

A MAGNIFICENT MAN-TRAP

SOON THE GREAT BATTLE would begin, and Browne and Richardson were determined not to miss it. They'd seen many battles but they'd missed others, including Shiloh, arriving too late to witness the fighting and reduced to writing moody descriptions of the forlorn battlefield—the trees pockmarked with bullet holes, the ground strewn with hats, boots, broken guns, and, of course, rows of fresh graves, some of them ripped open by animals who dragged dead soldiers through the dirt and tore at their uniforms to get the fresh meat.

Albert Richardson and Junius Browne were reporters for the *New York Tribune*, Horace Greeley's newspaper. Both were 29 years old, and they'd been friends for a decade. Albert was stocky and strong, with a close-cropped beard and a serious face that masked a droll wit. Junius was scrawny and prematurely bald, a bookish intellectual with jug ears and a caustic sense of humor.

On May 3, 1863, they linked up at the Union army encampment in Milliken's Bend, a boggy backwater on the Mississippi, 25 miles north of Vicksburg. A couple weeks earlier, General Grant's army had

marched to Grand Gulf, Mississippi, 50 miles south of Vicksburg, the Confederate stronghold that Grant was preparing to attack. As everyone on both sides knew, if Grant could capture Vicksburg the Union would control the Mississippi River, and cut the Confederacy in half.

Whatever might happen there, Vicksburg would be among the war's most important battles, so Richardson and Browne needed to get to Grand Gulf. The two possible routes were both exceedingly dangerous. They could walk 75 miles south through the swamps on the Louisiana side of the Mississippi, then cross the river to Grand Gulf, which would take three days, assuming they made it past the Rebel snipers hiding in the marshes, eager to shoot passing Yankees. The alternative was to hitch a ride on one of the boats that set out from Milliken's Bend at night, ferrying supplies to Grant's army. That route was quicker—only about eight hours—but the boats had to float past Vicksburg, where batteries of Confederate cannon were waiting to blow them to bits.

Both routes were frightening, so Richardson and Browne tried to evaluate the odds. They'd heard that 15 Union boats had attempted to steam past the Rebel guns and that 10 or 12 of them had reached Grand Gulf unscathed, so they figured their chances were reasonably good. And there was another factor: Riding down the river past Rebel cannons would make a far more exciting story than plodding through the Louisiana mud. After two years of war reporting, they'd slogged through enough mud to last a lifetime. They located a tugboat captain who was planning to drag two barges of hay down the river that night and he invited them to come along. Another reporter—Richard Colburn of the *New York World*—agreed to accompany them.

As they waited for nightfall, the three reporters encountered Sylvanus Cadwallader of the *Chicago Times* and urged him to join their expedition. Cadwallader was skeptical. Floating past cannons on a barge packed with highly combustible hay bales seemed like an invitation to incineration. Cadwallader decided to take his chances with the mud. He borrowed an army mule and headed south through Louisiana. He spent the night listening as the cannons of Vicksburg boomed, and wondering if his friends would make it past them.



THE TUGBOAT LEFT Milliken's Bend a couple hours before midnight. The *Sturges* was a steam-powered tug that hauled two mas-

sive barges stuffed with bales of hay, as well as 32 soldiers from an Ohio infantry unit and the three reporters. A bright moon hovered overhead and a gentle breeze stirred the spring air. It was a perfect night for a romantic river cruise with a beautiful woman but a terrible one for sneaking past Confederate cannons under cover of darkness. There was precious little darkness and no cover: The full moon lit the sky and shimmered off the water, illuminating the *Sturges* as it chugged slowly south towards Vicksburg, dragging the barges behind.

Perched atop bales, the reporters made a disconcerting discovery: Although their barge was filled with hay that exploding shells could easily ignite, it carried only two small buckets for firefighting—and not even a single lifeboat.

“This is a magnificent man-trap,” Browne said, before quickly shrugging off the danger. “But the greater the risk, the more interesting the adventure, I suppose.”

The three lit cigars and started joking about their predicament. If they were killed, somebody suggested, maybe they could cover the story of their own deaths for a newspaper in heaven.

Scoffing at death was the code of the “Bohemian Brigade”—the tongue-in-cheek name that Junius Browne and other Northern war correspondents had coined to describe themselves. A self-conscious romantic, Browne reveled in the idea that they were “knights of the quill,” swashbuckling poet-warriors living “a nomadic, careless, half-literary, half-vagabondish life.” They traveled into the hell of battle and returned to tell the tale, risking their lives “purely from a love of adventure—to have the experience—which is a very natural desire of the poetico-philosophical temperament.” During the tedious days between battles, Browne and his fellow reporters—most of them not quite as “poetico-philosophical” as he was—killed time drinking, telling stories, and concocting a semi-serious code for their fictitious Brigade: Bohemians would suffer all necessary privations without grumbling, laugh at danger, and try to extract as much fun as possible out of the grim business of war.

As the barge floated south, a Union officer produced a bottle of Catawba wine and ceremoniously sliced off the top with his sword. He poured the wine into a cup, and he and the reporters passed it around, drinking toasts to the success of their mission, to victory at Vicksburg, and to the women they loved. They drank and smoked and waited for the inevitable bombardment.

It began after midnight, as the tug and its barges rounded a peninsula just north of Vicksburg and the reporters noticed that the trees had been shaved from the shore to give the cannons an unobstructed view of their targets. First, Rebels on the Louisiana side of the river fired their rifles, signaling to the batteries downstream that a Yankee boat was approaching. Ten minutes later came the boom of the first cannon, then many more. The Confederate gunners had honed their aim on previous nights; one of the first shells slammed into the second barge—the one that wasn't occupied—and exploded with a blast that ignited the hay.

“Well done for the Rebels,” Browne muttered.

More cannons roared, some so close that the reporters could see flames jump from the barrels. The Mississippi twisted like a snake outside Vicksburg, and as the tug chugged and puffed around the bends it seemed as if the cannon blasts were coming from left and right, front and rear, all at the same time.

Richardson burrowed into the hay, hoping the bales would cushion him from cannonballs, but he popped his head up periodically to watch the cannons firing and the shells shrieking across the sky. The spectacle reminded him of Tennyson's popular ode to the Crimean War's doomed Light Brigade:

*Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volley'd and thunder'd;
Storm'd at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of Hell
Rode the six hundred.*

Squatting in the hay, Richardson watched Browne boldly standing atop the highest bale, his slender body and bald head exposed against the bright sky. *Why didn't Junius take cover? Was he brave or crazy?* A shell exploded nearby, and Browne collapsed. Albert attempted to ask his friend if he was all right, but his voice failed to function. He thought about reaching for Browne in the darkness but feared that his fingers would find only mutilated flesh. Finally, Junius spoke,

announcing sheepishly that he'd slipped and fallen, and Richardson relaxed.

On shore, the cannons kept firing, their muzzle flashes now shrouded in the acrid smoke that hung over the riverbank like a morning fog. Between blasts, the reporters listened for the wheezing, puffing sound of the tug chugging down the river. As long as they could hear it they dared to think they might survive. They were south of Vicksburg now, almost beyond the range of the cannons. In ten minutes, they'd be safe, and could start joking about how scared they'd been. But a shell streaked out of the sky and smashed into the tug, exploding in its steam engine, killing the captain and spewing boiling water over his crew. As the burned men shrieked, fiery coals blasted out of the boiler and ignited the hay in the barges. From the shore came the sound of Rebels cheering.

Scalded soldiers leaped into the river, and the reporters threw them bales of hay to use as life rafts. Richardson and Colburn tried to stomp out the fires, but the flames, spitting sparks, leaped in great sheets. Richardson could see Browne, still standing atop the highest bale like a statue on a pedestal, observing the bombardment with the careless ease of a man watching a Fourth of July fireworks display. Albert hollered to his friend to come down to a safer perch, but Browne, who liked to think of himself as a stoic fatalist, calmly pointed out that in the present circumstances no safe places seemed to be available.

The Rebels' cannons kept blasting, and the barge, no longer pulled by the tug, spun in slow circles. The men had no idea where to seek safety.

"Which direction is Vicksburg?" Richardson yelled.

"There," Browne said, pointing into the smoke.

Richardson disagreed. "I think it must be on the other shore."

"Oh, no," Browne insisted. "Wait a moment and you'll see the flash of the guns."

He was right. A moment later, the cannons sent more shells arcing towards them. Richardson dropped behind a bale for safety, and found himself worrying whether his voice had betrayed how frightened he was. Around him, burned and wounded soldiers groaned and leaped into the river.

"Let's take to the water," Richardson yelled.

He climbed onto the railing and looked down. The muddy Mississippi was 10 or 12 feet below. He threw himself in and climbed aboard

the bale Browne and Colburn tossed him. He yanked off his boots, tied them to the bale with his watch chain, and began floating south.

Lying on his back, Richardson stared into the sky and watched a shell arching towards him. The sight amazed him. He'd heard wounded soldiers swear they'd seen the shots that hit them, but he had never believed it. Now he saw it himself: A round, smooth, shining black cannon ball was heading right for him. It plunged into the water just a few feet away, the splash knocking him off his bale. Astonished to be alive, he scrambled back on.

Still on the barge, Browne and Colburn watched all this in horror. Then they hurled a couple of bales into the river, jumped in after them, and soon all three reporters were floating slowly downstream. Colburn and Browne, who were close enough to talk about their next move, decided to ride the bales until they were out of danger, then swim to the Louisiana shore and hike south. Richardson, separated from his friends, began tearing up the letters he carried with him, some of them from high-ranking Union officers, so that he wouldn't be caught carrying them if he were captured.



WHEN THE CANNONS STOPPED FIRING, the Confederates dispatched a boat to capture any Yankees who might have survived the bombardment. The Rebels quickly scooped up Richardson and a half-dozen soldiers. They deposited their captives on shore, under guard, then rowed back to pick up more survivors. When the boat returned, Richardson was relieved to see that Browne and Colburn were aboard.

The reporters counted the survivors and learned that only 16 of the 32 soldiers were still alive, and several were badly burned, their scalded skin hanging off their faces as they moaned in agony.

It was past two o'clock in the morning as the Confederate soldiers marched their prisoners through the darkness towards Vicksburg, two miles away. The reporters were soaking wet but unharmed, although Browne hobbled along bare-footed because he'd lost his shoes in the river. It was a pathetic parade of dirty, dripping, forlorn men, and Browne, whose thoughts turned often to classical allusions, joked that they looked like "Charon's ferrymen on a strike for higher wages."

Plodding along, Browne and Richardson conferred in hushed whispers about what to tell their captors. Should they admit that they were

Tribune reporters or should they pretend to work for a less loathed journal? The *New York Tribune* was the most famous and controversial newspaper in America, despised by Confederates for its tireless abolitionist crusading and its famous editorial, printed not long after the war began, demanding that President Lincoln immediately dispatch the army to conquer the Confederate capitol: "TO RICHMOND! TO RICHMOND ONWARD!" A few months earlier, Richardson had interviewed three captured Confederate officers and asked, "What would you do with a *Tribune* correspondent if you captured him?" Their reply was quick and unequivocal: "We would hang him upon the nearest sapling." Although the memory of that exchange was chilling, Richardson and Browne decided that their captors would soon discover their true identity, so they might as well admit it.

When they reached Vicksburg, a Confederate officer recorded their names and other pertinent information, and Colburn, playing the role of Bohemian jester, said, "I hope, sir, that you will give us comfortable quarters."

"We will do the best we can for you," the officer replied dryly.

Their best turned out to be the yard behind the city jail, a foul stretch of dirt bisected by a ditch that served as an open sewer. As the first rays of dawn illuminated their new home, the reporters met their fellow prisoners, a ragged collection of local miscreants, some white, some black, all of them filthy.

"What did you come down here for?" one young prisoner asked. "To steal our niggers?"