

## OPENING THE MISSISSIPPI—A CIVIL WAR DRAMA

BY CHARLES KASSEL

THE life of Edwin Miller Wheelock, as it approaches the critical period of military operations by the Northern armies in the Department of the Gulf, becomes intertwined with events in Louisiana of which a full and connected narrative is wanting in the authoritative histories. The setting for the earlier stages of his career lay ready to hand in richly freighted volumes but with his appointment as one of the superintendents of negro labor at New Orleans on February 20, 1863, we enter a theater of action, carrying an alluring story of its own and of which the details must be gathered into order and sequence before the ensuing chapters of this biography can be read in their true light.

In the issues of the present magazine for February and July, 1922, March, August, and December, 1923, March and July, 1924, and April, 1925, we reviewed in detail to this point the remarkable career of the author of *Proteus*—of which career as a whole a bird's-eye view had been afforded by a brief life-sketch in the September issue, 1920—and in the September number, 1925, we dealt with the first month's labors of George H. Hepworth and the subject of our biography as joint superintendents of negro labor in the Department of the Gulf under General Banks.

The report of Hepworth, under date of March 24, 1863, with its pictures of plantation life in war-time along the Mississippi, was a recital of surpassing interest, but this document is merely the briefest hint of an elaborate series of adventures which in the course of their official and unofficial travels these two clergymen encountered. It was a picturesque region, somewhat apart from the arena of war, over which they fared, but with peculiar dangers and a peculiar attraction of its own, and the record of their wanderings is no unimportant memorial of one of the world's epic contests.

No spectacle, perhaps, in all that colorful struggle, was stranger than this of two Northern ministers, in the very heart of the old South, leading armed troops from plantation to plantation and judging between the slaves and their masters. An abolitionist of a few years before who could have conceived so wildly improbable a dream would have been laughed to scorn. Not even the pages of fairy lore and fiction held anything more extraordinary. Well worth while indeed is it to piece together from the historic material of the period a connected tale of the military operations surrounding these heroes as a kaleidoscopic background for the absorbing story of their adventures to follow.

To split asunder the Southern confederacy by a conquest of the Father of Waters was the aim of the Federal government in the fall of 1862. With the Mississippi, in the striking phrase of Lincoln, "rolling oncc more unvexed to the sea," Southern arms would be at a fatal disadvantage and the re-establishment of the Union might early be looked for.

The great river in its lower reaches pursues a serpentine course, and in their huge windings the turbid waters roll under great bluffs past the highlands of Tennessee and Mississippi, and likewise, here and there, in Louisiana. Crowning these cliffs, along the coils of the mighty stream, were Memphis, Port Hudson and Vicksburg, and lying at an advantageous point on the river also was Baton Rouge.

It is plain that the control of the Mississippi would cut off from the Confederacy the opulent states of the Southwest, which were feeding Southern armies and replenishing their ranks. New Orleans had been captured in the spring of 1862 and in June of that year Memphis had fallen, but Vicksburg still remained in the possession of the South, and Port Hudson as well, and between them the broad floods of the Mississippi moved for two hundred and fifty miles. In this situation Vicksburg was the key to the control of the great waterway from the tier of loyal states in the North to its outlet in the Gulf, and with Vicksburg gone Port Hudson must fall and the grandiose object of the Federal government would be accomplished.

When Banks, who had been sent with fifteen or twenty thousand men to succeed Butler in command of the Department of the Gulf, arrived at New Orleans in the middle of December, 1862, he carried orders from Halleck, the General-in-Chief, to advance up the Mississippi and in co-operation with Grant to gain a foothold and a line of communication by land from New Orleans to Vicksburg,

and when this should have been attained he was to occupy the Red River country for the protection of Arkansas and Louisiana and as a basis for future operations against Texas, toward which, because of the situation of Mexico and foreign intermeddling there, the eyes of Lincoln turned anxiously.

These plans could not be fulfilled to the letter and Banks was subjected to criticism in the report of Halleck. These criticisms, however, were in reality undeserved. There were no motor cars in those days, the electric telegraph was not available to the Union forces, the telephone was unknown, wireless and aeroplane were not, and, accordingly, before a letter from one general to another could reach its destination weeks might elapse and then the movement proposed might have become needless or impossible. It was such difficulties as these that brought on the confusion and misunderstanding between Grant, Halleck and Banks, and in the monumental life of Lincoln by Nicolay and Hay, the last named general is acquitted of all blame.

After the fall of New Orleans in the spring of 1862, Farragut resolved to join a fleet of Federal vessels above Vicksburg. Accordingly he despatched several of his ships up the Mississippi and these in the course of their voyage captured Baton Rouge, which was unfortified but was supplied with fuel and afforded excellent coaling facilities. Thus Baton Rouge came under Federal control. Later Farragut succeeded in passing the fortified heights of Vicksburg and in joining the Federal fleet above.

Vicksburg itself, however, smiled at the vain effort of the Federal vessels to reduce the fortifications, and, emboldened by the apparent safety of the city, Van Dorn concluded to essay the recapture of Baton Rouge, and to this end entrusted an expedition into the hands of General John C. Breckenridge, former Vice-President of the United States and quondam candidate for the Presidency.

It was quite important for the Confederate interests to recapture Baton Rouge. The North end of Red River was infested by Federal gunboats plying up from that place, thus blockading the river against use by the Confederacy, and as a strategic base for operations against New Orleans with the possible capture of that city from Union control it was by no means to be despised. The battle of Baton Rouge, however, on August 5, 1862, ended in a defeat for Breckenridge, and, leaving the city in the hands of its captors, he retreated to Port Hudson, twenty-five or thirty miles farther up

the river. This point was of high importance as guarding with Vicksburg the intervening stretches of the Mississippi and thus protecting the supplies for the Confederate armies coming from Arkansas by way of Red River. Accordingly, the heavy fortification of Port Hudson was begun and the beginning of the new year was to see that stronghold ready for defense against the attack which could easily be foreseen.

In the meanwhile, soon after the successful battle with Breckenridge, the Federal troops had been ordered to abandon Baton Rouge and to withdraw to New Orleans, leaving the former place unprotected, and Banks, upon his arrival, learning the situation, sent ten thousand of his troops under General Grover to retake possession of Baton Rouge, for the attack upon Port Hudson had already been planned and Baton Rouge was the logical point for concentrating troops in preparation for the assault.

In January after his arrival, pending preparations for the attack upon Port Hudson, General Banks set on foot an expedition to march up the Bayou Teche—of immortal memory in American literature as the scene of Evangeline's wanderings—and this expedition, joining another which was to leave the Mississippi at Plaquemine, had orders to take the Confederate position at Butte-a-la-Rose.

At this time the Confederacy had a post called Fort Bisland at Berwick, situated at the western terminus of the railroad connecting New Orleans and Brashear City, now Morgan City, about eighty miles away. From that fort, situated very close to Brashear, they controlled the country northward to Alexandria, where another confederate fort held command of Red River. It was to scatter the confederate forces along this line that the present movement of Banks was intended.

Brashear was situated in the midst of a region composed of fertile plantations but at that time the whole country was half submerged by the waters of the Mississippi and its tributaries. It was through this region the single railroad ran connecting New Orleans and Brashear City and here the waters of the Teche met those of the Atchafalaya and for the protection of these waters the strong fort we have mentioned had been erected by the Confederates. The first task of General Banks, therefore, was to expel the Confederates from Brashear City and its vicinity and the expedition for that purpose was led by General Godfrey Weitsel accompanied by a squadron of gunboats under Commodore McKean Buchanan, brother of the commander of the Merrimac.

Reaching Brashear City on January 11, 1863, Weitzel placed his infantry in the gunboats and despatched his cavalry and artillery by land, and on January 15, 1863, the attack on the Confederate works was made. The resistance was spirited and stubborn, but the attack was successful and the Confederates were driven out.

Only thirty-four men on the Federal side were killed or wounded in this engagement but it represented the only signal and noteworthy success of the winter expedition up the Bayou. The Plaquemine, as it developed, was impassible and the expedition was finally abandoned. This step was induced in part by the fact that Farragut had formed a bold plan for running past the Port Hudson batteries in order to patrol the river between that place and Vicksburg and thus intercept supplies for the Confederates from points on the river. Aside from all other considerations it seemed best to heed the request of Farragut. The difficult expedition to Butte-a-la-Rose was therefore given up and the day awaited by Banks when Farragut should attempt the dare-devil feat of passing the guns of Port Hudson, at which time the forces of Banks could be used on land, for a demonstration against the fortifications.

In March, 1863, Farragut was ready. Looking back now upon the venture it seems a task worthy the genius and daring of such a commander. The east bank of the Mississippi rises at this point in a sheer precipice eighty feet high forming a natural citadel, and within the heavy parapet, twenty feet in thickness, along the bluff, the Confederates had mounted twenty siege guns, with which, as was fondly thought, the command of the river would be assured.

Every advantage lay with the Confederates. A blow from Farragut's guns could do little more than throw up the earth about the fortifications, while a telling shot from the works might mean the disabling of a vessel. Farragut's plan, moreover, was unwittingly disclosed at the outset to the quick eyes of the Confederates by a river steamer which, giving warning of its presence with lights and whistle, brought to the Federal commander word of Bank's approach. When, therefore, on the night of March 14th, in spite of all these obstacles, Farragut determined to run the gauntlet of the Port Hudson batteries he essayed a task infinitely perilous and most unpromising. If the effort succeeded much would be accomplished, for his boats could in that event patrol the Mississippi between Port Hudson and Vicksburg and stop in large degree the Confederate access to supplies; but if he failed, his fleet and the lives of him-

self and his men would pay the forfeit, and failure by every probability seemed foredoomed.

It was well for Farragut that Banks was at hand to aid by a demonstration in this rare enterprise. The artillery of that commander and the number of his troops were insufficient to justify an assault upon so strong a work as Port Hudson but by way of drawing the attention of the Confederates while the fleet made ready for its dramatic dash, it would answer. So it was that with seventeen thousand men Banks brought up in the rear of the fortifications, and with the word at hand of the presence of Banks and his army Farragut at once began the movement of his vessels. Banks, in fact, was still building bridges when, near midnight, the booming of the guns was heard.

In the *Hartford*, of celebrated memory, with the *Abatross* lashed to her side, Farragut undertook to press by the great guns on the bluff. The success of the effort was staked upon one chance in a hundred. With the presence of the Federals discovered, the Confederates had lighted up the river from the banks with huge masses of blazing pine-knots, and in the illumination they could train their guns on the vessels now clearly outlined against the darkness beyond. There seemed the slenderest chance for the brave commander with his men and ships. Fortune, however, favored Farragut, and the two vessels reached safety beyond the range of the Confederate guns, although they barely escaped running aground in the darkness under the very batteries of the enemy. The remainder of the fleet failed to follow. Five of his vessels were disabled, and the *Mississippi*, a valuable steam corvette mounting nineteen guns, was burned to the water's edge by order of her commander when she ran aground. The aim of Farragut failed thus of complete accomplishment, but the presence of the two gunboats on the river between Port Hudson and Vicksburg was of immense value to the Federal government and in large measure, therefore, his hopes were realized.

Lacking the forces to make an assault upon the works at Port Hudson, Banks brought his men back to Baton Rouge and himself returned to New Orleans. Though criticized in the report of his General-in-chief for failure to invest Port Hudson at that time he is exonerated by Nicolay and Hay in their life of Lincoln, who declare General Halleck to have been manifestly in error in his censure, since the Confederate forces at Port Hudson were then at their maximum, the official returns for that month showing a total

of twenty thousand men with sixteen thousand ready for duty. The capture of Port Hudson was, however, a fixed feature of the military program for the Department of the Gulf, and in due season, when the hour should seem ripe, General Banks was to return to the task of taking these powerful works by assault or siege. In the meanwhile he returned to the enterprise he had begun and abandoned in the winter.

It will be recalled that from Port Bisland, on the Teche, northward to Alexandria, the country was under Confederate control, and that the expedition in January, designed to clear this region, had proved abortive. The project then suspended was now resumed. Moving his troops from Baton Rouge, and concentrating at Brashear City some seventeen thousand men, Banks on April 11th began again the march up the Bayou, taking Port Bisland in the initial skirmish. The loss of this fort forced the Confederates northward to Opeleusas, and Banks followed in pursuit, taking that place on April 20th, at which time, also, Butte-a-la-Rose was captured by the gunboats. The Confederates under General Richard Taylor, son of former President Zachary Taylor, made stubborn resistance but they were greatly outnumbered and Banks accordingly moved steadily northward, arriving at Alexandria on May 9th. At that place the troops were joined by Farragut's vessels, re-enforced by Porter, and a goodly portion of eastern Louisiana thus came into the possession of the Federal government.

"This enterprise," say Nicolay and Hay, "however successful and judicious it now seems to be, did not meet the approval of the General-in-chief, whose mind was fixed on the purpose of a junction between Grant and Banks to act successively against Port Hudson and Vicksburg." On the 12th day of May, Banks received at Alexandria a despatch from Grant urging him to join the latter with his army or send him all the force he could spare to co-operate in the struggle for Vicksburg. It was obviously impossible to do either, however, since both land and water communications were lacking and he accordingly explained his situation to Grant and announced his intention of investing Port Hudson, which, as Nicolay and Hay remark, "was unquestionably the wisest thing he could do."

The Confederate batteries above and below Port Hudson were splendidly situated along the river bluff, extending in an unbroken line for three and one-half miles. The strong parapet that had been thrown up for defense swept about the works in a semi-circle for the entire distance and rested at either end upon the cliffs. At fit-

ting salients four powerful forts were located and the line throughout was protected by artillery.

Attack by river from the Federal gunboats the defenders of Port Hudson deemed out of question. The height of the works above the surface of the water was an ample assurance against danger from that source. The approach of any army by land, on the other hand, would be greatly impeded by the heavy forests of magnolias, dense undergrowth and ravines choked with fallen timber.

Supplementing these obstacles and serving to throw about the defenders an added protection was the climate. The skies blazed with a semi-tropical sun, pouring down a scalding heat that dried up the brooks and sucked from the pestilential swamps miasmas fatal to constitutions unused to such an environment, while the defenders within the fortifications, away from the low-lying ground and inured to the heat by long residence in the region, could look on as the besiegers sickened and grew gaunt from disease.

Whoso cares to realize for himself the problem confronting the Federal armies at Port Hudson will do well to consult those rare volumes, published by the Review of Reviews Company in 1911, called *Photographic History of the Civil War*. In the sections dealing with the sieges of Vicksburg and Port Hudson will be found a series of remarkable photographs taken at the time and which serve to re-create for the beholder as nothing else could do that theater of heroic action. In one picture we see, with every detail plain as though we had been transported into that period of history, the Confederate fortifications commanding the majestic sweep of the river, just as they stood on that memorable night when Farragut breasted their terrors. In another we behold the artillery of the Federal armies ready for the assault while still another gives a magnificent view of the Confederate works from within, betraying the gigantic task that confronted the besiegers. A fourth picture, snapped like the others by photographers of the time, presents a particularly fascinating picture of that "last stronghold of the Mississippi" with an impressive view of the great river banks. The photographs taken from within the fortifications show plainly the ground which the investing armies were compelled to traverse in the two grand assaults which so signally failed.

The Confederate fortifications at Port Hudson were the subject of Federal attack and siege from May 24th to July 9th, 1863. On the 19th day of May, Banks began the movement of his troops, crossing the Atchafalaya, whence, marching down the bank of the



Mississippi to a point opposite Bayou Sara, they were ferried across the river, and at once moved toward Port Hudson, which they reached May 24th, joining there Augur's division from Baton Rouge. On the morning of May 25th with an army of thirty thousand men, Banks surrounded the fortifications from the eastward, and at ten o'clock in the morning, after his artillery had pounded the works for more than four hours, while from the river they were being bombarded by the gunboats of Farragut, the army advanced to the assault. Through the dense growths they made their way, over underbrush and across timber-clogged ravines, with the heat steaming from the ground about them, until at last they reached the ditch in front of the Confederate works. Here, however, a withering fire from the forts hurled them back and when night fell the attempt was abandoned and Banks retreated, leaving two thousand dead. Again at daylight on June 14th Banks repeated the attack and again his armies were repulsed with sickening loss.

It was now apparent to Banks, as it became apparent after the same experiences to Grant at Vicksburg, that the brave spirit of the Confederates was not to be broken nor their works taken by assault and that nothing less than a protracted siege would avail to accomplish the result. To such a siege therefore he now addressed himself.

In the second assault the Federal line had been carried forward fifty to two hundred yards, and in front of the citadel an advanced position was taken from which subsequently a mine was run to within a very short distance of the fort. The men worked like moles in the effort to undermine the works, using cottonbales roped together as a protection against sharpshooters. The heat was terrific and during the long weeks the miasmatic vapors brought illness and death until regiments here and there were reduced to a hundred and fifty men.

Banks meanwhile was sorely troubled in mind. His chief at Washington, General Halleck, was berating him in repeated despatches for his failure to go to the assistance of Grant, impracticable as that was, and from New Orleans, in the other direction, came desperate calls for help to relieve the menace of the Confederates there. Banks realized, however, that the task at Port Hudson was of supreme importance, and, disregarding the importunities from both directions, he pursued, as Nicolay and Hay remark, "the judicious course of standing by the work at hand."

On July 7th the sappers of Banks' army had carried their operations within seventeen feet of the ditch surrounding the Confederate fortifications. The supreme moment of the siege had come, and a storming party of one thousand volunteers had been organized to assault the works as soon as the heavily charged mines should be sprung. Everything was in readiness, but just at that hour word reached Banks of an event of the first importance that had taken place on the nation's natal day. At once the whole army was in an uproar. The troops shouted for joy and celebrated the news with thunders of artillery. The message ran from picket to picket until in the ears of the Confederate outposts the word was dinned that Vicksburg had fallen.

The fate of Port Hudson was now sealed. With the greater fortress fallen the lesser could not stand. Accordingly, on July 9th Port Hudson was surrendered. The Mississippi was now open to the Gulf and the great triumph of the Union took on a dramatic touch when on July 16th there landed at New Orleans the steamboat *Imperial*, laden with a cargo from St. Louis, the first vessel in two years to make the voyage unchallenged.