

The End of the Struggle

by G.A. Henty

Being unable to obtain any supplies at Wilmington, Lord Cornwallis determined to march on into Virginia and to effect a junction with the British force under General Arnold operating there. Arnold advanced to Petersburg and Cornwallis effected a junction with him on May 20. The Marquis de la Fayette, who commanded the colonial forces here, fell back. Just at this time the Count de Grasse, with a large French fleet, arrived off the coast, and, after some consultation with General Washington, determined that the French fleet and the whole American army should operate together to crush the forces under Lord Cornwallis.

The English were hoodwinked by reports that the French fleet was intended to operate against New York, and it was not until they learned that the Count de Grasse had arrived with twenty-eight ships of the line at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay that the true object of the expedition was seen. A portion of the English fleet encountered them, but after irregular actions, lasting over five days, the English drew off and retired to New York. The commander-in-chief then attempted to effect a diversion, in order to draw off some of the enemy who were surrounding Cornwallis. The fort of New London was stormed after some desperate fighting, and great quantities of ammunition and stores and fifty pieces of cannon taken. General Washington did not allow his attention to be distracted. Matters were in a most critical condition, for although to the English the prospect of ultimate success appeared slight indeed, the Americans were in a desperate condition. Their immense and long-continued efforts had been unattended with any material success. It was true that the British troops held no more ground now than they did at the end of the first year of the war, but no efforts of the colonists had succeeded in wresting that ground from them. The people were exhausted and utterly disheartened. Business of all sorts was at a standstill. Money had ceased to circulate, and the credit of Congress stood so low that its bonds had ceased to have any value whatever. The soldiers were unpaid, ill fed, and mutinous. If on the English side it seemed that the task of conquering was beyond them, the Americans were ready to abandon the defense from sheer exhaustion. It was then of paramount necessity to General Washington that a great and striking success should be obtained to animate the spirits of the people.

Cornwallis, seeing the formidable combination which the French and Americans were making to crush him, sent message after message to New York to ask for aid from the commander-in-chief, and received assurances from him that he would at once sail with 4000 troops to join him. Accordingly, in obedience to his orders, Lord Cornwallis fortified himself at Yorktown.

On September 28 the combined army of French and Americans, consisting of 7000 of the former and 12,000 of the latter, appeared before Yorktown and the post at Gloucester. Lord Cornwallis had 5960 men, but so great had been the effects of the deadly climate in the autumn months that only 4017 men were reported as fit for duty.

The enemy at once invested the town and opened their trenches against it. From their fleet they had drawn an abundance of heavy artillery, and on October 9 their batteries opened a tremendous fire upon the works. Each day they pushed their trenches closer, and the British force was too weak, in comparison with the number of its assailants, to venture upon sorties. The fire from the works was completely overpowered by that of the enemy, and the ammunition was nearly exhausted. Day after day passed and still the promised re-enforcements did not arrive. Lord Cornwallis was told positively that the fleet would set sail on October 8, but it came not, nor did it leave port until the 19th, the day on

which Lord Cornwallis surrendered.

On the 16th, finding that he must either surrender or break through, he determined to cross the river and fall on the French rear with his whole force and then turn northward and force his way through Maryland, Pennsylvania, and the Jerseys. In the night the light infantry, the greater part of the guards, and part of the Twenty-third were embarked in boats and crossed to the Gloucester side of the river before midnight. At this critical moment a violent storm arose which prevented the boats returning. The enemy's fire reopened at daybreak, and the engineer and principal officers of the army gave it as their opinion that it was impossible to resist longer. Only one eight-inch shell and a hundred small ones remained. The defenses had in many places tumbled to ruins, and no effectual resistance could be opposed to an assault.

Accordingly Lord Cornwallis sent out a flag of truce and arranged terms of surrender. On the 24th the fleet and re-enforcements arrived off the mouth of the Chesapeake. Had they left New York at the time promised, the result of the campaign would have been different.

The army surrendered as prisoners of war until exchanged, the officers with liberty to proceed on parole to Europe and not to serve until exchanged. The loyal Americans were embarked on the *Bonito*, sloop of war, and sent to New York in safety, Lord Cornwallis having obtained permission to send off the ship without her being searched, with as many soldiers on board as he should think fit, so that they were accounted for in any further exchange. He was thus enabled to send off such of the inhabitants and loyalist troops as would have suffered from the vengeance of the Americans.

The surrender of Lord Cornwallis' army virtually ended the war. The burden entailed on the people in England by the great struggle against France, Spain, Holland, and America, united in arms against her, was enormous. So long as there appeared any chance of recovering the colony the English people made the sacrifices required of them, but the conviction that it was impossible for them to wage a war with half of Europe and at the same time to conquer a continent had been gaining more and more in strength. Even the most sanguine were silenced by the surrender of Yorktown, and a cry arose throughout the country that peace should at once be made.

As usual under the circumstances, a change of ministry took place. Negotiations for peace were at once commenced, and the war terminated in the acknowledgment of the entire independence of the United States of America.

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