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DECISIVE  
BATTLES.

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THE FIFTEEN  
DECISIVE  
BATTLES OF THE WORLD

FROM

MARATHON TO WATERLOO

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Those few battles of which a contrary event would have essentially varied the  
drama of the world in all its subsequent scenes.—HALLAM

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PREFACE.

It is an honorable characteristic of the spirit of this age, that projects of violence and warfare are regarded among civilized states with gradually increasing aversion. The Universal Peace Society certainly does not, and probably never will, enroll the majority of statesmen among its members. But even those who look upon the appeal of battle as occasionally unavoidable in international controversies, concur in thinking it a deplorable necessity, only to be resorted to when all peaceful modes of arrangement have been vainly tried, and when the law of self-defense justifies a state, like an individual, in using force to protect itself from imminent and serious injury. For a writer, therefore, of the present day to choose battles for his favorite topic, merely because they were battles; merely because so many myriads of troops were arrayed in them, and so many hundreds of thousands of human beings stabbed, hewed, or shot each other to death during them, would argue strange weakness or depravity of mind. Yet it can not be denied that a fearful and wonderful interest is attached to these scenes of carnage. There is undeniable greatness in the disciplined courage, and in the love of honor, which makes the combatants confront agony and destruction. And the powers of the human intellect are rarely more strongly displayed than they are in the commander who regulates, arrays, and wields at his will these masses of armed disputants; who, cool, yet daring in the midst of peril, reflects on all, and provides for all, ever ready with fresh resources and designs, as the vicissitudes of the storm of slaughter require. But these qualities, however high they may appear, are to be found in the basest as well as in the noblest of mankind. Catiline was as brave a soldier as Leonidas, and a



much better officer. Alva surpassed the Prince of Orange in the field; and Suwarrow was the military superior of Kosciusko. To adopt the emphatic words of Byron,

"Tis the cause makes all,  
Degrades or hallows courage in its fall.

There are some battles, also, which claim our attention, independently of the moral worth of the combatants, on account of their enduring importance, and by reason of the practical influence on our own social and political condition, which we can trace up to the results of those engagements. They have for us an abiding and actual interest, both while we investigate the chain of causes and effects by which they have helped to make us what we are, and also while we speculate on what we probably should have been, if any one of those battles had come to a different termination. Hallam has admirably expressed this in his remarks on the victory gained by Charles Martel, between Tours and Poitiers, over the invading Saracens.

He says of it that "it may justly be reckoned among those few battles of which a contrary event would have essentially varied the drama of the world in all its subsequent scenes: with Marathon, Arbela, the Metaurus, Chalons, and Leipsic." It was the perusal of this note of Hallam's that first led me to the consideration of my present subject. I certainly differ from that great historian as to the comparative importance of some of the battles which he thus enumerates, and also of some which he omits. It is probable, indeed, that no two historical inquirers would entirely agree in their lists of the Decisive Battles of the World. Different minds will naturally vary in the impressions which particular events make on them, and in the degree of interest with which they watch the career, and reflect on the importance of different historical personages. But our concurring in our catalogues is of little moment, provided we learn to look on these great historical events in the spirit which Hallam's observations indicate. Those remarks should teach us to watch how the interests of many states are often involved in the collisions between a few; and how the effect of those collisions is not limited to a single age, but may give an impulse which will sway the fortunes of successive

generations of mankind. Most valuable, also, is the mental discipline which is thus acquired, and by which we are trained not only to observe what has been and what is, but also to ponder on what might have been.\*

We thus learn not to judge of the wisdom of measures too exclusively by the results. We learn to apply the juster standard of seeing what the circumstances and the probabilities were that surrounded a statesman or a general at the time when he decided on his plan; we value him, not by his fortune, but by his *προαρεδῖς*, to adopt the expressive word of Polybius,† for which our language gives no equivalent.

The reasons why each of the following fifteen battles has been selected will, I trust, appear when it is described. But it may be well to premise a few remarks on the negative tests which have led me to reject others, which at first sight may appear equal in magnitude and importance to the chosen fifteen.

I need hardly remark that it is not the number of killed and wounded in a battle that determines its general historical importance.‡ It is not because only a few hundreds fell in the battle by which Joan of Arc captured the Tourelles and raised the siege of Orleans, that the effect of that crisis is to be judged; nor would a full belief in the largest number which Eastern historians state to have been slaughtered in any of the numerous conflicts between Asiatic rulers, make me regard the engagement in which they fell as one of paramount importance to mankind. But, besides battles of this kind, there are many of great consequence, and attended with circumstances which powerfully excite our feelings and rivet our attention, and yet which appear to me of mere secondary rank, inasmuch as either their effects were limited in area, or they themselves merely confirmed some great tendency or bias which an earlier battle had originated. For example, the encounters between the Greeks and Persians, which followed Marathon, seem to me not to have been phenomena of primary impulse. Greek superiority had been already asserted, Asiatic ambition had already been checked, before Salamis and Plataea confirmed the superiority

\* See Bolingbroke "On the Study and Use of History," vol. ii., p. 497, of his collected notes.

† Polyb., lib. ix., sect. 9.

‡ See Montesquieu, "Grandeur et Decadence des Romains," p. 35.

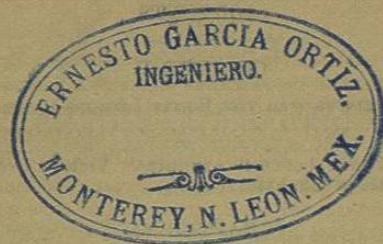


## PREFACE

of European free states over Oriental despotism. So *Egospotamos*, which finally crushed the maritime power of Athens, seems to me inferior in interest to the defeat before Syracuse, where Athens received her first fatal check, and after which she only struggled to retard her downfall. I think similarly of Zama with respect to Carthage, as compared with the *Metaurus*; and, on the same principle, the subsequent great battles of the Revolutionary war appear to me inferior in their importance to Valmy, which first determined the military character and career of the French Revolution.

I am aware that a little activity of imagination and a slight exercise of metaphysical ingenuity may amuse us by showing how the chain of circumstances is so linked together, that the smallest skirmish, or the slightest occurrence of any kind, that ever occurred, may be said to have been essential in its actual termination to the whole order of subsequent events. But when I speak of causes and effects, I speak of the obvious and important agency of one fact upon another, and not of remote and fancifully infinitesimal influences. I am aware that, on the other hand, the reproach of Fatalism is justly incurred by those who, like the writers of a certain school in a neighboring country, recognize in history nothing more than a series of necessary phenomena, which follow inevitably one upon the other. But when, in this work, I speak of probabilities, I speak of human probabilities only. When I speak of cause and effect, I speak of those general laws only by which we perceive the sequence of human affairs to be usually regulated, and in which we recognize emphatically the wisdom and power of the supreme Lawgiver, the design of the Designer.

MITRE COURT CHAMBERS, TEMPLE  
June 26, 1861.



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