

**Matthew Pearl**

**“Close Ranks”**

**a *The Technologists* short story**

Edwin Hoyt watched with envy and interest the taller, broader classmates who bore it all with more ease. A noble-looking specimen like Bob Richards even had a smile on his face as he took long, even strides across the grounds. But most of the students were rather ill-prepared and irritated. The drills were required by federal legislation as a condition of the land grant given to the college. They performed them in an empty lot not far from the building in the Back Bay, a rather desolate region of Boston where sand and dirt stung their eyes and mouths whenever the wind blew.

Imagine a scientist, counting how many steps to take in a minute, and facing reprimand if one step over or under!

He did not wish to be ungrateful. After only two months, Edwin had found many wonders of scientific training as part of the first class at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. But then each Saturday would bring Edwin fresh torments from the drill master and dampen his outlook.

On one otherwise typical day, Edwin was surprised when Bob Richards pulled him aside in the hallway, between classes, with this complaint: “Damn that General Moore!”

“You always seem to like our marching drills,” Edwin said upon hearing Bob echo his own thoughts, though formulated with more profane language than he would ever use.

“Oh, I like it just fine, Eddy!” Bob was the only one who called him Eddy, but Edwin did not try to correct him. Because it seemed hard to stop Bob from anything, for one thing; and also, it felt flattering to be granted your own name by Bob. “It's a good enough form of

exercise. But I twisted my ankle at the gymnasium last week.”

“It does not show,” Edwin said after slowing down and watching Bob walk ahead of him.

“It's hardly anything, I tell you! But the grand general claims it caused a flaw in our formation on Saturday, and has banished me from military drills for two weeks until it is healed completely. That means he will replace me as sergeant with Tilden—Bryant Tilden, of all choices! I am demoted to Tilden's position of corporal.”

“That seems rather fastidious of General Moore,” said Edwin.

“You are too diplomatic. I hear that some of the top military men of the Commonwealth are going to make a surprise visit during our drills sometime in the next few weeks,” Bob said. “Ol' Hobart Moore wants to make a good impression, probably hoping for a plum commission in the state militia. We are just pawns to the dear general!”

General Moore's ambitions were no concern to Edwin, but Bob's banishment was inspiring. With all the agony of the Saturday drills, Edwin had never considered there could be a way out of it. Instead, he had been dwelling miserably on his fear that the decision to come to the Institute had been misguided. He had already suffered through admitting one giant mistake in the last year, his decision to attend Harvard despite aspiring to a scientific education it could not provide him. He could not bear to think that his solution to that error, switching to the Institute, had also been erroneous.

To be removed, banished, or exempted from the drill, well, the very possibility was a revelation and a grant of hope! How perfect life at the Institute would be if only he no longer faced the physical tortures of General Moore. Edwin was constitutionally incapable of trying to deceive the authorities with some false ailment, but he could at least point out the very real effects of the drills on his physical well-being.

He proceeded to compose a letter to President Rogers. He described the throat irritation which had been plaguing him from the dust and dirt breathed in during their marching. Rogers called him to his office one day after Edwin deposited the letter, and asked question after question about his health.

“Your health is, without a doubt, far more important than learning a military maneuver or two, Mr. Hoyt,” concluded Rogers, who had founded their Institute a few years earlier.

“Thank you, President Rogers.”

“We are very happy you are at the Institute with us, my son. I hear very fine things about your work from all the professors. Here. I shall write you a letter confirming your exemption. If you please, continue to attend the drills until the end of this month, so General Moore will have the proper time to plan for one fewer soldier in his formations.”

“Of course, President Rogers. I shall be there.”

Edwin could not have been more pleased with this outcome. He even had a feather-light attitude about attending his final two military drills, as if he would prefer nothing else on a Saturday afternoon. It occurred to him, for some reason, that Bob Richards would also relish his triumph, and Edwin sought him out that Friday in the laboratory to tell him.

“An exemption!” Bob exclaimed, reading the letter for a second time. “So you are never going to drill again?”

“Well, not after this month.”

“Say, you can help me with a trick, Eddy!”

“A trick?”

“A grand dodge! That damn general needs to be taught a lesson. Think of it, shipping me off with a demotion for a slight twist in the ankle.”

“What are you thinking about, Bob?”

“Iodide of nitrogen. Do you follow, Eddy?”

“Bob! You mustn't think of any such thing. The general only does what he is engaged to do.”

Bob sighed. “You say that because you have an exemption. You suffer none of the indignity of being banished!”

“Bob, say you won't do it!”

“Very well,” Bob yielded. “But I shall never salute that braggart Tilden, no matter what,” he lamented.

Edwin arrived early to the drill the next day to show the general President Rogers's letter. General Moore whitened as he read it, then gave his response in a grim whine. “If you should leave, Private Hoyt, it will spoil the entire combination. I require a certain number of soldiers, you realize.”

“I know, and I do apologize, General,” Edwin said sincerely. “I happen to know Bob Richards is eager and able to return early, if that is of any help.”

General Moore ignored this, continuing by addressing Edwin with what sounded like an order. “Hoyt, you shall be a corporal from this moment forward. A real corporal, if you stand by me and do not break up our regiment.”

“My regrets, General,” Edwin said, the gust of a strong wind leading him to grip the Rogers letter as though for dear life. “I *will* be here until the end of the month, though.”

“Just stay with me and I will make you sergeant. Think of that, Hoyt! A sergeant, with stripes on your arm! Of course, it will interfere somewhat with the proper proportion of officers to privates, for, if we are to promote you, we shall have very few privates left, but I am willing to do it, nevertheless, for your sake and the regiment's.”

“I came to the Institute to learn the sciences. To fulfill my ambitions of becoming a true

technologist. I do not really care for military honors, General,” Edwin insisted with as much deference as he could.

“No, clearly you do not!” Moore said, before turning on his heel to the front of the herd of men.

Edwin exhaled with relief at having come through the confrontation with no worse than a sweaty brow, which he now dried with his handkerchief, and a fluttering heart. He was very proud of himself for remaining firm.

When the maneuvers began that afternoon, they felt more strenuous, perhaps due to the previous mental exertions. Within a few minutes, Edwin was quite certain the general had enhanced the difficulty of the program and he sputtered, dropping his musket twice during arduous rotations and falling into the dust face first before the end.

Moore stood over him and reached out his hand to the collapsed sophomore. “You should have never agreed to continue on till the end of the month, Private,” he whispered, lifting him to his feet roughly. “Until then, you're under *my* charge!”

Over the next days, Edwin's throat felt raw and scratchy, his arms and legs ached every time he moved, sat, stood, or bent down. He liked to think the best of people, yet he could not help but believe that Moore had designed the latest march especially to injure him. Though all the soldiers of the regiment performed the same maneuvers, it was an obvious fact that Edwin was the weakest of the group, and that any increase in difficulty in their physical routine would adversely affect Edwin more than the others. It was the drill-master's comment to him—was it a threat, or a reprimand for his weakness?—that had convinced him of it.

As Saturday approached, Edwin quivered with anxiety and resentment at the notion of returning to General Moore. Yet, he had promised President Rogers, and could not fail a promise to Rogers.

“Eddy, you look pale and serious,” Bob Richards said to him while they were both in the study room on a rainy afternoon. “More than usual.”

“Bob, it's General Moore...” Edwin said, trailing off.

“Eddy! You will help me?”

“Help you?”

“Teach General Moore a lesson! Give me your hand. I knew you would, Eddy, you know he deserves it! Come, Saturday, we become legends of Tech! Your hand!”

Edwin found himself sealing the agreement with a handshake. Later, he would remember Bob grabbing his hand forcibly, but perhaps part of him had wanted it. Perhaps it was even what he hoped when he sat down that day at Bob's table in the study room, knowing his classmate well enough to realize that, dwelling on his demotion, Bob would be more eager than ever to carry through his plot. In all events, Bob removed a sheet of paper and began to draw a map of the marching grounds, marking the place of the trap they were to create.

In an empty laboratory, they mixed a very small amount of fine iodine in a saucer with ample ammonia water. After filtering and drying the chemical, they stored it in containers that could be safely transported.

Early Saturday morning, by the smoky light of two lanterns, they visited the fields in Back Bay and spread the dark, dry powder they had composed to be especially explosive but harmless. Edwin wanted to tell Bob he could not carry it all out, but they had come too far already. Besides, he was new to their class, and did not want to be seen as a traitor, a word he still heard whispered whenever he passed a group of Harvard men from his former class in the street. When the afternoon came, Edwin could hardly keep himself from shouting out to Moore to halt the maneuvers before they reached the stretch of land concealing their artifice. He prayed that, perhaps, the drill-master would improvise a new path for the soldiers.

But no such luck. Edwin held his breath and closed his eyes when he realized it was about to happen. He could have run off, but knew he wouldn't do. It would give away his part in it. As he tried to think of some way out of it, it was too late—as the regiment of students made their turn, there was a growing crackling sound and the powder exploded under their feet. Pop! Pop! Pop! With every step, another explosion, and with every explosion, another followed. Some of the would-be soldiers tripped and fell at the surprise; others, believing they were being fired upon, as though the war had suddenly begun again, threw themselves down for cover. Edwin tried to pretend he was not hearing anything at all, and closed his eyes tightly.

When the smoke cleared, Edwin looked around in shock, with a brief rush of pleasure at the success of the plan, then saw the red-faced drill-master making his way through his fallen troops. Moore shouted for everyone to get back on their feet and then, transforming Edwin's fleeting lightheartedness to horror, called him to the front. Edwin kept his eyes fixed to the ground as he stepped his way over the shaken troops, thinking of all the ways he had unwittingly just given away his culpability.

“General, please, I...” Edwin began to plead, but so quietly nobody heard.

“Close ranks! Close order. Shoulder arms! Eyes front—all eyes on Hoyt!” commanded their leader.

With the line of men now standing erect again and facing him with their muskets, Edwin knew what it felt like to stand before a firing squad. Later, Edwin would hear that General Moore believed the trick had been arranged by men from the state militia to test his reaction to a crisis. But in the moment, Edwin knew he was caught. Before he could defend himself, General Moore continued: “One man. The one man among you who did not flinch, who stood his ground while the rest of you cowards scrambled and fell over each other, the

one man who deserves my training—all hail, Private Hoyt. All hail, I say!”

After a brief hesitation, the company saluted in unison. For that moment, all of what had transpired, all of the discomfort of the marches, all of the anxiety of showing the general his exemption, the guilt and worry surrounding Bob's trick, all of it felt worthwhile. For that one moment, Edwin had a glimpse of living a life different from his own.

The story of Edwin Hoyt, Bob Richards and Tech continues in

*The Technologists...*

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