

COMMAND

BY JAMES WARNER BELLAH

THE CAPTAIN WAS AN OLD INDIAN FIGHTER, BUT LIEUTENANT COHILL RATED HIM A COWARD. "IN A STIFF ACTION," COHILL DECIDED, "I'D PROBABLY HAVE TO KILL HIM AND TAKE OVER THE COMMAND."

SERGEANT UTTERBACK stiffened in his saddle, staring through the yellow sun-down haze at a ragged buzzard that circled low in the darkening air ahead of the little column. The only live thing in that prairie wasteland except the three dozen saddle-weary troopers and the two officers who hated each other.

A lone buffalo off there, dead after many migratory years. Dead in some stupid way of his own devising. The thought was John Utterback's. He shifted his weary loins in the saddle and spat into the dust in boredom and apathy. At the head of the halted column, Captain Brittles uncased his glasses and raised them to his eyes in both grimy hands, his gauntlets tucked under his left arm. Mr. Cohill, riding back with the point, was about four hundred yards ahead of the captain, coming back toward him. Four lean troopers and the lieutenant outlined against the crimson backwash where the sun had died in agony twenty minutes before. The heads and arched necks of their mounts cut easily upward and easily downward across the sky as they came toward the column outlined sharply in a

yellow band of light that touched them like St. Elmo's fire.

"Here's your best body of grass, sir. This slope, with a small run below for water. This slope is your bivouac."

You could smell the column as it stood there, still mounted, waiting. The warm flesh and leather and nitrogen of the horses. The heavy human rancidity of the men, unbathed for nine days. Utterback's mind fingered the roll from force of habit: Atkissons, Blunt, Cartter, Dannecker, Dortmund, Eskuries, Ershick, Hertwole—and you could smell the green horror above them, thickening as the wind shifted.

"Mr. Cohill"—the captain lowered his glasses and looked intently at his second in command—"do you see the rise there to the left behind you across the valley? What are those lumped shapes on the forward slope?"

Nathan Brittles was a gray man that no sun could redden for long. His eyes were agate-gray and his hair was dust-gray, and there was a grayness within him that was his own manner of living,

which he discussed with no man and no man questioned. Narrow-hipped and straight-backed. Hard and slender in the leg. Taut, so that when he moved, it was almost as if he would twang. And he did—when he spoke. Not unpleasantly, with a whine, but sharply, like the breech spang of a Spencer.

Flintridge Cohill half circled his horse on the forehand and turned his head, "We started back when we saw them, sir. Sleeping buffalo. A small herd."

"Now that the wind has shifted, take a deep breath, Mr. Cohill. Those aren't buffalo, Mr. Cohill!" Brittles closed his glasses, cased them and swung the case behind his left hip. He was furious. The red flush of his anger throbbled in his neck muscles. "Take another deep breath, Mr. Cohill! Get it in your nostrils and then tell me what's on that other slope!"

And then everyone in the column knew what was on that slope. That they weren't buffalo—either dead or sleeping. They were Mr. Gresham and the nine men of the 2nd that they'd come out to find—stripped naked and pincushioned to the ground with arrows, their feet and their right hands hacked off, their bodies purpling and sweet rotten.

Futile anger crawled within Cohill—anger at himself for his inaccuracy; anger at Nathan Brittles for catching it ruthlessly and ripping it wide open—as he always did.

"This is not a schoolroom out here, Mr. Cohill, in which you can fail and try again. I call it to your attention, Mr. Cohill, that accuracy in observation is a military virtue. Cultivate it. . . . Sergeant Utterback, dismount and unsaddle. This is the bivouac. Graze below the actual crest of the slope, off the skyline. Night grazing area between the military crest and the creek bottom. Use the picket rope, not individual pins, after darkness. Lay it on the ground."

The captain turned slowly and looked back the long way they had come across the flat depression,

Then the air ripped alive with the war shriek and the gray dawn was throbbing with a thundering rush.



of Paradise Valley; looked back toward the Mesa Roja.

The amber haze of the plains, shot now with the lavender of evening, lay across the distances. Flint Cohill, watching Brittles, felt dread loneliness for a second—the emptiness of a thousand frontier miles converging on him in a vast and whirling radius. Galloping toward him on thundering hoofs, lashed by the riata of oncoming night. And he was a boy again. Back again those few brief years that would put him into the irresponsibility of boyhood once more. A boy, masquerading as a man among grown men, steel-legged in fine boots and antelope-faced trousers. Silken kerchief at his neck, gauntleted and gunned and hatted for the part he would play if they'd let him. But alone now on the empty stage, with no applause. Nothing but his aloneness and the long vista of the years ahead of him, and the echoing memory of his own anger at himself that still clung sullenly to his brain—to be justified, because of his youth, if he could justify it.

Why doesn't Brittles go across to the other slope now and make sure, instead of camping here? If it is Gresham and his men, and they are fresh dead, it's the Santee Sioux war party whose trace we crossed this morning that killed them. It pleased Flint Cohill to be able to think Santee Sioux instead of plain Sioux, as everybody usually did back in the States. That was Sergeant Utterback's doing—Sergeant Utterback going along that trace at noon until he found the broken rattle made of the ends of buffalo toes.

"Sioux, sir"—to Brittles—"Santee Sioux I'd say; about forty strong." There was no triumph in the way John Utterback had said it; only the patience of long service and the acceptance of a fact. Utterback had stood there on foot, looking up at the captain, the broken rattle end in his hand. A modest, thin-faced man, John Utterback. Slope-shouldered almost to deformity, but secure in

ILLUSTRATED BY HAROLD VON SCHMIDT



"Mr. Cohill," the captain said, "what are those lumped shapes on the forward slope?"

the system that had made him, knowing the things that he knew, beyond all shadow of doubt and all human timidity, moving quietly within the laws of his life and fearing no man to best him or break him.

Brittles had said, "Or Cheyenne, Utterback. They make rattles much the same. Or Comanches. Or Arapaho. Mount up!"

In memory again, Cohill's silent anger lashed out at Nathan Brittles in the gathering dusk. A stickler for detail and accuracy, even probably if it sacrificed the over-all plan. That Indian trace was fifteen miles back. With the Sioux making approxi-

mately the same rate of march that they were, their wickiups would be no more than thirty miles to the northward. Less, Cohill remembered his teaching suddenly. If they were Sioux, they'd camp away from timber—with their mortal dread of ambush—and near water. They'd be along the Paradise's upper reaches—in the dead lands.

Cohill blurted it suddenly, "Two hours' rest and we can be on the upper reaches of the Paradise by dawn, sir."

"Mr. Cohill, I have no orders to be on anyone or anything by dawn or at any other time. My orders are to find Mr. Gresham's patrol"—Brittles threw a leg off his animal and dismounted—"and finding him, to go back in to Fort Stare and report it. I think I've found him. I'll know, as soon as the moon rises and I go over and look. Take evening stables. Water in a half an hour. Saddle blankets left on until after the mounts are watered. Remember always, Mr. Cohill, that because of the liability to deterioration of the horses, cavalry is a very delicate arm of the service."

There was this in Cohill—that, spurred to the bleeding quick, he still would not talk back. But his mind raced in futile anger, *He's an old woman and he can't hold his temper. Little things infuriate him, but with a big chance like this, he's going to cut and run back in. In a stiff action, I'd probably have to kill him and take over the command.*

Brittles turned again and said, "Mr. Cohill, reading minds is an uncomfortable habit." Flint stared and moved his arm imperceptibly toward his revolving pistol. "But suppose for a moment they were Cheyennes, which they well might be, instead of Santee Sioux, they wouldn't be in the dead lands, you see. They'd head for the timber along the lower Mesa Roja branch. So would Arapaho. Kiowas or Comanches would bivouac right in the open timber . . . and they all make rattles out of buffalo toes! Pass the word to Sergeant Utterback that dinner call will be at six-thirty, but the trumpeter will still not sound calls. Mr. Cohill, there is no short cut to the top of the glory heap. So we'll not run all over the West tonight looking for one."

To some of them for the rest of their lives, the full moon, rising red gold on the horizon, would bring back what they saw that night, and what they heard, for the dead can whisper restlessly when the cool evening air contracts stiffened diaphragms. By the empty cartridge cases, Gresham's men had sold out dearly—sold out until the panther rush flattened

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COMMAND

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and shredded them across the forward slope of the rise in a ferocious effort to rip their white dignity from them by savage mutilation.

"Whoever did it never wants to meet Mr. Gresham's patrol again," Sergeant Utterback growled; "that's why they lopped off their hands and feet to handicap them in case they meet in the Hereafter. They respected them as fighting men—every mother's son is left bald-headed, so he can cross the Shadow Waters without trouble."

The burial shovels were chattering in the hillside shale. Captain Brittles said, "Utterback, do you still think Santee Sioux?"

Sergeant Utterback stood quietly looking off toward the southwest. The moonlight was a limitless white wash across the sea of mist.

"No, sir. Not now, sir."

"Why not?" Brittles snapped. "Speak up!"

Flint Cohill turned toward them, listening intently.

"I made the march from Bent's Fort to Santa Fe with Steve Kearny, and I know an Apache arrow when I see one, sir, even a thousand miles from where they're made."

"Your Sioux of this noon could have brushed with an Apache war party"—Brittles nodded toward the southwest—"and come by Apache arrows that way."

"No," Utterback shook his head. "This job is two days old. It wasn't this morning's Sioux. It's an Apache job."

"How do you reason that?"

"Mostly"—Utterback smiled faintly—"because the captain knows it's Apache work, too, not Sioux work."

Brittles looked at his first sergeant, studying his eyes carefully. "I shall want to move the command out by ten tonight. We go back in to Fort Starke with this word as fast as we can get in."

"Yes, sir."

"When the graves are cairned, Sergeant Utterback, fall the burial party in for services."

"... for Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever, amen."

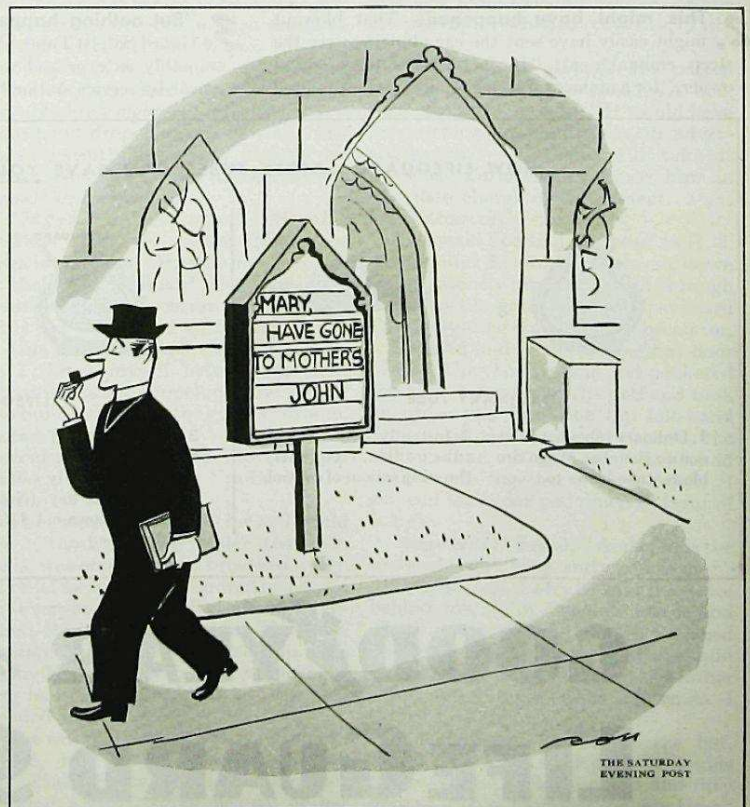
The moon was high and small and frozen crystal above the column as it moved out for Fort Starke. Thirty miles already that day, with no knowing how many night miles Brittles would pile up on top of them. Plenty. The order was to halt fifteen minutes in the hour, dismount and unbit for grazing. The order was to trot five minutes after every half hour of walking, to avoid animal fatigue from bad carriage in the saddle, and the liability to sore backs. The order was to dismount and lead, ten minutes in every hour. Walk, trot, lead, halt and graze—and at two in the morning Brittles halted on the Paradise for twenty-five full minutes for watering call.

Flintridge Cohill trudged along, leading, alkali white to mid-thigh. His spurs, dust muffled, sounded like silver dollars clinked deep in the pocket of a greatcoat. He could feel the resentment in the men—resentment at the night march. It was a hard and a sullen thing, and it was there in an occasional angry sneeze, in the dust coughing that became general after a while in spite of long intervals, in a deep and throaty curse rolled into the night on dry saliva.

Cohill could feel the swing and thrust of Sergeant Utterback's legs beside him; he could smell Utterback's rank gaminess above his own, cut by the sweet brownness of the sergeant's eating tobacco, all of it washed hot and cleanly sulphurous by a horse ahead. All of it rushing back again, to be breathed again against the cooling curtain of the dying night.

"Pass the word to mount." It came down the column like cards falling from a table edge, and Utterback, swinging up, stood high for a second in his stirrups. "He's heading up north."

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"How's that, sergeant?"

"North," Utterback said.

Cohill pulled his hat brim down under the dying moon and looked high to the horizon, toward Mesa Roja. "You're right." He meant to put a question into it, but if he put one in, Utterback ignored it.

Cohill sat with it for a moment, settling himself to the cold saddle, turning, looking back at the dust-white masks of the faces in the moonlight. The lean-jawed faces and the hard faces. The brutal faces and the weak. The hopeful faces and the finished faces—Jordine, Knight, Lusk, Mallory, Mittendorfer, Norton and Opdyke—and as far as he could see the faces back of him, he knew that they knew that the Old Man was heading up north, and that they questioned it. The flat top of Mesa Roja was dead ahead on the line of march. And it didn't make sense. If they were going back in, fast, to Fort Starke to report an Apache war party—going back in in a straight line across their own nine-day circle by a forced night march—Mesa Roja should bear on their left shoulders, not between their mounts' ears.

And then Cohill knew, and his mind was cold and taut with the knowledge, and he was ashamed suddenly for the traditions that had made him, but that could so fail other men.

Brittles had an Apache war party up from the southwest and Gresham's death at their hands to report. So he was forcing the march in to Starke, but in the midst of forcing it, he was taking good care that he gave this morning's Santee Sioux a wide berth. He wouldn't fight if it was handed to him! He was afraid to fight—afraid of himself probably. Knew himself for what Cohill was finding him out to be—superannuated, petty, nerve-racked and afraid.

What we all come to understand sooner or later, Mr. Cohill, is that we're not out here to fight Indians. We're out here to watch them and report on them for the Indian Bureau. We fight only if they attack us. I refer you to departmental standing orders, which are most explicit.

Gresham fought, damn you. He had no choice but to fight.

Mr. Gresham was young. Probably he was extremely rash.

And you are old, and not fit for this job any longer. If they are really Apaches, it's your duty to cut straight in to Starke and report it. But if they turned out to be those same Santee Sioux—as they well might, for all you really know to the contrary—you could force their attack on a technicality and wipe them out in punishment on the way in. This stupid way—we march all day and march all night, and we're still miles from home, with worn and sullen men and tired animals, and nothing to show for it but a sop to your old man's caution. Cavalry is a delicate arm.

Cohill was conscious that his lips were moving contemptuously with his silent monologue. He covered them with his hand as Utterback turned and looked at him.

"Sergeant, how did you know the captain thought they were Apaches that killed Mr. Gresham's detail?"

"I've been his first sergeant for a long time. You get to know."

"I see. Do I get to know?"

"Mr. Cohill, the captain's been out here a good many years."

"You're not answering me, is that it? If it's all the same to me, you fell up a tree?"

"No use talking. It ain't learned ever. It's lived. It's a feeling, after all's said and done, sir."

"And you're sure yourself it's an Apache party?"

"Reasonably, only I wouldn't hold to it alone. But I'm dead sure when I know Captain Brittles is sure too. He earns the difference in our pay, sir."

Cohill threw up his head in annoyance. Five hours on the way now. A shade less than three left to dawn. They'd make the foot of the mesa and bivouac there probably, hitting the trail again in the afternoon. What a fool procedure, when the whole command could have been freshened by a night's sleep and grazing after the burial detail.

The moon grew colder and slid down the sky behind them. Knees were thick now and sanded with fatigue, and there was the clamminess of dank sweat in their shirts that their bodies no longer warmed. Mist tatters wove above the prairie, girth high, and in the hollows chilled them with the hand of death. Flintridge heard his name passed softly down the column, "Mr. Cohill," and he kneeled out to the right and cantered forward.

Brittles sat straight in his saddle, cut there like stone, outlined against the night sky, nose and chin and shoulder—an aging man, riding out his destiny. "Mr. Cohill, this is officer's call. Listen carefully. I have Sergeant Suto ahead of me with the point. You will relieve him with eight men, and push forward fast. Do you recall the ford on the Mesa Roja branch?"

"I do, sir."

"There is a knoll on the mesa side—a knoll that the trail crosses from the mesa top."

"I remember."

"Be there prior to dawn. Build a bivouac fire on your arrival."

"Do what, sir?"

"I want to know it, when you get there. And I want everyone else for miles around to know it, too. Build a bivouac fire. A squad fire. No larger."

"But I can send a file back to tell you when I arrive."

"Disabuse yourself of the idea that this is a debating society, Mr. Cohill."

In the event of an attack on your position, you will hold the knoll top, fighting on foot. Always hold your fire at dawn to the last possible moment. Remember, the dawn light works for you, but it can fool you in the first half hour in this country. Move out, Mr. Cohill. You're the bait on my hook. Wriggle . . . and keep alive!

High overhead under the rim of Mesa Roja there was an eagle scream in the chilled darkness. The whipsaw blade of it grated down Flint Cohill's damp spine. His lips were drawn thin across his dry teeth. "Don't stand still, Skinner. Move a little all the time. Move always. Slap the mounts. Keep moving them too." Soft. Words lashed whisper-high across the knoll—whisper-high and rowel-sharp.

The little squad fire burned brightly, and the tired animals held the echo of its gold in the moist jewels of their eyes. Skinner and Blankenship were with the horses, moving them, keeping them circling their picket pins, ready to cut them free and stampede them. Corporal McKenzie and his five men lay just beyond the wash of light, fanned out behind their flung saddles, waiting and watching and listening and breathing softly. Mr. Cohill was wriggling beautifully on the hook.

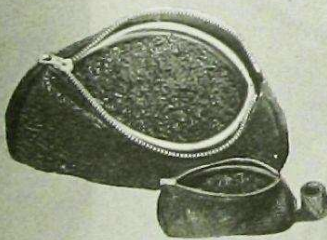
A great feathery exultation pressed its soft hands upward under his lower ribs, catching his breath every time he drew it. Here, then, is the justification—the final heritage of soldiering—to stand steady, ready to deliver, to bleed and to draw blood. Everything else is the parade ground. And he was afraid for his first shots in anger. His fear was livid and gasping behind the drawn curtain at the back of his mind. To fire and to draw fire. To kill and to be killed. And he could hear the panic whimper of his fear behind its curtain. "Mr. Cohill, this is not a schoolroom out here."

Some weed, some bitter prairie flower freshening on the dawn winds, feathered his nostrils, and, with association,

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Let's Have a Family Reunion

A POPULAR—if slightly unfair—way to get a high score on a Post quiz is to ring in the whole family and gang up on the thing. This number ought to be a natural for the family-circle treatment, because each correct answer will bring into the circle the common name of a relative. For instance, if the following names answered three of the questions—which they don't—you'd have MOTHER Goose, DADDY Long-Legs and BABY Snooks. Is everybody ready? Here we go:

Answers on Page 83.

1. Who led a string of Navy men in a conga line?
2. Identify the name you associate with Boys Town.
3. What nickname is commonly given to Cornishmen?
4. With whom do you associate tales of Br'er Rabbit?
5. What is Abraham Lincoln's grandfather called in the novel, *A Lion in the Streets*?
6. A comic strip was named for this member of the family. Who is he?
7. Identify an old woman who was affected by a meat shortage.
8. Who raised Tom Sawyer?
9. Identify a popular film star whose name is that of a relative.
10. This gay young lady is here without her husband. Who is she?

—JANE KESSLER.



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brought back the green horror in the moonlight that they had put decently below the ground thirty miles back across the plains.

The play went on. The trap was good. Carefully acted, Cohill crossed into the firelight, and out of it again. Always moving. The natural movement of a small bivouac. Carneal put the spider on, crisping and richening the clean air with the smell of frying bacon.

Neither Sioux nor Apache nor any Plains Indian will fight willingly at night, for a warrior killed in darkness wanders up and down the outer world forever, eternally blind in darkness. But in a little while the dawn would creep across from the eastward, and there on the knoll was a small white-soldier war party like two-yesterdays' party that lay bloating where they had overwhelmed it thirty miles down Paradise Valley. Fire alight and bacon cooking. Mounts unsaddled and warriors sleeping from a long night march to bring back the death news of the other party. Soft for the killing.

Down, then, from the mesa rim silently. Down in the last black darkness on shadow feet. With the ponies led carefully, so that not a stone could chip and skip and arch on ahead in chattering cascade to herald the approach. Not a twig must snap.

Suddenly Flint Cohill could see the pewter trace of the Mesa Roja branch below him. He could see tree boles and the shiny black dampness of a stomped hoof in dew-drenched grass and the grime on the back of his own hand. And it was the dawn opening slowly, like the reflexive lid of a dead eyeball. Then a horse screamed in bowel-torn agony, and three animals were down, thrashing. Skinnor crawled out, dragging a splintered shin bone, cursing in high falsetto. And the air was alive with whiplashing, but no lash cracks. Just the intake gasp, unfinished, threatening. Cruel and thin as the bite of a bone saw.

"Hold your fire, Corporal McKenzie!" Cohill was belly-down in the

soaking grass. Five of his horses were running free, fear driven and panic blind. Then the air ripped alive with the war shriek and the gray dawn was throbbing with a thundering rush. So close that it was on them. So close that it was over them. So close that Cohill screamed the order to fire, and they fired, and the wave broke like a brown sea wave on an emerald beach, crested before them on the slope of the knoll, curled mightily upward and crashed over and toward them with the weight of its own speed. Rolling in a spume of thrashing pony hoofs and of torn and howling throats and an agony of shattered bone.

"They are Apaches!"

Those behind broke away and to the left, and passed below the knoll, circling to re-form and roar up again toward the knoll top. Brown oiled bodies hard down on the off-side of ponies, galloping into the teeth of the dawn wind. And the men on the knoll saw them now for the Gresham massacre party, for there were yellow stripes on the legs of some, with the seat and the front cut from the trousers; and there were sabers and yellow silken neckerchiefs and the brass buckles of belts and of bandoleers.

Round again and up again frantically into the flaming scythe of Cohill's fire. And again, as they took it, breaking and circling, but this time raggedly bunched, with free ponies racing among them. Cut down to half their number. Torn and bleeding, whirling across the whitening dawn. Battered in their strength, broken and hacked into. Shrieking now in anger and the primitive hurt of animals—frustrated tigers of the Plains.

The raucous brass file of the trumpet scratched across the gunmetal of the new day, and Nathan Brittles' main body came up out of the bottoms of the Mesa Roja branch, splashed hoof-deep across the lower ford and charging as foragers, struck them on their shattered flank, parched sabers drawn and drinking. There was a long and

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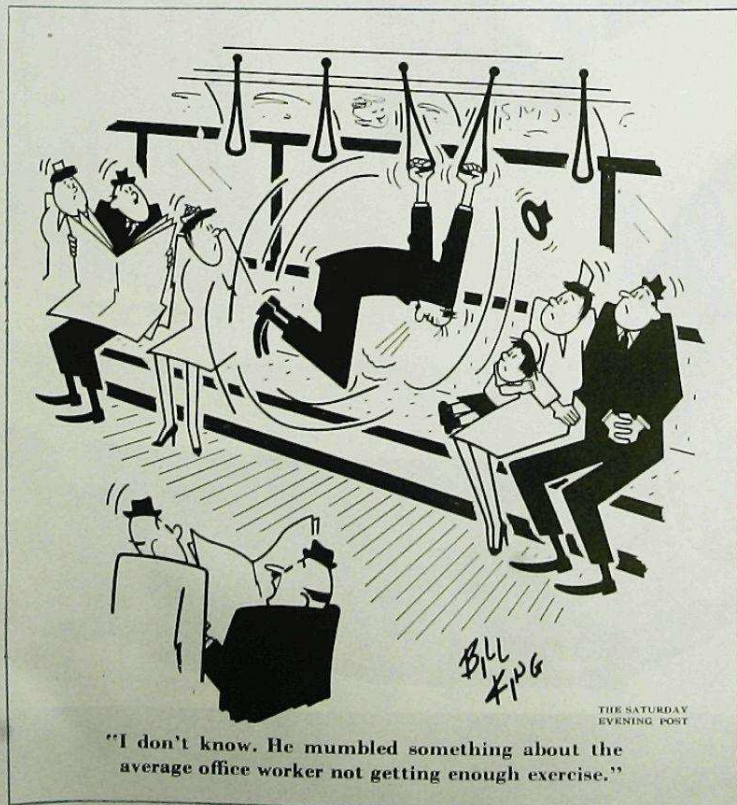
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THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

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racing moment down the bottoms, horse to horse and man to man, below Cohill's knoll. A red moment of fury. Steel and flesh and livid madness with the black lash of the devil in it to whip it to frenzied crescendo.

Cohill stood above, his shirt black with sweat, watching the bitter finish, the last flaming action and the last free pony pistoled off its flashing hoofs. Below him on the knoll there was a writhing Apache hurling himself up off his dead hips and legs, thrashing his upper body in madness to free himself from the icy shackles of his broken spine. Noiselessly thrashing, like a snake dismembered. And to the left, there was Corporal McKenzie, lying blue-faced and quiet, his hands close to the feathered shaft that was sunk deep in his right side below the ribs—hands rising and falling with the last of his breathing. And Skinner, with the twisted bloat of his leg stretched out naked before him, smoking evenly on his black-stubbed pipe, watching the sun wash that reddened the horizon.

"Mr. Cohill, you did that well." Nathan Brittles swung down and plunged his face and hands in the wet grass to clean them and freshen himself. He opened his matted shirt to the waist and tugged it over his head. "You may do. In time."

"You knew they were Apaches yesterday at sundown . . . and you knew they were camped on the mesa top, sir?"

"Mr. Cohill,"—Brittles swabbed his bare chest with his shirttail—"Apaches fear only man. They camp as high as they can get, no matter how far it is from water. Had you pushed forward to Mr. Gresham's slope, you would have found Mr. Gresham, not sleeping buffalo. Had your eyes been sharp, you would have seen this between the slope and last evening's bivouac." Brittles dug a hand deep into his pocket and tugged out a blood-hardened shred of Apache headband of red flannel and handed it over. "Commit it to your diary and your brain." Brittles pulled on his shirt again. "And had you been a plainsman and suspected the Apache, you would have looked at once for

smoke at sundown on the highest ground—Mesa Roja."

Cohill's quick admiration was in his eyes, in his blurted words, "You came straight here, sir, to hole them out and pay them off for Gresham. You had no intention of anything else, from the start, but to force the fight." He grinned. "You even had Utterback fooled, until you turned north."

The captain stood quite still for a moment, looking Flint Cohill over very carefully, as if he had never seen him before. "The essence of command is timing, Mr. Cohill. A successful commander keeps his own counsel until the right moment. At that time he tells his subordinates everything they should know to do their part of the work properly. Nothing more. My intention was to fool no one. Sergeant Utterback is a soldier. He keeps his mouth shut. The facts are these: My point, temporarily bivouacked at dawn today, came under sudden enemy attack. Fortunately, it was able to hold until I arrived with the main body."

Cohill drew himself up and bowed slightly. "I understand that, sir, perfectly. I am familiar with departmental standing orders which allow defensive actions only, and expressly forbid the attack."

"And yet"—Captain Brittles' eyes never wavered from Cohill's—"they are in direct violation of cavalry tactics, for cavalry is very weak on the defensive. It can defend itself well only by attacking. Most young lieutenants will agree with that, whether or not they examine the reasons."

"I am desperately sorry, sir."

"Mr. Cohill, never apologize. It's a mark of weakness. There is a captain out here who tried it once to escape a Benzine Board. He escaped it, but he's been ashamed a little bit ever since. He will die a captain, in spite of his apology. The man who did for him could have worked with him and made him a soldier, if his humanity had been large enough. Mr. Cohill, I'm going to make a soldier out of you, if you don't break. You may present my respects to General Cohill when next you write your father. Mr. Cohill, take morning stables."

THE END

JUST A NICE QUIET TITLE

(Continued from Page 21)

box out in front, it belongs to some dope named Colonel Pettigrew. Do you happen to know him?"

"Yes," said the girl. "I happen to know him."

"All right, then. How's for doing me a favor? I suppose you're so squeamish and stuck-up you'll refuse to do it even before you hear what it is."

"No," said the girl. "Not before I hear what it is."

"I want you to introduce me to this Pettigrew. He's got a sign posted by the mail box that says: 'Positively No Admittance. This Means You and I'm Not Fooling.' The point is that I want to examine the place more closely. It's a priceless example of everything you shouldn't do when you build a house. I mean to say, you very seldom run across a genuine nightmare except when you're asleep."

The girl studied him thoughtfully. "You want me to introduce you to Colonel Pettigrew, so you can get a real close-up of his ignorance and bad taste, is that it?"

"Yes. How about it?"

"I think I will," said the girl. "Yes, I think I'll do just that."

Jones opened the car door. "Come right in."

The girl slid into the seat, and Jones turned the convertible around and headed it back the other way.

"My name is Dexter Jones," he said.

"Ever heard of me?"

"No."

"You will. I'm due for big things in the building line. Homes with beauty and distinction and malarkey like that. What do your friends call you?"

"Prudence."

"Okay, Prudence. You can tell this Pettigrew that I'm an old school chum of yours. You did go to school, didn't you?"

"For a short time."

"You should have stayed with it, Prudence. I mean to say, I think you could have developed yourself into something, with persistence and the proper guidance. I've known girls no plainer than you who managed to accumulate enough camouflage to sneak up on a husband. Of course, they very seldom keep them long, but it just goes to show you that things aren't completely hopeless."

(Continued on Page 80)



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