

...to both left and right side, and he knew that his comrades were in battle with the other sharpshooters. But they were too far away to be seen, and he did not take his mind from his own particular part of the work. It was one of the merits of Mason that he knew how to attend to his own business.

He was as patient now as the Indians whom he imitated, creeping forward and then turning back, seeking to entrap his wary foe. But the man seemed to return with him every time and still remained hidden. Mason could not tell whether his enemy was endeavoring to escape or pursue. He laughed noiselessly at the thought that he himself might be pursued while he was pursuing. Well, it did not matter. It merely made the test of skill all the more interesting.

"The shepherd went to a busy way." He heard the notes of the music again, louder and clearer than ever, and then more rife shots. The skirmish was flaring into increased activity. He listened to it a moment, although he never doubted that his comrades would win. But he trusted that they would not win too soon, as he wished to finish his own affair without help.

Then he turned suddenly and went swiftly back on his own track, catching a glimpse of a dark figure around the curve of the bushes. He raised his rifle and fired, but not quicker than the other man. The reports were simultaneous, and a bullet clipped the clothing on Mason's shoulder. Whether his enemy

was struck or not he did not know, and there was no sound.

Mason was annoyed. He must devise some method of finishing it quickly. He lay quite still and pondered deeply for a minute or two. Then an idea came to him. He took off his cap, placed it on the end of his gun barrel and, being flat, thrust it out in front of him, raising it slightly in the air. He made no mistake. There was a flash, a report, and a bullet whizzed through the cap, springing to his feet. A solid rifle in hand, he ran forward.

His enemy, trapped so tightly, leaped up, his empty rifle still smoking at the muzzle, and ran through the thickets. Mason followed fast. The passion of the chase was upon him, and he resolved that the man should not escape. He raised his rifle once and marked a spot on the fugitive's back where he could plant a bullet. But he did not like to do it. He would rather shoot him in the face, if he could.

The man as he ran made desperate efforts to shield his rifle, but failed. Presently he threw it away, as if he feared that it would impede his flight. Then he ran faster. But Mason, too, increased his speed. The desperate fugitive heard the crackling footsteps on the snow coming close and closer.

They reached a little glen, and here the fugitive sank down among some bushes, exhausted.

"Throw up your hands!" cried Mason, raising his rifle.

The man raised his hands, saying, "I yield!"

But Mason did not lower his rifle. "Yes, you yield," he said, "but I don't know that I ought to spare you. I have my opinion of a man who sneaks up to a camp in the dark and shoots from ambush."

"It's war," replied the man.

"I suppose it's allowed," said Mason meditatively, "but if the way was mine every man who does so would get a bullet. I don't like this sharpshooting, anyway. There's too much sneaking business about it."

The glen in which they stood was shaded by the forests and thickets, and only a little light filtered through the branches. The sounds of the combat elsewhere had died, the fighting evidently finished. They could not hear the noises of the camp—only the sounds of the Christmas song.

"You led me a long chase around that thicket," said Mason, laughing a little. "Three or four times I thought I had you before I worked that cap trick on you."

"Aid three or four times I thought I had you," replied the man.

"Maybe so," replied Mason, who was too polite to dispute his assertion. Yet he was sure that it was his skill and not his luck which had achieved the victory. He noticed now that the man still remained in his knees in the snow. He seemed to be dreading a blow.

"Get up," said Mason. "Of course when I was talking about sharpshooters I didn't mean to practice what I was preaching. I'm going to take you a prisoner to camp, and I dare say they'll treat you well. Come on."

The man did not rise. He crouched even lower in the snow. Mason bent down to put his hand upon his shoulder and jerk him to his feet, but he started back before his fingers touched the kneeling figure.

"Why, you are in our uniform!" he cried. "What does it mean—a spy?" The man shivered.

repeated the decree that an such should be hanged or shot when caught, and he considered his prisoner a criminal whom he must take to justice. He looked at the dim figure of the kneeling man, and then he said:

"What you say may be so, but they'll hang you as sure as my name is Dan Mason."

The man sprang to his feet and ran. But Mason leveled his rifle, calling to him to stop or he would fire, and he added by way of precaution that he could not miss so good a target. The man sank down again in the snow, uttering a despairing cry, and Mason stood over him once more, still holding his rifle for use if needed. They were out of the shadows now, and the moonlight fell upon the face of the captive. Mason saw his features for the first time, and when he looked he uttered no threat, no exclamation, but stood perfectly still for a moment, his face turning deadly pale. Then he lifted his rifle again.

"Oh, Dan! Dan, don't kill me!" cried the man, falling at his feet in terror and grasping the snow in his hands.

Mason's body was rigid. Only the fingers of his right hand moved, and they played restlessly with the trigger of his rifle. He looked straight at the subject figure kneeling before him. He thrilled with powerful emotions, and triumph was strongest among them. His enemy was delivered into his hands. God was good and intended to see that he secured his just revenge. How could he doubt it when he looked at the face before him?

"Why shouldn't I kill you, Tom Markham?" he asked. "Would you spare me if it was the other way?"

"Of course I would! You know I would, Dan!" replied Markham.

"You lie!" said Mason. "If you had a chance, you would shoot me like a dog."

"You have been a liar and a sneak all your life. Who should know better than I do?"

Mason's figure was still rigidly erect, only the finger that strayed so restlessly over the trigger of his rifle moving. His face remained pale, but was as hard as stone, and the eyes, showing no mercy, sought those of Markham, which wavered and turned away in fear.

"You have been a liar and a sneak all your life!" he repeated.

"It's true, Dan, it's true—all that you say about me is true!" groined the man. "I know I'm a scoundrel, and I lied about you, and I made you think that you were all that I said you were."

"You made me lose her with your lies," said Mason.

"Yes, it's so, Dan," cried Markham, "but this war will be over some day, and then you can go home, and you'll have another chance."

"I don't know about that," said Mason grimly. "I may be dead when the war is over. But at any rate you'll never go back to tell any more lies about me."

"It would be murder, Dan! You know it would be to kill me now, when I'm unarmed!" cried Markham.

"What right has a bound like you to talk of murder?" said Mason. "I'd be making the world better to put you out of it. Besides, I'd only be ridding the officers of a dirty job. You're a spy, Tom Markham, and, according to the laws of war, you're to be put to death. I send a bullet through your head, and the thing is done neat and quick."

He stepped back a little and cocked his rifle. The man threw up his hands again and begged for mercy. Standing farther away now, Mason could scarcely see his face. The moon was hidden now by a drifting cloud, and the shadows had come over the glen. There was no sound in the woods about them. His comrades had returned to camp, having finished their part of the task. He looked up at the hill where the army lay. It was bright with many lights, and now and then he saw a dark tracery appear upon its luminous shield. He knew that it was the soldiers passing and repassing between him and the fires. He would be back with them soon, and there would be one accounted less in the world. There was satisfaction in the thought that his own hand would achieve the good work. The fierce mountain blood was hot in his veins and called for the death atonement upon the man who had done him a wrong.

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

The hymn had died for a little while, but now it rose again, borne aloft by a hundred voices, louder, clearer than ever and filling the night with melody. All other sounds were hushed at the distance. It alone sounded in the ears of the two men—the one who knelt and begged for mercy and the one who stood over him, cocked rifle in hand. That same sense of awe which he had felt earlier in the evening and then had shaken off began to steal over Mason again.

"Dan! Dan! Do you hear that?" suddenly cried the man.

"Yes, I hear it."

"Do you know what it means?"

"Yes; it is Christmas night. You need not tell me that. I know it. What have you or the likes of you to do with such a night as this?"

Markham looked up into his face.

"It's not me, Dan; it's you that ought to think about it," he said. "It's murder, Dan, if you kill me—me an unarmed

man. And think of it, Dan, on such a night as this—Christmas night, with that song ringing in your ears. Whenever you lay down to sleep, you'll hear it again!"

"The shepherds went their hasty way," The note penetrated all the woods and seemed to Mason to increase in fullness. It annoyed him. He wished they would stop. There had been enough of such sentiment. He was not a weak child to be turned aside from his just revenge. He was merely the executioner whom this criminal deserved.

"Say your prayers, if you know any to say!" he exclaimed roughly. "Your time's short, and it's going fast."

"Dan, Dan, you won't do it!" "I will!"

"Listen how they sing, Dan! Are you any better than they are? This is the night that a man ought to forgive his enemies. You wouldn't murder me on this of all nights in the year! Remember, Dan, that we were friends once. You won't forget that, will you?"

"You forgot it," said Mason.

He looked again at the kneeling figure and thought how he had longed more than two years for this moment. He had often pictured it to himself and had imagined in advance the joy which now he did not feel. How could he with the words of that song ringing in his ears? If it were only any other night!

"It's not murder; it's a punishment," he said at last.

"It is murder, and you know it, too, Dan! That sound would haunt you! Listen to it, Dan!"

"The shepherds went their hasty way And found the lowly stable shed."

It was growing darker and darker in the glen as the drifting clouds piled up between them and the moon. Mason could scarcely see the outlines of Markham's face, and he was glad that the suppliant's look was not visible to him. He knew that the man's face expressed abject entreaty. He raised his rifle again and leveled it, but his finger would not press the trigger. The warning hymn sounded in his ears and echoed again and again.

"Don't kill me, Dan!" said the man. "Take me a prisoner to the camp."

"And if I do," replied Mason shortly, "they'll hang you for a spy. Don't forget that."

Markham was silent.

The song did not cease. It seemed now to Mason that it was addressed to him alone. Would it be murder, and not a punishment, as Markham said? What would be thought of himself in the morning? Could he return to the campfires and sit calmly by his comrades, singing of Christmas night?

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

"Dan!" said the man.

Mason did not answer.

The song swelled into a great volume of sound, filling all the woods and echoing about them.

Mason felt that it was calling to him, and he could not refuse to listen if he would.

"Goodby," he said.

He turned about suddenly, leaving the kneeling man in the glen and, putting his rifle on his shoulder, walked back to camp, while over his head rolled the words of the hymn:

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

Where the Virgin mother lay."

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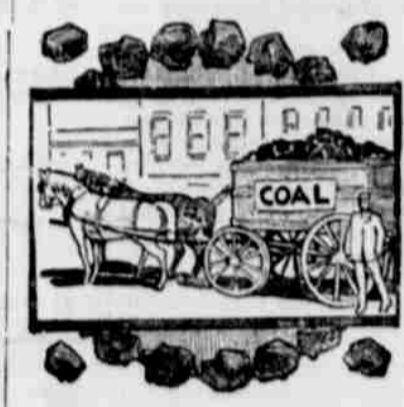
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