

Melville "Donelson"

The bitter cup
Of that hard countermand
Which gave the Envoys up,
Still was wormwood in the mouth,
and clouds involved the land,
When, pelted by sleet in the icy street,
About the bulletin-board a band
Of eager, anxious people met,
And every wakeful heart was set
On latest news from West or South.
"No seeing here," cries one -- "don't crowd -- "
"You tall man, pray you, read aloud."

IMPORTANT.

We learn that General Grant,
Marching from Henry overland,
And joined by a force up the Cumberland sent
(Some thirty thousand the command),
On Wednesday a good position won --
began the siege of Donelson.

The stronghold crowns a river-bluff,
A good broad mile of leveled top;
Inland the ground rolls off
Deep-gorged, and rocky, and broken up --
A wilderness of trees and brush.
The spaded summit shows the roods
Of fixed intrenchments in their hush;
Breast-works and rifle-pits in woods
Perplex the base. --

The welcome weather
Is clear and mild; 'tis much like May.
The ancient boughs that lace together
Along the stream, and hang far forth,
Strange with green mistletoe, betray
A dreamy contrast to the North.

Our troops are full of spirits -- say
The siege won't prove a creeping one.
They purpose not the lingering stay
Of old beleaguers; not that way;
but, full of vim from Western prairies won,
They'll make, ere long, a dash at Donelson.

Washed by the storm till the paper grew
Every shade of a streaky blue,
That bulletin stood. The next day brought
A second.

LATER FROM THE FORT.

Grant's investment is complete --
A semicircular one.
Both wings the Cumberland's margin meet,
Then, backward curving, clasp the rebel seat.
On Wednesday this good work was done;
But of the doers some lie prone.
Each wood, each hill, each glen was fought for;
The bold inclosing line we wrought for
Flamed with sharpshooters. Each cliff cost
A limb or life. But back we forced
Reserves and all; made good our hold;
And so we rest.

Events unfold.
On thursday added ground was won,
A long bold steep: we near the Den.
Later the foe came shouting down
In sortie, which was quelled; and then
We stormed them on their left.
A chilly change in the afternoon;
The sky, late clear, is now bereft
Of sun. Last night the ground froze hard --
Rings to the enemy as they run
Within their works. A ramrod bites
The lip it meets. The cold incites
To swinging of arms with brisk rebound.

Smart blows 'gainst lusty chests resound.

Along the outer line we ward
A crackle of skirmishing goes on.
Our lads creep round on hand and knee,
They fight from behind each trunk and stone;
And sometimes, flying for refuge, one
Finds 'tis an enemy shares the tree.
Some scores are maimed by boughs shot off
In the glades by the Fort's big gun.
We mourn the loss of colonel Morrison,
Killed while cheering his regiment on.
Their far sharpshooters try our stuff;
And ours return them puff for puff:
'Tis diamond-cutting-diamond work.
Woe on the rebel cannoneer
Who shows his head. Our fellows lurk
Like Indians that waylay the deer
By the wild salt-spring. --The sky is dun,
Fordooming the fall of Donelson.

Stern weather is all unwonted here.
The people of the country own
We brought it. Yea, the earnest North
Has elementally issued forth
To storm this Donelson.

FURTHER.

A yelling rout
Of ragamuffins broke profuse
To-day from out the Fort.
Sole uniform they wore, a sort
Of patch, or white badge (as you choose)
Upon the arm. But leading these,
Or mingling, were men of face
And bearing of patrician race,
Splendid in courage and gold lace --
The officers. Before the breeze
Made by their charge, down went our line;

But, rallying, charged back in force,
And broke the sally; yet with loss.
this on the left; upon the right
Meanwhile there was an answering fight;
Assailants and assailed reversed.
The charge too upward, and not down --
Up a steep ridge-side, toward its crown,
A strong redoubt. But they who first
Gained the fort's base, and marked the trees
Felled, heaped in horned perplexities,
And shagged with brush; and swarming there
Fierce wasps whose sting was present death --
They faltered, drawing bated breath,
And felt it was in vain to dare;
Yet still, perforce, returned the ball,
Firing into the tangled wall
Till ordered to come down. They came;
but left some comrades in their fame,
Red on the ridge in icy wreath
And hanging gardens of cold Death.
But not quite unavenged these fell;
Our ranks once out of range, a blast
Of shrapnel and quick shell
Burst on the rebel horde, still massed,
Scattering them pell-mell.
(This fighting -- judging what we read --
Both charge and countercharge,
Would seem but Thursday's told at large,
Before in brief reported. -- Ed.)
Night closed in about the Den
Murky and lowering. Ere long, chill rains.
A night not soon to be forgot,
Reviving old rheumatic pains
And longings for a cot.

No blankets, overcoats, or tents.
Coats thrown aside on the warm march here --
We looked not then for changeful cheer;
Tents, coats, and blankets too much care.
No fires; a fire a mark presents;
Near by, the trees show bullet-dents.

Rations were eaten cold and raw.
The men well soaked, come snow; and more --
A midnight sally. Small sleeping done --
But such is war;
No matter, we'll have Fort Donelson.

"Ugh! ugh!
'Twill drag along -- drag along"
Growled a cross patriot in the throng,
His battered umbrella like an ambulance-cover
Riddled with bullet-holes, spattered all over.
"Hurrah for Grant!" cried a stripling shrill;
Three urchins joined him with a will,
And some of taller stature cheered.
Meantime a Copperhead passed; he sneered.
"Win or lose," he pausing said,
"Caps fly the same; all boys, mere boys;
Any thing to make a noise.
Like to see the list of the dead;
These 'craven Southerners' hold out;
Ay, ay, they'll give you many a bout"
"We'll beat in the end, sir"
Firmly said one in staid rebuke,
A solid merchant, square and stout.
"And do you think it? that way tend, sir"
Asked the lean Cooperhead, with a look
Of splenetic pity. "Yes, I do"
His yellow death's head the croaker shook:
"The country's ruined, that I know"
A shower of broken ice and snow,
In lieu of words, confuted him;
They saw him hustled round the corner go,
And each by-stander said -- Well suited him.

Next day another crowd was seen
In the dark weather's sleety spleen.
Bald-headed to the storm came out
A man, who, 'mid a joyous shout,
Silently posted this brief sheet:

GLORIOUS VICTORY OF THE FLEET!

FRIDAY'S GREAT EVENT!
THE ENEMY'S WATER-BATTERIES BEAT!
WE SILENCED EVERY GUN!
THE OLD COMMODORE'S COMPLIMENTS SENT PLUMP INTO DONELSON!

"Well, well, go on!" exclaimed the crowd
To him who thus much read aloud.
"That's all," he said. "What! nothing more"
"Enough for a cheer, though -- hip, hurrah!"
"But here's old Baldy come again -- "
"More news!" -- And now a different strain.

(Our own reporter a dispatch compiles,
As best he may, from varied sources.)

Large re-enforcements have arrived --
Munitions, men, and horses --
For Grant, and all debarked, with stores.

The enemy's field-works extend six miles --
The gate still hid; so well contrived.

Yesterday stung us; frozen shores
Snow-clad, and through the drear defiles

And over the desolate ridges blew
A Lapland wind.
The main affair
Was a good two hours' steady fight
Between our gun-boats and the Fort.
The Louisville's wheel was smashed outright.
A hundred-and-twenty-eight-pound ball
Came planet-like through a starboard port,
Killing three men, and wounding all
The rest of that gun's crew,
(The captain of the gun was cut in two);
Then splintering and ripping went --
Nothing could be its continent.
In the narrow stream the Louisville,
Unhelmed, grew lawless; swung around,
And would have thumped and drifted, till
All the fleet was driven aground,
But for the timely order to retire.

Some damage from our fire, 'tis thought,
Was done the water-batteries of the Fort.

Little else took place that day,
Except the field artillery in line
Would now and then -- for love, they say --
Exchange a valentine.
The old sharpshooting going on.
Some plan afoot as yet unknown;
So Friday closed round Donelson.

LATER.

Great suffering through the night --
A stinging one. Our heedless boys
Were nipped like blossoms. Some dozen
Hapless wounded men were frozen.
During day being struck down out of sight,
And help-cries drowned in roaring noise,
They were left just where the skirmish shifted --
Left in dense underbrush now-drifted.
Some, seeking to crawl in crippled plight,
So stiffened -- perished.

Yet in spite
Of pangs for these, no heart is lost.
Hungry, and clothing stiff with frost,
Our men declare a nearing sun
Shall see the fall of Donelson.
And this they say, yet not disown
The dark redoubts round Donelson,
And ice-glazed corpses, each a stone --
A sacrifice to Donelson;
They swear it, and swerve not, gazing on
A flag, deemed black, flying from Donelson.
Some of the wounded in the wood
Were cared for by the foe last night,
Though he could do them little needed good,
Himself being all in shivering plight.
The rebel is wrong, but human yet;

He's got a heart, and thrusts a bayonet.
He gives us battle with wondrous will --
The bluff's a perverted Bunker Hill.

The stillness stealing through the throng
The silent thought and dismal fear revealed;
They turned and went,
Musing on right and wrong
And mysteries dimly sealed --
Breasting the storm in daring discontent;
The storm, whose black flag showed in heaven,
As if to say no quarter there was given
To wounded men in wood,
Or true hearts yearning for the good --
All fatherless seemed the human soul.
But next day brought a bitterer bowl --
On the bulletin-board this stood;

Saturday morning at 3 A.M.
A stir within the Fort betrayed
That the rebels were getting under arms;
Some plot these early birds had laid.
But a lancing sleet cut him who stared
Into the storm. After some vague alarms,
Which left our lads unscared,
Out sallied the enemy at dim of dawn,
With cavalry and artillery, and went
In fury at our environment.
Under cover of shot and shell
Three columns of infantry rolled on,
Vomited out of Donelson --
rolled down the slopes like rivers of hell,
Surged at our line, and swelled and poured
Like breaking surf. But unsubmerged
Our men stood up, except where roared
The enemy through one gap. We urged
Our all of manhood to the stress,
But still showed shattered in our desperateness.
Back set the tide,
But soon afresh rolled in;
And so it swayed from side to side --
Far batteries joining in the din,

Though sharing in another fray --
Till all became an Indian fight,
Intricate, dusky, stretching far away,
Yet not without spontaneous plan
However tangled showed the plight;
Duels all over 'tween man and man,
Duels on cliff-side, and down in ravine,
Duels at long range, and bone to bone;
Duels every where flitting and half unseen.
Only by courage good as their own,
And strength outlasting theirs,
Did our boys at last drive the rebels off.
Yet they went not back to their distant lairs
In strong-hold, but loud in scoff
Maintained themselves on conquered ground --
Uplands; built works, or stalked around.
Our right wing bore this onset. Noon
Brought calm to Donelson.

The reader ceased; the storm beat hard;
'Twas day, but the office-gas was lit;
Nature retained her sulking-fit,
In her hand the shard.
Flitting faces took the hue
Of that washed bulletin-board in view,
And seemed to bear the public grief
As private, and uncertain of relief;
Yea, many an earnest heart was won,
As broodingly he plodded on,
To find in himself some bitter thing,
Some hardness in his lot as harrowing
As Donelson.

That night the board stood barren there,
Oft eyes by wistful people passing,
Who nothing saw but the rain-beads chasing
Each other down the wafered square,
As down some storm-beat grave-yard stone.
But next day showed --

MORE NEWS LAST NIGHT.

STORY OF SATURDAY AFTERNOON.
VICISSITUDES OF THE WAR.

The damaged gun-boats can't wage fight
For days; so says the Commodore.
Thus no diversion can be had.
Under a sunless sky of lead
Our grim-faced boys in blacked plight
Gaze toward the ground they held before,
And then on Grant. He marks their mood,
And hails it, and will turn the same to good.
Spite all that they have undergone,
Their desperate hearts are set upon
This winter fort, this stubborn fort,
This castle of the last resort,
This Donelson.

1 P.M.

An order given
Requires withdrawal from the front
Of regiments that bore the brunt
Of morning's fray. Their ranks all riven
Are being replaced by fresh, strong men.
Great vigilance in the foeman's Den;
He snuffs the stormers. Need it is
That for that fell assault of his,
That rout inflicted, and self-scorn --
Immoderate in noble natures, torn
By sense of being through slackness overborne --
The rebel be given a quick return:
The kindest face looks now half stern.
Balked of their prey in airs that freeze,
Some fierce ones glare like savages.
And yet, and yet, strange moments are --
Well -- blood, and tears, and anguished War!
The morning's battle-ground is seen
In lifted glades, like meadows rare;
The blood-drops on the snow-crust there
Like clover in the white-week show --

Flushed fields of death, that call again --
Call to our men, and not in vain,
For that way must the stormers go.

3 P.M.

The work begins.
Light drifts of men thrown forward, fade
In skirmish-line along the slope,
Where some dislodgments must be made
Ere the stormer with the strong-hold cope.

Lew Wallace, moving to retake
The heights late lost --
(Herewith a break.
Storms at the West derange the wires.
Doubtless, ere morning, we shall hear
The end; we look for news to cheer --
Let Hope fan all her fires.)

Next day in large bold hand was seen
The closing bulletin:

VICTORY!

Our troops have retrieved the day
By one grand surge along the line;
The spirit that urged them was divine.
The first works flooded, naught could stay
The stormers: on! still on!
Bayonets for Donelson!

Over the ground that morning lost
Rolled the blue billows, tempest-tossed,
Following a hat on the point of a sword.
Spite shell and round-shot, grape and canister,
Up they climbed without rail or banister --
Up the steep hill-sides long and broad,
Driving the rebel deep within his works.
'Tis nightfall; not an enemy lurks
In sight. The chafing men

Fred for more fight:
"To-night, to-night let us take the Den"
But night is treacherous, Grant is wary;
Of brave blood be a little chary.
Patience! the Fort is good as won;
To-morrow, and into Donelson.

LATER AND LAST.

THE FORT IS OURS.

A flag came out at early morn
Bringing surrender. From their towers
Floats out the banner late their scorn.
In Dover, hut and house are full
Of rebels dead or dying.
The national flag is flying
From the crammed court-house pinnacle.
Great boat-loads of our wounded go
To-day to Nashville. The sleet-winds blow;
But all is right: the fight is won,
The winter-fight for Donelson.
Hurrah!
The spell of old defeat is broke,
The Habit of victory begun;
Grant strikes the war's first sounding stroke
At Donelson.

For lists of killed and wounded, see
The morrow's dispatch: to-day 'tis victory.

The man who read this to the crowd
Shouted as the end he gained;
And though the unflagging tempest rained,
They answered him aloud.
And hand grasped hand, and glances met
In happy triumph; eyes grew wet.
O, to the punches brewed that night
Went little water. Windows bright
Beamed rosy on the sleet without,
And from the deep street came the frequent shout;

While some in prayer, as these in glee,
Blessed heaven for the winter-victory.

But others were who wakeful laid
In midnight beds, and early rose,
And feverish in the foggy snows,
Snatched the damp paper -- wife and maid.
The death-list like a river flows
Down the pale sheet,
And there the whelming waters meet.

Ah God! may Time with happy haste
Bring wail and triumph to a waste,
And war be done;
The battle flag-staff fall athwart
The curs'd ravine, and wither; naught
Be left of trench or gun;
The bastion, let it ebb away,
Washed with the river bed; and Day
In vain seek Donelson.