged upon him, increasing his disorder. General Watrin, with the sixth light infantry and the twenty-second and fortieth of the line, started in pursuit and drove him nearly a thousand rods beyond the rivulet. But this movement separated the French from their own corps; the centre divisions were endangered by the victory on the right, and Generals Watrin and Champeaux were forced to fall back to the lines they had left uncovered.

At the same time Kellermann was doing on the left wing what Champeaux and Watrin had done on the right. Two cavalry charges made an opening through the enemy's line; but behind that first line was a second. Not daring to go further forward, because of superior numbers, Kellermann lost the fruits of that momentary victory.

It was now noon. The French army, which undulated like a flaming serpent along a front of some three miles, was broken in the centre. The centre,

retreating, abandoned the wings. The wings were therefore forced to follow the retrograde movement. Kellermann to the left, Watrin to the right, had given their men the order to fall back. The retreat was made in squares, under the fire of eighty pieces of artillery which preceded the main body of the Austrian army. The French ranks shrank visibly; men were borne to the ambulances by men who did not return.

One division retreated through a field of ripe wheat; a shell burst and fired the straw, and two or three thousand men were caught in the midst of a terrible conflagration; cartridge-boxes exploded, and fearful disorder reigned in the ranks.

It was then that Bonaparte sent forward the Consular guard.

Up they went at a charge, deployed in line of battle, and stopped the enemy's advance. Meantime the mounted grenadiers dashed forward at a gallop and overthrew the Austrian cavalry.

Meanwhile the division which had escaped from the conflagration received fresh cartridges and reformed in line. But this movement had no other result than to prevent the retreat from becoming a rout.

It was two o'clock.

Bonaparte watched the battle, sitting on the bank of a ditch beside the highroad to Alessandria. He was alone. His left arm was slipped through his horse's bridle; with the other he flicked the pebbles in the road with the tip of his riding-whip. Cannon-balls were plowing the earth about him. He seemed indifferent to this great drama on which hung all his hopes. Never had he played so desperate a game--six years of victory against the crown of France!

Suddenly he roused from his revery. Amid the dreadful roar of cannon and musketry his ear caught the hoof-beats of a galloping horse. He raised his head. A rider, dashing along at full speed, his horse covered with white froth, came from the direction of Novi. When he was within fifty feet, Bonaparte gave one cry:

"Roland!"

The latter dashed on, crying: "Desaix! Desaix! Desaix!"

Bonaparte opened his arms; Roland sprang from his horse, and flung himself upon the First Consul's neck.

There was a double joy for Bonaparte in this arrival--that of again seeing a plan whom he knew would be devoted to him unto death, and because of the news he brought.

"And Desaix?" he questioned.

"Is within three miles; one of your aides met him retracing his steps toward the cannon."

"Then," said Bonaparte, "he may yet come in time."

"How? In time?"

"Look!"

Roland glanced at the battlefield and grasped the situation in an instant.

During the few moments that had elapsed while they were conversing, matters had gone from bad to worse. The first Austrian column, the one which had marched on Castel-Ceriolo and had not yet been engaged, was about to fall on the right of the French army. If it broke the line the retreat would be flight--Desaix would come too late.

"Take my last two regiments of grenadiers," said Bonaparte. "Rally the Consular guard, and carry it with you to the extreme right--you understand? in a square, Roland!--and stop that column like a stone redoubt."

There was not an instant to lose. Roland sprang upon his horse, took the two regiments of grenadiers, rallied the Consular guard, and dashed to the right. When he was within fifty feet of General Elsnitz's column, he called out: "In square! The First Consul is looking at us!"

The square formed. Each man seemed to take root in his place.

General Elsnitz, instead of continuing his way in the movement to support Generals Melas and Kaim--instead of despising the nine hundred men who present no cause for fear in the rear of a victorious army--General Elsnitz paused and turned upon them with fury.

Those nine hundred men were indeed the stone redoubt that General Bonaparte had ordered them to be. Artillery, musketry, bayonets, all were turned upon them, but they yielded not an inch.

Bonaparte was watching them with admiration, when, turning in the direction of Novi, he caught the gleam of Desaix's bayonets. Standing on a knoll raised above the plain, he could see what was invisible to the enemy.

He signed to a group of officers who were near him, awaiting orders; behind stood orderlies holding their horses. The officers advanced. Bonaparte pointed to the forest of bayonets, now glistening in the sunlight, and said to one of the officers: "Gallop to those bayonets and tell them to hasten. As for Desaix, tell him I am waiting for him here."

The officer galloped off. Bonaparte again turned his eyes to the battlefield. The retreat continued; but Roland and his nine hundred had stopped General Elsnitz and his column. The stone redoubt was transformed into a volcano; it was belching fire from all four sides. Then Bonaparte, addressing three officers, cried out: "One of you to the centre; the other two to the wings! Say everywhere that the reserves are at hand, and that we resume the offensive."

The three officers departed like arrows shot from a bow, their ways parting in direct lines to their different destinations. Bonaparte watched them for a few moments, and when he turned round he saw a rider in a general's uniform approaching.

It was Desaix--Desaix, whom he had left in Egypt, and who that very morning had said, laughing: "The bullets of Europe don't recognize me; some ill-luck is surely impending over me."

One grasp of the hand was all that these two friends needed to reveal their hearts.

Then Bonaparte stretched out his arm toward the battlefield.

A single glance told more than all the words in the world.

Twenty thousand men had gone into the fight that morning, and now scarcely more than ten thousand were left within a radius of six miles--only nine thousand infantry, one thousand cavalry, and ten cannon still in

condition for use. One quarter of the army was either dead or wounded, another quarter was employed in removing the wounded; for the First Consul would not suffer them to be abandoned. All of these forces, save and excepting Roland and his nine hundred men, were retreating.

The vast space between the Bormida and the ground over which the army was now retreating was covered with the dead bodies of men and horses, dismounted cannon and shattered ammunition wagons. Here and there rose columns of flame and smoke from the burning fields of grain.

Desaix took in these details at a glance.

"What do you think of the battle?" asked Bonaparte.

"I think that this one is lost," answered Desaix; "but as it is only three o'clock in the afternoon, we have time to gain another."

"Only," said a voice, "we need cannon!"

This voice belonged to Marmont, commanding the artillery.

"True, Marmont; but where are we to get them?"

"I have five pieces still intact from the battlefield; we left five more at Scrivia, which are just coming up."

"And the eight pieces I have with me," said Desaix.

"Eighteen pieces!" said Marmont; "that is all I need." An aide-de-camp was sent to hasten the arrival of Desaix's guns. His troops were advancing rapidly, and were scarcely half a mile from the field of battle. Their line of approach seemed formed for the purpose at hand; on the left of the road was a gigantic perpendicular hedge protected by a bank. The infantry was made to file in a narrow line along it, and it even hid the cavalry from view.

During this time Marmont had collected his guns and stationed them in battery on the right front of the army. Suddenly they burst forth, vomiting a deluge of grapeshot and canister upon the Austrians. For an instant the enemy wavered.

Bonaparte profited by that instant of hesitation to send forward the whole front of the French army.

"Comrades!" he cried, "we have made steps enough backward; remember, it is my custom to sleep on the battlefield!"

At the same moment, and as if in reply to Marmont's cannonade, volleys of musketry burst forth to the left, taking the Austrians in flank. It was Desaix and his division, come down upon them at short range and enfilading the enemy with the fire of his guns.

The whole army knew that this was the reserve, and that it behooved them to aid this reserve by a supreme effort.

"Forward!" rang from right to left. The drums beat the charge. The Austrians, who had not seen the reserves, and were marching with their guns on their shoulders, as if at parade, felt that something strange was happening within the French lines; they struggled to retain the victory they now felt to be slipping from their grasp.

But everywhere the French army had resumed the offensive. On all sides the ominous roll of the charge and the victorious Marseillaise were heard above the din. Marmont's battery belched fire; Kellermann dashed forward with his cuirassiers and cut his way through both lines of the enemy.

Desaix jumped ditches, leaped hedges, and, reaching a little eminence, turned to see if his division were still following him. There he fell; but his death, instead of diminishing the ardor of his men, redoubled it, and they charged with their bayonets upon the column of General Zach.

At that moment Kellermann, who had broken through both of the enemy's lines, saw Desaix's division struggling with a compact, immovable mass. He charged in flank, forced his way into a gap, widened it, broke the square, quartered it, and in less than fifteen minutes the five thousand Austrian grenadiers who formed the mass were overthrown, dispersed, crushed, annihilated. They disappeared like smoke. General Zach and his staff, all that was left, were taken prisoners.

Then, in turn, the enemy endeavored to make use of his immense cavalry corps; but the incessant volleys of musketry, the blasting canister, the terrible bayonets, stopped short the charge. Murat was manoeuvring on the flank with two light-battery guns and a howitzer, which dealt death to the foe.

He paused for an instant to succor Roland and his nine hundred men. A shell from the howitzer fell and burst in the Austrian ranks; it opened a gulf of flame. Roland sprang into it, a pistol in one hand, his sword in the other. The whole Consular guard followed him, opening the enemy's ranks as a wedge opens the trunk of an oak. Onward he dashed, till he reached an ammunition wagon surrounded by the enemy; then, without pausing an instant, he thrust the hand holding the pistol through the opening of the wagon and fired. A frightful explosion followed, a volcano had burst its crater and annihilated those around it.

General Elsnitz's corps was in full flight; the rest of the Austrian army swayed, retreated, and broke. The generals tried in vain to stop the torrent

and form up for a retreat. In thirty minutes the French army had crossed the plain it had defended foot by foot for eight hours.

The enemy did not stop until Marengo was reached. There they made a vain attempt to reform under fire of the artillery of Carra-Saint-Cyr (forgotten at Castel-Ceriolo, and not recovered until the day was over); but the Desaix, Gardannes, and Chamberlhac divisions, coming up at a run, pursued the flying Austrians through the streets.

Marengo was carried. The enemy retired on Petra Bona, and that too was taken. Then the Austrians rushed toward the bridge of the Bormida; but Carra-Saint-Cyr was there before them. The flying multitudes sought the fords, or plunged into the Bormida under a devastating fire, which did not slacken before ten that night.

The remains of the Austrian army regained their camp at Alessandria. The French army bivouacked near the bridge. The day had cost the Austrian army four thousand five hundred men killed, six thousand wounded, five thousand prisoners, besides twelve flags and thirty cannon.

Never did fortune show herself under two such opposite aspects as on that day. At two in the afternoon, the day spelt defeat and its disastrous consequences to Bonaparte; at five, it was Italy reconquered and the throne of France in prospect.

That night the First Consul wrote the following letter to Madame de Montrevel:

MADAME--I have to-day won my greatest victory; but

it has cost me the two halves of my heart, Desaix and

Roland. Do not grieve, madame; your son did not care to live,

and he could not have died more gloriously. BONAPARTE.

Many futile efforts were made to recover the body of the young aide-de-camp: like Romulus, he had vanished in a whirlwind.

None ever knew why he had pursued death with such eager longing.

THE END