

THE LESSONS OF THE FRANCO-GERMAN WAR.

A lecture delivered by Captain Home, R. E., to Volunteer officers, and reprinted by permission from the collection of lectures published by Messrs. Mitchell.

Such, then were the military arrangements of the two great States, Prussia and France.

In one, the position of every man was carefully determined and fixed, and he was trained during peace for the position he had to occupy during war. There was an able, well-trained body of officers who commanded all troops. Reserve men were not commanded by different officers from line troops, neither were Landwehr men; all had learned their business and duty together, thus the whole manhood of the nation was carefully arranged and bound together with the chains of an iron discipline. There were traditions of steady, calm work; there were traditions of great things done, glorious victories achieved, not so much by genius, but by patient care and painstaking. This was the genius of the nation; and, gentlemen, traditions have great influence over nations, as well as over regiments, battalions, and individuals.

In France there was a brave, well-drilled, warlike Army, and there was a vast number, nearly 600,000 irregular troops of all kinds, over whom the State had some control but they were untrained, unofficered, not even formed in battalions or companies. There were traditions, too, on the French side. Traditions of rapid marches, marvellous combinations, made with lightning speed, and of battles fought under the inspiration of the greatest military genius the world has ever known. Such traditions are dangerous, they trust all on the genius of the individual, not on the patient endurance of the many. It is a painful thing, and a thing we often see in the world when great things are expected from some person, that he spends his energy in trying to reach the standard of what others expect, not what he is really capable of. Meeting check after check, he at length falls back disgusted, and does not even try to reach that point which is within his grasp. Without the genius of a Napoleon to direct them, the French strove to act, as all the world thought and expected they would act.

Such, gentlemen, is an imperfect sketch of the military arrangements of these two countries. On the one side was a great body of perfectly trained men, on the other a mass of trained, partly trained, and untrained soldiers.

Such, I repeat, was the state of affairs when war broke out suddenly, for, it was declared but fifteen days after a proposal to reduce the nominal contingent from 100,000 to 90,000 men was, for economical motives, passed in the French Assembly.

Very quietly, very gently, with all the power of great, stored up force, the Prussian Army swelled up from a peace to a war-footing, it rose so gradually, the operations connected with the mobilization were made with such care, such completeness, that twenty days after war was declared, when the wave broke on the French shores, the perfection of all the arrangements seemed marvellous.

The French Army with a feverish excitement, an eager haste, was flung down at Strasburg and Metz. Regiments went off without calling in their men on furlough, or their reserves, and far below their proper strength. Looking at the French transport returns, I find that the strength of every

regiment was largely below its proper footing. The war strength of a French regiment was 70 officers, 2,890 men, 39 horses, and 14 carriages. The strongest regiment that moved to Metz was 5 officers; 1,290 men, 28 horses, and 3 carriages below this strength. The reserve men who should have helped to fill up these gaps, wandered about the country without officers, without control, and assembled at some of the railway stations in such large bodies, that troops had to be called on to rescue the property of civilians from their grasp. No arrangements had been made for getting these men into the ranks, and after doing much injury, causing great confusion and trouble, they gradually subsided and melted away.

The Mobile, who numbered nearly 400,000 men, were called out, and each regular regiment left a depot battalion, consisting of two companies from each of the battalions composing it, to train and organize the Mobile. But it is impossible to organize as troops, men who have neither officers, arms, nor clothes.

I need not do more than recall to your mind how McMahon was defeated at Woreth, Froissard, at Spicheren, and Bazaine shut up in Metz on the 18th August.

A pressing necessity arose, if possible, to relieve Bazaine, and the whole of the depot battalions left behind, were put together as regiments de marche, and hurried from Chalons to Sedan. The Mobiles, who accompanied this disorganized force, from the fact of their being untrained, tended greatly to retard its progress. You all know how this Army fell at Sedan, and how, in the middle of September, Paris was blockaded. To Paris, Vinoy's corps, the only body in France that possessed any shape or form, and numbered about 30,000, fell back. To Paris all the officers and non commissioned officers all over the country were ordered. To Paris large numbers, 100,000, of the best Mobiles were sent. And in Paris where the chief stores, arsenals, War Office employes, and officials of all kinds.

There were plenty of men in France, and plenty of courage, the men were ready, willing, anxious to fight. But the regular Army had disappeared, there were only 4 regiments of infantry, 1 regiment of cavalry, and 1 battery of artillery. And from these, and hundreds of thousands of men, an Army was to be constructed at once.

Just think what this means. The men were untrained, there was no one to train them, admirals and post captains were in command of divisions and brigades, subalterns and sergeants commanded battalions and regiments, privates in the regular army commanded companies; to know the manual and platoon was to be an officer at once. Such was the army sent forth to combat the veteran hosts of Germany with no doubtful result, for recent wars have shown that neither courage, devotion, nor skill in the use of arms will compensate for want of professional knowledge.

The Mobiles levied in different parts of France were very different in character; those from the great towns were unusually shrewd, sharp witted men, two clever by half, who imagined they knew everything, and all the rest of the world were ignorant. The Mobiles from the provinces, more dense but more docile, and better under control, had the elements of good soldiers. And, gentlemen, all Frenchmen are brave. One thing that shines bright through all the misfortunes of France, is the personal gallantry of her sons.

The peculiar temper and tone of the Mobiles from the great towns in France, is well

exemplified by the following extract from one of the most interesting and touching little books I have ever read, and one which, I think every one who desires to have an idea of what really breaks down an irregular army, should read. The book is edited by Dr. Vaughan of the Temple, and is called "Eight Months on Duty."

The writer, who is a son of one of the old French nobles, giving an account of his battalion of Mobile at Chalons, says:—

"We soon attained some proficiency in the art of marching, and also in the execution of the first simple manoeuvres, and we had learned also, how to handle a rifle. Parisians are not slow in learning; as to discipline, we prided ourselves on ignoring the word altogether, we gave it clearly to be understood, that we were not soldiers, but the Mobile National Guard, we expected to be treated with respect, to be commanded with politeness, consequently the most complete antagonism existed between the officers in command and the citizens they were trying to convert into soldiers; on the other hand, there were some officers who seemed to regard it as their chief duty to exercise the men in humility and patience, those virtues so eminently Parisian! and to accustom them to receive the harshest reprimands in silence; some well-bred young men there were amongst the captains and lieutenants, who treated their subordinates with exquisite urbanity, abstaining from the infliction of all punishments, and exhibiting on all occasions that modesty which the characteristic of intelligent inexperience—these officers were popular, but scarcely escaped the reproach of incapacity, which is so often the reward of an absence of all pretension.

"On one of the first days of August, Marshal Canrobert came to review the battalions which had just arrived; there had been some disturbances, and he uttered a few severe words; instantly his voice was drowned by tumultuous cries and shouts, he saw that he had got out of his element and he hastily withdrew.

"It cannot be said that any of these men, to whatever class they belonged, were wanting in physical courage, but the greater number of them showed a profound horror of anything approaching enthusiasm, devotion or greatness of soul. Our chief desire was not to be heroes, but to pass for sagacious and clever politicians, was universally condemned, and reason alone was in the ascendant. Logic was appealed to in discussions on all subjects."

Such is a sketch of the irregular troops that accompanied and hampered MacMahon, as he moved on his march to Sedan; such were the troops that were surprised at Beaumont, and surrendered at Sedan. The only chance the rash expedition of MacMahon had of success, was speed; his army marched about six miles a day on an average.

But if we look at the irregular troops that fought on the Loire, and who composed Chanzy's Army, we find more discipline, more devotion, an earnest desire to do their duty, and an endurance of cold, hunger, and misery of all kinds, that made one regret deeply that so much endurance and fortitude should have achieved such small results.

"We read the history, in the same little book I referred to, of the 30th Regiment de Mortain, which was 4,000 strong. It was formed on the 25th August, but five officers had ever served before or had uniform, they were more than a month without arms and then got muzzle-loaders, they were two