

The Tree of Appomattox

A Story of the Civil War's Close

Book 8

by Joseph A. Altsheler



The Tree of Appomattox

A Story of the Civil War's Close

Book 8

by Joseph A. Altsheler

All rights reserved. This book may not be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior written consent of Zeezok Publishing.

ISBN 978-1-933573-89-2

Revised & edited by Zeezok Publishing, LLC
Copyright © 2009

Cover Art by Yuriy A. Yeremenko
www.yuriystudio.com

Published by:
Zeezok Publishing, LLC
PO Box 1960
Elyria, OH 44036

www.Zeezok.com
1-800-749-1681

*Books by Joseph Altsheler
available through Zeezok Publishing, LLC*

The Civil War Series

The Guns of Bull Run

The Guns of Shiloh

The Scouts of Stonewall

The Sword of Antietam

The Star of Gettysburg

The Rock of Chickamauga

The Shades of the Wilderness

The Tree of Appomattox

The Texan Series (Mexican War)

The Texan Star

The Texan Scouts

The Texan Triumph

World War I Series

The Guns of Europe

The Forest of Swords

The Hosts of the Air

Principal Characters in *The Tree of Appomattox*

Harry Kenton, A Lad Who Fights on the Southern Side.

Dick Mason, Cousin of Harry Kenton, Who Fights on the Northern Side

Colonel George Kenton, Father of Harry Kenton

Mrs. Mason, Mother of Dick Mason

Colonel Arthur Winchester, Dick Mason's Regimental Commander

Colonel Leonidas Talbot, Commander of the Invincibles, a Southern Regiment

Lieutenant Colonel Hector St. Hilaire, Second in Command of the Invincibles

Alan Hertford, A Northern Cavalry Leader

Philip Sherburne, A Southern Cavalry Leader

William J. Shepard, A Northern Spy

Daniel Whitley, A Northern Sergeant and Veteran of the Plains

George Warner, A Vermont Youth Who Loves Mathematics

Frank Pennington, A Nebraska Youth, Friend of Dick Mason

Arthur St. Clair, A Native of Charleston, Friend of Harry Kenton

Tom Langdon, Friend of Harry Kenton

George Dalton, Friend of Harry Kenton

Bill Skelly, Mountaineer and Guerrilla

Tom Slade, A Guerrilla Chief

Sam Jarvis, The Singing Mountaineer

Ike Simmons, Jarvis' Nephew

Aunt "Suse," A Centenarian and Prophetess

Bill Petty, A Mountaineer and Guide

Julien DeLangeais, A Musician and Soldier from Louisiana

John Carrington, Famous Northern Artillery Officer

John Watson, A Northern Contractor

Henrietta Carden, A Seamstress in Richmond

Dick Jones, A North Carolina Mountaineer

Historical Characters in *The Tree of Appomattox*

U. S. Grant, Northern Commander

Robert E. Lee, Southern Commander

Philip H. Sheridan, Northern General

Jubal Early, Southern General

Contents

The Apple Tree	1
The Woman at the House	16
Over the Hills	38
The Fight at the Crossways	52
An Old Enemy	70
The Fishermen	84
Sheridan's Attack.....	99
The Messenger from Richmond	121
At Grips with Early.....	138
An Unbeaten Foe.....	152
Cedar Creek.....	173
In the Cove.....	187
Dick's Great Exploit	207
The Mountain Sharpshooter	222
Back with Grant.....	239
The Closing Days.....	255
Appomattox	268
The Final Reckoning	288

Chapter 1

The Apple Tree

Although he was an officer in full uniform, he was a youth in years, and he had the spirits of youth. Moreover, it was one of the finest apple trees he had ever seen, and the apples hung everywhere, round, ripe, and red, fairly asking to be taken and eaten. Dick Mason looked up at them longingly. They made him think of the orchards at home in his own state, and a touch of coolness in the air sharpened his appetite for them all the more.

“If you want ‘em so badly, Dick,” said Warner, “why don’t you climb the tree and get ‘em? There’s plenty for you and also for Pennington and me.”

“I see. You’re as anxious for apples as I am, and you wish me to gather ‘em for you by making a strong appeal to my own desires. It’s your clever New England way.”

“We’re forbidden to take anything from the people, but it won’t hurt to keep a few apples from rotting on the ground. If you won’t get ‘em, Pennington will.”

“I understand you, George. You’re trying to play Frank against me, while you keep yourself safe. You’ll go far. Never mind. I’ll gather apples for us all.”

He leaped up, caught the lowest bough, swung himself lightly into the fork, and then, climbing a little higher, reached for the reddest and ripest apples, which he flung down in a bountiful supply.

“Now, gluttons,” he said, “sate¹ yourselves, but save a lot for me.”

Then he went up as far as the boughs would sustain him and took a look over the country. Apple trees do not grow very tall, but Dick’s tree stood on the highest point in the orchard, and he had a fine view, a view that was in truth the most remarkable the North American continent had yet afforded.

He always carried glasses over his shoulder, and lately Colonel Winchester had made him a gift of a splendid pair, which he now put into use, sweeping the whole circle of the horizon. With their powerful aid, he was able to see the ancient city of Petersburg, where Lee had thrown himself across Grant’s path in order to block his way to Richmond, the Southern capital, and had dug long lines of trenches in which his army lay. It was Lee who first used this method of defense for a smaller force against a larger, and the vast trench warfare of Europe a half century later was a repetition of the mighty struggle of Lee and Grant on the lines of Petersburg.

Dick, through his glasses, saw the trenches, lying like a brown bar across the green country, and opposite them another brown bar, often less than a hundred yards away, which marked where the Northern troops also had dug in. The opposing lines extended a distance of nearly forty miles, and Richmond was only twenty miles behind them. It was the nearest the Army of the Potomac had come to the Southern capital since McClellan had seen the spires of its churches, and that was more than two years away.

Warner and Pennington were lying on the ground, eating big red apples with much content and looking up lazily at Mason.

“You’re curving those glasses about a lot. What do you see, Dick?” asked Pennington at length.

“I see Petersburg, an old, old town, half buried in foliage

1 To satisfy to the full

and with many orchards and gardens about it. A pity that two great armies should focus on such a pleasant place.”

“No time for sentiment, Dick. What else do you see?”

“Jets of smoke and flame from the trenches, an irregular sort of firing, sometimes a half-dozen shots at one place, and then a long and peaceful break until you come to another place, where they’re exchanging bullets.”

“What more do you see, Brother Richard?”

“I see a Johnny come out of his trench hands up and advance toward one of our Yanks opposite, who also has come out of his trench hands up.”

“What are they trading?” asked Warner.

“The Reb offers a square of plug tobacco and the Yank a bundle of newspapers. Now they’ve made the exchange, now they’ve shaken hands and each is going back to his own trench.”

“It’s a merry world, my masters, as has been said before,” resumed Warner, “but I should add that it’s also a mad wag of a world. Here we are face to face for forty miles, at some points seeking to kill one another in a highly impersonal way and at other points conducting sale and barter according to the established customs of peace. People at home wouldn’t believe it, and later on a lot more won’t believe it, when the writers come to write about it. But it’s true just the same. What else do you see from the apple tower, Brother Richard?”

“A long line of wagons approaching a camp some distance behind the Confederate trenches. They must be loaded pretty heavily, because the drivers are cracking their whips over the horses and mules.”

“That’s bad. Provisions, I suppose,” said Warner. “The more these Johnnies get to eat, the harder they fight, and they’re not supposed to be receiving supplies now. Our cavalry ought to have cut off that wagon train. I shall have to speak to Sheridan about it. This is no way to starve the Johnnies to death. Seest

aught more, Brother Richard?”

“I do! I do! Jump up, boys, and use your own glasses! I behold a large man on a gray horse, riding slowly along as if he were inspecting troops away behind the trenches. Wherever he passes, the soldiers snatch off their caps, and, although I can’t hear ‘em, I know they’re cheering. It’s Lee himself!”

Both Warner and Pennington swung themselves upon the lower boughs of the tree and put their glasses to their eyes.

“It’s surely Lee,” said Warner. “I’m glad to get a look at him. He’s been giving us a lot of trouble for more than three years now, but I think General Grant is going to take his measure.”

“They’re terribly reduced,” said Pennington, “and if we stick to it we’re bound to win. Still, you boys will recall for some time that we’ve had a war. What else do you see from the heights of the apple tree, Dick?”

“Distant dust behind our own lines and figures moving in it dimly. Cavalry practicing, I should say. Have you fellows fruit enough?”

“Plenty. You can climb down, and if the farmer hurries here with his dog to catch you, we’ll protect you.”

“This is a fine apple tree,” said Dick, as he descended slowly. “Apple trees are objects of beauty. They look so well in the spring all in white bloom, and then they look just as well in the fall, when the red or yellow apples hang among the leaves. And this is one of the finest I’ve ever seen.”

He did not dream then that he should remember an apple tree his whole life, that an apple tree, and one apple tree in particular, should always call to his mind a tremendous event, losing nothing of its intensity and vividness with the passing years. But all that was in the future, and when he joined his comrades on the ground, he made good work with the biggest and finest apple he could find.

“Early apples,” he said, looking up at the tree. “It’s not the

end of July yet.”

“But good apples, glorious apples, anyhow,” said Pennington, taking another. “Besides, it’s fine and cool like autumn.”

“It won’t stay,” said Dick. “We’ve got the whole of August coming. Virginia is like Kentucky. Always lots of hot weather in August. Glad there’s no big fighting to be done just now. But it’s a pity, isn’t it, to tear up a fine farming country like this. Around here is where the United States started. John Smith, and Rolfe, and Pocahontas, and the rest of them may have roamed just where this orchard stands. And later on lots of the great Americans rode about these parts, some of the younger ones carrying their beautiful ladies on pillions² behind them. You are a cold-blooded New Englander, Warner, and you believe that anyone fighting against you ought to burn forever, but as for me, I feel sorry for Virginia. I don’t care what she’s done, but I don’t like to see the Old Dominion, the Mother of Presidents, stamped flat.”

“I’m not cold-blooded at all, but I don’t gush. I don’t forget that this state produced George Washington, but I want victory for our side just the same, no matter how much of Virginia we may have to tread down. Is that farmhouse over there still empty?”

“Of course, or we wouldn’t have taken the apples. It belongs to a man named Haynes, and he left ahead of us with his family for Richmond. I fancy it will be a long time before Haynes and his people sleep in their own rooms again. Come, fellows, we’d better be going back. Colonel Winchester is kind to us, but he doesn’t want his officers to be prowling about as they please too long.”

They walked together toward the edge of the orchard and looked at the farmhouse, from the chimneys of which no smoke had risen in weeks. Dick felt sure it would be used later on as

2 A pad or cushion used as a seat behind a saddle

headquarters by some general and his staff, but for the present, it was left alone. And being within the Union, lines, no plunderer had dared to touch it.

It was a two-story wooden house, painted white, with green shutters, all closed now. The doors were also locked and sealed until such time as the army authorities wished to open them, but on the portico, facing the Southern lines, were two benches, on which the three youths sat and looked again over the great expanse of rolling country, dotted at intervals by puffs of smoke from the long lines of trenches. Where they sat, it was so still that they could hear the faint crackle of the distant rifles and now and then the heavier crash of a cannon.

Dick's mind went back to the Wilderness and its gloomy shades, the sanguinary field of Spotsylvania, and then the terrific mistake of Cold Harbor. The genius of Lee had never burned more brightly. He had handled his diminishing forces with all his old skill and resolution, but Grant had driven on and on. No matter what Grant's losses, the North always filled up his ranks again and poured forward munitions and supplies in a vast and unbroken stream. A nation had summoned all its powers for a supreme effort to win, and Dick felt that the issue of the war was not now in doubt. The genius of Lee and the bravery of his devoted army could no longer save the South. The hammer strokes of Grant would surely crush it.

And then what? He had the deepest sympathy for these people of Virginia. What would become of them after the war? Defeat for the South meant nearer approach to destruction than any nation had suffered in generations. To him, born south of the Ohio River and so closely united by blood with these people, victory as well as defeat had its pangs.

Warner and Pennington rose and announced that they would return to the regiment, which was held in reserve in a little valley below, but Dick, their leave not having run out yet,

decided to stay a while longer.

“So long,” said Warner. “Let the orchard alone. Leave apples for others. Remember that they are protected by strict orders against all wandering and irresponsible officers, but ourselves.”

“Yes, be good, Dick,” said Pennington, and the two went down the slope, leaving Dick on the portico. He liked being alone at times. The serious cast of mind that he had inherited from his famous great grandfather, Paul Cotter, demanded moments of meditation. It was peaceful too on the portico, and a youth who had been through Grant’s Wilderness campaign, a month of continuous and terrible fighting, was glad to rest for a while.

The distant rifle fire and the occasional cannon shot had no significance and did not disturb him. They blended now with the breeze that blew among the leaves of the apple trees. He had never felt more like peace, and the pleasant open country was soothing to the eye. What a contrast to that dark and sodden Wilderness where men fought blindly in the dusk. He shuddered as he remembered the forests set on fire by the shells and burning over the fallen.

A light step aroused him, and a large man sat down on the bench beside him. Dick often wondered at the swift and almost noiseless tread of Shepard, with whom he was becoming well acquainted. He was tall, built powerfully, and must have weighed two hundred pounds, yet he moved with the ease and grace of a boy of sixteen. Dick thought it must come from his trade.

“I don’t want to intrude, Mr. Mason,” said Shepard, “but I saw you sitting here, looking perhaps too grave and thoughtful for one of your years.”

“You’re most welcome, Mr. Shepard, and I was thinking, that is in a vague sort of way.”

“I saw your face, and you were wondering what was to

become of Virginia and the Virginians.”

“So I was, but how did you know it?”

“I didn’t know it. It was just a guess, and the guess was due to the fact that I was having the same thoughts myself.”

“So you regard the war as won?” asked Dick, who had a great respect for Shepard’s opinion.

“If the President keeps General Grant in command, as he will, it’s a certainty, but it will take a long time yet. We can’t force those trenches down there. Remember what Cold Harbor cost us.”

Dick shuddered.

“I remember it,” he said.

“It would be worse if we tried to storm Lee’s lines. After Cold Harbor, the general won’t attempt it, and I see a long wait here. But we can afford it. The South grows steadily weaker. Our blockade clamps like a steel band and presses tighter and tighter all the time. Food is scarce in the Confederacy. So is ammunition. They receive no recruits, and every day the army of Lee is smaller in numbers than it was the day before.”

“You go into Richmond, Mr. Shepard. I’ve heard from high officers that you do. How do they feel there with our army only about twenty miles away?”

“They’re quiet and seem to be confident, but I believe they know their danger.”

“Have you by any chance seen or heard of my cousin, Harry Kenton, who is a lieutenant on the staff of the Southern commander-in-chief?”

Shepard smiled, as if the question brought memories that pleased him.

“A fine youth,” he said. “Yes, I’ve seen him more than once. I’m free to tell you, Lieutenant Mason, that I know a lot about this rebel cousin of yours. He and I have come into conflict on several occasions, and I did not win every time.”

“Nobody could beat Harry always,” exclaimed Dick with youthful loyalty. “He was always the strongest, and most active among us, and the best in forest and water. He could hunt, and fish, and trail like the scouts of our border days.”

“I found him in full possession of all these qualities, and he used them against me. I should grieve if that cousin of yours were to fall, Mr. Mason. I want to know him still better after the war.”

Dick would have asked further questions about the encounters between Harry and the spy, but he judged that Shepard did not care to answer them, and he forbore. Yet the man aroused the most intense curiosity in him. There were spies and spies, and Shepard was one of them, but he was not like the others. He was unquestionably a man of great mental power. His calm, steady gaze and his words to the point showed it. No one patronized Shepard.

“I should like to go into Richmond with you some dark night,” said Dick, who hid a strong spirit of adventure under his quiet exterior.

“You’re not serious, Lieutenant Mason?”

“I wasn’t, maybe, when I began to say it, but I believe I am now. Why shouldn’t I be curious about Richmond, a place that great armies have been trying to take for three years? Just at present, it’s the center of the world to me in interest.”

“You must not think of such a thing, Mr. Mason. Detection means certain death.”

“No more for me than for you.”

“But I have had a long experience, and I have resources of which you can’t know. Don’t think of it again, Mr. Mason.”

“I was merely jesting. I won’t,” said Dick.

He involuntarily looked toward the point beyond the horizon where Richmond lay, and Shepard meanwhile studied him closely. Young Mason had not come much under his

notice until lately, but now he began to interest the spy greatly. Shepard observed what a strong, well-built young fellow he was, tall and slender but extremely muscular. He also bore a marked resemblance to his cousin, Harry Kenton, and such was the quality of Shepard that the likeness strongly recommended Dick to him. Moreover, he read the lurking thought that persisted in Dick's mind.

"You mustn't dream of such a thing as entering Richmond, Mr. Mason," he said.

"It was just a passing thought. But aren't you going in again?"

"Later on, no doubt, but not just now. I understand that we're planning some movement. I don't know what it is, but I'm to wait here until it's over. Good-bye, Mr. Mason. Since things are closing in, it's possible that you and I will see more of each other than before."

"Of course, when I'm personally conducted by you on that trip into Richmond."

Shepard, who had left the portico, turned and shook a warning finger.

"Dismiss that absolutely and forever from your mind, Mr. Mason," he said.

Dick laughed and watched the stalwart figure of the spy as he strode away. Again the singular ease and lightness of his step struck him. To the lad's fancy, the grass did not bend under his feet. Upon Dick as upon Harry, Shepard made the impression of power, not only of strength but of subtlety and courage.

"I'm glad that man's on our side," said Dick to himself, as Shepard's figure disappeared among the trees. Then he left the portico and went down in the valley to Colonel Winchester's regiment, where he was received with joyous shouts by several young men, including Warner and Pennington, who had gone on before. Colonel Winchester himself smiled and nodded, and Dick saluted respectfully.

The Winchesters, as they loved to call themselves, were faring well at this particular time. Like the Invincibles on the other side, this regiment had been decimated³ and filled up again several times. It had lost heavily in the Wilderness and at Spotsylvania, but its colonel had escaped without serious hurt and had received special mention for gallantry and coolness. It had been cut up once more at Cold Harbor, and because of its great services and losses, it was permitted to remain a while in the rear as a reserve and obtain the rest it needed so sorely.

The brave youths were recovering fast from their wounds and exertions. Their camp was beside a clear brook, and there were tents for the officers, though they were but seldom used, most of them, unless it should be raining, for they preferred to sleep in their blankets under the trees. The water was good to drink, and farther down were several deep pools in which they bathed. Food, as usual in the Northern army, was good and plentiful, and for the Winchesters, it seemed more a period of play than of war.

“What did you see at the house, Dick?” asked Colonel Winchester.

“The spy, Shepard. I talked a while with him. He says the Confederacy is growing weaker every day, but if we try to storm Lee’s lines, we’ll be cut to pieces.”

“I think he’s right in both respects, although I feel sure that some kind of a movement will soon be attempted. But Dick, a mail from the west has arrived, and here is a letter for you.”

He handed the lad a large square envelope, addressed in tall, slanting script, and Dick knew at once that it was from his mother. He seized it eagerly, and Colonel Winchester, suppressing the wish to know what was inside, turned away.

I have not heard from my dearest boy since

3 To destroy a large part of

the terrible battles in the east [Mrs. Mason wrote], but I hope and pray that you have come safely through them. You have escaped so many dangers that I feel you must escape all the rest. The news reaches us that the fighting in Virginia has been of the most dreadful character, but when it arrives in Pendleton, it has two meanings. Those of our little town who are for the Confederacy say General Grant's losses have been so enormous that he can go no farther and that the last and greatest effort of the North has failed.

Those who sympathize with the Union say General Lee has been reduced so greatly that he must be crushed soon and with him the Confederacy. As you know, I wish the latter to be true, but I suspect that the truth is somewhere between the two statements.

But the truth either way brings me great grief. I cannot hate the Southern people. We are Southern ourselves in all save this war, and, although our dear little town is divided in feeling, I have received nothing but kindness from those on the other side. Dr. Russell often asks about you. He says you were the best Latin scholar in the Academy, and he expects you to have a great future, as a learned man, after the war. He speaks oftenest of you and Harry Kenton, and I believe that you two were his favorite pupils. He says that Harry's is the best mathematical mind he has ever found in his long years of teaching.

Your room remains just as it was when you left. Juliana brushes and airs it every day and expects

at any time to see her young Master Dick come riding home. She keeps in her mind two pictures of you, absolutely unlike. In one of these pictures you are a great officer, carrying much of the war's weight on your shoulders, consulted continually by General Grant, who goes wrong only when he fails to take your advice. In the other, you are a little boy whom she alternately scolds and pets. And it may be that I am somewhat like Juliana in this respect.

The garden is very fine this year. The vegetables were never more plentiful, and never of a finer quality. I wish you were here for your share. It must be a trial to have to eat hard crackers and tough beef and pork day after day. I should think that you would grow to hate the sight of them. Sam, the colored man who has been with us so long, has proved as faithful and trustworthy as Juliana. He makes a most excellent farmer, and the yield of corn in the bottom land is going to be amazing.

They say that since the Federal successes in the West, the operations of Skelly's band of guerrillas have become bolder, but he has not threatened Pendleton again. They say also that a little farther south a band of like character, who call themselves Southern, under a man named Slade, are ravaging, but I suppose that you, who see great generals and great armies daily, are not much concerned about outlaws.

Always keep your feet dry and warm if you can, and never fail to spread a blanket between you and the damp grass. Give my respects to

Colonel Winchester. Tell him that we hear of him now and then in Kentucky and that we hear only good. Don't forget about the blanket.

There was more, but it was these passages over which Dick lingered longest.

He read the letter three times—letters were rare in those years, and men prized them highly—and put it away in his strongest pocket. Colonel Winchester was standing by the edge of the brook, and Dick, saluting him, said:

“My mother wishes me to deliver to you her respects and best wishes.”

A flush showed through the tan of the colonel's face, and Dick, noticing it, was startled by a sudden thought. At first his feeling was jealousy, but it passed in an instant, never to come again. There was no finer man in the world than Colonel Winchester.

“She is well,” he added, “and affairs could go no better at Pendleton.”

“I am glad,” said Colonel Winchester simply. Then he turned to a man with very broad shoulders and asked:

“How are the new lads coming on?”

“Very well, sir,” replied Sergeant Daniel Whitley. “Some of 'em are a little awkward yet, and a few are suffering from change of water, but they're good boys, and we can depend on 'em, sir, when the time comes.”

“Especially since you have been thrashing 'em into shape for so many days, sergeant.”

“Thank you, sir.”

An orderly came with a message for Colonel Winchester, who left at once, but Dick and the sergeant, his faithful comrade and teacher, stood beside the stream. They could easily see the bathers farther down, splashing in the water, pulling one

another under, and, now and then, hurling a man bodily into the pool. They were all boys to the veteran. Many of them had been trained by him, and his attitude toward them was that of a school teacher toward his pupils.

“You have ears that hear everything, sergeant,” said Dick. “What is this new movement that I’ve heard two or three men speak of? Something sudden they say.”

“I’ve heard too,” replied Sergeant Whitley, “but I can’t guess it. Whatever it is, though, it’s coming soon. There’s a lot of work going on at a point farther down the line, but it’s kept a secret from the rest of us here.”

The sergeant went away presently, and Dick, going down stream, joined some other young officers in a pool. He lay on the bank afterward, but, shortly after dark, Colonel Winchester returned, gave an order, and the whole regiment marched away in the dusk. Dick felt sure that the event Sergeant Whitley had predicted was about to happen, but the colonel gave no hint of its nature, and Dick continued to wonder, as they advanced steadily in the dusk.