

# SHORT STORY AMERICA

## AN OLD SOLDIER'S STORY

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THE times were strange then, and at the front was not the only place to have adventures. During the war, some of the most stirring scenes I took part in were right at home. You see that old Colt's revolver which hangs by my sword? I carried it through my five years in the army, and more than once it helped me out of a bad scrape.

In '63 I went home on 30 days' furlough to see my people, also to get recruits. I was quite successful, and by the time my furlough was up, had found between 25 and 30 men who were willing to enlist. There was one young man I had tried hard to get, and though he was willing, his father stubbornly refused to let him go. The only reason he had for refusing was that corn-husking was not yet over and his son Hiram was needed for the work. The only reason which finally caused him to give his consent was the bounty. They were offering a thousand dollars for every man who would join the army, and Hiram promised to turn every cent of it over to his father. So old Zack said

he would agree if I would turn in and help with the husking.

My 30 days' furlough was up, but I was young and thoughtless in those days, and paid no heed to it. I knew the other recruits wished to stay till after corn-husking, and besides, felt that nothing would be done to me when I came back to my regiment with 30 stalwart lads. So I pitched in, and in two weeks all Old Zack's corn was husked and I was ready to start.

The tickets were bought, and the next morning we were ready to take the train at Rock Island for Quincy. There the men were to be sworn in and would receive their bounties, while our township would be credited with so many recruits. But in overstaying my furlough I had forgotten one thing—the provost marshal. These marshals were men who were looked down upon and despised worse than the dog-catchers. Their duty was to arrest deserters, and since their pay was \$25 for every deserter captured, you can see they never let a chance slip. If they had only arrested real deserters, the people would not have dislike them so, but they were always bringing trouble upon good, honest soldiers whose only fault lay in being a little careless and staying too long at home. The provost marshal in our county was shrewd, brave as a lion, and as mean a man as one could meet in a whole day's travel. Only a short time before, Tommy Jingles had come home from my regiment and thoughtlessly over-stayed his furlough. On the third day, just as he was boarding the train at Rock Island to go back to the army, Davy McGregor captured him and sent him back under arrest. The \$25 reward and the expenses were taken from poor Tommy's pay, and Tommy with never a thought of deserting. And this was not the only instance in which Davy McGregor had behaved so meanly.

But to return to my story. It was my last night at home, and I was dreaming of war and

battles. I had been thrown forward with a cloud of skirmishers. The musketry was rattling about like hail, and we were storming the first outpost, when I heard a loud rap at the door and was awake on the instant. "Come out, Simon, I want you."

It was Davy's voice, and I well know what he wanted me for. I made no answer, however, and began to silently dress. His knocking soon roused the house, and by the time I was dressed my sister came slipping into the room. I told her in whispers that to do. She went to the door and talked with Davy, but would not open it. He became suspicious, and I could hear him creeping around the house so as to have an eye on the kitchen door. You see, he was certain I was in the house, and thought I would most likely come out that way. Kissing father and mother and sister, I asked them to say good-bye to the boys, and carefully opened the front door. It was moonlight, and Davy was, as I suspected, keeping watch at the rear of the house. With my shoes in my hand, taking advantage of every shadow and scarcely daring to breathe, I crawled to the barn. I saddled father's big black stallion, and when all was ready, came out of the barn like a cannon shot.

Davy ran to the road and halted me as I came up on the dead lope, my cocked Colt's in my hand. He blocked my path, ordering me to halt and flourishing his pistols. On I came straight at him, and would surely have run him down, had he not sprung aside, blazing right and left at me as I went by. I knew he would do this, and ducked to the off-side of my horse, but not quickly enough, for a burning pain told me where his first bullet had plowed across my scalp.

On and away, with Rock Island 28 miles before me, I dashed like the wind. Davy, always well mounted, was hot after me. But our horses were evenly matched. At first he took flying shots at me as we rounded the bends, but he soon gave that up. Mile

after mile flew by, and I was just beginning to feel sure of escape, when I met with an accident. Dawn was breaking as I plunged into a stretch of woods where it was yet as black as night. The road was heavy at that place, and the horse's hoofs made no sound. Suddenly, out of the darkness and from the opposite direction, leaped a horse and rider. Too late to avoid the shock, our horses struck breast on. The strange steed and rider were hurled to the ground, while I was not badly hurt. But father's stallion was strong. He shook himself, groaned, and sprang away on the gallop.

Still he had been badly hurt, and I saw that he was losing his speed. Davy slowly overhauled me. Soon he was alongside, trying to seize my rein. He had emptied his pistols, so could not shoot. Again and again I drew a bead on him with my loaded Colt's, but he was a brave man, refusing to be frightened. I did not wish to shoot him, but I think I would have done it rather than have the disgrace of deserter put upon me. You see, instead of running away, I was trying to run back to the army—a funny thing for a real deserter to do. But I did not shoot, not intending to use my revolver unless I had to.

Then we galloped, side by side, for at least 10 or 12 miles. Little by little my horse gave out and the last mile he made, Davy had to hold his horse in to keep him from running away from me. Every time he tried to catch my bridle I struck at his hand with my heavy revolver, and he soon gave that up. I felt that the stallion could not last much longer, and know I must do something to escape unearned disgrace. Now I am and always was a mild man, full of pity for dumb animals, but necessity forced me to do what I did. I played a trick I had learned out west. It is called "creasing," and is often used on wild horses. They shoot them so the bullet just grazes the top of the neck. But it does not hurt the horse. It just stuns him and in a few minutes he is as

good as ever.

Quick as a flash I leaned out of the saddle, placed the muzzle of my revolver on the nape of the neck of Davy's horse, and pulled the trigger. Down he went with a crash, throwing Davy over his head. Yet Davy was on his feet instantly, and my poor horse could barely keep away from him as he ran after me on foot.

I looked at my watch. I could catch the first train, and Rock Island was only five miles away. My horse could not make those five miles and I did not know what to do. Davy gave me the idea, however. Coming around a turn in the road, I barely missed running into a farmer's wagon going to town. Not 20 feet away was another, going in the same direction. Davy stopped the first one and began to cut the traces—this was the idea. I halted the second one, which was driven by a woman, and explained as I did likewise. And she was willing for she know all about the provost marshal. We finished and mounted at the same time, with myself 20 feet in the lead. Yet fortune seemed to favor him, for his horse was a little the better of the two. But he had neglected to cut the traces quite short though, and the horse, stepping upon them, was thrown.

This gave me several hundred feet, and I was still leading by several lengths when we entered Rock Island. How we startled the city! Down the main street we thundered, while the people, who all hated the provost marshal, cheered me on. We barely missed a dozen collisions, and galloped into the depot, where the train was just ready to start. I rode through the crowd as far as I dared; the dismounted and made a dash for the steps. You can guess how the people gave room for a wild hatless soldier, flourishing a huge revolver.

Persevering Davy was right behind, and I had to face about and keep him off with my pistol. It was not loaded, but he did not know that. I backed away from him,

threatening to pull the trigger if he laid hand on me. The crowd began to take my part, and to hoot and jeer the provost marshal. "Hurrah for the soldier!" they cried. "Down with the provost marshal!" "Shoot him, soldier, shoot him!" "Who arrested poor Tommy Jingles?" "Davy McGregor, the black-hearted provost." "Hurrah for the boy in blue!"

So they kept it up, getting in his way and pushing and shoving him about. Then they became rough, and as I backed up the steps to the platform, they were stepping on his toes, pulling his coat-tails and twisting him about like a football. The conductor gave the signal, and with a last cheer from the crowd, the train pulled out for Quincy. There I met my recruits later in the day. And when I brought my sturdy lads into the regiment and told all about it, the colonel said, "Well done, Simon, and at this rate I think you have well earned a second leave of absence."