

THE BATTLE OF SOLFERINO

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I have received various accounts of the late battle from men who took part in that fight of giants. It is creditable to both armies, but though the number of men engaged on either side was much larger than at Magenta, it was even less decisive as a battle. The Austrians seem to have withdrawn in perfect order, and the French and Piedmontese, though they slept on the field of battle, were too exhausted to pursue the retreating army, which might have returned to bay, and recommenced the fight. The scene of battle was a range of hillocks, divided from each other by patches of level ground. The object of the Austrians in crossing the Mincio and offering battle in the positions which they had abandoned a few days ago, will doubtless appear incomprehensible to unprofessional readers.

But it was a bold and skillful manuvre, which had it been more skillfully executed, would have proved disastrous to the French and Piedmontese army. After the Austrians had a second time abandoned Lonate and Castiglione, the Piedmontese army was ordered to move to the north and invest Peschiera. The French army, on the other hand, made straight for the part of the Mincio which is equi-distant from Pischiera and Mantua, that is to say, towards Volta and Goito. The onward movement had already commenced, when on the night of the 23^d, the Austrian army crossed the Mincio in forty different parts, by means of pontoon and other bridges, with a view to get between the Sardinian and French forces, and try to deal with them separately.

So little did the French expect a battle that on the previous night a message from the King of Piedmont, asking for supports in case he should be attacked, which he considered very likely, was met with a refusal on the ground that an attack of the Austrians was not probable. At daybreak, however, the corps of Marshal Baraguay d'Hilliers came in sight of Solferino, and was immediately set upon by a large Austrian force, which rushed down the hill and fought with the greatest fury. The Marshal resisted to the best of his power, and sent off aid-de-camp after aid-de-camp for supports, but it was not before three hours of frightful carnage that the corps of General Neil made its appearance. The Austrians were slowly driven back, and every now and then there was a pause, and the French continued to gain ground, heaps of their own and the enemy's corpses marking the fluctuations of the fight.

The Austrians were thus slowly driven out of Solferino, but all of a sudden they made a tremendous burst forward and the French were driven down the hill. Admirably supported by their artillery, however, they made a stand, and commenced once more to advance. It was like a hailstorm of bullets and balls, and whole files were mowed down by a single discharge. Meanwhile at the right and left wing the Austrians were decidedly getting the best of it. The Piedmontese were slowly driven back. General Conrobert's corps was also heavily punished, and had there been a skilful general in the Austrian army to collect and concentrate their force against the weak point of the enemy's line, matters would have had a very different aspect. The French commander, to whom the credit of the day is entirely due, whether it be Niel, McMahon, or the Emperor himself, sent forward the Imperial Guard and a strong division of infantry of the line against the Austrian centre, and succeeded for a time in breaking it. Instead of bringing up their forces to repel the formidable attack the supports were sent to the left and right wings, which did not need them.

Desperate attempts were made to recapture Solferino, but the French stoutly held it and after some fierce encounters the bugles began to sound the general retreat, and the Austrians slowly fell back. One of the most remarkable episodes was a dreadful rain and thunder storm, which is mentioned by an officer on the extreme right as having burst over the field when the fight was at its thickest, and under cover of the darkness and rain the Austrians made a last splendid burst and then gradually fell back. An attempt was made by the Cavalry to pursue them, or at least to get to Volta, and so turn the flank, which led to an encounter between French Chasseurs and Austrian Hulans, in which the former were rapidly sent to the right about. Two whole days were consumed in seeking for the wounded, and the dead were interred pell mell in large trenches, dug at the spot where they fell. I am told on good authority that 20,000 corpses have been buried and that many are yet lying in ditches and corn fields. Wounded men are in the habit of creeping out of the way fearing lest friend or foe should charge over them, and many are only discovered days after dead, not from their wounds so much as from exhaustion.