

**BOYNTON
HENRY VAN**

CHATTANOOGA AND
CHICKAMAUGA

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Chattanooga and Chickamauga / Reprint of Gen. H. V. Boynton's letters to
the Cincinnati Commercial Gazette, August, 1888.:*

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**Henry V. Boynton
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Chickamauga / Reprint of
Gen. H. V. Boynton's letters
to the Cincinnati Commercial
Gazette, August, 1888**

PREFACE

Comrades of the Society of the Army of the Cumberland:

When General H. V. Boynton's letters recently appeared in the Cincinnati *Commercial Gazette*, so vividly portraying the achievements and heroism of the Army of the Cumberland in its campaign for the possession of Chattanooga, including the inevitable incident thereto, the battle of Chickamauga, I thought how agreeable it would be for each member of the society to have a copy for perusal at our approaching reunion on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Chickamauga.

Accordingly I asked General Boynton's permission to print these letters in pamphlet form, as advance sheets of any volume

in which he may determine to put them with other matter. To this he most cheerfully assented in the following letter:

Washington, Sept. 1, 1888.

My Dear General: You are welcome to the Chickamauga letters for any use you choose to make of them. While the salient features of both days' battle are easily understood, the details of movements by brigades are in many cases intricate. For this reason various errors may have been made in the text. If those who observe them will take the trouble to correct them before the public, they would thus assist in establishing the correct history of a battle in which the Army of the Cumberland should take great pride.

Very truly yours,

H. V. BOYNTON.

General W. S. Rosecrans.

With this explanation, the letters are given in the order of their respective dates.

W. S. ROSECRANS.

CHATTANOOGA AND CHICKAMAUGA

Washington, *August 3*. [Special.] – In two preliminary letters about Chickamauga the attempt was made to describe the field as it appears to-day, and to present some of the scenes of the battle which came rushing back over the plains of memory with a power suggestive of the departed legions that once clothed these farms, forests, and ridges with the terrible magnificence of battle.

In a sense, to write of Chickamauga is to try to excite interest in a subject which far too many regard as worn; but to the veterans who fought there it will never be a threadbare story. For that generation which has been born and has come to manhood since Chattanooga was won by the Union arms, there is no campaign which can be studied with greater profit, or which will more richly repay the reader. History has not yet done justice to Chickamauga, but its verdict is sure. Many of the misconceptions of the days following the battle still exist in the popular mind. It may be years before they are cleared away; but eventually the Chickamauga campaign will stand in the history of our war as unequalled in its strategy by any other movement of the contest, and as unsurpassed, and probably not equaled, for the stubbornness and deadliness which marked the splendid fighting of Unionist and rebel alike; and, furthermore, it will stand as a

substantial Union victory.

Just in proportion as the credit due is awarded to those who planned and executed the campaign will well-merited condemnation be meted out to those at Washington who insisted upon forcing the movement without regard to proper and vital preparation, who withheld re-enforcements, and who, in spite of public and private warnings which it was criminal not to heed, made rebel concentrations against Rosecrans possible from in front of Washington itself, and from Charleston, Mobile, and Mississippi.

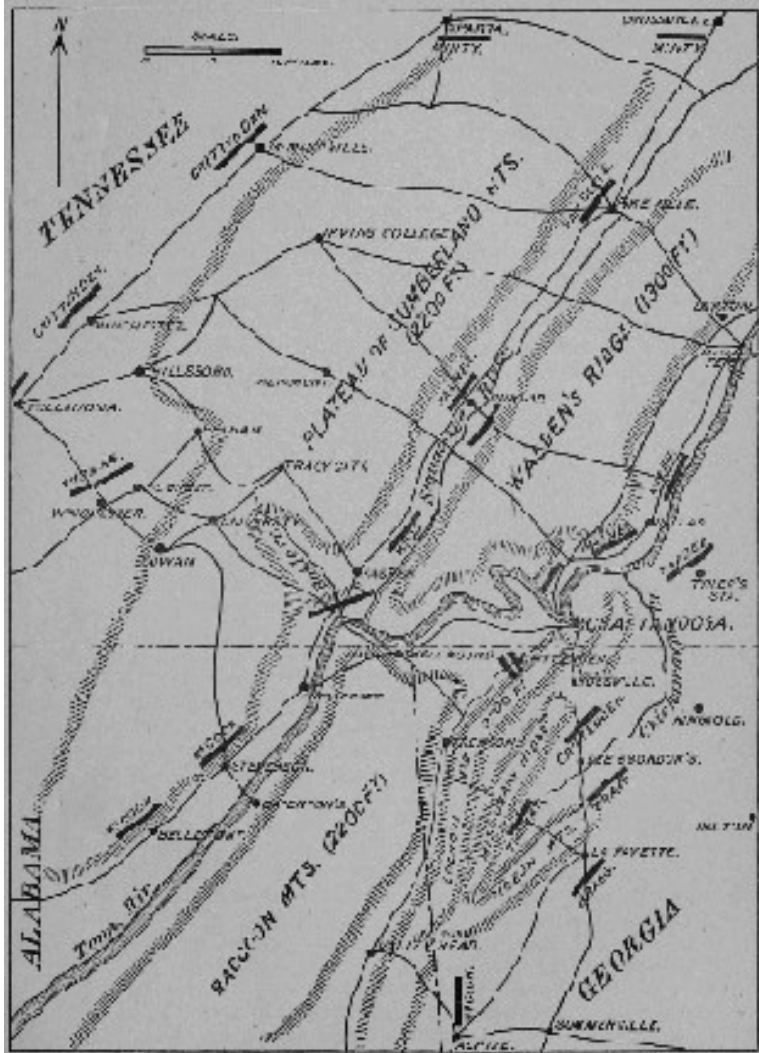
It will be the purpose of a few letters to go over some of the well-known ground of this campaign with a view of enforcing the ideas expressed in general terms above, and attempting to present a clear account of this most involved, and still seriously misunderstood battle. The strategy – matchless in our war – which compelled Bragg to abandon Chattanooga; the life and death struggle for concentrating the Union army when Rosecrans, against the protests of Washington authorities that it could not be true, found his widely separated corps confronted with re-enforcements from every part of the Confederacy; and, lastly, the great battle in the Chickamauga forests for the possession of Chattanooga, are each most fruitful and interesting themes. The present letter will relate to the first-named subject, the strategy of the Chickamauga campaign.

Marching from Murfreesboro on the 23d of June, 1863, General Rosecrans had advanced against Bragg, who was

strongly fortified, and whose lines, besides, occupied gaps and ranges of great natural strength. By brilliant strategy, with the loss of only 586 killed and wounded, and thirteen captured or missing, the Army of the Cumberland, with its nine divisions and twenty brigades, operating through sixteen days of continuous rain, maneuvered Bragg, with his seven divisions and twenty-three brigades, out of his natural and artificial strongholds, and forced him across the Tennessee. Up to that time there had been no strategic campaign to equal this, and it was soon to be far surpassed, except in the one element of loss, by the campaign to follow it. So brilliant had been the conception and the execution that all the corps commanders, headed by General Thomas, hastened to call on General Rosecrans and offer the warmest congratulations.

At the close of the Tullahoma campaign Bragg occupied Chattanooga and the mountain passes above and below it. Rosecrans's army lay along the western base of the Cumberland Mountains, its right above Winchester and its left at McMinnville. Here General Rosecrans at once began the most vigorous preparations for another campaign for the occupation of Chattanooga. Because the necessities of the case compelled secrecy as one of the main elements of success, there was soon at Washington a manifestation of unreasoning impatience over what was criticized as the inaction of the Union commander; but those who were on the ground know well the unceasing activity and energy with which the work progressed of accumulating

sufficient supplies of food, material, and ammunition, preparing the means for crossing the Tennessee and obtaining the necessary knowledge of the mountain passes, roads, and trails by which the army must move. Rosecrans's supplies reached him over a badly equipped line of worn railroad, a hundred and thirteen miles in length, and, as can be readily understood, when the daily wants of a great army preparing for extended movement and battle are considered, the matter of accumulating a surplus of supplies was not the task of a day or a week. With every effort the railroad was not repaired until July 25, and the forward movement began on the 14th of August.



A glance at the map will disclose the great natural obstacles which lay between General Rosecrans and Chattanooga. As his army faced toward the latter point, the Cumberland Mountains, with a general elevation of 2,200 feet, rose before it. The escarpment was everywhere precipitous, and destitute of every means of approach except narrow mountain roads and trails, with the one exception that a short railroad ran from Cowan to Tracy City, on the summit of the range. To the eastward this range dropped by like precipitous and difficult slopes into the valley of the Sequatchee River. Beyond that stream rose the equally sharp cliffs of Walden's Ridge, with a general elevation of 1,300 feet. This fell off along the eastern and southern edge of the plateau into the valley of the Tennessee, and overlooked it from the mouth of the Sequatchee River to a point far above Chattanooga. It was fifty miles as the crow flies from the lines of Rosecrans's army across this continuous mountain region to the valley of the Tennessee. This river was broad and deep, and presented in itself the most serious natural obstacle which the Union army had encountered since it left the Ohio River. It was 2,700 feet wide at Bridgeport, and 1,254 feet at Caperton, the points where the bridges were subsequently thrown.

On the left bank of the river, the stronghold of Chattanooga lying behind the river, and the great ranges to the westward between Rosecrans's position and his own, might well seem to Bragg impregnable, in fact almost unassailable. First, toward the

west, came the Lookout range, rising abruptly from the river to the height of 2,200 feet, and stretching southwestwardly far into Georgia and Alabama. Its western precipices looked down into the narrow valley of Lookout Creek. Beyond the latter rose the equally precipitous cliffs of the Raccoon Mountains, the latter having the same general elevation as the Lookout range.

The gorge of the Tennessee where it breaks through these mountain ranges is so narrow and so thoroughly commanded from the heights on both sides as to render it impracticable to so move an army as to attack it from the front or river side.

With these giant obstacles to the progress of his columns, most serious even if they had been within the Union lines, but almost insuperable when found in an enemy's territory, and while he was bending every energy to complete preparations for carrying out a brilliant plan of his own for overcoming them, General Rosecrans was astonished at receiving on August 4, only ten days after his railroad had been repaired to the Tennessee River, a dispatch from Halleck saying: "Your forces must move forward without delay. You will daily report the movement of each corps till you cross the Tennessee River."

To a commander who was building boats, opening mountain roads, rushing the accumulation of stores, getting out material for four thousand feet of bridges, preparing to leave his base carrying provisions for twenty-five days, and ammunition for two battles, and crossing three mountain ranges and a deep and broad river, in an enemy's country, and in the face of an army, this dispatch

was not only astounding, but discouraging and exasperating to the last degree.

It had become a habit at Washington to sneer at the slowness of General Rosecrans, as it was later to denounce General Thomas in similar terms at Nashville. There was no more reason or justice in the one case than in the other. The verdict of history has been reached in the case of General Thomas. It is sure to come, and to be the same in this matter, for Rosecrans.

To this dispatch, which can only be excused on the ground of wholly inexcusable ignorance of the active preparations in progress and the natural difficulties of an advance, General Rosecrans replied with his accustomed clearness and spirit: "Your dispatch ordering me to move forward without delay, reporting the movements of each corps till I cross the Tennessee, is received. As I have determined to cross the river as soon as practicable, and have been making all preparations and getting such information as may enable me to do so without being driven back, like Hooker, I wish to know if your order is intended to take away my discretion as to the time and manner of moving my troops." To this Halleck responded: "The orders for the advance of your army, and that it be reported daily, are peremptory." General Rosecrans immediately wrote the following reply, and, calling his corps commanders together, read the dispatches given above. There was no dissent from the proposition that at that stage of their preparations it was impossible to move. He then read his reply as follows, and all approved and agreed that they

should support him:

"General Halleck: My arrangements for beginning a continuous movement will be completed and the execution begun Monday next. We have information to show that crossing the Tennessee between Bridgeport and Chattanooga is impracticable, but not enough to show whether we had better cross above Chattanooga and strike Cleveland, or below Bridgeport and strike in their rear. The preliminary movement of troops for the two cases are very different. It is necessary to have our means of crossing the river completed, and our supplies provided to cross sixty miles of mountains and sustain ourselves during the operations of crossing and fighting, before we move. To obey your order literally would be to push our troops into the mountains on narrow and difficult roads, destitute of pasture and forage, and short of water, where they would not be able to maneuver as exigencies may demand, and would certainly cause ultimate delay and probable disaster. If, therefore, the movement which I propose cannot be regarded as obedience to your order, I respectfully request a modification of it or to be relieved from the command."

On the following day Halleck replied as follows:

"I have communicated to you the wishes of the Government in plain and unequivocal terms. The objective has been stated, and you have been directed to lose no time in reaching it. The means you are to employ and the roads you are to follow are left to your own discretion. If you wish to promptly carry out the wishes of

the Government you will not stop to discuss mere details. In such matters I do not interfere."

This was answered the same day by General Rosecrans as follows:

"Your dispatch received. I can only repeat the assurance given before the issuance of the order. This army shall move with all dispatch compatible with the successful execution of our work. We are pressing everything to bring up forage for our animals. The present rolling-stock of the road will barely suffice to keep us day by day here, but I have bought fifty more freight cars, which are arriving. Will advise you daily."

This was the last of interference from Washington, but, accustomed as all there were to interfering at will, and directing affairs according to the situation as they saw it, they could not brook such manifestly proper independence as was shown by Rosecrans, and from that time forward there was needed only an excuse to insure his removal.

Had there been a tithe of the attention given to preventing the rebels from concentrating on his front from every part of the Confederacy – in fact, bringing Longstreet's veterans from the lines under Halleck's own eyes – that there was to the kind of interference which has been noticed, Bragg would have been destroyed in front of Chattanooga. But this subject properly belongs in a succeeding letter. The dispatches given above are well known, but their reproduction will prove a convenience to readers who may not carry their exact terms in mind.

Ten days later, namely, on August 14, the movement to secure Chattanooga began. A glance at the map will reveal its strategy.

Rosecrans had decided to cross the Tennessee in the vicinity of Bridgeport, and subsequently the Raccoon and Lookout Mountain ranges at points south of Chattanooga, and thus compel Bragg to evacuate the place or to come out of it and fight for his line of communications. It is easily seen that if after crossing the river the enemy, warned in time, should be found in force on the western slopes of these ranges further progress in that direction would have been impossible, and a return to the north bank of the river obligatory. It was, therefore, necessary to wholly deceive Bragg as to the points of crossing.

Burnside was marching from Kentucky into East Tennessee. Any apparent movement of the Army of the Cumberland in force in that direction would naturally lead Bragg to believe that a junction of the Union forces was contemplated on his right.

Everything being ready, Crittenden opened the campaign with the Twenty-first Corps. Leaving his camps at Hillsboro, Manchester, and McMinnville on the 16th of August, he crossed the Cumberland Mountains and occupied the Sequachee Valley from a point between Jasper and Dunlap to Pikeville. Van Cleve held the latter place, Palmer was established at Dunlap, and Wood at Anderson, between Dunlap and Jasper. All built extensive camp fires and moved about in such ways as to convey to observers from the heights the impression that the whole army was moving. Meantime Minty's active cavalry had

moved through Sparta and driven Dibrell's cavalry eastward through Crossville, on to the Tennessee, and over it, and Dibrell, having come to reconnoiter and see what was going on, naturally got the idea that Rosecrans's army was coming. The crossing of the Cumberland was but the first step of the imposing diversion. Though the mountain roads were few and very difficult, Crittenden's movements over them had been completed exactly on time. The advance over Walden's Ridge, equally difficult, though it was not quite as high as the main range, was immediately undertaken. Minty, on the extreme left, appeared on the Tennessee more than thirty miles above Blythe's Ferry, where he made most energetic commotion. Hazen reached the river in the vicinity of Dallas. Two brigades were strung out along the edge of the cliffs on the top of Walden's Ridge, where they overlooked Blythe's Ferry, and could be seen from the other side of the river. Minty, with his troopers, swept down the valley of the Tennessee to near Chattanooga. Wilder and Wagner also appeared in the valley. While a show of building boats was made in the small streams about Blythe's Ferry, Wilder from the heights of Walden's Ridge, opposite Chattanooga, opened fire on the town with artillery. Bragg was thoroughly deceived. Forrest was ordered far up the Tennessee to Kingston to watch for the expected crossing. Buckner was ordered from East Tennessee toward Blythe's Ferry.

As may be supposed, Wilder's cannonading produced the wildest excitement in Chattanooga. The rolling-stock of the

railroads was hastened out of reach. The depots of supplies were moved out of the range of the unexpected bombardment. D. H. Hill's corps was hurried off to guard the river above, and other heavy forces were moved in the same direction. Everything done by Bragg was based upon the idea that Rosecrans was moving in force to points on the river above the city.

Meantime the real movement was going on quietly sixty to eighty miles in the opposite direction, in the vicinity of Bridgeport and Stevenson. A force of cavalry for the purposes of observation, and to convey the idea by quick movements that Rosecrans was feigning below, while really expecting to cross above the city, was sent as far westward as Decatur. Thus Rosecrans was operating along the river through a hundred miles of mountain region and fifty miles of low country beyond, and in spite of the natural difficulties every part of the plan was working with precision.

Thomas and McCook on the right moved at the same time with Crittenden. Reynolds, of Thomas's corps, had marched in advance and repaired the roads by way of University, and down the eastern slope of the mountain to Jasper. Brannan followed him, and both were at first kept well out of sight of the river. Baird and Negley came down nearer to Bridgeport, and McCook descended back of Stevenson. With the exception of Sheridan, at Bridgeport, all were kept well out of sight from the enemy's cavalry on the left bank.

Sheridan alone made a show of his presence and openly began

the construction of a trestle through the shoal water, in order to lessen the length of the floating bridge. As this was without a decided show of strength it deepened the impression that the movements on this wing were the feint and those toward the upper river the real move. In fact, after watching Sheridan's trestle building for a while from the other side of the river, Anderson's brigade of infantry, the only infantry force available to oppose a passage of the river, was withdrawn and sent to Chattanooga.

The bridge for Caperton's Ferry was brought down on a train, which was halted out of sight, and a road cut for its transportation through the woods to a point near its destination, where the troops which were to lay it were drilled in their work.

Early on the 29th fifty boats, each carrying fifty men, were brought out of the woods near Caperton's, rushed across an open field, launched, and quickly rowed to the opposite shore. The Confederate cavalry pickets were driven off and twenty-five hundred men held the south bank. The bridge was promptly laid. Davis was soon over, and then McCook's entire corps, with cavalry, started promptly for Valley Head, forty miles down the Lookout range. Reynolds collected boats at Shellmound, Brannan had built rafts and cut out canoes at the mouth of Battle Creek. The long bridge was successfully laid at Bridgeport, and before Bragg had recovered from his surprise, in fact before he had comprehended the extent of the movement, Rosecrans, with two corps, was over the river and moving on his communications.

As soon as the crossing was assured, Crittenden marched with celerity by way of the Sequatchee Valley towards the bridges and was soon across with the main body and advancing on the left of it directly towards Chattanooga.

This crossing of the Tennessee was a great feat. The bridges were not sufficient for the army. Reynolds gathered small boats and improvised his own means of crossing. Brannan's men had cut out canoes from immense poplars and launched them in Battle Creek out of sight. Some of them would hold fifty men. They also built rafts, one of them large enough to carry artillery. These, with an abandoned rebel pontoon boat, constituted Brannan's flotilla. When the signal was given the whole swept out from behind the bushes which concealed the mouth of Battle Creek and made for the opposite shore. The rebel pickets withdrew and the crossing was secured. Then all his men who could swim, piling their guns, clothing, and accouterments on a few fence rails, pushed these before them and thus gained the opposite bank. Later, Wilder swam his mounted brigade across the river and joined Crittenden south of Chattanooga. Halleck must have had this ability for crossing a river in the presence of an enemy in mind when he telegraphed Rosecrans, a few weeks before, to move at once and keep moving.

But this crossing, and the grand diversion which made it possible, were only the preliminary, and by no means the formidable parts of the movement. To complete it, Rosecrans was to cut loose from his base, carry twenty-five day's

supplies and sufficient ammunition for two battles, cross two precipitous and difficult mountain ranges wholly within the enemy's territory, and their passes presumably strengthened and defended, and, after crossing the last range at widely separated points, to descend into the valley in the rear of that enemy's stronghold, prepared for battle or any other contingencies which might arise on this distant and isolated theater of action.

When Bragg discovered the real point of crossing and the lines of actual movement it was too late to recall the forces dispatched up the Tennessee or to post columns of sufficient strength on the slopes before Rosecrans to impede his advance in force. How strong the positions thus turned by the Union forces were will appear from the statement that so precipitous and otherwise difficult were the roads over these ranges that at several of them it required a day and a night for a division with its artillery and reduced trains to make the ascent.

The Union commander had delayed his movement until the corn was ripe in order that it might not be necessary to carry grain for his animals, which would have largely increased his trains – so careful, thoughtful, and wise was he in every detail of preparation.

Bragg's failure to resist in the vicinity of Rosecrans's crossings and at the crossings of Raccoon Mountain was due in part to the fact that even after he knew that the heads of columns were over the river he was still inclined to look upon their movements as a feint, and to regard the real point of danger to lie above

the city. Rosecrans, even after crossing, sought successfully to strengthen such impressions in Bragg's mind. He directed Wagner's, Wilder's, and Minty's brigades to report to Hazen, and with this force, some 7,000 strong, the latter was ordered to make a conspicuous show of crossing the river far above Chattanooga. This active and efficient officer admirably executed his orders. By extended fires, by marchings and countermarchings, by moving his artillery continuously across openings in sight from the opposite bank, by buglers at widely separated points, and other similar devices, he easily created the belief that an army was encamped on the right bank intending to cross.

With the exception of this force, all of Rosecrans's army was south of the river on September 4, and on the move. The right was already well on its way. On the 6th his army had descended from Raccoon Mountain and occupied the valley between that range and the western slope of Lookout from a point seven miles from Chattanooga to Valley Head, forty-two miles from the city. The next day McCook and Thomas began to ascend Lookout at points respectively forty-two and twenty-six miles from Chattanooga. On the 8th McCook's troops were in motion down the eastern slope of the mountain toward Alpine, and Thomas was descending from Steven's and Frick's Gap, both of which were near where the road from Trenton, after running southwardly, is represented as leading over Lookout. Crittenden had pushed small portions of his command up mere mountain trails, and on the 9th these gained position where they could look

down upon Chattanooga. They saw no flags, and soon discovered that Bragg had evacuated. The day before Wagner, still watching from the north bank of the river, had reported to Rosecrans that the enemy was leaving. The news came in the night, and Rosecrans ordered Crittenden to ascertain the situation. His detachments on the mountain had already discovered that the city was deserted. Crittenden was at once ordered to march around the north point of Lookout, and follow Bragg toward Ringgold. At night on the 9th Palmer and Van Cleve's divisions were established at Rossville, five miles south of Chattanooga.

Thus, in three weeks from the time his diversion towards Bragg's right began, and in five days from the time his army was over the river, Rosecrans had repeated the Tullahoma campaign on a far greater scale, and in the face of much more formidable obstacles, and absolutely without fighting, except as Minty had been slightly engaged with Dibrell near Sparta in the outset of the movement, had driven Bragg from the mountain stronghold of Chattanooga, the objective of the campaign. It was well said later by General Meigs, who came from Washington to Chattanooga after its final occupation by the Union army, and spent some days in studying the movements by which it had been secured: "It is not only the greatest operation in our war, but a great thing when compared with any war."

But the occupation of Chattanooga, in a military sense, was not accomplished by sending Crittenden's two divisions beyond it and one brigade into it. Bragg had only withdrawn to save his

communications and supplies, and to await the re-enforcements he knew to be hastening from Virginia, from Mobile, and from Mississippi. The battle for Chattanooga was yet to be fought. Bragg had retired with deliberation. He established his headquarters at Lafayette, behind Pigeon Mountains, but his rear guard never passed beyond Lee and Gordon's Mills.

The news that Rosecrans' troops were in Chattanooga, and that he had pushed out after the retreating Bragg, made a tremendous impression upon the North. It was accepted as a capture, and a military occupation of that long-coveted stronghold. It is true it was occupied, but not in a military sense, since the Union army had not been brought into it, or concentrated between it and the enemy.

Hence arose that misconception, which is widespread still, that the Army of the Cumberland had occupied Chattanooga, and thence marching out to attack Bragg, had been defeated by the latter at Chickamauga, and driven back in disorder into Chattanooga.

But, instead, Chickamauga was the battle for Chattanooga, fought by Rosecrans while on the way to take military possession of it, and while he was concentrating his army between Bragg and that city, the objective of the Union campaign. The battle was not for the Chickamauga woods, but for the passes behind them which controlled the way to Chattanooga. These were secured as the immediate result of the battle, and the successful occupation of Chattanooga in the military sense followed – an occupation

which lasted till the close of the war.

In connection with the fact of Crittenden's unopposed movement into Chattanooga another point of general misapprehension arose, which, through the years, has formed the basis of unfair and unthinking, if not ignorant criticism of General Rosecrans' brilliant strategy. Why did not Rosecrans face Thomas and McCook about in the valley west of Lookout, where their movements would have been concealed, and hurry them after Crittenden into Chattanooga? It was simply because with McCook's advance nearly fifty miles from Chattanooga by the roads west of Lookout, and Thomas's head of column already down and over Missionary Ridge, full thirty miles away, to withdraw and send them in succession after Crittenden would have been to have invited attack in detail from Bragg upon each head of column as it followed Crittenden, with all the chances in favor of Bragg's success. Besides, the shortest and surest, in fact the only practicable line of concentration looking to the safety of the widely-separated corps was through a movement to the left along the eastern bases of Lookout and Missionary Ridge. It was this movement of Rosecrans for concentrating on Crittenden's position south of Rossville that led to the battle of Chickamauga. Bragg, having been heavily re-enforced, started at the same time from Lafayette to interpose between Rosecrans and Chattanooga, the Union objective of the whole campaign.

Subsequent letters will follow this exciting concentration, and the desperate contests of each army for position, and the bloody

battles which ensued, and by which Chattanooga was finally won.

H. V. B.

Washington, August 7. – [*Special.*] – In the movements of the Union armies none, from first to last, presented such brilliant strategy as the two which brought General Rosecrans from Murfreesboro', to the rear of Chattanooga. Almost equally wonderful was the successful concentration of his widely scattered corps. This was accomplished in the face of an enemy that had been heavily re-enforced with veteran troops, and largely outnumbered General Rosecrans. The concentration, moreover, united the Army of the Cumberland for battle between this confident enemy and the city which was the objective of the Union forces.

The story is crowded with brilliant and successful operations of detached corps against greatly superior forces and of minor strategy, which blend harmoniously with the more striking features of the great campaign. It covers a period of intense anxiety for General Rosecrans and his subordinate commanders, of most skillful action, and continued danger to destruction in detail. It culminated in the delivery of a battle, which, though still widely misunderstood, unquestionably ranks for the stubbornness and effectiveness of its fighting and the importance of its results with the most notable battles of the war.

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