

# The Red Light

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

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Richard M. Woodward



I had no love for that sort of thing, and I never will have. I greatly prefer the open battle, which to my mind is about the only decent way of making war. But I was one of those selected for the task, and, all of you know or ought to know, a soldier cannot pick his work, doing this and leaving that. Then, too, there was some animosity in me toward the English, which perhaps is not a feeling that one ought to cultivate even against an official enemy. But the English had done some very cruel things recently. Their ravages in the Chesapeake were fresh, and the massacre at the Raisin was not to be forgotten. I could not help hating them a little bit, although my sister Bertha was to marry an Englishman (and a good enough fellow Paul Leslie was), if this war ever ended.

But, having set out to do the job, I rejoiced in our success. We had planted the devilish instrument of destruction, torpedo I think they call it, where the frigate was bound to pass. She would come on at speed, unsuspecting. She would strike the torpedo. Boom! would go something under the water, and that would be the last of the most troublesome ship on our coast and her four hundred crew. A hard fate, you say. Well, yes, perhaps, but it was this very frigate that helped to bring on the war. It was she that lay off New York harbor before the war and killed the captain of one of our peaceful merchant ships because he refused to stop and be searched while entering his home port. Plague take these impudent English! Do they think they can bully us in our own house merely because they have a thousand ships of war?

The men in the boat were doing their work with caution and skill; that was evident. The torpedo planned, there was nothing left but to toll the frigate over it. They rowed steadily toward the big ship. Standing as I was on the sand-spit, I could see the water running like melted silver off their oar-blades. A fine moon threw a broad light over the sea. Just beyond the border of light crept the frigate. Her hull looked very black, and I could not discern human figures on her deck or in her rigging. She was a good ship, I knew, and I felt some sorrow for her approaching fate and the manner of it. I would much rather see her taken in fierce action by the Constitution or the United States than sent to the bottom of the sea by a sneaking torpedo which grovels under water and takes you unawares like a hungry shark.

My part of the work was over. I could have gone away had I wished to do so, but I preferred to remain and see the catastrophe. One does not have such a spectacle as that every day—or every night, for it must have been within an hour of midnight then.

The night and the sea seemed very peaceful. The presence of the boat and the ship did not detract from their calm. The water made a light murmuring where it broke over the shallows, but that was the only sound. There was no more lonely bit of coast.

The boat went on its direct way. Sanderson was a competent man, and would be sure to lure the ship along the fatal course. The figures of the men in the boat grew indistinct as she glided out toward the frigate. One square, stalwart form, which I knew to be Sanderson's, was the last to preserve any sort of outline. Then the boat became a blur on the sea, which was silvered by the moon. On it went for what looked like a quarter of an hour or near about it. Then it stopped. Presently it began to move about hither and thither, as if making observations. From where I stood it seemed to be very near to the frigate, but I knew the distance was greater than it looked. Sanderson would not go too close and allow himself to be caught. That was no part of the plan.

The frigate spread more sail, veered from her course, and bore into the nearer channel. She had seen the boat, and was suspicious. What was more, if she kept on her new course she would strike the torpedo, and we would be rid of a pest. For the moment I forgot my aversion to the enterprise, all seemed to fall out so well.

Sanderson turned the boat's head and rowed up the channel. He wished to keep in deep water, where the frigate would follow. In five minutes more the boat would pass over the torpedo. I could mark the very spot on the water where we had sunk

it. It was just across there where the tiny white-cap was breaking. The light boat would pass over it safely, but the deep-draught frigate could not. It was a queer sort of deadly engine. I had never seen such a thing before; in fact, I had never heard of any; but the man who made it, a stoop-shouldered fellow from Boston, said it would be safer to sit on an exploding magazine than to be on a ship when that torpedo burst beneath it. I wondered if there would be a great noise when the thing let go, and if the water would be thrown up like the foam of Niagara.

I saw a spout of flame from the bow of the frigate, and the sound of a cannon-shot caused me to jump a little. I had heard many a cannon-shot before, but in the stillness of the night, with both sea and land to give it an echo, this made such a prodigious uproar that I felt like sticking my fingers in my ears. The frigate had begun to fire on the boat. We had not bargained for this, but a small boat moving rapidly is a pretty hard thing to hit with a cannon-ball, especially when your cannon is moving too. Thinking twice, I concluded that the boat was not in very great danger.

The boat reached the spot beneath which the torpedo lay and passed over it and on. The frigate, a considerable distance behind, was pursuing steadily. She was now well into the nearer channel. The boat curved around a tongue of land and disappeared. Its part of the work, like mine, was ended. Sanderson had done well. It was the nature of the man to be thorough. I guessed easily that the English were hot on the chase, and would not turn back so long as they had plenty of deep water for the frigate. Her course was unbroken for two or three minutes. Then I noticed the men furling some sails and loosening out others. I could see their figures like black spots against the rigging. The ship veered about, and seemed to be tacking as much as the somewhat straitened channel would allow.

I was surprised much, and disappointed more. I could not ascribe the frigate's queer behavior to anything but suspicion, nay, more, alarm. But what had caused it? Why had she taken fright with such suddenness when everything was going so beautifully? I much fear that I swore—under my breath, it is true, but still I swore.

The further actions of the frigate confirmed my belief. It was in truth more than suspicion, it was alarm that had taken hold of her. She lay upon the water like a huge bird with wings fluttering. I could see a group of men gathered upon her quarter-deck, evidently the commander and his chief officers in consultation. I thought I could see the gold braid upon their caps shining.

Illustration:  
The Red Light

Perplexity was added to disappointment. It could not have been instinct that had warned them: their alarm was too sudden for that. One of the officers raised a telescope and began to examine the land. Then I saw. Then I knew the cause of the frigate's strange behavior. The shore at that point was thickly covered with bushes, and among these bushes, at the water's edge, a strong red light was shining.

As everybody knows, red is the sign of danger the world over. Wrath seized me. I had heard of Blue-light Tories farther up the coast, plenty of them. This was a red light. But what mattered that? It was treason just the same; it saved the enemy.

The traitor who held the light began to wave it violently as if the danger were pressing. I tried to see the man, but could not discern any trace of a figure, merely the light, which blazed out a red warning. I had a pistol, and I felt for it, but the light was on one spit of land and I on another, with deep water between. The distance was too great for a shot.

I decided to creep around the inlet and seize the sneak. I might be too late to snuff out his red light, but it would be some satisfaction to seize the miserable Tory, whoever he was. I did not believe there was more than one. Sneaks do not go in pairs.

The red light danced about, and the frigate responded. She continued to tack, and presently she bore away from the dangerous water. She had accepted the warning. We would have to save that torpedo for another time, but I was determined that the traitor should not give another such signal. I held my pistol in my hand ready for instant use, and began to run around the inlet. I marked the red light shining in the bushes, though it was not waved about so vigorously as before. I took another look at the frigate, whose hull was beginning to sink a little behind the curve of the sea. She had escaped us, beyond a doubt.

Suddenly the red light went out. Well it might! The treason had been done, and no longer was there need for its infamous warning. But the traitor should not escape if I could help it. I hastened as much as I could, and quickly turned the inmost angle of the inlet. Unless the man with the red light had been as quick, I would overhaul him.

On this side of the inlet the ground was very rough in places, and where it was not rough it was covered with dense patches of scrubby bushes. It was hard to make speed without being very noisy, and I did not wish to alarm the chase. Moreover, the clouds obscured the moon somewhat, and there was a noticeable increase of darkness. I thought that luck had become wholly mine enemy, but I took back the thought, for when I pushed my way through one of the densest of the thickets and topped a bit of rising ground I saw a figure some distance ahead of me. Had not my eyesight been good, the figure would have been invisible: as it was, it was rather dim. But I knew it to be a man, and I guessed it was the one for whom I was looking. I was sure of this when I pressed closer and saw something swinging from the man's hand which, by my surmise, was the lantern that had shed the red light.

The man stopped and turned about. I sank down in some bushes, for I did not wish to put him on his guard. For more than a minute he looked attentively at the frigate, now but a shapeless blot on the dusky horizon. At the distance and in the night I could not tell much about him. He looked rather tall, but seemed to be enveloped from head to heel in a long black cloak. The head, too, seemed to be covered by what resembled a wide-brimmed hat slouched over the face. A true traitor's disguise! I cocked my pistol, and for a moment was tempted to take a shot at him. But I could not do it. True, the sinking of the frigate would have been of like character. But I was ordered to do that; I was not ordered to do this. After all, it would be better to capture the fellow.

He seemed to be satisfied that his treason had succeeded, for he walked briskly on, passing over a hill, and did not look back any more. I followed at an equal pace, never once losing sight of him. When I too passed the hill I increased my

speed. I knew that there were houses a mile back of the sea, and I wished to overtake him before he could reach any of them and find possible friends.

I was gaining perceptibly, though the man himself was walking fast. He came to a brook and leaped it with nimble step. An athletic fellow, I thought. I had a few qualms then. He might prove stronger than I. But I would take him by surprise, and I could hold him safe with my pistol.

I leaped the brook also and continued to gain upon him. His long cloak caught on a bush and held him for a moment. He detached it and went on. Then, in an unlucky moment, I stepped on a stick, and it broke with a loud snap. The man looked back and saw me. Instantly he ran. Like the traitor that he knew himself to be, he feared everybody.

I saw that it was to be a foot-race unless he would turn and fight, and his quick flight did not promise that. He ran with great swiftness, and seemed to know the ground. I was careless of noise or concealment now, and dashed after him. Nothing incites your courage so much as for a man to run from you.

I stumbled frequently, but did not fall. Once my fugitive stumbled too, and I thought I would gain much upon him, but he recovered himself in a moment and leaped lightly over the ground. Then I thought that he was gaining. I hated to use the pistol, but there seemed to be no other course.

„Stop! stop!“ I shouted, „or I will fire upon you.“

But my threat seemed merely to increase the speed of the fellow. I raised my pistol once to fire, and had my finger on the trigger. Then I changed my mind. But a minute later, as it was evident that he was still gaining, I strengthened my resolution and pulled the trigger. The report of the pistol in the dead quiet of the night sounded like a cannon-shot. But the man ran on. I had missed.

I was not expert enough to load the pistol running, and I had no other. If I took him at all it must be by main strength. I believed that the man was unarmed, or he would have returned the fire. I was excited, blood and brain, and I determined to overhaul him and have a tussle with him. At least I would see the face of the traitor.

He stumbled and fell. I could not repress a little cry of joy, for before he was up I had gained all the ground I had lost, and more too. He dropped his lantern, but did not stay to pick it up. As I dashed past, I gave it a sound kick and heard the glass smash. „You won't be a tool for traitors any more, Mr. Lantern!“ thought I.

The man turned his head for the first time. Evidently he saw that I was gaining, for he swerved suddenly from the path and ran into a thicket. Then I knew that his alarm was increasing and that he hoped as a last resort to elude me in that way. But I too came up quickly and dashed helter-skelter into the bushes. For a moment I lost him, then I saw his head appearing above the lowest of the bushes, then I lost him again.

But, though out of my sight, I did not believe he could escape me. The thicket was not large, and it lay in a shallow valley or depression. The hills around were bare, and if he emerged upon them I would be sure to see him. I believed I had him in a trap at last. Nevertheless I became wary. The man, after all, might have a pistol, and if I tore blindly through the bushes I would become an easy mark. I endeavored to creep along noiselessly and discover where he was hiding. It was a

slow sort of business, for one's clothes will catch on twigs in a thicket, and stones and sticks are continually getting in the way.

I stopped several times to listen, but I could not hear him. I rose to my feet occasionally to look at the ridges around, but he did not appear there. I doubted not that he was still in the thicket. My apprehension lest he would shoot me began to disappear. I was satisfied that the man was a craven as well as a traitor. All traitors ought to be. Nevertheless I played half-brother to prudence and reloaded my pistol.

There was a further obscurity of the moon which might be good or bad; it might help him to escape, or it might help me to creep upon him. Just beyond one of the hill-tops I could see a light twinkling in a house. It was well that I had trapped the fellow in the thicket, for possibly he might find friends there.

I sat quite still for a little while. Then I heard a faint rustle as of some one pushing through close-set bushes. It was my man, I knew, and I slipped toward the noise. It ceased, but was resumed in a moment or two, and I continued to approach. Presently I caught sight of the fugitive, bent over, but walking. He seemed very weary. I carefully cocked my reloaded pistol and stole toward him.

There was a large tree in the thicket. The man in the cloak must have conceived a foolish notion that I had given up the chase, for when he came to this tree he went around on the far side of it and sat down. He drew a long breath, half a sigh, like one who is very faint. I was convinced now that he would be an easy capture, as he had run himself out of breath. Letting down the hammer of my pistol, I replaced it in my belt. I would use the weapon only in the last emergency. I reached the tree, and could hear him breathing, still brokenly, on the other side. But I felt very strong myself. I stopped half-way, for I heard him moving. He rose to his feet and apparently intended to resume his flight. I did not give him a chance. I sprang upon him and seized both his arms in my firm grasp. He uttered a little cry and turned his face toward me.

„Bertha!“ I cried. „You! You! Can you be a traitor!“

„No,“ said my sister, looking at me with calm eyes. „Paul is serving on board that ship.“

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