

THE AUTUMN MANŒUVRES.

THE SCENE OF OPERATIONS.

(From the Broad Arrow, August 21.)

The scene of the approaching manoeuvres and the probable incidents of strategy suggested by its special features, formed the subject of the following remarks in the *Observer* last Sunday:—

"In one sense Salisbury Plain is well known, for every English speaking man has heard of the wonderful prehistoric monument of the Stonehenge, and carries by association in his mind a general idea of the character of the surrounding country; while those who take an interest in the progress of army reform, and still bear in mind the special reports and discussions last year on the choice for the site for the autumn manoeuvres, to which the preference was given by many to the plain over the wastes of Surrey and Hants, will not be surprised that it has been selected for the work of the present autumn. A noble expanse of open downs, with very little cultivation and no enclosures worthy of the name, seem to indicate Salisbury Plain as the natural scene for one large body of troops to manoeuvre against another; but it lacks one element—but for that the *terrain* would be perfection as a *Champs de Mars*. The absence of any vegetation but the short sweet grass on which vast flocks of an excellent breed of sheep are fed is an indication to those who begin to reflect that the country before them is waterless. The French are beginning to investigate a subject, which they call subterranean hydrology, or the science of discovering streams or reservoirs of water beneath the surface of the soil, if their researches lead to any definite result, and they can indicate the existence of any large quantity of this hidden treasure beneath Salisbury Plain, this year will not be the last time that British generals will demonstrate their strategical and tactical ability on ground otherwise so suitable. Lack of water was the great point urged against the selection of this site last year, and at one time there was every prospect that the idea of utilizing Salisbury Plain for our peace manoeuvres would have to be abandoned altogether. Fortunately careful inspection and investigation of the hydraulic capacity of the district, made within the last few months has turned the scale in favor of giving it a trial; but there seems no doubt that with all the care and scientific skill which will be brought to bear, the meagre water supply in the district must seriously hamper the commanding generals in their movements, if it does not make the possible strategy on either side almost a foregone conclusion. This difficulty is the more to be regretted, as, setting aside want of water, the site is eminently suited for its general fitness for this annual culmination of army drill and training, which the good sense of the country has decided shall be annual. With perfect freedom of movement the fault would be in the generals if the manoeuvres were not made valuable instructively, both as regard strategy and tactics. Last year many who thought themselves qualified to infer the strategic object of any military manoeuvre sometimes got fogged even with the "general ideas" in their hands. The fault, however, was not so much with the strategists of the campaign as with the difficult character of the ground which must of necessity influence peace manoeuvres in a much greater degree than it would the operations of real war. As regards Salisbury Plain, however, the general character, of

the strategic problem is so patent that he who runs may read. The possession of the fine old cathedral city would be an object of prime importance to an invader landing anywhere to the south and west of it, for until it was in his hands he could not safely march to invest Portsmouth, much less make any progress towards his grand objective, the possession of the capital. A glance at the railway system of the south and west of England shows that Salisbury is a most important strategic junction station, for at this point the South Western line, one of the two, and the most direct means of communication between Plymouth, Exeter and London, is crossed by the principal line connecting Bristol, Gloucester, and South Wales with Portsmouth and the whole of the South Wales coast. Salisbury, therefore, is the key of the communication between the south and west, and under our new localization scheme, its possession by an invader would practically isolate the forces of those two districts. Once in possession of the city, his flank would be safe for an advance on London, and the course would be smoothed for further local operations of a most important kind. No time would he then lose in swooping at Bristol, and if his stroke was successful, this new base and the large supplies he would acquire would make dealing with the whole of the west of England a matter of ease. His first object therefore, after a successful landing in the south would be to detach a force to obtain the possession of Salisbury; and as we should certainly do our best in the same direction to defeat his object, a number of probable strategic problems are at once suggested which make thoroughly tracing out the strategic capabilities of the district a by no means unprofitable expenditure of military energy. The area of ground marked out under the Military Manœuvres Act of the present year sounds ample in the extreme for the forces that are to be pitted against each other. Speaking roughly it may be said to be forty miles in length from north to south, and twenty in width; but a considerable deduction must be made from this on account of the southern portion being much enclosed, and altogether unsuited for anything but the mustering one part of the force and comfortably encamping them as they perform a couple of marches to bring them within the fighting area. This may be defined as lying principally north of Salisbury. With Stonehenge as a centre, a radius of ten miles would take in all that is usefully available to the north of this famous monument of Britain's early antiquity though the sweep of the compasses would have to be extended nearly half as much again to include all the good strategic ground on the south and west. The whole of Salisbury Plain proper is included within these defining limits, and though much open ground exists in the south, and notably in the direction of the New Forest, it is too much cut up by the land under cultivation to be fought over without making the damages under the Autumn Manœuvres Act rather heavier than the country would care to pay. Several good and sufficient reasons exist why we may anticipate that the great battles of the campaign will take place north of the great chalk ridge which runs nearly east and west from Salisbury on the one side and Shaftsbury on the other. In the first place either general will be likely to edge away from the boundaries, unless some entrenched camp is prepared, like that of Chobham last year, in which, though close to the defining line, he can take shelter from impending defeat, with the certainty that the umpires

would rule that his position was unassailable. Otherwise the loss of a battle might force him into neutral ground, and the campaign would be prematurely brought to a close by a catastrophe similar to that which befell Bourbaki's army on the borders of Switzerland. The main military reason, however, is the situation of the streams at this district, which will be seen to be five in number and to converge, running through the centre of so many valleys towards Salisbury. Only two of these however, the Avon and the Wiley, are of much importance, though the others, if mere brooks, are not without value, seeing that the rising ground defining their basins affords a successive series of defensive positions which it would cost an enemy dear to force. All finally merge into the Avon at Salisbury, which thus becomes naturally and topographically, the objective of the operations of an invader, whether made from the south, west or north. The present position of the Blandford army, which, of course, is to play the *role* of the invader, suggests an attack from the south. Then the long chalk ridge to which reference has just been made, which forms a sort of hog's back, eleven or twelve miles long, and goes under different names at different parts of its length, would become the bulwark of the defence. All along its positions are to be found against which an enemy would require plenty of pluck and great numerical superiority if he anticipated success from a front attack. But while all are good, there is a position *par excellence* above Bishopstone and Combe Bisset, where an enemy would have to pass the Long Brook to close with the defenders under such a fire that he would have good cause to rue the day, whatever might be the result. But if he succeeded, the city would fall into his hands. The defenders once driven from his post of vantage, would not have time to wheel and fall back on Salisbury. Their strategical flank would be sure to receive the attention of the enemy, and that being defeated or turned, there would be nothing for it but to fall back across the Nodder, probably under fire, and with heavy loss, and take refuge somewhere on Salisbury Plain, and pull themselves together as soon as possible, so as to threaten the enemy's flank, on his attempting an advance from his newly acquired position, either on London or on Bristol, or on Exeter, if he determined to make all safe in his rear before attempting to attain the great object at which an invader would always aim—the speedy possession of the capital. So favourable is the ground, that, assuming what would be the most likely thing in the world, namely that an enemy who had landed in the south had sent a detached force to Salisbury, and that we had sent an equal force to try and prevent him, half a dozen strategical schemes may be worked out, none of which would violate probability. Such a one as we have suggested might be carried out, and the defenders might then fall back into the valley of the Wiley, defending the successive positions which occur as they retreated on Warminster, until, on the supposition that they had been reinforced by the *corps d'armes*, which, under the new organization, the west of England would supply, they were in turn able to take the offensive, and drive the invading enemy back on Salisbury."

THE SOUTHERN ARMY.

On Saturday Mr. Cardwell, accompanied by Sir Henry Storks, and Mr. Glyn, M. P., at whose house close by they were staying, paid a visit to the southern army encamped on Salisbury Plain. They went first to the headquarters camp at Franco Farm, where