

The Storyteller

THE OFFICER WHO RAN

'Tis strange how the influence of heredity shapes our lives. The story of Dickie Talbot furnishes an interesting problem to those who love to delve in such things.

As a boy Dickie was very timid, and all the vague fears that assail childhood plagued him. Away back among his ancestors must have been some disreputable person with a craven soul, or perhaps his great-great-grandmother, when a child, had been frightened at some old nurse's goblin tales, thereby unconsciously transmitting a shrinking disposition to one of her descendants far down the family line.

In Dickie's blood there lurked a few black drops—a yellow streak among the red—for he was a constitutional coward. Many are born thus and think themselves brave until in the presence of danger, when an unsuspected and hideous spectre of fear rises up to grip them by the throat.

The Fates who, with inscrutable smile, ever sit in the darkness spinning the thread of men's lives, spun for Dickie, and down in the West Indies, where the tropical sun is so fierce that after the heavy rains the miasmatic mist rises in clouds of steam from the dark, smoking earth, the Three Sisters at the end of their weaving remorselessly used their iron shears on his life-cord.

When he entered college he lost some of his excessive timidity and in time developed into a loud-talking, self-assertive Freshman. But the fatal defect in his character remained, ineradicable. With this, as is often the case, he had an inordinate vanity, which led him eagerly to seek after college honors in the classroom and on the athletic field. He led his class in oratory, held a quarter-mile record, and was first tenor in the glee club. Graduating with honors, for the lad did not lack brains or muscle, he entered his father's bank in the village as assistant cashier. Talbot senior was the leading citizen of the town.

There was a military company in the town, which Dickie joined, not from love of a martial life, but because it was quite the thing in a social way to belong to the Governor's Guards. Aided by his father's wealth and influence, in time he was elected commander of the company, and had held that commission for several years when the war with Spain broke out, like sheet lightning from a summer sky.

The Governor's Guards were part of the Fifth Regiment, and this regiment was ordered out at the first call for volunteers by the State.

Very proud and handsome Captain Richard Talbot looked the day he marched away at the head of his company, resplendent in new uniform with gold double-bars, surrounded by cheering men and weeping women.

Two weeks later the Governor's Guards, now known as Company A, were in camp at the State Capital, somewhat against Captain Talbot's will, as he loved ease, and the fatigue and monotony of camp life wearied him greatly. An old West Pointer happened to be in command of the Fifth, and he did his best to drill the regimental legs off daily. Captain Talbot would have gladly resigned, but pride forbade. It would never do for a member of one of the best families of the State to show the white feather in a crisis like that.

After a time the War Department moved the Fifth, with other regiments, down to the sea, where after many vexatious delays, they embarked on a dirty, leaky transport, and, under the command of a fussy little brigadier, set sail to invade Spain's finest possessions in the Caribbean Sea.

Captain Talbot was supremely disgusted with the whole proceeding. The miserable quarters, foul sea smells, badly cooked food, and other discomforts incident to the voyage made him ill. Besides, he began to be a bit afraid of the outcome of what at the start had promised to be only an enjoyable military junket. The two lieutenants of Company A were detached on staff duty, leaving him as the only commissioned officer with the command.

Rumors vague and terrifying flew thick and fast among officers and men. Some descendants of Ananias boldly asserted that Spain had a vast number of ferocious and seasoned veterans waiting to annihilate them on landing.

Other cheerful prevaricators stated to knots of gaping and appreciative listeners that they would certainly be attacked at sea by the enemy's cruisers and every defenceless transport fiendishly sunk with all on board. Not that many of the harum-scarum scamps cared for the prospective danger; they would have joyously welcomed an enemy, and would have fatuously attacked even a torpedo boat with nothing but Springfields and their invincible courage.

They lounged the lazy days on deck, watching the heaving, shining waves as they rushed past, lashed into foam by the fast-spinning screw, which threw up a white, boiling phosphorescent wake behind the ship. Three times a day they brought out hard-tack, cold canned tomatoes, pork and beans, and had a poor picnic, littering the decks and throwing the surplus rations to the myriad finny life which ever followed the ship. Crap games, chuck-a-luck and keno, played on outspread blankets, whiled away the time, enlivened occasionally by a fist fight, the offenders being summarily dragged off by the

guard and cast into the dark forepeak to meditate on their sins. In the cabin the officers played draw-poker from the early morning into far into the night, and sometimes all night. The novelty of the voyage soon wore off, and counting the miles reeled off by the patent log at the stern, or calculating the time of day by the ship's bells, were occupations earnestly engaged in. At twilight the red sun went down where the white-capped waste of water met the purplish azure sky, and one by one the white stars came out and hung glittering in the spangled heavens; then the Southern Cross, like a beautiful jewel, sparkled against the blue dome of infinite space, and the pallid rays of the tropic moon cast an unearthly radiance on the tossing sea. In the misty dawn the bugles blew the shrill reveille, the regiment swarmed out of its swaying hammocks, and, drawn up in two long lines on the freshly-scrubbed decks, were inspected by the fussy little brigadier and the cold-eyed colonel. Ill were the consequences if any 'rookie neglected to appear spick and span in clean blue shirt and khaki trousers, gray hat creased at the proper angle, brown canvas leggings, and shining rifle and accoutrements.

Time passed. The regiment landed with other regiments, a handful of cavalry and a battery or two. After dispersing the feeble resistance of some Guardia Civile, the march was taken up through the smiling country. The inhabitants joyously welcomed the invaders with much 'vivo los Americanos,' incidentally appropriating stray canteens and blankets when their new-found friends were not looking. The little army marched on, the enemy, with desultory skirmishing, persistently retreating. At a strong place in the mountains he finally halted, entrenched and waited to offer battle. The Americans followed fast, and at the close of a hot August day forded a boulder-strewn little river, and within striking distance of the Spaniard bivouacked for the night.

In the gray mist of the morning the fussy little brigadier sat on the top of a huge rock; around him stood his eager staff. Behind and on each side lay the restless, waiting regiments.

Company A was lying down on its blanket-rolls, shivering with the penetrating cold. Up and down in front of the recumbent soldiers Captain Talbot walked with nervous step. Sergeant Burke, an old regular, observed his officer's manner, and as a flash from his pipe lit up the veteran's battle-scarred face a smile disclosed his strong white teeth gripping the pipe-stem.

''Tis unasy he is,' confided Burke to his 'bunkie,' who lay at his feet munching a cold bacon sandwich.

A subdued murmur arose from the company as the men moved uneasily on the hard ground, and speculated on what would happen next. Private Red Finn, who had presided over a keno game the whole of the previous night, had fallen asleep, his head pillowed on a canteen, and was snoring vigorously, as if protesting against the proceedings. A Ph. D., sitting on the wet earth with his rifle across his knees, was discoursing learnedly to an interested squad of listeners on the doctrine of chance, with an appalling application to their present situation.

A mile away, as the fog lifted in smoky rifts and the light of the cloud-smothered sun shone on their sombre tops, the towering mountains loomed above the valley. Through the murk along their sides twinkled little points of light, star-like in their shine. They were the campfires of the Spaniards.

The fussy little brigadier gazed long and earnestly at the position, conversing in low tones with his adjutant, and, from time to time, consulting a rude native map. Suddenly an order issued from his lips, galvanising his staff into action. Many more orders followed, and the battle was about to begin.

The fussy little brigadier planned it all clearly in his head, and part of the plan resulted in the Fifth making a wide detour and marching at route-step in columns of fours along a precipitous, narrow mountain road. They were going to take the enemy from the rear, and, swinging round, try to roll up his right flank. Chance had it that Company A was the advance guard, and 600 yards in front of the regiment it stumbled along in the semi-darkness, muttering curses on the lack of light, the roughness of the road, the quartermaster sergeant for not serving coffee while they were waiting, the commanding-general—at everything. They knew they were going to have a fight.

It was the crucial moment in the life of Captain Talbot, and meant a fierce struggle between pride of position and family and inherited cowardice. With tightly-clenched teeth he marched at the head of the first set of fours, nearly paralysed with cold and fatigue, and the old boyish apprehension of the unknown. He was so unmoved that he overlooked the important precaution of sending forward a party of skirmishers, and this error cost the company dearly.

As they stole along with a faint rattle of accoutrements under the overhanging palms, a single shot rang out, and the right guide next to the captain sank to his knees a little round black hole in his forehead from which the blood slowly oozed. Instantly from behind the frowning rocks skirting the road, a fierce, cracking volley burst out, stabbing the black night with red flashes, and the Mauser bullets whistled and sang among the astonished soldiers. A bullet knocked off the captain's hat, another sniped his shoulder-strap; men were scrambling for cover, and the hoarse voice of Sergeant Burke was heard imploring the 'rookies' to stand firm.

Captain Talbot looked with startled eyes one fearful instant into the Valley of the Shadow, and beheld then the Pale Spectre, vague, monstrous, terrifying; earth and sky seemed to whirl in a round dance about him, punctuated by the constant red jets of flame and deadly whirl of the steel-clad missiles. Panic seized him, and he re-