Ambrose Burnside took command of the Army of the Potomac at Warrenton, Virginia, on November 7, 1862, and in ten days reached the Rappahannock opposite the undefended town of Fredericksburg. A pontoon train for bridging the river was to have been waiting for him, but due to negligence in Washington, it did not arrive until well after Robert E. Lee had reached Fredericksburg with James Longstreet’s corps of the Army of Northern Virginia. While Burnside considered crossing the river at various points above and below the town, Lee assembled his entire army along the south bank of the Rappahannock. Eventually Burnside decided to make a frontal assault at Fredericksburg, and sent his troops across the river on December 11. Two days later the Army of the Potomac attacked the heights behind the town. Lieutenant Samuel W. Fiske of the 14th Connecticut Infantry described the assault in a letter to the Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, using his penname Dunn Browne. Union losses in the battle totaled more than 12,600 men killed, wounded, or missing, while Confederate casualties were about 5,300.

Dunn Browne on the Battle Field

Fredericksburg
December 15

Oh, Republican! My heart is sick and sad. Blood and wounds and death are before my eyes; of those who are my friends, comrades, brothers; of those who have marched into the very mouth of destruction as coolly and cheerfully as to any ordinary duty. Another tremendous, terrible, murderous butchery of brave men has made Saturday, the 13th of December, a memorable day in the annals of this war.

On Friday, Fredericksburg was taken with comparatively little trouble and loss. On Saturday, the grand army corps of Sumner marched up against the heights back of the city, where the enemy lay behind strong fortifications, all bristling with cannon...
and protected by rifle pits; while our men must cross a wide
space of clear, open ground, and then a canal whose every
crossing was swept by artillery so perfectly trained beforehand
that every discharge mowed down whole ranks of men. Into
this grand semi-circle of death our divisions marched with
rapid and unflinching step. French’s division (to which we be-
long) behaved splendidly, and the others no less so if we may
judge by the losses. Of whole companies and regiments not a
man flinched. The grape and canister tore through their ranks,
the fearful volleys of musketry from invisible foes decimated
their numbers every few moments; the conflict was hopeless;
they could inflict scarcely any damage upon the foe; our artil-
lery couldn’t cover them, for they would do more damage to
friend than to enemy; yet our gallant fellows pressed on, deter-
mined to scale those breastworks and take the position of the
rebels. But there were none left to do that work. A little hand-
ful of a great division approached, and even in a few instances
began to climb the works, but only to leave their mangled
bodies on the bloody field; a few torn and blackened remnants
of the fine regiments sternly retired to the city. The wounded
were mainly brought off, though hundreds were killed in the
benevolent task. The city is filled with the pieces of brave men
who went whole into the conflict. Every basement and floor is
covered with pools of blood. Limbs in many houses lie in
heaps, and surgeons are exhausted with their trying labors.

But I will not sicken you with a recital of the horrors before
us. Why our noble fellows were pushed on into such a hopeless
and desperate undertaking I am not military man enough to
say. Or why the grand division of Hooker were marching and
countermarching all through the day on the other side of the
river, and didn’t cross over till just at night to help in the
bloody business, if it must be undertaken, I do not know
either. Indeed I don’t know anything hardly save that I am sick
at such a destruction of noble human lives, necessary or un-
necessary, useful or useless.

Personally, dear Republican, I was not much in the fight
except to be under the shell fire a considerable part of the day
in my anxiety to reach my regiment, and failing that to get as
near as possible, as a spectator of the terrible scene. Sick for
two weeks of a fever and diarrhoea, I heard the heavy firing of
Thursday from a hospital ten miles distant, got permission from the surgeon in charge to mount a U.S. wagon laden with medical stores and start for the regiment. But the fearful roads of corduroy under a foot or two of mud, and the feeble state of the teams living for weeks on half forage, hindered us, and prevented your correspondent from reaching his post till the day after the battle. And doubtless the sight of the poor remnants of his regiment—one hundred men only reported for duty—and of his brigade, not enough to make half a regiment—and then not having been in the scene where the change was effected, have come over his feelings more powerfully than would otherwise have been the case, and given a sad tinge to what he ever wishes to write cheerfully. For God is over all, and even this thing is right, and shall come out in a result of good, sometime. God grant we may see it!

December 17: Night before last, quietly and without disturbance from the enemy, we evacuated Fredericksburg, and marched back to our respective old camps on this side the Rappahannock. In the darkness and through the deep mud the tired soldiers plodded wearily on their way, and then on their arrival were obliged to lie down on the ground and make the best of a rainy winter’s night, before they could proceed to arrange themselves any comfortable quarters. Let us hope that the shattered divisions that bore the brunt of the fatal fight behind Fredericksburg may be left to a little rest before meeting any more of the horrors of a winter’s campaign in this terrible country. Oh for a month of that beautiful weather that we wasted in the autumn. We hear rumors of the capture of Fort Darling and of Richmond, but do not credit it. If it only could be so, and that our desperate attack at Fredericksburg could have the excuse of being a part of the preconcerted plan to occupy the attention of the enemy and keep his forces here, it would much relieve many sore and discouraged hearts.

We brought off all our wounded from the city, and have left little that is valuable on the other side, save our unburied heroes on the field of battle. The pontoon bridges too are saved and ready to throw across again, and our heavy artillery command the passage of the river at any time, I suppose.

Dunn Browne

December 15 and 17, 1862