

THE BATTLE OF RIO, VA.

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It happened in April, 1864, and while a veteran of that period might smile at the above title, that is what we children, who were eyewitnesses, called it then, and call it now, though seen through the long vista of many bygone years and many hard-fought battles of various kinds.

The little hamlet, Rio, situated upon the Rivanna River, was as thrifty, peaceful, and picturesque a little place as one would wish to find, and was as yet unvisited by the rude hand of war that had desolated so many other not far-distant localities. The river there flowed between two very steep hillsides and was spanned by a long wooden bridge just a few feet above the dam, whose never-ceasing roar was music to our childish ears. A little farther down the river were the three mills whose yards were resonant with the cries of the teamsters as they unloaded their sacks of corn and wheat or rolled the heavy logs in place for the busy saw. The millers' houses, cooper shop, blacksmith shop, and other necessary accompaniments of a milling village lay scattered cosily around, while in the house on the hill, overlooking and satisfied with all, dwelt the owner.

About a mile away was the neighborhood school in which was being dispensed that day, as usual, knowledge and justice, when suddenly the sound of rapid hoof beats startled the small assembly, and the cry, "The Yankees are coming!" sent teacher and pupils scurrying in various directions, while the rider hurried on to notify the neighborhood people. How our feet did fly down that sandy road to the "house on the hill" to tell our uncle, its owner, to fly for safety. The rider had passed rapidly on, calling the news as he went, over the bridge and up the hill to a small camp of our men about a mile beyond the top of the hill on the road to Charlottesville. They thought it only one of the many false alarms, but took the precaution to send out scouts to ascertain the truth.

We reached home, breathless, just in time to see the three scouts come flying back around the curved road, across the bridge, and up the hill, firing over their shoulders as their horses ran at the firing men in blue close behind, and then pass safely out of sight.

As the head of the long blue column (Custer's brigade, said to be 3,000 strong) swung around the bend in the road below, our uncle seized his gun and ran to the body of woods back of the house. He had to cross a cleared field between two pieces of woodland, and our hearts almost stopped beating as we saw several of the enemy take deliberate aim and fire, but the flying figure kept on and, darting into the friendly shelter of the woods, was safe.

Early that morning another Confederate soldier and relation had left our house to join his regiment some distance away, and as we turned to look again at that dread column of blue, we thought we saw him near the head of the line, but neither he nor we dared make any sign of recognition, until after a little he, with a gesture peculiarly his own, removed his pipe from his mouth and slowly replaced it. With heavy hearts we recognized the gesture and the prisoner.

The enemy then swept over the bridge and up the long, red, winding road on the other side, until suddenly the boom of cannon called an abrupt halt. A hurried consultation seemed to follow, and soon a reversed column of blue came flying back down the long, red hill and across the bridge, pausing only long enough on the other side to unhitch from the plows and take nine fine horses belonging to our people. In less time than it takes to tell it, men with axes had chopped

great holes in the sides of the bridge, torches had been stuck in every available place, and tongues of flame soon devoured the structure, thereby cutting off all chance of immediate pursuit by our soldiers, who were now rapidly forming a line of battle along the hilltop, with Commanders Chew and Brethard. The Northern soldiers planted their batteries along the ridge back of our house, while the hillside in front was filled with cavalymen, who ordered us to leave the porches to keep from being hurt by our own men.

A lively skirmish followed, but, so far as we could tell, no one was badly hurt.

One of the Northern officers came to the house and asked my aunt to tell him the size of the Confederate army between them and Charlottesville. She told him that she did not know exactly, but *perhaps* there were *forty thousand*. While the firing was going on between the two hill crests, works of vandalism proceeded in the little valley. The flour mill was set afire in spite of the pleadings of our aunt that they would take what breadstuffs they pleased and only spare the structure, but the pleadings fell upon deaf ears, and soon dense columns of smoke and heavy odors of burning grain filled the atmosphere. Peach trees were in blossom, and, as the incense from our burning property arose to the rude god of war, the men in blue, seeming like demons to us, chopped the blooming branches from the trees. One squad seemed particularly merry over the occasion as, with drawn swords, they chased a large turkey gobbler around and around the miller's house, until finally, after a desperate fight, poor soldier in gray, his head was severed from his body, which was swung lightly up behind his captor's saddle. Many pigs suffered the same fate. We could forgive them for the turkey and pigs, and also the burned mills, but even now my heart swells with indignation when I think of *the peach trees*.

They evidently believed that our forces were much stronger than theirs, for after the first lively skirmish they swiftly withdrew. None of them came in our house, and all treated us politely, but as they were leaving an Irishman appeared at a back door and asked for *bread*. I can see the lady of the house now as, with figure erect and eyes flashing, she pointed to her burning mills and said: "*There is our bread.*"

Soon all was quiet, and so quickly had it transpired that it might have seemed a dream but for the rude scene of desolation on every hand, which kindly night soon hid from view, kindly night in a double sense, as it brought back to us our beloved uncle. He remained with us a short while, then joined the army only to be taken prisoner and carried to Fort Delaware to suffer for many long, weary months.

Later in the year, when the two hostile armies lay upon opposite banks of the Rappahannock, a little episode occurred which was of intense interest to our family.

One day a commotion was observed in a part of the Federal camp, and a large gray horse was seen to break away and gallop toward the river, closely pursued by several men. He rapidly distanced his pursuers, dashed into the stream, and swam across to our side, being received with yells and cheers of delight by the onlookers. One young soldier especially was overjoyed when he recognized the "gallant gray" as an old friend and as a comrade in harness of his own horse, whose neighing had attracted him from the other shore. The young soldier boy was granted a furlough and was sent to return the much-needed horse to his people, it proving to be one of the number taken from the plows at Rio.