

THE SIEGE OF ST. SEBASTIAN.

SCOTT has beautifully said respecting the diversities of British troops who fought throughout the eventful wars of the Spanish peninsula:—

A various host they came,—whose ranks display
Each mode in which the warrior meets the fight.
The deep battalion locks its firm array,
And meditates his aim the marksman light;
Far glance the lines of sabres flashing bright,
Where mounted squadrons shake the echoing mead;
Lacks not artillery breathing flame and night,
Nor the fleet ordnance whirl'd by rapid steed,
That rivals lightning's flash, in ruin and in speed.

A various host—from kindred realms they came,
Brethren in arms, but rivals in renown—
For yon fair bands shall merry England claim,
And with their deeds of valour deck her crown.
Hers their bold port, and hers their martial frown,
And hers their scorn of death in Freedom's cause,
Their eyes of azure, and their locks of brown,
And the blunt speech that bursts without a pause,
And freeborn thoughts, which league the soldier with the laws.

And, oh! loved warriors of the Minstrel's land!
Yonder your bonnets nod, your tartans wave!
The rugged form may mark the mountain band,
And harsher features, and a mien more grave;
But ne'er in battle field throbb'd heart so brave
As that which beats beneath the Scottish plaid;
And when the pibroch bids the battle rave,
And level for the charge your arms are laid,
Where lives the desperate foe that for such onset staid."

Three Highland regiments, the 42nd, the 79th, and the 92nd, were specially conspicuous in the peninsular campaigns. The 42nd was the earliest Highland regiment ever raised, and has always moved foremost in the march of fame; the 79th is the regiment of Cameron Highlanders, first raised

in the year 1793, among the glens of the central Grampians; and the 92nd is the regiment of Gordon Highlanders, first raised in the year 1794, principally on the estates of the Duke of Gordon, and afterwards always recruited mainly from the counties of Aberdeen and Banff. These regiments fought so bravely in the skirmishes and battles of the Peninsula, and performed so many of the feats which led to victory, and were so often foremost in desperate onset and hindmost in lingering retreat, that the exciting history of the whole peninsular war derives from their achievements much of the colouring and interest of a Scottish narrative. Corunna, Salamanca, Burgos, Vittoria, and most other far-famed names in that eventful history, might all be made appropriate headings of chapters in the grand story of Scottish military exploits; and, since all were so dazzling, we can scarcely go amiss for a specimen, and may select one at random; and in selecting the siege of St. Sebastian, we do less than average justice to the Highlanders, for only the 92nd were present in its feats.

In the summer of 1813, when the French had been driven from all the strengths of the north of Spain excepting Pampluna and St. Sebastian, General Graham was assigned the arduous task of attempting the reduction of the latter,—then esteemed the most important fort within all the Spanish territory excepting Gibraltar. On the 14th of July, the arrangements for the siege were complete, and the batteries began to play on the convent of St. Bartolomeo; and on the 17th, this stronghold, though fortified with a protecting work, and a steep hill on its left flank, was so completely destroyed, that General Graham ordered both to be stormed. The division of General Oswald carried these posts, though bravely defended by a strong body of men. Having made two breaches which were considered practicable, a party of two thousand men made an assault on the 25th; but after an obstinate contest, they were recalled, after sustaining a very

severe loss. The attention of the commander-in-chief being now directed to the movements of Marshal Soult, who was advancing with a large army, the siege of St. Sebastian was suspended for a time.

At this juncture the allied army occupied a range of mountain passes between the valley of Roncesvalles, celebrated as the field of Charlemagne's defeat, and St. Sebastian; but as the distance between these stations was 60 miles, it was found impossible so to guard all these passes as to prevent the entrance of an army. The passes occupied by the allies were defended by the following troops:—Major-general Byng's brigade and a division of Spanish infantry held the valley of Roncesvalles, to support which General Cole's division was posted at Piscarret, with General Picton's in reserve at Olaque; the valley of Bastan and the pass of Maya was occupied by Sir Rowland Hill, with Lieutenant-general William Stewart's and Silveira's Portuguese divisions, and the Spanish corps under the Condé de Amaran; the Portuguese brigade of Brigadier-General Archibald Campbell was detached to Los Alduidos; the heights of St. Barbara, the town of Pera, and the Puerto de Echelar, were protected by Lord Dalhousie and Baron Alten's light division, Brigadier-general Pack's being in reserve at Estevan. The communication between Lord Dalhousie and General Graham was kept up by General Longa's Spanish division; and the Condé de Abisbal blockaded Pampluna.

Such were the positions of the allied army when Marshal Soult, who had been lately appointed to the command of a numerous French army, recently collected, having formed a plan of operations for a general attack on the allied army advanced on the 25th of July at the head of a division of 36,000 men against Roncesvalles, whilst General Count d'Erlon, with another division of 13,000 men, moved towards the pass of Maya. Pressed by this overwhelming force, General Byng was obliged, though supported by part of Sir Lowry Cole's

division, to descend from the heights that commanded the pass, in order to preserve his communication, in which situation he was attacked by Soult and driven back to the top of the mountain, whilst the troops on the ridge of Arola, part of Cole's division, were forced to retire with considerable loss, and to take up a position in the rear. General Cole was again obliged to retire, and fell back on Lizoain. Next day General Picton moved forward to support General Cole; but both were obliged to retire in consequence of Soult's advance.

Meanwhile Count d'Erlon forced the battalions occupying the narrow ridges near the pass of Maya to give way; but these being quickly supported by Brigadier-general Barnes's brigade, a series of spirited actions ensued, and the advance of the enemy was arrested. In the main combat of Maya, the right wing of the 92nd regiment, drawn up in line, met the advancing French column; and after sustaining a most destructive fire, part of it retired, and the other part, consisting more of the wounded and the dying than the dead, lay still like a long and continuous rampart. The French column advanced up to this human rampart, and halted behind it; and the left wing of the 92nd then opened their fire on the column, and inevitably made awful slaughter upon their own fallen comrades. "So dreadful was the slaughter," says Napier, "that it is said the advancing enemy was actually stopped by the heaped masses of dead and dying; and then the left wing of that noble regiment, coming down from the higher ground, smote wounded friends and exulting foes alike, as mingled together they stood or crawled before its fire. . . . Marausin, no longer seeking to turn the position, suddenly thrust the head of his division across the front of the British line, throwing as he passed a destructive fire into the wasted remnant of the 92nd, which even then sullenly gave way, for the men fell until two-thirds of the whole had gone to the ground. Still the survivors fought. . . . The stern valour of the 92nd would have graced Thermopylæ."

General Hill, hearing of the retrograde movement from Roncesvalles, retired behind the Irurita, and took up a strong position. On the 27th, Sir Thomas Picton resumed his retreat. The troops were greatly dejected at this temporary reverse; but the arrival of Lord Wellington, who had been with the army before St. Sebastian, revived their drooping spirits. Immediately on his arrival he directed the troops in reserve to move forward to support the division opposed to the enemy. He formed General Picton's division on a ridge on the left bank of the Argua, and General Cole's on the high grounds between that river and the Lanz. To support the positions in front, General Hill was posted behind the Lizasso; but, on the arrival of General Pakenham on the 28th, he took post on the left of General Cole, facing the village of Sourarem; but before the British divisions had fully occupied the ground, they were vigorously attacked by the enemy from the village. The enemy were, however, driven back with great loss, after a short but severe contest.

Soult next brought forward a strong column, and advancing up the hill against the centre of the allies, on the left of General Cole's line, obtained possession of that post; but he was almost immediately driven back at the point of the bayonet by the Fusileers. The French renewed the attack, but were again quickly repulsed. About the same time, another attack was made on the right of the centre, where a Spanish brigade, supported by the 40th, was posted. The Spaniards gave way, but the 40th not only kept their ground, but drove the enemy down the hill with great loss.

The enemy pushing forward in separate bodies with great vigour, the battle now became general along the whole front of the heights occupied by the fourth division; but they were repulsed at all points, except one occupied by a Portuguese battalion, which was overpowered and obliged to give way. The occupation of this post by the enemy exposed the flank of Major-General Ross's brigade, immediately on the

right, to a destructive fire, which forced him to retire. The enemy were, however, soon dispossessed of this post by Colonel John Maclean, who, advancing with the 27th and 48th regiments, charged and drove them from it, and immediately afterwards attacked and charged another body of the enemy who were advancing from the left. The enemy persevered in his attacks several times, but was as often repulsed, principally by the bayonet. Several regiments charged four different times.

The division of Lord Dalhousie, from the left, having reinforced the centre the following day, Soult withdrew a part of his troops from his strong position in front of the allies, with the intention of turning the left of their position. Though the position occupied by Soult in front appeared almost impregnable, yet Lord Wellington resolved, after this reduction of Soult's force, to attempt it. Accordingly, on the morning of the 30th, Lord Dalhousie made a well-conducted attack on the heights on the right, which was performed with great bravery by Brigadier-general Inglis's brigade. Sir Thomas Picton, during this operation, turned their left, whilst General Pakenham, at the same time, drove them from the village of Ostiz. These successful attacks were followed up by one made in front by General Cole's division, upon which the enemy, to use the words of Lord Wellington, "abandoned a position which is one of the strongest and most difficult of access that I have yet seen occupied by troops." The enemy were now pursued beyond Olaque, in the vicinity of which General Hill, who had been engaged the whole day, had repulsed all the attacks of Count d'Erlon; and though they endeavoured to rally in their retreat, they were driven from one position to another till the 2nd of August, when the allies had regained all the posts they had occupied on the 25th of July, when Soult made his first attack.

After this second expulsion of the French beyond the Pyrenees, the siege of St. Sebastian was resumed with re-

doubled energy. A continued fire was kept up from eighty pieces of cannon, which the enemy withstood with surprising courage and perseverance. At length a practicable breach was made, and on the morning of the 31st of August the troops advanced to the assault. The breach was extensive, but there was only one point where it was possible to enter, and this could only be done by single files. All the inside of the wall to the height of the curtain formed a perpendicular scarp of twenty feet. The troops made the most persevering exertions to force the breach, and everything that bravery could attempt was repeatedly tried by the men who were brought forward in succession from the trenches; but each time, on attaining the summit, all who attempted to remain were destroyed by a heavy fire from the entrenched ruins within, so that "no man outlived the attempt to gain the ridge."

"Sir Thomas Graham, standing on the nearest of the Chofre batteries," says Napier, "beheld the frightful destruction with a stern resolution to win at any cost; and he was a man to have put himself at the head of the last company and died sword in hand upon the breach rather than sustain a second defeat; but neither his confidence nor his resources were yet exhausted. He directed an attempt to be made on the horn work, and turned all the Chofre batteries, and one on the Isthmus, that is to say the concentrated fire of fifty heavy pieces upon the high curtain. The shot ranged over the heads of the troops, who now were gathered at the foot of the breach, and the stream of missiles thus poured along the upper surface of the high curtain broke down the traverses, and in its fearful course shattering all things, strewed the rampart with the mangled limbs of the defenders. When this flight of bullets first swept over the heads of the soldiers, a cry arose from some inexperienced people, 'to retire because the batteries were firing on the stormers.' But the veterans of the light division under Hunt, being at that point, were

not to be so disturbed; and in the very heat and fury of the cannonade, effected a solid lodgment in some ruins of houses actually within the rampart on the right of the great breach. Hughes in his poem called "Iberia Won" describes this singular passage of military history in the following terms:—

“ Upon the Chofre stood the dauntless Graham,
 And marked the slaughter with determined eye
 Sad, yet unshrinking—poured then forth of flame
 A torrent, hissing red athwart the sky;
 Close o'er the stormers' heads the missiles fly;
 The stone-ribbed curtain into fragments hurled—
 Full fifty cannon streaming death on high.
 Unmoved they stand—no flag of fear unfurled—
 A scene unmatched before since dawning of the world.

Even as at Niagara's thundering,
 Where leaps the torrent with gigantic stride;
 Beneath the watery volume, Cyclop wall,
 Of rocks, huge piled, spans the river wide,
 Where dares the venturous voyager abide;
 And while his ears terrific clamour stuns,
 Flies free o'erhead the cataract's foaming tide,
 And scarce crystalline globule o'er him runs:
 Thus stand 'neath Death o'erarched, Britannia's dauntless
 sons!

'Retire!' was first the cry, 'A traitorous foe!
 Our batteries' fire is 'gainst the stormers turned;
 And struck a straggling shot the ranks below;
 But Niall and his men the counsel spurned—
 To win, whate'er the cost, their bosoms burned,
 And mid the fiercest of the cannonade,
 While San Sebastian for his bulwarks mourned,
 Within the rampart solid ground they made—
 First step in victory's march whose laurels ne'er will fade.”

The fire of the batteries upon the high curtain was directed with admirable precision; and the troops advanced with perfect confidence. They struggled unremittingly for two hours to force the breach, and, taking advantage of some confusion occasioned by an explosion of ammunition within the ramparts, they redoubled their efforts, and by assisting each other got over the walls and ruins. After struggling about an hour among their works, the French retreated with great loss to the castle, leaving the town, which was now reduced to a heap of ruins, in the possession of the assailants. This success was dearly purchased,—the loss of the allies, in killed and wounded, being upwards of two thousand men. Soult made an attempt to raise the siege, by crossing the Bidassoa on the very day the assault was made with a force of nearly 40,000 men; but he was obliged, after repeated attacks, to repass the river.