

# WHEN BOYS WERE MEN

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

Then that grayish brown man fired. It is astonishing how much damage can be done by the buckshot which can be put into an old horse pistol. I afterward learned that all the horses in the first set of fours, as well as two of the men were killed. The man who was seriously injured, by that grayish brown man's double shot.

In half a minute some of our men were on the bridge, but so were some of the enemy. Ten seconds later the bridge was jammed with horsemen.

"Fire fast! Fire fast!" screamed our major.

The major meant well, but how much firing could be done on a bridge only wide enough for about four men abreast after the men in front had emptied their revolvers? How were any but the surest shots and the best marksmen to hit their marks, when their comrades, who already were using their revolvers as hammers or hitting the Johnnies with bare fists? There was little firing on the other side, for nearly all the Confederates carried shotguns and threw their shot, which they could not reload in haste, so after firing once they used their guns as lances, punching our men in breast or face and being horribly scared in return.

Meanwhile each horse was looking out for No. 1. The horse is a wedge shaped animal, and each of our four footed wedges pushed his head and shoulders between those of horses in front of him. This gave the animals absolute rest as well as safety while their riders were in the thick of it.

The major turned to the rear, first cautioning his captains to maintain the pressure, and soon we heard him say:

"Two rear companies dismount! Third company deploy on the right; fourth on the left. Prepare their rear carbines as long as there's a man of them in the saddle! Aim carefully! Be careful not to hit our own men!"

This promised sickening slaughter, for our men with their carbines could get within 100 yards of the most distant Johnny and do a great deal of harm before the enemy could dismount and fire more than a single shot. Probably the enemy would follow our example as soon as they saw what we were up to, if they were not already after we had given them a volley or two. This is not a joke. Our Sharp carbines were as true as sporting rifles. For several months we had been taught, when fighting dismounted with carbines or revolvers, to aim as true as possible, and our practice shooting showed that anywhere within point blank range we could shoot well.

At the major's orders three men of every set of fours in the last two companies dismounted and handed to trees, logs and fences near the creek.

"Now, men," said the major to us, "as soon as they begin to fire and clear away the rear you press upon the advance with all your might. If we drive them off the bridge, divide, right and left, as soon as you get across and ride down their flanks, and we'll capture every mother's son of them who's alive."

This seemed practicable, and I hoped it might begin at once. Had there been no other reason, it would have been pleasant to take a lot of prisoners into camp than to bury an equal number of Confederate dead, for burial party duty stays in one's mind.

"Why don't those skirmishers begin firing?" shouted the major, though it was not easy to hear him above the horrid din on the bridge.

"Crack!" went one of our carbines. I reined my horse toward the edge of the road to see when the enemy's rear should become crack enough for the pressure to begin.

"Crack, crack, crack!" sounded in rapid succession, but the sounds were not like the report of revolver or carbine. Something new was occurring on the bridge, for the men, both gray and blue, seemed to press to one side. A second or two later that entire bridge, containing 40 or 50 Union troops, went down with a crash and a splash into the creek below.

A great deal of the unexpected again, and a great deal of it, too, so I looked anxiously at the major to see what he was going to do about it. He didn't seem a bit puzzled. On the contrary, the bridge had scarcely fallen when he roared:

"Skirmishers cover the bridge! Move to the other side of the bridge! Don't let a rebel get away! Second company dismount; lie down along the edge of the bank! Cover every rebel trying to get out of the water and order him to come ashore here!"

Out of their saddles dropped Nos. 1, 2 and 3 of each set of fours in our troop, and in less than half a minute each had picked out for himself a gray target in the great gulley below. The skirmishers had already begun to blaze away at the bridge, and from the other side of the bridge, too, the Johnnies, like sensible soldiers, broke right and left into the woods, left their horses pretty well sheltered from fire by the standing timber and then took cover themselves behind the trees nearest the creek and began to operate exactly according to our tactics, firing on our skirmishers and trying to secure prisoners from the struggling mass below. We were the stronger in numbers and weapons, but nature gave the enemy one immense advantage. As members of the Potomac army will remember, creeks on the Virginia coast almost invariably have one bank high and steep and one which is low and shelving, and where we were fighting the steep bank was on our side.

Our fellows could not easily get out, much less drag out prisoners, but the Johnnies had scamped up their own side before all of us were in position to fire. Some, too, whose horses had been hit or who had fallen from their saddles during the tumble had the presence of mind to take Yankee carbines or horses with them. One had the impudence to lead away two of our horses, including the forage, blankets and overcoats strapped upon the saddles, and he roared himself so skillfully with one of the animals that none of the bullets aimed at him seemed to hit. On the other hand, when one of our fellows tried to climb the bank on our side, perhaps with revolver in hand, trying to drive an unarmed prisoner in front of him, he was a capital mark for the other side to shoot at, and if

man sighted:

"I'll take your word for it!"

I couldn't understand why a mere handshake was so convincing until one of our middle aged chaps told me that both men were Freemasons. But the agony for us was resumed after we started for camp, for the major, though true to the letter of his duty, was not Freeman himself, so he halted us in front of the old man's farm long enough to bid the family come out and bid the boy goodby, perhaps for the last time. They came down with a lantern, for it was a dark night, and the mother sobbed and wailed as she leaned over the cart and did all her thinking aloud and told how handsome and cheery her boy had looked when he took dinner at home a few hours before for the first time in months. His pretty sister, whom all of us had adored from time to time as she stood at the farm gate with her father to see the soldiers pass by, prayed aloud for heaven's sake to fall on the man whose bullet had pierced the forehead of her brother. I saw each of us tremble at the thought that the bullet might be his own. Near them stood a little brother and sister crying in the pitiful, hopeless way that my brother Ned did when he first heard that I was going to the war.

Yet this was not the only family that suffered by that engagement. Besides the men killed outright, some of our own comrades died afterward of their wounds without father, mother, sisters or others to say goodby to them, so that all the missing were taken prisoners by the enemy, and nearly half a year of awful uncertainty and of frantic letter writing passed before we learned this through our captured men who returned when exchanged. In the case of one man, who was broken by a bullet and who then was knocked senseless by a glancing shot on the head, floated down the shallow stream some distance before he came to his senses and got ashore. Stanching his wound by tying a strip of shirt tightly around his leg, he bound the broken limb in twigs and then spent two whole days and nights in crawling on his hands and one knee to our nearest picket station, several miles distant. In the case of another man, who was shot in the neck and whose body was carried to the creek to fish found the remains of one of our men beside a tree, a mile below the scene of the fight, and scratched on the bark of the tree were a few words telling how the poor fellow had died a lingering death from wounds, exposure and starvation.

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The fight at the bridge was the severest engagement in which our company had ever participated, so I ought to have been so absorbed by it as to be insensible to anything but my duty as a soldier. I am glad to say that I loaded, aimed and fired as carefully as if—oh, as if it were the first day of the "open season" for quail in the woods and fields near Summerton. Nevertheless I frequently detected myself in the act of looking about me to see what other men were doing. I saw the major leading and firing as placidly and smilingly as if he were merely making out bills at the Summerton lumber yard. Mick McTwyney was handling his carbine as energetically as if it were a coffee mill, yet in his excitement he was discharging it in the direction of the sun, the tree tops and his own toes, as if the enemy were atoms of the surrounding air and could be easily hit by a man with his eyes shut. Meanwhile he was volubly cursing his platoon in English and French with some assistance from the vocabulary of the Bovey, for not firing more rapidly and carefully.

"Look at that little devil Brainerd!" he shouted. "He's puttin' rebs into purgatory as fast as if he was walkin' to Sunday school in Summerton."

Brainerd! The sound of his name startled me and caused a guilty pang as my having been concerned only for my own life. I looked quickly about for him and just in time to see him roll sideways from behind a tall log, his face as white as paper on which I am writing. Killed? No, he moved. I hurried to his side and asked him where he was hit.

"In the heart, Jack, but 'twas not the enemy that hit me. 'Twas Mick McTwyney's tongue. Great heaven! I've vowed my life a hundred times to the saving of men—you know I was studying for the ministry. But now I'm trying to kill men! It's all—but why aren't you firing? See that red bearded ace sticking out from behind a tree on the other side of the creek? No, not Don't you fire at him! Here goes!"

Brainerd's lips curled so tight that I could not see their driving line, so I looked toward the Confederate with a red beard, and a second after Brainerd fired I saw the red bearded man clap a hand to his shoulder. Then the angles of his elbows and knees indicated that he had gone out of action and sat down behind his tree.

At that instant Brainerd himself had a strip of skin and a bit of flesh taken from his cheek by a shot from the other side, but he did not know of it till the fight was over. I was recalled to the sense of duty by Cloyne, who drawled:

"What are you looning for, Jack? This isn't a Sunday school picnic."

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Yet this was not the only family that suffered by that engagement. Besides the men killed outright, some of our own comrades died afterward of their wounds without father, mother, sisters or others to say goodby to them, so that all the missing were taken prisoners by the enemy, and nearly half a year of awful uncertainty and of frantic letter writing passed before we learned this through our captured men who returned when exchanged. In the case of one man, who was broken by a bullet and who then was knocked senseless by a glancing shot on the head, floated down the shallow stream some distance before he came to his senses and got ashore. Stanching his wound by tying a strip of shirt tightly around his leg, he bound the broken limb in twigs and then spent two whole days and nights in crawling on his hands and one knee to our nearest picket station, several miles distant. In the case of another man, who was shot in the neck and whose body was carried to the creek to fish found the remains of one of our men beside a tree, a mile below the scene of the fight, and scratched on the bark of the tree were a few words telling how the poor fellow had died a lingering death from wounds, exposure and starvation.

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"Look at that little devil Brainerd!" he shouted. "He's puttin' rebs into purgatory as fast as if he was walkin' to Sunday school in Summerton."

Brainerd! The sound of his name startled me and caused a guilty pang as my having been concerned only for my own life. I looked quickly about for him and just in time to see him roll sideways from behind a tall log, his face as white as paper on which I am writing. Killed? No, he moved. I hurried to his side and asked him where he was hit.

"In the heart, Jack, but 'twas not the enemy that hit me. 'Twas Mick McTwyney's tongue. Great heaven! I've vowed my life a hundred times to the saving of men—you know I was studying for the ministry. But now I'm trying to kill men! It's all—but why aren't you firing? See that red bearded ace sticking out from behind a tree on the other side of the creek? No, not Don't you fire at him! Here goes!"

Brainerd's lips curled so tight that I could not see their driving line, so I looked toward the Confederate with a red beard, and a second after Brainerd fired I saw the red bearded man clap a hand to his shoulder. Then the angles of his elbows and knees indicated that he had gone out of action and sat down behind his tree.

At that instant Brainerd himself had a strip of skin and a bit of flesh taken from his cheek by a shot from the other side, but he did not know of it till the fight was over. I was recalled to the sense of duty by Cloyne, who drawled:

"What are you looning for, Jack? This isn't a Sunday school picnic."

Quickly I covered my confusion by regarding the cover I had left, but I was still curious to know what the other men were doing. The Balaklava veterans were side by side on the ground and as flat as the head of a snake about to coil, though they did not seem intent on striking. Not far to my right stood Phil Hamilton, handsome and composed as usual, but in apparent trouble with his pistol. He looked so superb, with his clear cut face, erect figure and broad shoulders, that for a moment I wished my cousin May might see him. Then I was glad he could not, for did not Brainerd lose May, and was not Brainerd my dearest friend?

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