

The Battle of Gettysburg.

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## BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG.

BY SAMUEL WILKESON.

HEADQUARTERS ARMY OF POTOMAC,  
*Saturday Night, July 4.*

Who can write the history of a battle whose eyes are immovably fastened upon a central figure of transcendently absorbing interest—the dead body of an oldest born son, crushed by a shell in a position where a battery should never have been sent, and abandoned to death in a building where surgeons dared not to stay?

The battle of Gettysburg! I am told that it commenced on the 1st of July, a mile north of the town, between two weak brigades of infantry and some doomed artillery and the whole force of the rebel army. Among other costs of this error was the death of REYNOLDS. Its value was priceless, however, though priceless was the young and the old blood with which it was bought. The error put us on the defensive, and gave us the choice of position. From the moment that our artillery and infantry rolled back through the main street of Gettysburg and rolled out of the town to the circle of eminences south of it, we were not to attack but to be attacked. The risks, the difficulties and the disadvantages of the coming battle were the enemy's. Ours were the heights for artillery; ours the short, inside lines for manœuvring and reinforcing; ours the cover of stonewalls, fences and the crests of hills.

The ground upon which we were driven to accept battle was wonderfully favorable to us. A popular description of it would be to say that it was in form an elon-

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gated and somewhat sharpened horse-shoe, with the toe to Gettysburg and the heel to the south.

LEE's plan of battle was simple. He massed his troops upon the east side of this shoe of position, and thundered on it obstinately to break it. The shelling of our batteries from the nearest overlooking hill, and the unflinching courage and complete discipline of the army of the Potomac repelled the attack. It was renewed at the point of of the shoe—renewed desperately at its southwest heel—renewed on its western side with an effort consecrated to success by EWELL's earnest oaths, and on which the fate of the invasion of Pennsylvania was fully put at stake. Only a perfect infantry and an artillery educated in the midst of charges of hostile brigades could possibly have sustained this assault. HANCOCK's corps did sustain it, and has covered itself with immortal honors by its constancy and courage. The total wreck of CUSHING's battery—the list of its killed and wounded—the losses of officers, men and horses COWEN sustained—and the marvelous outspread upon the board of death of dead soldiers and dead animals—of dead soldiers in blue, and dead soldiers in gray—more marvelous to me than anything I have ever seen in war—are a ghastly and shocking testimony to the terrible fighting of the Second Corps that none will gainsay. That corps will ever have the distinction of breaking the pride and power of the rebel invasion.

For such details as I have the heart for. The battle commenced at daylight, on the east side of the horse-shoe position, exactly opposite to that which EWELL had sworn to crush through. Musketry preceded the rising of the sun. A thick wood veiled this fight, but out of its leafy darkness arose the smoke—and the surging and swelling of the fire, from intermittent to continuous and crushing, told of the wise tactics of the rebels in attacking in force and changing their troops. Seemingly the attack of the day was to be made through that wood. The demonstration was protracted—absolutely it was preparative. There

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was no artillery fire accompanying the musketry, but shrewd officers on our western front mentioned, with the gravity due to the fact, that the rebels had the day before fallen trees at intervals upon the edge of the wood they occupied in face of our position. These were breastworks for the protection of artillerymen.

Suddenly, and about 10 in the forenoon, the firing on the east side, and everywhere about our lines, ceased. A silence as of deep sleep fell upon the field of battle. Our army cooked, ate and slumbered. The rebel army moved 120 guns to the west, and massed there LONGSTREET'S corps and HILL'S corps, to hurl them upon the really weakest point of our entire position.

Eleven o'clock—twelve o'clock—one o'clock. In the shadow cast by the tiny farm-house 16 by 20, which Gen. MEADE had made his headquarters, lay wearied staff officers and tired journalists. There was not wanting to the peacefulness of the scene the singing of a bird, which had a nest in a peach tree within the tiny yard of the whitewashed cottage. In the midst of its warbling, a shell screamed over the house, instantly followed by another, and another, and in a moment the air was full of the most complete artillery prelude to an infantry battle that was ever exhibited. Every size and form of shell known to British and to American gunnery shrieked, whirled, moaned, whistled and wrathfully fluttered over our ground. As many as six in a second, constantly two in a second, bursting and screaming over and around the headquarters, made a very hell of fire that amazed the oldest officers. They burst in the yard—burst next to the fence on both sides, garnished as usual with the hitched horses of aids and orderlies. The fastened animals reared and plunged with terror. Then one fell, then another—sixteen laid dead and mangled before the fire ceased. Still fastened by their halters, which gave the expression of their being wickedly tied up to die painfully, these brute victims of a cruel war touched all hearts. Through the

midst of the storm of screaming and exploding shells, an ambulance, driven by its frenzied conductor at full speed, presented to all of us the marvelous spectacle of a horse going rapidly on three legs. A hinder one had been shot off at the hock. A shell tore up the little step of the Headquarters Cottage, and ripped bags of oats as with a knife. Another soon carried off one of its two pillars. Soon a spherical case burst opposite the open door—another ripped through the low garret. The remaining pillar went almost immediately to the howl of a fixed shot that WHITWORTH must have made. During this fire the horses at twenty and thirty feet distant were receiving their death, and soldiers in Federal blue were torn to pieces in the road and died with the peculiar yells that blend the extorted cry of pain with horror and despair. Not an orderly—not an ambulance—not a straggler was to be seen upon the plain swept by this tempest of orchestral death thirty minutes after it commenced. Were not one hundred and twenty pieces of artillery, trying to cut from the field every battery we had in position to resist their purposed infantry attack, and to sweep away the slight defences behind which our infantry were waiting! Forty minutes—fifty minutes—counted on watches that ran, oh so languidly! Shells through the two lower rooms! A shell into the chimney that fortunately did not explode. Shells in the yard. The air thicker and fuller and more deafening with the howling and whirling of these infernal missiles. The chief of staff struck—SETH WILLIAMS, loved and respected through the army, separated from instant death by two inches of space vertically measured. An aide bored with a fragment of iron through the bone of the arm. Another cut with an exploded piece of case shot. And the time measured on the sluggish watches was one hour and forty minutes.

0 Then there was a lull, and we knew that the rebel infantry was charging. And splendidly they did this work—the highest and severest test of the stuff that

soldiers are made of. HILL's division, in line of battle, came first on the double-quick, their muskets at the "right-shoulder-shift." LONGSTREET's came as the support, at the usual distance, with war cries and a savage insolence as yet untutored by defeat. They rushed in perfect order across the open field up to the very muzzles of the guns, which tore lanes through them as they came. But they met men who were their equals in spirit, and their superiors in tenacity. There never was better fighting since Thermopylae than was done yesterday by our infantry and artillery. The rebels were over our defences. They had cleaned cannoniers and horses from one of the guns, and were whirling it around to use upon us. The bayonet drove them back. But so hard pressed was this brave infantry that at one time, from the exhaustion of their ammunition, every battery upon the principal crest of attack was silent, except COWEN's. His service of grape and cannister was awful. It enabled our line, outnumbered two to one, first to beat back LONGSTREET, and then to charge upon him, and take a great number of his men and himself prisoners. Strange sight! So terrible was our musketry and artillery fire, that when ARMISTEAD's brigade was checked in its charge, and stood reeling, all of its men dropped their muskets and crawled on their hands and knees underneath the stream of shot till close to our troops, where they made signs of surrendering. They passed through our ranks scarcely noticed, and slowly went down the slope to the road in the rear. Before they got there, the grand charge of EWELL, solemnly sworn to and carefully prepared, had failed.

The rebels retreated to their lines, and opened anew the storm of shell and shot from their 120 guns. Those who remained at the riddled headquarters will never forget the crouching, and dodging, and running of the butternut-colored captives when they got under this, their friends' fire. It was appalling to as good soldiers even as they were.

What remains to say of the fight? It straggled surlily over the middle of the horse-shoe on the west, grew big and angry on the heel at the southwest, lasted there till 8 o'clock in the evening, when the fighting Sixth Corps went joyously by as a reinforcement through a wood bright with coffee pots on the fire.

I leave details to my excellent friend and associate, Mr. HENRY. My pen is heavy. Oh, you dead, who at Gettysburg have baptised with your blood the second birth of Freedom in America, how you are to be envied! I rise from a grave whose wet clay I have passionately kissed, and I look up and see Christ spanning this battle-field with his feet and reaching fraternal and loving up to heaven. His right hand opens the gates of Paradise—with his left he sweetly beckons to these mutilated, bloody, swollen forms to ascend.

SAMUEL WILKESON.