

CHAPTER 18

The Final Battle

A short while later, a Confederate attack started up against two other regiments on a nearby hill. From where he was standing, with the flag clutched in his hands, Henry was able to watch the fierce fighting and hear the yells and shouts from both sides.

Soon the battle came closer, and the 304th Regiment joined the fighting. With wild cries of rage, the men eagerly pounded cartridges into their rifle barrels with clanging ramrods and furiously returned the gunfire. Before long, the dark, heavy smoke was clinging to

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their blackened faces, with only their glowing eyes and white teeth showing.

The rebels were coming closer, so close that Henry could see their weary, excited faces. As the regiment started firing at them, the rebels ducked behind the protection of a long stone fence. From the safety of this position, they began to fire direct hits on the Union soldiers, cheering and shouting insults at their easy targets.

The Northern regiments, however, did not return the shouts or insults of the rebels.

“We’ve got to hold this ground!” cried the lieutenant.

“Yea, we got t’ show that general we’re no mud diggers,” grumbled a soldier bitterly.

Even with all the shooting going on around him, Henry didn’t regret he was holding a flag instead of a rifle. His pride in his comrades was growing with each shot they fired. And his hatred for the general and captain was growing with each shot too. “If it takes

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my dead body, lyin' torn and bloody, on the battlefield to make those officers regret callin' us mule drivers and mud diggers, then I'll gladly give my life. It would be my final revenge on them!"

As the fighting continued, Henry saw his comrades dropping everywhere. Some crawled for places to hide; others were silent corpses. A sergeant was shot through the cheek, and blood was pouring out of the gaping hole that had been his mouth.

The lieutenant was hit in the right arm, but continued directing his troops' movements with his left. With so many casualties and so many weak, exhausted men, however, there wasn't much of a regiment to direct. Still, the troops held their ground, just as they had been ordered to.

Then the voice of the colonel called out from the back of the line. "Charge!" he shouted. "We must attack! Attack!"

Henry looked out across the field to the

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enemy's position. He nodded silently, then turned to Tom. "The colonel's right. We have to attack. If we stay here or retreat, we'll all be killed. But if we attack, there's a chance that we can push those rebels away from the fence."

"I don't know if th' men'll follow those orders an' attack," said Tom, frowning. "They've already been pushed 'bout as far as any men could be."

But to Tom's surprise, the men were nodding at the colonel's orders. And at the command to charge, they quickly fastened their bayonets onto their rifle barrels and sprang forward with eager shouts.

The troops seemed to completely forget their weak, tired bodies as they rushed feverishly toward the fence. They seemed filled with new strength as they came face to face with the blasts of their enemies' rifles.

At the front of the charge, Henry held the colors high with his right arm while waving

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his left in circles to urge on the men behind him. The soldiers were hurling themselves into battle with a reckless enthusiasm.

“Gawd, they’ll wind up a pile of corpses, the way they’re goin’ in such a frenzy,” thought Henry. “They’re not even thinkin’.”

As he ran faster and faster, with the cheering regiment beside and behind him, Henry felt himself catching this battle madness. “Let’s show ‘em!” he shouted. “Let’s crash into those rebs with a crushin’ blow!”

But that crushing blow was not to be struck. For as the smoke rolled off, it revealed rebel soldiers running *away* from the battle. As they ran, some turned to fire their last bullets into the attacking Union soldiers.

Only one part of the rebel line was holding firm. With their tattered flag flying above them, a stubborn group of Confederate soldiers continued firing from behind the stone fence and yelling at the attacking Union troops.

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As the regiment closed the distance between themselves and this small group, Henry's gaze was fixed on the badly torn Confederate flag. "What bloody battles it must have flown over!" he whispered. "How proud I'd be to capture it!"

As he reached the fence where the rebels were holding out, Henry lunged for their flag. His own flying colors tilted toward the enemy's. The bird-shaped brass tips on each pole pointed at each other like two eagles getting their claws and beaks ready to attack.

As the rest of the troops followed Henry to the fence, they roared a blast of fire at the fleeing enemy. Some of the rebels were still firing back, but nothing could stop the Union soldiers now. Yelling and shrieking, they leaped onto the fence and over it.

Henry and Tom jumped into the group of rebels. Some of the men were stretched out on the ground; others were writhing on their

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knees. The flag bearer was struggling to stand upright in spite of the bullet holes that had just riddled his body. His face was twisted in pain and desperation as he hugged his flag to him. Then he stumbled and staggered, trying to carry it to safety.

Tom sprang at the flag and wrenched it free. "I've got it!" he cried at the same moment that the flag bearer gasped and stiffened, then fell to the ground, dead.

The elated Union troops cheered wildly as Tom waved his captured prize. Those men who still wore hats or caps flung them high into the air.

A little farther down the line, other troops had swooped down on a pocket of four rebel soldiers. The prisoners now sat at the feet of their captors.

One veteran rebel soldier was gripping his wounded leg and glaring up at the Union men. He began swearing and cursing at his captors.

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Another, much younger, soldier was smiling and chatting with the Union troops about the battles they had both fought in.

The third prisoner sat in stony silence. When the soldiers tried to question him, his only reply was "Go t' blazes!"

The fourth man refused to raise his eyes. He seemed ashamed to have been captured and couldn't face his comrades or his captors.

Henry and Tom, meanwhile, had walked off by themselves, away from the victory celebrations, and sat in some tall grass.

Planting his flag in the ground in front of him, Henry reached out to shake Tom's hand. "Congratulations, Private Wilson!"

Tom planted his flag beside Henry's and smiled at his friend. "An' congratulations t' yeh too, Private Fleming! We sure done a good job t'day!"

CHAPTER 19

From Boy to Man

Though there were some occasional bursts of artillery in the distance, the crashes of musketry that had surrounded the troops for days had completely stopped. Soldiers were marching away in all directions. Their cannons trailed leisurely after them.

Soon, the 304th Regiment was ordered to fall into line. Henry and Tom rejoined their comrades, who were stretching and grunting as they stood up.

“Can’t they even give us some time t’ rest?” grumbled one man.

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“What now?” asked another.

The men trudged slowly back across the same field they had charged across only a while ago. They entered the same woods they had been in earlier and joined up with other dust-covered regiments to form their division once again.

When they reached the river they had waded across only the day before, Henry turned and looked back over the trampled ground they had just left. Scorched artillery shells and exploded cannons were strewn all over it.

“Well, I guess this one’s over . . . at least for now,” Henry said with a sigh.

Tom looked back too. “I sure am glad!”

As Henry thought back over the last two days, he had mixed feelings about his performance. He was proud of his courage in carrying the flag as he led the regiment. But the memory of his desertion during the first battle made him blush with shame. He felt even more ashamed when he remembered how he

had repaid the tattered soldier's concern for his wound by leaving him to die alone in the field. Henry quickly looked at his comrades. Could they see his shame?

"Is somethin' wrong, Henry?" asked Tom, noticing his friend's discomfort.

Henry shook his head and kept his eyes straight ahead as he marched along.

A heavy rain began to fall. As it washed the dirt and smoke from his face, Henry felt it wash the guilty thoughts from his mind as well. "I was a coward when I first went into battle," he told himself. "I was just a boy and didn't know any better. But in the last two days, I saw death all around and faced it many times myself. In those two days, I grew up and earned my red badge of courage!"

When the late afternoon sun came out, it shone down on fresh meadows and cool brooks, on a world that hoped one day for peace, and on a boy who was ready to face the next battle as a man!