

GEORGE G. MEADE AND HIS ROLE IN THE GETTYSBURG CAMPAIGN

BY WARREN W. HASSLER, JR.*

“THERE is probably no other battle,” writes General Francis A. Walker, “of which men are so prone to think and speak without a conscious reference to the commanding general of the victorious party, as they are regarding Gettysburg.”¹ Why, it might be asked, does this curious phenomenon exist regarding the commander of the triumphant Union Army of the Potomac, Major General George Gordon Meade?

Several reasons have been offered in response to this disturbing query. After Gettysburg, Northerners almost immediately referred to it as the soldiers’ battle, won by the men in the ranks alone, with their high-ranking officers serving as little more than window dressing. Then, too, the victory at Gettysburg was a defensive one, with the army commander playing, supposedly, a somewhat passive if not torpid role. Meade had been in command of the army for only three days prior to the opening of this pivotal engagement, and the first day’s combat—which went far toward shaping the course and outcome of the entire battle—was fought while he was fourteen miles distant. Also, the large number of general officers who were slain or wounded on the Federal side tended to draw much of the attention to these men and to their actions, highlighted as they were by the disjointed and episodic nature of the second and third days’ battles. Finally, General Meade was reluctant to engage in controversy with the critics who censured him for alleged errors of commission or omission.²

But these partial explanations will not do. The historian cannot be satisfied to write off as a cipher the man who led this magnificent army of the republic to victory in the greatest and most costly

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¹ Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (New York, 1884), III, 406; cited hereinafter as *B & L*.

² See *ibid.*, pp. 406-407.

battle ever fought on American soil.³ While considerable probing has been done as to Robert E. Lee's conduct at Gettysburg, Meade has been comparatively ignored. What manner of man, then, was this Federal commander, and what was his role in this most decisive battle of the Civil War?

George G. Meade was born in Cadiz, Spain, on December 31, 1815, the son of a businessman of American citizenry.⁴ After graduation from West Point in 1831, Meade's career was that of a professional soldier, and included service in the Mexican War.⁵ During the earlier part of the Civil War, he worked his way up from brigade to corps command, and participated in most of the major campaigns through Fredericksburg. Though his V Corps was not engaged, Meade was present at Chancellorsville, and had his sagacious advice been heeded by Joseph Hooker, the outcome of that battle might well have been different. As Lee began his second invasion of the North in June, 1863, relations between Hooker and Meade were strained as a result of their differences in the previous campaign.⁶

As the Pennsylvania campaign developed in June, Hooker maneuvered his army skillfully, keeping it between Lee and Washington. But owing to a lack of confidence in "Fighting Joe's" ability to handle the army successfully in another full-scale battle, and to a dispute over the status of the Harpers Ferry garrison, Abraham Lincoln, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, and General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck decided that it was time for a change in command. Hooker submitted his resignation on June 27, and it was quickly accepted.⁷ After considering John F. Reynolds, and perhaps one or two others,⁸ Lincoln seized upon Meade for the

³ Thomas L. Livermore, *Numbers and Losses in the Civil War* . . . (Boston: Houghton, 1901), pp. 102-103.

⁴ George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U. S. Military Academy* . . . (New York, 1868), I, 472; Dumas Malone, ed., *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Scribner's, 1933), XII, 474-476, cited hereinafter as *D.A.B.*

⁵ *D.A.B.*, XII, 474-476; Cullum, *Biographical Register*, I, 472.

⁶ Freeman Cleaves, *Meade of Gettysburg* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), pp. 55-114.

⁷ *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, 1880-1901), Serial No. 43, 59, cited hereinafter as *O.R.*; *Report of the Committee on the Conduct of the War* (Washington, 1865), I, 150-151, 176-178, cited hereinafter as *C.C.W.*; Walter Geer, *Campaigns of the Civil War* (New York: Brentano's, 1926), pp. 236-237; *B & L*, III, 270.

⁸ *B & L*, III, 239 ff.

army command. Meade was a Pennsylvanian who, said the President to Stanton, "will fight well on his own dunghill."⁹

So on the night of June 27-28, a personal messenger of the administration, Lieutenant Colonel James A. Hardie, was sent from Washington with the orders for the change in command. By this date, the movements of the two rival armies had progressed far enough to shift the arena of the war in the East from Virginia into Maryland and Pennsylvania. Most of the units of the Union army were near Frederick, Maryland, while the divisions of the Confederate army were at Carlisle and York, and between Chambersburg and Cashtown, Pennsylvania.¹⁰

Going first to Meade's tent, Hardie found the forty-seven-year-old commander of the V Corps half-dressed and asleep on an army cot. Tall and spare, Meade stood about six feet in height, and, though slightly stooped, was nevertheless soldierly and graceful in appearance, and was considered a fine horseman. His curling brown hair was streaked with gray, and he was balding. Meade had a smallish head, and his prominent aquiline nose and high forehead framed bespectacled and nearsighted eyes that, although slightly sunken, were large and full and swift in their movements. His voice was refined and pleasant in normal conversation. Meade's headgear was the regulation wide-brimmed officer's hat; but Meade wore it with crown uncreased, and with the brim pulled down all around.¹¹

When aroused by Hardie, Meade's first reaction was that he was about to be placed under arrest because of his poor relations with Hooker. When informed that he was now to succeed Hooker, Meade was astounded. He protested that the whole thing was unfair to his senior, Reynolds, whom he considered to be the best qualified man for the job. Then Hardie and Meade rode through the night to Hooker's headquarters. They found Fighting Joe awake and dressed in full uniform; the orders were given to him, and the change in command made. Although Hooker was chagrined

⁹ George C. Gorham, *Life and Public Services of Edwin M. Stanton* (Boston, 1899), II, 98-100.

¹⁰ William F. Fox, *New York at Gettysburg* (Albany: Albany Publishing Co., 1900), I, 116, 162.

¹¹ Theodore B. Gates, *The "Ulster Guard" . . .* (New York, 1879), pp. 404-405; George H. Gordon, *A War Diary of . . . the Great Rebellion . . .* (Boston, 1882), p. 141; George Meade, *The Life and Letters of General George Gordon Meade* (New York: Scribner's, 1913), I, 227 n.

and Meade's nerves were frayed, both men behaved well under the trying circumstances. There was only one outburst during the confrontation. This came when Hooker pointed out the positions of the various divisions of the National army, and Meade voiced sharp surprise at what he considered to be too scattered a disposition.¹²

Hooker departed from the Army of the Potomac on the evening of June 28 after issuing a magnanimous farewell address to the soldiers—one which spoke in encomiums of the new commander. As Henry J. Hunt notes, "Many welcomed [Meade's] advent—some regretted Hooker's departure. All thought the time for the change unfortunate, but accepted loyally."¹³ Actually, Meade was so little known generally in the North that one New York newspaper termed him an "official accident."¹⁴ But Reynolds, upon whom Meade relied heavily, being told of Meade's appointment, declared generously that the command had "fallen where it belongs."¹⁵

The reaction of the officers and men in the Army of the Potomac to the naming of the new commander was encouraging if not enthusiastic. The matter was perhaps best stated by Samuel Adams Drake:

There were few better soldiers in that army than Meade; none, perhaps, so capable of uniting it at this particular juncture, when unity was all-important and yet so lamentably deficient. . . . It is difficult to see how a better selection could have been made, all things considered. In point of fact, there was no one of commanding ability to appoint; but every man in the army felt that Meade would do his best, and that Meade at his best would not fall far behind the best in the field. Meade could not become the idol of his soldiers, like Lee, because he was not gifted by nature with that personal magnetism which

¹² Frederick W. Seward, *Reminiscences of a War-Time Statesman* . . . (New York: Putnam, 1916), pp. 238-241; Isaac R. Pennypacker, *General Meade* (New York: Appleton, 1901), pp. 130-131; *B & L*, III, 240-242; Meade, *Life and Letters of Meade*, II, 3.

¹³ J. H. Stine, *History of the Army of the Potomac* (Washington, 1893), p. 445; *B & L*, III, 241-243.

¹⁴ *New York Independent*, July 9, 1863.

¹⁵ *B & L*, III, 242; see also A. K. McClure, ed., *Annals of the War* . . . (Philadelphia, 1879), p. 62.

attracts men without their knowing why; but he could and did command unhesitating obedience and respect.¹⁶

And how did the new Federal commander shape up personally? Like all men, Meade had his shortcomings. He was hypersensitive—in an age of touchy, thin-skinned generals—and ever conscious of receiving what he considered his justly earned positions and rewards. Many thought him nervous, irascible, and dyspeptic.¹⁷ “He was,” Grant comments, “unfortunately of a temper that would get beyond his control, at times, and make him speak to officers of high rank in the most offensive manner. No one saw this fault more plainly than he himself, and no one regretted it more. This made it unpleasant at times, even in battle, for those around him to approach him even with information.”¹⁸ Although he was swift to make amends, some of Meade’s underlings termed him “a damned old goggle-eyed snapping turtle.” He could, in his ire at inefficient or laggard soldiers, mete out corporal punishment with his own hands. In short, he could not win or inspire the troops with his personality, although he was a general of commanding presence.¹⁹ “He had,” according to John G. Nicolay and John Hay, “none of the genial gifts and graces which were in different ways possessed by all of those who had preceded him in command.”²⁰

Meade was a soldier by reason of keen application and diligence to duty, not by natural gift. He was a conservative politically, had few important political friends and supporters, and kept out of politics. At times he was prone to self-deprecation and self-pity. On the eve of the Chancellorsville campaign, he went so far as to indulge in an amateurish and uncharacteristic effort to curry favor with President and Mrs. Lincoln during their visit to the

¹⁶ Samuel Adams Drake, *The Battle of Gettysburg, 1863* (Boston, 1892), pp. 42, 43.

¹⁷ Meade, *Life and Letters of Meade*, I, 278, 308, 310-311; Pennypacker, *General Meade*, p. 7.

¹⁸ Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant* (New York, 1885-86), II, 538-539.

¹⁹ John Russell Young, *Around the World with General Grant . . .* (New York, 1879), II, 299; Gamaliel Bradford, *Union Portraits* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), pp. 84-85; Joseph Warren Keifer, *Slavery and Four Years of War* (New York: Putnam, 1908), II, 25; A. F. Hill, *Our Boys . . .* (Philadelphia, 1864), pp. 368, 391-393.

²⁰ John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History* (New York, 1890), VII, 226-227.

army's camp, "in view of the vacant brigadier-ship in the regular army."²¹

But most Civil War personages were impressed with Meade's assets, which bulked large. To McClellan, Meade was, among many honorable figures, wholly "an honest man."²² The British officer, Cecil Battine, asserts that Meade "was just, modest, and courteous; determined though cautious, and a good judge of men. He was personally brave and had the moral courage which is so often lacking to men who never fear for their own safety."²³ David M. Gregg, who knew him well, states that "in his intercourse with those he knew but slightly, [Meade] was reserved; with his intimates he was pleasantly familiar. . . . For the rights of others he had the highest regard, and would not brook interference with his own."²⁴ He loved music and the arts, and impressed people with his balanced mind and obvious brain-power.²⁵ "He was an intellectual man," said Charles A. Dana, "and agreeable to talk with when his mind was free, but silent and indifferent to everybody when he was occupied with that which interested him."²⁶

Gideon Welles, Union Secretary of the Navy, reports that while Meade's fellow-officers "speak well of him . . . he is considered rather a 'smooth-bore' than a rifle."²⁷ The General once said of himself, "I am a *juste milieu* man [a middle-of-the-roader]."²⁸ In a field in which many Civil War commanders were deficient—logistics—Meade excelled. And Isaac Pennypacker points out another talent which Meade had to a surpassing degree: "With the exception possibly of General [Andrew A.] Humphreys, he was the only officer connected with the Army of the Potomac who, awakened at any hour of the night . . . could tell on the instant

²¹ John P. Nicholson, ed., *Pennsylvania at Gettysburg* . . . (Harrisburg: State Printer, 1904), II, 953; Glenn Tucker, *High Tide at Gettysburg* . . . (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), p. 74; Meade, *Life and Letters of Meade*, I, 241, 265, 364.

²² George B. McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story* . . . (New York, 1887), p. 140.

²³ Cecil Battine, *The Crisis of the Confederacy* . . . (London: Longmans, 1905), p. 145.

²⁴ Nicholson, ed., *Pennsylvania at Gettysburg*, II, 962.

²⁵ Bradford, *Union Portraits*, pp. 73, 74.

²⁶ Charles A. Dana, *Recollections of the Civil War* . . . (New York: Appleton, 1902), pp. 189-190.

²⁷ John T. Morse, ed., *Diary of Gideon Welles* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), I, 349.

²⁸ Meade, *Life and Letters of Meade*, I, 162, 361.

from the sound of the firing exactly what troops were engaged. . . . He had an extraordinary eye for topography. He saw a whole section of country from an indication."²⁹

In essence, the character and moral fiber of the new commanders were fine and lofty. "Few men," writes Gamaliel Bradford of Meade, "have built their lives upon a broader foundation of dignity, of purity, of courage, of faithful devotion to duty."³⁰ A Federal officer noted something else of decency about Hooker's successor: "General Meade was emphatically a Christian soldier, and never forgot his responsibility to a higher power. Caring more for the approval of his conscience than for the applause of his countrymen, no consideration could ever swerve him from the course he knew to be right; and on more than one occasion he deliberately chose to endanger his own reputation, rather than risk unnecessarily the lives of his men."³¹ And Bradford points out another ennobling quality of the General: "What is most of all attractive about Meade's intellectual make-up is his absolute candor. There is no bluff, no swagger, no pretension, no attempt to throw dust in the eyes of posterity. He debates and analyzes his own mistakes just as freely and frankly as he would those of another."³²

This, then, was the man upon whose shoulders rested the fate of the Union cause. As J. G. Randall plainly states it, "Accepting extraordinary prerogatives conferred by the President, [Meade] prepared to fulfill a responsibility unexcelled, unless by Washington, in previous American history."³³ When Lee was apprised of the change in the Federal command, he expressed conviction that Meade was far more competent than Hooker, but felt that this might be counterbalanced by the difficulty and danger in changing commanders at such an awkward moment in the midst of a crucial and complex campaign. When someone at Lee's headquarters termed the "Old Snapping Turtle" a mediocre general, the gray leader sharply contradicted this view. Meade, he said, was painstaking and conscientious, and a general of intelligence

²⁹ Pennypacker, *General Meade*, pp. 5-6, 8.

³⁰ Bradford, *Union Portraits*, p. 93.

³¹ James Grant Wilson and Titus Munson Coan, ed., *Personal Recollections of the War of the Rebellion* . . . (New York, 1891), p. 1.

³² Bradford, *Union Portraits*, pp. 76-77.

³³ J. G. Randall, *Lincoln the President* . . . (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1945), II, 275.

and ability. Lee thought that Meade would commit no major blunders when confronting the Confederate army, and that he would quickly turn any Southern errors to Union advantage.³⁴

The situation confronting Meade when he took over the command on June 28 was ominous. At first somewhat ill at ease, he agreed with the Federal estimates that Lee had over 100,000 men disposed at York, Carlisle, and between Chambersburg and Cash-town, with the Confederate cavalry detached on a wide-sweeping raid. His own Army of the Potomac numbered nearly 100,000.³⁵ Meade came to the wise conclusion that Lee would soon concentrate east of South Mountain, although the Union commander could not as yet determine whether the enemy intended to move against Harrisburg, Philadelphia, Baltimore, or Washington. Since all contingencies had to be provided for, Meade chose to act circumspectly.³⁶

Fortunately, in the degree of autonomy and discretion which were granted the army commander, the administration in Washington was more generous to Meade than it had been to Hooker. "All forces within the sphere of your operations," telegraphed General-in-Chief Halleck, "will be held subject to your orders. Harper's Ferry and its garrison are under your direct orders." Halleck went on to say that, while Meade would receive no detailed orders from Washington as to how to maneuver his army, he must keep in mind that, while operating aggressively against Lee, he was nonetheless to employ the Army of the Potomac also as a defensive shield to cover Baltimore and Washington.³⁷ In his first hours in command, in working out plans for the ensuing days' operations, Meade was assisted by the army's trusted Left Wing commander, the able John F. Reynolds, who was also a friend of Meade's from their days together in the Pennsylvania Reserves.³⁸

Most of June 28 was spent by Meade in studying the dispositions of his various army units and in bringing forward his three

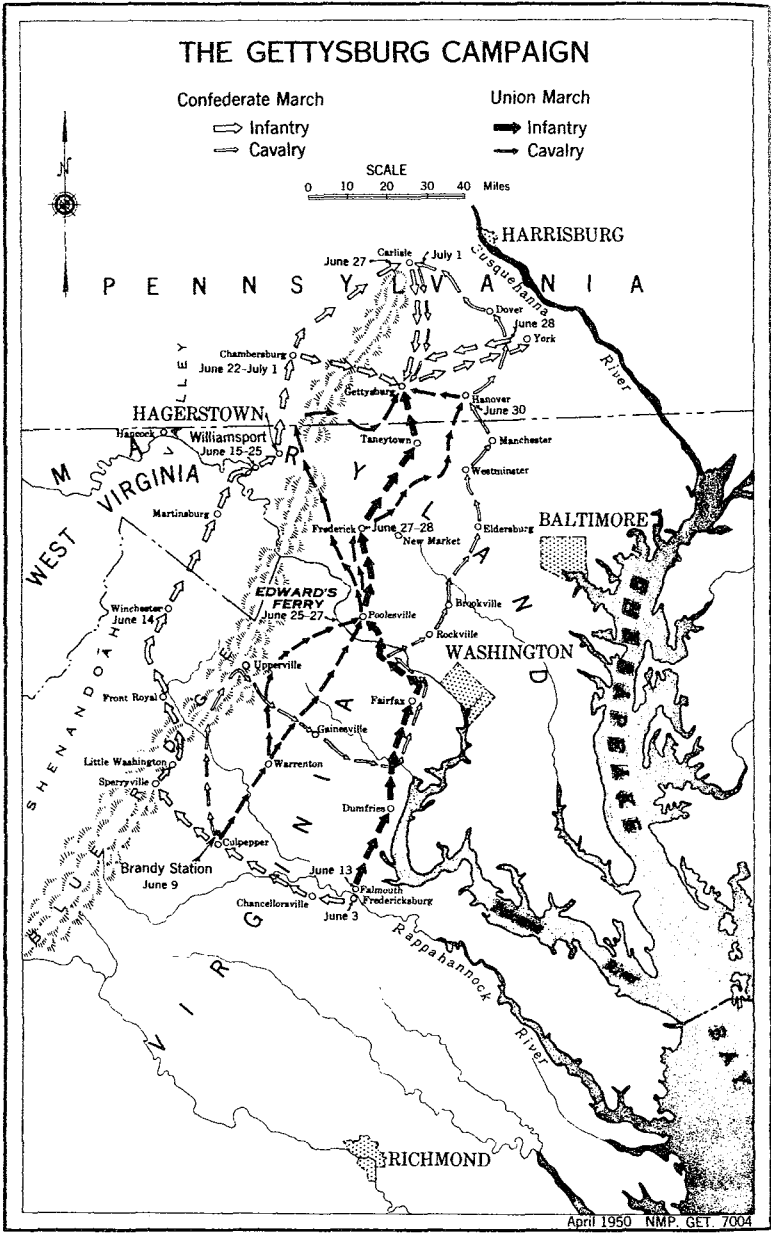
³⁴ Robert Stiles, *Four Years Under Marse Robert* (New York: Neale Publishing Co., 1903), pp. 227-228; A. L. Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee . . .* (New York, 1886), p. 274.

³⁵ *C.C.W.* (1865), I, 329-330.

³⁶ Meade, *Life and Letters of Meade*, II, 28, 355.

³⁷ 43 *O.R.*, p. 61.

³⁸ McClure, ed., *Annals of the War*, pp. 62, 207.



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cavalry divisions.³⁹ Hooker's plan had been to move more to the west and operate against Lee's line of communications; but Meade felt this would not bear fruit in time to keep Lee from crossing the Susquehanna and seizing Harrisburg. He therefore abandoned Hooker's scheme and decided to advance more to the northeast, directly toward the enemy, with Pipe Creek as a possible defensive battle line. Meade could still shift to a movement against Lee's communications by way of Mechanicstown and Hagerstown.⁴⁰

As Meade anticipated, Lee, near midnight on June 28, ordered a concentration of the Confederate army in the Cashtown-Gettysburg area, where he hoped Meade would attack him.⁴¹ Lee had the advantage in that Meade had only three roads upon which to concentrate at Gettysburg, if he so desired, while the Southerners had seven. Meade wired Halleck at 10:00 a.m. on June 29: "My endeavor will be in my movements to hold my force well together, with the hope of falling upon some portion of Lee's army in detail." On the 30th, the initiative still rested with Lee, for Meade stated, in a message to Washington on that date, that he had "received information that the enemy are advancing, probably in strong force, on Gettysburg. . . . It is the intention to hold this army pretty nearly in the position it now occupies until the plans of the enemy shall have been more fully developed."⁴²

But Meade needed more than the observations of local citizens as to present Confederate movements, and he wished also to cover his contemplated occupation of the line along Pipe Creek, just north of the Mason-Dixon Line. So he ordered John Buford's cavalry division to Gettysburg on June 30, with Abner Doubleday's I Corps and O. O. Howard's XI Corps to move there the next day. Daniel Sickles's III Corps was ordered to Ennitsburg.⁴³ These three corps were under Reynolds's command. Buford proceeded to Gettysburg and, appreciating the terrain and the fact that ten roads converged at the town, assumed a position about

³⁹ *B & L*, III, 270; 45 *O.R.*, p. 462.

⁴⁰ Abner Doubleday, *Chancellorsville and Gettysburg* (New York, 1882), pp. 114-115; *B & L*, III, 407. See also Drake, *Battle of Gettysburg*, pp. 48-49.

⁴¹ E. P. Alexander, *Military Memoirs of a Confederate . . .* (New York: Scribner's, 1907), pp. 378-379; 43 *O.R.*, 66-68.

⁴² 45 *O.R.*, pp. 414-417.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 414-417, 420.

one mile west of town, and determined to hold on until succored by Reynolds's infantry.⁴⁴

One of the reasons why Gettysburg was strategically important for both armies was the fact that it was the first point in Lee's march eastward from Chambersburg where he would encounter roads leading southward toward Washington and Baltimore. But it is rather surprising that it was not until late on June 30 that Meade secured firm intelligence as to the enemy's whereabouts. Now it was impossible for him to concentrate his army at Gettysburg in one day.⁴⁵ "By endeavoring to cover too much ground," Drake asserts, "his army had been dangerously scattered."⁴⁶ However, Meade was correct in guessing that Lee would attack him if the Southerners—being on hostile soil—were confronted by a defensive-minded Army of the Potomac.⁴⁷

On the night of June 30, from his headquarters at Taneytown, Maryland, Meade issued orders for the I and XI Corps to move to Gettysburg on July 1, with the III Corps in supporting distance. All other Federal units, except John Sedgwick's VI Corps—which was to remain at Manchester, well in the rear—were to move forward toward Gettysburg. In this dispatch late on the 30th, Meade noted that Lee's "movements indicate a disposition to advance from Chambersburg to Gettysburg."⁴⁸ Knowing that several of his own units were either at or approaching Gettysburg, it is quite likely that Meade suspected that a battle was in the offing at that point. "All is going well," he wrote his wife that night from Taneytown. "I continue well, but much oppressed with a sense of responsibility and the magnitude of the great interests entrusted to me. Of course, in time I will become accustomed to this. . . . Pray for me."⁴⁹

The battle of Gettysburg opened in the early morning hours of July 1 with heavy Confederate attacks on Buford's Union cavalry. With fresh troops arriving on both sides, the combat to the west and north of Gettysburg mushroomed in scope and intensity. The tide of battle swayed to and fro until late afternoon, when superior Southern numbers forced the Federals back through the

⁴⁴ Fox, *New York at Gettysburg*, I, 8-9.

⁴⁵ 45 *O.R.*, p. 420.

⁴⁶ Drake, *Battle of Gettysburg*, p. 53.

⁴⁷ *B & L*, III, 273.

⁴⁸ 45 *O.R.*, pp. 416, 418.

⁴⁹ Meade, *Life and Letters of Meade*, II, 15-16, 18.

streets of the town to Cemetery Hill, a key elevation just to the south of Gettysburg.⁵⁰

Meanwhile, back at Taneytown, Meade sent a communiqué to Halleck at 7:00 a.m. on July 1 containing his latest strategic thinking. Ignoring his June 30 directive, which had mentioned Gettysburg as the Confederate objective, Meade stated in this latest missive, "The point of Lee's concentration and the nature of the country, when ascertained, will determine whether I attack or not. Shall advise you further today, when satisfied that the enemy are fully withdrawn from the Susquehanna."⁵¹

Earlier that morning, Meade had issued to his corps commanders the "Pipe Creek Circular," which said: "It is no longer my intention to assume the offensive until the enemy's movements or position renders such an operation certain of success. If the enemy assumed the offensive, and attack, it is [my] intention, after holding them in check sufficiently long, to withdraw the trains and other *impedimenta*," and to pull back the army to the Pipe Creek line.⁵² Meade wrote privately at about the same time to Reynolds, saying that if the Confederates concentrated west or north of Gettysburg, he was not well enough acquainted with the terrain there "to judge of its character for either an offensive or defensive position." Since Reynolds left Marsh Creek at 6:00 a.m. for Gettysburg, it is unlikely that he received either the private note from Meade or the Pipe Creek Circular.⁵³

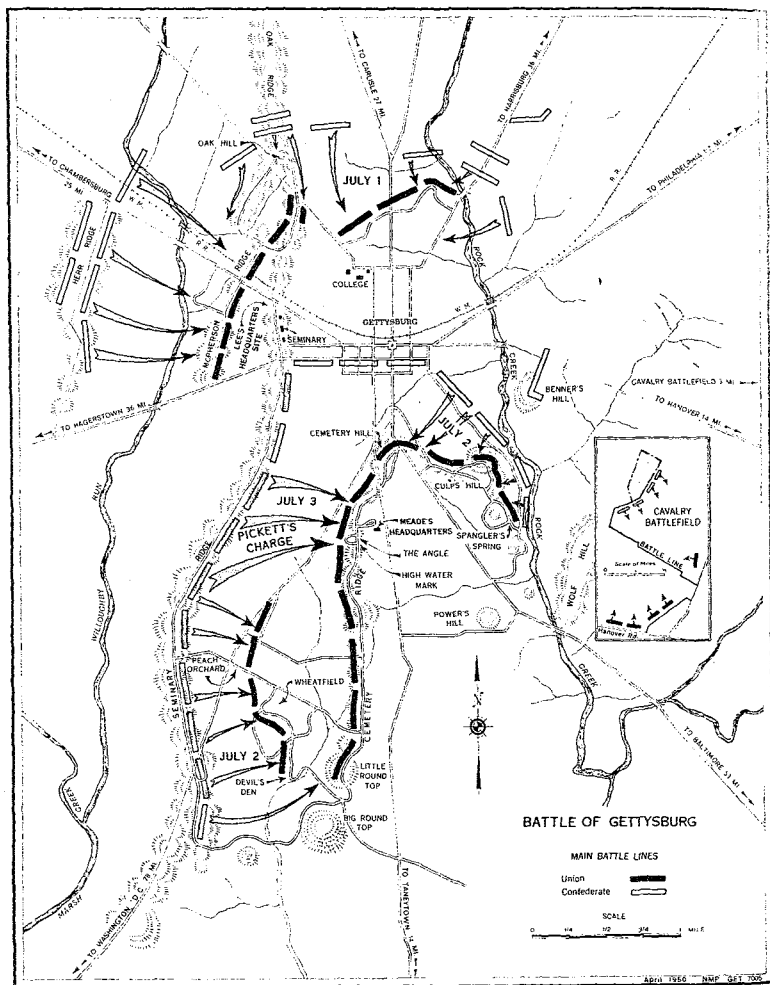
Owing to the adverse direction of the wind, Meade was unaware for quite some time that a great battle was under way at Gettysburg. But his trusted lieutenant, Reynolds, had reached the battlefield about 9:00 a.m., and the I Corps came up at approximately 10 o'clock to bolster the hard-pressed Buford. It was at this time that Reynolds sent Meade the first authoritative information concerning Confederate movements about Gettysburg—a message received in Taneytown about noon. In it Reynolds reported that "The enemy is advancing in strong force, and I fear he will get to the heights beyond the town before I can. I will fight him inch by inch, and if driven into the town I will barricade the streets,

⁵⁰ See Warren W. Hassler, Jr., "The First Day's Battle of Gettysburg," *Civil War History*, VI (Sept., 1960), *passim*.

⁵¹ 43 *O.R.*, p. 70.

⁵² 45 *O.R.*, pp. 458-460.

⁵³ *C.C.W.* (1865), I, 348, 355; *B & L*, III, 290; Doubleday, *Chancellorsville and Gettysburg*, pp. 124-125.



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and hold him back as long as possible." When he read this dispatch, Meade exclaimed, "Good! that is just like Reynolds; he will hold on to the bitter end." But the National forces at Gettysburg suffered a catastrophic loss when Reynolds was killed at 10:15 a.m. The command of the field devolved first upon the skillful Doubleday, then upon the less capable Howard. When ap-

prised later of Reynolds's death, Meade hailed his comrade as his "noblest" and "bravest" general.⁵⁴

Shortly before receiving Reynolds's dispatch from Gettysburg, Meade had sent the following message to Halleck:

The news [from Harrisburg and York] proves my advance has answered its purpose. I shall not advance any, but prepare to receive an attack, in case Lee makes one [at Pipe Creek]. If I am not attacked, and I can from reliable intelligence have reason to believe I can attack with reasonable degree of success, I will do so; but at present, having relieved the pressure on the Susquehanna, I am now looking to the protection of Washington and fighting my army to the best advantage.

But after he received Reynolds's dispatch at noon, Meade telegraphed Washington at 1:00 p.m.: "The enemy are advancing in force on Gettysburg, and I expect the battle will begin today."⁵⁵

In the fighting at Gettysburg, after initial successes, the Federals by mid-afternoon were being subjected to massive attacks in front and flank by superior numbers of relentlessly-attacking graycoats, who could not long be denied.⁵⁶ Meantime, at army headquarters, Meade had learned before 1:00 p.m. of the death of Reynolds and of the grave situation confronting those Northern brigades contending at Gettysburg. The Union commander then made a decision of momentous consequence: at 1:00 p.m. he instructed Winfield S. Hancock, commander of the II Corps, to go himself to Gettysburg and take over the command of the Federal forces then on the field. The significant orders given to Hancock read: "If you think the ground and position there a better one to fight a battle under existing circumstances, you will so advise the General [Meade], and he will order all the troops up." Meade's decision to stay himself at Taneytown while sending Hancock to Gettysburg indicates that perhaps he had not yet completely abandoned his thought of fighting at Pipe Creek. For this reason, possibly, the Union commander held the II Corps at Taneytown when it reached that point at 11:00 a.m.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ McClure, ed., *Annals of the War*, p. 210; Meade, *Life and Letters of Meade*, II, 35-36.

⁵⁵ 43 *O.R.*, pp. 70-72.

⁵⁶ See Jesse Bowman Young, *The Battle of Gettysburg* . . . (New York: Harper, 1913), pp. 181-202.

⁵⁷ Meade, *Life and Letters of Meade*, II, 36-37, 55; 45 *O.R.*, p. 461.

By late afternoon, the Federal I and XI Corps, after heroic resistance, had been defeated north and west of town and compelled to fall back to Cemetery Hill, which they reached between 4:30 and 5:00 p.m.⁵⁸ Here, the fugitives met the dashing Hancock, who had just arrived on the hill after his hurried ride from Taneytown. Assisted by Howard and others, Hancock played a leading role in rallying these broken troops and swiftly deploying them in defensive positions on Cemetery and Culp's Hills. Welcome reinforcements in the form of Sickles's III Corps and Henry W. Slocum's XII Corps arrived on the field by 6:00 p.m. to augment the battered remnants of the I and XI. Then Hancock, with Howard's concurrence, selected the field as a good one on which to fight the crucial battle. He dispatched two couriers to Meade, saying that he would hold the field until dark. This would leave to Meade the final decision as to whether to withdraw the troops at Gettysburg and elsewhere to the Pipe Creek line, or to order forward to Gettysburg the entire Army of the Potomac. At approximately 8:00 p.m., Hancock left Gettysburg to report to Meade in person.⁵⁹

Meade's reactions were sharp and decisive. When Hancock reported to him at Taneytown, Meade told him that, having received reports from others at the front, he had already ordered the rest of the army to Gettysburg—*before* the delivery of Hancock's dispatch via the two couriers. At 6:00 p.m., well before Hancock's arrival at army headquarters, Meade had sent him this message: "It seems to me that we have so concentrated, that a battle at Gettysburg is now forced upon us, and that if we can get up our people and attack with our whole force, tomorrow, we ought to defeat the force the enemy has." Meade had wired Halleck at 6:00 p.m.: ". . . I see no other course than to hazard a general battle" at Gettysburg, although "circumstances during the night may alter this decision." General Francis A. Walker declares that Meade's decision to risk battle on July 2, with the I and XI Corps badly cut up, with the V and VI Corps still distant from the field, and in the face of Lee's faster concentration, was "as brave as it proved fortunate; and his inspired rashness,

⁵⁸ Hassler, "The First Day's Battle of Gettysburg," p. 275.

⁵⁹ Doubleday, *Chancellorsville and Gettysburg*, p. 143; *B & L*, III, 284, 285, 288.

like that of Reynolds in the morning, was of the kind which wins battles and saves states."⁶⁰

Now it was time for the National commander to go himself to the field. So at about 11:00 p.m. Meade rode forth from Taneytown for Gettysburg. He arrived on Cemetery Hill under a full moon at approximately 1:00 a.m. on July 2, and conferred with Howard, Slocum, Sickles, and G. K. Warren. To the observers, Meade appeared hollow-eyed and gaunt from loss of sleep and the heavy responsibility.⁶¹ When told by these officers that the Union position on the field was strong, the Old Snapping Turtle responded "that he was glad to hear it, for it was now too late to leave it."⁶² From then until daybreak, Meade examined his lines by moonlight, posted some newly-arriving troops, and changed some other dispositions.⁶³

Almost the entire morning of the hot, sultry second of July, writes Hunt, was spent by Meade and his staff "in rectifying his lines, assigning positions to the commands as they came up, watching the enemy, and studying the field." "The rapidity with which the army was assembled," the same officer asserts, "was creditable to it and to its commander."⁶⁴ General Carl Schurz was struck that early morning by Meade's "long-bearded, haggard face, his careworn and tired look." "His mind," Schurz went on, "was evidently absorbed by a hard problem. But this simple, cold, serious soldier with his business-like air did inspire confidence. The officers and men, as much as was permitted crowded around and looked up to him with curious eyes and then turned away not enthusiastic but clearly satisfied."⁶⁵

At 5:00 a.m., on the Federal left, the division of John W. Geary, which had been stationed on the low part of Cemetery Ridge just north of Little Round Top, and on the slopes of the knob itself, was moved to the Union right to Culp's Hill to join the rest of the XII Corps. An hour later, Sickles was instructed to move his III Corps to the position just vacated by Geary. But Sickles

⁶⁰ 43 *O.R.*, pp. 71-72; Meade, *Life and Letters of Meade*, II, 37-41; *B & L*, III, 291, 409.

⁶¹ *B & L*, III, 291, 293, 294; Meade, *Life and Letters of Meade*, II, 62, 392.

⁶² Oliver Otis Howard, *Autobiography of Oliver Otis Howard* (New York: Baker and Taylor, 1908), I, 424.

⁶³ McClure, ed., *Annals of the War*, p. 211.

⁶⁴ *B & L*, III, 294, 295.

⁶⁵ Carl Schurz, *The Reminiscences of Carl Schurz* (New York: McClure, 1908), III, 20.

and Geary's officers failed to communicate properly as to the exact position Geary had occupied, the orders from army headquarters were a bit vague in several respects, and Sickles was rather dense in grasping the intent of Meade's wishes. Preoccupied with his right, Meade unfortunately did not find time to inspect his left, and Sickles—a political general of combativeness though of dubious ability—was left to his own limited devices. Sickles began moving at 7:00 a.m., and deployed his brigades with his right connecting with the left of Hancock's II Corps and his left at the northern foot of Little Round Top. Meade's qualified instructions to Sickles as to Little Round Top were that he should occupy it "if practicable."⁶⁶

Sickles was unhappy with his low-lying position just to the north of Little Round Top. He had neglected to post even a small party of observation on the hill, where a good view of the Confederate lines could be had. So before noon he rode to army headquarters—located behind the Federal right-center—to inquire about his position. Meade reiterated that he expected Sickles to occupy the ground previously held by Geary, and declares that he pointed out Little Round Top to Sickles as the place where the left flank of the III Corps was to be anchored. Then, near noon, Sickles received word that large numbers of Confederate troops had been spotted several hundred yards west of Seminary Ridge. Meade directed Hunt to go with Sickles to inspect the higher ground at the Peach Orchard, to which Sickles desired to move his corps. Hunt did so, noted the advantages and disadvantages of the newly-proposed position, and suggested that Sickles first obtain Meade's approval before moving his corps out to the orchard on his own authority. Returning to army headquarters, Hunt urged Meade to go himself to inspect the Peach Orchard position before permitting Sickles to advance to it. Meade agreed to do so.⁶⁷

But Sickles's impetuous nature asserted itself. At 2:00 p.m., without awaiting Meade's consent and without notifying Hancock on his right, Sickles moved his entire corps out to the Peach Orchard on his own authority. His new position—though on

⁶⁶ William Roscoe Livermore, *The Story of the Civil War* . . . (New York: Putnam, 1933), II, 434 n; *B & L*, III, 416 ff.; Meade, *Life and Letters of Meade*, II, 63-64; William H. Powell, *The Fifth Army Corps* . . . (New York, 1896), pp. 517-519.

⁶⁷ Powell, *Fifth Corps*, pp. 519, 556-557; *B & L*, III, 301-303.

higher ground—was weak in that it formed a salient at the orchard, and had both flanks in the air. Although Sickles's move would tempt Lee to attack him directly instead of turning the Round Tops, and although James Longstreet would have to overcome the Union III Corps before he could strike at the main Federal line on Cemetery Ridge, nonetheless Sickles had isolated his corps and had failed to subordinate properly his actions to the orders of his commander.⁶⁸

In the meantime, Meade had determined to convene his corps commanders in a council of war in mid-afternoon. As they were gathering at his headquarters, the commanding general dispatched this message to Halleck at 3:00 p.m.:

The army is fatigued. I have today, up to this hour, awaited the attack of the enemy, I having a strong position for defensive. I am not determined on attacking him till his position is more developed. . . . If not attacked, and I can get any positive information of the position of the enemy which will justify me in so doing, I shall attack. If I find it hazardous to do so, or am satisfied the enemy is endeavoring to move to my rear and interpose between me and Washington, I shall fall back to my supplies at Westminster. . . . I feel fully the responsibility resting upon me, but will endeavor to act with caution.⁶⁹

At the mid-afternoon corps commanders' conclave, Meade directed George Sykes to move his V Corps to the Federal left. Sedgwick's exhausted VI Corps was then arriving on the field after a thirty-four-mile march from Manchester, and could be retained in the rear on the Baltimore pike as a mobile reserve. Sickles rode up just as the conference was adjourning; but he did not get a chance to dismount. At that very moment Longstreet's artillery opened fire opposite the Peach Orchard. Meade ordered Sickles back to his corps, saying that he would soon join him. Then the National commander, for the first time that day, rode to his left to inspect Sickles's position and to help deploy the V Corps.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Meade, *Life and Letters of Meade*, II, 75, 77, 78.

⁶⁹ *B & L*, III, 349; Meade, *Life and Letters of Meade*, II, 72.

⁷⁰ "Historicus," in *New York Herald*, March 12, 1864; 43 *O.R.*, p. 592; *B & L*, III, 416.

After sending Warren to examine the situation at Little Round Top, Meade arrived at Sickles's position near 4:00 p.m. The army commander was annoyed and astonished to see the III Corps in the exposed position at the Peach Orchard. Sickles said coolly that Meade could reinforce the III Corps, and pointed out that his new position was on elevated ground. "General Sickles," replied Meade sternly, "this is in some respects higher ground than that to your rear; but there is still higher ground in front of you, and if you keep on advancing you will find constantly higher ground all the way to the mountains." When Sickles offered to withdraw his corps to its old position on Cemetery Ridge, Meade declared: "I wish to God you could, Sir, but you see those people do not intend to let you." The Confederates gave emphasis to Meade's remark by launching at that moment their heavy attack against the III Corps. Assuring Sickles that he would reinforce him, Meade rode back to army headquarters.⁷¹

While Warren was saving the vital Little Round Top with a detachment from the V Corps, Meade directed most of Slocum's XII Corps in the Culp's Hill area to hasten to the aid of the threatened Federal left. But Sickles was desperately wounded at 6:00 p.m., and his lines driven back from the Peach Orchard and Devil's Den by the hard-charging grayclads. Meade galloped from headquarters to the left again, and placed the III Corps under Hancock's personal command. In the furious fighting then raging in the Wheatfield, several V Corps brigades and a II Corps division, helping Sickles's men, were badly shattered.⁷²

By 7:15 p.m., the situation was deteriorating critically on the left for the Unionists. But now Meade was there in person to help deploy the reinforcements from the XII Corps. He personally led forward Henry Lockwood's brigade to fill a serious gap in the lines, and ran into such a heavy fusillade of bullets that his horse, "Baldy," was shot out from under him. Then, dashing back for a few moments to his headquarters, Meade ordered two I Corps divisions to rush into the breach that still existed on the left of the II Corps. He rode again to this gap and, while eagerly

⁷¹ *C.C.W.* (1865), I, 298, 299, 332, 377; McClure, ed., *Annals of the War*, p. 211; "Historicus," *loc. cit.*; Meade, *Life and Letters of Meade*, II, 78-79, 82; 43 *O.R.*, p. 369; *B & L*, III, 307n-309 n; Powell, *Fifth Corps*, pp. 520-521.

⁷² See Cleaves, *Meade of Gettysburg*, p. 149; Powell, *Fifth Corps*, pp. 521-524; Pennypacker, *General Meade*, p. 173; *B & L*, III, 307, 311.

waiting for these reinforcements to arrive, beheld an approaching enemy line of battle. In an instinctive reaction, Meade drew his sword—an action copied by the few staff officers with him—as if to hold off the assailants himself until the momentarily-expected help arrived. At the last possible moment, one of the commander's aides spotted the desperately-needed supports rushing forward, and shouted, "Here they come, General! Here they come!" Waving his hat, Meade called to them, "Come on gentlemen! This way! This way!" He personally led them forward into the crucial gap, checking the Confederates, and establishing a line which could finally be held behind Plum Run.⁷³

With the situation stabilized at last on his left, Meade rode at dusk to Cemetery Hill, only to find it being assaulted by the Louisiana "Tigers." You must hold this position if it costs every man," Meade exhorted his artillerymen on the key height. With the timely arrival of reinforcements, the menacing Confederate attack was repulsed after vicious hand-to-hand fighting. But Meade had been compelled so to strip his right on Culp's Hill that many of the evacuated XII Corps trenches on that important elevation were seized by enterprising Southerners. The enemy, however, missed the chance during the night to exploit this advantage by moving against Meade's rear and supply trains.⁷⁴

"Thus ended the second day," writes Confederate General E. P. Alexander, Longstreet's chief of artillery, "and one is tempted to say thus ended the battle of Gettysburg." Although—like its opponent—the Army of the Potomac had suffered enormous losses in the first two days of battle (some 20,000 casualties), Meade had nonetheless shown to good advantage in comparison with his distinguished Confederate counterpart. "Few commanders," comments General Walker, "ever showed more resolution in fighting a seemingly lost battle, advanced their reserves more promptly, or stripped other parts of their lines with less hesitation." Alexander asserts that "There was not during the war a finer example of efficient military command than that displayed by Meade on this occasion." Lee himself said that, had he known that Meade would have been

⁷³ Wilson and Coan, *Personal Recollections*, p. 25; 43 *O.R.*, p. 371; Meade, *Life and Letters of Meade*, II, 88-89; Pennypacker, *General Meade*, p. 173.

⁷⁴ Cleaves, *Meade of Gettysburg*, p. 154; Pennypacker, *General Meade*, p. 180; *B & L*, III, 317.

able to concentrate his army so effectively at Gettysburg, he would never have attacked, and he praised Meade for this feat.⁷⁵

On the night of July 2, the Union commander held a council of war of his top generals at his headquarters. Meade himself had little to say. The generals then voted to remain on the defensive and await the attack of the Confederates on the third.⁷⁶ As the conference was breaking up, Meade said to John Gibbon, who was temporarily commanding the II Corps in the Federal center, "If Lee attacks tomorrow, it will be in *your* front." When Gibbon asked the reason for this prognostication, Meade responded, "Because he has made attacks on both our flanks and failed, and if he concludes to try it again, it will be on our center."⁷⁷

A brutal combat began on the slopes of Culp's Hill at 4:00 a.m. on July 3 and persisted for some seven hours. Elements of the XII and VI Corps finally succeeded in driving the Confederates from the hill, thereby ending the threat to that flank.⁷⁸ "During the morning," Meade's grandson states, "while the attack . . . [at Culp's Hill] was in progress, General Meade remained on the far right of the line, occasionally riding to various parts of the field, reforming the troops and strengthening their positions." But now, contrary to what he had said to Gibbon the previous night, Meade declared to Hancock that, in his opinion, Lee would *not* attack the center of the Army of the Potomac. Instead, the Federal commander thought the Southerners would assail his left again.⁷⁹

By 1:00 p.m., Meade had returned to his headquarters in the Leister house on the Taneytown Road. At that hour, 138 Confederate guns opened an artillery bombardment that lasted an hour and fifty minutes—the greatest ever seen in the western hemisphere. Eighty-eight Union guns replied. The ground about Meade's headquarters was swept with fire, with casualties mounting among men and horses. The commanding general, according to Pennypacker, "stood in the doorway as a cannon shot, almost grazing his legs,

⁷⁵ Alexander, *Military Memoirs*, pp. 393, 412; *B & L*, III, 409, 410; Fitzgerald Ross, *A Visit to Cities and Camps of the Confederacy* (Edinburgh, 1865), pp. 80-83.

⁷⁶ *C.C.W.* (1865), I, 350-351; *B & L*, III, 313-314, 412.

⁷⁷ John Gibbon, *Personal Recollections of the Civil War* (New York: Putnam, 1928), pp. 140-145.

⁷⁸ W. Birkbeck Wood and James E. Edmonds, *A History of the Civil War in the United States . . .* (New York: Putnam, 1905), p. 244; Cleaves, *Meade of Gettysburg*, pp. 157-158; *B & L*, III, 369-370.

⁷⁹ Meade, *Life and Letters of Meade*, II, 102-104; *B & L*, III, 362.

buried itself in a box standing on the portico by the door.”⁸⁰ Meade and his remaining aides moved first to the yard of the house, and then several hundred yards south on the Taneytown Road, the general joking about his staff officers’ attempts to find cover from the hail of projectiles.⁸¹

Pickett’s magnificent charge struck the center of the Union lines at approximately 3:15 p.m., only to be hurled back with frightful losses after making but a slight penetration. Meade rode up to the crest of the ridge from the rear just as Pickett had been repulsed. The Union commander was described as he appeared at that moment as

a plain man, dressed in a serviceable summer suit of dark blue cloth, without badge or ornament save the shoulder straps of his grade, and a light, straight sword. He wore heavy, hightop boots and buff gauntlets, and his soft black felt hat was slouched down over his eyes; his face was very white and pale, and the lines were marked and earnest and full of care.

When Meade asked Frank A. Haskell how it was going at the Federal center and was told that the Confederates had been repelled, the General exclaimed, “What! Is the assault already repulsed?” When reassured that it was, Meade said fervently, “Thank God!”⁸²

After a quick visit to Cemetery Hill to see if that bastion was secure, Meade rode down the length of his lines toward Little Round Top to see if he could mount an attack from his left against the Confederate right. He was vociferously cheered by his troops as he galloped past. After issuing orders from Little Round Top to deploy for an attack against Lee’s right, Meade saw that this was impractical, owing to the scattered positions of his troops, their bone-weariness, and the gathering darkness which was hastened by a thunderstorm.⁸³

At 8:45 p.m., Meade wired Halleck about the battle, claiming

⁸⁰ Pennypacker, *General Meade*, p. 188.

⁸¹ Meade, *Life and Letters of Meade*, II, 106-108.

⁸² Frank Aretas Haskell, *The Battle of Gettysburg* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Commission, 1908), p. 136; Pennypacker, *General Meade*, p. 195.

⁸³ Jacob Hoke, *The Great Invasion of 1863 . . .* (Dayton, 1887), pp. 437-441; ; *B & L*, III, 375-376; McClure, ed., *Annals of the War*, pp. 214-216, 455-456; Meade, *Life and Letters of Meade*, II, 109-111; 43 *O.R.*, p. 74; Cleaves, *Meade of Gettysburg*, pp. 167-168.

only that he had gained "a handsome repulse" of the Confederates. When one of his aides said to him, "You ought to boast a little more, General, for the country will not appreciate what you have done, unless you do so," Meade replied, "I would rather understate our success than claim greater results than I have accomplished." Then, utterly fatigued, the Union commander lay down to sleep amongst some rocks—a slumber that was interrupted by a heavy rain which thoroughly soaked the general.⁸⁴

The greatest battle ever fought on the American continent was over. Meade had used some 88,000 effectives of his total army of 95,000, and had suffered aggregate casualties of 23,049; Lee had lost 27,528 out of about 75,000 engaged.⁸⁵

Late on the 4th of July, Lee commenced his retreat from Gettysburg. Meade pursued cautiously and, supported by most of his corps commanders, refrained from attacking Lee's strong defensive position along the Potomac River—probably, in retrospect, a wise decision. The Confederates were then able to cross safely into Virginia.⁸⁶ The anguished Lincoln, learning of Lee's escape, was angry and disheartened, although not quite appreciative of Meade's problems in the field. "We had them in our grasp," cried the President; "we had only to stretch forth our hands and they were ours, and nothing I could say or do could make the army move."⁸⁷ Overcome with grief and emotion, Lincoln went too far when he proclaimed to Gideon Welles: "And that, my God, is the last of this Army of the Potomac! There is bad faith somewhere."⁸⁸ When Meade was told by Halleck of Lincoln's displeasure, the Old Snapping Turtle flung back this rejoinder: "Having performed my duty, conscientiously and to the best of my ability, the censure of the President . . . is, in my judgment, so undeserved, that I feel compelled, most respectfully, to ask to be immediately relieved from the command of this Army."⁸⁹

The General-in-Chief tried to smooth Meade's ruffled feathers,

⁸⁴ 43 *O.R.*, p. 74; McClure, ed., *Annals of the War*, p. 217; Meade, *Life and Letters of Meade*, II, 112.

⁸⁵ Livermore, *Numbers and Losses*, pp. 102-103; *B & L*, III, 440; 43 *O.R.*, pp. 65, 114.

⁸⁶ See Warren W. Hassler, *Commanders of the Army of the Potomac* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1962), pp. 186-188.

⁸⁷ Tyler Dennett, ed., *Lincoln and the Civil War in the Diaries and Letters of John Hay* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1939), pp. 66-67.

⁸⁸ Morse, ed., *Diary of Gideon Welles*, I, 370.

⁸⁹ 43 *O.R.*, pp. 92-94.

saying that no condemnation of his conduct was intended, and refusing to have him superseded. "This is exactly what I expected," Meade wrote in disgust to his wife; "unless I did impracticable things, fault would be found with me." "My army (men and animals) is exhausted," yet the administration was hounding him to throw his army into Virginia without needed reorganization and rest. "This has been the history of my predecessors," declared the disgruntled general, "and I clearly saw that in time their fate would be mine."⁹⁰ Yet Meade was to remain in command of the Army of the Potomac until that splendid fighting machine finally brought Lee to bay at Appomattox Court House in April, 1865, although most of the laurels would go to U. S. Grant who, as General-in-Chief, would be in de facto command from early 1864.⁹¹

George G. Meade has not, perhaps, been treated well by posterity. He has been, as noted previously, largely eclipsed by the very success he scored in the pivotal battle at Gettysburg. General Henry J. Hunt states that, in the Pennsylvania campaign, Meade was right in fighting strictly on the defensive, in not counter-attacking at any time, and in his mode of pursuing Lee after the battle. "Rarely has more skill, vigor, or wisdom been shown under such circumstances as he was placed in."⁹² Abruptly finding himself thrust into the cruel position of a new commander of a great army on the eve of a decisive battle, Meade acted sagely in relying heavily on such accomplished subordinates as Reynolds, Hancock, Hunt, and Warren, and in delegating wide powers to them. Certainly, the Federal commander handled his artillery and cavalry better than Lee in the campaign, and in the use and coordination of his infantry divisions—especially in committing reserves at the proper moment—the National commander worked efficaciously and extracted excellent teamwork from his top generals.⁹³

In his first few days in command, Meade permitted his forces to become too scattered, and his "Pipe Creek Circular" of July 1 should have been phrased more explicitly. Then, too, he hesitated painfully about whether to commit his army to a fight as far north-

⁹⁰ Meade, *Life and Letters of Meade*, II, 134, 135.

⁹¹ See Hassler, *Commanders of the Army of the Potomac*, pp. 189 ff.

⁹² Powell, *Fifth Corps*, p. 559.

⁹³ See Samuel P. Bates, *The Battle of Gettysburg* (Philadelphia, 1875), p. 184.

ward as Gettysburg. But once having determined to risk all in fighting there, Meade promptly concentrated his army with great skill at Gettysburg by the morning of July 2. He was overly occupied with his right wing on the second day, and should have spelled things out more clearly to the befuddled Sickles. However, there can be only the highest praise for his admirable reinforcement—personally done—of Sickles once the exposed III Corps was attacked. On the third day, the Union commander's handling of his infantry, artillery, and cavalry was superb; in short, he simply outgeneralled Lee at Gettysburg. And Meade was probably sagacious in not counterattacking—even if it could have been done—right after Pickett's repulse, and in not assaulting Lee's strong position along the Potomac River during the Confederate retreat from Gettysburg.⁹⁴

Most authorities think Meade a sound though not a great commander. Samuel Adams Drake, for example, asserts that the General "was no genius. He was only a brave, methodical, and conscientious soldier, who, within his limitations, had acted well his part."⁹⁵ But prominent Confederates held high opinions of Meade. Jefferson Davis stated: "My idea is that Meade was the most skillful general in the Federal army. General Lee once said to me that he could understand the movements of all the generals in the Federal army easier than those of General Meade." "General Lee," writes John Esten Cooke, "esteemed . . . General Meade very highly as a soldier, declaring that he was the best officer in the Federal army, and had 'given him more trouble than any of them.'" And while Lee spoke highly also of McClellan and Grant, he was quoted as saying: "Meade, in my judgment, had the greatest ability. I feared him more than any man I ever met upon the field of battle."⁹⁶

As Glenn Tucker—one of the most able historians writing recently on Gettysburg—concludes:

It is true that Meade might have won more decisively by taking the offensive. He wisely decided, at an hour

⁹⁴ See Richard Meade Bache, *George Gordon Meade* (Philadelphia, 1897), *passim*; Bates, *Battle of Gettysburg*, pp. 184-195; Livermore, *Story of the Civil War*, II, 495-498.

⁹⁵ Drake, *Battle of Gettysburg*, pp. 165-166.

⁹⁶ McClure, ed., *Annals of the War*, pp. 217, 218; Pennypacker, *General Meade*, p. 5.

when defeat would have meant disaster to the Federal cause, that a victory in hand, even though it did not destroy his adversary, was preferable to risking his own badly battered army further, when there was nothing in the history of Lee's generalship or that of the Army of Northern Virginia which gave much promise that by a frontal attack that army could be captured or destroyed. Probably the preservation of the [Union] depended a great deal at this hour on Meade's conservatism. He had the sense to recognize that after three days of fighting, he possessed, not striking power, but position.

Finally, as Tucker perspicaciously observes, "Meade approached many of his decisions gropingly, owing probably to his brief tenure in command. In the end, his decisions seemed to be unfailingly correct."⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Tucker, *High Tide at Gettysburg*, pp. 389-390.