Chapter 8: Chattanooga

Back to Chattanooga

Rosecrans’ army was in motion. The Federals were advancing, but as yet they were afar off. Chattanooga must be fortified. Well do we remember the hard licks and picks that we spent on these same forts, to be occupied afterwards by Grant and his whole army, and we on Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge looking at them.

Am Visited by My Father

About this time my father paid me a visit. Rations were mighty scarce. I was mighty glad to see him, but ashamed to let him know how poorly off for something to eat we were. We were living on parched corn. I thought of a happy plan to get him a good dinner, so I asked him to let us go up to the colonel’s tent. Says I, “Colonel Field, I desire to introduce you to my father, and as rations are a little short in my mess, I thought you might have a little better, and could give him a good dinner.” “Yes,” says Colonel Field, “I am glad to make the acquaintance of your father, and will be glad to divide my rations with him. Also, I would like you to stay and take dinner with me,” which I assure you, O kind reader, I gladly accepted. About this time a young African, Whit, came in with a frying-pan of parched corn and dumped it on an old oil cloth, and said, “Master, dinner is ready.” That was all he had. He was living like ourselves—on parched corn.

We continued to fortify and build breastworks at Chattanooga. It was the same drudge, drudge day by day. Occasionally a Sunday would come; but when it did come, there came inspection of arms, knapsacks and cartridge-boxes. Every soldier had to have his gun rubbed up as bright as a new silver dollar. W. A. Hughes had the brightest gun in the army, and always called it “Florence Fleming.” The private soldier had to have on clean clothes, and if he had lost any cartridges he was charged twenty-five cents each, and had to stand extra duty for every cartridge lost. We always dreaded Sunday. The roll was called more frequently on this than any other day. Sometimes we would have preaching. I remember one text that I thought the bottom had been knocked out long before: “And Peter’s wife’s mother lay sick of fever.”[i] That text always did make a deep impression on me. I always thought of a young divine who preached it when first entering the ministry, and in about twenty years came back, and happening to preach from the same text again, an old fellow in the congregation said, “Mr. Preacher, ain’t that old woman dead yet?” Well, that was the text that was preached to us soldiers one Sunday at Chattanooga. I could not help thinking all the time, “Ain’t that old woman dead yet?” But he announced that he would preach again at 3 o’clock. We went to hear him preach at 3 o’clock, as his sermon was so interesting about “Peter’s wife’s mother lay sick of a fever.” We thought, maybe it was a sort of sickly subject, and he would liven us up a little in the afternoon service.
Well, he took his text, drawled out through his nose like “small sweetness long drawn out:” “M-a-r-t-h-a, thou art w-e-a-r-i-e-d and troubled about many things, but M-a-r-y hath chosen that good part that shall never be taken from her.” Well, you see, O gentle and fair reader, that I remember the text these long gone twenty years. I do not remember what he preached about, but I remember thinking that he was a great ladies’ man, at any rate, and whenever I see a man who loves and respects the ladies, I think him a good man.

The next sermon was on the same sort of a text: “And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam and took out of”[ii]—he stopped here and said e meant out of, that e, being translated from the Latin and Greek, meant out of, and took e, or rather out of a rib and formed woman. I never did know why he expaciated so largely on e; don’t understand it yet, but you see, reader mine, that I remember but the little things that happened in that stormy epoch. I remember the e part of the sermon more distinctly than all of his profound eruditions of theology, dogmas, creeds and evidences of Christianity, and I only write at this time from memory of things that happened twenty years ago.

“Out A Larking”
At this place, we took Walter Hood out “a larking.” The way to go “a larking” is this: Get an empty meal bag and about a dozen men and go to some dark forest or open field on some cold, dark, frosty or rainy night, about five miles from camp. Get someone who does not understand the game to hold the bag in as stooping and cramped a position as is possible, to keep perfectly still and quiet, and when he has got in the right fix, the others to go off to drive in the larks. As soon as they get out of sight, they break in a run and go back to camp, and go to sleep, leaving the poor fellow all the time holding the bag.

Well, Walter was as good and as clever a fellow as you ever saw, was popular with everybody, and as brave and noble a fellow as ever tore a cartridge, or drew a ramrod, or pulled a trigger, but was the kind of a boy that was easily “roped in” to fun or fight or anything that would come up. We all loved him. Poor fellow, he is up yonder—died on the field of glory and honor. He gave his life, ’twas all he had, for his country. Peace to his memory. That night we went “a larking,” and Walter held the bag. I did not see him till next morning. While I was gulping down my coffee, as well as laughter, Walter came around, looking sort of sheepish and shy like, and I was trying to look as solemn as a judge. Finally he came up to the fire and kept on eyeing me out of one corner of his eye, and I was afraid to look at him for fear of breaking out in a laugh. When I could hold in no longer, I laughed out, and said, “Well, Walter, what luck last night?” He was very much disgusted, and said, “Humph! you all think that you are smart. I can’t see anything to laugh at in such foolishness as that.” He said, “Here; I have brought your bag back.” That conquered me. After that kind of magnanimous act in forgiving me and bringing my bag back so pleasantly and kindly, I was his friend, and would have fought for him. I felt sorry that we had taken him out “a larking.”

Hanging Two Spies
I can now recall to memory but one circumstance that made a deep impression on my mind at the time. I heard that two spies were going to be hung on a certain day, and I went to the hanging. The scaffold was erected, two coffins were placed on the platform, the ropes were dangling from the cross beam above. I had seen men shot, and whipped, and shaved, and branded at Corinth
and Tupelo, and one poor fellow named Wright shot at Shelbyville. They had all been horrid scenes to me, but they were Rebels, and like begets like. I did not know when it would be my time to be placed in the same position, you see, and “a fellow feeling makes us wondrous kind.” I did not know what was in store in the future for me. Ah, there was the rub, don’t you see. This shooting business wasn’t a pleasant thing to think about. But Yankees—that was different. I wanted to see a Yankee spy hung. I wouldn’t mind that. I would like to see him agonize. A spy; O, yes, they had hung one of our regiment at Pulaski—Sam Davis. Yes, I would see the hanging. After a while I saw a guard approach, and saw two little boys in their midst, but did not see the Yankees that I had been looking for. The two little boys were rushed upon the platform. I saw that they were handcuffed. “Are they spies?” I was appalled; I was horrified; nay, more, I was sick at heart. One was about fourteen and the other about sixteen years old, I should judge. The ropes were promptly adjusted around their necks by the provost marshal. The youngest one began to beg and cry and plead most piteously. It was horrid. The older one kicked him, and told him to stand up and show the Rebels how a Union man could die for his country. Be a man! The charges and specifications were then read. The props were knocked out and the two boys were dangling in the air. I turned off sick at heart.

Eating Rats
While stationed at this place, Chattanooga, rations were very scarce and hard to get, and it was, perhaps, economy on the part of our generals and commissaries to issue rather scant rations.

About this time we learned that Pemberton’s army, stationed at Vicksburg, were subsisting entirely on rats. Instead of the idea being horrid, we were glad to know that “necessity is the mother of invention,” and that the idea had originated in the mind of genius. We at once acted upon the information, and started out rat hunting; but we couldn’t find any rats. Presently we came to an old out-house that seemed to be a natural harbor for this kind of vermin. The house was quickly torn down and out jumped an old residenter, who was old and gray. I suppose that he had been chased before. But we had jumped him and were determined to catch him, or “burst a boiler.” After chasing him backwards and forwards, the rat finally got tired of this foolishness and started for his hole. But a rat’s tail is the last that goes in the hole, and as he went in we made a grab for his tail. Well, tail hold broke, and we held the skin of his tail in our hands. But we were determined to have that rat. After hard work we caught him. We skinned him, washed and salted him, buttered and peppered him, and fried him. He actually looked nice. The delicate aroma of the frying rat came to our hungry nostrils. We were keen to eat a piece of rat; our teeth were on edge; yea, even our mouth watered to eat a piece of rat. Well, after a while, he was said to be done. I got a piece of cold corn dodger, laid my piece of the rat on it, eat a little piece of bread, and raised the piece of rat to my mouth, when I happened to think of how that rat’s tail did slip. I had lost my appetite for dead rat. I did not eat any rat. It was my first and last effort to eat dead rats.

Swimming the Tennessee with Roastingears
The Tennessee river is about a quarter of a mile wide at Chattanooga. Right across the river was an immense corn-field. The green corn was waving with every little breeze that passed; the tassels were bowing and nodding their heads; the pollen was flying across the river like little snowdrops, and everything seemed to say, “Come hither, Johnny Reb; come hither, Johnny; come hither.” The river was wide, but we were hungry. The roastingears looked tempting. We
pulled off our clothes and launched into the turbid stream, and were soon on the other bank. Here was the field, and here were the roastingears; but where was the raft or canoe?

We thought of old Abraham and Isaac and the sacrifice: “My son, gather the roastingears, there will be a way provided.”

We gathered the roastingears; we went back and gathered more roastingears, time and again. The bank was lined with green roastingears. Well, what was to be done? We began to shuck the corn. We would pull up a few shucks on one ear, and tie it to the shucks of another—first one and then another—until we had at least a hundred tied together. We put the train of corn into the river, and as it began to float off we jumped in, and taking the foremost ear in our mouth, struck out for the other bank. Well, we made the landing all correct.

I merely mention the above incident to show to what extremity soldiers would resort. Thousands of such occurrences were performed by the private soldiers of the Rebel army.

Am Detailed to Go Foraging
One day I was detailed to go with a wagon train way down in Georgia on a foraging expedition. It was the first time since I had enlisted as a private that I had struck a good thing. No roll call, no drilling, no fatigue duties, building fortifications, standing picket, dress parade, reviews, or retreats, had to be answered to—the same old monotonous roll call that had been answered five thousand times in these three years. I felt like a free man. The shackles of discipline had for a time been unfettered. This was bliss, this was freedom, this was liberty. The sky looked brighter, the birds sang more beautiful and sweeter than I remember to have ever heard them. Even the little streamlets and branches danced and jumped along the pebbly beds, while the minnows sported and frollicked under the shining ripples. The very flocks and herds in the pasture looked happy and gay. Even the screech of the wagons, that needed greasing, seemed to send forth a happy sound. It was fine, I tell you.

The blackberries were ripe, and the roadsides were lined with this delicious fruit. The Lord said that he would curse the ground for the disobedience of man, and henceforth it should bring forth thorns and briars; but the very briars that had been cursed were loaded with the abundance of God’s goodness. I felt, then, like David in one of his psalms—“The Lord is good, the Lord is good, for his mercy endureth forever.”

Please Pass the Butter
For several days the wagon train continued on until we had arrived at the part of country to which we had been directed. Whether they bought or pressed the corn, I know not, but the old gentleman invited us all to take supper with him. If I had ever eaten a better supper than that I have forgotten it. They had biscuit for supper. What! flour bread? Did my eyes deceive me? Well, there were biscuit [sic]—sure enough flour bread—and sugar and coffee—genuine Rio[v]—none of your rye or potato coffee, and butter—regular butter—and ham and eggs, and turnip greens, and potatoes, and fried chicken, and nice clean plates—none of your tin affairs—and a snow-white table-cloth and napkins, and white-handled knives and silver forks. At the head of the table was the madam, having on a pair of golden spectacles, and at the foot the old gentleman. He said grace. And, to cap the climax, two handsome daughters. I know that I had
never seen two more beautiful ladies. They had on little white aprons, trimmed with jaconet edging, and collars as clean and white as snow. They looked good enough to eat, and I think at that time I would have given ten years of my life to have kissed one of them. We were invited to help ourselves. Our plates were soon filled with the tempting food and our tumblers with California beer. We would have liked it better had it been twice as strong, but what it lacked in strength we made up in quantity. The old lady said, “Daughter, hand the gentleman the butter.” It was the first thing that I had refused, and the reason that I did so was because my plate was full already. Now, there is nothing that will offend a lady so quick as to refuse to take butter when handed to you. If you should say, “No, madam, I never eat butter,” it is a direct insult to the lady of the house. Better, far better, for you to have remained at home that day. If you don’t eat butter, it is an insult; if you eat too much, she will make your ears burn after you have left. It is a regulator of society; it is a civilizer; it is a luxury and a delicacy that must be touched and handled with care and courtesy on all occasions. Should you desire to get on the good side of a lady, just give a broad, sweeping, slathering compliment to her butter. It beats kissing the dirty-faced baby; it beats anything. Too much praise cannot be bestowed upon the butter, be it good, bad, or indifferent to your notions of things, but to her, her butter is always good, superior, excellent. I did not know this characteristic of the human female at the time, or I would have taken a delicate slice of the butter. Here is a sample of the colloquy that followed:

“Mister, have some butter?”

“No, any at present, thank you, madam.”

“Well, I insist upon it; our butter is nice.”

“O, I know it’s nice, but my plate is full, thank you.”

“Well, take some anyhow.”

One of the girls spoke up and said:

“Mother, the gentleman don’t wish butter.”

“Well, I want him to know that our butter is clean, anyhow.”

“Well, madam, if you insist upon it, there is nothing that I love so well as warm biscuit and butter. I’ll thank you for the butter.”

I dive in. I go in a little too heavy. The old lady hints in a delicate way that they sold butter. I dive in heavier. That cake of butter was melting like snow in a red hot furnace. The old lady says, “We sell butter to the soldiers at a mighty good price.”

I dive in afresh. She says, “I get a dollar a pound for that butter,” and I remark with a good deal of nonchalance, “Well, madam, it is worth it,” and dive in again. I did not marry one of the girls.

We Evacuate Chattanooga
One morning while sitting around our camp fires we heard a boom, and a bomb shell passed over our heads. The Yankee army was right on the other bank of the Tennessee river. Bragg did not know of their approach until the cannon fired.

Rosecrans’ army is crossing the Tennessee river. A part are already on Lookout Mountain. Some of their cavalry scouts had captured some of our foraging parties in Wills valley. The air was full of flying rumors. Wagons are being packed, camps are broken up, and there is a general hubbub everywhere. But your old soldier is always ready at a moment’s notice. The assembly is sounded; form companies, and we are ready for a march, or a fight, or a detail, or anything. If we are marched a thousand miles or twenty yards, it is all the same. The private soldier is a machine that has no right to know anything. He is a machine that moves without any volition of his own. If Edison could invent a wooden man that could walk and load and shoot, then you would have a good sample of the private soldier, and it would have this advantage—the private soldier eats and the wooden man would not.

We left Chattanooga, but whither bound we knew not, and cared not; but we marched toward Chickamauga and crossed at Lee & Gordon’s mill.

The Bull of the Woods

On our way to Lafayette from Lee & Gordon’s mill, I remember a ludicrous scene, almost bordering on sacrilege. Rosecrans’ army was very near us, and we expected before three days elapsed to be engaged in battle. In fact, we knew there must be a fight or a foot race, one or the other. We could smell, as it were, “the battle afar off.”

One Sabbath morning it was announced that an eloquent and able LL. D., from Nashville, was going to preach, and as the occasion was an exceedingly solemn one, we were anxious to hear this divine preach from God’s Holy Word; and as he was one of the “big ones,” the whole army was formed in close column and stacked their arms. The cannon were parked, all pointing back toward Chattanooga. The scene looked weird and picturesque. It was in a dark wilderness of woods and vines and overhanging limbs. In fact, it seemed but the home of the owl and the bat, and other varmints that turn night into day. Every-thing looked solemn. The trees looked solemn, the scene looked solemn, the men looked solemn, even the horses looked solemn. You may be sure, reader, that we felt solemn.

The reverend LL. D. had prepared a regular war sermon before he left home, and of course had to preach it, appropriate or not appropriate; it was in him and had to come out. He opened the service with a song. I did remember the piece that was sung, but right now I cannot recall it to memory; but as near as I can now recollect here is his prayer, verbatim et literatim:

“Oh, Thou immaculate, invisible, eternal and holy Being, the exudations of whose effulgence illuminates this terrestrial sphere, we approach Thy presence, being covered all over with wounds and bruises and putrifying sores, from our heads to the soles of our feet. And Thou, O Lord, art our dernier resort. The whole world is one great machine, managed by Thy puissance. The beautific splendors of Thy face irradiate the celestial region and felicitate the saints. There are the most exuberant profusions of Thy grace, and the sempiternal efflux of Thy glory. God is an abyss of light, a circle whose center is everywhere and His circumference nowhere. Hell is the
dark world made up of spiritual sulphur and other ignited ingredients, disunited and unharmonized, and without that pure balsamic oil that flows from the heart of God.”

When the old fellow got this far, I lost the further run of his prayer, but regret very much that I did so, because it was so grand and fine that I would have liked very much to have kept such an appropriate prayer for posterity. In fact, it lays it on heavy over any prayer I ever heard, and I think the new translators ought to get it and have it put in their book as a sample prayer. But they will have to get the balance of it from the eminent LL. D. In fact, he was so “high larnt” that I don’t think anyone understood him but the generals. The colonels might every now and then have understood a word, and maybe a few of the captains and lieutenants, because Lieutenant Lansdown told me he understood every word the preacher said, and further informed me that it was none of your one-horse, old-fashioned country prayers that privates knew anything about, but was bang-up, first-rate, orthodox.

Well, after singing and praying, he took his text. I quote entirely from memory. “Blessed be the Lord God, who teaches my hands to war and my fingers to fight.”[vi] Now, reader, that was the very subject we boys did not want to hear preached on—on that occasion at least. We felt like some other subject would have suited us better. I forget how he commenced his sermon, but I remember that after he got warmed up a little, he began to pitch in on the Yankee nation, and gave them particular fits as to their genealogy. [sic] He said that we of the South had descended from the royal and aristocratic blood of the Huguenots of France, and of the cavaliers of England, etc.; but that the Yankees were the descendants of the crop-eared Puritans and witch burners, who came over in the Mayflower, and settled at Plymouth Rock. He was warm on this subject, and waked up the echoes of the forest. He said that he and his brethren would fight the Yankees in this world, and if God permit, chase their frightened ghosts in the next, through fire and brimstone.

About this time we heard the awfulest racket, produced by some wild animal tearing through the woods toward us, and the cry, “Look out! look out! hooie! hooie! hooie! look out!” and there came running right through our midst a wild bull, mad with terror and fright, running right over and knocking down the divine, and scattering Bibles and hymn books in every direction. The services were brought to a close without the doxology.

This same brave chaplain rode along with our brigade, on an old string-haltered horse, as we advanced to the attack at Chickamauga, exhorting the boys to be brave, to aim low, and to kill the Yankees as if they were wild beasts. He was eloquent and patriotic. He stated that if he only had a gun he too would go along as a private soldier. You could hear his voice echo and re-echo over the hills. He had worked up his patriotism to a pitch of genuine bravery and daring that I had never seen exhibited, when fliff, fluff, fluff, fluff, FLUFF—a whir, a BOOM! and a shell screams through the air. The reverend LL. D. stops to listen, like an old sow when she hears the wind, and says, “Remember, boys, that he who is killed will sup tonight in Paradise.” Some soldier hallooed at the top of his voice, “Well, parson, you come along and take supper with us.” Boom! whir! a bomb burst, and the parson at that moment put spurs to his horse and was seen to limber to the rear, and almost every soldier yelled out, “The parson isn’t hungry, and never eats supper.” I remember this incident, and so does every member of the First Tennessee Regiment.
Presentment, or the Wing of the Angel of Death

Presentment is always a mystery. The soldier may at one moment be in good spirits, laughing and talking. The wing of the death angel touches him. He knows that his time has come. It is but a question of time with him then. He knows that his days are numbered. I cannot explain it. God has numbered the hairs of our heads, and not a sparrow falls without His knowledge. How much more valuable are we than many sparrows?

We had stopped at Lee & Gordon’s mill, and gone into camp for the night. Three days’ rations were being issued. When Bob Stout was given his rations he refused to take them. His face wore a serious, woe-begone expression. He was asked if he was sick, and said “No,” but added, “Boys, my days are numbered, my time has come. In three days from today, I will be lying right yonder on that hillside a corpse. Ah, you may laugh; my time has come. I’ve got a twenty dollar gold piece in my pocket that I’ve carried through the war, and a silver watch that my father sent me through the lines. Please take them off when I am dead, and give them to Captain Irvine, to give to my father when he gets back home. Here are my clothing and blanket that any one who wishes them may have. My rations I do not wish at all. My gun and cartridge-box I expect to die with.”

The next morning the assembly sounded about two o’clock. We commenced our march in the darkness, and marched twenty-five miles to a little town by the name of Lafayette, to the relief of General Pillow, whose command had been attacked at that place. After accomplishing this, we marched back by another road to Chickamauga. We camped on the banks of Chickamauga on Friday night, and Saturday morning we commenced to cross over. About twelve o’clock we had crossed. No sooner had we crossed than an order came to double quick. General Forrest’s cavalry had opened the battle. Even then the spent balls were falling amongst us with that peculiar thud so familiar to your old soldier.

Double quick! There seemed to be no rest for us. Forrest is needing reinforcements. Double quick, close up in the rear! siz, siz, double quick, boom, hurry up, bang, bang, a rattle de bang, bang, siz, boom, boom, boom; hurry up, double quick, boom, bang, halt, front, right dress, boom, boom, and three soldiers are killed and twenty wounded. Billy Webster’s arm was torn out by the roots and he killed, and a fragment of shell buried itself in Jim McEwin’s side, also killing Mr. Fain King, a conscript from Mount Pleasant. Forward, guide center, march, charge bayonets, fire at will, commence firing. (This is where the LL. D. ran.) We debouched through the woods, firing as we marched, the Yankee line about two hundred yards off. Bang, bang, siz, siz. It was a sort of running fire. We kept up a constant fire as we advanced. In ten minutes we were face to face with the foe. It was but a question as to who could load and shoot the fastest. The army was not up. Bragg was not ready for a general battle. The big battle was fought the next day, Sunday. We held our position for two hours and ten minutes in the midst of a deadly and galling fire, being enfiladed and almost surrounded, when General Forrest galloped up and said, “Colonel Field, look out, you are almost surrounded; you had better fall back.” The order was given to retreat. I ran through a solid line of blue coats. As I fell back, they were upon the right of us, they were upon the left of us, they were in front of us, they were in the rear of us. It was a perfect hornets’ nest. The balls whistled around our ears like the escape valves of ten thousand engines. The woods seemed to be blazing; everywhere, at every jump, would rise a lurking foe. But to get up and dust was all we could do. I was running along by the side of Bob Stout. General Preston Smith stopped me and asked if our brigade was falling back. I told him it was. He asked me the
second time if it was Maney’s brigade that was falling back. I told him it was. I heard him call out, “Attention, forward!” One solid sheet of leaden hail was falling around me. I heard General Preston Smith’s brigade open. It seemed to be platoons of artillery. The earth jarred and trembled like an earthquake. Deadly missiles were flying in every direction. It was the very incarnation of death itself. I could almost hear the shriek of the death angel passing over the scene. General Smith was killed in ten minutes after I saw him. Bob Stout and myself stopped. Said I, “Bob, you weren’t killed, as you expected.” He did not reply, for at that very moment a solid shot from the Federal guns struck him between the waist and the hip, tearing off one leg and scattering his bowels all over the ground. I heard him shriek out, “O, O, God!” His spirit had flown before his body struck the ground. Farewell, friend; we will meet over yonder.

When the cannon ball struck Billy Webster, tearing his arm out of the socket, he did not die immediately, but as we were advancing to the attack, we left him and the others lying where they fell upon the battlefield; but when we fell back to the place where we had left our knapsacks, Billy’s arm had been dressed by Dr. Buist, and he seemed to be quite easy. He asked Jim Foge to please write a letter to his parents at home. He wished to dictate the letter. He asked me to please look in his knapsack and get him a clean shirt, and said that he thought he would feel better if he could get rid of the blood that was upon him. I went to hunt for his knapsack and found it, but when I got back to where he was, poor, good Billy Webster was dead. He had given his life to his country. His spirit is with the good and brave. No better or braver man than Billy Webster ever drew the breath of life. His bones lie yonder today, upon the battlefield of Chickamauga. I loved him; he was my friend. Many and many a dark night have Billy and I stood together upon the silent picket post. Ah, reader, my heart grows sick and I feel sad while I try to write my recollections of that unholy and uncalled for war. But He that ruleth the heavens doeth all things well.

Notes
i Matthew 8:14.
ii Genesis 2:21.
iii The May 1862 siege of Corinth, Miss., and the July 1862 battle at Tupelo, Miss., were Union victories that strengthened Grant’s control of the West. There were several skirmishes at Shelbyville, Tenn., during 1862 and 1863.
iv Psalm 107:1.
v From Rio de Janeiro.
vi Psalm 144:1.