

WHEN BOYS WERE MEN

By JOHN HABBERTON,
Author of "Helen's Babies," "George Washington," Etc.

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(CONTINUED.)

I, too, was mystified and looked inquiringly at Brainard, who in turn looked pale and as if a heavy load of guilt was on his conscience.



Then came a deafening report.

"Colonel," said he, saluting, "I think I can explain it. I—some of the men brought in unexploded shells after the siege as mementos, and they were too big to carry away and were carelessly left in the houses, and the fire has reached them and made them hot, and"—

"Thunder!" roared the colonel, turning almost black with anger. "Bugler, blow 'forward!'"

Again the column moved. Brainard and I had been glad we were of the rear guard, for we had planned to be together, if only for a moment, the last men to leave the post. Now, we almost wished we might never leave it, for the colonel's anger boded no good to the men who were to blame for the false alarm, and it would be easy for the colonel to learn who the men were.

CHAPTER XIX.

BETTER THAN WE HAD EXPECTED.

OUR destination, which we soon reached, was the Union line on the Peninsula, on the road by which McClellan had started in 1862 for Richmond, and we were cheered by quite a lot of letters from home. It appeared that the evacuation had been ordered for an earlier date, so mail matter for our regiment had not been forwarded.

No sooner had I opened one of my letters than I began to be mystified, for the writer, my mother, was praising me extravagantly for something gallant which she assumed I had done. I read rapidly, but only to be further mystified. A letter from my father was equally confusing. It informed me that the whole town was ringing with praises of me and that our district's member of the state senate had called to hear the story and declared that all the district as well as Summerton was talking of me and was proud of me.

I called Brainard to my assistance, but he was reading a letter from my cousin May and was utterly unresponsive, so I opened other envelopes, only to find congratulations from old school-mates and even from some of the solid men of the village. What could it mean? Evidently some other John Frost in the cavalry service had done something in particular, and my family and fellow townsmen, like villagers in general, had not thought that there might be two men of the same name.

Little by little I learned from the letters that the deed of which I was

supposed to be the hero was a midnight ride alone into a country swarming with the enemy. I had made no such ride unless it was on the night I was scared back to camp by the rattling trace chains of the artillery horses that Brainard afterward discovered. I had not recovered from my mortification at my failure that night, so of course it could not be for that affair that all Summerton and our senatorial district were praising me.

Slowly it occurred to me that some one of our Summerton troopers had heard of Brainard's successful ride of the same night and had known that I started to make the trip. He had got Brainard and me mixed in his mind, and so I was being glorified for work at which I had shamefully failed, and the real hero of the affair was being defrauded of his right.

"Charley!" I groaned. He was looking idiotically happy when I spoke, but said afterward that my face alarmed him. I quickly told him of the contents of my letters and of the only possible explanation.

"Is that all?" asked Brainard when I had concluded. "Do feel easy about it, for I'm not a bit jealous." Then he fell to rereading his letter from my cousin May, but I exclaimed:

"Stop being a fool! Listen to me! You know perfectly well that I'm not going to sail under false colors. The story will get pretty soon to the other Summerton men of our company, and they'll chaff me most unmercifully. I must find the man who wrote the yarn home, and you must help me, and we must make him correct the blunder before the story gets back here."

For the first time in my acquaintance with him Brainard looked irresolute. Still worse, he looked sheepish. Then he said:

"I'm afraid I'm the guilty man."

"You?"

"Yes. Don't be angry, Jack, when I explain. Of course I didn't suppose that your cousin May"—

"What has May to do with it?"

"Nothing. That is, she isn't in any way to blame. Say, old chap, I suppose you'll think me a fool, but—you can't understand. I'm not so modest that I couldn't see that my ride with dispatches that night was quite creditable to me, and I did wish your cousin May could know of it and that I might know how she regarded it. I began to write her about it, but my pen simply wouldn't work. Somehow I can't blow my own trumpet. Suddenly it occurred to me that you'd gone through all that I had—the sense of danger, the loneliness, the expectation of running into a camp of Johnnies or at least of being fired upon at short range. So I wrote up your ride just as I knew you felt while making it, and I didn't leave out a single heart quake."

"You infernal, blessed hypocrite! Did you make me deliver the dispatch? I never imagined you could lie, even for the sake of telling a good story. I"—

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Dec. 26—d51

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"I didn't lie. I said that despite the scares the dispatches finally reached their destination. And, oh, Jack, the letter she's written in reply! I'm taking all the praise to myself, every bit of it, but you may read it."

"Read it? I'll send back a denial by the first mail, and if ever again you trust a big hearted, excitable girl with any story that you don't want known by the whole world I'll dump you into a lunatic asylum for your own protection and for mine. Can't you see what an awful position you've put me in? I shall never dare face the boys again unless you explain to all of them, and, of course, you can't do that. I almost wish I could be shot or made a prisoner. Besides"—

"Heard the news, boys?" asked Cloyne, stopping a moment in front of our tent. "Hamilton has been promoted—a big jump, too, for he's made

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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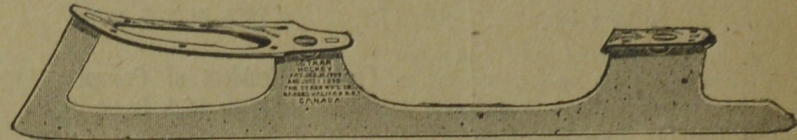
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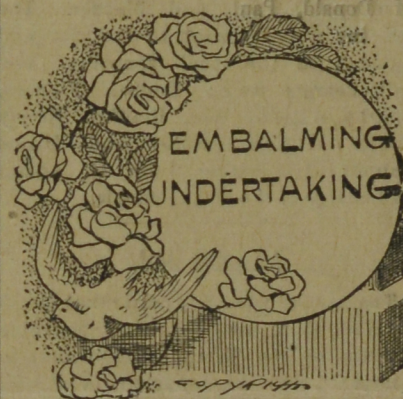
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