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The Battle of Harlem Heights

By

William R. Shepherd, Ph.D.

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THE BATTLE OF HARLEM HEIGHTS

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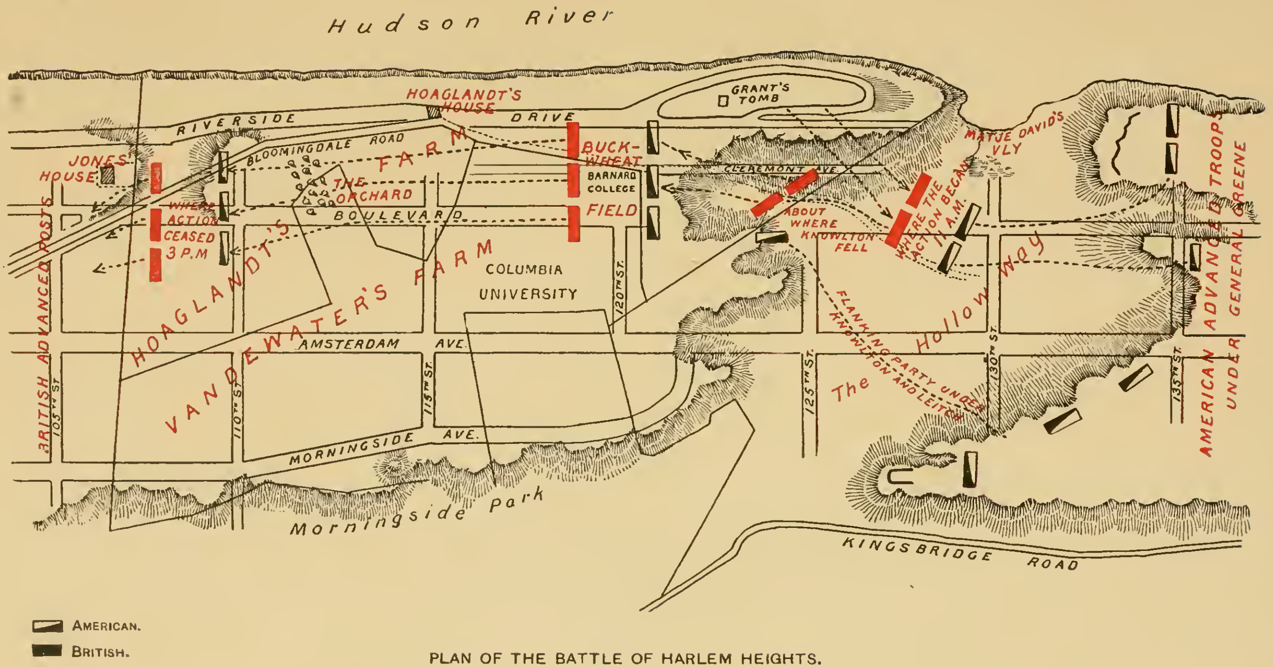
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AMERICAN.
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PLAN OF THE BATTLE OF HARLEM HEIGHTS.

(SEE NOTES AND REFERENCES 1.)

Half Moon Series

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Volume II. Number X.

THE BATTLE OF HARLEM HEIGHTS.

By WILLIAM R. SHEPHERD, Ph.D.

Local Interest of the Battle

ANY event in the Revolution that made a distinct contribution to the establishment of independence has its share of interest to the patriotic American ; but the "affair"[1] at Harlem Heights has a general importance, colored with a local interest, which specially merits our attention and admiration. Its general importance is attested by the fact that, coming as it did immediately after the calamity on Long Island, it served as a prelude to the brilliant exploits at Trenton and Princeton ; while its local interest is clear, when we remember that it was the only contest within the limits of Greater New York that resulted in a victory for the Americans. The battle of Harlem Heights, therefore, has a peculiar charm to the citizen of the metropolis. Gazing at the very ground on which it was fought, as he traces from one landmark to another

The Defence of New York

the course of the struggle, he may reflect with honest pride that here, within the precincts of his own city, occurred what Washington was pleased to term a "success . . . productive of salutary consequences,"[2]—once more a Concord and Lexington which "animated our troops, gave them new spirits," and enabled them "with inferior numbers to drive their enemy, and think of nothing . . . but conquest."[3]

In January, 1776, two months before the British evacuated Boston, the question arose whether an effort should be made to hold New York—probably their next objective point of attack. Although apparent that the insular position of New York with its belt of navigable waters bore out the truth of Charles Lee's assertion that whoever commanded the sea must command the city,[4] still, if a Declaration of Independence was to be issued and its assertion of rights made good, the abandonment of New York, merely on the plea of difficulty in fortifying it, would have been a serious mistake. Even if the city could not be made impregnable, a brave show of resistance might deter the British from attempting its capture, or at any rate "give them," says a blunt patriot, "a scrag which they would not relish very well,"[5] before a capture could be effected.

In order to confine the British water control

The Defence of New York

to the harbor and the mouth of the Hudson River, the East River—the key of the American position—was fortified along both banks at various points from the Battery to Hell Gate. The water front on the south and west also was protected by batteries on the shore and barricades in the streets ; while to the north of the city other fortifications were constructed along the line of the present Grand Street, to ward off an attack from that quarter. Then to command the Hudson, as well as to cover a possible retreat by way of Kingsbridge, Fort Washington was built a little to the southwest of the Washington Bridge, and connected with Fort Lee on the New Jersey shore by a series of stone-laden boats fastened with chains, and sunk as an obstruction to the enemy's ships. A few hundred feet north of West One Hundred and Ninetieth Street, overlooking the Harlem River, was erected a redoubt which the British later called Fort George. On the mainland also, beyond Spuyten Duyvil Creek, and on what is now Giles' Place west of Sedgwick Avenue, Fort Independence was constructed to hold the approaches to Kingsbridge.

England had regarded the campaign around Boston as a mere preliminary indicative of the resistance likely to be offered by the Americans. Hence it is probable that the British change of base from Boston to New York was

Condition of the Opposing Armies

prompted as much by motives of strategy as by the pressure of the American besiegers. New York henceforth was to be the centre of British operations, and here the war began in earnest. Late in June, 1776, appeared the first signs of the coming occupation. Within seven weeks over four hundred vessels and thirty thousand troops under the command of General Howe were in New York harbor, the latter being encamped on Staten Island. To oppose this huge array—as mighty a military and naval armament as England had ever sent upon foreign service—Washington had less than twenty thousand effective men. Some of these were fairly armed and equipped, but many of them, farmers fresh from the plough, had hardly any other weapons than a spade or pick-axe, or possibly a scythe made straight and fastened to a pole. Undaunted however by the overwhelming odds, on July 2, Washington addressed to his army the stirring appeal that follows :

> "The fate of unborn millions will now depend under God on the courage and conduct of this army. Our cruel and unrelenting enemy leaves us no choice but a brave resistance or the most abject submission. This is all we can expect. We have, therefore, to resolve to conquer or die. Our country's honor calls upon us for a vigorous and manly exertion, and if we now shamefully fail we shall become infamous to the whole world. Let us, therefore, rely upon the goodness of the cause and the aid of the Supreme Being, in whose hands victory is, to animate and encourage us to

Washington's Appeal to his Army

> great and noble actions. The eyes of all our countrymen are now upon us, and we shall have their blessings and praises, if happily we are the instruments of saving them from . . . tyranny."[6]

Not only does this appeal seem to have had the desired effect upon the army in general, but, in particular, "never did people in the world act with more spirit and resolution than the New Yorkers."[7] A part of the enthusiasm was manifested a week later in pulling down the gilded equestrian statue of King George near the junction of Broadway and Bowling Green, and in sending the pieces to Connecticut, where patriotic women converted them into bullets for the American army.[8]

The personality of Washington and the magnetic influence he exercised over his soldiers were well known to General Howe. If he could capture the rebel leader the war would indeed be ended in the single campaign which boastful British officers declared was sufficient. A direct attack on the centre and right of the American position—*i. e.*, Governor's Island, the Battery, and the fortifications facing the Hudson River—would probably be successful ; but, besides entailing serious loss on the aggressive party, might accomplish no more than the withdrawal of the Americans to the heights in the north of Manhattan Island, whence Kingsbridge furnished an easy escape. Several schemes of

The Battle of Long Island

outflanking, therefore, suggested themselves to Howe's mind, the most feasible being to assail the American left wing, then stationed on Long Island. The defences of Brooklyn once broken through and the forts along the shore silenced, the fleet could sail up the East River and, in conjunction with the army, cut off Washington's retreat on the north. The haughty Virginian rebel, who declined to receive from his Majesty's commissioners any communication addressed simply "George Washington, Esq.,"[9] would then be caught like a rat in a trap. Accordingly, on August 22, with fifteen thousand troops the British commander crossed the Narrows to Gravesend Bay, and took possession of the villages on the flatlands where he was soon joined by five thousand Hessians. For several days the armies lay over against each other with no more hostile demonstration than an occasional skirmish. South of the American lines at Brooklyn, and extending eastward from New York Bay, was a low range of densely wooded hills that served as a huge natural barrier to the approach of an enemy, and could be vigorously defended. Four roads led through depressions in this range, three of which were strongly guarded, but at the fourth, known as the "Jamaica Pass," only five mounted pickets had been stationed. On the night of August 26, the British stealthily advanced to the

"Pass," captured the pickets, and ere an alarm could be given fell upon the astounded Americans and routed them with a loss of over eleven hundred. Happily, however, the British had not forced the American lines, otherwise, outnumbering as they did their opponents nearly three to one, the entire patriot army on Long Island must have surrendered. Two nights later, Washington effected his masterly retreat to New York. Leaving his camp-fires ablaze and a few pickets posted so as to lull suspicion, the army of nine thousand Americans marched to Fulton Ferry and crossed in safety, the only accident being the loss of a boat with four stragglers. If the Americans had been outflanked the British had been outwitted, and some consolation at least might be derived from that fact.

Washington's Retreat from Long Island

Yet, however courageous the resistance and brilliant the retreat, the immediate result of the battle of Long Island was deplorable. No one more than Washington realized it, for in his letter to Congress, September 2, he says:

> "Our situation is truly distressing. The check . . . sustained on the 27th ultimo has dispirited too great a proportion of our troops, and filled their minds with apprehension and despair. The militia, instead of calling forth their utmost efforts to a brave and manly opposition in order to repair our losses, are dismayed, intractable, and impatient to return. Great numbers of them have gone off; in some instances almost by whole regiments, by half ones, and by companies at a time."

The Result of the Battle of Long Island

An absolute disregard of "that order and subordination necessary to the well-doing of an army" made his situation all the more alarming, and evoked from him the sorrowful statement:

> "With the deepest concern I am obliged to confess my want of confidence in the generality of the troops. . . . Till of late I had no doubt in my own mind of defending this place [*i. e.*, New York], nor should I have yet if the men would do their duty, but this I despair of. It is painful and extremely grating to me to give such unfavorable accounts, but it would be criminal to conceal the truth at so critical a juncture."[10]

Indeed it was found necessary to establish guards at Kingsbridge and other points to stop the deserters, especially those with arms and ammunition. One incident will serve to illustrate the simple character of the average militiaman. The guard brought to a halt a ragged fellow who was carrying something in a bag. The something proved to be a cannon ball which, he explained, he was taking home to his mother to pound mustard seed![11] Yet give these rustic soldiers a little longer time in the army, render them accustomed to the din of warfare, and the skittish militia, for whom the Continental regulars evinced such utter contempt, would soon be found among the bravest defenders of their country. At this moment, however, Washington felt that he could place no reliance on an army

Withdrawal to Harlem Heights

composed largely of such material, and reluctantly began to consider the advisability of evacuating Manhattan Island, at any rate south of Harlem Heights. Here an energetic stand might be made, for Washington had no intention of doing what Lee later proposed,—to "give Mr. Howe a fee simple"[12] to New York, without a struggle. From several of his officers came the suggestion to burn the city, but fortunately this piece of useless destruction was averted by the prudent moderation of Congress. In reply to Washington's query on this point, Congress declared that the city be left intact; for, even "though the enemy should for a time obtain possession of it," eventual recovery was certain.[13] At length, September 12, it was resolved to withdraw the army to Harlem Heights, a sufficient number only of men being left to keep guard over the approaches from the East River, while Putnam superintended the removal of stores and munitions. Hence at the foot of the present Grand Street (then Corlaer's Hook), East Twelfth Street, East Twenty-third Street, and East Thirty-fourth Street (then Kip's Bay), were entrenched several brigades of militia. Also at various points as far north as East Eighty-ninth Street (then Horn's Hook) was posted a line of sentinels who half-hourly passed along the cheering watchword, "All 's well," to which the

The British Land at Kip's Bay

British sailors, who could distinctly hear the call from their ships in the river, derisively responded, "We will alter your tune before to-morrow night."[14]

Two days later Washington set up his headquarters at the Roger Morris (now Jumel)[15] Mansion, still standing on One Hundred and Sixty-first Street, east of St. Nicholas Avenue, and in one day more the removal of men and munitions would have been complete. Meanwhile several ships of war had forced their way up the East River, in spite of the steady fire from the American batteries on the Manhattan shore; but it was not until September 11, that the British effected a landing on Montresor's (now Randall's) Island, and on Buchanan's (now Ward's) Island, with the manifest intention of crossing to Harlem and of advancing upon the city from the north. Washington had anticipated this move by the prompt withdrawal to Harlem, and, as the powerful American battery at Horn's Hook had not been silenced, Howe decided to debark his troops at Kip's Bay. On Sunday, the fifteenth, under a furious cannonade from the frigates, the British regulars landed and drove the American militia in wild confusion from their entrenchments. The half-humorous description of the encounter related by a participant on the American side shows the situation exactly :

Description of the Encounter at Kip's Bay

"At daybreak," he says, "the first thing that saluted our eyes was . . . four ships at anchor . . . within musket-shot of us. . . . They appeared to be very busy on shipboard, but we lay still and showed our good breeding by not interfering with them, as they were strangers and we knew not but they were bashful withal ! As soon as it was fairly light we saw their boats coming, . . . filled with British soldiers. When they came to the edge of the tide, they formed their boats in line. They continued to augment these forces . . . until they appeared like a large clover field in full bloom. . . . It was on a Sabbath morning, the day in which the British were always employed about their deviltry, because, they said, they had the prayers of the church on that day. We lay very quiet in our ditch waiting their motions till the sun was an hour or two high. We heard a cannonade at the city, but our attention was drawn to our own guests. But they being a little dilatory in their operations, I stepped into an old warehouse which stood close by me with the door open inviting me in, and sat down upon a stool ; the floor was strewed with papers which had in some former period been used in the concerns of the house, but were then lying in woful confusion. I was very demurely perusing these papers when, all of a sudden, there came such a peal of thunder from the British shipping that I thought my head would go with the sound. I made a frog's leap for the ditch and lay as still as I possibly could, and began to consider which part of my carcass was to go first. The British played their parts well ; indeed they had nothing to hinder them. We kept the lines till they were almost levelled upon us, when our officers, seeing we could make no resistance, and no orders coming from any superior officer, and that we must soon be entirely exposed to the rake of the guns, gave the order to leave the lines. In retreating we had to cross a level clear spot of ground, forty or fifty rods wide, exposed to the whole of the enemy's fire ; and they gave it to us in prime order ; the grape-shot and langrage

Description of the Encounter at Kip's Bay

flew merrily, which served to quicken our motions. When I had gotten a little out of the reach of their combustibles I found myself in company with one who was a neighbor of mine when at home, and one other man belonging to our regiment; where the rest of them were I knew not. . . . We had not gone far (along the highway) before we saw a party of men apparently hurrying on in the same direction with ourselves; we endeavored hard to overtake them, but on approaching them we found that they were not of our way of thinking; they were Hessians! We immediately altered our course and took the main road leading to King's bridge. We had not long been on this road before we saw another party just ahead of us whom we knew to be Americans; just as we overtook these they were fired upon by a party of British from a cornfield, and all was immediately in confusion again. I believe the enemies' party was small; but our people were all militia, and the demons of fear and disorder seemed to take full possession of all and everything on that day. . . . They did not tarry to let the grass grow much under their feet."[16]

But the ordeal was something which even veteran troops could not have withstood. "The fire of the shipping," wrote General Howe to Lord Germain, "being so well directed and so incessant, the enemy could not remain in their works and the descent was made without the least opposition."[17] This statement of the British commander will go far to extenuate the conduct of the militia, disheartened as they were by the disaster on Long Island, and terrified by the swarms of British troops as well as by the thunderous roar from the frigates. Then, too, the knowledge that their countrymen were safe at Harlem Heights was no small incentive to rapidity in flight. The Americans stationed at East Twenty-third Street soon joined them, and together they hastened along the Kingsbridge road (Lexington Avenue).

Retreat from Kip's Bay

As soon as the boom of cannon reached his ears, Washington mounted his horse and sped along the four miles intervening between Harlem and the scene of action. Near Park Avenue and Fortieth Street, what were his horror and consternation to behold the Americans flying in all directions, while scarce a half mile away the dust was rising under the feet of the pursuing British and Hessians. Riding excitedly into the midst of the runaways, he shouted: "Take to the wall! Take to the cornfield!" Beside himself with wrath and mortification at seeing his commands disobeyed, he lashed the fugitives with his riding-whip, flung his hat upon the ground, and cried in accents choked with passion, "Are these the men with whom I am to defend America?" Indeed so blind was he to all sense of danger that, had not one of his attendants seized the bridle of his horse and turned the animal's head in the opposite direction, the Revolutionary War might have terminated then and there.[16] Regaining his self-possession, the commander-in-chief permitted the demoralized militia to continue their stampede toward Harlem Heights, although in his report to

Retreat from Kip's Bay

Congress he did not fail to denounce their conduct as "disgraceful and dastardly." [19] He then ordered the immediate retreat of Putnam.

The story of how Mrs. Mary Murray, wife of Robert Murray, whose farm included most of the "commanding height of Inclenberg" (now Murray Hill), entertained the British generals so hospitably that Putnam and most of the remnants of the patriot army still in the city managed to elude the enemy and gain the heights in safety, is too well known to bear repetition.[20] Suffice it to say that the cake and wine and geniality of this lady, who responded with rare tact and good humor to the bantering of the British officers on her rebel sympathies, as effectually "bowed" her guests "at her feet"—for a while at least—as the hammer and tent-nail of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, had done in detaining Sisera, the captain of the Canaanitish host, when "he asked water and she gave him milk," when "she brought forth butter in a lordly dish."

After having completed their debarkation, the British drew up their lines across the island from the foot of East Eighty-ninth Street to the foot of West Ninety-sixth Street, or Striker's Bay as it was then called, the pickets being stationed between that street and West One Hundred and Fifth Street. Gen. Howe's headquarters were at the Beekman mansion [21] (Fifty-first Street and First

The Position of Washington's Army

Avenue), while Sir Henry Clinton took up his residence at the Apthorpe house (Ninety-first Street and Columbus Avenue). And in general this was the position of the British for nearly a month. Of the two positions, however, that of the Americans was the stronger. Beginning at Washington's headquarters, One Hundred and Sixty-first Street, the camp extended southward to the "Hollow Way," or the valley now comprised between West One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street and West One Hundred and Thirtieth Street, through the centre of which runs Manhattan Street. At the eastern end of this depression was a rugged spur called the "Point of Rocks" (One Hundred and Twenty-sixth Street and Columbus Avenue), used by the Americans as a lookout station, whence Harlem Plains could be surveyed as far as McGowan's Pass; while the western portion terminated in a round marshy meadow known as Matje David's Vly, a little to the south of Fort Lee ferry. With the Hudson on the right, the valley in front, the plains on the left, and the rear protected by Fort Washington and the troops at Kingsbridge, the whole well screened by woods and thickets, the Americans could feel that the addition of a few redoubts and entrenchments would make these natural fortifications impregnable. Accordingly three parallel lines of defensive

The Effect of the Encounter at Kip's Bay

works were constructed between One Hundred and Forty-seventh Street and One Hundred and Sixty-first Street, while a division of soldiers under Greene was posted near the southern edge of the heights overlooking the "Hollow Way," to guard against an assault from that direction.

The unfortunate issue of the encounter at Kip's Bay made precisely the same impression upon the minds of British and Americans as had the battle of Long Island ; the former it confirmed in their belief of absolute superiority, the spirits of the latter it depressed until many had lost practically all confidence in their officers and in themselves. For the moment even nature seemed intent upon rendering their lot still harder to bear. The well housed and equipped soldiers of the king were in forcible contrast to the poorly provided soldiers of the republic, who, says Colonel Humphreys,

> "excessively fatigued by the sultry march of the day, their clothes wet by a severe shower of rain that succeeded towards the evening, their blood chilled by the cold wind that produced a sudden change in the temperature of the air, and their hearts sunk within them, . . . lay upon their arms covered only by the clouds of an uncomfortable sky."[22]

But amid all the gloom and depression the leader of the American army never lost his faith in the ultimate courage of the American soldier, however much the timidity of the militia aroused his indignation. His power

The Debatable Ground

of keen discernment showed him, further, that, if a fortified camp was a haven of refuge to a soldiery hard pressed by the enemy, so also it might be a tower of strength wherein the very sense of security would inspire the former fugitives with a zeal for action, and, by giving them an opportunity to display their native courage, aid them to regain the confidence which before had failed them. Under such circumstances Washington might well say, "I trust that there are many who will act like men and show themselves worthy of the blessings of freedom."[23] Appreciating the strength of his position, he determined "to habituate his soldiers by a series of successful skirmishes to meet the enemy in the field.[24] This determination was realized in the battle of Harlem Heights.

Sloping upward from the southern line of the "Hollow Way" was another elevation of land, then known as Bloomingdale or Vandewater's Heights, and now called Morningside Heights. In 1776, it was occupied and partly cultivated by its owners, Adrian Hoaglandt and Benjamin Vandewater. The space of land about a mile in extent between the present One Hundred and Fifth Street and One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street, west of Columbus Avenue, was the "debatable ground," and the scene of the battle of Harlem Heights. It effectually hid the opposing

The Rangers

forces from each other. Now, whereas an advance of the British from the direction of Harlem Plains could be easily observed by the American lookouts on the "Point of Rocks," no movement from behind Morningside Heights would be perceptible before the "Hollow Way" had been reached. It was not to be supposed that an enemy flushed with success in the recent campaign would long hesitate to assail the American stronghold. Desirous of guarding against a flank attack, especially from the vicinity of Morningside, early in the morning of Monday, September 16, Washington sent a body of scouts to ascertain what preparations the enemy were making. He himself then rode from headquarters down to the outposts at the "Hollow Way." The men selected were the Rangers, consisting of about one hundred and twenty picked volunteers from New England regiments, and under the command of Colonel Thomas Knowlton, who had done gallant service at the battle of Bunker Hill. Proceeding cautiously under cover of the woods, probably along the line of what is now Riverside Drive, Knowlton and his men had arrived at the farmhouse of Nicholas Jones (One Hundred and Sixth Street, west of the Boulevard) before the British pickets stationed on One Hundred and Fourth Street were startled by the report of shots fired at close

The Retreat of the Rangers

range, and spied the forms of the Americans through the trees.[26] The alarm was instantly sounded, whereat a portion of the second and third battalions of light infantry, numbering upwards of three hundred, started to drive back the audacious rebels. In gleeful expectation that this second installment of Kip's Bay militia, as they thought, would fly from before them with the utmost terror and dismay, the British regulars hurried on. But suddenly they were brought to a stop. Upon falling back a short distance, Knowlton had posted his men behind a stone wall and bidden them "not to rise or fire a gun" till the British were ten rods away. Scarcely had the first redcoat crossed the "dead line," when a blaze of fire shot from the stone wall, and the astounded infantry fell back in dire consternation. Then for some time the woods echoed with the sharp crack of musketry in a skirmish. At length Knowlton, perceiving that the superior numbers of the foe menaced his flank, commanded a retreat, which was effected in good order and without the loss of a man.[26]

Meanwhile a rumor spread through the American camp that the enemy were approaching in three columns, whereupon Adjutant-General Reed obtained permission from the commander-in-chief to learn its truth. Riding hastily from the "Point of Rocks" in

The Retreat of the Rangers

the direction Knowlton had taken, he reached the scene of skirmish as it was about to begin. "While I was talking with the officer," he writes, "the enemy's advanced guard fired upon us at a small distance; our men behaved well, stood, and returned the fire till, overpowered by numbers, they were obliged to retreat." He further states that the British came on so quickly that he had not left a house (probably Hoaglandt's, One Hundred and Fifteenth Street and Riverside Drive) five minutes before they had seized it. The light infantry continued the pursuit through the fields and woods of Hoaglandt's farm as far as the immediate neighborhood of Grant's tomb. The sight of the scampering rebels restored the gleefulness which they had lost near the stone wall, and, advancing within plain view of the Americans on the heights beyond, they derisively "sounded their bugle-horns, as is usual after a fox-chase." The insult showed the contempt in which their adversaries held the Americans, who three times within three weeks had fled before his Majesty's regulars,—once on Long Island, once at Kip's Bay, and now on the heights just opposite their own camp. "I never felt such a sensation before," says Reed; "it seemed to crown our disgrace." [27]

The appearance of the enemy produced the natural impression that Harlem Heights were

The Retreat of the Rangers

to be carried by storm. Preparations were, therefore, being made for a vigorous defense, when Reed dashed up to the commander-in-chief, "to get some support for the brave fellows who had behaved so well."[28] With characteristic caution, however, Washington declined at first to hazard his men until exact information of the British strength and position could be obtained. For the present he felt that a weakened and somewhat despondent army was hardly capable of engaging advantageously in a general conflict. At this juncture Colonel Knowlton and the Rangers brought the news that the enemy were about three hundred strong, and detached more than a mile from the main body. Washington now saw his opportunity to cut off this detachment ere it could be reinforced from below, and thereby, as he says, to "recover that military ardor which is of the utmost moment to an army."[29] If a general engagement could not be risked, a lively and successful skirmish would furnish the very tonic of energy and enthusiasm then so sadly needed. Still the American commander realized that an attack wholly in front would not only involve the ascent of the steep Morningside Heights, from the top of which the well-posted British could pour a galling fire, but might result in no more than driving them back upon the main body—a contingency he

Attempt to fall upon the Enemy's Rear

wished most to avoid. Curiously enough, however, this was the very thing that eventually happened, although not with the consequences he had anticipated. The consummate soldier, who had learned the art of stratagem from many an Indian adversary in the tangled forests of Virginia and Pennsylvania, resolved to make a feint in front, while a body of picked men should stealthily creep round to the left and fall upon the enemy's rear. For this purpose he chose about two hundred volunteers, consisting of Knowlton and his Rangers, together with three companies of Virginia riflemen under the command of Major Leitch. Starting from their position near the grounds of the present Convent of the Sacred Heart, One Hundred and Thirtieth Street and Convent Avenue, Knowlton and Leitch, accompanied by Reed, made their way diagonally down the slope, across the now intervening numbered streets and Amsterdam Avenue, near its junction with Manhattan Street, and proceeded toward a rocky ledge, not far from One Hundred and Twenty-fourth Street and the Boulevard. If once they reached this point unobserved they could assail the enemy from the rear, and thus, catching them between two fires, compel their surrender. Stirred by the thought of this brilliant prospect, the intrepid Americans eagerly hurried onward.

Lieutenant-Colonel Crary and his Volunteers

In the meantime Washington directed one hundred and fifty volunteers, under Lieutenant-Colonel Crary, to proceed from the vicinity of One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street and the Boulevard straight down to the "Hollow Way," but not to make any real attack till they saw that the venture of the flanking-party had proved successful.[30] The bait readily attracted the confident British. Running down the hill across Claremont Avenue to the Boulevard and One Hundred and Twenty-seventh Street, they crouched behind some fences and bushes, whereupon "a smart firing began but at too great a distance to do much execution on either side."[31] However, if the British could only be kept where they were, or enticed still further toward the American lines, Knowlton and Leitch would reach the desired position, and the light infantry would be prisoners. At this moment Washington judged it expedient to reinforce Crary's courageous volunteers, and for nearly an hour the contest continued. As they dodged behind tree, rock, bush, fence, or other point of vantage, the skirmishers on both sides watched their opportunity to pick off an unwary bluecoat or redcoat. Ere long the British were forced to retreat up the slope of the hill to a field about six hundred feet southwest of their first position, "where they lodged themselves behind a fence covered

The Attack by the Rangers

with bushes"[32] (One Hundred and Twenty-fourth Street and the Boulevard). But this was the objective point which Knowlton's party was straining every nerve to attain. As luck would have it, just as the American rangers and riflemen were clambering over the rocky ledge referred to, they spied the redcoats almost directly in front of them. So far as it was an attempt to hem in the British from the rear the project had failed ; the attack must now be made on the flank. One explanation of the failure is, that through some "misapprehension," as Washington says, the Americans "unluckily began their attack too soon."[33] Another is, that some subordinate officers, in their enthusiasm to meet the enemy, disregarded the commands of their superiors and took the wrong road —commenting on which behavior, in his general orders, issued the following day, Washington declared that "the loss of the enemy . . . undoubtedly would have been much greater if the orders of the commander-in-chief had not in some instance been contradicted by . . . inferior officers, who, however well they may mean, ought not to presume to direct."[34] But perhaps the unexpected retreat of the British and their arrival at the fence in question just as the foremost Americans emerged from the rocks on their right, give the best explanation, and in its light the reck-

The Death of Colonel Knowlton

lessness of the American soldier and the presumption of the American officer become transfigured into the headlong zeal and self-confident enthusiasm that betoken the militant patriot.

Wherever the mistake might lie, this was no time for conjecture. Their comrades had driven the enemy before them; the gallant example was theirs to emulate. Headed by Leitch and Knowlton, the riflemen and Rangers rushed upon the British and a sharp action ensued. In a few minutes the two leaders fell, mortally wounded, the former lingering a few days, the latter expiring within an hour. To one of his officers who bent tenderly over him as the light of triumph in his eyes darkened and the din of battle in his ears grew fainter, the dying hero of Bunker Hill whispered, "I do not value my life if we do but get the day."[35] To his eldest son, a soldier-boy of only fifteen years, he uttered his last command, "Go, fight for your country!"[36] Thus perished an officer "whose name and spirit ought to be immortalized," says Reed;[37] "the gallant and brave Colonel Knowlton . . . an honor to any country . . . who had fallen gloriously fighting at his post," says Washington.[38]

Meanwhile the struggle was being fiercely maintained. Incited to vengeance by the loss of their leaders, the Americans "continued

Conflict at the Buck-wheat Field

the engagement with the greatest resolution,"[39] and soon the British were dislodged from their position near the fence. The Americans then "pursued them to a buckwheat field on the top of a high hill, distance about four hundred paces."[40] Here the respective antagonists were reinforced and the British made a determined stand. The day's campaign had opened with an attempt to capture the light troops whose "ungovernable impetuosity," wrote Sir Henry Clinton, drew them into the "scrape."[41] The attempt had failed, and an open conflict had resulted. But, instead of remaining strictly consistent with his purpose of avoiding anything like a general engagement, the prudence of Washington succumbed to surprise and delight at the vim and courage his soldiers were displaying. Hence he despatched to their aid about fifteen hundred men, a number of whom had been runaways at Kip's Bay hardly twenty-four hours previous. If the panic-stricken militia proved to be excellent in a foot-race when the British were the pursuers, here was another chance for them to show their vigor at running—but this time with the positions reversed. Had Washington any misgivings when he resolved to try the mettle of the skittish militia under more favorable circumstances, his anxiety vanished when he beheld the fugitives of yesterday valiantly supporting

Retreat of the British

their comrades, and charging "the enemy with great intrepidity."[42] Scarcely had the buckwheat field been reached when the remainder of the light infantry, the Forty-second Highlanders, and a company of Hessians came up with two field-pieces. Then occurred the real battle of Harlem Heights—or to speak somewhat more precisely, Morningside Heights—"a smart action," observes a Maryland colonel, "in the true bush-fighting way, in which our troops behaved in a manner that does them the highest honor."[43] During nearly two hours the conflict raged for the possession of the buckwheat field. Terrible as were the British with the bayonet, they proved no match for the accurate marksmanship of the Americans. The field, snowy with the blossoms of coming harvest, an hour before peacefully smiling under the rays of a September sun, was now ruthlessly trampled by the hurrying feet of the combatants, its sunlight obscured by a pall of dust and smoke, its whiteness reddened by the life-blood of many a valiant soldier who furrowed, as he fell, its forest of waving grain. Still, though the harvest of grain might be destroyed, a harvest of hope was to be garnered. Another impetuous charge and the British were driven headlong from the field. Exhilarated by the sight of their fleeing enemies, the Americans enjoyed to the full the novel sensa-

Retreat of British

tion of a fox-chase, in which they did not personate the fox!

In an orchard near the Boulevard and One Hundred and Twelfth Street the British again stood their ground; but the onward rush of the Americans could not be borne. Once more the enemy fled "across a hollow and up another hill not far distant from their own lines."[44] Here in the vicinity of Jones's house (One Hundred and Sixth Street west of the Boulevard), where the contest had begun in the morning, it ended about three o'clock in the afternoon. For hardly had the redcoats left the orchard, when Washington, surmising that reinforcements would soon arrive, "judged it prudent to order a retreat."[45] But, says Reed, "the pursuit of a flying enemy was so new a scene, that it was with difficulty our men could be brought to retreat."[46] At length "they gave a Hurra! and left the field in good order,"[47] just as the foremost columns of the British reinforcements appeared. From Jones's house to the "Hollow Way" the redcoat had pursued the bluecoat; from the "Hollow Way" to Jones's house the bluecoat chased the redcoat, or, in the somewhat picturesque language of Captain Brown of the Rangers, "drove the dogs near three miles."[48] The derisive bugle call of the morning was answered by the exultant hurrah of the afternoon.

The Effect upon the American Army

"Hail to the shades where Freedom dwelt!
Where wild flowers deck her martyrs' grave,
Where Britain's minions keenly felt
The stern resistance of the brave.

"'Twas here in firm array they stood—
Here met Oppression's giant power;
Here nobly poured their sacred blood,
And victory crowned their dying hour."[49]

The effect of this encounter on the drooping spirits of the Americans was simply magical. "A most timely and well delivered return stroke," observes Professor Johnston, "it revived the energies of our army, and had its influence in compelling another delay in the enemy's movements."[50] Its effect is seen in the glow of joyful hope that pervaded the hearts of the patriot soldiers. "I assure you it has given another face of things in our army," writes Reed; "the men have recovered their spirits, and feel a confidence which before they had quite lost."[51] "The impression it made upon the minds of our people," says Major Morris, "is [that of] a most signal victory."[52] "Our troops," declares Major Shaw, "behaved with as much bravery as men possibly could. . . . Now or never is the time to make a stand, and rather than quit our post [we will] be sacrificed to a man."[53] "An advantage so trivial in itself," remarks Colonel Humphreys, "produced, in event, a surprising and almost incredible effect

The Effect upon the American Army

upon the whole army. Amongst the troops . . . every visage was seen to brighten, and to assume, instead of the gloom of despair, the glow of animation."[64] Colonel Silliman and General Knox take about the same view. Says the former: "They [*i. e.*, the British] have found now that when we meet them on equal ground we are not a set of people that will run from them, but that they have . . . had a pretty good drubbing."[65] Says the latter: "They [*i. e.*, the Americans] find that if they stick to these mighty men they will run as fast as other people."[66] Indeed, General Greene somewhat extravagantly asserts that, with good discipline and leadership, the Americans "might bid defiance to the whole world."[67] And what words of commendation had the commander-in-chief to bestow? In the general orders issued the next day Washington "most heartily" thanked the troops for their courageous behavior, and added: "Once more . . . the general calls upon officers and men to act up to the noble cause in which they are engaged, and support the honor and liberties of their country."[68] The crisis had passed. The doubts of Washington as to the staying qualities of the American soldier vanished with the receding forms of the enemy. The mortification of yesterday was replaced by the gratification of to-day. The success for which

British View of the Encounter

he had so earnestly wished, to retrieve misfortune and infuse new courage, had been attained. Henceforth the devotion of the American soldier to his chief was only equalled by the confidence of that chief in his soldier.

Because the Americans who had enjoyed the rare sport of chasing their enemies for over a mile, and, deeming it unwise to attack the main body, had reluctantly withdrawn, the British construed the "affair of outposts"[59] at Harlem Heights into a victory for themselves. According to General Howe, they "repulsed the enemy with considerable loss, and obliged them to retire within their works"[60]; and in his orders of September 17, he "entertains the highest opinion of the bravery of the few troops that yesterday beat back a very superior body of the rebels," although he disapproves, the "want of attention in the light companies pursuing the rebels without . . . proper discretion."[61] Colonel von Donop, however, who commanded the Hessians, comes nearer the truth when he modestly observes that had it not been for his "Yagers (riflemen), two regiments of Highlanders and the British infantry would have all perhaps been captured."[62] But the utterance of an English officer, as related by an American prisoner on one of his Majesty's ships, affords the best commentary on the events of September 15 and 16, at Kip's Bay and Harlem

Present Site of the Encounter

Heights. It seems that, on the evening after the unfortunate occurrence at Kip's Bay, this officer went on board denouncing "the Yankees for runaway cowards, and storming that there was no chance to fight and get honor and rise." Quite different the burden, if not the manner, of his complaint when, having fairly encountered the patriot soldiers at Harlem Heights, he again went on board cursing the war, and "saying he had found the Americans would fight, and that it would be impossible to conquer them."[63] Unwittingly the blustering soldier told the truth. From Harlem to Yorktown the story of the Revolution is his witness.

On the buckwheat-field of Morningside Heights, the American soldier studied and learned a lesson of bravery in the school of warfare. The woods and fences, fields and orchards, have long since disappeared, but on their site the genius of education still lives to perpetuate the memory of that lesson, and of that school, in the mind of the American student,—on their site arise to-day the stately buildings of Barnard College and Columbia University. Here, in the centre of what once was the buckwheat-field—the historic landmark of a victory in war—stands Barnard College, a magnificent memorial of a far grander victory in peace, of a victory over the narrowness of Revolutionary days, of a victory for the enlightenment of the nineteenth century, of a victory for the higher education of the American woman.

Present Site of the Encounter

NOTES AND REFERENCES.

Notes and References

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