

The General

by Joseph Alexander Altsheler, 1862-1919

Published: 1897
in »The Hartford Courant«
Re-published: 2016
Richard M. Woodward



The colonel's temper was in a shocking state. The cause thereof was manifest to the officers of the regiment, who tried to make a brave show of dignity in tattered regimentals. But the course of affairs was enough to depress the most spirited and the most patriotic, and there was not one among them who could hold his head very high without feeling that he was merely playing make-believe. The call, so widely circulated throughout that region, for recruits to help in the struggle against the „sanguinary tyrants of Great Britain,“ had met with no response. Not a single volunteer had come in. The country people everywhere appeared to be cowed by the enemy who had been making such head lately. The patriot cause was doomed, they thought, and they had no mind to risk life or limb in a hopeless struggle.

The colonel had abundant courage, but the reflection that he would have to report the flattest failure of the campaign to the commander-in-chief cut him to the quick. Having full knowledge of his ill humour, the adjutant and the quartermaster kept away from him as much as their duties would permit. They were lying on the hillside discussing the matter, and round them stretched the irregular camp. The ill clad soldiers hovered over the camp fires, and the sentinels walked their beats with weary feet. The whole detachment owned but one tent, and the colonel sat in the doorway of that, his chin resting on his hand and a very sour look on his face.

Just how he passed the sentinels Norton and Howard never knew, but suddenly a diminutive form stood before them and a thin but resolute little voice said:

„If you please, gentlemen, I've come to join the army and help beat the British.“

He did not seem to be more than half as tall as Norton or Orwell, and his clothing was rough and poor, but he was a very eager and earnest little boy. Nevertheless Norton and Orwell could not keep from laughing heartily, and Norton said:

„A camp is no place for runaway lads like you, and I'll warrant your father and mother will make it very unpleasant for you when they get you back home again.“

„If you please, sir,“ said the boy, very gravely, „my father and mother are dead, and I've come to join the army and beat the British.“

„What's the lad after, and why do you permit him here in the camp?“ asked a rough voice behind them.

The colonel had seen the boy, and the sight did not improve his temper. He could not imagine who would be guilty of such an infraction of discipline as to bring a boy who might talk all over the countryside into the camp, and he drew near to find out more about it.

„He says he has come to join our army and help beat the British,“ said Norton. „I suppose he has read our proclamation or heard of it. Do you scorn the reinforcement, sir?“

The colonel turned red in the face and uttered an unintelligible growl. Norton, although he was a favorite with the colonel, concluded that he had been imprudent.

„At least,“ he said hastily, „it shows that some spirit is left when the little boys want to join us.“

„Yes,“ growled the colonel, „they seem to be reversing things. But the trouble is they don't do it completely. For while all the men have turned into boys, only one boy has turned into a man. What's his name?“

He addressed the inquiry in a more kindly tone. During the debate the boy had stood stiffly erect in something like soldierly attitude. But he listened eagerly to every word that was said.

„Johnny Shelton,“ he replied to the question.

„How old?“

„Twelve.“

„Twelve! I wouldn't have thought it,“ said the colonel doubtfully. „From his appearances,“ he said, turning to his adjutant, „provisions have not been more plentiful with him than they have been with us. At any rate he has been in training for the military fare.“

„Oh, yes, sir,“ said the boy quickly. „I can stand anything and do anything. Please let me be a soldier and help beat the British.“

„Hearken to him,“ said the colonel. „What zeal! what enthusiasm! Norton, if you and Orwell could imitate this young gentleman’s spirited example, we might turn the tide of affairs very quickly. I’ll wager my epaulettes against a sixpence that he’ll be a general inside of a year, if he gets a chance in the army.“

„Oh, yes, sir; I know I will,“ said Johnny, delighted at this encouragement. „I’d like mighty well to be a real general, and I can be if you’ll only give me a chance, sir.“

Norton and Orwell laughed again, but the colonel reproved them with a gesture.

„I’m afraid you’re too small, my lad,“ he said, more gravely. „We can’t feed little boys like you to the cannon.“

„I’m not afraid,“ said Johnny stoutly. „Just give me the chance, sir.“

The colonel hesitated. Then he beckoned to one of the men who had drawn near, and told him to fetch a loaded musket.

„Now, general,“ he said to Johnny, „take that musket and aim at the big tree on the hillside over there.“

Johnny struggle manfully, but there was not enough strength in his thin little arms. He could not raise the musket to the required level.

„You see, you are too little,“ said the colonel. „You cannot aim a gun. It is too big for you.“

Johnny burst into tears, but he remembered in a moment that they were unworthy of a soldier and quickly dried them.

„If you please,“ he said, „I’ll grow, and the musket won’t.“

„But what are we to do with you in the meanwhile, general?“ asked the colonel.

„There are other things useful that I can do,“ said Johnny.

„Well, what are they?“ asked the colonel, impatiently, for he was becoming somewhat tired of the matter.

Johnny looked around him in despair. But presently his eyes alighted on a big drum that was lying near. Then his troubles rolled away.

„Why, sir,“ he said confidently to the colonel, „I can beat that drum there and call the soldiers to battle and keep their courage up. Then I’ll do a lot to help beat the British.“

„I’m afraid the drum is as much too big for you as the musket is,“ said the colonel, looking at the drum. „Why, it’s about as tall as you are!“

„I know it,“ said Johnny, his confidence in no wise diminished by the colonel’s depreciatory remarks. „But you just let me try, sir, and I’ll show you I can manage it.“

„Very well,“ said the colonel. „Give the general a chance.“

A soldier brought the drumsticks. The lad attached the drum to his side, or rather himself to the side of the drum, and took the sticks with confident hands.

„Now listen to me,“ said the general, his eyes shining, „and I’ll show you that I’m good enough to be a soldier.“

Illustration:
The General

Soon all the officers and half the soldiers in the camp were gathered around the little drummer and the big drum. Never before had they seen drumsticks wielded by such practised and skillful hands. The general beat the charge with so much vigor and spirit that the men wished the enemy would come in sight at once and give them a chance to get at them. Then, when he beat the retreat, it was hardly a retreat at all; it was so full of encouragement; it told the men they would have better luck next time, and it exhorted them to keep their spirits up and their faces to their foes. Then the general glided off into the rollicking music of a dance by the campfire and the heels of the listening men were itching to get a-moving.

While he played, the general's face was transfigured. He seemed to forget where he was. His whole soul had gone into his music and when he finished he came to himself with a kind of gasp.

„You'll do, general, you'll do,“ said the colonel, and in his enthusiasm he clapped his hand upon the boy's shoulder with such violence that the little fellow reeled against the big drum. „You're worth a whole regiment. With such music as yours to help them on the men ought to be able to march up against anything. Norton, find quarters for him, and see that he keeps this drum.“

The general, smiling and content went off with a sergeant, and the colonel returned to his tent.

In the course of time the general, despite his diminutive size, became, next to the colonel, the most conspicuous personage in the detachment. He marched and camped like a veteran, and always kept his beloved drum by his side. There was a-plenty of hardships for him as well as for the others, but he never complained. If food was scarce and there was nothing to eat when night came on, the General lay down on the ground and forgot his hunger in sleep. If he became footsore and weary on the march, and the big drum that dragged at his side grew heavier and heavier every step he took, he stiffened his muscles and tried to conceal the evidences of his exhaustion. So it was no wonder that the colonel gave him his distinct approval, and his title of „The General“ clung to him until his real name was forgotten by the few who had ever known it.

But The General's career was not one of unalloyed glory. There were some things that rankled very much in his mind. The times were gloomy. The patriot cause was in a bad way. That fact could not escape The General's observant faculties, and though he made a brave attempt to conceal his knowledge it preyed upon him. It also kept the soldiers in a bad and despondent humor, and as The General was by far the smallest person in the detachment, they were disposed to vent some of their vexation upon his head. Their teasing took various forms. Sometimes they would steal his drum away from him and hide it. All such things as this The General could stand, despite his love for his drum, but what cut him to the quick was the charge that he could not fight.

„Wait until we see the enemy,“ said one of the soldiers to The General. „You're spry enough now with your drum, and you beat it mighty well, but when the red-coats are comin', and their bayonets are glistenin', away will go your drum on one side and your drumsticks on the other, an' you'll think it's a deer scootin' off. That's what you'll do, General.“

The General invariably resented their aspersions upon his courage by offering to fight on the spot, but nobody would fight him, and he was forced to wait for an

opportunity to prove what stuff his spirit was made of. It seemed to The General that such an occasion would never come, but it did come at last.

The detachment was aroused early one morning and set off on a rapid march, for what point the general knew not. But he knew from the look on the faces of the colonel and the other officers that there was work ahead. He had also heard the order to the men to look well to their muskets and see that their ammunition was in order.

They crossed fields and passed houses and scared-looking farmers who ran when they saw the soldiers coming, but they stopped for none of them. About noon they came to a wood and the general saw something red gleaming among the trees.

„Now,“ said the colonel sharply to the general, „beat the charge as you never beat it before.“

The general seized his drumsticks and began a loud and rapid rat-a-tat rat-a-tat. The soldiers broke into a cheer and ran toward the wood, the general being borne on in the rush. A volley was fired from the trees. There were some cries of pain from his companions and the general saw two men fall. But the patriots never stopped. They rushed on toward the wood, cheering as they ran. When the general saw the men falling, he was terribly frightened at first, but he managed to keep his feet and rattled the drumsticks with all his might. In a moment they were into the wood and in the midst of the hurly burly. Through all the sputtering of the muskets and the crush of heavy blows, and the cheers and the counter cheers, the general pounded away on his drum with an unnatural vigor born of the excitement and fever in his veins.

By and by only the patriots were cheering, for all the enemy who were not captured or slain had taken to flight. When the general had recovered from his fit of excitement and battle fever, he was sitting, limp and weak, on a log, while the colonel was complimenting him on his bravery and the spirit which he had shown.

„I thought the men would have broken once, If it had not been for that midget and the ceaseless call of his drum, I believe that they would,“ he said afterward to Norton.

After this incident the general's courage was unchallenged, wherefore life became pleasanter to him. Also it was much easier to endure hardships, for he was now honored by the men as well as the officers and had a standing in the camp recognized by everybody.

The summer passed and affairs began to mend a little. The general observed that the cloud on the colonel's brow was not as black as it used to be, and that circumstances cheered him mightily.

One of the most important duties of the command was to forage. In a country that had been swept by both armies the task was attended with many difficulties and disappointments. But the general became quite an adept in the art, and his skill in this respect contributed quite as much as his bravery to the esteem in which he was held.

One evening just as dusk was beginning to fall and the command was going into camp, the general thought he saw the setting sun glinting along the eaves of a distant farmhouse. He said nothing about it to the soldiers, but immediately the thought of forage came into his mind. He was sure that none of them had seen the

house, and if there was anything to be had there, he would get it himself, though he meant to make a fair division of the spoils.

The men scattered themselves about the ground, each making himself as comfortable as he could. The general edged away toward the wood, intending to take a short cut for the house. It was no very difficult matter to get away, the guard being lax, owing to information that the enemy had withdrawn from that region.

The general took his drum with him for two reasons. First, the boys could not hide it while he was gone, and pester him about it when he returned; second, that drum was an instrument of many uses—one of its heads could be taken out, and slaughtered chickens and turkeys could be stowed in its capacious insides as snugly and neatly as if it were a big basket made especially for the purpose. In anticipation of such use, he removed one of the heads.

The general and his big drum were soon lost to sight among the trees and the shadows. But a sharp walk of fifteen minutes carried him through the wood, and then he came to a river. Beyond the river he could see the farm house of his desire. The colonel had known of this river, but the general did not until he was halted almost by its stream. It looked too deep to ford, and the general was sorely vexed, for he could not swim. But he was a veteran now, and made a call upon his resources. He followed the river down stream about a half mile until he came to a place so shallow that the water barely rippled over the stones.

The general walked across and then went back up the stream. It was quite dark now, but he could see dimly the outlines of the farmhouse, which stood about a quarter of a mile to the westward of the river. He approached boldly, but he grew discouraged when he saw not signs of the coveted forage. There were no cattle about; no chickens cackled in the yard. Nowhere were signs of life. At first the general thought that the house was deserted, but presently he was reassured by a twinkle of light from one of the windows. His spirits rose and his mouth began to water at the prospect of something better to eat than the ordinary hard fare of the camp.

He crossed the yard with firm steps and knocked at the door.

„Come in,“ said a masculine voice,

The general pushed open the door as he entered. As he put his foot upon the sill, several lanterns were held up and the room seemed to him to be full of red uniforms and yellow epaulettes. The general would have cried out in surprise, but a heavy hand fell upon his throat.

„Hold your lantern closer, Melville,“ said a gruff voice; „I want to see what sort of a capture we have made.“

A lantern was held so close to the general's face that he was compelled to wink both eyes. But he could see enough to know that he was in the hands of the British and that the owner of the gruff voice was the commander of the force. The general was trapped, but he determined to present a brave front, nevertheless.

„Pouf, it is but a boy!“ said the owner of the gruff voice.

„Still, Colonel Montague,“ said one of the officers, „a boy might know much that we want to know.“

„That's true,“ said Colonel Montague. „Boy, who are you?“

„If you please, sir,“ said the lad, „I'm the general.“

Some of the officers laughed, but Colonel Montague grew angry.

„What nonsense is this?“ he cried. „You, the general? The general in what?“

„In the American army, if you please, sir,“ said the general, leaning upon his drum for moral as well as physical support.

Colonel Montague burst into a harsh laugh.

„Well, the rebels are harder pressed than we thought they were, if they make generals of such as you,“ he said. „Gentlemen, we expected good luck to-night, but we little dreamed how extremely good it would be. I verily believe that we have caught the commander-in-chief of all the rebel armies himself. Behold him!“

All the officers laughed, and their ridicule recalled the lad's memory. It was so since he had been called by any other name than „the general,“ that he gave it involuntarily in reply to Colonel Montague's questioning. Now he remembered.

„If you please, sir,“ he said, „I don't mean that I'm a general. That's what the soldiers call me; it's just a nickname, though I'm going to be a general sure enough, some day. My real name is Johnny Shelton.“

„And I infer, Master John, from that instrument you have with you that you are a drummer boy in the rebel army, and that you are in training to get yourself hanged,“ said Colonel Montague sternly. „You are beginning at a very early age, young man, to tread the road to the gallows.“

The general felt uncomfortable. The prospect of such an unpleasant end had never been presented to him before, and he was very far from liking it. But he did not intend to let Colonel Montague see his trouble.

„I am serving my country, sir,“ he said.

„Your country,“ said Colonel Montague roughly. „Who made it your country? It's King George's country, as you and all the other rebels will soon find out. Take him outside, Melville, and see that the men keep a good watch over him.“

The officer led the general, still clinging to his drum, to the rear of the house. Here was an extensive wood and in it were hundreds of armed men in the British uniform. The fires were burning and the hoofs of the horses were muffled and their mouths muzzled. The general was placed with a squad of infantry, where he was compelled to endure much chaffing from the men.

„What a terror 'e is, Bill,“ said one of the men to another. „I don't wonder that we can't put down the rebels when they have such fighters as 'e is. I know I'd run, if hever I saw 'im a-comin'.“

„And so would I, Tom,“ said the other; „but look at the bloomin' youngster's big drum. I wonder if 'e sleeps inside of it hevery night.“

The general treated these remarks with the silent scorn they deserved. By and by they let him alone, and he calmly stretched himself out on the ground beside his drum. But he did not go to sleep. Every faculty was awake and strained. He was alarmed not for himself alone, but for the other men across the river. He had heard the soldiers around him talking in whispers, but he did not need what they said to tell him the secret. He had guessed it already, but he listened attentively to the details.

The British attack was to be made two hours after midnight, when the unsuspecting patriots would be buried in their deepest slumbers. The surprise would be complete. The British soldiers felt no doubt of that, as they knew their enemies had no idea they were so near. They expected an easy triumph and at one

blow to sweep out of existence a most important portion of the rebel army. They were exultant at the thought.

But their talk filled the general with the most painful emotions, and the hands that had so often wielded the drumsticks grew clammy. But he said nothing and pretended that he was asleep.

„Better go to sleep, lads,“ said the man who had been called Bill. „We’ll ‘ave sharp work hafore mornin’ and we’ll need all the rest we can get.“

All the men, including Bill himself, adopted the suggestion and were soon asleep, their snores rising peacefully on the night air.

The general lay near the edge of the wood and a sentinel paced backward and forward about twenty feet in front of him. The man was vigilant and stopped to listen whenever a bird or a cricket made a noise. The general watched him for a long time. Oh, if he would only lie down and snore like Bill and his squad! But the sentinel showed no such intention. On the contrary, he walked up and down with as firm and active a step as ever, and seemed to be awake to everything.

The general thought of all the fearful results of this surprise. The command would be cut to pieces. All his comrades killed or taken. Could the cause stand such a blow? The general, despite the fact that he was now a veteran, shed some tears and cuddled up to his drum for comfort.

The night was not very dark. The moon shone above the trees and threw silver streaks over the sleeping men. Now and then a stray beam fell upon the face of the watchful sentinel and showed his weather-beaten features.

The general guessed that it was nearly midnight when he heard a noise to the left. It sounded like the snorting of a horse, and undoubtedly proceeded from one of the animals belonging to the troop. The sentinel stopped and listened. So did another sentinel who was farther away. The snort was repeated. The two sentinels looked doubtfully at each other. But the general’s sentinel was nearer the point whence the noise proceeded. It was his duty to go and muzzle the horse more securely. He looked around at the recumbent forms and then walked lightly away. The other sentinel, continuing on his beat, soon became hid among the shadows.

The general’s heart began a drum beat of its own against his ribs. He rose quickly to his feet and stepped forward, dragging with him his big drum, which he had attached to his shoulder with a strap. He had forgotten about the drum, and he was in terror lest the scraping noise it made when he dragged it over the ground would awaken Bill and his companions. But they slept peacefully on.

The general started to unloosen the strap and leave the drum behind. Then he stopped. Why should he leave his cherished drum as a trophy in the hands of the enemy? He had heard Norton tell of some old Greeks—their names he couldn’t exactly remember—who thought it an irredeemable disgrace to leave their shields in the possession of their foes. He would do as well as they did. So he gathered up his drum and, darting over the ground as quickly and noiselessly as a hare, was soon beyond the circle of the sentinels.

The general paused for a moment. He could scarcely believe that he was free. But as he paused he heard a shout behind him. Some one had missed him and given the alarm. In an instant a half dozen lights flared up. He ran on again, but tripped among some bushes and pitched forward. Then he and his drum rolled over each other down a little hillside. But when he reached the bottom he was up

like a flash, dragging his drum after him, and darted off in straight line for his own camp. Behind him he heard the rapid tramp of many pursuers.

„Confound the little rebel!“ cried a voice. „We must catch him or he'll give the alarm to the enemy. He's off there in front of us. I heard him fall among the bushes.“

The fear of recapture took a mighty hold upon the general, and he skimmed over the ground, the great drum occasionally bumping on the stones. He would have cast it aside, but in his haste and excitement he could not undo the strap. Still he ran so fast that once he thought he had thrown his enemy off his trail. But a moment later he heard several shouts and the torches again twinkled behind him. The general made another great effort and, rushing through some bushes, stopped aghast, for he was on the very verge of the deep river.

In the confusion of the flight he had forgotten all about the river which flowed between him and his friends. Before him it stretched wide and unfordable. Behind him came the heavy tramp of his enemies. Their torches flared higher, and they saw him now, for they raised exultant cries.

The general was trembling all over, for hope seemed gone; but at the very last moment inspiration came to him. With fingers that he nerved into steadiness he deftly undid the strap that confined the big drum to his shoulders. One of the heads was still out just as he had fixed it when he intended to put his chickens in it, and he placed the drum, with the remaining drum downward, on the stream. Then he dropped lightly into it, as if it were a canoe.

His enemies were approaching rapidly and their torches blazed now. The general put both hands against the bank and gave a mighty shove. The drum, with the drummer inside it, shot far out into the stream, and general saw, with a rejoicing heart, that the current would continue to bear him toward the further shore. But when the water bubbled around him he trembled again. He balanced himself as nearly as he could in the center of the drum, but the stout hide head held fast beneath his light weight and floated safely on the surface of the stream.

The crashing among the bushes on the bank behind him increased, and several men in red uniforms appeared on the river's verge. There was some hesitation among them, and then one cried out:

„Fire! Fire on him! It's true as you say that he's only a boy, but we mustn't let him alarm the enemy. Fire! They may not hear our shots!“

A half dozen muskets were fired and the bullets whistled all around him. One even struck the metal hoop of his drum and glanced off into the water, but he was not touched.

„Oh, Lord,“ groaned the general, „they'll hit me the next time.“

Then he raised up his voice and shouted with all the strength of his lungs.

„Comrades! Comrades! Wake up! Wake up! The enemy are coming! The enemy are coming! Wake up!“

Again and again he repeated his cry. The muskets behind him continued to crack, and some of the bullets splashed the water in his face. Presently he felt a sensation in his shoulder, as if it had been pierced by a hot needle, but he did not cease to utter his cry of alarm, and the woods resounded with the echo of it.

Torches were now twinkling on the shore in front of him as well as behind him, and the general heard the rush of men coming to meet him. He knew they were his comrades, and though he felt his strength leaving, he strove to redouble his cries.

„It's the general himself!“ shouted the well known voice of the colonel. „Give it to 'em, my lads! Give it to 'em.“

Crack-crack-crack went the guns and the bullets whizzed over the general's head toward the men in the red uniforms on the further shore, and crack-crack-crack the men in the red uniforms replied. There was a blaze of light back and forth that half-blinded the general and he did not see how near he was to the coveted shore. But two muscular brown hands reached out, grasped the rim of the drum and drew it to the shore. Then the general fainted, and knew nothing until many hours afterward.

When the general revived he found himself lying on a mattress of coats in the colonel's own tent, and the colonel, Norton and Orwell were sitting beside him. He tried to turn over, but he felt a pain in his shoulder and saw that it was swathed in many bandages. He looked inquiringly at the colonel.

„It's all right, general,“ said the commander. We heard your shouts and came fully armed. We crossed afterward at the ford below and gave them a sound beating. It was a fine victory and the Congress will have to give you a medal and put a gold hoop around your drum in place of the one that the bullet battered.“

„Yes,“ said Norton. „You came back to us on your drum head like the Spartan on his shield, but, unlike the Spartan, you didn't come back dead. Now go to sleep, general, and you'll be well in a few days.“

The general moved himself gently into a better position among the coats, and, as he closed his eyes, said, in a droll tone:

„And maybe I'll live to be a real general yet. Won't I, colonel?“

