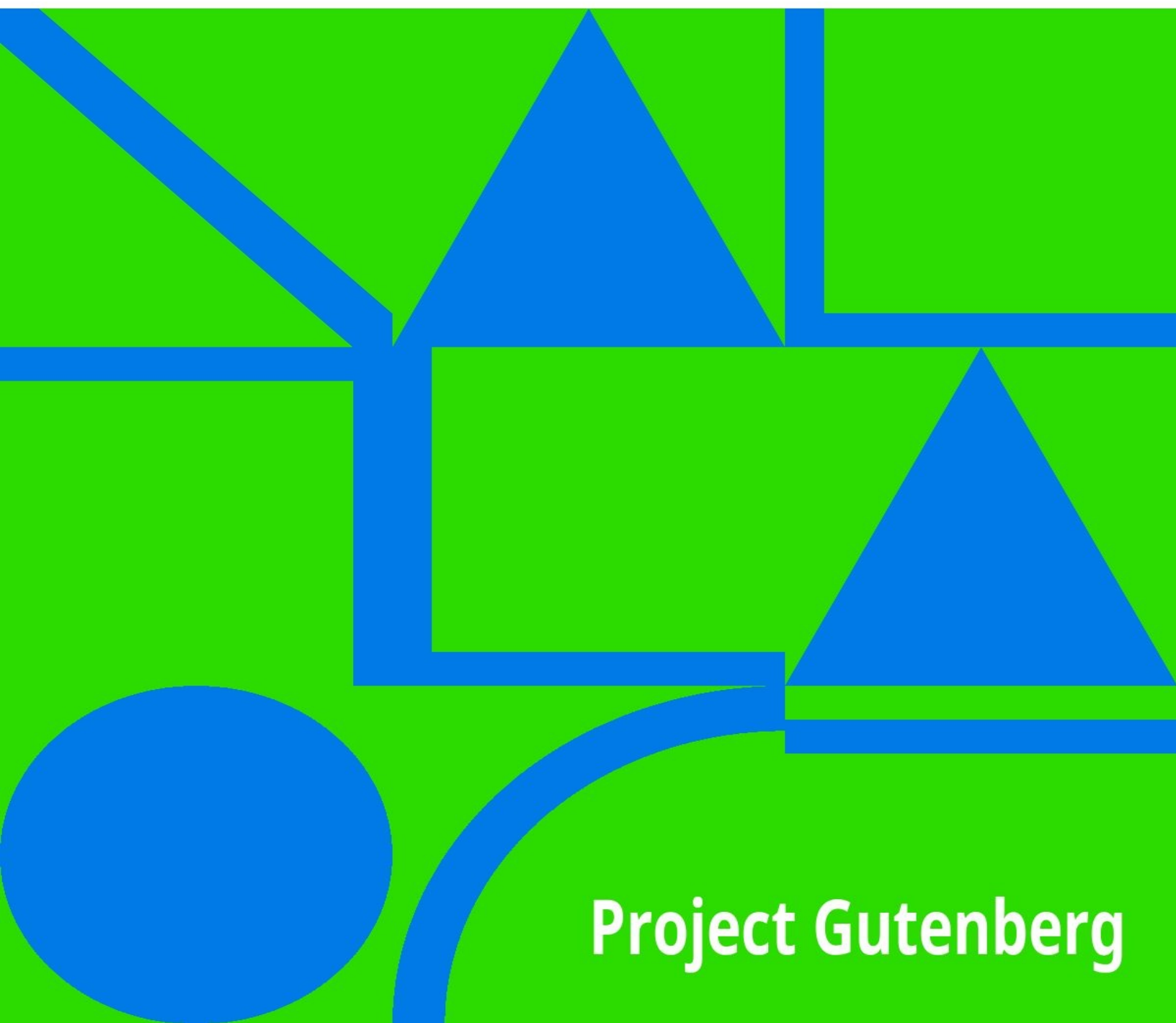


Malplaquet

Hilaire Belloc



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MALPLAQUET

Malplaquet.

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Frontispiece.

MALPLAQUET

BY

HILAIRE BELLOC

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. THE POLITICAL MEANING OF MALPLAQUET	9
II. THE SIEGE OF TOURNAI	27
III. THE MANŒUVRING FOR POSITION	45
IV. THE PRELIMINARIES OF THE BATTLE	52
V. THE ACTION	65

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
Sketch Map showing how the Lines of La Bassée blocked the advance of the Allies on Paris, and Marlborough's plan for turning them by the successive capture of Tournai and Mons	19
Sketch Map showing how the Allies, holding Lille, thrust the French back on to the defensive line St Venant-Valenciennes, and thus cut off the French garrisons of Ypres, Tournai, and Mons	28
Sketch Map showing complete investment of Tournai	34
Sketch Map showing the lines of woods behind Mons, with the two gaps of Boussu and Aulnois	48
The Elements of the Action of Malplaquet, September 11th, 1709	66
Sketch Map showing the peril the French centre ran towards noon of being turned on its left	79
Sketch Map showing Marlborough bringing up troops to the centre for the final and successful attack upon the entrenchments	84



MALPLAQUET

I

THE POLITICAL MEANING OF MALPLAQUET

That political significance which we must seek in all military history, and without which that history cannot be accurate even upon its technical side, may be stated for the battle of Malplaquet in the following terms.

Louis XIV. succeeding to a cautious and constructive period in the national life of France, this in its turn succeeding to the long impotence of the religious wars, found at his orders when his long minority was ended a society not only eager and united, but beginning also to give forth the fruit due to three active generations of discussion and combat.

Every department of the national life manifested an extreme vitality, and, while the orderly and therefore convincing scheme of French culture imposed itself upon Western Europe, there followed in its wake the triumph of French arms; the king in that triumph nearly perfected a realm which would have had for its limits those of ancient Gaul.

It would be too long a matter to describe, even in general terms, the major issues depending upon Louis XIV.'s national ambitions and their success or failure.

In one aspect he stands for the maintenance of Catholic civilisation against the Separatist and dissolving forces of the Protestant North; in another he is the permanent antagonist of the Holy Roman Empire, or rather of the House of Austria, which had attained to a permanent hegemony therein. An extravagant judgment conceives his great successes as a menace to the corporate independence of Europe, or—upon the other view—as the opportunity for the founding of a real European unity.

But all these general considerations may, for the purposes of military history, be regarded in the single light of the final and decisive action which Louis XIV. took when he determined in the year 1701 to support the claims of his young grandson to the throne of Spain. This it was which excited against him a universal coalition, and acts following upon that main decision drew into the coalition the deciding factor of Great Britain.

The supremacy of French arms had endured in Europe for forty years when the Spanish policy was decided on. Louis was growing old. That financial exhaustion which almost invariably follows a generation of high national activity, and which is almost invariably masked by pompous outward state, was a reality already present though as yet undiscovered in the condition of France.

It was at the close of that year 1701 that the French king had determined upon a union of the two crowns of France and Spain in his own family. His forces occupied the Spanish Netherlands, which we now call the Kingdom of Belgium; others of his armies were spread along the Rhine, or were acting in Northern Italy—for the coalition at once began to make itself felt. Two men of genius combined in an exact agreement, the qualities of each complementing the defects of the other, to lead the main armies that were operating against the French. These men were Prince Eugene of Savoy (French by birth and training, a voluntary exile, and inspired throughout his life by a determination to avenge himself upon Louis XIV.), and the Englishman John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough.

The combination of such a pair was irresistible. Its fruit appeared almost at the inception of the new situation in the great victory of Blenheim.

This action, fought in August 1704, was the first great defeat French arms had registered in that generation. Henceforward the forces commanded from Versailles were compelled to stand upon the defensive.

To Blenheim succeeded one blow after another. In 1706 the great battle of Ramillies, in 1708 the crushing action of Oudenarde, confirmed the supremacy of the allies and the abasement of France. By the opening of 1709 the final defeat of Louis and his readiness to sue for peace were taken for granted.

The financial exhaustion which I have said was already present, though hardly suspected, in 1701, was grown by 1709 acute. The ordinary methods of recruitment for the French army—which nominally, of course, was upon a voluntary basis—had long reached and passed their limit. The failure of the harvest in 1708, followed by a winter of terrible severity, had completed the catastrophe, and with the ensuing spring of 1709 Louis had no alternative but to approach the allies with terms of surrender.

It seemed as though at last the way to Paris lay open. The forces of the allies in the Netherlands were not only numerically greatly superior to any which the exhausted French could now set against them, but in their equipment, in their

supplies, the nourishment of the men, and every material detail, they were upon a footing wholly superior to the corresponding units of the enemy, man for man. They had further the incalculable advantage of prestige. Victory seemed normal to them, defeat to their opponents; and so overwhelming were the chances of the coalition against Louis that its leaders determined with judgment to demand from that monarch the very fullest and most humiliating terms.

Though various sections of the allies differed severally as to their objects and requirements, their general purpose of completely destroying the power of France for offence, of recapturing all her conquests, and in particular of driving the Bourbons from the throne of Spain, was held in common, and vigorously pursued.

Marlborough was as active as any in pushing the demands to the furthest possible point; Eugene, the ruling politicians of the English, the Dutch, and the German princes were agreed.

Louis naturally made every effort to lessen the blow, though he regarded his acceptance of grave and permanent humiliation as inevitable. The negotiations were undertaken at the Hague, and were protracted. They occupied the late spring of 1709 and stretched into the beginning of summer. The French king was prepared (as his instructions to his negotiators show) to give up every point, though he strove to bargain for what remained after each concession. He would lose the frontier fortresses, which were the barrier of his kingdom in the north-east. He would even consent to the abandonment of Spain to Austria.

Had that peace been declared for which the captains of Europe were confidently preparing, the future history of our civilisation would have proved materially different from what it has become. It is to be presumed that a complete breakdown of the strength of France would have followed; that the monarchy at Versailles would have sunk immediately into such disrepute that the eighteenth century would have seen France divided and possibly a prey to civil war, and one may even conclude that the great events of a century later, the Revolution and the campaigns of Napoleon, could not have sprung from so enfeebled a society.

It so happened, however, that one of those slight miscalculations which are productive in history of its chief consequences, prevented the complete humiliation of Louis XIV. The demands of the allies were pushed in one last respect just beyond the line which it was worth the while of the defeated party to

accept, for it was required of the old king not only that he should yield in every point, not only that he should abandon the claims of his own grandson to the throne of Spain (which throne Louis himself had now, after eight years of wise administration, singularly strengthened), but himself take arms against that grandson and co-operate in his proper shame by helping to oust him from it. It was stipulated that Louis should so act (if his grandson should show resistance and still cling to his throne) in company with those who had been for so many years his bitter and successful foes.

This last small item in the programme of the victors changed all. It destroyed in the mind of Louis and of his subjects the advantages of the disgraceful peace which they had thought themselves compelled to accept; and, as Louis himself well put it, if he were still compelled to carry on the war, it was better to fail in pursuing it against his enemies than against his own household.

The king issued to the authorities of his kingdom and to his people a circular letter, which remains a model of statesmanlike appeal. Grave, brief, and resolute, it exactly expressed the common mood of the moment. It met with an enthusiastic response. The depleted countrysides just managed to furnish the armies with a bare pittance of oats and rye (for wheat was unobtainable). Recruits appeared in unexpected numbers; and though none could believe that the issue could be other than disastrous, the campaign of 1709 was undertaken by a united nation.

Of French offensive action against the overwhelming forces of their enemies there could be no question. Villars, who commanded the armies of Louis XIV. upon the north-eastern frontier, opposing Marlborough and Eugene, drew up a line of defence consisting of entrenchments, flooded land, and the use of existing watercourses, a line running from the neighbourhood of Douai away eastward to the Belgian frontier. Behind this line, with his headquarters at La Bassée,^[1] he waited the fatal assault.

It was at the close of June that the enemy's great forces moved. Their first action was not an attempt to penetrate the line but to take the fortresses upon its right, which taken, the defence might be turned. They therefore laid siege to Tournai, the first of the two fortresses guarding the right of the French line. (Mons was the second.)

Here the first material point in the campaign showed the power of resistance that tradition and discipline yet maintained in the French army. The long resistance of

Tournai and its small garrison largely determined what was to follow. Its siege had been undertaken in the hope of its rapid termination, which the exiguity of its garrison and the impossibility of its succour rendered probable. But though Marlborough had established his headquarters before the place by the evening of the 27th of June, and Eugene upon the next day, the 28th, though trenches were opened in the first week of July and the first of the heavy fighting began upon the 8th of that month, though the town itself was occupied after a fortnight's struggle, yet it was not until the 3rd of September that the citadel surrendered.

This protracted resistance largely determined what was to follow. While it lasted no action could be undertaken against Villars. Meanwhile the French forces were growing stronger, and, most important of all, the first results of the harvest began to be felt.

Tournai once taken, it was the business of the allies to pierce the French line of defence as soon as possible, and with that object to bring Villars to battle and to defeat him.

The plan chosen for this object was as follows:—

The allied army to march to the extreme right of the positions which the French could hope to defend. There the allies would contain the little garrison of Mons. Thither the mass of the French forces must march in order to bar the enemy's advance upon Paris, and upon some point near Mons the whole weight of the allies could fall upon them, destroy them, and leave the way to the capital open.

[Larger Image](#)

Sketch Map showing how the Lines of La Bassée blocked the advance of the Allies on Paris, and Marlborough's plan for turning them by the successive capture of Tournai and Mons.

The plan was strategically wise. The lines of La Bassée proper could not be

pierced, but this right extremity of the French positions was backed by easy country; the swamps, canals, and entrenchments of the main line to the north and west were absent. With the defeat of the inferior French forces at this point all obstacle to an advance into the heart of France would be removed.

The plan was as rapidly executed as it was skilfully devised. Actually before the capitulation of the citadel of Tournai, but when it was perceived that that capitulation could only be a matter of hours, Lord Orkney had begun to advance upon the neighbourhood of Mons. Upon the day of the capitulation of Tournai, the Prince of Hesse-Cassel had started for Mons, Cadogan following him with the cavalry. Less than twenty-four hours after Tournai had yielded, the whole allied army was on the march throughout the night. Never was a military operation performed with organisation more exact, or with obedience more prompt. Three days later Mons was contained, and by Monday the 9th of September Villars awaited, some few miles to the west of that fortress, the assault of the allies.

There followed two days of delay, which will be discussed in detail later. For the purposes of this introductory survey of the political meaning of the battle, it is enough to fix the date, Wednesday, 11th September 1709. A little before eight o'clock on the morning of that day the first cannon-shot of the battle of Malplaquet was fired. To the numerical superiority of the allies the French could oppose entrenchment and that character in the locality of the fight, or "terrain," which will be fully described on a later page. To the superior *moral*, equipment, and subsistence of the allies, however, it was doubtful whether any factor could be discovered on the French side.

An unexpected enthusiasm lent something to the French resistance; the delay of two days lent something more to their defensive power. As will be seen in the sequel, certain errors (notably upon the left of Marlborough's line) also contributed to the result, and the whole day was passed in a series of attacks and counter-attacks which left the French forces intact, and permitted them in the early afternoon to rely upon the exhaustion of the enemy and to leave, in order and without loss, the field to the enemy.

Marlborough's victory at Malplaquet was both honourable and great. The French were compelled to withdraw; the allies occupied upon the evening of the battle the ground upon which the struggle had taken place. It is with justice that Malplaquet is counted as the fourth of those great successful actions which distinguish the name of Marlborough, and it is reckoned with justice the

conclusion of the series whose three other terms are Blenheim, Ramillies, and Oudenarde. So much might suffice did war consist in scoring points as one does in a game. But when we consider war as alone it should be considered for the serious purposes of history—that is, in its political aspect; and when we ask what Malplaquet was in the political sequence of European events, the withdrawal of the French from the field in the early afternoon of September 11, 1709, has no significance comparable to the fact that the allies could not pursue.

Strategically the victory meant that an army which it was intended to destroy had maintained itself intact; morally, the battle left the defeated more elated than the victors; and for this reason, that the result was so much more in their favour than the expectation had been. In what is most important of all, the general fortunes of the campaign, the victory of the allies at Malplaquet was as sure a signal that the advance on Paris could not be made, and as sure a prevention of that advance as though Marlborough and Eugene had registered, not a success, but a defeat.

Situations of this sort, which render victories barren or actually negative, paradoxical to the general reader, simple enough in their military aspect, abound in the history of war. It is perhaps more important to explain them if one is to make military history intelligible than to describe the preliminaries and movements of the great decisive action.

The “block” of Malplaquet (to use the metaphor which is common in French history), the unexpected power of resistance which this last of the French armies displayed, and the moral effect of that resistance upon the allies, have an historical meaning almost as high as that of Blenheim upon the other side. It has been well said that one may win every battle and yet lose a campaign; there is a sense in which it may be said that one may win a campaign and suffer political loss as the result.

Malplaquet was the turning-point after which it was evident that the decline of the French position in Europe would go no further. As Blenheim had marked the turn of the tide against Louis, so Malplaquet marked the slack water when the tide was ready to turn in his favour. After Blenheim it was certain that the ambition of Louis XIV. was checked, and probable that it would wholly fail. After Malplaquet it was equally certain that the total destruction of Louis’ power was impossible, that the project of a march on Paris might be abandoned, and that the last phases of the great war would diminish the chances of the allies.

The Dutch (whose troops in particular had been annihilated upon the left of the

field) did indeed maintain their uncompromising attitude, but no longer with the old certitude of success; Austria also and her allies did continue the war, but a war doomed to puerility, to a sort of stale-mate bound to end in compromise. But it was in England that the effect of the battle was most remarkable.

In England, where opinion had but tardily accepted the necessity for war nine years before, and where the fruits of that war were now regarded as quite sufficient for the satisfaction of English demands, this negative action, followed by no greater fruit than the capitulation of the little garrison at Mons, began the agitation for peace. Look closely at that agitation through its details, and personal motives will confuse you; the motives of the queen, of Harley, of Marlborough's enemies. Look at it in the general light of the national history and you will perceive that the winter following Malplaquet, a winter of disillusionment and discontent, bred in England an opinion that made peace certain at last. The accusation against Marlborough that he fought the battle with an eye to his failing political position is probably unjust. The accusation that he fought it from a lust of bloodshed is certainly a stupid calumny. But the unpopularity of so great a man succeeding upon so considerable a technical success sufficiently proves at what a price the barrenness of that success was estimated in England. It was the English Government that first opened secret negotiations with Louis for peace in the following year; and when the great instrument which closed the war was signed at Utrecht in 1713, it was after the English troops had been withdrawn from their allies, after Eugene, acting single-handed, had suffered serious check, and in general the Peace of Utrecht was concluded under conditions far more favourable to Louis than would have been any peace signed at the Hague in 1709. The Spanish Netherlands were ceded to Austria, but France kept intact what is still her Belgian frontier. She preserved what she has since lost on the frontier of the Rhine, and (most remarkable of all!) the grandson of Louis was permitted to remain upon the Spanish throne.

Such is the general political setting of this fierce action, one of the most determined known in the history of European arms, and therefore one of the most legitimately glorious; one in which men were most ready at the call of duty and under the influences of discipline to sacrifice their lives in the defence of a common cause; and one which, as all such sacrifices must, illumines the history of the several national traditions concerned, of the English as of the Dutch, of the German principalities as of the French.

No action better proves the historical worth of valour.

II

THE SIEGE OF TOURNAI

When the negotiations for peace had failed, that is, with the opening of June 1709, the King of France and his forces had particularly to dread an invasion of the country and the march on Paris.

The accompanying sketch map will show under what preoccupations the French commander upon the north-eastern frontier lay.

Lille was in the hands of the enemy. There was still a small French garrison in Ypres, another in Tournai, and a third in Mons. These of themselves (considering that Lille, the great town, was now occupied by the allies, and considering also the width of the gap between Ypres and Tournai) could not prevent the invasion and the advance on the capital.

It was necessary to oppose some more formidable barrier to the line of advance which topography marked out for the allies into the heart of France.

[Larger Image](#)

Sketch Map showing how the Allies holding Lille thrust the French back on to the defensive line St Venant-Valenciennes, and thus cut off the French garrisons of Ypres, Tournai, and Mons.

Some fear was indeed expressed lest a descent should be made on the coasts and an advance attempted along the valley of the Somme. The fear was groundless. To organise the transportation of troops thus by sea, to disembark them, to bring and continue the enormous supply of provisions and ammunition they would require, was far less practical than to use the great forces already drawn up under

Marlborough and Eugene in the Low Countries. Of what size these forces were we shall see in a moment.

The barrier, then, which Villars at the head of the French forces proceeded to erect, and which is known in history as “The Lines of La Bassée,” are the first point upon which we must fix our attention in order to understand the campaign of Malplaquet, and why that battle took place where it did.

It was upon the 3rd of June that Louis XIV. had written to Villars telling him that a renewal of the war would now be undertaken. On the 14th, Villars began to throw up earth for the formation of an entrenched camp between the marshy ground of Hulluch and that of Cuinchy. Here he proposed to concentrate the mass of his forces, with La Bassée just before him, the town of Lens behind. He used the waterways and the swamped ground in front and to the right for the formation of his defensive lines. These followed the upper valley of the Deule, the line of its canal, and finally reposed their right upon the river Scarpe. Though the regularly fortified line went no further than the camp near La Bassée, he also threw up a couple of entrenchments in front of Bethune and St Venant in order to cover any march he might have to make towards his left should the enemy attempt to turn him in that direction.

It must further be noted that from the Scarpe eastward went the old “lines of La Trouille” thrown up in a former campaign, and now largely useless, but still covering, after a fashion, the neighbourhood of Mons.

Toward the end of the month of June Villars awaited the advance of the allies. His forces were inferior by 40,000 to those of his enemy. He had but eight men to their twelve. The season of the year, immediately preceding the harvest, made the victualling of his troops exceedingly difficult, nor was it until the day before the final assault was expected that the moneys necessary to their pay, and to the other purposes of the army, reached him; but he had done what he could, and, acting upon a national tradition which is as old as Rome, he had very wisely depended upon fortification.

The same conditions of the season which produced something like famine in the French camp, though they did not press equally severely upon that of the allies, rendered difficult the provisioning of their vast army also.

It was the first intention of Marlborough and Eugene to attack the lines at once, to force them, and to destroy the command of Villars. But these lines had been carefully reconnoitred, notably by Cadogan, who, with a party of English

officers, and under a disguise, had made himself acquainted with their strength. It was determined, therefore, at the last moment, partly also from the fears of the Dutch, to whom the possession of every fortress upon the frontier was of paramount importance, to make but a “feint” upon Villars’ lines and to direct the army upon Tournai as its true object. The feint took the form of Eugene’s marching towards the left or western extremity of the line, Marlborough towards the eastern or right extremity near Douai, and this general movement was effected on the night of the 26th and 27th of June. In the midst of its execution, the feint (which for the moment deceived Villars) was arrested.

The 27th was passed without a movement, Villars refusing to leave his entrenchments, and the commanders of the allies giving no hint of their next intention. But during that same day Tilly with the Dutch had appeared before Tournai. On the evening of the day Marlborough himself was before the town. On the 28th Prince Eugene joined both the Dutch and Marlborough before the town, taking up his headquarters at Froyennes, Marlborough being at Willemeau, and the Dutch, under Tilly, already established on the east of Tournai from Antoing to Constantin, just opposite Eugene, where they threw a bridge across the Scheldt. By the evening of the 28th, therefore, Tournai was invested on every side, and the great allied armies of between 110,000 and 120,000 men had abandoned all hope of carrying Villars’ lines, and had sat down to the capture of the frontier fortress.[2]

A comprehension of this siege of Tournai, which so largely determined the fortunes of the campaign of Malplaquet, will be aided by the accompanying sketch map. Here it is apparent that Marlborough with his headquarters at Willemeau, Eugene with his at Froyennes, the Dutch under Tilly in a semicircle from Antoing to Constantin, completed the investment of the fortress, and that the existing bridge at Antoing which the Dutch commanded, the bridge at Constantin which they had constructed, giving access over the river to the north and to the south, made the circle complete.

[Larger Image](#)

Sketch Map showing complete investment of Tournai.

The fortifications of Tournai were excellent. Vauban had superintended that piece of engineering in person, and the scheme of the fortifications was remarkable from the strength of the citadel which lay apart from the town (though within its ring of earthworks) to the south. The traveller can still recognise in its abandonment this enormous achievement of Louis XIV.'s sappers, and the opposition it was about to offer to the great hosts of Marlborough and Eugene does almost as much honour to the genius of the French engineer as to the tenacity of the little garrison then defending it.

Two factors in the situation must first be appreciated by the reader.

The first is that the inferiority of Villars' force made it impossible for him to do more than demonstrate against the army of observation. He was compelled to leave Tournai to its fate, and, indeed, the king in his first instructions, Villars in his reply, had taken it for granted that either that town or Ypres would be besieged and must fall. But the value of a fortress depends not upon its inviolability (for that can never be reckoned with), but upon the length of time during which it can hold out, and in this respect Tournai was to give full measure.

Secondly, it must be set down for the allies that their unexpectedly long task was hampered by exceptional weather. Rain fell continually, and though their command of the Scheldt lessened in some degree the problem of transport, rain in those days upon such roads as the allies drew their supplies by was a heavy handicap. The garrison of Tournai numbered thirteen and a half battalions, five detached companies, the complement of gunners necessary for the artillery, and a couple of Irish brigades—in all, counting the depleted condition of the French units at the moment, some six to seven thousand men. Perhaps, counting every combatant and non-combatant attached to the garrison, a full seven thousand men.

The command of this force was under Surville, in rank a lieutenant-general. Ravignon and Dolet were his subordinates. There was no lack of wheat for so small a force. Rationed, it was sufficient for four months. Meat made default, and, what was important with a large civil population encumbering the little garrison, money. Surville, the bishop, and others melted down their plate; even that of the altars in the town was sacrificed.

The first trench was opened on the night of the 7th of July, and three first attacks were delivered: one by the gate called Marvis, which looks eastward, another by the gate of Valenciennes, the third at the gate known as that of the Seven Springs. A sortie of the second of these was fairly successful, and upon this model the operations continued for five days.

By the end of that time a hundred heavy pieces had come up the Scheldt from Ghent, and sixty mortars as well. Four great batteries were formed. That to the south opened fire upon the 13th of July, and on the 14th the three others joined it.

The discipline maintained in the great camps of the besiegers was severe, and the besieged experienced the unusual recruitment of five hundred to six hundred deserters who penetrated within their lines. A considerable body of deserters also betook themselves to Villars' lines, and the operations in these first days were sufficiently violent to account for some four thousand killed and wounded upon the side of the allies. Villars, meanwhile, could do no more than demonstrate without effect. Apart from the inferiority of his force, it was still impossible for him, until the harvest was gathered, to establish a sufficient accumulation of wheat to permit a forward movement. He never had four days' provision of bread at any one time, nor, considering the length of his line, could he concentrate it upon any one place. He was fed by dribblets from day to day, and lived from hand to mouth while the siege of Tournai proceeded to the east of him.

That siege was entering, with the close of the month, upon the end of its first phase.

It had been a desperate combat of mine and counter-mine even where the general circumvallation of the town was concerned, though the worst, of course, was to come when the citadel should be attacked. The batteries against the place had been increased until they counted one hundred and twelve heavy pieces and seventy mortars. On the night of the 24th of July the covered way on the right of the Scheldt was taken at heavy loss; forty-eight hours later the covered way on the left between the river and the citadel. The horn work in front of the Gate of the Seven Springs was carried on the 27th, and the isolated work between this point and the Gate of Lille upon the following day. Surville in his report, in the true French spirit of self-criticism, ascribed to the culpable failure of their defenders the loss of these outworks. But the loss, whatever its cause, determined the loss of the town. A few hours later practicable breaches had been

made in the walls, ways were filled in over the ditches, and on the imminence of a general assault Surville upon the 28th demanded terms. The capitulation was signed on the 29th, and with it the commander sent a letter to Versailles detailing his motives for demanding terms for the civilian population. Finally, upon the 30th,^[3] Surville with 4000 men, all that was left of his original force of 7000, retired into the citadel and there disposed himself for as long a resistance as might be. As his good fortune decided, he was to be able to hold with this small force for five full weeks.

To Marlborough is due the honour of the capitulation. The besieging troops were under his command, while Eugene directed the army of observation to the west. Marlborough put some eight thousand men into the town under Albemarle. A verbal understanding was given on both sides that the citadel would not fire upon the civilian part, nor the allies make an attack from it upon the citadel, and the siege of that stronghold began upon the following day, the 21st, towards evening. The operations against the citadel proved far more severe and a far greater trial to Marlborough's troops than those against the general circumvallation of the town. The subterranean struggle of mine and counter-mine particularly affected the moral of the allies, and after a week a proposal appeared^[4] that the active fighting should cease, the siege be converted into a blockade, and only the small number of men sufficient for such a blockade be left before the citadel until the 5th of September, up to which date, a month ahead, at the utmost, it was believed the garrison could hold out. Louis was willing to accept the terms upon the condition that this month should be one of general truce. The allies refused this condition, and hostilities were resumed.^[5]

The force employed for containing the citadel and for prosecuting its siege had no necessity to be very large.

It was warfare of a terrible kind. Men met underground in the mines, were burned alive when these were sprung, were exhausted, sometimes to death, in the subterranean and perilous labour. The mass of the army was free to menace Villars and his main body.

But the admirable engineering which had instructed and completed the lines of La Bassée still checked the allies, in spite of superior numbers and provisionment still superior.

The effect of the harvest was indeed just beginning to be felt, and the French general was beginning to have a little more elbow-room, so to speak, for the

disposition of his men through the gradual replenishment of his stores. But even so, Marlborough and Eugene had very greatly the advantage of him in this respect.

When the siege of the citadel of Tournai had been proceeding a little more than a week, upon the 8th of August the main body of the allies fell suddenly upon Marchiennes. Here the river Scarpe defended the main French positions. The town itself lay upon the further bank like a bastion. The attack was made under Tilly, and, consonantly to the strength of all Villars' defensive positions, that attack failed. On the night of the 9th Tilly retired from before Marchiennes, after having suffered the loss of but a few of his men.

This action, though but a detail in the campaign, is well worth noting, because it exhibits in a sort of section, as it were, the causes of Malplaquet.

Malplaquet, as we shall see in a moment, was fought simply because it had been impossible to pierce Villars' line, and Malplaquet, though a victory, was a sterile victory, more useful to the defeated than to the victors, because the defence had been kept up for such a length of time and was able to choose its own terrain.

Now all this character in the campaign preceding the battle is exemplified in the attempt upon Marchiennes upon August 8th and 9th and its failure. Had it succeeded, had the line been pierced, there would have been no "block" at Malplaquet but an immediate invasion of France, just as there would have been had the line been pierced in the first attempt of five weeks before.

In the next week and the next, Villars continually extended that line. He brought it up solidly as far as St Venant on his left, as far as Valenciennes on his right. He continually strengthened it, so that at no one place should it need any considerable body of men to hold it, and that the mass of the army should be free to move at will behind this strong entrenchment and dyke, fortified as it was with careful inundation and the use of two large rivers.

Though the body of the allies again appeared in the neighbourhood of the lines, no general attack was delivered, but on the 30th of August Villars heard from deserters and spies that the citadel of Tournai was at the end of its provisions. Though but a certain minority of the allied army was necessary to contain that citadel, yet once it had fallen the whole of the allied forces would be much freer to act.

It was upon the 31st of August that Surville, finding himself at the end of his

provisionment of food, proposed capitulation. At first no capitulation could be arrived at. Marlborough insisted upon the garrison's complete surrender; Surville replied by threatening a destruction of the place. It was not until the morning of the 3rd September that a capitulation was signed in the form that the officers and soldiers of the garrison should not be free to serve the king until after they had been exchanged. The troops should march out with arms and colours, and should have safe escort through the French lines to Douai. They reached that town and camp upon the 4th, and an exchange of prisoners against their numbers was soon effected.

Thus after two months ended the siege of Tournai, a piece of resistance which, as the reader will soon see, determined all that was to follow. Six thousand four hundred men had held the place when it was first invested. Of these, 1709 (nearly a third) had been killed; a number approximately equal had been wounded. The figures are sufficient to show the desperate character of the fighting, and how worthy this episode of war was on both sides of the legends that arose from it.



III

THE MANŒUVRING FOR POSITION

With the end of the siege of Tournai both armies were free, the one for unfettered assault, the other to defend itself behind the lines as best it might.

To make a frontal attack upon Villars' lines at any point was justly thought impossible after the past experience which Eugene and Marlborough had of their strength. A different plan was determined on. Mons, with its little garrison, should be invested, and the mass of the army should, on that extreme right of the French position, attempt to break through the old lines of the Trouille and invade France.

Coincidentally with the first negotiations for the capitulation of the citadel of Tournai, this new plan was entered upon. Lord Orkney, with the grenadiers of the army and between 2000 and 3000 mounted men, was sent off on the march to the south-east just as the first negotiations of Marlborough with Surville were opened. With this mobile force Orkney attempted to pass the Haine at St Ghislain. He all but surprised that point at one o'clock of the dark September night, but the French posts were just in time. He was beaten off, and had to cross the river higher up upon the eastern side of Mons, at Havre.

The little check was not without its importance. It meant that the rapid forward march of his vanguard had failed to force that extreme extension of the French line, which was called "The Line of the Trouille" from the name of the small river that falls into the Haine near Mons. In point of time—which is everything in defensive warfare—the success of the defence at St Ghislain meant that all action by the allies was retarded for pretty well a week. Meanwhile, the weather had turned to persistent and harassing rain, the allied army, "toiling through a sea of mud,"^[6] had not invested Mons even upon the eastern side until the evening of the 7th of September. On the same day Villars took advantage of a natural feature, stronger for purposes of defence than the line of the Trouille. This feature was the belt of forest-land which lies south and a little west of Mons, between that town and Bavai. He strengthened such forces as he had on the line of the Trouille (the little posts which had checked the first advance upon Mons, as I have said), concentrated the whole army just behind and west of the forest

barrier, and watching the two gaps of that barrier, whose importance will be explained in a moment, he lay, upon the morning of Sunday, September the 8th, in a line which stretched from the river Haine at Montreuil to the bridge of Athis behind the woods; keeping watch upon his right in case he should have to move the line down south suddenly to meet an attack. As Villars so lay, he was in the position of a man who may be attacked through one of two doors in a wall. Such a man would stand between the two doors, watching both, and ready to spring upon that one which might be attacked, and attempt to defend it. The wall was the wall of wood, the two doors were the opening by Boussu and the other narrow opening which is distinguished by the name of Aulnois, the principal village at its mouth. It was this last which was to prove in the event the battlefield.

All this I must make plainer and elaborate in what follows, and close this section by a mere statement of the manœuvring for position.

[Larger Image](#)

Sketch Map showing the Lines of Woods behind Mons,
with the two gaps of Boussu and Aulnois.

Villars lying, as I have said, with his right at Athis, his left on the river Haine at Montreuil, Marlborough countered him by bringing the main of his forces over the Trouille^[7] so that they lay from Quevy to Quaregnon.

Eugene brought up his half, and drew it up as an extension of the Duke of Marlborough's line, and by the evening of the Sunday and on the morning of the Monday, all the troops who were at Tournai having been meanwhile called up, the allied army lay opposite the second or southern of the two openings in the forest wall. Villars during the Sunday shifted somewhat to the left or the south in the course of the day to face the new position of his enemy. It was evident upon that Monday morning the 9th of September that the action, when it was forced, would be in the second and southernmost of the two gaps. On that same Monday morning Villars brought the whole of his army still further south and was now right in front of the allies and barring the gap of Aulnois. By ten o'clock the centre of the French forces was drawn up in front of the hamlet of Malplaquet, by noon it had marched forward not quite a mile, stretched from wood to wood, and awaited the onslaught. A few ineffective cannon-shots were exchanged, but the expected attack was not delivered. Vastly to the advantage of the French and to the inexplicable prejudice of the allies Marlborough and Eugene wasted all that Monday and all the Tuesday following: the result we shall see when we come to the battle, for Villars used every moment of his respite to entrench and fortify without ceasing.

With the drawing up of the French army across the gap, however, ends the manœuvring for position, and under the title of "The Preliminaries of the Battle" I will next describe the arrival of Boufflers—a moral advantage not to be despised—the terrain, the French defences, and the full effect of the unexpected delay upon the part of the allies.

IV

THE PRELIMINARIES OF THE BATTLE

The arrival of Louis Francis, Duke of Boufflers, peer and marshal of France, upon the frontier and before the army of defence, was one of those intangible advantages which the civilian historian will tend to exaggerate and the military to belittle, but which, though not susceptible of calculation or measurement, may always prove of vast consequence to a force, and have sometimes decided between victory and defeat. This advantage did not lie in Boufflers' singular capacity for command, nor, as will presently be seen, was he entrusted with the supreme direction of the action that was to follow. He was a great general. His service under arms had occupied the whole of his life and energies; he was to have a high and worthy reputation in the particular province of his career. But much more than this, the magic of his name and the just prestige which attached to the integrity and valour of the man went before him with a spiritual influence which every soldier felt, and which reanimated the whole body of the defence. His record was peculiarly suited for the confirmation of men who were fighting against odds, under disappointment, at the end of a long series of defeats, and on a last line to which the national arms had been thrust back after five years of almost uninterrupted failure.

Boufflers at this moment was in his 66th year, and seemed older. His masterful, prominent face, large, direct, humorous in expression, full of command, was an index of a life well lived in the business of organisation, of obedience, and at last of supreme direction. Years ago at Namur his tenacity, under the pressure of a superior offensive, had earned him the particular character which he now bore. Only the year before, his conduct of the siege of Lille, when he had determinedly held out against the certitude of ultimate surrender, had refused to yield the place even after receiving orders from his sovereign, and had finally obtained, by his unshakable determination, a capitulation of the most honourable kind, was fresh in the minds of all. There is a story that on his arrival in the French camp the cheers with which he was greeted reached the opposing line, and that the allies were moved by the enormous rumour to expect an instant assault. He was one of those leaders who, partly through their legend, more through their real virtue, are a sort of flag and symbol to the soldiery who have the good fortune to receive

their command.

Nine years the senior in age of Villars, of a military experience far superior, in rank again possessed of the right to supreme command (for he had received the grade of marshal long before), he none the less determined to put himself wholly at Villars' orders, for he knew of what importance was continuity of direction in the face of the enemy. At the end of the last campaign, when he had expected peace, he had honourably retired. His life was nearing its close; in two years he was to die. He sacrificed both the pretension and the fact of superiority so dear to the commander, and told Villars that he came simply as a volunteer to aid as best he might, and to support the supreme command in the coming fight.

He had arrived at Arras on the same day that Tournai had surrendered. Upon the morrow he had reached Villars' headquarters near Douai, Sin le Noble, in the centre of the defensive line. He had followed the easterly movement of the mass of the French army along that line to their present establishment between the two woods and to the terrain whereupon the action would be decided. In that action he was set at the head of the troops on the right, while Villars, attending in particular to the left, retained the general command and ordered all the disposition of the French force.



The landscape which lay before the French commanders when upon the Monday morning their line was drawn up and immediate battle expected, has changed hardly at all in the two hundred years between their day and ours. I will describe it.

From the valley of the Sambre (which great river lies a day's march to the south of the French position) the land rises gradually upward in long rolls of bare fields. At the head of this slope is a typical watershed country, a country that is typical of watersheds in land neither hilly nor mountainous; small, sluggish streams, lessening to mere trickles of water as you rise, cut the clay; and the landscape, though at the watershed itself one is standing at a height of 500 feet above the sea, has the appearance of a plain. It is indeed difficult, without the aid of a map, to decide when one has passed from the one to the other side of the water parting, and the actual summit is, at this season of the year, a confused, flat stretch of open stubble fallow, and here and there coarse, heathy, untilled land. For two or three miles every way this level stretches, hummocked by slight rolls

between stream and stream, and upon the actual watershed marked by one or two stagnant ponds. Seven miles behind you as you stand upon the battlefield lies the little French market town of Bavai, which was for centuries one of the great centres of Roman rule. It was the capital of the Nervii. Seven great Roman roads still strike out from it, to Rheims, to Cologne, to Utrecht, to Amiens, to the sea. Two in particular, that to Treves and that to Cologne, spreading gradually apart like the two neighbouring fingers of a hand, are the natural ways by which an army advancing to such a field or retreating from it would communicate with Bavai as a base.^[8]

The outstanding feature of this terrain is not that it is the summit of a watershed; indeed, as I have said, but for a map one would not guess that it bore this character, and to the eye it presents the appearance of a plain; it is rather the symmetrical arrangement of it as a broad belt of open land, flanked upon either side north and south by two great woods. That upon the right is known as the wood of Lanière, that upon the left bears several names in its various parts, and is easiest to remember under the general title of "The Forest of Sars." The gap between these two woods narrows to a line which is precisely 2000 yards in extent and runs from north-west to south-east, the two nearest points where either wood approaches the other being distant one from another by that distance and bearing one to the other upon those points of the compass. The French army, therefore, drawn up on the open land and stretching from wood to wood, faced somewhat north of east. The allies, drawn up a mile and a half away on the broad beginning of that gap, looked somewhat south of west. Behind the latter at a day's march was Mons; behind the former some seven miles was Bavai; and the modern frontier as well as the natural topographical frontier of the watershed runs just in front of what was then the emplacement of the French line.

Upon the French side the bare fields are marked by no more than a few hamlets, the chief of which is the little village of Malplaquet, a few houses built along what is now the main road to Brussels. Certain of the French reserve were posted in this village, accompanied by a few sections of artillery, but the fields before it lay completely open to the action.

Upon the Belgian side a string of considerable villages stretched; three of them from right to left marked the principal position of the allies. Their names from north to south, that is, from the left of the allies to the right, are Aulnois, Blaregnies, and Sars. The first of these lies right under the wood of Lanière; the second faces the gap between the woods; the third lies behind the left-hand wood, and takes its name from it, and is, as we have seen, called the forest of

Sars.[\[9\]](#)

The dispositions which the French army would take in such a defensive position were evident enough. It must defend the gap by entrenchment; it must put considerable forces into the woods upon the right and to the left of the gap to prevent the entrenchments being turned. The character of Villars and the French tradition of depending upon earth wherever that be possible, was bound, if time were accorded, to make the entrenchment of the open gap formidable. The large numbers engaged upon either side left a considerable number at the disposal of either commander, to be used by the one in holding the woods, by the other in attempting to force them; not much more than half of the French force need stand to the defence of the open gap. This gap was so suitable, with its bare fields after harvest, the absence of hedges, the insignificance of the rivulets, for the action of cavalry, that gates or gaps would be left in the French entrenchment for the use of that arm in order to allow the mounted men to pass through and charge as the necessity for such action might arise. In general, therefore, we must conceive of the French position as strong entrenchments thrown across the gap and lined with infantry, the cavalry drawn up behind to pass through the infantry when occasion might demand, through the line of entrenchment, and so to charge; the two woods upon either side thickly filled with men, and the position taken up by these defended by felled tree trunks and such earthwork as could be thrown up with difficulty in the dense undergrowth.

It would be the business of the allies to try and force this line, either by carrying the central entrenchments across the gap or by turning the French left flank in the forest of Sars or the French right flank in the wood of Lanière, or by both of these attempts combined; for it must be remembered that the numerical superiority of the allies gave them a choice of action. Should either the stand on the left or that on the right be forced, the French line would be turned and the destruction of the army completed. Should the centre be pierced effectively and in time, the Northern half of the army so severed would certainly be destroyed, for there was no effective line of retreat; the Southern half might or might not escape towards the valley of the Sambre. In either case a decisive victory would destroy the last of the French bodies of defence and would open the way for an almost uninterrupted march upon Paris.

It will be self-evident to the reader that what with Villars' known methods, his dependence upon his engineers, the tradition of the French service in this respect, the inferior numbers of the French forces, and the glaring necessities of the position, earthworks would be a deciding factor in the result.

Now the value of entrenchment is a matter of time, and before proceeding to a description of the action we must, if we are to understand its result, appreciate how great an advantage was conferred upon the French by the delay in the attack of the allies.

As I have said, it was upon the morning of Monday, September 9th, that the two armies were drawn up facing each other, and there is no apparent reason why the assault should not have been delivered upon that day. Had it been delivered we can hardly doubt that a decisive defeat of the French would have resulted, that the way to Paris would have been thrown open, and that the ruin of the French monarchy would have immediately followed. As it was, no attack was delivered upon that Monday. The whole of Tuesday was allowed to pass without a movement. It was not until the Wednesday morning that the allies moved.

The problem of this delay is one which the historian must anxiously consider, for the answer to it explains the barrenness and political failure associated with the name of Malplaquet. But it is one which the historian will not succeed in answering unless indeed further documents should come to light. All that we now know is that in a council of war held upon the Monday on the side of the allies, it was thought well to wait until all the troops from Tournai should have come up (though these were few in number), and necessary to send 9000 men to hold the bridge across the Haine at St Ghislain in order to secure retreat in case of disaster.^[10]

The English historians blame the Dutch, the Dutch the English, and the Austrians and Prussians blame both.

Perhaps there would have been an attack upon the Tuesday at least had not Villars spent all the Monday and all the Monday night in exacting from his men the most unexpected labours in constructing entrenchments of the most formidable character. Marlborough and Eugene, riding out before their lines to judge their chances on the Tuesday, were astonished at the work that had been done in those twenty-four hours. Nine redans, that is, openworks of peculiar strength, stretched across the gap to within about 600 yards of the wood of Lanière, and the remainder of the space was one continuous line of entrenchment. What had been done in the woods could not be judged from such a survey, but it might be guessed, and the forcing of these became a very different problem from what it would have been had an attack been delivered on the Monday. Behind this main line Villars drew up another and yet another series of earthworks; even Malplaquet itself, with the reserve in the rear, was defended,

and the work was continued without interruption even throughout the Tuesday night with relays of men.

When at last, upon the Wednesday morning, the allies had arrived at their tardy agreement and determined to force an action, their superiority in numbers, such as it was (and this disputed point must be later discussed), was quite negated by having to meet fortifications so formidable as to be called, in the exaggerated phrase of a witness, “a citadel.”

One last point must be mentioned before the action itself is described: the open gap across which the centre of the allies must advance to break the French centre and encapture the entrenchments was cut in two by a large copse or small wood, called “The Wood of Tiry.” It was not defended, lying too far in front of the French line, and was of no great consequence save in this: that when the advance of the allies against the French defence should begin, it was bound to canalise and cut off from support for a moment the extreme left of that advance through the channel marked A upon the map over page. As will be seen, the Dutch advanced too early and in too great strength through this narrow gap, and the check they suffered, which was of such effect upon the battle, would not have been nearly so severe had not the little wood cut them off from the support of the centre.



V

THE ACTION

On the morning of Wednesday, the 11th of September, the allied army was afoot long before dawn, and was ranged in order of battle earlier than four o'clock. But a dense mist covered the ground, and nothing was done until at about half-past seven this lifted and enabled the artillery of the opposing forces to estimate the range and to open fire. In order to understand what was to follow, the reader may, so to speak, utilise this empty period of the early morning before the action joined, to grasp the respective positions of the two hosts.

[Larger Image](#)

The Elements of the Action of Malplaquet, September 11th, 1709.

The nature of the terrain has already been described. The plan upon the part of the allies would naturally consist in an attempt to force both woods which covered the French flank, and, while the pressure upon these was at its strongest, the entrenched and fortified centre. Of course, if either of the woods was forced before the French centre should break, there would be no need to continue the central attack, for one or other of the French flanks would then be turned. But the woods were so well garnished by this time, and so strongly lined with fallen tree-trunks and such entrenchments as the undergrowth permitted, that it seemed to both Eugene and Marlborough more probable that the centre should be forced than that either of the two flanks should first be turned, and the general plan of the battle depended rather upon the holding and heavy engagement of the forces in the two woods to the north and south than in any hope to clear them out, and the final success was expected rather to take the form of piercing the central line

while the flanks were thus held and engaged. The barren issue of the engagement led the commanders of the allies to excuse themselves, of course, and the peculiar ill-success of their left against the French right, which we shall detail in a moment, gave rise to the thesis that only a “feint” was intended in that quarter. The thesis may readily be dismissed. The left was intended to do serious work quite as much as the right. The theory that it was intended to “feint” was only produced after the action, and in order to explain its incomplete results.^[11]

Upon the French side the plan was purely defensive, as their inferior numbers and their reliance upon earthworks both necessitated and proved. It was Villars’ plan to hold every part of his line with a force proportionate to its strength; to furnish the woods a little more heavily than the entrenchments of the open gap, but everywhere to rely upon the steadiness of his infantry and their artificial protections in the repelling of the assault. His cavalry he drew up behind this long line of infantry defence, prepared, as has already been said, to charge through gaps whenever such action on their part might seem effective.

It will be perceived that the plan upon either side was of a very simple sort, and one easily grasped. On the side of the allies it was little more than a “hammer-and-tongs” assault upon a difficult and well-guarded position; on the side of the French, little more than a defence of the same.

Next must be described the nature of the troops engaged in the various parts of the field.

Upon the side of the allies we have:—

On their left—that is, to the south of their lines and over against the wood of Lanière—one-third of the army under the Prince of Orange. The bulk of this body consisted in Dutch troops, of whom thirty-one battalions of infantry were present, and behind the infantry thus drawn up under the Dutch commander were his cavalry, instructed to keep out of range during the attack of the infantry upon the wood, and to charge and complete it when it should be successful. Embodied among these troops the British reader should note a corps of Highlanders, known as the Scottish Brigade.^[12] These did not form part of the British army, but were specially enrolled in the Dutch service. The cavalry of this left wing was under the command of the Prince of Hesse-Cassel, who was mentioned a few pages back in the advance upon Mons. It numbered somewhat over 10,000 sabres.

The other end of the allied position consisted in two great forces of infantry acting separately, and in the following fashion:—

First, a force under Schulemberg, which attacked the salient angle of the forest of Sars on its northern face, and another body attacking the other side of the same angle, to wit, its eastern face. In the first of these great masses, that under Schulemberg, there were no English troops. In strength it amounted alone to nearly 20,000 men. The second part, which was to attack the eastern face, was commanded by Lottum, and was only about half as strong, contained a certain small proportion of English.

It may be asked when once these two great bodies of the left and the right (each of which was to concern itself with one of the two woods in front of the gap) are disposed of, what remained to furnish the centre of the allies? To this the curious answer must be afforded that in the arrangements of the allies at Malplaquet no true centre existed. The battle must be regarded from their side as a battle fought by two isolated wings, left and right, and ending in a central attack composed of men drawn from either wing. If upon the following sketch map the section from A to B be regarded as the special province of the Dutch or left wing, and the section from C to D be regarded as the special province of the Austro-Prussian or right wing, then the mid-section between B and C has no large body of troops corresponding to it. When the time came for acting in that mid-section, the troops necessary for the work were drawn from either end of the line. There were, however, two elements in connection with this mid-section which must be considered.

First, a great battery of forty guns ready to support an attack upon the entrenchments of the gap, whenever that time should come; and secondly, far in the rear, about 6000 British troops under Lord Orkney were spread out and linked the massed right of the army to its massed left. One further corps must be mentioned. Quite separate from the rest of the army, and right away on the left on the *French side* of the forest of Sars, was the small isolated corps under Withers, which was to hold and embarrass the French rear near the group of farmsteads called La Folie, and when the forest of Sars was forced was to join hands with the successful assault of the Prussians and Austrians who should have forced it.

The general command of the left, including Lord Orkney's battalions, also including (though tactically they formed part of the right wing) the force under Lottum, lay with the Duke of Marlborough. The command of the right—that is, Schulemberg and the cavalry behind him—lay with Prince Eugene.

The French line of defence is, from its simplicity, quite easy to describe. In the wood of Lanière, and in the open space just outside it, as far as the fields in front of Malplaquet village, were the troops under command of the French general D'Artagnan. Among the regiments holding this part was that of the Bourbonnais, the famous brigade of Navarre (the best in the service), and certain of the Swiss mercenaries. The last of this body on the left was formed by the French Guards. The entrenchments in the centre were held by the Irish Brigades of Lee and O'Brien, and by the German mercenaries and allies of Bavaria and Cologne. These guarded the redans which defended the left or northern part of the open gap. The remainder of this gap, right up to the forest of Sars, was held by Alsatians and by the Brigade of Laon, and the chief command in this part lay with Steckenberg. The forest of Sars was full of French troops, Picardy, the Marines, the Regiment of Champagne, and many others, with a strong reserve of similar troops just behind the wood. The cavalry of the army formed a long line behind this body of entrenched infantry; the Household Cavalry being on the right near the wood of Lanière, the Gens d'armes being in the centre, and the Carabiniers upon the left. These last stretched so far northward and westward as to come at last opposite to Withers.



Such was the disposition of the two armies when at half-past seven the sun pierced the mist and the first cannon-shots were exchanged. Marlborough and Eugene had decided that they would begin by pressing, as hard as might be, the assault upon the forest of Sars. When this assault should have proceeded for half an hour, the opposite end of the line, the left, under the Prince of Orange,^[13] should engage the French troops holding the wood of Lanière. It was expected that the forest of Sars would be forced early in the action; that the troops in the wood of Lanière would at least be held fast by the attack of the Prince of Orange, and that the weakened French centre could then be taken by assault with the use of the reserves, of Orkney's men, and of detachments drawn from the two great masses upon the wings.

The reader may here pause to consider the excellence of this plan—very

probably Marlborough's own, and one the comparative ill-success of which was due to the unexpected power of resistance displayed by the French infantry upon that day.

It was wise to put the greater part of the force into a double attack upon the forest of Sars, for this forest, with its thick woods and heavy entrenchments, was at once the strongest part of the French position in its garnishing and artificial enforcement, yet weak in that the salient angle it presented was one that could not, from the thickness of the trees, be watched from any central point, as can the salient angle of a fortification. Lottum on the one side, Schulemberg on the other, were attacking forces numerically weaker than their own, and separate fronts which could not support each other under the pressure of the attack.

It was wise to engage the forces upon the French side opposite the allied left in the wood of Lanière half an hour after the assault had begun upon the forest of Sars, for it was legitimate to expect that at the end of that half hour the pressure upon the forest of Sars would begin to be felt by the French, and that they would call for troops from the right unless the right were very busily occupied at that moment.

Finally, it was wise not to burden the centre with any great body of troops until one of the two flanks should be pressed or broken, for the centre might, in this case, be compared to a funnel in which too great a body of troops would be caught at a disadvantage against the strong entrenchments which closed the mouth of the funnel. An historical discussion has arisen upon the true rôle of the left in this plan. The commander of the allies gave it out *after* the action (as we have seen above) that the left had only been intended to "feint." The better conclusion is that they were intended to do their worst against the wood of Lanière, although of course this "worst" could not be expected to compare with the fundamental attack upon the forest of Sars, where all the chief forces of the battle were concentrated.

If by a "feint" is meant a subsidiary part of the general plan, the expression might be allowed to pass, but it is not a legitimate use of that expression, and if, as occurred at Malplaquet with the Dutch troops, a subsidiary body in the general plan is badly commanded, the temptation to call the original movement a "feint," which developed from breach of orders into a true attack, though strong for the disappointed commanders, must not be admitted by the accurate historian. In general, we may be certain that the Dutch troops and their neighbours on the allied left were intended to do all they could against the wood

of Lanière, did all they could, but suffered in the process a great deal more than Marlborough had allowed for.



These dispositions once grasped, we may proceed to the nature and development of the general attack which followed that opening cannonade of half-past seven, which has already been described.

The first movement of the allies was an advance of the left under the Prince of Orange and of the right under Lottum. The first was halted out of range; the second, after getting up as far as the eastern flank of the forest of Sars, wheeled round so as to face the hedge lining that forest, and formed into three lines. It was nine o'clock before the signal for the attack was given by a general discharge of the great battery in the centre opposite the French entrenchments in the gap. Coincidentally with that signal Schulemberg attacked the forest of Sars from his side, the northern face, and he and Lottum pressed each upon that side of the salient angle which faced him. Schulemberg's large force got into the fringe of the wood, but no further. The resistance was furious; the thickness of the trees aided it. Eugene was present upon this side; meanwhile Marlborough himself was leading the troops of Lottum. He advanced with them against a hot fire, passed the swampy rivulet which here flanks the wood, and reached the entrenchments which had been drawn up just within the outer boundary of it.

This attack failed. Villars was present in person with the French troops and directed the repulse. Almost at the same time the advance of Schulemberg upon the other side of the wood, which Eugene was superintending, suffered a check. Its reserves were called up. The intervals of the first line were filled up from the second. One French brigade lining the wood was beaten back, but the Picardy Regiment and the Marines stood out against a mixed force of Danes, Saxons, and Hessians opposing them. Schulemberg, therefore, in this second attack had failed again, but Marlborough, leading Lottum's men upon the other side of the wood to a second charge in his turn, had somewhat greater success. He had by this time been joined by a British brigade under the Duke of Argyle from the second line, and he did so far succeed with this extension of his men as to get round the edge of the French entrenchments in the wood.

The French began to be pressed from this eastern side of their salient angle, right in among the trees. Schulemberg's command felt the advantage of the pressure

being exercised on the other side. The French weakened before it, and in the neighbourhood of eleven o'clock a great part of the forest of Sars was already filled with the allies, who were beating back the French in individual combats from tree to tree. Close on noon the battle upon this side stood much as the sketch map upon the opposite page shows, and was as good as won, for it seemed to need only a continuation of this victorious effort to clear the whole wood at last and to turn the French line.

This is undoubtedly the form which the battle would have taken—a complete victory for the allied forces by their right turning the French left—and the destruction of the French army would have followed, had not the allied left been getting into grave difficulty at the other end of the field of battle.

[Larger Image](#)

Sketch Map showing the peril the French centre ran towards
noon of being turned on its left.

The plan of the allied generals, it will be remembered, was that the left of their army under the Prince of Orange should attack the wood of Lanière about half an hour after the right had begun to effect an entrance into the opposing forest of Sars. When that half hour had elapsed, that is, about half-past nine, the Prince of Orange, without receiving special orders, it is true, but acting rightly enough upon his general orders, advanced against the French right. Tullibardine with his Scottish brigade took the worst of the fighting on the extreme left against the extreme of the French right, and was the first to get engaged among the trees. The great mass of the force advanced up the opening between the coppice called the wood of Tiry and the main wood, with the object of carrying the entrenchments which ran from the corner of the wood in front of Malplaquet and covered this edge of the open gap. The nine foremost battalions were led by the Prince of Orange in person; his courage and their tenacity, though fatal to the issue of the fight, form perhaps the finest part of our story. As they came near the French earthworks, a French battery right upon their flank at the edge of the

wood opened upon them, enfilading whole ranks and doing, in the shortest time, terrible execution. The young leader managed to reach the earthworks. The breastwork was forced, but Boufflers brought up men from his left, that is, from the centre of the gap, drove the Dutch back, and checked, at the height of its success, this determined assault. Had not the wood of Tiry been there to separate the main part of the Prince of Orange's command from its right, reinforcements might have reached him and have saved the disaster. As it was, the wood of Tiry had cut the advance into two streams, and neither could help the other. The Dutch troops and the Highlanders rallied; the Prince of Orange charged again with a personal bravery that made him conspicuous before the whole field, and should make him famous in history, but the task was more than men could accomplish. The best brigade at the disposal of the French, that of Navarre, was brought up to meet this second onslaught, broke it, and the French leapt from the earthworks to pursue the flight of their assailants. Many of Orange's colours were taken in that rout, and the guns of his advanced battery fell into French hands. Beyond the wood of Tiry the extreme right of the Dutch charge had suffered no better fate. It had carried the central entrenchment of the French, only to be beaten back as the main body between the wood of Tiry and the wood of Lanière opened.

At this moment, then, after eleven o'clock, which was coincident with the success of Lottum and Schulemberg in the forest of Sars, upon the right, the allied left had been hopelessly beaten back from the entrenchments in the gap, and from the edge of the wood of Lanière.

Marlborough was hurriedly summoned away from his personal command of Lottum's victorious troops, and begged to do what he could for the broken regiments of Orange. He galloped back over the battlefield, a mile or so of open fields, and was appalled to see the havoc. Of the great force that had advanced an hour and a half before against Boufflers and the French right, fully a third was struck, and 2000 or more lay dead upon the stubble and the coarse heath of that upland. The scattered corpses strewn over half a mile of flight from the French entrenchments, almost back to their original position, largely showed the severity of the blow. It was impossible to attempt another attack upon the French right with any hope of success.

Marlborough, trusting that the forest of Sars would soon be finally cleared, determined upon a change of plan. He ordered the advance upon the centre of the position of Lord Orkney's fifteen battalions, reinforced that advance by drafts of men from the shattered Dutch left, and prepared with some deliberation

to charge the line of earthworks which ran across the open and the nine redans which we have seen were held by the French allies and mercenaries from Bavaria and Cologne, and await his moment. That moment came at about one o'clock; at this point in the action the opposing forces stood somewhat as they are sketched on the map over page.

The pressure upon the French in the wood of Sars, perpetually increasing, had already caused Villars, who commanded there in person, to beg Boufflers for aid; but the demand came when Boufflers was fighting his hardest against the last Dutch attack, and no aid could be sent.

Somewhat reluctantly, Villars had weakened his centre by withdrawing from it the two Irish regiments, and continued to dispute foot by foot the forest of Sars. But foot by foot and tree by tree, in a series of individual engagements, his men were pressed back, and a larger area of the woodland was held by the troops of Schulemberg and Lottum. Eugene was wounded, but refused to leave the field. The loss had been appalling upon either side, but especially severe (as might have been expected) among the assailants, when, just before one o'clock, the last of the French soldiers were driven from the wood.

[Larger Image](#)

Sketch Map showing Marlborough bringing up troops to the centre for the final and successful attack upon the entrenchments about one o'clock.

All that main defence which the forest of Sars formed upon the French left flank was lost, but the fight had been so exhausting to the assailants in the confusion of the underwood, and the difficulty of forming them in the trees was so great, that the French forces once outside the wood could rally at leisure and draw up in line to receive any further movement on the part of their opponents. It was while the French left were thus drawn up in line behind the wood of Sars, with their redans at the centre weakened by the withdrawal of the Irish brigade, that Marlborough ordered the final central attack against those redans. The honour of

carrying them fell to Lord Orkney and his British battalions. His men flooded over the earthworks at the first rush, breaking the depleted infantry behind them (for these, after the withdrawal of the Irish, were no more than the men of Bavaria and Cologne), and held the parapet.

The French earthworks thus carried by the infantry in the centre, the modern reader might well premise that a complete rout of the French forces should have followed. But he would make this premise without counting for the preponderant rôle that cavalry played in the wars of Marlborough.

Facing the victorious English battalions of Orkney, now in possession of the redans, stood the mile-long unbroken squadrons of the French horse.

The allied cavalry, passing between gaps in its infantry line, began to deploy for the charge, but even as they deployed they were charged by the French mounted men, thrust back, and thrown into confusion. The short remainder of the battle is no more than a *mêlée* of sabres, but the nature of that *mêlée* must be clearly grasped, and the character of the French cavalry resistance understood, for this it was which determined the issue of the combat and saved the army of Louis XIV.

A detailed account of the charges and counter-charges of the opposing horse would be confusing to the reader, and is, as a fact, impossible of narration, for no contemporary record of it remains in any form which can be lucidly set forth.

A rough outline of what happened is this:—

The first counter-charge of the French was successful, and the allied cavalry, caught in the act of deployment, was thrust back in confusion, as I have said, upon the British infantry who lined the captured earthworks.

The great central battery of forty guns which Marlborough had kept all day in the centre of the gap, split to the right and left, and, once clear of its own troops, fired from either side upon the French horse. Shaken, confused, and almost broken by this fire, the French horse were charged by a new body of the allied horse led by Marlborough in person, composed of British and Prussian units. But, just as Marlborough's charge was succeeding, old Boufflers, bringing up the French Household Cavalry from in front of Malplaquet village, charged right home into the flank of Marlborough's mounted troops, bore back their first and second lines, and destroyed the order of their third.

Thereupon Eugene, with yet another body of fresh horse (of the Imperial

Service), charged in his turn, and the battle of Malplaquet ends in a furious mix-up of mounted men, which gradually separated into two undefeated lines, each retiring from the contest.

It will be wondered why a conclusion so curiously impotent was permitted to close the fighting of so famous a field.

The answer to this query is that the effort upon either side had passed the limits beyond which men are physically incapable of further action. Any attempt of the French to advance in force after two o'clock would have led to their certain disaster, for the allies were now in possession of their long line of earthworks.^[14]

On the other hand, the allies could not advance, because the men upon whom they could still count for action were reduced to insufficient numbers. Something like one-third of their vast host had fallen in this most murderous of battles; from an eighth to a sixth were dead. Of the remainder, the great proportion suffered at this hour from an exhaustion that forbade all effective effort.

The horse upon either side might indeed have continued charge and counter-charge to no purpose and with no final effect, but the action of the cavalry in the repeated and abortive shocks, of which a list has just been detailed, could lead neither commander to hope for any final result. Boufflers ordered a retreat, screened by his yet unbroken lines of horse. The infantry were withdrawn from the wood of Lanière, which they still held, and from their positions behind the forest of Sars. They were directed in two columns towards Bavai in their rear, and as that orderly and unhurried retreat was accomplished, the cavalry filed in to follow the line, and the French host, leaving the field in the possession of the victors, marched back westward by the two Roman roads in as regular a formation as though they had been advancing to action rather than retreating from an abandoned position.

It was not quite three o'clock in the afternoon.

There was no pursuit, and there could be none. The allied army slept upon the ground it had gained; rested, evacuated its wounded, and restored its broken ranks through the whole of the morrow, Thursday. It was not until the Friday that it was able to march back again from the field in which it had triumphed at so terrible an expense of numbers, guns, and colours, and with so null a strategic result, and to take up once more the siege of Mons. Upon the 9th of October Mons capitulated, furnishing the sole fruit of this most arduous of all the great series of Marlborough's campaigns.

No battle has been contested with more valour or tenacity than the battle of Malplaquet. The nature of the woodland fighting contributed to the enormous losses sustained upon either side. The delay during which the French had been permitted to entrench themselves so thoroughly naturally threw the great balance of the loss upon the assailants. In no battle, free, as Malplaquet was free, from all pursuit or a rout, or even the breaking of any considerable body of troops (save the Dutch troops and Highlanders on the left in the earlier part of the battle, and the Bavarians and Cologne men in the redans at the close of it), has the proportion of the killed and wounded been anything like so high. In none, perhaps, were casualties so heavy accompanied by so small a proportion of prisoners.

The action will remain throughout history a standing example of the pitch of excellence to which those highly trained professional armies of the eighteenth century, with their savage discipline, their aristocratic command, their close formations, and their extraordinary reliance upon human daring, could arrive.

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- XIII. Wherein the Romancer takes courteous leave of the Three Gentle Readers.

Footnotes:

[1] From which little place the lines as a whole take the name in history of “Lines of La Bassée.”

[2] As is common in the history of military affairs, the advocates of either party present these confused movements before the lines of La Bassée upon the eve of the siege of Tournai in very different and indeed contradictory lights.

The classical work of Mr Fortescue, to which I must, here as elsewhere, render homage, will have the whole movement, from its inception, to be deliberately designed; no battle intended, the siege of Tournai to be the only real object of the allies.

The French apologists talk of quarrels between Eugene and Marlborough, take for granted a plan of assault against Villars, and represent the turning off of the army to the siege of Tournai as an afterthought. The truth, of course, is contained in both versions, and lies between the two. Eugene and Marlborough did intend a destructive assault upon Villars and his line, but they were early persuaded—especially by the reconnoitring of Cadogan—that the defensive skill of the French commander had proved formidable, and we may take it that the determination to besiege Tournai and to abandon an assault upon the main of the French forces had been reached at least as early as the 26th. There is no positive evidence, however, one way or the other, to decide these questions of motive. I rely upon no more than the probable intention of the men, to be deduced from their actions, and I do not believe that the Dutch would have had orders to move as early as they did unless Marlborough had decided—not later than the moment I have mentioned—to make Tournai the first objective of the campaign.

[3] Mr Fortescue in his work makes it the 23rd. I cannot conceive the basis for such an error. The whole story of the 24th, 25th, 26th, 27th, 28th, and 29th is in

the French archives, together with full details of the capitulation on the 29th and 30th.

[4] As usual, there is a contradiction in the records. The French record definitely ascribes the proposal to Marlborough. Marlborough, in a letter to his wife of 5th August, as definitely ascribes it to Surville; and there is no positive evidence one way or the other, though Louis' rejection of the terms and the ability of calculation and the character of the two men certainly make it more probable that Marlborough and not Surville was the author of the proposition.

[5] The dispute as to who was the author of the suggestion for an armistice is further illumined by this refusal on the part of the allies. The proposal to contain Tournai and yet to have free their vast forces in operation elsewhere, if a trifle crude, was certainly to their advantage, and as certainly to the disadvantage of the French.

[6] This excellent phrase is Mr Fortescue's.

[7] Technically the line of defence was forced, for the line of Trouille was but a continuation of the lines of La Bassée—Douai—Valenciennes. So far as strategical results were concerned, the withdrawal of Villars behind the forest barrier was equivalent to the reconstruction of new lines, and in the event the action of Malplaquet proved that new defensive position to be strong enough to prevent the invasion of France. On the other hand, there is little doubt that if Villars had been in a little more strength he would have elected to fight on the old lines and not behind the woods.

It must further be remarked that if the operations had not been prolonged as they were by the existence of the posts on the lines, notably at St Ghislain, the defensive position of the French would probably have been forced and their whole line broken as early as September 4th.

[8] It is remarkable that these two roads, which are the chief feature both of the landscape and the local military topography, and which are of course as straight as taut strings, are represented upon Mr Fortescue's map (vol. i. p. 424) as winding lanes, or, to speak more accurately, are not represented at all. In this perhaps the learned historian of the British army was misled by Coxe's atlas to Marlborough's campaign, a picturesque but grossly inaccurate compilation. The student who desires to study this action in detail will do well to consult the Belgian Ordnance Map on the scale of $\frac{1}{40,000}$ contours at 5 metres, section Roisin, and the French General Staff Map, $\frac{1}{80,000}$, section Maubeuge, south-

western quarter; the action being fought exactly on the frontier between Belgium and France, both maps are necessary. For the general strategic position the French $\frac{1}{200,000}$ in colours, sheet Maubeuge, and the adjoining sheet, Lille, are sufficient.

[9] The reader who may compare this account of Malplaquet with others will be the less confused if he remembers that the forest of Sars is called on that extremity nearest to the gap the wood of Blaregnies, and that this name is often extended, especially in English accounts, to the whole forest.

[10] These 9000 found at St Ghislain a belated post of 200 French, who surrendered. Someone had forgotten them.

[11] For the discussion of this see later on p. 75.

[12] They were commanded by Hamilton and Tullibardine. It is to be remarked that the command of the whole of the left of the Prince of Orange's force, though it was not half Scotch, was under the command of Hamilton and Douglas. The two regiments of Tullibardine and Hepburn were under the personal command of the Marquis of Tullibardine, the heir of Atholl.

[13] Nominally under Tilly, but practically under the young Royal commander.

[14] Villars, wounded and fainting with pain, had been taken from the field an hour or two before, and the whole command was now in the hands of Boufflers.

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