

His Splendid Lack of Fear

BY GEORGE BRONSON-HOWARD

It is quite a necessity for some actors to occupy the centre of the stage. In minor parts they consider themselves unappreciated, sulk, gloom, are very bad companions and do not do justice even to the small roles they play. It is not particularly difficult to find their prototypes on the greater stage of life. There is Roland Varion, for instance. Some of you know his work; I know the man. Perhaps you are more fortunate than I.

It may be that it was not Varion's fault that he was such a liar. Two things contributed to the superlative in his case—his desire to be in the full glare of the calcium and his natural bent for craftsmanship, which put the construction of a yarn before all else. Some of Varion's stories may have been told for the pure art of them, and the personal note added as much for the reason that it was easier to tell a story in the first person as for the effect he intended it to produce. Other people who know Varion are not so kind to him as I appear to be, but then they do not know him as well as I do.

Not that I ever liked the man. At first acquaintance I think my feelings approached detestation. He immediately showed out among the passengers. If I remember rightly, captivated most of the women on the ship before we were out of San Francisco a day. He had the art of dressing in perfect good form, and then adding some small detail which made him quite conspicuous.

The war had been on for some time now, and every Pacific steamer carried some of the fourth estate, and by the time we had been out of San Francisco for a few days we had newspaper men got to know one another, and we found out who the gold safety pin man was. There were three of us, and we had all heard of Varion. He had never done much, but he was the sort which gets the maximum of advertising out of accomplishments. So far as we knew he was the youngest of the lot of us and the least experienced. He had written some vivid magazine stuff of the Poe school and had got into a libel suit over some of it, after which the most editors of all New York newspapers acquiesced him as a special Sunday feature. This newspaper was now sending him to war, and he also represented a very well known magazine.

But with the women of the ship he created a profound impression. Even the wife of one brother correspondent joined in the crowd of worshippers. Varion was slender, well groomed and, more than all else, romantic in appearance. He had thin, well formed features and large brown eyes, but he was so soft and so lacking in strength as a woman. However, they did not know this, and they gave him the sort of qualities with which they endowed a matinee hero.

Not that Varion cared particularly, except that he liked admiration in general, and was willing to be pleasant and agreeable to the most homely or uninteresting woman who gave it to him. But there was one girl on the ship for whose good opinion he strove earnestly, and she was attracted to him from the first because she had read his magazine story and believed that he was a coming genius. For all his faults, Varion could write marvelously well.

The girl's name was Anstey Robinson, and her aunt explained, for the justification of the family, that a grandmother with several hundred thousands had to be placated when the girl was born, and the helpless baby sacrificed to the name of Summerville. With the grandmother dead it was but natural that a discriminating girl should prefer her middle name, and thus the "Anstey."

Now, it was most irritating for the rest of us to see Varion step in where higher beings shrank and appear to carry off the prize, for it was Varion who was permitted to be most often in the presence of Miss Robinson. Not only that, but he showed a bloated monopolist's trick of shutting the door on the other fellow, for he had a fashion of getting her seated with people on both sides of the steamer chairs and thus precluding any conversation from the rest of us. In our wounded pride, therefore, three or four of her admirers and myself formed an offensive and defensive alliance against Varion and often proceeded to take talks out of him when Miss Robinson was by.

The fact that Varion had never been under fire was, in itself, a beautiful thing to work upon, and let Varion so much mention anything relative to the way of a war correspondent and we were upon him with the fact that he knew not whereof he spoke. It appeared that Varion worked around it somehow, and it was thus that he evolved his splendid lack of fear.

It was one morning a long time out of Honolulu, and but four days from the Japanese coast, that Varion got the centre of the stage again with this very striking characteristic which he provided for his self. Miss Robinson was looking very delightful and tantalizing with her wavy black hair blowing into little curls from under her white Tam o' Shanter a straw berrylike stain to her white cheeks and

two little white shod feet and arched silk stockings ankles peeping out from a bewitching array of skirts and lace. Varion, having bribed the ship's steward on the first day to seat him next her at table, had been with her through breakfast, but we had spoiled his monopoly by gulping down our food and joining them on deck before he had lighted his cigarette.

Varion had dragged two chairs forward, and they occupied them, while the rest of us sat around in a circle at their feet. The sky was turquoise blended with melting gold, and the breeze had the smell of spring and hollyhocks in it, and it was a constant joy to look at Anstey Robinson. The only disagreeable element was to watch Varion lean over until his lips almost touched her shell-like ear. It was not strange therefore that when the question of gathering news under fire came up Bourke O'Brien turned upon him.

"A man's no good in his first battle," Bourke said. "You've got to get used to it, Varion. I remember my first battle. There wasn't any way I could get away from the firing line quick enough. When it came to writing the story I had to get the facts from some other fellow. I didn't remember a thing that had happened."

Whether Varion had been preparing his story or whether he evolved it in a brilliant flash of resentment is problematic. I feel quite sure that he was wearing of the continual "Well, I've been through it and I know. You haven't and don't." So he broke in, trying to speak nonchalantly, aware of the fact that he must lose no ground with Miss Anstey Robinson.

"You see," he smiled and waved his cigarette, "that's all true enough for most fellows. It's evident that you fellows have a sense of fear. Now, I haven't. I lack that sense. I have the faculty of being cool at critical moments. My father had it. It's a family trait. So you haven't any advantage over me by having been in wars after all, have you?"

Being somewhat dazed by this new imaginative flight, both O'Brien and I were quite silent.

"I remember," he went on, reflectively, "once when I was a youngster, I woke up one night. There was a burglar in the room. He had on a mask and was peering around with a dark lantern. He pointed his gun at me and told me to keep quiet. Now, it was the most natural thing in the world for me to run to the door and call out to my father. The notion of danger didn't enter my head at all. What the burglar made a dive for the window before my father got in. He didn't shoot. It's funny that I didn't even think of the possibility of his shooting until the thing was all over. Strange, wasn't it?"

Well, it's true he shut us up for the time being because we couldn't straighten away our statements without having sufficient proof of their mendacity; but just the same Varion let himself in for a lot of trouble when he eliminated fear from his makeup. When stories having in them the element of danger were told some reference such as "Of course, if I had Varion's faculty for being cool at critical moments it would have been all right, but being normal, I must confess I was scared," was slipped in. After awhile Varion got the fact that he doubted his splendid lack of fear, and he dropped the subject altogether, even showing a certain degree of regret. Perhaps the idea occurred to him that where he was going he would have great opportunity for displaying his bravery, and the thought might have disagreed with him.

But, having delivered himself into our hands, we were loath to discontinue the lack of fear business, and brought it up

on every possible occasion. And I am not forgetting the time I put my foot majestically "in it" by an ironical reference to this subject in the presence of Miss Anstey Robinson.

"You seem to doubt Mr. Varion's word," she said, "which is very horrid of you, I think. I know he's telling the truth, and I know you'll find it out. Both of you are going with the Russians, and I'll be under fire together, and after the first battle I shall expect you to write me, telling me that you have apologized to Mr. Varion for doubting him—that is, if you care anything for my friendship."

She seemed to be very angry. Varion, on his part, simply turned red.

"I don't care for him to do that," he said. "Besides, we probably shouldn't be together anyhow."

"Oh, but you must be, I want you to be friends. You must be—what is it?—bunk mates. Now, you must promise me. You will, won't you, Roland?"

He hesitated.

"If you don't, I shall be angry!" And she looked as though she meant it.

"Oh, all right," said Varion, sulkily. She made me promise, too.

"And you won't forget to write. I shall expect it. Promise."

I promised again—not that I wanted to. This was just before we had reached Shanghai. The other correspondents dropped off at Yokohama to go with the Japanese. I chose the Russians as the lesser of two evils. The little brown men are no friends of mine. I know their trickery too well. Varion was going because his paper had been on the other side.

She regarded me as too good a friend to refuse. I understood perfectly Miss Anstey Robinson's attitude toward me. It had taken time, but had gradually dawned on me. She regarded me as too good a friend to refuse. I understood perfectly Miss Anstey Robinson's attitude toward me. It had taken time, but had gradually dawned on me.

Anyhow I didn't want to see her marry Varion. I didn't think him the right sort of man for her. Not mind you, because I was jealous, but for the reason that she deserved a better fate. Perhaps I looked on truthfulness as one of the most essential qualities in a man's makeup, and truthfulness Varion had not at all.

The Robinsons (uncle, aunt and Anstey) were continuing to Hong Kong and Manila, and the five of us had dinner together at the Astor House in Shanghai on the evening that the Sultana was to sail. After dinner Varion got the girl off somewhere for the better part of a half hour, and when they rejoined us he looked radiant. Varion and I accompanied them down to the dock, where they got aboard the launch which was to carry them to Wansui, where the Sultana lay. And the last thing Anstey Robinson said was:

"Don't forget your promise to write after the first battle." That was it. As I turned to think it over, I wondered if she believed in the splendid lack of fear herself.

Anyhow, our promises bound us together, whether Varion liked it or not. Certainly I did not. He had the faculty of making himself comfortable under all circumstances, and it was not long before he was telling me about the girl.

"She says I'm to come for my answer when I get back from the war. Now, what do you think that means, old man? Not being a barbarian, I recommended going. Not that he didn't firmly believe the girl was in love with him. He would have been shocked and surprised at her bad taste otherwise."

It was my hope meanwhile that I should be able to save the girl from him, and, on a little promissory some two miles

had it not been for that I might have liked him better. He improved on close acquaintance. When the personal note was eliminated he could talk brilliantly about things he had seen, people he had observed, and he had original ideas on plenty and theories about everything under the sun. In the bigger things I believe that he was perfectly honorable.

He did not make a bad companion, and we crossed the Liao-ho River and landed in Neuchwang. Here we were detained for some time with honeyed promises, and after fretting and fuming through the months of June and July allowed to go to general headquarters, which meant Mukden. We joined a party consisting of an English lord, a French count, two Americans and an Italian from the Russian headquarters—by boat from Shanghai to Tientsin, by railroad to Shan-kai-kuan and by imitation railroad to Yinkow, where we crossed the Liao-ho River and landed in Neuchwang. Here we were detained for some time with honeyed promises, and after fretting and fuming through the months of June and July allowed to go to general headquarters, which meant Mukden.

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WE FOUND OURSELVES IN THE MIDST OF THE SWEATING, STRAINING HORDE OF HATLESS, WEAPONLESS, SQUETTING COATLESS INFANTRY

Both Varion and I expected the fight to be waged with the town of Liao-Yang as a centre, for there the main division of the army lay.

Breakfast finished, we crept forward between the spurs of two flanking hills, with the object of gaining the Yen-tai Hill. The firing was all away to the south and we seemed to be out of the range, but we knew the hill was occupied and judged it a good place from which to view the fight.

Whether or not I should have ridden into the very mouth of hell had I known it to be such I do not know. As it was, we were nearing the base of Hayentai when a great gun from some little spur near the river rumbled out a challenge, and on the hill above us, a shattering explosion told us that the Japanese were firing.

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long every one there would be things of the past. Still I was not going to let Varion say I suggested a retreat.

"This is the place to see the fight," I returned shortly, "but we're liable to get blown to pieces any minute."

"Do you want to go?" He tried to snap his teeth together and failed. "Do you?" he asked again.

"No," I said obstinately.

Something happened then—just what I don't remember. Two or three shells fell in the same place probably, and that place the masked battery near which we lay. The very entrails of the earth seemed to shoot upward, and my face was splattered and torn by bits of iron, dust and—maybe something else, but I don't like to think of it. The stuff was in my eyes and I was half blinded. The shock had thrown me head foremost on the ground. When I had wiped my eyes and gotten so I could see things there was Roland Varion standing bolt upright, with shells bursting on every side of him. His mouth was working gibberously, and his fingers twitched up and down as though he were performing upon an invisible piano.

"Lay down, you fool!" I yelled, and grabbed his legs. He fell and gave a convulsive shudder and a sob. And there we lay side by side on the slope of the hill. There was sand in front of me. I unconsciously got to counting the grains. In the hours that passed I must have counted every grain and it. All his time, he was sweating at the heavy field pieces. A galloper from general headquarters was spurting his horse up the hill, stumbling in the trenches and over the obstructions. He reported to some officer on the western slope, saluted and started down the hill again. A shrapnel shell burst over him, and he and horse disappeared in a trench. I watched with a certain horrified curiosity to see whether he would reappear again. He did not.

Suddenly the fire of the big guns ceased. Quiet, absolute, intangible, fell upon us. I looked at Varion again. His eyes were staring away toward the southern hill, and his fingers were working about his pencil. He made queer scrawls on his pad of paper.

"Look here," I said. "We've got a chance to get out. Do you want to take it?"

Something whizzed by again, following several quick, successive booms. The shell burst in a rifle pit some fifty yards away. Its course blew off Varion's hat, that despised hat with the gold safety pin. He crammed his hat into his pocket and picked up his hat in his nervous fingers, twisting it into unrecognizable shape.

"And just to think," he whispered hoarsely, "that was a man."

I saw now where he had been looking—the ghastly, decapitated, almost disemboweled thing that a shell had hurled our way. Varion looked away from it with the eyes of the dead as a tuft of hair flickered in the wind.

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distinct against the dun colored background. Varion tried to lift his hat to his head, but his hands seemed to have lost their strength and it dropped to the ground. A bullet whizzed very near his ear. He put up his hand and waggled it fanwise, as though brushing away a mosquito.

The rush of the retreating Siberians carried us off our feet. We found ourselves in the midst of the sweating, steaming horde of hatless, weaponless, sometimes coatless infantry. The rush carried us along with it, stumbling headlong into the coal holes, scrambling out of them, with men falling on every side of us, and the constant whirr, whirr of the bullets from behind to keep us aware of our peril. Varion caught my arm. "Wait—wait!" he mouthed. "We've got to see the rest of it—the fight!"

"Right—hell!" I replied. "Come on!" "I'm going to stay," he said, and tumbled into an abandoned rifle pit, where he scrambled up and then squatted down, his pale eyes searching the vista before us.

I don't know why I stayed. But I did, and there, every moment a lifetime, we saw the shameful rout, the fearful conclusion of the greatest battle of modern times. There, surrounded by the dead and dying, the scared and the mangled, to the tune of the thunderous field pieces and death spitting Maxims, the whirling bullets and the bursting shrapnel, Varion wrote his story.

He lay forward, his pad of paper resting on a blanket roll, his cheeks red, crimson red, his fingers shaking nervously as the pencil glided over the pages of his story. He wrote as he had never seen man write before, feverishly, stopping sometimes to take breath, and his body shaking near-while with long, convulsive shudders. I watched him without words, as though viewing a curious phenomenon. He tossed each sheet carefully from him once it was finished, and I saw him pause at last, scratch a great double X and stand bolt upright with a sudden nervous movement. One hand went to his side and he doubled up and rolled to the ground.

There was no wound on him, but his heart was beating freely. I gathered up the loose sheets of paper and thrust them in my blouse. Soon afterward we were found by a Japanese lieutenant, who made us prisoners and carried us to a place called Yang. In a temporary hospital, formerly a Chinese sweetmeat seller's store, a surgeon cared for Varion.

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There was no time to answer. We knew now what the cessation of firing meant. The Japanese were storming the hill. First came the hollow detonations of the big field pieces and quickly on the heels of them the maddening roar of the spitting machine guns, and, seen through the smoke and the haze, the flying cohorts of the Japanese, the infantry advancing in lines of skirmishers, deploying to the left and lunging away at the hill slope, stumbling into rifle pits and ditches, impaling themselves on barbed wire obstructions and grappling with the white blouse savages of the North, over all the noises the spit of the bullets and their tack hammer explosions.

Then the cavalry brought a new note along with the frightened neigh of the war horses and their shrill cries of pain as some of the splendid animals tattered and rolled down the hill; the thud, thud, of their hoofs, the savage swish of sabres in air, the more distinct banging of the cavalry pistols and the occasional bare of a bugle, the notes cut short, quick, tense. The slope of the hill was one mass of the scrambling khaki colored Japanese, with here and there a white horse standing



WE HAD SPOILED HIS MONOPOLY BY GULPING DOWN OUR FOOD AND JOINING THEM ON DECK