

HOW MEN FEEL IN BATTLE; RECOLLECTIONS
OF A PRIVATE AT CHAMPION HILLS.

BY S. H. M. BYERS.

Of the Blue and the Gray it took about fifty thousand men to fight the battle of Champion Hills. In this little random sketch I am going to relate something of the personal experience of just one of those fifty thousand. I am going to do this because it has been often asked of me by the Editor of *THE ANNALS*, though I do it at the risk of being thought of as one talking about himself. As a private soldier's view is very limited in a great battle, however, he must tell of himself, and what he sees with his own eyes, or not speak at all. The little and narrow experiences of the private in the ranks, who stands there in the smoke and fights, kills, and gets killed, are seldom written down. The big volumes are all about the officers, the commanders, and the grand maneuvers.

In my own case it was a strong love of adventure, no less than my patriotism, that led me to enlist in a strange regiment almost as soon as Sumter was fired on; and of adventure, before the war was over, I had gotten my extreme share. Some of the experiences I met with, luckily or unluckily, have been told elsewhere. Here I want to tell only of how a youth of 23 felt who carried a musket in a fight that gave Grant Vicksburg.

After the Union army crossed the Mississippi river at Grand Gulf, it was without a base, pretty nearly without rations, and, in a sense, was running loose over half the State of Mississippi. We made forced marches everywhere, often tramping both day and night, and if we slept any, it was at the roadside, where the dust was "shoe-mouth" deep: the very trees, fences and stones, were gray



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and heavy and yellow from the dust stirred up by marching armies. The sun shone mercilessly upon us; water was scarce; food scarcer. None of the private soldiers knew what we were about. We only realized that we were far away from our base, and were supposed to be in the rear of the rebel army. But more than once we lay down at the dusty roadside to sleep with the rumor afloat that the rebel army was in the rear of us. But we were too tired and too sleepy to care much for that. So we ran hither and thither, up and down the hot dusty roads, eternally on the "ragged edge" of things—sometimes skirmishing, sometimes fighting battles. So went the fights at Grand Gulf, Port Gibson, Raymond and Jackson.

Then came the sixteenth of May. It must have been about four o'clock in the morning when my company was quietly wakened and told to cook our breakfasts. That was an easy undertaking, considering how scanty the raw material. The 5th Iowa Infantry had absolutely nothing but some poor wet flour at this time. Of this we made little dough balls, and cooked them at the ends of our ramrods over the few bivouac fires we were permitted to kindle. We had no coffee; no water, not even to wash our faces—and yet every man felt jubilant, for it seemed that something great was about to happen. When day broke, we saw thousands of infantry, cavalry, and dozens of batteries of artillery crowding the country roads past our bivouac. At sunrise we too were ordered to join these columns, filling every available place for marching. No bugles sounded, no bands played, no cheers. It was just a great line of dusty, unkempt, hungry, but enthusiastic, Blue Coats, being hurried towards Champion Hills. Shortly we heard cannon booming far in front of us, and we knew what that meant. Our steps quickened, for rumors reached us that our advance divisions ten miles or more away were being annihilated. Early in the morning as it was, it was fearfully hot, and as I was not much used to

marching, my tired feet barely bore me up, with my heavy musket and accouterments. I had been a quartermaster sergeant for the past few months. I had ridden a horse and had had things easy. But, as I said before, I had gone into the army for adventure as well as patriotism, and I was forever trying to get into the lines where the real adventures were going on. I foolishly wanted to see men killed in battle, and to take a real chance of being killed myself. When for the second or third time I had turned my horse and my quartermaster duties over to a deputy at Grand Gulf, and shouldered a musket, our good old Colonel Matthies rebuked me; but now that I had shared on foot all the hard marching and the fighting from the Mississippi River to Jackson and from Jackson to the camp of that night, he relented and allowed me to carry my gun and fall into any company I pleased. It was very foolish in me, I think now, but as an adventurous youth I wanted to see the worst that war offered. And, anyway, I had not volunteered with a view of lingering behind in safe places when the bugle was sounding at the front.

We were just out into the road that early morning when General Grant rode by, followed by a small staff. He rode through the woods and fields at the road side on a gallop, his horse leaping logs and whatever obstructions happened in his way. Grant was then a perfect picture of fresh strong manhood, and he sat his horse like a sportsman behind the hounds. His hurrying ahead gave us all confidence—but no one cheered. Soon the rays of the sun became more intense, and the terrible dust was suffocating. But the hurried march continued—there was not one moment's rest. Here and there we passed a little puddle of water or a half dried up brook. The columns crowding the road could not stop, of course, but many of us left the ranks a moment, filled our canteens with the muddy liquid, and hurried back into line. For my own part I not only filled my canteen but my stomach as well,

with the dirty stuff. Already we could hear the fierce musketry in the battle now going on in the front. Already the wounded came limping past us to get to the rear. Already we saw little sheds built of branches at the road side by the surgeons and their assistants—and some of the doctors and their aids had their sleeves rolled up and knives in their hands. We knew very well what it all meant.

Shortly we ourselves were on the field. We were in the division led by the brave General Crocker—the heroic Crocker who is at rest in Woodland Cemetery, Des Moines, with these words by Grant himself chiseled on his humble monument: “General Crocker was fit to command an independent army.” Almost in a moment we were wheeled into line of battle at the edge of an open field or meadow that sloped up to wooded hills and ridges where the infantry and batteries of the Rebel army were posted hurling shot, shell and bullets into the Union lines. Our own line stood still for awhile in terrible suspense, not knowing why we were put under fire without directions to shoot. Zip, zip, zip came the Rebel bullets, and now and then a boy in blue would groan, strike his hand to a wounded limb or arm, drop his gun and step to the rear; or perhaps he fell in his tracks, dead, without uttering a word. We too, who saw it, uttered no word, but watched steadily, anxiously at the front. Then General Grant himself rode up and dismounted behind us, and so close to the spot where I stood I could have heard his voice. He leaned against his little bay horse, had the inevitable cigar in his mouth, and was as calm as a statue. Possibly smoking so much tranquilized the nerves a little and aided in producing calmness. Still, Grant was calm everywhere, but he also smoked everywhere. Be that as it may, it required very solid courage to stand there quietly behind that line at that moment. For my own part, I was in no agreeable state of mind. In short, I might be killed there at any

moment, I thought, and I confess to having been nervous and alarmed. Every man in the line near me was looking serious, though determined. We had no reckless fools near us whooping for blood. Once a badly wounded man was carried by the litter-bearers (the drummers of my regiment) close to the spot where the General stood. He gave a pitying glance at the man I thought—I was not twenty feet away—but he neither spoke nor stirred. Then I heard an officer say, "We are going to charge." It seems that our troops in front of us in the woods had been sadly repulsed, and now our division was to rush in and fight in their stead, and the Commander-in-Chief was there to witness our assault. Two or three of us, near each other, expressed dissatisfaction that the commander of an army in battle should expose himself as General Grant was doing at that moment. When staff officers came up to him he gave orders in low tones and they would ride away. One of them, listening to him, glanced over our heads towards the rebels awhile, looked very grave, and gave some mysterious nods. The Colonel who was about to lead us also came to the General's side a moment. He, too, listened, looked, and gave some mysterious nods. Something was about to happen. "My time has probably come now," I said to myself, and with a little bit of disgust, I thought of the utter uselessness of being killed there without even firing a shot in self-defense. The suspense, the anxiety, were indeed becoming fearfully intense. Soon Grant quietly climbed upon his horse, looked at us once, and as quietly rode away. Then the Colonel came along the line with a word to each officer. As he came near me he called me from the ranks and said: "I want you to act as Sergeant-Major of the regiment in this battle." I was surprised. "Hurry to the left," he continued. "Order the men to fix bayonets—quick!" I ran as told, screaming at the top of my voice, "Fix bayonets, fix bayonets!" I was not quite to the left when I heard other voices yell-

ing, "Forward, quick, double quick, forward!" and the line was already on the run towards the rebels. I kept up my screaming, "Fix bayonets!" for by some blunder the order had not been given in time, and now the men were trying to get their bayonets in place while running. We were met in a minute by a storm of bullets from the wood, but the lines in blue kept steadily on as would a storm of wind and cloud moving among the tree-tops. Now we met almost whole companies of wounded, defeated men from the other division hurrying by us, and they held up their bleeding and mangled hands to show us they had not been cowards. They had lost twelve hundred men on the spot we were now about to occupy. Some of them were laughing, even, and yelling at us, "Wade in and give them hell!" We were wading in faster than I am telling the story, and on the edge of a low ridge we saw a solid wall of men in gray, their muskets at their shoulders blazing into our faces, and their batteries of artillery roaring as if it were the end of the world. Bravely they stood there. They seemed little over a hundred yards away. There was no charging further by our line. We halted, stood still, and for over an hour we loaded our guns and killed each other as fast as we could. The firing and the noise were simply appalling. Now, I was not scared. The first shot I fired seemed to take all my fear away and gave me courage enough to calmly load my musket and fire it forty times. Others with more cartridges fired possibly oftener still. Some of the regiments in that bloody line were resupplied with cartridges from the boxes on the dead. In a moment I saw Capt. Lindsay throw up his arms, spring upwards, and fall dead in his tracks. Corporal McCully was struck in the face with a shell, the blood covered him all over, but he kept on firing. Lieutenant Darling dropped dead, and other officers fell wounded. I could not see far to left or right; the smoke of battle was covering everything. I saw bodies of our men lying near me without knowing

who they were, though some of them were my messmates in the morning. The rebels in front we could not see at all. We simply fired at their lines by guess, and occasionally the blaze of their guns showed exactly where they stood. They kept their line like a wall of fire. When I fired my first shot I had resolved to aim at somebody or something as long as I could see, and a dozen times I tried to bring down an officer I dimly saw on a gray horse before me. Pretty soon a musket ball struck me fair in the breast. "I am dead, now," I said, almost aloud. It felt as if some one had struck me with a club. I stepped back a few paces, and sat down on a log to finish up with the world. Other wounded men were there covered with blood, and some were lying by me dead. I spoke to no one. It would have been useless; thunder could scarcely have been heard at that moment. My emotions I have almost forgotten. I remember only that something said to me, "It is honorable to die so." I had not a thought of friends, or of home, or of religion. The stupendous things going on around me filled my mind. On getting my breath a little, I found I was not hurt at all—simply stunned; the obliquely fired bullet had struck the heavy leather of my cartridge belt, and glanced away. I picked up my gun, stepped back into the line of battle, and in a moment was shot through the hand. The wound did not hurt; I was too excited for that. If possible, the awful roar of battle grew more terrific. I wonder that a man on either side was left alive. Biting the ends off my cartridges, my mouth was filled with gunpowder; the thirst was intolerable. Every soldier's face was black as a negro's, and, with some, blood from wounds trickled down over the blackness, giving them a horrible look. Once a boy from another part of the line to our left ran up to me crying out, "My regiment is gone; what shall I do?" There was a little moment's lull in the howling noise; something was going on. "Blaze away right here," I said

to the boy, and he commenced firing like a veteran, and then I heard one of our own line cry, "My God, they're flanking us!" I looked to where the boy had come from. His regiment had indeed given way. The rebels had poured through the gap and were already firing into our rear, and yelling to us to surrender. In a moment we would be surrounded. It was surrender or try and get back past them. I ran like a race-horse—so did the left of the regiment amidst a storm of bullets and yells and curses. I saved my musket anyway. I think all did that—but that half-mile race through a hot Mississippi sun, with bullets and cannon balls ploughing the field behind me will never be forgotten. My lungs seemed to be burning up. Once I saw our regimental flag lying by a log, the color bearer wounded or dead. I cried to a comrade flying near me, "Duncan Teter, it is a shame—the Fifth Iowa running!" He picked up the flag and with a great oath dared me to stop and defend it. For a moment only we two tried to rally to the flag the men who were rushing by. We might as well have yelled to a Kansas cyclone. Then Captain John Tait rushing by, saw us, stopped and recognizing the brave deed of Corporal Teter, promoted him on the spot. But the oncoming storm was irresistible, and, carrying the flag, we all again hurried rearwards. We had scarcely passed the spot where I had seen Grant mount his horse before the charge than a whole line of Union cannon, loaded to the muzzle with grape shot and cannister, opened on the howling mob that was pursuing us. The rebels instantly halted, and now again it seemed our turn. A few minutes rest for breath, and our reformed lines once more dashed into the woods. In half an hour the battle of Champion Hills was won, and the victorious Union Army was shortly in a position to compel the surrender of the key to the Mississippi River. Grant's crown of immortality was won, and the jewel that shone most brightly in it was the blood of the men of Champion

Hills. Had that important battle failed, *Grant's army, not Pemberton's, would have been prisoners of war in an hour.* Where then would have been Vicksburg, Spottsylvania, Richmond, Appomatox?

Six thousand blue-and gray-coated men were lying there in the woods, dead or wounded, when the last gun of Champion Hills was fired. Some of the trees on the battlefield were tall magnolias; many of their limbs were shot away, and they were in full bloom, their beautiful blossoms contrasting with the horrib'e scene of battle. Besides killing and wounding three thousand of the enemy, we had also captured thirty cannon and three thousand prisoners.

When the troops went off into the road to start in pursuit of the flying enemy, I searched over the battle-field for my best friend, poor Captain Poag, with whom I had talked of our Northern homes only the night before. He lay dead among the leaves, a bullet hole in his forehead. Somebody buried him, but I never saw his grave. Another friend I found dying. He begged me only to place him against a tree and with leaves to shut the burning sun away from his face. While I was doing this I heard the groaning of a Rebel officer who lay helpless in a little ditch. He called to me to lift him out, as he was shot through both thighs, and suffering terribly. "Yes," I said, "as soon as I get my friend here arranged a little comfortably." His reply was pathetic. "Yes, that's right; help your own first." I had not meant it so. I instantly got to him and with the aid of a comrade pulled him out of the ditch. He thanked me and told me that he was a Lieutenant-Colonel and had been shot while riding a gray horse in front of the spot where he lay. I eased his position as best I could, but all that night, with many another wounded soldier, blue and gray, he was left on the desolate battle-field.

Now I realized how terrible the fire had been about us—for some comrades counted two hundred bullet marks on a single oak tree within a few feet of where the left of the regiment had stood loading and firing that awful hour and a half. Most of the bullets had been fired too high, else we had all been killed. Near by lay the remains of a Rebel battery. Every horse and most of the cannoneers lay dead in a heap. The caissons and the gun carriages were torn to pieces by our artillery. Never in any battle had I seen such a picture of complete annihilation of men, animals and material, as was the wreck of this battery, once the pride of some Southern town—its young men lying there dead among their horses—the loved ones of Southern homes. That was war!

We went on for Vicksburg that very night, and twice assaulted its steep walls in vain. Then we undertook its reduction by siege. Trenches and sap, approaches and mines, were dug everywhere, and day and night for weeks our mortars, our gunboats, our siege guns and field artillery poured a storm of lead and iron into the city. At the extreme front in the trenches our infantry kept up a ceaseless fire of rifle balls. We were directed to fire all the day against the works, whether a foe could be seen or not. At night the scene was brilliant and terrible. The great mortar shells from the Union gun boats sailed high in the air like comets, then bending downwards in their course with their trails of fire, exploded above the town with the noise of thunder. Many exploded on the ground inside the city, tearing holes big enough to have buried a house in. One of the great mortars used on those nights for throwing shells into Vicksburg now stands peaceful and silent in front of the Capitol at Des Moines. The people and the soldiers of Vicksburg all lived in secure caves during the siege, else none would have been left alive to surrender on that memorable 4th of July of 1863. One day when I was out with several comrades in the

trenches in front of the Vicksburg forts, I noticed our good Colonel Matthies making his way to us through one of the approaches. Quietly coming up to where I was he handed me an officer's silk sash. It was his own. "That is for Champion Hills," he said, smiling. "I have been made a General, and before I leave I want to make you Adjutant of the regiment, and you must wear that." I don't know now what I answered. Afterwards, in the terrible battle of Chattanooga, I saw my beloved Colonel sitting against a tree wounded and bleeding. It was his last battle, for he never fully recovered from the wound. His sash, *my* sash, is kept sacred as a proof of my commander's confidence, and as a souvenir of one of the hardest fought battles of the war.

After Vicksburg's surrender several of our divisions were hurried back towards Jackson in the hopes of catching Joe Johnson's army that had been hanging on our rear during the siege. One night on the march—it was a strange happening—my regiment bivouacked on the very battle-ground of Champion Hills, almost on the spot where my regiment had fought. It was dark when we reached the place, and our sensations were very strange, for we realized that all about us there in the woods, were the graves of our buried comrades, and the still unburied bones of many of our foe. Save an occasional hooting owl, the woods were sad and silent. The Glee Club of Company B sang, "We're Tenting To-night on the Old Camp Ground." Never was the song sung under sadder circumstances. All the night a terrible odor offended the nostrils, and when daylight came some of the boys came to our company and said—"Go over to that hollow and you will see a sight!" Some of us went. We looked but once. Dante himself never conjured anything so horrible as the reality before us. After the battle the Rebels in their haste had tossed hundreds of their dead into this little ravine and slightly covered them over with earth; but the rains had come and

the earth was washed away, and there stood, or lay, hundreds of half-decayed corpses. Some were grinning skeletons, some were headless, some armless, some had their clothes torn away, and some were mangled by dogs and wolves. The horror of that spectacle followed us for weeks. *That, too, was war.*

I have written this random, but true sketch of personal recollections of a severe battle, first, as stated, because I was urged to; further, because it may help young men who are anxious for adventure, and war, as I was, to first realize what war really is. My experiences probably were the same as hundreds of others in that same battle. I only tell of what was nearest me. A third of my comrades who entered this fight were lost. Other Iowa and other Western regiments suffered equally or more. General Hovey's division had a third of its number slain. I have been in what history pronounces greater battles than Champion Hills, but only once did I ever see two lines of blue and gray stand close together and fire into each other's faces for an hour and a half. I think the courage of the private soldiers, standing in that line of fire for that awful hour and a half, gave us Vicksburg, made Grant immortal as a soldier, and helped to save this country.

CORN has been going abroad for some time at the rate of 1,200,000 bushels a week, or nearly ten times as much as was exported last year, and more than double the export of 1891 and 1892. Europe has been slow to learn the value of Indian corn, but is beginning to have a better knowledge of one of nature's finest productions.—*Fort Dodge Messenger, October 22, 1895.*

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