

SKETCHES OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR.

BY GEO. MACRAE

THE CRATER FIGHT.

On our return we visited the scene of one of the most hideous tragedies of the war. Those who read of Burnside's mine and the Crater fight, at the time, are not likely to have forgotten it. It was in the year '64, in the second month of the fighting around Petersburg. At this particular point, the Federal lines had been pushed up to within 150 yards of a projecting fort in Lee's line of defence. General Burnside, who commanded at that point on the Federal side, secretly sunk shafts, and running his subterranean passages right under the Confederate fort, prepared to blow it up. This grand bursting open of the gates of Lee's position was fixed to take place on the morning of the 30th of July. Accordingly, at 4.45 on that fatal morning the picket firing ceased at that part of the line, the men were withdrawn, and the mine was sprung. Instantly the earth burst with a roar that seemed to bring down the heavens, and the fort, with (it was said) 300 defenders, went whirling up through fire and smoke into the skies. At this concerted signal the guns all along the Federal front opened their throats of thunder, assailing the Confederate lines with thunder storms of shot and shell. Now came the time for the grand charge contemplated by Burnside. The explosion had left in place of the fort a vast crater, 150 feet long, 60 feet wide, and 30 feet deep. Burnside's plan was this.—Give the enemy no time to recover from the shock—dash in through the crater, clutch the Confederate lines right and left, and seize the ridge beyond. That seized, the city lies at our feet; we take the enemy in rear, and Petersburg is ours.

Fired with this great idea, Burnside, as soon as the explosion was over and the way cleared, poured into the crater a Niagara of troops—Ledlie's entire division, part of Potter's, part of Wilcox's, and finally his Black Brigade, anticipating glorious results, possibly the panic and stampede of Lee's entire army.

But the grim veterans of Lee's army were not to be discomfited by noise and momentary disaster. Though thunderstruck at first by the terrific explosion, which tossed the fort and 300 of their comrades into the air, they speedily rallied; Lee and Beauregard were soon up with reinforcements, and after a bloody conflict the lines were recaptured, and the Federals driven out with fearful loss.

As we approached the scene of carnage I asked the Major where he had been when the explosion took place.

"Away yonder, at Beauregard's headquarters," he said, pointing across the country. "It was before I had been transferred to Lee's staff. I remember I was roused from sleep at a very early hour by a booming sound, apparently at a great distance. Soon after, Colonel Paul, one of our staff-officers, came galloping into camp and told general Beauregard that the enemy had sprung a mine under our lines near the junction of the Baxter and Jerusalem plank roads—that Captain Pogram's battery of artillery had been blown into the air—that the enemy was swarming in through the crater, and was developing to the right and left, driving our men from the trenches. Beauregard communicated with Lee, Lee ordered Major-General Mahone's division to the place to dislodge the enemy at all hazards. Mahone got his men together, came

up here, and went in with his old brigade and Sorrel's. After hard fighting, Mahone's brigade carried the position yonder in its front, but Sorrel's was almost torn to pieces, and had to fall back. Mahone then put in an Alabama brigade which did the work gallantly. We were all up by that time from head-quarters. This way, and I shall show you where we stood and saw it."

We rode some distance to the left, where the Major stopped.

"This is the place," he said. "There, where you are now, was where Lee and Beauregard stood. Yonder, in the ravine, the Alabama brigade formed. As they rose from the ravine, out upon the open slope of the hill, they were met with a terrific fire of musketry. They staggered for a moment. The forest of bayonets waved and shook. Just then I saw an officer on the right flank of the brigade draw his sword from what seemed to be a silver scabbard—it flashed so white—and, waving it, cheered on the men. Up they moved in the face of the fire, leaving the slope littered with dead. The officer's sword was still waving; we could see it flash and flash in the light; up went the men quicker and quicker in the face of that murderous fire, till suddenly we heard their yell, and saw them dash up to the works, swarm in, and disappear. It was as gallant a charge as I ever saw. We recaptured all our lines, driving the enemy over into the crater like a herd of frantic buffaloes. Then such a scene ensued as I hope never to see again. The crater filled with a seething mass of men—hundreds and thousands of them—some firing back upon us, some struggling wildly to escape. Shattering volleys were fired into the seething abyss, till it became a perfect hell of blood. The frantic mass heaved and struggled like demons. Hand grenades were tossed in, and as they exploded you could see heads and arms and legs go up into the air. Our men sickened at the carnage and stopped. The enemy lost that day more than four thousand men. They left the crater choked with dead. No attempt was made till long after to take the bodies out for burial. The earth was thrown in upon them where they lay—covering the hideous sight from the face of heaven."

We rode up (the Major and I) to see the fatal spot. A booth had been erected beside it now, where relics of the fight were sold, and 25 cents charged for admission to the ground. The Major's uniform, however, gave an official air to our visit, and we were charged nothing. There is still a vast hollow in the earth, though the look of the place has much changed (the Major said) in consequence of the falling in of the sides. Human bones were still lying about in plenty; and shreds of uniform and cartridge pouches and bayonet scabbards, some of them scorched and curled up as with fire.

SOUTHERN CODE OF HONOUR.

On another occasion, talking with the General on the subject of duelling and the resenting of insults, the General said—"We differ from the North and we differ from you, but we believe we are right. You must not suppose that our practice in the South is the result of passion or mere caprice. It is a matter of faith and principle with us. We hold that honour amongst men is only second to virtue amongst women, and that instant reparation should be made or exacted for every insult. We teach that to our children. I would punish my boy, four years old, if he should permit another—whether his schoolmate or his teacher—to call him opprobrious names and did not strike the offender at once. He might be

beaten in return; but that matters nothing. The boy preserves his honour if he resents the insult to the best of his ability."

I asked if this principle carried out did not multiply squabbles and strifes.

"No, sir; it makes the boys respectful to one another, and at the same time high spirited. We believe it tends to prevent unseemly conduct, either in word or deed, when the person knows that insult will be instantly resented."

"But remember," he said, "that we consider it as necessary to the character of a gentleman to apologise when he does wrong, as to fight when an apology which is due him is not given."

He went on to speak of duelling.

"In the South here," he said, "we are taught to believe that death is preferable to dishonour, and that in defending character life should be hazarded whenever necessary. The duel is resorted to to put an end to broils, and the pistol prevents a strong man from having any advantage over a weak man."

"Is duelling much practised?"

"Not to half the extent that is supposed. Many of us do not believe in the indiscriminate duel. But there are times, sir—I assert unhesitatingly there are times—when to fight is as indispensable to character as breath is to life."

"What does the law do in such cases?"

"When honour is at stake we do not ask what the law does or will do. If a man impeaches my honour and I call him out and kill him, I may be punished according to law, but public sentiment will acquit me. There are cases in which even the law would not convict me. If a man destroyed, or attempted to destroy the virtue of a female member of my family, and I took the man's life, as I should certainly do or die in the attempt, I should be borne out by the moral sense of the public. I might be tried, but no jury in this country would convict me. In such cases there is no duel. The offender by his conduct places his life in my hands. . . . In your country cases of dishonour are dealt with in courts of law. Compensation is offered for the loss of virtue in the shape of damages assessed by the court. God forbid," said the General sternly, "that it should ever be so with us! A money compensation for the loss of honour! Why, sir, a woman here who would seek such redress would be regarded as a saleable harlot, and her male relations who permitted such a thing would be looked upon as dastards who shared the profits and deserved a deeper infamy."

I explained the practice of the state of feeling in this country.

"Well, sir," said the General, "we do not assume that our system is the best possible system, but we do not know any other for which we could change it without being the losers. We think we have proof of its excellence in the honour, the courage, and the intelligence of our men, and in the superlative chastity, piety, and gentleness of our women."

In friendly correspondence by letter after leaving Wilmington, some of these points were again referred to; and in one of the General's letters a paragraph occurs which, having nothing in it of a private nature, may be quoted. It refers to a question I had put to him in regard to the bearing of Christ's teaching on the practices we had discussed.

He says—"The influence of Christianity on me personally would, I believe, prevent me from seeking in cold blood the life of a fellow-man unless he had destroyed the virtue of one of the members of my family....."