



A Terrible Great Battle

With an extra blanket for himself, and the milk and the whiskey, and a packet of cigarettes and a little more tea, Mickey climbed the hill and came late to his camp. Through the huge solemnity of the woods in the night, and the cool air running between the trunks like a fairy, he came to the glow of his fires and the long shadows, and suddenly knew that he was home. Tired as he was, this knowledge that his bed was only a few yards away, and that the great wood was his house, gave him the delightful ease, long remembered and never quite explained, such as a tramp might feel, at night in the streets of a city, if a great palace lifting before him were all of a sudden to welcome him.

Soon he slept; the blackbirds woke them all; and they had their breakfast of boiled eggs, bacon and tea. And now Mickey put out only one sentry, telling him to move about a good deal and to watch the country at the back of the hill. He wanted to have the rest of his army handy, being sure that Patsy Hefferman would attack him very soon. And Jimmy Mullins was sure of it too, when they talked it over. "He's an agent of a big English insurance company," said Jimmy, "and goes about the country a lot on a bicycle. That's how he got to know it so well. But he'll want to be getting on with his work, so he'll come for us as quick as he can get his army together."

"That's so," said Mickey.

"What'll you do?" asked Jimmy.

"Sure, there's two ways of beating an army, and only two, in the books," said Mickey; "and many's the time I've read of them."

"What's those ways?" asked Jimmy.

"Two good ways," said Mickey. "One is to break its center, and the other to roll up one of its flanks."

"And which is the best?" asked Jimmy.

They were talking by themselves a little way off from the fire, at which the rest were seated.

"Sure, there's no comparison," said Mickey. "If we broke their center we'd have to go slap at them, and when we got there they'd be all round us. It'd be very close fighting, and we'd lose lots of men. That'd do well enough for big armies that couldn't move about quickly, like what the King of Babylon used to have. But we'll get away and attack one of the flanks. We'll have no one behind us then, and only one man in front of us."

"Only one man?" said Jimmy, puzzled.

"Sure, that's all," said Mickey. "If Patsy has a hundred men, and all in a row coming up the hill, and we get round and fire from a flank, there's only one man can fire back at us, but they all get our bullets."

"Begob, it's a great idea," said Jimmy, not knowing that he bestowed praise somewhat late on these tactics, which were well worn before Julius Caesar.

And as they talked the sentry came in, to tell that there was dust rising off a road a long way out in the plain.

"It'll be Patsy Heffernan," said Mickey.

"Are they within shot?" asked Jimmy.

"Sure, Patsy would never do that," said Mickey.

"They are not," said the sentry.

"He'd never bring a column along a road within shot of the wood," said Mickey.

Then Mickey gave orders to wrap all their possessions, except their rifles and ammunition, in the big sheet of canvas, and to bury it together with their two spades under a few inches of earth and moss, while he went with the sentry to the edge of the wood to watch the dust coming nearer. Before going he saw his trans-

port tied to a tree with as long a piece of cord as they were able to knot together, and a pail of water by the trunk of the tree; and ordered two of his men to collect and throw down beside it a bundle of extra grass. It was a dry day at the end of March, and they saw the dust before they made out the men marching. They watched them marching until ten o'clock, then saw them halt and eat some meal by the roadside; and at half-past ten they saw them leave the road in two parties and cross the fields in opposite directions; they were in fact making a line across the country along the foot of the hills. Mickey saw at once what they were doing, and noted that there must be nearly a hundred of them.

"He's brought his whole army," he said to the sentry. But he need not have been surprised, for Mickey had done all he could to make out his own army to be one that merited such a display of force.

He saw them spread to about five paces between man and man, and by half-past ten they were coming up the hill, moving rather north-westwards. Mickey ran back to his men. It was the left flank that he fancied most. If he attacked the right he would be all in Patsy Heffernan's country, whereas attacking Patsy's left he could at least have his back to the country he knew. But first of all he lined up his men along the edge of the wood, and opened fire on Patsy Heffernan's force. They halted then at nearly a thousand yards, and lay down, and Mickey's men could hear them firing, fire that at first seemed unconnected with them, a noise in a far country. And then the first bullet arrived, dropping short and ricocheting, and going over them with a clear cry; and very soon several more. The trees were beginning to drop twigs on them. Mickey's men fired back as fast as they could, till he blew a whistle and stopped them. Then he led them back through the wood and over the top of the hill, and along the western side of it he must have run with them for nearly a mile, coming over the hill again when he was about opposite the end of Patsy's left flank. Unseen by the enemy he got to a point that was about eight hundred yards from Patsy's left-hand man, while they were all still firing into the wood. There he opened fire over a stone wall, and so well he achieved surprise that it was some minutes before a sin-

gle bullet from Patsy's men hit one of the stones of the wall and screamed away upwards. Then Patsy's flank began to assort itself, so that instead of the one man who was able to fire at Mickey, there was soon a line of ten or a dozen; and bullets began to come over with that sharp crack, the intensity of which is the most noticeable of all the noises of battle.

Though Patsy's firing line was now a little stronger than Mickey's, and was even slowly increasing, as Patsy's officers began to understand what was happening and brought up a few more men, yet the advantage was still with Mickey, for all his bullets that went past that dozen men went right down Patsy Heffernan's line, uttering the single harsh syllable of which all men know the meaning. A little longer of this, and Mickey felt that his right to obtain provisions from any of the farms he had visited would no longer be questioned. And Patsy Heffernan's thoughts were not much different.

Suddenly there came a change. Again a haze of dust went up from a road. There was a flash from a brass button, far off, catching the sunlight. There shone some of the color so lacking in modern battlefields. The long rattle of horses' hooves floated up from the plain. And Patsy Heffernan ceased firing. Then, leaving the road, a column, bright with twenty pink coats, spread out and came up the hill between the two armies. It was the M.V.H., the famous Mountain and Valley Hounds, coming to draw those very woods for a fox.

"What are they doing?" said the Master to his huntsman, for Mickey's men were still firing.

"They're only having a battle, sir," came the answer.

"Well, tell them to stop," said the Master. "We can't draw the covert with all that going on."

And Old Jack cantered off, and came to the stone wall.

"What are you lads doing?" he called.

"Sure, we're fighting Patsy Heffernan," came the answer from the one that was nearest to him.

"Well, you can't do that here," said the huntsman.

"I don't know about that," said the other, slipping in one more cartridge for Patsy Heffernan's men. "You must ask the General."

"Where is he?" asked Old Jack. And the firing died down.

"What is it?" shouted Mickey.

"You can't fight a battle here," said Old Jack.

"Why not?" said Mickey.

"Because we're going to draw the covert," replied Old Jack.

"Can't you wait?" asked the General.

"We can not," said Old Jack. "It's our last meet near here for this season."

"We're fighting a battle," said Mickey.

"I know that," said Old Jack. "But we have to draw this covert. Or there wouldn't be a hen left in the whole country."

"Are the foxes as bad as that?" asked Mickey.

"Sure they are," said Old Jack. "Sure you don't see the claims on the fowl-fund as we do."

"Are they all in this wood?" asked Mickey.

"Look at the size of it," said Old Jack.

"Sure there's room for them," agreed Mickey.

"I'm telling you," said the huntsman, "there wouldn't be a hen left in the whole country. And you'll have all the people against you."

"Ah well," said Mickey. "Cease fire."

And the hounds went on up the hill.

The change that came over the battle was not due so much to this pause as that most of Patsy Heffernan's army, and the whole of his right flank, went up the hill to see the hounds draw the covert. On such occasions there is usually an honorable understanding not to change the position of troops, but no such understanding could hold against the Mountain and Valley Fox-hounds: as well expect people to draw down their blinds when the hunt rode through a village. And by the time that the hounds left covert the whole strategy of that battle was altered.

Old Jack gave a wave of his hand and the hounds ran jubilantly into the wood, and there came that tense minute when all is silent in covert. Then a hound gave tongue, and then all of them; but not that high clamorous note with which they greet the enemy that they share with man; it was a cry angry and deep that they were uttering, almost a roar. "A badger," said Old Jack, as he heard the

deep note of that tumult. Further and further into the deeps of the wood those voices roared away, till the badger came to a fastness of rocks wherein his family had dwelt for ages; the hounds were all round him and he was slow, but their teeth could not get through his skin, and he eluded them at a great shaft in the rocks that was called the Devil's chimney, because it went right down to the river that runs where the devil had dived, when he went under the hills to escape from the sword of St. Michael.

One whip went into the wood, but all the rest of the hunt rode on the slope outside, keeping level as they could with the pack for as long as they heard them. For a long while there was silence in the wood, when suddenly there broke out that cry that to hunting people is what cockcrow is to the farmstead, almost what dawn is to the world, the cry of a pack that has found its fox. After that everything that they had gathered there for began for them; the wide plain smiling in sunlight had now a meaning for them; hedges, streams, stone walls, that they had idly noticed, but as strangers having no share in them, became now so much a part of their own lives that their lives even depended on the skill with which they and their horses dealt with these obstacles. And the exhilaration with which they saw the hounds pouring down the hill from the wood, with the wide plain before them and great fields splendid for galloping, spread to all onlookers and the whole of Patsy's army. They watched the hounds, those men of Patsy Heffernan, till they could see them no longer, they watched till the last red coat and brass button were far away over the plain, and it was long before they slowly turned their backs to get on with their battle with Mickey.

The whole strategy of the battle was altered. Patsy Heffernan's right wing, in their eagerness to see hounds leave covert, had strayed as far as the wood, and the rest of them straggled all the way up the slope; while Mickey's army had not moved at all, except to show their heads frequently, by Mickey's orders, over different parts of the wall, so as to deceive the enemy as to their numbers; but no one had seen them, being all turned the other way to see all they could of the fox-hunt. Men who tell of that day tell of a marvelous fox-hunt, that carried the "Mountain and Val-

ley" far over that wide plain, till one of the last of the watchers standing high on the hill and gazing into the blue distance said at last to another, "I can't see tail or trace of them:" they tell of a kill far off, getting on towards evening; they tell nothing of any fight. It is as though History willfully forgot both Mickey and Patsy Heffernan, and turned her back on that battle.

Yet all the more for the neglect of History must I describe the main features of this battle for my reader. They were these: Patsy Heffernan's army straggling all the way from his original line to the wood was now roughly parallel with Mickey's, while some of them straying through the wood in the hopes of finding a dead badger cut Mickey off from his hidden camp in which were all his provisions. Mickey opened a frontal fire, but realized that no good could come of it; and far from outflanking the enemy any longer, his own left flank was threatened by the men in the wood. Not only that but, from enfilading fire which must come the moment the men came out of the wood, the wall was no protection. Mickey increased the rapidity of his fire, and then slipped away down hill, under cover of the wall, as fast as he could move his men, before the men could fire at him from the wood. He was only just in time, and they soon came after him, and passed the news of his movement all along their line. The whole of Patsy Heffernan's army was now in pursuit of him, coming down from the wood, while he going down to the farmlands was leading his men into the enemy's country. Bullets from outside the wood now began to come over them, without the fierce crack that they make at shorter ranges, but hissing like rather lazy snakes. There was no flank of Patsy's that he was able to get at, and he continued his retreat down the hill. Soon his stone wall came to an end and he had to cross open fields in full view of the whole of the hostile army, and the number of bullets increased. At the first hedge he halted his men and fired at the enemy, but found that this did not stop them, so he stopped to fire no more, as it only lost time. Soon after his delay at the hedge he came to more level ground, while the enemy were still on the slope, and with the hill and victory to help them they were decreasing the distance between them and Mickey. Mickey's army ran on, while a strong wind that was ris-

ing seemed almost to push them back. If he stopped to fight there would soon be casualties when Patsy's line came closer. Suppose he lost two men! What general would risk, except for the most promising objective, a quarter of his entire force? The question was now where to go. O'Dwyer's farm with its haystack was now in sight. Could that haystack be his Corunna? No; for he was in full sight from the hill and, though the orchard might hide them as they entered the haystack, it would be a sufficiently likely hiding-place to be thoroughly searched if they went anywhere near, especially by a general like Patsy Heffernan who had lived much in haystacks himself, when freeing Ireland from the invader.

An hour ago Mickey had been fighting with a distinct advantage against an enemy that regarded him as an equal, and the advantage had been due to his own generalship. Then an event had occurred on the battlefield that had nothing to do with the battle, and as a result his superior position was utterly lost, and he was in full retreat, with the insignificance of his army known to the enemy. I cannot find any such effect on a battle by a totally extraneous force, in all military history. The only parallels that seem to suggest themselves are the angels at Mons, and the Russians a little later that, landing in Scotland from Vladivostok, fell on the German flank in the same advance, but acting independently of the angels. Yet neither of these so ruined a general's plans as that appearance of the Mountain and Valley Hounds treated poor Mickey's.

His rapid retreat was in exactly the opposite direction to that in which he wanted to go: if he could get to the woods a force like his was safe, but the enemy were all the way between him and the woods. And there was no getting round; they would be overtaken while they tried to do that: there was nothing for it but to keep straight on. The haystack was now before him, like a friendly but untenable fortress, only a few hundred yards away. Beyond it lay open fields, where they could never get out of view and must either be shot down or captured. And the enemy were closer, as they could tell without judging distance, for the bullets were now once more making their ear-splitting crack. And, more depressing than any of these things, came a question gasped

by Jimmy Mullins as he ran: "Where are we going, General?" It showed Mickey that confidence in himself no longer went without saying.

"To that haystack," he said.

"We can't hide behind a haystack, sure," said Jimmy.

"I cut a hole in it that will hold us all," replied Mickey.

And that was a point to the General, till Jimmy countered, as Mickey had feared he would, with the remark, "They will search the haystack."

It almost forced from Mickey the words, "They will not." And as he said them there came to him an idea.

"Why not?" asked Jimmy.

"You'll see," said Mickey.

He increased the pace of his army and gained a little on Patsy. The wind that was blowing against them seemed even stronger now, and it was nine very tired men that reached O'Dwyer's farm. There were no men there except O'Dwyer, for the farm lads had joined Patsy Heffernan; and O'Dwyer was in the house. "Get a bucket each from the cowsheds," he shouted to his men. Then he ran into the house and found Alannah. O'Dwyer was there too. "What is it?" he said.

"Sure, it's a bit of a battle," said Mickey. "It would be best to stay in the house."

But he asked Alannah to come with him to the haystack and to bring two large jugs with her. He put her on the far side of the stack in case Patsy should be sending any more bullets, the side on which he had made his tunnel; and as his men came up with pails he told them to run to the duck-pond and throw palls of water over both sides of the haystack and the back of it and the top, but not over the front of it.

"Is it insured?" he said to Alannah.

"Sure, it is," she said. "What are you going to do?"

"Is it insured in Ireland?" he asked.

"It is not," she said. "Patsy Heffernan insured it with the big company."

"Ah that's in England, then, and it won't matter," said Mickey.

"It will not," she said.

"We'll have to burn it," he told her. "And I wouldn't burn your father's haystack if it weren't insured."

"Why will you burn it?" she asked.

"Sure, it's the only cover we have for miles," he said, "and they'd see us all the way over these fields. We must hide here."

"But why burn it?" she said again.

"Sure, isn't it the first place they'd search if we didn't. The water should prevent it coming along the surface to us, and this wind is just right. Say we lit it and ran on. And keep it as wet as you can for us."

"I will that," said Alannah, "and my father will help."

Whether she told her father they were inside or not Mickey never knew. But a hose was brought from the house and Mickey later heard it being played in the right place, keeping the fire from coming round the sides to the back of the haystack. It was a good big stack and Mickey had no fear of the fire coming through the middle for a long time, especially with that strong wind against it. Patsy's army was now so near that they could have seen Mickey's men throwing water over one side of the haystack if he had kept them at it any longer, so he opened his door of hay and got them all into his tunnel; then he went round to the front and lit the haystack and squeezed into his tunnel, and Alannah tied up the pieces of hay behind him.

In about a minute Patsy's men came through the orchard, and Alannah explained to Patsy himself that Mickey had lit her father's haystack and gone on with his men over the fields. For all that, Patsy searched the house and the cowsheds.

"For the love of Heaven be quick," said Alannah, "or you won't catch him."

In the dark of the haystack Mickey listened to the crackle and roar of the fire, deciding to stay as long as he could. But after a little while his door of hay opened. "Are you hot in there?" asked Alannah.

"We are not," said Mickey.

"Well, you can come out now," she said, "for they're gone."

"All of them?" asked Mickey.

"The whole army," she said.

Mickey came out with his men, and got them at once round to the far side of the haystack into the smoke; but he himself stood and looked at Patsy's army, hurrying away from him over the fields. Then he fell in his men to march them away.

"Would you like any more ammunition after your battle?" said Alannah. "For we have a few rounds."

And he took from her twenty cartridges, for his .303 rifles; and thanked her, and Alannah wished him luck and cheerily said good-by.

But O'Dwyer was laying down his hose, as he looked regretfully at his burning haystack.

"Sure, such things must happen in war," said Mickey, and marched back to the woods.