

The Man Who Spoiled Napoleon's "Destiny"

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From March 18 to May 20, 1799—for more than sixty days and nights, that is—a little, half-forgotten, and more than half-ruined Syrian town was the scene of one of the fiercest and most dramatic sieges recorded in military history. And rarely has there been a struggle so apparently one-sided.

A handful of British sailors and Turkish irregulars were holding Acre, a town without regular defences, against Napoleon, the most brilliant military genius of his generation, with an army of 10,000 war-hardened veterans, the "Army of Italy"—soldiers who had dared the snows of the Alps and conquered Italy, and to whom victory was a familiar experience. In their ranks military daring had reached, perhaps, its very highest point. And yet the sailors inside that ring of crumbling wall won! At Acre Napoleon experienced his first defeat; and, years after, at St. Helena, he said of Sir Sidney Smith, the gallant sailor who baffled him, "That man made me miss my destiny." It is a curious fact that one Englishman thwarted Napoleon's career in the East, and another ended his career in the West, and it may be doubted which of the two Napoleon hated most—Wellington, who finally overthrew him at Waterloo, or Sidney Smith, who, to use Napoleon's own words, made him "miss his destiny," and exchange the empire of the East for a lonely pinnacle of rock in the Atlantic.

Sidney Smith was a sailor of the school of Nelson and of Dundonald—a man, that is, with a spark of that warlike genius which begins where mechanical rules end. He was a man of singular physical beauty, with a certain magnetism and fire about him which made men willing to die for him. He became a middy at the tender age of eleven years; went through fierce sea-fights, and was actually mate of the watch when fourteen years old. He was a fellow-middy with William IV in the fight off Cape St. Vincent, became commander when he was eighteen years of age, and captain before he was quite nineteen. But the British marine, even in those tumultuous days, scarcely yielded enough of the rapture of fighting to this post-captain in his teens. He took service under the Swedish flag, saw hard fighting against the Russians, became the close personal friend of the king, and was knighted by him. One of the feats at this period of his life with which tradition, with more or less of plausibility, credits Sidney Smith, is that of swimming by night through the Russian fleet, a distance of two miles, carrying a letter enclosed in a bladder to the Swedish admiral.

Sidney Smith afterwards entered the Turkish service. When war broke out betwixt France and England in 1790, he purchased a tiny craft at Smyrna, picked up in that port a mixed crew, and hurried to join Lord Hood, who was then holding Toulon. When the British abandoned the port—and it is curious to recollect that the duel between Sidney Smith and Napoleon, which reached its climax at Acre, began here—Sidney Smith volunteered to burn the French fleet, a task which he performed with an audacity and skill worthy of Nelson, and for which the French never forgave him.

Sidney Smith was given the command of an English frigate, and fought a dozen brilliant fights in the Channel. He carried with his boats a famous French privateer off Havre de Grace; but during the fight on the deck of the captured ship it drifted into the mouth of the Seine above the forts. The wind dropped, the tide was too strong to be stemmed, and Sidney Smith himself was captured. He had so harried the French coast that the French refused to treat him as an ordinary prisoner of war, and threw him into that forbidding prison, the Temple, from whose iron-barred windows the unfortunate sailor watched for two years the horrors of the Reign of Terror in its last stages, the tossing crowds, the

tumbrils rolling past, crowded with victims for the guillotine. Sidney Smith escaped at last by a singularly audacious trick. Two confederates, dressed in dashing uniform, one wearing the dress of an adjutant, and the other that of an officer of still higher rank, presented themselves at the Temple with forged orders for the transfer of Sidney Smith.

The governor surrendered his prisoner, but insisted on sending a guard of six men with him. The sham adjutant cheerfully acquiesced, but, after a moment's pause, turned to Sidney Smith and said, if he would give his parole as an officer not to attempt to escape, they would dispense with the escort. Sidney Smith, with due gravity, replied to his confederate. "Sir, I swear on the faith of an officer to accompany you wherever you choose to conduct me." The governor was satisfied, and the two sham officers proceeded to "conduct" their friend with the utmost possible despatch to the French coast. Another English officer who had escaped—Captain Wright—joined Sidney Smith outside Rouen, and the problem was how to get through the barriers without a passport. Smith sent Wright on first, and he was duly challenged for his passport by the sentinel; whereupon Sidney Smith, with a majestic air of official authority, marched up and said in faultless Parisian French, "I answer for this citizen, I know him"; whereupon the deluded sentinel saluted and allowed them both to pass!

Sidney Smith's escape from the Temple made him a popular hero in England. He was known to have great influence with the Turkish authorities, and he was sent to the East in the double office of envoy-extraordinary to the Porte, and commander of the squadron at Alexandria. By one of the curious coincidences which marked Sidney Smith's career, he became acquainted while in the Temple with a French Royalist officer named Philippeaux, an engineer of signal ability, and who had been a schoolfellow and a close chum of Napoleon himself at Brienne. Smith took his French friend with him to the East, and he played a great part in the defence of Acre. Napoleon had swept north through the desert to Syria, had captured Gaza and Jaffa, and was about to attack Acre, which lay between him and his ultimate goal, Constantinople. Here Sidney Smith resolved to bar his way, and in his flagship the *Tigre*, with the *Theseus*, under Captain Miller, and two gunboats, he sailed to Acre to assist in its defence. Philippeaux took charge of the fortifications, and thus, in the breaches of a remote Syrian town, the former prisoner of the Temple and the ancient school friend of Napoleon joined hands to wreck that dream of a great Eastern empire which lurked in the cells of Napoleon's masterful intellect.

Acre looks like a blunted arrow-head jutting out from a point in the Syrian coast. Napoleon could only attack, so to speak, the *neck* of the arrow, which was protected by a ditch and a weak wall, and flanked by towers; but Sidney Smith, having command of the sea, could sweep the four faces of the town with the fire of his guns, as well as command all the sea-roads in its vicinity. He guessed, from the delay of the French in opening fire, that they were waiting for their siege-train to arrive by sea. He kept vigilant watch, pounced on the French flotilla as it rounded the promontory of Mount Carmel, captured nine of the vessels, carried them with their guns and warlike material to Acre, and mounted his thirty-four captured pieces on the batteries of the town. Thus the disgusted French saw the very guns which were intended to batter down the defences of Acre—and which were glorious with the memories of a dozen victories in Italy—frowning at them, loaded with English powder and shot, and manned by English sailors.

It is needless to say that a siege directed by Napoleon—the siege of what he looked upon as a contemptible and almost defenceless town, the single barrier betwixt his ambition and its goal—was urged with amazing fire and vehemence. The wall was battered day and night, a breach fifty feet wide made, and more than twelve assaults delivered, with all the fire and daring of which French soldiers, gallantly led, are capable. So sustained was the fighting, that on one occasion the combat raged in the ditch and on the breach for *twenty-five* successive hours. So close and fierce was it that one half-ruined

tower was held by *both* besiegers and besieged for twelve hours in succession, and neither would yield. At the breach, again, the two lines of desperately fighting men on repeated occasions clashed bayonets together, and wrestled and stabbed and died, till the survivors were parted by the barrier of the dead which grew beneath their feet.

Sidney Smith, however, fought like a sailor, and with all the cool ingenuity and resourcefulness of a sailor. His ships, drawn up on two faces of the town, smote the French stormers on either flank till they learned to build up a dreadful screen, made up partly of stones plucked from the breach, and partly of the dead bodies of their comrades. Smith, too, perched guns in all sorts of unexpected positions—a 24-pounder in the lighthouse, under the command of an exultant midddy; two 68-pounders under the charge of "old Bray," the carpenter of the *Tigre*, and, as Sidney Smith himself reports, "one of the bravest and most intelligent men I ever served with"; and yet a third gun, a French brass 18-pounder, in one of the ravelins, under a master's mate. Bray dropped his shells with the nicest accuracy in the centre of the French columns as they swept up the breach, and the midddy perched aloft, and the master's mate from the ravelin, smote them on either flank with case-shot, while the *Theseus* and the *Tigre* added to the tumult the thunder of their broadsides, and the captured French gunboats contributed the yelp of their lighter pieces.

The great feature of the siege, however, was the fierceness and the number of the sorties. Sidney Smith's sorties actually exceeded in number and vehemence Napoleon's assaults. He broke the strength of Napoleon's attacks, that is, by anticipating them. A crowd of Turkish irregulars, with a few naval officers leading them, and a solid mass of Jack-tars in the centre, would break from a sally-port, or rush vehemently down through the gap in the wall, and scour the French trenches, overturn the gabions, spike the guns, and slay the guards. The French reserves hurried fiercely up, always scourged, however, by the flank fire of the ships, and drove back the sortie. But the process was renewed the same night or the next day with unlesened fire and daring. The French engineers, despairing of success on the surface, betook themselves to mining; whereupon the besieged made a desperate sortie and reached the mouth of the mine. Lieutenant Wright, who led them, and who had already received two shots in his sword-arm, leaped down the mine followed by his sailors, slew the miners, destroyed their work, and safely regained the town.

The British sustained one startling disaster. Captain Miller of the *Theseus*, whose ammunition ran short, carefully collected such French shells as fell into the town without exploding, and duly returned them, alight, and supplied with better fuses, to their original senders. He had collected some seventy shells on the *Theseus*, and was preparing them for use against the French. The carpenter of the ship was endeavouring to get the fuses out of the loaded shells with an auger, and a midddy undertook to assist him, in characteristic midddy fashion, with a mallet and a spike-nail. A huge shell under his treatment suddenly exploded on the quarter-deck of the *Theseus*, and the other sixty-nine shells followed suit. The too ingenious midddy disappeared into space; forty seamen, with Captain Miller himself, were killed; and forty-seven, including the two lieutenants of the ship, the chaplain, and the surgeon, were seriously wounded. The whole of the poop was blown to pieces, and the ship was left a wreck with fire breaking out at half-a-dozen points. The fire was subdued, and the *Theseus* survived in a half-gutted condition, but the disaster was a severe blow to Sir Sidney's resources.

As evening fell on May 7, the white sails of a fleet became visible, and all firing ceased while besiegers and besieged watched the approaching ships. Was it a French fleet or a Turkish? Did it bring succour to the besieged or a triumph to the besiegers? The approaching ships flew the crescent. It was the Turkish fleet from Rhodes bringing reinforcements. But the wind was sinking, and Napoleon, who had watched the approach of the hostile ships with feelings which may be guessed, calculated that there

remained six hours before they could cast anchor in the bay. Eleven assaults had been already made, in which eight French generals and the best officers in every branch of the service had perished. There remained time for a twelfth assault. He might yet pluck victory from the very edge of defeat. At ten o'clock that night the French artillery was brought up close to the counterscarp to batter down the curtain, and a new breach was made. Lannes led his division against the shot-wrecked tower, and General Rimbaud took his grenadiers with a resistless rush through the new breach. All night the combat raged, the men fighting desperately hand to hand. When the rays of the level morning sun broke through the pall of smoke which hung sullenly over the combatants, the tricolour flew on the outer angle of the tower, and still the ships bringing reinforcements had not reached the harbour! Sidney Smith, at this crisis, landed every man from the English ships, and led them, pike in hand, to the breach, and the shouting and madness of the conflict awoke once more. To use Sidney Smith's own words, "the muzzles of the muskets touched each other—the spear-heads were locked together." But Sidney Smith's sailors, with the brave Turks who rallied to their help, were not to be denied.

Lannes's grenadiers were tumbled headlong from the tower, Lannes himself being wounded, while Rimbaud's brave men, who were actually past the breach, were swept into ruin, their general killed, and the French soldiers within the breach all captured or slain.

One of the dramatic incidents of the siege was the assault made by Kleber's troops. They had not taken part in the siege hitherto, but had won a brilliant victory over the Arabs at Mount Tabor. On reaching the camp, flushed with their triumph, and seeing how slight were the apparent defences of the town, they demanded clamorously to be led to the assault. Napoleon consented. Kleber, who was of gigantic stature, with a head of hair worthy of a German music-master or of a Soudan dervish, led his grenadiers to the edge of the breach and stood there, while with gesture and voice—a voice audible even above the fierce and sustained crackle of the musketry—he urged his men on. Napoleon, standing on a gun in the nearest French battery, watched the sight with eager eyes—the French grenadiers running furiously up the breach, the grim line of levelled muskets that barred it, the sudden roar of the English guns as from every side they smote the staggering French column. Vainly single officers struggled out of the torn mass, ran gesticulating up the breach, and died at the muzzles of the British muskets. The men could not follow, or only died as they leaped forward. The French grenadiers, still fighting, swearing, and screaming, were swept back past the point where Kleber stood, hoarse with shouting, black with gunpowder, furious with rage. The last assault on Acre had failed. The French sick, field artillery, and baggage silently defiled that night to the rear. The heavy guns were buried in the sand, and after sixty days of open trenches Napoleon, for the first time in his life, though not for the last, ordered a retreat.

Napoleon buried in the breaches of Acre not merely 3,000 of his bravest troops, but the golden dream of his life. "In that miserable fort," as he said, "lay the fate of the East." Napoleon expected to find in it the pasha's treasures, and arms for 300,000 men. "When I have captured it," he said to Bourrienne, "I shall march upon Damascus and Aleppo. I shall arm the tribes; I shall reach Constantinople; I shall overturn the Turkish Empire; I shall found in the East a new and grand empire. Perhaps I shall return to Paris by Adrianople and Vienna!" Napoleon was cheerfully willing to pay the price of what religion he had to accomplish this dream. He was willing, that is, to turn Turk. "Had I but captured Acre," Napoleon added, "I would have reached Constantinople and the Indies; I would have changed the face of the world. But that man made me miss my destiny."

Source:

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