LEE AT GETTYSBURG.

BY J. D. IMBODEN.

The recent death of the commander of the Confederate armies, General Lee; the uncertainty which exists in the public mind of the South whether he had prepared since the war any record of his military operations to supply the loss in the burning of Richmond of so many of the official papers of the Confederacy; and the desire that all fair minded men feel, that the materials for a true and complete history of the great conflict in all its details shall be collected and preserved for the use of the future dispassionate and impartial historian of the war, are sufficient reasons, it seems to me, for the publication of the following incidents of General Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania in the summer of 1863, and of his retreat from Gettysburg.

For convenience of narration, and to give authenticity to the facts stated, I write under my own signature, and as an eye-witness of all that is related. * * * I prefer confining myself to a simple statement of hitherto unpublished facts that came under my personal observation, as a modest contribution to the annals of the period; some of them of little importance in themselves, but forming a part of the history of the great event that probaly decided the fate of the country.

To understand properly how I came to occupy the important position assigned to me by General Lee in his retreat from Gettysburg, and which gave me the opportunity of seeing and hearing what I am about to narrate, it is necessary to state that during the whole of the preceding winter and spring I had a somewhat independent and mixed command of infantry, artillery, and cavalry, which I had raised and organized in my native mountains of Virginia, after "Stonewall" Jackson's famous campaign in 1862 in the Shenandoah Valley, in which, with less than 15,000 men, he in about thirty days encountered and defeated successively Generals Milroy, Banks, Fremont and Shields, and, having relieved the valley of their presence, moved to the Chickahominy to assist in the operations against General McClellan.

In May 1863, with the mountaineers I had enlisted and organized during the nine preceding months, strengthened by some temporary reinforcements, amounting to about 3,000 men. I was ordered by General Lee on an expedition through the northwestern counties beyond the Alleghenies, to break up the military posts at Beverly, Buchannon, Phillipi, Weston, Bulltown, Sutton, Big Birch and Summersville, and, if possible, with the co-operation of Generals William E. Jones and Samuel Jones, to destroy the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in the mountains, and then drive the Federals out of the Kanawha Valley. This raid occupied thirty-seven days, and was in the main successful. Within a week after our return, to the vicinity of Staunton in the Shenandoah Valley, I received a long confidential letter from General Lee, informing me of his purpose to cross the Blue Ridge from the Rapidan into the valley, to capture Winchester, and cross the Potomac; and directing me to move independently and at once through the mountains against Cumberland, Maryland, to break up the small posts along the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, and destroy all the bridges eastward as far as Martinsburg. General Lee had driven Milroy out of Winchester and was crossing the Potomac. He again confidentially advised me of his contemplated movements and ordered me to go into Pennsylvania as far as I deemed prudent, west of the North Mountain, and to keep an eye upon Milroy, who was reported to be collecting his scattered troops at Bloody Run. This duty took us as far as McConnelsburg, where we crossed the mountains eastward to Mercersburg. There on the night of the 30th of June, we were ordered to Chambersburg to relieve General Pickett's division which held the place. Arriving about 4 p. m., on the 1st of July, General Pickett at once moved off to join the army, then near Gettysburg.

That night I received a brief note from General Lee, expressing the apprehension that we were in some danger of being cut off from communication with him by the Union cavalry, and directing us to move next morning as far as the South Mountain on the road toward Gettysburg, and keep it open for Generals William E. Jones and Beverly Robertson whose brigades of cavalry were in the direction of Shippensburg. About midnight of the 2d, after a good deal of harrassment from detachments of the hostile cavalry, we gained the top of the mountains, east of the Hon. Thad. Stevens' iron works, then in ruins. Before daybreak on the 3d, Robertson and Jones passed us, and about sunrise we followed them. I belonged to no division or corps in our army, and therefore, on arriving near Gettysburg about noon, when the conflict was raging in all its fury, I reported directly to General Lee for orders, and was assigned a position to aid in repelling any cavalry demonstration that might occur on the flanks or rear. None being made, my little force took no part in the battle. I then had only about 2,100 effective men and a six gun battery.

When night closed upon the grand scene our army was repulsed. Silence and gloom prevaded our camps. We knew that the day had gone against us, but the extent of the disaster was not known except in high quarters. The carnage of the day was reported to have been frightful, but our army was not in retreat, and we all surmised that with to-morrow's dawn would come a renewal of the struggle; and we knew that if such was the case those who had not been in the fight would have their full share in the honors and the dangers of the next day. All felt and appreciated the momentous consequences of final defeat or victory on that great field. These considerations made, that, to us, one of those solemn and awful nights that every one who fought through our long war sometimes experienced before a great battle.

Few camp fires enlivened the scene. It was a warm summer's night, and the weary soldiers were lying in groups on the luxuriating grass of the meadows we occupied, discussing events of the day or watching that their horses did not straggle off in browsing around. About eleven o'clock a horseman approached and delivered a message from General Lee that he wished to see me immediately. I mounted at once, and accompanied by Lieutenant McPhail of my staff, and guided by the courier, rode about two miles towards Gettysburg, where half a dozen small tents on the roadside were pointed out as General Lee's headquarters for the night. He was not there; but I was informed that I would find him with General A. P. Hill half a mile further on. On reaching the place indicated, a flickering, solitary candle, visible through the open front of a common tent, showed where Generals Lee and Hill were seated on camp stools, with a county map spread upon their knees and engaged in a low and earnest conversation. They ceased speaking as I approached, and after the ordinary salutations General Lee directed me to go to his headquarters and wait for him. He did not return until about one o'clock, when he came riding along at a slow walk and evidently wrapped in profound thought.

There was not even a sentinel on duty, and no one of his staff was about. The moon was high in the heavens, shedding a flood of soft, silvery light, almost as bright as day, upon the scene. When he approached and saw us, he reined up his horse and essayed to dismount. The effort to do betrayed so much physical exhaustion that I stepped forward to assist him, but before I reached him he had alighted. He threw his arm across the saddle to rest himself, and fixing his eyes upon the ground leaned in silence upon his equally weary horse; the two forming a striking group, as motionless as a statue. The moon shone full upon his massive features, and revealed an expression of sadness I had never seen upon that fine countenance before, in any of the vicissitudes of the war through which he had passed. I waited for him to speak until the silence became painful and embarrassing, when to break it, and change the current of his thoughts, I remarked, in a sympathetic tone, and in allusion to his great fatigue.

"General this has been a hard day on you."

This attracted his attention. He looked up and replied mournfully:

"Yes, it has been a sad, sad day to us," and immediately relapsed into his thoughtful mood and attitude. Being unwilling again to intrude upon his reflections, I said no more. After a minute or two he suddenly straightened up to his full height, and turning to me with more animation, energy and excitement of manner than I had ever seen in him before, he addressed me in a voice tremulous with emotion, and said:

"General, I never saw troops behave more magnificently, than Pickett's division of Virginians did to-day in their grand charge upon the enemy. And if they had been supported, as they were to have been—but, for some reason not yet fully explained to me, they were not—we would have held the position they so gloriously won at such a fearful loss of noble lives, and the day would have been ours."

After a moment he added in a tone almost of agony:

"Too bad! *Too bad!!* Oh! TOO BAD!!!"

I never shall forget, as long as I live, his language, and his manner, and his appearance and expression of mental suffering. Altogether it was a scene that a historical painter might well immortalize had one been fortunately present to witness it.

[illegible] while he called up a [illegible] from his sleep to take his horse, spoke mournfully, by name, of several of his friends who had fallen during the day; and when a candle had been lighted invited me alone in his tent, where, as soon as we were seated, he remarked:

"We must return to Virginia. As many of our poor wounded as possible must be taken home. I have sent for you because your men are fresh, to guard the trains back to Virginia. The duty will be arduous responsible and dangerous, for I am afraid you will be harassed by the enemy's cavalry. I can spare you as much artillery as you require, but no other troops, as I shall need all I have to return to the Potomac by a different route from yours. All the transportation and all the care of the wounded will be intrusted to you. You will recross the mountain by the Chambersburg road, and then proceed to Williamsport by any route you deem best, without halting. There rest and feed your animals then ford the river, and make no halt till you reach Winchester, where I will again communicate with you."

After a good deal of conversation he sent for his chiefs of staff and ordered them to have everything in readiness for me to take command the next morning, remarking to me that the general instruction he had given would be sent to me next day in writing. As I was about leaving to return to my camp, he came out of his tent and said to me in a low tone: "I will place in your hands to-morrow a sealed package for President Davis, which you will retain in your possession till you are across the Potomac, when you will detail a trusty commissioned officer to take it to Richmond with all possible despatch, and deliver it immediately to the President. I impress it upon you that whatever happens this package must not fall into the hands of the enemy. If you should unfortunately be captured, destroy it."

On the morning of the 4th my written instructions and the package for Mr. Davis were delivered to me. It was soon apparent that the wagons and ambulances and the wounded could not be ready to move till late in the afternoon. The General sent me four four-gun batteries, which with my own gave me twenty-two guns to defend the trains.

Shortly after noon the very windows of heaven seemed to have been opened. Rain fell in dashing torrents, and in a little while the whole face of the earth was covered with water. The meadows became small lakes; raging streams ran across the road in every depression of the ground; wagons, ambulances, artillery carriages filled the roads and fields in all directions. The storm increased in fury every moment. Canvas was no protection against it, and the poor wounded, lying upon the hard, naked boards of the wagon bodies, were drenched by the cold rain. Horses and mules were blinded and maddened by the storm, and became almost unmanageable. The roar of the winds and waters made it almost impossible to communicate orders. Night was rapidly approaching, and there was danger that in the darkness the "confusion" would become "worse confounded." About 4 p. m. the head of the column was put in motion and begun the ascent of the mountain. After dark I set out to gain the advance. The train was seventeen miles long when drawn out on the road. It was moving rapidly, and from every wagon issued wails of agony. For four hours I galloped along, passing to the front, and heard more—it was too dark to see—of the horrors of war than I had witnessed from the battle of Bull Run up to that day. In the wagons were men wounded and mutilated in every conceivable way. Some had their legs shattered by a shell or Minie ball; some were shot through their bodies; others had arms torn to shreds; some had received a ball in the face, or a jagged piece of shell had lacerated their heads. Scarcely one in a hundred had received adequate surgical aid. Many had been without food for 36 hours. The ragged, bloody, and dirty clothes, all clotted and hardened with blood, were rasping the tender, inflamed lips of their gaping wounds. Very few of the wagons had even straw in them, and all were without springs. The road was rough and rocky. The jolting was enough to have killed sound, strong men. From nearly every wagon, as the horses trotted on, such cries and shrieks as these greeted the car:

"Oh God! why can't I die?"

"My God! will no one have mercy and kill me and end my misery?"

"Oh! stop one minute and take me out and leave me to die on the roadside."

"I am dying! I am dying! My poor wife, my dear children! what will become of you?"

Some were praying; others were uttering the most fearful oaths and execrations that despair could wring from them in their agony. Occasionally a wagon would be passed from which only low, deep moans and sobs could be heard. No help could be rendered to any of the sufferers. On, on, we must move on. The storm continued and the darkness was fearful. There was no time even to fill a canteen with water for a dying man; for, except the drivers and the guards disposed in compact bodies every half mile, all were wounded and helpless in that vast train of misery. The night was awful, and yet in it was our safety, for no enemy would dare attack us when he could not distinguish friend from foe. We knew that when day broke upon us we would be harassed by bands of cavalry hanging on our flanks. Therefore our aim was to go as far as possible under cover of the night, and so we kept on. It was my sad lot to pass the whole distance from the rear to the head of the column, and no language can convey an idea of the horrors of that most horrible of all nights of our long and bloody war.

Daybreak on the morning of the 5th found the head of our column at Greencastle, twelve or fifteen miles from the Potomac at Williamsport, our point of crossing. Here our apprehended troubles from the Union cavalry began. From the fields and cross roads they attacked us in small bodies, striking the column where there were few or no guards, and creating great confusion.

To add still further to our perplexities, a report was brought that the Federals in large force held Williamsport. This fortunately proved untrue. After a great deal of harassing and desultory fighting along the road, nearly the whole immense train reached Williamsport a little after the middle of the day. The town was taken possession of; all the churches, school houses, etc., were converted into hospitals, and proving insufficient, many of the private houses were occupied. Straw was obtained on the neighboring farms; the wounded were removed from the wagons and housed; the citizens were all put to cooking and the army surgeons to dressing wounds. The dead were selected from the train—for many had perished on the way—and were decently buried. All this had to be done because the tremendous rains had raised the river more than ten feet above the fording stage, and we could not possibly cross.

Our situation was frightful. We had over 10,000 animals and all the wagons of General Lee's army under our charge, and all the wounded that could be brought from Gettysburg. Our supply of provisions consisted of a few wagon loads of flour and a small lot of cattle. My effective force was only about 2,000 men and twenty-odd field pieces. We did not know where our army was; the river could not be crossed; and small parties of cavalry were still hovering around. The means of ferriage consisted of two small boats and a small wire rope stretched across the river, which owing to the force of the swollen current broke several times during the day. To reduce the space to be defended as much as possible, all the wagons and animals were parked close together on the riverbank.

Believing that an attack would soon be made upon us, I ordered the wagoners to be mustered, and, taking three out of every four, organized them into companies, and armed them with the weapons of the wounded men found in the train. By this means I added to my effective force about five hundred men.

Slightly wounded officer promptly volunteering their services to command these improvised soldiers; and many of our quartermasters and commissaries did the same thing. We were not seriously molested on the 5th; but next morning about nine o'clock information reached me that a large body of cavalry from Fredericks, Maryland, was rapidly advancing to atack us. As we could not retreat further, it was at once frankly made known to the troops that unless we could repel the threatened attack we should all become prisoners, and that the loss of his whole transportation would probably ruin General Lee; for it could not be replaced for many months, if at all, in the then exhausted condition of the Confederate States. So far from repressing the ardor of the troops, this frank announcement of our peril inspired all with the utmost enthusiasm. Men and officers alike, forgetting the sufferings of the past few days, proclaimed their determination to drive back the attacking force or perish in the attempt. All told, we were less than 3,000 men. The advancing force we knew to be more than double ours, consisting, as we have ascertained, of five regular and eight volunteer regiments of cavalry, with eighteen guns, all under command of Generals Buford and Kilpatrick. We had no works of any kind; the country was open and almost level, and there was no advantage of position we could occupy. It must necessarily be a square stand up fight face to face. We had twenty-two field guns of various calibre, and one Whitworth. These were disposed in batteries, in semicircle, about one mile out of the village, on the summit of a very slight rising ground that lies back of the town. Except the artillery, our troops were held out of view of the assailants, and ready to be moved to any menaced point along the whole line of nearly two miles in extent. Knowing that nothing could save us but a bold "bluff" game, orders had been given to the artillery as soon as the advancing forces came within range to open fire along the whole line, and keep it up with the utmost rapidity. A little after one o'clock they appeared on two roads in our front, and our batteries opened. They soon had their guns in position, and a very lively artillery fight began. We fired with great rapidity, and in less than an hour two of our batteries reported that their ammunition was exhausted. This would have been fatal to us but for the opportune arrival at the critical moment of an ammunition train from Winchester. The wagons were ferried across to our side as soon as possible, and driven on the field in a gallop to supply the silent guns. Not having men to occupy half our line, they were moved up in order of battle, first to one battery, then withdrawn and double-quicked to another, but out of view of our assailants till they could be shown at some other point on our line. By this manœuvring we made the impression that we had a strong supporting force in the rear of all our guns along the entire front. To test this, Generals Buford and Kilpatrick dismounted five regiments and advanced them on foot on our right. We concentrated there all the men we had, wagoners and all, and thus, with the aid of the united fire of all our guns directed at the advancing line, we drove it back, and rushed forward two of our batteries four or five hundred yards further to the front. This boldness prevented another charge, and the fight was continued till near sunset with the artillery. About that time General Fitzhugh Lee sent a message from toward Greencastle, that if we could hold out an hour he would reinforce us with 3,000 men. This intelligence elicited a loud and long continued cheer along our whole line, which was heard and understood by our adversaries, as we learned from prisoners taken. A few minutes later General J. E. B. Stuart, advanced from Hagerstown, fell unexpectedly upon the rear of their right wing, and in ten minutes they were in rapid retreat by their left flank in the direction of Boonsborough. Night coming on enabled them to escape.

By extraordinary good fortune we had thus saved all of General Lee's trains. A bold charge at any time before sunset would have broken our feeble lines, and we should all have fallen an easy prey to the Federals. This come to be known as "the wagoner's fight" in our army, from the fact that so many of them were armed and did such gallant service in repelling the attack made on our right by the dismounted regiments.

Our defeat that day would have been an irreparable blow to General Lee, in the loss of all his transportation. Every man engaged knew this, and probably in no fight of the war was there a more determined spirit shown than by the handful of cooped-up troops. The next day our army from Gettysburg arrived, and the country is familiar with the manner in which it escaped across the Potomac on the night of the 9th.

It may be interesting to repeat one or two facts to show the peril in which we were until the river could be bridged. About 4,000 prisoners taken at Gettysburg were ferried across the river by the morning of the 9th, and I was ordered to guard them to Staunton. Before we had proceeded two miles I received a note from General Lee to report to him in person immediately. I rode to the river, was ferried over, and galloped out toward Hagerstown. As I proceeded I became satisfied that a serious demonstration was making along our front, from the heavy artillery fire extending for a long distance along the line. I overtook General Lee riding to the front near Hagerstown. He immediately reined up, and remarked that he believed I was familiar with all the fords of the Potomac above Williamsport, and the roads approaching them. I replied that I knew them perfectly. He then called up some one of his staff to write down my answers to his questions and required me to name all fords as high up as Cumberland, and describe minutely their character, and the roads and surrounding country on both sides of the river, and directed me to send my brother, Colonel Imboden, to him to act as a guide with his regiment, if he should be compelled to retreat higher up the river to cross it. His situation was then very precarious. When about parting from him to recross the river and move on with the prisoners, he told me they would probably be rescued before I reached Winchester, my guard was so small, and he expected a force of cavalry would cross Harper's Ferry to cut us off, and he could not spare to me any additional troops, as he might be hard pressed before he got over the river, which was still very much swollen by the rains. Referring to the high water, he laughingly inquired, "Does it ever quit raining about here? If so, I should like to see a clear day."

These incidents go to show how near Gettysburg came to ending the war in 1863. If we had been successful in that battle, the probabilities are that Baltimore and Washington would at once have fallen into our hands; and at that time there was so large a "peace party" in the North, that the Federal Government would have found it difficult, if not impossible to carry on the war. General Lee's opinion was that we lost the battle because Pickett was not supported "as he was to have been." On the other hand, if Generals Buford and Kilpatrick had captured the ten thousand animals and all the transportation of Lee's army at Williamsport, it would have been an irreparable loss, and would probably have led to the fall of Richmond in the autumn of 1863. On such small circumstances do the affairs of nations sometimes turn.—*Galaxy for April.*

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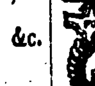

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