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Strange STORIES


VOL. III, NO. 3

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JUNE, 1940

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STRANGE STORIES, published bi-monthly by Better Publications, Inc. 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y. N. L. Pines, Editor. Entered as second class matter November 3rd, 1933, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Postage paid at New York, N. Y. and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Please send address changes to **STRANGE STORIES**, 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y. Yearly, \$3.00; single copies, \$0.15; foreign and Canadian, \$0.20. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are accepted for mailing at special rate of postage provided for in Section 1103, Act of October 3, 1917. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If any name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.



Soldier, Rest

By ROBERT D. PRICE

Author of "Dark Wanderer," "Every Wednesday," etc.

A New Kind of Memorial Day Awaited Cal Dudley's Restless Shade when He Sought Surcease on the Old Battlefield!

THE sun lay heavy on woodland and furrowed field as old Cal Dudley slipped slowly, like the shadow he was, down the familiar path to the quiet glade along Antietam Creek, close by Burnside's Bridge.

The shriveled little wraith of a man was tired. The fatigue of three score and eighteen years of wandering had drained him of all energy, washed him of all strength. He ached with longing for rest.

The glade was cool and quiet, like a dim cathedral. Cal Dudley sighed a soft little sigh, as he settled down with his back propped against a tree. This was the nearest thing to peace that he had known since he had been wrenched from life to become a roving spirit, homeless and unsleeping.

Since that bloody June day of 1862, he had roamed the world, a spirit in a world of men, alone and miserable. The misty little man in regimentals of faded blue had trailed the dwindling armies of blue and of gray. He had seen them fade to a grizzled rearguard, had seen them laid to rest in honored graves while a dull twinge of envy threaded through his soul.

Always, in brief interims of semi-rest, an invisible magnet had drawn him back to this little glade, for brief surcease before the claw in his soul sent him forth again.

Now, as much alone as when he first awoke in that bloody sunset so long ago, he leaned against a tree and stared at the placid water. Even the creek had a purpose and a



The old soldier was very tired

goal—it had a channel to steer its flowing to the sea.

He had—nothing.

A lilting, happy whistle floated into the old man's reverie and a chubby little boy skipped into the clearing.

The lad was pink of cheek, his tow head was tousled. He was just such a boy as Cal Dudley once had been, a little older than the Cal, Jr., he had left behind when he marched

away to war from a farm in the nearby Pennsylvania hills.

The little old soldier smiled benevolently as the boy ran to the creek and looked down at the smooth-flowing water. High water of a week ago had undermined the bank where he stood, and the sod had crumbled away, exposing long-buried earth to the sunshine.

HEAVY trees were a wall against all sound. Only the delicate song of a breeze in the green leaves overhead and the silver music of the creek disturbed the stillness. Long, restless years ago, on the day Cal Dudley died with the steel of a bayonet deep between his ribs, this glade had not been such a place of peace.

Then, as now, the somnolent haze of summer had lain warmly upon the land.

The distant mountains had been veiled in thin, blue mist, the silken dust smothered the roads.

But the glade and the surrounding fields had been dim in swirling smoke and the woodland had shivered to crackling gunfire and the shrill yells of men locked in combat. The grass had turned red in the dye of their blood and the current of the creek ran pink from bank to bank.

In that mad chaos of battle, Cal Dudley had died—with the lean bulk of a soldier in butternut looming above him, and the hammer of his own revolver clicking on an empty chamber.

He had awakened in a dusk shot through with the afterglow of a crimson sunset. The spot where he had fallen had been churned to a pulp of earth by the surge of charging feet and he was adrift, condemned by an impelling urge he could not fathom, to seek a peace he could not find.

The boy picked up a round, flat rock and skimmed it across the water. He laughed in glee as it bounced into the grass on the opposite bank.

The youngster leaned down for another stone, stopped to yank at

something white protruding from the earth.

It was long and knobbed at each end, chalky, clodded with bits of dirt—a bone.

The boy's eager fingers dug again into the moist ground, laid another weathered bone beside the first. Then came a sliver of steel, brown and crusted from years of intimacy with the earth.

A mother's summons for her son sounded from the stippled shade of the nearby road, and the boy looked up brightly as a man and a woman emerged into the clearing, the man bearing a lunch basket in his hand. The boy beckoned them to the creek, pointed proudly to the bits of bone and the splinter of steel.

They looked in awe and in silence. The father knelt by the naked earth of the creek bank. His probing fingers found a button, once bright and polished, now dark and stained. Its rounded surface bore the dim outlines of two letters—"U.S."

THE man held the little button in his open palm.

"Here's all that's left of a brave man—a couple of bones and a dirty button," he said, and there was a tear in his voice.

"A soldier," the woman breathed. "He's lain here all these years, just where he fell. He never had a decent grave, never had anyone to lay him to rest." A sob welled from her throat.

"It isn't too late!" The man knelt and placed the button beside the faded bones. "We can have him buried now. It would give a new significance to this Memorial Day."

His hand patted the shining hair of the silent boy. His eyes strayed to the lunch basket, forlorn and forgotten on the grass.

"We've been coming here a good many years for Memorial Day picnics," he said, "but I have a feeling this will be the best Memorial Day of all."

"You're thinking of your grandfather, aren't you? He was a brave man and he died at Antietam, too."

"I suppose he did. He was listed

as missing after the battle, you know, and the family never heard from him again. He must have been a grand man, from grandmother's tales of him, but I've never felt as close to him, even on these picnics here at Burnside's Bridge, as I do this minute. Somehow, I feel that, in honoring this old fellow, we'll be honoring grandfather, too."

There was mysticism and a knowledge of unseen things in his voice, but the syllables fell on Cal Dudley's ears like the patter of far-away rain. And when they went away, he relaxed again into the fog of fatigue that engulfed him.

But soon they came again, the man and the woman and the tow-headed boy. And with them came men bearing shovels, and men carrying cameras and sheafs of paper on which they scribbled with stubs of pencils.

All of them stood while shovels dug into the chocolate earth. Later, they stared in silent awe, as had the man and the woman before them, at a few more scraps of lifeless bone.

The bones and the button and the sliver of steel were borne reverently away, and the clearing once again was left to the unseen soldier and his uncomprehending soul. Cal Dudley merely sat beneath his tree and wondered vaguely why he did not feel impelled to resume his roaming. Peace seemed so close he could almost touch it, yet it was not quite within his grasp, not yet—

Then, in the sunset, a sunset of gold and of crimson, and of purple-lined clouds, people once more clustered in the clearing.

ON THEIR shoulders, they brought a box, velvet-lined and sturdy. In it reposed the chalky bones, the button and the sliver of steel.

Cal Dudley watched idly as men

again plied shovels, not on the bank this time but back under the dusky trees. They dug a little excavation, laid the box tenderly in its depths.

Suddenly—if anything that might happen to him now could be called sudden—Cal Dudley felt strength flow into his limbs. He rose, not by his own will, and walked toward the silent circle and the hole in the musty earth.

And the more sensitive in the group of onlookers felt a flutter in the air as the words of a prayer for the soul of the unknown soldier were intoned by a man in black, who spoke with head bowed low. But none of them saw the wisp of a man in blue filter through them and stand looking into the open grave as a prodigal looks at home.

Nor did they see him descend into the grave, lay down and relax in sudden ease. Calmly he closed his eyes, and turned his face to the sky, eager for the first caress of warm, falling earth.

Three score and eighteen years of roaming were ended — Cal Dudley had found peace.

The sun had gone, leaving only a faded glory in the western sky.

The last spine-prickling notes of "Taps" still vibrated in the twilight air. A little mound of earth marked where the soldier slept, at peace and at rest at last.

All the people had left save the three who had found the faded bones.

The man and the woman stood at the edge of the glade, looking back to the boy beside the grave. His little figure was straight, his hand moved up in impulsive, boyish salute.

Softly the woman called him.

And, with a lingering look at the quiet mound, Calvin Dudley 4th ran to his mother's outstretched hand.