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The Old Army Game

Henry Kuttner

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I used to think there warn't much to this army life—just marching round toting a firearm and wearing khaki. First off I was glad to get out'n the Kaintuck hills, figuring that I'd see the world and maybe some excitement.

Things has been awful dull in Piney since the last of the Fletcher boys was killed off, and Uncle Aylmer was allus talking about how he shouldn't of plugged Jared Fletcher, 'cause that ended the clan and there wasn't anybody left to fight with. Uncle took to drinking corn likker serious like after that, and we had to keep the still running overtime to keep him supplied.

Anyhow, the teacher up at Piney allus told me to start a yarn at the beginning, so I guess I will. Only I don't know when the beginning happened. Might have been the day I got a letter that said Huet Hogben on the front, or so Paw said, and he's got a mite of book-learning.

"Yep," he said, "that's an aitch, all righty. Guess it's for you, Saunk."

They call me Saunk because I'm kinda short and runty, as the Hogbens go. Maw says I ain't got my full growth yet, but I'm nigh twenty-two, and hardly over six feet at all. I been kinda touchy about my runtiness all along, so I used to sneak off and chop kindling to give me strength. Anyhow, Paw took the letter over to the teacher to get it read, and he come back ranting and raving.

"Fightin'," he yelled. "There's a war goin' on! C'mon, Aylmer. Git yore shootin' iron."

Uncle Aylmer was sitting in a corner drinking corn and weaning the new baby with it. "War's over," he mumbled, kinda mad like. "Them damyankees was too much fer us. Gen'l Lee's dead, I hear."

"They's a war," Paw said stubborn. "The teacher says Saunk's gotta go."

"Mean to say we're secedin' ag'in?" Uncle Aylmer asked him, tilting the jug. "I allus said them damyankees couldn't make us stay in their Union."

"I dunno 'bout that," Paw told him. "I couldn't make haid nor tail out'n what that blabbermouth teacher was sayin'. My idee is thet they's a war."

Maw was getting her old muzzleloader out of the closet. "C'mon, Aylmer," she said. "We'll all go. Dunno what good a runty li'l shote like you can do," she said to me, "but you can shoot straight, kinda."

"Shucks, Maw," I said, noticing the teacher coming up the path on his mule. "I can fight good."

"Them Bowyer boys near licked you," Uncle Aylmer cackled. "An' they was only six of 'em."

"They jumped me from behind," I argued. "Anyway, when I got my wind back I licked 'em good."

"Jabberin' like jaybirds," Maw said. "Let's git goin'."

So we all went out the door, kinda tromping on the teacher, but it was his own fault 'cause he didn't get out of the way fast enough. Maw's got a soft heart, though, so she come back and picked him up. He was mumbling somethin' 'bout gorillas and buff'lo, but he come to when we poured some corn down his weasened, after a little scrap with Uncle Aylmer who didn't want to give up the jug. The teacher jumped up sudden and stuck his head in a pail of water on the table, but we ignored him polite-like, bein' he's a furriner.

"First you stampede all over me," he says, kinda bitter, "and then you revive me with molten lava. God!"

"Don't you use that kind of language," Maw tells him, jerking her head toward me. "We got a growin' boy here."

"If he grows any more, they'll build a penthouse on his head," the teacher says, which I don't understand.

"Well, we're in a hurry," Uncle Aylmer growls, getting the jug back.

"There isn't any war," the teacher yells, clawing at his hair. "Mr. Hogben ran away before he understood."

Well, he kept talking and talking, and after awhile we understood what it was all about. Seems like some clans are feuding in Europe, and it's up to us to oil our fire-irons, case they get too rambunctious and start taking pot-shots at us. Oncommon good sense, Maw said, and we'd all jine up.

"You can't," the teacher said, red around the gills. "It's just Huet that's drafted."

"Might's well draft the baby," Paw snapped. "Saunk ain't got his full growth yet."

"He's over twenty-one. You're too old, Mr. Hogben."

Paw started for the teacher, but Maw grabbed him sudden like. "Calm down," she snapped at him, so he subsided, still growling. "You ain't a chicken no more."

"Just how old are you, Mr. Hogben?" the teacher asked.

"I lost count back in '87," Paw said thoughtful.

"I'm a hundred an' three," Uncle Aylmer cackled, but everybody in Piney knows what a liar he is. The teacher shut his eyes up tight and said, in a funny voice:

"The President of the United States signed a bill drafting men between the ages of 21 and 35. Huet's supposed to join the army for a year unless he's exempt."

"He's too runty," Paw said jealous-like. "They won't take him."

But Maw was looking thoughtful. "You got to do what the President wants, Saunk. Now you jest sit down with the teacher and see if you can figger out what's in his mind."

So I did what she told me, and we filled out the paper the President had sent me. There was a bit of trouble, 'cause Uncle Aylmer kept interrupting, but after awhile the teacher kinda grabbed the jug and swallowed some corn.

"Whoosh!" he said, busting out in a sweat. "Desperate ills require desperate measures. Let's see, Saunk. What's your income?"

"I traded ol' Langland some corn for a pair of britches once," I said, hesitating.

Smack! Maw hit me over the head with her broomstick. "Where'd you git that corn?" she asked. "Stealin' it from the still?"

"Shucks, no, Maw," I said, ducking. "Uncle Aylmer give it to me for not tellin' about the time he—"

"Shet up!" Uncle Aylmer yelled, kicking out at me.

"Income!" the teacher said, kinda screaming. "Cash! Hard money!"

“I found a nickel last May,” I said.

I never saw a man lose his temper so quick. But I made allowances, 'cause the teacher's a furriner, and after he'd gulped some more corn he felt better. Anyway, he took the paper away and said he'd tend to it. So nothing more was done till one day the teacher told me I'd have to go to the draft board.

Everything was kinda mixed up in my mind till suddenly I found myself in a room with Uncle Aylmer and a few other men I didn't know. They talked funny. They told me to take off my clothes and go into the next room, which I did, and a little feller in there yelled something about a bear and ran out, leaving the door open. I looked around, but I didn't see no bear.

So I waited till he came back, with a big man who was grinning all over his face.
“Okay, Doc,” he said. “That's no bear. That's Huet Hogben, according to the files.”

“He's—uh—hairy,” the little runt said.

“I didn't get to shave last week,” I explained. “We was slaughtering the pigs an' the razor got lost somewheres. Anyway I ain't hairy. You ought to see Paw. He's got a pelt like one of them things the teacher calls a yak.”

The doctor was hitting me on the chest, but I didn't feel it. After a mite he said: “Sound as a bell. Pick up that weight, Hogben.”

He pointed to a chunk of iron on the floor, with a handle on top, so I hefted it. It looked heavier than it was, and it got away from me somehow and went sailing up against the wall. Plaster came spurting out.

“Good heavens!” the doctor said.

“Shucks, I'm sorry,” I told him.

“You'll be sorrier,” he said, “when you get to camp and start taking orders from a top-sergeant. You'll spend your time in the guard-house, or I don't know top-sergeants.”

There was a kind of rumpus then, 'cause Uncle Aylmer had found out they wouldn't let him jine up, and he took off his peg-leg and sailed into 'em. I finally wropped my arms round him, trying not to listen to his language—which wasn't anything for a growing boy like me to hear—and tied him on the mule, which I smacked on the rump and sent home. Last I see of Uncle Aylmer was his face bobbing up and down under the mule, while the poor critter's hide was rising in blisters from his unrestrained cursing. Then I noticed everybody in the street was staring at me, and I remembered I didn't have nothing on. I never been so embarrassed.

The teacher says that when a lot of things happen you don't want to tell about, you just put a line of little stars on the paper. I can't do that, but my buddy's writing this down, and he'll make the stars.

* * * * *

All that means I got dressed again, went through a lot of rigamarole, and finally found myself in camp, a regular soldier. The doctor wasn't speaking true when he said I'd be in the guard-house all the time, though. Maw allus told me to obey orders—at least till I got my growth—so I did.

Sometimes people would get mad without having any reason for it, like the time we was at shooting-practice, and after plugging the bull's-eye on my target I shot out the centers of all the other targets too. Then they got rambunctious when I cut holes in my shoes so's my feet would have room, and the time I stepped on a feller's face—but that was jest an accident. I kinda stumbled and he got tromped on. But he was picking on my buddy, and hit me on the

nose when I told him to stop, and they carted him off to the hospital and put me in the calaboose.

My buddy's name was Jimmy Mack, and he was eddicated beyond all reason. He was a skinny little feller, just over the weight limit, and I guess we stuck together 'cause we was both runts. He said his grandpaw had more book-learning than he did. Grandpaw Eliphalet Mack, his name was, and he invented things. Everybody thought he was crazy, but Jimmy said that he wasn't. He was working on a gadget to make airplanes fly better—an alloy, Jimmy called it.

Seems like if a plane was made of this stuff it could be awful big, and carry enough gas to fly awful far. Only Grandpaw hadn't invented the alloy yet, but kept blowing himself up instead. He lived not far from the camp, and we visited him once on leave, but only got blowed up a mite when he tried to show us how his stuff worked. We left him crying and combing his whiskers, which had got burned a trifle, but Jimmy said Grandpaw would win out yet.

The camp was right near a big woods, and I'd sneak off there whenever I got the chance, to tend to some business I had. It was kinda private, so I didn't even tell Jimmy. And that got me in trouble. One day they brought me up before a room full of brass-buttoned officers and asked me questions I couldn't figure out.

The major kinda liked me, but he looked awful mad. He kept fumbling with a crumpled paper he was holding and staring at me.

"Private Hogben!" he said, sudden-like. "Where were you this afternoon?"

"Shucks, Major," I told him, "I jest went for a walk."

"Outside the camp?"

"Well—yes, sir," I said, not wanting to lie.

"That was out of bounds. And it wasn't the first time. You've been seen going into the woods more than once."

"I jest like to tromp round the hills, Major," I said.

A man with a white mustache made a noise like he'd swallowed the wrong way, and looked at me very mean. "Expect us to believe that?" he asked.

"Shucks, I do like to tromp round," I said.

"That wasn't the reason you've been going into the hills. What's the explanation of this paper the inspecting officer found in your pocket?"

The major showed me the scrap, which was burned at the edges.

"I found it," I said. "Jest today, when I was back in the woods. It was fluttering along, so I picked it up."

"Know what it says?"

"I couldn't read it very well. I thought I'd get Jimmy to read it to me."

"Jimmy?" the mustache asked, and the major said:

"Private Mack. He's above suspicion."

"Nobody is! Especially with this code message mapping the camp and estimating—well, information."

"Listen, Colonel," the major said, "Private Hogben's not a spy—I'm sure of that. I think someone was on the hill, mapping the camp and following our maneuvers, and then Hogben came along and frightened him. He tried to burn the paper, but it blew away before he finished the job."

"Somewhat far-fetched, Major," the colonel growled.

“These weren’t secret maneuvers anyway, sir. Why should a spy want—”

“They’re thorough,” the colonel said, and I wondered who “they” were. “Work like machines. Cover every detail. Even if it seems unimportant. We can’t risk a spy in camp. Private Hogben, you are under arrest.”

“Till we investigate further,” the major told me, friendly-like, but I shook my head.

“Can’t it wait till tomorrow, sir?” I asked. “Jimmy an’ me got leave to visit his Grandpaw. He wrote his invention’s all finished, an’ he wanted to show it to us.”

“Your leave’s cancelled,” the colonel snapped. “Whom have you been meeting in the woods?”

“It ain’t true,” I said. “Sir, I jest promised to go with Jimmy, an’ Maw told me never to break a promise.”

“Guardhouse!” the colonel said, awful loud, and I was took away by the O.D., feeling mighty bad. After a while I found out Jimmy had already left, leaving word for me to catch up with him on the road. He didn’t know I was in the guardhouse, I guess.

Far as I could figure out, I hadn’t done anything wrong. And I’d promised Jimmy. So when it got dark I squeeze out through the window, after bending the bars a little and skinning my knuckles on ’em. The moon was just coming up over the hill, and the sentry saw me. He was the feller who had tried to pick on Jimmy a while before, and he had it in for me. I tried not to hurt him, but I figured he’d duck when he saw my fist coming. He kept moaning sort of feeble-like after that, and I got worried about leaving him out in the open, ’cause it was pretty chilly.

Finally I shoved him into the cell I’d squeeze out of, and laid him out peaceful. I took a loose tooth out of his mouth so he wouldn’t swallow it by accident, and left him. It was risky getting past the guards, but I managed it, picking up a jug of corn on the way, and then heading for the road.

It was a nice night, bright as day, with jay-birds hollering in the moonlight and cars ripping past on the highway and the snow piled up on the trees. I felt good enough to spit. So I tilted the jug, swallowed some corn, and started out.

Might have been half an hour when a car came rattling past like a bat out of hell. Jimmy’s Grandpaw, Eliphalet Mack, was driving it, his whiskers flapping, but he didn’t hear me when I yelled.

I crawled out of the ditch, where I’d jumped as he came at me, took another drink, and jumped back again, as a big black sedan swooshed past. It was full of men.

One of ’em yelled something like “*Dumkopf!*” at me, but that didn’t seem to mean anything. I drank some more corn and got ready to hide in the ditch again as another car came racing along.

It stopped when it saw me, though, and I saw Jimmy was at the wheel, with a little bald-headed man beside him. “Saunk!” my buddy yelled. “Jump in quick!”

“What’s all the fuss about?” I asked, strolling over. “I jest saw yore Grandpaw.”

Jimmy dragged me into the back of the car. The little bald-headed man got out, said: “You can have the bus,” and ran off up the road.

Then we started off again, faster’n I’d ever rode before in my life.

“Shucks,” I said, crawling into the front seat, “Take it easy, Jimmy. What’s the rush?”

“Fifth Columnists,” my buddy said. “They’ve been hanging around here trying to get army information, I guess, and they found out about Grandpaw’s invention. When I got there they

were trying to make him give 'em the formula.”

“Huh?” I said.

“Spies!” Jimmy yelled at me. “Foreign agents! We had a fight, and Grandpaw got away with the papers. They followed him in their car, and I commandeered one myself when I woke up. Sweet little bus, isn't it?”

Jimmy's a mechanic. He's always talking about engines and things.

“That bald-headed little guy—who was he?” I asked.

“This is his car. He's been begging me to let him get out for miles, but I didn't dare stop.”

We swung around a turn, skidded on slush, climbed halfway up a bank, swiveled around, and came down again. I crawled back into the front seat and drank more corn.

“You ain't jest right in the haid, Jimmy,” I said. “What's all this about?”

“I've been trying to explain it to you, numbskull,” he yelled. “Those men are trying to get Grandpaw's formulas away from him. The warplane alloy secret. The method's perfected now —”

“Why didn't yore Grandpaw call the police?” I asked.

“There aren't any around this farm. He's heading for camp, I'll bet. It's the closest place where he can get help.”

A touring car was trying to hog the road in front of us. Jimmy blew his horn and swung out. I heard a scraping noise and some yelling, but when I opened my eyes again the touring car was gone. Looking back, I saw it 'way on a hillside, wedged in between a couple of pines.

“There they are!” Jimmy said.

We were getting close to the camp. The road was pretty straight for a ways, with hills on both sides, and the woods looking pretty in the moonlight. Grandpaw Eliphalet's car was 'way ahead, but suddenly it started swaying, ran off in the ditch, and fell over.

“Blowout!” Jimmy groaned.

The black sedan was ahead of us, too. I saw Grandpaw climb out of the wrecked car, look back, and then start running up the slope into the woods. The sedan stopped and men jumped out of it and took after Grandpaw. They were shooting at him.

“I see now,” I said. “They're feuding with yore Grandpaw.”

A bullet whanged off the front of our car. Two men were waiting for us, the others having gone off into the woods. Jimmy ducked and jammed on the brakes. Being as I was, drinking from the jug, I didn't notice anything wrong till I went sailing through the windshield.

I landed pretty hard, and there was a chunk of glass in my scalp that was hurting me, so I sat up and picked it out. I was tangled up with the remains of Grandpaw Eliphalet's car, which we'd hit, and two fellers were tangling up with Jimmy. He could fight for a runt his size. But one of them got behind him, grabbed his arms, and then the other let fly a punch that hit my buddy right in the jaw.

“Quit that,” I said, angry-like. “Let him be, hear me?”

Jimmy slumped down in the snow and didn't move, but the two men whirled, surprised. They were big, husky fellers, and both of them had little toy shooting-irons that they aimed at me.

“Another soldier!” one of them said. “Kill the *schweinhund!*”

Well, Maw allus told me guns warn't meant to play with, so when they started to shoot I kinda scrooged down behind what was left of Grandpaw's car. The engine looked pretty

shaky, and it was, for when I sort of leaned against it, it busted right off from the rest of the machine. I ducked just in time, but a bullet nicked my ear. The two men were walking toward me, firing.

“He’s not armed, Hans,” one of the fellers grunted. “You circle to the right—”

That’s what they call a flank attack in the army. I knew better than to let somebody with a gun get behind me, so I thought I’d act fast while they was still together. I picked up the engine and heaved it at those fellers, though it was uncommon heavy.

“*Gott!*” said one, and the other said, “*Der Teufel!*” They went back into a snowbank with the engine on top of them, so all I could see was their feet sticking out. The feet wiggled for a minute or so and then stopped, so I kinda figgered they wouldn’t give no trouble for a while. But poor Jimmy was slumped down with his eyes shut. I looked around for the jug to revive him, only it had been smashed, and the snow was sizzling a mite where the corn had spilled. A jaybird was splashing around in the puddle and squawking fit to be tied.

I picked up Jimmy and started back for the camp, where I’d another jug of corn cached away. Grandpaw Eliphalet was yelling ’way back in the woods, but Maw allus told me it ain’t polite to go busting into another clan’s feuds. It was different with Jimmy, ’cause he was my buddy. But I remember last July when the Goodwins ganged up on Jem Martin, who walks with a crutch, and after I’d roughed up the Goodwins, old Jem took after me shooting and yelling for me to mind my own business. Maw said it served me right as she picked buckshot out’n my hide.

But all of a sudden I noticed that the yells were coming from a hill where a big blasted pine stood up all alone, and then I changed my mind. I put Jimmy down carefully in the ditch and ran up the slope. My feet hurt, so I took my shoes off and left ’em in a holler log, and then I kept on running.

I ain’t much given to new-fangled contraptions anyhow.

There’s a wash—a sort of gulley—that splits the hill, and up near the edge of that, under some pines, was Grandpaw Eliphalet scrapping with the four men. But he wasn’t no match for them. They got him down and held him, whilst he cussed fit to singe his whiskers.

“*Ach!*” said one of them, a big husky feller with a mustache. “*A verdamnt soldier!*”

“Hold on,” I said. “Don’t point that shootin’-iron at me, mistuh. You mind your business an’ I’ll mind mine.”

“He is not armed, Kurt,” another of the four whispered. “Perhaps—”

Kurt looked around. “Are you alone?” He kept the gun pointed at me.

“Sure,” I said. “I jest want to say you ain’t got no call to be traipsin’ all round here. You better clear out ’fore I make you.”

Meantime Grandpaw was squealin’ like a stuck hawg. “Help!” he kept yelling. “Murder!”

“I cain’t help you,” I told him. “Maw always said to keep out’n other people’s feuds. What do you-all intend to do?” I asked Kurt.

“We—we’re just leaving,” he said, looking at me funny-like.

“All right, then,” I said. “Long as you’re leaving. I’ll be runnin’ ’long myself then.”

But jest as I turned a gun went off, an’ something whammed me ’longside the head. Lucky I’d turned when I did, or my brains would of been spattered all over the country. Even as it was, the bullet knocked me out for a mite, and when I woke up I was standing in the snow, tied to a tree. I couldn’t have been onsensible long, I figgered, but Grandpaw Eliphalet was tied near me, to another pine.

“You ain’t right friendly,” I said reproving. “I ain’t aimin’ to bust into your feuds.”

“Silence, *schweinhund!*” growled Kurt. “Now we must work fast—we have little time. Where did you hide those papers, you old fool?”

Grandpaw jest shook his head, looking mad. Kurt grinned.

“Take off his shoes. Give me the matches. While you’re at it, Fritz, see if that imbecile soldier knows anything.”

“Shucks, I’m jest a buck private,” I told him, but he didn’t listen. Grandpaw yelled and cursed fearful while they was unlacing his shoes, but he only was practicing, I guess. When they lit matches under his feet his profanity was an eddication. I tried to remember some of it to tell Uncle Aylmer, though I knew if Maw ever found out about it she’d skin me.

Meantime they was putting matches up against my feet too, and I thanked ’em kindly, being as I’d been barefooted in the snow for a mite.

“His soles are made out of leather!” Fritz mumbled. “*Ach!* He is like a dinosaur—he doesn’t know when he’s hurt.”

I was going to tell him that if he wanted to hurt me, he should try kicking my shins, but I thought better of it. After a while Grandpaw Eliphalet groaned:

“In the ravine, damn you! There’s a cave there—I shoved the papers into it.”

“*Ja!*” Kurt said, mighty pleased. “I hope you are not lying! Come! Fritz, you stay here and guard these two.”

“Shall I—”

“Wait till I have the papers. Then you may kill them.”

“You’re right onfriendly,” I told him. “Hey! Grandpaw! Did you say the cave in the wash?”

He jest groaned, and Kurt and two others started down the bank. Fritz whirled his gun by its trigger-guard and grinned.

I yelled after Kurt: “You stay out’n thet thar cave, hear me?”

He shouted back: “Shoot the soldier, Fritz, if he gets troublesome.” Then he was gone.

I figgered, shucks, it was time to do something. So I started to work on the ropes that tied my arms back of me to the tree. Fritz noticed what I was doing, and told me to stop, but I didn’t pay him no mind. He circled around back of me and hit my hands with his gun, talking to himself. I jest kept on working.

So he came round in front of me, stepped up close, and shoved the pistol-muzzle into my stummick. “Very well. I shall shoot you,” he said. “*Heil—*”

He couldn’t have knowed very much about feuding, or he wouldn’t have come so close. I slammed my head down hard, hit him on the forehead, and got an uncommon splitting headache right then. I heard the gun drop on my toe, and Fritz wavered round a bit, grinning silly-like, and fell over after a while. He had a fearful lump starting on his hairline.

Anyhow, I didn’t need to pay him no mind now, so I jest worked myself free and picked up his gun. Grandpaw Eliphalet was shouting at me to set him loose, but I was in a hurry. Kurt and his friends were already way down the wash. I ran along the bank, kicking up a flurry of snow, till I caught up with them. They was right near the cave, ploughing away at a great rate, and sometimes splashing in the stream where it wasn’t all ice.

“Hey!” I yelled down at them. “You stay out’n that cave!”

But they only shot off their guns, not aiming very careful, and talking in some furrin language. I fired back at ’em, missing my aim ’cause I’d never handled this kind of pistol

before. I plugged one of 'em in the arm, but it was the left one, and I felt bad. Maw would of whaled me for that sort of shooting.

Finally my gun was empty, so I threw it down at Kurt and jumped after it. The drop was only twenty-five feet or so, and I landed right on top of one of the men. It was the feller with the busted arm—at least, it was only his arm was busted 'fore I fell on him. After that he jest lay with his head in a snowbank and his feet kicking feeble-like.

That left three of them, but they'd been shooting so wild two fellers had to stop to reload. The one with the gun fired at me, creasing my ribs as I rushed him. Using strategy, I fell down and rolled a mite till I could grab his legs.

The others were rushing in, ready to finish me, but I jest stood up, holding the gunman's feet so he would of been dangling down if I hadn't started to swing him around. He yelled, and the pistol went sailing off into a bush. I sort of braced myself and kept swinging him rapid, figgering he'd knock Kurt and the other man down. It worked out that way, too. After a mite I let go, and the feller shot across the wash and kind of caromed off a big rock there. He vanished out of sight behind it, and I didn't hear nothing more from him.

Kurt had scrambled up and was running toward the cave, but the other man was wriggling around and bringing his gun to bear on me. There wasn't time to persuade him proper, so I jumped and came down heavy on his stummick. He didn't want to let go the fire-iron, though, but he did after I'd trompled him a speck.

"Ach!" he said, "*Der blitzkrieg!*" But them was his expiring words.

Kurt was already inside the cave when I caught up with him. He was bent over, stowing some papers in his pocket, but he swung round and shot at me, missing bad. I didn't have no gun, and I couldn't be bothered looking round for one, so I stooped down and packed up a clod of snow. Jest as I threw it one of Kurt's bullets whanged into my shoulder, and my whole left arm went numb. But I got good aim—even Maw admits that—and the snowball splattered all over Kurt's face. There must of been some dirt in it, too, from the way Kurt acted.

I ran and grabbed the gun, but he didn't want to let go. He kicked me in the shins, which allus makes me lose my temper. So I kept hold of his wrist and swung him around a trifle, sort of battering him 'gainst the walls. He stopped screaming after a bit, being kind of bashed up, and when I let go he sailed out'n the mouth of the cave and never once stopped till he ran into a pine tree 'cross the wash. After that he rolled down into the stream and didn't make no more remarks.

I was bleeding a trifle, but shucks, I still had work to do. So I drug the four fellers out of the ravine and back up to where I'd left Grandpaw Eliphalet. I took a jug of corn with me, and after we'd got Grandpaw untied, I revived him a trifle while I waited for him to simmer down. But then Jimmy came staggering up the slope, leading the hull army, with the colonel and the major in the front, and I had to hide the jug under a bush.

There was so much going on I kinda lost track till I was back in camp in the tent with Jimmy, lying on my cot and wriggling my toes comfortable-like. It made me laugh to think of the fuss they made over my shoulder, what with bandages and medicine. Maw would of slapped a poultice on it, poured a gallon of corn down my throat, and whopped me for getting into trouble. Only, as I figgered it, I hadn't got in trouble. Jest the opposite, from what Jimmy explained to me.

"They were spies—foreign agents, Saunk," he told me, puffing at a cigarette as he pulled off his shoes. "You'll get a medal for this, I'll bet."

“Shucks,” I said, “I was jest safeguarding my rights.”

He looked at me kind of puzzled, but went on talking.

“Grandpaw’s alloy is really good. The colonel’s sending him to Washington tomorrow with his formula for the stuff. And you saved it from those dirty spies, Saunk. Bravest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“I jest couldn’t let ’em go in the cave,” I said, and then shut up, seeing as I’d said too much. But Jimmy looked surprised, and pestered me with questions till I had to tell him, after I’d made him promise to keep it secret.

“Where do you think I git my corn?” I asked him. “It ain’t sent in from Kaintuck. I got me a still.”

Jimmy’s jaw dropped. “You don’t mean—”

“Sure,” I said. “It’s in the cave. Mind you don’t tell about it, now, or I won’t give you a swaller. An’ thet’s mighty good corn. Uncle Aylmer showed me how to make it.”

Jimmy was laughing fit to bust, but he finally sobered down.

“Okay, Saunk,” he told me. “You’ve been running an illicit still back in the woods. I won’t squeal. Besides, you’re still a hero. You captured those spies, didn’t you?”

“Shucks,” I said. “I thought they was revenooers.”

[The end of *The Old Army Game* by Henry Kuttner]