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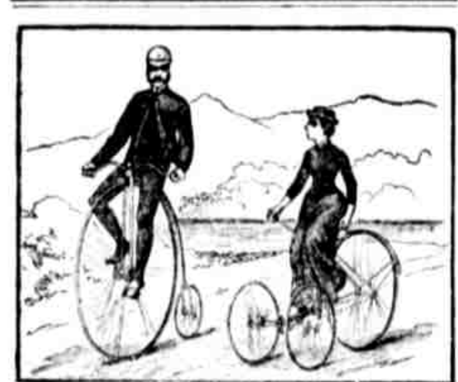

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It was during the autumn of 1861, while I was with Fremont's army in Missouri as war correspondent of The Tribune, that I first met Hakluyt Wordless. He was then a member of Fremont's body guard, commanded by Maj. Zagonyi, a Hungarian, and had distinguished himself by his coolness and intrepidity when the guard had been suddenly and unexpectedly attacked at night, as they were riding through a lane, on their way to Springfield. War was a novelty then; not one of the privates, among whom was Wordless, had been under fire; and yet they bore themselves like veterans in circumstances specially calculated to test their nerves. A band of guerrillas several hundred strong—southwest Missouri was full of them the first year of the war—had heard of the detached movement of the guard, and concealed themselves behind a rail fence, skirting the lane through which they knew the "Yankees" must pass. They impatiently awaited their coming, and at an agreed signal, opened fire with rifles, shot guns, muskets, on the enemy, never dreaming of danger, within a few feet of the muzzles of their weapons. They believed, naturally, that many of the raw soldiers would be killed and wounded, and that the rest, surprised in the dark, would be thrown into confusion and take to indiscriminate flight. Their part of the programme was faithfully executed; but the guards wholly failed to act as anticipated. These, though flung for a moment into disorder by the fire, before which a number fell, rallied in a few seconds, taking in the situation at a glance. Their commander, calm and courageous, ordered them to charge; but before they could do this, most of them were obliged to dismount—a few leaped the fence—and let down the rails. This they accomplished very quickly, and firing their carbines at the shadowy figures, rushed upon them with drawn swords, and drove them pell mell like a flock of sheep. The guerrillas, who had no regular organization, were dismayed at the unlooked for assault, and escaped in the darkness. The whole action was over in five minutes, but its echo lasted for weeks. Any skirmish seemed a battle in those days, and as the guards had been considered rather drawing room knights than true soldiers, their reputation for valor was exaggerated. But allowing for hyperbole, their conduct was right gallant—they were not more than one to three of the foe—and merited praise, which as a chronicler of events and as an ardent Unionist, I was eager to award. I had been particularly struck by what I had been told of a young fellow—he was strangely named Hakluyt Wordless—who had been smoking a pipe at the onset, and was still puffing it at the outcome. Maj. Zagonyi was enthusiastic at what he called his splendid courage.

I had just written a glowing account of the body guard, and was leaving my tent—the correspondents were attached to headquarters, and nominally on Fremont's staff—to post my letter, when a boyish looking youth, in the uniform of the guard, touched his cap, and said, "You are The Tribune correspondent, I believe." I replied affirmatively, when he mentioned his name and his desire to make my acquaintance. I told him I had heard his name, and was proud to know him, adding that I had been trying to do the body guard justice for the heroism they had displayed. "That was what I wanted to see you about," he remarked; whereupon I said jocularly, "Your prowess shall not suffer at my hands. You shall hear what I have written." I read my letter, perhaps with some satisfaction—I was yet in my twenties—and he blushed like a girl when I spoke eulogistically of him. "Would you," I inquired, "like to add anything more? I shall be happy to write it."

"You are very kind; but you would oblige me exceedingly if you would erase what you have said about me. I do not deserve it, and if I did, I would greatly prefer your silence."

I could hardly believe him sincere; for I had not found men in the army, or out of it, for matter of that, averse to praise. But he soon convinced me of his earnestness, and I reluctantly canceled the personal reference to him. That was the beginning of our intimacy. He impressed me most favorably from the start. We talked together till 3 o'clock in the morning, and I felt, at parting, as if I had known him all my life—a natural feeling when one meets a sympathetic spirit. I discovered him to be thoroughly educated, a classical scholar, acquainted with several modern languages, a traveler at home and abroad; in brief, a delightful companion. But he was singularly reticent as to his antecedents and personality, and I respected his reticence. He simply told me that he was an American for six generations, a New Yorker, 25 years old (he looked much younger) and an intense lover of his country. When I mentioned his courage, he said he had not really displayed any; that, in the skirmish of the previous day, he had not had time to be frightened; that no man could tell if he were brave until he had frequently been tested. We were a great deal in company until Fremont was relieved of his command, when the bodyguard being dissolved (he had joined it in St. Louis), he was mustered out. The army now fell back, and Hakluyt and I separated, not for long, he declared, as sympathetic natures were likely to be drawn together under any circumstances.

I went to Kentucky to observe military operations, and after the battle of Mill Spring started with Grant up the Tennessee. Fort Henry had been taken mainly by the gunboats, and the bit of land that separated the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers, expecting to reduce Fort Donelson before breakfast. I was trudging over the snow covered field on the third day's fighting, half starved, half frozen—we had no tents and were short of provisions—and nearly blind from the recent explosion of a case of cartridges at the landing—one of them having struck my eye—when I suddenly encountered Hakluyt on horseback. Our meeting was joyous. He wanted to do something for me; but I told him I could hold out, if the fort did not, and I believed its capture at hand, in which opinion he agreed. He had gained the rank of captain and was on the staff of one of the generals, a position he enjoyed, he said, since he could volunteer for any special enterprise he might fancy. He had his duties to perform, and I had mine; so we bade each other good-by for the time. In the afternoon I was on the right, where the hottest strife was raging, and an Iowa regiment was one of the first to assault the enemy's works and gain a position on the inside. The next morning Buckner surrendered with 15,000 prisoners, and as it was the earliest positive success of the Union arms everybody was jubilant.

Nearly exhausted, I went down the river to Cairo, the boat filled with captured Confederate officers, and with difficulty wrote up my account, being scarcely able to see. Wordless was my companion, and I went to St. Louis to recruit, where he had been sent on special business.

I had learned, meanwhile, that he had volunteered as a private in the Iowa regiment, and had led the van, winning universal admiration by his intrepidity. Men had been shot down, all around him; bullets had passed through his cap and clothing, and yet he was unhurt. The color bearer having been killed by the explosion of a shell, he picked up the flag, and carried it until another relieved him of it, when he again took up his musket and pushed forward with the front line. He was silent on the subject, and when I questioned him said he had done very little, and changed the theme. I doubt if any soldier on the field, from the highest to the lowest, on either side, had shown more valor and resolution than that effeminate looking, boyish appearing officer. But there was no mention of his name in the military dispatches or in the correspondents' letters, as I had, in obedience to his eager request, refrained from speaking of his gallant conduct to my fellow journalists. He had, probably, taken every means to keep himself out of the official reports, and had been successful. I could not understand his morbid modesty, and I tried my best to overcome it, though without avail. He had an unmistakable dread of fame; why was beyond my comprehension.

In St. Louis our long talks, carried late into the night, were continued. What themes did we not discuss! It seems now as if we left nothing untouched. We ranged from the natural to the supernatural, from the purely practical to the speculative and mystical, and our views, as is usual with very young men, were more positive than they would be now. On my referring to the oddness of his name, and his air of mystery, he replied that when the war was over, should he survive it, he would have no more reserves; that then I would understand his present motives for concealment.

Once more we went our respective ways; he going to Grant in Tennessee, and I to the Mississippi flotilla bent on opening the river. He was at Shiloh, while I was at the capture of Island No. 10. I had intended to join Grant's army after that event; but his victory was won almost simultaneously, the battle having occurred earlier than had been anticipated, owing to the enemy making the attack. I received a letter from Hakluyt, and, reading between the lines, could see that he had once more distinguished himself. He had carried, through a deadly fire, several highly important orders, on the issue of which the engagement turned. He might not have told me this, had he not been honorably mentioned in the dispatches and promoted to the rank of colonel.

We did not see each other again until we were before Vicksburg in the winter and spring of 1863. One night we were on the Louisiana peninsula, opposite the besieged town, when some of our gunboats ran the Confederate batteries. We, with others who had gone there to witness the spectacle, were directly in range. The shot and shell tore through the trees above our heads, shattering the trunks, and cutting off the limbs, which fell around us in fragments. It was a terrible fire. The Mississippi shore seemed for miles all ablaze. Cannon after cannon shot out in murderous flame; the air was full of deadly missiles; it appeared as if no living thing in front of them could escape. But the danger was more visible than actual. We lay on the ground, and the shot passed above us, commonly at a height of ten or twelve feet. Our chief peril was from tumbling branches and flying splinters. Wordless called the ceaseless fire a military wood cutting machine, cords of wood might have been gathered the next morning in our vicinity, though it would hardly have been worth the powder and iron expended for it.

In a lull of the cannonade we overheard a group of men near us giving directions as to the disposition of their bodies in case they should be killed. Being all married but one, they wished their remains and what money and valuables they had on their persons sent home to their wives. The bachelor, who was the Bohemian correspondent of a Chicago newspaper, said: "Bury me just where I lie; nobody cares for me, and I haven't a cent in my pocket." Hakluyt laughed at this, and said: "It's a great comfort, isn't it! when a fellow is in danger to think that he isn't married." "I have heard," I replied, that mature husbands are often indifferent to danger, even to death." Is it because they have nothing to live for? or because they have nothing more to fear?" Another roar of the batteries prevented a response; and as the gunboats had passed, the firing gradually ceased, and in an hour or two we were asleep on one of the transports.

That night's experience had awakened in both of us a desire to run the batteries. He thought it might be exciting, a sort of sensation, since all that could be done would be; as the phrase is, to stand and take it, which is commonly thought to be a trial of courage. I told him that his valor had been tried so often that it was superfluous to try it further. But he insisted, as before, that exposure to a new kind of peril might frighten a man who had reason to believe himself brave, and added: "I have never run batteries, you know, and the thing appeals to my imagination. I hope we shall do it together, some time."

Within a week he was ordered to Washington as a bearer of important dispatches, expecting to return speedily. The plan of the campaign against Vicksburg demanded that some of the transports should pass the town, and preparations were made to that end. A year before, when Gen. W. T. Sherman had suggested the idea, he was pronounced crazy. It had always been accepted as an incontrovertible military fact that a wooden vessel could not go by a stationary battery of heavy grade. The attempt had never been made by any nation. But America was going to try it; indeed Farragut's war ships had already tried it successfully. We had already taught Europe various military lessons, and we were destined to teach her more. I had arranged to run the batteries on the first transport that was to steam past the strongly defended town. I had telegraphed to Wordless, who had replied: "Am very anxious to accompany you. Wait for me."

I waited, and lost my opportunity. The first transport went, and the second, and the third, and they all got through. Meantime the river was steadily falling, and the conditions for running the batteries grew more and more unfavorable. My friend did not come. I telegraphed again and again; no answer. What could be the cause? He was so faithful to his word that I became alarmed. Finally the last expedition was fitting out; it was composed of two barges loaded with provisions and bales of hay, to be lashed to a tug. The soldiers below needed rations, and the horses fodder. No time was to be lost. I must go then, or not at all, and I had set my heart on having the experience.

OUR EXPEDITION HAD BEEN DESTROYED.

The night fixed for our departure was Sunday, May 3, 1863. The moon was full, and, at the hour when we should be opposite the batteries, would be in the zenith. Several old Mississippi pilots, hearing of my intent, came to me and urged me not to make the venture. They said the water was very low; the barges were unmanageable; the enemy had felled most of the trees on the peninsula, so as to have no obstruction between their guns and the Yankee boats, which had to follow a sharp bend in the stream, bringing them in direct range of the batteries when several miles above the city. The artillerymen, they insisted, had got the range by practice, and, assisted by the brilliant moonlight, would make every shot tell. The probabilities were that we should get aground in turning the bend, and be at the mercy of the heavy guns. We should, in all likelihood, be completely destroyed; not a man would escape.

My reply to all this was that, as I was simply seeking a sensation, the greater the danger the greater the sensation. They intimated that I was a blank fool, and too young to know how big a fool I might be.

We got off just before midnight. The night was like day, the moon being so bright that we read papers and letters after starting. Two other war correspondents of New York journals, who were my friends, were on the expedition, which was abominably fitted out—a regular death trap, as one of the pilots had pronounced it. Fifteen enlisted men who had volunteered for the occasion—it was the custom in the army to call for volunteers for any service considered particularly perilous—two officers, and the crew of the tug brought the number up to thirty-four. The night was beautiful, very warm, and singularly still. We floated with the current, not willing to arouse the attention of the enemy, if we could help it, by puffs of steam. But our precautions were futile. He had seen us. We had barely got opposite the batteries, on the further side of the bend, when we saw a flash, followed by a report, and a thud near the water line of the nearer barge assured us that the gunners had indeed got the range. The next instant every battery that could be trained upon us was belching forth flame and iron. We were continuously under fire for four miles, first rounding the bend and then slowly moving directly under the guns. The cannonading surpassed the cannonading I have already described. The Confederates appeared to be furious at their previous failure to destroy the previous vessels or prevent any of them from getting by, and redoubled their efforts on this occasion. They were most prodigal of powder, shot and shell. The moon was dimmed with the ceaseless flashing of the great guns; the smoke lay along the river and partially obscured the town. Our barges, with the tiny laboring tug, appeared insignificant compared with the stunning din from the shore. The shot roared, the shell screamed and burst all around us. Why we were not blown into the air I could not comprehend. But the tug kept up its petty puffs, audible only at intervals, and steadily crept on. The handful of men were distributed about, watching the hostile fire and chatting of our chances of getting through. We could only wait for the result, which it seemed every second must be decided against us. We appeared to be in the hands of destiny, and destiny was not, manifestly, on our side. It occurred to me that Wordless would have enjoyed the scene, which was a magnificent and terrible representation of war—war of a multitude against a few compelled to be wholly passive. So many shells exploded above our heads that I believed that some of our men must be killed or wounded. I walked over the barges and perceived that several of the soldiers had been struck. Whether dead or not I could not tell. The horrible noise hindered inquiry; no aid could be rendered, no action taken until we were out of that fire of hell under which we had now been for nearly half an hour. We were getting below the town; the heaviest batteries had been passed; In ten minutes we should be beyond peril.

SHOT THROUGH THE HEART.

Just then a shell from an upper gun dropped, by strange mischance, upon the tug, went into the boiler, exploded, threw the furnace fires upon the loose hay covering the tops of the barges, which in a minute or two were wrapped in flames. Our expedition had been destroyed, and its destruction was greeted with a wild, fierce yell from the shore. The tug sank and her crew went down with her. The fire darted up everywhere; we were enveloped in it. Those of us unhurt threw off bales of hay, helped the wounded to reach them, and then plunged into the Mississippi to avoid the flames. A companion and I were congratulating ourselves that we should get away by swimming, when a yawl, filled with armed Confederates, suddenly ran upon us—the whole river was lighted up—and dragged us into the boat with a round oath at the blank Yankees. Our entire thirty-four had been killed, wounded or captured. The doleful prophecy of the pilots had been verified—not a man had escaped.

Then began my two years of prison life. The enemy would not exchange or release on any terms a Tribune correspondent. I was sent from prison to prison, until at last, shortly before Richmond had fallen, I escaped from Salisbury, N. C., and tramping through a hostile country a distance of 400 miles in midwinter, reached our lines, and welcomed again the Stars and Stripes. As soon as I was free I instituted inquiries about Hakluyt Wordless, and I learned why he had not joined me in running the batteries. A week before I had started he was dead. He had gone out on a reconnaisance from Helena, Ark., and been shot through the heart by guerrillas in ambuscade. The mystery surrounding him has never been divulged. His was the stuff of which heroes are made.

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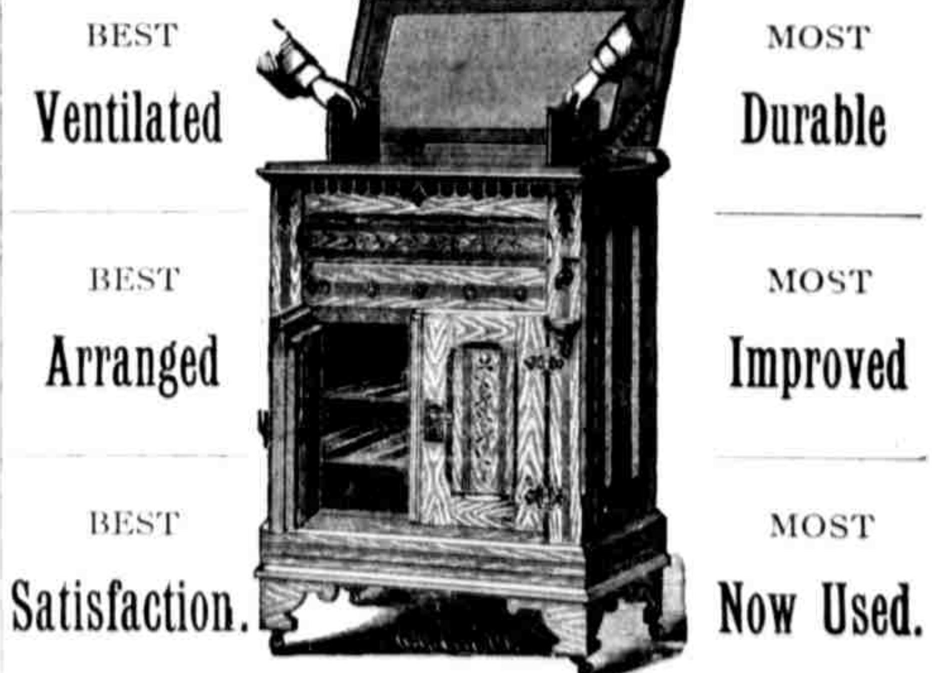

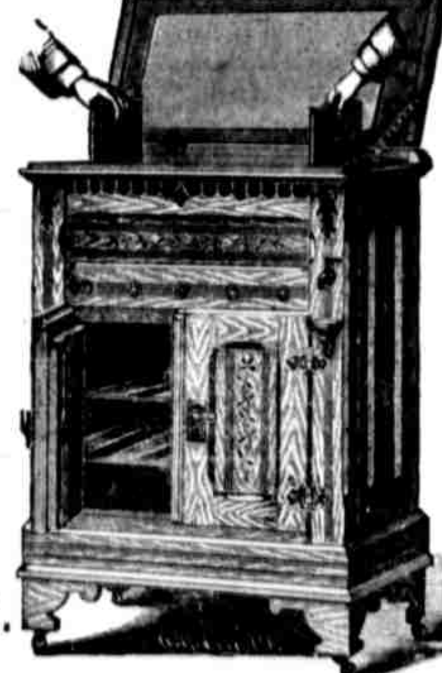

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