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Major McCrary saw into the future

Major McCrary's Vision

By RALPH MILNE FARLEY

*Author of "Liquid Life,"
"A Month a Minute," etc.*

First published *Strange Stories*, February 1939.

To Kill or Not to Kill—That Is the Question, as Time Stands Still to Give a Man the Answer!

At about 5:30 o'clock on the afternoon of Monday, July 13, 1863, Major Terence McCrary, U.S.A., was walking quietly along Second Avenue, New York City, between 34th and 35th Streets.

He felt perfectly contented and happy. True, the Civil War wasn't going as well as might be. The Confederates had just staged an invasion of Pennsylvania, which had even threatened Philadelphia. But this was no business of Major McCrary's.

He was not responsible for affairs going on at the front. His duty was at a desk in the office of the District Quartermaster of New York City.

His own work was going well, and he had recently been commended for his efficiency. Furthermore, he had just read in today's *Tribune* that the invaders were withdrawing, after a Federal victory at Hagerstown, following close on the heels of Gettysburg.

The only cloud on his particular horizon was the draft riots. The ninth district conscription-office had been wrecked that morning, and a number of Army officers had been threatened with violence during the day.

But McCrary himself had promptly drawn a cavalry revolver from the local Ordnance stores; he was a crack shot, and furthermore he had sufficient confidence in the dignity of his rank to discount the idea that any thug or draft-dodger would dare to assault him—a Major of the Quartermaster Corps of the U.S. Army.

On this warm summer afternoon, as he absentmindedly plodded along up Second Avenue, his thoughts were of wife and children.

"Hey, you Army scum!" sang out an uncouth and belligerent voice.

McCrary looked up. Several roughnecks, with sticks in their hands, were standing some ten feet in front of him on the sidewalk.

McCrary halted. One of the bums, stooping over, scooped up a fistful of mud from the gutter, let fly with it. It struck him on the chest, splattering all over his immaculate blue uniform.

The veins swelled purple in McCrary's throat; he clenched his fists. But all the officers on duty in New York had that day been warned to avoid any acts which might start a riot. So McCrary choked down his Irish wrath, and sought to avoid the mob by crossing the street.

With a whoop of derision, they charged upon him, surrounding him in the middle of the thoroughfare. The major halted, began to argue with them, as peacefully and as diplomatically as he could.

The hoodlums howled him down.

"Bloody Republican!" they shouted. "Murderer!" They barred his way, showered him with unprintable oaths.

Still the Army officer kept his temper. He had his orders; he must avoid provoking a riot.

Yet a man could stand so much and no more. When one of the largest and most brutal-looking of the mob rushed at him with upraised club, McCrary abruptly decided that affairs had gone too far for any hope of peaceful settlement; so he reached to his hip and grasped the butt of his cavalry revolver; prepared to yank it from its holster and defend himself.

At that very moment . . . just as his fingers closed around the grip of his weapon . . . something . . . something very strange happened . . .

Everything around Major McCrary came to a sudden and complete stop. If the year had been 1938, instead of 1863, the phenomenon would have suggested to his mind the sticking of a motion-picture film in the projector. Events which had been flowing along so smoothly and rhythmically, suddenly stuck and became a flat scene without motion.

The club of the advancing rioter hung poised in mid-air; the rioter himself abruptly froze, in a running position, with one foot on the ground and the other one lifted in front of him.

It was a position from which he would have fallen forward on his face—but the attraction of gravitation no longer operated—it too had stopped, along with everything else.

The shifting surrounding crowd about McCrary and his attacker still surrounded but shifted no longer. The hot afternoon breeze no longer blew against McCrary's cheek. The

fleecy clouds overhead had ceased their lazy drift across the blue—had ceased even to change their shapes.

A sea-gull, high aloft, flapped no more; remained fixed upon the sky. As a ludicrous touch, a large horse-fly, buzzing a minute before around the major's head, now hung a few inches in front of his nose, not a quiver coming from its formerly vibrating wings. The major himself was a frozen tableau of a man drawing a revolver.

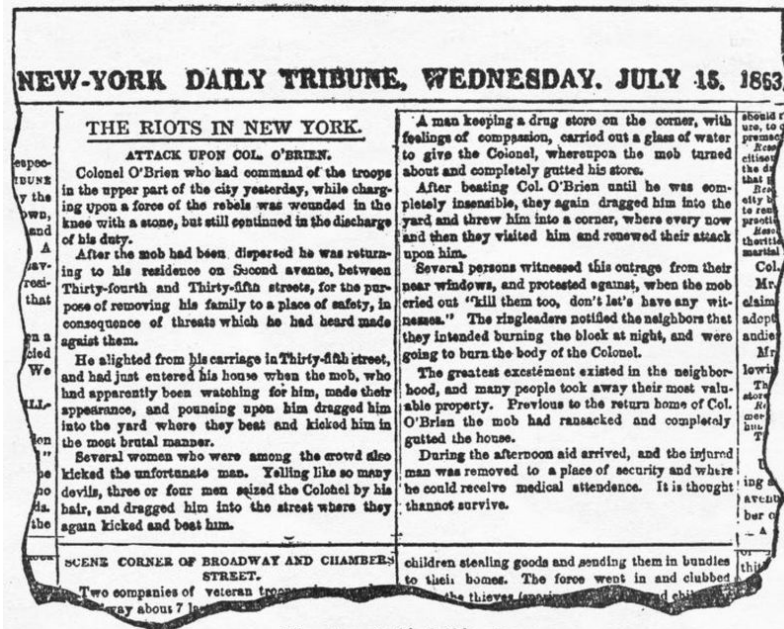
Time had stopped stock-still! Nothing moved except the major's thoughts. And as he gradually took in the situation, as he slowly recovered from his stupefaction, he saw a white-robed winged figure approaching down the street.

Just beyond edges of the now motionless mob, the figure stopped and called softly, "Terence McCrary, come with me."

For McCrary—for McCrary alone, the spell was broken. Letting his revolver slide back into its holster, the major wormed his way out between the silent wax-work-like figures of the mob.

"Yes?" he said tentatively, timidly, like an awed child.

"Come," replied the winged figure. And reaching out one hand, she laid it on the major's shoulder, led him to the curb, across the sidewalk, and through an open doorway. Everything else in the world remained still.



The story behind this story

Inside the building there was peace and coolness, quiet and darkness. Led by his guide, McCrary groped his way to a chair and sat down. He felt very tired. He wanted to rest forever. He sat with his head in his hands, silent. A touch on his arm roused him.

"Look!" commanded his companion.

McCrary raised his head and looked. On the wall ahead of him, he saw a square of silver light.

“What is that?” he asked listlessly.

“A ‘motion picture’,” his companion replied.

“A what?”

“A ‘motion picture’. There are no such things yet in this world; but in the future, in the twentieth century, men will perfect them. They will be like a magic-lantern, a stereopticon, except that the pictures will move, and will show living scenes in action. Now I shall show you a ‘news reel’.”

“What is that?” The major was humble and attentive.

“It is a motion picture of actual events. You will be able to *hear* the event, as well as see it. And the film will be colored, so as to make it still more realistic.”

“What wonderful devices the men of the future will have!” exclaimed the major.

“Those devices of the future will be nothing compared to what you are about to see,” asserted his companion. “For I shall show you a newsreel of *things which have not yet occurred*. Men will never attain to that. Now watch and listen.”

As she ceased speaking, the square on the screen in front of them began to flicker, soft music came from somewhere in the room, and some printed words danced upon the space blank but a moment before.

Wide-eyed, the major read: “The Fatal Shot, featuring Major Terence McCrary, Q.M.C., U.S. Army.”

The musical prelude stopped, the printed announcement flashed off, and McCrary gasped to see a colored action-picture of himself, in his blue uniform, surrounded by the anti-draft rioters in the street outside.

The scene was exactly as it had been just before Time had stopped. Not only could the major see the scene, but he could hear all the sounds which had accompanied it: his own peaceful words, the taunts and gibes of the mob.

Then the burly hoodlum raised his club and rushed at the figure in blue, just as he had done outside.

At this point in the film, McCrary expected to see everything come to a standstill, as it had actually done. To his surprise, the action went on.

The Army officer in the picture snatched out his revolver—snatched it so quickly that the film scarcely recorded the movement—and fired point-blank at the oncoming thug.

An expression of surprise flooded the face of the rioter. His club clattered to the pavement. With a gurgling groan, he sank to his knees; then pitched forward in a heap.

“Next!” exclaimed the officer on the screen tersely.

The mob fell back, snarling. There were no takers to the hero’s invitation. “Scatter!” he tersely ordered them, raising his smoking weapon; the mob promptly scattered.

The McCrary of the film disdainfully returned his revolver to its holster; without a glance behind him at his thoroughly cowed enemies, or at the corpse of the man he had killed, he marched to the sidewalk, moved along it toward his home.

The scene shifted back to the street again, where the mob, with swearing and many threats, picked up the dead body and bore it away.

There followed next the hero’s welcome to the arms of his wife and children. Then a humorous touch: the spotted uniform being cleaned by the major’s Negro serving man, with

much excited comment by the gathered servants.

Sub-title: "The Next Morning."

McCrary saw his screen replica seated at his desk at the Q.M. storehouse. An orderly entered, saluted and presented a summons from headquarters. The hero went there. The colonel in charge gravely informed him that the rioting was fast becoming uncontrollable, that the mobs were deifying the slain thug, and that it had become necessary to recall troops from the front in order to patrol the city.

"You are under arrest, McCrary," said the colonel. "Charges will be preferred against you for shooting, without provocation, an unarmed civilian, and for conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman."

"But, Colonel—"

"Silence!" bellowed his superior, and he was led away.

Then, successively flashing upon the screen, scenes showed the return of many troops from Gettysburg to restore order in New York, the frantic consternation of the populace in both New York and Philadelphia. The New Yorkers were afraid that not enough troops would be recalled to restore order and suppress the draft-riots. The Philadelphians were afraid that too many troops would be recalled, allowing Lee and his retreating Southern Army to turn back and again invade Pennsylvania.

The populace of both cities—in fact, of the country at large—demanded a scapegoat; the harassed officials had no trouble finding one.

Major Terence McCrary had killed a civilian, and the event had intensified the draft-riots. The riots had necessitated weakening General Meade's Union Army by sending troops to New York. The fate of the nation hung in the balance as the result of McCrary's rash act. Major McCrary had to be punished.

There followed the convening of a General Court-martial to try the culprit. With popular feeling inflamed as it was, McCrary never had a chance.

The verdict was "guilty as charged." The sentence, dishonorable dismissal from the Army.

The film then showed the barely successful termination of the Civil War, with a flashback to the disgraced McCrary after each event.

He was shown filling one civilian job after another; filling them satisfactorily, only to be discharged from each as soon as his identity as "Butcher McCrary" became known.

His family was shown moving into successively less and less livable quarters, finally ending up in a slum.

The last view of McCrary himself was as a white-wing, with scoop and push-brush, picking up manure in the streets of post-war New York.

The prophetic news-reel came to an end. The living major sat quietly, staring ahead of him. At last he said: "And what if I do *not* shoot?"

"I was waiting for you to ask that," replied the angel. "Look again and see."

Once more the film began, with the same musical prelude and the same title: "The Fatal Shot, featuring Major Terence McCrary, Q.M.C., U.S. Army."

But when it reached the scene where the thug, with club upraised, rushed upon the blue-coated Army officer, the action changed.

With a smile on his lips—shown in a close-up—the officer folded his arms, looked his assailant coolly in the eye . . . and was felled to the cobble-stones!

With loud laughter, the mob dragged the prostrate form to the gutter, beat it with clubs, kicked it.

Exhausted at last, they stopped. The blue-coated body stirred.

“Water!” came a faint moan.

A kindly-faced man in a white coat emerged from a nearby drug store with a tumbler in his hand. Eagerly the stricken figure raised its head. But the glass was dashed from the druggist’s hand. The mob wrecked the drug store. All attempts to rescue the fallen man were repulsed by the mob. Occasionally a passerby would give the body a contemptuous kick. The body typified the hated draft.

Along toward dusk, there came two priests with a dump-cart. The mob grudgingly let them through, and they tenderly carried the stricken man away to a hospital, where later he died, surrounded by his family.

Overnight the dead major became a national hero. The riots were promptly and vigorously suppressed. President Lincoln was shown writing a long-to-be-treasured letter of condolence to the major’s proud widow. A popular subscription was taken up to educate his children, who were taught to know that “father gave his life for his country.”

The second film ended. “Choose!” commanded the winged figure.

There was a long moment of silence. Then: “I have chosen,” Major McCrary said softly.

His celestial guide led him forth again into the street.

The scene remained unchanged. The clouds still hung motionless in the blue. The group of figures, that had been the mob, continued to await their victim in frozen silence.

Right through their midst the winged guide led the major, until she had placed him exactly as he had stood when Time had stopped. His hand was on the butt of his revolver. The horse-fly hung motionless in front of his nose. The impending figure of the rioter stood with upraised club. “Good-by and good luck,” said his guide. She moved away up the street, was gone.

For a moment Major McCrary stood immovable. Then, with a sigh and a slight shudder, he let his pistol slip back into his holster. He raised his arms and folded them proudly across his breast.

Time started moving again. The club of the rioter crashed down upon the skull of his unresisting victim.

The rest is history.

(See the *New York Tribune* of July 15, 1863, and *Harper’s Weekly* of Aug. 1, 1863.)

[The end of *Major McCrary’s Vision* by Roger Sherman Hoar (as Ralph Milne Farley)]