

IV

THE BATTLE OF HOOK'S FARM

AND now, having given all the exact science of our war game, having told something of the development of this warfare, let me here set out the particulars of an exemplary game. And suddenly your author changes. He changes into what perhaps he might have been--under different circumstances. His inky fingers become large, manly hands, his drooping scholastic back stiffens, his elbows go out, his etiolated complexion corrugates and darkens, his moustaches increase and grow and spread, and curl up horribly; a large, red scar, a sabre cut, grows lurid over one eye. He expands--all over he expands. He clears his throat startingly, lugs at the still growing ends of his moustache, and says, with just a faint and fading doubt in his voice as to whether he can do it, "Yas, Sir!"

Now for a while you listen to General H. G. W., of the Blue Army. You hear tales of victory. The photographs of the battlefields are by a woman war-correspondent, A. C. W., a daring ornament of her sex. I vanish. I vanish, but I will return. Here, then, is the story of the battle of Hook's Farm.

"The affair of Hook's Farm was one of those brisk little things that did so much to build up my early reputation. I did remarkably well,

though perhaps it is not my function to say so. The enemy was slightly stronger, both in cavalry and infantry, than myself [Footnote: A slight but pardonable error on the part of the gallant gentleman. The forces were exactly equal.]; he had the choice of position, and opened the ball. Nevertheless I routed him. I had with me a compact little force of 3 guns, 48 infantry, and 25 horse. My instructions were to clear up the country to the east of Firely Church.

"We came very speedily into touch. I discovered the enemy advancing upon Hook's Farm and Firely Church, evidently with the intention of holding those two positions and giving me a warm welcome. I have by me a photograph or so of the battlefield and also a little sketch I used upon the field. They will give the intelligent reader a far better idea of the encounter than any so-called 'fine writing' can do.

"The original advance of the enemy was through the open country behind Firely Church and Hook's Farm; I sighted him between the points marked A A and B B, and his force was divided into two columns, with very little cover or possibility of communication between them if once the intervening ground was under fire. I reckoned about 22 to his left and 50 or 60 to his right. [Footnote: Here again the gallant gentleman errs; this time he magnifies.] Evidently he meant to seize both Firely Church and Hook's Farm, get his guns into action, and pound my little force to pieces while it was still practically in the open. He could reach both these admirable positions before I could hope to get a man there. There was no effective cover whatever upon my right that would

have permitted an advance up to the church, and so I decided to concentrate my whole force in a rush upon Hook's Farm, while I staved off his left with gun fire. I do not believe any strategist whatever could have bettered that scheme. My guns were at the points marked D C E, each with five horsemen, and I deployed my infantry in a line between D and E. The rest of my cavalry I ordered to advance on Hook's Farm from C. I have shown by arrows on the sketch the course I proposed for my guns. The gun E was to go straight for its assigned position, and get into action at once. C was not to risk capture or being put out of action; its exact position was to be determined by Red's rapidity in getting up to the farm, and it was to halt and get to work directly it saw any chance of effective fire.

"Red had now sighted us. Throughout the affair he showed a remarkably poor stomach for gun-fire, and this was his undoing. Moreover, he was tempted by the poorness of our cover on our right to attempt to outflank and enfilade us there. Accordingly, partly to get cover from our two central guns and partly to outflank us, he sent the whole of his left wing to the left of Firely Church, where, except for the gun, it became almost a negligible quantity. The gun came out between the church and the wood into a position from which it did a considerable amount of mischief to the infantry on our right, and nearly drove our rightmost gun in upon its supports. Meanwhile, Red's two guns on his right came forward to Hook's Farm, rather badly supported by his infantry.

"Once they got into position there I perceived that we should be done

for, and accordingly I rushed every available man forward in a vigorous counter attack, and my own two guns came lumbering up to the farmhouse corners, and got into the wedge of shelter close behind the house before his could open fire. His fire met my advance, littering the gentle grass slope with dead, and then, hot behind the storm of shell, and even as my cavalry gathered to charge his guns, he charged mine. I was amazed beyond measure at that rush, knowing his sabres to be slightly outnumbered by mine. In another moment all the level space round the farmhouse was a whirling storm of slashing cavalry, and then we found ourselves still holding on, with half a dozen prisoners, and the farmyard a perfect shambles of horses and men. The melee was over. His charge had failed, and, after a brief breathing--space for my shot--torn infantry to come up, I led on the counter attack. It was brilliantly successful; a hard five minutes with bayonet and sabre, and his right gun was in our hands and his central one in jeopardy.

"And now Red was seized with that most fatal disease of generals, indecision. He would neither abandon his lost gun nor adequately attack it. He sent forward a feeble little infantry attack, that we cut up with the utmost ease, taking several prisoners, made a disastrous demonstration from the church, and then fell back altogether from the gentle hill on which Hook Farm is situated to a position beside and behind an exposed cottage on the level. I at once opened out into a long crescent, with a gun at either horn, whose crossfire completely destroyed his chances of retreat from this ill-chosen last stand, and there presently we disabled his second gun. I now turned my attention

to his still largely unbroken right, from which a gun had maintained a galling fire on us throughout the fight. I might still have had some stiff work getting an attack home to the church, but Red had had enough of it, and now decided to relieve me of any further exertion by a precipitate retreat. My gun to the right of Hook's Farm killed three of his flying men, but my cavalry were too badly cut up for an effective pursuit, and he got away to the extreme left of his original positions with about 6 infantry-men, 4 cavalry, and 1 gun. He went none too soon. Had he stayed, it would have been only a question of time before we shot him to pieces and finished him altogether."

So far, and a little vaingloriously, the general. Let me now shrug my shoulders and shake him off, and go over this battle he describes a little more exactly with the help of the photographs. The battle is a small, compact game of the Fight-to-a-Finish type, and it was arranged as simply as possible in order to permit of a full and exact explanation.

Figure 1 shows the country of the battlefield put out; on the right is the church, on the left (near the centre of the plate) is the farm. In the hollow between the two is a small outbuilding. Directly behind the farm in the line of vision is another outbuilding. This is more distinctly seen in other photographs. Behind, the chalk back line is clear. Red has won the toss, both for the choice of a side and, after making that choice, for first move, and his force is already put out upon the back line. For the sake of picturesqueness, the men are not put

exactly on the line, but each will have his next move measured from that line. Red has broken his force into two, a fatal error, as we shall see, in view of the wide space of open ground between the farm and the church. He has 1 gun, 5 cavalry, and 13 infantry on his left, who are evidently to take up a strong position by the church and enfilade Blue's position; Red's right, of 2 guns, 20 cavalry, and 37 infantry aim at the seizure of the farm.

Figure 2 is a near view of Blue's side, with his force put down. He has grasped the strategic mistake of Red, and is going to fling every man at the farm. His right, of 5 cavalry and 16 infantry, will get up as soon as possible to the woods near the centre of the field (whence the fire of their gun will be able to cut off the two portions of Red's force from each other), and then, leaving the gun there with sufficient men to serve it, the rest of this party will push on to co-operate with the main force of their comrades in the inevitable scrimmage for the farm.

Figure 3 shows the fight after Red and Blue have both made their first move. It is taken from Red's side. Red has not as yet realised the danger of his position. His left gun struggles into position to the left of the church, his centre and right push for the farm. Blue's five cavalry on his left have already galloped forward into a favourable position to open fire at the next move--they are a little hidden in the picture by the church; the sixteen infantry follow hard, and his main force makes straight for the farm.

Figure 4 shows the affair developing rapidly. Red's cavalry on his right have taken his two guns well forward into a position to sweep either side of the farm, and his left gun is now well placed to pound Blue's infantry centre. His infantry continue to press forward, but Blue, for his second move, has already opened fire from the woods with his right gun, and killed three of Red's men. His infantry have now come up to serve this gun, and the cavalry who brought it into position at the first move have now left it to them in order to gallop over to join the force attacking the farm. Undismayed by Red's guns, Blue has brought his other two guns and his men as close to the farm as they can go. His leftmost gun stares Red's in the face, and prevents any effective fire, his middle gun faces Red's middle gun. Some of his cavalry are exposed to the right of the farm, but most are completely covered now by the farm from Red's fire. Red has now to move. The nature of his position is becoming apparent to him. His right gun is ineffective, his left and his centre guns cannot kill more than seven or eight men between them; and at the next move, unless he can silence them, Blue's guns will be mowing his exposed cavalry down from the security of the farm. He is in a fix. How is he to get out of it? His cavalry are slightly outnumbered, but he decides to do as much execution as he can with his own guns, charge the Blue guns before him, and then bring up his infantry to save the situation.

Figure 5a shows the result of Red's move. His two effective guns have between them bowled over two cavalry and six infantry in the gap between the farm and Blue's right gun; and then, following up the effect of his

gunfire, his cavalry charges home over the Blue guns. One oversight he makes, to which Blue at once calls his attention at the end of his move. Red has reckoned on twenty cavalry for his charge, forgetting that by the rules he must put two men at the tail of his middle gun. His infantry are just not able to come up for this duty, and consequently two cavalry-men have to be set there. The game then pauses while the players work out the cavalry melee. Red has brought up eighteen men to this; in touch or within six inches of touch there are twenty-one Blue cavalry. Red's force is isolated, for only two of his men are within a move, and to support eighteen he would have to have nine. By the rules this gives fifteen men dead on either side and three Red prisoners to Blue. By the rules also it rests with Red to indicate the survivors within the limits of the melee as he chooses. He takes very good care there are not four men within six inches of either Blue gun, and both these are out of action therefore for Blue's next move. Of course Red would have done far better to have charged home with thirteen men only, leaving seven in support, but he was flurried by his comparatively unsuccessful shooting--he had wanted to hit more cavalry--and by the gun-trail mistake. Moreover, he had counted his antagonist wrongly, and thought he could arrange a melee of twenty against twenty.

Figure 5b shows the game at the same stage as 5a, immediately after the adjudication of the melee. The dead have been picked up, the three prisoners, by a slight deflection of the rules in the direction of the picturesque, turn their faces towards captivity, and the rest of the picture is exactly in the position of 5a.

It is now Blue's turn to move, and figure 6a shows the result of his move. He fires his rightmost gun (the nose of it is just visible to the right) and kills one infantry-man and one cavalry-man (at the tail of Red's central gun), brings up his surviving eight cavalry into convenient positions for the service of his temporarily silenced guns, and hurries his infantry forward to the farm, recklessly exposing them in the thin wood between the farm and his right gun. The attentive reader will be able to trace all this in figure 6a, and he will also note the three Red cavalry prisoners going to the rear under the escort of one Khaki infantry man.

Figure 6b shows exactly the same stage as figure 6a, that is to say, the end of Blue's third move. A cavalry-man lies dead at the tail of Red's middle gun, an infantry-man a little behind it. His rightmost gun is abandoned and partly masked, but not hidden, from the observer, by a tree to the side of the farmhouse.

And now, what is Red to do?

The reader will probably have his own ideas, as I have mine. What Red did do in the actual game was to lose his head, and then at the end of four minutes' deliberation he had to move, he blundered desperately. He opened fire on Blue's exposed centre and killed eight men. (Their bodies litter the ground in figure 7, which gives a complete bird's-eye view of the battle.) He then sent forward and isolated six or seven men in a

wild attempt to recapture his lost gun, massed his other men behind the inadequate cover of his central gun, and sent the detachment of infantry that had hitherto lurked uselessly behind the church, in a frantic and hopeless rush across the open to join them. (The one surviving cavalry-man on his right wing will be seen taking refuge behind the cottage.)

There can be little question of the entire unsoundness of all these movements. Red was at a disadvantage, he had failed to capture the farm, and his business now was manifestly to save his men as much as possible, make a defensive fight of it, inflict as much damage as possible with his leftmost gun on Blue's advance, get the remnants of his right across to the church--the cottage in the centre and their own gun would have given them a certain amount of cover--and build up a new position about that building as a pivot. With two guns right and left of the church he might conceivably have saved the rest of the fight.

That, however, is theory; let us return to fact. Figure 8 gives the disastrous consequences of Red's last move. Blue has moved, his guns have slaughtered ten of Red's wretched foot, and a rush of nine Blue cavalry and infantry mingles with Red's six surviving infantry about the disputed gun. These infantry by the definition are isolated; there are not three other Reds within a move of them. The view in this photograph also is an extensive one, and the reader will note, as a painful accessory, the sad spectacle of three Red prisoners receding to the right. The melee about Red's lost gun works out, of course, at three dead on each side, and three more Red prisoners.

Henceforth the battle moves swiftly to complete the disaster of Red. Shaken and demoralised, that unfortunate general is now only for retreat. His next move, of which I have no picture, is to retreat the infantry he has so wantonly exposed back to the shelter of the church, to withdraw the wreckage of his right into the cover of the cottage, and--one last gleam of enterprise--to throw forward his left gun into a position commanding Blue's right.

Blue then pounds Red's right with his gun to the right of the farm and kills three men. He extends his other gun to the left of the farm, right out among the trees, so as to get an effective fire next time upon the tail of Red's gun. He also moves up sufficient men to take possession of Red's lost gun. On the right Blue's gun engages Red's and kills one man. All this the reader will see clearly in figure 9, and he will also note a second batch of Red prisoners--this time they are infantry, going rearward. Figure 9 is the last picture that is needed to tell the story of the battle. Red's position is altogether hopeless. He has four men left alive by his rightmost gun, and their only chance is to attempt to save that by retreating with it. If they fire it, one or other will certainly be killed at its tail in Blue's subsequent move, and then the gun will be neither movable nor fireable. Red's left gun, with four men only, is also in extreme peril, and will be immovable and helpless if it loses another man.

Very properly Red decided upon retreat. His second gun had to be abandoned after one move, but two of the men with it escaped over his

back line. Five of the infantry behind the church escaped, and his third gun and its four cavalry got away on the extreme left-hand corner of Red's position. Blue remained on the field, completely victorious, with two captured guns and six prisoners.

There you have a scientific record of the worthy general's little affair.