

TUESDAY EVENING, MARCH 2, 1863.

A GRAPHIC BATTLE-SKETCH.

Christmas in the Army of the West—The Battles of Stone River.

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MR. EDITOR: I see in the eastern illustrated papers spirited cuts of "Santa Claus in the Army"—the ruddy saint dispensing all kinds of good cheer and plenty through the comfortable camps of the Potomac. Let me redeem an old promise to occasionally contribute, by giving you a glimpse of Christmas in the army of the West. And I think by way of introduction, that there is a vast difference in point of comfort and luxury between the armies that rest on the Atlantic and the Mississippi, and a difference that, perhaps, carries in it the secret of the success which ever crowns the latter. Cut off by a thousand miles from home—with only spasmodic mail connection—with almost nothing beyond the army ration to eat, and often not that—with no furloughs or home trips—deprived even of hospital accommodation on their bleak and barren battlefields—our toil-tested and suffering volunteers have, by their very privations become the heroes of a dazzling series of brilliant campaigns.

But to particulars. The season of Christmas just passed, hallowed by the eternal association of peace and good will, has been to the army of Gen. Rosecrans a period of trial, turmoil and endurance that can happen but once in a lifetime. The decade from December 24th, 1862, to January 4th, 1863, was fairly crowded with suffering and exposure. On the 24th the grand army moved from in front of Nashville on to Murfreesboro, the three great corps, each on its own road, and all converging to the beleaguered town. A strong reserve followed in the centre, which was shifted from right to left, as one or the other wing was threatened. Here commenced in truth the battle. While the rebels were comfortably housed in warm winter quarters, built with substantial stone fireplaces, among a smiling community, their ancestral servants at hand—our army under a heavy rain lasting steadily for days, and varied only by a roaring storm, was slowly, through mud and water fighting its way down to the hostile entrenchments. It was five days before enough of troops to regularly open the engagement could be mussed before the town, and all this time was consumed in the most exhaustive and fatiguing labors, in bringing up the immense artillery and supply trains. At times the wagons and cannon had literally to be lifted out of the marshes and almost carried by the hands of the soldiers. Night marches were the standing order, at least for the reserves, and a column frequently spent ten hours of darkness in making half as many miles. Oh, how we longed through those weary and hopeless nights for the hottest fighting, the deadliest charges, to put an end to this prostrating and wretched slavery.

At last it came. After heavy preliminary skirmishing on Monday and Tuesday, Wednesday evening's sun—the last of the year—went down on us a badly defeated and slaughtered army. Driven four miles back, our right wing disastrously turned, our artillery despoiled, our unnumbered dead and four thousand living in the hands of the enemy—most armies would have thought themselves beaten, but for us it was only a terrible misfortune to be at once and on that spot retrieved. Our field was to be lost only with ourselves. I think every private, every boy, felt that. There, on that dismal night—that frosty, bleak December night—without blankets, without coffee or meat, without a solitary fire, (for we dared not to make them,) among thousands of their comrades dead, or what was worse, dying—our men threw themselves

without a murmur or a whine, on the bare frozen ground and slept, waiting for the coming of the morning—and that morning uncheered by a single ray of hope. I felt appalled there at the bravery of man—I did homage at that awful altar to the unnamed and countless heroes. Next morning most probably meant death, but not a man wept or flinched. It was fighting pure and simple, robbed of all its adventitious glory, there was nothing to excite, nothing to stimulate, save desperation. The banners of Chaplin Hills and Shiloh were paling. It was battle, but the battle of the vanquished with their flushed and confident victors.

On Thursday, with compressed lips and braced nerves, we silently took up our line. I cannot tell here the history of the long hours of those battle-crowded days—engagements which, in the days of Revolutionary story, would have made their leaders famous, and blazoned through time in school-books and minstrelsy, were here merely *affaires* of Colonel so and so. Many a bloody onset was only a reconnoissance. Suffice it, on that day we held our ground, and gained a few rods. On Friday we steadily pushed our lines over the red mire of the clotted corn and cotton fields, and on Saturday, in black darkness, and under a driving tempest we stormed the last entrenchment, and swept the fluctuating field.

To the reading world the taking Murfreesboro, the western week of battles, doubtless seems a brilliant and glowing achievement. The conventional idea is, I doubt not, largely composed of blue and gold uniforms, bacchalic charges, maddening music, sashes, banners, plumes, and a general explosion of military theatricals. In reality, it was a contest of suffering, a trial of endurance. We fagged out the Southern blood. Coming to the field worn out and prostrated, it was an unequal strife in condition as well as in numbers, but the sturdy Northern yeomen had made up their minds to stay there, and did, till at last the impetuous chivalry, weary of hurling themselves on a human wall, could stand it no longer, and fled.

The space between the town and our lines was won inch by inch, crawling now, and now charging through a sheet of flame. Many a brave man fell merely in gaining a few furrows. All the area of strife was covered by sharpshooters, and in the din of conflict their rifles were unseen and noiseless messengers of death. A convulsive plunge, and a stretched corpse with a little red spot in the forehead told the tale. Somebody had fallen, as unconscious as his neighbors of the direction of the fatal ball. All the fighting ground, for the most part ploughed fields, was ankle deep in mud, or worse. Charging was no more an impetuous dash, but just a steady march into the jaws of death. On this slippery, swimming ground, we had to eat and sleep. In the centre the approaches were covered by trenches dug secretly, and occupied by night. These, of course, under the rain became knee deep in a few hours with cold and dirty water, but in them night and day lay our indomitable troops, relieving each other, regiment by regiment, in the night. Too low to stand up in, too wet to sit down in, the wretched occupants had to remain bent and strained, or to kneel over thighs in water. A single peep over the embank-

ment was a signal for a dozen bullets. In our eyes, scientific warfare is simply torture.

To complete the scene, the rear was cut off, and provisions gave out. Corn on the ear—about one ear to four men per day—was issued to the troops, and the splendid fighting of Friday was made on that novel diet. I saw horses, not one hour dead, neatly carved to a skeleton—all gone to steaks. Hard crackers, mess pork and clean water were the delicacies of the season.

Privation of every kind and degree was the feature of the struggle and the lever of victory. Dirty, mud-colored, hungry, shivering men did the work, and passed through filth to glory. What reads like an intoxicating success was a hard-earned and laborious strife, and the dearest fruit of victory was rest.

In strange contrast to the sombre hues of those long dreary days, stands out one scene so startlingly dramatic in its effect, so wild in its brilliancy, that its recollection seems like the flights of oriental fancy. The closing act of that week of suffering must be forever prominent as the picture of the war—perhaps as the picturesque battle piece of war. Unique in conception, terribly splendid in its execution, the night battle of January 3d, 1863, is seared forever on the memory of its actors, and destined, I think, to an artistic immortality in song and painting.

About dusk our sharpshooters stealthily began to advance, for the purpose of gaining the dark line of a dense cedar forest in front. Their approach instantly caused a sudden illumination of the woods by the rebel riflemen, stud-ded behind every tree and rock. I may mention here that when we took this piece of timber we found *platforms* raised behind many of the large trees for their sharpshooters, enabling them to extend their range and mislead the aim of our men. To stop this our artillery was brought into play, posted in a huge semi-circle. The couchant lions opened their throats, and shot and shell fairly rained on the devoted spot. The earth literally trembled and quivered with the roar of a hundred cannon, and when we laid down it seemed to beat and throb with the pulse of a living creature. Instantaneous with our attack Heaven's dread artillery opened on both armies. A furious storm sprang up from the South. The winds roared and crashed with the shell through the black forest. The rain streaming in torrents was driven directly in the faces of our troops. We who stood only a few steps in the rear of a range of batteries, were blackened and almost strangled with the suffocating clouds of thick moist powder, which were carried into our faces directly from the muzzles of the guns. By this time the action was general. Charges were repeatedly made on our infantry and batteries, and at last our divisions were set in motion. The scene became weird and exciting beyond conception. The effect of every movement of the contending forces was written in characters of deadly light; the movements themselves were wrapped in thick darkness. Regiment after regiment of rebels advanced noiselessly to the edge of the woods, and all at once a leaping line of flame told their presence and object. The fierce cries of the victors, borne on the angry gusts, told now and again of some merciless bayonet charge, and one could almost fancy that he heard, mingled with them, the hopeless wail of the lost in battle.

I have read of nothing in history, I know of nothing in the dreamland of romance and imagination, to equal or approach the infernal splendor of those three black and bloody hours. I thought of the demon scenery of Dante, of the dark imagery of Milton, of all the fiends that fought in hell, until it seemed as if one could almost feel the real presence of the Prince of the Power of the Air, riding upon a phantom.

For three hours this strange and unearthly battle raged. The blackness of darkness was relieved only by the deathly flash of musketry, or the volcanic glare of artillery. The cheerful "forward—charge" of the successful, the despairing, almost hopeless, "steady, men steady," of the retreating officers, could be heard from time to time, and there was something inhuman in the sound. The balance wavered again and again. The tide of victory was marked only by the advancing and retreating sheets of flame, the red surges of a sea of death, or more dreadful still, by the relentless shouts of the victors, and the shrieks of the trodden.

At last shriek and shout died out together, and without a cheer, the victors of an unknown victory laid down upon the silent field.