

[Special Correspondence of the New York Tribune.]

THE GREAT BATTLES IN VIRGINIA.

THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE FIGHTING.

WILDERNESS TAVERN, HEART OF THE
WILDERNESS, 8 A.M., Thurs. May 5, '64.

Late on Tuesday the whole army became aware that it would be moved within a few hours. During the night and the first daylight of the next morning everything was put in motion. Gregg's Division of Cavalry crossed Ely's Ford, without opposition, at daybreak. Wilson's Division (late Kilpatrick's) crossed Germania Ford. Hancock's 2d Corps followed Gregg, and Warren's 5th Corps followed Wilson. Long before night Hancock had posted his corps and established headquarters at Chancellorsville, while Warren had pushed on to Wilderness Tavern and occupied the ridges facing Mine Run and the enemy. By sunset Sedgwick, with the 6th Corps, had crossed Germania Ford, and last night encamped along the road in rear of Warren. Sheridan, with the Cavalry Corps, thoroughly scoured the country in all directions. He intercepted despatches from the rebel Gen. Rhodes to Ewell, stating that Meade had effected a crossing, and asking instructions. Another intercepted despatch apprised us that Stuart was having a cavalry review at Hamilton's Cross roads. Sheridan was anxious to assist at the spectacle, but it was not thought expedient. Gen. Grant left Culpepper and Gen. Meade early yesterday morning, and early in the afternoon pitched headquarters just this side of Germania Ford. At daybreak this morning Sheridan moved with all his force with two purposes—to find and fight Stuart, and to push a reconnaissance far to our left on the enemy's right flank. The order of march to-day, as fixed since midnight, is for Warren to advance to Parker's Tavern, five miles toward Mine Run, for Hancock to take a road leading him from Chancellorsville, that will enable him to establish a line on the left of Warren, connecting with the latter, while Sedgwick is to move up and assume Warren's present position. It is possible, however, that Lee may cause a change in the programme. Gen. Griffin reports the enemy menacing his position on the ridge south of this point, and not a mile away. Warren orders him not to move off towards Parker's Tavern until Sedgwick can come up and relieve him. Gen. Meade rode up ten minutes ago and said to Warren, "If the enemy comes near you, pitch right in with all you've got!" The dispositions necessary to sustain an attack, if such be Lee's purpose, have caused a halt of the columns; and now we are listening for the first gun. If the enemy does not choose to precipitate the battle here our army before night will hold the position contemplated by the morning order. On the other hand, we can well afford to fight him now. It is six miles back to the Rapidan—if we are attacked it will be with the hope of breaking through the moving columns by a vigorous assault upon the flank. Generals Grant and Meade and Warren and Sedgwick will see to it that what the enemy supposes to be a weak flank he shall find to his cost is nothing less nor else than a formidable front. I have never seen the army move with more exact order, with a less number of stragglers, and with so little apparent fatigue to the men. All had a full ration of sleep last night—which is a better augury of victory than a re-enforcement of thousands. The roads are in excellent condition, the weather delightful and so warm that whole divisions abandoned their overcoats and extra blankets on the march. At one point I noticed some hundreds of overcoats had been thrown into a stream to improve the crossing. Overcoats and blankets are decidedly better for the purpose than rails. I understand that Burnside marched last night to join this army, and will reach Germania to-day. It is understood that Gen. Butler is making a simultaneous "Onward to Richmond," and will first occupy City Point, James River. That these two movements are being made is generally known in the army, and has a most inspiring effect. Rest your confidence not only in what may be predicted upon the records of its Generals as to how this army will be handled, but in this the rank and file will fight this fight with more than the élan of the French, with more than the pluck of the British. They feel it in their bones that something allied to these, but better than either or both.

WILDERNESS BATTLE-FIELD,
Thursday, May 5, 2 P.M.

How perfect have been the combinations, how completely on time they have been executed, how well in hand the army has been every hour and is now, how masterly and successful thus far has been the movement—all this is so clearly apparent that I can but not notice it here, even while a spirited battle is being fought only half a mile from where I write. Let me here pay a tribute to the first soldier killed in this campaign. Let Charles Wilson, of Franklin, Mass., private in Co. I, 18th Mass., Col. Jos. Hayes, commanding, be remembered as the first man to give his life in this (God willing,) last grand campaign of the war. Immediately after "writing up" this morning, I rode out to Griffin's lines, then reported to be menaced by the enemy. His division was in line of battle at right angles with and on either side of the Old Turnpike. The enemy had evidently despatched a force from his lair on Mine Run to worry and delay our march by threatening in flank. Gen. Griffin had sent the 18th Massachusetts and 83d Pennsylvania, under Col.

Hayes, of the former, to feel well out on the turnpike. It was here that Charles Wilson fell, the rebel skirmish line opposing a vigilant front. Finally, after some little firing, Gen. Warren, who had come up in person, ordered an advance down the road in force. Ayer's brigade moved on upon the right of the road, and Bartlett's upon the left, with each flank well supported. Field officers were obliged to dismount, so dense was the growth of dwarf pines. An advance of less than half a mile and a smart fusillade opened the action. The two brigades carried the first eminence, and were pushing up a second, when, owing to a failure of the commands right and left to connect, and form a continuous line, the rebels flanked them on both sides. Col. Hayes, of the 18th Massachusetts, finding himself in command of several regiments and the enemy all around him, formed a line facing to the rear and fought in both directions. At length he gave the order to fall back, and the movement was being executed, when he was hit on the scalp and fell. The brigade bugler brought him safely off. Meanwhile, fresh troops were put in, and the rebels slowly driven along the whole front then fighting. In this action our loss is probably 300 or 400. At this hour the enemy has ceased to make demonstrations, and we are waiting for Hancock to join on our left. Gen. Grant is smoking a wooden pipe, his face as peaceful as a summer evening, his general demeanor indescribably imperturbable. I know, however, that there is great anxiety that Hancock should fall into position, for it is believed that the entire rebel force is massing upon us.

WILDERNESS BATTLE FIELD,
9 P.M., Thursday, May 5.

Heavy fighting since 3 o'clock, mostly at the extreme left, under Hancock. Getty's division, 6th corps, was at the right of the Orange plank road, fronting toward Mine Run, where Carr's division, 2d corps, joined him on his left. The other divisions of Hancock's corps were pushing up; in the twinkling of an eye the rebels were upon him in great force, with the evident purpose of turning our left. The ground was fearfully overgrown with shrub trees, thick as one sees shoots from the same root. In a few minutes urgent requests came back for re-enforcements. The enemy was repeating his tactics at Chancellorsville of falling with tremendous force and superhuman vim upon one wing. This time he was not repulsed, but foiled. The battle raged for three hours precisely where it began; along a line of not more than half a mile. Fast as our men came up they were sent in—still no ground was gained, none lost. It was all musket y, roll surging upon roll—not the least cessation. We were fighting 20,000 men, and such was the nature of the country but two guns could be planted bearing upon the enemy. Hayes's brigade of Birney's division became warmly engaged soon after the ball opened. A little while and he asked for re-enforcements. Hancock sends back word:—"I will send a brigade within 20 minutes. Tell Gen. Alex. Hayes to hold his ground. He can do it. I know him to be a powerful man." Within that time Gen. Hayes was killed, and his body brought to the rear. The work was at close range. No room in that jungle for maneuvering; no possibility of a bayonet charge; no help from artillery, no help from cavalry; nothing but close, square, severe, face-to-face volleys of fatal musketry. The wounded stream out, and fresh troops pour in. Stretchers pass out with ghastly burdens, and go back reeking with blood for more. Word is brought that the ammunition is failing. Sixty rounds fired in one steady stand-up fight and that fight not fought out. Boxes of cartridges are placed on the returning stretchers, and the struggle shall not cease for want of ball and powder. Do the volleys grow nearer, or do our fears make them seem so? It must be so, for a second line is rapidly formed just where we stand and the bullets slip singing by, as they have not done before, while now and then a limb drops from the tree-tops. The bullets are flying high. Gen. Hancock rides along the new line is recognized by the men, and cheered with a will and a tiger. But we say them. The 2d Corps is all up, and it must be that troops will come up from Warren or Sedgwick, or else they will divert the enemy's attention by an attack upon another quarter. Yes, we hold them, and the fresh men going in will drive them. I ride back to General Headquarters, and learn that an advance has been ordered an hour ago along the whole line. Gen. Meade is in front with Warren, and Grant is even now listening for Wadsworth's division or Warren's corps, to open on Hill's flank, for it is Hill's corps that is battling with Hancock. The latter reports that he shall be able to maintain his ground. The severe fighting for the day is over, and it is sunset.

I write now at 10 p.m. Since dark there has been brisk firing at intervals at different points along the line. The enemy has been splendidly foiled to-day in his intention of beating us before we should be ready to fight. To-morrow we shall be altogether ready.

Our line to-night extends, perhaps, six miles from northeast to southwest, the right being a little advanced.

Gen. Burnside has come up 25,000 strong and will probably be the reserve to-morrow. Our loss to-day may be estimated at 3000 to 4000. The main battle probably a decisive one, must be to-morrow. To-day we have fought because the enemy choose that we should. To-morrow because we choose that he shall.

WILDERNESS BATTLE FIELD,
Friday, May 6—11 p.m.

Fourteen hours of severe fighting to-day, and still nothing decisive. The position this morning was that of last night substantially. Gen. Sedgwick, with two of his divisions, Ricketts's and Wright's, has fought upon the right; Gen. Hancock, with the four divisions of his corps, viz., Birney's, Carr's, Barlow's, and Gibbons's, with Getty's division of the 6th corps, has fought upon the left; and Gen. Warren, with his full corps and Stevenson's division of the 9th corps (Burnside's), has fought in the center. Burnside's corps has constituted the reserve, and has marched and counter-marched incessantly, and gone in by brigades at the center and on the left.

Sedgwick was to advance at 5 a.m., but Ewell, who commands opposite him, attacked at 4:45. Sedgwick says Ewell's watch must be 15 minutes ahead of his. This action on our right was spirited and well fought. At the expiration of an hour the rebels were handsomely borne back, the firing ceased, and each side held the ground they had bivouacked upon. Our loss was severe, and the enemy's could not have been less.

Gen. Sedgwick's staff were brilliant and ubiquitous throughout, while the old General was the man of Antietam and Fredericksburg repeating himself. This action barely over, and suddenly we heard from the extreme left that peculiar moribund swell and volume of sound which tells of large numbers engaged—so many that single shots and even volleys of long lines are not distinct, but are merged in the mighty noise of a great battle. Hancock was engaged.

The details of his two-hour steady struggle I do not know, but I know that he did his work cleanly and completely. Longs reethad joined the rebel right, and this was a second determined attempt to turn our left, and a second utter discomfiture.

At 11 o'clock the enemy press close upon Warren and Sedgwick, and train a number of guns exactly upon the latter's headquarters. A man and three horses are killed within 20 feet of the General, and in the very center of his grouped staff. Finding the enemy disposed to renew the engagement of the early morning, Sedgwick accepts the challenge, and advances his whole line. The men go in with more dash and hold on more sturdily than in the morning. Ewell is driven back to his second line where his guns are in position, and there makes a stand.

It is noon, and Sedgwick's second fight is over, and he again rests on the line of his last night's bivouac. Wadsworth advances and finds the enemy—A. P. Hill's corps—strong and prepared. The divisions on his right and left become engaged with him, and the work is warm. Here, as elsewhere, the contest is in a tangled jungle, and the soldiers push aside the bushes and find mortal enemies bursting through the adjoining growth of bushes and face to face with them.

Half or three-fourths of an hour of alternating success and repulse, and Gen. Wadsworth orders a charge to recover his command from a slight wavering. He is cheered loudly by his men who loved the grey haired chieftain. One horse is shot under him. He mounts a second and spurs to the front, hat in hand, and we should have won then, but his men saw him fall. He was shot through the head, killed instantly, and his body fell into the hands of the enemy.

His command fell back to their original position with comparative order. Wadsworth's death is a heavy loss—scarcely an officer in the army but could have been better spared, and none would have been more deeply regretted. Yesterday and to-day he had displayed such marked ability and gallantry as to compel his recognition on all hands as an able soldier, who, now that he is gone, can hardly be replaced. He was a true man, a beloved, a high-toned gentleman, to be respected, an unshrinking patriot to be emulated, an accomplished soldier, dead on the field of honor, to be mourned.

But this battle does not pause for a hero slain. From noon until 5 o'clock, a number of sharp assaults at various points were made and invariably repulsed, whether made by us or by the enemy. Each one of these affairs were material for a long letter, but I find it simply impossible at this time to ascertain and write out correctly the facts in detail.

Prisoners came in at the rate of 100 an hour. The day was excessively hot, and the men were much exhausted. We had neither gained nor lost ground, but continued this thing long enough, and we hoped to finally wear them out. At 5½ o'clock Hancock was preparing for a grand movement of our entire left. He did not make it, for the enemy anticipated him, and he had to repel perhaps the most wicked assault thus far encountered—brief in duration, but terrific in power and superhuman momentum.

The first few minutes we were staggered. Stragglers for the first time in all this fighting streamed to the rear in large numbers choking the roads and causing a panic by their stampede and incoherent tales of frightful disaster. It was even reported at general headquarters that the enemy had burst entirely through and supports were hurried up. Grant and Meade seated their backs against the same tree, quietly listening to the officer who brought the report, and consulted a moment in low tones. The orders for sending re-enforcements were given, and for a little time not a word was spoken in the group of more than twenty officers. They but looked into each others' faces.

At length, Grant says, with laconic emphasis, "I don't believe it." He was right.

Long before that Hancock had recovered from the first shock, held his own awhile, and now was gaining ground. In forty minutes from this attack the enemy was completely beaten back with tremendous slaughter, and the loss of some hundreds of prisoners.

It was now nearly sunset. From one end of the line to the other not a shot could be heard. The day's work seemed over. Our line of tonight would be that of last night. The auguries were good. In two day's fighting we had lost heavily, but not more than the enemy. Our assaults had been futile, but the enemy's had been equally so; and it is by these massed assaults that he has ever achieved his victories.

The inference was clear that we had over-matched him fighting at his best and strongest. Men separated in the heat of the day, now chancing to meet, congratulated each other. The rebels can't endure another such day, and we can, was the expressed conviction of all hands, and this statement epitomizes the situation at sunset.

The sun went down red. The smoke of the battle of more than two hundred thousand men destroying each other with villainous saltpeter through all the long hours of a long day, filled the valleys, and rested upon the hills of all this Wilderness, hung in lurid haze all around the horizon, and built a dense canopy overhead, beneath which this grand army of Freedom was preparing to rest against the morrow. Gens. Grant and Meade had retired to their tents. Quiet reigned, but during the reign of quiet the enemy was forging a thunderbolt.

Darkness and smoke were mingling in grim twilight, and fast deepening into thick gloom, when we were started out of a reprieve back into fierce excitement. The forged thunderbolt was sped, and by a master. A wild rebel yell away to the right. We knew they had massed and were charging. We waited for the volley with which we knew Sedgwick would meet the onset. We thought it but a night attack to ascertain if we had changed our position. We were mistaken—it was more. They meant to break through, and they did. On Sedgwick's extreme right lay the 2d brigade, 3d division of his corps, under Gen. Seymour, who had been assigned to it but two days before. The brigade is new to the 6th corps, and is known as the Milroy brigade; connecting on the left of Seymour by Shaler's and then Neill's brigades, the latter being a brigade of Getty's division that had not been sent to Hancock. These troops were at work entrenching when fallen upon. The enemy came down like a torrent, rolling and dashing in living waves, and flooding up against the whole 6th corps. The main line stood like a rock, but not so the extreme right. That flank was instantly and utterly turned. The rebel line was the longer, and surged around Seymour's brigade, tided over it and through it, beat against Shaler, and bore away his right regiments. All this done in less than ten minutes, perhaps not five. Seymour's men, seeing their pickets running back, and hearing the shouts of the rebels, who charged with all their chivalry, were smitten with panic, and, standing on no order of going, went at once, and in an incredibly short time made their way through a mile and a half of woods to the plank-road in the rear. They reported, in the frantic manner usual with stampeded men, the entire corps broken. Grant, as in Hancock's case, didn't believe it. But when three of Sedgwick's staff rode in to army headquarters separately and stated how they had ridden from Sedgwick's to keep Seymour's men to their work, had been borne back by the panic, and had last seen Sedgwick and Wright hard to the front working like Trojan's to hold the wavering line, the situation appeared more critical. No word came in from Sedgwick. It began to be feared that he and Wright, disdaining to fly, were prisoners.

Artillery moved quietly to commanding positions, to be prepared for the worst, and cool heads felt that were the whole 6th corps broken, the army, as an army, would still be invincible. Warren's corps is instantly, but in perfect composure, disposed to meet the situation. Grant and Meade and Warren are in Grant's tent, and from which officers come and go with a certain earnest air that bespeaks urgent and important cares. So during an hour. No firing has been heard the last three-quarters of an hour. The rebels must have ceased to advance; but how far have they penetrated, and what is the present situation?

The 6th corps' flag comes in. Where is the 6th corps chieftain? My watch says ten o'clock at night. A dispatch received. John Sedgwick safe. Wright safe. The 6th corps holds a strong line; only Seymour's and a part of Shaler's brigade have been broken. The enemy can do nothing more. The 6th corps proper has not lost its pristine glory. Compelled to withdraw, under orders after the defection of its right, it is still invincible—is now, and ever shall be. I may not refrain from mentioning for gallantry, Sedgwick's staff and Wright's.

Riding in the thickest with rare presence of mind and rare judgment, they won and deserved John Sedgwick's emphatic commendation. Gens. Seymour and Shaler were captured. It should be stated that both are awarded by their division and corps commanders every credit for doing all men could to recover their troops from panic, communicated to the latter's brigade, not beginning there.

C. A. P.

—The memories of joys and sorrows are their pale ghosts.