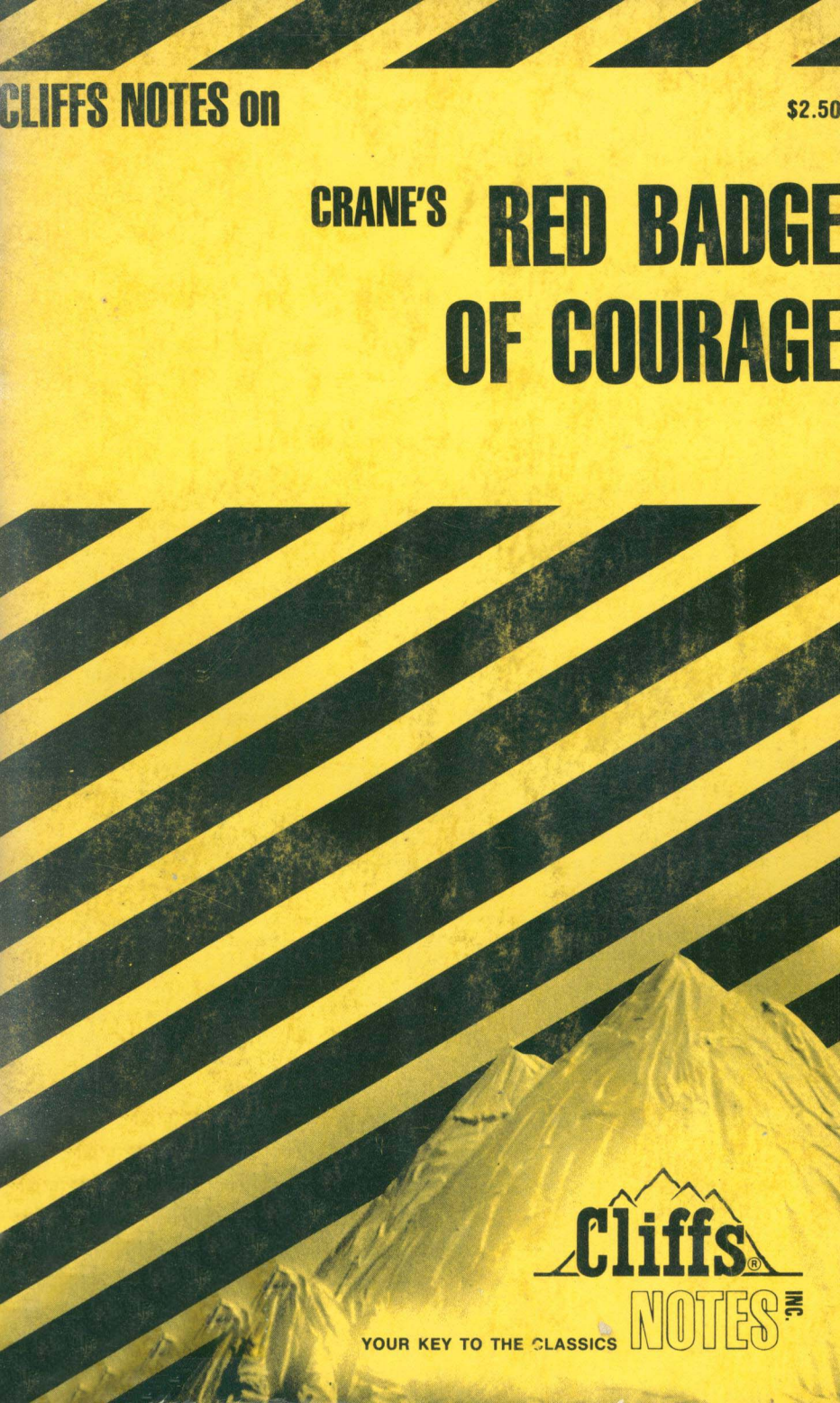


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**CRANE'S RED BADGE  
OF COURAGE**



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# THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE

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- *Questions for Review*

*by*

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# THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE

## INTRODUCTION

Stephen Crane was only twenty-two and had never witnessed any war when he wrote *The Red Badge of Courage*. On the surface this is a simple story of a young soldier in the Union Army in the Civil War who becomes frightened as he faces battle for the first time but who recovers from this fright as the book progresses. However, what makes this book unique is not the simple outward story. Crane has imagined what is going on in the mind of the youth and chronicles this in great detail. Thus through the eyes of the hero, Henry Fleming, the reader can experience not only the actions of an ordinary soldier but also his thoughts and feelings.

Crane's story is cosmic in scope in spite of its limited viewpoint and concise style because it deals with some of the major agonies facing man. These agonies, which Henry experiences in the book, are extreme isolation from other human beings, the confrontation of death, the lack of self-identity, failure, and guilt. During the course of the book Henry also experiences the opposites of these. He recognizes the brotherhood of man, in this case born of the fact that all face death together in battle. He faces death and finds "that, after all, it is but the great death." His search for self-identity is successful. He discovers that courage is sublime unselfishness. Finally he is able to see all his actions, good and bad, in perspective so that he feels less proud about his good deeds and less guilty about his bad actions.

Crane enriches his story by writing in an impressionistic and symbolic manner using color in a compelling way and creating images which are striking and original. For instance he compares guns to Indian chiefs:

The guns squatted in a row like savage chiefs. They argued with abrupt violence. It was a grim pow-wow. Their busy servants ran hither and thither.

Underlying the story is Crane's belief in the naturalistic concept of man as insignificant and helpless, driven to action by his instincts and the conditions of his environment. Crane points up the insignificance of Henry by emphasizing the machine-like quality of the army of which Henry is just a small cog and the indifference of nature to his plight.

The story is basically realistic. Crane undercuts the glory of war by writing of the boredom, hardships, and actual dangers of fighting. He emphasizes the simple, awkward actions and talk of his characters even during extremely tense moments. In writing of officers Crane says:

The officers, at their intervals, rearward, neglected to stand in picturesque attitudes. They were bobbing to and fro roaring directions and encouragements. The dimensions of their howls were extraordinary. They expended their lungs with prodigal wills. And often they nearly stood upon their heads in their anxiety to observe the enemy on the other side of the tumbling smoke.

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND COMMENTARIES

### CHAPTER I

#### *Summary*

The chapter opens with a description of an army resting on some hills with the enemy campfires visible in the distance. A tall soldier goes to the brook to wash his shirt. He comes back with a rumor he has heard that the company will move the next day. The other soldiers listen carefully and discuss the possibility of the rumor being true. A loud soldier calls this information "a thundering lie" as he does not think the army will ever move. The tall soldier defends the rumor.

One youthful private listens intently to the discussions and

then goes to his shabby little hut to think of the implications of actually being in battle for the first time. He recalls his early dreams of great and bloody battles of far-off times and places. He remembers how he insisted on enlisting despite his mother's wishes because he had read of "marches, sieges, conflicts, and he had longed to see it all," even though he suspected that present-day war would not be the grand struggle it was in other ages.

The youth remembers his mother's farewell talk to him in which she admonishes him to take good care of himself, stay away from bad companions, and not to shirk his duty on her account. He recalls that although the sight of his mother peeling potatoes as she gave him advice irritated him, his last sight of his weeping mother makes him momentarily ashamed of his desire to seek adventure and glory.

He recalls that he has spent several months in camp doing very little but trying to keep himself comfortable and being "drilled and reviewed" over and over again and he has come to the conclusion that he is an insignificant part of a large machine and that war as a glorious heroic endeavor is a thing of the past.

The youth ponders the nature of the enemy for a time but then comes to the conclusion that it does not matter what the enemy is like as long as it fights. The real problem is how he himself will react to a real battle. He becomes fearful as he realizes that he may prove not to be heroic after all. He is afraid that his dreams of glory are just dreams.

After awhile the tall soldier and the loud soldier come to the hut still arguing about the truth of the rumor. The youth asks the tall soldier, Jim, whether he thinks any of the soldiers will run from the battle. Jim replies that probably some will run but most will stay and fight after they once start shooting. Jim says that he will probably do what the majority of men do. If most of the company runs he will run too but if most stay and fight he will stay and fight too. Jim points out that all the new recruits are untried in battle. Jim's words reassure the youth somewhat.



### *Commentary*

The author introduces most of the main elements in the book in the first chapter. He reveals the atmosphere of the book, which is serious and somber, in his opening sentence: "The cold passed reluctantly from the earth, and the retiring fogs revealed an army stretched out on the hills, resting."

The author's technique is impressionistic; that is, he describes scenes, characters, and moods as they appear to him at a particular moment rather than how they are in actuality. For instance in describing the landscape in the early morning as it is getting light he tells how "the landscape changed from brown to green...." Actually the change of light gives this effect at this time. Later the landscape might look blue or some other color.

The chapter reveals that the book has two settings, one physical and one emotional. The physical setting is an army camp on some wooded hills with a brook and river nearby. The arguing, rumbling soldiers seem to be part of the setting. On another level the setting is the mind of the youthful soldier. The boy reacts to a series of impressions gained from his environment, his senses, and his own thinking. For instance his early impression of war as a great and glorious conflict is gained from his early reading, gossip, newspaper accounts, and his own imaginings.

The main character in the book is introduced although we do not learn his full name until later. The author speaks of him as "a youthful private" or "the youth." We learn that Henry Fleming is a farm boy, who, before his enlistment and during the first few days of his service, has created in his mind an illusion about himself and about the nature of war. His illusions reigned over the reality until after he has experienced the monotony and anonymity of being "part of a vast blue demonstration." He has temporarily lost his sense of identity until the rumor of impending battle jolts him back to a consciousness of himself as an individual. Then he turns his attention to the central problem of the book, his behavior in a real battle. Will he fight bravely and honorably or will he cowardly run away?

The other characters in this chapter tend to point up Henry's character and his illusions. It is emphasized that Henry's whole regiment is untried and thus all the men face what he faces. The veterans call them "fresh fish." The tall soldier enjoys being the center of attention when he spreads the rumor. The loud soldier is swaggering and seemingly unthinking. Both are more concerned about the externals of going into battle than their behavior during the fighting. Thus Henry feels alone with his problem.

Crane's realism is apparent in this chapter. The soldiers talk in a dialect which was common in rural areas during the Civil War period. Henry's mother, during the very emotional moments when Henry tells her he is going to enlist and when he says his farewells to her, milks the cows, and peels the potatoes. The tall soldier hears the rumor when he is washing his shirt in the brook. Henry first meets the enemy when he and a rebel soldier are both standing guard duty on opposite sides of a river. They chat amiably and like each other.

The chapter moves ahead through a series of pictures or images. First there is the picture of the arguing soldiers excited by a rumor. Then there is a picture of Henry in his shabby, crowded hut thinking of his past life and what may occur in the future. The two merge in the last picture as the tall and loud soldiers enter the hut still arguing and disturb the youth's reverie. By means of Henry's reverie Crane reveals the background of the youthful hero.

## CHAPTER II

### *Summary*

The chapter opens with Henry Fleming learning that the tall soldier's rumor is false, that the company will not move after all. However, the youth is still troubled by the question of whether he will be brave in battle. He thinks about the question constantly and finally comes to the conclusion that he will not know the answer until he actually gets into battle. He becomes eager to fight so that he can prove his courage. He seeks comfort from the other soldiers. The tall soldier, whom he has known since childhood, gives him the

most consolation because he feels that he can do what the tall soldier can do. Even so, a battle may bring out hidden qualities in the other man. Henry alternates between thinking his companions are the bravest of men and as frightened and wondering as he, himself, is. He cannot find anyone to confide his fears in as he is afraid of being ridiculed.

One morning the order is given to move. There is much speculation among the men as to where they are going. Henry, however, is lost in his own thoughts. He is depressed while his companions sing and make jokes. A fat soldier battling with a country lass about a horse makes the soldiers forget their big war for the moment.

When the soldiers camp for the night Henry withdraws from his comrades to think his gloomy thoughts. He becomes homesick as he thinks of the farm and the peaceful animals on it. He thinks that perhaps he is not cut out to be a soldier after all.

The loud soldier, Wilson, interrupts his reverie and asks Henry what the trouble is but the youth cannot tell him. Wilson talks happily of the battle and how they will defeat the enemy easily. He swaggers as he talks of the fight ahead, obviously confident that he will fight hard and well. Henry asks him how he knows that he won't run from the battle. Wilson laughs at the thought and refuses to admit that there is even the possibility of such a thing. He becomes angry with Henry for bringing up the question and leaves him again.

Henry feels more alone than ever when Wilson leaves. He goes to bed in his tent but has a hard time going to sleep because of his great fear that he will prove to be a coward. In the background he hears the snoring of the tall soldier and of other soldiers playing cards. He is alone with his mental anguish.

### *Commentary*

On a physical level the chapter finally sees the regiment starting toward a battle. Rumors and speculations are rampant. The soldiers are happy and confident as they look forward to their first battle. The tall soldier seems very matter-of-fact about the engagement. The loud soldier is swaggering and confident.

Henry's battle in his mind continues. He cannot again become part of the anonymity of the "blue demonstration." He no longer just wonders if he will be courageous in battle but now fears that he won't be. He tries to "measure himself by his comrades" but he is not able to sense any insecurity in them. He is homesick, lonely, and unhappy.

One of the most striking images in this chapter is the picture of the marching army as "moving monsters." Crane describes the soldiers as "huge crawling reptiles," "long serpents," and the like. This has the effect of depersonalizing the army and the men in it. The men seem to be part of one moving insect. This is in keeping with the impressionistic method which presents a scene in terms of colorful images.

Crane uses color more like a painter than a writer. He is interested in the effect of light on color as is shown by his pointing out that the soldiers' uniforms before daybreak "glowed a deep purple hue." He speaks of the enemy campfires as "red eyes."

Crane again shows how he can fuse the real with the imaginative and achieve a single effect. While Henry is suffering mental agony in his bunk Crane introduces a background of relaxed soldiers playing cards. Both of these are in contrast to the poetic image of the "red, shivering reflection of a fire on the white wall" of Henry's tent. The three elements point up Henry's suffering and insecurity.

### CHAPTER III

#### *Summary*

The chapter opens with the troops crossing the river and then camping for the night. The next morning they start their march again. The regiment begins to lose some "of the marks of a new command," although they still do not look like veterans. They begin to get rid of the non-essential items in their knapsacks.

The regiment rests briefly again. One morning early Henry is awakened by the tall soldier and he finds himself running along a

path in the woods. Presently his regiment is joined by other regiments and Henry realizes that the time has finally come, that he is about to be tested. He thinks of running away but realizes that he can't as he is surrounded on all sides by the regiment. He feels as if he is "in a moving box." He forgets momentarily that he voluntarily enlisted and blames a cruel government for what he considers to be a death march.

As he marches toward the front line the youth is, at first, curious and tries to see all he can. He is fascinated by the skirmishers in front of him who shoot into bushes and trees in the distance. He encounters his first corpse and stares at it curiously. However, his curiosity soon is satisfied and he feels more alone than ever. He becomes obsessed with the thought that the troops are marching into a trap and that none of the leaders know it. He wants to warn his companions but doesn't for fear of ridicule. The regiment halts in a forest and the men busily dig trenches but are soon moved to another position and then another. The youth feels the strain of the waiting; he is eager to fight to prove to himself that his doubts about his courage are false—"The youth had been taught that a man became another thing in battle."

The tall soldier accepts the situation calmly, in an uncomplaining manner, and eating whenever he can. As the afternoon wears on, Henry feels "stupid and incompetent" again but this time does not try to fight his fears. He decides that perhaps death is the best solution to his problem but the sight of fighting ahead drives the thought out of his mind.

The loud soldier, at the sight of the fighting, becomes depressed and feels certain that he will be killed. He gives Henry a yellow envelope to deliver to his family after his death.

### *Commentary*

This chapter is concerned with the march toward the front where the fighting is taking place. There is a feeling of movement throughout the chapter. The infantry gets rid of excess baggage so it can move more efficiently. The chapter ends when the regiment finally reaches the front.

In Henry's mind there is also a feeling of movement as he goes forward to meet his challenge. His thoughts are always concerned with his problem but he reacts to it in different ways as he moves along. At one moment he feels trapped by the regiment unable to escape if he wants to. Even the landscape seems hostile to him. Sometimes he forgets his fears in the face of his curiosity about war. At other times he looks forward to death as a possible solution. For the most part he is eager for the battle so that he can prove to himself that he is courageous.

There are many contrasts between illusion and reality. For instance, a "house standing placidly in distant fields" looks "ominous" to Henry. He has the illusion that he was forced to join the Army and to fight although actually it was entirely his own doing.

Crane's realism is shown often in the chapter. One example is the description of the dead soldier. He is presented very realistically pointing out the horror of war.

It is significant to note that the tall soldier and the loud soldier are changing their attitudes. The tall soldier seems less concerned with rumors and tactics. He still argues with the loud soldier but defends his leaders. New soldiers cannot see the whole picture of the war and thus cannot see the reasons for the many moves and delays. He is calm and does not object to the hardships of marching.

The loud soldier is still complaining and swaggering until the regiment gets to the front and he sees the fighting. Then he loses his cocky pose and becomes frightened, upset, and unsure.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Summary*

The brigade is hiding near the edge of a grove of trees with their guns pointing toward the open fields. They look out through the haze of gunsmoke and see running men and also hear them gossiping about the battle. Although they are not yet fighting, bullets whiz over their heads causing twigs and needles to come down on

their heads. The lieutenant gets shot in the hand and the captain binds it up with his handkerchief. They watch a regiment retreat amidst catcalls from the veteran regiments on either side of it. The retreating men frighten Henry's regiment and make them want to run too. However, they all stay where they are. Henry realizes that he has not seen the enemy yet. He thinks that once he has seen the enemy, he, also, will be very ready to run away.

### *Commentary*

The regiment is waiting in a grove of trees to be called to join the fighting. This is a time of quiet after the continuous move in the last chapter. The retreat of another regiment shows the recruits the reality of war. Their side cannot always win and not all men can fight off an attack. Henry and his comrades are almost at the point of being in battle themselves.

## CHAPTER V

### *Summary*

The chapter opens with the regiment still waiting to be called into battle. Someone calls out, "Here they come!" and the soldiers prepare themselves for the fight. The general appears on his horse and tells the colonel that the line has to hold the enemy back. All the officers look agitated.

Henry takes his rifle and starts shooting at the enemy. He forgets himself for awhile, forgets that he is an individual and feels that he is a part of the common personality of his regiment. He is always conscious "of his comrades about him." He feels "the subtle battle brotherhood more potent even than the cause for which he was fighting." After a time he feels the physical effects of fighting, burning sensations in his eyes and roaring in his ears. He then develops a "red rage" and feels frustrated because he does not have the power to make a grand gesture and subdue the enemy all at once. He feels almost suffocated from the smoke of the gunfire.

There are no "heroic poses" or "picturesque attitudes" on the part of the soldiers and officers. They are fighting intently in every conceivable posture. The officers are running "to and fro roaring

directions and encouragements." Several men are killed; others are wounded.

At last the fighting stops. The youth realizes that he and his comrades have repulsed the attack. He, at last, takes a drink of water and surveys the scene around him. He sees the motionless forms of the dead and the slow procession of the wounded as they move away from the battlefield. He hears the sounds of fighting coming from all directions and for the first time realizes that the fighting is going on in other places and not just where he is.

### *Commentary*

This is the first picture of an actual battle in the book. War is presented with moving realism. The soldiers are intent on what they are doing. They suffer from heat, smoke, noise, and exhaustion.

The Army is again presented as a single entity, but this time as a person rather than an insect. Henry forgets that he is an individual and is "welded into a common personality...dominated by a single desire." When the wounded men start to leave, Crane speaks of their procession as "a flow of blood from the torn body of the brigade."

The grim picture of warfare is contrasted with a serene, unblemished nature. The youth is amazed to look up and see a "blue, pure sky and the sun gleaming on the trees and fields."

One good example of impressionism in this chapter is the comparison of guns to Indians as follows:

The guns squatted in a row like savage chiefs. They argued with abrupt violence. It was a grim pow-wow.

The youth does not consider his state of mind in this chapter. Crane suggests that Henry is in "his battle sleep" and is not fully aware of all that he is doing.



## CHAPTER VI

### *Summary*

The youth wakes up from his "battle sleep" and considers himself and his reaction to the battle. He is delighted with himself and feels that he has fought well and heroically. He feels that he has passed the test. He displays a new interest and good will toward his companions and chats sociably with them.

But suddenly to the regiment's amazement the enemy reappears. The men are tired and cannot stand the thought of more fighting. The youth feels that it must be a mistake. He is on the verge of total exhaustion. He exaggerates in his mind "the endurance, the skill, and the valor of those who are coming." The man next to him suddenly stops shooting and runs away howling. The youth sees other men fleeing. He feels that perhaps he is being left behind by his regiment to fight the enemy alone.

Suddenly the youth becomes panic-stricken and runs away from his post. He is so frightened that he loses all sense of direction. He becomes more fearful as he runs and imagines that he is being chased by the enemy. He narrowly misses being hit by a stray shell in a little meadow. He comes across a battery of six gunners and feels sorry that they soon will be killed by the enemy who is chasing him. He sees a fresh brigade marching toward the fighting.

As he moves away from the noise of the fighting he slows down his pace. Presently he comes upon a general seated upon a horse conferring with his staff who are also on horseback. The youth hangs around to see if he can learn anything. He discovers that his comrades have held the line, that there was no general retreat after all.

### *Commentary*

The first five chapters have led up to the moment in this chapter when the youth's worst fears are realized and he runs away from his battle post. While he can see his comrades at his side fighting steadily he, too, is molded into the common person of the regiment and can fight. However, when he is cut off briefly from the other men he