

AT THE CANNON'S MOUTH.

BY JOSEPH A. ALTSHELER.

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PART I.

I found it neither a pleasant nor an easy task to force my way through the undergrowth which flourished in such thick and tangled fashion and the snoring of my wound, slight though the latter was, for the ball had merely cut the flesh of my wrist, contributed to both my bodily and mental suffering. The faint flashes of summer lightning in the hot June night gave brief and imperfect glimpses of masses of low, scrubby trees, with interlacing bushes and briars, and an occasional pool of dirty and discolored water, rimmed in by the Virginia mud, sticky and yellow, into which I tumbled more than once when the friendly lightning was not at hand. Then, pulling myself out again, I tore my clothes and skin on the clumps of briars that caught me, as I blindly plunged forward. Two hours of such work and, with the feeling of a shipwrecked sailor among rocks and reefs, I reached the river bank. True, it was not much, merely a path, where the undergrowth had been crushed down, as if by some very heavy weight, probably a train of artillery. For I trod the ruins cut by wheels. But it was not the undergrowth which made the path so much greater a hindrance and less dangerous to my person, and would undoubtedly lead me to the main body of the army.

A large rain drop splashed in my face, and then another, and soon a torrent came down. I plucked on, while the rain beat upon me. Out to the right I heard the frequent booming of cannon. Twice shells came shrieking high over me, and I voluntarily ducked my head at the noise, for I was not yet an old enough soldier to cure myself of the habit. My wound had now ceased to pain me, but the bitterness of my reflections was sufficient torment. I had come up the Peninsula with the great army, to obtain my first taste of War. Often had I, like many another young soldier in that gallant body of men, painted rosy pictures of victory, promotion, rewarded patriotism and a round-topped crown. With a light heart I encountered the toils and deprivations of the advance. I had the enthusiasm of youth, and was daunted by no obstacle. I did not fear the fever bred in the swamps of the Chickahominy, which cut down our men as if we were standing in front of the enemy's artillery. I did my share, and twice my share, of the work which tries a soldier more than fighting. I took an ax and helped to build roads through the swamps, and bridges over the swollen streams. We thought of the wheels of the cannon stuck in the mud, and at night I did picket duty in the dense forests, and sometimes, in the darkness, heard a confederate bullet hiss by me. But all the time we were cheered by the knowledge that we were advancing. We thought of nothing but forward, forward, and our hardships were forgotten in the reflection that at each sunset we were nearer to the enemy's capital.

The reverse side of the picture had come quickly enough, I thought, as I stumbled into the miry edge of a small brook that ran across the path. The prize was almost within our hands. I had even seen, one bright morning, the spires of Richmond glittering in the sunshine—and then we were turned back. For a moment I felt a regret that I had not been taken prisoner by the enemy in the last battle, when I was cut off from my regiment, instead of escaping through their lines to struggle among the woods as best I could. In the effort to join the retreating army, the grotesqueness of my anticipations had made the repulse the more mortifying.

The voices of the night repeated the word, retreat, retreat, retreat. The very shells that sang over my head had but one tune, and it was retreat, retreat, retreat. The plashing of the rain formed the same sound, and I began to repeat it to myself as a kind of chorus. At last I saw a light, far ahead and faint, but very cheerful in the darkness and rain. I was sure that I had overthrown a portion of our rear guard, but, as I came nearer, I saw that it was a house standing in a small clearing, and the light came from one of the windows. There were no pickets about.

Finished eating the food that they had placed before me, thanked them, kissed the little girl, and followed once more the path of the retreating army, whose rear guard I overtook in encampment not an hour later.

The sun shouldered his golden disk above the horizon the next morning, and flooded the earth with yellow sun-

transformed. The men laughed and, when discipline allowed, shouted to each other. Many of the wounded begged the privilege of taking a place in the ranks, and there was no need for the officers to exhort the troops, and endeavor to excite their courage. Secure in their position, they had all the ardor of battle, and awaited with impatience the coming of the enemy. My regiment was stationed in the front rank. The privations and bitter feelings of the previous night were forgotten, and I paid no notice to the trifling wound on my arm, for like the others I was anxious that we should beat the enemy back, and repay him for some of the losses that he had inflicted upon us.

Before waiting long, we saw Confeder-

ate troops debouche from some woods about a mile distant. We watched them for a little while, and then I had some experience in seeing the colored sent me forward to join our skirmishers and bring a report to him. I advanced among the rocks and bushes, until within a few hundred yards of the enemy. I stooped down behind a large rock and watched their movements. Within the edge of the woods I could see the house at which I had stopped during the previous night, and I wondered if its inmates had taken me at my word, and had gone.

While I was watching, a shell flew over my head, struck the ground near the confederate troops, and exploded. Directly came another, and it alighted among them, causing great confusion. One man was killed, as I could plainly see, and several others were wounded. They withdrew in haste and much disorder. Some of them came back. I supposed they were trying to recover the body of the dead man, but I could not see why they should take so great a risk for so slight an object, slight, at least in war, and upon the eve of a great battle. They were a shining mark for our batteries, and again the shells came flying toward them, tearing up the earth around them and covering them with dirt.

I watched their movements, and would be annihilated within a few days. As I was receiving their hospitality, I did not care to dispute these points with them, but asked why they had remained in such an unsafe place, when a cannon ball might come crashing through their house at any time.

The man replied that he did not like to abandon his home, as he had nowhere else to go, and that he did not anticipate any danger.

Again I did not care to differ with him, and I merely uttered some compliments about the pretty little girl and her beautiful yellow hair, which caused the mother's face to flush with pride.

I warned them to keep the child out of danger, as flying bullets might be numerous in that vicinity, before long, and the father repeated that there was nothing to fear.

I finished eating the food that they had placed before me, thanked them, kissed the little girl, and followed once more the path of the retreating army, whose rear guard I overtook in encampment not an hour later.

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SHE TURNED HER FACE TOWARD THE CONFEDERATE.

that had concealed him, and, when it drifted aside, he was still rushing on at the head of the enemy. Once he stumbled and fell upon his knees, and I was sure that he was shot, but he had slipped on a stone or something else, and in a moment recovered himself, and came on again. Balls, grape shot and shells tore the ranks around him, but he was untouched and came straight as the flight of a hawk toward me. I felt sure that I would have to shoot that man, or he would have my own life, and I deliberated whether to aim at his head or his heart. At length I decided upon the head. A curl of his black hair fell down upon the left side of his forehead, and I would shoot straight between the end of that curl and into his head. I wondered if my nerves would remain steady, and I could hit so small a mark amid the great noise and confusion. I even held out my arm to see if it shook, but not a muscle quivered. From the man next to me I heard a faint cry, and I saw a colored man give the preliminary command, and I knew that the one to fire would come next. I leveled my gun, and looked for my confederate. There he was, as before, directly opposite me. The black curl still hung over his left eye and offered a fair mark. They had now reached a little patch of bushes that fringed the base of the slope. I sighted at the black curl, and my hand felt for the trigger while I awaited the order to fire.

An exclamation from the man next to me startled me and disarranged my aim. From the bushes in front of the charging Confederates arose a figure very strange to the battle field. Full into view came the long yellow curls and frightened face of a little girl that I had seen before. I dropped the muzzle of my gun in amazement as she stood there between the lines, scared and appealing.

She came out of the bushes which had concealed her, and, running midway between our lines, and those of the advancing enemy stooped, evidently too much terrified to move any further. She was directly between me and the Confederate soldier with the black curl. In a few moments he would be upon her, I felt a thrill of sympathy for the child alone on the battle field.

"I can explain that," he replied. "A curious thing happened over there. We captured some prisoners a short while ago, and one of them told us about it. A man with his wife and child lived in that house in the edge of the clearing. The man persisted in remaining until the last moment, although he saw our troops massed on the hill. He did not get out until the Confederates themselves came, and even then they had to hurry him away. At that time the shells struck, and in the confusion the child disappeared. The troops, instead of coming back after the body of the dead man, came for her, but they did not find her."

I went on and delivered my report to the colonel, but I thought much, on the way, of the child. What would become of her? Doubtless she would be found after the battle, ridden over by the cavalry, or torn to pieces by a cannon shot.

Heavier masses of the enemy now issued from the woods, and it was evident that the battle was at hand. For some time there had been a lively firing, but this was to be the great trial of strength. The Confederates formed batteries in the woods behind their infantry, and replied to the shells that were hurled in the earth about ten feet from me. Another went over my head and killed a man in the rear rank. A minie ball broke the colonel's sword sheath. It was getting very uncomfortable. I was willing to fight, but I did not like waiting, and anxiously watched the dense columns of the enemy who were moving toward the hill.

They came on steadily and at a trot. All our batteries were turned upon them, and the men were loading and firing as fast as they could. Whole platoons of the advancing enemy were swept away, but the others never paused or hesitated. As I stood with my gun in my hands, my admiration for their courage was unlimited. Many of them were in their shirt sleeves, as I have often seen the Georgians and Mississippians fight, but they came on a run over the broken ground, and seemed to fear the rain of shot and shell no more than a boy would a snowball. Even in moments of greatest danger and excitement, the mind often involuntarily dwells upon trifles, and I remember smiling at the queer appearance their heads made, bobbing up and down, as they came over the uneven ground.

Then I fell to watching individual soldiers, for they were near enough for us to discern their features, whenever the clouds of smoke blew aside. I was particularly attracted by one who was coming straight toward me. The force of the rain of shot and shell had no more than a boy would a snowball. Even in moments of greatest danger and excitement, the mind often involuntarily dwells upon trifles, and I remember smiling at the queer appearance their heads made, bobbing up and down, as they came over the uneven ground.

He let his gun fall to the ground, stooped down and took the little girl in his arms. The action could be plainly seen by a personated order, the artillery and small arms on either side ceased firing.

The roar of the battle field was replaced by a silence that would have been complete had it not been for the groans of wounded men, and I knew that thousands of eyes were strained upon the soldier and the child, looked at the man next to me. He seemed oblivious of the conflict. I looked at our colonel, but he had forgotten the command to fire.

The soldier bent his head and kissed the child, and then lifted her high over his shoulder and handed her to the man behind him. Then we could see her passed rapidly from rank to rank, until in a few moments the frightened face and yellow curls had disappeared toward the wood, and she was in safety.

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The soldier seized his gun, uttered the rebel yell, and came on again with line after line charging behind him. Our colonel shouted "fire!" and the volley blazed from our rifles. At the same moment a hundred cannon from the summit of the hill poured a torrent of lead and iron upon the charging battalions, and the batteries of the enemy replied. The earth shook as if in the throes of an earthquake. My ears were deafened by the uproar, and thick clouds of floating smoke hid the dark volleys and his companions.

DESERVES ENCOURAGEMENT. From the Philadelphia Bulletin. Speaker Boyer deserves encouragement in carrying out his purpose to have the floor of the house at Harrisburg this winter cleared of visitors, lobbyists and other persons who have no business there other than that of curiosity or buttonholing members for their votes. The house has too often lost all semblance of dignity in the promiscuous crowd of sight-seers and politicians who have been permitted to enjoy the privileges of the floor in the midst of a session, and the speaker is determined, so far as he has the power, to put an end to the abuse. There are few legislators, even in the west, which have been so good-natured and so accommodating in these things as the legislature at Harrisburg has long been. The business of law-making for a great commonwealth is too important to be conducted amidst the rabble that heretofore has had access to the floor, and the members should in self-protection strengthen the hands of the speaker in his new departure.

People shudder when they think of the possibility of sudden death by violence or accident. There is a sentimental horror attached to death that makes people prefer the grim monster in almost any other guise. Yet all the lives that are lost each year by violence and accident are but an insignificant fraction to the untold thousands that are slain by the grim and insidious consumption. It is the most insidious and the deadliest of all known diseases. It knows neither rank nor wealth. It attacks people in all the walks of life. It makes no distinction. It has for centuries been considered incurable.

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