THE LETTER TO ROSE.

A Romance of War Times and an Odd Meeting.

Night had fallen on the banks of the Chippalogo, and the fight was over. It had been hot and fierce while it lasted, and the battered remnant of Southern troops, though at last they had been forced to flight, leaving one-third their force on the field, had thinned the numbers of their conquerors.

To Roland Pearse, monotonously tramping on sentry duty along the track worn by his own feet in the snow at a tantalizing distance from the nearest of the small watch-fires which gleamed around the central one, where the officers were sunk in sleep, it seemed as if the dawn would never come. A year's hard campaigning had toughened him to all accidents of war, and the coldest and longest night's watch after the hardest day's fighting or marching came to him, as a rule, naturally enough. But he had been wounded in the fight, though not seriously, yet painfully, and between the consequent loss of blood and the bitter cold was weary well nigh to death. In the dead stillness of the night the monotonous chant of the river near at hand combined with weakness and weariness to stupefy his senses, and for minutes together he shuffled along the track he had worn in the snow with a quite unconscious persistence, awakening at the end of his beat with a nerve-shattering start, and falling asleep again ere he had well turned to retrace his steps. At last, a deeper doze was terminated by his falling at full length in the snow. He gathered his stiff, cold limbs together, and limped along shivering, swearing at the snow which had penetrated different loopholes of his ragged uniform, and, slowly melted by contact with his scarce warmer skin, served at least to keep him awake. He drew from his pocket a flask containing a modicum of whiskey. It was little enough—he could have gratefully drunk twice the amount; but, with a self-denial taught by many bitter experiences, he took only a mouthful and reserved the rest for future needs.

With a vague idea that a new beat would somewhat relieve the monotony of his watch, he struck into another track and trudged resolutely at right angles with his former course, the two lines of footsteps making a gigantic cross upon the snow. His former lassitude was again beginning to conquer him, when it was suddenly dissipated by a voice which rang out on the stillness with startling suddenness, instinct with anguish:

"If you have the heart of a man in your breast, for God's sake, help me!"

Twenty feet from where he stood Roland beheld the figure of a man raised feebly on one elbow above the level of the snow. There was only just light enough to distinguish it. He approached it cautiously, with his rifle advanced and shooting rapid glances from the prostrate figure to every clump of snow-covered herbage or inequality of ground which might afford shelter for an ambuscade.

"I am alone," the man said.

He spoke each word upon a separate sob of pain and weakness. He wore the Southern uniform, and Roland saw that one arm and one leg dragged from his body, helpless and distorted. An old sabre cut traversed his face from the cheek-bone to the temple. He looked the very genius of defeat.

"I am dying," he panted to Roland.

The young man pulled his beard as he looked down at him, and shrugged his shoulders with a scarce perceptible gesture.

"I know," said the Southerner. "I don't growl at that. I've let daylight in a few of your fellows in my time, and would again if I got the chance. Now it's my turn, and I'm going to take it quiet. But I want to say something—to write something to my wife in Charleston. Will you do that for me? It isn't much for a man to ask of another. I don't want to die and rot in this cursed wilderness without saying good-by to her."

"You must look sharp, then," said Roland, kneeling beside him, "for I shall be called into camp in a few minutes."

He took an old letter from his pocket, and with numbed fingers began to write, at the wounded man's dictation, on its blank side.

"My darling Rose," he began.

Roland started as if stung by a snake, and bent a sudden look of questioning anger on his companion's face. The Southerner looked back at him for a moment with a look of surprise. Then his face changed.

"Jim Vickers!" said Roland.

"Roland Pearse!" cried the other, and for a moment there was silence between them.

"Last time your name passed my lips," said Roland, slowly, "I swore to put a bullet in you on sight."

"I guess you needn't," said Vickers; "I've got two already. Not that I'm particuliar to a bullet or so, only you might finish the letter first, anyhow. For God's sake, Pearse," he continued, sudden emotion conquering his dare-devil cynicism, "write the letter! It's for Rose. She won't have a cent in the world if I can't send her the news I want you to write, and she and the child will starve. I got her by a trick, know, and a nasty trick, too; but I'd have done murder to get her. She was the one woman I ever cared a straw for, really. And she loves me, too. Shoot me, if you like; but for God's sake write the letter."

Roland bent his head over the scrap of paper again.

"Go on," he said, hoarsely, and Vickers went on, panting out the words with an eagerness which proved the sincerity of his affection. The letter had regard to the disposition of certain sums of money for which the voucher had been destroyed by fire during the siege of Philipville two days previously. It was scarcely ended when a bugle sounded from the camp.

"That's the sentinel's recall," said Roland. "I must get in. I'll forward the letter the first chance I get."

He rose. Vickers, with a dumb agony of grateful entreaty in his face, feebly held up his left hand—the right arm was shattered. After a moment's hesitation Roland bent and took it.

"Here," he said, "take this."

He dropped his flask beside him. "Keep you heart up; perhaps you ain't as bad as you think. I'll see if I can get help for you."

Tears started to the wounded wretch's eyes.

"Rose had better have taken you, I guess," he said. Roland turned sharply away.

"I'll be back as quickly as I can," he said, and ploughed his way back into camp without a single backward glance. Coming to a large tent, the only one in the camp, roughly run up as a temporary hospital, he passed between two rows of prostrate figures, sunk in the sleep of exhaustion or tossing in agony, to where a man in the uniform of an army surgeon was bending, pipe in mouth, over the body of a patient. "I want to speak to you when you've finished, Ned."

The surgeon nodded without raising his eyes, completed his task, ran his blood-stained fingers wearily through his hair and turned to Roland with a yawn and a shiver.

"That's the last of 'em," he said. "I've been at it since nightfall, and I'm dead beat. Cut it short, old man; we start in an hour, and I mean to get a wink of sleep."

"I'm afraid you'll have to do without it," said Roland. "Do you remember Jim Vickers?"

"Jim Vickers," repeated the surgeon.

"Oh, yes! The man who married Rose Bishop."

Ro and winced and nodded.

"He's out there, shot in the arm and leg. Says he's dying. He didn't know me, and asked me to write a word for him to Rose—to his wife. I want you to come and have a look at him."

The surgeon shrugged, with a half yawn.

"He's a reb, I suppose? Haven't seen him in our crowd."

"Yes," said Roland, "but one man is pretty much the same to you as another, I reckon, and you know Rose. You might save him."

Ned shrugged again, tossed some lint and other necessaries into a bag on the table, and they set out together. They found Vickers asleep, with the empty whiskey flask lying on the snow beside him.

There was a ruined shed at a hundred yards' distance, to which they carried the wounded man, who woke and groaned as he was raised. Arrived under shelter, Ned silently betook himself to examining Vickers's wounds. Arm and leg were both shattered, and three of his ribs were broken by a horse's hoof. Roland watched his friend's face, but it wore the aspect of even gravity common to the faces of men of his profession engaged at their work, and nothing was to be learned from it. His task finished, he patted his patient's shoulder, collected his tools and left the shed. Roland followed him to the door.

"What do you think? Can he pull through?"

"He would with proper nursing and good food; not without."

"Can we take him with us?"

"No, the Colonel wouldn't hear of it. We have to join Meade at Petersburg in two days, and we can't afford to be bothered with lame prisoner. Leave him some biscuit and a bottle of whiskey, and let him take his chance. We've done all we could."

"I can't leave him," said Roland.

"You've got mighty fond of him all of a sudden," said Ned, with something of a sneer.

"I'm as fond of him as I always was," answered Roland. "It's Rose."

"Well," said the other, after a moment's silence, and with the air he might have worn had he found himself forced to apply the knife to the flesh of his own child, "if you want my opinion, you shall have it. You'll do a long sight better business for Rose if you let the fellow die. And, besides, you can't save him. He'd take months to heal up in hospital, with every care and attention."

"I might take it," said Roland.

"And be shot for desertion?"

"That's as may be. The chances are I shouldn't be missed till you were too far away to send back for me. I mustound answer to my name, and then see if I can't drop behind."

Ned held his head in his hands as if it would else burst with the folly of his friend's idea.

"I can't stay here all day talking—nonsense," he said angrily. "I'm off into camp."

He strode away, and Roland kept pace with him. He did not need his friend's assurance of the folly of the act he meditated. He quite recognized that, but it was only in the background of his thoughts, which were filled with the memory of a woman's face. How could he leave the man Rose loved to die, while any possible effort of his might suffice to save him?

"Somebody might come along and give me a hand to get him to the nearest town," said Roland vaguely, but tenaciously.

"The nearest town is thirty miles away. How would you get him there? It's impossible. Besides, look at this." He pointed to the sky, an even black of thick gray cloud. "That'll be falling in another hour. You'd be snowed up. And then—hang it all, man, I must be as mad as you are to discuss the thing at all. You don't suppose you're going to get leave of absence to nurse a Johnny Reb?"

The first flakes of the coming snow-storm fell as the detachment started. It marched in very loose order, for the road was rough, the snow deep, most of the men more or less broken with wounds and fatigue, and it was known that no enemy was within sixty miles. Roland fell little by little, to the rear, where the clumsy country wagons lumbered along full of the wounded under Ned's charge.

"You'll take care of the letter," he whispered, and thrust it into his friend's hand. "Good-bye. I shall fall in with the next detachment if I pull through long enough. If not."

He nodded, and at a sudden turn of the road, here thickly surrounded by maple and hemlock, darted among the trees, and listened, with his heart in his ears, to the jingle and clatter of arms as his comrades marched on. It died away upon the snow-hidden road, and he retraced his steps to the shed with an armful of dry leaves and twigs, with which, by the sacrifice of one of his few remaining cartridges, he speedily made a blazing fire. Vickers lay quiet, watching him through half-shut lids.

"Say, Roland," he said, presently, "wha sort of game is this?"

"I'm going to see if I can pull you through," said Roland, with an affectation of cheerfulness.

"You can't," said Vickers. "I heard what Ned said just now. I'm booked for the journey through, I know it. Don't be a fool. Follow the boys and leave me here. I'm beyond any man's help. You won't? Well, you always were a mutinous-headed sort of creature. I never knew you to have more than one idea at a time, and that one wasn't worth much, as a general thing. But this is madness, sheers, fark madness! Look at the snow! Another hour or two, and we shall be snowed up. It's just chucking a good life after a bad one. I know you ain't doing it for me. It's for Rose. Well, if it was any use, I wouldn't say no. But it isn't. I shall be a dead man in twenty-four hours at most. Nothing can save me."

"I'm just going to the wood," said Roland, taking up his gun, and speaking in a quite casual tone. "If there's any game about, this weather will drive it under cover. I'll be back presently, anyhow."

He flung some of the broken timber of the shed upon the fire and went out.

He had not taken six paces through the blinding flakes when Vickers's voice rang out with startling loudness and suddenness. "Good-by, Roland!" and a loud report seemed to shake the crazy old hut to its foundation.

Roland ran back. Vickers was lying dead, with firelight playing frightly on the barrel of a revolver clinched in his left hand.

Ten minutes later he was lying in a deep snow drift, and Roland was tramping through the snow on the track of his detachment.—*Boston Times.*

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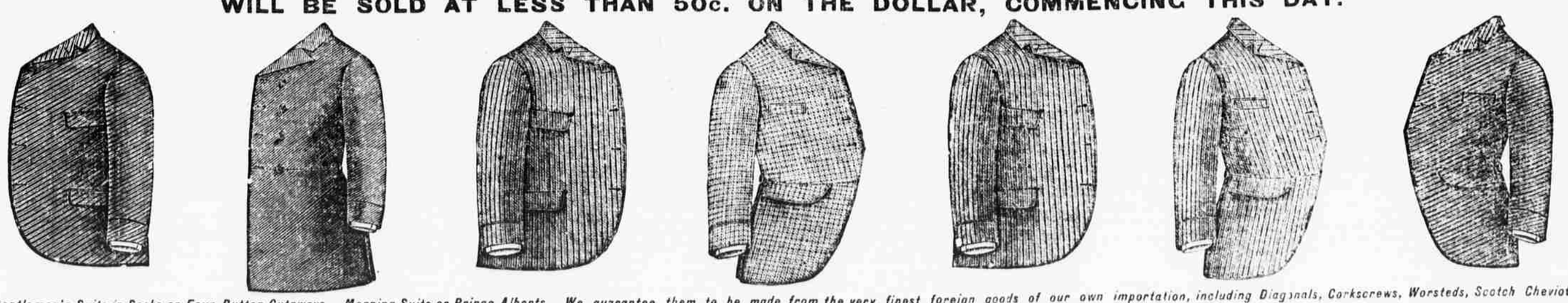

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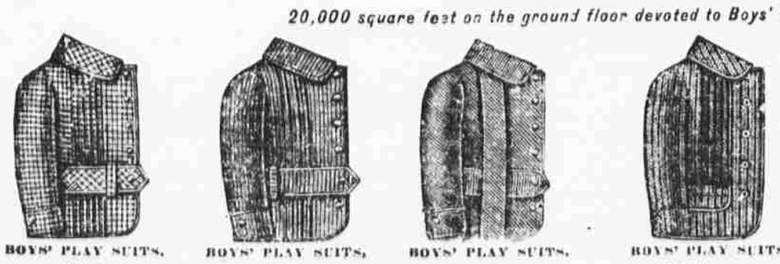

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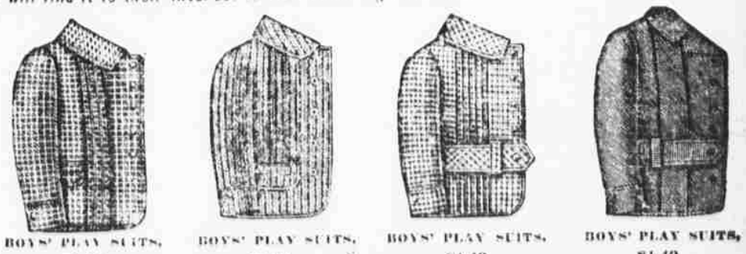

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