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Captain Philo Norton McGiffin

In the Chinese-Japanese War the battle of the Yalu was the first battle fought between warships of modern make, and, except on paper, neither the men who made them nor the men who fought them knew what the ships could do, or what they might not do. For years every naval power had been building these new engines of war, and in the battle which was to test them the whole world was interested. But in this battle Americans had a special interest, a human, family interest, for the reason that one of the Chinese squadron, which was matched against some of the same vessels of Japan which lately swept those of Russia from the sea, was commanded by a young graduate of the American Naval Academy. This young man, who, at the time of the battle of the Yalu, was thirty-three years old, was Captain Philo Norton McGiffin. So it appears that five years before our fleet sailed to victory in Manila Bay another graduate of Annapolis, and one twenty years younger than in 1898 was Admiral Dewey, had commanded in action a modern battleship, which, in tonnage, in armament, and in the number of the ships' company, far outclassed Dewey's *Olympia*.

McGiffin, who was born on December 13, 1860, came of fighting stock. Back in Scotland the family is descended from the Clan MacGregor and the Clan MacAlpine.

"These are Clan-Alpine's warriors true, And, Saxon—I am Roderick Dhu."

McGiffin's great-grandfather, born in Scotland, emigrated to this country and settled in "Little Washington," near Pittsburg, Pa. In the Revolutionary War he was a soldier. Other relatives fought in the War of 1812, one of them holding a commission as major. McGiffin's own father was Colonel Norton McGiffin, who served in the Mexican War, and in the Civil War was Lieutenant-Colonel of the Eighty-fifth Pennsylvania Volunteers. So McGiffin inherited his love for arms.

In Washington he went to the high school and at the Washington Jefferson College had passed through his freshman year. But the honors that might accrue to him if he continued to live on in the quiet and pretty old town of Washington did not tempt him. To escape into the world he wrote his Congressman, begging him to obtain for him an appointment to Annapolis. The Congressman liked the letter, and wrote Colonel McGiffin to ask if the application of his son had his approval. Colonel McGiffin was willing, and in 1877 his son received his commission as cadet midshipman. I knew McGiffin only as a boy with whom in vacation time I went coon hunting in the woods outside of Washington. For his age he was a very tall boy, and in his midshipman undress uniform, to my youthful eyes, appeared a most bold and adventurous spirit.

At Annapolis his record seems to show he was pretty much like other boys. According to his classmates, with all of whom I find he was very popular, he stood high in the practical studies, such as seamanship, gunnery, navigation, and steam engineering, but in all else he was

near the foot of the class, and in whatever escapade was risky and reckless he was always one of the leaders. To him discipline was extremely irksome. He could maintain it among others, but when it applied to himself it bored him. On the floor of the Academy building on which was his room there was a pyramid of cannon balls—relics of the War of 1812. They stood at the head of the stairs, and one warm night, when he could not sleep, he decided that no one else should do so, and, one by one, rolled the cannon balls down the stairs. They tore away the banisters and bumped through the wooden steps and leaped off into the lower halls. For any one who might think of ascending to discover the motive power back of the bombardment they were extremely dangerous. But an officer approached McGiffin in the rear, and, having been caught in the act, he was sent to the prison ship. There he made good friends with his jailer, an old man-of-warsman named "Mike." He will be remembered by many naval officers who as midshipmen served on the *Santee*. McGiffin so won over Mike that when he left the ship he carried with him six charges of gunpowder. These he loaded into the six big guns captured in the Mexican War, which lay on the grass in the centre of the Academy grounds, and at midnight on the eve of July 1st he fired a salute. It aroused the entire garrison, and for a week the empty window frames kept the glaziers busy.

About 1878 or 1879 there was a famine in Ireland. The people of New York City contributed provisions for the sufferers, and to carry the supplies to Ireland the Government authorized the use of the old *Constellation*. At the time the voyage was to begin each cadet was instructed to consider himself as having been placed in command of the *Constellation* and to write a report on the preparations made for the voyage, on the loading of the vessel, and on the distribution of the stores. This exercise was intended for the instruction of the cadets; first in the matter of seamanship and navigation, and second in making official reports. At that time it was a very difficult operation to get a gun out of the port of a vessel where the gun was on a covered deck. To do this the necessary tackles had to be rigged from the yard-arm and the yard and mast properly braced and stayed, and then the lower block of the tackle carried in through the gun port, which, of course, gave the fall a very bad reeve.

The first part of McGiffin's report dealt with a new method of dismounting the guns and carrying them through the gun ports, and so admirable was his plan, so simple and ingenious, that it was used whenever it became necessary to dismount a gun from one of the old sailing ships. Having, however, offered this piece of good work, McGiffin's report proceeded to tell of the division of the ship into compartments that were filled with a miscellaneous assortment of stores, which included the old "fifteen puzzles," at that particular time very popular. The report terminated with a description of the joy of the famished Irish as they received the puzzle-boxes. At another time the cadets were required to write a report telling of the suppression of the insurrection on the Isthmus of Panama. McGiffin won great praise for the military arrangements and disposition of his men, but, in the same report, he went on to describe how he armed them with a new gun known as Baines's Rhetoric and told of the havoc he wrought in the enemy's ranks when he fired these guns loaded with similes and metaphors and hyperboles.

Of course, after each exhibition of this sort he was sent to the *Santee* and given an opportunity to meditate.

On another occasion, when one of the instructors lectured to the cadets, he required them to submit a written statement embodying all that they could recall of what had been said at the lecture. One of the rules concerning this report provided that there should be no erasures or interlineations, but that when mistakes were made the objectionable or incorrect expressions should be included within parentheses; and that the matter so enclosed within parentheses would

not be considered a part of the report. McGiffin wrote an excellent *resume* of the lecture, but he interspersed through it in parentheses such words as "applause," "cheers," "cat-calls," and "groans," and as these words were enclosed within parentheses he insisted that they did not count, and made a very fair plea that he ought not to be punished for words which slipped in by mistake, and which he had officially obliterated by what he called oblivion marks.

He was not always on mischief bent. On one occasion, when the house of a professor caught fire, McGiffin ran into the flames and carried out two children, for which act he was commended by the Secretary of the Navy.

It was an act of Congress that determined that the career of McGiffin should be that of a soldier of fortune. This was a most unjust act, which provided that only as many midshipmen should receive commissions as on the warships there were actual vacancies. In those days, in 1884, our navy was very small. Today there is hardly a ship having her full complement of officers, and the difficulty is not to get rid of those we have educated, but to get officers to educate. To the many boys who, on the promise that they would be officers of the navy, had worked for four years at the Academy and served two years at sea, the act was most unfair. Out of a class of about ninety, only the first twelve were given commissions and the remaining eighty turned adrift upon the uncertain seas of civil life. As a sop, each was given one thousand dollars.

McGiffin was not one of the chosen twelve. In the final examinations on the list he was well toward the tail. But without having studied many things, and without remembering the greater part of them, no one graduates from Annapolis, even last on the list; and with his one thousand dollars in cash, McGiffin had also this six years of education at what was then the best naval college in the world. This was his only asset—his education—and as in his own country it was impossible to dispose of it, for possible purchasers he looked abroad.

At that time the Tong King war was on between France and China, and he decided, before it grew rusty, to offer his knowledge to the followers of the Yellow Dragon. In those days that was a hazard of new fortunes that meant much more than it does now. Today the East is as near as San Francisco; the Japanese-Russian War, our occupation of the Philippines, the part played by our troops in the Boxer trouble, have made the affairs of China part of the daily reading of every one. Now, one can step into a brass bed at Forty-second Street and in four days at the Coast get into another brass bed, and in twelve more be spinning down the Bund of Yokohama in a rickshaw. People go to Japan for the winter months as they used to go to Cairo.

But in 1885 it was no such light undertaking, certainly not for a young man who had been brought up in the quiet atmosphere of an inland town, where generations of his family and other families had lived and intermarried, content with their surroundings.

With very few of his thousand dollars left him, McGiffin arrived in February, 1885, in San Francisco. From there his letters to his family give one the picture of a healthy, warm-hearted youth, chiefly anxious lest his mother and sister should "worry." In our country nearly every family knows that domestic tragedy when the son and heir "breaks home ties," and starts out to earn a living; and if all the world loves a lover, it at least sympathizes with the boy who is "looking for a job." The boy who is looking for the job may not think so, but each of those who has passed through the same hard place gives him, if nothing else, his good wishes. McGiffin's letters at this period gain for him from those who have had the privilege to read them the warmest good feeling.

They are filled with the same cheery optimism, the same slurring over of his troubles, the same homely jokes, the same assurances that he is feeling "bully," and that it all will come out right, that every boy, when he starts out in the world, sends back to his mother.

"I am in first-rate health and spirits, so I don't want you to fuss about me. I am big enough and ugly enough to scratch along somehow, and I will not starve."

To his mother he proudly sends his name written in Chinese characters, as he had been taught to write it by the Chinese Consul-General in San Francisco, and a pen-picture of two elephants. "I am going to bring you home *two* of these," he writes, not knowing that in the strange and wonderful country to which he is going elephants are as infrequent as they are in Pittsburg.

He reached China in April, and from Nagasaki on his way to Shanghai the steamer that carried him was chased by two French gunboats. But, apparently much to his disappointment, she soon ran out of range of their guns. Though he did not know it then, with the enemy he had travelled so far to fight this was his first and last hostile meeting; for already peace was in the air.

Of that and of how, in spite of peace, he obtained the "job" he wanted, he must tell you himself in a letter home:

TIEN-TSIN, CHINA, April 13, 1885.

MY DEAR MOTHER—I have not felt much in the humor for writing, for I did not know what was going to happen. I spent a good deal of money coming out, and when I got here, I knew, unless something turned up, I was a gone coon. We got off Taku forts Sunday evening and the next morning we went inside; the channel is very narrow and sown with torpedoes. We struck one—an electric one—in coming up, but it didn't go off. We were until 10.30 P.M. in coming up to Tien-Tsin—thirty miles in a straight line, but nearly seventy by the river, which is only about one hundred feet wide—and we grounded ten times.

"Well—at last we moored and went ashore. Brace Girdle, an engineer, and I went to the hotel, and the first thing we heard was—that *peace was declared!* I went back on board ship, and I didn't sleep much—I never was so blue in my life. I knew if they didn't want me that I might as well give up the ghost, for I could never get away from China. Well—I worried around all night without sleep, and in the morning I felt as if I had been drawn through a knot-hole. I must have lost ten pounds. I went around about 10 A.M. and gave my letters to Pethick, an American U. S. Vice-Consul and interpreter to Li Hung Chang. He said he would fix them for me. Then I went back to the ship, and as our captain was going up to see Li Hung Chang, I went along out of desperation. We got in, and after a while were taken in through corridor after corridor of the Viceroy's palace until we got into the great Li, when we sat down and had tea and tobacco and talked through an interpreter. When it came my turn he asked: 'Why did you come to China?' I said: 'To enter the Chinese service for the war.' 'How do you expect to enter?' 'I expect *you* to give me a commission!' 'I have no place to offer you.' 'I think you have—I have come all the way from America to get it.' 'What would you like?' 'I would like to get the new torpedo-boat and go down the Yang-tse-Kiang to the blockading squadron.' 'Will you do that?' 'Of course.'

"He thought a little and said: 'I will see what can be done. Will you take \$100 a month for a start?' I said: 'That depends.' (Of course I would take it.) Well, after parley, he said he would put me on the flagship, and if I did well he would promote me. Then he looked at me and said: 'How old are you?' When I told him I was twenty-four I thought he would faint—for in China a man is a *boy* until he is over thirty. He said I would *never* do—I was a child. I could not know anything at all. I could not convince him, but at last he compromised—I was to pass an examination at the Arsenal at the Naval College, in all branches, and if they passed me I would have a show. So we parted. I reported for examination next day, but was put off—same the next day. But today I was told to come, and sat down to a stock of foolscap, and had a pretty stiff

exam. I am only just through. I had seamanship, gunnery, navigation, nautical astronomy, algebra, geometry, trigonometry, conic sections, curve tracing, differential and integral calculus. I had only three questions out of five to answer in each branch, but in the first three I answered all five. After that I only had time for three, but at the end he said I need not finish, he was perfectly satisfied. I had done remarkably well, and he would report to the Viceroy to-morrow. He examined my first papers—seamanship—said I was *perfect* in it, so I will get *along*, you need not fear. I told the Consul—he was very well pleased—he is a nice man.

"I feel pretty well now—have had dinner and am smoking a good Manila cheroot. I wrote hard all day, wrote fifteen sheets of foolscap and made about a dozen drawings—got pretty tired.

"I have had a hard scramble for the service and only got in by the skin of my teeth. I guess I will go to bed—I will sleep well tonight—Thursday.

"I did not hear from the Naval Secretary, Tuesday, so yesterday morning I went up to the Admiralty and sent in my card. He came out and received me very well—said I had passed a 'very splendid examination'; had been recommended very strongly to the Viceroy, who was very much pleased; that the Director of the Naval College over at the Arsenal had wanted me and would I go over at once? I *would*. It was about five miles. We (a friend, who is a great rider here) went on steeplechase ponies—we were ferried across the Pei Ho in a small scow and then had a long ride. There *is* a path—but Pritchard insisted on taking all the ditches, and as my pony jumped like a cat, it wasn't nice at first, but I didn't squeal and kept my seat and got the swing of it at last and rather liked it. I think I will keep a horse here—you can hire one and a servant together for \$7 a month; that is \$5.60 of our money, and pony and man found in everything.

"Well—at last we got to the Arsenal—a place about four miles around, fortified, where all sorts of arms—cartridges, shot and shell, engines, and *everything*—are made. The Naval College is inside surrounded by a moat and wall. I thought to myself, if the cadet here is like to the thing I used to be at the U. S. N. A. *that* won't keep him in. I went through a lot of yards till I was ushered into a room finished in black ebony and was greeted very warmly by the Director. We took seats on a raised platform—Chinese style and pretty soon an interpreter came, one of the Chinese professors, who was educated abroad, and we talked and drank tea. He said I had done well, that he had the authority of the Viceroy to take me there as 'Professor' of seamanship and gunnery; in addition I might be required to teach navigation or nautical astronomy, or drill the cadets in infantry, artillery, and fencing. For this I was to receive what would be in our money \$1,800 per annum, as near as we can compare it, paid in gold each month. Besides, I will have a house furnished for my use, and it is their intention, as soon as I *show* that I *know* something, to considerably increase my pay. They asked the Viceroy to give me 130 T per month (about \$186) and house, but the Viceroy said I was *but a boy*; that I had seen no years and had only come here a week ago with no one to vouch for me, and that I might turn out an impostor. But he would risk 100 T on me anyhow, and as soon as I was reported favorably on by the college I would be raised—the agreement is to be for three years. For a few months I am to command a training ship—an ironclad that is in dry dock at present, until a captain in the English Navy comes out, who has been sent for to command her.

"*So Here I am*—twenty-four years old and captain of a man-of-war—a better one than any in our own navy—only for a short time, of course, but I would be a pretty long time before I would command one at home. Well—I accepted and will enter on my duties in a week, as soon as my house is put in order. I saw it—it has a long veranda, very broad; with flower garden, apricot trees, etc., just covered with blossoms; a wide hall on the front, a room about 18x15, with a 13-foot ceiling; then back another rather larger, with a cupola skylight in the centre, where I am

going to put a shelf with flowers. The Government is to furnish the house with bed, tables, chairs, sideboards, lounges, stove for kitchen. I have grates (American) in the room, but I don't need them. We have snow, and a good deal of ice in winter, but the thermometer never gets below zero. I have to supply my own crockery. I will have two servants and cook; I will only get one and the cook first—they only cost \$4 to \$5.50 per month, and their board amounts to very little. I can get along, don't you think so? Now I want you to get Jim to pack up all my professional works on gunnery, surveying, seamanship, mathematics, astronomy, algebra, geometry, trigonometry, conic sections, calculus, mechanics, and *every* book of that description I own, including those paperbound 'Naval Institute' papers, and put them in a box, together with any photos, etc., you think I would like—I have none of you or Pa or the family (including Carrie)—and send to me.

"I just got in in time—didn't I? Another week would have been too late. My funds were getting low; I would not have had *anything* before long. The U. S. Consul, General Bromley, is much pleased. The interpreter says it was all in the way I did with the Viceroy in the interview.

"I will have a chance to go to Peking and later to a tiger hunt in Mongolia, but for the present I am going to study, work, and *stroke* these mandarins till I get a raise. I am the only instructor in both seamanship and gunnery, and I must know *everything*, both practically and theoretically. But it will be good for me and the only thing is, that if I were put back into the Navy I would be in a dilemma. I think I will get my 'influence' to work, and I want you people at home to look out, and in case I *am*—if it were represented to the Sec. that my position here was giving me an immense lot of practical knowledge professionally—more than I could get on a ship at sea—I think he would give me two years' leave on half or quarter pay. Or, I would be willing to do without pay—only to be kept on the register in my rank.

"I will write more about this. Love to all."

It is characteristic of McGiffin that in the very same letter in which he announces he has entered foreign service he plans to return to that of his own country. This hope never left him. You find the same homesickness for the quarterdeck of an American man-of-war all through his later letters. At one time a bill to reinstate the midshipmen who had been cheated of their commissions was introduced into Congress. Of this McGiffin writes frequently as "our bill." "It may pass," he writes, "but I am tired hoping. I have hoped so long. And if it should," he adds anxiously, "there may be a time limit set in which a man must rejoin, or lose his chance, so do not fail to let me know as quickly as you can." But the bill did not pass, and McGiffin never returned to the navy that had cut him adrift.

He settled down at Tien-Tsin and taught the young cadets how to shoot. Almost all of those who in the Chinese-Japanese War served as officers were his pupils. As the navy grew, he grew with it, and his position increased in importance. More Mexican dollars per month, more servants, larger houses, and buttons of various honorable colors were given him, and, in return, he established for China a modern naval college patterned after our own. In those days throughout China and Japan you could find many of these foreign advisers. Now, in Japan, the Hon. W. H. Dennison of the Foreign Office, one of our own people, is the only foreigner with whom the Japanese have not parted, and in China there are none. Of all of those who have gone none served his employers more faithfully than did McGiffin. At a time when every official robbed the people and the Government, and when "squeeze" or "graft" was recognized as a perquisite, McGiffin's hands were clean. The shells purchased for the Government by him were not loaded with black sand, nor were the rifles fitted with barrels of iron pipe. Once a year he

celebrated the Thanksgiving Day of his own country by inviting to a great dinner all the Chinese naval officers who had been at least in part educated in America. It was a great occasion, and to enjoy it officers used to come from as far as Port Arthur, Shanghai, and Hong-Kong. So fully did some of them appreciate the efforts of their host that previous to his annual dinner, for twenty-four hours, they delicately starved themselves.

During ten years McGiffin served as naval constructor and professor of gunnery and seamanship, and on board ships at sea gave practical demonstrations in the handling of the new cruisers. In 1894 he applied for leave, which was granted, but before he had sailed for home war with Japan was declared and he withdrew his application. He was placed as second in command on board the *Chen Yuen*, a seven-thousand-ton battleship, a sister ship to the *Ting Yuen*, the flagship of Admiral Ting Ju Chang. On the memorable 17th of September, 1894, the battle of the Yalu was fought, and so badly were the Chinese vessels hammered that the Chinese navy, for the time being, was wiped out of existence.

From the start the advantage was with the Japanese fleet. In heavy guns the Chinese were the better armed, but in quick-firing guns the Japanese were vastly superior, and while the Chinese battleships *Ting Yuen* and *Chen Yuen*, each of 7,430 tons, were superior to any of the Japanese warships, the three largest of which were each of 4,277 tons, the gross tonnage of the Japanese fleet was 36,000 to 21,000 of the Chinese. During the progress of the battle the ships engaged on each side numbered an even dozen, but at the very start, before a decisive shot was fired by either contestant, the *Tsi Yuen*, 2,355 tons, and *Kwan Chiaie*, 1,300 tons, ran away, and before they had time to get into the game the *Chao Yung* and *Yang Wei* were in flames and had fled to the nearest land. So the battle was fought by eight Chinese ships against twelve of the Japanese.

Of the Chinese vessels, the flagship, commanded by Admiral Ting, and her sister ship, which immediately after the beginning of the fight was for four hours commanded by McGiffin, were the two chief aggressors, and in consequence received the fire of the entire Japanese squadron. Toward the end of the fight, which without interruption lasted for five long hours, the Japanese did not even consider the four smaller ships of the enemy, but, sailing around the two ironclads in a circle, fired only at them. The Japanese themselves testified that these two ships never lost their formation, and that when her sister ironclad was closely pressed the *Chen Yuen*, by her movements and gun practice, protected the *Ting Yuen*, and, in fact, while she could not prevent the heavy loss the fleet encountered, preserved it from annihilation. During the fight this ship was almost continuously on fire, and was struck by every kind of projectile, from the thirteen-inch Canet shells to a rifle bullet, four hundred times. McGiffin himself was so badly wounded, so beaten about by concussions, so burned, and so bruised by steel splinters, that his health and eyesight were forever wrecked. But he brought the *Chen Yuen* safely into Port Arthur and the remnants of the fleet with her.

On account of his lack of health he resigned from the Chinese service and returned to America. For two years he lived in New York City, suffering in body without cessation the most exquisite torture. During that time his letters to his family show only tremendous courage. On the splintered, gaping deck of the *Chen Yuen*, with the fires below it, and the shells bursting upon it, he had shown to his Chinese crew the courage of the white man who knew he was responsible for them and for the honor of their country. But far greater and more difficult was the courage he showed while alone in the dark sick-room, and in the private wards of the hospitals.

In the letters he dictates from there he still is concerned only lest those at home shall "worry"; he reassures them with falsehoods, jokes at their fears; of the people he can see from

the window of the hospital tells them foolish stories; for a little boy who has been kind he asks them to send him his Chinese postage stamps; he plans a trip he will take with them when he is stronger, knowing he never will be stronger. The doctors had urged upon him a certain operation, and of it to a friend he wrote: "I know that I will have to have a piece about three inches square cut out of my skull, and this nerve cut off near the middle of the brain, as well as my eye taken out (for a couple of hours only, provided it is not mislaid, and can be found). Doctor —— and his crowd show a bad memory for failures. As a result of this operation others have told me—I forget the percentage of deaths, which does not matter, but—that a large percentage have become insane. And some lost their sight."

While threatened with insanity and complete blindness, and hourly from his wounds suffering a pain drugs could not master, he dictated for the *Century Magazine* the only complete account of the battle of the Yalu. In a letter to Mr. Richard Watson Gilder he writes: "...my eyes are troubling me. I cannot see even what I am writing now, and am getting the article under difficulties. I yet hope to place it in your hands by the 21st, still, if my eyes grow worse——"

"Still, if my eyes grow worse——"

The unfinished sentence was grimly prophetic.

Unknown to his attendants at the hospital, among the papers in his dispatch-box he had secreted his service revolver. On the morning of the 11th of February, 1897, he asked for this box, and on some pretext sent the nurse from the room. When the report of the pistol brought them running to his bedside, they found the pain-driven body at peace, and the tired eyes dark forever.

In the article in the *Century* on the battle of the Yalu, he had said:

"Chief among those who have died for their country is Admiral Ting Ju Chang, a gallant soldier and true gentleman. Betrayed by his countrymen, fighting against odds, almost his last official act was to stipulate for the lives of his officers and men. His own he scorned to save, well knowing that his ungrateful country would prove less merciful than his honorable foe. Bitter, indeed, must have been the reflections of the old, wounded hero, in that midnight hour, as he drank the poisoned cup that was to give him rest."

And bitter indeed must have been the reflections of the young wounded American, robbed, by the parsimony of his country, of the right he had earned to serve it, and who was driven out to give his best years and his life for a strange people under a strange flag.