

After the Battle

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The falling dusk quenched the fury of the battle. The cannon glimmered but feebly on the dim horizon like the sputter of a dying fire. The shouts of combatants were unheard, and Dave Joyce concluded that the fighting was over for that day at least. In his soul he was glad of it.

„Pardner,“ he said to the wounded man, „the battle has passed on an' left us here like a canoe stuck on a sand bank. I think the fightin' is over, but if it ain't we're out of it anyhow, an' I don't know any law why we shouldn't make ourselves as comfortable as things will allow.“

„If there's anythin' done,“ said the wounded man, „you'll have to do it, for I can't walk, an' I can't move, except when there's a bush for me to grab hold of and pull myself along by.“

„That’s mighty bad,“ said Joyce, sympathetically. „Where did you say that bullet took you?“

„I got it in my right leg here,“ the other replied, „an’ I think it broke the bone. Leastways the leg ain’t any more use to me than if it was dead, though it hurts like tarnation sometimes. I guess it’ll be weeks before I walk again.“

„Maybe I could do somethin’ for you,“ said Joyce, „if there was a little more light. I guess I’ll take a look, anyhow. I haven’t been two years in the army not to know anythin’ about bullet wounds.“

He bent down and with his pocket-knife cut away a patch of the faded blue cloth from the wounded man’s leg.

„I guess I’d better not fool with that,“ he said, looking critically at the wound. „The bullet’s gone all the way through, but the blood’s clotted up so thick over the places that the bleedin’ has stopped. You won’t die if you don’t move too much an’ start that wound to bleedin’ again.“

„That’s consolin’,“ said the wounded man; „but, since I can’t move, I don’t know what’s to become of me but to lay here on the field an’ die anyway.“

„Don’t you fret,“ said Joyce, cheerfully. „I’ll take care of you. You’re Fed. and I’m Confed., but you’re hurt an’ I ain’t, an’ if the case was the other way I’d expect you to do as much for me. Besides, I’ve lost my regiment in the shuffle, and the chances are if I tried to find it again to-night I’d run right into the middle of the Yankee army, and that would mean Camp Chase for your humble servant, which is a bunk he ain’t covetin’ very bad just now. So I guess it’ll be the safe as well as the right thing for me to do to stick by you. Jerusalem! listen to that! Just hear them crickets chirpin’, will you!“

There was a blaze of light in the west, followed by a crash which seemed to roll around the horizon and set all the trees of the forest to trembling. When the echoes were lost beyond the hills the silence became heavy and portentous. The night was hot and sticky, and the powdery vapor that still hung over the field crept into Joyce’s throat and made him cough for breath.

„Thunderation!“ he said at length, still looking in the direction in which the light had blazed up. „I guess at least a dozen of the big cannon must have been fired at once then. Can’t some fellows get enough fightin’ in the daytime, without pluggin’ away in the night-time too? Now I come of fightin’ stock myself—I’m from Kentucky—but twelve hours out of the twenty-four always ‘peared to me to be enough for that sort of thing. Besides, it’s so infernal hot to-night, too.“

„It was hotter than this for me a while ago,“ said the wounded man.

„So it was, so it was,“ said Joyce, apologetically, „an’ I mustn’t forget you, either. Let ‘em fight over there if they want to, an’ if they’re big enough fools to spile a night that way when they might be restin’. What you need just now is water. I think there’s a spring runnin’ out of the side of that hill there. If you’ll listen you’ll hear it tricklin’ away, so cool and refreshin’ like. I guess it was tricklin’ that same way, just as calm an’ peaceful as Sunday mornin’, while the battle was goin’ on round here. Don’t you feel as if a little water would help you mightily, pardner?“

„’Twould so,“ said the wounded man. „I’m burnin’ up inside, an’ if you’d get me a big drink of it I’d think you were mighty nigh good enough to be one of the twelve apostles.“

„It’s easy enough for me to do it,“ said Joyce. „I’ll be back in a minute.“

He took off his big slouch hat and walked toward the source of the trickling sound. From beneath an overhanging rock in the side of the hill near by a tiny stream of water flowed. After a fall of five feet it plunged into a little basin which it had hallowed out for itself in the rock, and formed a deep and cool little pool. Around the edge of the pool the tender green grass grew. The overflow from it wandered away in a little rill through the woods.

„Thunder, but ain't this purty?“ exclaimed Joyce, forgetting that the wounded man was out of hearing. „It's just like our springhouse back in old Kentuck. I've put out butter-crocks an' milk-buckets a hundred times to cool in our pool when I was a boy. Wish I had some of them things now!“

The stirring of peaceful memories caused Joyce to linger a little, in forgetfulness of the wounded man. It was cool in the shadow of the hill, and the gay little stream tinkled merrily in his ears. He would have liked to remain there, but he pulled himself together with an impatient jerk, filled the crown of his hat with the limpid water, and started back to the relief of the wounded man.

He followed the channel of the stream for a little way, and as he turned to step across it he noticed the increasing depth of its waters.

„It's dammed up,“ he muttered. „I wonder what's done that.“

Then he started back shuddering and spilled half the water from his hat, for he had almost stepped on the body of a man that had fallen across the channel of the poor little rivulet, checking the flow of its waters and deepening the stream.

The body lay face downward, and Joyce could not see the wound that had caused death. But as he stooped down he saw again the broad red flash in the west, and heard the heavy crash of the cannon.

„Will them cannon always be hungry?“ he muttered. „But I guess I must give this poor little stream which ain't done no harm to anybody the right of way again.“

He stooped and pulled the body to one side. With a thankful rush and gurgle the waters of the recent pool sped on in their natural channel, and Joyce returned to the fountain-head to fill his hat again.

He found the wounded man waiting with patience.

„I was gone longer than I ought to have been. Did you think I had left you, pardner?“ asked Joyce.

„No,“ said the man. „I didn't believe you'd play that kind of a trick on me.“

„An' so I haven't,“ said Joyce, „an' for your faith in me I've brought you a hatful of the nicest an' freshest an' coolest water you ever put your lips to in all your born days. Raise your head up, there, an' drink.“

The wounded man drank and drank, and then when the hat was emptied he laid his head back in the grass and sighed as if he were in heaven.

„I must say that you 'pear to like water, pardner,“ said Joyce.

„Like it?“ said the wounded man. „Wait till you've been wounded, an' then you'll know what it is to want water. Why, till you brought it I felt as if my inside was full of hot coals an' I'd burn all up if I didn't get something mighty quick to put the fire out.“

„Then I reckon I've stopped a whole conflagration,“ said Joyce, „an' with mighty little trouble to myself, too. But I don't wonder that you get thirsty on a night like this. Thunderation, but ain't it clammy!“

He sat down on a fallen tree and drew his coat-sleeve across his brow. Then he held up the sleeve: it was wet with sweat. There was no wind. The night had brought no coolness. The thick and heavy atmosphere hung close to the earth and coiled around and embraced everything. Through it came the faint gunpowdery vapor that crept into the throats and nostrils of the two men.

„I wish I was at home sleepin' on the hall floor,“ said Joyce. „I'll bet it would be cool there.“

The wounded man made no answer, but turned his face up to the sky and drew in great mouthfuls of the warm air.

„Them tarnation fools over yonder 'pear to have their dander up yet,“ said Joyce, pointing to the west, where the alternate flashing and rumbling showed that the battle still lingered. „I thought the battle was over long ago, but I guess it ain't. I've knowed some all-fired fools in my time, but the fellows that would keep on fightin' on a hot night like this must be the all-firedest.“

Then the two lay quite still for a while, watching the uneasy rising and falling of the night battle. Had they not known so much of war, they might have persuaded themselves that the flashes they saw were flashes of heat-lightning and the rumbling but the rumbling of summer thunder. But they knew better. They knew it was men and not the elements that fought.

„It's mighty curious,“ said Joyce, „how the sand's all gone out of me for the time. To-day I felt as if I could whip the whole Yankee army all by myself. To-night I don't want to fight anythin'. I'm as peaceful in temper as a little lamb friskin' about in our old field at home. I hope that there fightin' won't come our way; at least not to-night. How are you feelin', pardner?“

„Pretty well for a wounded man,“ replied the other; „but I'd like to have some more water.“

„Then I'm the man to get it for you,“ said Joyce, springing up. „An' I'm goin' to see if I can't get somethin' to eat, too, for my innards are cryin' cupboard mighty loud. There's dead men layin' aroun' here, an' there may be somethin' in their haversacks. I hate to rob the dead, but if they've got grub we need it more'n they do.“

He returned with another hatful of water, which the wounded man drank eagerly, gratefully. Then he went back and searched in the grass and bushes for the fallen. Presently he came in great glee, and triumphantly held up two haversacks.

„Luck, pardner!“ he exclaimed. „Great luck! Bully luck! One of these I got off a dead Fed. and t'other off a dead Confed., and both must have been boss foragers, for in one haversack there's a roast chicken an' in t'other there's half a b'iled ham, an' in both there's plenty of bread. I haven't had such luck before in six months. You're a Yank, pardner, and a Northerner, an' maybe you don't know much about the vanities of roast chicken an' cold b'iled ham. But it's time you did know. I've come from the field at home when I'd been plowin' all day, an' my appetite was as sharp as a razor an' as big as our barn. I'd put up old Pete, our black mule that I'd been plowin' with, an' feed him; then I'd go to the house an' kinder loosen my waist-ban', an' mother would say to me, 'Come in the kitchen, Dave; your supper's ready for you,' Say, pardner, you ought to see me then. There'd be a pitcher of cold buttermilk from the spring-house, and one dish of roast chicken, an' another of

cold ham, an' all for me, too. An' say, pardner, I can taste that ham now. When you eat one piece you want another, an' then another, an' you keep on till there ain't any left on the dish, an' then you lean back in your chair an' wish that when you come to die you'd feel as happy as you do then. Pardner, I wish them times was back again."

"I wish so too," said the wounded man.

"We can't have 'em back, at least not now," said Joyce, cheerily, "but we can make believe, an' it'll be mighty good make-believe, too, for we've got the ham an' the chicken, an' we can get cold water to take the place of cold milk. I guess you can use your arms all right; so you can spread this ham an' chicken out on the grass, an' I'll see if I can't find a canteen to keep the water in. Say pardner, we'll have a banquet, you an' me, that's what we'll have."

The stalwart young fellow, full of boyish delight at the idea that the thought of home had suggested to him, swung off in search of the canteen. He found not one alone, but two. Then he returned clanking them together to indicate his success. As he came up he called out, in his hearty voice—

"Pardner, is the supper-table ready? Have you got the knives an' forks? You needn't min' about the napkins. I guess we can get along without 'em just this once."

"All ready," said the wounded man; "an' I guess I can keep you company at this ham an' chicken an' bread, for I'm gettin' a mighty sharp edge on my appetite too."

"So much the better," said Joyce. "There's plenty for both, an' it wouldn't be good manners for me to eat by myself."

He sat down on the grass in front of the improvised repast, and placed one canteen beside the wounded man and the other beside himself.

"Now, pardner," he said, "we'll drink to each other's health, an' then we'll charge the ham an' chicken with more vim than either of us ever charged a breastwork."

They drank from the canteens; and then they made onslaught upon the provisions. Joyce ate for a while in deep and silent content, forgetting the heat and the battle which still lowered in the west. But presently, when his appetite was dulled, he remembered the cannonade.

"There they go again!" he said. "Boom! Boom! Boom! Won't them fellows ever get enough? I thought I was hungry, but the cannon over there 'pear to be hungrier. I suppose there ain't men enough in all this country to stop up their iron throats. But bang away! They don't bother us, do they, pardner? They can't spile this supper, for all their boomin' an' flashin'."

The wounded man bowed assent and took another piece of the ham.

Joyce leaned back on the grass, held up a chicken leg in his hand, and looked contemplatively at it.

"Ain't it funny, pardner," he said, "that you, a Tommy Yank, an' me, a Johnny Reb, are sittin' here, eatin' grub together, as friendly as two brothers, when we ought to be killin' each other? I don't know what Jeff Davis an' old Abe Lincoln will say about it when they hear of the way you an' me are doin'."

The wounded man laughed.

"You can say that I was your prisoner," he said, "when they summon you before the court-martial. An' so I am, if you choose to make me. I can't resist."

„I’m thinkin’ more about gettin’ back safe to our army than makin’ prisoners,“ said Joyce, as he flung the chicken bone, now bare, into the bushes.

„That may be hard to do,“ said the wounded man; „for neither you nor me can tell which way the armies will go. Listen to that boomin’! Wasn’t it louder than before? That fightin’ must be movin’ round nearer to us.“

„Let it move,“ said Joyce. „I tell you I’ve had enough of fightin’ for one day. That battle can take care of itself. I won’t let it bother me. I don’t want to shoot anybody.“

„Is that the way you feel when you go into battle?“ asked the wounded man.

„I can’t say exactly,“ replied Joyce. „Of course when I go out in a charge with my regiment I want to beat the other fellows, but I don’t hate ‘em, no, not a bit. I’ve got nothin’ against the Yanks. I’ve knowed some of ‘em that was mighty good fellows. There ain’t any of ‘em that I want to kill. No, I’ll take that back; there is one, just one, a bloody villain that I’d like to draw a bead on an’ send a bullet through his skulkin’ body.“

„Who is that?“ asked the wounded man; „an’ why do you make an exception of him?“

Joyce remained silent for a moment or two and drew a long blade of grass restlessly through his fingers.

„It’s not a pleasant story,“ he said at last, „an’ it hurts me now to tell it, but I made you ask the question, an’ I guess I might as well tell you, ‘cause I feel friendly toward you, pardner, bein’ as we are together in distress, like two Robinson Crusoes, so to speak.“

The wounded man settled himself in the grass like one who is going to listen comfortably to a story.

„It’s just a yarn of the Kentuck hills,“ said Joyce, „an’ a bad enough one, too. We’re a good sort of people up there, but we’re hot-blooded, an’ when we get into trouble, as we sometimes do, kinfolks stan’ together. I guess you’re from Maine, or York State, or somewhere away up North, an’ you can’t understand us. But it’s just as I say. Sometimes two men up in our hills fight, an’ one kills the other. Then the dead man’s brothers, an’ sons if he’s got any old enough, an’ cousins, an’ so on, take up their guns an’ go huntin’ for the man that killed him. An’ the livin’ man’s brothers an’ sons an’ cousins an’ so on take up their guns an come out to help him. An’ there you’ve got your feud, an’ there’s no tellin’ how many years it’ll run on, an’ how many people will get killed in it.—Thunderation, but wasn’t them cannon loud that time! The battle is movin’ round toward us sure!“

Joyce listened a moment, but heard nothing more except the echoes.

„Our family got into one of them feuds,“ he said. „It was the Joyces and the Ryders. I’m Dave Joyce, the son of Henry Joyce. I don’t remember how the feud started; about nothin’ much, I guess; but it was a red-hot one, I can tell you, pardner. It was fought fair for a long time, but at last Bill Ryder shot father from ambush and killed him. Father hadn’t had much to do with the feud, either; he didn’t like that sort of thing—didn’t think it was right. I said right then that if I ever found the chance when I got big enough I’d kill Bill Ryder.“

„Did you get the chance?“ asked the wounded man.

„No,“ replied Joyce. „Country got too hot for Ryder, and he went away. He came back after a while, an’ I was big enough to go gunnin’ for him then, but the war

broke out, an' off he went into the Union army before I could get a chance to draw a bead on him. I ain't heard of him since. Maybe he's been killed in battle an' his bones are bleachin' somewhere in the woods."

"Most likely," said the wounded man.

"There's no tellin'," said Joyce. "Still, some day when we're comin' up against the Yanks face to face I may see him before me, an' then I'll hold my gun steady an' shoot straight at him, instead of whoopin' like mad an' firin' lickety-split into the crowd, aimin' at nothin', as I generally do."

"It's a sad story, very sad for you," said the wounded man.

"Yes," said Joyce. "You don't have such things as feuds up North, do you?"

"No," replied the other, "an' we're well off without 'em. Hark, there's the cannon again!"

"Yes, an' they keep creepin' round toward us with their infernal racket," said Joyce. "Cannon love to chaw up people an' then brag about it. But if them fellows are bent on fightin' all night I guess we'll have to give 'em room for it. What do you say to movin'? I've eat all I want, an' I guess you have too, an' we can take what's left with us."

"I don't know," said the wounded man. "My leg's painin' me a good deal, an' the grass is soft an' long here where I'm layin'. It makes a good bed, an' maybe I'd better stay where I am."

"I think not," said Joyce, decidedly. "That night fight's still swingin' down on us, an' if we stay too long them cannon'll feed on us too. We'd better move, pardner. Let me take a look at your wound. It's gettin' lighter, an' I can see better now. The moon's up, an' she's shinin' for all she's worth through them trees. Besides, them cannon-flashes help. Raise up your head, pardner, an' we'll take a look at your wound together."

"I don't think you can do any good," said the wounded man. "It would be better not to disturb it."

"But we must be movin', pardner," said Joyce, a little impatiently. "See, the fight's warmin' up, an' it's still creepin' down on us. Seems to me I can almost hear the tramp of the men an' the rollin' of the cannon-wheels. Jerusalem! what a blaze that was! I say, it's time for us to be goin'. If we stay here we're likely to be ground to death under the cannon-wheels, if we ain't shot first. Just let me get a grip under your shoulders, pardner, an' I'll take you out of this."

The cannon flamed up again, and the deep thunder filled all the night.

"Listen how them old iron throats are growlin' an' mutterin'," said Joyce; "an' they're sayin' it's time for us to be travelin'."

"I believe," said the wounded man, "that I would rather stay where I am an' take my chances. If I move I'm afraid I'll break open my wound. Besides, I think you're mistaken. It seems to me that the fight's passin' round to the right of us."

"Passin' to the right of us nothin'," said Joyce. "It's coming straight this way, with no more respect for our feelin's than if you an' me was a couple of field-mice."

The wounded man made no answer.

"Do you think, pardner," asked Joyce, slight offence showing in his voice, "that the Yanks may come this way an' pick you up an' then you won't be a prisoner? Is that your game?"

As his companion made no answer, Joyce continued—

„You don't think, pardner, that I want to hold you a prisoner, do you? an' you a wounded man, too, that I picked up on the battle-field and that I've eat and drank with? Why, that ain't my style.“

He waited for an answer and as none came he was seized with a sudden alarm.

„You ain't dead, pardner?“ he cried. „Jerusalem! what if he's died while I've been standin' here talkin' an' wastin' time!“

He bent over to take a look at the other's face, but the wounded man, with a sudden and convulsive movement, writhed away from him and struck at him with his open hand.

„Keep away!“ he cried. „Don't touch me! Don't come near me! I won't have it! I won't have it!“

„Thunderation, pardner!“ exclaimed Joyce; „what do you mean? I ain't goin' to harm you. I want to help you.“ Then he added, pityingly, „I guess he's got the fever an' gone out of his head. So I'll take him along whether he wants to go or not.“

He bent over again, seized the wounded man by the shoulders, and forcibly raised him up. At the same moment the cannonade burst out afresh and with increased violence. A blaze of light played over the face of the wounded man, revealing and magnifying every feature, every line.

Joyce uttered no exclamation, but he dropped the man as if he had been a coiling serpent in his hands, and looked at him, an expression of hate and loathing creeping over his face.

„So,“ he said, at last, „this is the way I have found you?“

The wounded man lay as he had fallen, with his face to the earth.

„No wonder,“ said Joyce, „you wanted to keep your face hid in the grass! No wonder you hide it there now!“

„Oh, Dave! Dave!“ exclaimed the man, springing to his knees with sudden energy, „don't kill me! Don't kill me, Dave!“

„Why shouldn't I kill you?“ asked Joyce, scornfully. „What reason can you give why I shouldn't do it?“

„There ain't any. There ain't any. Oh, I know there ain't any,“ cried the wounded man. „But don't do it, Dave! For Christ's sake don't do it!“

„You murderer! You sneakin', ambushin' murderer!“ said Joyce. „It's right for you to beg for your life an' then not get it! Hear them cannon! Hear how they growl, an' see the flash from their throats! They'd like to feed on you, but they won't. That sort of death is too good for the likes of you. The death for you is to be shot like a ravin' cur.“

He drew the loaded pistol from his belt and cocked it with deliberate motion.

„Dave! Dave!“ the man cried, dragging himself to Joyce's feet, „you won't do that! You can't! It would be murder, Dave, to shoot me here, me a wounded man that can't help myself!“

„You done it, an' worse,“ said Joyce. „Of all the men unburnt in hell I think the one who deserves to be there most is the man who hid in ambush and shot another in the back that had never harmed him.“

„I know it, Dave, I know it!“ cried the wounded man, grasping Joyce's feet with both hands. „It was an awful thing to do, an' I've been sorry a thousand times that I done it, but all the sorrow in the world an' everythin' else that's in the world can't undo it now.“

„That’s so,“ said Joyce, „but it don’t make any reason why the murderer ought to be kept on livin’.“

„It don’t, Dave; you’re right, I know; but I don’t want to die!“ cried the man. „I’m a coward, Dave, and I don’t want to die by myself here in the woods an’ in the dark!“

„You’ll soon have light enough,“ said Joyce, „an’ I won’t shoot you.“

He let down the hammer of his pistol and replaced the weapon in his belt.

„Oh, Dave! Dave!“ exclaimed the man, kissing Joyce’s foot. „I’m so glad you’ll let me have my life. I know I ain’t fit to live, but I want to live anyhow.“

„I said I wouldn’t shoot you,“ said Joyce, „but I never said I’d spare your life. See that blaze in the trees up there.“

A few hundred yards away the forest had burst into flame. Sparks fell upon a tree and blazed up. Long red spirals coiled themselves around the trunk and boughs until the tree became a mass of fire, and then other tongues of flame leaped forward and seized other trees. There was a steady crackling and roaring, and the wind that had sprung up drove smoke and ashes and fiery particles before it.

„That,“ said Joyce, „is the wood on fire. Them cannon that’s been makin’ so much fuss done it. I’ve seen it often in battle when the cannon have been growlin’. The fire grows an’ it grows, an’ it burns up everythin’ in its way. The army is still busy fightin’, an’ the wounded, them that’s hurt too bad to help theirselves, have to lay there on the ground an’ watch the fire comin’, an’ sure to get ‘em. By an’ by it sweeps down on ‘em, an’ they shriek an’ shriek, but that don’t do you no good, for before long the fire goes on, an’ there they are, dead an’ burnt to a coal. I tell you it’s an awful death!“

The wounded man was silent now. He had drawn himself up a little, and was watching the fire as it leaped from tree to tree and devoured them one after another.

„That fire is comin’ for us, an’ the wind is bringin’ it along fast,“ said Joyce, composedly, „but it’s easy enough for me to get out of its way. All I’ve got to do is to go up the hill, an’ the clearin’s run for a long way beyond. I can stay up there an’ watch the fire pass, an’ you’ll be down here right in its track.“

„Dave!“ cried the man, „you ain’t goin’ to let me burn to death right before your eyes?“

„That’s what I mean to do,“ said Joyce. „I don’t like to shoot a wounded man that can’t help himself, an’ I won’t do it, but I ain’t got no call to save you from another death.“

„I’d rather be shot than burned to death,“ cried the man, in a frenzy.

„It’s just the death for you,“ said Joyce.

Then the wounded man again dragged himself to the feet of Joyce.

„Don’t do it, Dave!“ he cried. „Don’t leave me here to burn to death! Oh, I tell you, Dave, I ain’t fit to die!“

„Take your hands off my feet,“ said Joyce. „I don’t want ‘em to touch me. There’s too much blood on ‘em.“

„Don’t leave me to the fire!“ continued the man. „You’ve been kind to me to-night. Help me a little more, Dave, an’ you’ll be glad you done it when you come to die yourself!“

„I must be goin’,” said Joyce, repulsing the man’s detaining hands. „It’s gettin’ hot here now, an’ that fire will soon be near enough to scorch my face. Good-by.“

„For the sake of your own soul, Dave Joyce,” cried the man, beating the ground with his hands, „don’t leave me to be burned to a coal! Think, Dave, how we eat an’ drank together tonight, like two brothers, an’ how you waited on me an’ brought the water an’ the grub. You’ll remember them things, Dave, when you come to die yourself!“

The fire increased in strength and violence. The flames ran up the trees, and whirled far above them in red coils that met and twined with each other, and then whirled triumphantly on in search of fresh fuel. A giant oak, burned through at the base and swept of all its young boughs and foliage, fell with a rending crash, a charred and shattered trunk. The flames roared, and the burning trees maintained an incessant crackling like a fire of musketry. The smoke through which the sparks of fire were sown in millions grew stifling.

„God, what a sight!“ cried Joyce.

„Dave, you won’t leave me to that?“ cried Ryder.

Joyce drew down his hat over his eyes to shield them from the smoke. Then he stooped, lifted the wounded man upon his powerful shoulders, and went on over the hill.

