

AN ADVENTURE WITH GUERILLAS.

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In the year of our Lord, one thousand and sixty-two, when the “backbone” of this rebellion was not yet broke in twain., when the mythical “last ditch” was as distant as ever, when the last “intelligent contraband” had unburthened himself of the latest starvation news from rebeldom, when the last “little story” was narrated at Washington, when the loyal States were making every endeavor to place their quotas in the field, and the when Kentucky and Indiana shook hands together for the first time on a pontoon bridge, I was “marching along” with the army of General Buell, in *pursuit* of the rebel General Bragg. The suffering of our soldiers was saddening in the extreme, and more than one stout heart had to put forth its whole power of endurance to bear up against the many privations and hardships incident to that terrible march. The dust on the road was knee-deep in many places, and the moving feet of such a large body of men maintained it in a perpetual cloud floating around us. Provisions were scarce-water, the priceless boon to the soldier, almost impossible to obtain, so that many of the men fell in the ranks from mere physical exhaustion. The only remedy at hand was to carry them to one side in the shade, and let them recover as best they could.

None but soldiers know how hard it is to catch up with a regiment if it once gets the start of you, and I, having thrown myself down in the shade of a tree to rest my weary limbs, and clear my mouth from dust with a little lukewarm water from my canteen, began to consider the probable chances of joining my regiment before sundown.

I was aroused from my reverie by a familiar voice above me, and looking up beheld three members of my company, looking for all the world like perambulating dust-piles; their faces marked by dusty streaks where the perspiration had cut little channels down their sun-browned “phisiogs,” and their whole appearance betokening the effects of a long and dusty march. Bill Sykes, the spokesman of the party, was generally considered the hardest case in the regiment, but if he was fond of his bitters his heart was in the right place, for a braver or truer-hearted man never donned the “suit of blue.”

Pat Mulligan, one of his companions, was a silent, reserved sort of genius-except when he was under the influence of the “ardent”-and Somers, his companion, was quite the reverse, being the most talkative man in the regiment.

“Hot weather, boys,” said Pat, making preparations for a smoke.

“Hot weather, indeed,” retorted Somers.

“Call this hot!” If that don’t remind me of a little story I heard when I was in the Army of the Poto-“

“For heaven’s sake, Somers!” I groaned, “do not bore me with one of your infernal little stories; that’s a good fellow; sit down, and let us rest ourselves!”

Sykes, who had been eyeing Somers with no very amicable cast of countenance, flung his rifle and accoutrements on the ground, and sat down by my side, the other two following his example.

Bill wiped his face with a nameless part of his raiment (for handkerchiefs, dear reader, are unknown at the front), and, having drained the last drop from my canteen, looked at us with a mysterious expression.

“What would you give for a good horn of old Jamaica?” said he, looking cautiously around and sinking his voice to a whisper. We sighed, shut our eyes and thought of old times. “And what would you think if I could furnish you one now?” he continued. We opened our eyes. Suddenly plunging his hand into his haversack (which I had thought him a little too careful of), he revealed to our astonished gaze a pint-bottle, labeled “Old Jamaica Rum.”

Bill smiled triumphantly, and handing it to me, said: “Now, Harry, drink quick!” I drew the cork, and a peculiar odor saluted my olfactories. A suspicion entered my mind; I tasted it; my distrust was verified, It was not rum-it was laudanum. “Bill,” I inquired, “where did you make the raise of this stuff.” “Never you mind,” he answered, “but drink quick. Thunder! What a fool to be asking questions. Why don’t you ask is there any more where it came from?” he continued, looking savagely. “Well Bill,” I resumed, “I only wished to find out if any of the citizens on the route gave it to you, for there is enough in that bottle to kill a whole company.” They all looked startled enough at this, but Sykes was completely prostrated by the discovery. He had carried it and guarded it with jealous care all that weary day’s march, his spirits buoyed up with the thought of enjoying at night the spirit supposed to be confined in the bottle. All was for naught –his trouble and care went for nothing.

“Ha! ha! ha!” laughed Somers, “if this is not rich, to mistake laudanum for Old Jamaca [sic]; it reminds me of a little story I heard when I was in the Army of the Poto-.”

Sykes made a rush for Somers, and I used my utmost endeavors for a few moments to restrain him, for Somers’s little stories always enraged him. When I had pacified him he told us how he got the laudanum.

One of our hospital wagons broke down that morning, and Sykes, always ready to lend a helping hand, went cheerfully to work to assist the teamster. His keen eye descried a box of bottles in the wagon, and, watching a favorable opportunity, he laid violent hands on one of them as a reward for his labors. He had no opportunity to test the quality of its contents surrounded by so many eyes, for, as he sagely remarked, “there were ‘fellers’ in the brigade who could scent whiskey half-a-mile.” But to resume or we will never get to the “gorillas.”

Sykes looked completely crest-fallen for a few minutes, but, arousing himself and casting a revengeful glance at the bottle, would have hurled it against a fence if I had not prevented him. “We are short of this article, Bill,” I urged,” and it will be God-send to our old doctor, for it is scarce in our medicine chest.” Shakespeare has said, “There’s a divinity shapes our ends,” and I am now a devout believer in the doctrine for that despised bottle of laudanum was the means (under providence) of saving the lives of three of the gallant officers of our regiment.

“Come boys,” said Pat, “it’s time to be toddling the sun is getting low, and we have a long tramp before us to reach our company before it camps for the night.”

We arose and girded up our loins, or, rather, put on our belts, shouldered our Springfields and commenced hobbling along as rapidly as our sore feet would permit. We had advanced some two or three miles when Sykes, who had been eyeing the country with the practiced glance of an old forager, asked if we would not like a good supper that night.

We smiled ironically, thinking of his former effort to cater for us, and made no reply.

“Supper, indeed, in such a country as this.” Said Somers, “talking about good suppers, it reminds me of a little story I heard when I was in the Army of the Poto-.”

There was a rush, a cry, and Sykes and Somers, in deadly embrace, disappeared from our astonished view in a cloud of dust. We found them in a few minutes and with great difficulty separated them.

“You tarnel critter, if I ever hear another of your infernal stories you’re a gone goose, or my name is not Bill Sykes! Gaspd Sykes, beating a portion of the dust off his person.

“Well,” said Sykes, when he had recovered his equanimity, “I’m going off the road a piece, and my usual good luck must have deserted me, if I cannot get sufficient to make a square meal, and as for money, look here (displaying a quantity of Champagne bottle labels, which, I’m ashamed to say, were sometimes uttered to the inhabitants as greenbacks); now will you come?” The prospect of a good supper was too much for the discipline of the other two, and they agreed to accompany him. I hesitated, but visions of infantile porkers, tender chickens, majestic turkeys, together with the insulting remarks of Bill, overcame all my scruples.

“Guerillas,” I urged.

“Pooh! Who cares for the sneaking critters,” said Sykes, scornfully: “haven’t we four good rifles, stout hearts, and plenty of ammunition; come on if you are coming.”

I yielded reluctantly, fearing ridicule more than the probable danger of the expedition.

We struck boldly off into one of the many shady lanes opening on the road, and the refreshing coolness and delicious anticipations of a good supper prevented us feeling wearied as our long and dusty march warranted. A large piece of heavy timbered land bounded the horizon before us, and we knew well we should find a plantation of some description on either side of it. It seemed to be about three miles distant, but there was a valley intervening, and the actual distance must have been double that. We gradually entered the valley, losing sight of the woods on the one hand and the slowly-moving bodies of troops on the other. We spied a large dwelling-house about a mile up the valley, and we determined to begin our operations by honoring it with a visit.

We soon arrived at a worm-eaten gate, and, pushing it open, found ourselves in a garden overrun with weeds, but still bearing evident marks of a former high state of cultivation. The house seemed uninhabited, and had that peculiar air of desolation which marks the majority of the once hospitable and happy dwellings of the South during the present fratricidal contest. Grass had sprang up in the crevices of the door-steps, the windows broken, and the door, hanging askew on one hinge, had a few ominous holes in it, evidently caused by rifle bullets, and, in fact, more determined hearts than ours would have despaired of finding anything to satisfy their hunger in such a tumbledown concern, judging by the exterior.

“Never mind the looks,” said Sykes, reading our misgivings in our long faces, “there is many a rough looking nut has a sweet kernel-if you only crack it.” Having uttered this oracularly, he took the lead, as he always did, and stalked boldly to the house, bidding, at the same time, look well to our arms. He gave a thundering rap on the door with the butt of his rifle, which elicited no response, save to awaken the dull echoes in the house. He rapped again with no better success. “Well, here goes,” said he, placing his brawny shoulder to the door, and burst it open. But the door had not been locked or bolted, and as it flew open, Sykes was precipitated into the house, making such a clatter that we looked around in affright, thinking an army of “gorillas” were upon us. “Ha! ha! ha!” laughed Somers, “if that don’t remind of a little story I heard when I was in the army of the Poto-.”

“If you don’t stop your darned little stories,” roared Sykes, making an ineffectual effort to rise, but he was so tangled in his varied assortment of necessaries for camp-life hanging around him that he found it impossible for a few minutes, during which interval his wrath abated. But he came up to Somers and shook his enormous fist in his face, saying: “If you ever do so again, I’ll stop your wind, you old hen; always putting in your oar when you ain’t wanted; and then, too, under aggravated circumstances. I give you fair warning, the next little story I hear from you I’ll break every bone in your body.” Somers said nothing, but grinned.

Hastily cursing the door and devoting to the infernal regions his eyes and limbs with astonishing volubility, Sykes sprang forward and commenced a careful examination of the interior of the house.

A scene of disorder and desolation met our view; everything was in confusion as if its former occupants had left on a moment’s warning; and a thick coating of dust on the furniture was proof positive that the hand of the housekeeper had not been employed for weeks, we explored to the garret, and Somers insisted on being hoisted to the roof, in hopes of finding something concealed there. But alas! we could not find anything; our joyful anticipations were not to be realized, and we soon collected in the parlor to hold a consultation. When we had well considered the pros and cons of our “situation” we determined to return to camp (if we could find it), at the same time eyeing the cause of all our disappointment (Sykes) with very unfriendly eyes.

“Why, what fools we are, to be sure,” suddenly exclaimed Pat; “we have not tried the cellar yet. A house with such nice furniture as this in it (he was sitting *on* a piano) must have something good in its cellar.

A new hope cheered us on; we searched for this cellar; it was quickly found, and, by way of precaution, we left our silent friend Pat on guard up stairs while we explored the dark depths below.

“A dried ham!” shouted Somers, in ecstasy. [sic]

“We will have something to eat after all,” thought I.

Suddenly I heard a blowing and puffing noise in the far corner, and presently Sykes appeared, bearing in his arms a small keg, which he eyed with affection and delight.

“I have it!” he exclaimed with triumphant voice. “Did you ever see Bill Sykes return from foraging empty handed? No, sir-ee!”

We carried the treasure up stairs, and having opened it found that Bill’s instinct had not deceived him-it was a prime article of Cognac.

With the assistance of some onions and crackers, we made a hearty supper off the ham, and, having satisfied our appetite, determined to return to our command.

Having filled our canteens with some of the brandy, we bade adieu to the hospitable old house, Bill Sykes in the lead, with the keg on his shoulder.

I cannot, for the life of me, explain, even to this day, how we took the route diametrically opposite to our proper course; whether the onions were too strong, or the ham too old. All I know is, that, in the course of an hour we were in a complete state of mystification as to our whereabouts.

Having reached a gloomy piece of woods, we sat down to hold a consultation. Pat, our heretofore silent companion, voted for a camping ground. "We could easily catch up with the troops in the morning," &c., &c. Sykes said nothing, but eyed the keg.

Suddenly arousing himself, he uttered these remarkable words-"Let's take a drink!'" Unanimously agreed to-without one dissenting voice.

"Well boys," said Somers, "let us enjoy ourselves-with plenty to eat and drink, what care we, for our situation reminds me of a little story I heard when I was in the Army of the Poto-."

A brawny form tramped over me-a struggle-and Sykes, with eyes blazing with wrath, had Somers in the ground under him pommelling him with might and main. We had the same difficulty separating them-tried to conciliate them, but Sykes swore, as usual, the very next time he offended he would be the death of him.

Finding them not disposed to leave till morning, I commenced making preparations for the night. Our blankets were spread out in a trice; a bright fire kept the damp air of night from chilling us, and, having disposed ourselves in easy attitudes around it, we lit our pipes, and began to feel comfortable.

"Where's Pat?" asked Sykes.

"Gone for a log," I answered.

"Well I suppose we have one more drink before we-"

He was interrupted in a startling manner. Pat appeared, wild with excitement; his face would have been pale only for the thick coating of dust on it, and his eyes starting out of his head. He trampled the fire out in an instant, and, without heeding our anxious inquiries, commenced loading his piece rapidly.

Sykes jumped up and seized him by the throat, shaking him violently. "You infernal villain! What do you mean? Tell us quick, or I will shake the wind out of your miserable carcase.[sic]"

Pat gasped for breath, and muttered "Gorillas!"

"Where?" continued Bill, eyeing him closely.

"Not fifty rods off," was the reply.

We immediately seized our arms, examined them, and having placed pat in the lead, made a reconnaissance in force. We moved cautiously forward, examining everything with close scrutiny, when suddenly we arrived at one of those extraordinary depressions in the land common in Southern Kentucky and Northern Tennessee, familiarly termed "sink holes."

It was about fifty feet deep, the sides sloping down gradually to the bottom, which covered an area of about a quarter of an acre. And an extraordinary scene met our eyes: a large fire blazed in the centre, throwing its ruddy gleams upon as ---ous a gang of

bushwhackers as ever I had the misfortune to behold. There were about thirty of them all told, disposed around the fire, amusing themselves in various ways and manners.

But what attracted our attention the most was three men in the federal uniform, evidently prisoners, for their hands were tied behind them.

A tall rebel stood guard over them and seemed to wish, by his looks, he had the authority to put them out of the way, in order that he could join his companions at the fire.

The prisoners seemed to be in anything but a pleasant frame of mind their pinioned arms and disarranged clothing; gave them a truly pitiable appearance.

Bill Sykes, who was leaning over my shoulder casting his hawk eye in every direction over the rebel camp, suddenly uttered a suppressed ejaculation, and, grasping my arm with a vise-like grip, whispered in my ear: "Do you know who they are?"

"No," I replied.

"Look close, man," he continued; "now the nearest raises his head."

I looked with all my eyes, and recognized in the prisoners our fine old Colonel and his Adjutant and Quartermaster. I will not attempt to portray the grief and surprise of my companions when they assured themselves of the truth of this mournful discovery; but I could see in their flashing eyes and compressed lips that, if possible, they would rescue their officers or die in the attempt.

We held a hurried consultation. It would be madness to openly attack such a superior force. What was to be done? One proposed finding some of our troops and capturing the whole squad; but the idea was useless, as we did not know or have the slightest idea of our whereabouts. Suddenly an idea struck me. I communicated it to the rest. Sykes grasped my hand, his face beaming with hope and joy. "The very thing," he whispered; "and Bill Sykes is the man to do it." My bright idea was simply this: the bottle of laudanum Bill had so providentially confiscated was to be carefully distributed among the contents of the canteens and keg. Somebody was to sling the canteens on his shoulder, take the keg under his arm, and, with well-feigned drunkenness, throw himself by some means into the clutches of the rebels, who no doubt would consider him a rare prize. As Confeds like their bitters equal to Feds, we did not doubt but that in a little while (when the drug did its work) we could not only liberate our officers but take the whole gang prisoners.

I went back for the canteens and keg left behind and forgotten in the excitement consequent on the first discovery of the close proximity of the rebels, and, not wishing to kill them outright, I mixed a sufficiency of the laudanum with the brandy to deprive them of all sense for at least twelve hours. Sykes arrayed himself with the canteens, put the keg under his arm, and, having left a few directions with me in regards to his family (if he should lose his life in the attempt), shook hands with us, and was soon lost in the surrounding gloom, we lying perdu in the meanwhile watching events. We awaited with beating hearts the result of stratagem. In about half an hour-it seemed a lifetime-we heard a loud hallo from the other side of the sink-hole, and suddenly the sound of a heavy body rolling down the slope. On the first alarm, every rebel sprang to his feet, and a scene of wildest confusion ensued. "The Yank!" "The Yank!" was yelled by everybody, and, while some scattered the fire, the others seized their arms and prepared to mount their horses, corralled at one end of the camp-ground. We noticed the guard over the prisoners; he looked at them as if he was making up his mind to put an end to their troubles, in this

world at least. He drew his revolver several times, and replaced it again, seemingly waiting for some higher authority to commence his work of blood. We, in the mean time, while keeping him well covered with our rifles, determined, on the first movement endangering our officers, to blaze away at him. Suddenly loud shouts of laughter greeted our listening ears, and straining our eyes, we perceived a brace of tall rebels leading in Bill Sykes, who staggered to and fro with well-simulated inebriety. We could not hear much of their conversation, but, from their loud laughter and boisterous conduct, imagined they were congratulating themselves on the double capture. We soon had the satisfaction to see them take the canteens from Sykes; the keg had been taken possession of when he was first captured.

Bill was led off to keep company with the other unfortunates, with his arms pinioned behind him.

We awaited with no small anxiety the first attack on the canteens, fearing they might detect the trick, and thus destroy all our hopes of relieving our officers. But our fears were unfounded. We saw the chief man of the party take possession of both canteens and keg, and commence measuring it out impartially to the expectant crowd. The guard received his share the last, and we could see him hobnobbing with Sykes, no doubt thanking him for the treat he had furnished.

One by one the rebels dropped out of sight, and the camp, before so noisy, was as still as the grave. The guard over the prisoners was the last to succumb. He nodded, swayed to and fro for a few minutes, until at last his knees refused to support the weight of his body, and he fell sprawling on the ground.

Sykes had warned me that he would whistle when all was accomplished, and presently the oppressive stillness was broken by its shrill cadence. We jumped to our feet and rushed down the slope. To cut the bonds of the prisoners was the work of the moment, and in a little while afterwards every rebel was as hard and fast as strong ropes and skilful hands could tie them.

Mutual explanations followed. Our officers had left the road like our more humble selves to procure their supper. They arrived at a large house about a mile from the road, and having made known the object of their visit, were politely invited in, with the assurance that supper would be prepared for them forth with. They entered the house, having very carelessly left their revolvers in the holsters on their saddles. The lady of the house, with infinite grace and tact, whiled away the tedious interval while supper was being prepared, or rather until her messenger had notified the rebels of their presence in the house. Supper was at last announced, and, led by their fair hostess, they passed into a dark passage leading to the dining room, as they imagined. They had not advanced ten steps, when their arms were pinioned behind, mufflers thrown over their heads, and, with the ironical laughter of their fair but treacherous entertainer ringing in their bewildered ears, were led like sheep to the slaughter.

They were politely informed that the coming day was to be their last on earth, and that they had better prepare themselves for it—that they were to be shot, in retaliation for a like number of their comrades, executed some time previous for bushwhacking.

When our Colonel had concluded his narrative, we held a consultation regarding the disposal of our “sleeping beauties.” We concluded, at last, to leave them for the present, and return to the Union camp, which we imagined could not be very far distant;

so having selected the best horses (our officers of course taking their own) we loaded ourselves with revolvers and spurred on to the Union lines.

We rode on in silence for nearly an hour, when suddenly the everlasting Sykes uttered an ejaculation of delight.

“What is it?” we inquired.

“Look!” he replied, pointing with out-stretched finger before him. we looked and beheld a streak of vivid red surmounting the trees in the distance-the reflected light of the camp-fires.

“The camp!” we exclaimed with one voice; and so it was.

Somers having lost all fear of Sykes in the Colonel’s presence, suddenly raised his voice. “Well, Colonel,” he commenced, “it was a narrow escape, and it reminds me of a little story I heard when I was in the Army of the Poto-.”

“For gracious sake, Somers, have mercy on me,” interrupted the Colonel, “it’s suffering enough for one night to be captured by guerillas, without being forced to listen to one of your interminable stories-do, like a good fellow, let me have peace.”

“Let me at him,” roared Sykes, spurring his horse forward, with rage flashing in his countenance; but his bellicose intention was frustrated by a startling halt immediately in the front. “Who comes there?” “Friends,” answered the Colonel. “Dismount, friends, advance one with the countersign!”

As we had no countersign, we were marched to headquarters.

We were not detained long, and we had the satisfaction of seeing a large force detailed to bring in the “captives of our bow and spear.”

The adventure spread like wildfire through the various camps, and the morning’s light saw a large concourse of spectators viewing the woebegone countenances of the “gorillas.”

Sergeant Sykes was observed to be in a brown study for some days after his foraging expedition, but, having solved some momentous question in his mind, he gave out as an axiom to his companions in arms-

“Never go on a foraging expedition without a bottle of “Iodium” in your pocket.”

“Yes, and I say so, too,” said Somers, who was standing near. “It is very good advice, and just reminds me of a little story I heard when I was in the Army of the Poto-“

Sykes made for him, a struggle ensued, but I, having other business to attend to, left them there, and in all probability they are fighting yet.

Transcribed by
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