

CHAPTER XXV.

MILITARY VALUE OF WESTERN VIRGINIA IN THE WAR.

The reorganization of the Virginia government at Wheeling and the formation of a State devoted to free soil and the Union, at the time these things were done, were of enormous advantage to the Union cause. Mr. Lincoln said once that this Virginia movement was worth more to the government than an army with banners. Mr. Sumner said in the Senate on the question of admitting the New State: "Perhaps no question of greater importance has ever been presented to the Senate. It concerns the whole question of slavery; it concerns also the question of State rights; it concerns also the results of this war. Look at it, therefore, in any aspect you please, and it is a great question." Mr. Bingham said, in closing the debate in the House of Representatives: "It is an inroad, if you pass this bill, which will become permanent and enduring, into that ancient Bastile of slavery out of which has come this wild, horrid conflict of arms which stains this distracted land of ours this day with the blood of our children." Mr. Seward said "the harmony and peace of the Union" would be promoted by allowing the New State to take jurisdiction of the west slope of the Alleghenies supplanting control by "a political power concentrated at the head of the James River." Mr. Stanton said that "by the erection

of the New State the geographical boundary heretofore existing between the free and slave States will be broken and the advantage of this from every point of consideration" exceeded all objections. The *New York Times* said: "Virginia in rebellion, one-half her territory gravitates by kindred attraction to the North. Already is a victory gained which is conclusive of the whole contest. A territory equal in area to a first-class State is thrown off from the South by mere force of repulsion. It can never be reclaimed."

This with reference to political aspects. The military value of the movement has not perhaps been so generally appreciated as it ought. Plans at Richmond and at Montgomery contemplated the speedy occupation of Western Virginia by the Confederate forces. The check to Garnett's army and the subsequent occupation of the mountain inlets saved the Northwest very early in the fight; and it was Rosencranz, who had captured Rich Mountain and cut off Garnett's communications, who made Wise's occupancy of the Kanawha untenable, and maneuvered rather than fought him out of the country. The Southwest might have been spared Wise, just as the Northwest was Garnett, if troops had been sent into the Kanawha Valley as promptly as they were into the Tygart Valley. We have described in another chapter what ravage was suffered in the Southwest; and therein we have a picture of what might have happened in the Northwest but for the early invitation to Federal troops and their instant response. Not only was the Northwest spared despoilment but weightier consequences resulted. It gave Ohio and the western border of Pennsylvania the Allegheny Moun-

tains for a "frontier." If McClellan had met Confederate armies at the Ohio River, he might never have become the "Young Napoleon of the West," and a good deal of the history of the war might have been different. Once those armies had camped on the east bank of the Ohio—even if we take no account of the moral and political effect in the Northern States, it would have made a very different military situation from what was actually confronted. If the Confederates could have established themselves on the Ohio, their aim must then have been to cross the hundred miles lying between the northern extremity of Virginia and Lake Erie, to cut the great east and west lines of railway which were the military arteries of the Union. The disabling of the Fort Wayne, the Steubenville & Indiana, the Atlantic & Great Western and the Lake Shore Roads, even temporarily, would have been a frightful disaster—more deadly than the closing of the Mississippi; for the circulation in that narrow neck between East and West was more vital than that by the great river. Such a severance would have divided the military power of the North fatally if maintained for any considerable time. The achievement of this would have been an object of supreme effort, on the one hand, and of unexampled resistance on the other. That upper Ohio region would have become the center of the struggle. If the main Confederate effort had been made in this quarter instead of wasting itself in Eastern Virginia against an impregnable wall, the event might have told a different story. The time to attack in this quarter would have been at the initiative, before the North could have organized to meet the assault, even before they could realize the blow that was intended.

Howell Cobb, president of the Montgomery government, looked forward to the occupation of West Virginia. He said in a speech at Montgomery that the people of the Gulf States need have no fear that the war would roll their way; that they might plant their cotton in security, for "the theater of war," he said, "will be along the Ohio and in Virginia." This may have been thrown out merely to soothe the nerves of the Cotton-State chivalry; and there is no evidence that the rebel plans ever contemplated any bolder stroke in that quarter than the occupation of Virginia to the Ohio. But if that had been done successfully, raids across the territory north of the river would have been the next logical military venture.

When laymen undertake to express ideas about military strategy, they must, of course, do so with due recognition of the absurdity of ideas at variance from the settled formulas of the military schools. Yet the greatest campaign in the West during the rebellion was planned by a woman, an employe, I believe, in one of the departments at Washington. The facts are undeniable; but it would have detracted from the glory of the hero of the hour to confess the truth, and the truth was suppressed.

It is the unexpected that wins in war, as in other fields of effort. When Napoleon started out as the thunderbolt of beleaguered France, he left behind him the accepted, but for him obsolete, methods of his contemporaries and took the military world by surprise. His genius consisted in getting on the ground first, with the longest guns and the largest battalions. In no other field of human enterprise is the "instant way" more vital to success than in war. The South had been for years getting ready; and

yet with the total want of preparation in the North,—with arsenals and armories depleted to supply those in the South; with the regular army reduced to seventeen thousand men; and with a general belief that the South was only blustering and did not really mean to fight—the Confederates were from the start the invaded, not the invaders. With their preparation and premeditation, they might have taken the North by surprise; might by bold and instant invasion at the vulnerable point have so anticipated its readiness for attack as to have produced a momentary paralysis—possibly have created such confusion and panic as to have dictated terms of separation before the North could have organized resistance or recovered equilibrium. That would seem to have been the way to begin a successful war. This was the kind of opening to expect from a people who prided themselves on their military temper and prowess. Courage they did not lack; but there was a lack of military audacity and genius which made the rebellion a foredoomed failure from the day its generals permitted themselves to be put on the defensive. Along with the government muskets the rebellion stole the government's West Point officers, trained to believe war could not be waged except within the formulas of the books. What did Attila or Zenghis Kahn care for the methods of military schools? And what might not have happened if the South had at the opening had ready some such leader with an army secretly organized, ready for instant mobilization, to follow him into the "enemy's country?"

The recognition of opportunity is the privilege, the seizure of it the proof, of genius. Fortunes are made or marred, campaigns and countries lost or won, powers and

principalities established or overthrown, according as the opportune moment is seized or lost. The Confederates lost their opportunity in Northwestern Virginia. It was the vice of their slave civilization that even under the tremendous stimulus of war their enterprises were all tainted with the ineffectiveness of their methods of thought and business. There was too much strutting and preening; too much thought of display for its effect on the world at large; too much orating and premature self-glorification over results not yet achieved. There was too little cold-blooded calculation—too little of that far-reaching audacity which is not afraid to reach out beyond the accepted methods of ordinary men and means—to “dare, and again dare, and without end dare,” in the words of the “lost Titan” of the French revolution. The daring of the Confederates only once rose above the level of a merely defensive war, though no country in the world offered a richer spoil than the North; and the experience of that exception showed them how unequal they were to anything else.