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Untitled reminiscences of the March to the Sea

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[Paginated as the original handwritten manuscript.]

There are but few persons in all this broad land of ours who have no living personal interest in the events of the late great war. To mention the names of the memorable battle fields of the Republic, or the momentous campaigns through which the varying fortunes of war guided our arms to victory at the last, is to arouse in almost every heart emotions of either sorrow for the dead or rejoicing that the loved one was spared to enjoy all the blessings of home and the fireside and peace.

Indeed there were but very few who could say they had no personal heart tie linking them to the battle field while the war was raging, and even such could at least join in the prayer of her whose petition ran--

In the army where our banners hover
I have neither brother, son nor lover
Round what camp fire shall my thoughts be straying
Whom shall I remember in my praying
O We lonesome ones, who linger over
No dear name of brother, son nor lover

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Still our hearts ache, and our tear drops fall

Others pray for one--we pray for all.

And so if apology must needs be made for the subject of this sketch, I will not call it lecture, let it found in the fact that there are still bleeding hearts beneath countless roofs, bleeding because of the crushing events of 1861-5 and was not the march to the sea the most fascinating scene in all the great drama of our home war?

Ten years have passed swiftly into history since the famous March to the Sea. The dim shadows of the receding past have already partially obscured events which at the time roused into feverish excitement every patriotic heart the country over. The tinge of romance already attaches to a campaign which was among the clearest outlined realities of a sanguinary conflict.

Early in September '64 the Armies of the Cumberland and Tennessee under the command of Sherman were camped in upper Georgia, stretching away to the north west and south of Atlanta, gradually tightening around the city, powerful

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unyielding, relentless. Suddenly one mellow autumn day, while our corps--the 20th--was laying in camp along the Chattahoochee, an orderly came galloping into camp and up to corps headquarters, with the welcome intelligence that Atlanta was evacuated. Immediately the bugle sounded "Fall in" and the corps was in motion, every soldier's heart beating with new enthusiasm over the sudden termination of what promised to be a bloody siege, and just as the sun sank out of sight the column passed through the frowning abatis, over the deserted fortifications and into the rebel stronghold of the South West. At the head of our division was the gallant Massachusetts 33d, every man a hero, led by its splendid band of 33 pieces. As we filed into the principal streets this band struck up "Rally round the flag boys." Immediately the song was taken up by Regiment after Regiment and brigade after brigade until the grand old chorus resounded round the city. The effect was sublime--with elastic step, the entire division pressed on keeping

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time to the music. The old battle flags kissed the evening breeze, flags that had waved grandly above death's carnival on Cemetery Ridge at Gettysburg, that had been borne above the clouds on Lookout Mountain, and that had been upborne wherever the fight was the thickest in the long campaign from Chattanooga to the Chattahoochee. From behind closed shutters and closely drawn curtains the wives and daughters left at home in the hasty exit of the rebel army peered curiously, fearfully at the unwelcome spectacle. What emotions the starry flags, the patriotic music and all this imposing array must have aroused in the minds of those women of Atlanta. Proud, sensitive, and devotedly attached to the Confederate cause, with what hatred and bitterness they beheld this triumph of the Union arms. Verily they sat in the valley of humiliation that night, for although life and property and honor were protected--it was after all the protection of an enemy. But the stern fortunes of war had decreed it thus, and so they watched and waited and prayed no doubt

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while the long line now partially obscured by the gathering darkness moved steadily on. To the eyes of these women it was indeed a hateful spectacle but to the poor despised hunted Unionists black and white how glorious seemed the advent of this blue-clad host. They had endured ignominy suffering and shame, had waited and prayed and hoped for this glorious hour. To their worn and weary hearts that patriotic song was a very anthem of deliverance, and they read protection and safety and freedom in the glance of every soldier's eye, in all that long line. From many a lowly habitation in the city that night went up to God the tearful thanks of grateful hearts for this glorious deliverance, and there was that depth of rejoicing such as only those who had endured the persecutions of these long years of rebel rule could properly understand and fathom.

And so Atlanta was ours--but with it a burden. The inhabitants cut off from all assistance from their Southern friends must have food. The one single and often interrupted line of

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rail-road to Nashville was unable to transport supplies sufficient for both the army and the people. Here Gen. Sherman issued his famous order so generally characterized as "Brutal" at the South, requiring all the inhabitants of the city to leave, those who wished to be escorted to the rebel lines at Rough and Ready, on the South, and those who preferred it to be furnished transportation to Nashville. If it was a hard alternative, finding its justification in a single crisp sentence from the General in command written in reply to the mayor's protest. "War is cruelty and you cannot refine it," wrote the general in answer to the mayor's statement that the order was "cruel." A whole volume of logic, a most cleanly cut and most complete answer to would-be sentimentalists, North and South.

But we must leave the occupation of Atlanta and its incidents and hasten to the matters more properly within the subject of this sketch. On the 13th day of Novr. the last message was sent over the wires to Gen. Thomas in front of Nashville. "All is well," was the message, and the wires were cut and

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the army faced to the Southward. Then began the most hazardous undertaking of modern warfare. With the R.R. to the north for many miles torn up, the bridges burned and the rails twisted over the burning ties, the Union armies in Atlanta were in the very heart of the Confederacy--either to go forward triumphantly to the Sea, or to fall back over the long line, defeated, demoralized, routed, it may be destroyed, forfeiting all the splendid results of the memorable Atlanta campaign.

But this was no time, and certainly not the fit place, to brood over possible disaster, and there was no disposition among the soldiers even to consider such a contingency. In the lexicon of the general in command was written, "no such word as fail." The march to the sea had been determined upon and to the Sea this army was going, and so the work began. Atlanta with its splendid mills and furnaces that had supplied so much of the material of war must not be left in condition to continue such substantial aid and

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comfort. On the 15th day of November when the piercing winds told shivering tales of the coming winter and the sky was forbidding and over cast the work of destruction began. The heavy stone and brick machine shops and warehouses were mined, the torch was applied here and there and just as the army moved out to the south the loud concussions in the rear told how well the work had been done. From various points the flames burst forth, and a fiery glow spread over the sky. The heaven was one expanse of lurid flame, the air was filled with burning flying cinders, two hundred acres were in ruins. The sharp detonations betokening exploding mine and bursting shell was heard accompanied by shooting flames far up against the smoky back ground. Terrible was the destruction and its effect most sublime. For days as we marched to the eastward could be seen the overhanging cloud of smoke by day and the almost blood red glow by night, reminding us of the devastation of war, and of the ruin we had wrought.

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From Atlanta extends to the eastward in the direction to Charleston by way of Augusta, the Memphis & Charleston R.R., while the Geo. Central leads to the South east by way of Macon to Savannah. The army was composed of two wings, the right wing under the command of Howard, known as the Army of the Tennessee, followed the Macon road, while the left wing or Army of Georgia under the command of Slocum advanced apparently upon Augusta. In all 60,000 infantry, 5,300 cavalry. The destruction of the rail road was immediately commenced. The rails were torn up, ties piled suitably for burning, the rails neatly balanced over the pile so that as they became heated in the center the ends would drop down turning angles in the rails. Then the soldiers would seize the rails at the ends and by twisting in opposite directions very awkward kinks were made in the heated irons, rendering the rails entirely useless except as old iron. In this way mile after mile of track was destroyed leaving nothing available but the grading. At times an entire brigade would form line abreast of a section of track and each man seizing the rail, turn upside down

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a quarter of a mile of track at a single effort. Thus were the great arteries of the confederacy destroyed, upon the same theory of military necessity whereby Gen. Butler declared the slaves contraband of war, and set them at liberty accordingly. He saw the way out of a very serious dilemma then just as he has seen the way out of many an awkward predicament since. And pardon me if I pause to say here--that revile him as you may, the fact remains that Butler has good hard common sense, is not deficient in back bone, and of him it may truthfully be said, "He has done the State some service." It is true the industries of great communities were paralyzed by this wholesale destruction of the means of transportation, but no more supplies to rebel armies could pass that Way. It was only making practical application of that great first law just as certainly applicable to nations as individuals--the law of self defense.

One of the features of the great march never to be forgotten was the exodus of the negroes. For miles into the interior far from our line of march

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the news spread among these ignorant chattels that the Yankees were coming. Undefined, imperfect and crude as were their conceptions of our progress and purposes, yet certain were they of one great fact, that the day of deliverance had surely come. Just how it was to be accomplished they neither knew nor tried to ascertain, but deep down in the profound depths of their minds the truth had sunk that the success of the Union army meant the end of slavery, and so for weary miles through woods and over hills they swiftly journeyed to the camps of the Federal army. Across the darkness of their lives shone the serene sunlight of freedom, and charmed by its glorious beams they became insensible to every danger and ready for any peril. In the immediate track of the army the hasty flight of master & mistress left them alone to welcome the sheltering folds of the starry flag. How appropriately they might sing--

The master run ah--ha--etc.

So it was that while our advance was a line of fire and a very track of devastation it opened up a grand highway to freedom. Deliverance came through

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destruction and ruin it is true, but fate had written across the murky back ground of the picture, words like those of the poet--

Down let the shrine of Maloch sink,
And leave no traces where it stood.
No longer let his idol drink
His daily cup of human blood.
But rear another altar there
To truth, and love, and mercy given,
And freedom's gift and freedom's prayer
Shall call an answer down from Heaven.

And now the answer came--came with the flapping of the Union flag, and the glistening of the Union bayonet--conveying to the slave the assurance of liberty, to the hunted Unionist promising the ark of safety. The army soon found in its wake a great throng of people mostly black, clad in all manner of costumes but rags being the rule, choking up the very highways in their eager advance to the sea.

It is a difficult thing to convey to a mind unused to such premises a correct

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understanding of this feature of the march--pressing in on all sides through the woods and by-ways came the motley crowd, with great packs upon their heads, comprising such hastily assorted plunder as they could the most quickly get together--sacks of corn meal--jugs of sorghum--old bed quilts--silk umbrellas--pots, pans, kettles--babies--apple butter--old clothes in endless variety and in all the advanced stages of dilapidation--band boxes--game cocks, feather beds, hams--hoe cakes--natural leaf--and a thousand nameless articles useful and worthless just as the wisdom of one or the foolishness of another might dictate. Ask of a grinning contraband thus picturesquely laden whither he was going and the standard answer was, "I'se gwine wid ye all." When they scarcely knew only this--that behind them there was slavery, before them freedom.

How did all this vast army of soldiers and its attendant host of refugees subsist is a pertinent inquiry--and when I say mainly upon the country every soldier will quickly

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appreciate the significance of the answer. The army left Atlanta with 20 days bread and 40 days sugar and coffee, but before us was unknown experiences, and a thousand unseen perils, so it was the prudent order of the commander that so far as possible, these supplies should be kept on hand, to be drawn upon in cases of emergency, and that in the meantime so far as possible men and animals should be supplied by foraging. The country, contrary to the prevailing opinion at the North, abounded in provisions. The people had learned that corn and not cotton was king, and so corn abounded on every hand, sweet potatoes had only to be dug, hogs ran at will in the woods, poultry was found in every farm yard, farm houses were supplied with corn meal & salt meats, and sorghum was everywhere. It was a common thing to see a group of soldiers by the wayside filling their canteens with this very poor kind of molasses, and not infrequently in the jam, some greedy blue coat dipping from the open barrel and pressed upon by the crowd would find his head immersed in

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the sticky sweets. One man in our regiment who had a remarkably sweet tooth so often suffered this mishap and appeared in camp with his hair matted in sorghum that we gave him that name, and down to the day of muster out he was known in camp by the name of Sorghum--a sweet name if not a pretty one.

Foraging parties were detailed each morning consisting of about 50 men from a brigade whose duty it was to take the advance next to the skirmishers--and indeed often they took the advance of them too--and gather up provision for their comrades. These men usually mounted themselves upon horses and mules found in the country, and would appear at night with great sacks of provisions upon their horses backs--strings of chickens dangling from the saddle, pigs, bacon, boxes of honey, hoe cakes, and a vast variety of articles mostly food confiscated from the hapless citizens. This was a dangerous service, for these men were considered

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by the enemy as thieves and plunderers and placed outside the protection of civilized warfare. But this foraging was not confined to the regular details, for the bummers were there, and who has not heard of the bummers. In common military parlance the bummer was he who habitually shirked duty, and slacked off as it was called--feigning sickness, or other excuse--and thus escaping from the fair share of work or peril, but in this march the term acquired a wider signification and was applied to those reckless spirits who either from a love of adventure or a desire to plunder, fell out by the way to explore some farm yard temptingly in view, to bayonet some luckless stray pig, or bring off a few chicks for the mess. But truth compels me to say that their exploits did not end here--houses were pillaged and vicious persons seized upon the opportunity to steal and rob and burn. This system of foraging or rather its outgrowth of indiscriminate plunder, was a foul blot upon the otherwise fair page

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of the story of the march. It was a sad spectacle often presented of viewing the ruin wrought by the bummers. The brilliant march to the sea was dimmed by their unworthy exploits. But there are bad men in every calling, among soldiers as well as civilians, and it was a fact often commented upon that no experience would so vividly bring out the good qualities of a really worthy man, or so quickly develop the ragged edges of a rascally character as army life. And so it fell out that under these demoralizing influences even chaplains lost their manhood (or forgot it for the time) and were found confiscating articles neither useful to the service or dangerous when left behind. Not infrequently this advance guard of foragers and bummers, spreading like a curtain across our front and along our flanks, would meet and skirmish with the enemy, the latter fleeing at their approach, supposing them to be the main body of the army.

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And in one instance in the succeeding campaign of the Carolinas, the Mayor and Council of a city formally surrendered the town to a party of these men, under the belief that they were the advance of our organized forces. Imagine the disgust of these officials when they learned too late they had surrendered to a squad of bummers and that the Federal army was many miles away! Soon the army presented a strange spectacle. A great host of pack mules and horses could be seen in rear of every brigade, bearing great burdens of provisions of all sorts, and an infinite variety of articles brought in by the bummers, lead by contrabands willingly confiscated for such service, who also assisted in preparing the meals for the soldiers. Soon every squad had its pack animals and negroes, a constantly increasing mass, giving to the army on the march an appearance so unlike anything else, that an attempt at description is useless. Cotton was everywhere burned, and corn suffered the same fate when found in quan-

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tities too great for transportation. Cattle were driven along so that every division was possessed of a goodly herd, horses and mules were eagerly sought for and exchanged for worn out animals in the trains, or for the mounted service. Fires were lit on every hand, and the flames from burning fences, barns, dwellings, mills and cotton everywhere lit up the line of march, making our advance a track of fire, leaving a barren waste. The flouring mills within a safe distance in front were seized and operated so long as the army was in supporting distance, thus supplying breadstuffs, and when they could be no longer run with safety they suffered the general fate and were burned, adding new and severe losses to the most unhappy people whom a most cruel fate had settled in the track of our army.

When our left wing reached the Oconee, in its seeming advance upon Augusta, and the R.R. bridge at that point had been burned, the infantry turned southward toward Milledgeville, the cavalry still

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advancing in the direction of Augusta.

At Milledgeville, the capital of Georgia, the two wings of the army united, and halted for a day's rest. The Georgia legislature, bewildered by the advances of the Union forces by way of Eatonton on the north and Gordon on the South, incontinently fled, and the boys with all due gravity and decorum took possession of the State house and organized a legislature of their own, and soon laws were enacted, which for clearness and general utility rivalled a least the average stock law of a Kansas legislature. There being no clinch bugs or grasshoppers in Georgia that year, no special relief measures were enacted, and the direct appropriations made by Sherman's army were considered ample for ordinary purposes.

Great quantities of Georgia State currency in the sheet fresh from the printing press was found here and with its aid fortunes were speedily won and lost around the camp fire in the mysteries of Draw poker and Seven up. Milledgeville we found an uninteresting and rather in-

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significant country town. Its style of buildings was inferior and its whole appearance shabby. A single line of "strap" rail road connects it with the Macon and Savannah road. It is about miles from Savannah and the march thither had occupied 7 days. The negroes here were very obsequious in their welcome to Mr. Sherman and all "dese gemmen trabelling with him"--as they styled the Gen. and his army.

The next point of interest in the march was Millen. Here was located one of the infamous prison pens of the South. A resolute effort was made to surprise the garrison and release the prisoners but to our great disappointment and their untold misery, the prisoners were safely removed to Andersonville and we were unsuccessful. Here was a field of perhaps 5 or 6 acres surrounded by a huge stockade, with its surmounting guard houses, and its interior "dead line." Here without but board or blanket to shelter them our comrades had been herded like cattle. Inside the stockade the ground was literally burrowed out, showing

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how the half famished victims of rebel hate had sought to protect their shivering bodies from the chilling storms and piercing winds of winter by digging into the cold bosom of the earth. Here we halted for an hour and mournfully contemplated the spectacle, calling to mind the sufferings of our dear comrades. The repulsive pen was desolate, hollow and deserted now, but in imagination we could see the emaciated forms of our brothers still peopling these wretched holes in the ground--shivering, hungry, stricken with scurvy, tormented by vermin, and mocked by brutal keepers--and all this the work of men and brothers! the people of one country and lately the followers of one flag! To what extremes of hate and refinements of cruelty, blind passion may lead us. Can it be that we are all children of on Great Heavenly Father, and brethren of Him who went about doing good and commanded us to love one another? This ghastly feature of the war is not mentioned for the purpose of kindling into a new flame the smoldering embers of partisan hate

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for I pray God they may burn lower and lower and soon go out forever, but I mention it sadly and haste to leave the subject. Some one has said, "O God, it is a fearful thing to perish by the fire." But what think you of that death that came creeping on the icy blast assisted by a slow but certain process of starvation, and made most terrible by putrid sores? A death that lingered in tantalizing dalliance with its victim until reason tottered from her throne, and the body was racked with pains unbearable, a death that consumed months in opening the only door of escape--the door that looked out to the "land beyond the Hills"--"The beautiful shore of the Blest."

But I find my subject more appropriate for a volume than an address, and hence must be content with mere skimming over the surface. The lost army as it was called now fairly turned toward Savannah, still destroying the Rail road and still moving by parallel columns. We had little difficulty in making our average advance of 15 miles per day. The enemy offered a feeble resistance here and [there]

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but not enough to even check our progress. From the 1st to the 8th of December [we] were in the low lying peninsula formed by the Savannah and Ogeechee rivers. It became apparent we were nearing the sea. The whole face of the country changed. The rich soil of central Ga. disappeared and we found instead shifting sands and ponds and swamps. The creeks spread out over the flat surface into miry branches. For days we marched through almost broken forests of pine, but along the banks of the Savannah the magnificent live oaks with their wide spreading branches gracefully hung with a peculiar species of feathery moss, gave a wild beauty to the scene. Soon we were amid the wide stretching rice swamps of the Savannah. Our diet changed from a substantial round of hoe cake, sweet potatoes and pork to very thin rations of rice and sorghum, while the poor mules were obliged to exchange corn for rice straw. We were hard by the sea. The end approached.

At length on the 10th day of Decr. having driven in the enemy's outlying detachments, and surmounting their temporary barricades, we found ourselves in

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front of the defenses of Savannah. The army had leisurely wended its way through the very center of the Confederacy, from the mountains to the sea, with no base of supplies and no line of retreat, and without meeting scarcely a respectable resistance in the whole 300 miles and more accomplished in 24 days. That which promised to be the most perilous undertaking of the war turned out to be almost a holiday march, and with its zest of freshness and novelty the most enjoyable campaign of the war. Spasmodic efforts were made-- now at Macon, now at Augusta--to stay our progress, only to see our forces . pass swiftly by both places without stopping to give battle but pressing merrily on to the sea.

Now however there was work to do. A great city flanked by wide rivers and to be approached only through treacherous swamps must yet be taken, and behind these swamps from river to river stretched formidable earthworks, bristling with heavy guns and defended by brave men. The festive and brilliant march gave promise of ending in the death of

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thousands before the final prize was won.

Fort McAllister, a fine earthwork upon the enemy's left flank guarding the line of the Ogeechee, was first assaulted. Through the swamp in front filled with torpedoes went Hazen's gallant division. The sides of the fort seemed literally to vomit flame, as the huge cannon belched forth shot and shell and death. But Hazen's men went steadily on, "into the mouth of hell, into the jaws of death," as did the 600 at Balaklava, and surmounted the parapet--here a hand to hand fight, and all was over. The rebel flag went down and the stars and stripes went up, and McAllister was ours. 90 blue clad forms lay upon the parapet and in the abatis, and half that number of the enemy. How short a story, but how long shall its memory last?

Now through' the turbid waters of the Ogeechee menaced [no] longer by rebel batteries, communication was opened with the Federal fleet in Ossabaw sound. Then went out to an anxious and expectant country the glorious news that the lost army had penetrated to the sea--and was found.

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On the beautiful morning of Dec. 21st the White Star Division of the 20th Corps--the division in which your humble speaker had the honor to serve, was aroused at the first indication of the dawn, and the advance was sounded. We were encamped beneath the grand old live oaks that lined the banks of the Savannah. All was expectation, and there was that hush and meditation and undefined something in the camp that betokened bloody work on hand. Down the banks of the wide spreading river and toward the city that bore its name we marched swiftly, eagerly, hopefully--for although momentarily expecting to hear the fierce rattle of the musketry and to endure the dread shock of battle, every man was ready. But soon came through the ranks the glad news that the fortifications were deserted. And so they were, for during the darkness Hardee and his forces had stolen away into Carolina, and had disappeared in the swamps toward Charleston. We had but to enter in and possess the city. Just as the sun's bright beams fairly gilded the domes of the ancient town, the White Star was planted at the base of Pulaski monument, and Savannah was ours.

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Gen. Sherman immediately despatched to the President the following:

"I beg to present you as a Christmas gift the city of Savannah with 150 heavy guns and plenty of ammunition and also about 25,000 bales of cotton. W. T. Sherman."

To which President Lincoln--God bless his memory--answered:

"My dear Gen. Sherman--Many, many thanks for your Christmas gift, the capture of Savannah. When you were about to leave Atlanta for the Atlantic coast, I was anxious, if not fearful, but believing you the better judge, and remembering that 'nothing risked is nothing gained,' I did not interfere. And taking the work of Gen. Thomas into the count as it should be taken it is indeed a grand success. Not only does it afford the obvious and immediate military advantages but in showing to the world that your army could be divided, putting the stronger part of it to an important new service, and yet leaving enough to vanquish the old opposing forces of the whole--Hood's army--it brings those who sat in darkness to see a great light. But what next? I suppose it will be safe if I leave Gen. Grant and yourself to decide.

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Please make my grateful acknowledgments to your entire army, officers and men.

Yours very truly, A. Lincoln."

The march was ended. The Confederacy was severed in twain. Her inhabitants seeing their helplessness were terror stricken. Her entire armies except that of Gen. Lee at Richmond, scattered into broken fugitive bands.

The good work had been well done. The army rested from its labors.