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Excerpt

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HISTORY
OF THE
WAR IN FRANCE AND BELGIUM
IN 1815.

CHAPTER XI.

Commencement of the grand attack upon the left wing and centre of the Anglo-allied army—On the right of the attack the French gain possession of the farm of Papelotte, which, however, is soon retaken by the 3rd battalion of the 2nd regiment of Nassau—Retreat of Bylandt's Dutch-Belgian infantry-brigade—Picton's dispositions—Attack by the French left central column—Gallant charge by Kempt's brigade—Death of Picton—Contest between cuirassiers and the 2nd life guards in front of the right of Kempt's brigade—Attack upon La Haye Sainte by the left brigade of Donzelot's division—Advance of Rousset's cavalry-brigade by the French left of La Haye Sainte—Uxbridge decides upon charging the enemy's attacking force with Somerset's and Ponsonby's cavalry-brigades—Charge by the French cuirassiers and carabiniers—It is met by that of Somerset's cavalry-brigade—Advance of Ponsonby's cavalry-brigade—Advance of Alix's and Marcognet's French infantry-divisions—They reach the crest of the Anglo-allied position—Advance of Pack's brigade—Its attack upon the head of Marcognet's column—Charge by Ponsonby's cavalry-brigade—Complete overthrow of the French columns—The Greys capture the eagle of the 45th French regiment—They also charge and defeat a supporting column of Marcognet's attacking force—The Royals capture the eagle of the 105th French regiment—The Inniskillings defeat and disperse the columns to which they are opposed—Continuation of the charge by Somerset's brigade—Disordered state of the two British cavalry-brigades—They crown the enemy's position, and

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cut down the gunners and horses of the French batteries—At length they retire—The left of their line suffers severely from a charge by Jaquinot's light cavalry-brigade—Vandeleur's light cavalry advances in support upon the left—Charge by the 12th and 16th British light dragoons—The French cavalry is driven back—Vivian moves his brigade to the right, and opens a fire from two guns of his horse artillery—The British cavalry engaged in this affair sustains a heavy loss—Disposition of the troops on the Anglo-allied left and centre—Tableau of the battle at this period.

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NAPOLÉON, having taken the precaution of posting a cavalry corps of observation upon his right flank, no longer delayed sending the order to Ney for the commencement of the grand attack upon the centre and left wing of the Anglo-allied army. About the same time, Wellington, considering that some of the battalions along the right wing of his front line were too much exposed to the enemy's cannonade, which had from the commencement been principally directed against them, and which was now conducted with increased vigour, withdrew them more under shelter of the crest of the ridge. It might then be about half-past one, or perhaps a quarter before two o'clock. The simultaneous advance of d'Erlon's four divisions of infantry, amounting to nearly 18,000 men, was grand and imposing. As the heads of the columns cleared their own line of batteries ranged along the crest of the intervening ridge, and as the points on which they were directed for attack opened out to their view, loud and reiterated shouts arose from their ranks of "*Vive l'Empereur!*" which, as the masses began to descend the exterior slope of their position, were

suddenly drowned in the roar produced by the discharge of seventy-four pieces of French cannon ^{18th of June.} over their heads. The effects of the latter upon Picton's division, and upon Bylandt's Dutch-Belgian brigade, which, as before stated, was deployed upon the exterior slope of the Anglo-allied position, were severely felt. Light troops now issued forth from each column, and soon spread out into a line of skirmishers extending the whole length of the valley. As Donzelot's division, which was on the left, approached La Haye Sainte, one of its brigades moved out to attack that farm, while the other continued its advance on the right of the Charleroi road; and it was not long before a sharp fire of musketry along and around the hedges of the orchard of La Haye Sainte announced the first resistance to d'Erlon's formidable advance. Shortly afterwards a dropping fire commenced among the hedges and inclosures of Papelotte, La Haye, and Smohain, which were occupied by the Nassau battalions under Prince Bernhard of Saxe-Weimar. The right brigade of Durutte's division was thrown out against the troops defending these inclosures, while the left brigade continued to advance across the valley, so as to form a support to Marcognet's division on its left, and, at the same time, to connect this attack with the advance of the latter against the main front line of the Allied right wing.

Durutte's skirmishers pressed boldly forward against those of Prince Bernhard's brigade; and it

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was not long before they succeeded in gaining possession of the farm-house of Papelotte, driving out the light company of the 3rd battalion of the 2nd regiment of Nassau, commanded by Captain von Rettberg; but the latter, on being reinforced with four additional companies, resumed the offensive, and gallantly retook the farm. The contest in this quarter was now limited to a persistent skirmish, which extended itself along La Haye and Smohain, occupied by the regiment of Orange-Nassau. With this tirailade on either flank of d'Erlon's corps, the central columns pursued their onward course, and began to ascend the exterior slope of the Allied position.

Immediately on the departure of d'Erlon's corps from the French position, Bachelu's infantry-division, which constituted the right of Reille's corps, was moved forward to the intermediate height between La Belle Alliance and La Haye Sainte, (where it is intersected by the hollow-way formed by the Charleroi road,) in order to maintain that point, to be at hand as a reserve to the attacking force, and to keep up the connection between the right and left wings of the front line of the French army.

The three central columns continued their advance up the exterior slope of the Allied position. The nature of the ground still admitted of the play of the French batteries over their heads, and great was the havoc produced by this fire in Picton's

devoted ranks. As the heads of the columns neared the deployed line of Bylandt's brigade, the shouts of "*Vive l'Empereur !*" were renewed. The skirmishers in advance were on the point of opening their fire upon the brigade, in order to prepare for, and give increased effect to, the succeeding charge of the columns, when the Dutch-Belgians, who had already evinced a considerable degree of unsteadiness, commenced a hurried retreat, not partially and promiscuously, but collectively and simultaneously—so much so, that the movement carried with it the appearance of its having resulted from a word of command. The disorder of these troops rapidly augmented; but, on their reaching the straggling hedge along the crest of the position, an endeavour was made to rally them upon the 5th battalion of Dutch militia. This attempt, however, notwithstanding the most strenuous exertions on the part of the officers, completely failed. The reserve battalion and the artillerymen of Captain Byleveld's battery, though they seemed to stem the torrent for a moment, were quickly swept away by its accumulating force. As they rushed past the British columns, hissings, hootings, and execrations, were indignantly heaped upon them; and one portion, in its eagerness to get away, nearly ran over the grenadier company of the 28th British regiment, the men of which were so enraged, that it was with difficulty they could be prevented from firing upon

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the fugitives. Some of the men of the 1st, or Royal Scots, were also desirous of shooting them. Nothing seemed to restrain their flight, which ceased only when they found themselves completely across and covered by the main ridge along which the Anglo-allied army was drawn up. Here they continued, comparatively under shelter, during the remainder of the battle, in which they took no further part, and to assist in gaining which their services were, from that moment, neither afforded nor required.

Picton, who had been calmly watching the French movements, and whose quick and practised eye detected the increasing unsteadiness and wavering disposition of the Dutch-Belgians, appeared to expect but a feeble resistance on their part; and upon his aide-de-camp, Captain Tyler,* remarking to him that he was sure they would run, he said, "Never mind; they shall have a taste of it, at all events." He had certainly not anticipated the possibility of their running off in the manner they did, the moment the French came within musket-range of their ranks.

Now, however, that these troops had completely cleared away to the rear, and left him no other means wherewith to brave the coming storm than could be afforded by the shattered remnants of Kempt's and Pack's brigades which had survived

* Lieut. Colonel John Tyler, K.H., died on the 4th June, 1842.

the sanguinary fight of Quatre-Bras, Picton immediately deployed his force, and assumed an attitude of patient but determined resistance. When the disparity in relative numbers of the assailants and defenders is considered, the attempt to make head, with such odds, against the advancing masses of an enemy elated by his triumphant progress, was, it must be admitted, a daring and critical undertaking. Each brigade presented a thin two-deep line. Their united strength did not amount to more than about 3,000 men; whilst of the French force, the central attacking columns alone, which were now advancing directly upon those two brigades, consisted of nearly 13,000 men. Picton had, moreover, no infantry-reserve whatever, from which he could obtain support in case of success, or upon which he could fall back in case of disaster. He was not, however, one to be daunted by the approach of heavy columns, formidable as they might appear in point of numbers, when he could meet them with a well-trained British line, though it should be but two deep, and present but a fourth of the numerical force of its opponents. It is true, that nearly all the regiments in Kempt's and Pack's brigades had lost half their numbers in the battle of the 16th; but Picton well knew that they had not lost that indomitable spirit, which, under his guidance, had immortalized them on that memorable field of battle. There, he had triumphantly led them both in line against heavy columns of in-

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_____ fantry, and in squares against charging squadrons of cavalry. What, then, might not be achieved by such innate valour—by such consummate discipline? The entire confidence which he reposed in his men was warmly reciprocated on their part. With such a chief to lead them, they would have bravely confronted the whole French army, had it been moving in mass against them. The flight of the panic-stricken Dutch-Belgians produced no effect upon them beyond that of exciting their derision and contempt.

The 28th, 32nd, and 79th regiments of Kempt's brigade, when deployed, occupied a line parallel to, and about fifty yards distant from, the hedge along the Wavre road, its right resting on a high bank lining the Charleroi road, and its left terminating at a point in rear of that part of the Wavre road which begins to incline for a short distance towards the left rear. In their right front, immediately overlooking the intersection of the Charleroi and Wavre roads, stood (as before stated)* the reserve of the 1st battalion 95th rifles; they had two companies, under Major Leach,† posted in the sand-pit adjoining the left of the Charleroi road; and one company, under Captain Johnston,‡ at the hedge on the knoll in rear of the sand-pit. Their commanding officer, Colonel Sir Andrew Barnard, and Lieut.

* See page 334, vol. i.

† Now Lieut. Colonel Jonathan Leach, C.B.

‡ Major William Johnston died in April, 1836.

Colonel Cameron,* were with these advanced companies, watching the enemy's movements. Pack's line was in left rear of Kempt's brigade, and about 150 yards distant from the Wavre road. Its left rested upon the knoll between the Wavre road and a small coppice on the reverse slope of the position; but the centre and right extended across a considerable hollow which occurs on the right of that coppice. The front of the interval between the two brigades became, after the retreat of the Dutch-Belgians, completely exposed and uncovered.

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The French left central attacking column had continued its advance in a direction contiguous to, and parallel with, the high road, until the skirmishers in its front were suddenly checked by the companies of the 95th British rifles posted in the sand-pit, which obstacle had hitherto been in a great measure concealed from their view by the particular formation of the ground, combined with the height of the intervening corn. Influenced by the discovery of this impediment, and by the appearance of the *abatis* upon the high road, the column inclined to the right so as to clear the sand-pit; and, as their skirmishers were pressing on in that direction, the companies of the 95th became turned, and were forced to fall back upon the other company stationed along the little hedge in rear of the pit. So vigorous and effective was

* Now Major General Sir Alexander Cameron, K.C.B.

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the fire maintained from this hedge by the British riflemen, both upon the skirmishers and upon the column itself, that the latter was induced to swerve still further to the right, out of its original direction. The retreat of Bylandt's brigade having removed all impediment to the advance of the central attacking columns, the three companies of the 95th soon found themselves outflanked by the French skirmishers, and gradually retired upon their reserve. The light companies of the other regiments of Kempt's brigade, which had moved out to skirmish, fell back in like manner, accordingly as the French columns advanced. With a view to secure the left flank of the attacking force, and at the same time to connect the movements with those on the opposite side of the high road, the French presented a strong line, or rather a mass of skirmishers, in the interval between that road and the left central column.

As the columns now rapidly approached the crest of the Anglo-allied position, the greater part of the batteries along the French ridge—that is, all those which had been cannonading that portion of the line embraced by the attack—gradually suspended their fire. The partial cessation of their thunder was immediately succeeded by loud and reiterated shouts from the columns of “*Vive l'Empereur!*” whilst at short intervals were heard the cheering exhortations of “*En avant! en avant!*” mingled with the continued roll of drums beating