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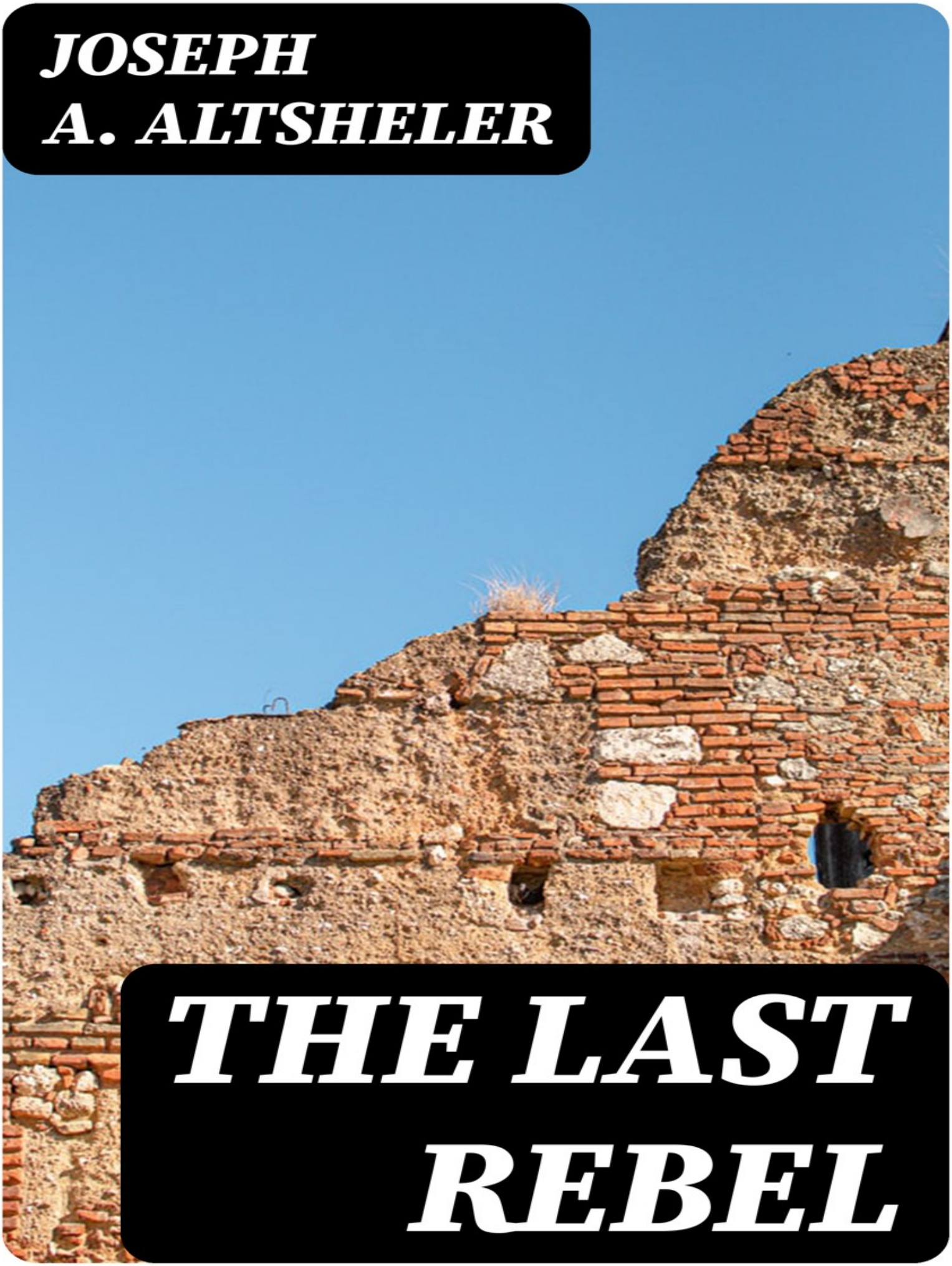

THE LAST REBEL

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CHAPTER I.
AT ODDS WITH THE COMPASS.

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East or west, north or south? With all the experience of a man's years and the knowledge of many wise books of travel, I could not tell. I had taken no note of the sun when I left, and, neglected then, it would not serve me now as a guide. To me at that moment all points of the compass were the same.

The provoking sun which I could not use as a sign-post seemed bent upon showing how brilliant it really could be. The last shred of white and harmless cloud had been driven from the heavens, which were a deep unbroken blue, with the golden lining showing through like a faint, yellow haze. The glowing light clothed the earth, and intensified the red and yellow and brown tints of the leaves, painted by the master artist, autumn. In such a glorious flush the woods and the mountains were a dazzle and tangle of color. But through all the glow and blaze of the sun came the crisp and tonic coolness which marks the waning autumn and makes it best and most beautiful as it goes. It was good to be alone with forest and mountain. To breathe and to see were enough.

I cared nothing at the moment for the lost camp and my comrades of the hunt. Yet I was in no Arcady. Take down the map of Kentucky, and you will see in the east a vast region, roughened over with the dark scrawls meaning mountains, through which no railroad comes, and few roads of any kind either. Add to it other large and similar portions of the map

contiguous in Virginia, West Virginia, and Tennessee, and you have enough country to make a brave kingdom,—a kingdom, too, over which no man yet has been able to make himself ruler, not even any governor of the four States, and they have had some fine and fit governors. In this kingdom of mountain and wilderness I was lost, and was not mourning it, for the time.

A light wind stirred the currents of air and began that faint, curious moaning through the drying leaves which I call the swan-song of autumn. The brilliant foliage quivered before the light touch of the breeze, and the reds and the yellows and the browns and the lingering bits of green shifted and changed like shaken pieces of colored silk.

But one must do more than merely breathe and see, or even listen to the wind playing on the autumn leaves. This kingdom might be mine by right of sole tenancy, but after a little I preferred—greatly preferred—to find some partner of my throne who would feed me and house me and show me my way back to camp. Not knowing any other mode by which to choose, I chose the direction which indicated the easiest foot-path, though that might lead me farthest astray. I put my rifle upon my shoulder and walked through the yellowing grass and the short red bushes, over hills and down gullies, which were a trial to muscles and the forgiving spirit. But I came to nothing which looked familiar, not a tree, not a bush, not a hill, not a rock.

I began to tire of the monotony of the wilderness, which was lately so beautiful; ever the same reds and yellows and browns and bits of lingering green; ever the same burnt grass and purpling bushes and rocky hills; but never a

human being except myself, and I am not company for two. When one grows lonesome beauty departs. I abused the wilderness in its unchanged garb, and longed for the camp and the ugly black cook frying strips of bacon over the coals. Hunger will not be denied its complaints, though in my case they availed nothing.

I wandered about until the spirit and the flesh rebelled sorely and called upon me for the relief which I had not to give. Both ankles were in a state of open mutiny; and I sat down upon the crest of a high hill to soothe them into temporary quiet. I observed then a very marked change in the skies, real, and not due to the state of my mind. The sun, as if satisfied with a half-day's splendor, was withdrawing. Some clouds, dark purple streaks showing in them, hid the blue and made the skies sombre. All the bright color with which the wilderness had prinked and primped itself in the sunshine faded and became dull in this twilight afternoon.

It needed no weather-wise prophet to guess quickly the meaning of these changes. In the mountains a whiff of snow sometimes comes very early,—now and then so early that it whitens the skirt of lingering autumn. The clouds and the misty air with the chilly damp in it betokened such an arrival. Once more I longed for our snug little valley, with the camp, half tent, half cabin, and the sight of the fat black cook frying strips of bacon over the glowing coals.

I had no fear of a heavy snow. The season was too early, I thought, for anything more than a mere spatter of white. But snow, whether in large or small quantities, is wet and

cold, and it was sufficient to be lost, without these new troubles.

From the hill I thought I could see a valley far to the northeast, with the blue and silver waters of a brook or small river shining here and there through the foliage. I decided to make all haste toward it, for in these mountains human life seeks the valleys, and if I found food and shelter at all it would most likely be there.

I took small account of the rough way, and almost ran over the stones and through the scrub. I was in some alarm, for which there was ample cause. The clouds thickened, and clothed the higher peaks. Yet I was cheered by my belief that in truth I had seen a valley of some extent; the patches of blue and silver water showed more plainly through the distant foliage, which looked greener than the withering leaves on the mountain, indicating a sheltered and warmer zone. Rising hope brought back some of my strength, and when I reached the summit of a new hill in the long rows of hills that thrust themselves before me as if to bar my way, I was ready to shout for gladness at the sight of smoke.

The smoke rose from the valley, merely a faint spiral of blue, slowly ascending, and melting so imperceptibly into the clouds that I could not tell where it ended. Yet there was never a more welcome sight to me than that little smoky wisp which told so plainly of man's presence.

I pushed on with new zeal, stumbled against a stone, and rose with an ankle that made bitter complaints. It was not a sprain, but it was unpleasantly near one, and I doubted my ability to walk with the cripple over so wicked a way to the valley. I abused the cruelty of fate, which was but my own

carelessness and haste, and then tried to think out the matter. My first impulse was to throw aside my gun and escape its weight; that led to my second, which was to fire it in the hope of attracting attention.

I had plenty of cartridges. I discharged a bullet into the air. The echo was carried from hill-top to hill-top, until at last I heard it faintly speeding away through the distant mountains. If any one were near, such a report could not escape his ears; but the only answer was the snow, which began to fall as if my shot had been the signal for its coming. The soft flakes descended gently, but they would soon put a sheet of white over all the ridges. Some melted on my face, and the damp chilled me. It was not a time to spare my crippled ankle. I limped on, firing my rifle a second, third, and fourth time. I could still see the spiral of smoke, a true beacon to me, though it was all but hid by the increasing clouds.

I fired the fifth time, and while the echo was yet travelling among the peaks I heard a faint and very distant halloo. I had no doubt that it was an answer to my shot, and, to be sure, I emptied a sixth cartridge into the air. Back came the far cry. Like the shot, it too was taken up by the echo: ridge repeated it to ridge, faint and far away, until I could not tell from what point of the compass the true sound had come.

I was perplexed, but hopeful. I believed that help of some kind was near. I sat down on a rock and expended much ammunition. The snow was still coming down in the same gentle undecided way, but I was compelled to stop between shots and brush the damp, white patches off my clothing.

Presently the answering halloo sounded very near me, and I ceased to fire, replying with a shout.

Two large dogs scampered through the bushes, and, approaching me, began to bark as if they had brought game to bay. A strong voice ordered them to be quiet, and then the owner of dogs and voice came into view.

I had expected the usual mountaineer, sallow, angular, and shabby, but I saw at once that this man was different. The clean-featured, keen, intelligent face could not belong to one of the ignorant dwellers in cabins. He was tall, thin, and past sixty, well dressed in a gray uniform, upon which the brass buttons shone with peculiar brightness. I had seen such uniforms before, but they were relics, and men do not often wear them nowadays.

He approached me, walking in the upright fashion of a military man, and showed much strength and activity for one so far advanced in years.

"I must apologize for my dogs, sir," he said. "They see strangers but seldom, and when they do see one they must lift up their voices and announce it to all the world."

"The sight of your dogs, and still more that of their master, is very welcome to me," I replied.

He bowed with ancient grace and thanked me for my courtesy.

"I must ask your help," I said. "I've lost my way, and I've bruised my ankle so badly on a stone that I fear I cannot walk many more miles."

"It is not far to my place," he replied, "and I will be glad to offer you such hospitality as it can afford."

I looked at him with the greatest curiosity, a curiosity, too, that increased with all he said. He had no weapon, nothing to indicate that he was a hunter; and the uniform of a fashion that went out of style forever, I thought, more than thirty years ago, with its gleaming brass buttons and freshness of texture, drew more than one inquiring glance from me, despite my effort not to appear curious to a stranger upon whom I had become dependent. But if he noticed my curiosity it did not appear in his manner.

The dogs, secure in the judgment of their master, sniffed about me in friendly fashion. The man pointed toward the corkscrew of smoke which the clouds and the film of snow had not yet hidden.

"My home is there," he said. "Come, let us start. This is no place for a man in your condition to linger. If your ankle gives way I can help you."

But rest had improved my ankle, and I found that I could walk in a tolerable manner. He took my gun from me, put it over his own shoulder, and whistled to the dogs. They were leaping about like two panthers in play, but at his whistle they ceased the sport and marched sedately, neck and neck, toward the rising smoke, leading the way for us.

The old man chose the way as if he knew it, avoiding the rougher slopes and winding about in a sort of path which made the walking much easier for me. As if good luck brought good luck, the snow ceased, and the sun, returning, drove all the clouds out of the heavens. The lustrous sunshine again gilded all the colors of mountains and forest and brought out the fine and delicate tints of the reds and yellows and browns. The white skim of snow over the earth

dissolved in tears, and the warm sun that made them drank them up.

The valley lying fresh and yet green below us broadened. The coil of smoke grew into a column.

"Did you say your camp lay there?" I asked, pointing toward the valley. We had been silent hitherto.

"I did not say my camp, sir; I said my home," he replied, with some haughtiness. "Twenty yards farther, and you can see through the trees a corner of the roof of Fort Defiance."

I did not understand him. I saw no reason for his high tone, and much was strange in what he said. Yet he had the manner and bearing of a gentleman, and he had been a timely friend to me. I had no right to ask him curious questions.

He did not seem inclined to further talk, and I too was silent. But I found employment for my eyes. We were descending the first slopes of the valley, and it lay before us a welcome oasis in the weary wilderness of mountains.

It must have been several miles in length and a good mile or more across. Down the centre of it flowed a creek of clear, cool water, almost big enough to call itself a river, and the thickness of the tree-trunks and the long grass browned by the autumn breath showed the fertility of the soil. Through the trees, which still retained much of their foliage, the corners of house-roofs appeared. There are many such secluded and warm little valleys in the Alleghanies, and I saw no occasion for surprise. In truth, what I saw was most welcome: it indicated the comfort of which I stood in need.

"I haven't asked you your name," said my host, suddenly.

"Arthur West," I replied.

"I would infer from your accent that you are a Northerner, a Yankee," he said, looking at me closely, and in a way I did not quite understand.

"You are right on the first point, but not on the second," I replied. "I am a Northerner, but not a Yankee. I am not from New England, but from New York City."

"It's all the same," he replied, frowning. "You're a Yankee, and I knew it from the first. We call the people of all the Northern States Yankees."

"Have it so," I replied, with a laugh. "But abroad they call us all Yankees, whether from the Northern or the Southern States."

"Luckily I never go abroad," he replied, frowning still more deeply. "You have not asked me my own name," he continued.

"No, but I confess I would like to hear it," I replied. "I wish to know whose hospitality I am about to enjoy, a hospitality for which I can never thank you too much, for if I had not met you I might have starved or frozen to death in this wilderness."

"I am Colonel John Greene Hetherill, C.S.A.," he replied.

"C.S.A.?" I said, looking at his gray uniform.

"Yes, 'C.S.A.,'" he replied. His tone was emphatic and haughty. "Confederate States of America. What have you to say against it?"

"Nothing," I replied. "I leave that to the historians."

"Who are mostly liars," he said.

He looked at me with an expression of undoubted hostility.