

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Siege of Corinth

The reader of history is usually informed that on such a day General So-and-so moved on such a road, or in such a direction, and occupied such a point with so many men, with the view of accomplishing some certain stated purpose. This clear, precise, and definite view of the matter is not taken by the rank and file who march in the general's army. A commanding general has no time to arrange and exhibit plans with explanatory comments, for the enlightenment of his army. It would be very injudicious for him to do so if he could. Officers and soldiers are nearly always in utmost ignorance of what is about to be attempted (unless a charge is impending, on which occasion they are, or should be, informed), but it is their business to fall in at the tap of the drum, and march where glory or disaster awaits them. No matter how wise the captains or lieutenants look, they know no more about what is in contemplation

than the men do. Even the colonel — whose orders are more imperial and more certain to be carried out than the political schemes of a king or president — even that autocrat, five times out of ten, is ignorant of where he is going or what he is going for. Our colonel, the redoubtable Alexander Chambers, never seemed to care, but mounted his horse, gave his commands, and led the way like a human machine — as a colonel should do.

The real advance of Halleck's army upon Corinth began on April 29, 1862. My private journal describes our first move.

“On Tuesday noon I arrived in camp from a toilsome detail. I had barely time to swallow a dinner before the drums beat to fall in line. Orders had come to move without tents or knapsacks, and with a day's rations in our haversacks. Of our own volition we also left our blankets and overcoats behind us, in order to be free of incumbrance and ready for the fray. The brigade moved in a body, and our course was apparently in the direction of the enemy's stronghold.

“The afternoon was hot. Our line of march was sometimes rough, and at other times lay through pleasant places. For a while we would pass through cool and shady woods, filled with the odors of flowers, shrubbery, and sweet blossoms, and then emerge into a clearing that formed the homestead of some hardy farmer, whose log cabin, dogs, and half-terrified children seemed a mute protest against the bar-

barity of war. Pushing down a few yards of his rail fence, we would march on through green meadows and fragrant orchards. Many little homes, half concealed by foliage, excited our envy. If we grew enthusiastic over the natural beauties around us, some swamp was sure to obstruct our way. 'Forward!' would be the word, and forward our column would move through water and mud knee deep, amid the shouting of the officers and the swearing of the men. At the end of every hour we would halt five or ten minutes to rest.

"At about dusk several regiments of Union cavalry passed us, galloping to the rear. In reply to inquiries as to where they had been, one trooper yelled: 'To the Land of Nod, where's there's forty devils and no God.' With more courtesy, an officer reined in and said they had been raiding on the enemy's flank, and had burnt two railroad bridges and also captured a locomotive.

"After dark the march was more difficult than ever. We floundered through swamps and through brush and every sort of jungle, and the Recording Angel must have had a severe night's work of it, to judge by the multiplicity of oaths we showered around. At ten o'clock the welcome order to halt was given. After forming a line of battle, and receiving strict instructions to build no fires, we stacked arms and slept on the ground without covering or bedding of any description.

"At daylight we rose, and with some disregard of

orders, built a long line of blazing bonfires. After drying ourselves, and feeding on crackers and bacon, we fell into line and moved still further towards Corinth. We had proceeded only about a mile when we came to a halt and faced about, intelligence having been officially sent that some point we had been ordered to drive the enemy from had been already occupied by Union troops. The news was not gratefully heard, and with loud grumbling we started back, reaching camp in the afternoon, much worn by the expedition.

“May 1st we broke camp, taking tents and equipage with us, and after traversing a delightful region, came to our present location — a few miles south of the State line of Tennessee, and on the sacred soil of Mississippi. I am sitting in a cool grove, the boughs of which are filled with feathered songsters. In front of me flows a limpid brook, and on a little eminence beyond are twelve pieces of artillery, frowning in the direction of Corinth.”

The next morning we pushed on again over excellent roads till we came to the hamlet of Monterey, from which the enemy had been shelled. Fragments of old tents, knapsacks, clothing of all kinds, commissary stores, and a little of everything imaginable, were flung around promiscuously. Along the route we had come, we found the grain fields trampled, fences torn down, farms deserted, houses riddled with cannon shot or shell, and dead horses lying about everywhere, for there had been much cavalry fighting. For the first time we saw a field of cotton,

and more than ever realized we were in Dixie. A citizen yet lingering around the wreck of Monterey, told me that after the battle of Shiloh, the Confederates who came flying by his home were in utter panic; that discipline and organization were gone, and that "it was every devil for himself to get to Corinth."

On the afternoon of May 3d we heard heavy cannonading ahead. I sat on a fence and counted fifty-five guns, fired about as fast as I could count them. We afterwards learned that the enemy had been driven out of Farmington. The next day we moved forward two miles, and occupied a heavy line of works, with troops in line of battle on either side of us. There a slight military misfortune befell me. A corporal struck me a blow in the face. For retorting with the butt of a musket, I was arrested on the charge — as the boys phrased it — of "smiting an inferior officer." After passing a night in the guard-tent, I was ordered to my company for duty.

Thus far we had not encountered the enemy, although expecting to at any hour, as skirmishing and fighting were going on continually. On the 16th we pressed his lines for the first time, while making another advance, and skirmishers deployed in force at the front of our brigade. A lively fight ensued immediately, without formalities, and leaden "epistles to the Corinthians" flew thick and fast. In about an hour, with the assistance of a little grape and canister, the woods were cleared of Confederates, and, advancing to a position that seemed satisfactory, we halted and threw up a line of works.

That night our regiment performed "grand guard" duty for the first time. We marched into the woods a little to the rear of the skirmish line, and remained there all night, in one body, in readiness to repulse any heavy attack the enemy might make. A few men from each company did sentry duty, in order to give alarm in case of danger, and the others, with accoutrements on, were allowed to lie on the ground and sleep. I happened to be one of those on guard. Extremely tired, and not being well accustomed to marching as yet, in the warm, close atmosphere of a dense wood, we found it difficult to keep awake. Resorting to various expedients, I fell at last to wooing the muses, and evolved the following:

ODE TO THE PLANET MARS

Red star of War! while armies sleep,
To march to slaughter at the dawn,
'Tis mine a faithful watch to keep,
Lest suddenly the foe come on.

I peer into the gloomy wood,
Alarmed at some portentous sound,
Then gaze on thee, red orb of blood,
Whose beams a warring world confound.

O, from among the stars retire,
Elsewhere send forth thy rays malign,
Thou baleful globe of restless fire,
Man's blood is poured for thee like wine.

The next afternoon I strolled along our lines to view the stirring operations in progress. Mounting a breastwork, I walked on the top of it for more than a mile, and was told by an officer that to his personal knowledge, it extended three miles beyond that point. It was occupied by troops, of course, with batteries at intervals.

I had no sooner returned from this ramble than the pickets and skirmishers of our part of the line were driven in by the Confederates, with much shooting, and many piercing variations of the famous "rebel yell". The drums rolled and the troops fell in everywhere; the pickets were promptly reinforced and the enemy was driven back. Our brigade was ordered to pack up, send tents, wagons, and baggage to the rear, and be ready to move at a moment's notice.

In the afternoon the skirmish line was again driven in, and rebel batteries opened on our bivouac, pelting us in a lively manner. Most of the missiles were shells. Our batteries responded, and for a time it sounded as though the battle we had been so long expecting was really about to commence. A regiment of infantry went on the double-quick down into the woods, and after some heavy volleys of musketry, we heard that one of the enemy's batteries had been captured. General Morgan L. Smith's brigade had a sharp fight that day also, somewhere on the line beyond us. All day long, and through most of the night, the booming of cannon and rattle of small

arms was heard along the front of the army, which must have been a distance of ten or fifteen miles.

On the next day a heavy thunder storm swept over the camps and lines of both armies. Peals of thunder echoed and bellowed through the wide woods, as though in rivalry of the noise of cannonading.

Our part of the line was close to Corinth then — so close that when the universal uproar quieted some we could hear the whistling of locomotives and the rumbling of trains. Deserters came stealing across to our picket lines daily, to surrender. They told a uniform tale of miserable rations, half-rations, impressments, and military executions. A general conscription act was being enforced with great severity, and, as Grant afterwards tersely expressed it, the Confederate government was robbing the cradle and the grave to fill its armies. Grey-haired men and half-grown boys were alike dragged from home to become food for powder. These deserters also said a scarcity of water was causing sickness and many deaths in Beauregard's camps. Not only was water scarce, but foul water had to be used, greatly injuring the health of the troops.

Water was also scarce in the Union camps, at the front of our division at least, and on May 21st a bloody engagement occurred for the possession of a creek that lay between the rival skirmish lines. A party of the enemy stole through the woods to obtain water, and found a lot of our pickets at the creek. A fight ensued, both sides being reinforced, and after

obstinate combat our men held possession of the creek. A few hours afterwards the enemy shelled our camps, picket reserves, and skirmish lines viciously; our batteries replied with spirit, and some heavy volleys of musketry indicated that another fight for water had probably commenced. All day long the skirmishers of the two armies blazed away at one another, the firing at times almost rising to the dignity of a battle. Frequently artillery was brought into action to prevent the pickets of one side from driving their adversaries back upon the main body. The opposing armies lay like two sullen monsters slowly gathering strength for an impending death struggle.

At this time the weather was delightful, for the line of battle ran through a forest apparently boundless. The troops — in our vicinity at least — had fully stripped for action, being without tents, wagons, or baggage, well supplied with ammunition, and ready to fight at a minute's notice. Our sleeping apartments consisted mainly of rustic bowers formed of the boughs and branches of trees. Not unfrequently the recumbent warrior was roused from gentle dreams of lady love or home by cold contact with an intruding snake or lizard. Though snakes abounded in the South and often shared a soldier's bed, I never heard of anyone being bitten. A general impression prevailed that snakes would not bite a sleeping man.

The twenty-sixth of May found us in the reserve,

the army having made another lunge forward (and covered its front with earthworks), leaving our brigade a trifle to the rear. Everything being placid around us, the colonel had excuse for his favorite pastime. He trotted us out to the drill ground and gave us three hours of company drill in the forenoon and four hours of battalion drill in the afternoon, which we thought sufficient in view of the balmy weather.

On May 28th our regiment had its first formal military burial. We had buried plenty of men, but not in regulation style. A comrade having died, the colonel improved the opportunity to show us how the government desired to have us buried. The body was laid out in uniform on a stretcher, and borne through camp to the melancholy rolling of muffled drums. An escort marched with arms reversed. The bottom of the grave having first been strewn with green boughs and green leaves, the body was rolled in a blanket and respectfully lowered to place. Over it other leaves and boughs were strewn. In a gentle manner earth was spilled in till the corpse was covered, then the grave was filled up. The firing squad discharged three volleys over the grave, and the detail marched back to quarters to the sound of lively music.

At daylight on the morning of May 30th our regiment passed the outer intrenchments of the army. Leaving five companies on reserve, the rest of us deployed in the woods and relieved part of the troops

on the skirmish line. Soon after sunrise extraordinary explosions, apparently within the enemy's lines, excited universal attention. The roar was not like cannonading precisely, nor very much like thunder. We had never heard the like of it before. An officer said it was the firing of mortars by some of Pope's troops. We were in thick woods. No Confederates had yet been seen. Indeed, we had received no instructions to hunt for them, though we thought they could be readily found if wanted. These heavy explosions, however, suggested the possibility that Corinth was being evacuated — that the enemy was blowing up his powder magazines.

After a brief consultation, the commanding officer of that part of the picket line ordered Lieutenant Thomas Purcell, of our company, and our fourth corporal to go forward and ascertain if any Confederate sharpshooters were in front of us. I had permission to go also. Cocking our muskets and holding them in readiness to fire, the corporal and I advanced with the lieutenant. We stealthily threaded our way through an intervening wood and reached the edge of a clearing. After looking about carefully in every direction, and seeing no signs of the enemy, we decided to cross the clearing. On the other side of it was a little grove where we feared we might be captured or killed, but on entering it we found no one there. It occupied the crest of a slight eminence. The quietness around rendered us bolder, and we passed on through the grove.

At the opposite border, we came in full view of Beauregard's breastworks, forts, and intrenchments, stretching away for miles on either side. They appeared utterly deserted. Not a flag or soldier was visible anywhere. In front of us was an abatis of fallen trees, beyond which ran a line of rifle trenches for sharpshooters, but we could see nobody over there. The corporal was sent back to report what he knew, and to say that Corinth was evacuated without a doubt.

The lieutenant and I then made a bold march for the rifle pits, and finding them unoccupied, became perfectly satisfied that the Confederate army was gone. There might be stragglers or a rear guard of skirmishers on the high hill, but in some excitement we continued on till we reached the main breastwork of Beauregard's line. It was of earth, twelve feet high at that point, and had embrasures, at intervals, for heavy artillery. Mounting the work, we took off our hats and gave three cheers for the Union army. As far as the eye could see were the formidable works of the foe, but in them we saw no defenders.

We had not been there many minutes before the space between our picket line and the rebel fortifications was dotted with scouts and skirmishers who had heard the tidings and ran across to see for themselves. Cheer after cheer went up from little groups, then the skirmish line caught the contagion, and thence it spread to the line of battle, which made the woods ring with triumphal cheers. Bands followed

quickly with victorious music; here and there a regiment moved across to plant its flag on the walls of the famous stronghold; and thousands of troops were soon in eager but vain pursuit of the foe.

CLINT PARKHURST