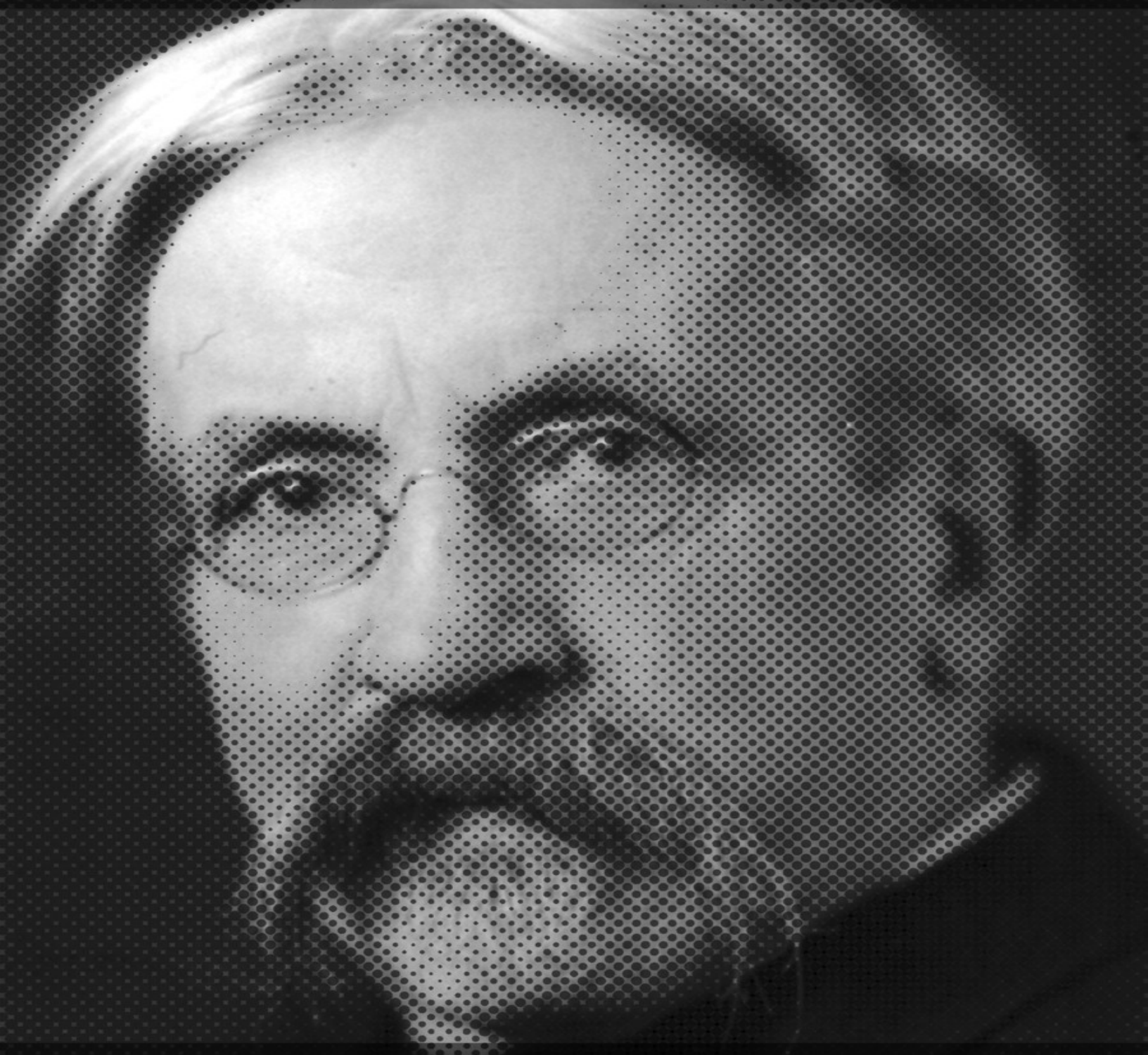
George Cary Eggleston



Southern Soldier Stories

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PREFACE

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THE use of the first personal pronoun singular in any of these stories does not of necessity mean that the author had anything to do with the events chronicled.

“I tell the story as ’twas told to me.”

ILLUSTRATIONS

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J. E. B. Stuart—The Cavalier

HOW BATTLES ARE FOUGHT

A PREFATORY EXPLANATION FOR THE BENEFIT OF THOSE WHO KNOW NOTHING ABOUT THE MATTER

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When squads or scouting parties meet each other, they either fight in an irregular fashion or they run away.

With a systematic battle it is different.

Before a systematic battle, one army selects some place at which to resist the advance of the other.

The advancing army usually cannot leave the other aside and go on by another route to the capital city which it wants to reach, because, if it did, the army left aside would quickly destroy what is called the advancing army's "communications."

To destroy these communications would be to cut off supplies of food, ammunition, and everything else necessary to an army.

The army which takes the defensive selects some point that can be most easily defended,—some point where a river or a creek, or a line of hills, or something else, serves to give it the advantage in a fight.

The enemy must either attack that army there, and drive it out of its position, or it must "flank" it out, if it is itself to

go forward.

To “flank” an army out of position is not merely to pass it by, which, as explained above, might be dangerous, but to seize upon some point or some road, the possession of which will compel that army to retire.

Thus, when General Lee could not be driven out of his works at Fredericksburg by direct attack, General Hooker marched his army up the river, and by crossing there placed himself nearer Richmond than General Lee was. This compelled General Lee to abandon his position at Fredericksburg, and to meet General Hooker in the open field; otherwise there would have been nothing to prevent General Hooker from going to Richmond, with a part of his greatly superior force, leaving the rest of it to check any operations Lee might have undertaken against his communications.

It is in some such fashion as this that every battle is brought about. One side is ever trying to get somewhere, and the other side is ever trying to prevent it from doing so. Incidentally, each army is trying to destroy the other.

When one army has planted itself in a position of its choice, and the other advances to attack it, this is what happens:—

The army that is standing still throws out lines of pickets in front to watch for the enemy’s advance and report it.

The enemy, as he advances, also throws out a cloud of skirmishers to “feel” of the position and avoid traps and ambushes.

A line of battle often extends over several miles in length, covering all available ground for attack or defence.

Before the advancing general can determine against what part of his adversary's line to hurl his heaviest battalions, he must study the conditions along that line; namely, by means of his skirmishers.

In the same way the general who is awaiting attack tries to discover through his skirmishers what his enemy's plan of battle is, and at what points he most needs to concentrate his own men.

While awaiting this information he posts his men—cavalry, artillery, and infantry—wherever he thinks they will be most useful, having reference all the time to their rapid movement during the battle from one part of the line to another, as occasion may demand.

He also holds a considerable part of his army "in reserve." That is to say, he stations it at points a little in rear of the line of battle, from which he can order all or any part of it to any point where strength may be needed.

In a great battle, involving large bodies of troops, each corps or division commander must do in a smaller way what the general-in-chief does on a larger scale. Each has charge of the battle on a certain part of the line. Each must take care of things within his own jurisdiction, and be ready at a moment's notice to respond to the demand of the commanding general for troops with which to help out elsewhere.

These are the generalities. Let us now come to the battle itself.

When the skirmishers of the advancing army meet the skirmishers of the resisting army, there is apt to be some pretty hot fighting for a time, and sometimes the artillery is

considerably involved in it. But this is not the real thing; it is a mere preliminary to the actual battle.

The army that is standing on the defensive holds its lines in position—every battery placed where it will do the most good, and every infantryman lying down and taking the utmost advantage of every tree stump, log, or inequality of the ground, to protect himself as much as possible.

The men on horseback are either in front with the skirmishers, minutely observing the strength and movements of the enemy, or, having finished that work, are thrown out at the two ends of the lines, called “flanks,” to watch there for possible movements of the enemy that might be otherwise unobserved. They are within call of any part of the line where need of them may arise.

While the skirmishers are doing their work, the heaviest strain of war falls on the nerves of the men in line of battle.

They have nothing to do but wait.

They wait with the certain knowledge that in a few minutes the advancing army will throw men forward, and thus convert its skirmish line into a line of attack; while on their own side they know that their skirmish line, after making all of discovery that temporary resistance can accomplish, will fall back, and that then the crucial conflict will begin.

Then comes the uproar of battle,—the dust, the blood, the advance, the retreat, the shock of arms, the murderous volleys of the infantry, the thunder storm of artillery; in short, the final desperate conflict of determined men for the mastery, all of them directed by cool-headed commanders, sitting on their horses at points of vantage for observation,

and directing a reinforcement here, a withdrawal of men there, the hurrying of artillery to one point, an onset of cavalry at another, and at a critical moment an up-and-at-them charge with the bayonets. That usually ends matters one way or the other at the point involved. For only two or three times in any war do men with fixed bayonets on one side actually meet in physical shock men armed with fixed bayonets on the other.

Wherever there is advantage on either side, the general commanding that side throws troops forward in as heavy masses as possible to make the most of it. If one line or the other be broken, every conceivable effort is made to convert the breach into victory. And if victory comes, the cavalry thunder forward in pursuit and in an endeavor to convert the enemy’s defeat into rout.

This is only a general description. I hope that no old soldier on either side will read it. It is not intended for such as they. It is written *virginibus puerisque*, and for other people who don’t know anything about the subject. It is printed here in the hope that it may enable such persons a little better to understand these stories of strenuous conflict.

JOE

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JOE was very much in earnest at Pocotaligo, South Carolina, where a great little battle was fought on the 22d of October, 1862.

That is to say, Joe was not quite seventeen years old, was an enthusiastic soldier, and was as hot headed as a boy well can be.

We had two batteries and a few companies of mounted riflemen—three hundred and fifty-one men all told—to oppose the advance of five thousand. We had only the nature of the country, the impassability of the marshes, and the long high causeways to enable us to make any resistance at all.

Before the battle of Pocotaligo proper began, we went two miles below to Yemassee and there made a stand of half an hour.

Our battery, numbering fifty-four men, received the brunt of the attack.

Joe had command of a gun.

His men fell like weeds before a scythe. Presently he found himself with only three men left with whom to work a gun.

The other battery was that of Captain Elliot of South Carolina; and Captain Elliot had just been designated Chief of Artillery. Elliot’s battery was really not in action at all. Joe seeing Captain Elliot, and being himself full of the enthusiasm which insists upon getting things done, appealed to the Chief of Artillery for the loan of some

cannoneers with whom to work his gun more effectively. Captain Elliot declined. Thereupon Joe broke into a volley of vituperation, calling the captain and his battery cowards, and by other pet names not here to be reported.

I, being Joe's immediate chief, as well as his elder brother, commanded him to silence and ordered him back to his gun. There he stood for fifteen minutes astride a dead man and pulling the lanyard himself. At the end of that time we were ordered to retire to Pocotaligo.

Joe was flushed, powder grimed, and very angry; so angry that even I came in for a part of his displeasure. When I asked him, in order that I might make report for the section, how many shots he had fired, he blazed out at me: "How do I know? I've been killing Yankees, not counting shots."

"How many rounds have you left in your limber-chest, Joe?" I asked.

He turned up the lid of the chest, and replied: "Five."

"And the chest had fifty, hadn't it, when you went into action?"

"Of course."

"Then you fired forty-five, didn't you?"

"Oh, I suppose so, I don't know! Confound these technicalities, anyhow! I'm *fighting*, not counting! Do your own arithmetic!"

It wasn't a very subordinate speech for a sergeant to make to the commander of his section, but Joe was my brother, and I loved him.

At Pocotaligo he fought his gun with superb devotion and effect. But he remained mad all over and clear through till

two o’clock that night. At that hour I was able to persuade him that he had been indiscreet in his remarks to the Chief of Artillery.

“Maybe I was,” he said, grasping my hand; “but you’re not to worry, old fellow; I’ll stand the consequences, and you’re the best that ever was.”

Nevertheless I did worry, knowing that such an offence was punishable without limit in the discretion of a court-martial. It was scarcely sunrise the next morning when I appeared at Captain Elliot’s headquarters. I had ridden for half an hour, I suppose, my mind all the time recalling a certain military execution I had seen; but this morning I imagined Joe in the rôle of victim. I had not slept, of course, and my nerves were all on edge.

I entered headquarters with a degree of trepidation which I had never felt before.

Captain Elliot was performing his ablutions as well as he could, with a big gourd for basin. He nodded and spoke with his head in the towel.

“Good fight, wasn’t it? We have a lot of those fellows to bury this morning. Pretty good bag for three hundred and fifty-one of us, and it was mainly your battery’s cannister that did it.”

I changed feet and said, “Y—e—s.”

I thought to myself that that was about the way *I* should take to “let a man down easy” in a hard case.

The captain carefully removed the soap from his ears, then turning to me said: “That’s a *fighter*, that brother of yours.”

“Yes,” I replied; “but, captain, he is very young, very enthusiastic, and very hot-tempered; I hope—I hope you’ll overlook—his—er—intemperateness and—”

“THUNDER, MAN, DO YOU SUPPOSE I’VE GOT ANY GRUDGE AGAINST A FELLOW THAT FIGHTS LIKE THAT?” roared the gallant captain.

As I rode back through the woods, it seemed to me about the brightest October morning that I had ever seen, even in that superb Carolina climate.

AROUND THE CAMP-FIRE

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IT was a kind of off-night, the 23d of October, 1862, twenty-four hours after the battle of Pocotaligo, on the South Carolina coast.

We had to stop over there until morning, because the creek was out of its banks, and we couldn’t get across without daylight. There were only about a dozen of us, and we had to build a camp-fire under the trees.

After supper we fell to talking, and naturally we talked of war things. There wasn’t anything else to talk about then.

There was the long-legged mountaineer, with the deep voice, and the drawl in his speech which aided the suggestion that he kept his voice in his boots and had to pump it up when anything was to be said. Opposite him was the alert, rapid-speaking fellow, who had come in as a conscript and had made a superb volunteer,—a fellow who had an opinion ready made on every subject that could be mentioned, and who was accustomed to wind up most conversations with a remark so philosophical as to seem strangely out of keeping with the rest of the inconsequent things that he had said. Then there were the two mountaineers who never said anything because they never had anything to say. They had reached that point of intellectual development where the theory is accepted that there ought to be thought behind every utterance; and under this misapprehension they abstained from utterance.

Joe was there, but Joe wasn’t talking that night. Joe was surly and sullen. He had had to kill his horse at Pocotaligo

the day before, and all the honors he had harvested from that action had not reconciled him to the loss. The new horse he had drawn was, in his opinion, “a beast.” Of course all horses are beasts, but that isn’t precisely what Joe meant. Besides, he had received a letter from his sweetheart just before we left camp,—she’s his wife now, and the mother of his dozen or more children,—in which that young woman had expressed doubts as to whether, after all, he was precisely the kind of man to whom she ought to “give her life.” Joe was only seventeen years of age at that time, and he minded little things like that. Still again, Joe had the toothache. Besides that, we were hungry after our exceedingly scant meal of roasted sweet potatoes. Besides that, it was raining.

All the circumstances contributed to make us introspective and psychological in our conversation.

The long-legged mountaineer with the deep voice was telling some entirely inconsequent story about somebody who wasn’t known to any of us, and none of us was listening. After a while he said: “He was that sort of a feller that never felt fear in his life.”

From Joe: “There never was any such fellow.”

The long mountaineer: “Well, that’s what he *said*, anyhow.”

From Joe: “He lied, then.”

“Well,” continued the long-legged mountaineer, “that’s what he said, and he sort o’ lived up to it. If he had any fear, he didn’t show it till that time I was tellin’ you about, when he went all to pieces and showed the white feather.”

“There,” growled Joe, “what did I tell you? He was lying all the time.”

The postscript philosopher on the other side of the fire broke in, saying: “Well, maybe his breakfast went bad on him that morning. An overdone egg would make a coward out of the Duke of Wellington.”

Joe made the general reflection that “some people locate their courage in their transverse colons.”

“What’s a transverse colon?” asked one of the mountaineers. Joe got up, stretched himself, and made no answer. Perhaps none was expected.

“Well,” asked the long-legged mountaineer, “ain’t they people that don’t feel no fear?”

The glib little fellow quickly responded: “Let’s find out. Let’s hold an experience meeting. I suppose we’re a pretty fairly representative body, and I move that each fellow tells honestly how he feels when he is going into battle; for instance, when the skirmishers are at work in front, and we know that the next two minutes will bring on the business.”

“Infernally bad,” growled Joe; “and anybody that pretends to feel otherwise lies.”

The postscript philosopher replied: “I never saw *you* show any fear, Joe.”

“That’s because I’m too big a coward to show it,” said Joe.

Even the two reticent mountaineers understood that.

One of them was moved to break the silence. At last he had, if not a thought, yet an emotion to stand sponsor for utterance.

"*I* always feel," said he, "as though the squegees had took hold of my knees. There ain't anything of me for about a minute—exceptin' a spot in the small of my back. I always wish I was a woman or a baby, or dead or something like that. After a while I git holt of myself and I says to myself, 'Bill, you've got to stand up to the rack, fodder or no fodder.' After that it all comes sort of easy like, you know, because the firin' begins, and after the firin' begins you're doin' somethin', you see, and when you're fightin' like, things don't seem so bad. I s'pose you've all *noticed* that."

From Joe: "In all the works on psychology it has been recognized as a universal principle, that the mind when occupied with a superior consideration is able to free itself from considerations of a lesser sort."

The mountaineer looked at him helplessly and said nothing.

The postscript philosopher began: "I shall never forget my first battle. It wasn't much of a battle either, but it was lively while it lasted. Unfortunately for me it was one of those fights where you have to wait for the enemy to begin. I was tender then. I had just left home, and every time I looked at the little knickknacks mother and the girls had given me to make camp life comfortable,—for bless my soul they thought we *lived* in camp,—every time I looked at these things I grew teary. There oughtn't to be any bric-à-brac of that kind given to a fellow when he goes into the army. It isn't fit. It worries him."

He was silent for a minute. So were the rest of us. We all had bric-à-brac to remember. He resumed:

“We were lying there in the edge of a piece of woods with a sloping meadow in front, crossed by a stone wall heavily overgrown with vines. At the other edge of the meadow was another strip of woods. The enemy were somewhere in there. We knew they were coming, because the pickets had been driven in, and we stood there waiting for them. The waiting was the worst of it, and as we waited I got to feeling in my pockets and—pulled out a little, old three-cornered pincushion. Conscience knows I wouldn’t have pulled out that pincushion at that particular minute to have won a battle. I’ve got it now. I never had any use for a pincushion because I never could pin any two things together the way a woman can, but a man can’t make his womenkind believe that: I’ve kept it all through the war, and when I go back home—if it suits the Yankees that I ever go back at all—I’m going to give it as a souvenir to the little sister that made it for me. And I’m going to tell her that it was that pincushion, little three-cornered thing that it is, that made a man out of me that day.

“My first thought as I pulled it out was that I wanted to go home and give the war up; but then came another kind of a thought. I said, ‘The little girl wouldn’t have given that pincushion to me if she hadn’t understood that I was going off to fight for the country.’ So I said to myself, ‘Old boy, you’ve got to stand your hand pat.’ And now whenever we go into battle I always brace myself up a little by feeling in my breeches pocket and sort of shaping out that pincushion.”

From Joe: “It’s a good story, but the rest of us haven’t any pincushions. Besides that, it’s raining.” I couldn’t help

observing that Joe drew that afternoon's letter out of his pocket and fumbled it a little, while the long-legged mountaineer was straightening out his limbs and his thoughts for his share in the conversation. He said in basso profundo: "The fact is I'm always so skeered just before a fight that I can't remember afterwards how I did feel. I know only this much, that that last three minutes before the bullets begin to whistle and the shells to howl, takes more out of me than six hours straightaway fightin' afterwards does."

From Joe: "There must be a lot in you at the start, then."

There were still two men unheard from in the experience meeting. Some one of us called upon them for an expression of opinion.

"I donno. I never thought," said one.

"Nuther did I," said the other.

"Of course you didn't," said Joe.

Then the postscript philosopher, rising and stretching himself, remarked: "I reckon that if any man goes into a fight without being scared, that man is drunk or crazy."

Then we all lay down and went to sleep.