

MOLLY PITCHER

In the days of the American Revolution a young woman lived as a servant in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, with the family of General Irving, a retired British officer, who had fought in the French and Indian War and had seen a great deal of service. This young woman was named Molly Ludwig Hays, and was the wife of a barber who had been well known in the village. He had won her hand with difficulty for Molly was a belle throughout the countryside. She was not only handsome, but as strong as a man, able to carry a heavy meal-sack on her shoulder; and one of the hardest workers that the town knew. She washed and scrubbed and scoured and baked from morning till night, and seemed to revel in the hard work that gave the needed exercise to her strong muscles.

Throughout her life Molly Hays had admired soldiers, and more than once she expressed herself in no undecided terms to the effect that she wished she were a man so that she could bear arms and wear a uniform, and be a soldier herself.

When she was still a very young woman the American Revolution for freedom from Great Britain broke out. All the country was aflame, and rang with the stories of what happened at Lexington and Bunker Hill. Man after man from the village took his powder horn and musket and went off to enlist for the war, and Molly grew more and more restless as she saw them go.

At last her husband came to her, somewhat sheepishly, for he disliked to tell her the intention he had in his heart; but at length he made her understand that just because he was married was no reason why he should remain at home with the women; and he, too, intended to enlist that very day.

Molly consented with the utmost enthusiasm. She told him that she would be proud to be the wife of a soldier, since she could not be one herself, and bade him farewell with the admonishment to do his part bravely and to bear himself like the man she knew him to be. And she stood at the door of their home waving good-by to him with a cheerful face that gave no hint of her aching heart.

When her husband had departed Molly returned to the Irving household where she worked as well as she had before her marriage, trying to find relief in the heavy labor from the pain of having lost her husband and the aching desire to go and do her part beside him even though she were a woman. Fate, thought Molly, had made a sad mistake, in making her a woman, for she knew that in spite of her petticoats she could soldier as well as the men,--and if she had only been a man she believed she could have risen to an important position in the army.

The tide of the struggle wavered and battles with the red coats were fought and won. It was hard to get the newspapers in those times and news of the armies and their doings was often weeks behind the actual events. Molly hoped and waited, but for weeks at a time she went without word from her husband and did not know whether he were alive or dead.

One day a messenger called for her at the Irving household. He had a letter from John Hays for Molly, and it not only told her that he was alive and well, but was in camp not far off from her former home in Trenton, New Jersey, where her aged parents were still living. The letter ended by telling her to come to Trenton and live with her parents, for he would be able without doubt to get leave from his command and see her often.

Soon the war itself was being fought in the neighborhood of her home. The Americans attacked the British near Princeton killing and capturing a large number. Then Washington with his small force withdrew from that region before reinforcements could be brought against him.

And now Molly found that there was something that she could do--namely, go and care for the wounded who were still lying where they had fallen on the field of battle. The British General Cornwallis and his men were approaching, but that did not worry her a whit, and she went to and fro upon the battlefield carrying water for parched throats and binding wounds until the British soldiers were actually upon her.

Then Molly saw a cannon pointed in the direction of the British, and to her surprise it was loaded and there was a fuse still smoldering and lying near at hand. She studied the cannon carefully and it seemed to be aimed right at a group of the enemy that was approaching. The brave girl dropped the pail of water that she had been carrying, picked up the fuse and applied it to the touch hole. With a loud roar the charge was fired and the cannon leaped backward on its wheels.

At this the British halted in amazement. They had believed that the Americans were far away, and here this gun gave warning that they were still near at hand, or at any rate had left a strong rear guard with artillery to delay them in their pursuit. Hastily they crossed over the field and surrounded the gun which was deserted. Molly had left and had taken with her a wounded American soldier whom she carried on her shoulder.

The British had seen her go, but it had not occurred to them that a woman had fired the shot that caused so much disturbance among them and aided the retreating Americans so greatly by delaying their pursuers. If they had realized that Molly herself was the cannoneer, she would have had but little chance of mercy at their hands, and would at once have faced a firing squad or been hung to the nearest tree. As it was

they thought she was only some country girl who had perhaps lost some relative in the recent battle and was carrying his dead body back to her home. And so they paid no attention to her.

Molly, however, by firing this shot had materially aided General Washington, for any delay of the British, even a slight one, gave a great advantage to the Americans who were hurrying from superior numbers to put themselves in a good tactical position as soon as they could.

On a hot day of July in the following summer it chanced that Washington's forces were again not far away from Molly's home, and she took a difficult journey on the chance of seeing her husband. Her first step in soldiering had been taken when she fired the cannon at the British in the preceding year. A far greater adventure lay before her, for she fell in with the American soldiers just as they commenced the severe battle of Monmouth.

This battle had considerable importance, as a comparatively large number of troops were engaged in it. General Washington was in command of the Americans and the English were led by Sir Henry Clinton. The English had been retreating from Philadelphia, across New Jersey, followed by Washington, and the American general had decided to launch an attack on the left wing of the retreating forces and General Lee was ordered by Washington to attack the English on the flank and hold them in battle until he himself could come up with the bulk of the American Army.

General Lee, however, proved to be a poor man for this task and his indecision and semi-cowardice left Washington exposed to the brunt of the enemy's attack before he was prepared to meet it and against the intentions of the American commander. The situation was saved by General Greene, who saw what had happened, changed his own plans and diverted the attack of the British to his own position from which he poured in a heavy artillery fire that caused them terrible losses.

John Hays was one of the cannoneers of Greene's artillery and he worked all day loading and firing his piece. It was a terribly hot day and many men in both the British and the American armies fell exhausted and even died from the heat of the sun.

All this time Molly Hays had been caring for the wounded and carrying water to the thirsty gunners, using for the purpose the bucket that was attached to her husband's cannon for cleaning purposes. Tirelessly she continued her efforts to care for the wounded and comfort the fighting soldiers, heedless of the bullets that came her way or of the general turmoil of battle. As the day wore on the men would greet her coming with: "Here comes Molly with her pitcher!" And gradually this was changed to "Here comes Molly Pitcher." And this was the name that history has adopted in regard to the brave woman for whom it was so used.

At last John Hays succumbed to the heat and fell unconscious beside his gun. The sun had proved too much for him.

Molly stopped carrying water to care for her husband. She bathed his head and moved him into the shade, returning to her duties just in time to hear General Knox give orders that the cannon be removed, because he had no other gunner cool enough and skilful enough to work it in its present exposed position. At this Molly sprang forward crying out:

"Leave the gun where it is. I can fire it. I am a gunner's wife and know how to load and fire a cannon. I'll take the place that my brave husband has left!" And running to the gun Molly commenced to load and fire so determinedly and skilfully that a gasp of amazement ran through the men that saw her.

For many weary hours she toiled at the gun, until the British were driven back and the battle was claimed as an American victory. And then the young woman found herself the darling of all the soldiers in the army, for word of her actions ran like wildfire through the ranks and cheers reechoed wherever she went. Before she left her cannon General Greene himself came over to where she stood and grasping her hand thanked her in the name of the American Army.

This was not all the triumph she received, however, for word was soon brought to her that General Washington himself wished to see her. She was in her ragged grimy clothes in which she had fought and succored the wounded through the whole of that hot day, and she now put on a soldier's coat in which to meet the General.

Washington praised her highly and before a large number of his officers and men, and more cheering reechoed through the ranks when he gave her the brevet rank of Captain in the American Army.

And not only the Americans did her honor, but the French as well, for the Marquis de Lafayette with his own hand presented her with a purse of golden crowns.

In this strange way Molly Hays' desire to be a soldier came true, and the name of Molly Pitcher, as she was ever after called, became one of the great names of American History.

After the war was ended she lived with her husband until he died, and later she married again. But in her whole life the battle of Monmouth stood out as the great day on which she realized her ambition and helped the American forces in battle.

This story was taken from A Treasury of Heroes and Heroines, by Clayton Edwards, 1920 and now in public domain.

Connect with a more modern adventurous girl, Vic Challenger, at <http://www.vicplanet.com>