

THE PALIMPSEST

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Our First View of Vicksburg

Know ye the land where bloom the citron bowers?

Where the gold-orange lights the dusky grove?

High waves the laurel, there, the myrtle flowers,

And through a still blue heaven the sweet winds rove.

Springtime of 1863! The long-drawn-out Vicksburg campaign was in progress, more stubbornly than ever. Floods along the Mississippi — a deluge, in fact — cut a figure in the matter, on the Louisiana side especially, and often had effect on the movement of troops. The water rose higher than had been known for years. At that period of our country's history (and perhaps now), the difference between high and low water on the lower Mississippi was from twenty-five to fifty feet. One seventh of Louisiana was inundated — a great part of the low country. Swamps, rivers, and bayous overflowed. Our canal operations at Lake Providence and just above Vicksburg had aggravated matters immensely. Guerilla bands and the enemy's cavalry cut dykes

and levees wherever it would do us most harm. Many dangerous crevasses occurred in this way.

Our division of the Seventeenth Army Corps was on reserve, a circumstance we thought humiliating. We tarried on a big plantation twelve miles directly west of Vicksburg.

“Napoleon always put his best troops on reserve — the flower of his army”, an officer told us.

“Rats!” bellowed a cynical sergeant. “We’re keepin’ the lines open to the supply boats above Vicksburg. Lookin’ after the hard tack and ammunition. That’s it, me boy.”

This diagnosis was correct. All we had to do was to keep reasonably near the gun stacks, be ready for anything that might happen, and wait for orders.

It is not entirely unpleasant, however, to be on reserve after you have met the enemy a few times and had an ample draught of the ruddy wine of glory. Afar you hear the rumble of the guns; the clamor and exultation of victory reach you; those of the enemy you see are captives, whose dejection and unhappy situation awake your sympathy. You view the wreck of war, and the boastful signs of triumph. Before you reach a scene of combat the dead have been buried, and most repulsive sights have disappeared. You see war as many a general, historian, or politician sees it.

Much around us awoke admiration. Beautiful groves fringed the glassy bayous. Trees in countless varieties thrived in semi-tropic luxuriance —

the magnolia, ash, pine, holly, cypress, beech, and hickory. Sweet-gum flourished and live oak towered. Everywhere the stately trees were hung with trailing plumes of Spanish moss.

On April 29th tremendous cannonading continued for hours, attracting the attention of all. It seemed a long way down the river. News came that Admiral Porter was bombarding Grand Gulf, and having a great fight there. The next day McPherson crossed the river lower down and moved inland. There was a battle at Port Gibson, the enemy was beaten, and hasty evacuation of Grand Gulf ensued. This left the Union fleet in control of the river from Port Hudson to Vicksburg.

On May 5th a battalion of Confederates trudged by who had been captured three days previously at Port Gibson. It was soon observed that many of them were old friends of ours, having fought against us at Corinth. Captain Williams, who was wounded in that battle, the first day, walked up to one of them and said:

“I believe you are the gentleman who captured me at Corinth.”

Mutual recognition and a cordial hand-shake followed, and the Captain handed him a much needed five-dollar bill. We treated them well, gave them what little food we could spare, and assured them that as soon as they got through to the supply boats they would get everything they needed in abundance. A good deal of fun passed back and forth.

“Boys, you’ll never get Vicksburg”, they told us.

“We’ll stack arms on the levee there before summer is over,” we answered — a boast that came true. The unanimous belief in the Union army that Vicksburg would fall was something remarkable.

A tough looking crowd they were, many being barefooted, and all of them in rags. One of them shouted merrily:

“We can’t dress as well as you, boys, but you know we can shoot as well.”

I saw many old men among them who had “seen better days”, an air of refinement not being obliterated by old clothes. The southern Conscription Act respected neither gray hairs or youthful bodies. A day or two afterwards General Sherman rode by at the head of the Fifteenth Army Corps. We hastened out to the roadside to silently greet so famous a leader — one destined, in another year, to command us all on another great field of action.

A detachment of the First Heavy Artillery of the regular army also went by with a battery of siege guns which had helped repulse the foe on Sunday evening at Shiloh, and afterwards, at Corinth, had thundered from Fort Robinet, when a desperate assault was made on that earth work. As a large part of the rebel garrison in Vicksburg — most of it, in fact — consisted of Price’s veterans, it seemed funny to see the same old guns coming so far to trouble them once more. Sixteen strong oxen pulled each gun.

On May 11th our division left the Holmes plantation at sunrise; we marched rapidly; by eight o'clock we had covered ten miles. Crossing a nameless bayou, we stacked arms along the Mississippi River front — below Vicksburg, of course. On account of intense heat we rested in the shade of the groves until four in the afternoon — then marched again. At New Carthage we saw a wooden gunboat which had been very thoroughly peppered with cannon shot in the Grand Gulf engagement. Its guns, machinery, and hull, to all intents and purposes, remained uninjured and ready for battle — an indication of hurried marksmanship by the enemy. A large field hospital at the roadside was filled with sick and wounded. I was sorry to find among these lads a school boy friend of mine who had been shot through the thigh with a musket ball at Port Gibson. A funeral was in progress as we marched away. Innumerable snakes infested every wayside spot, and we killed great numbers of them. Fourteen-foot alligators swam in the bayous. Dismayed by the presence of so many human beings, they fled from one lagoon where hundreds of us went in bathing. A low, flat, hot, swampy country was around us.

“It's hotter than Hades”, our Major observed.

“Yes, I think it's hotter than Hell”, an officer answered. Perspiration often penetrated waterproof knapsacks.

All along the route we saw the smoking ruins of splendid plantation homes, costly sugar-houses, cot-

ton gins, warehouses, and enormous barns, for we moved through one of the finest and richest sections of the South, and all this property was being cruelly and uselessly destroyed, in defiance of the rules of civilized warfare. How could we blame Southerners for hating us? This vandalism was perpetrated by the division of troops that marched immediately ahead of us, and was explained on the ground that a large number of those men came from Missouri, Kentucky, and other border States. They justified their conduct on the plea of retaliation. They had received many letters recounting atrocious deeds at their own homes perpetrated by Confederate guerrillas and raiding bands of cavalry. They claimed to be "only fighting the devil with fire".

On the following day our course lay away from the Mississippi, and we marched for fifteen miles along Lake St. Joseph, the opposite side of which was green with vernal woods that rose from the edge of the waters. The lake was a lovely sylvan-flood, and around its fertile shores had been one of the garden spots of Louisiana. Even as we gazed the country to the rear was one vast field of sugar cane and Indian corn, which in the distance resembled the green waves of the sea. Only the day before, expensive homes, sugar mills, and cotton plants of great cost looked out upon the placid lake in proud serenity. Now, where we marched, were smouldering ruins, and for miles ahead we could see smoke and flames wrapping roofs and walls that

towered high. I saw but one white civilian that day. Men, women, and children must have fled to the woods and fields — hidden away. These homes had been sumptuously furnished, several pianos being often seen near one of them. Little plundering was done, scarcely any — almost everything was burnt. Our division commander, that morning, had given orders that any man caught firing property along the route should be immediately “stood up” at the roadside and shot. The troops ahead of us either had full license to burn, or so fierce a determination to do so, that efforts to prevent proved unavailing. The burning went on. This most barbarous spectacle reminded us of what we had read in Gibbon concerning the passage of the Danube by the northern barbarians, whose advance was traced by the blaze of Roman villas. Cruelty has no effect in deciding military operations. Neither has destruction of private property, except in special cases covered by absolute military necessity. The loss inflicted along Lake St. Joseph was enormous. Wrongs perpetrated in Missouri and Kentucky by irresponsible outlaws were wiped out in Louisiana by trained soldiers.

Early the next day we marched eight miles and reached the Mississippi again at Hard Times Landing—a spot that did not belie its name. It gave us a fine view, however, of the captured fortress of Grand Gulf. When we embarked, and rapidly steamed down and across toward it, previous interest was

intensified. Bluffs loomed from the water's brink. A new Vicksburg might have been created there, had not the enemy's plans been frustrated. Everywhere on the sides of precipitous cliffs and lofty hills we saw forts, breastworks, and rifle pits. Only a little more time was needed. In the capture of the place our troops got several brass fieldpieces, five heavy siege guns, two battle flags, and a thousand prisoners. Painted in white on the siege guns was an assertion that Admiral Porter captured them.

Without land forces Grand Gulf might not have been taken in a thousand years. Porter's fleet fought five hours and a half; transports ran the blockade as they had done at Vicksburg; then ferried troops across the river by thousands. At Port Gibson a Confederate army was beaten, and the enemy fled from Grand Gulf that night to avoid capture. Nevertheless the gunboats fought bravely, as they always did.

The day before we reached Grand Gulf the enemy was defeated again at Raymond. McPherson then scattered another force and entered the capital of Mississippi, capturing twenty pieces of artillery. The army was now said to be in the rear of Vicksburg. After we disembarked at Grand Gulf I made a visit to the forts. In one was a large siege gun that no cannonade had been able to silence. The reason was now apparent. On either side of the muzzle of the gun a strong post was deeply set in the ground, to which a negro slave had been chained,

and a Confederate officer had stood near the pair of unfortunates with a drawn revolver, and forced them, under pain of instant death, to load the gun. When a negro was killed, another one took his place. How many perished in this way we had no means of knowing. The officer was finally blown to atoms. I saw the posts, chains, and manacles. Grand Gulf commanded not only the Mississippi River, but also the mouths of Big and Little Black rivers — it dominated three rivers, and was a citadel moulded by Nature's hand.

Our immediate command, the Iowa Brigade, went into bivouac on a sandy flat, suffering from intense heat, and, like the rest, having a wretched time of it. The atmosphere that rose from swamps, rivers, and bayous under a sweltering sun engendered disease among some other troops. Rations were scant. We scarcely had enough to eat, but cheerfulness prevailed, for the situation was known to all. A great campaign was in rapid progress; quick movements outranked everything else. The boats were loaded with rations, above Vicksburg, but the trouble was to get them to us, for moves and changes occurred incessantly. Great numbers of us went bathing in the swollen tides of the Mississippi, which were treacherous and dangerous. One soldier was drowned, being drawn under by the headlong currents. Bathing when over-heated injured many men, and the surgeons tried to stop the practice, but everyone was hot and nobody cared for orders. All

civilians had fled from town. We did not blame them.

On May 14th I wrote: "In the shade of the trees on the heights of Grand Gulf I view the glittering Mississippi, dotted with transports and iron clads. At the foot of the bluff are the rude camps of the soldiers. Strewing the hillside are cannon shot, fragments of shell, bursted or dismounted guns, and the remains of blown-up magazines which had been plated over with railroad iron. Even the monuments of the town cemetery have been shattered by missiles, with two or three graves dug out by solid shot — skeletons, coffins and all. The sun glows as if in the tropics, and, in the distance, all we view is robed in livid green. The woods around are in utmost splendor — in foliage of deepest dye. Like another Egypt, Louisiana lies 'in the midst of its waters' — a land of fertility — of corn, oranges, sugar cane, cotton, rice and tobacco — a land of flowers, fanned by breezes from the Gulf, or from the tropics — a land of prodigious richness, overhung by the double pall of human slavery and civil war. At twelve o'clock last night the drums beat an alarm. Our regiment and another one hurried to the picket line, and performed grand-guard duty till morning. Rifle pits are now being constructed around the rear of the town by the First Mississippi Infantry, which is composed of escaped slaves commanded by white officers promoted from veteran regiments. Thousands of fugitive slaves of both

sexes have poured into Grand Gulf. For the first time without a master, and herded like animals in a long ravine, their demoralization is deplorable. Vice is rampant."

On May 16th I was one of a party of forty detailed to guard a small wagon train on a foraging expedition. Our course lay through a wild and romantic region. The highway was walled on either side by abrupt hills covered by trees in richest robes of green. Vines hid the trunks of trees; tall grass grew till it drooped and lay on the ground; thickets were impassable because of density. The birds, blossoms, flowers, and the aroma of southern Spring aroused admiration. The road at times led along the steep sides of hills, and when we reached a summit, the view of fields, woods, glistening bayous, and wide, baronial plantations, almost banished thoughts of war. The odors of the pear, the orange, and the nectarine, floating from blossoming orchards, filled the breeze with perfume. Everywhere was "fruit, foliage, crag, wood, field and vine." After marching five miles we came to a big plantation and loaded our wagons with corn. No tedious formalities attended the transaction. No money passed, no receipt was given. The owner lost his corn because there were forty of us and only one of him. Not a guerrilla came up to protest against "the good old rule, the simple plan," or fire a shot from copse or jungle. The slaves treated us with lavish hospitality, offering us milk, corn-bread, honey, preserved

fruits, and other foods that seemed to us luxurious. We needed this increase of rations, for each day our stinted fare grew more slender. These black people lived in great abundance as regarded food, and the quality was far better than many northern white people enjoy to-day, but their clothing was utterly worn out. The attire of some of them was unworthy of human beings, but in spite of ragged garments and rawhide shoes, most of them were fat, jolly, and apparently without a care on any subject. Their cabins appeared cosy, clean, and homelike. Not one of them could read, but they thoroughly understood that the war deeply involved their future fate. Their "religious instruction" had been mainly confined to sermons on such texts as these: "And God cursed Ham," "servants obey your masters," etc., etc. By the terms of the Emancipation Proclamation every slave was now free, but the proclamation had little force outside of our military lines. The male slaves of the region we were in all had muskets and ammunition, which they had picked up on adjacent battle fields. On this plantation I conversed with handsome young female slaves that were so nearly Caucasian that they had red cheeks and blue eyes. They were the children of their owner, undoubtedly, and variously called themselves creoles, quadroons, and octoroons — a comment on the "divine institution" of Slavery—that "sum of all villainies". I thought of the conflagrations along Lake St. Joseph, and of the Biblical warning: "I will repay, saith the Lord."

The more intelligent of these girls were gloomy and unhappy. They had little to live for. Without untoward incident we returned to our camps on the Mississippi.

In the middle of the night of May 19th the rattle of drums awoke us. "Fall in for Vicksburg", was the startling cry. Cheers rang among the battle-rent hills of Grand Gulf, and floated far over woods and waters. By the light of the stars the Iowa Brigade embarked on steamers, and moved up that broad and perilous flood. The dark shores teemed with possible dangers. The shots of a single fieldpiece might wreck the whole fleet and drown the expedition. Mines or torpedoes might underlie the tide, or some newly invented implement of war be waiting for experiment. We little appreciated the dangers of that campaign. Few or none of us thought of them. Huddled and crowded together, to a degree intolerable, we found that sleep was impossible. The steamers plodded along cautiously, keeping the middle of the river, and making only about three miles an hour. By sunrise we had got only half way to Warrenton. The bands played gayly and the soldiers cheered. The booming of cannon ahead sounded incessantly. The forenoon wore tediously away. At noon, from the upper deck, we could see the deserted Confederate forts at Warrenton. Several gunboats came down to convoy us, and in so doing found a masked battery in the woods below Warrenton, and shelled it from position. We had been

moving steadily toward it. While this artillery fight was in progress, our transports hurried over to the Louisiana shore, and all the troops disembarked. At the end of several hours we went aboard again, and the fleet slowly steamed up in the direction of the Vicksburg canal.

It was late in the afternoon, and few of us forget the first view we had of Vicksburg. Its spires glittered, and for miles its warlike hills shone in the blaze of the western sun; high in air could be seen the bursting of innumerable shells; white circlets of smoke floated above the fated city, and then disappeared; the forts and fleets, in furious combat, exchanged missiles that hissed and screamed through the air; the quick flash of artillery on the lofty heights resembled the lightning's flash; clouds of dust arose a hundred feet high as some tremendous and well directed explosive struck the broad front of a fort; huge guns could be seen shining behind works that were suddenly rent; answering missiles would strike near the black gunboats; and slender, shining jets of water would dart straight up in the air, and fall back in showers of spray; like uneasy monsters the ironclads kept in constant motion, firing from one side and then swinging slowly around, and firing from the other, and moving restlessly up and down stream, never keeping still a moment; white clouds of smoke floated off from hotly engaged batteries; the booming of a thousand guns, softened by the dis-

tance, was musical and grand, and past that magnificent and indescribable panorama of war, the great river flowed as tranquilly on as though pouring its smooth tides through the heart of a wilderness.

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