

## CHAPTER 12

### Regaining His Strength

The next morning, Henry awoke before dawn. An icy dew covered his face, and he pulled the blanket over his nose and mouth. His still sleepy eyes stared out from under the blanket, and he saw the motionless bodies of the sleeping men all around him. "Am I surrounded by a field of corpses?" he gasped.

Then, in a moment, he came fully awake. "What kind of foolishness is fillin' my head? These are the same troops who were sleepin' here when I came last night. And that shootin' in the distance, I guess it didn't stop much

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since I fell asleep.”

Henry turned his head toward the crackling fire. Tom was already there, making coffee for the men, while a few soldiers were chopping more wood.

Just then, bugles blew from near and far to wake the troops. The sleeping men grumbled and cursed as they stretched their stiff aching bodies and rubbed their eyes. Only the shouts from their officers got them moving with any speed.

Henry sat up and yawned. His hand carefully touched the bandage over his wound. His head felt as swollen as a melon.

Seeing his friend awake, Tom hurried over, asking, “Well, ol’ man, how do yeh feel this mornin’?”

“My head’s mighty sore, an’ my stomach ain’t feelin’ much better,” grumbled Henry.

“Let’s see th’ bandage,” said Tom, moving the handkerchief. “Looks like it slipped.”

“Gosh dern it!” exploded Henry. “You’re the

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clumsiest man I ever saw! Are you wearin' mittens on your hands? Now go slow and easy. You ain't nailin' down some carpet! You're bandagin' a gunshot wound."

Tom answered his friend's angry outburst with calm, soothing words. "Well, well, sounds like yeh need t' get some food in yer belly. Then mebbe yeh'll feel better."

They went over to the fire, where Tom roasted some fresh meat on a stick for Henry. Then he filled a little black tin cup of hot coffee and sat back to watch Henry devour the food. Tom smiled broadly.

Once the meal had filled his stomach, Henry sat back and studied Tom with great seriousness. "Tom, you've changed mightily these last few days. Once, you'd have been right angry at the way I spoke to you. Once, all you cared about was yourself. Now, your thoughts are for all the men around you."

"I guess I was a pretty big fool then," Tom said quietly, "even though it was only days

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ago. . . Say, Henry, what yeh think our chances are? All th' officers say we've got th' rebs in a pretty tight box."

"I don't know about that," replied Henry. "What I seen over on the right makes me think it's the other way around. From where I was yesterday, it looked as if we was gettin' a good poundin'."

"I thought we was *givin'* the poundin'."

"Not a bit! If that's what you thought, man, you didn't see nothin' of the fight and—oh, Lord, I forgot to tell you, Jim Conklin's dead. Shot in the side."

"Oh, Jim! Poor feller! Our regiment lost over half th' men yesterday. I thought they was all dead, but they kept a-comin' back last night. They'd been scattered all over, wanderin' around th' woods, fightin' with other regiments. Jest like yeh, Henry."

"So what?" demanded Henry. He was suddenly afraid that Tom was about to question him about where he was yesterday.

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“So, I guess we’s jest lucky we came out alive.” Then Tom began fidgeting nervously with the buttons on his jacket. “Uh—uh—uh, Henry,” he stammered.

“What is it, man?” snapped Henry. “Spit it out.”

“W-well,” mumbled Tom. He gulped and his face turned bright red with embarrassment. “I guess yeh might as well give me back them letters. Yeh don’t need t’ send ‘em t’ my family now.”

Henry had to keep from grinning at his friend’s discomfort. He slowly reached his hand inside his jacket and took out the thick yellow envelope, all the while watching Tom squirm.

Tom couldn’t know that Henry was thinking, “I could’ve used these letters as a weapon to silence Tom if he became suspicious of my story. But now I can be generous and return them to him. After all, no one questioned me, no one discovered anythin’. Everythin’ I did, I

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did in the darkness, so no one saw my cowardly retreat. I'm still a man!"

Tom seemed to be suffering his embarrassment silently as he shifted his weight from foot to foot and stared at the ground. He was ashamed of having feared death and giving Henry his letters.

Henry was now smiling smugly. He felt very generous, very proud of himself, as he pictured glowing scenes in his mind. "I can see it now. When I return home after this war and tell everyone excitin' stories of these mighty battles, how impressed they'll be! How proud they'll be of my bravery!"

The order to fall into formation snapped Henry out of his daydreams. Tom brought him a rifle and fresh supplies, and together the two men stood at attention waiting for the command to march.

## CHAPTER 13

### From Coward to Hero!

The 304th Regiment was marched to a line of damp trenches along the edge of some woods. They relieved a regiment that had been holding that line for several weeks.

The low embankments piled in front of the trenches gave protection to the troops, even allowing some of them to lean up against these hills of dirt and go to sleep.

In front of the embankments lay an open field, with only cut stumps of trees rising out of the foggy ground. From beyond the field came the occasional sputtering of rebel

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skirmishers firing into the fog.

Henry leaned his chest against the embankment and peered up and down the line and across at the woods. The sound of gunfire from battles going on around him and the roaring of cannons on both sides made it impossible for him to even talk to any of his comrades. As they waited, the men could only listen to the firing and guess at what was happening.

Most of them believed their troops were being defeated, and when there was a lull in the firing and the men could talk, they blamed their officers for the defeat.

The waiting continued until the sun's rays were beginning to shine down through the trees. Then the regiment was ordered out of the trenches and on a retreating march back through the woods. Behind them, they could hear the triumphant cheers and yells of the enemy.

These yells enraged Henry. "By jiminy,



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we're bein' commanded by a lunkhead of a general!" he exploded.

Many of the soldiers around him agreed.

Tom heaved a weary sigh. "Mebbe it wasn't all his fault. He did th' best he knowed. We jest had the bad luck t' get licked often."

"Don't we fight like the devil? Don't we do all that men can?" shouted Henry.

Then he stopped. Had those words actually come from his lips? For a moment, he looked around him, feeling guilty. But then he realized that no one doubted his courage... no one doubted his right to say those words or have those feelings. So he went on.

"I don't see any sense in fightin' an' fightin', an' always losin' because a' some derved old lunkhead of a general!"

One sarcastic man nearby snapped, "Mebbe yeh think yeh fought th' whole battle by yerself yesterday, Fleming."

Those words sent shivers of fear through Henry. Did the man know his secret? "W-why

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no," he stammered, "I don't think I fought the whole battle by myself at all."

Still, Henry felt threatened. "I'd best keep quiet durin' the rest of the march," he thought. "I don't need to call attention to myself."

As the march through the forest continued, the troops became more and more sullen. They muttered more and cursed more each time they heard firing begin in the distance.

When the 304th was halted in a clearing, they were soon joined by other regiments and ordered to set up their battle lines again. So the men dug trenches, or lay down behind embankments, branches, tree trunks, or whatever other protection they had collected.

As the men faced the shouts of the enemy infantry, their own cannons were set up in position behind them. No shots were fired yet, and everyone waited breathlessly.

"Good Gawd!" grumbled Henry. "We're bein' chased around like rats! Nobody seems to

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know where we go or why we go. We just get sent from one place to another, and get beaten here and there, and what for? Why were we marched here? So the rebs could take pot shots at us? There ain't no reason for it. It's that derved old—"

Tom interrupted his friend, trying to calm him. "It'll turn out all right in th' end, Henry. Jest yeh wait an' see."

"You always talk like a preacher, Tom Wilson! You an' your confidence! Don't—"

The lieutenant had been pacing behind them when he heard the arguing. He had to put a stop to it even though he was feeling the same frustrations as his men. "You boys shut right up!" he ordered. "There's no need wastin' your breath jawin' like a lot a' old hens. All you got to do is fight, and you'll get plenty a' that in about ten minutes. I figger the rebs'll attack as soon as the sun's up. Less talkin' and more fightin' is what's best for you boys!"

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The men were too afraid to reply, and the lieutenant resumed his pacing, tugging nervously at his mustache as he strode to and fro in the morning silence.

When the sun was directly overhead, a single rifle shot flashed into the woods at the regiment. A moment later, it was followed by many others. Explosions from the enemy's cannons mixed with the cracklings of their rifles. The big battle had begun!

The men of the 304th waited for the enemy to approach. Wide-eyed, worn, and exhausted, they stood as if they were tied to the stake, taking their last breath before they were executed!

As he crouched behind a tree, Henry nervously twisted his fingers on his rifle. His pulse began to pound and his eyes burned with hate. The bandage around his head had a new spot of blood on it. It was as if his rage against the enemy and against his own officers was pounding so heavily inside his head

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that it opened his wound again.

Henry muttered to Tom, "Oh, how I wish I could use my rifle t' smash in the victory smiles those rebs are probably smilin' now!"

When the order came for the regiment to begin firing, Henry was the first and fastest to begin. He kept stuffing cartridges into his rifle and pounding them in with his clanking ramrod. Grunting fiercely, he ran out from behind the tree, rushed forward, and pulled the trigger.

He kept repeating his actions over and over again until his rifle barrel grew so hot that ordinarily he wouldn't have been able to touch it. But now his palms felt no pain. His fingers and hands knew only the actions they had to take. Even when the enemy seemed to be retreating and there was a lull in the shelling, Henry's rifle—and *only Henry's*—continued firing.

During that lull, a hoarse laugh reached Henry's ears and a voice brought him to his

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senses. "Yeh derved infernal fool! Don't yeh know enough t' quit when there ain't nothin' t' shoot at?"

Henry froze. With his rifle raised to shooting position, he looked down the line. His comrades were all staring at him in astonishment. He turned his bewildered eyes to the front again and saw the smoke lifting. The battlefield was deserted!

"Oh," he said, slowly lowering his rifle and finally understanding what had happened.

He returned to his comrades and threw himself down on the grass. His skin was burning hot, and the battle noises were still ringing in his ears. He groped for his canteen and took a long drink.

The lieutenant came over to where Henry was sprawled out on the grass and called out loud enough for the regiment to hear, "By heavens, Fleming, if I had ten thousand wild men like you, I could end this war in less than a week!"

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During the battle, his comrades had been watching with astonishment as Henry loaded and fired, loaded and fired, long after they, themselves, had stopped. Now, their smudged, blackened faces could not hide the wonder and respect they felt as they stared at him.

“By thunder, I bet this army’ll never see another regiment like ours or another war devil like Henry Fleming!” shouted one man.

“Lost a pile a’ men, them rebels did,” added another, “thanks t’ us an’ t’ Henry!”

“And in an hour, they’re goin’ t’ lose a pile more,” boasted a third confidently.

Henry was smiling as he listened to his comrades. He, too, was proud. “I went into this battle believin’ I was a coward, and I came out of it a hero!”

## CHAPTER 14

### The Mule Drivers

It was during this pause in the fighting that Henry heard screams of pain. He and Tom rushed to a wounded soldier who was writhing in agony on the grass nearby.

"Maybe some water will help his pain," suggested Henry.

"I think I saw a stream off t' th' left as we marched here," said Tom.

"Then let's go get some before the shootin' starts up again."

With the lieutenant's permission, Tom and Henry gathered the canteens of the thirsty



troops around them and headed off through the woods.

Up one path and down another they searched for the stream, but with no luck. Once away from the smoke of their own line, they stood on a hill and got a full view of the fighting. The Union infantry was marching to the rear, retreating from the Confederate army.

When Henry and Tom finally gave up their search for water, they started to retrace their steps back to the regiment. As they came to a small clearing, they saw the commanding general of their division and his aide reining their horses to a halt. Their own regimental captain was riding toward the general from the opposite direction.

Henry and Tom halted their steps, though they made sure to stay hidden in the bushes.

"Let's listen," whispered Henry. "Maybe we'll learn what's happenin' out there."

"Mebbe it's real important," added Tom.

As the captain came alongside, the general

announced, "The enemy's forming for another charge." And he pointed off to his right.

"Where do you figure they'll attack, sir?" asked the captain.

"My guess is it'll be directed against General Whilterside's division. And I fear the rebs'll break through their line unless we get him more troops to help stop them."

"I don't see how we can stop them, sir."

"I don't either, unless... what troops can you spare from the regiments under your command, Captain?"

The captain thought for a moment, "Well, sir, I had to order in the 12th to help the 76th, so I haven't really got any to spare... unless you want to consider the 304th. Only problem there, sir, is they're kind of wild and rather stupid. They fight like a bunch of mule drivers. Still, they're the only spare regiment."

Henry and Tom looked at each other, first in astonishment, then in rage at what they

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had just heard their captain call them.

“We fight with our hearts an’ souls, and he has the nerve to call us mule drivers!” Henry snarled under his breath to Tom.

The general ordered the captain, “Then get the 304th ready! I’ll watch the developments from here and send you word when to attack. It’ll probably be in about five minutes.”

The captain saluted and swung his horse around. Behind him, the general called out grimly, “I don’t think many of your mule drivers will come out of this battle alive.

Henry and Tom turned to each other once more, this time exchanging looks of fear. Then they quickly and quietly made their way back to their line.

As he led the way through the woods, a sudden realization hit Henry, and he shared his feelings with Tom. “Do you realize our whole regiment’s not all that important in this war, at least not to the general? He hardly needs us. We’re nothin’ more than a broom he’s usin’

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to sweep out the forest . . . but I suppose that's the way war is."

"Fleming! Wilson!" The lieutenant's voice interrupted Henry. "How long does it take you to get water? Where've you been?"

The excited faces on the two soldiers quickly silenced the lieutenant.

"We're goin' t' be the ones to charge!" cried Tom. "We're goin' t' be the ones to attack! Us! Our regiment!"

"Charge?" said the lieutenant with a broad smile. "Well, now finally this is goin' to be real fightin'!"

A group of soldiers surrounded Henry and Tom, full of questions and doubts.

"Are we? Sure 'nough?"

"Well, I'll be derved!"

"Charge? What fer?"

"Yer lyin', Wilson!"

"I swear!" argued Tom. "Sure as shootin'."

"He ain't lyin'," Henry defended his friend. "We heard the general talkin'."

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Minutes later, the regiment's officers began scurrying back and forth, forming the men into a tighter line. As they took their positions, the men seemed to be bravely and seriously concentrating on the battle that was about to begin.

Henry and Tom exchanged long, knowing looks. Each man remembered the general's words . . . words they had *not* repeated to their comrades . . . words that they had kept secret . . . *"I don't think many of your mule drivers will come out of this battle alive!"*

When a shaggy man near them groaned that they'd "all git swallowed up by them rebs," Henry knew it was true. Still, he didn't hesitate or move from his position.

He nodded silently to Tom, and his friend nodded in return. Both men were now ready to accept the dangers of the battle ahead. Both knew that many of their men—perhaps even they themselves—would surely be killed!