

CHAPTER XXI.

THE ATLANTA CAMPAIGN.

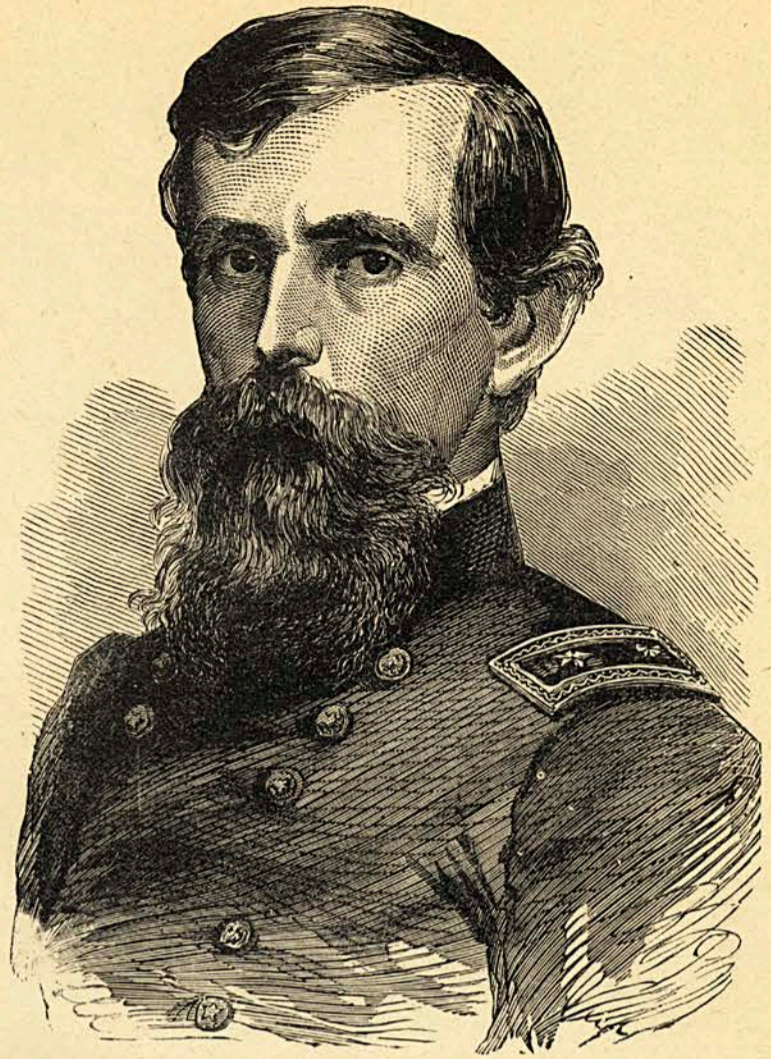
At the West, the first important movements in 1864 were for the purpose of securing the Mississippi River, possession of which had been won by the victories of Farragut at New Orleans and Grant at Vicksburg, and setting free the large garrisons that were required to hold the important places on its banks. On the 3d of February, General William T. Sherman set out from Vicksburg with a force of 20,000 men, in two columns commanded by Generals McPherson and Hurlbut. Their destination was Meridian, over 100 miles east of Vicksburg, where the Mobile and Ohio Railroad is crossed by that from Jackson to Selma. The march was made in 11 days, without notable incident, except that Sherman narrowly escaped capture at Decatur.

General Leonidas Polk, in command at Meridian, at the approach of Sherman's columns, retreated into Alabama. The National troops entered the town on the 14th, and at once began a thorough destruction of the arsenal and storehouses, the machine-shops, the station, and especially the railroads. Miles of the track were torn up, the ties burned, and the rails heated and then bent and twisted, or wound around trees. These were popularly called "Jeff Davis' neckties," and "Sherman's hair-pins." Wherever the columns passed, they destroyed the mills and factories and stations, leaving untouched only the dwelling-houses. Sherman was determined to disable those railroads so completely that the Confederates could not use them again, and in this he succeeded.

While the gap that had been made in the Confederacy by the seizure of the Mississippi was thus widened by destruction of railroads east of that river, General Banks, in command at New Orleans, attempted to perform a somewhat similar service west of it. With 15,000 men he set out in March for Shreveport, at the head of steam navigation on Red River, to be joined at Alexandria by 10,000 men under General A. J. Smith (loaned for the occasion by Sherman from the force at Vicksburg), and by Commodore David D. Porter with a fleet of gunboats and transports. Smith and Porter arrived promptly at the rendezvous,

captured Fort DeRussey below Alexandria, and waited for Banks. After his arrival, the army moved by roads parallel with the river, and the gunboats kept even pace with them, though with great difficulty because of low water. The army jogged along strung out for 20 miles on a single road, with a small cavalry force in the advance, then the wagon-trains, and then the infantry.

As they approached Sabine Cross Roads, April 7, they were confronted by a strong Confederate force commanded by General Richard Taylor, and suddenly there was a battle, though neither commander intended it. Taylor, before camping for the night, had sent out troops merely to drive back the advance guard of the expedition. But the men on both sides became excited, and the Nationals fought persistently for an hour and a half to save their trains, while Banks tried to bring forward his infantry, but in vain, because his wagons blocked the road. At the end of that time the line suddenly gave way, and the cavalry and teamsters rushed back in a disorderly mass, followed closely by the victorious enemy. Three miles in the rear the Nineteenth Corps was drawn up in line, and here the rout was stayed. The Confederates attacked this line, but could not break it, and at nightfall retired. Banks had lost over 3000 men, 19 guns, and a large amount of stores. He fell back a short distance, to Pleasant Hill, where the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Corps came up, and next day he had nearly his whole force in line. Here the Confederates made a determined assault late in the afternoon, but were repelled, and, being attacked in return, lost many men and several guns. But Banks, instead of following up his victory, fell back to the river at



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Grand Ecore, partly for the reason that he had been ordered to return Smith's borrowed troops.

The water in the river had fallen so that the fleet, taken up over the rapids with difficulty, could not pass down again. But a genius came to the front in the person of Lieutenant-Colonel Joseph Bailey, who said he could build dams across the river, and raise the water enough to float the fleet. He was laughed at by the regulation army engineers, but got permission to try the experiment, and set to work with 3000 men, cutting down trees, hauling stone, and building cribs. In eight days the work was done, the water had risen sufficiently, and the gunboat "Lexington" took the lead in the passage through the narrow opening that had been left in the dam. Here the water rushed like a mill-race, and as she swung into the current with a full head of steam on, probably few expected to see her make the passage unharmed. But though she rolled heavily, and seemed to hang for a moment on the edge of the rocks, she passed down without accident, and was quickly followed by three other gunboats. Within a few days the whole fleet was thus rescued.

General Steele had marched with 15,000 men from Little Rock toward Shreveport, to co-operate with Banks' expedition. But after the battles of Sabine Cross-Roads and Pleasant Hill the Confederates turned upon him and drove him back to Little Rock, capturing several of his guns and hundreds of wagons.

All these expeditions were preliminary to the great campaign that General Grant had designed for an army under Sherman, simultaneous with that conducted by himself in Virginia, and almost equal to it in difficulty and importance. The object was to move southward from Chattanooga, cutting into the heart of the Confederacy where as yet it had been untouched, and reach and capture Atlanta, which was important as a railroad centre and for its manufactures of military supplies. This involved conflict with the army under General Joseph E. Johnston, by some esteemed the ablest general in the Confederate service. If he was not the ablest in all respects, he was certainly equal to the conducting of a defensive campaign with great skill. The distance from Chattanooga to Atlanta, in a straight line, is 100 miles, through a country of hills and streams, with a great many naturally strong defensive positions. Johnston



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