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A Noble Sacrifice

A Story For Memorial Day

By F. A. MITCHELL
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ONE evening before Memorial day a remnant of a Grand Army post, a few old fellows whose hair and beards were white as snow, had got together to confer upon the morrow's decoration of the graves of their comrades who had gone before them to the eternal camping grounds. Having perfected their arrangements, they fell to swapping yarns about episodes that had occurred half a century before. They had told their stories many a time, but each listened to the other with much of the original interest and a respect that had grown with years. This is one of the stories that were told:

Along about '62—or was it '63?—may be it was '64 (my memory about those days is getting mixed), I commanded General B's headquarters escort, we being encamped just back of the tents



HE WAS SO STUPID IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO GET ANYTHING OUT OF HIM.

of the general and his staff. One morning an officer of a picket post sent to headquarters a country bumpkin who had driven his cow right up to our line. The general asked him why he bucked up against an army with no better support than a cow, and he said he had had his cow in pasture down below and didn't know our men were there. He was questioned about the Confederate forces in the region from whence he had come, but he was so stupid that it was impossible to get anything out of him. As to numbers, it was always "a heap o' horse sopers," or "right smart o' cannons," or "a hull regiment o' walkin' men." The general soon gave over questioning him and issued orders that he be permitted to drive his cow on homeward.

Two or three days later, while talking with one of the aids, he told me that a circular order had been sent out from general headquarters for all commanders to look out for a spy who had first appeared driving a cow, pretending to have got confused without the picket line. A few hours later a man in Federal uniform had been picked up by the provost guard for being absent from his command without a pass. While inquiries were being made about him he had given the guard the slip and had disappeared. At our headquarters we wondered if the country man we had passed and this straggler were not one and the same man.

While we were talking about it a telegram came in from the left of our command stating that a man who was trying to steal through our picket line to go south had been fired on, but had disappeared in a wood thick with tangled undergrowth. The officer of the post sent a sergeant with twelve men into the wood, who deployed to cover the ground and swept out every live thing there. A man was seen running to a small village, or, rather, a clump of houses, half a mile distant, and before he could be captured had disappeared among a group of a few men, more women and a lot of children. When our men got there they couldn't tell which of the men they had chased. The sergeant sent a private to report the matter to the officer of the picket post, while the others surrounded the people so that none of them should get away. The officer reported the situation to the general, and the general sent for me.

After going over all this that I've been telling you the general told me to go over with part of the escort and exercise my ingenuity to discover the man who had tried to steal through the picket line. "A spy," he said, "has undoubtedly been moving about our camps collecting information and is trying to get south with it. I rely on you to find out which one of these people is the man we want. They are all probably devoted to the Confederate cause and will use every effort to conceal his identity. I would suggest that you threaten to shoot every one of them unless they give up the spy." Taking a couple of men, I rode over to the place where the supposed spy

had been cornered and found the picket line stretched around the group. I examined all the men critically, but could learn nothing from any of them. Considering that it would be no use to question the women, I concluded to adopt the general's suggestion. I stood the men in line, ordered the sergeant to draw in his command and assemble them for a firing squad. When the two lines faced each other I told the citizens that if they didn't give up the man who had been chased in among them I would shoot every one of them. Of course I only did it to effect my purpose, for I had no orders to carry out the threat and wouldn't have been so inhuman as to do so if I had.

They all turned white, but not a man spoke. I gave the word to the squad to aim, and yet no one flinched. I was about to give up my bluff game when a window sash in one of the houses went up and a man put his head out of the window.

"Don't shoot, cap'n," he said. "I'm your man."

Delighted at the result of my expedient, I turned my firing squad over to the sergeant and sent the two men I had brought with me to arrest the man who had confessed. He proved to be very young—scarcely eighteen. I scanned his face with a view to discover if he were the fellow who had driven the cow, but saw no resemblance, though I did not consider this of importance, for he had probably been made up for every character he had played.

I searched him, but, finding no papers, directed the men to search every house in the place. I was not surprised that they found nothing, for there had been plenty of time to burn any papers he might have carried. Not finding any documentary evidence, I took him to headquarters.

He was the pluckiest young fellow I ever saw. The general questioned him and cross questioned him, but could get nothing out of him. Asked if he was the man who drove the cow, he said "No." He also denied that he was the man in Federal uniform who had eluded the provost guard. All he would admit was that he was the man who had been chased by the pickets out of the wood and into the village.

Well, the case was reported to general headquarters with the expectation that we would be ordered to send the spy there. No such order came. No general likes hanging a spy, and they didn't propose to do it further up when they could shove it on to us below. That's one of the benefits of high rank. We were ordered to try the youngster by drumhead court martial and hang him at once. He was convicted and sentenced to be hanged the next morning at sunrise.

That night the boy weakened and withdrew his confession. He said that before I arrived on the ground the real fugitive had gone into a house, dressed himself as a woman and, coming out with a bucket, started to a spring for water. He passed one of the guard, who failed to stop him, and never returned.

No one believed this story told by a man as a last resort to save his life, and preparations were made for the execution next morning. About mid night a telegram came from general headquarters countermanding the order for the spy's execution. We were further informed that a man dressed in woman's clothing had applied for a



"DON'T SHOOT, CAPT. HE SAID, 'I'M YOUR MAN'."

pass to go through the lines southward. Having a very coarse voice, he was suspected, searched and full information found upon him concerning the strength, equipment, etc., of our corps d'armee. He was to be executed at once and had confirmed the story of the young man now in our hands.

I never saw a more relieved, a happier man than our general at the outcome of the affair. He called for the prisoner and, taking him by the hand, called him a noble fellow. Then, putting his own hand in his pocket, he took out the principal part of his last pay and gave it to him.

After the war I went south to find that young man. I learned that he had enlisted in the Confederate army and had been killed in one of the battles of the Wilderness. I've been down there since and have found that on every southern Memorial day the whole people of that region turn out to put flowers on his grave. For a long while I and several others used to club together once a year and send a wreath to be put on his grave with the other flowers.

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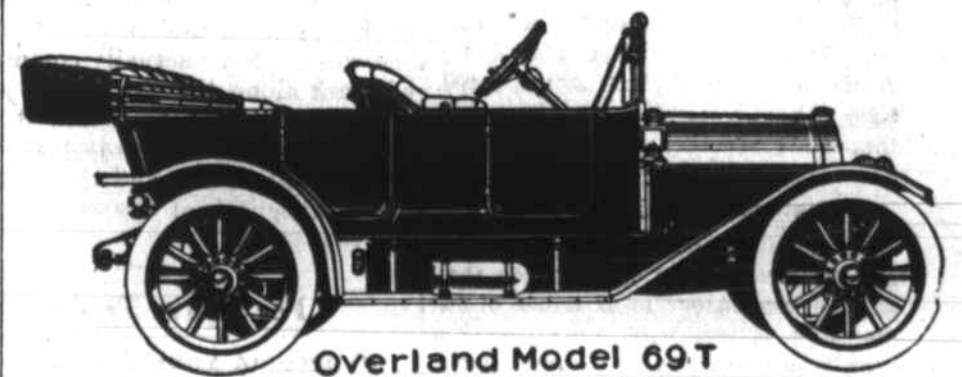
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