

THE "IRONSIDES." II—1643.

The year 1643 was that in which the "Ironsides" laid the foundation of the great reputation which clung to them until the close of their existence; for in that year they checked the advance of the Royalists upon London, drove them out of Lincolnshire, relieved the sorely-pressed army in Hull, and established a secure base for the operations which led up to Marston Moor.

But for the Parliamentary successes in the eastern counties in this year the Royalists would have swept down concentrically upon London, and Marston Moor and Naseby would not have been fought.

Troop number "67" had steadily increased in numbers and reputation, and on March 2nd, 1643, Cromwell was appointed Colonel, with authority to increase his troop to a double regiment of fourteen troops, and by May he had two thousand well disciplined men. As he himself said, "I raised such men as had the fear of God before them, as made some conscience of what they did; and from that day forward they were never beaten."

By the end of April, 1643, the eastern counties were freed from all fear of Royalist risings and Cromwell's men prepared for more serious work.

The Parliament held the eastern counties as far north as the line Peterborough—Lynn; and another of their forces under Fairfax was holding Hull. But the Royalists, pivoting on their strong garrison at Newark, dominated Lincolnshire and prevented any communication between the two Parliamentary forces; and Fairfax was in imminent danger of being forced to surrender unless relieved.

Cromwell occupied Peterborough and Crowland, and pushed into Lincolnshire. On 13th May he advanced with twelve troops towards Newark, and in the evening, about two miles from the little town of Grantham, came suddenly upon the enemy's cavalry of double his own strength. Surprised, doubtless, at meeting opposition to which they were unaccustomed, the Royalists halted and began to form for attack, but Cromwell gave them little time.

Giving the word to charge, he dashed at the confused enemy; his troopers did not fail him. In a serried mass, knee to knee, powerfully mounted and splendidly disciplined, the twelve troops of steel-clad cuirassiers thundered down on the foe, shouting their battle cry. The distance was short, the charge well timed and splendidly executed and in a few moments the Royalists were completely routed. The stern Puritan cavalry gave no opportunity to rally but pursued for three miles, doing great execution.

As Mr. Gardiner has rightly said, "The whole fortune of the Civil war was in that skirmish. A body of Puritan horse had driven twice their number like chaff before the wind, and, as armies were then constituted, superiority in cavalry was superiority in war."

The two following months were most critical for the Parliamentary cause in the east. Jealousies between commanders prevented combined operations; money and supplies could not be obtained, but the cavalry still guarded the eastern counties against attack. They were in need of clothing and equipment, their pay was in arrears, but they never thought of giving way.

Something had to be done to recover Lincolnshire and relieve the pressure on Fairfax in Yorkshire.

Cromwell and Meldrum were ordered to the relief of Gainsborough, a place of strategic importance, as it stood in the way of the Royalist advance. They took Burleigh House by storm after desperate fighting, swept the Royalists from the neighbourhood of Stamford, and on July 26th, Cromwell pushed forward to Gainsborough with 600 horse, being joined by some small reinforcements on the way.

On the morning of July 28th, after a forced march of fifty-five miles, they came upon the Royalist cavalry, posted on the edge of a sandy plateau where the ground slopes down steeply at the small village of Lea, two miles

south of Gainsborough. Cromwell attacked at once, and for some time the result was in doubt, neither side being able to break through; but at last the Royalists began to give ground and the Parliamentary horse pressing them the harder, completely broke and routed them, pursuing for more than five miles. The Royalist reserve remaining unbroken, Cromwell charged it, drove it into a quagmire, and cut it to pieces.

Gainsborough was relieved and supplied, but the enemy was advancing from the north. The cavalry went forward to check the advance, taking with them 400 infantry; the enemy proved to be Newcastle with the Royal army; the infantry fled at once. Then was seen the perfection of the training and discipline of the troopers.

Wearied with heavy marching and their previous engagement, opposed to an army, deserted by their infantry, with no hope of re-inforcement, they showed no signs of panic or unsteadiness. Two parties, each of three troops, under Major Whalley and Captain Ayscough formed the rear guard. Pressed by greatly superior numbers, they held them in check, retiring steadily by alternate wings until the whole body was safely drawn off to Lincoln, with the loss of but two men. No finer exploit has been recorded of cavalry in any age or country. "Here, at last, was that which Essex had failed to create, a cavalry as highly disciplined as enterprising. Potentially, the combat at Gainsborough was the turning point of the war."

Cromwell retired to Huntingdon, which he reached on July 31st; on the 30th Gainsborough surrendered. The infantry had retired or deserted, and the cavalry soon took a position at Peterborough to cover the Eastern counties, for they alone stood to check Newcastle's march on London. The end of August, however, brought large reinforcements and the crisis was past.

Always acting on the offensive, when possible, Cromwell pushed his cavalry forward into Lincolnshire on September 5th; on the 18th their advance reached Barton, opposite Hull, where Fairfax was besieged by Newcastle.

September 22nd had been appointed by the besieged as a day of fasting and humiliation, but on that day Cromwell with his main body reached Hull, bringing supplies of arms and powder, both urgently required. On the 26th Cromwell's men, together with twenty troops of horse under the younger Fairfax, re-crossed into Lincolnshire, retired to Boston, and then besieged Bolingbroke Castle.

On the evening of October 10th Sir John Hendersson, the Royalist governor of Newark, advancing to relieve Bolingbroke Castle, drove in some of Fairfax's cavalry near Horncastle; and on the morning of the 11th he pushed forward through Horncastle.

Near Winceley he was met by Cromwell with his cavalry; each side was about 3,000 strong.

The horses of the Puritans were much exhausted but retreat would have been disastrous.

Great was the contrast between the forces; the Royal horse magnificently mounted, armed, and accoutred, with polished armour, gay scarfs, and standards fluttering, and trumpets sounding exultingly. The Puritan cavalry lacking the splendour of their enemies, with plain but soldierly accoutrements, fine horses well cared for, troopers grim, resolute, and dauntless. They stood silent and motionless, by squadrons with intervals, solemn and voiceless, with matchless discipline and precision.

Cromwell gave the word and led the charge in person. Pealing forth a psalm, his splendid heavy cavalry followed him; his horse was killed but he remounted and led a second charge, and Fairfax now attacking, the enemy gave way in great disorder. Pursuing fiercely, the Puritans drove the broken cavalry through Horncastle, and almost to the gates of Lincoln, slaughtering the fugitives or driving them into the Fens.

On the following day Newcastle abandoned the siege of Hull, and the army under Lord Fairfax was set free, and