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THE CONTRITE COWARD.

A STORY OF DECORATION DAY.

For Thirty Odd Years Abel Had Been the Scorn of the Town and the Butt of the Children, but One Minute of Bravery Redeemed Him from Eternal Ignominy.

BY D. Y. BLACK.

Abel went to war one day. Dropped his gun and ran away! The children cried after him the jingling doggerel. About Tut went on his road and would not look at them nor seem to hear them. The insult was a very old one to his ears. These were not the first children to molest him in the village street as the schools were dismissed. The parents of some of them had yelled at him years ago, parents who were the first concoctors of the rhyme. The elder brothers and sisters of these present babes had chanted it in their turn and still the mocking words were relished by the urchin mob. For nearly thirty-four years the now gray-headed and solitary man had been the butt of his native township. No girl had in that time walked with him or danced with him, although he had been a straight and handsome youth, nor had he been a sharer in the sports of the young men. As he grew older he was allowed no part in the councils of the village. If he desired to vote at a presidential election he did it only by running the gauntlet of a thousand sneers. Manifestly it seemed absurd that a man who had deserted in the face of his country's enemy should have a say in the choice of his country's chief. He was taboo. He was ostracized. He was outside the camp. As the lenient years passed by and many of the soldiers who had fought while he ran dropped out of life, his punishment became softened to a great extent. He lived so consistently apart and was so long suffering under torture and also so many new and interesting events happened that people began to forget if they never forgave. For a large part of the year, therefore, Abel Tut could now come into the market place from his patch of a farm and be contemptuously ignored. But on one day of each year, even of those years when a new generation was springing up, his humiliation was freshened and complexed, and a scene of shame peculiarly acute. This always happened on Decoration Day. When the schools were closed and flags were displayed, when war-scarred veterans limped to life and drum and rattle, cadets claimed their fathers' cheers, when wreaths of laurel and the best love flowers were piled on heroes' graves and the modest monument on the green was surrounded by the jeering crowd who listened to the orators—then Abel hid himself away. May and spring-time were to him no season for rejoicing, but a period of pain and remorse. Then the story of his shame was certain to be retold and if he dared to go abroad his ears must hear the old refrain:

Abel went to war one day,
Dropped his gun and ran away!
He was a young man when first he had been called "coward"—a lad of 18. Now he was stooped and grayer than some men older than he, but his hard working life in the open and almost necessitating abstention from all revels had kept him strong and active. He had suffered in soul, but not in body. Now, when he was over fifty, an old, familiar call came to his solitude, a call unheard for many years, a call which rang out until every citizen from the Atlantic to the Pacific heard it—the bug-call to arms. Abel heard in the store and saw in the papers what had occurred and he fell on his knees in his lonely house and sobbed and prayed.

"If I am permitted another trial," he cried, "give me strength, O Lord, give me courage!"

There was a recruiting station in a large town not far from the village, and there gathered many of the region who desired to enlist for the war against Spain. Thither

perceived observer would have regretted their unwarlike and vagabond looks, but the passing officers, who knew their value, watched them anxiously and with as lively an interest as they did the troops, for each mule was laden down with ammunition, and upon these coarse-looking, coarse-tongued mule whackers depended perhaps the fate of the army, should that ammunition not be at hand at a critical moment. These, also, took their lives in hand. Not all heroes are dressed for the part.

Among them, doing his hard work silently and without complaint under a glaring sun, rode the coward, Abel Tut. All his efforts to enlist in the ranks had been absolutely vain. Despairing of carrying a rifle then, but determined to wipe out his disgrace by some means, he had gone down to Florida and there at Tampa he had at last found



HE GUIDED THE STAMPEDED JACK MULE. HE CHARGED THROUGH THE HELL IN FRONT OF HIM.

means to follow the army he had once deserted. He knew little of the special work of a mule packer, but he was accustomed to horses and mules and his perservency gained him a place as assistant.

No one knew the misery the man was in. No one knew of the fear which oppressed him. The village boys were quite right in their judgment of him. Abel was a coward as people judge cowards. His flesh shivered at the mere thought of a wound. He shrank and cowered instinctively at the crack of a rifle or the distant roar of heavy guns. In his boyhood he had not realized the peril and carried away by the contagious enthusiasm of comrades had enlisted, only to run, panic-stricken, at the first gleam of the enemy's bayonets. Now he was walking up to death's domain with his eyes open, knowing and understanding the imminent danger and he was afraid, horribly afraid. Yet he followed on and

with your present force. He can ill spare the men, but if necessary you can have another company. What shall I tell him?"

"Tell him," said the major coolly, "that a company will make no difference. I've men enough, I guess, but wait a moment, please."

He walked along the rear of the skirmish line as calmly as if drilling on the target range and asked questions of a number of non-commissioned officers and men while bullets splattered around him.

"Please ask the general to not mind sending men," he told the aide, "but, for heaven's sake, to send me ammunition. We don't average twenty rounds left per man. If he can't, why—I must fall back."

"I can promise it in half an hour," said the aide. "The pack mules have arrived."

The battalion continued its dogged assault, creeping up by inches, the men throwing aside one by one everything they dared. To lighten them and make the heat less intolerable. The minutes passed until ten, fifteen, twenty had gone, and at last the half hour. The major chafed.

"Easy, boys, easy!" he cried. "Don't throw away a shot. What's wrong, Corporal Eads?"

"Not a cartridge left, sir."

He fumed.

"If I fall back," he groaned, "those beggars will charge us and—ah! is that them? Yes—go it, boys, here come more ammunition. Non-commissioned officers, fall out and make ready to distribute ammunition."

At the edge of the jungle strip appeared two pack mules. Two men, mounted on other mules, drove them forward. The Americans cheered, but the sharp-eyed Spaniards also saw the newcomers and at once realized on what errand they came. The fire of three guns on the hill was directed instantaneously upon the mules, who were at once crazed by the shell and shrapnel which screamed at them, while every rifle in the trench seemed to be aimed at the devoted mule whackers.

One of the muleteers, a gray-bearded, round-shouldered man, was white with the agony of his fear, but the other, a dark, cannon ball-headed young fellow of the building type, was aroused by his danger to passionate wrath and utterly unthinking recklessness. As the tornado of iron and lead broke upon him he yelled to his comrade with a clatter of crowded oaths to come on.

"You white-faced dummy!" cried he. "What are you shaking about? Round up that mule—get a move on you—them cartridges have got to get to the major, see? They've got to. Ram your heels into that brute of yours and follow me, or by the saints I'll plug you so full of holes folks'll take you for an open door. Come on!"

The coward's weaker part was nearly the conqueror. Every nerve in his body, every instinct prompted him to turn and run to shelter. He was in exactly the same deplorable physical condition as he was when years ago he slipped away from the ranks, unobserved by the rear of his village. He was wet with cold perspiration; his hands were shaking; his knees gripped his mounts' flanks convulsively. In another moment he would have abandoned his trust and added greater disgrace to his name, when a good angel whispered to him. He saw, by the light of one clear flash of memory his village. He saw himself passing through more than thirty years, a discolored life. He felt again the slow torture of shame. He heard the mocking voices of the children:

Abel went to war one day,
Dropped his gun and ran away!
Abel Tut cried out aloud:
"Anything but that! S' oner death! Give me strength, O Lord! Give me courage!"

The incident passed in less than a minute. Then the two muleteers lashed on the pack mules. The distance to the battalion was but a few hundred yards, but these yards were each black with the shadow of grinding death. The pack mules also were so

mad with the noise and the clouds of earth shot up by shells that they ran here and there and made the distance twice as long. The younger muleteer was aflame with rage and excitement. He rode like a horse-breaker. He circled like an Indian. He kept his pack mule pretty straight, shouting, cursing and cheering with every breath. Abel followed silently, but he was no expert. His charge broke hither and thither and every moment the bullets seemed to fall faster. At last the young man rose in his stirrups with a triumphant yell and waved his hat at the Spaniards with a gesture of contempt. Too soon he crowded. He was but seventy or eighty yards from a bluff which would shelter him, where the soldiers were eagerly waiting and cheering him on. The pack mule was immediately in front of him and Abel was yards behind. The ordered shell arrived. It crashed fairly into the boxes of ammunition.

The last dash was grand, magnificent! You're a hero, and the folks at home shall know of it, I promise you."

Abel tried to speak.

"Please, sir," he gasped. "Will you—will you tell the children?"

He lived awhile and was sent home, and in the village which had mocked him died of his wound. There was no mocking then, but much honor was paid the coward, for the major made good his word, and the newspapers spoke much of the obscure muleteer's timely bravery.

Decoration day came after Abel was laid in his grave. For long, long lonely years the day had been the un happiest day to him of all. Now the veterans of the civil war and the returned volunteers of the Spanish war stopped remorsefully at his headstone and sorrowed that they had jeered at him. And the children came in little crowds, silent and tearful, and the scornful rhyme was forever banished from their lips and Abel Tut's memory was hidden by very many best loved flowers. Thus, by a permitted at last to take part in the solemn celebration.

There are divers sorts of bravery, but he who is bravest of all is the coward who conquers his cowardice.

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A MAGICIAN'S TRICK REVEALED.

How a Cane May Be Hypnotized to Stand Alone Without Support.

The widow of Herrmann, the celebrated sleight-of-hand performer, reveals the modus operandi of the famous can trick when discussing "Magic as a Home Amusement" in the June Woman's Home Companion. "The feat of compelling a walking-stick or umbrella to stand upright in the middle of a parlor without being supported by anything or anybody else seems wonderful. It is best, when about to perform this feat, to have a black screen for a background, and to order the stick or umbrella to stand alone about a foot in front of this screen. To show the audience that there is no person or apparatus behind this screen to secretly help the stick to stand when commanded, the performer can take the screen away for a few minutes until all are satisfied that there is no hidden apparatus there. Face the cane around among the audience to let them see there is no pin in the cane's ferrule, and that it is an ordinary cane, absolutely without life." When the screen is again in place the stick can be hypnotized by a few mysterious mumblings, which will be certain to keep the audience gazing in the wrong direction. Then the stick will stand alone for as long as the performer may desire. The secret of the hypnotizing is so simple that the audience will never suspect it; it is to previously tie a yard of black thread from the top of one of the front legs of an ordinary chair to the top of the other front leg, letting the 'bag' of the thread fall to the ground until ready for the "hypnotizing." Carelessly place the stick upright six inches from the chair, making it appear that it is only by the mere accident that the performer selects this particular spot. Now take your hand away, and of course the stick will stand where you place it. The supporting thread will not be seen on account of the dark background. This and many other feats any amateur can perform after a little practice."

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