

# The Fate of the Gun

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

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The sun sent down sheaves of fiery rays and the soldiers behind either line of earthworks sought to shelter themselves alike from the burning heat and the bullets of the enemy. They did not know which they dreaded the more.

„My, how hot it is!“ said Helm, taking off his cap and wiping his forehead.

„Yes, but if you were to stick your head up above the earthwork there you'd find it a good deal hotter,“ said Willard.

„The Yankee sharpshooters, you mean,“ replied Helm. „There's a fellow over there a little bit to our right who never misses. He clipped off my finest lock of hair, the one my sweetheart at home used to say became me so well, and made a red streak right across the top of my head. Say, how that fellow can shoot!“

Helm puckered up his lips and emitted a low whistle of admiration. Then his eyes wandered to the dismantled gun lying midway between the lines, its wheels shot off, its caisson smashed to pieces, but its mighty bronze barrel intact and ready again for death and destruction if mounted once more.

„It's a pity we can't get that gun,“ said Helm. „Put new wheels on it, give it a caisson, and it would be a wonder.“

„There's no doubt of it,“ said Willard, „but how to get it, that's the rub, and it's bothering us Johnnies just as much as it is the Yankees over there.“

These two divisions of the hostile armies had been face to face for days neither able to advance and both refusing to retreat. Three days before, one side had run forward a great gun in a bold attempt to break through the line of the enemy, but the gun's squad was annihilated almost instantly by the rifle fire, and the gun itself was dismounted by the shells of a sheltered battery. The victors did not dare go forth to secure the splendid gun, knowing that they in their turn would be swept out of existence by hostile fire. So there it lay midway between them, neither side able to secure it and both coveting it with all the ardor of veterans.

Helm doffed his cap and wiped his hot face once more. „How the sun burns!“ he repeated.

„So it does,“ said Willard, „but I believe they've gone to sleep over there in the Yankee lines.“

„Gone to sleep! Gone to sleep!“ exclaimed Helm scornfully. „You just stick your head above the earthwork and the sharpshooter down there a little to the right will show you whether or not they've gone to sleep.“

„I've a good notion to do it,“ said Willard.

„See here now, Willard,“ exclaimed Helm. „Don't you be a fool! I know it's silly of me, but I value your worthless life. I don't want to lose a friend. How would you know anyway whether they are asleep or not if you got killed? If you are bent on it, why don't you put your cap on your ramrod and stick it just above the parapet? Then you'll see if our friend the sharpshooter isn't awake.“

Willard lifted the cap on the ramrod a few inches above the earthwork, where it would look from the hostile line like a human head thrust up carelessly. Not a sound came from the northern earthwork. No rifle cracked; there was no flicker of smoke.

„They're asleep,“ repeated Willard, „and I'll prove it. Here goes my real head.“

He thrust his face above the earthwork and stood there staring at the northern lines. He was in plain view—brow, eyes, every feature. Usually at such a sight the whole northern earthwork would have flamed into fire with the zeal of the sharpshooters. Now the dead silence of the morning was unbroken. Not a rifle muzzle was thrust into view.

Helm was amazed. „What does it mean, Billy?“ he said to Willard.

The low, mellow note of a trumpet came from the northern lines. It was a signal, a musical note breathing of peace, and its soft echoes floated far away, repeating themselves among the sunny hills.

„They want to talk to us!“ exclaimed Helm. „I wonder what's up.“

The soft note of the trumpet came again, and then an officer in the uniform of a colonel appeared on the northern earthwork, waving a small white flag. A southern colonel rose up near Helm and Willard to respond and lifted a signal to advance.

The northerner leaped down boldly and came across the open space between the two lines that had been aptly named „The Plain of Death“. As he advanced he passed the fallen gun, halted there a moment, stroked the polished barrel and then walked on.

After the first signal both earthworks were lined with hundreds of heads. They popped up suddenly, and every pair of eyes gazed curiously at the northern colonel who walked so lightly across „The Plain of Death“, and on all their heads the sun blazed down.

„A fine fellow,“ said Helm to Willard, nodding toward the northern colonel who had crossed „The Plain of Death“, the southern colonel advancing to meet him. They saluted politely, and the southern colonel stood waiting and inquiringly. The northerner looked up at the long row of sunburned faces regarding him with so much curiosity and smiled. The men grinned back.

„Do you boys know what day this is?“ he asked.

„I know it's a mighty hot day and that's all I do know,“ replied the southern colonel. „The last date I remember was the 14<sup>th</sup> of May, and I've lost all track of time since then; can't catch up to save me.“<sup>2</sup>

„We're better off than you are.“ said the northerner. „We've got an almanac in our camp, and one of our men got to looking at it last night. He made an important discovery. Say, can't you guess what day this is?“

„Not if my life was at stake.“

„Well, it's the Fourth of July.“

A low whistle ran along the line of the southern earthwork.

„Yes, it's the Fourth of July,“ repeated the northerner, „and whether you succeed in going out of the Union or whether we succeed in keeping you in, the Fourth of July was for both of us, and it will still be for both of us. It's where we both got our start, and we can never change that, can we?“

„I reckon you're right,“ said the southerner.

„I reckon I am,“ said the northerner, „and, it being the Fourth of July and such a hot day, too, I thought we might as well skip the fighting until tomorrow and just make a sort of Fourth of July picnic of it.“

„I reckon you're right.“ said the southerner again.

„I reckon I am,“ said the northerner „and, while we're about it, why not do the thing up brown and have some sort of a celebration—fireworks for instance?“

„I don't know how to have fireworks unless we take to shooting at each other again,“ said the southerner grimly.

„Oh, no,“ replied the northerner; „there's a much better way than that.“ He turned and waved his hand toward the center of „The Plain of Death“. „You see the gun lying there? Well, you are not able to take it.“

„Nor are you.“

„Exactly. That is why I speak of the gun. A good many lives have been lost by both of us in the effort to take that gun, and if it stays there more will be lost. It's no use to anybody there, and still nobody can take it away. Now, I propose that we cram that barrel full of everything, including a good lot of powder, set a fuse and let her rip. It will be the biggest Fourth of July bomb ever set off, and it will save both of us a lot of hard fighting that can't profit either. What do you say?“

Illustration:

A wild cheer rose

Before the southern colonel could reply a wild cheer rose from the southern earthwork. The men had heard, and they approved. The southerner smiled. „Good enough,“ he said. „Let the boys have their fun and we'll share it.“

The signals were hoisted and in an instant „The Plain of Death“ was covered with ragged men in blue and ragged men in gray, pushing and shoving like boys, exchanging jokes and comparing notes. Then they rolled that cannon up into the most conspicuous place and stuffed its mighty throat to the very muzzle with inflammables and explosives. Helm and Willard working with the foremost.

Then the northern colonel set the fuse and the southern colonel shouted, „Scatter, boys for your lives!“ and they raced toward the earthworks for shelter. The southern colonel, standing erect took off his cap, whirled it around his head and shouted; „Now, boys, all together! Hip! Hip! Hurrah! Hurrah for the Fourth of July!“

The mighty cheer swelled from hundreds of throats in both earthworks, and when it died an intense stillness settled over „The Plain of Death“. The slow burning fuse was near its end.

The next instant a sheet of flame shot up, the mighty mass of metal seemed to leap into the air, the earth shook with a terrific explosion, and the greatest Fourth of July bomb ever set off had been exploded!

