

## THE CANOE SPEAKS.

On the great streams the ships may go  
About men's business to and fro,  
But I, the eggshell pinnace, sleep  
On crystal waters, ankle deep;

I, whose diminutive design,  
Of sweeter cedar, pitchier pine,  
Is fashioned on so frail a mould  
A hand may launch, a hand withhold.

I, the unnamed, inviolate,  
Green, rustic rivers navigate,  
My dipping paddle scarcely shakes  
The berry in the bramble brakes.

Still forth on my green way I wend  
Beside the cottage garden end  
And by the nestled angler fare  
And take the lovers unaware.

By willow, wood and water wheel  
Speedily fleets my touching keel;  
By all retired and shady spots,  
Where prosper dim forgetmenots.

—Robert Louis Stevenson.

## HOLDING THE BRIDGE.

BY CHARLES B. LEWIS.

A knoll in a meadow, a bit of forest, a stone wall, a creek meandering through the fields and across a highway to empty its waters into a river two or three miles away—all these are points which may bring victory or defeat when 100,000 men grapple in a struggle. The guns rush for the hills and knolls when they go into action; the cavalry must have a clear sweep of the fields if they are to break lines of infantry; the marching battle lines are broken and thrown into confusion by a ditch across which a farmer's boy could spring with ease.

A mile and a half above our right wing is a simple wooden bridge spanning the creek to connect the highway. Above and below the bridge are steep banks, overgrown with bushes. A farmer or hunter would plunge downward through the bushes, bound over the babbling waters without effort and be at the top of the other bank in a moment. Not so with the battle line. It halts, wavers and marches by the right or left flank to find another crossing above or below. The guns change position at a dead run; the cavalry trot or gallop; the infantry move slowly and grudgingly and waste precious time. A battle is won or lost because a single brigade loses a quarter of an hour in reaching the position assigned to it. A division is turned aside by a wall, a regiment by a rail fence. These are the orders to the captain of Company F:

"You will march your company to the bridge and take up such position as you think best to prevent the army from crossing. If attacked by a hundred men, hold it; if attacked by a thousand, do not fall back. If the enemy forces the bridge, he will take our right wing and flank, you understand."

"I understand," replies the captain. "I am to hold the bridge to the last."

"To the last."

Company F marched away by the right face and was soon lost to sight in the woods. In an hour it was throwing up an earthwork at the north end of the bridge. It was a simple ridge of earth, extending east and west across the highway and into the fields for a distance of 100 feet, with its center thicker and stronger than its wings. When that was finished, the men pulled down small trees and uprooted bushes, clogged the highway to the south of the bridge and heaped obstructions on the bridge itself. For two hours they worked like farmers, each man straightening up now and then to flit the sweat from his temples, and then they took up their muskets and were ready.

Did you ever try to imagine the sounds created by a great body of troops—a division or a corps—moving forward to battle? You hear a faraway neighing of horses, a rumbling of wheels, the blowing of bugles and the rattle of drums. All the various sounds go to make up one general, awesome sound, as if you could see through the forests and over the hills and know that a great tidal wave was sweeping toward you from the shores of the sea. The sounds come nearer and nearer, and you seem to feel the tramp of thousands of feet. You hear a mighty muttering, of men scolding at each other. Your ear catches fragments which speak of menace and peril and make you look behind to see if the road is clear for flight. It is the march of the specter of death, and its fleshless bones rattle as it tramps forward over the highways to another feast of blood.

"There they come! Steady now!"

The enemy should have sent a force forward to seize the bridge three hours ago, but of the hundred details of a battle some are overlooked or some one blunders. In front of the division marching at will over the dusty road is an advance guard to clear the way; in front of the advance a few cavalrymen. The latter are first to make the turn of the highway and note the obstructions and the earthwork at the north end. They smile in derision. In front of them are 100 men; behind them five brigades. There will be a rush down the narrow road with its walls of clay, over the bridge, over the earthwork, a score of dead and wounded friends and foes, and the specter of death will hardly have been halted on its march.

"See and hear 'em, Tom?" queries an old veteran of his right hand man as he peers over the top of the earthwork.

"Aye, Ben!" is the answer.

"How many?"

"A division at least."

"And what are we going to do?"

"Die here, of course! Didn't the captain say we were to hold the bridge to the last?"

"But, d—n it, it ain't a fair show," protested Ben. "Who's fightin' 50 to 1 and expecting to come out on top?"

"Nobody. We are coming out in the trenches with two feet of earth to cover us up. Feel shaky, old man?"

"Num, but it ain't a fair show."

"Better save your breath. We ain't looking for fair shows just now. Lordy, but what a chance to swipe it to 'em? They are forming up around the bend, and we'll have it red-hot in about a minute!"

Around the bend of the road 200 infantry formed up in lines eight abreast. The width of the road allowed for no more. With bayonets fixed and muskets at the trail they waited for a minute and then made a dash. From the center of the earthwork leaped a sheet of flame a third of the way across the bridge—from the right and left other sheets of flame. Every musket had a rest on top of the earthwork—every sight covered a human target. The head of the advancing column did not reach the planks of the bridge. It melted away in the midst of the obstructions, to create other obstructions, and 40 men lay dead and wounded as the smoke lazily drifted away down the stream.

"Purty fair fur what time we was at it," said Ben as he rose up for a look after reloading.

"We ought to get at least 20 more at such close shootin'," growled Tom in reply.

"They'll come ag'in, of course?"

"Don't be a d—d fool, Ben, D'ye think the loss of 40 or 50 men would stop one of our divisions from gittin' somewhars. If you feel tired and sleepy, you'd better ask fur leave to go to the rear."

"Say, I don't want too much of yer chin, old man!"

"Oh, you don't! Waal, you jest 'tend to fightin' and dyin' and don't worry about my chin. Better shut yer eyes this time and see if you can't damage some of 'em."

That dash was a feeler to develop the strength defending the bridge and to see if it was mined for blowing up. Around the bend of the road they laughed at the idea of 100 men holding a division at bay. Farther back the soldiers fretted and fumed and officers cursed and swore at the delay. Down on the left the battle was already opening, and Death was sharpening his scythe on the stone walls which men of peace had built up 50 years before.

"Get ready! Fire at will!"

This time a column of 500 men, formed eight abreast as before, dashed at the bridge with ringing cheers, and though the first four or five ranks went down others lived to reach the earthwork and to make a fierce fight for its possession. For ten minutes there were shout and curse and groan, and then the bridge was clear again—clear of all but the dead and wounded. The veteran Ben was one of the half dozen who started to cheer as the enemy suddenly fell back, but Tom interrupted him with:

"What yer makin' a cussed fool of yerself fur?"

"We've licked 'em ag'in!"

"Licked hell! If this war don't end in less'n three months, ye won't know 'nuff to pound sand! The idea of yer yawpin and whoopin over a victory when we've lost at least 20 men and when we are sartin to be wiped out body and butes! Look along the lines!"

Ben looked up and down the lines and shivered as he noted the dead and wounded who had fallen. And now the enemy deployed a force to the right, another to the left, and the men crept forward to the very brink of the ravine and opened such a hot fire that no defender of the earthwork could lift his head. Under cover of this fire a force formed up in the road for a dash across the bridge. The captain sent an order along the earthwork, and each crouching man made ready to spring up and fire when the critical moment came.

"Say, this is gettin' to be red-hot!" exclaimed Ben as the bullets sent the dirt flying over his head.

"Waal, we don't need any ice just now!" grimly replied Tom.

"We are goin' to get licked on this deal, old man."

"Not licked, but wiped out. The orders are to hold the bridge to the last, and our captain's the man to do it. Purty leetle fight—mighty purty. Lots of heads will git busted when we arise up to fire. Never had a bullet through yer cokernut, did ye?"

Ben did not answer. Just then came the order to fire at will, and as the muskets looked over the earthwork the enemy cheered and dashed for the bridge a third time. Over the rocks and bushes obstructing the road, over the wounded crying out, over the dead and over the blood spots, and again they reached the earthwork and fought hand to hand.

"Guess they'll stay licked this time," growled Ben as the enemy fell back after ten minutes' fighting.

"Oh, you do!" sneered Tom as he jabbed his bayonet into the earthwork to clear it of the blood. "Waal, of all the blamed idiots

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in Grant's army ye take the cake! We've got about ten men left to hold a division, and ye are countin' on a vict'ry."

"Then why don't we retreat?"

"Ag'in orders, ye old shell back. Here's whar we die and over thar is whar they'll bury us."

Now the enemy, maddened by the delay and resistance, crossed men above and below the bridge, and they were soon taking the breastwork in the rear. The captain was down, his lieutenants were down—a corporal had command of the remnant of the hundred men.

"What d'ye call this?" asked Ben as the bullets began to come in from flank and rear.

"Next door to hell," replied Tom. "Face about and see if you can hit a barn door."

"I've dropped a man every time I've fired, and—and—"

"Got yer dose, eh? Waal, I told ye it would be a wipe out. Sorry fur ye, old man, but war would be a picnic if nobody was killed. Guess I'm the only one left, and I'll go back and report."

And half an hour later, wounded in the arm and shoulder and hip, a powder stained, dust covered old veteran appeared before his colonel and saluted and said:

"Company F, sir. Detailed to hold the bridge above."

"Well?"

"Enemy forced the crossing half an hour ago. Captain dead, lieutenants dead—all dead but me!"

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