

The Sergeant's Private Madhouse

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THE moonlight was almost steady blue flame, and all this radiance was lavished out upon a still, lifeless wilderness of stunted trees and cactus plants. The shadows lay upon the ground, pools of black and sharply outlined, resembling substances, fabrics, and not shadows at all. From afar came the sound of the sea coughing among the hollows in the coral rocks.

The land was very empty; one could easily imagine that Cuba was a simple, vast solitude; one could wonder at the moon taking all the trouble of this splendid illumination. There was no wind; nothing seemed to live.

But in a particular, large group of shadows lay an outpost of some forty United States marines. If it had been possible to approach them from any direction without encountering one of their sentries, one could have gone stumbling among sleeping men, and men who sat waiting, their blankets tented over their heads; one would have been in among them before one's mind could have decided whether they were men or devils. If a marine moved, he took the care and the time of one who walks across a death-chamber. The Lieutenant in command reached for his watch, and the nickel chain gave forth the slightest tinkling sound. He could see the glisten in five or six pairs of eyes that turned to regard him. His Sergeant lay near him, and he bent his face down to whisper: "Who's on post behind the big cactus bush?"

"Dryden," rejoined the Sergeant just over his breath.

After a pause the lieutenant murmured: "He's got too many nerves. I shouldn't have put him there." The Sergeant asked if he should crawl down and look into affairs at Dryden's post. The young officer nodded assent, and the Sergeant, softly cocking his rifle, went away on his hands and knees. The Lieutenant, with his back to a dwarf tree, sat watching the Sergeant's progress for the few moments that he could see him moving from one shadow to another. Afterward the officer waited to hear Dryden's quick but low-voiced challenge; but time passed, and no sound came from the direction of the post behind the cactus bush.

The Sergeant, as he came nearer and nearer to this cactus bush -- a number of peculiarly dignified columns throwing shadows of inky darkness -- had slowed his pace, for he did not wish to trifle with the feelings of the sentry. He was expecting his stern hail, and was ready with the immediate answer which turns away wrath. He was not made anxious by the fact that he could not as yet see Dryden, for he knew that the man would be hidden in a way practiced by sentry marines since the time when two men had been killed by a disease of excessive confidence on picket. Indeed, as the Sergeant went still nearer he became more and more angry. Dryden was evidently a most proper sentry.

Finally he arrived at a point where he could see him seated in the shadow, staring into the bushes ahead of him, his rifle ready on his knee. The Sergeant in his rage longed

for the peaceful precincts of the Washington Marine Barracks, where there would have been no situation to prevent the most complete non-commissioned oratory. He felt indecent in his capacity of a man able to creep up to the back of a G Company member on guard duty. Never mind; in the morning, back at camp --

But suddenly he felt afraid. There was something wrong with Dryden. He remembered old tales of comrades creeping out to find a picket seated against a tree, perhaps upright enough, but stone dead. The Sergeant paused and gave the inscrutable back of the sentry a long stare. Dubious, he again moved forward. At three paces he hissed like a little snake. Dryden did not show a sign of hearing. At last the Sergeant was in a position from which he was able to reach out and touch Dryden on the arm. Whereupon was turned to him the face of a man livid with mad fright. The Sergeant grabbed him by the wrist and with discreet fury shook him. "Here! Pull yourself together!"

Dryden paid no heed, but turned his wild face from the newcomer to the ground in front. "Don't you see 'em, Sergeant? Don't you see 'em?"

"Where?" whispered the Sergeant.

"Ahead and a little on the right flank. A reg'lar skirmish line. Don't you see 'em?"

"Naw," whispered the Sergeant.

Dryden began to shake. He began moving one hand from his head to his knee, and from his knee to his head rapidly, in a way that is without explanation. "I don't dare fire," he wept. "If I do they'll see me, and oh, how they'll pepper me!"

The Sergeant, lying on his belly, understood one thing. Dryden had gone mad. Dryden was the March Hare. The old man gulped down his uproarious emotions as well as he was able, and used the most simple device. "Go," he said, "and tell the Lieutenant, while I cover your post for you."

"No! They'd see me! And they'd pepper me! Oh, how they'd pepper me!"

The Sergeant was face to face with the biggest situation of his life. In the first place, he knew that at night a large or a small force of Spanish guerrillas was never more than easy rifle-range from any marine outpost, both sides maintaining a secrecy as absolute as possible in regard to their real position and strength. Everything was on a watch-spring foundation. A loud word might be paid for by a night attack which would involve five hundred men who needed their sleep, not to speak of some of them who would need their lives. The slip of a foot and the rolling of a pint of gravel might go from consequence to consequence until various crews went to general quarters on their ships in the harbor, their batteries booming as the swift searchlight flashed through the foliage. Men would get killed -- notably the Sergeant and Dryden -- and the outposts would be cut off, and the whole night would be one pitiless turmoil. And so Sergeant George H. Peasley began to run his private madhouse behind the cactus bush.

"Dryden," said the Sergeant, "you do as I told you, and go tell the Lieutenant."

"I don't dare move," shivered the man. "They'll see me if I move; they'll see me. They're almost up now. Let's hide -- " "Well, then you stay here a moment and I'll go and -
- "

Dryden turned upon him a look so tigerish that the old man felt his hair move. "Don't you stir!" he hissed. "You want to give me away? You want them to see me? Don't you stir!" The Sergeant decided not to stir.

He became aware of the slow wheeling of eternity, its majestic incomprehensibility of movement. Seconds, moments, were quaint little things, tangible as toys, and there were billions of them, all alike.

"Dryden," he whispered at the end of a century, in which, curiously, he had never joined the marine corps at all, but had taken to another walk of life and prospered greatly in it -- "Dryden, this is all foolishness!"

He thought of the expedient of smashing the man over the head with his rifle, but Dryden was so supernaturally alert that there surely would issue some small scuffle, and there could be not even the fraction of a scuffle. The Sergeant relapsed into the contemplation of another century. His patient had one fine virtue. He was in such terror of the phantom skirmish line that his voice never went above a whisper, whereas his delusion might have expressed itself in coyote yells and shots from his rifle. The Sergeant, shuddering, had visions of how it might have been -- the mad private leaping into the air and howling and shooting at his friends, and making them the centre of the enemy's eager attention. This, to his mind, would have been conventional conduct for a maniac. The trembling victim of an idea was somewhat puzzling. The Sergeant decided that from time to time he would reason with his patient. "Look here, Dryden, you don't see any real Spaniards. You've been drinking or -- something. Now -- "

But Dryden only glared him into silence. Dryden was inspired with such a profound contempt of him that it had become hatred. "Don't you stir!" And it was clear that if the Sergeant did stir the mad private would introduce calamity. "Now," said Peasley to himself, "If those guerrillas *should* take a crack at us to-night, they'd find a lunatic asylum in front, and it would be astonishing."

The silence of the night was broken by the quick, low voice of a sentry to the left some distance. The breathless stillness brought an effect to the words as if they had been spoken in one's ear.

"Halt! Who's there? Halt, or I'll fire!" Bang!

At the moment of sudden attack, particularly at night, it is improbable that a man registers much detail of either thought or action. He may afterward say: "I was here." He may say: "I was there"; "I did this"; "I did that." But there remains a great incoherency because of the tumultuous thought which seethes through the head.

"Is this defeat?" At night in a wilderness, and against skillful foes half seen, one does not trouble to ask if it is also death. Defeat is death, then, save for the miraculous ones. But the exaggerating, magnifying first thought subsides in the ordered mind of the soldier, and he knows, soon, what he is doing, and how much of it. The Sergeant's immediate impulse had been to squeeze close to the ground and listen -- listen; above all else, listen. But the next moment he grabbed his private asylum by the scruff of its neck, jerked it to its feet, and started to retreat upon the main outpost.

To the left, rifle-flashes were bursting from the shadows. To the rear, the Lieutenant was giving some hoarse order or caution. Through the air swept some Spanish bullets, very high, as if they had been fired at a man in a tree. The private asylum came on so hastily that the Sergeant found he could remove his grip, and soon they were in the midst of the men of the outpost. Here there was no occasion for enlightening the Lieutenant. In the first place, such surprises require statement, question and answer. It is impossible to get a grossly original and fantastic idea through a man's head in less than one

minute of rapid talk, and the Sergeant knew that the Lieutenant could not spare the minute. He himself had no minute to devote to anything but the business of the outpost. And the madman disappeared from his ken, and he forgot about him.

It was a long night, and the little fight was as long as the night. It was heartbreaking work. The forty marines lay in an irregular oval. From all sides the Mauser bullets sang low and swift. The occupation of the Americans was to prevent a rush, and to this end they potted carefully at the flash of a Mauser -- save when they got excited for a moment, in which case their magazines rattled like a great Waterbury watch. Then they settled again to a systematic potting.

The enemy were not of the regular Spanish forces, but of a corps of guerrillas, native-born Cubans, who preferred the flag of Spain. They were all men who knew the craft of the woods and were all recruited from the district. They fought more like red Indians than any people but the red Indians themselves. Each seemed to possess an individuality, a fighting individuality, which is only found in the highest order of irregular soldier. Personally, they were as distinct as possible, but through equality of knowledge and experience they arrived at concert of action. So long as they operated in the wilderness they were formidable troops. It mattered little whether it was daylight or dark, they were mainly invisible. They had schooled from the Cubans insurgent to Spain. As the Cubans fought the Spanish troops, so would these particular Spanish troops fight the Americans. It was wisdom.

The marines thoroughly understood the game. They must lie close and fight until daylight, when the guerrillas would promptly go away. They had withstood other nights of this kind, and now their principal emotion was a sort of frantic annoyance.

Back at the main camp, whenever the roaring volleys lulled, the men in the trenches could hear their comrades of the outpost and the guerrillas pattering away interminably. The moonlight faded and left an equal darkness upon the wilderness. A man could barely see the comrade at his side. Sometimes guerrillas crept so close that the flame from their rifles seemed to scorch the faces of the marines, and the reports sounded as if within two or three inches of their very noses. If a pause came, one could hear the guerrillas gabbling to each other in a kind of delirium. The Lieutenant was praying that the ammunition would last. Everybody was praying for daylight.

A black hour came finally when the men were not fit to have their troubles increase. The enemy made a wild attack on one portion of the oval which was held by about fifteen men. The remainder of the force was busy enough, and the fifteen were naturally left to their devices. Amid the whirl of it, a loud voice suddenly broke out in song:

"The minstrel boy to the war has gone,

In the ranks of death you'll find him;

His father's sword he has girded on,

And his wild harp slung behind him."

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"Who the deuce is that?" demanded the Lieutenant from a throat full of smoke. There was almost a full stop of the firing. The Americans were puzzled. Practical ones muttered that the fool should have a bayonet-hilt shoved down his throat. Others felt a thrill at the strangeness of the thing. Perhaps it was a sign!

"While shepherds watched their flocks by night,

All seated on the ground,

The angel of the Lord came down,

And glory shone around."

This croak was as lugubrious as a coffin. "Who is it? Who is it?" snapped the Lieutenant. "Stop him, somebody!"

"It's Dryden, sir," said old Sergeant Peasley as he felt around in the darkness for his madhouse. "I can't find him -- yet."

"Please, oh, please -- oh, do not let me fall!

You're -- gurgh -- ugh -- "

The Sergeant had pounced upon him.

The singing had had an effect upon the Spaniards. At first they had fired frenziedly at the voice, but they soon ceased, perhaps from sheer amazement. Both sides took a spell of meditation.

The Sergeant was having some difficulty with his charge. "Here, you, grab 'im! Take 'im by the throat! Be quiet, you idiot!"

One of the fifteen men who had been hard pressed called out, "We've only got about one clip apiece, Lieutenant. If they come again -- "

The Lieutenant crawled to and fro among his men, taking clips of cartridges from those who had many. He came upon the Sergeant and his madhouse. He felt Dryden's belt and found it simply stuffed with ammunition. He examined Dryden's rifle and found in it a full clip. The madhouse had not fired a shot. The Lieutenant distributed these valuable prizes among the fifteen men. As they gratefully took them, one said, "If they had come again hard enough they would have had us, sir -- maybe."

But the Spaniards did not come again. At the first indication of daybreak they fired their customary good-by volley. The marines lay tight while the slow dawn crept over the land. Finally the Lieutenant arose among them, and he was a bewildered man, but very angry. "Now, where is that idiot, Sergeant?"

"Here he is, sir," said the old man cheerfully. He was seated on the ground beside the recumbent Dryden, who, with an innocent smile on his face, was sound asleep.

"Wake him up," said the Lieutenant briefly.

The Sergeant shook the sleeper. "Here, Minstrel Boy, turn out. The Lieutenant wants you."

Dryden climbed to his feet and saluted the officer with a dazed and childish air. "Yes, sir."

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The Lieutenant was obviously having difficulty in governing his feelings, but he managed to say with calmness: "You seem to be fond of singing, Dryden? Sergeant, see if he has any whiskey on him."

"Sir?" said the madhouse, stupefied. "Singing -- fond of singing?"

Here the Sergeant interposed gently, and he and the Lieutenant held palaver apart from the others. The marines, hitching more comfortably their almost empty belts, spoke with grins of the madhouse. "Well, the Minstrel Boy made 'em clear out. They couldn't stand it. But -- I wouldn't want to be in his boots. He'll see fireworks when the old man interviews him on the uses of grand opera in modern warfare. How do you think he managed to smuggle a bottle along without us finding it out?"

When the weary outpost was relieved and marched back to camp, the men could not rest until they had told a tale of the voice in the wilderness. In the meantime the Sergeant took Dryden aboard a ship, and to those who assumed charge of the man he defined him as "the most useful crazy man in the service of the United States."