

THE BIRD THAT WAS NOT COOKED.

BY HARRY C. ANTES.



“HAD we ever play draw in the army? Well, yes, we sometimes had a little game.”

The Major smiles, as some pleasing reminiscence of the past passes through his mind. He leans back indolently in his easy chair, carefully wipes his mouth and military whiskers with a napkin, and then, in his slow, deliberate manner, proceeds to fill his cherished meerschaum with his favorite tobacco.

It is the regular Saturday evening session of our “club,” restricted both as to membership and betting limit. It is more of a social than a gaming club, although the regular business of the evening is never neglected.

It is our custom, as the ghostly hour of midnight draws nigh, to send one of the “boys” to the cafe on the corner, for the purpose of purchasing a slight collation. For this purpose we levy a trifle from each jack-pot played between eleven and twelve. It is just after we have partaken of this refreshment, when the Major is in his best humor, that he often favors us with a choice anecdote ere we return to the game. And as to-night he has been pleased to graciously approve of the taste displayed by the gentleman who was elected caterer for the evening, and as his stack of “blues” is rather tall, we anticipate a good yarn.

“D’I ever tell you about the great game that I sat in one night while we lay in front of Vicksburg? No? You would like to hear the story? All right, then, here goes!

“Well, boys, it was while Grant’s army was besieging Vicksburg. I tell you it was hot down there those days. Not like it is now, when a lot of boy tin soldiers strut around with an old musket on their shoulder, and imagine that the carrying of a gun and the knowledge of the meaning of a few military phrases makes all there is of a soldier. M-m-m-m-m!”

The Major sniffs in contempt, glaring defiantly over his spectacles at Pete Shuffle, who belongs to the State Militia, which said organization, by the way, for reasons unknown, the old soldier hates and detests most cordially. But as Pete (good-nat-

ured youth as he is) forbears to argue, and urges the Major on with a deprecating wave of his hand, the latter forgets his spleen and continues :

“Time hung heavy upon our hands. As you know, Grant had thrown a line of earthworks nearly around the doomed city, and behind them, in mud and heat, lay the Union soldiers, and fought flies and insects, cussed the ‘rebs’ and Jeff Davis, swapped lies and tobacco, contracted debts, rheumatism and pneumonia, killing time as best they could. We had become used to the infernal din made by the big guns, which kept pounding away night and day, so that we could sleep pretty soundly through it all. Occasionally, however, a shell would drop down in the midst of the sleepers, and then they would awaken speedily and take a yelling and absorbing interest in the subsequent proceedings of that shell. Yes, a shell now and then greatly relieved the monotony.

“‘How about the game?’ Yes, yes, I’m coming to that right away. Don’t be impatient, boy.

“Rations were poor—hard-tack and salt pork for the most part, with coffee made from chicory and the muddy water of the river. Fresh meat was a rare treat to us.

“One raw, chilly morning the boys of our mess were awakened by the loud, shrill crowing of a cock. Such welcome sounds we had not heard for many and many a long day. We were wide awake at once. Without delay we proceeded to arise and investigate.

“Directly in front of our tent, upon an empty box, sat a fat Dutchman, Sneider by name. In his hand he held a string which was attached to the yellow leg of a lean and scraggy rooster who was engaged in picking up a few stray kernels of corn which lay scattered upon the ground. He was a starved-looking, disreputable old game-cock, had lost one eye and wore a general air of age and decrepitude. Nevertheless, Sneider was contemplating the movements of his new possession with satisfaction, and we ourselves hailed the appearance of this new member of our company with great enthusiasm.

“‘Hoorah! Pot-pie!’ yelled one.

“‘Stew! Soup! Roast! Stuffed! Baked!’

“Everyone had a different suggestion to make, each and all smacked their lips in anticipation. As for me, I always did like fried chicken.

“‘Bully for you, Dutchy!’ exclaimed Jake Simmons, a long, lank New Englander.

"Dutchy turned and calmly regarded the speaker.

"'Vat vor you zay, bully, Dutchy, eh?'"

"'Why, because you have a chicken, of course. Who's hen-roost is shy?'"

"'Yah, I haf got me a leetle shickeen. Vat is more, I shall keep me dot leetle shickeen,' replied Dutchy, altogether ignoring the base insinuation conveyed in the latter phrase of Simmons' question.

"We exchanged looks of alarm. Snieder had never been regarded as the most brilliant man in camp, and the thought that we would have trouble in coaxing him to share the treat had never entered our minds.

"'My good little friend,' said I, soothingly, 'surely, you do not mean to eat that great, big rooster all alone? Why, man, you are not used to such rich fare, it's apt to cause indigestion. And indigestion, you are well aware, causes fever, and fever in this locality is nearly always fatal.'

"Dutchy slowly arose to his clumsy feet, beckoning to me with his fat forefinger.

"'Coom you here.'

"I obeyed, thinking that I was the lucky man with whom he had decided to share his 'leetle shickeen.' Good, generous heart! My breast heaved with emotion, and my face was wreathed with smiles as I thought of the generosity of the good little man. I did not blame him in the least for not wanting to share his treasure with six or eight great, hulking fellows. That fowl was just large enough for two.

"When I had approached, with his thumb and forefinger he opened wide his big blue eye.

"'Look you mit dot eye in.'

"I complied, although my fond hopes of a chicken fry in the near future began to vanish.

"'See you some green mit dot eye, eh?' he demanded.

"Well, I decided that there was nothing so very verdant, to be sure, in 'dot eye,' but I did see indications of a hoggish nature therein, although I was careful not to tell him so, for I still hoped against hope; so I merely told him that if any verdant thing existed in his eye it was below the surface and could not be seen.

"'Vell, den,' he exclaimed, in triumph, 'vas dot shickeen so pig as an osterich, dot I should share heem mit von—tree—seex—I know not how many more—pig vellows all, hey? Nein, nein!

Dot leetle yallow vas pig enough vor yoost von alone. I haf heem caught, I vill heem eat. To-day I vill fat heem, to-morrow I vill eat heem. Coom, my leetle pirdie, coom mit me. Shentlemen, I vish you all goot-day.'

"Dutchy tucked his fowl lovingly under his arm, laughing softly and winking his eye at us in a most aggravating manner as he retreated. Strange how selfish some men are. His hog-gishness made me so angry that I could have brained him and taken the rooster away from him with pleasure.

"But one and all, we were of the same mind. We must, by hook or by crook, obtain possession of the chicken.

"Various and many were the stratagems to which we resorted in our efforts to separate the loving couple. Slyly we enticed the rooster from his master's vicinity with corn scattered in a line extending under our tent, where an eager man lay in wait for the unwary fowl. The onery critter ate the corn up to the very edge of the tent, and then, when success almost crowned our efforts, Dutchy would yank at the string and pull him, squawking and fluttering, back to his protecting arms. We created a panic, and put ourselves in jeopardy of a court-martial by yelling, at the top of our voices, 'Fall in! Fall in! Rebs! Rebs!' hoping in the excitement that Sneider, for one brief moment, might desert his precious rooster. But alas! Our efforts were all in vain. Dutchy, it is true, ran, gun in hand, to his place in the ranks, but from under his greasy waistcoat there protruded the scarred, one-eyed head of an old game-cock. We tried to spirit him away while Sneider slept. But he slept with one eye open and foiled our best efforts. Strange how circumstances had sharpened the obtuse mind of that Dutchman.

"(Yes, I will get to the game in a moment now. Patience, patience!)

"When morning again dawned, Sneider was still the proud owner of the fowl, and with much cheerfulness he began to prepare for an early slaughter and his own subsequent refreshment. Then, at length, goaded into desperation, five of us, 'Lanky' Tompkins, Sam Withers, Lew Hotchkiss, Murray and myself, fell upon our last resort, 'chipped in four bits' apiece and purchased that tough old rooster at the exorbitant price of two dollars and fifty cents.

"Immediately there was another difficult question to settle.

"'We'll bile that critter,' solemnly proclaimed 'Lanky,' as we stood in an admiring circle around our new property. 'En

we can throw into the pot a few potatoes, a handful of corn and beans and an onion, (if we can contrive to steal them somewhere,) put in a leetle salt and pepper, and there *you* be! Chicken and chicken-soup!

“‘Bile yer grandmother!’ interrupted Lew Hotchkiss, with hot and irrelevant disdain. ‘Ain’t yer got no sense? There is only one way to cook that fowl, and that way is to bake him.’

“‘First bile him, then bake him, else he’ll be tougher than all git-out,’ said Sam Withers.

“Murray suggested pot-pie. As for me, be that game-cock tough or tender, old or young, I had to have him fried! And fried I was determined he should be, if I had to whip all four of my partners to obtain my desire.

“Well, siree, that was a hot debate. We argued, and jawed, and bullyragged, and cussed through the whole livelong day. When night came on we had the question as near settled as when we began the debate in the morning. Never in my life did I meet with such ‘sot’ men as those four were. It stands to reason, that when they could not come to any decision, that the only way was for them all to give in and let me fry him. But would they do it? No, indeedy! Every one of the four was as stubborn as a mule.

“A chilly drizzle set in as night came on. After we had eaten our supper of hard-tack and bacon, and fed the rooster, we crouched in our tent and again began the discussion.

“‘Hang it all, boys!’ I exclaimed at length, in disgust, as I brought my fist down with a bang upon the empty soap-box which served us for a table, ‘there is only one way of settling this question——’

“‘I’ll see you in——’(well, boys, a frequently mentioned country where the climate is supposed to be extremely sultry,) ‘seven times over, before I’ll let you fry him!’ yelled ‘Lanky.’ ‘Why, you derved old ijiot——’

“‘Oh, shut up that big mouth of yours! Who’s talking about frying him, anyhow? No matter how we cook him, he will make a mighty slim meal for five hungry men.’

“They all looked rather blank. In the heat of our argument, I do not think that one of us had thought of this question before.

“I continued, ‘now, that fowl is not large enough for five men, he is not large enough for four men, he is not large enough for three men, he would hardly make a full meal for

two men, but I reckon that he would fit *one* man's stomach to a T!

"They all agreed that I was right. But who was to be the lucky man? Chance must decide for us.

"'Seven-up!'

"'Euchre!'

"'High-five!'

"'Gentlemen,' I interrupted, 'you are all wrong. We are Union soldiers, Americans, and there is but one American game, draw-poker! And there is but one way of settling this question, and that is by playing a freeze-out game of draw-poker, the lucky man to win the rooster and cook him as he likes.'

"This arrangement was satisfactory to all. 'Lanky,' in an audible tone, complimented me by 'wondering why some dog-goned fool hadn't thought of it before?'

"The soap-box we pressed into service as a table. For a light we had a smoky old lantern, borrowed from a neighbor. This threw a very dim and imperfect light over the table, but it answered the purpose well enough. We knelt around the soap-box, (for we had no seats,) in various picturesque but uncomfortable attitudes. I appointed myself to act as a master of ceremonies. As we had no chips, I counted out to each player fifty white and twenty red grains of corn. The white grains we valued at two cents apiece, the red at five cents, thus giving to each pile a fictitious value of two dollars. Of course, table stakes were to be played, with a betting limit of twenty-five cents. We were to play until one man was 'froze out,' then another and another, until finally one would own all of the chips and incidentally the object of dispute.

"Murray produced an ancient deck of cards, and the game began. And, gentlemen," says the Major, looking about to see if we are all awake and paying the proper attention to his narrative, "never before or since in my life, have I 'sat in' a game in which I took such a desperate and absorbing interest as I did in this one. I must own that bird! My mouth watered for fried chicken; the smell of fried chicken was in my nostrils. I'd have that old rooster or bust! And I think that the other four were as interested in the game as I was.

"By and by Dutchy wandered in and expressed great surprise, that the chicken, (which we had tied fast to a convenient stake,) remained alive and apparently in a healthy condition. We explained the situation to him, and he was pleased to express his approval of our plans.

"Tompkins was the first to drop out. 'Lanky' never *could* play poker. He withdrew from the game in dismal silence and retired to gaze mournfully at the unconscious rooster, now lost to him forever. Poor fellow! I almost felt sorry for him. But I felt elated at my own luck, for 'twas I who now had most of his chips.

"My happiness was of short duration. A catastrophe, of most serious consequences to me, occurred, and nearly drove me frantic with rage and vexation. As I think, I mentioned before, it was a rainy night. Our tent was far from large, the front part being particularly leaky, so that we all crouched in the rear. It was my evil hap to be kneeling, with my back fairly rubbing the pole of the tent. Above my right shoulder, at some long distant date, a ragged hole had been torn in the canvas. Over this hole we had stitched an old gunny-sack. Of a sudden, I heard a strange sound by my right ear. Turning my head quickly, a rough, wet, hairy muzzle was thrust against my cheek. I yelled with fright, rolling over upon the ground. Quickly regaining my feet, I saw that the hobgoblin which had scared me out of a year's growth was nothing more nor less than a long-eared mule, who had broken his halter, strayed to our tent, poked his head through the rotten gunny-sack, and was now engaged in the agreeable occupation, (to him,) of eating my stack of red chips whilst my fool companions watched his proceedings with open-mouthed amazement, and let him eat his fill! I rushed upon the intruder and smote him vigorously, and I am afraid that in my vexation I said a few words that smelled of sulphur. The mule wisely withdrew. He had eaten up nearly a dollar's worth of my red chips! He couldn't eat the white ones. Oh, no! *Dod-rot-'im,*" exclaims the Major, with asperity, "he had to have the best there was in sight. White corn was too common for his aristocratic blood, he must have richer food, red corn was the only proper diet for him.

"Kick! Did I kick? Of course I kicked. But the more I kicked the more those unfeeling comrades of mine laughed and roared:

"'Table stakes, you know. We can't change the rules at this stage of the game.'

"That was all the satisfaction that they would give me. So that 'will ye, nil ye,' with my hard luck must I be content and continue the game as best I could with my remaining chips. I vowed deep and dire vengeance upon that mule. I picked up a

piece of board that chanced to lay upon the ground, and directly, when our unwelcome visitor came after the remainder of my red chips, I had the satisfaction of whacking him soundly over the head.

“Now the game was in full swing. Sam Withers held a good hand, ‘aces full’ on queens, and ‘bucked up’ against a good hand which I also held. Four jacks. The result was quite discouraging to Sam, but it was just what I expected when I got my fourth jack in the ‘draw.’ Soon the small remainder of his chips went the way of their predecessors. He joined the melancholy ‘Lanky,’ feasting his eyes upon the rooster that could never be *his*. My star was in the ascendancy once more. Only two more between me and victory.

“All this time we could hear the boom! boom! boom! of the big guns shelling the city, and sometimes, far away, the shrill, indescribable song which the shell itself sings while in rapid flight through the air. At times, too, that unpleasant song seemed to be coming from the city towards us, for this shelling business was not one-sided by any means. At such times we would experience moments of uneasiness.

“‘Rebs are getting our range. Killed eight men with one shell last night,’ observed Tompkins.

“‘Ef one of them shells should happen to strike this ’ere little poker party, it would be mighty apt to ‘raise’ the whole caboodle, eh, ‘Lanky’?’ replied Sam Withers, intent, now that he himself was out of the game, in making the remainder of us as uncomfortable as he possibly could.

“Somehow, I could not get his foolish remark out of my head. The idea of a ‘raise’ is, in nine cases out of ten, unpleasant to the man who plays poker; this kind of a ‘raise’ was particularly unpleasant to think about. I wished the idiot had more sense than to make such remarks. That confounded screeching seemed to be coming nearer—nearer—nearer—the wild song of the shells was—‘I’m after you—you—you—I’m after you—you—you!’ Dutchy, too, appeared uneasy, for presently he bid us good-night, saying that he was going to his own quarters. I paid little attention to his movements at the time, for the singing of the shells, the perseverance of the mule, (who continually returned), and the excitement of the game kept me well occupied with my own private affairs.

“Murray, about this time went to join the others, now ‘a (silent) majority,’ grouped about the rooster that was never to

be his. Lew Hotchkiss and I were alone in the struggle. Now would come the tug of war!

“‘Did we have good hands?’ Oh, yes, we had good hands, and medium hands, and small hands, and every other kind of a hand. Still nothing remarkable came along until that last jack-pot. And then—

“Lew and I had been playing alone for about thirty minutes. I suggested that we count our chips, as the two stacks seemed about equal. Lew assented. By a singular chance, each had exactly the same amount, four dollars and fifty cents. So we figured it out that the mule had eaten just ninety cents’ worth of my chips.

“As it was now growing late we decided to raise the limit to fifty cents so as to finish the game sooner.

“It was my turn to deal. Lew shoved in a fifteen cent ante.

“‘Pass,’ said I, not having a pair.

“‘Jack, then,’ replied Lew.

“He drew down his fifteen cent ante and shoved ten reds in the center. I followed suite.

“Lew dealt. I picked up my hand. Eight, nine, jack and queen of hearts and the tray of diamonds. So near, and yet so far, so very far, from a straight flush.

“‘Pass,’ said I.

“‘Open ’er,’ said Lew.

“Would it be wise and best to stay and take my chance of filling in the middle? One chance in fifty-two. Still, I had a fair chance of drawing, if not the ten of hearts, either a ten of some other suite or a heart. Either a straight or a flush. Both fairly good hands. I decided to draw.

“Lew hesitated about discarding, finally throwing away one card. Thought I, ‘he has threes, and is trying to make me think that he has only two pair.’

“I picked up the one card that I had drawn. When I looked at it, every nerve in my body quivered and stung with excitement. I could hardly resist the inclination to let out a yell that would raise the tent from over our heads. Great Jehosaphat! I had drawn my ten of hearts, and now held a straight flush! That rooster was mine! Poor Lew!

“Now I always did rather like Hotchkiss. I thought I would let him off easy.

“‘Lew,’ said I, ‘you are beat. Now I tell you what I am willing to do. I will call it a draw, before the show-down, and

we will divide the chicken. After all, I think we can manage to make a meal of him.'

"'Oh, I guess that I had better be game and play my hand. Bet yer fifty,' replied Lew, easy like, as he carelessly skinned over his hand.

"My conscience was clear. I had warned him. On his own unbelieving head must fall the consequences.

"'See you and raise you fifty.'

"'See *you* and raise *you* fifty.'

"So we continued, alternately raising and seeing, until our last chip was in the pot. Then came that one short minute of bliss, that moment when each player carefully looks over his hand for the last time to make sure that by no terrible fatality has he made an error, and draws a long breath ere he lays down his hand. But we did not show our hands just then, for a terrible thing prevented us.

"From far away in the distance came the moaning song of the shell—'w-h-r-r-r-r-r, w-h-r-r-r-r-r, I'm after you, w-h-r-r-r-r-r, w-h-r-r-r-r-r,'—that shell meant business—'w-h-r-r-r-r-r, I'm after you—you—you—w-h-r-r-r-r-r—w-h-r-r-r-r-r—' we arose from our seats in terror, overthrowing the lamp and putting it out, nearer—nearer—'w-h-r-r-r-r-r, w-h-r-r-r-r-r,—' outside someone yelled, 'in the tent, look out there!' and then—

"Through that hole in the canvas came a spent shell, narrowly missing my head, and rolled upon the ground at our feet. The fuse was alive and sputtered and spit spitefully.

"'Oh, God save us!'

"'Murder! Let me out! Murder!'

"'Hellsafire! Run, boys, run!'

"The shell lay between us and the front entrance, and not one of the boys seemed to like the idea of jumping over it as they made their escape. By rights, 'Lanky,' who stood nearest to the sputtering shell, should have proved the heroic stuff that was in him and pulled that live fuse out, but he didn't. He preferred to make for the hole in the back. So did the other three. So did I. I was—

"'Who reached it first?' We all did, sonny. Yes, there was not a man of the five to be the last to reach that hole. A struggle, a ripping and a tearing, and five cursing, active men landed in a heap in the mud back of the tent. I was the bottom man, and that is proof that I was the *last* man out of the tent. We did not stay on the ground any great length of time. I rather

think, that of all the sprinting that was done in the army upon occasions, that we broke the record as we headed for the nearest rifle-pit.

"While we crouched in the pit the thought struck me that perhaps the mule would consider our absence an opportune time to finish his lunch with the jack-pot. By the piper that played before Moses, when I thought of the reception he was apt to meet from the present occupant of our tent, I laughed aloud. 'Lanky' seemed to consider my mirth a personal insult, for he called me a—well, a simple person who (if popular tradition be correct) is apt to never suffer cold in the world to come.

"We waited a long time for that shell to attend to the business upon which it came, but it did not do it. Finally, we concluded that the fuse had gone out, and cautiously ventured towards the tent.

"'Lew, I had you beat!'

"'Hadn't, either. Save your hand?'

"'Yes. Save yours?'

"'Yer bet yer bottom dollar! A man's a derved ijiot to leave go of four aces while the breath of life is in his body—'

"'Yes, and he is a bigger idiot to throw away a straight flush.'

"When I told Lew that I held a straight flush, he—but my goodness, boys!" exclaims the Major, as he looks at his watch, "here I have talked and delayed the game nearly an hour! Start it again, Pete."

"One moment, Major," remonstrates Pete. "How about that shell?"

"Wasn't any shell. Only a couple of tin cans and some scrap iron fastened together with wire, and a lighted fuse tied to the dummy. Dutchy invented it and threw it into the tent. Of course, dark as it was in there, we did not notice the deception. No one had sense enough to investigate, anyhow, when the thing came through that hole."

"What made the sound which you took for the hissing of the shell?"

"Dutchy, with that big mouth of his."

"Who won the chips, Major?"

"Wasn't any to win. Mule had eaten them up."

"Then how could you decide who owned the rooster?"

"Didn't have to decide. Sneider had stolen him. Your ante, son."