



It was just after the defeat of our army in front of Fredericksburg under Burnside, and Gen. Joe Hooker had succeeded to the command of the Army of the Potomac, which was posted along the left bank of the Rappahannock river opposite Fredericksburg, known as Falmouth Heights; with a force at Stafford under Gen. Slocum, a part of whose command, the Second division of the Twelfth corps, under Gen. John W. Geary was posted at Aquia Landing and Dumfries, on the Potomac, "the base of supplies" for the army.

The winter of 1862, just passed, may well be considered the darkest of all the dark days of the rebellion; especially was it so with the Army of the Potomac. Burnside's disaster at Fredericksburg had turned many a faint heart to despair, men were deserting and officers resigning, which was one and the same thing in principle; while the press of the north was very severe in its criticisms on the management, all of which had a bad influence within the ranks and file of the army. The never-to-be-forgotten headlines, "Why don't they army move," "stuck in the mud," etc., are of the relics of that wretched winter.

On the 19th of March, 1861, I was ordered on detached duty, to report to Gen. Geary at Aquia Landing. I was attached to Geary's staff as courier and received my instructions. I was told that my duties would be arduous and at times hazardous; I would be the bearer of dispatches to and from army headquarters and to corps headquarters, or to any place the General might desire, whether inside or outside of our lines.

I was very favorably impressed with Gen. Geary; he was a grand talker and inspired me with that feeling of confidence which makes one feel that he is subordinate because of the presence of a superior mind.

There had hardly a week passed that some courier did not fail to report back to headquarters and as our numbers thinned out, more duties were heaped upon the few remaining. Moseby had enlarged his command so that he could cover all that portion of Virginia between our army and Washington, and his men were on the watch for dispatches and good horses; the first were sent to Gen. Lee, the latter they kept for their own use. I usually carried a fictitious dispatch in my belt if on an important mission and liable to capture, while the real message was secreted in my clothing where it could be easily gotten at and destroyed in case I should fall into the enemy's hands. The little dispatch boat, Osceola, which lay at the landing, was ever ready to take us, whenever there were orders for Col. Candee, at Dumfries, or more important dispatches from Hooker's headquarters intended for the navy officers, or the commander at Fort Washington. These little trips by water were by way of a change very enjoyable.

It was generally known around headquarters that the date fixed for a move against Lee's army was postponed more than once on account of heavy rains which made the roads impassible and the rivers too high for successful bridging.

On the 26th of April, Geary's division broke camp at Aquia and joined Slocum at Stafford in the general move. The Adjutant-General took occasion to drill us, respecting our new duties in the field; he told us that much of the formalities of camp duty could be dispensed with; that activity and promptness were the principal requirements, and under this license I came near getting into serious trouble. As we stopped



the second night on near Potomac creek I carried verbal instructions to the brigade commanders as to the location of their camps. Approaching Gen. Green of the Third brigade, my horse on a full gallop, I saluted him and proceeded to say: "Gen. Geary's instructions are that you put your brigade into camp, right resting, etc., etc." Gen. Green, who had dismounted, and was standing when I addressed him, came at me in this way: "What do you mean? Don't you know how to approach a general officer? Let me give you a lesson. You should dismount, advance on foot to within three paces of the officer, salute, then say: 'Gen. Geary sends his compliments to Gen. Green and desires etc.'" to which I quickly replied, "Gen. Geary did not read any compliments, besides we are in the field now and haven't time to put on any frills," and at that my spurs touched my horse and away I flew to Gen. Kane, where I had another peculiar experience, but of a different nature. Gen. Kane, the first Colonel of the celebrated Buck-Tails, was a genial and unpretentious officer, who did not hold himself aloof from those under him; he was a good friend of mine and accustomed to calling me by my familiar name. When I delivered Geary's instructions to him he looked around and said, "Where is my Adjutant-General? I don't see him anywhere; darned if my whole staff ain't

gone. Here Billy, you put my brigade into camp," which I did, explaining Gen. Kane's peculiar fix to the regimental commanders.

When I reported at Geary's headquarters I felt a little shaky fearing Gen. Green had reported me for conduct unbecoming a soldier; so I lost no time in seeing our Adjutant-General, to whom I told all that had happened. "Have no fears," he said, "Gen. Geary would pay no attention to that old crank; he has no love for him, I assure you."

On the 27th three army corps, the Fifth, Eleventh, and Twelfth, under command of Gen. Slocum, moved towards Kelly's ford on the Rappahannock river. When we reached the ford the next day I was sent back with orders to Capt. Douglas, our Provost Marshal, to follow and join the command with his guard; I was particularly instructed that as soon as we reached the ford to hurry forward and join the staff again. When Capt. Douglas received his instructions he positively declined to follow them; for said he, "it would be foolish for me or you to attempt such a thing; I have every reason to believe that the enemy's cavalry will be in Gen. Slocum's rear, and I would not take my small company on that road, unless I wanted to transfer them to Andersonville." Disregarding good advice, I followed my instructions, which I felt in duty bound to carry out.

The water in all the streams was, from continuous rains, at full banks, and pontoons were used to get the army over, but when I got back to Kelly's ford neither army nor pontoon were anywhere to be seen. The whole force had crossed the night before, and it was now only an hour before noon.

I was a good half day behind. Knowing my horse was a good swimmer (for old Jimmie had never failed me on previous occasions), I was willing to trust him. Behind my saddle was a sack of grain, which was supposed to last the horse three days; this I considered risky baggage for the marine excursion I was about to undertake, so I opened it out on the ground and invited Old Jimmie to partake of "The last supper." Well, he made a regular grgin barge of himself, so I had nothing to throw away.

The current of the river was so very swift that I deemed it advisable to launch above the ford, that I might strike the opposite side all right. At taking my saber to the saddle and taking my revolver and belt off I wrapped it around my neck so as to keep the ammunition dry; I then rode to a point about twenty yards above; here I found the bank quite abrupt, and it took the full length of the spur to convince my horse that it was just the time for a bath. Old Jimmie never did things by halves; he made a wonderful jump, and when he struck water he was completely submerged. Where was I? Well, my magazine was just above water. Did you ever see a horse swim? How he lunges, and grunts, and catches for breath, as though he expected to drown the next minute. It soon became a serious question with me whether my horse's strength would hold out and land me on the south bank, or otherwise; but his feet found bottom at last, and I was once more on terra firma.

I lost little time removing my boots and socks and other clothing, and after wringing what water I could from them, with difficulty I got them on again, and was soon in the saddle, headed towards Grenama ford on the Rapidan. I found the roads as bad as they could be, the deep ruts made by the artillery of the three army corps, with their long ammunition trains, made my progress very slow. I had gone perhaps two miles, when I crossed the road leading to Brandy Station. Here I discovered the tracks of cavalry in column, and knowing that Slocum had no cavalry with his command, I could see the word "Stewart" on every shoe print; but I kept on making tracks in another direction. I had gone but a short distance farther, when I came to a lone cabin just off the road in front of which stood an old colored woman. As she sighted my blue uniform, she came up to the fence that separated her from me.

"Good morning, Auntie," said I, "have you seen any rebels about here this morning?"

"Is you Unun?" she asked, in a most solicitous manner.

"Yes," I replied, "I'm a real, live Yankee without horns."

"Oh! Lord, goodness, massa, I's awful 'fraid you'll be killed, I is. A heap of dem rebels been robbin' by here, up an' down, ever since you all's done gone by; some old dem rebels ax me how many Yankees I saw go by. I said not very many; I wusent gwine to tell dem de trufe," and then she placed both hands on her knees and laughed heartily.

At this juncture the old colored woman, who was looking in the direction I had just come, raised her hands and exclaimed: "Dar dey come, git to de woods, quick, git to de woods, quick."

Turning in my saddle, I saw a column of cavalry just halted at the forks of the road. They had evidently discovered me, and were arranging for my capture. Raising my cap to this true disciple of the Union, with a good-by and God bless you, I took a hasty leave. Down a decline in the road I went, and then up a rise. Here I took occasion to look back to see if I was being followed; yes, there was a squad of six or eight horsemen on my track and making good headway, for they seemed to have good horses. I soon came to a bend in the road, which brought me out of sight of my pursuers, as there was timber on both sides. The road was some better now, and I put my horse down to his heels, and we were making splendid time, when I discovered objects in my front. I slackened my pace and moved cautiously, hoping all the while that I was about to strike our rear guard.

A little nearer and I could see that there were horsemen dismounted, their horses hitched to the fences on each side of the road; this settled it, they were not of our kind. My first thought was to take a by-road leading to the east which I had just passed, but changed my mind when I saw my newly discovered enemy mounting their horses facing towards me.

best, especially during a rainy season, like the one we were passing through. I could not go ahead, I could not retreat, I dare not take the ground in plain sight of my pursuers, leaving the woods as my only alternative. I selected a spot where I should leave the road, where there was a heavy growth of fern and weeds, that I might not be easily traced. When I struck the timber my horse rebelled as he felt his feet sinking under him, but a spur is a great stimulus, and we were soon wallowing in the mirey woods, my horse sinking below his knees as every step. Considering myself well concealed, I halted to await results. Looking out into the light from the dark recesses of the woods I could occasionally catch a glimpse of passing horsemen, but they did not seem to suspect my whereabouts, and I was feeling fairly safe when my Jimmie elevated his head, and gave a tremendous jump from the saddle I took him gently by the nose, and I felt the old prospector until I had shot off his breath.

"You're gosh-fool," says I, "if you don't quit your darned nonsense, you'll get us both in Libby Prison," and I gave his nose another twist. The two squads of rebels had met in the road nearly opposite us, and my heart was



resting to the tune of about 120 per minute, lest my hiding place be discovered. The brilliant thing that saved me was the sand I did not take, for after a little consultation they started in that direction at a lively pace.

I did not wait long, as I considered that my opportunity was at hand; emerging from the woods I was soon pushing towards a great battlefield for safety. The place to try a man's nerve is to stand him on his own bottom, in an enemy's country, with no bottom to stand upon.

At about 5 o'clock p. m. I brought up on the north bank of the Rapidan river at Grenama ford. There was a heavy guard of our men on the opposite side, but I was the only armed Yankee between the two rivers. As I was preparing to make myself known to the guard on the opposite side, I received a salute from one of their Springfield rifles, and a good shot it was, too, for I felt the wind caused by the bullet on my cheek. Raising my cap and swinging it above my head, I got a friendly signal. Then I rode to the water's edge, and tried to communicate with them, but the distance was so great that our voices could not be heard above the rushing waters. One comrade told me in dumb language to swim over. This he did by pawing the air with his hands.

Going through with exactly the same preliminaries I did at Kelley's ford, I was once more struggling against the current of another big river, the "Rapidan" or "Rapid Run," so called because of its rapid current, was a hard stream to swim, and many a man and horse, during the war, went down in attempting it. Before I had passed the middle of the stream, I saw that I had drifted far below the landing place and that it would be impossible to land at any other point, on account of steep banks covered with rocks. Turning my horse so that he was headed diagonally up stream, and gathering the little reins in one hand, I grasped a saddle strap with the other, and slipped out of the saddle by my horse's side; this lightened his burden, and he swam gallantly to shore with me in tow. We landed amid a tumult of cheers from the men who stood on shore. In crossing the Rappahannock the "high water mark" was just above my waist, but the water of the Rapidan reached my ears.

Near the river was a very respectable looking farm house, to which I repaired, hoping to find accommodations that I might dry my dripping clothes. Calling at the door I met a very lady-like woman, who was, as she said, the wife of a Confederate officer; when I told her that I would like a room with a fire, she said the only fire about the place was in the cook house, and that the cook was using it preparing supper; I told her I would see if it would answer my purpose.

I found the typical Southern kitchen with its large fireplace, and equipped by an old darkey mother and seven or nine little black young ones. I established headquarters at once and issued by orders: "Remove all pots and kettles from the fireplace, get dry wood and make a big fire."

These orders carried out, I was soon on "mudras" paraded with my clothes streaming from the backs of chairs before a fire. How time dragged, while the process of evaporation went slowly on.

I was hurried into my half dry regimentals, by a notice from one of the guards, that they would abandon the post and move forward at once. The sun was just going down when I mounted my horse to complete that memorable day's march. At 7 o'clock p. m., April 30, I reported to Gen. Geary at Chancellorville Corners, a thoroughly worn out man with a badly played out horse. The corn-popping business had already begun between the sharpshooters and scouting parties of both armies, indicating what the morrow would bring forth. I could not think of resting until my poor horse had been fed; the horses at headquarters had been cared for, and the wagons sent back to the rear. If I remember rightly, I drew some feed from one of our batteries without a requisition—I borrowed it when the guard was not looking, and the men were asleep.

The Battle. On the morning of May 1 there was little done except by way of preparation. I went to the wagon train to get a new horse, as the Adjutant-General said he thought I would have plenty of riding to do later in the day, and I

wanted old Jimmie to have a rest. At about 10 o'clock there was a general advance made by the Twelfth and second corps, and by the division of the Fifth corps, the Twelfth, under Slocum, moved forward, their left flank on the Plank Road leading to Fredericksburg. We met with some resistance, but it only amounted to lively skirmishing in our front, while at times in front of the Second corps the fighting was quite heavy. Everything seemed to move off in good style, and we had but one thought and that was to push ahead. It was a general surprise and disappointment when our aggressive movement, by order of Gen. Hooker, was discontinued, and we fell back to our original line, except the brigade of Gen. Kane, of Geary's division, who was left as an outpost, occupying a commanding position, with a full battery of artillery, where he soon got into business, and was making it interesting for the enemy, when Geary received orders from Hooker to call him in. Capt. Wilson of the staff was sent to perform that duty. He did not seem to crave the job, as he knew the enemy had pushed his skirmishers past the ground held by Kane, and by the hesitating way he started off, let our Adjutant-General remark, "Capt. Wilson will never see Kane in God's world," and he never did until after he was paroled. A written order was then handed to me, which was successful in placing in Gen. Kane's hands, who was the most thoroughly disgusted man I ever saw, after reading the order; "why," says he, "I just got my guns nicely trained on the enemy, and was in good shape to give them 'Hail Columbia,' if they would leave me alone." Gen. Kane was a man who went into the service to fight rebels, and he hated to be deprived of a single opportunity. Out of the saddle he was almost as helpless as an infant, having been literally shot to pieces early in the war.

The ground abandoned by Gen. Kane proved advantageous to the enemy, for when they got their artillery planted there, it played havoc along our lines. It was the prevailing opinion of officers of high and low rank, as well as the men, who always had opinions on moves and maneuvers, that our giving up the ground, and the position gained by the advance in the morning, was a mistake, and time proved that this was Hooker's first great blunder, for had he pushed the enemy head at this time with the four army corps he then had at Chancellorville, with the first corps near at hand, Stonewall Jackson would never have started on his wonderful flank march, and Lee could have been forced to uncover Fredericksburg, and

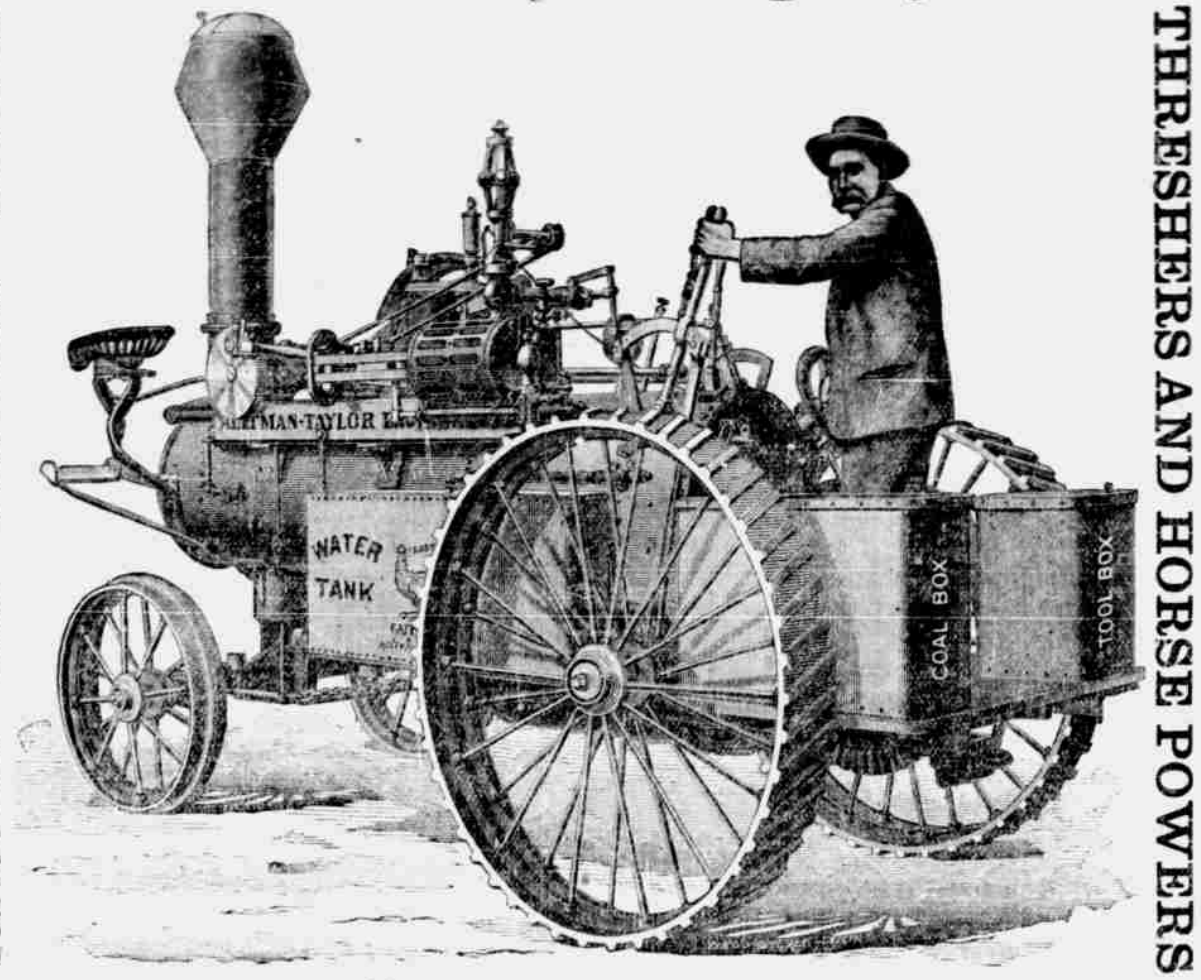


let Sedgwick in on his rear. On the other hand the enemy was not only active but aggressive, their batteries, occupying the high ground just vacated by us, now opened upon Slocum's lines with not less than twenty guns, and their range was so good that our position was uncomfortable; but they didn't have it all their own way, for our batteries retaliated in good style, and when Knapp's battery (the pride of the corps), which occupied the fine position on the plank road, got her parrots to talking, the Johnnies had to move their most effective pieces, which was a great relief to us, but our guns kept pounding away. At this juncture a body of the enemy could be seen, pressing through the woods and thick underbrush, just to the left of the plank road, and immediately in front of Knapp's battery. I was told by Capt. Elliott, Gen. Geary's Adjutant-General, to ride down as near the enemy as possible, to see if it was a general advance, while Lieft. Davis of the staff went to Gen. Slocum to prepare him for whatever might come. I started down the road directly in front of the battery, while every discharge of her guns would nearly raise me from the saddle, so great was the concussion; in a dense cloud of smoke, I proceeded unmolested, until I found myself desperately near to the other fellows, and I very soon learned that it was a move to capture Knapp's battery. The ground was much against them, however, as it was rising all the way to our line of defense, with heavy underbrush and trailing grape vines, making their advance tedious and slow; and should they attempt to move up the plank road in column, our artillery could hash them into sausage meat in short order.

My observations completed, I started back, anxious to impart what I had learned to Gen. Geary; but I was discovered by rebel sharpshooters, who sent their whispering messages to me to halt, but I zigzagged in my course, and laid low in my saddle, and reached our lines in safety. It was not long before we could see the rebel horde pouring out of the woods into the partially cleared grounds in our front, and forming for the charge. The Twenty-eighth Pennsylvania (Geary's old regiment), which lay in support of the battery, was now ordered forward with fixed bayonets. The rebels had by this time got into pretty good shape and were moving forward in good style as the timber and brush would permit, and what they lacked in style they made up in noise, for they yelled like—like—rebels, and our guns were giving them case shot in genuine allopathic doses. Gen. Geary, who was undoubtedly the most interested spectator to this scene, as he sat on his big black horse, exposed all the time to the bursting shell of the enemy, now commanded: "Battery cease firing," then riding down to where his old regiment was, he ordered Major Chapman to charge his men; the order was given promptly, but not so promptly obeyed; one company would advance a little way, but seeing the other holding back would halt; some of the officers were yelling, others were pleading with the men, but no concert of action seemed possible, and the advance

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ing energy was gaining courage as we while, Geary did not long hesitate what to do, he had ordered this regiment to charge three times its own number 'tis true, but he was the kind of an officer who believed a soldier should obey any and all orders, throwing his bridle rein to me, he slipped out of his saddle and getting his ponderous form down in front of that faltering line in very quick time, and with his drawn sword in air he shouted, "Are the men of the old Twenty-eighth to be branded as cowards? No; then follow your old leader, Charge." Every man came to the front at the word, and with caps swinging above their heads, a lusty yell from every throat, and in almost perfect line, they swept down upon the enemy.

That was an awful moment and everyone who saw that charge must have stood spell bound; the enemy must give way, or the Twenty-eighth Pennsylvania killed or captured; and they do give way; not one among the enemy strikes his steel with ours. During the excitement I had quite forgotten the General, but recovering myself I hurried to the front with his horse, and when I found him, he was reclining at the roots of a huge tree stump, nearly exhausted. Congratulating him on his success, and for his personal bravery, I jumped to the ground to assist him to mount, but after several attempts to get that 250 pounds into the saddle I found it necessary to call for assistance, which was soon at hand, and our hero gras riding back over the field he had just made glorious. I did not feel belittled, by riding just a little behind that grand old General, as he was greeted by round after round of cheers from the men of his command. Among the officers of his division, there were some who did not entertain the kindest feelings for their commander and for good reasons perhaps, as he was at times very uncomplimentary, and used harsh language to them, but what I have just described, was for him admiration from all. Everything seemed to quiet down all along the line, and the first day's battle was closed. That night I lay down by that little log barn, around which was our headquarters and which may be seen in the foreground of Scribner's Chancellor House view, and slept soundly and sweetly.

Business did not open up very early on May 2, but the first detail the enemy made was a lively one for us; our supply trains were brought up and were parked just in front of the Chancellor house; they were cited by the enemy, who opened on them with artillery, which was vigorously responded to by our batteries, resulting in one of the prettiest artillery duels I ever saw. I was out with Gen. Geary, who was inspecting his lines, and as we returned to headquarters he halted and sat on his horse watching the effect of the cannonading, when a shell came very close to his head. "Getting a new range, I guess," said the General, and he moved a little way to the left. The next shot was still closer, showing that the gunner was really personal in his designs. "I will dismount and let you take my horse to the rear until this shelling business is over with," said the General. Hardly spoken, when I saw another dark speck in the direction of the enemy's battery. I eried look out, and ducked my head, expecting the shot, like the others, to range a little high; but they had ducked their gun and that shell tore a hole from breast to stern through my horse, and he died without a struggle. Another man took the General's horse, while I removed

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