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When the War Was Over

BY FREDERICK R. BURTON.
Author of "Her Wedding Interlude," "Josef Helmuth's Goetz," "A Pot of Gold," "The Strange Object of Thornton Wetmore," etc.

CHAPTER VIII.—THE BATTLE OF SPADES.

Warren caught his adversary's spade about midway of the handle with the blade of his own, and holding the edge of his blade against the shank of the other, with a deft and powerful movement tried to wrench it from Golding's hands, somewhat as a swordsman might try to disarm his antagonist. Golding hung on like grim death, and carried along partly by the force of his own attack and more by the added impetus of Warren's parry, he hopped around in a semi-circle, the spades remaining interlocked, before he recovered his balance and drew away his crude weapon.

Each man had dropped his rake as a fragile and useless encumbrance. It did not occur to either of them in the heat of the moment that they were fighting a most singular battle. To them the peaceful implements of agriculture were as broadswords, and each saw in the other a foe as hateful and determined as any he had met in genuine war. Golding had attacked on the impulse of his terrible passion, and Warren was stirred by it, not only to self-defense, but to all the fury of aggressive combat.

Golding made a faint with his spade as if he would catch his enemy in the abdomen, and as he saw from Warren's eyes that such a blow would be parried, he instantly changed his maneuver and thrust straight for Warren's face. The Granite farmer, however, was as keen in reading his adversary's intentions in his eyes, and up he brought his spade, catching and raising it so that Golding's blade fanned his face but did not touch it. At the same instant Golding being momentarily unguarded, Warren thrust forward with both hands upon the handle of his spade and landed it with great force upon Golding's chest.

Golding gasped violently and staggered back. Warren, had he been younger, might have followed his advantage and laid out his enemy with a single swinging blow, but although he was not an old man, years of farm work had stiffened his muscles, and before he could accomplish this movement Golding had recovered and was at him again.

The vigor with which he had begun the combat and the skill and strength with which Warren had resisted, made both men wary, and for a moment they faced each other, feinting and watching. The edges of their spades clicked, and ting-tinged as they sparred for openings, and when Golding thought he saw one he bore hard down upon Warren's spade and tried again to thrust toward his face.

Again Warren parried the thrust, and again the spades hung together for a second while each tried to disarm the other. Then they broke away and each retreated a pace, for each had come to have a high respect for the other's strength and the exertion had so far cooled their passions that they were inclined to combine caution with attack. And in that instant of unintended truce each man saw the blind folly of their fight.

With his eyes still on Warren and every nerve prepared for further conflict if necessary, Golding slowly lowered his spade. He leaned upon it, breathing heavily, while Warren remained standing with his spade half raised, his attitude one of defense.

"Haven't we had about enough of this?" asked Golding.

"Speak for yourself," retorted Warren. "You haven't made me holier."

For an instant it seemed as if Golding would be provoked by this taunt into renewing hostilities. His fingers clutched his spade handle convulsively and his brows contracted ominously. Better sense prevailed, however, and he responded:

"I'm not hollering myself. If you want more fight you can have it."

"I didn't begin it," said Warren, by way of acknowledging that he didn't care to continue.

"You fight like a soldier," remarked Golding.

"I am a soldier," returned Warren, proudly. "I fought all through the war."

"I might have known it by the way you handled your spade. 'Tisn't quite like bayonet exercise, though, is it?" and Golding grinned, as if he saw something ludicrous in the scrimmage that had just taken place.

"You're a soldier, too," said Warren, lowering his spade at last.

"Yes, I fought through the war—that is, the most of it. I got knocked out early in the Wilderness."

"I was in the Wilderness from start to finish."

"You were? Wonder if 'twas your shot that did for me?"

Warren looked a little puzzled.

"I was in the Union army," he said, "and for a long time my closest comrade was Freeman Dutton."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Golding, slowly, and he gazed at his adversary with new interest. "I was on the other side, and it was my bayonet that fixed Freeman."

"You were the man, then, that he had the hand-to-hand tussle with, in which he got the worst of it?"

"I was that same."

"We drove you back after that," said Warren presently, "and in the lull that followed I hunted up my comrade. He appeared to be dying, and before he could be removed you fellows were at us again, and we left Dutton in your lines that night. I supposed he was dead. He was so reported, and—"

"What else?" interposed Golding, eagerly, as Warren paused.

"I never saw or heard of him again until last night."

"I felt proud of my success with him," said Golding, after another pause, "and when we had recovered things around you had taken from us I hunted for him."

"You wanted to make sure and finish him, I suppose?"

"No, sir; I'm not that kind of a soldier. No, I did not go to see if I had finished him, and when I found him still alive I did everything that one soldier could do to help him. I gave him the last drop from my canteen, I got the wagon, who was a personal friend of mine, to attend to him early. He got just as good care as any one of our men, and when next day I got a shot in the leg, I was taken to the cot next to his in the hospital. The war was over when we recovered. We became friends and partners till—"

It was Golding's turn to pause and Warren's to ask eagerly: "What else?"

"I was some little time ago in Africa. I was going to say, but he and I are partners still, Mr. Warren, partners now, and I intend to keep an eye to his interest, and revenge his death if he dies here."

Had it not been for circumstances but partially understood by either of these men, the deadly feud upon which they had entered might have come to an end right there and then, in this interchange of experiences. The old-time enemies of war had nothing whatever to do with their present feelings—on the contrary, the memories of former conflicts had tended promptly to cool their passions and bring them closely together. The soldier of the South, partner of the soldier of the North, might easily have become the friend of this other northerner, respecting his courage, admiring his strength, and finding everything pleasing in his character; but there were the diamonds, and there were other things of mysterious import that kept them apart.

From the moment when Warren had mentioned Dutton's name, Golding had studied his face and racked his brain for some memory that eluded him. He had suspected almost from the time when he discovered that Dutton had suffered from the play, that Warren was the guilty man, led thereto in the first instance by the remark Warren had let fall when his wife carried the unconscious man from the burning cabin. This and upon his suspicions had been the extreme improbability that Warren knew about Dutton's diamonds. All attempts to extort from Warren an admission that he knew of them had failed, and another motive for hostility between the two he could not even guess.

Suddenly there flashed upon his memory the scene that had eluded him, and then, though there were still in his mind many things that he could not understand as yet, he was positive—nay, he knew—that Nicholas Warren had attempted the life of Freeman Dutton. As much seems to be accomplished in a dream, of a dream, so the memory sets forth in a single impression what it may have taken hours of action and conversation to effect in the first instance.

Golding saw a lonely camp in the wilds of Mashonaland, wherein a Union and a Confederate soldier lay battling with the silent enemy, fever. It was a case of sick caring for the sick, and the other was a man for aught they knew, within hundreds of miles. These two who had fought one another upon the field of battle, each summoning death as his ally, now faced the grim destroyer upon fortune and hope bound together. He had no terrors for them but in his presence with his damp breath upon their hot brows, words were spoken that might have remained unuttered had further life seemed possible.

Nature prevailed, and in due time death withdrew, relinquishing for a period the claim he held upon these two soldiers. The confidences of that solemn hour when dissolution seemed imminent, were never referred to by either. They had been life secrets, and while life endured so should the secrets.

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