



THE ANGEL of MARYE'S HEIGHTS

by CHESTER B. GOOLRICK

He led no charge, won no thrilling victory. But men honor his memory because, in the midst of slaughter, he dared death to bring solace to his wounded foes

ON A BLEAK December day in Virginia, a hero added his brief footnote to the annals of American valor. He received no medals. His reward came, fittingly, from the grateful hearts of Civil War fighting men on both sides of the lines. They called him "The Angel of Marye's Heights."

He was Sergeant Richard Kirkland of the 2nd South Carolina Volunteers, part of the Confederate command occupying the now-famous Sunken Road which lay behind a low stone wall snaking along the foot of Marye's Heights at the edge of the quaint little town of Fredericksburg. As dusk fell there on December 13, 1862, the exhausted Carolinians had just taken part in one of the most concentrated slaughters ever seen when the Union forces under General Ambrose Burnside attempted to force a crossing of the Rappahannock and smash against Lee at Fredericksburg.

Sensing that Burnside might attempt something of the sort, Lee put the bulk of his men into well-nigh impregnable positions behind the stone wall. Before them for several hundred yards stretched a gentle slope leading into the town. On December 12, under the protection of artillery, Burnside's men crossed the river, and the following day made their supreme effort to effect a break-through.

OldMagazineArticles.com

The main attack went through the streets and up the slope leading to the stone wall. Union troops stormed forward valiantly—and were cut to pieces. By late afternoon, the ground in front of the wall was covered with dead and wounded. All night long and the next day, they kept up a steady duel with the Confederates.

In the few lulls in the firing, Dick Kirkland heard the wounded crying for aid. Though still in his twenties, Kirkland was a veteran of previous actions and probably little more sensitive than most of his fellows. Nevertheless, by midday he could stand it no longer.

Appearing before his astonished general, the young sergeant asked permission to cross the wall and give water and what comfort he could to “those poor people out there.” The general, who believed he was signing the soldier’s death warrant, reluctantly granted permission.

The Union men were thunderstruck when a Confederate soldier, laden with canteens, suddenly climbed into view. Their surprise was probably what saved Dick, for in a few seconds he had sprinted to the nearest wounded man, given him water, covered him with an overcoat, and gone on to the next.

Without orders, firing from the Union side ceased. Confederate soldiers put down their weapons. In the unnatural hush there rose, first from the Northern side and then from the Southern, a great cheer.

When Kirkland disappeared behind the wall to get more canteens, fighting was resumed. But when he climbed back into the open there was silence again, and cheering. By nightfall, every wounded soldier had received aid.

Dick was the talk of both armies for days. Then the war moved on and his hour of glory was over. Promoted a little later to lieutenant, he died in the closing hours at Chickamauga.

A massive slab, paid for by popular subscription, marks his grave in the cemetery at Camden, South Carolina. Appropriately, too, there is a tablet to his memory on the walls of the Prince of Peace Episcopal Church at Gettysburg.

And there Dick Kirkland sleeps, his name unknown to most of his countrymen of the North and South to whom, for a few hours on a long-past December afternoon, he demonstrated what it was like to be a real American.

Coronet

January, 1957 * p. 154

OldMagazineArticles.com