

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PENINSULAR CAMPAIGN.

IV. THE WITHDRAWAL FROM THE PENINSULA.

Position of the two Armies.—Petersburg fortified.—Pope placed in Command of the Army of Virginia.—Halleck appointed General-in-Chief.—McClellan asks for Re-enforcements.—His Plan of carrying on the War.—McClellan and Halleck.—Jackson and Hill sent to Gordonsville.—Night Attack from Coggin's Point.—Movement to Malvern Hill.—McClellan ordered to withdraw from the Peninsula.—His Remonstrance.—Hooker's Advice.—Halleck's Reasons for the Order.—The Withdrawal.—The Confederates march Northward.

SIX weeks of almost entire inactivity followed the battle of Malvern and the retreat of the Federal army to Harrison's Landing. The Confederate force remained for some days in the vicinity of the battle-field, and on the 8th of July returned to its positions near Richmond, the movement being so completely masked by the cavalry that no intelligence of it reached the Federal commander, who was still fearful of an attack.¹ Lee was apprehensive that an attempt might be made upon Richmond from the new Federal base by way of Petersburg. D. H. Hill was detached from his division, and placed in command of the Department of the South Side, extending from Drewry's Bluff to the South Carolina line. Petersburg was utterly defenseless, not a spadeful of earth having been thrown up around it. A system of fortifications was now begun, which were ultimately developed into the formidable works which afterward resisted for so long the approach of General Grant. All the troops that could be spared from before Richmond were set to work upon these intrenchments, besides a thousand negroes brought from North Carolina.²

On the 26th of June, General Pope had been called from the West, and placed in command of the Army of Virginia, comprising the forces of McDowell, Banks, and Fremont. Pope strenuously opposed the movement of McClellan to the James, urging instead that, if he found himself unable to maintain his position on the Chickahominy, he should mass all his force on the north bank, even at the risk of losing much material of war, and endeavor to make his way in the direction of Hanover Court-house, but in no case to retreat farther to the south than the White House on the Pamunkey. After the retreat to the James, it became apparent that the views of Pope and McClellan were wholly opposed to each other. Both commanders urged the appointment of a commander-in-chief over all the forces. General Halleck, who had successfully conducted operations in the West, was appointed to command the whole land forces of the United States as general-in-chief, and was directed to repair to the capital as soon as he could with safety to the operations within his Department of the Mississippi. This order was dated July 11, and Halleck assumed the command on the 23d.

McClellan had not fairly established himself in his new position when he began to urge that he should be largely re-enforced. On the 1st of July he asked for 50,000 men at once. Next day: "Re-enforcements should be sent to me rather much over than less than 100,000 men." In reply to the demand for 50,000, the President said that, according to McClellan's own plan, 75,000 were required for the defense of Washington; while, including Banks, Fremont, McDowell, and those about the capital, there were not more than 60,000; adding to these Wool at Baltimore, and Dix at Fortress Monroe, there were not, outside of the force then with McClellan, 75,000 men east of the Mountains. "Thus the idea of sending you 50,000, or any other considerable force promptly, is simply absurd." McClellan still continued to urge for re-enforcements from any and every quarter. The true defense of Washington, he said, was before Richmond; Burnside, with all his troops, should be brought thither from North Carolina; with a little more than half a chance he could take Richmond.

On the 25th of July General Halleck went to the James in order to consult with the commander of the Army of the Potomac. At that time McClellan's plan was to cross the James River, attack Petersburg, cut off the enemy's communications with the South, making no farther demonstrations against Richmond. Petersburg being then wholly unfortified, this attempt might probably have succeeded. Halleck was, however, utterly averse to the plan, and it was abandoned. McClellan then said that with 30,000 re-enforcements he could attack Richmond with a good chance of success, although he would then have but 120,000 effective men, while he estimated the force of the enemy at not less than 200,000. Halleck would promise only 20,000, and said that unless McClellan could attack Richmond with these, with a strong probability of success, it would be a military necessity to unite the forces of McClellan and Pope. McClellan, after consultation with his officers, decided that he would make the attempt with 20,000, although he would not say that the probabilities were in favor of success; still, there was a chance, and he would try it, and Halleck returned to Washington with the understanding that the attempt should be made. The next day McClellan wrote asking 15,000 or 20,000 more re-enforcements.³

The four weeks' quiet on the James was interrupted on the night of July 31. The Union fleet lay stretched along for two miles above and below Harrison's Landing. Just opposite, across the James, was Coggin's Point, a peninsular projection jutting out into the river, diminishing its breadth to 1000 yards. Hill ordered forty-three guns to be quietly placed on the point; this was done without being discovered from the opposite shore, and just after midnight fire was opened upon the Federal shipping and camp.

Innumerable lights from the vessels and camp served to show just where lay the objects of aim, and for half an hour there was a continuous bombardment. But, owing to the difficulty of the roads, and the necessity for concealing the operation, only a small quantity of ammunition had been brought forward. In all only 1000 shot were fired, by which ten men were killed and fifteen wounded. The attack failed of its main object, the injuring of the fleet. The fire was returned briskly from the gun-boats, but it was almost harmless, there being nothing to show the position of the enemy. Of the Confederates but one man was killed and two wounded. The ammunition being expended, the guns were withdrawn as silently as they had been advanced.⁴ The south bank of the river opposite his position was then occupied by McClellan, who wrote cheerily to Halleck, who had urged him to press the enemy: "I will attend to your telegraph about pressing at once. I will send Hooker out. Give me Burnside, and I will stir these people up."⁵

On the 4th of August McClellan moved, as if to press the enemy. Hooker and Sedgwick advanced to Malvern Hill, drove back the enemy's pickets, took possession of the point, and pushed reconnoissances toward Richmond. McClellan reported: "This is a very advantageous position to cover an advance on Richmond, only 14½ miles distant; and I feel confident that, with re-enforcements, I could march this army there in five days."⁶ When intelligence of this advance reached Richmond, the greater part of the troops there were hurried down; and the night of the 6th closed upon the two armies occupying nearly the same positions as on the 1st of July. Next morning, when the Confederates looked to the hill, they found it abandoned by the Union force.⁴ McClellan had, during the night, received peremptory orders from Halleck to withdraw his army from the Peninsula. He sent an earnest remonstrance against this order. His army, he said, was now in excellent condition; he held both sides of the James River, and could act in any direction. He was within 25 miles of Richmond, and was not likely to meet the enemy in sufficient force to fight a battle until he had reached 15 or 18 miles, thus practically bringing him within 10 miles of Richmond. His longest line of land transportation was 25 miles; but, by the aid of the gun-boats, his army could be supplied by water during its advance until within 12 miles of Richmond. The retreat would demoralize the army, would depress the people of the North, and would probably influence foreign powers to recognize the Confederacy. He therefore urged that the order should be rescinded; and that, so far from being recalled, his army should be promptly re-enforced to enable it to resume the offensive.⁵ Hooker, indeed, wished to disobey the order of the general-in-chief. He said that they had then force enough to take Richmond; he himself was ready to take the advance. If the movement was unsuccessful, it would probably cost McClellan his head, but that "he might as well die for an old sheep as for a lamb." McClellan for a time seemed inclined to follow Hooker's counsel. On the 10th he gave Hooker a written order to supply himself with ammunition and three days' rations, and to be ready to march the next day. "This order," says Hooker, "was communicated to the whole army, and I firmly believed that order meant Richmond; but, before the time arrived for executing it, it was countermanded."⁶

To McClellan's remonstrance Halleck replied briefly by telegraph, "The order will not be rescinded, and you will be expected to execute it with all possible promptness;" and at length by letter, setting forth his reasons for giving and adhering to the order.⁷

After this definite and final order for the withdrawal from the Peninsula ten days passed before the army began to move. Sharp criminations and recriminations passed between Halleck and McClellan on account of this delay. But at length, on the 16th, the sick and stores had all been embarked, and the movement of the troops had begun. A long pontoon bridge had been thrown across the Chickahominy near its mouth, and by this and other bridges the troops recrossed that fatal stream. On the morning of the 18th the rear guard was over and the bridge was removed. McClellan, who had apprehended an attack upon his rear, did not feel secure until he had his whole army across the river.⁸ But almost the entire Confederate force had been gradually withdrawn from Richmond. Jackson and Ewell had been sent to Gordonsville five weeks before; they had been followed a fortnight later by A. P. Hill. On the 13th of August, Longstreet's, Hood's, and the bulk of Magruder's and Huger's divisions marched northward; and while McClellan was congratulating himself that he had got safely across the Chickahominy, the whole Confederate force was a hundred miles away, confronting Pope on the Rappahannock.⁹

¹ Lee's Rep., ii., 232.

² McC. Rep., 285.

³ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁴ Lee's Rep., i., 16.

⁵ McC. Rep., 288-296.

⁶ Hooker's Testimony, in *Com. Rep.*, 579.

⁷ After replying to the strategical and political arguments advanced by McClellan, Halleck says: "If your estimate of the enemy's strength was correct, your requisition [for 35,000 re-enforcements] was perfectly reasonable; but it was perfectly impossible to fill it until new troops could be enlisted and organized, which would require several weeks. To keep your army in its present position until it could be so re-enforced would almost destroy it in that climate; and even after you receive the re-enforcements asked for, you admitted that you must reduce Fort Darling and the river batteries before you could advance upon Richmond. It is by no means certain that the reduction of these fortifications would not require considerable time, perhaps as much as those at Yorktown. This delay might not only be fatal to the health of your army, but, in the mean time, General Pope's forces would be exposed to the heavy blows of the enemy without the slightest hope of assistance from you. . . . I have not inquired, and I do not wish to know by whose advice, or for what reasons, the Army of the Potomac was separated into two parts, with the enemy between them. I find the forces divided, and I wish to unite them. Only one feasible plan has been presented for doing this. If you or any one else had presented a better plan, I should have adopted it. But all of your plans require re-enforcements which it is impossible to give you. It is very easy to ask for re-enforcements, but it is not so easy to give them when you have no disposable troops at your command."—McC. Rep., 299-301.

⁸ McC. Rep., 313-316.

⁹ Lee's Rep., i., 13, 18; ii., 3, 80.

¹ "The rebel army is in our front, with the purpose of overwhelming us by attacking our positions, or reducing us by blocking our river communications. I can not but regard our position as critical."—McClellan to the President, July 7.

² D. H. Hill, in Lee's Rep., ii., 110.

³ Com. Rep., 456.