

Story of Antietam

George Smalley, *New York Tribune* (Narrative)

Battle-field of Antietam Wednesday Evening, Sept. 17, 1862

Fierce and desperate battle between two hundred thousand men has raged since daylight, yet night closes on an uncertain field. It is the greatest fight since Waterloo – all over the field contested with an obstinacy equal even to Waterloo. If not wholly a victory to-night, I believe it is the prelude to a victory to-morrow. But what can be foretold of the future of a fight in which from five in the morning till seven at night the best troops of the continent have fought without decisive result?

...

But out of those gloomy woods came suddenly and heavily terrible volleys – volleys which smote, and bent, and broke in a moment that eager front, and hurled them swiftly back for half the distance they had won. Not swiftly, nor in panic, any further. Closing up their shattered lines, they came slowly away; a regiment where a brigade had been; hardly a brigade where a whole division had been victorious. They had met at the woods the first volleys of musketry from fresh troops – had met them and returned them till their line had yielded and gone down before the weight of fire, and till their ammunition was exhausted.

In ten minutes the fortune of the day seemed to have changed; it was the rebels now who were advancing, pouring out of the woods in endless lines, sweeping through the corn-field from which their comrades had just fled. Hooker [Joseph Hooker, Union general, 1814-1879] sent in his nearest brigade to meet them, but it could not do the work. He called for another. There was nothing close enough, unless he took it from his right. His right might be in danger if it was weakened, but his centre was already threatened with annihilation. Not hesitating on moment, he sent to Doubleday [Abner Doubleday, Union general, 1819-1893]: “Give me your best brigade instantly.”

The best brigade came down the hill to the right of the run, went through the timber in front through a storm of shot and bursting shell and crashing limbs, over the open field beyond and straight into the corn-field, passing as they went the fragments of three brigades shattered by the rebel fire and streaming to the rear. They passed by Hooker, whose eyes lighted as he saw these veteran troops, led by a soldier whom he knew he could trust. “I think they will hold it,” he said.

...

The field and its ghastly harvest which the Reaper had gathered in those fatal hours remained finally with us. Four times it had been lost and won. The dead are strewn so thickly that as you ride over it you cannot guide your horse’s steps too carefully. Pale and bloody faces are every where upturned. They are sad and terrible, but there is nothing which makes one’s heart beat so quickly as the imploring look of sorely wounded men who beckon wearily for help which you cannot stay to give.