

Extract from a Narrative
of the
Battle of Quatre Bras

by
A Soldier of the 79th Highlanders¹

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*Now, readers, what I've got to tell,
Which in that fatal strife befell,
Is just as true's you'd sen't yoursel'
Believe my word,
While you were safe from shot and shell,
And Frenchman's sword.*²

I was reared in a humble cottage in a moorland district of Scotland, and got hardly any education, and therefore beg that my reader will excuse the Old Soldier for not dressing his lines in proper grammatical style; but what is deficient in that respect is supplied by telling what is nothing but the truth.

In the season of youth, a thirst for military fame, with few exceptions, pervades all classes of society, from the peasant to the peer. The "sight of a regiment marching past, with its colours flying and its martial music, awakens a slumbering instinct in the soul."

In my youth I learned the exercise of the cart, plough and harrow; but I soon abandoned this peaceful employment for the exercise of gun and bayonet. I enlisted in the 79th Regiment of foot in the summer of 1813 and was with my gallant regiment in France and at the Battle of Waterloo, in the year 1815, which I am about to narrate.

The British army was stationed in Flanders or Belgium for some time previous to the battles of Quatre Bras and Waterloo. The 79th Regiment was quartered in Brussels along with some other Scottish regiments. We were billeted on the inhabitants of Brussels, from whom we experienced as much kindness as we could have received at home in our native land; while we, in return endeavoured to be as civil, grateful, and obliging as possible.

Four of us were quartered at a public house. The landlord treated us as well in every respect as if we had been his near relatives. In the evening of the 15th of June we received orders to hold ourselves in readiness to march from Brussels on the shortest notice, as the French army was reported to be advancing on the road to Brussels. On receiving this order, we lost no time in getting everything

packed up and ready. Having two shirts with the woman who used to wash for me, I hurried away to get them from her; but, unfortunately, she had them steeping in water, and I had to get them wrung, and packed them up as they were. When we had got all things ready, we lay down on our beds, with clothes, accoutrements on—not to sleep, however, but impatiently waiting for the sound of the bugle to raise us to arms. We had not lain long upon our beds when bugles, bagpipes, and drums were heard in all directions, calling those soldiers to their post who were quartered in Brussels. We sprang to our feet on hearing our own pipers playing the *Gathering of the Camerons* and the *War-Note of Lochiel*.

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On hearing the alarm, our host came running to the room where we were, to tell us to get ready, but he found us all prepared, upon which he told us that the French army was advancing on the road to Brussels, but that he was not the least afraid of their coming to the town—

*For the brave sons of Scotia would stop their advance
And defeat the designs of haughty, proud France.*

Our host kindly treated each of us to a flowing bumper of gin and aloaf of bread, and, as is the custom of the place when friends part, he kissed and shook hands with each of us. Having got our host's blessing and good wishes, we returned him our best thanks for his kindness and civility, and hurried on to the place of muster in the large square of Brussels, at the Place Royal. When our regiment was mustered, we got provisions served out to us, and our allowance of gin. We marched for Brussels on the 16th June, at the sun-rising, in high spirits, the band playing *Loudon's Bonny Woods and Braes*. Part of our road from Brussels to Waterloo and Quatre Bras led through a forest. We got orders to halt in the forest at a place where we got waterto drink. As the day was very warm, we got a little time to rest and refresh ourselves under the shade of the trees of the forest. While we halted, I opened my knapsack and laid out my wet shirts to dry. I had just got my shirts dry and packed up, when the bugle sounded for us to fall into our places in the ranks, with an order to march. As we advanced, the day became very warm, and many of us suffered much from thirst; but the inhabitants of the villages which we passed through evinced their sympathy with us in the best possible manner—by having a row of tubs filled with water on each side of the road, in front of their houses, and wooden cups floating in them, for us to drink as we passed along. On our route, we met a number

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² From *Songs and Ballads of Clydesdale*, edited by A. Nimmo, John Menzies & Co., Edinburgh and Glasgow, 1882

