

A SNOW BATTLE

By Daniel C. Beard

January, 1881

In the Public Domain

IT WAS a year when the Indian-summer had been prolonged into the winter. Christmas had come and gone and a new year begun, but no snow had fallen on the river bank or neighboring hills.

Such was the condition of things one January morning, in a Kentucky town, upon the banks of the Ohio River, where I and some sixty other boys were gathered in a little frame school-house.

We had about made up our minds that old Jack Frost was a humbug, and winter a myth; but when the bell tapped for recess, the first boy out gave a shout which passed from mouth to mouth, until it became a universal cheer as we reached the playground, for, floating airily down from a dull, gray sky came myriads of white snow-flakes!

Winter had come! Jack Frost was no longer a humbug! Before the bell again recalled us to our study, the ground was whitened with snow, and the school divided into two opposing armies. That night was a busy one. All hands set to work manufacturing ammunition-sleds and shields for the coming battle. It was my fortune to be chosen as one of the garrison of the fort. There was not a boy late next morning—in fact, when the teachers arrived to open the school, they found all the scholars upon the play-grounds, rolling huge snow-balls. All night the snow had continued to fall, and it was now quite deep. When we went out at noon, a beautifully modeled fort of snowy whiteness stood ready for us, and from a mound in the center floated the battle-flag.

Our company took their places inside the fortifications. We could see the enemy gathered around their captain at their camp, some two hundred yards distant, their ammunition-sleds loaded with snow-balls. The lieutenant bore their battle-flag.

Our teachers showed their interest by standing shivering with wet feet in the deep snow to watch the battle. At a blast from a tin horn, on rushed the foe! They separated, and came in two divisions, approaching us from the left and right.

“Now, boys!” cried our captain. “Don't throw a ball until they are within range.”

Then, calling the pluckiest amongst us, a flaxen-haired country-boy, to his side, he whispered a word or two and pointed to the flag in the enemy's camp.

The boy, who had been nicknamed "Daddy," on account of his old-looking face, slipped quietly over the rear wall of the fort, dodged behind a snow-drift, and then behind a fence, and was lost to sight. Forward marched the enemy, their battle-flag borne in advance of the party to the right. Their captain was at the head of the division to the left.

Having engaged our attention on the two flanks, where we stood ready to receive them, as they neared us, by a quick and well executed maneuver, rushing obliquely toward each other, the two divisions unexpectedly joined, and advanced, shield to shield, with the ammunition-sleds in the rear. It was in vain we pelted them with snow-balls; on they came, encouraged by a cheer from the teachers and some spectators who by this time had gathered near the school-house.

Three times had our noble captain been tumbled from his perch upon the mound in the center of the fort, when another burst of applause from the spectators announced some new development, and, as we looked, we could see "Daddy" with the colors of the enemy's camp in his arms, his tow hair flying in the wind, as he ran for dear life.

In an instant, the line of the enemy was all in confusion; some ran to head off "Daddy," while others in their excitement stood and shouted. It was our turn now, and we pelted their broken ranks with snow until they looked like animated snow-men. Another shout, and we looked around to find our captain down and the hands of one of the besieging party almost upon our flag. It was the work of a second to pitch the intruder upon his back outside the fort. Then came the tug of war. A rush was made to capture our standard, several of our boys were pulled out of the fort and taken prisoners, and the capture of the fort seemed inevitable. Again and again a number of the enemy, among whom was their color-bearer, gained the top of our breast-works, and again and again were they tumbled off, amid a shower of snow-balls that forced them to retire to gain breath and clear their eyes from the snow. Once, their lieutenant, with the red-bordered battle-flag, had actually succeeded in reaching the mound upon which stood our colors, when a combined attack that nearly resulted in his being made prisoner, drove him from the fort to gather strength for another rush. "Daddy" was now a prisoner, and the recaptured flag again floated over the enemy's camp, when the school-bell called us, fresh and glowing with exercise and healthful excitement, to our lessons. The battle was left undecided, and our fort was soon captured by a force stronger than any our companions were able to bring against it, for a warm south wind sprang up from the lowlands down the river, our fortification quickly yielded to its insidious attack, and the snow-campaign was over.