

SKIRMISH AT MARQUARTSTEIN

Sous-Brigadier de la Colonie

1704

A few days later we arrived at a little town called Rosenheim, where we found the Marquis de Massey with his command. This place is not very far from a village called Marquartstein, which lies at the foot of the Tyrolese Mountains, overlooking a river and a pretty plain, on which were encamped the enemy we were in search of. The neighbouring peasants kept us supplied with news, exaggerating as usual. According to their report, the whole plain of Marquartstein was covered with troops, and that a force of even twice our strength would not be sufficient to make head against them. The Marquis de Massey, paying no attention to this, simply sent out an officer in disguise, who came from this part of the country; he being a very intelligent man, and having reconnoitred the enemy closely, brought in a reliable report of their numbers and positions, and then our General no longer had any hesitation in advancing to attack them, and, if possible, to surprise them. We had some obstacles to pass through in the shape of woods before attaining the plain on which they were encamped, but as we were in a friendly country, we found no lack of guides to show us the way. We marched the whole night, and were free of these defiles by daybreak. Nevertheless, it was ten o'clock in the morning before we were able to form up into battle formation, and the necessary orders for the attack were issued. The Imperialists, who had seen our advance, struck their camp with all possible haste, and retired across the river by means of a wooden bridge, which they afterwards set light to. This river runs close along the foot of an inaccessible range of mountains, the level bank at that side being just wide enough for the purpose of a road, which ran along it. On this road lay the village of Marquartstein, which consisted of a single street, where the Imperialists took up their position with their line extending a short way to either flank. They thus left the river between them and us in the belief that by means of this rampart they would be altogether safe from attack. Our peasant guides told the Marquis de Massey that it would be impossible for the enemy to retire over the mountains in their rear, as there were no gorges or passes whatever, and in such a case they would find themselves obliged to follow the river up-stream for a good league, in order to arrive at a point at which they could hope to cross the range; moreover, before reaching this point, they would have to traverse a small plain, where it would be easy to head them off, as the river there was only about three feet deep. I was with our General and the colonels, Messieurs de Sauligny and de Mercy, reconnoitring the enemy's position when the peasants made this report, upon which we took counsel together there and then. It was arranged that the three regiments of dragoons should be sent off to seize this point, and that when they had got beyond the enemy's flank we should cannonade the village across the river with eight small pieces of cannon that we had brought with us until they were driven out, so that when their troops began to retire and our infantry should take up the pursuit, they would then find themselves between two fires when they passed into the little plain, which was to be held by our dragoons; in short, the plan was so well thought out that the defeat of our opponents was certain if only our dragoons could seize the point ahead of them.

The order was then given to the dragoons to make their way along the further edge of the plain, so that the enemy should not discover the direction of their march; and the artillery officers were directed to bring up their cannon to where we were standing in order to bombard the Imperialists; but the sentries posted by the enemy on the top of a church belfry noted the movement of the dragoons and gave the alarm, whereupon the enemy immediately began to move in order to get a start. Boismorel, who had remained with the main body of our troops, as he was not on intimate terms with our generals, knew nothing of our plan of operations, and seeing the enemy begin their retirement, believed that we could catch them like mice in a trap, and that we were letting them go scot free either from fear or collusion on our part. Besides this, want of knowledge of the art of war prevented him from weighing such matters in the least degree, consequently he worked himself into a passion, and we now saw him dashing up to our group at full gallop with his face distorted by astonishment. He accosted us like a madman, and addressing the Marquis de Massey, shouted out in a loud and threatening voice, "In the name of God, sir, what do you mean by letting the King's enemies escape in that manner, just at the time when we could have taken every man of them? You are a traitor, and unworthy of your rank, and I shall certainly report you and complain of your conduct."

We were dumb with amazement at this discourse, and could hardly believe our ears that anyone could have spoken thus to a general officer. The first thing the General did on hearing himself apostrophised in this manner was to carry his hand to his pistol, but he had scarcely done so before Boismorel whipped out his own, and had we not promptly laid hold of him, the General might have been killed at the very moment when he was devoting himself to the interests of the King and the Elector.

We had a world of trouble to calm the violence of Boismorel, and we should never have succeeded had we not forcibly disarmed him of his pistols. The Marquis de Massey acted most prudently on this occasion; no one could possibly have blamed him if he had ordered Boismorel to be shot, or killed him with his own hand on the spot. He contented himself with ordering him to be put under arrest; but this was never carried out, for no sooner did Boismorel find himself free of our grasp, than he galloped off to the regiment, shouting to it to follow him.

It had just arrived close up to where we were, in accordance with the General's orders, and several grenadiers made as though they were going to obey him, but were kept in their places by my orders. Three or four, however, of his own company followed him across the plain, and later he sent a man to fetch the pistols of a sub-lieutenant, after which he disappeared for the time being.

This incident so far over, we thought over our line of action with regard to the enemy. Our regiment of grenadiers had come up, but the rest of the infantry were still some distance away, because the affair with Boismorel had had the effect of checking the general movement. Nevertheless, it was full time to begin our movement, if we wished to close with the Imperialist rear guard, and seeing our General getting impatient, I suggested crossing the river with my grenadiers, and engaging it until the rest of the infantry were at hand. My proposal was at once accepted, so with the guides' assurance that the stream was everywhere fordable, we plunged in file by file and crossed with ease.

This crossing, however, was not effected as quickly as I could have wished, and I feared, from the time it took, that the enemy might escape me; I therefore started in pursuit with the first half of the regiment that had passed over, and left an order for the rest to follow on. We were now in hard chase of the enemy's rear-guard, and came up with it a good quarter of a league from the village, owing to their march having been hindered by the woods and my extreme diligence in pursuit. I first caught sight of them retiring over the brow of a wooded ridge, when I gave my grenadiers orders to fix bayonets and not to fire without permission from me. We then hastened our pace, and the enemy seeing us on the point of falling upon them, halted, turned about, and opened fire upon us, with the result that a number of my men were killed on either side of my horse without, strange to say, even wounding him. This animal was so gunshy that he became quite paralysed, and trembled so violently that, though I had no idea of dismounting, still I was obliged to do so, as there was no possibility of getting him to move on at all. After delivering this volley, the enemy continued their retirement with even more precipitation than before, and without reloading. Here, then, was our turn in the game. We let ourselves go headlong upon them, and every one of our shots told. They quite thought that the whole of our army was at their heels, and were soon seized with panic; my grenadiers followed eagerly, slaying them with bayonet-thrust and gunshot, giving no quarter, so as not to delay the advance, and everywhere driving them before them. We met with hardly any resistance, for they sought safety only in flight, though this was by no means easy, as the hilly country had already put them out of breath; they had no possible reason to expect any succour from those in their van, as their one thought was to secure the open position before the arrival of our dragoons. The rest of our infantry were unable to join us in time; indeed it was judged unnecessary to push them over the river, so that in this action of August 8th I and my grenadiers disposed of the entire regiment of Schvein, eighteen hundred strong. They fell victims to the fury of my men, excepting a very small number, who were made prisoners under singular circumstances which somewhat calmed the excitement of my people. This is how it happened.

A youth of good family, a cadet in the regiment of Schvein, seeing death staring him in the face, crouched behind a large tree, towards which I chanced to be making my way. This poor boy, who had kept his wits sufficiently to notice me, and thinking he might perhaps receive quarter at my hands, waited in this position until I had come right up to his tree, when, suddenly dashing out, he threw himself upon his knees right between my legs, crying for mercy. His action and handsome face so excited my compassion that, fearing that the grenadiers might run a bayonet into him, I held him in my arms and shouted loudly that no one was to harm him, as I wished to obtain intelligence through him regarding the enemy. This excited the curiosity of my grenadiers, who crowded round to see what was going on, with the result that their fury calmed down, and they thought that I wished for more prisoners to be taken. Thus, instead of shooting down all that they met, they ran to make them prisoners, and in this way were saved the lives of the lieutenant-colonel, four captains, six lieutenants, and about two hundred and sixty soldiers of the regiment. We also took the six colours of the regiment, for in the Imperialist service each battalion has two of these, and the regiment of Schvein had three battalions.

de la Colonie. The Chronicles of an Old Campaigner, M. de la Colonie, 1692-1717. (London: 1904):211-217