THE MYSTERIOUS SHARP-SHOOTER.

A STORY OF THE LATE WAR, BY JULIAN HAWTHORNE.

PART II.

(Concluded.)

The battle had seriously thinned our ranks, and there had been an especial mortality among our officers. Reinforcements were sent on as expeditiously as possible, and with them arrived Sebastian Mayne. Bronzed and hardened by the campaign, he appeared much older, graver, and sterner than when I had known him in college. The sternness was, no doubt, in great measure external only—a coat of mail such as soldiers are fain to wear above their hearts—but the gravity and the growth of character had a deeper source. He told me, by degrees, the history of the years since we had last met; how he had stuck to his determination to pay all his father's liabilities before doing anything else, and, after a long series of disappointments, how an unexpected run of good fortune had enabled him to do this, with interest; how he had immediately thereupon enlisted "for the war" as a common soldier, but had been rapidly promoted, until now he held the rank of major. Of his private adventures in the great struggle he said little or nothing; but his renown was not silent in the mouths of others. It struck me, however, that, gallant and efficient soldier though he was, he had not the born soldier's love of battle for its own sake—had not even perhaps, any really vital interest in the cause for which we fought. He would have preferred that whatever right and truth there was on either side of the conflict, should be developed and inculcated by other means than the sword. In short—for I may as well state my impression, be it correct or not—I could not help thinking that Sebastian, like Curwin, would never have entered the army, had there been no such person as Virginia Randall. The two men were almost at the opposite poles of manhood; but the same woman swayed them both. She had done no good to Curwin; it remained to be seen what effect she would have on Mayne. I should have mentioned that he never spoke of her directly, though now and then I had a notion that her name was just behind his lips. And since he chose not to speak of her, neither did I, nor did I tell him, as perhaps I should have done, how it happened that his letter had never been delivered.

From North Carolina, where Mayne had joined us, we now began to move in a northerly direction, and were soon across the Virginia border. Mayne was promoted to be colonel of our regiment, and the appointment was a very popular one, for, in the field, a man is weighed and judged, as to his character and capacities, in as short order as a court martial would deliver a verdict upon his guilt or innocence of some specific accusation. Mayne had not filled his new position a week before the men were ready to follow him everywhere, though his discipline was as strict as his popularity was hearty, and he never excused conscious military dereliction. When men go out to fight they don't much care to be fed by kindness and mercy, but by justice and foresight, and a strength greater than their own.

After moving forward some fifty miles into the interior of the State, our division encamped along the thickly wooded banks of a small river, on the opposite side of which were stationed the Confederate outposts. Occasional shots were exchanged, but we were awaiting further orders, and no important engagement was imminent. One day Colonel Mayne and I, attended by a couple of men, rode out a few miles towards the west, where the ground was higher, in order to obtain a better idea of our surroundings. A large house was visible on the southern exposure of the upland, and toward this we made our way. On arriving there we dismounted and mounted the verandah, and Mayne knocked at the door, which stood open. In a few moments a tall young lady, dressed in white, appeared, and advanced to meet us. It was Virginia Randall.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, gentlemen," she said, composedly. "Have you lost your way, or is your visit intentional?"

Mayne's face flushed, and he drew in a deep breath. For an instant he seemed unable to speak. "I did not know you were so near us," he said at length, in a low voice. "Are you alone here, Miss Randall?"

"Alone with my father," she replied. "I see you have your regiment," she added. "Times have changed for both of us. But perhaps we may enlist our women yet, and then we shall meet on more equal terms."

"Since we have met," said Mayne, "I may as well tell you that I have news of your brother—not good news."

"He died doing his duty—I know that!" she answered, her eyes darkening.

"I can testify to that," I remarked, "for I saw him fall, and I saw him buried where he fell."

"I am indebted to you for that," returned she; "and I should be still more so, if you could tell me who killed him."

"That I cannot do."

"Will you come in, gentlemen?" said she. "You need not hesitate on my father's account; he does not know friends from enemies. I cannot promise you much entertainment; but what I have is at your service."

We assented, and, while Mayne stepped out to give orders to our men, I was left alone with Miss Randall. I had been thinking of the letter, which I still carried inside my coat, and seized this opportunity to deliver it to her, stained and creased as it was, at the same time informing her of the circumstances under which I had received it, and of my reasons for not having sooner presented it. She listened to me impassively, holding the letter in her hands, and, when I had concluded, she tore the letter into several fragments and dropped them into a wastepaper basket that stood beside a table.

"I have no concern with Colonel Mayne's past history any more than with his present career," she said, "and though I am only a woman, I am not sorry to prove to you that all I care for in the world are my country and my cause."

But there was something in her face, as she uttered these haughty words, that made me fancy that they might not be altogether so true as she wished me to believe. After staying about an hour we took our leave and rode away.

For a mile or so Mayne observed a silence, which I did not venture to intrude upon. At last he said: "You've heard, of course, of that mysterious sharp-shooter who keeps picking off our men at the watering-place. I've been thinking how to have that stopped."

The matter to which he referred had indeed become a serious nuisance. There was a certain spot on the river's bank, near our encampment, where, and where only, it was practicable to water our animals; but, for the last week, some Confederate marksman, concealed in the bushes of the opposite bank, some two hundred yards distant, had been amusing himself by exercising his skill upon whomsoever of our men ventured to expose himself in that vicinity. His aim was deadly, the men being usually struck either in the forehead or in the heart, one only having thus far escaped with a bullet through his right lung. This man related that, when he fell, he saw the bushes parted aside on the opposite shore, and a young fellow appeared with a broad-brimmed hat on his head, a grey flannel shirt and high boots, and holding a smoking rifle in his hand. He looked across at his victim for a few moments, and then silently withdrew. The whole affair had become so mysterious and appalling, that a kind of superstitious dread began to show itself among our fellows; and any one of them would rather have led the most desperate of forlorn hopes than have led his horse down to that particular point of the river's brink. It was high time, therefore, that something should be done to put a stop to it.

"My notion is," said Mayne, "to ask for a volunteer to stand up and be shot at, and then have one of our crack shots—Curwin, for instance—in ambush near by, and when the fellow steps out to view his work, Curwin shall put a bullet through him. How does that strike you?"

"Very good, except for the volunteer."

"Oh, there'll be no trouble about that."

That evening there was a meeting of the officers of the regiment in Mayne's quarters, at which the question of the rebel sharpshooter was canvassed and determined; and then followed a discussion relative to the suspected presence of a spy among us. Certain important movements contemplated by our army had, in some inexplicable manner, become known to the enemy; there seemed no way of accounting for it save on the supposition that some one was betraying us.

Early in the morning Mayne set forth alone, intending, as I supposed, to have another interview with Virginia Randall. I did not feel altogether at ease about this intimacy, renewed at such a moment. Sebastian had evidently never ceased to love her, and it was dangerous for even a man like him to love so fair a rebel. On the other hand, whether she loved him or not, she was capable of using his love to advance her own ends. And women, though they do not fight with sword or rifle, can find means of helping their side of a struggle which are scarcely less effective. And certain indications which I had lately observed led me to think that mischief was brewing, or was already afoot, not far off. Meanwhile, I could only watch for something to make my suspicions certainties.

Mayne returned about noon with a carefully composed countenance, from which I could divine nothing, and spent an hour or two in his tent writing letters. The expedition to the river bank in quest of the rebel sharpshooter was fixed for 4 o'clock, that being the likeliest time for finding him. Curwin was on hand and eager for his shot; for the rest, the party consisted of only Mayne and myself, and the man who had volunteered to serve as the rebel's target. We went down to the fatal spot, observing the greatest silence and precaution, though Curwin persisted in manifesting what was to me a revolting delight of anticipation. Arrived at the bank, I concealed myself beside Curwin, whom I partly distrusted; Mayne and the other went to a point about a dozen yards further down stream. Each pair of us were now out of sight of the other. The "target" man, by the way—his name was Rupert King—had begun, during the last few minutes, to suffer from a feeling of nausea, by no means singular for one in his position. I had offered him a drink out of my flask, but Mayne had somewhat peremptorily put it aside, saying that he had provided himself with a decoction which would do the business more effectually.

For several minutes there was almost total silence. The sun shone down broad and hot out of the blue sky upon the shining stream, which glided smoothly and sluggishly past. A couple of swallows skimmed and dipped over the surface. There was a faint undertone of humming insects. Curwin crouched with his rifle ready cocked and poised; I strained my eyes to detect a movement or the gleam of a gun barrel upon the opposite bank; but no living thing betrayed its presence there. The time seemed to pass with intolerable slowness. Mayne, no doubt, was trying to revive King's drooping courage, whether by words or by pungent decoctions; but it began to look as if neither were likely to avail much. * * Hark! there he is at last, trampling heavily through the underbrush, and whistling as he goes. I could just distinguish, amidst the leafy boughs, the movement of his figure, which seemed larger than ordinary; but I could not see his face. Now his feet had ceased to rustle amidst the bushes; he was treading on the sandy margin of the stream. I fixed my eyes on the opposite bank and held my breath.

He is going to shoot,——

Curwin.

But, as he spoke, there was a white cloud of smoke belch suddenly forth in the tsunlight opposite us, and then heard the flat crack of the explosion. The invisible bullet sang on its path and struck; the man fell without a cry.

"So far so good," said Curwin, bringing his weapon to his shoulder. "Now for me!"

Another eternal moment; then a slight, graceful figure, in grey shirt and broad-brimmed hat, stepped forth from its ambush and stood erect and exposed on the low bank above the sandy lip of the river. Instantly the sharp roar of Curwin's rifle rang through my ears; the youth staggered forwards, tried to catch an overhanging bough, over-balanced himself, and plunged down the slope. As he fell his hat came off, and a torrent of black hair tumbled down on his shoulders.

Curwin sprang up with a wild shriek, stood motionless, gazing for an instant, then dropped his rifle, and leaped headlong down the bank, where an old punt lay moored, and, almost sooner than it can be told, had cast off the painter, seized the oars, and was pulling furiously across to where the body lay. Startled and mystified at his strange action, I descended to the water's edge to look after King. But he who lay dying there was not King; it was Sebastian Mayne.

His eyes met mine and he recognized me. I bent down towards him, and he whispered, "It's all right. I drugged him: I intended this. It was the best way out of it."

I drew him tenderly up to where a hummock of turf, fallen from above, served him as a pillow. I poured some brandy down his throat.

"It was for her," he said. "Never let her know it."

The splash of oars sounded close at hand. I looked up. Curwin had already returned with his dark-haired freight. The boat slid up on the beach; he lifted out his burden. As I looked upon that pale, beautiful face, the black, troubled eyes and haughty mouth, I scarcely felt surprised. I seemed to have known that it could be no other than Virginia Randall. By no other hand than hers was it fitting that Sebastian Mayne should meet his death.

"Bring me to him," she said. "Sebastian, was it you? And was there no carrion in your army, gentlemen, that you must lime me with a man like this?"

Blood came to her lips as she spoke. She was shot through the right breast. We laid her close beside him. He was beyond speech or movement, but his eyes showed that he knew her. After an interval, he spoke again:

"This morning I offered him all that a woman can offer a man who loves her; for one little traitorous word, he might have won me; but he would not. Sebastian, I knew you would not; else, I love you too much to have tempted you. Do you hear, Sebastian? I love you—and I have killed you—and that fool has done the one good deed of his life in killing me."

Curwin had hitherto stood in a sort of stupor, apparently hearing and seeing nothing; but he now said sluggishly. "Yes, I've been a fool long enough. Ever since we came here, I have furnished the enemy, through her, with information of our plans. And all to see this, at last? I'm the spy you're looking for; and the sooner I'm hanged, the better."

"Meanwhile, Virginia had found Sebastian's hand, and raised it to her lips, and laid her cheek upon it. "Tell me—when—he—dies," she murmured, with difficulty; "I—won't be—behind him."

I put my hand over his heart; no movement was perceptible. I covered my eyes with my hand, and groaned.

Then, suddenly, with an effort of dying strength, Virginia Randall half rose from the ground, turned toward Sebastian, and passionately flung her arms around him. Her head sank on his breast, her hair was strewn over his face, like a black veil. Their war was over, and their peace had come.

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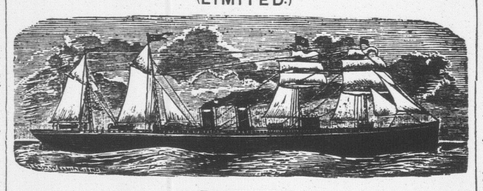

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Engraving, Watch and Jewelry repairing, &c., done promptly and in the best manner. Work sent by mail will receive prompt attention at either of our shops in Chatham or Newcastle.
MOSS & SON.
Miramichi, August 1st, 1885.

NEW LIVERY
AND
Boarding Stable.
ADJOINING THE ADAMS HOUSE.
CHATHAM, N. B.
The subscriber has just fitted up these stables, put in first class stock and hopes by strict attention to business to win a share of public patronage.
FRANK S. GRIFFIN,
Proprietor

Marble Works!!
The subscriber has removed his WORKS from Upper Chatham to the premises on WATER ST., CHATHAM, lately occupied by MR. ALEX. CANTLEY, Blacksmith, (near the Ferry,) where he is prepared to execute orders for
MONUMENTS, HEAD STONES, TABLETS AND CEMETRY WORK GENERALY,
Also: COUNTER and TABLE TOPS and other Miscellaneous Marble and Fine Stone Work.
A good stock of MARBLE constantly on hand.
EDWARD BARRY.
Chatham, August 1st 1885.