

My Pennsylvanian

by Joseph Alexander Altsheler, 1862-1919

Published: 1897

in »Lippincott's Monthly Magazine«

Re-published: 2016

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I had no particular fancy for the task to which I had been assigned. Still I was not minded to give it up. In the military life the duty of obedience is soon impressed upon one, and, moreover, I had become hardened to such riskful adventures.

„You are so skilled in creeping to the edge of death and then creeping away again without giving Old Nick the chance to make a single snap at you,“ said our colonel one day, „that we will keep you for such dangerous but important duty.“

Our colonel was always a man of discernment and tact. But, though I was full of pride at his words, my modesty compelled me to restrain the expression of it. It is true, some of my comrades charged that when I returned from the successful completion of such duties I was wont to assume a fine importance and to take

privileges for which they would not dare to ask. But I submit that my conduct on those occasions was no more than my services warranted. Is it not written in the greatest of all books that the laborer is worthy of his hire? And who labors harder than the soldier, in particular when his government can neither put clothes upon his back nor food within his stomach and he must forage for himself? Not that the latter is wholly without spice or reward upon occasion.

My mind was running upon these things rather too freely for the good of the business I had in hand, and the twig of an overlapping bush caught in my homespun tunic. It thrust itself in at a hole a British bullet had made not three weeks before. I was, in truth, very near the edge of death, to quote the colonel's phrase, when that bullet warmed my skin, but not so near as I was when at Long Island we held back Howe's whole force and saved our army from destruction. Jupiter, how the bullet that cut into my shoulder then stung me! I have always believed that it was a Hessian bullet, and because of it I have ever since cherished an exceeding great animosity against all Hessians. Moreover, the Hessians make most comfortable spoil, as King George clothes and arms them to an exceeding degree of excellency.

I disentangled my tunic from the bush and crept forward again, bidding myself to be more cautious or ere long I would be swinging in a British noose, to the great gain of the British cause and the great loss of our own. To make my way silently but with speed through undergrowth was no difficult task for me. I have hunted the 'coon and the 'possum too many a night in the thick woods of the Eastern Shore when a boy to lose my skill as a man. And in truth the colonel gave me so much work of this character that I would have been compelled to recall my knowledge of wood-craft had I ever been in danger of losing it.

Presently I saw ahead of me a little clump of bushes of an exceeding great degree of density. It occurred to me that I would act wisely to secrete myself in the clump and watch about me for a while. According to my calculations, and I am wont to be precise in such matters, I was very near the doubtful space between the lines of the two armies, the strip of region which both claimed and neither held. It behooved me, therefore, to be of exceeding caution and to look well around me. I slipped through the bushes, but not without difficulty, into the centre of the clump, and then, after I had bestowed myself with a fair degree of comfort and with my rifle across my knee, I found that I had, with my usual good judgment, secured a most admirable outlook. In front of me was a stretch of ground rather more free of undergrowth than the remainder of the forest seemed to be, and my view was better than I had anticipated.

I sat there for some time looking about me to see some signs of the British. I have always been proud of my eyesight. In truth, it was good by nature, and had received such a degree of training for work like this that no gleam of red coat could appear even for a moment among those trees without my seeing it.

I saw nothing but the trees, and heard nothing but the silence—for you can hear the silence of the woods. I began to believe that the enemy was not as alert as I—which, however, need cause wonder in the mind of no one.

The time lengthened into a half-hour, and then I heard the faint sound of a trumpet. It came from the British lines, I knew, and it was very far away. In truth, it would not have been audible at all had not a smart breeze been blowing toward

me. It is a very curious thing how sound rides the wind like drift carried on by the waves. On a clear night, with a strong wind blowing in the right direction, I have heard the sentinels exchanging the watchword in the British camp nearly a mile away.

So far as I knew, there was nothing of significance in the blowing of the trumpet, but it was a very pretty sound. It has always pleased me to hear the distant notes of military music. The sound is martial, yet it strikes upon the ear as gently and sweetly as the falling of a rose-leaf. It moves me, and yet does not make a woman of me. In truth, I have always felt that I have a fine fancy and am of a some-what poetic turn. Had it not been for the troublesome character of the times, and had I been permitted to cultivate my gift—but pshaw! the life of a soldier, cold and hungry as it often is, doubtless finds more clothes for the back and food for the stomach than the making of rhymes ever will.

The trumpeter was playing a tune. But I thought nothing of that. The British were much given to playing defiant music when they lay near us, inasmuch as they were usually in far greater force and their arms and other equipment were of immense superiority to ours. But it was a diversion that they carried too far sometimes, for when they followed us through New York after the beating they gave us on Long Island all their trumpeters played a fox-hunting tune. Then we turned upon them and cut up their vanguard, which was a source of much mortification to Earl Howe and of a great uplifting of the spirits to us.

The playing of the trumpet ceased, without leaving me in any measure the wiser, and after biding there a quarter of an hour longer I began to think it was time for me to bestir myself. My knees were getting stiff with crouching so long in a scarce-changed position, and, moreover, it did not become me to waste time.

I had just swung my rifle around in preparation for the start, when I heard a noise among some bushes a small distance to my left. All my trained and professional instincts were at once upon the alert. I remained quite still, listening with that intentness which is necessary when one is engaged upon such dangerous and delicate business as mine.

The noise, which sounded like the fluttering of a bird's wing among the grass and leaves, continued for a half-minute perhaps. Then there was naught but silence. I concluded that the rustling was in truth made by a bird, but I am too cautious a man to rest content with mere surmises. Battles are not won by guess. Moreover, I had a reputation to maintain.

So I remained quite still, waiting for a repetition of the noise, if perchance there should be such repetition. Many minutes passed. Few men would have had the patience to sit there as I did, but then the colonel had paid me the compliment of hinting that I was not an ordinary man. After a while my waiting was rewarded, for I heard again the sound, which was a mixture of a crackle and a rustle. But I was not able to make out the cause of it, for I could see nothing living.

The sound continued, but instead of approaching me it moved away. I was not pleased thereat. I could not return to the camp and look my colonel honestly in the face unless I discovered the cause of that noise. There was naught for me to do but to pursue it.

It had entered into my mind that my vexatious neighbor was a rattlesnake. I have a strong aversion to rattlesnakes, and it would give me great pleasure to

crush this reptile with a stone or a stick. My hunter's instinct, as well as curiosity and professional pride, was aroused. So I gathered my rifle up by my side. It is a trick that I have when scouting through underbrush. If you hold your rifle by your side parallel with your body and close to you, it becomes a part of you and therefore is not likely to become entangled in anything to your great discomfort and equal danger.

I crept out of the bushes, and did it so well that I do not think I made a noise that could have been heard even by a rattlesnake. Just beyond me was a fallen tree, the trunk of which was half decayed. Yet it was so large that what was left must have lain a half-yard high on the ground. It was just such a place as a rattlesnake would love, and I said to myself, „Now, my fine reptile, I will find you soon enough, and smash your head off for annoying me when I am engaged in the transaction of an affair of high importance to the army and the patriot cause.“

I now perceived that the sound came from beyond the tree-trunk. As I approached, it ceased, but I was confident the reptile was there, in all likelihood basking in the sun, which at that spot broke through the trees, imagining in his foolish pride that he was the king of all these woods. He would lose his crown and his head to boot, and that, too, mighty soon.

I reached the log, and then, noiselessly rising up, peeped over. I saw no snake, but what I did see was a fine fat soldier, spread out on his face and stomach, and looking about him with all the wisdom of an old gray owl. I dropped back; then I rose up again and took another look. I knew the man, upon the instant, for what he was. All that plumpness and girth of figure could belong to none but a Pennsylvanian. I also caught a glimpse of his fat Quakerish face, and nothing more was needed.

There had always been a feud between us Marylanders and the Pennsylvanians; for the matter of that, the remainder of the army invariably took our part. The hungrier and thinner all the others grew, the fatter and more contented those Pennsylvanians looked. Where they got their provisions none of us could ever tell, but thin men were as scarce among the Pennsylvanians as fat men were among the remainder of us. And the Pennsylvanians—a plague on their Quakerish skins—made such pretensions to piety, too. I have never had any love for that kind of piety which keeps you from dividing the bread and meat in your knapsack with a half-starved comrade.

What inflamed me the more was the presence of this lump of a Quaker scouting in my own particular bit of territory. Did he think to forestall me, who was so finely skilled in such affairs? Why should any officer send such an awkward body as that to do work which required knowledge, foresight, and alertness of movement? The very proof of his unfitness for the task was evident in the fact that he lay there like a great fat turtle sprawled out, and entirely unconscious that I was present and watching every movement he made.

He was dressed much as I was, in a homespun tunic and trousers, the ancient color of which had long since been destroyed by dirt and wear. He moved forward a foot or so from the log and looked about him. Then the right thing to do occurred to me. As I have said, I have no love for the Pennsylvanian, and this fellow in particular had thrust himself upon me in the most aggravating fashion. There he

lay upon his stomach, and he offered such a noble opportunity for revenge that I could not resist it.

I raised myself above the log until I could get a good swing for my arms. Then, reversing my rifle, I grasped it with firm hands by the barrel. I paused a moment to see whether the Pennsylvanian suspected my presence, but the fat fool was so busy examining a cluster of trees that he never looked behind him. Then I swung the rifle two or three times around my head and brought the flat part of the stock down with great force upon the anatomy of the Pennsylvanian.

There was a mighty spat, the splitting of cloth, and a yell of pain and surprise. Then the Pennsylvanian sprang to his feet, rubbing himself and looking wildly about him. But he saw nothing, for I had dropped noiselessly behind the tree-trunk. I could peep up at him, but he could not see me. He stared stupidly all around, swearing under his breath, as the Quaker militiamen mostly do, for their principles will not allow them to swear out loud. It was hard work for me to keep down any longer at the sight of his gruesome face.

After a minute of this useless staring, Master Quaker seemed suddenly to remember the business that he had come about, and that it was hardly wise on his part to stand there staring and screwing up his red face. So he dropped down behind the fallen tree, and in a few moments I heard him twisting about as if he were trying to look over the trunk and see what had smitten him with such suddenness and force. Then, still laughing to myself, I determined to give my fat Quaker another surprise.

I began to thrust my own face up. I raised it very slowly, and just as my eyes reached the top of the log I saw a thatch of red hair appearing on the other side. More of his head came into view, and then in a moment a pair of astonished eyes was staring into mine across the log.

„Hello!“ he exclaimed, in a startled way.

„Hello to you!“ I replied, with an air of indignation. „Is that any way to salute a gentleman, with your *hello?*“

„It’s a better way than you saluted me, I’m thinking,“ he said, ruefully.

„Oh, that was merely a friendly tap. I don’t see that it did any harm,“ I replied, examining the stock of my gun with a finely critical air.

„But I fear that it has done harm to me,“ he said, with the same rueful air, though he did not appear to be angry. Those Pennsylvania fellows never know when they are insulted.

„Are you scouting?“ he asked.

„Yes,“ I replied; „and you are too, I suppose?“

„A little,“ he said, „but it’s a slow business.“

„That depends upon a man’s gift for it,“ said I, as I coolly seated myself upon the log. „If he has the gift for it he can do it, and if he hasn’t he can’t, and that’s an end to it. Now, my friend, I don’t believe you have any gift for this business, and, to tell you the truth, your scouting days are over, at least for a long time.“

„Why?“ he asked, in mild surprise.

I had shifted my rifle around until the muzzle covered him, and now I was ready to come to the kernel of my joke.

„Why, it’s just this,“ I said, and with great difficulty I smothered my laughter and made my voice solemn. „You take me for an American, whereas I am an

Englishman. Now, if your brain is bright enough to see the point readily, you must admit that you are my prisoner, and that never was a man taken more easily.“

His jaw dropped, and he ejaculated, in the most stupid fashion, „Your prisoner!“

„Yes,“ I replied, and in my enjoyment I could not restrain a little chuckle this time; „but be comforted, my good fellow. You Pennsylvania chaps haven't much stomach for the fighting, and when you're a prisoner you can't fight, you know. There's consolation for you in that. You can't lose your life, and we won't treat you badly.”

„That's true,“ he said, as if my words had entirely reconciled him to his situation.

But a moment later I saw a light spring up in his eye, and he shook his head as if a thought had occurred to him. Then I knew that he was planning some trick, and I was on the watch for it.

„You have made a mistake, my friend,“ he said. „I am an Englishman too. You don't want to make a prisoner of one of your own comrades, do you?“

But I was too old a hand to be deceived by a device of such transparency as that.

„Come, now,“ I said. „You Pennsylvanians—for I know your breed—are too clumsy to impose upon people with such tales. Why, your very tunic shows that you belong to the Pennsylvania line.“

I pointed to his homespun garment. His face was red by nature, but it turned much redder. The man convicted himself.

„You are right,“ he said; „but don't take me into the British lines. I would not like for it to be known that I was taken in such a manner as this. It might get back to my comrades.“

„Where else do you suppose I could take you?“ I asked, in a high fashion. „I haven't a private encampment of my own, in which I could keep you a prisoner. So you must even go with me into our lines. Now get along.“

He did not make much more delay, but, very crestfallen of countenance, began to walk before me toward the encampment of the British army. I held my rifle under my arm in such convenient position that I could throw it to my shoulder on the notice of a moment. But I was far from the idea of doing such a thing. I merely intended to carry a good joke to the furthest point, and I anticipated no attempt to escape or device to annoy me on the part of the Pennsylvanian. He was too heavy and dull-witted to do aught but what I told him to do.

I was sure that no one was near. My previous examination of the forest had convinced me of that fact, and hence my prisoner and I walked upright.

„You have not had much experience in scouting,“ said I, thinking to console him a bit.

„No,“ he said. „I haven't made any attempt before, and I don't seem to prosper in such pursuits.“

„I would advise you,“ I said, warmly, „to leave it alone. It requires a peculiar skill, gift I may call it, that is born in one, and cannot be acquired. Now I think that you Pennsylvanians do much better in the provision and supply department of the army. That is your place. You stay there, and leave the more important affairs, such as planning campaigns and executing delicate movements, to us.“

„I think I will hereafter,“ he said, regretfully.

He seemed so much impressed by my excellent advice that my heart warmed to him as the heart of a teacher warms to his apt pupil. I was going to make some further remark of a consolatory nature, but just then we entered a place where the wood was denser, and as we curved around a hill we met three British soldiers. These fellows were in their uniform, red coats and all, of such a newness and goodness of texture that I was filled with envy, for I had not had a new uniform now for more than two years.

Most men would have been stunned when placed in such a situation, and I myself am even willing to confess to a feeling of dismay at first. But I saw that I must act with great fortitude and brazen the matter out, risking everything on my courage and happy chance.

„Hello, comrades,“ I said, cheerily. „I warn you against such incautious procedure. The rebels are thick about here, and if you are not wary you will walk into a nest of them.“

„Have you seen any of them?“ asked the foremost of the three soldiers, somewhat nervously.

„Seen them?“ I said, in most high and mighty accents. „I should think I had. Not only have I seen them, but I have had further dealings with them.“

My Pennsylvanian opened his mouth and was about to say something, but instantly I was upon him with the utmost fury.

„Be silent, you damned rebel!“ I shouted. „If I hear you say a word I’ll smash your head with my gun-stock. Is it not enough for you to plunge into wicked rebellion against your lawful king, who prays for your soul’s welfare every night and morning of his life, without opening your mouth to preach sedition in the presence of loyal and devoted servants of His Majesty, such as I and these gentlemen here?“

My eyes blazed with apparent wrath. The soldiers looked approvingly at me. „How did you take him?“ one of them asked.

„I was scouting in the woods back yonder,“ I replied, „and I surprised him crawling among the bushes, like the worm he is. I intend to take him into the camp, where an example can be made of him. He is a most unconscionable villain. From the very moment I took him he has been attempting to prate to me about the justice of his wicked and rebellious doctrines. Half a dozen times I have thought I would have to ram his teeth down his throat and gag him with them. Be silent, you rebel! Do not defile the air with your seditious words.“

„I suppose they will hang him,“ said one of the soldiers, looking at my Pennsylvanian.

„Hang him? of course they will hang him,“ I replied; „and richly he deserves it, too. He is a spy. I took him within our lines. He will get his deserts, and that speedily, never fear.“

The blockheads never for a moment suspected what I in truth was, my presence of mind and dash had imposed upon them to such an extent.

„Well,“ said one of them, enviously, „you have had luck, and will get a reward. I wish I was in your place.“

„It requires only skill and energy,“ I said, grandly. „If you will only go over there and beat through the woods in the most wary manner, you may have equal luck. But take care: those rebels know how to shoot.“

I moved my hand to the left as I spoke, and they walked off in that direction, each giving me a friendly nod as he went away.

I was struck with admiration at the success of my bold measures in rescuing myself from such a precarious position, and, prodding my Pennsylvanian with my gun-barrel, I told him to march on. It was evident now that we were dangerously near the enemy, and I intended to curve around to the right, in order that we might retrace our steps to the American encampment.

„You did that very cleverly,“ said my Pennsylvanian, when we had plodded along a bit.

The words showed more perception than I thought him capable of, and he began to rise in my esteem.

„It was not half bad,“ I said, carelessly; „but I have been in much worse fixes than that. All it requires is a little courage and presence of mind. But I guess this joke has gone far enough. We had better stop it, as we are close to the British lines.“

„I think so too,“ he said. „There is an outpost just over the hill there.“

„We won't visit them,“ I said, leaning against a tree, „for I am no Englishman at all, my Quaker friend, but an American, and I have merely been teaching you a few tricks.“

I expected him to burst out into a great sputter of indignation, but he did nothing of the kind. He sat down on a convenient stone and looked at me, an air of fine contemplation on his face.

„So,“ he said, „you are not what I took you to be. You are an American.“

„That is the precise truth,“ I said. „Haven't you got into a pretty pickle, allowing yourself to be taken in such a highly ridiculous fashion by one of your own comrades? Why, the whole army will be laughing at you for months.“

„They would laugh of a certainty,“ he said, in his musing fashion. „That was a hard blow you gave me. I feel it yet.“

„Yes,“ I said, „but it will not interfere with your marching. Come along now: I think we'd better be returning.“

„I don't think I'll go,“ he said, decidedly.

„Why?“ I asked.

„It's because I told you the truth,“ he said. „I am, as I said, an Englishman, and not a Pennsylvanian. It's the first real chance you've given me to say so.“

There, on the border of the English encampment, I could not doubt that his words were true, even had not his tone been convincing. I felt great surprise, and in truth much chagrin too, I confess. But I have always made it a point to hide my feelings.

I looked at the man, and he looked at me, though I do not think that either could read the other's face.

„I bear you no malice for that blow,“ he said.

„You should not,“ I replied. „It was not intended for you, but for a Pennsylvanian.“

„But I got it,“ he said.

„It was one of the little mistakes that will occur in the military life,“ I replied, apologetically.

He seemed satisfied with that, and we relapsed into a gloomy silence.

„You are my prisoner,“ he said, after waiting a minute or two.

„You are mine,“ I replied.

„I have only to give one halloo,“ he said, „and a dozen comrades will come running over that hill there to take you.“

„I have only to pull the trigger of this rifle that I hold in my hand,“ I said, „to blow you into the Englishman’s heaven.“

He rubbed his head and thought a moment.

„It seems to me that we are both in a tight fix,“ he said, despondently.

„It looks like it,“ I said, with equal despondency.

He shook his head slowly, as if the matter were too deep for him. But my mind was at work.

„There is no law against an exchange of prisoners,“ I said.

„There is none that I ever heard of,“ he replied, brightening up.

„I’ll give you my prisoner for yours,“ I said.

„It’s a fair trade,“ he replied.

„Then we may consider the bargain complete,“ I said.

„It’s done,“ he replied; „but we ought to ratify it in some manner.“

„It’s the custom to put these things in writing,“ I said; „but we have no writing-materials.“

„I have something else,“ he said. „Wait a bit.“

He thrust his hand into his pocket, and, pulling out a large black bottle, banded it to me. I drew the cork and took a long, deep, and refreshing draught. Then I handed the bottle back to him, and he took a drink of equal duration.

„You are hospitable,“ I said.

„It’s no more than right that I should offer it to you,“ he replied. „I stole it this morning from an American farm-house.“

„It’s none the worse for that,“ I said.

Then we saluted, and he went back to his army and I went back to mine.

