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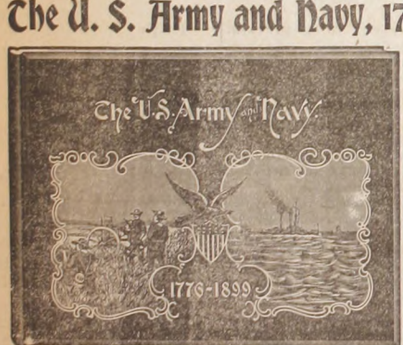

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One brilliant afternoon, as she lay on the broad, cane-bottomed bedstead with its overhanging canopy of filmy netting, she drowsily heard the corporal posting the new sentinel in the marbled corridor below, and then marching the relief to the rear gate opening to the beach. Nita was already up and moving about in her room. Margaret heard the rustle of her skirts and the light patter of her tiny feet as she sped over the hardwood floor of the main salon. She heard her throwing back the sliding shutters that kept out the glare of the sun in the morning hours, and knew that she was gazing out over the tree-dotted lawn toward the gate where the guard lounged through the warm afternoon. All of a sudden, quick and stirring, a bugle sounded over on the Calle Nueva, where the North Dakotas had a strong detachment. The call was repeated, and, army woman though she was, she did not recognize it. She could not remember ever having heard it before. Then up the street, from the engineer barrack, there came thrilling echo, and there was a sound of movement and excitement along the dusty thoroughfare. She heard Nita calling her name, and then the child's quick, nervous step along the hallway toward the stairs. Then came a sudden stop, a gasping, wailing cry, and, springing from her bed and to the door, Margaret found her sister cowering before a tall slender man in the rough dress and field equipment of a private soldier. With a little packet—letters, apparently—held forth in one hand, while the other grasped her wrist, Rollin Latrobe stood sternly gazing at the girl shrinking at his feet.

The tableau was over in another second. Springing up the broad marble stairs came Billy Gray, the corporal of the guard at his heels, and Latrobe saw his danger in a flash. Throwing little Gray aside as he would a terrier, the young athlete whirled on the stalwart regular. There was the sound of a crashing blow, followed by a heavy fall. The corporal went rolling down the steps with Latrobe bounding over the tumbling form, and the next instant he had vaulted over the ledge of the open window on the lower floor, and vanished through the gateway to the beach. And now all along the Calle Real the bugles were sounding "To Arms!"

CHAPTER XVI.

That was a wild day in Manila. Far over near the Escolta somebody shot at a vagrant dog lapping water from a little pool under one of the many hydrants. The soldier police essayed an arrest; the culprit broke and ran; the guard fired; a lot of coolies, taking alarm, fled jabbering to the river side. The natives, looking for trouble any moment, rushed to their homes. Some soldiers on pass and unarmed tumbled over the tables and chairs in the Alhambra in their dash for the open street. A stampede sergeant told a bugler to sound to arms, and in the twinkling of an eye the call was taken up from barrack to barrack, and the news went flashing out by wire to the extreme front. The shopkeepers hastily put up their shutters and bolted their doors. Cabs, carts, quilez and carromattas—even the street cars—were instantly seized by the soldiery scattered all over town, and utilized to take them tearing back to join their regiments. In five minutes the business streets downtown were deserted. Chinese cowered within their crowded huts. The natives, men and women, either hid within the shelter of their homes or fled to the sanctuary of the many churches. All over the great city the alarm spread like wildfire. The battalions formed under arms, those nearest the outer lines being marched at once to their positions in support, those nearer the walled city waiting for orders. Foreign residents took matters more coolly than did the Asiatic; German phlegm, English impassiveness and Yankee devil-may-care-ishness preventing a panic. But those who had families and owned or could hire carriages and launches were not slow in seeking for their households the refuge of the fleet of transports lying placidly at anchor in the bay, where Dewey's bluejackets shifted their quids, went coolly to their stations and, grouped about their guns, quietly awaited further developments. In an agony of fear Col. Frost had bidden his driver to lash the ponies to a gallop and go like the wind to Malate; but the appearance of the long ranks of sturdy infantry resting on their arms and beginning to look bored, measurably reassured him before he reached his home. Once there, however, the sight of Nita, clinging hysterically to her sister and moaning on her bed, was sufficient to determine his first move, which was to wire for his launch to come around to the bay shore and take them off to the fleet. The next was to send and ask for an officer and 20 men from the Cuartel, on receiving which message the major commanding, standing on the dusty roadway in front of his men, grinned under his grizzled mustache and said: "Frost's got 'em again. Here, Gray, you go over and tell him to keep his hair on, that it's nothing but a fake alarm." And Gray, glad enough of the chance to go again into the presence of the woman who so fascinated him, sped on his mission. He was in a fury over his recent humiliation in her very sight—he, a commissioned officer, tossed aside like a child and outwitted by this daring intruder in the shape of a private soldier—he and his guard brushed away and derided by a young fellow in some strange regiment—who had easily escaped along the beach to an adjoining inclosure into which he darted and was no more seen. The streets were full of scurrying soldiers, and it was the simplest thing in the world for him to mingle with them and make his way to his own command. Of course, Gray well knew who the man must be—Nita's troublesome lover of whom Witchie had told him so much. There was his chance to recover the letters and claim the reward; but man and letters both had escaped his grasp; and when he pulled up, blown and exhausted after fruitless chase, he was brought to his senses by the sight of his own men falling in "for business," and he had to scamper for his sword and join them.

That was a miserable evening. Margaret Garrison was the only member of the household who seemed to have her wits about her and her nerves under control, for Frank, her liege lord, had his duty elsewhere, and not until hours later trotted slowly home. Margaret plainly let Gray understand how he had fallen in her estimation at being so easily tossed aside. A warning finger was laid upon her lip. "Not one word of what has happened while he is here," she muttered; and a nod of her fluffy head toward the perturbed colonel told plainly that the chief of the household really had no place in the family councils. To the sisters that alarm was a blessing in disguise. It was all sufficient to account for Nita's prostration. To the rash and reckless lad, who, claiming to be an orderly with a letter from the colonel, had been passed by the gate guard to the open stairway, it afforded ample cover for escape, when, alarmed by Nita's cry, Gray and the corporal came springing to her aid. To Gray himself it gave only a few minutes' forgetfulness of his trouble, for, smarting under the sting of a woman's only half-hidden disdain, he would have welcomed with almost savage joy some fierce battle with a skillful foe, some scene in which he could compel her respect and admiration. He was still smarting and stung when at last that opportunity came.

Long will Manila remember the night! It followed close upon the heels of warnings that for weeks held every officer and man to his post of duty. Day after day the strain increased. The insurgents, crowding upon our outposts in front of Santa Mesa on the north and of Santa Ana on the south side of the Pasig, had heaped insult and threats upon our silent sentries, compelled by orders to the very last to submit to anything but actual attack rather than bring on a battle. "The Americans are afraid," was the gleeful cry of Aguinaldo's officers, the jeer and taunt of his men. The regulars were soon to come and replace those volunteers, said the wiseacre of his cabinet, therefore strike now before the trained and disciplined troops arrive and sweep these big boors into the sea. And on the still, starlit night, sooner perhaps than his confederates within the walls intended, the rebel leader struck, and, long before the dawn of the lovely Sunday morn that followed, the fire flashed from 40,000 rifles in big semicircle around Manila, and the long-expected battle was on.

He held her wrist.

Hours after dawn, hours after the attack began, the —teenth were in extended battle order to the south of Malate confronted by thickets of bamboo that fairly swarmed with insurgents, yet, only by the incessant zip and "whiew" of their deadly missiles and the ceaseless crackle of rifle fire, could this be determined; for with their smokeless powder and their Indian-like skill in concealment nothing could be seen of their army. Over to the westward on the placid waters of the bay the huge Monadnock was driving shell after shell into the dense underbrush across the abandoned rice fields and the marshy flats that lined the shore. Over to the east resounding cheers and crashing volleys, punctuated by the sharp report of field guns, told that the comrade brigade was heavily engaged and, apparently, driving the enemy before them. To right and left their volunteer supports were banging into the brush with their heavy Springfields; and still there seemed no symptom of weakness along the immediate front, no sign of yielding. If anything the fury of the insurgent volleying increased as the sun climbed higher, and all along the blue-shirted line men grit their teeth and swore as they crouched or lay full length along the roadside, peering through the filmy veil that drifted slowly across their front—the smoke from the Springfields of the volunteers. To lie there longer with the bullets buzzing close overhead or biting deep into the low embankment, sometimes tearing a stinging path through human flesh and bone, was adding to the nerve strain of the hours gone by. To rush headlong across that intervening open space, through deep and muddy pools and stagnant ditch, and hurl themselves upon the lurking enemy in the bamboo copse beyond, had been the ardent longing of the line since daylight came to illumine the field before them. Yet stern orders withheld: Defend, but do not advance, said the general's message; and the whisper went along from man to man: "There is trouble in town behind us, and the chief may need us there."

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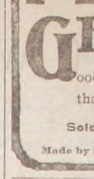

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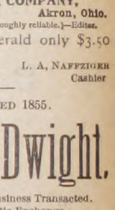

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