

The Literary Digest

September 6, 1912

GENERAL MEADE OF GETTYSBURG: HIS LIFE AND LETTERS

Reviewed by GEORGE HAVEN PUTNAM

THE history of the Civil War must in large part be based upon the personal reminiscences of the chief actors, the leaders on either side of the struggle, and the series of these memoirs would, of course, be seriously incomplete if it had failed to include a record of the services of the victor at Gettysburg. This biography of General Meade has been produced with conscientious labor, editorial judgment, and good literary skill, by the General's son, himself an accomplished soldier, and the son's work has been supplemented by editorial service from a grandson. Colonel Meade has wisely presented the record very largely in the letters of the General, thus giving to the work the character and the personal interest of an autobiography. In Meade's letters to his wife, we find frank utterance of his hopes, ambitions, and occasional disappointments; we also find expressions of likes and dislikes, opinions and criticisms of the men with whom he had to do, which have both personal interest and historic value.

The book can not take rank in literary quality with that wonderful production, the autobiography of Grant, nor has it the dramatic interest that we find in the memoirs of Sherman and of Sheridan; but it is a faithful record of the life and service of a soldier of assured tho not brilliant capacity, a conscientious, patriotic citizen, and a Christian gentleman. Meade had the legitimate ambitions of his profession, but he appears to have been eminently free from the self-seeking, self-asserting, bumptious, political methods of certain of our generals. He kept himself in camp quietly absorbed in his duties, while not a few of his competitors were buzzing around congressional committee rooms or holding levees at Willard's Hotel.

Meade had been graduated high in his class and, like McClellan and W. F. ("Baldy") Smith, he belonged to the group of engineer officers. He had had a cordial admiration for McClellan, with whom his relations had been close and friendly, but he finds occasion in the later period of McClellan's career (only, however, in his confidential correspondence) to express keen disappointment with McClellan's management of his responsibilities and a strong doubt as to his capacity for command. Men trained as engineers naturally carry into active service as commanders of armies the methods and the temperament of their profession. No one of the Northern leaders was better equipped than was General McClellan for placing an army in a position so well selected and so well protected by works that it would be fairly safe against the attacks of the enemy. He also showed exceptional skill in extricating an army after his advance had failed, and in the management of a retreat. His own narrative, however, gives the impression that when he had

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It would be difficult to find in the history of the country an instance of a more serious responsibility being suddenly placed upon a patriotic citizen than that which came to General Meade, when at three o'clock in the morning of the 28th of June, 1863, he was awakened with the announcement that he was to take command of the Army of the Potomac. During the week that followed, there was little sleep or rest of any kind for the commander. General Hooker, whom he relieved, appears to have been unable to give Meade any information in regard to plans that had been put into shape for the conduct of the campaign. It was more than twenty-four hours before Meade was able even to ascertain the positions of the several corps making up the army, but with the information before him he acted with decision and good judgment. The commanders of both armies were evidently at a serious disadvantage during this Gettysburg campaign for want of trustworthy information. It is difficult to understand why it should not have been

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practicable to organize a more effective scouting service with the cavalry; while in this instance, as had, of course, not before been the case with the campaigns of the Army of the Potomac, the people on the country-side could, with hardly an exception, have been trusted to do all that was in their power to secure for the commander trustworthy information.

The histories of the campaign are in accord to the effect that the two armies blundered into each other at Gettysburg without prevision on the part of their commanders; but the immediate result of this accidental attack was in favor of Lee two-thirds of whose army was in immediate reach of Gettysburg, while the Army of the Potomac was represented only by a small cavalry squadron with portions of two of the weaker infantry corps.

The space allotted for this review gives opportunity for reference but to the decisive features of the great struggle. It is in order to recall, however, that through the perverse disobedience of General Sickles in placing the Third Corps far in advance of the line assigned to him, the army was brought into serious risk of having its left crumpled up and of losing its main line of communication. The disasters of the fight carried on under serious disadvantage by the badly placed troops of the Third Corps, with the aid of forces that had been hurried to their support from the Second in the center and from the Twelfth on the extreme right, were in part offset by the magnificent defense made on Culp's Hill on the right by Gen. George S. Greene, who extended two small brigades so as to cover the line previously held by the Twelfth Corps. General Johnson, of Ewell's Corps, succeeded, however, in getting past our right, and at three o'clock in the morning of the second day was in the rear of Culp's Hill and was within striking distance, one thousand feet or so, of the reserve ammunition train of the army. If Johnson, in place of exhausting his men in attacks on Greene's inner line, had pushed his troops to the rear of our center, he would have had the magnificent opportunity of destroying the ammunition train and possibly also of capturing the headquarters. Such a blow, even if Johnson's division had itself been destroyed, might easily have decided the battle. In the early morning hours of the second day, Slocum's men, returning to their position on the right, drove the enemy out of their lines and Johnson's opportunity was gone.

The repulse of Pickett's men on the afternoon of the third day constituted the decisive event in the decisive battle of the war; and on this ground, and also because of the spectacular character of an advance carried on within sight of the encircling lines of the two armies, there has been a tendency to overestimate the difficulty and the daring of the undertaking. It is only just to the Army of the Potomac to recall that the ground traversed by Pickett's divisions was not so difficult as that over which the Union troops had made their way in two assaults on St.

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Marye's Heights at Fredericksburg, or that marched over by Grant's advance at Cold Harbor; while both at Fredericksburg and at Cold Harbor the assaulting troops, after succeeding, under a heavy and concentrated fire, in getting over the ground, were confronted with carefully constructed earthworks.

Certain of the military historians have found Meade wanting in enterprise for his failure to utilize for a countercharge, after the repulse of Pickett, the Sixth Corps, which, stationed to the left and rear of the center of our line, was in convenient position for such service, and which during the previous days of fighting, had been called upon less than any of the other corps. Longstreet's chief of artillery, Gen. E. P. Alexander, states in his memoirs that at the hour in question he had remaining in his caissons but two rounds of ammunition, while Longstreet's command had certainly been seriously shattered, not only by the repulse of Pickett's divisions, but by the severe fighting of the previous day with the Third Corps. There certainly seemed to be a fair chance, through such an advance, for a crumpling up of Lee's whole right wing.

On the afternoon, however, of this third day Meade was an exhausted man. The responsibilities and the anxieties of the week's campaign and the loss of sleep might well have impaired his vital energy. Whatever the cause, Lee was permitted to make his way in safety across the Potomac, and by the close of July the two armies were again facing each other on the old lines along the Rappahannock and the Rapidan. The Army of the Potomac remained under the direct leadership of Meade for nine months, at the close of which period Grant took personal charge of the campaign in Virginia; but during those months no aggressive operations were undertaken. During the last year of the war, Meade acted practically as an executive officer to carry out plans for which the commander-in-chief was responsible.

Meade will not be ranked by the historians with the great commanders, but his career is that of a well-trained, capable, and patriotic soldier, and he must always be remembered in the history of the war and of the country as the General who, for the longest period in its history, held the command of the Army of the Potomac, and to whom came the well-deserved good fortune of winning with this army the decisive battle of the war. Meade's distinctive reputation will rest upon the fact that he was the only one of our generals who in a pitched battle, fought on substantially equal terms, succeeded in defeating the greatest soldier of the Civil War, Gen. Robert E. Lee.

