

The Sharpshooter

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Whiz-z-z-z sang the Minié ball as it flattened against the rock, and spattered a fine grey, stinging powder into the face of Dick Yorke.

Yorke crouched down until his head was withdrawn from the range of the sharpshooter. Then he turned over on his side and asked Hays for another chew of tobacco.

“Tobacco is good for the nerves,” he said apologetically “and when I’m out on the skirmish line I like to have a free handed fellow like you, Hays, to borrow from.”

“If you don’t keep that bumptious Kentucky head of yours down behind the rocks you’ll be chewing a bullet instead of tobacco,” returned Hays. “It’s foolish to

take such risks. That fellow's alive across the valley over there. He'll drop you the next time. He was clipping mighty close to you then."

"So he was," said Yorke, picking up the piece of lead which had battered itself into a formless mass against the rock, and lay on the ground at his feet, where it had fallen, its mission ended; "but it's not the first bullet that's whistled next to my head without stoppin' to draw blood, an' I reckon there'll be as many more. What's the use of bein' so careful anyway. One man gets a bullet in the heart the first time he hears the enemy's gun fire; the other goes through all the toughest fights and comes out without a scratch. It's the luck of a soldier's life, my boy."

"Some people would call you a fatalist."

"I don't know much about that sort of thing," said Dick Yorke, "but I reckon I'll take my chances. But this debate is not business. Can you make out any movement over there?"

Hays looked through a cleft in the rocks and studied the opposite slope with keen eyes. Everything was so still that he could hear the chirp of a bird in a distant tree. A little white cloud of smoke that had risen when the sharpshooter fired drifted away up the valley, twisting itself into fantastic spirals and at last dissipating itself in the warm sunshine.

Illustration:

The Sharpshooter

"That pesky sharpshooter is so quick I don't dare to rise up for a good look," said Hays. "As it is, I can see nothing but the big grey rocks and the stunted cedar trees, and now and then a fleck of mist that floats along the mountain side. It looks as quiet as a summer morning at home in the country in the old times. I don't suppose the armies will do anything for a while, as they haven't had time yet to mass their troops for a big movement."

"And while they're massin' it's our business to pick off as many of their skirmishers as we can with these long barrelled rifles of ours; eh, Hays, my boy?"

"That's what we are here for, and I can't say I like this sort of business, either. What do you think of sharpshooting, anyway, Yorke?"

Yorke picked up the shapeless piece of lead and looked gravely at it as he held it in his hand. Then he dropped it on the ground and said:

"It's a bad trade, Hays! A bad trade! Hardly the right sort of way for a fellow to earn his livin'. I tell you, Hays, I don't like this kind of thing; it's too much like murder—cold-blooded, calculatin' murder."

"It's not a pleasant sort of business," said Hays, "but it's war, and when we're ordered we've got to do it. That's what you get for being a Kentuckian and a sharpshooter. When a man can pop a squirrel out of the tallest tree every time like you can, you know they're going to send him out on the skirmish line. Did you ever kill a man while doing skirmish duty, Yorke?"

"Once," said Yorke, whose face looked gray in the shadow, "and I'd like to forget it. It was last year when we were fallin' back, followed close by the enemy. They didn't dare attack us in force, but their skirmishers were mighty active, and they singed our flanks nearly every day. They got to be so troublesome that the officers sent a lot of picked sharpshooters back to scorch their faces for 'em. I was one of

the gang, and I was full of fight, too. They'd been followin' us so close and stingin' us so hard that I wanted to show 'em, Hays, that we could shoot as straight and true as they could. We went back a little till we showed ourselves to the other fellows, then we began to retreat and draw 'em on. We dropped back through a corn field which had been just out of the route of the army, and the corn was standin' in rows higher than a man's head. I was trottin' back between two of the rows, which were so tall that I was in a kind of aisle. I was goin' kind of sideways, lookin' back and watchin' for the enemy's skirmishers. Just then one of 'em came in between the corn rows at the end, behind me. He fired at me and missed. I turned, let him have it, and he dropped. All our fellows turned then, and we drove the whole crowd of 'em before us. I went back down between my corn rows just as I had come, and there lay my man as dead as a door nail. The bullet had gone right through his head. The life blood had streaked his blue uniform, and some of it had spurted on the green corn. I turned him over on his back. He was a nice lookin' young fellow. I had been a soldier more than a year then; but I tell you, Hays, I turned sick at the sight of what I'd done, though it was fair and open war, give and take. I was sorry that we'd driven those fellows back. Then I might have always thought that I'd merely wounded the man. But, Hays, I can't forget that dead face, and the blood on the blue uniform and the green corn."

In the excitement of the narrative Yorke had raised a little too high, and another Minié ball "zip-zipped" through the air, swished the wind in his face and battered itself like its predecessor against the stony side of the little hollow in which they lay.

"Must be a pretty good marksman out there, and he's watchin' us mighty close," said Yorke as he picked up the lump of lead. "That's a bad habit he's got into, disturbin' two gentlemen when they're tellin' war stories and hurtin' nobody. I think we'll save the free lead we're gettin' and see if our collection grows. We may need this lead before the war is over."

He placed the two lumps of lead side by side on a rock. "That's what you'd call misspent energy," he said, looking at the misshapen lumps.

"Yorke," asked Hays, "How did you happen to become a soldier?"

"Well, I don't know that I can explain it any more than thousands of other fellows in the army can explain how they happened to be there. The war began. Everybody was talkin' about it. You see, where I lived up in Kentucky was doubtful ground. Some were for secession, some for the Union. Families were divided. Confederate recruitin' officers came around. The band was playin', and I was young and got the fever in my blood. I didn't know much about the wrong or right of it. Didn't care much either. I was like our colonel. When they came to him to take a commission in the Southern army, he said, 'Well, boys, you'll get whipped like tarnation, but I'm of your blood, and I'm with you.' That's the way I felt about it. Soon I was in a grey uniform, followin' the stars and bars. Our family was split up like the rest. Brother Bill, he said the North was right and off he went to Louisville to join the Yankee army. Brother Tom couldn't quite make up his mind which was right, so he stayed at home, safe out of the way of the bullets. Brother Tom was always smart. So that's our history up to date. Look out there, Hays, or you'll catch it this time! Confound that sharpshooter, anyway! We must give him a dose of lead, or there'll never be any gettin' out of this hole alive."

It was Hays who had become incautious, and a third bullet smashed against the stone wall of the hollow, but did no harm. Yorke picked it up tenderly and put it on the rock by the side of the other two.

“We’ll soon have a fine lead mine here in the side of the mountain,” he said.

Then he looked to the priming of his rifle and added—“We must wing that fellow, Hays.”

“What has become of your scruples against sharpshooting, Yorke?” asked Hays with a laugh. “Do you want to have another dead face haunting you?”

“Oh, that’s all right,” exclaimed Yorke impatiently. “But we must do what we are sent to do, and that fellow is interferin’ with our work. Our own safety depends on our winging him. Besides this is not a plain shot in the open. If we bring him down he’ll fall among the rocks and trees over there. We’ll never see his face. How far would you say he is up the mountain side?”

“Full three hundred yards, I think. But the valley between us is narrow. The distance is not too great for a shot, if we can get a good view of him.”

The two men peered cautiously through the rocks at the spot where they had seen the flash of the rifle and the whiffs of smoke, and where they thought the sharpshooter lay, but they could see no sign of a human form. The great grey rocks lay heaped along the mountain side, and the scrubby cedar trees grew in the crevices. Rocks and trees together formed a covert impenetrable to the keenest eyes. Apparently they were the only human beings on either hillside. Another puff of smoke had floated upward in white rings and melted into the atmosphere.

“He has rather the better of us,” said Yorke. “He has found out exactly where we are, for he has seen us, while we can’t place him just right.”

“What do you propose to do?” asked Hays.

“I think we’ll work a trick that my old granddad, back in Kentucky, who was an Indian fighter in his young days, used to tell me about. If what he said was straight, and the old gentleman was a truthful man, it was a great scheme for bringin’ the enemy out of his hidin’ place to be a mark for you to shoot at. Now you do just as I say, for two are better than one at this trick.”

Yorke drew himself over cautiously until he lay by the side of Hays. He gave him some instructions, and then they prepared for the trapping of the sharpshooter. Yorke secured a good position, and lay with the muzzle of his rifle projecting between the rocks, where he could secure an almost instant aim at anybody who showed himself on the opposite mountain side. Then Hays placed his cap on the muzzle of his gun, and raised it to the level of the rock in front of him.

“Now steady!” said Yorke. “You don’t want to let him guess what we’re up to.”

Hays began to raise the cap with the gun barrel. Slowly the cap went up. A narrow strip of cloth showed above the rock, then a little more and a little more until the brim was in view.

There was a flash from across the valley, a little cloud of smoke, and the cap with a bullet hole through it was dashed from the gun muzzle and against the side of the hollow. A second later and Yorke’s own rifle cracked, and then, as the smoke drifted upward, he lay intently regarding the rocks and bushes on the mountain side in front of him. For a moment there was silence, save for the echo of the rifle shots reverberating far up the valley. Then Hays asked:

“What luck, Yorke?”

"None at all," replied Yorke sorrowfully. "He bit at our bait, but he was too quick for me to get back at him. I caught a glimpse of a levelled rifle, a cap and a face below it, but that was all. He fired and dropped back like a flash. I sent a bullet at random, so to speak. There's not one chance in a hundred that he's hit. But our lead mine's growin'."

He took the fourth bullet and put it on the rock in the row with the other three.

"How are we ever to get out of this place if that fellow stays over there and peppers away at us every time we show the hair of our heads?" asked Hays. "That bullet hole in my cap shows that he knows how to shoot."

"Blessed if I know," said Yorke. "I guess we'll wait. There are big movements on hand, you know. Both armies are marchin' all around here, and maybe there'll be a change in our favour."

The two men lay quite still for some time. By and by they ceased to watch for the sharpshooter and looked far up over the wide brown strath of the valley. They could dimly make out moving forms in the distance, but whether of the blue or the grey they could not tell. Just under the horizon where some trees grew their eyes caught a glint of silver.

"Looks like water. What is it?" asked Yorke.

"Chickamauga Creek, maybe," said Hays. "I don't know much about the country hereabouts, but I think the creek is off there somewheres."

"That's the wrong direction for Chickamauga, seems to me," said Yorke; "but whether it is or not, there's somethin' going on in the valley down there. There's somethin' warm ahead, Hays, sure as shootin'."

The shifting forms up the valley grew more numerous, and they no longer seemed to move about aimlessly. There was a misty veil drooping over the horizon's rim, but the watchers in the hollow in the hill could see the swarms of men gather coherence and form. Companies and regiments deployed on the slopes and levels. There were men on horses and more men afoot. Sword and bayonet tip flashed back the sunlight.

Yorke and Hays watched the movements with absorbed interest. The two armies had been virtually face to face for several days, and even the newest soldiers knew that battle was almost sure. To comparative veterans like Yorke and Hays the signs were unmistakable. They were much annoyed at their ignorance of the country and of the movements in progress.

"It's to be an attack of some kind, isn't—" began Hays.

Two rifle shots almost simultaneous, interrupted his question. Yorke was holding his smoking weapon in his hands and gazing disappointedly across the valley.

"It's that skulkin' fellow across there," he said. "I caught a glimpse of somethin' movin' over there among the rocks and bushes and I banged away at it. As soon as I raised my head to fire he popped back at me. I know he's missed, and I'm about as sure that I have, too. Poorest shootin' I've done for a long time. But our lead mine's growin' fast."

Yorke picked up a fifth flattened lump of lead and put it on the rock in the row with the other four.

"It's lucky they've got plenty of lead in the Yankee army," he said, "or that fellow would soon make a hole in their stock. I guess he thinks he'll get us yet."

“Never mind him now,” said Hays. “Lie close and watch that crowd up the valley there. If I’m not mistaken, the tune the Minié balls have been singing for us is nothing to the tune they’ll soon be singing out there for somebody. Can you make out whether they are ours or the other fellows?”

“Too far away, yet,” said Yorke. “We’re all mixed up in these valleys and mountains, and it’s not safe to be friendly with a fellow until you can see the colour of his uniform; but I know that our fellows are on that mountain over there. But, look what a crowd is gathering in the valley.”

Heavy masses of troops were now collected in the valley. There seemed to be many thousands of them, and they were drawn up like men ready for important action. Flags were waving and the sun shimmered along the edges of drawn sabres in the hands of the officers.

“I can’t make them out yet,” said Hays; “but whoever they are they are in strong force. Perhaps they are to begin the battle we’ve been expectin’ for nearly a week now.”

“It’s the Yankees,” said Yorke, who had the keener eye. “I can see the blue of the uniforms and the stars in their flags. I wonder what’s up now. You and I are in the hole sure enough, Hays, for as long as that sharpshooter over there sticks to us we’ve got to watch and see what’s goin’ to be done whether we want to or not.”

The troops began to move directly towards a steep mountain slope that lay in front of them, and as that action brought them nearer to Yorke and Hays they perceived that the force was larger and stronger than they had at first supposed. Clearly it was a movement of importance. The troops quickened their step. They were at a trot now, and they spread far over the valley.

“They are going to attack our army’s position on the mountain!” exclaimed Hays.

“I don’t think it. They would hardly dare.”

“Look and see.”

The troops advanced on a run towards the base of the mountain, officers waving their swords and apparently cheering them on, though Yorke and Hays were too far away to hear the sound of voices. But there was all the many-coloured medley of an army in motion, columns of men appearing on the hillocks and then sinking out of sight soon to appear again, while the yellow shafts of sunlight falling across swords and bayonets flung brilliant streaks over the advancing army.

Soon the columns were at the base of the mountain and began to move up the slope. Then Yorke and Hays expected to hear the artillery of the defenders, but there came no sound from the mountain.

“What can our men up there be doing?” exclaimed Hays.

A moment after he spoke there was a heavy crash of artillery on the summit and side of the mountain, and gusts of flame shot from the rocks. The deep boom of the cannon echoed far off through the hills, and a cloud of smoke floated over the valley. The lines of the assailing troops were shattered and those in front were hurled back on the others, where front ranks and rear ranks momentarily remained, huddled together. Yorke and Hays could see the ruts torn through the living mass.

“More than one good man has got his good-bye out there,” said Yorke, philosophically. “Their lines are broken and they appear to falter. I guess they’ve got enough, Hays! It was a rash charge!”

"The fun has just begun! Look, they are going on!" exclaimed Hays.

The ranks of the charging army closed up and rushed on with waving flags, leaving the ground behind them sprinkled with human forms. Many stumbled and fell on the slope, but dragged themselves up and climbed on. Far up the mountain side countless other forms were now seen outlined against the clear sky, and the flash of the artillery was incessant. The mountain was turned into a blazing volcano, and the cloud of smoke that floated up and hovered over the valley grew denser and darker. The assailants, many thousands of them, despite the fallen, who were becoming very numerous now, still swarmed up the slope in the face of that fire that scorched and burnt like the infernal flames. The flags were waving, and officers flourished their sabres. Sometimes a column was hurled back for a moment, but the men locked shoulders and came on again.

"Our fellows are firin' too high," said Yorke in a judicial tone. "If they'd depress the guns more they'd soon stop that rush. Nothin' easier."

"But they won't stop it! Look how those fellows climb and rush up. What a splendid sight!"

"Hays," said Yorke, "don't you know that you are applaudin' the enemy? You ought to be ashamed of yourself, admirin' the Yankees in that manner!"

"You don't mean that, Yorke, I know," said Hays. "Why shouldn't I admire a bold deed, whoever does it!"

"It's a sight worth seein'," said Yorke, making no direct reply. "That's the only kind of fightin' for a man to do with your crowd around you, and the other fellows' crowd before you, and both bangin' away like man! Not this infernal takin' aim in cold blood from ambush! I wish we were there, Hays, old fellow!"

Yorke nervously fingered his gun. He had the light of battle in his eyes.

"If I don't make a mistake," he resumed, "we'll miss the best part of it. See how the clouds are gatherin' around the upper half of the mountain."

Heavy mists were coming from somewhere out of the beyond and wrapping the crest of the mountain in their shadow. The figures of the defenders grew indistinct. Those on the top of the mountain soon disappeared, and those on the slopes followed. All were covered by the gathering clouds. The incessant spouting of flame from this canopy and the heavy crash of the artillery showed that they were still active. Below the broken but persistent ranks of the assailants were yet visible and climbing upward.

The heavy pall of smoke, darker and more threatening than the rising mists, lowered over the valley. The edges of the two clouds, one of black and the other of white, met and mingled, but the activity of the cannon bathed the lower half of the mountain in a lurid light. Yorke and Hays saw everything through a blood red mist. The figures of the distant men, shapeless and indistinct, were like splotches of red on the horizon. They formed a swaying and fighting, but still ascending mass, giving a yard sometimes but soon regaining it. The drifting smoke and cloud now and then obscured the brilliant banners and floating aside again disclosed them still held aloft.

Through the heavy thud, thud of the artillery a new sound was heard, not so deep but steadier.

"The small arms are at work! The rifles are talkin' now!" cried Yorke, who, eager of eye, and colour heightened, was listening intently. "Don't you hear them, Hays?"

Listen to that infernal cracklin' like the sound of a forest on fire! There's a storm of lead on that mountain slope now! Can they live before it? I tell you, Hays, I'm not much afraid of the artillery. It roars and it pounds, but there's too much bark for the bite. But when the rifle balls begin to sing their little song in your ears, look out! The old man with the scythe is abroad. I remember when I heard it at Shiloh for the first time. It was like a million bees swarmin' around my ears, and nights and nights after when I lay down under the trees to sleep I heard that infernal singin' and hiss'n' around me!"

Hayes made no reply. He was engrossed in the spectacle.

The clouds drooped lower and swallowed up more and more of the mountain. Now only the rear ranks of the assailants were visible. Now these, too, had passed out of sight, the clouds swallowing up them all.

Yorke and Hays still gazed towards the invisible battlefield. It was now a huge cone of mist which enwrapped all the combatants. But out of this cone came flashes of flame, and the grinding and crashing of the cannon and rifles still showed to the watchers how fierce was the activity within the crater of that cloud.

The two men lay silent for some time while the gusts of flame spouted from the cloud-clothed mountain. Absorbed in the terrific spectacle they forgot all else for a while. The clouds grew thicker, but the flames spirited from them as rapidly and as vividly as ever.

Presently Hays pulled Yorke's arm and whispered:

"Look, across the valley, Yorke!"

"What is it?" asked Yorke without turning his eyes from the flaming mountain. "Our sharpshooter! The battle has made him forget us!"

Yorke looked and saw a man's head projecting, above some rocks. Only the side of the face was visible, and that but dimly, for some of the smoke from the conflict was now drifting up the valley where the men lay. Evidently the sharpshooter was as much engrossed with the battle in the clouds as Yorke and Hays had been. He was sitting upright and stiff, and staring at the mountain, apparently forgetful that his head was exposed.

Hays touched Yorke on the arms and whispered in his ear:

"You don't forget, Yorke!"

"Forget what?"

"Remember that we must get out of this hole."

"Well, I know that!"

"We can't unless that sharpshooter over there is out of the way. He will remember soon that we are here."

Yorke was silent for a few moments. He picked up his rifle and put it down again. Then he said:

"It is no more my duty, Hays, than it is yours. You do it."

"You are the better shot. I might miss him, and there would not be another chance. You must do it. It's sharpshooter against sharpshooter."

Yorke picked up his rifle, rested it on a rock, and took aim with slowness and great care at the sharpshooter. Hays waited for the report of the weapon, but Yorke, without firing, took the gun down from the rock, making an impatient gesture as he did so.

"What's the matter, Yorke?" asked Hays in surprise.

“There’s somethin’ wrong with the sights of the gun,” said Yorke, turning away his face.

He fumbled a moment or two with the weapon. The head of the sharpshooter was still outlined against the mountain side as he watched the cone of cloud in which the battle flamed and seethed.

“You still have the chance, Yorke,” said Hays.

Yorke lifted his gun again, and again took slow and careful aim. The hammer was raised, and Hays looked across at the sharpshooter to see him drop when Yorke pulled the trigger.

Yorke suddenly pulled the hammer down with his hand, and threw the gun upon the ground, exclaiming—

“I can’t, do it, Hays! I can’t do it! I can’t kill a man like that! It’s too much like murder! When I looked down the sights of my rifle I did not see his face, Hays, but the face of that dead man lyin’ between the corn-rows—the face of the man I killed! I tell you, I can’t do it, Hays, even if we never get out of this hole alive!”

“At any rate your chance is gone,” said Hays, “for the man is hidden again, and I suppose he is watching us with that rifle of his in his hand ready for use. The problem now is what is going to become of us?”

Yorke said nothing, but turned his attention again to the battle. The clouds had become darker and the flashes of flame were growing less numerous. The noise of the cannon and the rifles began to sink.

“That affair in the clouds there is settled, I think,” said Yorke, “for the men who have gone up the mountain have not come down. I think we shall see somethin’ come out of those clouds soon.”

They were not compelled to wait long. Numerous figures shot out of the mist and began to descend the neck of the mountain. There were large bodies of men. Some were dragging artillery and others were helping ammunition waggons down the steep roads. They showed some evidence of haste, though the semblance of order was still preserved.

“They are our fellows,” said Yorke, “and we’ve lost. We’ve been driven off the mountain, but it’s likely to do a good turn to you and me. The boys are retreatin’ our way. Our sharpshooter will have to clear out or become a prisoner. He’s reminded us pretty often that he’s there, hasn’t he, Hays?”

Yorke looked at the five lumps of lead lying there in a row on the rock. Then he resumed:

“I would like to have a crack at that fellow out in the open, when the battle was rollin’ around us. But I couldn’t pot him as I would shoot a feedin’ deer from ambush.”

The retreating army was now coming up the valley and along the mountain sides, and the columns were near enough for Yorke and Hays to hear the clanking of the artillery and the shouting of the officers.

“What’s the matter with our sharpshooter?” exclaimed Yorke. “It’s time for him to make a run for it.”

“Why, don’t you see he’s trapped?” said Hays. “He’s afraid if he breaks from his cover that he’ll catch one of our bullets. Wonder what he’ll do?”

The retreating columns drew nearer. The front lines were within gunshot. The sharpshooter sprang from the rocks, fired a random bullet that hit nothing, at an approaching column and darted higher up the mountain.

“Fire, Yorke! Fire!” exclaimed Hays. “You’ve got a fair mark now. Wing him, or he’ll escape over the mountain!”

“Not I,” said Yorke. “I’ve spared his life once and I reckon I can do it again.”

But the sharpshooter was not to escape. A body of men appeared in front of him. He was cut off. Throwing down his gun he held up his hand as a token of surrender.

“We’ll go across and see him,” said Yorke, “we’ve got to join the retreatin’ army. Besides, I’d like to compliment him on the way he watched and waited for us, and plunked away every time he saw a head.”

The two men scrambled down into the valley and across it and quickly overtook the columns.

“A skirmisher was captured up here. Do you know where he is?” asked Yorke of a soldier.

The soldier pointed ahead.

Yorke and Hays reached the first column, and Yorke asked a captain whom he knew if he could see the prisoner.

“There he is marching between two of our boys,” said the captain. “A likely enough looking fellow, too. I guess we’ll hold him to trade for some of those we left back yonder on the mountain top in the enemy’s hands.”

Yorke walked round until he was in front of the prisoner and could see him well.

The sharpshooter looked up when Yorke appeared before him. The two gazed at each other. Yorke trembled for a moment, and turned very pale. Then he recovered himself and his face became impassive again. He walked up to the man, extended his hand, and said:

“I’m glad to see you, brother Bill. How are you?”

