

The Storyteller.

SERGEANT NED.

In his command he was known as Sergeant Ned. He was the life of his comrades, the athlete of his regiment. He could sing a song or dance a jig with the best of them, and he was as brave and as fearless as a medieval knight. War was not his profession, but he believed that it was the duty of every able-bodied citizen to familiarise himself with military tactics, making him a useful subject of the Republic in case of trouble with a foreign foe or its enemies at home.

When the clash of arms came between the United States and Spain, Sergeant Ned was a member of his home militia company. He might have held an officer's commission, but he was a modest, unassuming young man, of a retiring disposition, and much preferred to see others advance than push himself ahead. He was tall and sinewy, of fair complexion, with light blue eyes, and would pass for a handsome man anywhere. He was the only child of a widowed mother, herself a representative of that old-fashioned type of motherhood so rarely seen nowadays on this side of the Atlantic. He was the apple of the old lady's eye, as the saying goes, and she had every reason to feel proud of her boy. He had yet to commit one act which caused her a moment's pain or worry.

In his school days, to be sure, he had been guilty of boyish pranks, but he had never in his life committed a mean act. At school he was a bright scholar, generally at the head of his class, and graduated as a civil engineer with high honours. At the call for volunteers, Ned was filling an important and responsible place for such a young man, but to him the sacrifice of his position was nothing compared with his idea of a citizen's duty to his country, in an armed conflict with a foreign foe.

Only one thing bothered Ned. It wouldn't do to go and leave his aged mother alone. 'Suppose,' he mused to himself, 'that in my absence something should happen my mother. Suppose she should die. I could never forgive myself for thus forsaking her.' The thought of it made him shudder. 'Suppose, too,' he said, 'that I should die of disease or be killed in battle. Who would care for my mother after I am gone?' It was hard for him to decide which course to take. One seemed as imperative as the other, and yet he desired to fulfil his military obligations, if there was any way in which it could be done. While he was in this quandary, orders came to the captain of the militia company to which Ned belonged to assemble his command at the armory and report for duty to the colonel of his regiment within twenty-four hours. A prompt decision was, therefore, necessary. On his way home that evening, Ned thought the matter over seriously, and wondered how he would break the news to his mother.

As was her custom, Ned's mother met him at the door of their modest, neat little home. She gave him a welcome and an embrace such as only a mother can give a son. 'Have you heard the news?' inquired Ned's mother, as she kissed him first on one cheek and then on the other.

'Yes, mother,' said Ned, 'I have been ordered to report at the armory for duty to-morrow morning at 10 o'clock. But how can I go and leave you alone? You will have nobody to care for you in my absence. I'd go in a minute if it were not for you. I know, too, that if I don't go, there will be plenty of busybodies who will point me out as a dress parade soldier, but of course I could stand that. Those who know me would understand full well why I did not go.'

By this time Ned had removed his hat and seated himself in an easy chair. 'My boy,' said his mother, placing her arm about him, and seating herself on his knee, 'if you want to go, don't mind me. You wouldn't be your father's son if you didn't go, my boy. Why, my dear child, your father went to war when Lincoln called for troops. We'd only been married a short time. He was a mere boy, not much older than yourself, and I—I was a mere slip of a girl. But he saw all the young men of the town going, and I could see that he was getting uneasy. I knew he wanted to be off. Finally, I told him to go, and I'd take care of myself. You should have seen him the day he went away. With a brave heart and quick step he marched with his company, shouldering his gun as if he'd been a soldier all his life. I didn't see him for two years, and when he came home you, and she pressed Ned to her closer, 'you, Ned, were a toddling eighteen-months-old youngster, creeping about from chair to chair.'

'Ah, poor man,' continued the good woman as she heaved a deep sigh, while she recalled the stirring days of '61. 'He came home a sergeant, and if he had been able to read and write he would have been made a commissioned officer for bravery on the field of battle. It wasn't his fault that he lacked learning. Congress gave him a medal for bravery at Gettysburg, and I think he was as proud of his sergeant's stripes and his medal from Congress as General Grant was of his major-general's stars. I got along then, my boy, and I can get along very well now. Go, go, Ned, and may God guard, direct and protect you, and bring you and your comrades safely home.'

Ned listened to his mother's story and advice with bowed head. He was deeply affected, but it was not the time for showing emotion. When she had finished he kissed her, and said that he would think the matter over during the night, make up his mind, and announce his decision by early morning. There was little sleep for Ned. He turned and tossed in his bed, lying awake making his plans. At last a happy thought came to him. There was the parish priest, Father John; he was an old friend of the family. Why not go and tell him his predicament, and ask his advice?

Ned arose earlier the next morning than had been his custom,

jumped into his clothes and hurried down to the priest's house. Although it was an unseasonable hour for a call at the parsonage, the housekeeper, who answered the door, received him kindly, and asked what the matter was, thinking that only an urgent sick-call would bring Ned to the house so early in the morning. She hesitated about calling Father John, but when Ned informed her that he must see the priest immediately on a very important matter, she rang Father John's private bell. The answer came in a few moments that he would be down directly.

While Father John was dressing, Ned sat down in the reception-room of the parsonage and tried to interest himself in the books and magazines that lay on the table before him, but his mind was too much absorbed in the mission which he had called to consult Father John about, and he could not divert it with literature of any sort. In a little while Father John's footsteps were heard on the stairs, and Ned put on his best appearance to greet his pastor, who said: 'Why, Ned, my boy, what's the matter? What brings you here so early?'

Ned proceeded to tell his story, and when he had finished added: 'I want to go, Father, but I can't go and leave my mother. If I had anybody to whom I could entrust her care, I wouldn't hesitate a moment.'

Father John thought for a minute or two, and then said slowly: 'Ned, I'll promise you to care for your mother while you are away. If it is the will of God that you are not to return, I'll see that she will never want for anything.'

A great load seemed to be lifted from Ned's mind as he listened to this generous offer of Father John. He arose, and said: 'I thank you, Father, with all my heart. I'll never forget your kindness. I know mother, too, will appreciate your offer.' Ned left with Father John's blessing, and hastened home to tell the good news.

As he entered the house, his mother met him and asked where he had been so early in the morning. She saw at a glance that he was happy. 'I've made an early call on a good friend,' said Ned, approaching his mother. 'Try to guess who it is!'

'O, I can't,' replied his mother, appealingly. 'Come, Ned, tell me: don't keep me waiting; tell me.'

'Well, I have just left Father John. He has agreed to look after you while I am away with the regiment, and has assured me that he will see that you will not want for anything. Under these circumstances, I have decided to go, mother.'

'Ah, my dear, I knew you would,' exclaimed his mother, as she threw her arms about her stalwart soldier boy. 'Why, you wouldn't be mine, if you didn't. It was very kind of Father John to offer to look after me, but I am quite sure that he will not have very hard work. I have my health, thank the Lord, and while I have that I'm sure I'll not be a charge on anybody.'

In a few hours, Sergeant Ned had completed his arrangements with his employers, had taken a fond farewell of his mother, Father John, and his many friends, and was on his way to the railway station with the rest of the company, en route for the regimental camp. The examinations at the camp by the mustering officers and the surgeons occupied several days. A number of Ned's associates in the company and the regiment had been dropped, owing to their failure to pass the medical and military examinations before being mustered into the United States service. By a series of changes and promotions made necessary by the dropping of some of the regimental officers, Ned found himself, at the end of the week, promoted to the position of regimental adjutant, a position for which his abilities peculiarly fitted him.

We shall omit to tell the story of the dreary wait of many weeks in southern camps, the trip to Cuba, the landing, the skirmishing and the fighting, and the welcomed surrender of the military stronghold of the Spangiards, observing only that Ned and his command acquitted themselves most honourably in the campaign. Then came the homeward trip on the transports, where many of the command died and were buried at sea in military fashion. One of the poor, unfortunate fellows who died at sea bore a name identical with that of Ned. When the transport arrived at Montauk, the names of those who died at sea were given out, and printed in the newspapers. A well-meaning but unthinking neighbour of Ned's mother rushed in and exclaimed, 'Poor Ned died on the transport on his way from Cuba, and was buried at sea.'

The dreadful news was more than the poor woman was prepared to hear. She swooned and fell into the neighbour's arms and remained unconscious. Father John and the doctor were called and everything possible was done to revive the poor woman, but, despite the efforts of the doctor, she remained in a dazed condition for several days. Father John telegraphed the colonel of Ned's regiment to ascertain the truth of the published report. In a few hours came back the word that Ned was alive and well, attending to his duty as regimental adjutant. Ned also sent word by telegraph to his mother that he was well and that he would be home with the regiment in a few days. Father John, on receiving the assurance of his colonel that Ned was alive and well, telegraphed him to come home immediately, as his mother was quite ill. Ned tried hard to get away the day he received the telegram, but he was obliged to serve the customary term in the detention camp. When this time expired he lost no time in starting for home. He arrived late at night, travelling all day, tired and care-worn. A carriage met him at the railroad-station, and he was driven home on the gallop. The moment he placed his foot on the walk leading to the door of his home, his mother seemed to revive. She recognised the footsteps and surprised everybody about her by starting up any saying in a feeble voice, 'That sounds like Ned's footsteps.'

Ned bounded over the stairs anxious to see his mother. He feared that they had not made known to him her true condition. His mother, too, as she afterwards said, took little stock in the story the nurse and the others had told her that Ned's death was all a mistake, owing to the similarity of names. She made up her mind that this story was told to soothe her agitated feelings.