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Eben Holden

By Irving Bacheller.

... a great glow, such as comes of fine tailoring and new linen. He was so preoccupied with his paper that I went out into the big room and sat down, awaiting a better time. "The printer's going to Washington to talk with the president," said an editor.



"Look at that!" I said, looking down upon me like a flood. It had a wild, fleeing tone. He stood near the landing, swinging his arms and swearing like a boy just learning how. In the middle of the once immaculate shirt bosom was a big yellow stain. Something had fallen on him and adhered as it struck. We stood well out of range, looking at it, unemphatically, in a voice that was no encouragement to confession he stared "the drooling idiot" to declare himself. In a moment he opened his waistcoat and surveyed the damage.

CHAPTER XXVI. MY regiment left New York by night in a flare of torch and rocket. The streets were lined with crowds now hardened to the sound of fire and drum and the pomp of military preparation. I had a very high and mighty feeling in me that were away in the discomfort of travel. For hours after the train started we sang and told stories and ate peanuts and pulled and hauled at each other in a cloud of tobacco smoke. The train was sidetracked here and there and dragged along at a slow pace. Young men with no appreciation, as it seemed to me, of the sad business we were off upon went roistering up and down the aisles, drinking out of bottles and chasing around the train as it halted. These revellers grew quiet as the night wore on. The boys began to close their eyes and lie back for rest. Some lay in the aisle, their heads upon their knapsacks.

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The air grew chilly, and soon I could hear them snoring all about me and the chatter of frogs in the near marshes. I closed my eyes and vainly courted sleep. A great sadness had laid its hand on me. I had already given up my life for my country. I was only going away now to get a better price for it as possible in the blood of its enemies. When and where would it be taken? I wondered. The fear had mostly gone out of me in days and nights of solemn thinking. The feeling I had, with its flavor of religion, is what has made the volunteer the mighty soldier he has ever been. I take it, since Naseby and Marston Moor. The soul is the great captain, and with a just quarrel it will warm its sword in the enemy, however he may be trained to thrust and parry. In my sacrifice there was but one reservation—I hoped I should not be horribly cut with a sword or a bayonet. I had written a long letter to Hope, who was yet at Leipzig. I wondered if she would care what became of me. I got a sense of comfort thinking I would show her that I was no coward with all my littleness. I had not been able to write to Uncle Eb or to my father or mother in any serious tone of my feeling in this enterprise. I had treated it as a kind of holiday, from which I should return shortly to visit them.

All about me seemed to be sleeping. Some of them were talking in their dreams. As it grew light one after another rose and stretched himself, rousing his seat companion. The train halted. A man shot a musket voice in at the car door. It was loaded with the many syllables of "Annapolis Junction." We were pouring out of the train shortly to bivouac for breakfast in the depot yard. So I began the life of a soldier, and how it ended with me many have read in better books than this, but my story of it is here, and only here. We went into camp there on the lonely flats of east Maryland for a day or two, as we supposed, but really for quite two weeks. In the long delay that followed my way traversed the dead levels of routine. When southern sympathy had ceased to wreak its wrath upon the railroads about Baltimore we pushed on to Washington. There I got letters from Uncle Eb and Elizabeth Brower. The former I have now in my box of treasures, a torn and faded remnant of that dark period. "Dear sir," it said (he always wrote me in this formal manner), "I take my pen in hand to let you know that we are all well, also that we were sorry you could not come home. They took on terrible. Hope she wrote a letter. Said she had not heard from you. Also that somebody wrote to her you was going to be married. You oughter write her a letter, Bill. Looks to me so you haint used her right. Shes a comin' home in July. Sowed corn to day in the garden. David is off byn catul. I hope God will take care uv you, boy, so good by from yours truly

"EBEN HOLDEN." I wrote immediately to Uncle Eb and told him of the letters I had sent to Hope and of my effort to see her. Late in May, after Virginia had succeeded, some 30,000 of us were sent over to the south side of the Potomac, where for weeks we tore the flowery fields lining the shore with long intrenchments. Meantime I wrote three letters to Mr. Greeley 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 off, horse and foot, so that I could see miles of the blue column before and behind me, I felt sorry for the mistake on the evening of the 15th our campfires on either side of the plike 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 mess. "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 wouldn'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 gits 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 3:30 in the morning and go down the plike 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. Muffled in darkness there was an odd silence in the great caravan forming rapidly and waiting for the word to move. At each command to move forward I could hear only the rub of leather, the click, click of rifle rings, the stir of the stubble, the snorting of horses. When we had marched an hour or so I could hear the faint rattle 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 lump of jelly 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 boldly, "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 hoods of smoke leaped out of the far thickets to the left of us as cannon roared. Going at double quick, we began loosening 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, charging 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 away they went, sound and color, and we spread to pass them. At the order 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. "Charge!" It was the one thing needed. They

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... I struggled to my feet, weak and trembling and sick with nausea. I must have been lying there a long time. The firing was now at a distance. The sun had gone half down the sky. They were picking up the wounded in the rear field. A man stood looking at me. "Good God!" he shouted and then ran away like one afraid. There was a great mass of our men back of me some twenty rods. I staggered toward them, my knees quivering. "I can never get there," I heard myself whisper. I thought of my little flask of whiskey and, pulling the cork with my teeth, drank the half of it. That steadied me, and I made better headway. I could hear the soldiers talking as I neared them. "Look a-ther!" I heard many saying. "See 'em come! My God! Look 'em on the hill there!"



... The raw army had been on its feet since midnight. For hours it had been fighting hunger, a pain in the legs, a quivering sickness at the stomach, a stubborn foe. It had turned the flank of Beauregard; victory was in sight. But lo, a new enemy was coming to fight for battle. The long slope bristled with his bayonets. Our army looked and cursed and began letting go. The men near me were pausing on the brink of awful rout. In a moment they were off, pell-mell, like a flock of sheep. The earth shook under them. Officers rode around them, cursing, gesticulating, threatening, but nothing could stop them. Half a dozen trees had stood in the center of the retreating mass. Now a few men clung to them—a remnant of the monster that had torn away. But the greater host was now coming. The thunder of its many feet was near me; a cloud of dust hung over it. A squadron of cavalry came rushing by and broke into the fleeing mass. Heavy horses, cut free from artillery, came galloping after them, straps flying over many flanks. Two riders clung to the back of each, lashing with whip and rein. The ruck of wagons came after them, wheels rattling, horses running, voices shrilling in a wild hoot of terror. It makes me tremble even now, as I think of it, though it is muffled under the cover of nearly forty years! I saw they would go over me. Reeling as if drunk, I ran to save myself. Zigzagging over the field, I came upon a gray bearded soldier lying in the grass and fell headlong. I struggled madly, but could not rise to my feet. I lay, my face upon the ground, weeping like a woman. Save I be lost in hell, I shall never know again the bitter pang of that moment. I thought of my country. I saw its splendid capital in ruins, its people surrendered to God's enemies. The rout of wagons had gone by. I could now hear the heavy tramp of thousands passing me, the shrill voices of terror. I effort to a sitting posture somehow. The effort nearly smothered me. A mass of cavalry was bearing down upon me. They were coming so thick I saw they would trample me into jelly. I took my hat and covered my face quickly and then uncovered it as they came near. They sheered away as I felt the foam of their nostrils. I had split them as a rock may split the torrent. The last of them went over me, their tails whipping my face. I shall not soon forget the look of their helmets or the smell of their flanks. They had no sooner passed than I fell back and rolled half over like a log. I could feel a warm flow of blood trickling down my left arm. A shell shot at the retreating army passed high above me, whining as it flew. Then my mind went free of its trouble. The rain brought me to as it came pelting down upon the side of my face. I wondered what it might be, for I knew not where I had come. I lifted my head and looked to see a new dawn, possibly the city of God itself. It was dark so dark I felt as if I had no eyes. Away in the distance I could hear the beating of a drum. It rang in a great silence. I have never known

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... matter he could turn I felt a rush of air and saw him fly into pieces, some of which hit me as I fell backward. I did not know what had happened; I know not now more than that I have written. I remember feeling something under me, like a stick of wood, bearing hard upon my ribs. I tried to roll off it, but somehow it was tied to me and kept hurting. I put my hand over my hip and felt it there behind me—my own arm! The hand was like that of a dead man—cold and senseless. I pulled it from under me, and it lay helpless; it could not lift itself. I knew now that I, too, had become one of the bloody horrors of the battle. I struggled to my feet, weak and trembling and sick with nausea. I must have been lying there a long time. The firing was now at a distance. The sun had gone half down the sky. They were picking up the wounded in the rear field. A man stood looking at me. "Good God!" he shouted and then ran away like one afraid. There was a great mass of our men back of me some twenty rods. I staggered toward them, my knees quivering. "I can never get there," I heard myself whisper. I thought of my little flask of whiskey and, pulling the cork with my teeth, drank the half of it. That steadied me, and I made better headway. I could hear the soldiers talking as I neared them. "Look a-ther!" I heard many saying. "See 'em come! My God! Look 'em on the hill there!"

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