

Letter from Surgeon David Slow, Royal Horse Guards

To his sisters: Kitty, wife of Robert Cooch, Solicitor of Baldock, and Judith, wife of Robert Wicksteed.

My beloved sisters,

By the great mercy of God I am spared to write to you once again, although around me lie the unburied bodies of thousands of dead and still more of the wounded, many in such pain that they only wish they were dead. It is now three days since the great victory which we all devoutly hope will put an end to this protracted strife. I have never had my clothes off since the morning of the battle and hardly know how to keep awake. I have both my colonels down with gunshot wounds. Captain Hill is much cut about but I hope I shall be able to pull all three through. My dear friend Packe (the major) who was with me all through the Peninsula and saved my life at Badajoz was killed at the head of his squadron. I shall lament him as long as the lord spares me. Thoyt, our senior captain is dead too though our fellows have not yet found his bodyⁱ. Tathwell is missing. He was last seen struggling with two of the French Guardsmen, so it is possible he was taken prisonerⁱⁱ. Five of our corporals and 51 of our troopers were wounded and will keep me more than occupied till I return. I rode out with the Staff to the crest of the hill at La Haye Sainte in the early morning three days ago. Before we had been there a quarter of an hour Colonel Elley said to me "Get back to headquarters Doctor, as fast as you can for in less than an hour you will be busier than ever you were in your whole life.' Before the hour expired the French cuirassiers drove in the Hanoverian cavalry almost to the very spot where I had been standing half an hour before; when our Household Brigade, the Life Guards, The 'Blues' and the 1st Dragoons, all under Lord Edward Somerset came galloping to the rescue. The clash of our horse against the picked mounted troops of Bonaparte was something I shall never forget. It made me hold my breath. For some minutes no one could tell how it was going to end. Neither side appeared to give way an inch. At last to our great joy the French right wheeled about and rode off in disorder, our men after them. It was a race for life and though the main body escaped, many were killed and captured on both sides. In about 20 minutes the wounded began to stagger in, or were brought in to my field hospital. This went on for hours after it had been filled. I have 37 French prisoners as well as my own officers and men to look after, mostly sword cuts. One, a Marquis de Touraine, who was all the time I was extracting a bullet and splinters of bone from his shoulder blade, kept apologising for the great trouble he was giving me. As hardly any of my officers and none of the men can speak a word of French, you may guess I am kept pretty busy translating. They are not half bad fellows and are far more grateful for anything done for them than our chaps are. My own tent was torn to ribbons at Quatre Bras and a couple of my ambulance wagons were knocked into matchwood. The French artillery made good practise till moved by the Coldstreams. Captain Drake has put his tent at my disposal for the night as he has gone to Brussels with despatches. Most of my wounded are laid on horse cloths out in a wheat field and all except about half a dozen are going on well. I am dead tired my dear sisters and in a fearful mess, but felt I must write you these few lines to assure you of my safety. God bless you both and little Henryⁱⁱⁱ. I hope he is doing well at Christ's Hospital. Will Judith take him a guinea for me and tell him that he shall have another ride with me in the park when I return if he is a good boy and say Black Bess sends her love to him and his sister Ann^{iv}. Ever your most affectionate brother, David.

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NOTES

Plain text of Slow letter – from NAM collection: NAM 9102-163

Connected to HCM collection: Slow Waterloo medal – AB1240 – medal cabinet 1, shelf D

FOOTNOTES

ⁱ Thoyt was not actually killed, his horse being shot from under him; he was taken prisoner, but escaped 4 days later.

ⁱⁱ Tathwell was made prisoner, after apparently seizing an Eagle, but was captured. He escaped the following day and returned to his regiment.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Henry Wicksteed, later of Maidstone, Kent.

^{iv} Ann Wicksteed who later married Dr Jonathan Monckton of Brenchley, Kent.