

## THE BATTLE OF STONE RIVER.

AS SEEN BY ONE WHO WAS THERE.

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**T**HE battle of Stone River, if not the greatest, was one of the greater battles of the war, and that not because of the numbers engaged, the character of the fighting, or the victory won, though in all these it was hardly second to any; but because of its place in the history of the war, the encouragement it gave to the people of the North, and the confidence and experience it gave to an army hitherto untried in battle.

The Army of the Cumberland, or the 14th Army Corps, was the immediate successor of the Army of the Ohio. It was simply the reorganization of the old army with a large number of new regiments distributed to its several brigades. Since the battle of Shiloh the older regiments had seen very little fighting, but a great deal of marching. The newer ones had seen very little of either. At this time the Army of the Potomac, after a summer's fruitless campaign, was stuck fast in the Virginia mud; the Army of the West was pounding away at the Mississippi forts; the Army of the Ohio, after a five months' pleasant promenade through the rich valleys and over the rugged mountains of Kentucky and Tennessee, found itself facing its partner between Nashville and Murfreesboro. Only one incident occurred to mar the pleasure of our trip to Louisville; that was the battle of Perrysville. This battle was a mistake, that might have resulted seriously. It was brought on by the imprudent and somewhat impulsive nature of one of our division commanders. By his generalship Buell succeeded in putting a stop to the battle before it had gone too far, and Bragg quietly and willingly withdrew to a safer distance. Both generals apologized and parted good friends. The victory of Stone River, although poor, was to us a rift in the clouds, a streak of sunshine promising a brighter day. It gave hope to the anxious watchers at home and confidence in itself to the Army of the Cumberland.

The closing year of 1862 found us in camp near the lunatic asylum, a few miles south of Nashville. We were in comfortable winter-quarters, and, seemingly, for all winter. By drilling, camp duty, picket duty, foraging, and an occasional reconnoissance, we were kept in

exercise and from forgetting that we were in front of the enemy.

It was here that the reorganization of the army was completed and the change in commanders made. However good a military man General Buell may have been—and on horseback he was a model—on parade he was every inch a commander. He never won the love, and entirely lost the confidence, of the army he commanded. There was silent rejoicing everywhere when Rosecrans took his place. Other changes followed that were not so popular and that suggested serious work ahead.

Until now we had been using the Sibley tent, a tent large and comfortable enough for camp purposes, but hard to manage and heavy to transport, and when our wagons got behind, as they often did for days together, we had to do the best we could, with only the heavens above us for shelter.

One day there was issued to each one about two yards square of heavy cotton, with buttons and button-holes along three sides and small loops of cord along the other. We were seriously informed that henceforth these were to be our burden by day and our shelter by night, and they might answer for flags of truce in a time of need. Of course the big tents were to follow us, as usual, and be used in regular camp, so that we were not nearly so mad as we felt like being, but somewhat disgusted and a great deal in doubt. However, being helpless, we turned our disgust into fun and frolic, gave our doubts to the winds, and, taking up our little squares, we folded them away for whatever emergency they might happen to suit.

It was the morning after Christmas, 1862, when orders came to strike tents, fold them up, and turn them over to the quartermaster (and that was the last we ever saw of our "Sibleys"), draw three days' rations, and be ready to march at a moment's notice. We obeyed, of course, but not without grumbling, and the notice came before we were ready. We gathered up our traps, said good-bye to our quarters, and were soon in our place on the road. We were hardly fairly started before it began to rain, and to rain only as it can rain in that Southern country. Soon the earth was all mud beneath us, the heavens

all dark above us, while sounds that were not thunder gave us a hint of business before us. We tramped on and on, encountering nothing worse than the enemy's pickets, who retreated slowly over the hills.

In the evening we halted near Nolinsville. The rain had ceased to pour, but fog was settling heavily and night was near at hand. We were wet and tired and hungry. There was an abundance of good cedar rails near by, and soon roaring, fragrant fires gave us what cheer they could. Hot coffee, crackers and pork soon helped to modify the situation, so that things were not nearly so bad as they seemed. When we began preparations for the night our minds went out to our squares of muslin. If ever they might be useful, now was the time. We unfolded them carefully, spread them out gently, and studied their anatomy. Evidently they were constructed with reference to each other; they seemed to be social in their nature, and must somehow go together. The buttons and the button-holes suggested at least a pair to begin with. We went to work and buttoned two pieces together, then stretched them over a ridge-pole

made of a cedar rail, and, with pegs through the loops, made them fast to the ground. We now had a shelter about four feet high, long enough and wide enough for two persons. The idea thus far developed seemed to strike us favorably, and we wondered if they would shed the rain.

We paired off, selected our ground, pitched our united squares, and in a little while the evening gloom was all lighted up by the snowy whiteness of our shelter tents. Spreading our blankets and putting our knapsacks under our heads, with jest and joke, we took possession of our strange, new quarters. When all seemed to be settling down into the quiet of the night,

some sleepless fellow stuck his head out and began to bark. Soon another followed, then another. The idea was swiftly contagious, and in a few minutes the whole camp sounded like a vast dog convention, where all kinds of dogs were barking for a prize.

The shape of the tent, the way of getting into it, and all the surroundings gave to some one the idea of a dog kennel and he felt constrained to bark. The tents were henceforth christened "dog tents," which in a little while degenerated into "purp tents," and by this name they were ever after known. It rained during the night, and, as we were dry in the

morning, the last question was answered to our entire satisfaction. But so far the tent was only a roof. We were not long, however, in discovering that by three or four persons going together, or by one person managing to get possession of three or four squares, a very close and comfortable shelter could be erected in a very few minutes, and, when in camp, with the help of a few rails or logs or boards, we could have quarters fit for the General himself — better in every way than the old wall or Sibley tents. And then,

though our baggage train was cut down to its lowest limits, we were always pretty sure of a house over our heads. The man who invented the "dog tent" ought to have a monument.

The next day we reached Triune, the enemy contesting every inch of the way and sometimes making our further progress doubtful. Finding the little village almost deserted, we took possession of such live-stock and provisions as we could conveniently carry along, and the next day being the Sabbath, we rested from all our labors and feasted upon the spoils.

Early on Monday we took up our burdens, and leaving the good road to go its own way to the right, we struck across lots. Through cedar



MAJOR-GENERAL W. S. ROSECRANS.

forests and dismal swamps we plodded patiently along, stimulated by the occasional booming of cannon far off to our left and front. We knew that the other divisions of the army were somewhere on the road and forcing their way along, but we did not know where they were. But as to that, we did not know where we were ourselves.

Night found us joining them on Stewart's Creek, a few miles north of Murfreesboro. It now became evident that unless Bragg should keep going on and traveling faster than we, there was going to be trouble pretty soon. Rosecrans was not on the war-path just for the fun there was in it.

We all felt exceedingly homesick that night as we lay under the clouds and in the mud. But we still had some hope that the situation was not so serious as it seemed to be; that Mr. Bragg would think better of it and get out of our way before it would be forever too late. We had been on friendly terms so long and had so often managed to avoid each other that our hopes, however vain, were not without foundation. Thinking a great many thoughts about home and the morrow, we dropped off at last into a restless sleep.

Morning dawned cloudy and cold. We ate our breakfast in silence, rolled up our blankets, and patiently waited for orders. Rumors and reports of what had taken place the day before were plenty, but none of them were very encouraging except to those who were longing for a fight, and that class was not conspicuous. We lay under arms all day and made but little change in our position. At irregular intervals, somewhere in front of us, cannon kept thundering away, not as in battle, but as though searching for a foe. All day long regiments of other divisions kept marching past us and on to the front, disappearing in the woods and dark thickets of cedar.

In the evening came our turn to move, and we marched to the right, through woods and across fields, until we came to the Franklin Pike. Here we formed the extreme right of the line of battle; a part of our division curling around like a dog's tail until some of us fronted to the rear. Behind us was a large field of corn-stalks, the ground sloping gently back for a mile or more to the creek. On the right were open fields as far as the eye could see. On the left, a cedar thicket with large limestone rocks covering the ground. In front were heavy woods, dark with cedar underbrush and full of we knew

not what. But we had some reason for thinking that there was nothing there worse than the silent gloom. Night came on clear, cold, and frosty, almost too cold for sleep, and we were allowed no fires. We made our beds among the rocks and under the cedar branches. Though everything was quiet and our sleep undisturbed, we were glad when morning came.

The morning of December 31, 1862, came on with a cloudless sky and a ringing, frosty air. With the first streak of dawn we were all up and lively, with fires kindled, coffee boiling, and meat frying on the coals. The night had passed without any alarm, and the early light revealed no signs of an approaching storm. The pickets were all at their posts, thinking only of the coming relief. The battery horses were away to watering. General Willich, who commanded our brigade, alone seemed uneasy and was out inspecting the picket line.

Just as I had taken my meat and coffee from the fire, and was sitting down on a cold rock to eat my breakfast, a few shots rang through the woods in front. We had hardly time to be alarmed before others followed, and we heard bullets singing uncomfortably near and saw the pickets rushing in, followed by a line of gray, yelling and shooting like demons. There was no need nor time for any order to "fall in." We just tumbled over each other to get in. Dropping our pots and pans, leaving our haversacks and blankets, we snatched up our cartridge-boxes and rushed for our guns, only to find ourselves in ranks with our backs to the foe. Before we could change front to rear they were upon us, not a skirmish-line, but a line of battle; not one line, but two or three, it seemed to us. The woods were just full of them. They swarmed, they overflowed, they were a regular flood. We stood to deliver our fire and say good-morning, then took to our heels and ran. But not all of us. Some fell right there; many lingered too long with their breakfast dishes, but most of us ran. Our way was through the corn-field. The stalks were yet thickly standing. The ground was frozen and rough. I could hear the bullets striking the stalks. I could hear them strike a comrade as he ran; then there would be a groan, a stagger, and a fall. I could hear the wild yelling behind and the roar of the guns that were now getting into action. I saw, by a backward glance, a gray mass covering all the ground where our camp had so lately been. I saw the fields on the right filling up with regiments and columns and armies of gray. I felt like running.

I felt as though I would like to be all legs, with no other purpose in life but to run.

At the lower side of the field was a high rail-fence. No fence ever stood so much in my way. I could not get to it for the crowd that was ahead of me. We all wanted to get over it first. But many never got over it at all. None of us sat on the top rail to rest. Some tumbled off and ran no further. There was an old house a little way ahead. I reached it safely, and sheltered behind its big chimney, reloaded and fired, and loaded again. I do not know that I hurt anybody. I am not sure that I shot at anybody in particular, but it was a good thing to do. It made me feel better. My fingers were so cold that I could hardly handle the cartridges; but they very soon warmed up to the work. A team of battery-horses came dashing along without riders, and passing between two gate-posts; one of them struck a post and was killed. By this time we were so scattered and mingled that hardly two of a company were together, and there did not seem to be anyone to give us a word of command. It was a plain case of "everyone for himself, and the devil take the hindmost."

The pursuit had now somewhat slackened and the noise behind us was not so furious, but we continued our retreat until we crossed the small creek about one mile from where we started. Here we seemed to be at a distance safe enough to stop and breathe, and gather ourselves together. The flag was still with us, and one or two of our regimental officers made it a rallying point. In a few minutes a large fragment of the regiment had clustered around, not nearly so badly whipped as they thought, but hardly knowing what to do. The panic was over, the scare was out of us, and we were ready to retreat in an orderly manner, if further retreat was necessary. We had not lost all hope, but we had lost our breakfast, and now began to realize the emptiness of our stomachs. But it was, no doubt, the loss of our breakfasts that saved our stomachs, for the enemy, finding it all prepared, tarried long enough to gather it up. That short delay gave us time to get beyond their reach.

Having taken our breath and refreshed ourselves from the clear waters of the creek, we consulted together and studied the situation. The battle was raging on our left and front with increasing fury, and we could see the lines of gray swinging around our right. It was dangerous to go further back, for we saw signs of rebel cavalry in that direction. We did not dare to

tarry longer where we were. The only thing to do was the thing we did. Deliberately moving off to the left and front, and to the rear of the still unbroken centre, we gathered up fragments of our own and other regiments, until we had quite a respectable company. The right wing having been thus broken, the centre was left to bear the whole force of the attack, which was now being made upon both its flank and front with an energy increased by present success and confidence in future victory.

But the centre was not so easily put to rout. Having had some time to prepare for the shock, it was ready to meet it, the positions of the regiments being changed only so far as necessary to resist the flank approaches of the enemy.

In the meantime, Rosecrans had hurried his left division to the right, and uniting them to the centre, formed a new line of battle almost at right angles with the old. This line was strongly posted, and formed a rallying place for the demoralized regiments from the right. Here we all halted, and together gave the first real check to the exulting foe. All the afternoon the battle raged among the cedars, shifting from one point to another, until night drew her curtains between the combatants and ordered a truce until morning.

It was a long, cold night that followed, and a busy one to both the armies. Lines were reformed, weak places strengthened, and breastworks of logs and stones hastily thrown up. What was left of our brigade was sent back to the right and rear to guard against cavalry, and give warning of any danger from the north. We had nothing to eat. Our blankets were giving comfort to the enemy, and we were allowed no fires. All night long we could hear the sounds of preparation for the coming day, and we felt gloomy and doubtful and miserable enough. We had time to think over the events of the day, to count up the missing, and wonder what was their fate; to think of our homes, so many of them soon to be clouded with sorrow. There was no chance for sleep and no occasion for motion, so we just sat and waited, and watched the old year out and the new one in.

When morning came it brought us a little comfort in the softer atmosphere and pleasant sunshine, but no breakfast. All remained quiet on the lines of battle. The morning passed and gave place to noon, and still we waited for the opening gun. The afternoon had almost passed when a furious uproar began near the centre of our line, and we were hurried to the rear of



A FIERCE DASH AT STONE RIVER.

where the battle was in progress. It continued only a short time. The enemy having made the assault was repulsed so decidedly that nothing more was heard from him that evening. A little food had by this time been secured and some blankets hunted up. The night was not nearly so cold, and we began to take a more hopeful view of the situation. The morning came too soon.

The third day of the battle passed with only skirmishing enough to let us know that we were not deserted. It was late in the afternoon when an attack was ordered on the left, in which the broken regiments of the first day's battle were to take a prominent part. We heard the orders with no particular pleasure, though we were anxious enough to redeem our reputation. We had a very general idea of the work before us and believed we were going to win. The order was given and we started forward. Down through the open fields we rushed, keeping in as good order as possible. Cannon thundered before us, to the right of us, and behind us.

Shells shrieked over us, and bursting, scattered their fragments through our ranks. But it was "close up," "guide right," and still forward until Stone River was reached, and we paused for a moment on its bank. A part of the line passed over and the Southern ranks were broken. They fell back and doubled upon their centre, which, already strained to its utmost, gave way, and the battle ended just where it was intended that it should begin.

At night we rested where our work ended, but to most of us there was no rest.

There was comfort in the

thought that our defeat had turned to victory; that we who had fared so badly under the first stroke of the enemy were permitted to lay the last stroke on his back. All night long the rain poured down as though it would wash away every stain of blood. All night long we listened to the cries of the wounded where they lay upon the field. All night long the ambulances were busy gathering in the sheaves of this fearful harvest. All night long we waited and watched and wondered if the battle were really over.

The morning came, dark and damp and gloomy enough, but revealed no enemy. The pickets gave no alarm. The scouts reported Bragg in full retreat and many miles away. We quietly took possession of Murfreesboro and turned her churches and public buildings into hospitals and store-houses. The wounded were gathered in, the dead buried, the losses counted up, the news sent back to the anxious North, and the battle of Stone River became history.

