

# **At the Cannon's Mouth**

**by Joseph Alexander Altsheler, 1862-1919**

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I found it neither pleasant nor an easy task to force my way through the undergrowth which flourished in such thick and tangled fashion, and the smarting 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 floundered 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 delight that a shipwrecked sailor must

experience when he sees a rescuing sail, I struck a beaten track. True, it was not much. Merely a path, where the undergrowth had been crushed down, as if by some very heavy weight, probably by a train of artillery, for I tread in the ruts cut by wheels. But it enabled me to advance with much greater speed and less danger 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 plodded on, while the rain beat upon me. Off to the right I heard the frequent booming of cannon. Twice shells came shrieking high over me, and I involuntarily 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 roseate pictures of victory, promotion, rewarded patriotism and a reunited country. With a light heart had I encountered the tolls and privations 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. Then I tugged at 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 at the time we were cheered by the knowledge that we were advancing. We thought of nothing but forward, forward, and out 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 hand. 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 greatness 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 splashing 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 overtaken 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, no evidences of encampment, and I knew that our men were not near. Evidently it was occupied by a family which, more fearless than others in that region, had not taken itself from this battle ground and gone to Richmond, or some similar place of security. Though it was a risky business to linger with the enemy so close behind. I was tired and hungry, and had lost my way, and I determined to hail them, and get

something to eat and news of the army, if I could. I went up to the door and knocked lightly on it with the muzzle of my rifle. I repeated the stroke two or three times before a man's voice called out and asked who I was. I replied that I was a Union soldier who had been cut off from his command, and wished to obtain information that would guide him to the army.

At first he refused entrance to me, saying that the Yankees had found their own way into Virginia, and could find it out again.

I replied that I was sick and wounded, and appealed to the hospitality of Virginians, who boasted that they never refused aid to the suffering and unfortunate.

This evidently touched his pride, for he opened the door, held up a lantern in my face and looked closely at me. He must have been satisfied that I was not dangerous, for I know that I did not look like it, although I was by no means a pretty figure. I was wet and bedraggled, but the rain had not washed all the yellow mud off me, and on my uniform there were still streaks of the blood that had flowed from my wounded wrist. He invited me to enter, in a not unkindly tone, and I followed him into a room that was furnished with a fair degree of comfort. He seemed to be a Virginia farmer of some cultivation, for his language was not bad. In one corner sat a woman of about 40, evidently his wife, who held in her arms a little girl of three or four years, with beautiful, long yellow curls which at once attracted my notice and admiration. My countenance must have expressed these feelings, for both the man and woman softened toward me, and the latter volunteered to bind up my wrist, while the former stated that some of our troops had passed only an hour before.

While the woman was putting the bandage on my wrist the man brought me something to eat, though he said the provisions in the house were scanty, and he had much rather give them to a confederate than to a federal soldier. They avowed their confederate sentiments, and gloried in them, exulted over our retreat, knew the enemy were pursuing us, and boasted that our army 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 crushing 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.

The sun shouldered his golden disk above the horizon the next morning, and flooded the earth with yellow sunshine. The rain drops dried up, the grass and foliage turned to a deeper green, and the despondency that I had felt during the night passed away before the glorious daylight. We lay upon the heights, and the

army had turned at last. We faced the enemy once more, and there, expectant and confident, we awaited his onset, for we knew that he would come, and we believed that we would beat him back. The army was 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 he had inflicted upon us.

Before waiting long, we saw Confederate troops debouche from some woods about a mile distant. We watched them for a little while, and then, as I had had some experience in scouting, the colonel sent me forward to join our skirmishers and „bring a report to me.“ 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 suppose they were trying to recover the body of the dead man. But I wondered 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.

They retreated, but in a few minutes returned again to be driven back as before by the shells. I could not understand such obstinacy, but, as I had more serious work to do than to discover the cause, I continued my reconnoissance, and moved off to the right. The Confederate troops remained stationary at the edge of the woods, and I had plenty of time for my duties. About an hour later I started back to my regiment. On the way I met another of our skirmishers and told him about the little episode of the Confederate troops and the shells.

„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 our fire. A cannon ball struck 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 nor 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 greater danger and excitement, the mind often involuntarily dwells on 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 fierceness of his appearance indicated the soldier who loved fighting for fighting's sake. He wore neither coat nor waistcoat, and his long, black hair fell partially over his half wild face. He waved his gun above his head, and joined in the rebel yell which I had heard before in the swamps of the Chickahominy. If he were not shot down on the way, this man would charge directly upon me, I thought, and perhaps I would die by his hand.

We were ordered to reserve our fire for closer quarters. I had become fascinated by the appearance of the Confederate who was coming in my direction, and thought little of the bullets that fell around me. I was watching that soldier. When the command to fire should be given I determined to discharge my gun at him. If he ever reached us, I felt sure that he would kill me. I wondered if he would be shot down by the artillery before our turn to fire came. Twice I lost sight of him, and thought that he was down, but each time it was merely some smoke 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 thick hair fell down upon the left side of his forehead, and, if the smoke did not conceal him, 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 one arm to see if it shook, but not a muscle quivered.

The colonel now gave the preliminary command, and I thought 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 uprose 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 appalling.

She came out of the bushes which had concealed her, and, running midway between our lines and those of the advancing enemy, stopped, evidently too much terrified to move any further. She was directly between me and the confederate soldier with the black hair. In a few moments he would be upon her. I felt a thrill of sympathy for the child alone on the battle field, and at the same time a desire to save her. I wondered what the Confederate soldier would do when he reached her, for I had come to the conclusion that he would not fall unless I shot him. Would he rush on over her? Would he trample her into the dirt, or merely thrust her aside?

The child may have cried out with fear, but I could not hear her, for the roar of the battle filled my ears, and I was watching the wild-looking Confederate. A light wind blew the smoke at that point aside, and I could see distinctly. She turned her face toward the confederate, and a beam of sunlight fell upon her hair. I glanced up and down the ranks. I could see, by the look of apprehension on the faces of our men, that all had noticed her, and the muzzles of many guns had fallen, as mine had.

The dark confederate was almost upon the little one. Evidently he had not perceived her, for the ardor of battle shone undiminished upon his face, and again he waved his gun over his head, a thing which soldiers never do in a charge, unless they are much excited. Another step would bring him to her, and at this moment I think that for the first time he perceived the frightened face and yellow hair.

The soldier dropped his gun by his side. The fierceness went out of his countenance, and... he stopped... The whole line stopped with him, and those behind coming upon the wall of their comrades were brought also to a halt. 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 both armies. Suddenly, as if by a preconceived 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. I looked at the 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 hair had disappeared toward the wood, and she was in safety.

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 soldier and his companions.

