

THE OLD MAID.
How long the fair one tell her age.
When age itself will tell?
—Judge.

THE AFFAIR AT COULTER'S NOTCH.
BY AMBROSE BIERCE.
"Do you think, Colonel, that your brave Coulter would like to put one of his guns in here?" the General asked.

"General," he replied, warmly, "Coulter would like to put a gun anywhere; his reach of those people—with a motion of his hand in the direction of the enemy.
"Is it the only place," said the General. He was serious, then!

"The place" was a depression, a notch, in the sharp crest of a hill. It was a place, and through it ran a ravine which, reaching this highest point in its course by a sinuous ascent through a thin forest, ran straight away toward the enemy. For miles to the left and a mile to the right the ridge, though occupied by a line of infantry lying close behind the sharp crest and appearing as if held in place by atmospheric pressure, was commanded on slightly lower elevation beyond a creek and a mile away. All the guns but one were masked by the trees of an orchard; that one—its barrel a mile with-

"Listen!" said the colonel, interrupting with an upward gesture, "do you hear that?"
"Tha!" was the silence of the federal gun. The staff, the orderlies, the lines of infantry behind the crest—all had "heard" and were looking curiously in the direction of the crater, whence no smoke now ascended, except desultory cloudlets from the enemy's shells. Then came the blast of a bugle, a faint rattle of wheels: a minute later the sharp reports recommenced with double activity. The demolished gun had been replaced with a sound one.

"Yes," said the adjutant-general, regarding his subordinate with a friendly interest. "I don't know that I ought to say anything, but there is something wrong in all this. Do you happen to know that Captain Coulter is from the south?"
"Sir, he is indeed?"
"I heard last summer that the division which the general then commanded was in the vicinity of Coulter's home—camped there for weeks and—"

"The colonel had risen from the rock upon which they had been sitting. His eyes were blazing with a generous indignation.
"See here, Morrison," said he, looking his gossiping staff officer straight in the face, "you got that story from a gentleman or a liar?"
"I don't want to say how I got it, colonel, unless it is necessary"—he was blushing to the ears—"I stake my life upon its truth in the main."

full complement of its guns, came bounding down the side in a storm of dust, unaltered under cover and was run forward by hand to the fatal crest among the dead horses. A gesture of the captain's arm, a come-strange-like movement of the men in loading, and almost before the troops along the way had ceased to hear the rattle of the wheels a great and appalling spring forward down the declivity, and with a sharp shock which turned up the white of the forest leaves like a storm the affair at Coulter's Notch had begun.

Unwilling to see the efforts which he could not aid and the slaughter which he could not stay, the colonel had ascended the ridge at a point a quarter of a mile to the left, whence the notch, itself invisible but pushing up successive masses of smoke, seemed the crater of a volcano in thundering eruption. With his glasses he watched the enemy's guns, and he could see the effects of Coulter's fire—if Coulter still lived to direct it. He saw that the federal gunners, ignoring the enemy's positions, were firing at random, and that their smoke only, gave their whole attention to the one which maintained its place in the open—the lawn in front of the house, with its guns accurately in line. Over and about that hardy piece the shells exploded at intervals of a few seconds. Some exploded in the house, as could be seen by the appearance of smoke from the chimney-roots. Figures of prostrate men and horses were plainly visible.

"If our fellows are doing such good work with a single gun," said the general to an aide who happened to be nearest, "they must be suffering like the devil from six. Go down and present the commander of that piece with my congratulations on the accuracy of his fire."
Turning to the adjutant general he said: "Did you observe Coulter's damned reluctance to obey orders?"
"Sir, I did."

"Well, say nothing about it, please. I don't think the general will care to make any accusations. He will probably have enough to do in explaining his own connection with this uncommon way of amusing the rear guard of a retreating enemy."
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and gazed up at the mounted officer with an unsteady regard, his teeth flashing between his black lips, his eyes, fierce and expanded, burning like coals beneath his bloody brow. The colonel made an authoritative gesture, pointing to the rear. The band bowed in token of obedience. It was Captain Coulter.
Simultaneously with the colonel's arresting signal silence fell upon the whole field of action. The procession of missiles no longer streamed into that defile of death; the enemy also had ceased firing. His army had been gone for hours—the commander of his rear guard, who had held his position perilously long in hope to silence the Federal fire, at that strange moment had silenced his own. "I was not aware of the breadth of my authority," thought the colonel, facetiously, riding forward to the crest to see what had really happened.

Naturally, the colonel established himself and his military family in the plantation house. It was somewhat shattered, but it was better than the open air. The furniture was broken and damaged, and there was a lingering odor of powder smoke everywhere. The beds, the closets, the women's clothing, the cupboards were not badly damaged. The new tenants for a night made themselves comfortable and the practical enforcement of Coulter's battery supplied them with an interesting topic.

"What is it, Barbour?" said that officer, pleasantly, having overheard the request. "Colonel, there is something wrong in the cellar; I don't know what it is, but there, I was down there rummaging about."
"I will go down and see," said a staff officer, rising.
"Sir, I will go down and see," said a staff officer, rising.

"The staff officer was looking at his unfinished work, the orderly who might possibly be in one of the casks on the other side of the cellar. Suddenly the man whom they had thought dead raised his head and gazed tranquilly into their faces. His complexion was coal black; the cheeks were apparently tattooed in irregular lines from the eyes downward. The lips, white, like wax, were set in a steeple negro. There was blood upon his forehead.

The staff officer drew back a pace, the orderly two paces.
"Where are you doing here, my man?" said the Colonel, unmoved.
"This house belongs to me, sir," was the reply, civilly delivered.
"Who are you? What are these?"
"My wife and child, Colonel, I am Captain Coulter."

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New York letter to Pittsburgh Post: "Give me a bottle," said George Law at the resplendent Stokes bar.
A bottle meant a quart of champagne, of course, and the bartender glanced inquiringly around for Law's companion in the proposed feast. But he was alone. The cork was popped out, and one glass set forth. Law coolly gripped the bottle, filled the glass, and then kept on pouring. The liquid foamed and sparkled over the brim and on the bar, and thence to the floor, until the orderly who was gazing at the Law drank the single glass of champagne that he had secured out of a bottle and drank it placidly. Perhaps the wine gained an extra flavor because the two gills were drunk through the purchaser's erratic method. The witnesses of the queer episode said not a word that he could have heard, nor did they stare at him, but they gazed at the orderly, though he had merely quaffed a glass of beer.

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