



# ReaderWorks

Standard



## Sharpe's Ransom. by Bernard Cornwell.

RICHARD SHARPE tugged off his boots, put his hands in the small of his back, arched his spine and grunted with pain. "Bloody cogwheels," he said. Lucille asked, "What is wrong with the bloody cogwheels?" "Rusted up," Sharpe said as he tipped a cat off a kitchen chair. "No one's greased those wheels in years."

He groaned as he sat down. "I'll have to chip the things down to bare metal, then clear the leat." "The leat?" Lucille asked. She was still learning English. "The channel that takes the water to the mill, love. It's full of rubbish." Sharpe poured himself some red wine. "It'll take

me all week to clear that." "It's Christmas 1816 in two days," said Lucille. "So?" "So at Christmas you rest," Lucille declared, "and the leat can rest. It is a holiday. I shall cook you a goose." "You cooked my goose long ago, girl,"

Sharpe said. Lucille made a dismissive noise, collected a pile of washing from the table, then walked down the scullery passage. Sharpe tipped his chair back to watch her, and Lucille, knowing she was being observed, deliberately swayed her hips. "Cooked it proper, you did!" Sharpe shouted. "If you want supper, she called back, "the stove needs wood."

Sharpe glanced up as a gust of wind howled at the farm's high gables. A year before, when he had returned after the Waterloo campaign, the gable roof had leaked and every door and window had let in killing draughts, but the house was snug and tight now. It had cost a penny or two, and all of it had come from the half-pay Sharpe received as a retired British officer, because the farm was not making any profit. Not yet, anyway, and whether it ever would was dubious. "Bloody frog taxes," Sharpe grumbled as he tossed wood into the stove. He closed the firebox door, then hung his wet boots from the mantel so they would dry. A battered British rifle hung above the hearth and he looked up at it, half

smiled, then reached to touch the weapon's lock. "You miss it?"

Lucille had come back to the kitchen. "I wasn't thinking about the army,"

Sharpe said, "but of shooting some foxes at dawn tomorrow. Lambing's not far off. Then it's back to that bloody mill. Christmas or not, I've got to chip those wheels, clear the leat, then rebuild the paddles. God knows how long it'll all take." "In the old days," Lucille said, "we would have the whole village to help, and when the work was done we would give them a feast."

"Those were the good old days," Sharpe said, "and they were too good to last."

And it wouldn't do me much bloody good asking the village for help, would it?

They'd as soon shoot me as help me."  
"You must give them time," Lucille said.

"They are peasants. If you live here 20 years they will begin to recognise you."  
"Oh, they recognise me," Sharpe said.  
"Cross the street, they do, so they don't have to breathe the same air as me. It's that bloody Malan. Hates me, he does."

LUCILLE shrugged. "Jacques is still loyal to Bonaparte. What do you expect?

And besides," she hesitated. "Besides what?" Sharpe prompted her. "A long

time ago, when I was a girl, Jacques Malan thought he was in love with me. He pursued me. One night he was even on the roof!" She sounded indignant at the memory. "He was peering through my bedroom window!" "Get an eyeful, did he?"

"More than he should have!" said Lucille. "My father was furious that Jacques should even think about me. Jacques-Malan was a peasant, and my father was the Vicomte de Seleglise." She laughed. "But Jacques's not such a bad man. Just disappointed."

"He's a lazy bastard, that's what he is," Sharpe said. "I cut that timber for the priest and Jacques was supposed to

collect it, but has he? Hell! He does nothing but drink his mother's pension away." The thought of Jacques Malan always made Sharpe angry, for Malan seemed determined to drive Sharpe from the village by sheer unfriendliness. The big man had returned defeated from Waterloo and ever since had sat around the village in a sulk. He did no work, he earned no money, he just sat glowering at the passing world and dreaming of the days when the Emperor's soldiers had strutted though Europe. The rest of the village feared to cross him, for though he had neither land nor money, Jacques Malan possessed an undeniable force of character. "He was a sergeant, wasn't he?" Sharpe asked. "A sergeant in the

Imperial Guard," Lucille confirmed, "the Old Guard, no less." "And I'm the only enemy he's got left now, so there's not much hope of him helping me clear out the leat. Sod him,"

Sharpe said. "Is Patrick asleep?"

"Fast asleep," Lucille said, then frowned. "Why do you English say 'fast asleep'? Why not slow asleep? I think your language is mad." "Fast or slow, who cares? Long as the child's asleep, eh? So what shall we do tonight?"

Lucille skipped away from his arms. "For a start, we shall eat." "And after that?" Lucille let herself be caught. "Who knows?" She asked, though she

did know, and she closed her eyes and prayed that Sharpe would stay in Normandy, for she worried that the village might yet repel him. A man could not live without friends, and Sharpe's friends were far away, too far away, and she feared for his happiness. But this was her farm and her house, and she could not bear the thought of leaving. Let us stay, she prayed, please God, let us stay.

SHARPE woke early on the morning of Christmas Eve. He slid from the bed, picked up his clothes from the chair beside the door, then tip-toed from the room so as not to wake Lucille. He paused to look at his son who slept in

the crib in the next room, then hurried to the kitchen where, still naked, he stooped to riddle the stove and feed it with wood. "Bonjour, monsieur!" Marie, the old woman who was the one house servant left, peered at him from the larder. "You're up early." Sharpe said, snatching his shirt to hide his nakedness. "The one who rises early gets to see the best sights," the old woman said, then closed the larder door to let Sharpe dress. He dressed warmly, knowing that the cold outside would be brutal. He took a shotgun and a full powder horn from the cupboard, filled a coat pocket with loose shot, then added cartridges for the rifle. He doubted he would use the rifle, but he liked to carry it in case a

deer crossed his path. He pulled on a woollen hat, unbarred the back door and stepped into the courtyard where the cold hit him like a blast of cannon shot. He pulled the stable door open to let Nosey out.

The dog scampered and jumped until Sharpe growled at him to heel. The moat was skimmed with ice, the reeds were brittle and frost-edged, and a mist hung in the bare trees on the ridge above the farm. The sun was not yet up and the world was grey with the thin light between night and day. Sharpe climbed the ridge, the dog padding behind, and when he reached the top he glanced back and noted that the smoke from the farm's

chimneys was drifting east, which meant he would have to make a circuit about the big wood to keep himself upwind of the valley where he knew the foxes had their lairs. With any luck he would bag a couple. What he should do, he thought, was dig the beasts out, but to do that he would need a dozen men. Father Defoy would offer to help, and so would the doctor, but neither man was fit for hard physical labour, and Jacques Malan made certain that no one else from the village would ever help the Englishman. Damn Malan, he thought. It took him the best part of an hour to reach the upwind side of the small valley where he crept to the wood's edge with the shotgun already loaded and rammed. The eastern

horizon was a sullen red and mist drifted across the valley where a score of rabbits fed. No foxes yet. Sharpe guessed his first intimation of a fox would be the thump of a rabbit's warning feet, then the scamper as they fled to their burrows. A moment or so later he would see the dark fur slinking along the edge of the trees and he would have one chance of a shot. He reckoned he would bag his second fox lower down, but only after his terrier Nosey had flushed it out. It was just like war, he thought. Set an ambush, bloody the enemy, then attack to finish him off. Except the trouble with bloody foxes was that they never were finished off.

FROM the wood's edge he could just see the roof of the farmhouse a mile away.

The Chateau Lissan, it was called, a castle, only it was not really a castle.

The farmyard's gate was still an old castellated tower, and at one time, inside the circling moat, there had been a small stronghold where the Vicomte of Seleglise had lorded it over a dozen villages, but the castle had crumbled and all that was left was a chapel, barn, dairy, stables, the watermill and the big farmhouse where Sharpe had found Lucille. Lucille and happiness, he thought, except that a man could not live among a people who dismissed him as an enemy. He did not want to leave

Normandy, and he knew Lucille would hate to go from the land that had been in her family for 800 years, but if the village did not accept him, then Sharpe knew he would have to surrender. Go back to England, he thought, and make a life there. But what life? He could not afford any land in England, not unless Lucille sold the chateau, and that would break her heart. It would break his heart, Sharpe thought, for he was learning to love this patch of stubborn Norman earth.

A group of six or seven people appeared on the road above the farm and Sharpe frowned in puzzlement. There was little enough traffic on that road at any time,

let alone on a cold winter's dawn. Then he wondered if they were hurrying to beat the snow and, glancing up at the heavy airy, he reckoned they might indeed be in for a blizzard. The small group vanished beneath the opposite crest and Sharpe waited for them to reappear where the road crossed the stream at the valley's end. A cockerel crowed, and Sharpe looked to the east to see that the sun was rimming the layers of grey cloud with livid red.

Like blood seeping through bandages, he thought, and that image made him close his eyes. He still woke in the nights, shuddering with memories of blood and battles, but he consoled himself that it

was all behind him now. He had Lucille, he had a son and, given time, he might even find happiness in this land of his erstwhile enemies. A rabbit thumped in warning, Nosey growled softly and Sharpe opened his eyes, slid the gun forward and waited.

LUCILLE fed Patrick his breakfast. "Almost two years old!" She told the child, tickling under his chin. "Big for his age" their housekeeper Marie said. "He'll grow up to be a soldier like his father." "I hope not," Lucille said, crossing herself "Where's papa?" Patrick wanted to know. "Shooting foxes," Lucille said, spooning porridge into her son's mouth. "Bang," Patrick said,

spraying the porridge over the table. "Patrick Lassin!" Lucille said reprovingly.

"Lassin?" Marie asked. "Not Castineau? Not Sharpe?" "Lassin," Lucille said firmly. Lucille's maiden name had been Lassin, then she had married a cavalry officer called Castineau who had died for France in the horrors of Russia, and now she lived with Sharpe, and the village, who rightly suspected that Lucille and her Englishman were not married, never quite knew whether to call her Madame Lassin, Madame Castineau or Madame Sharpe. Lucille did not care what she was called, but she was determined that her family name

would go on to the next generation and Patrick Lissan would see to that.

SHE JUMPED, startled, as the old bell clanged in the courtyard to announce that someone was at the main gate. "Who would call so early?" Lucille asked.

"The priest?" Marie suggested, taking a shawl from the hook behind the door.

"He might be wanting his firewood." She draped the shawl over her thin shoulders. "Early or not, Madame, he'll want a glass of brandy." She went out into the yard, letting in a gust of freezing air. "Bang," Patrick said again, reckoning that the sight of splattering porridge was worth the risk of a cuff

about the ear, but Lucille was too distracted to notice. It was unlike Father Defoy to be up so early, she thought, and an instinct made her cross to the hearth where she reached for the rifle, then she realised the weapon was gone.

She heard the gate squeal open, there was the mutter of a man's voice and suddenly Marie gave a shout of indignation that was abruptly cut short.

Lucille ran to the cupboard where Richard kept his other guns, but before she even had time to turn the key, the kitchen door banged wide open and a tall man with a face like old scratched leather was standing in the doorway where his breath misted in the cold air.

He slowly raised a pistol so that it was pointing between Lucille's eyes, then, just as slowly, he thumbed the cock back. "Where is the Englishman?" he asked in a calm voice. Lucille said nothing. She could see there were a half-dozen other men in the yard. "Where is the Englishman?" The tall man asked again. "Papa's shooting foxes!" Young Patrick explained helpfully. "Bang!" A small bespectacled man pushed past the man with the pistol. "Look after your child, Madame," he ordered Lucille, then he stepped aside to let his six ragged followers into the kitchen. The small bespectacled man was the only one who did not carry a pistol, and the only one who did not have long pigtails

framing his face. The last man through the door dragged Marie out of the cold and pushed her down on to a chair. "Who are you?" Lucille demanded of the small man, "Look after your child, Madame!" he insisted again. "I cannot abide small children." The tall man who had first appeared in the doorway shepherded Lucille away from the gun cupboard. He looked to be around 40 years old, and everything about him declared that he was a soldier from the wars. The pigtails had been the badge of Napoleon's dragoons, and they framed a face that had been scarred by blades and powder burns. His coat was an army coat with the bright buttons replaced by horn, while his cap was a forage hat

which still had Napoleon's badge. He pushed Lucille into a chair, then turned to the small man. "We'll start the search now, Maitre?" "Indeed," the small man said. "Who are you?" Lucille asked again, this time more fiercely. The small man took off his coat, revealing a shabby black suit. "Make sure she stays at the table," he said to one of the men, "the rest of you, search! Sergeant, you start upstairs." "Search for what?" Lucille demanded as the intruders spread out through the house.

THE SMALL man turned back to her. "You possess a cart, Madame?" "A cart?"

Lucille asked, confused. "We shall find

it, anyway," the man said. He crossed to the window, rubbed mist off a pane and peered out. "When will your Englishman return?" "In his own time," Lucile said defiantly. There was a shout from the old hall where one of the strangers had discovered the remnants of the Lissan silver. There had been a time when a lord of this chateau could seat 40 diners in front of silverware, but now there was just a thick ewer, some candlesticks and a dozen dented plates. The silver was brought into the kitchen, where the small man ordered that it be piled beside the door. "We are not rich!" Lucille protested. She was trying to hide her terror, for she feared that the farm had been invaded by one of the desperate

bands of old soldiers who roamed and terrorised rural France. The newspapers had been full of their crimes, yet Lucille had somehow believed that the troubles would never reach Normandy. "That is all we have!" she said, pointing to the silver.

"You have more, Madame," the small man said, "much more. And I would advise you not to try to leave the house, or else Corporal Lebecque will shoot you."

He nodded to her, then ducked under the staircase door to help the men who were ransacking the bedrooms. Lucille looked at the thin corporal who had been ordered to watch her. "We are not rich,"

she said. "You're richer than we are," the corporal answered. He had a ferret's face, Lucille thought, with ravaged teeth and sallow eyes. "Much richer," he added. "You won't hurt us?"

Lucille asked, clutching Patrick. "That depends on your Englishman," the corporal said, "and on my sergeant's mercy." "Your sergeant?" Lucille asked, guessing he meant the big man who had first confronted her. "And my sergeant," the corporal continued, "does not have mercy. It was bled out of him in the war. It was bled out of us all. You have coffee?" A shot sounded far away, and Lucille thought of the terrible things that war had left in its wake. She

remembered the stories of pillage and murder that racked poor France and which now, at Christmas, had arrived at her own front door. She held her child, closed her eyes and prayed.

THE fox had twisted in the air when it was hit, a last reflex making the beast leap to escape the shot, and then it fell to leave a smear of blood on the frosted grass. "One less," Sharpe told Nosey. "Leave it alone, boy," he said, nudging the dog away from the corpse and he wondered if he should skin it for the fur and brush, then thought the hell with it. He kicked the dead animal into the underbrush, then turned and looked down the valley. Odd, he thought, that

the group of pedestrians had not appeared on the bridge. The familiar smell of powder smoke lingered as he stared down the valley. Maybe the travellers had been in a hurry and were already hidden by the beech trees on the far slope? But those trees were bare and he could see no flicker of movement where the road climbed beneath their branches.

DAMN IT, he thought, but they should be in sight, and suddenly the old instinct of danger prickled at him and so he called Nosey to heel, slung the gun on his shoulder and began walking down the valley. He told himself he was being ridiculous. The world was at peace.

Christmas was a day away and folk had the right to walk rural roads without sparking the suspicions of a retired Rifleman, but Sharpe, like Lucille, read the newspapers. In Montmorillon, just a month before, a group of ex-soldiers had invaded a lawyer's house, had killed the parents, stolen their goods and dragged the daughters away. All across France similar things happened. There was no work, the harvest had been scanty and men back from the wars had no homes, no money and no hope, but they all possessed the skills of foraging and plundering that Napoleon had encouraged in his soldiers. Sharpe was certain now that the travellers had not passed him, which meant they had either

turned back to the village or else gone to the farm. And maybe they had business there? Maybe they were just beggars? Not all the soldiers back from the wars were violent criminals, most just roamed the countryside asking for food. Sharpe had fed enough of them and he usually enjoyed those encounters with his old enemies. One man had been on the walls of Badajoz, a Spanish citadel attacked by the British, and had boasted how many Englishmen he had killed in the ditch at the foot of the fortification, and Sharpe had never told him he had been in that same ditch, nor that he had climbed the breach in a storm of blood and fire to send the Frenchmen running. It was over, he told himself it was over

and gone and good riddance to it. So maybe they were just beggars, he thought, but even so Sharpe did not like leaving Lucille, Marie and Patrick alone with a group of hungry men who might just be tempted to take more than they were offered.

AND so he hurried, taking the short route across the shoulder of the hill and then down the steep slope to where the choked mill-leat was skimmed with ice.

He crossed the leat bridge, something else that needed rebuilding, and stopped to gaze into the farm's courtyard beyond the moat. Nothing moved there. Smoke drifted from the kitchen chimney. The windows were misted.

Everything looked as it should, and yet the danger still nagged him. It was a feeling he had come to trust, a feeling that had saved his life on countless Spanish fields. He thought about loading the rifle, then decided it was too late. If there were men in the farm then there would be too many for one rifle bullet. Besides, they would already be watching him and it was best not to make a show of hostility. What would be best, he thought, was to get the hell away from here and watch the farmhouse until he understood if there was danger there or not, but he had no choice in the matter. Lucille and his son were inside the farm, so he had to go there even though his

every instinct shrieked at him to stay away. "Come on, Nosey," he said, and he walked on, crossing the bridge over the moat and anticipating what a fool he would feel as he pushed the kitchen door open to discover Lucille feeding Patrick, Marie chopping turnips and the stove blazing cheerfully. The war had left him nervous, he told himself, nervous, jumpy, skittish and prone to fears, and it was all nonsense. Nothing was wrong. Tomorrow was Christmas and all was well with the world, except that all the world needed rebuilding.

He pushed open the kitchen door. "Got one of the sods," he announced happily, then went very still. A small

bespectacled man was sitting opposite Lucille.

Another man was behind her with a pistol pointing at her black hair. Marie was huddled in the corner chair, while in front of Sharpe, and carrying Sharpe's old sword that he had taken down from the wall above the spice cupboard, was a tall man with dragoon pigtails framing a face that was as hard as horn.

"Remember me?" The tall man said "Because I remember you." He pushed the sword forward until its point touched Sharpe's neck. "I remember you very well, Major Sharpe," he said, "very well indeed. Welcome home."

SHARPE sat beside Luciile at his kitchen table. One man stood behind him with a pistol while Sergeant Guy Challon chopped Sharpe's sword into the table's edge. "A clumsy weapon," he said derisively. "It works better on Frenchmen than on tables," Sharpe said. "Put the sword down, Sergeant!" the small bespectacled man complained. "Put it on the pile. Someone will pay a few francs for it." He watched as the sergeant added the sword to the pile of silver and other small valuables that was growing beside the kitchen door. The collected loot included Lucille's small stock of jewelry, among which had been a large ruby that had come from Napoleon's own treasure chests and the

small man had seized on the stone as evidence of Sharpe's wealth. He had introduced himself as Maitre Henri Lorcet and explained that he was a lawyer. "And I had the honour," he went on, of drawing up the last will and testament of Major Pierre Ducos. This is it," he had said, producing a long document that he smoothed on the kitchen table. Now, with the sword safely put away, he tapped the paper as though it somehow gave legitimacy to his presence. "The will mentions the existence of a hoard of gold, once the property of Napoleon Bonaparte. Lorcet looked up at Sharpe, and the wan light flashed off his round spectacle lenses. "Major Ducos was kind enough to

bequeath the treasure to me and to Sergeant Challon, and he indicated that you would know where it was to be found." He paused, "You do know about this gold, Major Sharpe?" "I know about it," Sharpe admitted. Two-years before, when Napoleon had been banished to Elba, Sharpe had helped rescue the Emperor's treasure that had been lost on its journey to the island. Pierre Ducos had stolen the gold, and Sergeant Challon had been Ducos's helper, and though Ducos was long dead, he had somehow reached from his grave to wish this trouble on his old enemy.

"WE HAVE nothing!" Lucille insisted, "other than what you see." Maitre Lorcet

took no notice of her protest. "The value of the gold amounted to 200,000 francs, I believe?" Sharpe laughed. "Your friend Ducos spent half of that!"

"So? 100,000 francs," Lorcet said equably, as well he might, for the halved sum was still close to 50,000 pounds, and a man could live in luxury on 200 pounds a year. "I wasn't alone when I took that gold," Sharpe told the lawyer.

"Ask your friend, Sergeant Challon," he jerked his head at the big man. "I was with General Calvet. You think he didn't want some of the gold?" Challon nodded confirmation, but Lorcet merely shrugged. "So you divided the treasure," he conceded, "but you must have some

left, surely?" Sharpe was silent. "I'll hit him, Maitre," Challon offered. "I detest violence," the lawyer said. "Come, Major," he pleaded with Sharpe, "you have surely not spent it all?" Sharpe sighed as though surrendering to the inevitable. "There's 40,000 left," he confessed, and heard Lucille's gasp of surprise. "Maybe a bit more," he admitted grudgingly. Henri Lorcet smiled with relief for he had feared there would be nothing at the end of his long quest. "So tell me where it is, Major," he said, "and we shall take it away and leave you in peace." It was Sharpe's turn to smile. "It's all in a Bank, Lorcet. It's in Monsieur Plaquet's bank in the rue Deauville in Caen. It's in a big

iron-cornered box, locked in a stone vault behind an iron-ribbed door and Monsieur Plaquet has one key to the vault and I have the other." Sergeant Challon spat at the stove, then twisted and untwisted one of the long pigtails that framed his face. Napoleon's dragoons had all grown the braids, wearing them as a mark of pride, yet few men had kept them since the Emperor's defeat. Challon had kept his, proclaiming himself a soldier, but a soldier who evidently did not understand the strange and respectable world of banks. "He's lying," he growled at the lawyer. "Let me knock the truth out of him." "So hit me, Sergeant," Sharpe said, "and then tear the chateau down, and

when you find nothing, what will you do then?" "I'll kill you" Challon suggested, "and take what we already have. Like this."

HE REACHED forward and took the ruby from the lawyer's hand. Sharpe nodded.

"That'll be worth a bit," he agreed. Henri Lorcet petulantly snatched the ruby back. "But this," he said, "is not worth 40,000 francs." He put the stone into a pocket, then took from his small case a sheaf of papers, a pen and a bottle of ink. "You will write to this Monsieur Plaquet," he told Sharpe, pushing the pen and paper across the table, "introducing your good friend Maitre Lorcet and saying that he

is taking over the custody of the gold."  
"Won't work,"

Sharpe said flatly, staring at the Lawyer, "It had better work!" Lorcet snapped. Sharpe shook his head. "I've got a wife, Lorcet," he said, "a thieving woman in England, and she stole all my money because I wrote my London banker a letter saying she could be trusted. So Monsieur Plaquet and I have an arrangement. He doesn't release any money except to me. Personally."

He tapped his chest. "Me." Lorcet glanced at Lucille who, startled, managed to nod. "It's true," she whispered, meaning it was true that Jane

Sharpe had stolen her husband's money, though whether anything else Sharpe had said was true, she did not know. "I have to go to the bank myself," Sharpe went on, "with my key. Otherwise? Nothing." "So where is the key?" Lorcet demanded.

Sharpe glanced at a rack of keys hanging beside the kitchen door, Lorcet nodded permission, and Sharpe stood and took down a great black heavy key that looked as old as time, and Lucille at last began to understand that he was playing a game, for the key opened no vault in Caen, but instead unlocked the chateau's chapel. Sharpe tossed the key to the lawyer. "You get me and that key to

Caen, Lorcet," he said, "and you get your money." "How far is it to Caen?" Lorcet asked. "Three hours by cart," Sharpe said, "and I'll have to take the cart, because 40,000 francs in gold weigh more than a ton. An hour to load the money, then three and a half hours back? Longer if it snows." "Then pray it does not snow," Lorcet said, "for if you are not back by nightfall I shall assume you have betrayed us, and I shall let Sergeant Challon deal with your family. I shall regret that, Major." He laid the key on the table.

"Corporal Lebecque will accompany you with two men. If you attempt to summon help, Major, the Corporal will

kill you. But do as I ask, and you will all survive the day." He smiled. "Though, admittedly, you will be somewhat poorer." Sharpe picked up the key, then pulled on his greatcoat and hat. "I'll be back here before nightfall," he promised the lawyer, then stooped to kiss Lucille and his son. She clutched at him. "Richard!" He eased her fingers from his coat collar. "Look after Patrick, love," he said, then kissed her again.

CORPORAL Lebecque and his men helped Sharpe harness the two horses. One of the two men claimed he could drive, and so Lebecque ordered Sharpe to join him in the back of the cart, where the corporal lifted the skirts of his heavy

coat to reveal a pistol. "I should have shot you in Naples," Lebecque said. "You were with Ducos when I came for the gold?" Sharpe asked. "I don't remember you." "I remember you," Lebecque said, then he shouted for the gate to be opened and the driver cracked the whip so that the heavy cart jolted forward.

THE first snow began to fall in big, loose flakes that melted as soon as they touched the road. The cart lurched from side to side, for one of the horses was a big plough horse while the other, much smaller had been an offside leader on a French gun team and Sharpe had deliberately harnessed it on the wrong

side. The horse would hate being on the nearside, and Sharpe knew it would pull like a pig. "You have to rein in the big horse," Sharpe told the driver. "I know how to drive," the man said, and the cart lurched again, almost throwing Lebecque clear across the cart. "Rein it in," Sharpe said, "and let the little one set the pace." "Shut your face," the man said, then cracked the whip again and the big horse jerked forward, the small one swerved, and Lebecque and the other guard held on tight as the cart jolted up over the road's central ridge.

"Bastards!" The driver swore at the horses and lashed down with the whip, and the old gun horse shoved at the

plough horse and the cart pitched again like a storm-tossed boat. "I'm telling you!" Sharpe shouted, "let the little horse lead!" Lebecque swore as the cart bumped down again into the ruts. "Stop!" he shouted, and the driver obediently hauled on the curb reins "You," Lebecque pointed at Sharpe, "you drive. And I'll be beside you with this." He lifted his coat to show Sharpe the big pistol again. Sharpe obediently climbed onto the box. Lebecque joined him there, while the two other men settled in the back. Those two men were also armed with pistols, but Sharpe had them where he wanted them, just as he was where he wanted to be. He had escaped the farm, he was ready to fight back. He clicked

his tongue, curbed the plough horse's speed, and let the cart climb the steady slope to the village. The snow was fitful and light, whirling in the black branches, but the sky was ominously dark and Sharpe reckoned blizzard was coming. He knew that a heavy fall of snow would never let him reach Caen and back in a day, but nor did he have any intention of going to Caen, for Monsieur Plaquet did not exist, nor was there any great iron-bound chest in a stone vault on the Rue Deauville. There was just a woman and a child to rescue. Shawled women were hurrying along the village street to the Christmas Eve mass in the little church. Sharpe nodded to one or two, then saw Jacques Malan standing in the doorway

of the tavern.

The big man, who hated Sharpe because he was English, had just been going into the inn when he saw Sharpe appear, but he waited in the cold long enough to spit into the roadway as Sharpe passed.

"BONJOUR, Monsieur Malan," Sharpe said cordially, but Malan just ducked into the tavern and slammed the door. Sharpe hauled on the reins, turning the cart down the alley beside the inn. "You don't use the main road?" Lebecque asked suspiciously. "Short cut," Sharpe said. "Sooner we're done, sooner we're warm again." "My God, it's cold," Lebecque grumbled. The corporal tugged his coat tighter about his thin

body, and Sharpe knew the heavy coat would make it much harder for Lebecque to extricate the pistol. Sharpe was relying on that, but afterwards? God only knew how he would manage the rescue. The alley turned into a narrow lane that passed the butcher's yard and then ran downhill between banks topped with hedges. It turned sharply east at the top of the slope and then came to a steep and wooded stream. Sharpe would normally have jumped off the cart and walked the horses down the hill, but this day he let the cart's weight drive the beasts down the slope so they were going at a fast trot when they reached the bend above the stream. "Careful!" Lebecque snapped.

"I drive here every day," Sharpe lied, and he cracked the whip hard and hauled on the reins so that the horses leaped around the corner and, just as Sharpe had expected, the cart's offside wheels caught in the deep ruts and the vehicle tipped towards the stream as it was dragged about the bend. He heard the men behind shout as they were thrown across the cart, but he had already abandoned the whip and reins and had seized one of Lebecque's pigtails. He threw himself forward off the box, hauling Lebecque with him as the cart rolled to the right. The frightened horses jerked to a halt as the half overturned cart cracked to a halt against a tree. Lebecque and Sharpe had tumbled onto

the splinter bar behind the horses' legs and Sharpe, still holding the corporal's pigtail, thumped his left hand hard down onto Lebecque's throat. The corporal gasped for breath Sharpe hit him on the Adam's apple again, then pulled Lebecque's coat aside to find the pistol, and the corporal, whose every breath was now like swallowing acid, was powerless to resist.

SHARPE kicked him in the head, then jumped over the tangle of traces and reins to find the two remaining men. One had struck his head against the tree as the cart capsized, and he was lying pale-faced on the grass, while the other man had been thrown into a thorn bush,

where was fumbling to free his pistol.

"Don't move" Sharpe said, and hauled back the pistol's cock. "No, monsieur!

Please!" the man said. The wheels of the upset cart were still turning. "I do hate dragoons," Sharpe said, walking up to the man. "Should have killed you all when I had the chance." He dragged the man free of the thorns, then cracked the pistol barrel over his skull to drive him down to the ground. He took that man's pistol and found the third on the unconscious man. "Three dragoons against one rifleman," Sharpe said, "no wonder we won the bloody war.

Lebecque! Stop croaking like a bloody

frog and come here." It took 15 minutes for the unconscious man to revive, and when he came to his senses he found his hands were tied behind his back and a vengeful Englishman was standing over him with a knife. "No, monsieur!" he pleaded. "Shut up," Sharpe said, and get up." He had found the knife in Lebecque's pocket and had used it to cut the horses' reins into short lengths with which he had tied all three men's hands.

Now he kicked the three onto their feet and back up the hill towards the village. The snow was falling more heavily now, settling on the hedgerows and in the ruts of the road. It was mid-morning, but the clouds had turned the day into dusk. So

far, Sharpe thought, so good. He had freed himself and defeated half of Challon's small force, but that had been the easy part for a soldier like Sharpe. Now came the hard part. For now, instead of dealing with enemies, he had to make some friends.

THE goose that should have been Sharpe's Christmas dinner was now roasting in the oven, though the bird would take some hours to cook and Challon was too hungry to wait, and so Lucille was frying eggs and bacon to feed the sergeant and one of his two dragoons who had stayed in the farm. The second dragoon was keeping guard in the gate-tower from where he could

see both bridges across the chateau's moat, while Lorcet declared he did not like eggs and was content to breakfast on bread and an apple. Sergeant Challon walked up behind Lucille.

"So why are you married to an Englishman?" he asked. "I'm not married,"

Lucille said, spooning hot fat onto the eggs. "A Frenchman isn't good enough for you, eh?" Lucille shrugged. Lorcet was seated at the table where he was trying to decipher Sharpe's account books. "Leave her alone." he told Challon.

The big man ignored the lawyer. "So

what's wrong with a Frenchman?" he demanded of Lucille. "The Englishman came here," Lucille said, "as simple as that." Challon put his arms around Lucille's waist. She stiffened. "I think you're a traitor to France," the sergeant said, then slid one hand up to a breast. He smiled, then yelled and leaped away from the stove. "Bitch!" he snarled, clasping the hand where Lucille had spooned steaming fat onto his skin.

HE LET go of the wounded hand so that he could hit Lucille, then went very still as he saw she was poised to throw the whole pan of eggs, bacon and fat into his face. "Sit-down, Sergeant," Lorcet said tiredly, "and leave her alone. You have

more apples, Madame?" "In the larder behind you," Lucille said, then carried the pan to the table where she tipped eggs and bacon onto one of the plates, but paused before giving any to Challon. "You owe me an apology, Sergeant," she said. He was about to curse her, then saw that the pan was poised over his groin. "I apologise, Madame," he said grudgingly. Lucille tipped the rest of the food onto his plate. "Bon appetite," she said sweetly.

"So why are you with an Englishman?" the lawyer asked. "I told you. He came here one day. He stayed." "You let him stay," Lorcet corrected her. "True."

"An Englishman has no business in

France," Lorcet said. "His business,"

Lucille said, "is mending the mill, rearing lambs, raising cattle and tending the orchards." "There are Frenchmen who could do that," Lorcet said, "and who should do that. There's no work, Madame. These men" he indicated the two dragoons who were eating as though they had not seen food in a month, "fought for France. They bled, they burned, they starved, they thirsted, and came home to what? To a fat king on a fat throne and to rich folk in carriages, while they have nothing. Nothing!" "So you let them steal?" "Your Englishman stole our gold," Lorcet said. "I come merely to restore the gold to its rightful

owners." He twisted and peered at the window. "Is it still snowing?" "Harder than ever," Lucille said. "Then pray your Englishman does not get stuck in a drift," Lorcet said. "If I were you, Maitre," Lucille said, "I would pray that he does get stuck." The lawyer frowned at her with incomprehension, and Lucille smiled. "Because if he is stopped by the snow," she explained, "he won't come back here. And then you might live." "You terrify us," Sergeant Challon sneered at her. "You sent only three men with him," Lucille said calmly, then made the sign of the cross, "May their souls rest in peace. But worry not, Sergeant. He will come back." A gust of wind rattled the door and Challon

whipped round, his hand going to Sharpe's rifle that he had adopted as his own weapon. Lucille smiled at his alarm, then picked up some sewing. "My rifleman will come back, Sergeant," she said, "I promise you that. He will come back."

FATHER Defoy finished the Mass with the blessing, then made his few announcements; that tomorrow's Mass would be an hour earlier, that there would be no catechism class, and lastly a very public appeal to Madame Malan to remind her that her son had promised to deliver fuel to the priest's house and the promise had not been kept. The priest worried about Jacques Malan.

The big man had returned from the war and now did nothing except take his mother's pension and cause trouble. "You will remind him, Madame?" Father Defoy asked.

"I shall, Father," Madame Malan answered, then turned in alarm as the church door was thrown hard open. Wind gusted snow into the small church and flickered the candles burning in front of Mary's statue that had been wreathed in holly in honour of Christmas. Three men, two of them with bloodied faces and all with tied hands, were thrust into the church and behind them came Monsieur Sharpe, the Englishman, carrying a huge pistol. "Monsieur

Sharpe!"

Father Defoy remonstrated. "This is the house of God!" "Sorry, Father," Sharpe said, pushing the pistol into a pocket of his coat and snatching off his snow-crusted hat. "I've brought you three sinners who want to make confession," he said as he kicked Corporal Lebecque up the aisle. "Three miserable sinners, Father, whose souls need shriving before I send them to hell." "Monsieur Sharpe!" The priest protested again. "You left the door open!" "So I did, father," Sharpe said. He pushed his three prisoners down to the floor in front of the pulpit. "Wait there, you scum," he said, then he turned back to the priest. "I

stopped at the tavern on the way here, Father, he said, "and invited more of your parishioners to come to church."

FATHER Defoy watched as a huddle of sheepish men, their coats white with snow, edged into the back of the church. They had been drinking happily enough, content to let their wives and daughters look after God, when Sharpe had kicked the tavern door open and hauled a bloody-faced Corporal Lebecque into view. "I've just kicked hell out of three dragoons," Sharpe had announced belligerently, "and if any of you want to know why, then come to the church now." He had dragged his prisoner out of the doorway and the men, astonished

and curious, had abandoned their drink to follow. Jacques Malan was the last man into the church. He pulled off his hat and made the sign of the cross, but kept good hold of the cudgel he always carried. He gave the priest a surly nod. "The Englishman wants trouble, father," he growled. "No I do not," Sharpe said. Father Defoy, fearing that the church was about to witness some unseemly violence, hurried forward to take charge of the situation, but Sharpe gestured the priest to silence. Then he looked at the villagers. "You don't like me, do you?" He challenged them. "You reckon I'm a stranger, an Englishman who spent most of his life fighting against Frenchmen, and now I'm here and you don't want me,

do you?" "No," Jacques Malan said, and his cronies grinned. "But I want you," Sharpe said, "because where I come from neighbours help each other, and you're my neighbours now and I need help. So I've got a story to tell. A story about an Emperor, and about gold, and about greed. So settle down and listen." Because he had four hours of daylight left, and a family to rescue.

SHARPE told the villagers the story of the Emperor's gold and how it had been stolen by Pierre Ducos, and how Ducos had arranged matters so that everyone believed Sharpe was the thief, and the villagers, like folk everywhere, liked a good story. Sharpe told how he had

come to Lucille's chateau in search of information, and instead had been shot in the leg. "By Madame!" he said indignantly, and most of them laughed. He told them about Ducos, and how he had been called a Major, but was not really a soldier at all. He had been un fonctionnaire, he told them, and they sighed for they had all suffered greatly at the insolent hands of officials, and he had been a secret policeman, Sharpe said, and shawled heads shook in the church, and Ducos might even have been a lawyer. Sharpe embellished his story, and some of the women crossed themselves. Then Sharpe told how he had travelled to Naples and cornered Ducos, and how he had taken the gold

back, and that made everyone sit up because if there was one subject that was always close to a peasant's heart, it was gold. "But I did not travel to Naples alone," Sharpe said, and he crossed the church and took hold of Corporal Lebecque. The villagers still did not know why Lebecque and his two companions were Sharpe's prisoners, and they watched wide-eyed as the dragoon was dragged to the front of the aisle. "This man," Sharpe said, "was one of Ducos's companions. Isn't that true, Lebecque?"

Lebecque nodded. "So you tell them, Corporal," Sharpe went on, "who came to Naples with me." Lebecque's nose

was running and his hands were tied behind his back, so all he could do was sniff. "Soldiers," he said miserably. "What sort of soldiers?" "French." "And what uniform were they wearing?" Sharpe demanded. Lebecque looked sullen, then shrugged. "The Imperial Guard," he said. "Louder," Sharpe demanded. "Head up, man! Back straight! Let's hear you!" Lebecque instinctively stood up straight. "The Imperial Guard!" he snapped, and Sharpe saw that Jacques Malan had heard. He had wanted Jacques Malan to hear, for Malan had been an Imperial Guardsman himself and he still wore one of the great moustaches that Napoleon's picked warriors had sported.

"The Imperial Guard," Sharpe said, staring at Malan, "and I fought alongside them. I fought under the orders of General Jean Calvet." He saw that name register on Malan's suspicious face. "I was not fighting for Britain," Sharpe said, "but for France. And when we had taken back the gold, we did not keep it. It went to Elba!" That statement did not go down quite as well as he had hoped, for most of the villagers, far from being impressed by his honesty, plainly thought he was daft for having allowed such a fine treasure to escape.

"But these men," Sharpe indicated Lebecque and the other two prisoners, "believe I still possess the gold. So they

came here. Seven of them. And four are still in the chateau where they are holding Madame, our child and Marie as hostages." A murmur ran through the church. "And I have come here," Sharpe finished, "because you are my neighbours, and because I need help." He pushed Lebecque back to the other prisoners, then turned to Father Defoy and shrugged as though he had nothing more to say. There was silence in the church for a few seconds, then an urgent muttering. One man demanded to know why they should help Sharpe at all, and Sharpe spread his hands as if to suggest he could think of no reason. "But you all know Madame," he said, "and Marie has lived here all her life. Would you

abandon two of your women to these thieves?" Father Defoy shook his head. "But we're not soldiers! We should call the gendarmes from Caen!" "And at nightfall," Sharpe said, "Lucille will die while the gendarmes are still looking for their boots." "But what do you want us to do?" another asked plaintively. "He wants us to fight his battles for him," Jacques Malan growled from the back of the small church. "It's the English way. They let the Germans fight for them, the Spanish, the Portuguese, the Scots, the Irish, anyone but the English."

A MURMUR of agreement sounded from Malan's supporters, then Malan looked momentarily alarmed as Sharpe strode

down the aisle. The big man hefted his cudgel. "Outside," Sharpe said, pulling open the church door. "I don't obey you," Malan said stubbornly. "Lost your courage, have you?" Sharpe sneered as he walked out into the snow. "All words, no action?"

Malan came through the door like a charging bull, only to find Sharpe sitting on the church's low wall. "Stand up," Malan demanded. "Just get it over,"

Sharpe said. "Hit me." He saw the puzzlement on Malan's face. "That's what you've been wanting to do all year, isn't it?" he asked. "Hit me? So do it."

"Stand up!" Malan said again, and his

supporters, who had followed Malan out of the church, growled their support. "I'm not going to fight you, Jacques,"

Sharpe said, "I don't need to. I've been in as many battles as you have, so I don't have to prove a thing. But you do. You don't like me. In fact you don't seem to like anyone. You do nothing all day except make trouble. You were supposed to deliver firewood to the church-house, weren't you? But you haven't done it. You'd rather sit in the tavern spending your mother's money. Why don't you make yourself useful? I could use you! I've got a rusted-up mill that needs rebuilding, and a mill channel that needs clearing, and next month I've

got a load of stone coming from Caen to repave the yard. I could do with a strong man. But right now I need a soldier. A good soldier, not some fat drunk who lives off his poor mother's purse." Malan stepped forward and raised the cudgel. "Get up," he insisted. "Why bother?" Sharpe asked, "if you're just going to knock me down again?" "You're frightened!" Malan jeered. "Of a drunk?" Sharpe asked scornfully. "You dare call me a drunk?" Malan shouted.

"You? The English? Who were always drunk in battle!" "That's true," Sharpe admitted, "but we had to be, didn't we? If we were going to fight you lot."

Malan blinked, unsure how to take

Sharpe's agreement. "You were drunk?" he asked, sounding surprised. "Not me, Sergeant Malan, not me. But a lot of the lads were. You can't blame them though, can you? They were terrified of the Imperial Guard. Best soldiers in Europe." Jacques, assuming the last four words applied to the Imperial Guard, nodded. "We were," he said fervently, putting the cudgel on to his shoulder as though it were a musket. "And you know what that makes you and me, Jacques?" Sharpe asked. "What?" Malan asked suspiciously. "The best soldiers in the village." Sharpe stood. "You and me, Jacques Malan, two of the very best there ever were. Real soldiers! Not like those dragoons I dragged up here."

Malan shrugged. "Dragoons!" He spat. "Girls on horseback." "So what I'm saying, Jacques Malan, is help me or hit me."

Malan frowned at Sharpe. "Help you?" "How do I get inside the chateau without them seeing me? They're bound to have a sentry in the tower, and there's only two bridges over the moat and that sentry can see both, but there has to be another way in." "How would I know?" Malan said indignantly. "Because you were sweet on Madame when you were young," Sharpe said, "and one day you got on to the chateau's roof to look through her bedroom window, and you didn't get there by crossing either bridge, did

you?" Malan looked embarrassed. "There is a way," he admitted. "So show me," Sharpe said, "and after that, if you really have to, you can hit me." "It will be my pleasure," Malan said. "But first,"

Sharpe said, "we have to organise the choir." "The choir?" "Watch me," Sharpe said. He clapped the big man on the shoulder. "I knew, from the moment when I was in trouble, that I needed you. Only you." He took one of the captured pistols from his pocket and pushed it into Malan's hand. "You'll find that more useful than a cudgel, Jacques." "I have my musket at home." "Then go and fetch it. Then join me here. And Jacques?" Sharpe paused. "Merci beaucoup." He

hid his sigh of relief then went back into the church. He had some singing to arrange.

SERGEANT Challon finished off the last of the goose, patted his belly and leaned back in his chair. Lucille was putting Patrick to bed upstairs and Challon raised his eyes to the ceiling. "She can cook, that one," the sergeant said appreciatively. "Goose is too much for me," the lawyer said. "Too rich, too fatty." He had finished with Sharpe's accounts and was wondering why there was no evidence of the stolen gold in the columns. "I could eat another goose," Challon grunted, then looked at the lawyer. "So what will you do with her

when her Englishman gets back?" The lawyer drew a finger across his throat. "It's for the best," sadly, he said. "I detest violence, but if we let them live they'll only tell the gendarmes. And Major Ducos's will is hardly clear title to the gold, is it? The Government will want it. No, we have to make certain that Major Sharpe and his woman do not talk." "So if the woman's going to die," Chalon said, "does it matter what happens to her first?" Lorcet frowned. "I find your suggestion distasteful," Sergeant. Chalon laughed. "You can find it what you like, Maitre, but she and I have got some unfinished business." He pushed back his chair. "Madame," he said, raising his eyes to the ceiling

again, "you are about to enter paradise." But before Challon could move there was a sudden rush of feet on the stairs and the man who had been keeping watch from the tower ran into the kitchen. "Sergeant!" "What is it?"

"People! Scores of them! Coming here."

CHALLON swore and hurried after the man towards the tower. Lorcet followed them up the stairs, down the small passage and through the door which led to the circular stairs. Once at the top he could peer through the slits under the tower roof and he saw that a crowd of villagers was walking slowly down the hill towards the chateau. A priest dressed in his full vestments led them

through the snow, while behind him a man carried a silver crucifix on a tall pole. Once at the chateau the small crowd split into two, some walking on towards the bridge which led into the gate-tower while the others followed the priest around to the rear of the farm. "Stay here," Lorcet ordered the man who had been on guard. "Sergeant! Follow me." The two men went back to the kitchen and stared through a window at the priest, who was arranging his followers on the far side of the bridge. "What are they doing?" Lorcet asked. "God knows,"

Challon said. He was still holding Sharpe's rifle, but what was he to do?

Shoot the priest? "Are they going to sing?" the lawyer asked incredulously, for the priest had turned to his flock, raised his hands, and now brought them down. And so the crowd began to sing.

They sang carols in the falling snow. They sang all the beautiful old carols of Christmas, the carols of a baby and a star, of a manger and the shepherds, and of angels' wings beating in the winter snow over Bethlehem. They sang of wise men and of gold, of Mary and her child, and of peace on earth and joy in heaven. They sang lustily, as though the loudness of their voices could stave off the bitter cold of the waning afternoon. "In a moment," Lucille had come down

from the bedrooms, "they will want to come in. I must give them wine, some food." "They can't come in!" Lorcet snapped. "How will you stop them?"

Lucille asked as she folded Patrick's clothes on to the table. "They know we're here. We have lamps shining." "You will tell them to go away, Madame!"

Lorcet insisted. "Me!" Lucille asked, her eyes widening. "I should tell my neighbours that they cannot sing me carols on Christmas Eve? Non, monsieur, I shall not tell them any such thing," "Then we'll just leave the doors locked,"

Sergeant Challon said, "and they can freeze to death. They'll get tired soon enough. And you, Madame, had better pray that your Englishman is bringing the gold." Lucille went back to the stairs. "I shall pray, Sergeant," she told Challon, "but not for that." She went up to her child. "Bitch," Challon said, and followed her. While outside the carollers sang on.

"THERE used to be a third bridge over the moat," Jacques Malan explained, "and it led to the chapel, but they pulled it down years ago. Only they left the stone pilings, see? Just under the water." Malan had not only fetched his musket, but had put on his old uniform so that

now he was glorious in the blue, white and scarlet of Napoleon's old guard. Thus dressed for battle he had led Sharpe on a wide circuit through the woods so that they approached the chateau from the east, hidden from the gate-tower by the farmhouse and the chapel roof. Malan now reversed his musket and stabbed its stock down through the moat's skim of ice. "There," he said, as the musket butt struck stone. He stepped carefully across so that he was standing in the moat with a few inches of water lapping his boots. He probed for the next piling. "There are five stones," he told Sharpe, "Miss one, though, and you'll fall in the water."

"But what happens once we're across?"  
"We climb to the roof," Malan said.

"There's a stone jutting out, see?" He pointed. "We throw a rope round it and climb." And once they were on the chapel roof, Sharpe thought, there was a window into an old attic that was filled with 800 years of junk, and the only other entrance to the attic was through a hatch high on the end wall of the bedroom and it needed a ladder to reach that hatch. Sharpe had only ever been into the attic once when he had marvelled at the collection of rubbish that Lucille's family had stowed away. There was a suit of armour up there, he remembered, and crates of mouldering

clothes, ancient arrows, a crossbow, a weather-cock which had fallen off the chapel, a stuffed pike caught by Lucille's grandfather, and a rocking horse that Sharpe thought he might get down for Patrick, though he hoped the toy would not put the idea of becoming a cavalryman into the boy's head. "I'd never live that down," he said aloud.

"Live what down?" Malan asked. He was standing on the third hidden piling, and probing for the fourth. "If Patrick becomes a cavalryman." "Mon Dieu! That would be terrible!" Malan agreed, then jumped across the last stones and on to the narrow ledge that edged the chapel. He held out his musket to help

Sharpe across the last two pilings. "They sing well!" he said, listening to the two choirs of villagers. "You do this carol singing in England, too?" "Of course we do." "But my captain said the English did not believe in God." "But they believe in getting free food and drink," Sharpe said. "So maybe they're not mad after all," Malan conceded. "And you have brandy in the house, monsieur?"

Not that I am a drunk, of course." "I have brandy," Sharpe said, then watched as Malan fetched a length of rope from a pocket of his guardsman's coat. "I'll go first," Sharpe said. "You'll follow me!" Malan insisted, as he tossed the rope to loop it over the projecting stone. "I have

done this before. You hold the musket." Malan was surprisingly nimble for a big man, though he was breathless by the time he reached the chapel roof. "I used to be able to do that in seconds," he grumbled. "I thought you only did it once?" "Mademoiselle Lucille only saw me once," Malan confessed. "Give me the musket barrel, monsieur, and I'll pull you up." He caught hold of the barrel and, with an enviable ease, hauled Sharpe up on to the roof. "Now what?" he asked. "The window," Sharpe said, pointing to the small, blackened panes of the old attic window that was set into the higher gable next to the roof on which they were precariously perched. "Break it in." "They'll hear us!"

"The choirs are singing fit to burst their lungs," Sharpe said. "Break it in. It'll be something else for you to mend." "And what makes you think I'll be working for you, Englishman?" "Because I'll pay you, because you like Lucille and you'd rather work for a soldier than sweat for some bastard who stayed at home while you went to war." Malan grunted, but said nothing in response. Instead he used the musket's butt to push in the window panes, then he snapped out the old rotten mullions and struggled through into the attic. Sharpe followed him, relieved to be out of the snow. "Now follow me," he whispered, "and go gently!"

This place is full of rubbish." It took a

few moments to edge through the dusty, dark clutter, but at last Sharpe pushed the stuffed pike aside and crouched beside the old hatch. He put an ear to the wood, listened for a second, then angrily pulled the pistol from his coat pocket. "Let's go to war," he told Malan, then shoved the hatch open.

LUCILLE screamed when Sergeant Challon shoved her down on to the bed. She had thought she would be safe now the villagers were outside the chateau. She suspected Richard had somehow persuaded them to be there, though what else he might have arranged she did not know, but now she feared she would never find out for Sergeant Challon had

pursued her upstairs and dragged her into the bedroom. "You burned me!" he had snarled at her, then struck her round the face with his wounded hand. Lucille screamed, then froze as Challon pointed his pistol between her eyes. He smiled when he saw her fear, then he tucked the pistol under his arm and began unbuckling his belt. "Boney gave us lots of practice with the ladies," he said. "Italian skirts, Spanish skirts, Portuguese skirts, we hauled 'em all up. So get yourself ready. I ain't a man who likes to be kept waiting." The noise of the high hatch opening made Challon look up, but he had no time to pluck the pistol from under his arm before Sharpe's boots raked down his face. Challon twisted

away, falling under the impact, but before he could recover there was one hand stifling his mouth and another was holding a pistol at his neck. He was hauled to his feet and there, right in front of him, stood a sergeant of the Imperial Guard with a most unfriendly smile. "Hold him, Major," Malan said.

Sharpe held Challon tight, Malan grinned, then kicked the dragoon between the legs. "Jesus!" Sharpe said in awe, as he let Challon fall. "He won't walk for a month!" He grinned at Lucille. "Where's Patrick?" "With Marie, next door, she gestured to the adjoining bedroom. Sharpe gave her a hand and helped her from the bed. "You

know Monsieur Malan?"

"I am very glad to see you, Monsieur Malan," Lucille said fervently. "What's going on up there?" Maitre Lorcet shouted from the bottom of the stairs. He had heard the thump of Sharpe jumping on Challon, and the bigger thump as Malan followed. Sharpe opened the door.

"Lorcet? This Is Major Sharpe. I've got four of your men prisoner, I've got my wife back, I've got my child, and there never was any gold. And now I'm coming down the stairs and you can have a fight if you want one, but I've no mind to kill anyone at Christmas. Put the ruby on the table, Lorcet, and unlock the door.

I've got a lot of guests coming for a Christmas drink, and I want you and your scum out of here."

He dragged Challon down the stairs, then locked all the intruders inside the chapel. They could repent of their sins there until morning, when Sharpe would deal with them, but for now he had more important tasks. He had to light the fire in the big hall, for the folks who had been singing to hide the noise that Sharpe and Malan made breaking into the chateau were all chilled to the bone.

So he lit the fire and Jacques Malan went down to the cellar and hauled up dusty bottles that had been stored there

since before the Revolution, and Sharpe, listening to the laughter, and wondering how Lucille had managed to find so much food in the house, reckoned he was staying in Normandy after all. It was Christmas 1816, he had neighbours at last, and he was safe at home.

The End