

UNCLE SAMMIE AT THE CEMETERY

GREAT STORY OF FICTION FOR MEMORIAL DAY BY

CHARLES F. EMBREE.

This Has Been Pronounced by Many Critics as One of the Finest Memorial Day Stories Ever Written. The Hero, Dubbed "The War," Decorates His Comrade's Grave for the Last Time. The Tender Ending. Its Mingled Humor and Pathos, Make Strong Appeal

UNCLE SAMMIE approached Decoration day with great anxiety of mind. He limped around his pruned orchard, laboring with his rebellious and diseased old legs, murmuring about Bill's grave, and in an immeasurable trepidation lest his health should shake him at last. The war, the war: that was still the whole life, and soul, and being, of Uncle Sammie. He had talked the Civil War, and laughed it, and wept it, for more than 40 years. Even California, to which he came at the end of the historic struggle, and which has revolutionized the lives of many thousands, had failed to pale in any measure whatever the picture of those vivid years in his mind. His comrades even jestingly nicknamed him "The War." His genial and hardy face was now haggard, but had an etherealized look, because he was always recollecting something grand and historical. He used to stop in the middle of a meal and make large mention of Gettysburg. Now, in his 75th year, he was little more than a tottering incarnation of memory.

"You see," he was accustomed to say with a tragic and husky humor, as though the thing of which he spoke had some extraordinary significance, "I've got a kind of a balky leg."

This was his favorite mention of himself. The balkiness of the member was no trivial thing to him, was not even a personal matter. It was no less than a National phenomenon, a result of the war as inevitable and as worthy of sedate attention as was the huge expansion of the United States, a historical fact, an epitome of the Misery of Slaves.

On the night before Decoration day, to his horror, the leg seemed holding unusual tyranny over him. The first hour after supper in the homely but attractive sitting-room of his small ranch-house at the edge of town was an hour of despair. Then the leg seeming partially to cease its pangs, a look of profound relief and hope came over Uncle Sammie's visage. Aunt Harriet knitted yonder, with one pained eye on him; and here the old fellow sat by his big grate fire watching the leg as if he expected strange performances from it. Now he pulled off his slippers, slid far down in his heavy rocker and toasted his cramped and aged feet with an indescribable satisfaction.

"Ah—ah—" he ejaculated long and comfortably. "M-m-m." Though to anyone else the night was warm, to feel his feet toasting was extraordinarily fine to him.

"Harriet," he said, turning his head round, "I'm going to be able to do it." Then he added with a kind of patriotic reverence, "My leg, my leg is limbering up!"

"Oh, Sammie, you old foolah," she replied, angry with emotion and trouble.

"Now, Harriet, now you looky here," his expression of longing was lofty, wide-minded, yet intolerant. "You know, very well do you know, how I've decorated Bill's grave every single, solitary year. Every time I've marched in line. They've always been able to say, 'Sammie is on hand with flowers for Bill.' Why, Harriet, you ought to be ashamed. You know what Bill did for me at Gettysburg. At Gettysburg didn't Bill put—?" He stopped, his hand, but suddenly finished, dropping it. "Shoot," he said, turning to the fire, pulling his sandy beard and swallowing, "you've heard a million times."

"You'll catch your death," she said with some suffering show of ferocity. "If your leg holds out till we've decorated the graves, or your old head, or the placid pleurisy, or something."

She never mentioned the stroke he had had in his head. He knew nothing about that.

"Always, always looking on the dark side," he answered, reproachfully. Then his countenance was illumined with a smile. "Choo, choo, why looky here, look at me, how say I can be whenever I've a mind to." He got out of his rocker with a military air, and was for executing a shuffle with the leg, at which she started, pale from awe. "Ha, ha! Harriet, I'm a game old bird yet. Gad, I've got the snap of California in my blood; I've got the Western sun running up and down inside of me! I'm a regular—Whew! Ouch! Limber up, old knee. Ah, hm! There you are, trim as a barkentine. I'm a regular cockatoo, Harriet!"

Apparently cockatoos were stiff but animated old fellows, with infinite courage, considerable dash, a little bit of limb, and crooked in the spine.

"Oh, go along," said Aunt Harriet, pleased, anxious, scolding. "You foolish old thing, you, go along to bed."

So he took a lamp, grew sad, had a solemn mien, yawned, and proceeded in his stockings to the door.

"Never mind it yet," he said. "Laid flowers on his grave year in and year out. Why, he'd turn over in his— It agitates me, just the thought of it agitates me, Harriet. Besides, I'm as good as the best—although," here he turned with a new idea, "there's none of 'em so confounded frisky any more. That's the fact." He pondered, then went on, gazed back with excitement, proceeded and disappeared repeating: "No, sir, there's none of 'em so confounded frisky any more!"

Aunt Harriet, with her customary air of being overwhelmed in difficulties, wiped her eye. Hearing him hesitate without, she called:

"You'll catch cold. Go along—standing there in your socks!"

The soft thuds of his feet were heard on some narrow back stairs that led to a little room under the low roof. A rose hung down from the eaves into the window.

"H-m-m. Ah-h," she heard him say from time to time putting his leg to bed.

A distant cannon fired by some enthusiast only less decrepit than he awoke him very early in the morning, and by 3 o'clock he was ready to sally forth into the town. There never was a happier man, though hours of seemingly bad humor, admonition and much anxious fussing on the part of Aunt Harriet had contributed to his readiness.

"Oh, I wish you'd stay at home!" she broke out at last with the pallid glare of a life-long love.

"Now, Harriet, be cheerful. Always looking—Why, I feel like a boy. You ought to be ashamed of yourself—poor

old Bill. If I couldn't march with the boys and lay these roses—Ouch! There, it's getting in prime trim. Old leg!" he addressed it with a stately profundity of manner—"you're doing yourself proud, you are. Here goes. Won't they be a little bit surprised, Harriet, down around the Courthouse, eh, to see old Sammie, whom they call 'The War,' heaving up over the horizon, leg and all? A little—bit—surprised? They'll say, 'There comes The War!' Good-by. This afternoon we'll listen to Buskirk's speech together in the Courthouse yard. Here we are, safe out of port, and the state ship, safe on the high seas, Harriet—now go along! Proceeding grandly, he turned round his head, and becoming disgruntled and mandatorious, "Go along now, about your business."

She went slowly toward the house, and stared queerly at the faded point on it, and at some dead vine, and the path in the grass, and the pruned trees. A plow stuck in a furrow just where he had been plowing when he was stricken three months before, and carried in.

A shower in the night had sweetened things, the sun was shining, and a large open square in the center of the town was green with trees around a courthouse. Little girls were passing hither and thither with baskets in baskets. The town had a bright-eyed look. Sons and daughters, widows and grandchildren of veterans waved surprised welcome at Uncle Sammie from bushes out of which enormous bouquets of California blossoms protruded. Carpenters were erecting a platform whose yellow skeleton women of the Relief Corps already began to decorate with bunting, and among the trees was an empty congregation of chairs.

Away in the distance somebody with reverent acclaim hailed the sight of the old man coming down the street.

"The War! Well, well, if there ain't The War!"

This trumpet announcement came from a tall old Judge, and attracted general attention. Countenances here and there changed.

"I thought you was laid-up!" cried to an older, advancing among his goods with astonishment, his hand outstretched.

A gurgling group swarmed from every side. Many had frayed, blue coats and dingy brass buttons. Confederates yonder approached with approving conservative, sympathetic, yet distant gaze.

"A little—bit—surprised!" vibrated the old man's voice, like a tightly-strung instrument, as he stooped down upon them, his thin and strained face lit with triumph. "You thought The War was done for, gentlemen? Maybe you thought, gentlemen, that The War was dead? No sir, I'm still captain of my leg. Good morning, Albert. How're you, Fred? Jim Jenkins, let me shake your crooked paw—why'n't you straighten out your fingers? John, you've shaved off your—Gad, the town is looking polite, judge, you're getting thin in the whiskers; it beats all how you do hang on! How's your bones? Want a little lubricating? Boys, are you all greased up?"

His laugh was somewhat solemn. The Judge took a contentious attitude; they all stood round in a circle and bent their varied and aged eyes on what Uncle Sammie carried in his hand. There was a moment of deep silence, and some glanced at others with a certain uneasiness.

"Them's lovely roses, Sammie," the Judge said at length, significantly, as though he were the spokesman of a universal fear or warning.

Sammie gazed at him at the northern sky.

"For Bill," he said, with a kind of epic simplicity.

Some rubbed the frayed edges of their blue coats as though they were embarrassed.

"But, see here, Sammie, you ain't a-going to try to march?" one ventured, and hobbled to a wall in order to lean on it.

Heaven, dinged if we won't find old Milt on a corner of the golden streets talking politics with a cherubim!

He shook his arm and walked like a captain.

Round the stairs to the G. A. R. hall the old soldiers were gathering. All the sidewalks were dotted with them, the stairs creaked under their slightly unsteady tread, here and yonder they stood in groups leaning on canes or half reclining against the walls, fat old soldiers, lean ones, some jolly, some sad and cadaverous, some prosperous, some fallow, some on crutches, a few carrying their years very well. The faces of all had the misty expression of the past, recollections of sublime tragedies and hints of the grave.

They looked at their own rusty bouquets. Some were chewing, and spit.

"Tell us about that time at Gettysburg, and how Bill he—" one of them began, and spat very far.

"You see, it was like this," Uncle Sammie said in a low, hoarse, and shining. He stood at the foot of the stairs and spoke in an oratorical manner, to many auditors. "You see Bill was impetuous. You couldn't hold him down. You recollect what a warm-hearted fellow Bill was. When the order came to march to the front—"

They were gazing at him with moveless countenances; they thrust out old stiff legs and stood attentive. They had a stolid and listening air.

"Aw, shoot," said Uncle Sammie, in sudden disgust, and moved a little off; "you've heard it a million times."

"The hand is getting ready," they said. "Let's go upstairs."

"No, boys," Sammie answered, propping himself up, weak and cheerful against the balustrade. "I'd like mighty well to see the inside of that hall again, but I feel I'll kind of have to give up my leg for Bill."

"You're looking a little pale, Sammie."

"Oh, go along. I won't begin to get pale for 15 years yet. Talk about a young, frisky thing like me getting—"

Hay, him, boys, I'll just rest here, is the band coming?"

The band was beginning to play on the street.

"Pale," sniffed Uncle Sammie, mopping his brow and sitting down on the bottom step unsteadily.

"Sammie, we really don't think, now," said some, with apologetic anxiety, "that you ought to march; it's a long way and the sun is getting hot."

They stared at him, frightened, with their mouths open, but he just raised his eyes to the level of their brass buttons which shone rather dully.

"Now, looky here, boys," he began to complain with a gentle bitterness, seeing them as through a veil; "if you don't quit that kind of child, talk, you'll make me real provoked."

Many soldiers came down the steps and passed him, while more were gathering from all points of the compass. Flowers were everywhere; the procession formed, headed by the band playing hymns.

The old blue-coated men fell in line by scores. Many seemed weary even before they got a start, but they had an appearance of placid proprietorship in a Na-

Over yonder Confederates walked by, sympathetic and distant.

Sammie swept the company with a look of exaltation, seemed about to speak, and made never a reply.

He went on toward a hall. They came after, and the street was full of their like. He looked excessively resentful, turned his head and called, joking at them queerly:

"What you hobble so for? Hobbling! Here's Sammie! Here's The War! Why, boys, ha, ha! If there he ain't!"

He was excited, exhilarated, toddling feebly.

"Gee-mun-ee! What roses! Why, Sammie, you ain't a-going—"

"Looky here," he ejaculated angrily. Did you fellows think I was going to desert? Old Milt, you still talking politics? Well, can't I hold out as long as you? Boys, when we pull up and camp in

tional event. The rickety boxes looked as though they marched to their last resting places, having no intention to return. Uncle Sammie took his place between two comrades of Gettysburg. His face was grim. Away they went.

In the Courthouse yard, round all the corners, in all the windows, and on the lawns, people stood looking; some women wiped their eyes. The town had been cheered, yet it now got a sad air, behold-

ing its decrepit saviors marching to the grave.

Going beyond the last houses among trees, they emerged on a hot, dusty, country road. The band now indulged in a slow and rumbling funeral march. Sammie's comrades, looking at him, saw that he was as pale as death. He clutched the roses, breathing hard.

"Sammie, you'd better drop out," they said. "Why, see here, it ain't worth hurting yourself for."

He turned on them with scorn, but his humor flickered across his countenance.

"Ain't it?" he said.

After a while he mumbled:

"Don't bother me, don't bother me, I'm busy—with my leg."

They were aware that the real trouble had been in his head; they looked at each other.

The march continued past orchards and grain fields and rows of mammoth eucalyptus trees, which a breeze made to bow down their heads in a reverent manner, as though they detected the passing of some august presence.

The day was growing very hot; all along the line a few old veterans dropped out and sat on the bank of earth beside the way. The column staggered, the faces of the marchers taking on a haunted and melancholy look. The landscape was beautiful, and yonder on a distant hill rising against the sky the cemetery lifted white stones to the sun.

"Sammie!" they cried. "See here! You mustn't go no further. Why, it ain't worth killing yourself for. What's the matter with you?"

"Ain't it?" the old man muttered.

His eyes had a glazed appearance, his set face was fierce and haggard; he staggered a little.

"Bill's not going to be able to say, 'Sammie, why didn't you decorate my grave today?'"

The march continued, his iron determination making him steeper. They went down a hollow and over a wooden bridge, the band playing "Watchman, Tell Us of the Night." The breeze imported to wide fields of sweet grass a traveling undulation like that of water.

The road ascended toward the cemetery, which looked cheerful, and away behind the column the towers of the distant town loomed on the universal greenness.

At a curve a lane bent abruptly upward to a gate.

"Sammie! Why, my God, boys, we'll have to make him stop. Sammie, you old reckless man, you've got to drop out. You'll kill yourself!"

He turned dejected, hollow eyes on them

and expelled his answer out of a hoarse throat:

"He wasn't afraid of killing himself for me, was he? I'll put 'em on his grave—if I have to crawl. Take your hands off me!"

He tried on wildly up the lane. Ahead of him the notes of the band improved. "Watchman Tell Us of the Night."

They turned in at the gate. To their left the slope, with its graves, sods and marble rose to the sky-line. Far to the right the town could be seen. The blue-coated column went on over long grass that stretched on a path.

"I'll put 'em on his—if I—"

He fought gutturally with his words. He gasped and staggered ahead a little. "If I—must!"

He was just within the gate. His comrades rushed at him. He swerved and fell, and when they stooped to pick him up he was trying to crawl.

"Is this it?" he shouted. "Boys, is this—Bill's grave? There—there!"

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