

S. H. M. BYERS

THE PALIMPSEST

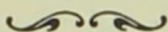
EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

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With Sword

On the twenty-fourth of June, 1861, a patriotic meeting to enlist a company of infantry was held in the courthouse at Newton, Iowa. In the midst of a lull in the drums and the cheering, some one called out "Myers to the platform", but Myers had nothing to say. Instead, he pushed a young lawyer into the aisle, saying "Byers, they are calling you".

The audience took up the cry and Byers, with the enthusiasm and ambition of twenty-three, went up on the platform and, standing by the big drum, made an extemporaneous appeal for enlistments. Ten minutes after the close of his speech, his name led the list of one hundred men on the roster of Company B of the Fifth Iowa.

The speaker was Samuel Hawkins Marshall Byers, born at Pulaski, Pennsylvania, on July 23, 1838. His father, James M. Byers, a bricklayer

by trade, moved to Iowa in 1851, settling at Oskaloosa in 1853. His mother, Parmela Marshall, a grand niece of Chief Justice Marshall, died when her son was less than a month old. At the time of his enlistment young Byers had just been admitted to the Iowa bar, having supplemented his rather meager common school education by reading law in the office of William Loughridge of Oskaloosa.

The enlistment was not as unconsidered as it appeared. A year previous Byers had gone to Memphis, Tennessee, with his father to sell some horses. There the father and son were entertained in the home of the overseer of a plantation and heard the slaves at night singing their plaintive songs. There, too, the young Iowan saw the darker side of slavery — the beating of an old and devoted slave by a quick-tempered master, the cold-blooded whipping of a young negro who had failed to do his work properly — one hundred lashes on the bare back as the slave lay on the stone floor of the public lock-up. "Well, what kind of people are you, up there in Iowa, anyway?" sneered one of the masters when the elder Byers, disliking to witness such incidents, told him he was going north. "If I could not stand to see a nigger licked, I'd go North, too!"

And now the war, and the younger Byers was

to see sights worse than the whipping of a slave. Company B was mustered into Federal service on July 15, 1861, and Corporal Byers spent the winter of 1861-1862 in the guerrilla warfare which divided Missouri, civilians as well as soldiers, into hostile camps. About a year after his enlistment, Colonel Matthies called Byers into his tent and said, "Corporal, I have noticed that you always do the duty assigned you with promptness. I need a quartermaster sergeant. You are the man." Byers said he would like the promotion, but added, rather surprisingly, that he would accept it only if he might, in time of battle, turn over his quartermaster duties to a substitute and fight with his comrades. "There's a fight to-day", called one officer to another during the Vicksburg campaign. "The sign's sure. The quartermaster sergeant has got his gun."

But life was not too safe even for a quartermaster sergeant. Riding back to camp one day, Sergeant Byers saw an armed man in gray ride into a lonely wood. Returning that night with a squad from his regiment, he captured one of the most dangerous guerrillas in Missouri.

In the spring of 1862, the Fifth Iowa was transferred to the army operating around New Madrid and Shiloh. At Iuka, Sergeant Byers, fighting in the line, saw half of the men in the Fifth Iowa

fall dead or wounded. Two weeks later the remnant of his regiment was in the breastworks at Corinth.

The winter of 1862-1863 was spent in the siege of Vicksburg. Quartermaster Sergeant Byers had enough to do to provide the men with supplies, many of which were taken from the plantations, usually at considerable risk. In the midst of this campaign, Byers, because of eye trouble, spent some time in the hospital at Memphis — where he had seen the slaves whipped before the war. Now he looked down each morning, into the room where the dead from the hospital were laid during the night, and counted the corpses of his comrades in arms.

Back in the army besieging Vicksburg, Byers saw other sights more horrible than the dead — men torn by shrapnel struggling in agony, piles of amputated limbs, heaps of decaying corpses where the rain had washed out the half-buried Confederate dead. This, as Byers said often in later years, was war. At Champion Hills, he was in the midst of another desperate battle and was slightly wounded in the hand, though the injury did not take him from the front.

One morning while Sergeant Byers was out in the trenches before the Confederate forts, Colonel Charles L. Matthies crept up to where he was

stationed and presented him with a parcel wrapped in brown paper. In it was the Colonel's own sash, the token of the recent promotion of the quartermaster sergeant to adjutant of the regiment. The promotion nearly caused his death, for riding back from the sutler's store on the Yazoo River with his new uniform tied to his saddlebow and his sword buckled on him, Adjutant Byers was fired upon by a Confederate ambuscade and his horse was killed. He escaped, however, with his uniform. His commission as adjutant was dated April 23, 1863.

On the third of July, 1863, came the joyful news that Vicksburg was to be surrendered the next day. The dispatch from General Grant announcing the surrender was the first order read to the regiment by Adjutant Byers.

After a short furlough to go north in September, 1863 — the only one he had during the war — Adjutant Byers returned to find what was left of the Fifth Iowa at Memphis, ready for the relief of Chattanooga. For two months they campaigned in northern Mississippi and Alabama. Finally, at two o'clock on the afternoon of November 25th, the regiment, hungry, cold, and without sleep for one hundred hours, received orders to assault Missionary Ridge. On they went in the face of a deadly fire, but just as they

began the ascent of the ridge, a detachment of Confederates deployed from a railroad tunnel and opened a withering fire on their flank.

Byers and some eighty members of the Fifth Iowa were taken prisoners. Seizing a blanket from a dead comrade, he obeyed the orders of his captors and hurried up the mountain, a prisoner of war, but as he glanced behind him he saw his blue-coated comrades swarm over the ridge.

That night Byers was among the northern prisoners who were loaded on cattle cars and transported to Libby Prison at Richmond. The building was an old brick tobacco warehouse three stories high. The windows were without glass and the cold, damp air from the nearby James River swept over the shivering men. The "fresh fish", as newcomers were jocularly termed, found some six hundred Union officers in this prison. Among these Byers noted Neal Dow, the author of the Maine liquor law.

The prisoners slept on the floor, each man having only a single army blanket for mattress and cover, and so crowded was the building that at night the makeshift chairs had to be piled on top of the boxes used for tables to make room for the men. The food was largely corn bread made of meal ground cobs and all. In this prison Adjutant Byers spent seven months.

There were occasional breaks in the monotony. One day John Morgan, who had escaped from the Ohio penitentiary, visited the prison and Byers wrote in his diary, "He is a rakish-looking chap, but is gentlemanly for all that." On another occasion a battalion of Marylanders paraded past the prison singing "Maryland, My Maryland", and years afterwards Byers used the same tune — "Der Tannenbaum" — for an Iowa State song. Among some books sent to the prison, Byers found a Latin grammar and studied it industriously but later declared that because of his weakened condition, he was unable to remember anything he studied.

In the summer of 1864, the prisoners were rushed from Libby Prison to Macon, Georgia. On the way, Byers noted that the farmers were growing corn instead of cotton and wrote in his diary, "The rebels look very cheerless, so we guess the tide of battle is in our favor again." At Macon, the captives were herded into a walled enclosure where the sun beat down mercilessly on the sand and the men were for a time without shelter except for their blankets stretched on pine sticks. Libby Prison had been cold; this place was scorching hot. The food was bad and the guards were often brutal.

Little by little, Byers, by trading with a guard,

secured a Confederate uniform and on July 15th, the day his enlistment expired, when the Confederate officers came in to count the prisoners, he walked out the gate, casually explaining to the guard that he had been sent for a missing roll-list. For days, he wandered about the country seeking a way out, pretending to be a Confederate looking for his regiment, gathering valuable information which he was destined never to use, for on the 23rd of July — his birthday — he was surrounded by a detachment of cavalry, charged with being a spy, and only by the accidental loss of a paper sent to headquarters was he saved from trial and possible execution.

As it was, he was taken back to the stockade at Macon, and not many days later he and two hundred other prisoners were sent to Charleston, South Carolina, where they were placed under the fire of the Federal guns bombarding the city. On the way a plot was made to overpower the guards and seize the train, but the leader failed to give the signal. At Charleston the prisoners were kept at the jail and later at what was called Roper Hospital. The Union gunners, however, soon learned the location of the prison and planned to miss it with their shells. The surgeon of the prison camp at Charleston was Dr. Todd, a half-brother of Mrs. Abraham Lincoln.

Yellow fever broke out in Charleston and the prisoners were finally moved to a camp near Columbia, South Carolina, which the men, in derision of the ration of half-cooked corn and cob meal with a little sorghum, called Camp Sorghum. Here the men were confined in a cleared field surrounded by pine woods. Rude shelters were made of sticks and logs. Byers and another officer spent much of their time in a hole dug in the ground, four feet deep, four feet wide, and eight feet long, roofed over with boughs and earth. A tiny fireplace of clay burned a few roots to warm them as they talked of old times or read stale newspapers.

The men were hungry and in rags. Day after day prisoners were shot down as they attempted to run the guard lines. Byers also wanted to escape, but he tried another plan. One day in November, 1864, he and a friend walked out of the enclosure with a detachment sent to gather fuel and then disappeared in the pine woods. Again Byers wandered about in a hostile country, seeing for the most part only the colored people who were always friendly. Again there were hair-breadth escapes and again there was the sudden meeting with the enemy, this time two cavalry officers, who escorted the two Union prisoners to jail at Lexington. It was there that

Byers reports one of the few acts of kindness he received from the white people of the South. The wife of one of his captors sent him a blanket and a basket of food. In a few days the men were back in the prison at Columbia.

Not long afterward the prisoners were moved into the high-walled yard surrounding a building which had formerly been a "lunatic asylum". It was there that the news of Sherman's march reached them and it was there that Adjutant Byers wrote the words of the popular song, "Sherman's March to the Sea".

That song made Byers famous. Even the captain of the prison was impressed and Byers was permitted to sleep inside the hospital building. This proved to be an unintentional favor, for when it was announced that the prisoners were to be transferred south — Sherman's army being too near — Byers and an officer from Pennsylvania crept into the attic over the porch and lay hidden there while their comrades were marched out. Discovered in their first attempt to scale the wall of the empty enclosure, Byers and his comrade took advantage of the fire set by the guards who were looking for them and, seizing buckets, hurried past the guard and escaped, Byers risking recapture to secure his diary which he had accidentally dropped.

It was the seventeenth of February, 1865, and Union soldiers were already in Columbia. A negro, Edward Edwards, gave them food and from a high doorstep in the city the two ragged and emaciated prisoners watched General Sherman and his staff enter the city. The news had been passed around that the author of "Sherman's March to the Sea" was there and Sherman stopped his army's victorious march long enough to greet the two men.

The lady of the house where the men were standing was the daughter of a Union man, though her husband was in the Confederate army. She invited the former prisoners in and gave them food. All that night fire swept over the city of Columbia. Byers and his friend thought of the woman who had fed them and helped her carry out some of her valuable belongings before the house burned.

The Fifth Iowa had literally been wiped out of existence so Adjutant Byers accepted a place with the Tenth Iowa, but a few days later General Sherman sent for him, assigned him to a place on his staff, and invited him, still in his ragged clothing, to dinner with him and his staff. The officers soon assembled a uniform and it was as a member of the General's official family that Byers followed the remainder of the campaign. At

Cheraw, on the third of March, the army celebrated its victories with wine and song. General John A. Logan played the violin while a dozen famous generals joined in "Sherman's March to the Sea".

At Fayetteville, General Sherman sent Byers down the Cape Fear River with dispatches informing General Grant and President Lincoln of his success. By the time Byers reached Washington the war was over. Across his discharge papers, dated March 19, 1865, the Assistant Secretary of War wrote, "Discharged as a supernumerary officer".

RUTH A. GALLAHER