

DAN MASON'S CHRISTMAS

BY —
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THE soldiers were in a splendid humor. They had won a victory the week before and were now resting securely among the hills, with no prospect of hard duty for at least a month. All the scouts brought news that the enemy was continuing his retreat into the west, and, moreover, the weather did not invite to active service. There was nothing for the men to do but make themselves comfortable, and that they did the best they could.

They occupied a shallow basin in the crest of a low but very wide hill—a basin large enough to hold the entire army and seemingly intended by nature as a place of camp and defense. Their great guns made a ring around them and covered every point of approach. The soldiers felt that they could hold such a natural fortress against the assaults of ten times their number, but they knew that an attack would not come, and they turned their minds to other things.

Nearly all the camp work was finished, and they were eating their suppers. Innumerable fires were burning, and the flames rose up in the clear, frosty air. Sparks flew off into the sky, trembled there a moment and then went out. The metal dishes rattled, and the hum of talk and laughter arose.

"This is comfort—solid comfort, I call it," said Dan Mason, the Kentuckian, to his comrades, leaning back and luxuriating a little in the unusual rest and peace. The others did not reply, but devoted themselves body and soul to the food. Mason looked thoughtfully at them for a minute or two and then resumed his task. Yet to himself was worth the contemplation of any one.

Dan Mason, like his comrades, was young, but he was taller, larger and stronger than any of those who sat near him; a splendid specimen of the Kentuckian of the hills, a man of powerful muscles, open face and frank, brown eyes that looked straight at you, and yet at times would flame into a sudden passion that might prove dangerous.

"Isn't this good, Tom Settle?" he said to the man immediately on his left.

"Of course it is," replied Tom, with a sigh of content. "I like soldiering well enough, but I'm not such a glutton for it that I must have it every day in the year. A month of steady marches and battles and skirmishes before we came into these hills had just about finished me up. If there's any fighting to be done before spring, Dan, you can have my share, and there won't be any charge for it. Now you leave me talking."

He resumed his attack upon the food, and the others laughed. It was in truth a most comfortable camp. The tents were raised already, and the men might take their ease without worry. Mason leaned back against a hillock and, drawing a tiny pamphlet from an inside pocket of his faded army coat, studied it attentively. The others did not notice him for a minute or two, and then it was Settle who spoke:

"Reading, Dan?" he asked.

"Yes, Tom, I'm reading."

"Is it so mighty interesting?"

"Yes."

"Tell it, then."

"I'll let you know directly."

Settle said no more. He was happy, and he would not allow even his curiosity to disturb him. Mason continued his study of the worn little pamphlet, his brow wrinkling now and then with a mental effort which evidently proceeded from an attempt to calculate something complex.

"Boys," he asked presently, "what day is this?"

"What funny questions you ask, Dan Mason!" exclaimed Settle. "How do you expect fellows who have been fighting for a month without a break to keep track of such little things as the days of the week?"

His pronouncement was received with approval by the majority, but a third man—Johnston—who took the question to heart, asserted that it was Friday, whereupon Settle, being compelled to return to the issue, staked his faith upon the day being Sunday. Johnston maintained that it was Friday, and both round supporters, while others held that it was neither Friday nor Sunday, but were divided in choice between the remaining days of the week. Then a dispute arose and waxed hot. It was at its height when it occurred to Settle to ask why they debated with such spirit a question that was unimportant.

"What difference, Dan, does it make what day of the week it is?" he said to Mason.

"It makes a lot," replied Mason. "I want to tell you in the first place, boys, that this little book I'm studying so hard is an almanac. I've been keeping track of the days, and this is Saturday, and what's more than that, it's the 24th of December. Now, Tom Settle, just you tell me what's coming."

Settle uttered a low whistle.

"Boys," he exclaimed, "it's Christmas night coming across you!"

There was a trace of awe in his tone as he pointed toward the east where the red sun was sinking and the shadows had begun to gather on the horizon. A silence fell over the group and soon extended to the whole camp. Hardened by war, immersed in constant fighting and

rest, said Settle.

"You have your wish," replied Mason.

"Didn't you notice the clouds before the dark came? Here's your snow."

Settle looked at the heavens, and a broad flake settled upon his upturned face. It was followed by another, and then many more, and in five minutes they were falling down upon the camp like a great white veil. The ground was soon covered, and the flakes continued to come down until the snow lay several inches deep. But it ceased by and by, and a clear silver moon shone in the cold, pale heavens. It was very beautiful to Mason, who had in his soul a little of the poetry of his native hills. This was the power of God after a month of battle. He sat in the lee of a tent and looked at the white expanse of the earth and the dim line of the horizon.



drawing a free breath this day for the first time in a month, these men had lost all track of time. So Mason's sudden announcement came with all the greater force. Peaceful memories rushed upon them like a torrent, and the silence in the great camp endured. The minds of these men—boys most of them were in years, though old in experience—went back to other Christmas nights, when there was no thought of war and all was peace on earth and good will among men. They thought then of those who were left behind them, and they spoke softly and without ont's.

Lower sank the sun. It seemed ever after to Mason when he thought of that night that it was a globe of intense, molten fire. Its rays lay blood red on the hills, but the shadows continued to creep up nevertheless. It was gone by and by, and the east was in a darkness which soon extended to the four quarters of the heavens. Christmas night had begun, and the sentinels on their beats called, "All's well!"

"Ought to be snow tonight. It's Christ-

The content of the soldiers did not decrease. It was a well sheltered and well provisioned army, and this was what they wished. The solemnity which they had felt at first began to wear away, and their spirits rose. The camp was filled with jest and laughter. Bright flames, flickering over the snow, shot up from a hundred fires, and beside each some good story was told. The camp was luminous with light and good feeling.

A clear voice was uplifted presently, and some one began to sing. It was a song of Christmas:

"The shepherds went their hasty way
And found the lonely stable shed
Where the Virgin mother lay;
And now they checked their eager tread,
For to the babe that at her bosom clung
A mother's song the Virgin sang."

his first, he shook it in the darkness. Then Johnston seen him then he would have felt the truth of Settle's words that Mason was not a man who "loved his enemies."

In truth, it was never part of Mason's code to love his enemies. It had been taught to him in his native mountains to exact an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Even now, as he thought of Markham and the great wrong that he had suffered from him, he longed for the time when the war would end and he might seek his revenge. He bore no animosity toward the soldiers on the other side except this particular one—Markham. He fought the others from a sense of duty, and the war over, he could be good friends with them. But there could be no forgiveness for Markham. As he clinched his hand and shook it in the darkness, his sense of the wrong done him was as keen as ever. Two years of incessant campaigning had not diminished it, and when the excitement and danger of each great battle were over he found that the memory of

it would come back to him as strong as before.

Mason stood at the northern rim of the camp. The sentinel who walked the beat there was a friend of his and nodded at him as he passed. The moon shone brighter and clearer than ever in the cloudless skies, and Mason, looking back at the camp, saw it brilliant with many lights. Clear and sweet still came the words of the hymn:

"The shepherds went their hasty way
And found the lonely stable shed
Where the Virgin mother lay."

Then the song ceased suddenly as a half dozen rifle shots rang loudly in the frosty air. Mason stopped quite still, and all his thoughts passed abruptly from peace to war. He looked toward another hill, divided by a shallow but wide valley from the one on which the camp lay—a hill on which clusters of bushes grew here and there, affording a cover for daring strikers. He had marked the place from the first and noted what a good cover it would be for attacking sharpshooters if the enemy were not fifty miles away. Now it seemed that at last some skirmishers were not as much as a mile away. While he looked he saw some jets of flames from the bushes and heard the crack of three or four rifle shots.

"Join these men, Mason," said an officer, "and clear those skirmishers out of the bushes. It ought to have been done before we settled into the camp. A pocket of ours should be there now."

But Mason did not wait to hear the officer's grumbling. He went mechanically about the business upon which he had been ordered, shouldering his rifle and falling in with the party of twenty who were to clear the bushes. He was a good man for such work, a master of woodcraft, cool, cautious and afraid of nothing.

The disturbance in the camp was only momentary. The soldiers were accustomed to such trifles. A few rifle shots fired from ambush could not annoy for more than five minutes men who had gone through many great battles. Nor did the thought of his task lay heavy upon the mind of Mason. Accustomed to such duties, he would perform it presently and return to his place with his comrades. It was merely mechanical.

They made a wide circuit around the valley and approached the hostile hill from the rear. Then they lay close to the earth and listened for sounds of their enemies, but they heard none—only the distant hum of their own camp and the notes of a Christmas hymn rising in the cold night.

"We'd better separate here and surround them," said the commander of the little troop. And the men spread out like a fan, Mason taking his way up a little gully. He was creeping on hands and knees like an Indian. All the instincts of the Kentuckian of the mountains were aroused in him. The flame was in his blood, and he was now the hunter after prey.

Forward he went, searching the interlocking bushes with his keen eyes, his rifle at the cock and every muscle tense and ready for action. His stained and dark uniform would have made a blot on the snow, but he kept to the cover of the bushes, and no one looking there would have known that a man was passing.

He could hear the notes of the Christmas hymn swelling in a chorus of many voices, but it was unheeded. Mason now had work to do, and he meant to do it. He crept on up the ravine and near the hill stopped and listened intently. He thought that he heard a soft creak on the snow, as of some one moving behind a thick clump of bushes that grew near, but he was not sure whether it was a friend or an enemy. He approached a little, lying down on the snow, and drew himself forward with body outstretched like a snake. He heard the sound again, very faint now—so faint that it would have passed unnoticed by any ear less keen than his own.

Mason felt that it was an enemy behind the bushes—an enemy who knew that danger was approaching and would be cautious. His blood swelled with the pride of conflict and the exaltation of skill. He would watch this way foe, and his muscles became tenser than ever as he prepared for the test. He glanced only once at his rifle to see that the weapon was ready and then resumed his sliding and slow advance. He reached the clump of bushes and, laying his ear to the snow, could hear nothing. But he was confident that his foe was still on the other side. He could not have escaped unseen, and, sure alike in his courage and his judgment, he began to creep around the bushes, his finger on the trigger, ready to fire at the first glimpse. He reached the other side, but nothing was there—only a trail in the snow to show how his enemy, too, had made the circuit—and the bushes still stood between.

But Mason was not discouraged. He did not expect to catch the man without trouble. The unknown would have been a very cheap sharpshooter indeed if he had allowed himself to be overtaken so easily, and Mason felt pleased because the enemy matched against his skill and courage seemed altogether worthy of him.

He began the second circuit of the bushes, more careful now than ever, not making the slightest noise, lest his enemy should hear and take warning. When he was half way around, the sound of