

THE BATTLE OF WATERLOO

(By GABRIEL BRADFORD)

There have been very great battles in the world's history, sometimes even decisive battles, that have had little significance beyond the time and place in which they were fought. There have been others, often less fiercely contested and from a military point of view less interesting, but of immense historical import, because they settled the triumph or downfall of some striking personage, some heroic people, some cause of vital and enduring weight in the progress of humanity. Such was Marathon in the ancient world; such were Gettysburg and Waterloo in modern.

To understand the significance of Waterloo, we must grasp clearly the extraordinary career of Napoleon Bonaparte and the meaning of what he did, not only in the history of France, but in all that of mankind.

He was an obscure Corsican adventurer who fell upon a time and circumstances that gave his genius most ample and fitting opportunity. What such a man would have done in the America of today makes a delightful subject of speculation; very probably nothing.

But he was born in the chaos of the French Revolution, which filled the last decade of the eighteenth century. Men had overthrown an old world. They had heaved up society from the bottom to the top. They had torn down old habits, old traditions, old beliefs. Heads had been cut off right and left, some stupid and vicious, some gracious and enchanting, some useless, some that might have been useful. But you cannot build a social order on several heads. After this riot of destruction and cruelty, men sought to rebuild and reorganize. In all that anarchic chaos there had been some ideas of real light and splendor, a blind longing for justice, a strange love for liberty, an enduring hope of a new and perfect world to be erected on the ruins. But the leaders who had been so potent to destroy had not the intelligence or the character to create. And so the body politic went tumbling on from blunder to blunder.

Worse still, outside foes beset them. An old Europe, ruled by heads that unfortunately had not been cut off, first started at the head cutters, then detested them, then struck at them. From every side great armies, evened out by the emigrant French aristocrats who had escaped the guillotine, gathered together and crowded in upon distracted France. They were eager to restore the old rulers, such heads as were left of them, a generation that, according to the epigram of a keen observer, "had learned nothing and had forgotten nothing."

Then was the chance of the Corsican. He was born a great soldier. He had superhuman insight, superhuman conviction, superhuman energy. He took the French armies, already trained and hardened by skillful leaders and fierce fighting, inspired them with his own driving fury, and hurled back the old generals and the old armies of the old kingdoms of the earth. Then he turned his cannon on the mob of Paris, and in a moment, historically speaking, the riot, the disorder, the anarchy, were still. A man had come among them. A man was what they needed, alike to ward off foreign enmity and to build up a new, stable social order at home.

It is here, we believe, that Napoleon lost his opportunity. If he had had the soul of Washington, might he not have built up a new order founded on freedom and the great characteristics of modern democracy? Some think, perhaps Napoleon himself thought, that that was impossible, that the Frenchman of that day was incapable of anything but servile submission to a military autocrat. That view may be correct. No man can prove the contrary. All we know is that seventy years later, out of a chaos of anarchy almost as great, there did grow a French Republic that, in spite of errors and failures and weaknesses, still endures and will endure. We know also that a great man, born long before Napoleon's death, took the far more unpromising chaos of Italy and built on it a free government, which is a lasting monument to his genius. The man was Cavour; and his are the glorious words that, we believe, might far better have been Napoleon's; "I am the child of liberty, and to liberty I owe all that I am."

In Napoleon's youth—for he was little more than a boy when supreme power came to him—ideas of self-sacrifice and patriotic duty were hazy and present. In some respects he was admirably fitted to win glory as the father of his country. He had immense personal charm, far more than Washington, so that men would do anything for him and follow him anywhere. But the passion for authority, the greed of control, the impetuous, wayward assertion of his own will, grew on him with years. There was something of the dreamer in him, something of the enthusiast, and his restless fancy was enthralled by visions of more power, more sovereignty, more conquest, and more, and ever

more. To carry out these views he needed a great military instrument, and he made France a nation of soldiers. Not that he was a fighter only; he was a great administrator and a cunning diplomat. With that singular faculty of cool analysis that is one of the elements of his greatness, he admitted that "the characteristic of the soldier is to wish to do everything despotically; that of the civilian is to submit everything to discussion, truth, and reason. The superiority unquestionably belongs to the civilian." Yet his glory, his delight, and his genius lay in war, and from the very first his influence tended to make his people feel that war was the true means of national aggrandizement, prosperity, and permanence.

The French a hundred years ago, however, never admitted that they were waging aggressive war. They maintained always that they were attacked by others, that all Europe was jealous of their freedom and progress, and that it was determined to destroy their independent national life.

Nor did this conquering soldier and his fighting people admit that their views were selfish or their efforts directed to their own advantages only. France was the most civilized, the most cultivated nation on earth. That was admitted by everyone. What then did French triumph mean but the universal diffusion of French civilization and culture? To every nation of Europe they were ready to offer some great gift; to Russia the disappearance of Asiatic barbarism, to Germany the downfall of a score of petty courts and cabinets, to Italy unity, to England the curbing of a harsh and haughty aristocracy. "We bring all these blessings to every people," said the French. "Then why, why, why, do they detest us?"

Blinded by the intoxication of victory, these soldiers did not understand that gifts are not attractive when offered on the point of the sword, and that culture served with the bayonet is likely to be difficult of digestion.

So both sides believed they were right and each hated the other with an intolerable bitterness of hatred. But of all their enemies those whom the French detested most heartily were the English. To destroy the English, Napoleon endeavored to create a fleet, and sought to make France what it had never been, a naval nation. In all his continental triumphs the invasion of England was the dream that haunted his days and disturbed his brief and restless nights. So that the wits of Paris called him Don Quixote "de la Manche," la Manche signifying at once the birthplace of the Spanish hero and the English Channel. Shakespeare, who expressed everything, even the hatred of his country, put into the mouth of a foreigner words that convey the feeling of too many of Napoleon's followers:

All form is formless, odor odorless, Save what is opposite to England's love.

The causes of this dislike to England are easily discovered, and the feeling is common to others beside the French. "The English are just but not amiable," said an acute critic; and amiability goes such a long way! The typical Englishman might give his life for you, but he shrinks from treating you with courtesy. Now few people want his life, but many want his good manners. Thus the English have laid up for themselves a sufficient stock of unpopularity throughout the world.

Again, their enemies accuse the English of hypocrisy. "Why," says the Englishman, "you amaze me! Bluff honesty is my known characteristic everywhere." In a sense, it is; but the very bluff honesty goes with a keen appreciation of the practical thing to be done at the moment, and that practical thing is not always consistent with abstract theory. Hence comes a practice at times so glaringly at variance with previous preaching that more logical nations call it in plain terms, hypocrisy.

So with English liberty. The Englishman thinks that the name of his country is synonymous with freedom, and that within the limits of that blessed island it is every man's privilege to do as he likes. Some outsiders think that the bonds of old conservative custom, the servility of caste, the domination of rank and wealth, are felt nowhere more crampingly than between land's end and John o'Goat's.

Yet with all these drawbacks, these inconsistencies, these absurdities if you like, the fact remains that England has stood more steadily than any other country in the Old World for the progress of modern democracy, and above all, that she has been the firm opponent of military absolutism, with all the centralization and systematized bureaucracy that military absolutism entails. Three times such military absolutism has stretched forth an iron hand to class all Europe. Three times has England met that clasp with dogged obstinacy and shattered and paralyzed it. At the end of the six-

teenth century Philip of Spain sought to be master. England broke him. At the end of the seventeenth century Louis XIV sought to be master. England broke him. At the end of the eighteenth century Napoleon sought to be master. England broke him. For a hated nation of hypocrites that is a record of to be altogether ashamed of.

A most interesting light is thrown on these achievements by studying a side eddy of the main current as depicted in Parkham's history of the French and English in America. Parkham fully appreciated the charm and culture of the French and the unprepossessing qualities of the English. But he shows conclusively that the triumph of the English was owing to the superiority of their training as freemen over the military subordination and monarchical loyalty of the French, and by so doing he raises his subject far above the limits of a petty provincial quarrel.

In the great struggle of the early nineteenth century each side was personified in a man peculiarly fitted to represent it. Napoleon embodied the very genius of the Latin races. He was daring, dashing, full of splendid energy, susceptible also of deep discouragement, keenly sympathetic and responsive to emotional appeals, yet ready to sacrifice any emotional to the attainment of his object. The English—or Irish—Wellington was slow, self contained, cold and hard in his ordinary manner, indifferent to his own suffering and that of others, a haughty aristocrat, yet sternly just and honest, and disciplined by long experience in the fierce democracy of battle and the supreme equality of death.

It is delightful to see these two striking characters, deadly enemies bent on mutual destruction, yet rising above petty jealousy and recognizing each other's gifts with the magnanimity of greatness. Wellington said to Greville that "Napoleon was undoubtedly the greatest military genius that ever existed," and Napoleon admitted to Bertrand that "the Duke of Wellington is fully equal to myself in the management of an army, with the advantage of possessing more prudence."

So between the two battle was engaged to the issue of death. But not at first directly; they had opposed each other for years before they met in the actual, final struggle.

By 1810 Napoleon was master of all central Europe. In Spain however he had met with an obstinate resistance from the whole nation, and it was here that Wellington, getting a bulldog grip and hanging on, slowly drove the emperor's subordinates before him and cleared the country. Then the great leader himself, with the finest ever seen in the world up to that day, followed the phantom of universal dominion into the deserts and the snows of Russia. The leader returned, and a few thousands of straggling, broken, demoralized followers. The deserts and the snows of Russia had swallowed all of the rest.

It was the beginning of ruin. Wellington still hung on, fighting steadily in the south. Napoleon with his inexhaustible energy, created a new army almost out of nothing; but all his northern enemies swarmed about him and gave him only a barren victory at Dresden, defeated him at Leipzig, their dreaded enemy but the old margrave gathered in an iron ring and drove him back through France to Paris, in spite of some of the most magnificent fighting in the history of the war. In April, 1814, the emperor abdicated for the first time, and was confined upon the Island of Elba.

He was a hard man to confine anywhere. In a year he was in France again. First a little band joined him, then more, then more; generals, ministers, and common soldiers. Those who were sent to arrest him threw up their caps, threw down their arms, and shouted "Vive l'Empereur" enthralled by that inexplicable magic that gives to man power over other men. In a few days he was reinstated at Paris and the battle of Leipzig had to be fought over again.

This time it was Wellington's turn. He had established himself with the English army in Belgium at the western end of the net that the allied nations were endeavoring to close about their dreaded enemy. Buttheadmarching celerity of the great soldier surprised his English antagonists as it had all others. Drawing his troops quietly together toward those Belgian battle fields that had been so often soaked with blood, Napoleon himself arrived at the front on June 14, 1815, while the English were taking their ease at Brussels. The emperor's hope was to conquer and destroy Wellington and Blucher in that region and then crush his other enemies at leisure.

The English and the Prussians, although in constant communication, were scarcely within strong supporting distance of each other, and Napoleon planned to thrust his army between them and defeat each one separately. The Prussians were ranged northwestward from Charleroi toward Ligny, in the direction of Liege, the English and Belgians to the north from Quatre Bras, with Brussels as their base. Until June 17th the French

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plan worked well. Ney, indeed, was tardy and uncertain about driving his opponents from Quatre Bras; but he finally accomplished it. And the emperor dislodged the Prussians and drove them in disorderly retreat in a direction as he hoped, that would separate them entirely from the English. Meantime, Wellington withdrew sullenly to Mont St. Jean, close to the village of Waterloo, and on the eighteenth Napoleon pressed after him. The emperor had left Grouchy with a strong force, supposedly under orders to hold Blucher, whatever happened. It seemed that the English would be infallibly cut off from their allies and driven back upon Brussels in retreat, if not in rout.

They were not. For hours the impetuous tide of French gallantry beat madly upon those scarlet squares. For hours those scarlet squares stood and took their punishment, doggedly, fiercely, pouring volley after volley into the stream of men and horses that threatened to sweep over them. Napoleon at first triumphantly confident grew anxious, and then angry, and then despairing. In last resort, he hurled forward the Old Guard, the best soldiers in Europe, certain that they must break down the obstinate English that balked him. The Old Guard fared no better than those that had gone before.

And then came the Prussians, not stopped, after all, by the unfortunate Grouchy. Wellington sprang to the chance he had waited for, and ordered forward his line in counter attack. And the battle of Waterloo became no drawn fight, like Gettysburg, but a rout, an utter disaster, the French flying from the field in complete disorder shot, and sabred, and trodden down by the scarlet lines they had threatened to overwhelm in the morning. As for him, the short heavy figure in the enveloping gray coat, who had aimed at the mastery of the whole world, what was left of him? A shadow, a phantom, a name only, although a name of infinite glory, he shrank out of life as insignificant as he had crept into it. His fittest epitaph is his own question, whether it would not have been better if he had never existed.

For twenty years Europe had been desolated by war. Homes had been ruined. Trade and commerce had been shattered. The best young, strong life had been blotted out, leaving the race to be carried on largely by weaklings in body and in soul. It seemed as if irreparable damage had been done, and no doubt in a certain sense it had been. Yet, as we look back now, over a hundred years of peace, we appreciate how magnificently progressive and fruitful are the great forces of nature, in human society, as in everything else. At times the instinct of destruction seems to be let loose in utter riot, seems to rejoice in tearing down all that ages of thought and patience and devotion have toiled so painfully to build up. Yet, after all, as we take long periods together, we see that humanity is not destructive, but constructive, that its real, vital joy and effort go, not to consume, but to produce. The value of all study of history is that it enables us, with the life of mankind as with the life of the individual, to fix our thoughts upon what is positive, creative, permanent, even in times when it seems as if there was nothing in the world but negation, and misery, and death.—Youths Companion.

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