

THE LAST DAYS OF THE CONFEDERACY

The most original feature of General Schaff's "The Battle of the Wilderness," the thing that signally caught the attention of readers, was its application of epic methods to historic narrative. In the spiritual framework, the supernatural machinery of that book, the author might almost be credited with the creation of a new form in literature. Probably to a good many sincere minds this form was a stumbling-block. A distinguished fellow-soldier said to him, "When you get done with your poetry and get down to history you will write a valuable book." But he did write a valuable book, an unique book, one aglow with vision and emotion. Its peculiar characteristics, its creative artistry, are what make it stand out from the hundreds of narratives and records of the Civil War, though many of these are also told by eye-witnesses and infused with personal emotion.

In essaying again a study of a single phase of the Civil War, General Schaff had two courses open to him. He might either bring back his new-made myths, his figures of fancy that brood above the scene and intermingle with the actors, or he might trust to plain narrative and the dignity of his theme. Very wisely, we think, he has chosen the latter method, except for a few brief and unimportant touches of the old imagination. It is very doubtful whether he could have captured again the thrilling effect of his first creations. A warmed-up mythology of visions and apparitions would have been fatal.

Another thing missing in the new book is the story of personal adventure, which, threading the great, glittering, and gloomy scenes of march and battlefield, made them at once more convincing and lent to them an air of romance and gay high spirits. We must count this a loss; though in wholly suppressing himself in the presence of the last great struggle, the author has obeyed the dictates of the finest good taste. Everything else that was apparent in the earlier book is here: the vivid phrase; the easy prose, pulsing as with the systole and diastole of the heart; the nature-painting, insistent and persistent. Probably no historian has ever set his scene with greater definition of view, more elaboration of foliage and flowers. The hills, roads, streams, houses are as real and vivid as the hosts which struggle and fight among them.

As far as theme is concerned the advantage is all with General Schaff's latest book. The battle of the Wilderness, that confused and indecisive struggle, that almost undecipherable scroll of events unrolled under the glooms of the tangled scrub-oak forest, has neither the unity nor the importance of the final, fatal week of the Confederacy. Each book covers only the operations of a few days, but in "The Sunset of the Confederacy" all the elements of great tragedy appear clear and distinct.

The book opens with a scene out of a novel, — Jefferson Davis and other dignitaries of the

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South at devotion in St. Paul's Church in Richmond, and the pompous sexton marching up and down the aisle to call each one of them separately out. The lines at Petersburg have been broken, and the end is near. Then follows the panic in the city, the departure of the trains with government officials, the withdrawal of the troops. Lee's seven days' retreat which ensues is told with amazing minuteness and clearness. It is not too much to say that the narrative recalls the art in De Quincey's "Flight of a Tartar Tribe" or Tolstoi's description of the rout of Bagration and his Russians in "War and Peace." General Schaff's impulsive prose, which curvets and prances and paws the ground like a high-strung horse, makes good speed and hurries us from side to side of the widespread flight, takes us into Lee's rushing hampered columns and into Grant's relentless cohorts of pursuit. The objectivity, the open-air quality of the style is noticeable, and not less so its waywardness and off-handedness. General Schaff will interrupt a cavalry charge to get down and paint some field flowers or brookside blooming bushes. Yet the whole thing is alive and rushing on.

Let us give a few specimens of the fresh and vivid writing of the book — and first, of its nature painting:

"I wish we could find a good, overlooking spot. How will that little elevation down there in the valley answer; that rises like an old-fashioned beehive on the left of the road and has a brotherhood of four or five big-limbed oaks crowning it, one of them leaning somewhat? Admirably! . . . Well, here we are: oaks spreading above us, at our feet violets, liverwort, and spring beauties scattered among acorn hulls, dead leaves, and clustered grass. What a reviewing stand, and so near the road that we shall be able to distinguish faces!"

Here is a night piece:

"Yet, reader, for loneliness — and every aide who like myself has carried dispatches will bear witness to the truth of what I say — give me a park of army-wagons in some wan old field wrapt in darkness at the dead hours of a moonless night, men and mules asleep, camp-fires breathing their last, and the beams of day, which wander in the night, resting ghost-like on the arched and mildewed canvas covers."

And here is a battle picture:

"They were now advancing firmly with colors, and there were so many standards crimsoning each body of troops — to their glory the Confederate color-bearers stood by Lee to the last, — that they looked like marching gardens blooming with cockscorn, red roses, and poppies. . . . The road was packed with men, their faces grimly ablaze, colors flying, and over them, like a wavering shield of steel, were their muskets at right-shoulder-shift, as they trotted forward to the sound of the now booming guns; for Gordon's and Fitz Lee's veterans were answering the last call of the Confederacy with their old-time spirit."

Perhaps what most of all imparts vitality to General Schaff's work is the immense gallery of human pictures painted from the intimacy of comradeship or experience. Some of these are full-length portraits, some mere heads, some thumbnail sketches dashed in with a phrase. And there is no West Point exclusiveness in this commemorative work. The author is just as ready to devote a paragraph or a page to some unnamed soldier boy as to the proudest general. Witness, for instance, the young sentinel in gray who turns back the slave dealer from the escaping Richmond train, or the young lad with brimming eyes who attracts Major Stiles's attention at field service and who next

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day is shot dead. Naturally, however, most of the portraits are of men of known name. Here is Custer :

“ After his promotion to a generalcy, Custer dressed fantastically in olive corduroy, wore his yellow hair long, and supported a flaming scarlet flannel necktie whose loose ends the wind fluttered across his breast as, with uplifted sabre, he charged at the head of his brigade, followed by his equally reckless troopers, who, in loving imitation, wore neckties like his own.”

And here is Sheridan :

“ Sheridan is mounted on Rienzi. Look at man and horse, for they are both of the same spirit and temper. It was Rienzi who with flaming nostrils carried Sheridan to the field of Cedar Creek, ‘ twenty miles away ’; and on the field of Five Forks, the battle which broke Lee’s line and let disaster in. Before the final charge there, the horse became as impatient as its rider, kicking, plunging, tossing his head, pulling at the bit, while foam flecked his black breast. Sheridan gave him his head, when he saw that Ayres, at the point of the bayonet, was going to carry the day; off sprang Rienzi and with a leap bounded over the enemy’s works and landed Sheridan among the mob of prisoners and fighting troops ”

General Schaff apologizes for not giving much attention to the greater Union leaders, as he had dealt pretty fully with them in his previous book. Grant and Meade, indeed, are kept rather in the background, save toward the close when the former of course takes the centre of the stage. But Lee is painted minutely and lovingly, on the march, at camp-fire, at council. Lee is the hero of the book. Shall we wonder at this? Is it strange that a Union officer, proud of his army and its leaders, should at the moment of victory draw back, give precedence to a defeated foe, and offer the crown of glory to Lee and his devoted veterans? No! It was their time of tragedy and triumph. Except Napoleon’s last campaign before Waterloo, Lee’s last year of struggle against the North is the most wonderful thing in modern warfare. General Schaff’s final tribute to Lee is too long to quote, but here are its concluding lines :

“ No, no eagle that ever flew, no tiger that ever sprang, had more natural courage; and I will guarantee that every field he was on, if you ask them about him, will speak of the unquailing battle-spirit of his mien. Be not deceived: Lee, notwithstanding his poise, was naturally the most belligerent bull-dog man at the head of any army in the war.”

Grave and tender and true is the North; gay and ardent and courteous is the South! But we think that for once the South is beaten out of the field in its own qualities. We doubt whether there is any Southern book more chivalrous in generosity of judgment about Southern leaders than is this; or a more emotional seizure of the passion, pathos, and heroism of the last days of the Lost Cause.

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THE SUNSET OF THE CONFEDERACY. By Morris Schaff.
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