

HOW RICHMOND WAS TAKEN.



GENERAL GRANT, fresh from his great success at Vicksburg and Chattanooga, having shown that he had military genius of a high order, was created Lieutenant-General, and appointed to the command of all the armies of the Union in the field. It was the beginning of a new *régime*. Up to that time there had been little concert of action between commanders. The armies lacked a head. The President, General Halleck, Secretary Stanton, had ideas of their own upon the best methods and plans for conducting the war. Department commanders worked at cross purposes. Each officer in the field naturally looked upon his sphere of action as the most important of all, and each had his own plan of operations to lay before the Secretary of War. A million men were tugging manfully at the Car of Freedom, which was at a standstill, or moved only by inches, because they had no head. But when the President appointed General Grant to the command, he gave up his own plans, while General Halleck became a subordinate. The department commanders found all their plans set aside. There was not merely concert of action, but unity of action, under the controlling force of an imperial will.

In the article entitled "The May Campaign in Virginia," the movements of the Army of the Potomac, from the Rapidan to Cold Harbor, are given. It is not intended in the present article to dwell in detail upon all the subsequent movements of that army and its allies, the Armies of the James and the Shenandoah. Volumes are needed to narrate the operations around Petersburg,—the battles fought on the 18th and 19th of June east of that city,—the struggles for the Weldon Railroad,—the movements between the James and the Appomattox,

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and north of the James,—the failure in the springing of the mine,—the march of the Fifth Corps to Stony Creek,—the battles between the Weldon Road and Hatcher's Run,—the many contests, sharp, fierce, and bloody, between the opposing lines, whenever an attempt was made by either army to erect new works,—the fights on Hatcher's Run,—the attack upon Fort Harrison, north of the James,—the successive attempts of each commander to break the lines of the other, ending with the Fort Stedman affair, the last offensive effort of General Lee. The new campaign which was inaugurated the next day after the attack on Fort Stedman compelled the Rebel chief to stand wholly on the defensive.

The appointment of General Grant to the command of all the armies was not only the beginning of a new *régime*, but the adoption of a new idea,—that Lee's army was the objective point, rather than the city of Richmond.

“The power of the Rebellion lies in the Rebel army,” said General Grant to the writer one evening in June last. We had been conversing upon Fort Donelson and Pittsburg Landing. One by one his staff officers dropped off to their own tents, and we were alone. It was a quiet, starlit night. The Lieutenant-General was enjoying his fragrant Havana cigar, and was in a mood for conversation, not upon what he was going to do, but upon what had been done. He is always wisely reticent upon the present and future, but agreeably communicative upon what has passed into history.

“I have lost a good many men since the army left the Rapidan, but there was no help for it. The Rebel army must be destroyed before we can put down the Rebellion,” he continued.*

There was a disposition at that time on the part of the disloyal press of the North to bring General Grant into bad odor. He was called “The Butcher.” Even some Republican Congressmen were ready to demand his removal. General Grant alluded to it and said,—

“God knows I don't want to see men slaughtered; but we have appealed to arms, and we have got to fight it out.”

He had already given public utter-

* I write from memory, not pretending to give the exact words uttered during the conversation.

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ance to the expression, — “I intend to fight it out on this line, if it takes all summer.”

Referring to the successive flank movements which had been made, from the Rapidan to the Wilderness, to Spottsylvania, to the North Anna, to the Chickahominy, to Petersburg, he said,—

“My object has been to get between Lee and his southern communications.”

At that time the Weldon Road was in the hands of the enemy, and Early was on a march down the Valley, towards Washington. This movement was designed to frighten Grant and send him back by steamboat to defend the capital; but the Sixth Corps only was sent, while the troops remaining still kept pressing on in a series of flank movements, which resulted in the seizure of the Weldon Road. That was the most damaging blow which Lee had received. He made desperate efforts to recover what had been lost, but in vain. It was the beginning of the end. Then the public generally could see the meaning of General Grant's strategy,—that the Wilderness, Spottsylvania, and all the terrible battles which had been fought, were according to a plan, which, if carried out, must end in victory. The Richmond newspapers, which had ridiculed the campaign, and had found an echo in the disloyal press of the North, began to discuss the question of supplies; and to keep their courage up, they indulged in boastful declarations that the South-side Railroad never could be taken.

The march of Sherman from Atlanta to Savannah and through South Carolina, destroying railroads and supplies,—the taking of Wilmington,—Sheridan's movement from Winchester up the Valley of the Shenandoah, striking the James River Canal and the Central Railroad, and then the transfer of his whole force from the White House to the left flank of the Army of the Potomac,—were parts of a well matured design to weaken Lee's army.

Everything was ready for the final blow. The forces of General Grant were disposed as follows. The Army of the James, composed of the Twenty-Fourth and Twenty-Fifth Corps, and commanded by General Ord, was north of the James River, its right flank resting near the old battle-field of Glendale, and its left flank on the Appomattox. The Ninth Army Corps—the right wing of the Army of the Potomac—was next in line, then the Sixth, and then the

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Second, its left resting on Hatcher's Run. The Fifth was in rear of the Second. The line thus held was nearly forty miles in length, defended on the front and rear by strong earthworks and abatis.

General Grant's entire force could not have been much less than a hundred and thirty thousand, including Sheridan's cavalry, the force at City Point, and the provisional brigade at Fort Powhatan. Lee's whole force was not far from seventy thousand, — or seventy-five thousand, including the militia of Richmond and Petersburg; but he was upon the defensive, and held an interior and shorter line.

The work which General Grant had in hand was the seizure of the Southside Railroad by an extension of his left flank. He had attempted it once with the Fifth Corps, at Dabney's Mill, and had failed; but that attempt had been of value: he had gained a knowledge of the country. His engineers had mapped it, the roads, the streams, the houses. The fight at Dabney's Mill was a random stroke, — a "feeling of the position," to use a term common in camp, — which enabled him to detect the weak point of Lee's lines. To comprehend the movement, it is necessary to understand the geographical and topographical features of the country, which are somewhat peculiar. Hatcher's Run is a branch of the Nottoway River, which has its rise in a swamp about four miles from the Appomattox and twenty southwest of Petersburg. The Southside Railroad runs southwest from Petersburg, along the ridge of land between the Appomattox and the head-waters of the Nottoway, protected by the swamp of Hatcher's Run and by the swamp of Stony Creek, another tributary of the Nottoway.

The point aimed at by General Grant is known as the "Five Forks," a place where five roads meet, on the table-land between the head-waters of Hatcher's Run and Stony Creek. It was the most accessible gateway leading to the railroad. If he could break through at that point, he would turn Lee's flank, deprive him of the protection of the swamps, use them for his own cover, and seize the railroad. To take the Five Forks was to take all; for the long and terrible conflict had become so shorn of its outside proportions, so reduced to simple elements, that, if Lee lost that position, all was lost, — Petersburg, Rich-

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mond, his army, and the Confederacy.

Surprise is expressed that the Rebellion went down so suddenly, in a night, at one blow, toppling over like a child's house of cards, imposing to look upon, yet of very little substance; but the calculations of General Grant were to give a finishing stroke.

If, by massing the main body of his troops upon the extreme left of his line, he succeeded in carrying the position of the Five Forks, it would compel Lee to evacuate Richmond. Lee's line of retreat must necessarily be towards Danville; but Grant, at the Five Forks, would be nearer Danville by several miles than Lee; and he would thus, instead of the exterior line, have the interior, with the power to push Lee at every step farther from his direct line of retreat. That Grant saw all this, and executed his plan, is evidence of great military ability. The plan involved not merely the carrying of the Five Forks, but great activity afterwards. The capture of Lee was a forethought, not an afterthought.

"Commissaries will prepare twelve days' rations," was his order, which meant a long march, and the annihilation of Lee's army. An ordinary commander might have been satisfied with merely breaking down the door, and seizing the railroad, knowing that it would be the beginning of dissolution to the Rebel army; but Grant's plan went farther,—the routing of the burglar from his house, and dispatching him on the spot. Perhaps Lee saw what the end would be, and did the best he could with his troops; but inasmuch as he did not issue the order for the transfer of a division from Richmond to the south side till Saturday night, after the Five Forks were lost, it may be presumed that he did not fully comprehend the importance of holding that gateway. If he had seen that Richmond must be eventually evacuated, he might have saved his army by a sudden withdrawal from both Richmond and Petersburg on Friday night, pushing down the Southside Road, and throwing his whole force on Sheridan and the Fifth Corps, which would have enabled him to reach Danville. Not doing that, he lost all.

It is not intended in this article to give the details of the attack at the Five Forks and along the line, but merely to show how the forces were wielded in

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that last magnificent, annihilating blow.

On the 25th of March, the Twenty-Fourth Corps was transferred from the north side of the James to Hatcher's Run, taking the position of the Second Corps.

The force designed for the attack upon the Five Forks was composed of the Fifth Corps and Sheridan's Cavalry, — the whole under command of Sheridan. The Second Corps was massed across Hatcher's Run, and kept in position to frustrate any attempt which might be made to cut Sheridan off from the support of the main army.

Sheridan found a large force in front of him, along Chamberlain's Creek, three miles west of Dinwiddie Court-House. He had hard fighting, and was repulsed. There was want of coöperation on the part of Warren, commanding the Fifth Corps, who was relieved of his command the next morning, General Griffin succeeding him. A heavy rain-storm came on. Wagons went hub-deep in the mud. The swamps were overflowed. The army came to a stand-still. The soldiers were without tents. Thousands had thrown away their blankets. There was gloom and discouragement throughout the camp. But all the axes and shovels were brought into requisition, and the men went to work building corduroy roads. It was much better for the *morale* of the army than to sit by bivouac-fires waiting for sunny skies. The week passed away. The Richmond papers were confident and boastful of final success.

"We are very hopeful of the campaign which is opening, and trust that we are to reap a large advantage from the operations evidently near at hand. . . . We have only to resolve that we will never surrender, and it will be impossible that we shall ever be taken," said the "Sentinel," in its issue of Saturday morning, April 1st, the last paper ever issued from that office. The editor was not aware of the fact, that on Friday evening, while he was penning this paragraph, Sheridan was bursting open the door at the Five Forks and had the Rebellion by the throat. Lee attempted to retrieve the disaster on Saturday by depleting his left and centre to reinforce his right. Then came the order from Grant, "Attack vigorously all along the line." How splendidly it was executed! The Ninth, the Sixth, the

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Second, the Twenty-Fourth Corps, all went tumbling in upon the enemy's works, like breakers upon the beach, tearing away *chevaux-de-frise*, rushing into the ditches, sweeping over the embankments, and dashing through the embrasures of the forts. In an hour the C. S. A., — the Confederate Slave Argosy, — the Ship of State launched but four years ago, which went proudly sailing, with the death's-head and cross-bones at her truck, on a cruise against Civilization and Christianity, hailed as a rightful belligerent, furnished with guns, ammunition, provisions, and all needful supplies, by England and France, was thrown a helpless wreck upon the shores of Time!