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Contact:

Archives & Special Collections
Waidner-Spahr Library
Dickinson College
P.O. Box 1773
Carlisle, PA 17013

717-245-1399

archives@dickinson.edu

The Scarlet Letter
by
Montgomery P. Sellen —

Napoleon has returned from
Elba. He marches through
France - it is one grand
triumphal march. He reenters
Paris. Louis XVIII. is now more
a fugitive, and Napoleon, by
one mighty wave of popular
enthusiasm is again placed
upon the imperial throne.
But all Europe has arisen in
arms against him. The campaign
of the Hundred Days has begun.
Ligny and Quatre Bras are
fought, and the allies and
Napoleon face each other upon
the field of Waterloo - the closing
scene in the great Napoleonic Drama.

As we are told in *Les Misérables*,
that master-piece of the human
intellect, the battle-field of
Waterloo, bounded by two converging
roads and intersected by a cross
road, forms, as you see, the
Capital letter A; a letter which
on the eighteenth day of June,
1815, becomes a Scarlet Letter
scarlet with the human blood.
Sixty thousand dead upon the
field of battle.

You all know the story. For
hours the tempest rages. For
hours the mighty floods of
humanity leave to and fro like
the ebbing and the flowing of

the tide. Victory, at one time
for the allies, at another perches
itself upon the eagle of France.
And now, just as the sun
is disappearing behind the
western hills, Blücher arrives.

The Old Guard, so long invincible,
is checked - wavers - flees.

Napoleon, uncrowned and fallen,
"beholds the mirage of another
scene - the lone and rocky
isle of St. Helena."

Years have passed. The
Scarlet Letter is no more
visible upon this earth. Those
fields, once plowed with cannon
balls, made fertile with human

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blood, and from which was
reaped a harvest of dead and
wounded - to-day, waving with
golden grain or tassled corn
tell only of the blessings of peace.
Waterloo is a Scarlet Letter no
more. The din of battle long
since has ceased. Peace reigns
victorious. There is Hongomont -
and oh, what memories cluster
about that name - there is
Hongomont, a martyr to the
curse of war. But today, vines
in true friendship cling to
its ruined walls; flowers of
peace bloom in court-yards
alive with the songs of birds,

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pouring forth their joyful
melodies as if in honor to the
last years of their old friend,
their sacred dwelling place.

Peace and calm reign over all.

Yet, to one standing at twilight
on that evermemorable field of
battle, as the shades of night
close in upon him, lingering
upon the details of that awful
day, the present becomes lost in
the memories of the past. He
hears the roll of the drums,
the rattle of musketry, the
tread of marching men. The songs
of the birds are no longer heard.
The waving grain disappears under

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the footsteps of advancing hosts.
The mound, with its proud
Belgian lion - symbolical of
Lion's firmness - fades from
view, and in its place rises
the mighty arm of England.
Though the startled air again
roll the thunders of dread
artillery, as the armies like
mighty whirlwinds, struggle
and struggle to sweep the
other from the face of the
earth. Everywhere the demon of
war holds high carnival. There
the brave cuirassiers rush
to their awful death in the
sunken road. There the Imperial

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Guards, until now invincible,
charge and charge again, but
all in vain, against the
adamantine walls of the British
squares. Everywhere are heard
the groans and shrieks of the
wounded and dying, the clashing
of sabres, the bursting of shells,
the roaring of artillery and
musketry, sending at every
discharge tears of agony to
distant homes, bowing aged
heads with grief, and evoking
from human hearts cries,
which once heard, can never
be forgotten. And there - high
above the carnage, the bursting

of shells, the clashing of sabers,
the cry of anguish - there in
the foreground of all this
settling hell - stands Napoleon,
the man who caused it all.

And look! there shining upon
his breast, indelibly imprinted
upon his soul, lighting up the
battlefield in all its gore,
gleaming throughout the ages
to tell mankind of the curses
of war - of the curse of selfish,
unbounded ambition - there,
transferred from Earth to
Napoleon, is the Scarlet Letter.

Commencement Oration of Montgomery P Sellers, Class of 1893
Transcribed by Christine Rosenberry, May 2002
Edited by Don Sailer, September 2009

The Scarlet Letter
by
Montgomery P Sellers

Napoleon has returned from Elba. He marches through France – it is one grand triumphal march. He re-enters Paris. Louis XVIII is once more a fugitive, and Napoleon, by one mighty wave of popular enthusiasm is again placed upon the imperial throne. But all Europe has arisen in arms against him. The campaign of the Hundred Days has begun. Ligny and Quatre Bras are fought, and the allies and Napoleon face each other upon the field of Waterloo – the closing scene in the great Napoleonic Drama.

As we are told in Les Miserables, that master-piece of the human intellect, the battle-field of Waterloo, bounded by two converging roads and intersected by a cross road, forms, as you see, the capital letter A; a letter which on the eighteenth day of June, 1815, becomes a Scarlet Letter – scarlet with the human blood. Sixty thousand dead upon the field of battle.

You all know the story. For hours the tempest rages. For hours the mighty floods of humanity leave to-and-fro like the ebbing and the flowing of

the tide. Victory, at one time for the allies, at another perches itself upon the eagles of France. And now, just as the sun is disappearing behind the western hills, Blücher arrives. The Old Guard, so long invincible, is checked – wavers – flees. Napoleon, uncrowned and fallen, beholds the mirage of another scene – the lone and rocky isle of St. Helene.

Years have passed. The Scarlet Letter is no more visible upon this earth. Those fields, once plowed with cannon balls, made fertile with human

blood, and from which was reaped a harvest of dead and wounded – to-day, waving with golden grain or tassled corn tell only of the blessings of peace. Waterloo is a Scarlet Letter no more. The din of battle long since has ceased. Peace reigns victorious. There is Hougomont – and oh, what memories cluster about that name – there is Hougomont, a martyr to the curse of War. But today, vines in true friendship cling to its ruined walls; flowers of peace bloom in courtyards alive with the songs of birds,

pouring forth their joyful melodies as if in honor to the last years of their old friend, their sacred dwelling place.

Peace and clam reign over all. Yet, to one standing at twilight on that evermemorable field of battle, as the shades of night close in upon him, lingering upon the details of that awful day, the

present becomes lost in the memories of the past. He hears the roll of the drums, the rattle of musketry, the tread of marching men. The songs of the birds are no longer heard. The waving grain disappears under

the footsteps of advancing hosts. The mound, with its proud Belgian lion-symbolhead of heroic firmness – fades from view, and in its place rises the mighty arm of England. Through the startled air again roll the thunders of dread artillery, as the armies like mighty whirlwinds, struggle and struggle to sweep the other from the face of the earth. Everywhere the demon of war holds high carnival. There the brave cuirassiers rush to their awful death in the sunken road. There the Imperial

Guards, until now invincible, charge and charge again, but all in vain, against the adamantine walls of the British squares. Everywhere are heard the groans and shrieks of the wounded and dying, the clashing of sabers, the bursting of shells, the roaring of artillery and musketry, sending at every discharge tears of agony to distant homes, bowing aged heads with grief, and evoking from human hearts cries, which once heard, can never be forgotten. And there – high above the carnage, the bursting

of shells, the clashing of sabers, the cry of anguish – there in the foreground of all this seething hell – stands Napoleon, the man who caused it all. And look! There shining upon his breast, indelibly imprinted upon his soul, lighting up the battlefield in all its gore, gleaming throughout the ages to tell mankind of the curse of war – of the curse of selfish, unbounded ambition: there, transferred from Earth to Napoleon, is the Scarlet Letter.