

SHARPSBURG

“This must be a ruse. Surely it is a ruse?”

George McClellan’s question was strangely melancholic. He had been like that of late.

Handsome Joe Hooker looked at the little man standing across the farmhouse kitchen table from him.

The “Young Napoleon” was six inches shorter and ten years younger.

Hooker despised him. He had always despised him. The dapper, self assured manner, the instant success that followed McClellan everywhere, all of this contributed to the dislike that Hooker felt. Now, Hooker was an army corps commander under McClellan. *Oh, well, he thought, everything has its price.*

The farmer’s family cowered in the cellar, herded there by civil but unsmiling men in blue, men with muskets and bayonets, strange men from lands far to the North.

“It sounds like Lee,” Hooker said levelly. “You know it does.”

Brigadier General John Gibbon had the Rebel papers in his hand. He had said nothing while reading. "General Order 191," he said now. "I think it is a true copy of his direction to them all. The assistant adjutant general's authentication looks correct. Venable signed it. I wonder whose copy this is." He looked at McClellan. "I think it is genuine," he said. Gibbon had long been a friend to the army commander. They had been cadets at the academy together.

McClellan looked doubtful. "You think he is really that spread out?" he asked, "with Longstreet on South Mountain, and Jackson at Harper's Ferry?" McClellan turned and pointed theatrically at the looming green ridge very near in the west. "How many miles is Lee from us here?"

Gibbon looked at the map lying on the kitchen table. "Ten miles maybe, and far enough from the rest of them so that we can beat them in detail if we move fast enough. According to this order, Jackson is at least twenty miles away doing God knows what."

Hooker spat out a window in disgust. He raged invisibly over McClellan. *The little bastard can't stop acting...*

The sizeable village of Middletown lay just to the east on the macadam road. The field where an infantry private found the order wrapped around two cigars was back there, near the village.

The cigars had disappeared. Someone in the kitchen had them.

The farmhouse yard was full of sweating men and horses. Staff officers, cavalry escorts, an ambulance, it looked like an anthill. The sun was very bright. South Mountain looked like a wall.

They are watching us now. I wonder who is up there, who among my old friends? I could use a drink, Hooker thought. *Have to give him a push, get him to do something.* “Who has the cigars?” he demanded.

“Why?” McClellan asked.

“I want one, no sense in letting them go to waste.”

A sergeant stepped forward to offer him the cigars.

Hooker took one.

The sergeant produced a match and lit the general’s cigar. The smoke drifted across the room. The sergeant stood there with the other cigar in his hand.

"That is yours," Hooker said. "Thanks for the smoke. What are you going to do, Mac," he asked.? He looked at Gibbon. *For Christ's sake, say something*, he thought.

McClellan seemed to wake from a dream. "I know what to do," he cried and waved the order at Gibbon. "Here is a paper with which if I cannot whip Bobbie Lee, I will be willing to go home."

Ah, Hooker thought, *at last...*

McClellan telegraphed President Lincoln: "I have the whole rebel force in front of me, but I am confident, and no time shall be lost. I think Lee has made a gross mistake, and that he will be severely punished for it. I have all the plans of the rebels, and will catch them in their own trap if my men are equal to the emergency... Will send you trophies."

Eighteen hours later he began to move the Army of the Potomac forward. On South Mountain; Longstreet, D.H. Hill, Lafayette McLaws and Robert Rodes watched the vast blue host approach across the green plain.

White cumulus clouds floated toward the mountain.

In Turner's Gap at the top of the ridge, D.H. Hill rubbed his stomach ulcer and watched them come. He was comfortable sitting on a stump by the side of the road. He wondered how

long it would be before the Yankees reached him. "Well, so be it," he said to his staff. "So be it."

The blue army began to climb the mountain.

In the next hours, the noise of battle became so loud in Boonsboro west of South Mountain that Lee was certain "Pete" Longstreet's men on South Mountain faced the whole of the Army of the Potomac. Listening from the front porch of the courthouse, he knew that eventually McClellan would take the mountain passes. With that judgment, he knew what must be done. He had brought his men into Maryland to seek a decisive fight with a big Union army, any big Union army would do. What was needed was a victory that would be enough to lure the British and the French down off "the fence" to break the blockade and enforce mediation in the quarrel.

Many in Richmond, and indeed in his own army, did not think the pursuit of such a decisive battle was wise. They argued that the South was inherently weaker than the North and that the loss of precious and irreplaceable manpower should not be risked in such a combat. Lee did not agree and he had carried the argument with the only man who mattered, President Jefferson F. Davis. Nevertheless, he knew that in the day of climactic battle he would be much weaker than McClellan.

The campaigning year had begun early in the spring.

Jackson was then engaged in a series of running battles the length and breadth of the Shenandoah Valley and into the Allegheny Mountains to the west.

McClellan had invaded the Virginia peninsula system to the east of Richmond at nearly the same time. He came by sea with the host that he had been training and organizing since the Union defeat at Manassas the previous year. With this army he marched toward Richmond sweeping all before him.

At Lee's urging, President Davis summoned Jackson, requiring him to bring his strong force of mountaineers and Shenandoah Valley men to Richmond as rapidly as possible.

Then, providence intervened and the Confederate commander at Richmond, Joseph E. Johnston, was struck down while fighting in the outskirts of the city.

Lee was given command of the combined army. In a week of murderous combat McClellan was driven back, away from the capital. He then began a long retreat to the sea and the safety of the U.S. forts and ships.

Having taken the measure of McClellan, Lee turned his back on him and marched away to the northwest where he met and defeated another large Union army at Manassas. He drove

that army into the Washington defenses and marched away again to the northwest. He crossed the Potomac into Maryland.

McClellan's returned army was soon somewhere to the east moving north, groping to find him.

Six months of marching and fighting had greatly weakened Lee's force. Casualties, straggling and loneliness had taken their toll. His army believed that it was fighting the second American Revolution, a renewal of the struggle for local government and popular sovereignty. For many in the army, an invasion of the North did not serve such purposes. Letters from home were often strongly against such an invasion. Some suggested that such "aggression" might imperil the soul.

For all these reasons, Lee reckoned that he would give battle with many fewer men than McClellan. Nevertheless, he knew McClellan well and had a low opinion of his strength of will. He had remarked recently that he "hoped to continue against McClellan for some time."

He decided to withdraw from South Mountain, move south and make his stand near the town of Sharpsburg, Maryland just north of the Potomac. He would wait for McClellan there on the low, ascending ridges just north of the little town.

Jackson was still at Harper's Ferry on the Potomac. The enemy garrison there had surrendered easily, and somewhat unaccountably. Jackson needed time to parole thousands of prisoners. Fortunately, McClellan could be counted on to dither for a day or two. There should be enough time for Jackson to arrive at Sharpsburg. There might then be enough men to make a defensive battle plausibly possible.

There was a grave difficulty in this plan. His engineers had learned that the bridge over the Potomac between Sharpsburg and Virginia had been destroyed. That meant that he would stand against McClellan with an un-fordable river at his back. The nearest crossing was a ford a long way off down the river.

I might have half their numbers, he thought. We might have that many if everyone comes up in time. At first I will have 25,000, perhaps. McClellan will have three times that many... On the other hand, it is McClellan. I remember him in Mexico when he worked for me...

A rider came in from the left flank on South Mountain.

"We have about two hours or so," Lee said after reading the note the man brought. He looked at the group of "gallopers" waiting to carry his orders.

They sat under the big trees around the courthouse square. The men in brown watched him and listened to the sound of the guns. Their horses were unbridled and feeding on the lawn, uncaring and indifferent in this historic moment.

“Colonel Taylor.”

“Sir?” Taylor sat on the porch rail waiting.

“We must tell them all along the top of the mountain that they are to depart before becoming fully engaged and make their way to our new position at Sharpsburg. Suggest routes. Tell them I will expect them by dawn. Pick the strongest riders to go to Jackson. He is farthest away...”

Up on South Mountain near the right end of the Confederate line, Kemper’s Brigade looked down at the Union Army infantry who had tried all day to drive them from the crest and from Crampton’s Gap.

There were immeasurable numbers of them. They stood in blue lines twenty ranks deep. Their artillery was “in battery” behind them, perhaps a hundred guns. Shells came over the top of the ridge every few minutes. The projectiles could be seen *en route* from the cannons. They passed over, accompanied soon thereafter by the sound of their going. Soon the report of the guns would arrive. There was a dreamlike quality in this sequence.

The blue infantry tried four times to capture the gap that day. They were driven back each time. Their dead and wounded covered the slope. Some crawled toward the bottom.

There were wounded in the ditches beside the road that ran down the slope on the way to Middletown. If they did not seem mortally hurt, someone in the brown ranks on top of the hill inevitably shot them again. It was the only prudent thing to do.

Farther to the north two more roads ran up to passes and then down to towns to the west, towns like Boonsboro. Most of the Confederate force was up there, north of Kemper's Brigade.

The blue waves had beaten against the rest of the mountain with no better luck but Kemper's men knew this could not continue.

Behind the right flank of the mountain and a dozen mile away to the south, Lafayette McLaws' small division still stood on Maryland Heights looking almost straight down into Harper's Ferry . In this position they had sealed one of the sides of Stonewall Jackson's trap for the 15,000 U.S soldiers in the town. The federal commander had surrendered them all, but McLaws remained in place with his artillery looking down on the town. With so many Yankee prisoners in the town, the possibility of revolt was worrisome until they could all be disarmed and paroled. McLaws' "back" would be exposed to any Union force that succeeded in forcing its way through Crampton's Gap. The gap must be held until McLaws moved away.

In the gap was Kemper's Brigade.

There, the 17th Virginia Infantry Regiment held the center of the line. Like everyone else in the army they had fought and marched for hundreds of miles since spring. Their numbers shrunk as the long route marches and the attrition of death and wounds had their effect. There were sixty officers and men present for duty on South Mountain when the Union assaults began.

At three o'clock in the afternoon, Captain Claude Devereux stood in his company's line. He had ten men. "H" Company, of the 17th Virginia at full strength would have had one hundred officers and men. At Manassas six weeks before, he had counted forty. Now, there were so few, his brother Jake, his old friend Fred Kennedy, Moses Samuels the watchmaker who lived on Washington Street, his lieutenant, Bill Fowle, and a few more, neighbors all. On the back side of the mountain the regiment's trains waited. With the wagons was another friend from home, Bill White, the regiment's head teamster.

The Yankees started up the slope again. Devereux knew that this effort would bring an end.

A bugle sounded "recall." A drum beat "withdraw."

Sergeant Frederick Kennedy contemplated a well mounted blue officer below. His sandy blond hair and mustache made a contrast with the weather and sun darkened skin of his

face. He saw Captain Devereux walk to the rear to find out what was happening. *We are leaving*, he thought. He had decided to kill the mounted officer. Now, he must act quickly.

Private John Quick went to stand beside him. "Best be swift, Sarn't. We'll be goin' soon." The Irish giant peered down the hill. "Shoot at the horse's chest. The bullet will raise up..."

Kennedy braced his Enfield against a tree. The brim of his floppy hat blocked his view. He dropped it on the ground. The sweaty white of his forehead and his pale blue eyes were starkly contrasted with the tan of his lower face. He took a breath, let half out and concentrated on the alignment of his sights against the brown horse's chest.

Lieutenant Fowle saw Devereux waving for them to come. "Come on boys," he yelled. "Let's git!"

Kennedy's rifle jumped in his arms.

"Good!" Quick laughed. "One less and you missed the horse..."

They ran for the top of the ridge where Devereux waited.

Longstreet's "wing" of the army marched all night going down the farm roads that led south.

Farmers hid in their houses with the shutters closed; afraid of the passing columns. These were not Southern people.

They crossed Antietam Creek at five in the morning. Longstreet was waiting for them by the bridge. They walked up the track into the little town. Kemper's men filed off to the south. As the sun rose, they "fell out" and collapsed in their blankets and rubber groundsheets.

Claude Devereux was shaken awake several hours later by Snake Davis, one of his company cooks. The day was bright but cool.

"We found the supply wagons, cap'n. We got breakfas' today, good breakfas'. We got biscuits and bacon and such...."

Devereux looked around.

"We dug a slit trench over by the road there, Mistuh Claude."

"Thanks. I'll be back in a minute. Save me a couple of biscuits."

“Ginrul Jackson come in fum Hahpuh’s Ferry while you was sleepin’. His cook, Jim, had a lot of that nice Yankee Army coffee.”

They waited all day for McClellan on the 16th. More and more of Stonewall’s soldiers arrived over Boteler’s Ford. By nightfall everyone had arrived, everyone but Ambrose Hill and the “Light Division.” The odds had improved. They were not good, but better.

“Where are they?” Devereux muttered, walking up and down in the farm road in which the regiment had been placed.

Brigadier General Kemper watched him pace. “Devereux, calm down. They will be here tomorrow. We know Ambrose. He always arrives when needed.” Kemper stroked his bushy beard. “How is your lovely mother? I won’t ask of your father, a thorny subject.”

Devereux remembered that lawyer Kemper had much of the bank’s business in the Richmond area. “Let’s start digging,” he said. “Let’s wake them up, all three hundred men of your ‘brigade.’ Let’s dig behind this fence here.” He put his hand on the top rail.

“With what?” Kemper asked. “Our fingernails? We have no tools. None, and Uncle Bob doesn’t want it. He wants us ready to ‘maneuver.’ What is it with these West Point people? “

“Jim, let’s get them up, and go over to those barns and take tools.” Devereux pointed to farms along the road a few hundred yards south. “Let’s dig! To hell with the West Pointers! There will be thousands of Yankees climbing up those ledges between us and the creek tomorrow. Let’s dig!”

Kemper thought. “Get them up, Claude. We won’t live through tomorrow, but you are right. Get them up.”

McClellan attacked at dawn on the 17th. He attacked *en echelon* from right to left, from north to south, by army corps. Joe Hooker’s, 1st Corps began the dance. Then Mansfield’s corps, then Sumner’s, etc.

Men died, and died and died. They stood and fought each other eye to eye in the corn and along the country roads. The “Iron Brigade” from the upper mid-west, the Louisiana “Pelicans,” the madmen from east Texas, they screamed and fought with rifles, artillery and bayonets as the fight came down the line toward Kemper’s Brigade.

Devereux heard it come. In the mid-afternoon, it centered on the bridge a quarter of a mile down the ledges from his position. The noise grew and grew. He could hear the rebel yell

until an hour before sundown and he knew that the Georgians who held the bridge from the hill above still prevailed. Then, that ended and Yankee “huzzahs” were everywhere below.

The first blue men came over the terrain mask near dusk. There were zouaves in the lead. The 17th Virginia shot them to bits. The colors went down and more men in baggy red trousers picked them up. They, too, went down. The zouaves stopped coming but more and more blue men came on behind them, coming over the edge of the ledge and into view.

When they got to fifty yards range, Devereux waved his men back. The brigade was falling back. He looked over his shoulder at the hard surfaced farm road. He saw a red shirt.

There were men in brown coming on behind Ambrose Hill’s red shirt.

Yankee bullets whined in the air.

Kemper was at the road. He waved Hill forward. “Come on! Come on!” he yelled.

Devereux turned to watch.

The bullet took him in the knee. It drilled through the joint from right to left ripping out cartilage and tendons and chipping the ends of the major bones. It made a hole through his knee that a ram rod could have been put through. It didn’t hurt at all at first. It felt like a blow

with the flat of a shovel against the side of his knee. The leg buckled under him and he fell heavily in the shadow of the rail fence beside which he had stood. The rocks his company had piled there sheltered him from the fight. He reached for the lowest rail and tried to pull himself to his feet. He felt the bones grate and sank back into the dust. The leg began to throb. He could see the flow of his blood into the dirt, but looking at the leg he saw that he still had a knee. Even in the moment of his wounding, he knew that what hit him must have been a pistol or carbine bullet. A lead slug from a rifled musket would have flattened against the big bones and smashed the joint to bits.

Hill's men passed him at a dead run, hurdling the fence and screaming their rage at the blue infantry.

Devereux rolled onto his side to watch them go. The Union line of battle hesitated for a moment and then broke for the rear leaving his line of sight below the lip of the nearest shelf.

The noise of gunfire and the sound of men in battle remained close by.

His brother, Jake, knelt beside him. "My, God, Claude, what have you done to yourself now?" His brother had been a classics student at Charlottesville before secession. Now he was an infantry sergeant, and well known for a wry sense of humor.

Devereux tried to see the humor in his situation. This was difficult. "Well," he finally said as Jake cut his trousers away to look at the wound, "Looks like Pat and I are going to have even more in common..."

His other brother, Patrick Henry Devereux had been crippled in a riding accident and walked with a permanently stiff left leg.

"Not funny," Jake replied, "not funny. You are going to lose the leg. They'll take it off above the knee."

Private Johnnie Quick arrived. The old soldier had served in several wars, most notably perhaps, in the Crimea. "I dunno" he said, "looks worse than it may be... Small holes goin' in and comin' out. We should put a tourniquet on that. Don't want you to bleed out, do we, sor? I'll use yer belt," he said without waiting for an answer.

Jake and Quick carried the captain off the field and into the village of Sharpsburg. They carried him along with an arm around each of their necks. His wounded leg stuck out in front. They made a splint from pieces of broken fence rail.

Claude felt more and more faint. He did not know how long he would be conscious. There were no townspeople to be seen. "Why is that?" he wondered aloud.

Artillery shells burst in the street close by as an answer to the question.

The noise of the fight persisted but even a little distance took the edge off the clamor of the battlefield.

They found a field hospital set up in a livery stable. Three surgeons were working inside. They were busy at the usual work of amputation of damaged extremities. There was a lot of pain, a lot of hurt in the sounds coming from the stable. There were pieces of people lying in the shadow of the building. Flies buzzed happily around them.

Jake went inside to talk to someone useful. He watched for a minute or two and then walked to a young man gory to the elbows who was wearing a rubber apron covered with both fresh and dried blood. He seemed to be in charge. The dense blond hair on the backs of his forearms had bits of drying tissue trapped in the fur.

“Doctor,” Jake said in a loud, firm voice.

The man looked at him, looked for wounds. “Who are you?” he demanded impatiently. “I am occupied, as you can see...”

Jake knew that his answer would decide the outcome for his brother. “Sir, I am Sergeant Joachim Murat Devereux of the 17th Virginia. My brother, Captain Claude Crozet Devereux lies gravely wounded in the leg outside. I would ask you to look at him.”

The doctor stared at him, then turned and started back to his work. Halfway to the old door on saw horses that served as an operating table, he changed his mind and returned to Jake.

“The banker Devereux family of Alexandria? “

“Yes, sir.”

The doctor wiped his drying hand on the apron and held it out. “I am Hunter McGuire. I am the Second Corps Surgeon. I know your father. He lent us the money we needed four years ago for work on the farm, my father’s farm... Show me your brother.”

“The easy thing would be to take it off,” McGuire finally said after examining the knee. “It is ruined enough that it will never be strong. It will always hurt you badly.” He was on his knees beside Claude in the dusty street. “I suppose you want to keep it?”

“Yes.”

“Well, someone will have to go with you all the way to Richmond or Lynchburg. Richmond would be best. Otherwise somebody will cut it off when you are unconscious or some such thing.”

John Quick held up a paw.

“Are you a nurse?” Dr. McQuire asked.

“Close enough, sor.” Quick growled.

“Did you splint this?” McQuire asked.

The answer was yes.

“All right, you did well. It might as well stay this way until you reach a good surgeon.” He sent Jake into the charnel house for writing materials. He wrote a note to a particular man at Richmond’s Chimborazo Hospital. “I presume that you have money?” he asked Jake.

“Not an issue,” Jake replied.

McGuire nodded at the expected answer. “Get a wagon. Get a couple of quarts of brandy or whiskey.” He looked at Quick.

“Put it on the leg?”

“Yes, and you can give him a drink now and then, but not too much. Take him to the railhead at Front Royal and then to Richmond as fast as you can. Time is important. I believe that the man to whom the note is addressed can repair this somewhat.”

They nodded at him. Claude was now in a lot of pain and groaning aloud.

Quick took the note.

“He has a thousand dollars in US and Confederate money in his wallet. You do, don’t you,” Jake asked his brother.

“It is not bleeding much now,” Mcquire said. He had loosened the tourniquet. “Try not to put that back on if you can avoid it...”

Quick nodded. “Yes, sor, the gangrene, I know.”

“Good. On your way, then, I must return to my butchery now. Good luck” he said to Claude and walked away.

They broke into a saloon that was under the provost marshal's closure and threatened to shoot the guard inside if they would not take a bribe to give them the brandy. A Sharpsburg merchant was more easily dealt with. He looked at the money and offered to drive them to Front Royal himself so that he could bring his team and rig back.

Five days later Claude Devereux was in Chimborazo Hospital. The surgeon saved his leg after much argument.

John Quick returned to the regiment. He found them, those who were left, in a tent camp outside Berryville. Stragglers and wounded had begun to return.

Jake Devereux was commissioned a lieutenant in "H" Company a month after Sharpsburg.

The secret service came for Claude in October and sent him to France on their business. He was carried onto the ship in Wilmington, North Carolina.

THE END