

Heroes of the Great Conflict; Life and Services of William Farrar eBook

Heroes of the Great Conflict; Life and Services of William Farrar by James H. Wilson

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HEROES OF THE GREAT CONFLICT; LIFE AND SERVICES OF WILLIAM FARRAR SMITH, MAJOR GENERAL, UNITED STATES VOLUNTEER IN THE CIVIL WAR

A Sketch by

James Harrison Wilson, major general, U.S.V.

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[Illustration]

William Farrar Smith, the subject of this sketch, graduated at West Point in 1845, fourth in a class of forty-one members. He died at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on the 28th of February, 1903 in his seventy-ninth year.

The publication of the Rebellion Records puts within the reach of every student the official reports of the various campaigns and battles of the Great Conflict, but something more is needed. They deal but slightly with men's motives, and still less with their personal peculiarities. They give only here and there any idea whatever of the origin of the plans of campaigns or battles and rarely any adequate description of the topography of the theatre of war, or of the difficulties to be overcome. They describe but superficially the organization, equipment, armament and supply of the troops, and leave their trials, hardships and extraordinary virtues largely to the imagination. They are entirely silent as to the qualities and idiosyncrasies of the leaders. Neither romance nor personal adventure finds any place within their pages, and fine writing is entirely foreign to their purpose. They are for the most part dry and unemotional in style, and are put together so far as possible chronologically in the order of their importance without the slightest reference to literary effect. While nothing is more untrustworthy generally than personal recollections of events which took place over a third of a century ago, those which are supported by letters and diaries are of inestimable value in construing and reconciling the official reports. But this is not all. The daily journals and other contemporaneous publications are quite important and cannot be safely left out of account. All must be taken into consideration before the final distribution of praise and blame is made, or the last word is written in reference to events or to the great actors who controlled or took part in them.

In the list of the most notable men of the day the name of Major General *William Farrar Smith* must be recorded. He belonged at the outbreak of the Civil War, to that distinguished group of which Lee on the Southern side and McClellan on the Northern, were the center. Joseph E. Johnston and William B. Franklin were his most intimate friends, and I but recall what was then the popular belief when I state that they were

widely regarded as the best educated and the most brilliant officers in the service. They were in middle life, in the full enjoyment of their powers, and it was the confident opinion of those who knew them best, that they were sure to become

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conspicuous leaders in the impending conflict. Great things were expected of them, and in this the world was not disappointed. They all reached high rank and great distinction, but only one of the group was fortunate enough to enroll himself amongst the world's great commanders. Johnston rose to the leadership of an independent army but failed to win a great victory or to secure the entire approval of his superiors. Franklin was without doubt a corps commander of sound judgment and unshakable courage, but he also failed to achieve the success that was expected of him, and to secure the support and confidence that his high character fully entitled him to look for from his Government. Smith who was not inferior to the ablest of his friends and contemporaries, in the art and science of war, had a career of great usefulness, in which he rendered services of extraordinary value and brilliancy but which ended in disappointment and unhappiness.

He was however not only a conspicuous officer connected with important events throughout his life, and especially during the Great Conflict, but he was a singularly virile and independent character who exerted great influence over all with whom he came in contact. He was strong, self-contained and deliberate in speech, and having been an industrious student and an acute thinker all his life, his opinions always commanded attention and respect. It so happened that his services brought him into the very focus of events on more than one occasion. It so happened also that I was more or less intimate with him to the time of his death, from the date of my entry into the Military Academy, where I had the good fortune to receive his instruction in mathematics. I first met him in the field, while I was serving temporarily on the staff of General McClellan, and he was commanding a division in the Antietam campaign, and next at Chattanooga, whither I was sent in advance of General Grant to prepare for his coming, after the disastrous battle of Chickamauga.

Shortly afterwards Smith was transferred to Grant's staff as Chief Engineer, and we messed and served together, in the closest intimacy throughout that campaign, and until I was assigned to duty in the War Department in charge of the Cavalry Bureau. I saw him frequently while I was commanding a division of cavalry and he an army corps in Grant's overland campaign against Richmond. During the latter period we were exceedingly intimate, and when we were not serving together an active correspondence was kept up between us. It is a source of pleasure and satisfaction to me that this intimacy became still closer after General Smith was appointed agent of the United States and assigned as a civil engineer to the charge of the river and harbor works on the Delaware and Maryland peninsula, with his office at Wilmington, Delaware. This long and close intimacy, extending as it did over the greater part of a lifetime, has afforded me an ample opportunity of studying his character and familiarizing myself with the facts of his military career, and with the point of view from which he considered his relations to the men and events with which he was so conspicuously connected.

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A man of great purity of character and great singleness of purpose, he took an intense interest in whatever his hand found to do. He felt a deep and abiding concern in all public and professional questions, and was both a tender and affectionate friend and an unrelenting enemy. He was a bold and resolute thinker who indulged in no half way measures. The bolder his plans and the more dangerous his undertakings, the more careful was he in working out the details, and the more attentive was he in supervising their execution. He left nothing to chance, but provided for every possible contingency with infinite care and yet he was a rapid worker. Methodical in his habits, untiring in his application and deliberate in his manner, he was always ready, always on time and nearly always successful.

In following him through the trials and vicissitudes of his active life it will be seen that he was one of the most interesting personalities of his day. He played a bold and distinguished part in the war for the Union, quite out of proportion to the actual command which fell to his lot. Indeed, it may well be doubted if any other single officer exerted a more potential or beneficial influence than he did upon the plans and operations in which he took part. While he was austere and reserved in manners, he was most highly esteemed by all with whom he served, and received unstinted praise for his suggestions and assistance, and yet strangely enough he became involved in several notable military controversies, which so enlisted his interest and wounded his pride as to materially change his career and cause him great unhappiness, during the later years of his life.

It may be truly said that he came to know by experience the dangers of frankness and friendly criticism, and that even the most patriotic and unselfish men in these modern times, like those of antiquity "have their ambitions which neither seas nor mountains nor unpeopled deserts can limit;" their egotism and personal interests "which neither victory nor far-reaching fame can suppress;" their secret motives and purposes which "cause them to injure one another when they touch and are close together." After all, generals and statesmen are but fallible men, the most magnanimous of whom are watchful of their rivals, and love not those who spitefully use them. In the vindication of his claims that he has rendered some service to his country, General Smith has made several valuable contributions^[1] to current American history, and has in addition left a manuscript volume of personal memoirs upon which I shall draw as occasion offers, and which will doubtless be published in due time. They were written during the last two years of his life and throw an interesting light, not only upon his own deeds and character, but upon the life and services of his friends and contemporaries. They are conceived in a kindly and charitable vein which does credit both to his heart and to his understanding.

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[Footnote 1: From *Chattanooga to Petersburg under Generals Grant and Butler*, Houghton, Muffin & Co., N.Y. 1893.]

William Farrar Smith was born at St. Albans, in Northern Vermont, on the 17th of February, 1824. He came of good New England stock, which emigrated from Massachusetts to the valley of Lake Champlain before the beginning of the last century. Both his paternal and maternal ancestors and relations were notable people, and took prominent parts in the troubles of a thinly-settled frontier, and especially in the French and Indian war, and in the Committee of Safety, as well as in the militia and volunteers during the Revolutionary War. They fought at the battle of Lake George, at the capture of Fort Ticonderoga, and at the affairs at Hubbardton and Bennington. They were the companions of Stark, Seth Warner and Ethan Allen, and appear to have borne themselves bravely and well upon all occasions. They were by name Robinsons, Saffords, Fays, Butlers and Smiths. There is a well-founded tradition that his father's family, which came from the old hill town of Barre, Massachusetts, were known during the earlier colonial days as Smithson, but before emigrating to Vermont dropped the second syllable for the sake of simplicity, and always thereafter called themselves Smith.

William's father was a respectable farmer at or near St. Albans. His uncle John was a lawyer and a judge of distinction, and during the excitement growing out of the Canadian rebellion of 1837, was elected to the next Congress. He was a Democrat and the only one up to that time ever elected from the State. During his term of service he gave the appointment of cadet at West Point to his nephew William. His cousin John Gregory Smith, also a lawyer of distinction, was afterwards Governor of Vermont, and for many years president of the Vermont Central and Northern Pacific Railroads. His grandmother Smith also from Barre, was the sister of a certain Captain Gregory of the Highland regiment serving in Boston before the Revolution. Through this connection the General always believed he received a strain of McGregor blood, for many of that clan took the name of Gregory after their immigration to the colonies.

His own mother was Sarah Butler, a direct descendent of Isaac and Samuel Robinson who were believed to have come in the direct line from the celebrated puritan pastor, John Robinson, of Leyden, who was long recognized by even those who differed with him on questions of doctrine as "the most learned, polished and modest spirit that ever separated from the Church of England." To the prepotency of this distinguished divine, General Smith often, in a tone of mingled banter and seriousness, attributed not only his habit of mature reflection and love of learning, but also his "moderation combined with firmness" upon all questions which engaged his attention.

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Be all this as it may, it is certain that his family were straight Anglo-Saxons, who like the rest, came into New England under the pressure of religious and political disturbance at home, and brought with them the sturdy virtues and ineradicable prejudices of their race. It is equally certain that this race, whatever its origin and however it may have been compounded and produced, has thriven and expanded in America, and that our country is indebted to it for not only its greatest scholars, divines and statesmen, but for its greatest soldiers as well. General Smith belonged by nature and education to both classes, and before this sketch is concluded I hope to show that in the highest walks of his chosen profession he had few equals and no superiors.

Like many another youth, his latent love of arms and his determination to go to West Point were aroused by seeing a company of regular soldiers, and making the acquaintance of its officers, at his native town. They were sent there to maintain order and prevent violations of the neutrality laws during the Canadian disturbances in 1837-8. From the day of his cadetship he received the sobriquet and was always thereafter designated familiarly by his more intimate friends as Baldy Smith in contradistinction from other officers of the same patronymic. In the old days his name would have been written Baldysmith.

He was a brilliant and faithful student and became in turn a cadet-corporal, color-sergeant and lieutenant. When it is recalled that he received those honors from that prince of soldiers Captain (afterwards Major General) Charles F. Smith, then commandant of cadets, and in whose presence it is said no graduate of his time could ever appear without involuntarily assuming the position of a soldier, it will be understood that young Smith was brought up under proper influences and sent forth with the highest ideals of his profession. He graduated in the "fives" of his class. He was commissioned as a Brevet Second Lieutenant in the corps of Topographical Engineers, and served with it continuously till, for convenience and simplicity of administration, it was merged with the Corps of Engineers after the outbreak of the Rebellion. At the request of his chief, he gave up two-thirds of the usual graduating leave of absence to lend a hand to an under-manned surveying party on Lake Erie. His services were from the first of the scientific and useful rather than the showy sort. They brought him a wide range of valuable experience, extending from the surveys of the great lakes to explorations of Texas and Arizona, covering a period of seven years, two of which were spent under Joseph E. Johnston and William H. Emory, then of the same corps, while engaged in establishing the new boundary line between Mexico and the United States. During his service in that region he located the stage and wagon-route from San Antonio to El Paso, surveyed a part of the Rio Grande Valley, and familiarized himself with the topography

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and resources of Northwestern Texas and the state of Chihuahua in Mexico. Later he was transferred to Florida and made surveys for a ship canal across the peninsula from the Atlantic to the Gulf of Mexico. Subsequently he had charge of the Eleventh District in the light-house service with his headquarters at Detroit. He then became Assistant Secretary, and finally on the retirement of his friend, Captain Franklin, Engineer Secretary of the Light-House Board. He had previously asked for service with the army in Mexico, but this had been denied. His service in Texas and Florida had brought him in contact with a number of officers who afterwards became distinguished in the Civil War. Among the most notable of these were Buell, Joseph E. Johnston, McClellan, Meade, Burnside and Emory. His light-house service gave him a friendly association with Commodore Shubrick and Captain (afterwards Admiral) Jenkins of the navy, General Totten of the army, Professor Bache of the Coast survey and Professor Henry of the Smithsonian Institute, and opened to him a wide acquaintance with the scientific thought of the day. While connected with the Light-House board he planned and supervised the construction of four first-class light-houses, one for Montauk Point, two for Navesink Highlands and Sandy Hook, and one for Cape Canaveral. These were all works of the highest class, fully abreast of the world's best practice at the time.

His experience in connection with the Light-House Board prepared the way for a piece of specially useful service to the country during the exciting period just prior to the outbreak of actual hostilities between the North and the South. His position gave him access to the Secretary of the Treasury, as the chief of the department to which the Light-House Board belonged. The storm then brewing showed itself in that board, made up, as it was, of Northern and Southern men, as well as elsewhere, and being intensely loyal, Smith took measures to protect and supply the principal light-houses on the southern coast. It will be remembered that Howell Cobb of Georgia was succeeded by General John A. Dix of New York as Secretary of the Treasury, and that the latter aroused the drooping hopes of the country by his celebrated order: "If any man attempts to haul down the American flag shoot him on the spot." Smith was privy to and encouraged the issuance of that order. Immediately afterwards General Dix gave him *carte-blanche* over the light-house service, in pursuance of which he visited all the important southern light stations, winding up at Key West. He found that place cut off from communication with Washington, and liable to fall at once under the control of the Secessionists. The Collector of Customs was a southern man and disloyal. The people of the town were in sympathy with him, and were doing all they could to overawe Captains Hunt and Brannan, who were stationed there with a small force of regular artillery. They were loyal and



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able officers. Both rose to distinction afterwards, but having been left without instructions they were at a loss as to their proper course till Smith arrived with the latest news from Washington. His clear and determined counsel gave them heart and encouragement, under which they made good their hold upon the fort and the island. They were reinforced in due time, which enabled the government to hold this important strategic position at the entrance to the Gulf of Mexico till the termination of the war put an end to all danger. Before returning to the north, Smith visited Havana, where he obtained valuable information for future use.

So far his work had been preparatory, and one of the most useful features of it was his tour of duty at West Point. His services in the south, and especially at Corpus Christi, had brought on a severe attack of malarial poisoning, ending in congestive chills and shattered health, followed by sick-leave and a return to the north. Before he had entirely recovered he was ordered to West Point, as principal Assistant Professor of Mathematics. This was in 1855, but his illness had so seriously affected his head as to make it impossible for him to discharge the duties of his position in a manner satisfactory to himself. As one of his pupils, I failed to discover any lack of knowledge or perspicacity on his part. To the contrary, he impressed the sections of which he had charge as a very clear-headed man with remarkable powers of mind and great aptitude as a disciplinarian and teacher. It is now known, however, that the close attention and mental exertion which his duties required of him gave him such pain as to make it imperative that he should be relieved, and this was done at his own request after a year's hard work and suffering. The injury he had received was unfortunately never entirely overcome. Throughout the whole of his subsequent life he was subject to recurrent attacks of malaria, accompanied by pain in the head with a tendency to mental depression, which disabled him entirely at times, and upon one most important occasion compelled him to leave the field, when his interests and his inclinations demanded that he should remain. I refer now especially to the time when he was assigned by General Grant to the command of the Army of the James, to succeed Major General Butler, who was at the same time ordered to return to Fortress Monroe. It will be remembered that this order was never carried into effect, but that General Smith, who was suffering from one of his attacks, took leave of absence, much to the concern of his friends, and went by the way of Fortress Monroe to New York. There was no great movement under way at the time, but before his leave of absence had expired he was notified that the order in question had been countermanded. Various explanations were given for this action, and I shall recur to it again. But it is believed by those who were interested in General Smith, and had confidence in his unusual capacity for high command, that his relief was largely, if not altogether, due to intrigue, on the part of General Butler, aided perhaps by an exaggerated estimate on the part of General Grant of that officer's political importance, which General Smith could easily have defeated had he been on the ground in actual command of the army to which he had been assigned.

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But to return to his services at West Point. It was during this year that he greatly widened his knowledge of military history and the art of war. Although far from well, he led the studious life of a scientist, and in the daily companionship of the professors and of Lieutenants Silvey and Holabird, two officers of distinguished talent and learning, he obtained new and broader views of professional subjects. He had early become noted as having an investigating mind which could not be satisfied with superficial knowledge, and for a sound and conservative judgment which gave great weight to his conclusions. He was most deliberate and methodical in his habits of thought, and had an unusually tenacious grip upon the thread of his argument. His manners and movements, while free from every appearance of hurry and excitement, were habitually so well ordered that he was enabled to cover a great deal of ground in a small space of time. Always a close student of the higher branches of his profession, and belonging to an elite corps which at that time had no part in the command of troops, he became a proficient in military organization, administration and logistics, and also in strategy and grand-tactics, as taught in the text books, long before the outbreak of the war for the Union, but it is to be observed that he never claimed to have become specially skilled in minor tactics, or in the daily routine of company or regimental service. He was, however, so profoundly devoted to the military profession in a larger way, that at times he gave to those less learned than himself the idea that he was a pedant in knowledge and a martinet on duty. With imperturbable self-possession, great lucidity of statement and a decidedly deliberate and austere manner, he was widely recognized as a masterful man, who won easily and without effort the respect and admiration, not only of the cadets who fell under his charge at West Point, but afterwards of the men and officers who came under his command from the volunteers. To such as are acquainted with West Point life, or with the relations existing between officers and men in the army, no higher evidence can be given of Smith's real abilities and strength of character. It is a creditable fact that no cadet, however adroit or skilful can cheat his way through the Military Academy, and that no officer, however plausible, can for any considerable time deceive or impose upon the cadets with a pretense of knowledge or a show of character which he does not possess. The same is true perhaps in a less degree of the volunteers and their officers. Occasionally a cadet or an officer may be so modest or unobtrusive or so slow of development as to escape the critical observation of his associates, but in most cases he becomes sufficiently known to justify a correct estimate of his character and a fair prediction, under favorable opportunities, as to his probable course and success in life. Of *William F. Smith* it may be truthfully said that he made his best friends among the cadets he taught and the subordinates he commanded, not one of whom ever deserted him in trouble or adversity, denied the greatness of his talents or questioned the elevation of his character. His troubles and differences were always with those above him, never with those under his command.

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As is frequently the fate of the strong man gifted with an analytical mind, and an outspoken contempt of pretense and sham, it was Smith's misfortune upon more than one occasion to arouse the animosity and opposition of those having higher rank than himself. Direct and vigorous in his methods, and confident of the rectitude of his purposes, he never hesitated to give his views to such as he believed to be entitled to them, without reference to whether they would be well received or not. Loyal and truthful by nature, he always held others to the high standard which he set up for himself. Brought up to a rigid observance of military discipline, it is not to be denied that he was exacting in a high degree, with those over whom he found himself in command. While he never permitted those below him to vary from or to disregard his instructions, it is perhaps true that like most men of talent, he was somewhat impatient of restraint, especially in cases where he felt himself to be abler than his commanding officer, or better informed as to the actual conditions of his work, and yet no man knew better than he when the time for discussion and the exercise of discretion ended and that for obedience and vigorous action began. If at any time later in life he seemed to forget the true rule for his own guidance, it must be inferred that he was sorely tried by the ignorance or incompetency of those above him, or had overestimated their forbearance or friendship for him, or their zeal for the public service. Always highly conscientious in his purposes and independent in his thoughts it was but natural that he should scorn "to crook the pregnant hinges of the knee where thrift may follow fawning." Not always as patient and conciliatory with his equals as a less virile or rugged nature would have made him, he occasionally aroused antagonisms and made enemies, as such characters always do, and those enemies were not slow to impugn his motives, nor to do what they could to mar his career. Withal, it will appear from a careful study of his life and services as set forth in the records, and as explained by his own writings, that his critics have signally failed to mar the foundation of his reputation or to deprive him of the fame to which his brilliant achievements so justly entitle him.

The culmination of the political agitation for the dissolution of the Federal Union, and the commencement of actual hostilities between the government and the seceding states, found *William F. Smith*, only a captain by law, after fourteen years of continuous service, a few months over thirty-seven years of age, and in the full maturity of his faculties. As before stated, his health was never afterwards altogether stable, but it was sufficiently re-established to enable him to throw himself heartily into the struggle and to perform such duties as fell to his lot with a fair degree of endurance. Although a Democrat, as far as he had any party connection, his sympathies were all with the Union and National Government, and impelled him to lose no time, but make haste, on his return from Key West and Havana, to obtain such employment as might be open to him. The first duty that was offered him was in New York, where he was engaged for several weeks in mustering the volunteers into the United States service.

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During this period, on the 24th of April, 1861, he was married to Miss Sarah Lyon, a young lady of New York, who was famous for the loveliness of her person and character, whom he had first met two years before. It was on a short wedding trip to his native state that he offered his services to the Governor. The latter had already raised and organized two regiments of infantry but without hesitation he promised Captain Smith the next, as soon as it should be called for.

Meanwhile he was still subject to duty as an engineer officer, and as such, strangely enough was ordered to report to Major General Benjamin F. Butler, fresh from the life of a successful lawyer, then in command at Fortress Monroe, where he arrived on the 1st of June, 1861. While there he conducted several important reconnaissances in the direction of Yorktown and Big Bethel, and thus became acquainted with a region in which he was afterwards to play a most important part. His services lasted something less than two months, and became still more notable from the fact that they made him thoroughly acquainted with General Butler. They were brought suddenly to an end by the reappearance of his old trouble, which in time made it necessary for him to take a sick-leave. The surgeon who had him in charge directed him to again seek the tonic climate of Brattleborough in his native State. According to promise, his good friend, the Governor, took the earliest opportunity to send him his commission as Colonel of the Third Regiment of Vermont Volunteer Infantry, to date from July 16th. But owing to the scarcity of regular officers, he had previously been ordered to duty on the staff of General McDowell, then commanding the army in front of Washington, though, his health did not permit him to join in time to take part in the forward movement which ended in the disastrous battle of Bull Run.

As soon however as his strength was sufficiently re-established Colonel Smith repaired to Washington, and in the rush and excitement which prevailed after the return of the defeated army to that neighborhood, he was engaged in helping to fortify and defend that city till the danger was past and the requirements of his regiment made it necessary for him to take command and begin its preparation for active service. It is to be noted that there was an unaccountable reluctance on the part of the War Department at the time, to permit the detachment of officers belonging to the various staff corps, for the purpose of commanding volunteers, but this was overcome without much difficulty in his case, and he began his career as an infantry colonel opportunely at the very time that McClellan was re-organizing the defeated army and badly needed the assistance of educated officers. Deeply impressed with the importance of stimulating the pride of the volunteers, and of keeping alive the heroic traditions of their state by all proper means, Colonel Smith recommended that the Vermont regiments should be brigaded

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and trained together, and fortunately this was approved by General McClellan. The Green Mountain men had won great renown in the Colonial and Revolutionary Wars by virtue of their state organization and services and the marked individuality which characterized them. It was a happy thought to keep them together during the Civil War. The sequel showed that it was not only highly beneficial to the national cause, but that it added greatly to the fame of the Vermont men.

As the war was a sectional one in its origin, many of our best officers believed that the volunteer regiments should be formed into brigades and divisions, without reference to the States from which they came. They held that an army organized in this way would more rapidly develop the national spirit and become a more efficient military machine than one formed on state or sectional lines, and the general practice to the end of the war, in the Union army, was in accordance with this idea.

The Vermont brigade, composed of the Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Vermont Regiments, was the one notable exception to this practice and the result was in every way satisfactory. It preserved its identity till the end of the war and became famous as one of the best and most distinctive organizations that ever upheld the Union cause. It was composed almost entirely of native Vermont men, racy of the soil, hardy, self-reliant and courageous, and always ready for the serious business of warfare. It owed its early and enduring discipline to Smith, who was appointed Brigadier General on the 13th of August, and from that time forth it never ceased to have a place in his affections. From the first he took a special pride in his regiment, and devoted himself earnestly to its instruction and discipline, for the perfection of which it soon became noted, but in those days of rapid changes, when the loyal states were sending forth their volunteers by the hundred thousand, brigades soon grew into divisions, and divisions into army-corps and armies.

General Smith was then at exactly the right age, and had already achieved such a high reputation as a scientific and competent soldier, that he was called upon after only a few weeks' service as a brigade commander to take charge of a division of three brigades. Looking about him with anxious care for a suitable successor, he assigned the Vermont Brigade to the command of Brigadier General William T.H. Brooks, a graduate of West Point from Ohio, but a grandson of Vermont. He was a veteran of the Mexican and Indian Wars, in which he had gained great experience, and from which he became justly famous as one of the finest soldiers of his time. A man of striking countenance, great physical vigor and dauntless courage, he was an ideal leader of the Vermont men and at once won their confidence and respect. It is one of the traditions of the times that under him "The Iron Brigade," as it soon came to be known throughout

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the army, was never repulsed and never failed to accomplish the task before it. Its "skirmish line" was believed to be "stronger than an old-fashioned line of battle," and when it covered the advance, the column behind it had to put forth its best efforts to keep up. From the brigadier general to the lowest private, they not only knew their business, but just when they should be called upon to take the lead. It was one of the grizzled privates during the pursuit of Lee from the field of Gettysburg, who perceiving that the cavalry was making but poor progress, said from the ranks as General Sedgwick was passing: "I 'low you want to get to Williamsport tonight, don't you, Uncle John?" "Yes, my man," said the General. "Well, in that case you had better put the Vermont brigade to the front!" The suggestion was at once adopted, and under the sturdy advance which followed the desired camp was reached that night without a check or a halt by the way.

The other two brigades of Smith's division were commanded, respectively, by Windfield Scott Hancock and Isaac I. Stevens, two soldiers of the highest quality, and both destined to achieve undying fame. When their subsequent career is considered it may well be doubted if there was ever a division in the Union army commanded by abler men than Hancock, Stevens, Brooks and Baldy Smith. During the formative period of the Army of the Potomac, when all were drilling, all studying tactics, all teaching guard duty and all striving hard to establish a satisfactory state of military discipline, Smith varied this irksome work by an occasional review, or by the still more exciting exercise of a reconnaissance in force, thus adding practice to precept, and bringing regiments and brigades to act coherently together. In all this he handled his division skillfully and well, and consequently soon had the satisfaction of showing those in authority over him that it was in admirable spirits and condition.

How far he favored the policy of delay for the purpose of increasing the army's strength and perfecting its organization is not certainly known, but it must be admitted on his own testimony that he belonged to the coterie of officers who fully trusted and supported McClellan in the determination to make complete preparation before moving against the enemy. Nor is it known what part he took in the selection of the line of operations ultimately adopted by McClellan for the capture of Richmond. Perhaps this is not important, for neither the duty nor the responsibility of the choice was his. It is not likely, however, that he was consulted for his acquaintance with McClellan was not at first close or intimate. At a later period he joined his friend General Franklin, then generally acknowledged as one of the leading military men of the day, in a letter to the President recommending the transfer of the Army of the Potomac from the vicinity of Fredericksburg to the James River, as near to Richmond as practicable, and urging its reinforcement by all



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the troops that could be gathered from the departments of the Atlantic seaboard. Without discussing here the origin or the wisdom of this controverted proposition, it may be remarked that it was supported by such an array of arguments and influence as would doubtless have secured another trial for it, even in the face of its failure under McClellan, had the condition and strength of the army, and the resources of the country been considered by the administration sufficient to meet all the requirements of the civil and military situation.

At a still later period after General Grant had come to the head of military affairs, had decided to take personal charge of operations in Virginia, and was seriously considering the appointment of General Smith to the immediate command of the Army of the Potomac, it became known to me, through a letter from the latter, that he strongly favored a "powerful movement from the lower James River, or even from the sounds of North Carolina" against the interior of the Confederacy. I was at that time serving in Washington, as the Chief of the Cavalry Bureau, and upon receipt of the letter laid it before General Rawlins, Grant's able Chief of Staff, but without giving it my concurrence or approval, for such consideration as he might think best to give it. It was received at a juncture when the selection of a proper plan of operations was conceded to be a matter of the gravest importance. It is an interesting fact that the plan in question did not receive the support of Rawlins, although both he and Grant, fresh from the victory of Chattanooga, were warm friends and admirers of General Smith as a strategist. Rawlins, with unerring instinct, took strong grounds against it, for the reason, as he vigorously expressed it, that he could not see the sense of going so far, and taking so much time to find Lee with a divided army, when he could be reached within a half day's march directly to the front, with the entire army united and reinforced by all the men the government had at its disposal. Knowing that this was Grant's argument as well, I have always supposed that his final decision to advance directly from Culpepper Court House against Lee's army, and to retain Meade in immediate command of the Army of the Potomac, while the entire available force of Butler's Department should advance directly from Fort Monroe under the immediate command of General Smith, was due partly to Smith's decided opposition to the overland line of operations, and to his tenacious adherence to the principal features of the plan which he and Franklin had recommended to Lincoln. Meade's approval of the direct line of advance, and his cheerful support of Grant's plans as explained in detail, aided by Butler's assurances of hearty co-operation, doubtless had much to do with the retention of those officers in their respective places, and in the assignment of Smith, much to his disappointment, to a relatively subordinate position on the line he had so openly preferred. It may also account in some degree for the failure of those distinguished generals to work as harmoniously with each other to the common end, as was necessary to ensure success.



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Before following this interesting subject to its conclusion, the part actually played by General Smith in McClellan's Peninsular Campaign should be briefly recounted. After the Army of the Potomac had been transferred to the lower Chesapeake, by water, instead of landing at Urbana or on the estuary of the Rappahannock, as was at first intended, out of fear of the Merrimac, which had played such havoc with the wooden frigates of Goldborough's fleet, in Hampton Roads, it was disembarked at Fortress Monroe. It necessarily lost some time here before it could be reunited and begin its march up the Peninsula. It had hardly got well under way, when much to the disappointment of the country it found itself stopped for thirty days, by an insignificant stream and a weak line of entrenchments held by a few guns and a single division of Confederate Infantry, under the command of General Magruder.

The so-called "Siege of Yorktown" followed, and General Smith, chafing at the delay which he conceived to be unnecessary set about studying the situation in his own front, with the keen eye of an experienced engineer. Having the year before familiarized himself with the lay of the land near Fort Monroe, he was quick to grasp every condition which favored an advance. A careful reconnaissance of his immediate front enabled him to surprise a crossing of Warwick River and to carry a section of the fortified line beyond. This as might have been expected was done by a detachment of the Vermont Brigade, which made a gallant effort to maintain the lodgement it had gained, but as it was not supported by McClellan, it was withdrawn after suffering a loss of 165 men killed, wounded and missing. This was the first engagement in a campaign destined to cost the lives of many brave men and to end in a terrible disaster to the national arms.

After making a heroic stand and holding McClellan and his overwhelming force at bay for nearly a month, Magruder abandoned his lines and fell back to Williamsburgh on the road up the Peninsula to Richmond. He was slowly followed by McClellan's army. Smith's division having crossed the Warwick at Lee's mill, led in the pursuit, coming up with the enemy strongly posted in a new line of fortifications covering the town of Williamsburg. Smith's engineering skill and his quick intelligence served him again most fortunately, and with the aid of Captain West of the Coast Survey then serving on his staff, soon enabled him to find the weak spot in the enemy's position. This time it turned out to be on the extreme left, where he had failed, probably through lack of troops, to occupy the extensive works which had been previously constructed. Realizing intuitively the futility of a front attack against such entrenchments, Smith threw Hancock's brigade promptly to the right and under cover of the woods, succeeded without serious loss or delay in occupying one of the works from which, with his division he could easily have swept the whole line had he not been restrained by the presence of his seniors.



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Unfortunately McClellan was in the rear, but Sumner and Heintzelman, corps commanders, were soon upon the ground, and with prudent but ill-timed conservatism declined to sanction the proper movement to reinforce Hancock, for fear that it would bring on a general engagement before the army could be properly closed up and placed in position to participate. Smith recognizing, the great advantage certain to arise from pushing promptly through the opening he had already found, besought Sumner for permission to go with the rest of his division to Hancock's assistance, but this was also denied. As other troops arrived on the field, Smith moved to the right to make place for them, with the hope that he might be permitted to continue his march unobserved till he had come up with his advanced brigade, but orders were sent which arrested him before he had accomplished the object he had in view. All day long he was held in the leash with certain victory in sight. McClellan arrived on the field late in the afternoon, but before he could get a satisfactory understanding of the condition of affairs, night came on. Consequently nothing decisive was done that day and a great opportunity was lost. The wily Magruder, seeing that his left had been turned, and that his position was untenable, abandoned his works under cover of darkness and fell back towards Richmond. Obviously this result was due, first, to the fortunate discovery made by General Smith and his engineer, and to the successful turning movement of Hancock, based thereon; and, second, to the certainty that if properly reinforced by the rest of Smith's division, and by other divisions, if necessary, as it surely would be as soon as the national commander had come to comprehend the real condition of affairs, the Confederate forces would be taken in flank and rear and overwhelmed.

This was Smith's last chance at anything like independent action. During the remainder of this ill-starred campaign he played the part of a subordinate division commander, in a large army engaged in a complicated series of movements and battles, and of course had no control over the general plans or operations. There is no evidence that he was ever consulted by anyone except his corps commander Franklin who was himself also a subordinate. The army lacking field experience, did not work well together as a whole. The corps commanders had been selected and appointed by the Secretary of War, without reference to McClellan's wishes or recommendations. Several of them were veterans, who received their assignments because of seniority rather than for special aptitudes, and this naturally begot a disposition on the part of the division commanders, who were generally younger and perhaps more ambitious men, to look carefully after their own troops and leave larger affairs to their seniors. At all events, Smith's principal care henceforth was to handle his own division and look out exclusively for its requirements, and this he did prudently and well, especially during the Seven days' battle, and during the change of base from the York to the James River. His brigades, led as I have pointed out, by very able men, were more or less constantly and successfully engaged. They took a most creditable part in the battles of Golding's Farm, Savage Station and White Oak Swamp.



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Throughout the whole of this trying time of incessant marching and fighting Smith remained watchful and wary, directing his division through every peril, and finally conducting it, without material loss, but with increased confidence in itself and in its leader, to the new base which had been selected for the army. His cool and confident bearing, and his skillful conduct throughout this campaign, won for him the brevet of Lieutenant Colonel in the regular army and the rank of Major General of Volunteers.

It was during the night march from Malvern Hill that General Smith encountered General Fitz-John Porter, his class-mate whom he always regarded as a first-class soldier, and with whom upon this occasion he had a conversation, the facts of which go far to justify this high estimate. Noting that Porter seemed greatly depressed he asked what was the matter. In reply, Porter told him that as soon as he had become certain the evening before that the enemy had been broken and beaten back from his reckless attack on the Union lines at Malvern Hill, and had withdrawn in disorder from the field, he had gone to McClellan on board the boat which he had occupied with his headquarters, and had begged him with all the arguments he could bring to bear, and all the force he could command, to assume the offensive at dawn. He said he had spent half the night in advocacy of this policy, expressing the confident belief that if adopted it would result, not only in the destruction of Lee's army, but in the capture of Richmond. He had no doubt that our own army, encouraged by the sanguinary repulse it had finally inflicted upon the enemy, would respond to every demand which could be made upon it, and would thus turn a series of indecisive combats, which the country would surely regard as defeats, into a magnificent victory. Smith's testimony shows this splendid conception to have been no afterthought with Porter, as it was with many who subsequently came to understand the facts of the case, but coming as it did hot from a desperate battle field, must be regarded as the inspiration of true military genius, while the fact that McClellan rejected it must always be considered as the best possible evidence of his unreadiness to meet great emergencies. Smith does not say specifically that he approved it, but the context of his narrative leaves but little doubt that he thought favorably of it and would have given it hearty support.

In the withdrawal of the Army of the Potomac from the Peninsula, and its transfer to Washington, as ordered by Halleck and the Secretary of War, Smith and his division necessarily played a subordinate part. With the rest of the army they formed a tardy junction with Pope in front of Washington, and did their share towards making the capital safe and unassailable, but they were not again engaged till they met the enemy in the bloody and successful action at Crampton's Gap, in the South Mountain. The division also

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took part three days later in the battle of Antietam, but notwithstanding McClellan's claim that the battle was a "master piece of art," neither Smith's troops, nor the corps to which they belonged, were seriously engaged. This was not the fault of either Franklin or Smith, both of whom were greatly displeased with the disjointed and irresolute manner in which the Union forces were handled and the battle was fought. The most that can be said is that both General Smith and his division did all that was asked of them, not only in the battle of Antietam, but in following Lee's army back to Virginia. These operations are now justly regarded as reflecting but little credit on the generalship by which the national army was controlled during that period of its history. While they ended McClellan's military career, they afforded but little chance for any of his subordinates to gain distinction, and those who escaped responsibility for supporting his policy of delay had good reasons to regard themselves as fortunate.

The withdrawal of McClellan and the accession of the weak and vacillating Burnside to command was followed by a re-arrangement of the Army of the Potomac into three grand divisions, and a re-assignment of leading generals. Franklin was placed in command of the Third Grand Division, consisting of the First Corps under General Reynolds, and the Sixth Corps under General Smith. In the abortive Fredericksburg campaign which followed, these corps had the extreme left of the Union line, but it should have been evident from the start that with the opposing armies separated by a broad river occupying a deep valley, from three-quarters of a mile to a mile and a half between the opposite crests, the movement which was to bring on the battle must necessarily be fought under extraordinary disadvantages to the attacking army. In the mind of those who were to carry out the details of the movements, success must have seemed hopeless from the first. Burnside was from the beginning of the campaign overcome by the weight of his responsibilities, and between tears at one time and lack of sleep at another, his fatuous mind failed to evolve for itself, or to accept from others a definite and comprehensive plan of operations. He seemed at successive times to have had hopes of surprising Lee, of breaking his center and overwhelming his left, of seizing two important points in his main line of defence and completely turning his left, but withal it is certain that he gave to none of these operations sufficient attention to justify the slightest hope that it could be successfully carried into effect.

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On the other hand, Lee was on the alert with his army of 78,000 men, well and compactly posted in a commanding and almost impregnable position along the wooded heights which overlooked Fredericksburg and the valley of the Rappahannock from the south. Burnside had 113,000 men of all arms, well supplied and thoroughly organized, commanded by the ablest generals in the service. His preponderance of force was therefore close to fifty per cent., but unfortunately that was not enough to outweigh the natural and artificial obstacles, the heights, stone walls, entrenchments, open fields and river to be overcome by the advancing army. The task was a hopeless one from the start, and to make matters worse, Burnside, who at best had but a vague and uncertain comprehension of the work before him, seems to have lost what little head he was endowed with before his operations were fully under way.

The result was unfortunate in the extreme. Two Grand Divisions succeeded in crossing the river without material opposition, but at once found themselves confronted by difficulties and forces they could not overcome. Franklin, in compliance with his instructions, took two days to get into position, but when his two corps had reached the place assigned them on the old Richmond Road, with the aid of Smith and Reynolds, he looked over the ground and made up his mind that the only chance of victory was offered by an assault upon the enemy's right center, with the full force of his two corps, amounting to 40,000 men. Burnside, at his invitation, came to that part of the field, and after listening to the views of the three generals, either of whom was vastly his superior as a soldier, approved the plan and promised to give a written order for its execution. Franklin waited all night for the order, telegraphed twice, and finally sent a staff officer for it, but it never came. Indeed it was never issued but a different order directing him to seize the heights at Hamilton's House, nearly three miles from his right division, and to keep the whole of his command in readiness to move at once, was sent instead. Sumner received an order equally inane, in reference to Marye's Heights. The resulting operations which should have been carefully co-ordinated and vigorously supported, were weak and indecisive. As the day wore away Lee took advantage of the delays and the opportunities which they offered him, and assumed the offensive. There was much severe but desultory and disconnected fighting. The Union generals with their officers and men did their best, but Burnside was on the opposite side of the river and could neither give intelligent orders nor act promptly upon the suggestions which were sent to him from the field. There was no chance for maneuvering. It was from the first head-on, face-to-face fighting with no hope of victory for the assailants. The Union losses were over 12,500 men killed, wounded and missing, of which 4,962 belonged to Franklin's Grand Division, while Jackson's corps which confronted him lost 5,364.



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A full description of this mid-winter campaign would be out of place in this sketch, and the same may be said of the abortive Mud Campaign six weeks later, which had for its object the passage of the Rappahannock by a movement above Fredericksburg. Both Franklin and Smith took part in this ill planned and poorly executed undertaking. The weather and the roads were against it, and it soon came to an end quite as pitiful, though not so costly, as its predecessor.

Following these failures, Burnside, in futile desperation, prepared an order relieving Franklin, Smith and several other officers of inferior rank from duty, and dismissing Hooker, Brooks, Newton and Cochrane from the service. He made no further charge against these officers than that they had no confidence in himself, and this much was probably true, but it would have been equally as true of any other generals serving at that time in the Army of the Potomac. The President, instead of approving the order, it should he noted, at once relieved Burnside and assigned Hooker to the command. Sumner and Franklin both of whom outranked Hooker were relieved from further service with that army, while Smith was transferred to the command of the Ninth Corps, which he held but a short time, owing to the failure of the Senate to confirm him as a major general. This was doubtless brought about by misrepresentation, made to the Senate committee on the Conduct of the War, but as the action of the Senate and its committees in reference to confirmations were secret, no correct explanation can now be given of the allegations against Smith, though they were generally attributed at the time to Burnside and his friends, and while they were neither properly investigated nor supported, they resulted in reducing Smith to the rank of brigadier general and depriving him of the high command which he would have otherwise continued to hold.

It is worthy of note that before these changes were made, and while the Army of the Potomac was still floundering in the mud under the inefficient command of Burnside, Franklin and Smith joined in the letter previously referred to, advising the President to abandon the line on which the Army was then operating, with such ill success, and after reinforcing it to the fullest extent, to send it back again to the line of the James River. This letter was doubtless written in entire good faith, but at a time when it seemed to be impossible for the government, even if it had so desired, to carry out its recommendations. Its only immediate effect was to arouse the antagonism of Mr. Stanton against these two able officers, and to deprive the country for a while of their services. A wiser and more temperate Secretary of War would have filed and ignored it, or sent for the officers and explained why he deemed their advice to be impracticable at that time. That, however, was not Mr. Stanton's way. Although intensely patriotic and in earnest, he was imperious and overbearing both to high and low alike, and preferred to banish and offend rather than to listen and conciliate.

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The winter of 1862-3 is now by common consent regarded as the darkest period of the war for the Union. The failure of Burnside's plans and the defeat of Hooker at Chancellorsville severely tried the discipline and organization of the Army of the Potomac, and filled the loyal North with alarm, while it correspondingly encouraged the Confederate government and raised the confidence of its army. As soon as the winter was over and the roads were settled Lee assumed the initiative, drove Hooker back from the Rappahannock, crossed the Potomac, advanced confidently to Chambersburg and pushed his cavalry as far north as Harrisburg and York.

Hooker had also proven himself to be incompetent, and desperate as the measure was, the Washington government relieved him in the midst of an active campaign, and entrusted the army and its fortunes to the direction of Major General George G. Meade, a gallant and able soldier, who checked the high tide of rebellion at Gettysburg on the 2nd and 3rd of July, 1863. During this campaign Smith, who was on leave of absence when it began, made haste to offer his services, without conditions, and was at once sent to Harrisburg to assist Major General Couch, who had been assigned to the command of the Pennsylvania and New York militia. Taking command of an improvised division, he moved against the enemy, then threatening Carlisle, with all the assurance of a veteran, and while the prompt retreat of the enemy prevented any severe engagement, the movement was entirely efficacious. With the true instincts of a soldier he pressed on in the direction of the Confederate army, and took part in its pursuit from Gettysburg back to Virginia. Curiously enough, instead of commending and thanking him and his raw troops for their gallant services, the Secretary of War ordered his arrest for taking his command beyond the limits of Pennsylvania, for the special defence of which the militia had been called out, but fortunately the remonstrance of General Couch caused this order to be recalled, and the gallant but unappreciated general again withdrew from the field, as soon as the scare was over and his forces were permitted to return to their homes.

It will be remembered that the news of Lee's defeat and his retreat from Gettysburg reached the country on the 4th of July, and that the same day was made triply memorable by the capture of Vicksburg with Pemberton's entire army of 30,000 men with all their guns and ammunitions. These two striking events threw the country into the wildest enthusiasm. Even the most despondent now became confident that the Southern Confederacy would soon be destroyed, and that the triumphant Union would be finally re-established. But this confidence was destined to be rudely shaken.

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Later in the summer, taking advantage of the lull in operations elsewhere, the Confederate leaders sent Longstreet's splendid corps of veterans from Virginia, and that part of Johnston's army which had been paroled, together with such detachments as could be got from Alabama, to reinforce Bragg, who had been driven by Rosecrans from Middle Tennessee to Northern Georgia. Turning fiercely upon his over-confident pursuer, as soon as his reinforcements were at hand, Bragg struck a staggering blow at Chickamauga, which not only came near giving Chattanooga back to him, but filled the northern states with consternation. The war was not only not ended, but had burst forth with renewed vigor. Reinforcements in large numbers were hurried forward from all parts of the country to Chattanooga. Hooker, with Howard's and Slocum's corps, was sent out by rail from Virginia, while the greater part of Grant's Army of the Tennessee was withdrawn from the lower Mississippi, where it was resting after the capture of Vicksburg, and marched over-land from Memphis to the same place. The separate departments in the Mississippi Valley were consolidated into a military grand division, under the supreme command of General Grant, and what turned out to be of almost equal importance was the fact that Brigadier General William F. Smith was relieved from service in West Virginia, where he had been recently assigned to duty, and sent to contribute his part towards strengthening the national grasp upon the vast region of which Chattanooga was justly considered the strategic center.

Whatever the government at that time may have thought of him as a commander of troops, it is certain that it was willing to recognize and use his experience and marked intellectual resources as an engineer officer to their fullest extent. As it turned out, it could not have paid him a greater compliment, nor given him a better opportunity for distinction. His fame had gone before him, and on his arrival at Chattanooga, although he preferred the command of troops, he was assigned at once to duty as Chief Engineer of the Department and Army of the Cumberland. Fortunately this gave him the control, not only of the engineer troops and materials, and the engineer operations of that army, but carried with it the right and duty of knowing the army's condition and requirements as well as all the plans which might be considered for extricating it from the extraordinary perils and difficulties which surrounded it.

Although efforts have been made at various times and by various writers, to minimize these perils and difficulties, it cannot be denied that the situation of that army was at that epoch an exceedingly grave one. It had been rudely checked, if not completely beaten, in one of the most desperate and bloody battles of the war, and shut up in Chattanooga by Bragg's army on the south, and by an almost impassable mountain region on the north and west. Its communication by rail with its secondary base at Bridgeport, and

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with its primary base at Nashville, had been broken by the Confederate cavalry and rendered most uncertain. Its supplies were scanty and growing daily less, while its artillery horses and draft mules were dying by hundreds, for lack of forage. The only safe wagon roads to the rear were by a long and circuitous route through the mountains north of the Tennessee River, which was besides so rough and muddy that the teams could haul hardly enough for their own subsistence, much less an adequate supply for the troops.

All the contemporary accounts go to show that Rosecrans, while personally brave enough, was himself more or less confused and excited by the great disaster which had overtaken his army at Chickamauga. He had been cut off and greatly shaken by the overthrow of his right wing, and consequently retired with it to Chattanooga. Notwithstanding this unfortunate withdrawal and his failure to rejoin the organized portion of his army, which under General George H. Thomas, held on firmly to its position against every attack, those who knew Rosecrans best still believed him to be a most loyal and gallant gentleman who was anxious and willing to do all that could be done to save his army and maintain its advanced position. But there is no satisfactory evidence that up to the time he turned over his command to his successor, he had formed any adequate or comprehensive plan for supplying it or getting it ready to resume the offensive. Every general in it knew that it needed and must have supplies, and that the only way to get them, without falling back, was to open and keep open the direct road or "cracker line" to Bridgeport. But how and when this was to be done was the great question.

Much has been written upon this subject; a military commission has had it under consideration; the records have been consulted; a report has been made, and comments upon it have been issued by General Smith and his friends. Even the late Secretary of War, Elihu Root, has passed judgment upon it, and yet it can be safely said that nothing has been done to disturb the conclusion reached at the time, that General Smith in consultation with his superiors worked out the plan as to how, when and by what means the short supply line by the way of Brown's Ferry and the Lookout Valley should be opened and maintained. He certainly secured its adoption first by Thomas and afterwards by Grant, and finally when he had arranged all the details of the complicated and delicate operations, and had prepared all engineer's materials and pontoons which were required, he personally commanded the troops and carried that part of the plan which was based on Chattanooga, to a successful conclusion.



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When it is remembered that Rosecrans had left Chattanooga, that he had been succeeded by Thomas, and that Grant himself had arrived on the ground and assumed supreme command, before the first practical step had been taken to carry the plan into effect, and that the plan itself involved a descent and passage of the Tennessee River by night, the defeat and capture of the enemy's outposts, the laying of a pontoon bridge across a broad and rapid river, the rebuilding of the railroad, and its maintenance within easy reach of the enemy's front for twenty-five miles, and that all of this was done without the slightest mishap and with but little loss, and that it resulted in relieving the army from want and in putting it in condition to resume the offensive as soon as its reinforcements had arrived, some fair idea may be had of the value of General Smith's services and the part he actually performed in all that took place. If General Rosecrans had actually conceived and worked out all the details of the plan, which cannot be successfully claimed, there would still be enough left to the credit of General Smith to immortalize him, but when Grant, Thomas and all the other officers who were present and in position to know what was actually done gave Smith the praise, not only for conceiving it, but carrying the plan into successful effect, there is but little room left for further controversy.

If any additional testimony is needed as to the masterful part played by Smith at Chattanooga, it is found in the fact that Grant made haste to attach him to his own staff and to recommend him for promotion to the grade of major-general to take rank from the date of his original appointment, declaring in support of his recommendation that he felt "under more than ordinary obligations for the masterly manner in which he discharged the duties of his position." Later he recommended that Smith be put first of all the army on the list for promotion, adding: "He is possessed of one of the clearest military heads in the army, is very practical and industrious," and emphasized it all with the highly eulogistic declaration that "no man in the army is better qualified than he for the largest military commands."

It is noteworthy that about the same time General Butler with whom he had served for a short season, made an application to have General Smith re-assigned to his command, but the Secretary of War, having evidently forgotten his order for Smith's arrest at the close of the Gettysburg campaign, wrote: "The services of William F. Smith, now Chief Engineer in the Army of the Cumberland, are indispensable in that command, and it will be impossible to assign him to your Department." But this was not all. General George H. Thomas, the soul of honor and fair dealing on the 20th of November, 1863, although General Smith had already been transferred from his own to the staff of General Grant, formally recommended him for promotion in the following striking and comprehensive words:

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“For industry and energy displayed by him from the time of his reporting for duty at these headquarters, in organizing the Engineer Department, and for his skillful execution of the movements at Brown’s Ferry, Tennessee, on the night of October 26th, 1863, in surprising the enemy and throwing a pontoon bridge across the Tennessee River at that point, a vitally important service necessary to the opening of communications between Bridgeport and Chattanooga.”

Certainly no language could be more clear and unequivocal than this, and yet, as though General Thomas wished to remove all chance of doubt as to whom the highest credit was due, he declared in a later and more formal official report:

“To Brigadier General William F. Smith, Chief Engineer, should be accorded great praise for the ingenuity which conceived and the ability which executed the movements at Brown’s Ferry.”

While even the best memory so long after the event is but little to be depended upon for details, it may serve especially when supplementing the records, to strengthen the conclusions therefrom. In this instance it should be stated that it was perfectly well known to the late Charles A. Dana, then present at Chattanooga as Assistant Secretary of War, and also to myself, who was serving at the time on General Grant’s staff as Inspector General, and was in daily contact with all the leading officers, that it was General Smith, and General Smith alone, who conceived and carried out the plan actually used for the capture of Brown’s Ferry and the re-establishment of the direct line of communication between Chattanooga and Bridgeport. Indeed, there was no question in that army, or at that time, in regard to the matter. Rosecrans was never mentioned in connection with it, while Smith’s praise was in everybody’s mouth till the close of the campaign, not only for the Brown’s Ferry movement, but, what was still more important, for the plan of operations against Bragg’s position on Missionary Ridge. He it was who personally familiarized himself with the *terrain* in the entire field of operations, which, with the mountains, valleys, rivers and creeks, that gave it its unique character, was the most complicated and difficult one of the entire war, if not the most complicated and difficult one upon which a great battle was ever fought. It was he alone who worked out every detail of the combinations and movements by which the great victory of Missionary Ridge was won. I state this upon my own knowledge and not upon hearsay.

Moreover, it was conceded by all in high command that Smith was easily the leading strategist in that entire host. He knew all the details of the ground and all the difficulties to be overcome, better than any other man. He studied them more closely, and with more intelligence than any other man, not only because it was his duty to do so, but because he was conscious of the portentous fact now so commonly lost sight of that the safety and success of the army depended upon the discovery and adoption of a feasible plan of action. Grant, the generalissimo, had neither the time nor opportunity to gather the facts. He was neither an engineer nor strange as it may seem, a close calculator of the chances.



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He necessarily depended upon the Chief Engineer, and the criticism which was sure to come from others, to gather and sift the data upon which final action must be based. Thomas was there from the first, able, methodical and invincible, a great field tactician, but not specially distinguished for his knowledge of engineering, grand tactics or strategy. Sherman came afterwards. He was bold, active and energetic, and had a fine eye for topography. He knew as well as anyone what could be done and what could not be done by an army, but he came too late to take part in the original investigations, or to do anything more than to accept the part assigned to him, and from an examination of the ground say whether or not he could carry it out. The important fact is that Smith was, beyond any question, the first mind among them all for working out just such problems as confronted the leaders of the Union army at Chattanooga, and that task was by common consent assigned to him. The responsibility was Grant's. His judgment and resolution must necessarily decide and execute, but it was Smith's place to gather the facts and work out the details of one of the most complicated military problems that was ever presented for solution, and it can hardly be too much to say that he discharged his task with such patience, skill and success as to justly entitle himself to be known in history as the Strategist of Chattanooga. Were his distinguished associates living, it cannot be doubted they would willingly concede that honor to him. In their official reports and correspondence at the time they went far beyond the usual limit to give him praise, and although Grant finally withdrew his friendship from him, for reasons which will be given hereafter, he never in the slightest degree withdrew or modified the praise he had awarded him for his services in the Chattanooga campaign.

But to return to the details of the plan of operations. It was Smith who discovered the possibility of turning Bragg's position on Missionary Ridge, by the Army of the Tennessee. After personal examination of the lay of the ground he suggested that Sherman's army coming up from Bridgeport through Lookout Valley should cross to the north side of the Tennessee by the bridge at Brown's Ferry, and after passing to the east side of Moccasin Point, under cover of the woods, to a position opposite the mouth of Chickamauga Creek, should re-cross the Tennessee River, by a bridge to be thrown under cover of darkness, and land on the end of Missionary Ridge with the obvious purpose of marching along the Ridge and rolling up and destroying Bragg's army, or taking it in reverse and driving it from its line of supply and retreat. As early as the 8th of November, Mr. Dana, writing to the Secretary of War, speaks of a reconnaissance made by Thomas, Smith and Brannan on the north side of the river to a point opposite the mouth of Citico Creek, near the head of Missionary Ridge, which he thought at that time "proved Smith's plan of attack impractical." But further investigation proved that a passage could be made higher up the river, and when Sherman was taken to the place that had been selected, examining both the place for the bridge and its approaches, on both sides of the river, with his usual care, he closed his field glasses with a snap and turning to Smith said with emphasis: "Baldy, it can be done!"



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And so much of it as referred to the passage of the river was done without halt or fault, just as it had been planned. Sherman's entire army, except his rear division that had been cut off by a break in the Brown's Ferry floating bridge, was brought upon the field just in the way suggested and by the means which had been provided by General Smith. I assisted in transferring the troops to the South bank of the river at the point of crossing, by the use of the river steamer "Dunbar," which had been put under my command so as to make certain that a sufficient force should be on the ground in time to cover the construction of the bridge. The bridge was laid successfully and the army was transferred without delay. Every stage of the movement pointed to an onward and victorious march against Bragg's commanding position, and a complete victory was finally achieved, but much to the surprise and disappointment of all, it was not attained at the time nor in the way that had been expected. The prearranged plan, so far as it concerns Sherman's army, had no other legitimate purpose than to land it on Bragg's exposed right flank and double him up or drive him from his regular line of supply and retreat. And there is nothing more certain than that there was no man in authority on either side who intended the battle to be fought as it was actually fought, nor who seriously expected the victory to be won in the way it finally was won by Thomas's army, and not by Sherman's.

It is here worthy of remark that for nearly a quarter of a century both Grant and Sherman believed and contended—in fact both died in the belief—that Sherman's lodgement on the foot-hills at the north end of Missionary Ridge, and his unsuccessful attack from that place, caused Bragg to so weaken his center by withdrawing troops from his center and left, to resist Sherman, that Thomas met with but little resistance when he advanced to the attack about ten hours later, in obedience to Grant's personal order. But it has been shown by irrefutable testimony, and is now conceded, that there is not a word of truth in this supposition—"that nothing of the kind occurred," and that in face of all statements and suppositions to the contrary, however natural they may have seemed at the time, "not a single regiment, nor a single piece of artillery," not even "a single Confederate soldier was withdrawn from Thomas's front to Sherman's on the final day of the battle. All the Confederate reports are clear and specific on that point."

The simple fact is that the plan of operations for Sherman were clear and perfect, and they were carried out in their initial stage without fault or accident, but their execution in the final and vital stage was marred by Sherman himself or by his subordinates, who never reached the point from which they could strike a fatal blow, or from which they could have taken possession of Bragg's communications with the rear.

That Sherman was entirely satisfied with Smith's part in carrying out the plan, is shown beyond dispute by his report, which bears

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“willing testimony to the completeness of this whole business. All the officers charged with the work were present and manifested a skill which I cannot praise too highly. I have never beheld any work done so quietly, so well, and I doubt if the history of war can show a bridge of * * 1350 feet, laid down so noiselessly and well in so short a time. I attribute it to the genius and intelligence of General William F. Smith.”

The genuineness of this praise is strikingly attested by General Grant, who almost immediately after the battle again urged the Secretary of War to give Smith the promotion which he had previously recommended. Unmistakably referring to the part taken by Smith in making and carrying out the plans which had yielded such notable results, he wrote, among other things: “Recent events have entirely satisfied me of his great capabilities and merits. I hasten to renew the recommendation and to urge it.”

Shortly afterwards Grant followed this letter by another asking for Smith’s assignment to the command of East Tennessee, to succeed the luckless Burnside, with whom he was dissatisfied, but in so doing he intimated that it would be agreeable to him if the government should, in pursuance of a personal suggestion sent to the War Department about the same time by Mr. Dana, give General Smith even a higher command. It is now well known that Grant had in mind the command of the Army of the Potomac, and not only then, but frequently afterwards, assured General Smith of his support for that great position.

The friendship of Grant, Sherman and Thomas, for Smith, was at that time genuine and unmistakable. Neither of these great generals had ever served with him before. He was a comparative stranger to them, and that he should have come amongst them from the East under a cloud as he did, and should in less than two months have won such unusual praise and recommendations is stronger testimony than their words themselves to the masterful part he had played at Chattanooga, and in recognition of which the President made haste to promote him again to the rank of Major General, at that time the highest grade in the service. It is to be regretted, however, that the vacancy made by his previous non-confirmation, having long since been filled, and opposition having arisen on the part of other generals already promoted and confirmed, the President did not feel justified in dating his new commission back to the date of his original appointment. The action of the President, the Secretary of War, who concurred in it, and the Senate which acted upon it, this time without reference to the military committee, set the seal of government approval in the most signal manner upon the services and abilities of General Smith. No subsequent action or criticism can deprive him of the great praise and unusual honors which were then bestowed upon him.



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But a new and far less fortunate era was about to open upon General Smith's career. Grant's work in the west had reached its close, and his extraordinary success had secured for him the full rank of Lieutenant General, with the command of all the armies of the United States. It at once became known to me, and to others serving at that time on his staff; that it was from the first, and till he went east to take charge of his new duties, Grant's intention to assign Smith to the command of the Army of the Potomac. He had come to trust his intelligence,—his judgment and his extraordinary *coup d'oeil* implicitly, and to regard him as a strategist of consummate ability. He made no concealment of his confidence in him, nor of his intentions in his behalf, and there can be but little doubt that he would have carried those intentions into effect could he have done so without injustice to others. But it is also true that after going to the eastern theatre of war and conferring with the President, Secretary Stanton, General Meade and General Butler, the Lieutenant General completely changed his mind, not only as to the proper plan of campaign for the army of the Potomac, which he had not previously visited or studied, but as to the disposition to be made of Smith and the other leading generals. In all this he had the sagacious advice and support of General Rawlins, his Chief of Staff and doubtless of other influential persons. Exactly why he did so, or what were the details of the argument which brought him to his final conclusions, is still one of the most interesting unsettled questions of the war. The general argument has already been indicated in the comprehensive language of Rawlins and that was doubtless strengthened by Mr. Lincoln, whose homely but astute reasoning convinced him that the better and safer line of operations was overland against Lee's army wherever it might be encountered, and not through a widely eccentric movement by water to a secondary base on the James River and thence against Richmond.

It is also doubtless true that finding Meade, who had shown himself to be a prudent and safe commander, if not a brilliant one, not only favorable to the overland route, but deservedly well thought of by the President, the cabinet and the army, while Smith, on the other hand, if not openly opposed to this plan of operations, was somewhat persistent as was his custom, in favoring a campaign from the lower James, or even from the sounds of North Carolina, Grant reached the conclusion that it would be better to retain Meade in immediate command of the principal army, and to place Smith over all the troops that could be mobilized from Fortress Monroe in Butler's department. Whatever may have been the open or secret influences at work, or the reasoning based upon the facts, this was Grant's first decision, but it is to be observed that the plan as adopted was afterwards fatally modified by permitting Butler, notwithstanding his partiality

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for Smith, as shown by his recent request for his re-assignment to his department, to take the field in person, with Smith commanding one of his army corps and Gillmore the other. In other words, Grant was not altogether a free agent, though the government had ostensibly given him a free hand. Of course, Smith knew that in any case he could not be permitted to make all the plans, even if he held the first subordinate command, and it is always possible that he had not specially endeared himself to the leading officers of the eastern armies, but there can hardly be a doubt that he would have given efficient and loyal support to Grant without reference to the plan of operations which it might be found necessary to adopt.

Without pausing here to recapitulate the arguments for and against the line and general plan of operations actually selected by General Grant, or to consider further his choice of subordinate commanders, it may be well to call attention to the fact that the organization and arrangements made by him for the control and co-operation of the forces in Virginia, are now generally regarded by military critics as having been nearly as faulty as they could have been. It will be remembered that Meade, with a competent staff had immediate command of the Army of the Potomac, but was followed closely wherever he went by General Grant and his staff. At the same time Burnside, with the Ninth Corps, having an older commission than Meade, and having been once in command of the Army of the Potomac, was for reasons which must be regarded as largely sentimental, permitted to report directly to and receive his orders directly from Grant, while Butler with two army corps operating at first at a considerable distance and later in a semi-detached and less independent manner, made his reports to and received his instructions directly from Grant's headquarters.

This arrangement, as might have been foreseen, was fatal to coherent and prompt co-operative action, and the result was properly described by Grant himself as comparable only to the work of a "balky team." It was in the nature of things impossible to make either the armies or the separate army-corps work harmoniously and effectively together. The orders issued from the different headquarters were necessarily lacking in uniformity of style and expression, and failed to secure that prompt and unflinching obedience that in operations extending over so wide and difficult a field was absolutely essential, and this was entirely independent of the merits of the different generals or the peculiarities of their Chiefs of Staff and Adjutants General. The forces were too great; they were scattered too widely over the field of operations; the conditions of the roads, the width of the streams and the broken and wooded features of the battle fields were too various, and the means of transport and supply were too inadequate to permit of simultaneous and synchronous movements, even if they had been intelligently provided for, and the generals had uniformly done their best to carry them out.

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But when it is considered that Grant's own staff, although presided over by a very able man from civil life, and containing a number of zealous and experienced officers from both the regular army and the volunteers, was not organized for the arrangement of the multifarious details and combinations of the marches and battles of a great campaign, and indeed under Grant's special instructions made no efforts to arrange them, it will be apparent that properly co-ordinated movements could not be counted upon. When it is further considered that Meade, Burnside, Butler, Hunter and afterwards Sheridan, as well as the corps commanders, were left almost invariably to work out the details for themselves, it will be seen that prompt, orderly, simultaneous and properly co-operating movements on an extended scale, from different parts of the same theatre of operations, and that properly combined marches and battle movements were almost impossible. As a fact they rarely ever took place, and it is not to be wondered at that the best officers of every grade in the armies operating in Virginia found much throughout the campaign, from beginning to end, to criticise and complain of. Nor is it to be thought strange that many of their best movements were successful rather because of good luck than of good management, or failed rather because of their defective execution, than by the enemy's better arrangements or superior generalship, though it is evident that the Confederates kept their forces better in hand and operated more in masses than did the Union generals. Their organizations were simpler and more compact, their generals were better chosen and better supported. Operating generally on the defensive and fighting behind breastworks whenever it was possible, it was all the more necessary to bring overwhelming forces to bear against them, in order to ensure their final overthrow. In addition to the defective organization and inefficient staff arrangements which have been mentioned, neither the Union government nor the Union generals ever made provisions, or seemed to understand the necessity, for a sufficient preponderance of force, to neutralize the advantages which the Confederate armies enjoyed, when fighting on the defensive, or to render victory over them reasonably certain.

Looking back over the long series of partial victories, vexatious delays and humiliating failures, and considering the inadequate organization and defective staff arrangements for which Grant was mainly responsible, it is evident that the terrible losses in the Union army in the overland campaign were due quite as frequently to the latter causes as to incompetency or lack of vigor on the part of the subordinate commanders. The blind grapplings in the forests of the Wilderness could not be helped, when both armies were marching through it, for they could not see each other through the tangled underbrush till they were almost face to face, but it is now certain that if the marches of the Union

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army corps had been properly timed and properly conducted, they could have reached the open country before the Confederate corps could have engaged them. But when the senseless assaults of fortified positions, which occurred in endless succession, from Spottsylvania Court House to Petersburg are considered, it will be impossible to find sufficient excuse for them. They were in nearly every case the direct result of defective staff arrangements and the lack of proper prevision. In a few instances they were due to positive incompetency on the part of subordinate commanders, while on several notable occasions there was a woeful lack of responsible oversight and supervision on the part of those whose duty it should have been to exercise both. Before the campaign was half over it had come to be an axiom among both officers and men that a well-defended rifle trench could not be carried by a direct attack without the most careful preparation nor even then without fearful loss. Such undertakings were far too costly, and far too frequently ended in failure, to justify them when they could be avoided. But no experience, however frequent or bloody, no remonstrance however forcible, could eradicate the practice of resorting to them occasionally. Rawlins was utterly opposed to them and never failed to inveigh against them but the advice of more than one trusted and influential staff officer was uniformly in favor of assaulting fortified positions. The favorite refrain at general headquarters is said to have been "Smash `em up! Smash `em up!"

It was with special reference to the application of this method of procedure at Cold Harbor, that General Smith afterwards gave vent to his indignation in words of the bitterest criticism. It will be remembered that the entire army confronting the enemy had advanced on that fatal day in compliance with a general order to attack "all along the line," which was done in a half-hearted, desultory manner, foreboding failure and defeat. Not a soul among the generals or in the fighting line dreamed of success and not a commander from highest to lowest except Smith and Upton, made any adequate preparation to achieve it. Officers and men alike felt that they had been ordered to a sure defeat. Knowing intuitively what awaited them, they wrote their names on scraps of paper and pinned them to their coats in order that their bodies might be identified after the slaughter was over. This done they advanced in long and wavering lines of blue against the enemy's bristling breastworks and rifle pits, and were mowed down like ripe grain before the scythe. In almost as short a time as it takes to recount the useless sacrifice, over twelve thousand Union soldiers were killed and wounded, without shaking the enemy's position or inflicting serious injury upon him.

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Smith and his gallant corps, did their part bravely in the futile attack. They were just back from Butler's abortive movement to Bermuda Hundred, in which by good management on the part of the General, and by steadiness on the part of the men, they had saved the expedition from a disgraceful defeat. They were not only hungry and tired, but disgusted with the incompetency of Butler and his abortive plans. The situation which confronted them was most discouraging. They were on new and unknown ground, but they had not yet worn themselves out against Lee's veterans and therefore they cheerfully took the position assigned them. Smith with his usual foresight and deliberation made haste to examine the ground in his front, and by availing himself of the advantages which his trained eye soon detected he was enabled to direct his main attack along a sheltering depression against a weak point, where he reached and broke through the enemy's line. He needed only the prompt and vigorous support that intelligent prevision and co-operation would have given, to make his lodgement safe and his victory certain. But as no one above him seems to have expected victory, no proper provision was made to ensure it. No supports were at hand. Each corps commander was looking out for his own front only, and not for his neighbor's. The Confederates were more wise and more alert, and seeing the danger which threatened the continuity of their line, made haste to concentrate their forces against Smith and of course hurled him back with terrible loss.

Smarting under this unnecessary disaster, and grieving over the useless loss and suffering of his gallant men, it was but natural that he should vent his feelings in sharp and caustic denunciation of all who were in any degree responsible for the blunder. He was especially outspoken with Grant and Rawlins, whose confidence he had won in the Chattanooga campaign, and with whom he had since been on terms of the closest intimacy and friendship. It is but just to note that they did not at that time appear to consider his criticism as in any sense directed against them nor did they rebuke or condemn it, but to the contrary they gave him every assurance of sympathy and approval.

But Smith although one of the heaviest sufferers, was not the only or even the severest critic, of the mismanagement or lack of management which characterized that disastrous day. The result was most demoralizing to the army. Officers of every grade were unreserved in their condemnation. The newspaper criticism was wide-spread and continuous.

It was with special reference to the useless slaughter at Cold Harbor that the gallant and invincible Upton, then coming to be widely recognized as the best practical soldier of his day, immediately wrote in confidence to his sister.

"I am disgusted with the generalship displayed. Our men have in many instances been foolishly and wantonly sacrificed. Thousands of lives might have been spared by the exercise of a little skill; but as it is, the courage of the men is expected to obviate all



difficulties. I must confess that so long as I see such incompetency, there is no grade in the army to which I do not aspire.”

Later referring to the same battle, he adds:



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“On that day [at Cold Harbor] we had a murderous engagement. I say murderous, because we were recklessly ordered to assault the enemy’s entrenchments knowing neither their strength nor position. * * * I am very sorry to add that I have seen but little generalship during the campaign. Some of our corps commanders are not fit to be corporals. Lazy and indifferent they will not even ride along their lines, yet without hesitancy they will order us to attack the enemy, no matter what their position or numbers.”

As the assault on Cold Harbor was a general one, it follows of course that it must have been ordered by someone higher in authority than either Smith of the Eighteenth or Upton of the Sixth Corps.

It was doubtless in allusion to this and to similar instances that the veracious and outspoken Humphreys, at that time Meade’s Chief of Staff, and afterwards the peerless commander of the Second Army Corps, wrote:

“The incessant movements day and night for so long a period, the constant close contact with the enemy during all that time, the almost daily assaults upon intrenchments having entanglements in front and defended by artillery and musketry in front and flank, exhausted both officers and men.”

Although all the orders which brought about this unfortunate condition of affairs must have passed through Humphreys himself, it is obvious that they could not have originated with him, but must have come from higher authority.

If the imperturbable and painstaking Smith, fresh from the triumphs and confidences of Chattanooga, should have lost his patience under these distressing circumstances, and declared to General Grant, frankly and fearlessly as he did as was clearly his duty, that “there had been a fearful slaughter at Cold Harbor,” surely it should not have been brought up against him later as one of the reasons for relieving him from the command of the troops of the Department of the James, to which he had been assigned after this criticism had been made. If in the same interview Grant acknowledged, as it is credibly stated he did, “that there had been a butchery at Cold Harbor, but that he had said nothing about it, because it could do no good,” his remembrance of the circumstance to the prejudice of Smith, must be regarded as an afterthought which had its origin in some cause not yet fully explained.

It is altogether likely that Smith’s criticism was repeated to others less entitled to speak than himself and that it was exaggerated into a direct attack upon both Meade and Grant, which could not be passed over lightly. Be this as it may, it must be apparent that it was fully justified as a mere matter of military criticism and quite independent of both Smith and Upton, it was generally approved both by the army and the country at large.

It was shortly after the assault in question, while I was commanding a division of cavalry, that I visited Grant's headquarters. During the conversation which followed the Lieutenant General asked me: "What is the matter with this army?" To which I replied:



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“It will take too long to explain, but I can tell you how to cure it. Give Parker [the Indian Chief] a tomahawk, a supply of commissary whiskey and a scalping knife and send him out with orders to bring in the scalps of general officers.”

During this same visit and frequently afterwards Rawlins, in a white rage, inveighed against the desperate practice of blindly assaulting fortified lines, and denounced in unmeasured terms all who favored them or failed to make adequate preparation for success, where any just excuse could be found for resorting to them. It is worthy of remark, without reference to the origin of the practice, or to the persons who were responsible for it, that General Grant alone had the power to stop it, and that later there was a noticeable change in the Army of the Potomac in regard to that practice, although it should be noted that Sherman followed it as an example in his desperate, but unsuccessful assault of the enemy's impregnable fortifications on Kenesaw Mountain, for the purpose, as he frankly explained, of showing that his army could also assault strongly fortified lines.

That such a costly practice could spring up and obtain imitation in our army is a striking commentary upon the lack of intelligent supervision over the essential details of its daily operations. It affords ample justification for again calling attention to the fact that in this respect the Confederate Army was much better off and more fortunate than the Union Army. Its generals, although not without fault, were much more careful in the management of their military details than ours were. Jefferson Davis was himself an educated soldier of great capacity, and selected none but educated and experienced military men for high command. While Lee's staff was far from faultless in organization, he had supreme authority in the field, with no army or independent corps commanders between him and the troops. His army corps were led by generals of the first rank, who took their orders directly from him, and no unnecessary time was lost in their transmission or execution, nor was there any uncertainty as to whose duty it was to work out and superintend the details of attack and defence. But whatever may be said in further elucidation of this important subject, I cannot help expressing regret that General Smith, who had shown such rare talents in another field, for planning and executing the most complicated movements, should not have had in this an opportunity to add to his fame, instead of being sent out as a subordinate to a general who, however great his talents as a lawyer and a militiaman, had developed no special aptitude as an army commander. In this connection the important fact should be recalled that Generals Barnard and Meigs, officers of the highest training and distinction, at the request of General Grant, shortly after the fiasco of Bermuda Hundred, had been sent by the Washington authorities to make an investigation of General Butler's fitness



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for command in the field, and had with due deliberation reported that while "General Butler was a man of rare and great ability, he had not had either the training or experience to enable him to direct and control movements in battle." It was doubtless the verification of this report to Grant's satisfaction that caused him finally to relieve that General from duty in the field, and in doing so to incur both his active and his covert hostility.

Meanwhile however valid and important, in either a military or a political sense, the considerations may have been which sent Butler out in command of an army with such men as Smith and Gilmore, both professional soldiers of the highest standing, as his subordinates, the arrangement was unfortunate from beginning to end, and from its very nature it was foredoomed to failure. It is to be observed that while these admirable soldiers were constantly with their troops moving against or confronting the enemy, Butler was generally at Fortress Monroe, or at a more central point some distance in the rear, and when his orders were not ill-timed or inapplicable to the case in hand, they were not infrequently deemed impracticable, or at cross purposes with the convictions of the generals whose duty it was to carry them into effect. The simple and incontrovertible fact is that General Butler's presence with that army was from the start embarrassing if not absolutely unnecessary. It interposed an intermediate commander between the generalissimo and two entire army corps, and however good the intentions of that commander or great his abilities, his principal influence was necessarily to derange and delay the orderly conduct and development of the campaign. It was productive of no good whatever, and was besides in direct violation of the rule of experience which teaches that better results are to be expected with one poor commander in full authority than with two or more good ones liable to pull against each other.

The chief conclusion to be reached from these considerations, and from a study of the records, in connection with the writings and unpublished memoirs of General Smith, is that his conduct during the continuance, of the arrangement was not only natural and blameless, but that the failure of Butler's army to play an important and decisive part, was due primarily, if not entirely, to Butler's own misunderstanding or mismanagement of what was entrusted to him, or the inherent defects in the organization and staff arrangements of the Union forces operating in Virginia. Under the conditions as they actually existed, effective co-operation and control, it has been shown, could not have been reasonably expected, and for this the verdict of the military critic and historian must be that the Lieutenant General who had ample power, if he chose to exercise it, was primarily responsible. Under the incontrovertible facts of the case it is difficult to see how this conclusion can be avoided.



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It will be recalled by those who have read "Butler's Book," that in addition to a number of trivial derelictions of duty, General Smith was charged with the more serious one of having failed through negligence and an untimely cessation of operations, to capture Petersburg, when it was claimed that all the conditions were favorable to success. It should also be recalled that several weeks after this failure had taken place and all the necessary explanations had been made and considered, the President had, on Grant's recommendation, relieved Butler from further service in the field and had assigned General Smith to the command of the Eighteenth Corps which was composed of the troops from Butler's department, serving with the Army of the Potomac. It should be remembered at the same time that before General Smith received this order he had applied for and been granted leave of absence on account of illness, or as he explained, "because of his old trouble with his head," and that while he was absent, the Lieutenant General was by some means never fully or satisfactorily explained, induced to restore Butler to his former command and to dispense entirely with the services of General Smith. In reply to a letter from Smith, he authorized Colonel Comstock of his staff to inform him that he had been relieved "because of the impossibility of his getting along with General Butler," who was his senior in rank. But General Grant assured me about this time that it was with great regret that he had taken this action; that he had tried in vain to utilize Smith's great talents; that he had been too free in his criticisms, and that Smith himself had made it necessary that either he should be relieved or that Meade, Burnside and Butler should be deprived of command and sent out of the army. Some conversation followed, in which it was suggested that he should have given the preference to the alternative as a means of simplifying the organization and increasing the efficiency of the army, and it is a singular coincidence at least, that this suggestion was partly carried into effect, with most excellent results, by the relief of both Butler and Burnside, shortly afterwards, from the command of troops in that theatre of operations. It has besides long been a question among military men whether still better results would not have been obtained if Grant had at the same time relieved Meade, who was certainly a most competent and loyal general, from the immediate command of the Army of the Potomac and placed him instead at the head of an army corps.

It may not be out of place here to call attention to the fact that while no specific limitations were ever put upon the responsibilities of Meade as an army commander, Grant thenceforth took upon himself a closer supervision of the details of the campaign, while upon many occasions during the final operations, he gave his orders directly to the corps commanders, instead of sending them through the regular official channels. The result of this practice after it became confirmed, was in every case beneficial, though it should be observed that it was far from increasing the cordial relations between Grant and Meade or between their respective headquarters.



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But to return to the breach between Grant and Smith, to the exact state of facts which led up to it, and to the immediate pressure which finally brought about Smith's relief from further command in the field. Much that is as well forgotten, has been written about this unfortunate episode. Smith felt to the day of his death that he had been misrepresented to Grant and unjustly injured by his action. He always contended that the whole truth had not been told, and it must be confessed that no consecutive and exhaustive analysis of the case has ever been made. Perhaps none can be made. But from such information as I have been able to gather, I have always supposed that Grant's action was based upon Smith's criticisms, exaggerated reports of which were made by certain officers of Butler's staff with whom Smith dined and spent the night at Fortress Monroe on his way home, that Butler presented these reports in person to General Grant, without the knowledge or concurrence of Meade or Burnside, and made them the basis of a demand for Smith's immediate relief. Exactly what took place at the interview must for reasons which will appear hereafter, always remain a matter of conjecture. It however seems to be probable that had General Smith deferred his leave of absence till he had seated himself firmly in his new command, or had he been sent for and allowed to make his own explanation, he would have been spared the humiliation, which ended his military career, while the country would have continued to receive the assistance of one of its greatest military minds.

General Smith, by his military writings, has not only refuted the unjust criticisms of General Butler's Book, but he has modestly and conclusively set forth his own military services during the various campaigns in which he took part. He points out with pardonable pride the friendship which sprang up during the Chattanooga campaign, between himself and General Grant. He makes it clear that his failure to capture Petersburg was due to a number of causes more or less potential and altogether beyond his control. First among them was the physical exhaustion of himself and his troops; second, an order which was sent to him through the signal corps from General Butler, who was all day June 15 at Point Lookout Signal Station, to stay his advance; and, third, the failure of General Hancock, who was with the Second Corps within supporting distance, to take up the movement and give the finishing stroke to the day's work. To these should be added the defective staff arrangements by which the various forces in the field of operations were controlled, the inadequate strength of Smith's command, which was inexcusable where such a vast force was within call, the lack of engineer officers and of exact information as to the character of the ground over which the troops were compelled to operate, and the total absence of proper support and co-operation on the part of the Army of the Potomac. Above all, it should be kept in mind that the enemy held the defensive and had interior lines upon which he could throw his troops from point to point on his threatened front, with greater celerity than the attacking force could be concentrated by outside lines and across wide rivers against him.



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When Smith began his movement against Petersburg, which was to be in the nature of a surprise, the greater part of Grant's army was still north of the James River, and both Meade and Hancock allege that they were not notified that a new effort was to be made to capture Petersburg by Smith alone, after Butler had tried and failed with his whole army to isolate and cut it off from Richmond by the movement to Bermuda Hundred. Both of these able officers declare that if they had known in time that Petersburg was to have been captured, Petersburg would have been captured. This simple statement, without reference to its truth, which has never been questioned, is conclusive evidence that the staff arrangements and the organization of the machinery of command were fatally defective, for had it been otherwise, every officer who could have been called upon to take part in the movement, or could have been expected to co-operate with it, would have been so clearly instructed as to make his duty entirely plain.

General Smith, in explanation of why he was relieved from command in the field, not only reflects strongly upon the conduct of General Butler, but endeavors to show that General Grant "was forced" by Butler to restore him to full command, in order to prevent the exposure of his own conduct, yet even if this were true it necessarily leaves both the question of fact and the question of motives in the dark. Certain letters which passed between Smith, Grant, Rawlins and Butler have been quoted, for the purpose of illustrating the character of the persons concerned. They will be found in the Records and they throw much light upon the subject, but they still leave the reason of Smith's removal in obscurity.

It cannot be denied that Smith was a man of great talents and conspicuous services, with unusual powers of caustic Criticism, who had been badly injured by the way in which his connection with the Army of the James had been severed. His views and conduct had been impugned, not only then, but afterwards, in both the newspapers and the personal statements of the day, and hence it was but natural that he should retort with an appeal to the facts of a private nature more or less commented upon at the time, to expose the reasons for official action and to vindicate his own conduct. He strenuously contended that he was under no obligation to conceal any important facts of the case connected either personally or officially with those who were using him unkindly to the prejudice of the public welfare, especially where those facts were believed to be a potential factor in influencing their official acts and in shaping history.

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It must be confessed that Grant's explanations of his later attitude towards Smith, and of the reasons for relieving him and restoring Butler to command, were neither full nor always stated in the same terms. He ignores the subject entirely in his memoirs, but it so happens that Mr. Dana, then Assistant Secretary of War, was sitting with General Grant when Butler, clad in full uniform, called at headquarters and was admitted. Dana describes Butler as entering the General's presence with a flushed face and a haughty air, holding out the order, relieving him from command in the field, and asking: "General Grant, did you issue this order?" To which Grant in a hesitating manner replied: "No, not in that form." Dana, perceiving at this point that the subject under discussion was an embarrassing one, and that the interview was likely to be unpleasant, if not stormy, at once took his leave, but the impression made upon his mind by what he saw while present was that Butler had in some measure "cowed" his commanding officer. What further took place neither General Grant nor Mr. Dana has ever said. Butler's Book, however, contains what purports to be a full account of the interview, but it is to be observed that it signally fails to recite any circumstance of an overbearing nature. It is abundantly evident, however, from the history of the times and from contemporaneous documents published in the Records, that neither the working arrangements by which Butler commanded an army from his headquarters at Fortress Monroe or in the field while the major part of it, under the command of Smith, was co-operating with the Army of the Potomac, nor his relations with either his superiors or subordinates, were at all satisfactory. In the nature of the case, they could not be. Butler was a lawyer and politician accustomed to browbeat where he could not persuade. He and Smith while starting out as friends, early came to distrust each other. Smith, who was as before stated on intimate terms at general headquarters, made his views fully known from time to time, and especially in a frank and manly letter of July 2, 1884, to both Rawlins and Grant, and from the correspondence of the latter with Halleck, it is certain that both sympathized with Smith at first. It was evidently at Grant's request to Halleck, then acting as chief of staff and military adviser at Washington, that Smith was assigned to the Eighteenth Corps, and at Grant's request that he was relieved from it, without explanation. The undisputed fact is that the countermanding order was issued after a personal interview between Grant and Butler, the details of which are only partly known, and that no further explanation consistent with the continuance of friendly relations between Grant and Smith has ever been given.



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The inference to be drawn from the records, the correspondence, the conversations and the writings of all the parties thereto, is that the representations of Butler, and especially his comments upon Smith's criticism of the battles and management of the campaign, were the principal factors in convincing Grant that the best way out of the complications was to relieve Smith and restore Butler to full command. This way had been foreseen and suggested by Smith himself for he had asked more than once to be relieved from further service in the field on account of ill health, which made it impossible for him to undergo exposure to the hot sun, but his request had been denied, doubtless from a sincere desire on Grant's part to have the advantages of his services in the solution of the complicated problem which yet confronted the army. Had this request been granted when made, or had it been granted afterwards, and placed on the ground of a personal favor for the benefit of his health, which might well have been done, General Smith has frankly admitted that he would have had no shadow of excuse for anything but thanks. But when he was relieved without notice or any assignment of cause, as he was starting on sick leave, and the order was concealed from him till he had returned, a suspicion at once arose in his mind as to the motives which inspired it, and the suspicion was claimed by him as a sufficient justification for telling the world all he knew in regard to those who were responsible for the action of which he complains. His military criticism, however indiscreet, had always been direct and manly. Its soundness had been approved by some of the best officers in the service, including Grant himself, but it must be observed that the latter in his final report of the campaign, takes pains to make the point, evidently to forestall criticism, that he held himself responsible for only the general plans of the campaigns and operations, and that in accordance with an invariable habit, he left the details and the actual conduct of the battles to his subordinate commanders. The wisdom of this arrangement is not here in question, though much might be said against it. Its effect, if admitted, as a sound rule of action, must be to transfer the responsibility for a bloody and costly campaign to the shoulders of Meade, Humphreys, Burnside, Butler, Sheridan, Hunter, and in a number of cases even to those of corps and division commanders, instead of leaving it where it more justly belongs, on the shoulders of those who were responsible for the working organization of the army, and for the details of its staff arrangements.

General Smith's true place in history does not depend solely on these considerations, nor on his contributions to the history or criticism of the war. Fortunately for him the military committee of the House of Representatives of the Fiftieth Congress on its own motion, long after all these incidents had been closed, investigated his military career, for the purpose of deciding upon his fitness for the retired list, and on April 20, 1888, it submitted to the House of Representatives a highly favorable report, from which the following extract is taken:

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“On October, 1863, he [General Smith] was transferred to the West, where he in turn became Chief Engineer of the Department of the Cumberland, on the staff of General George H. Thomas, and of the Military Division of the Mississippi, on the staff of General Grant. As such he devised the plan of operations by which the Army of the Cumberland was saved from starvation and capture at Chattanooga, and was duly credited with the same by General Thomas. He also devised the plan of operations by which Bragg’s army was overthrown and driven back from Missionary Ridge, for which services he was again appointed and this time confirmed as Major General of Volunteers, also as Brevet Brigadier General, United States Army.”

After referring to other incidents of his life, which have been considered more fully in this account of his public services and need not be repeated here, this report added, although General Smith had resigned from the army many years before, that he was

“fully entitled at the hands of the government to be retired for a lifetime of hard and conspicuous service, in which he has displayed the most incorruptible honesty, the most outspoken patriotism and devotion and the highest ability. It has been the good fortune of but few men in any age or in any country to save an army and to direct it to victory, from a subordinate position. Such service in Europe would secure honor and riches. In ours it should certainly result in an assignment to a place on the retired list of the army, with the rank of Major General, and the appropriate pay for the remaining years of his life. The committee therefore unanimously recommend the passage of the bill.”

The final action taken in this case, while highly creditable to General Smith, was not as liberal as the House Committee thought it ought to be. The Senate Committee, while concurring in the commendation of the General, in conformity to its own practice cut his rank on the retired list down to that of Major, which was the actual grade he held in the regular army at the date of his resignation. It was a piece of ungracious and niggardly economy, for the services which entitled him to retirement were those of a general officer, and as he was actually promoted from Brigadier General to Major General in recognition thereof, the House of Representatives was clearly right in recommending his retirement with the higher grade. General Smith, who had not in any way asked for this recognition, was strongly inclined to decline it, but on the solicitation of his friends he finally accepted it.

At the end of the war General Smith, notwithstanding the differences which had arisen between him and his official superiors, received the brevet of Major General for “gallant and meritorious services in the field during the rebellion.”



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After his relief from further service in the field, General Smith remained at New York, awaiting orders, till November 24th, 1864, at which time he was assigned to special duty under the orders of the Secretary of War. This detail was voluntarily tendered and took him to New Orleans, where he was engaged in looking into the military administration of the department, under Butler and his successors, and in reference to which he made several confidential reports which have never been given to the public. Perceiving that his military career was practically at an end, and that he was not likely to receive satisfactory recognition on the reorganization of the army, he resigned his volunteer commission on the 4th of November, 1865, and took a leave of absence as a Major of Engineers, from December 15th, 1865, to March 7th, 1867, on which later date his resignation from the army was accepted. He had meanwhile taken employment as President of the International Ocean Telegraph Company, and had visited Florida, Cuba and Spain for the purpose of obtaining an exclusive concession for a term of years, for laying, maintaining and operating an ocean telegraph cable from Jacksonville to Havana. He was most successful in his negotiations, and in the construction and management of his lines, till 1873, when he and his associates sold out under advantageous terms to the Western Union Telegraph Company. For the next two years he resided abroad, mostly in England, with his family. During this time he visited nearly all the countries of western Europe, where he met and made the acquaintance of many leading men in the highest walks of life.

In May, 1873, General Smith was appointed one of the police commissioners for New York City, which place he filled till December 31st of that year, when he was appointed president of the board. He held this office till March 11th, 1881, during which time he took an important part in elevating and perfecting the police service. He was, however, too honest and independent to get on harmoniously with the politicians, and after an open breach with a number of them, including the Mayor, he resigned his position and retired to private life.

While engaged in this service he took an active interest in the presidential campaign. It will be remembered that the closeness of the vote between Mr. Tilden and General Hayes, and the high degree of tension between the opposing parties and their managers, filled the country with alarm, in the midst of which General Smith was consulted by the friends of Mr. Tilden, with the view of devising measures against the possibility of a subversion of the government by military or arbitrary power, but fortunately the device and action of the Electoral Commission averted all danger of that sort. The timid and vacillating behavior of Mr. Tilden during the emergency and afterwards was, however, a powerful factor in the estrangement of his supporters, and did much to bring about the nomination of General Hancock



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by the next Democratic National Convention. General Smith and his friend General Franklin took an active interest in the canvass and convention, and although they were soldiers without political experience, it is believed that their endorsement of Hancock and their work in his behalf was one of the most powerful influences in securing his nomination. They had been his life-long friends and his comrade during the great conflict, and hence felt justified in giving him their most earnest support.

At the close of the presidential campaign, the result of which was necessarily disappointing to General Smith, he was compelled, by unfortunate investments, to look about for an occupation. His friend, General John Newton was then Chief of Engineers and the system of Internal Improvements, which had long been favored by the Republican party, was being carried forward by bountiful appropriations from Congress. Many officers and civil engineers were required for the supervision of the various river and harbor works, and General Smith, having had wide experience, was, by the act of his friend, appointed Government Agent, and placed in charge of the works on the Peninsula between the Delaware and Chesapeake Bays, with his headquarters at Wilmington, Delaware. On March 1st, 1889, he was, in compliance with a special Act of Congress, put upon the retired list of the army, with the rank of Major. This at once raised the question whether he could draw the pay appropriate to his retired rank, and at the same time receive pay as a Government Agent. After argument by his friend, the Honorable Anthony Higgins, the United States Senator from Delaware, the case was decided in his favor on the theory that an "agent" was not an officer, within the meaning of the law. The decision in this case was similar to that made in the case of Quartermaster General Meigs, who was employed to supervise the construction of the Pension Office in Washington, after he had been placed on the retired list. Under the decision General Smith continued to perform the duties and draw the pay of Agent, till 1901, when he voluntarily gave up the appointment and definitively retired from business of every kind. For the last ten years or more he resided in Philadelphia, where he enjoyed the acquaintance and society of his chosen friends to within a few weeks of his death, which occurred on the 28th day of February, 1903, four years subsequent to the death of his wife.

He retained his wonderful intellectual powers, absolutely unimpaired, to the date of his final illness. With keen wit, sparkling repartee and a mind always on the alert for fresh information and the beauties of literature, he remained a delightful and instructive companion to the end. Firm in the Christian faith and fully satisfied that life had nothing further in store for him worth waiting for, he took his departure in to the Silent Land composed and free from regret, like a strong man going to sleep. He left a son and daughter with many friends and hosts of companions scattered throughout the country to mourn his loss. His native State had filled his heart with pride and satisfaction by giving on the walls of its capital to a bronze effigy and tablet with a laudatory inscription celebrating his virtues and his most distinguished services, and handing down his

memory to future generations as one in every way worthy of their respect and admiration.

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[Illustration:

This tablet is presented to Vermont by soldiers from other states who admire so much her great soldier son

Brevet Major General
William Farrar Smith,
U.S. Army.

The extracts here quoted from the letter of the assistant secretary of war C.A. Dana, to General Grant, dated December 21, 1863, show that at a crisis in the Nation's life he was in the thoughts of Lincoln, Stanton and Grant, as the general best qualified for the most important command.

"The surest means of getting the rebels altogether out of East Tennessee is to be found in the Army of the Potomac. This naturally led to your second proposition, namely that either Sherman or W.F. Smith should be put in command of that army. Both the Secretary of War and Gen. Halleck said 'Gen. W.F. Smith would be the best person to try'. The President, the Secretary of War and Gen Halleck agree with you in thinking that it would be on the whole much better to select him."

* * * * *

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I cannot close this sketch without repeating in part my personal testimony to the strength and elevation of General Smith's character. He was blessed by a singularly clear, orderly and comprehensive mind, and was most industrious and persistent in its use. Somewhat phlegmatic and deliberate in temperament and manner, he gave the impression occasionally that he was lacking in push and energy, but such was not the case in fact. During his services on the Rio Grande he suffered, as previously related, a malarial attack from which it is now evident he never entirely recovered. Under exposure to the summer sun, he was for the rest of his life liable to a recurrence of the symptoms especially those pertaining to the head, and this may have made him more or less irascible at times. Military habits are at best not calculated to develop a mild and patient behavior, nor to beget a spirit of resignation to unjust or arbitrary treatment, especially if it comes from higher authority, and is not merited.

General Smith was the last man to lay claim to a saint-like character, but according to those who knew him best he possessed a just and even a charitable disposition, which made him fair towards his equals and most considerate towards his subordinates. He was, however, above all things, logical, and as a close student of his profession, he invariably followed the established principles of the military art to their legitimate

conclusions. In the presence of great military problems and responsibilities such as those with which he had to deal at Chattanooga, he became absorbed and reticent if not austere and had but little to say except to those with whom it was his duty to talk. There the solution was so clearly his own that no one thought of disputing it with him till years afterwards.

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But in the conduct of operations against Lee, there were so many roads open, so many commanders in the field, and so many plans of operations suggested, so many considerations to be observed that no one man except Grant who was clad with special powers for the emergency, could hope for the honor of directing all movements. That became his exclusive function as soon as he was made Lieutenant General, but unfortunately, as has been shown, he and Smith began drifting apart from the day of their arrival in the East, and long before the great task before them was accomplished they had by their own peculiarities, looking at the problem from different points of view, and aided doubtless by the misrepresentations and selfish purposes of others, become hopelessly out of harmony with each other.

This is not the place to pronounce final judgment between them. They knew each other well, and although Grant had said towards the close of their friendship, "General Smith, while a very able officer, is obstinate, and is likely to condemn whatever is not suggested by himself," he had shown an earnest desire that his great talents should be utilized. On the other hand Smith, who was intimately acquainted with both the strength and the weaknesses of Grant's character, had full confidence in the soundness of his judgment, when left free from prejudice and misrepresentation, to act upon a full statement of the facts. Neither had hitherto shown himself to be particularly sensitive to criticism from the other, and both were in the highest degree patriotic and loyal to the cause. They had worked harmoniously and with marked success together in the West. Not a shadow had come between them. The case must therefore have been a most complicated one which made it impossible for them to work together in the same manner and to the same end in the East. The severance of their relationship, to whatever influence it may be attributed, is profoundly to be regretted, not only because it prematurely ended the military career of General Smith, but because it must have injuriously affected the fortunes of General Grant as well as of the country and the army, at a time when both sorely needed the help of every capable soldier. These results are all the more to be deplored because no one can study the circumstances connected therewith, without reaching the conclusion that they were brought about by methods which were themselves not above criticism, and which finally resulted in the downfall of their author.

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