

# *The Red Badge of Courage*

By

Stephen Crane

## Chapter 13

The youth went slowly toward the fire indicated by his departed friend. As he reeled, he bethought him of the welcome his comrades would give him. He had a conviction that he would soon feel in his sore heart the barbed missiles of ridicule. He had no strength to invent a tale; he would be a soft target.

He made vague plans to go off into the deeper darkness and hide, but they were all destroyed by the voices of exhaustion and pain from his body. His ailments, clamoring, forced him to seek the place of food and rest, at whatever cost.

He swung unsteadily toward the fire. He could see the forms of men throwing black shadows in the red light, and as he went nearer it became known to him in some way that the ground was strewn with sleeping men.

Of a sudden he confronted a black and monstrous figure. A rifle barrel caught some glinting beams. "Halt! halt!" He was dismayed for a moment, but he presently thought that he recognized the nervous voice. As he stood tottering before the rifle barrel, he called out: "Why, hello, Wilson, you—you here?"

The rifle was lowered to a position of caution and the loud soldier came slowly forward. He peered into the youth's face. "That you, Henry?"

“Yes, it’s—it’s me.”

“Well, well, ol’ boy,” said the other, “by ginger, I’m glad t’ see yeh! I give yeh up fer a goner. I thought yeh was dead sure enough.” There was husky emotion in his voice.

The youth found that now he could barely stand upon his feet. There was a sudden sinking of his forces. He thought he must hasten to produce his tale to protect him from the missiles already on the lips of his redoubtable comrades. So, staggering before the loud soldier, he began: “Yes, yes. I’ve—I’ve had an awful time. I’ve been all over. Way over on th’ right. Ter’ble fightin’ over there. I had an awful time. I got separated from the reg’ment. Over on th’ right, I got shot. In th’ head. I never see sech fightin’. Awful time. I don’t see how I could a’ got separated from th’ reg’ment. I got shot, too.”

His friend had stepped forward quickly. “What? Got shot? Why didn’t yeh say so first? Poor ol’ boy, we must—hol’ on a minnit; what am I doin’. I’ll call Simpson.”

Another figure at that moment loomed in the gloom. They could see that it was the corporal. “Who yeh talkin’ to, Wilson?” he demanded. His voice was anger-toned. “Who yeh talkin’ to? Yeh th’ derndest sentinel—why—hello, Henry, you here? Why, I thought you was dead four hours ago! Great Jerusalem, they keep turnin’ up every ten minutes or so! We thought we’d lost forty-two men by straight count, but if they keep on a-comin’ this way, we’ll git th’ comp’ny all back by mornin’ yit. Where was yeh?”

“Over on th’ right. I got separated”—began the youth with considerable glibness.

But his friend had interrupted hastily. “Yes, an’ he got shot in th’ head an’ he’s in a fix, an’ we must see t’ him right away.” He rested his rifle in the hollow of his left arm and his right around the youth’s shoulder.

“Gee, it must hurt like thunder!” he said.

The youth leaned heavily upon his friend. “Yes, it hurts—hurts a good deal,” he replied. There was a faltering in his voice.

“Oh,” said the corporal. He linked his arm in the youth’s and drew him forward. “Come on, Henry. I’ll take keer ‘a yeh.”

As they went on together the loud private called out after them: “Put ‘im t’ sleep in my blanket, Simpson. An’ —hol’ on a minnit —here’s my canteen. It’s full ‘a coffee. Look at his head by th’ fire an’ see how it looks. Maybe it’s a pretty bad un. When I git relieved in a couple ‘a minnits, I’ll be over an’ see t’ him.”

The youth’s senses were so deadened that his friend’s voice sounded from afar and he could scarcely feel the pressure of the corporal’s arm. He submitted passively to the latter’s directing strength. His head was in the old manner hanging forward upon his breast. His knees wobbled.

The corporal led him into the glare of the fire. “Now, Henry,” he said, “let’s have look at yer ol’ head.”

The youth sat obediently and the corporal, laying aside his rifle, began to fumble in the bushy hair of his comrade. He was obliged to turn the other’s head so that the full flush of the fire light would beam upon it. He puckered his mouth with a critical air. He drew back his lips and whistled through his teeth when his fingers came in contact with the splashed blood and the rare wound.

“Ah, here we are!” he said. He awkwardly made further investigations. “Jest as I thought,” he added, presently. “Yeh’ve been grazed by a ball. It’s raised a queer lump jest as if some feller had lammed yeh on th’ head with a club. It stopped a-bleedin’ long time ago. Th’ most about it is that in th’ mornin’ yeh’ll fell that a number ten hat wouldn’t fit yeh. An’ your head’ll be all het up an’ feel as dry as burnt pork. An’ yeh may git a lot ‘a other sicknesses, too, by mornin’. Yeh can’t never tell. Still, I don’t much think so. It’s jest a damn’ good belt on th’ head, an’ nothin’ more. Now, you jest sit here an’ don’t move, while I go rout out th’ relief. Then I’ll send Wilson t’ take keer ‘a yeh.”

The corporal went away. The youth remained on the ground like a parcel. He stared with a vacant look into the fire.

After a time he aroused, for some part, and the things about him began to take form. He saw that the ground in the deep shadows was cluttered with men, sprawling in every conceivable posture. Glancing narrowly into the more distant darkness, he caught occasional glimpses of visages that loomed pallid and ghostly, lit with a phosphorescent glow. These faces expressed in their lines the deep stupor of the tired soldiers. They made them appear like men drunk with wine. This bit of forest might have appeared to an ethereal wanderer as a scene of the result of some frightful debauch.

On the other side of the fire the youth observed an officer asleep, seated bolt upright, with his back against a tree. There was something perilous in his position. Badgered by dreams, perhaps, he swayed with little bounces and starts, like an old, toddy-stricken grandfather in a chimney corner. Dust and stains were upon his face. His lower jaw hung down as if lacking strength to assume its normal position. He was the picture of an exhausted soldier after a feast of war.

He had evidently gone to sleep with his sword in his arms. These two had slumbered in an embrace, but the weapon had been allowed in time

to fall unheeded to the ground. The brass-mounted hilt lay in contact with some parts of the fire.

Within the gleam of rose and orange light from the burning sticks were other soldiers, snoring and heaving, or lying deathlike in slumber. A few pairs of legs were stuck forth, rigid and straight. The shoes displayed the mud or dust of marches and bits of rounded trousers, protruding from the blankets, showed rents and tears from hurried pitchings through the dense brambles.

The fire cackled musically. From it swelled light smoke. Overhead the foliage moved softly. The leaves, with their faces turned toward the blaze, were colored shifting hues of silver, often edged with red. Far off to the right, through a window in the forest could be seen a handful of stars lying, like glittering pebbles, on the black level of the night.

Occasionally, in this low-arched hall, a soldier would arouse and turn his body to a new position, the experience of his sleep having taught him of uneven and objectionable places upon the ground under him. Or, perhaps, he would lift himself to a sitting posture, blink at the fire for an unintelligent moment, throw a swift glance at his prostrate companion, and then cuddle down again with a grunt of sleepy content.

The youth sat in a forlorn heap until his friend the loud young soldier came, swinging two canteens by their light strings. "Well, now, Henry, ol' boy," said the latter, "we'll have yeh fixed up in jest about a minnit."

He had the bustling ways of an amateur nurse. He fussed around the fire and stirred the sticks to brilliant exertions. He made his patient drink largely from the canteen that contained the coffee. It was to the youth a delicious draught. He tilted his head afar back and held the canteen long to his lips. The cool mixture went caressingly down his blistered throat. Having finished, he sighed with comfortable delight.

The loud young soldier watched his comrade with an air of satisfaction. He later produced an extensive handkerchief from his pocket. He folded it into a manner of bandage and soused water from the other canteen upon the middle of it. This crude arrangement he bound over the youth's head, tying the ends in a queer knot at the back of the neck.

"There," he said, moving off and surveying his deed, "yeh look like th' devil, but I bet yeh feel better."

The youth contemplated his friend with grateful eyes. Upon his aching and swelling head the cold cloth was like a tender woman's hand.

"Yeh don't holler ner say nothin'," remarked his friend approvingly. "I know I'm a blacksmith at takin' keer 'a sick folks, an' yeh never squeaked. Yer a good un, Henry. Most 'a men would a' been in th' hospital long ago. A shot in th' head ain't foolin' business."

The youth made no reply, but began to fumble with the buttons of his jacket.

"Well, come, now," continued his friend, "come on. I must put yeh t' bed an' see that yeh git a good night's rest."

The other got carefully erect, and the loud young soldier led him among the sleeping forms lying in groups and rows. Presently he stooped and picked up his blankets. He spread the rubber one upon the ground and placed the woolen one about the youth's shoulders.

"There now," he said, "lie down an' git some sleep."

The youth, with his manner of doglike obedience, got carefully down like a crone stooping. He stretched out with a murmur of relief and comfort. The ground felt like the softest couch.

But of a sudden he ejaculated: “Hol’ on a minnit! Where you goin’ t’ sleep?”

His friend waved his hand impatiently. “Right down there by yeh.”

“Well, but hol’ on a minnit,” continued the youth. “What yeh goin’ t’ sleep in? I’ve got your—”

The loud young soldier snarled: “Shet up an’ go on t’ sleep. Don’t be makin’ a damn’ fool ‘a yerself,” he said severely.

After the reproof the youth said no more. An exquisite drowsiness had spread through him. The warm comfort of the blanket enveloped him and made a gentle langour. His head fell forward on his crooked arm and his weighted lids went softly down over his eyes. Hearing a splatter of musketry from the distance, he wondered indifferently if those men sometimes slept. He gave a long sigh, snuggled down into his blanket, and in a moment was like his comrades.