

THERE WAS THE metallic scent of blood in the air; Pendragon could taste it on his lips as surely as if it existed. And yet the blood was still unspilled, and the long wide valley silent and empty, as the men waited for their orders. Pendragon's clothing was still damp from the early morning mist and Dasher Charlie's grey bulk beneath the saddle was comfortingly warm. Pendragon made a soft clicking noise with his tongue, and Dasher Charlie swung his ears back and fidgeted his forelegs, working his shoulder muscles in anticipation.

Time ceased to exist. Pendragon had the feeling he was part of a painted tableau; even the wings of a distant hawk, hovering above the ploughed ground ahead, seemed to slow down and finally stop. Then the hawk fell in a twisting spiral, sweeping away out of sight close to the brown earth.

There were movements. The oil painting disintegrated. Cardigan swung his horse ahead of John Pendragon and rode forward until he was five yards in the lead of his officers. Pendragon heard him say, in a rather bored voice, "Well, here goes the last of the Brudenells."

Pendragon, looking younger than his twenty-four years, turned his head slightly and winked at Ashley, who grinned back. Old Cardigan might be an obtuse and pompous fool, but he was certainly no coward.

The valley, almost a mile wide, was an open-ended coffin. To the left of the Brigade, which was now aligned with parade ground precision, were eight



battalions of infantry, fourteen guns, and four squadrons of cavalry—all Russian. To the right were thirty Russian heavy guns, a few field batteries, and eleven more infantry battalions, some of the men being sharp-shooters armed with a new and highly effective Belgian rifle. Ahead was a mass of Russian cavalry three lines deep, protecting a further twelve cannon. And on the Russian flanks were six of their lancer squadrons.

Ashley's saddlery creaked. Pendragon looked at him again. Ashley was leaning sideways, polishing a smear of mud from his boot with a silk wipe. He straightened himself, pushed the kerchief back into his sleeve and adjusted it so that a couple of inches trailed elegantly below his blue cuff. He looked satisfied with the result. Pendragon wondered which of Ashley's conquests had given him the favour, then felt immediately guilty as he remembered the silk square given him by his Aunt Georgina and still in his trunk back in camp. He'd promised he'd wear it for her.

Lord Cardigan drew his sword a couple of inches and pushed it back into the scabbard with a metallic click. In the silence the sound carried as a signal to prepare. There was a slight sigh, like the passing of a gentle breeze, as the Brigade took a breath of anticipation. Saddles groaned as men gripped harder with their knees.

Cardigan pulled out his sword with a broad flourish and moved his horse forward at a slow walk. There was no shouted command. The brigade followed; 636 men and horses of the finest light cavalry in Europe, disciplined and proud.

Captain Pendragon wanted to look back at his men, to admire them, view them behind him in their wide straight lines. He could hear their harness jingle and the pad of hooves on the soft ground. With laughter and chatter, it would be the sound of Rotten Row in London's Hyde Park on a spring Sunday. He