The Break of Day

by Joseph Alexander Altsheler, 1862-1919

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"And you feel sure that the attack will be made before morning?" asked Carson.

"Undoubtedly," replied Beltone. "They know that our defenses are imperfect and that we have lost heavily. They will not give us time to strengthen ourselves."

"Can we beat them off?"

"I do not think we can stop them. I would not say this before the men, but I will to you. They appear to be in force much superior to ours. Besides, they are just as good, man for man, as we are. They have shown that here as well as many a time elsewhere. Did you notice the tall, slender man, with the scar across his face, who was in the front of the charge they made this morning?"

"The one who climbed upon the breastwork at the left angle?"

“Yes. Right in the mouth of our guns. Even after the attack was repulsed he leaned over and chopped at our cannoneers with his sword until some of the men seized him and dragged him inside, a prisoner. When they have the advantage of numbers and of darkness to render our aim ineffective we cannot overcome such desperate courage as that.”

“But we may be reinforced.”

“Improbable. We have been tangled up a long time in the wilderness. The movement was well intended, but it has failed; and now we are like a mislaid and forgotten package in this lonely and isolated spot. Remember how long it has been since we have heard from the army. We do not even know which way it has gone.”

“You don’t take a cheerful view of the matter.”

“I was merely presenting the facts. But don’t look upon me as a croaking raven, predicting evil, old fellow. There are no cowards in our party, and I dare say we shall give a good account of ourselves. Only, as the last hand in the game is to be played soon, I wish our hand was as good as theirs.”

The two young officers shrank close to the rude and hastily thrown up earthwork as they whispered together. The darkness, heavy, clammy, and thick with the exhalations from the slimy ooze of the swamps, oppressed them. Behind them they could see indistinctly the recumbent forms of some of their comrades catching a little sleep upon the ground. To the right and to the left were the sentinels. In front was the little clearing, and beyond the forest in which the enemy lay. The moon cast down a few pallid rays which apparently served only to make the darkness visible.

“What a black night!” whispered Carson. “This darkness and the swamp ooze creep into my marrow and numb my courage. I have to reinforce my nerves with my will.”

“Many a brave man before you has had to do that when old Father Sun has gone down the other side of the earth,” returned Beltone. “Fighting is bad enough at any time, but a night attack, barring the noise, is like a battle among the ghosts. Can you see anything over there in the wood?”

“No,” said Carson; “I can barely make out the outline of the wood itself. The moon is of very little use tonight. I suppose it is so much ashamed of the war and bloodshed here that it does not consider it worth while to pay any serious attention to this portion of the earth.”

“Never mind,” said Beltone; “it’s the same moon that’s shining, or rather not shining, for the enemy over there. So long as the darkness is as thick as this they will not attack. They could not tell friends from enemies.”

“They are silent in the wood,” resumed Beltone, a moment later. “Such a considerable force lying so very near us makes no noise that we can hear. I should say that circumstance certainly portended an attack. They are resting before the rush. Ah, what is that?”

“You have nerves as well as I,” chuckled Carson, “when the hoot of a swamp owl, which you have heard many and many a time before, would disturb you like that.”

“I don’t deny it,” said Beltone, “nor am I ashamed of it. It is hard enough work to lie down with the reserves in a big battle and wait your turn to be called, while you hear the cannon thundering in front, and the wounded are taken by you to the

rear, and the Minié balls are zip-zipping over your head. But then you have the bright sun shining over you, and there is no friend like the daylight. Here you crouch in the darkness and wait for a hand to cleave the black veil and strike you."

There was perfect silence in the camp. In the distant wood, the notes of the night owl rose higher and higher and grew more mournful the higher they rose.

"Isn't that a brooding raven?" whispered Carson. "He makes the lines of that old poem sing through my head."

"It may be the dirge of some brave man," returned Beltone; "again, he may be lamenting man's folly."

"Confound it, I wish he would stop, whatever he means. The swamp and the darkness and the owl together may be too much for me," said Carson.

Beltone did not reply. A faint breeze sprang up, but it brought to them nothing but the rustling of the leaves, and the owl's melancholy measure. The two young men still sat by the earthwork, and tried to pierce the darkness. Presently Beltone said,

"The moon is getting brighter; can you see anything in the wood there now?"

"Nothing except the trees that compose it," returned Carson. "We might send a cannon ball into it. That would stir them up."

"It's not worth while," said Beltone. "They would simply draw further back, if they are not already out of range. There's nothing for us but to wait."

"Beltone," said Carson, "I don't mean to be melodramatic or sentimental, but if I fall you will tell them at home what became of me?"

"Certainly," replied Beltone calmly, even cheerfully, "if you are the one taken and I am the one left. If it is the reverse, I ask you to do as much for me. If we both fall, probably enough of our comrades will be left to make all the history of it the world needs."

They relapsed again into silence, but remained beside the breastwork, voluntary and vigilant sentinels. Old Time moved on with heavy step. The owl's hoot died away, and only the rustling of the wind through the leaves was heard.

"It seems a week since the sun set," said Carson.

"And that means that it will be another week until the sun rises again," returned Beltone. "It must be about midnight now. Do you see anything in the wood yet?"

"No, only the trees swaying in the wind. I think I shall climb upon the breastwork and get a better view."

"Don't do it."

"Why?"

"Sharpshooters. Some of them can see like owls, and the shadows will not protect you."

"I'll chance it."

Cautiously he climbed the earthwork. There was a report from the wood, followed by the familiar singing noise that a Minié ball makes, and Carson rolled back into the camp.

"It is nothing, or rather a narrow escape only," he said getting up. "I felt the swish of his bullet past my cheek. I am not hurt."

Beltone made no comment. By and by he asked again,

“Can you see anything yet in the wood?”

“No; nothing but the black wall of trees.”

“But don’t you hear a sound that is not the rustling of the leaves?”

“I think so, but I can’t tell yet whether it’s reality or the imagination.”

“There, again; don’t you hear it?”

“I seem to hear something; but still it may only be imagination playing one of her tricks at the sunset of life.”

“If I do not really hear it, then imagination is very strong, even for such a night and such a situation as this.”

“The balance is certainly inclining to the side of reality.”

“Listen!”

They lay perfectly quiet for a minute, straining every sense to hear. Then Beltone drew his pistol belt a little tighter.

“There can be no doubt of it,” he said. “The wind is blowing from the wood towards us, and in the stillness of the night sound comes a long distance with great distinctness. I have heard such sounds too often before to be mistaken. That steady, regular pulsation could not be made by anything but marching troops.”

“It isn’t possible that they are withdrawing! Beltone! Do you think they are?”

“No. They have been reinforced. That sound was made by troops coming to join them. It means heavier odds against us when the rush comes. There—do you hear that? Am I not right?”

A cheer, far away and faint, but unmistakable, came to them. In a moment it was repeated, and then again and again, each time swelling with increased volume.

“I don’t see why they should make so much noise about it,” said Carson, a little pettishly.

“It’s their time to cheer,” returned Beltone quietly.

After the cheers came silence, and for a long time the listening men could hear nothing. Then a confused hum and murmur of voices came from the wood; but this, too, soon died away, and the stillness of the night settled down again. It might have been a half hour afterwards when a plaintive but clear note pierced the air and startled the listening men. As it continued, the sound grew louder and fuller. Mellow and sweet, it filled the darkness around them.

“A violin!” said Carson. “On the eve of battle. How strange!”

“I never knew anything like it before in all my experience of war,” returned Beltone. “But hush, listen. Don’t you recognize the tune?”

Through the heavy night air floated the solemn strains of “Home, Sweet Home,” and the music rose and fell as if the hand of a master held the bow.

“Perhaps the forest is haunted,” whispered Carson.

“If it’s not, the force out there has a strange commander!” returned Beltone. “He has an odd method of rousing the spirits of the men for battle.”

“Beltone,” said Carson gravely, “don’t forget your promise about telling them at home, if I fall in the morning.”

Before Beltone could reply a voice, deep in the wood, took up the strain of the violin and blended with its notes. Over them and around them, clear and sweet, floated the words and the echo of the song:

Home, home, sweet homeBe it ever so humbleThere's no place like home

The atmosphere had cleared and the moon shone bright. Beltone could see a tear glisten on the eyelid of his companion.

"Do not be ashamed of it," said Beltone, with a nervous little laugh, as Carson raised his hand to wipe the tear away. "When we lose our feelings we cease to be men."

He stopped, for now a dozen, twenty, even fifty—yes, a hundred voices, far away in the wood, joined in the song of home.

Then the melody ceased. Beltone heard a sigh of regret, like an echo, from Carson.

Neither spoke for some time. Then Carson said,

"Beltone, what does it mean?"

"I cannot say. Perhaps it was for amusement. But I would choose another kind of music for troops who expected to make a bloody assault in an hour or two. Still, you never can tell what a commander will do. The sternest of them grow sentimental sometimes."

Beltone shrugged his shoulders, and the two again relapsed into their silent waiting. But they heard the music no more.

"What we shall hear next will be music of a different sort," said Carson.

The night crept on with heavier steps than ever.

"Daylight cannot be far away. The enemy's rush is near at hand. We are as well prepared for him as we can be in this camp here. But I wish it were all over."

"I believe I hear their footsteps now," said Carson. "Listen. Are they coming?"

But the sound, if there was any, died away, and the two men crouched against the soft earth, waited, and heard nothing.

A slight gray streak appeared in the east. It broadened, and soon bars of light shot up over the forest.

"He will come now," whispered Beltone, "when there is just light enough for him to see our camp, and too little for us to take aim by."

But the wood was still silent. No human forms could be seen among the trees. The bars of light broadened. The red edge of the sun arose above the horizon. A full throated bird in a tree began to sing.

"Strange," said Beltone. "Where is he? He is not wont to be lax like this."

The morning grew, until camp and forest and swamp were flooded with the yellow sunlight.

Suddenly Carson grasped Beltone's arm.

"There is some one," he said. "They are coming at last!"

A man appeared at the edge of the clearing. He held up his hands and walked towards the camp. He was unarmed.

Beltone and Carson watched him intently. The rifles of the sentinels covered him.

"I wonder what he is after? Does he want to play with us after the cat-and-mouse fashion?" muttered Beltone.

The man came on towards the camp. Other men fell in behind him, but came no further than the edge of the wood. The stranger walked with an easy step, straight and firm, toward the earthwork where Beltone and Carson stood, awaiting his approach.

“An officer of rank. A colonel, at least,” said Beltone.

The stranger saluted.

“I wish you a pleasant morning, sirs.”

“We are indebted to you. I trust you are well,” said Beltone, with equal politeness. “May I ask you who has honored us with this visit?”

“Certainly.” He spoke with great dignity. “I am Colonel Walton of the Louisiana troops, commander of the forces out there.”

“I have heard of you often, colonel,” returned Beltone. “We have not forgotten how you held us back that fierce day at the bend of the river.”

“I have done the best that I could for what I thought was right,” said the colonel simply.

Then Beltone asked,

“Have you any message that I may take to our commander?”

“Yes,” said Colonel Walton. “We were joined by Tennessee troops last night. Their officers are fine fellows, and they bring us news. Perhaps you heard us singing in the night?”

“Yes,” said Beltone wonderingly.

“Well, then,” the stranger continued, “say to your commander that I and my officers would be greatly pleased and honored if he and his staff would take dinner with us today. It is true that we have little to offer, but I dare say we can treat you well.”

“Why, sir,” said Beltone angrily, “what sort of jesting is this? We are aware that you are in overwhelming force, but before we go into your camp as prisoners you must first come and take us. War is bad enough, sir, without such ill timed jokes as this.”

“War?” said Colonel Walton calmly. “Why do you speak of war? General Lee and his army surrendered three days ago. The war is over.”