

EBEN HOLDEN

By IRVING BACHELLER
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CHAPTER XXV—Continued

meanime I wrote three letters to Mr. Grooley and had the satisfaction of seeing them in the Tribune. I took much interest in the camp drill, and before we crossed the river I had been raised to the rank of first lieutenant. Every day we were looking for the big army of Beauregard, camping below Centerville, some thirty miles south. Almost every night a nervous picket set the camp in uproar by challenging a phantom of his imagination. We were all impatient as hounds in leash. Since they would not come up and give us battle, we wanted to be off and have it out with them. And the people were tired of delay. The cry of "Ste' boy!" was ringing all over the north. They wanted to cut us loose and be through with dallying.

Well, one night the order came; we were to go south in the morning—30,000 of us—and put an end to the war. We did not get away until afternoon. It was the 16th of July. When we were off, horse and foot, so that I could see miles of the blue column before and behind me, I felt sorry for the mistake made south. On the evening of the 18th our campfires on either side of the pike at Centerville glowed like the lights of a city. We knew the enemy was near and began to feel a tightening of the nerves. I wrote a letter to the folks at home for postmortem delivery and put it into my trousers pocket. A friend in my company called me aside after dusk.

"Feel of that," he said, laying his hand on a full breast. "Feathers!" he whispered significantly. "Balls can't go through 'em, ye know. Better'n a steel breastplate! Want some?"

"Don't know but I do," said I. We went into his tent, where he had a little sack full, and put a good wad of them between my two shirts.

"I hate the idee o' bein' hit 'n the heart," he said. "That's too awful!" I nodded my assent.

"Shouldn't like t' have a ball in my lungs, either," he added. "Tain't necessary for a man t' die if he can only breathe. If a man gets his leg shot off an' don't lose his head an' keeps drawin' his breath right along smooth and even, I don't see why he can't live."

Taps sounded. We went asleep with our boots on, but nothing happened. Three days and nights we waited. Some called it a farce; some swore; some talked of going home. I went about quietly, my bosom under its pad of feathers. The third day an order came from headquarters. We were to break camp at 1:30 in the morning and go down the pike after Beauregard. In the dead of the night the drums sounded. I rose, half asleep, and heard the long roll far and near. I shivered in the cold night air as I made ready; the boys about me buckled on knapsacks, shouldered their rifles and fell into line.

leather, the click, click, click of the stir of the stubble, the snorting of horses. When we had marched an hour or so I could hear the faint rumble of wagons far in the rear. As I came high on a hilltop, in the bending column, the moonlight fell upon a league of bayonets shining above a cloud of dust in the valley—a splendid picture, fading into darkness and mystery.

At dawn we passed a bridge and halted some three minutes for a bite. After a little march we left the turnpike, with Hunter's column bearing westward on a crossroad that led us into thick woods. As the sunlight sank in the high tree tops the first great battle of the war began. Away to the left of us a cannon shook the earth, hurling its boom into the still air. The sound rushed over us, rattling in the timber like a fall of rocks. Something went quivering in me. It seemed as if my vitals had gone into a big jump of jolly that trembled every step I took. We quickened our pace; we fretted; we complained. The weariness went out of our legs; some wanted to run. Before and behind us men were shouting ho! ho! "Run, boys, run!"

The cannon roar was now continuous. We could feel the quake of it. When we came over a low ridge in the open we could see the smoke of battle in the valley. Flashes of fire and clouds of smoke leaped out of the far thickets to the left of us as cannon roared. Going at double quick, we began loosing blankets and haversacks, tossing them into heaps along the line of march without halting. In half an hour we stood waiting in battalions, the left flank of the enemy in front. We were to charge at a run. Halfway across the valley we were to break into companies and, advancing, spread into platoons and squads and at last into line of skirmishers, lying down for cover between rushes.

"Forward!" was the order, and we were off, cheering as we ran. Oh, it was a grand sight—our colors flying, our whole front moving like a blue wave on a green, immeasurable sea! And it had a voice like that of many waters. Out of the woods ahead of us came a lightning flash. A ring of smoke reeled upward. Then came a deafening crash of thunders, one upon another, and the scream of shells overhead. Something stabbed into our column right beside me. Many went headlong, crying out as they fell. Suddenly the colors seemed to halt and sway like a tree top in the wind. Then down they went, squad and colors, and

we sprang to pass them. At the other we halted and laid down and fired volley after volley at the gray coats in the edge of the thicket. A bullet struck in the grass ahead of me, throwing a bit of dirt into my eyes. Another brushed my hat off, and I heard a wailing death yell behind me. The colonel rode up, waving a sword. "Get up an' charge!" he shouted. "On we went, cheering loudly, firing as we ran. Bullets went by me, hissing in my ears, and I kept trying to dodge them. We dropped again flat on our faces.

A squadron of Black Horse cavalry came rushing out of the woods at us, the riders yelling as they waved their swords. Fortunately we had not time to rise. A man near me tried to get up. "Stay down!" I shouted.

In a moment I learned something new about horses. They went over us like a flash. I do not think a man was trampled. Our own cavalry kept them busy as soon as they had passed.

Of the many who had started there was only a ragged remnant near me. We fired a dozen volleys lying there. The man at my elbow rolled upon me, writhing like a worm in the fire.

"We shall all be killed!" a man shouted. "Where is the colonel?" "Dead," said another. "Better retreat," said a third. "Charge!" I shouted as loudly as ever I could, jumping to my feet and waving my saber as I rushed forward.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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