

How the Flag was Saved

Our party was seated around a large circular table in a private apartment in the Waldorf-Astoria, New York City. It consisted of veterans of the Civil War, many of whom carried upon their bodies, in the shape of scars, the proof of their gallantry.

The glasses were filled, and we waited for the words of the toastmaster.

"I have one toast to propose, gentlemen, and I have purposely reserved it for the last, in order that proper respect may be done it. Let it be drunk standing, gentlemen, and in silence. Here's to the memory of gallant Sergeant Sheridan!"

"Who was he, Colonel?" asked one of the party. "The name is not familiar to me."

"Neither are the names of thousands of brave men. Their valorous deeds are unheralded, and they fill heroes' graves all over the South, their gallantry unknown except to a small circle of their comrades. This was the case of Sergeant Sheridan, who fell at Fredericksburg. Were you at the battle of Fredericksburg, Captain?"

"No, Colonel, I was in the Army of the Tennessee when that bloody battle was fought."

"You characterize it properly. It was a terrible day for the Union troops, and, but for the prodigious valor they displayed upon the field of battle, the repulse would have ended in a rout and Washington might have been taken by the enemy. But I digress."

"It was the night following the disastrous repulse of our troops. All day long they had stubbornly charged the enemy's works on the heights of Fredericksburg, making desperate efforts to drive the Confederates from their position, but without success."

"Our men fell like hail from a thunder cloud. Over their dead and mangled bodies the troops in the rear pressed on bravely, only to meet with a similar fate. The wide-mouthed cannon on the height mowed us down on all sides. Our soldiers did all that brave men could do, and it is no reflection upon their gallantry to say they suffered defeat. The Confederate fortifications were impregnable."

"Night found us a beaten army, and we retreated to the cover of the woods that skirted the banks of the Rappahannock; but not to sleep, for we expected that the enemy would follow up the advantage and attempt to drive us into the river."

"A night of intense anxiety followed a day of frightful slaughter. Only those slept who were never to awaken again in this world."

"Always in the hottest of the fight, our regiment stood the brunt of battle the entire day. Driven back again and again, we reformed and renewed the assault upon the enemy's works until my command was reduced by casualties from a regiment to less than a company."

"I remember distinctly the final effort. The cannons on the heights pointed directly towards us belched forth grape and canister unceasingly."

"We reached the gully, crossed it and began to climb the heights when the confederate sharpshooters opened upon us a deadly fire. It staggered us for a moment. I called to my men to press forward. They made a desperate effort to reform, but with the fire of a hundred cannon concentrated upon them, this was impossible. They turned and fled panic-stricken into the woods in the rear."

"As we retreated I looked for the colors of the regiment, and my heart throbbed with joy as I saw them in the grasp of our standard-bearer, still waving gallantly in the smoke; and bearing proof in the numerous rents which appeared in their silken folds of the desperate nature of the conflict."

"We reached the woods, and, as I endeavored to concentrate the scattered remnant of my brave regiment, I heard news that made my hair turn gray."

"The colors had been lost!" "The brave color-bearer had been shot down while we were retreating, and the flag was lying upon the field about midway between the woods and the enemy's lines."

"As the news of our loss spread among the men, its effect was apparent by the look of despair that appeared upon their faces."

"Twilight was fast fading away when I crawled to the edge of the woods and gazed cautiously out upon the battle-field. The enemy's sharpshooters were upon the alert, and a careless exposure of one's body meant instant death. I strained my eyes as I gazed upon the thousands of our dead and dying who were lying in bloody heaps upon the field of battle, endeavoring if possible to catch a glimpse of our flag, determined if I could locate it to head a forlorn hope and secure it; but among such a mass of dead and dying I was unable to discern it, and as I gazed the twilight faded away, and darkness hid the battle-field from view."

"As I returned to my command an idea suddenly suggested itself to my mind. I would see Sergeant Sheridan and get him to crawl out upon the field and secure the flag. 'Sheridan was a young Irish lad, about twenty, and had been in the service for over a year, in which time, on outpost duty and as a skirmisher, he had invariably distinguished himself, not only by his gallantry, but by his coolness in trying moments.'"

"Send Sergeant Sheridan to me," I said as one of my men appeared. "He left to execute my order, and in a short-time returned."

"Sheridan is not among our men, Colonel. He must have been killed in action to-day, and is doubtless lying upon the field in front of us."

"I waved my hand for the soldier to depart, for I dared not trust myself to speak, so overcome was I by this news. He had been my main reliance in many a trying ordeal, and had always faithfully executed the many difficult and dangerous duties I had imposed upon him since the day I had assumed command of the regiment."

"It is not characteristic of the soldier to be overcome by his feelings as I was at that time, but you must remember that the colors of our regiment had been lost in the fight, and with Sheridan's aid I felt satisfied that they could be recovered; but the sergeant being dead, all hope of recovering them seemed to die with him."

"The midnight hour arrived and with our arms in our hands we anxiously awaited the executed onslaught of the enemy. It did not come, however, but instead thereof, the wounded of our army, or such as were able to do so, crawled into our lines in search of succor."

"Among the number came one who, when he got safely within our lines, raised himself to his feet and leaned feebly against a tree for support. He was faint from loss of blood, while the pallor of his face and the feeble accents of his voice unmistakably indicated that death had claimed him as his victim."

"Where's Colonel Bosworth," he said; 'lead me to the Colonel. I must see him before I die. Take me to him at once,' gasped the wounded man."

"Two soldiers ran forward and grasped him in their strong arms as he was about falling to the ground."

"I heard the well-known voice and recognized it at once."

"It was Sergeant Sheridan!" "I hastened to his side and putting my arms around him, I led him to the trunk of a fallen tree, and upon that we sat."

"The colors, Colonel—the colors of our regiment," gasped Sheridan. "I know all about them, Sergeant. They've gone; we've lost them now, my poor boy; think of those at home. Have you any message to send them?"

"He gazed into my eyes for a moment with an expression of thankfulness, but immediately reverted to the old topic."

"The colors, Colonel! The colors! Water! Give me some water; do not let me die."

"I seized my canteen, pressed it to his lips, and he drank a deep draught."

"Now Sergeant, about the colors," I gently suggested, for I perceived he was dying fast, and I feared that he might expire before he told me his story."

"The standard-bearer is dead, Colonel, I left his cold body upon the battle-field, when I crawled here."

"I thought as much, Sheridan." "The same deadly volley that struck him down laid me low, and we fell side by side upon the field. I soon became unconscious. How long I remained so I do not know, but when I recovered and looked about me I saw the little stars of heaven shining sweetly down upon me."

"I thought of the colors, Colonel, I thought of the colors. I could not bear to think that the enemy might capture them and carry them off as a trophy, and determined to secure them if possible, crawl into the line and restore them to you; for I knew you were in these woods."

"Our color-bearer was still lying beside me. His flag, stained with his blood, was under him, as though in his death agony he had purposely fallen upon it to protect it from the enemy with his dead body. I seized the flag and tore it from the staff."

"Oh, boys, it was terrible to see Sheridan then. The hand of death had touched his heart, but he was not ready to die. He desired to tell me more. He jumped to his feet and looked imploringly toward me, as if I could stay the fatal moment."

"You tore the flag from its staff Sheridan," I yelled in his ear. "You have already told me that. What did you do with it then?"

"With an unnatural strength he seized his coat with both hands and tore the breast of it open, scattering the buttons around him in every direction."

"The flag stained with his blood fell upon the ground, and with a triumphant smile upon his lips he sank down beside it—dead."

"Gallant to the last, he died a hero's death."

"We carried those colors to the end of the war, through the dark tangled wilderness, through the bloody battles of Gettysburg, Cold Harbor, Ream's Station, and in front of Petersburg, but never lost them again."

"The superstitious members of the regiment attributed that result to the belief that the spirit of Sergeant Sheridan constantly hovered around them, guarding and protecting them."

"Such, comrades, is the history of the death of Sergeant Sheridan, whose memory we honor to-night."

When Colonel Bosworth had concluded his story he found himself surrounded by men whose cheeks were pale and whose lips trembled visibly in their efforts to suppress their emotions."

"Colonel," said one of the veterans, "you have told us the story of one who has long filled a soldier's grave. Although no headstone marks the spot where the remains of that gallant Irish lad now lie, we will to-night perpetuate the memory of one who died to save our flag! Let us drink once more to the dead soldier. Permit me, Colonel."

"Now, gentlemen, let us drink the toast again. 'Here's to the memory of gallant Sergeant Sheridan.'"—M. C. Walsh, in *The White Owl*.



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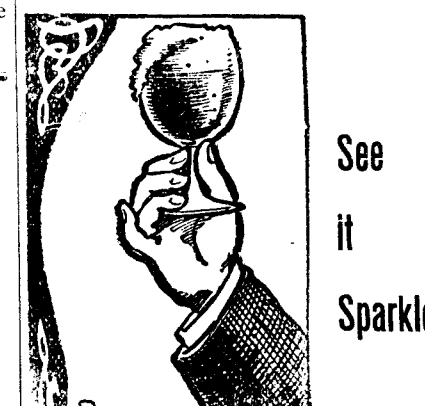
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