

The Knight of the Pen

by C. L. Martzloff

On the 19th of May, 1900, there came to the village of New Lexington, Perry county, a stranger. He was a young man just graduated from Harvard University, and was preparing to return to his native land Bulgaria. His mission to New Lexington was to visit the grave of a noted Perry county boy who is held most dear in the affections of the Bulgarian people. Such honors are rarely bestowed upon Americans by foreigners. This honor, however, was not unmerited. You ask, perhaps, why a boy reared among the hills of Perry county, taught in the rude schools of half a century ago, should receive such attention from a foreign people. There is the best reason in the world. Do we not have a great deal of respect for Lafayette, because he came to America and helped us gain our independence? Then why should not the people of Bulgaria love Januarius A. MacGahan, the Perry county boy, for securing their independence?



Januarius A. MacGahan
“Liberator of Bulgaria”
June 12, 1844 - June 9, 1878

The story of the life of this man reads like a page from a romance. On June 12, 1844, he was born in a log cabin, the roof of which was held on by long poles. To enter the doorway you must climb over a log. The only window was a small affair. A huge fireplace occupied one end of the room. The sleeping apartment of our young hero was in the loft, which was reached by a ladder. There he could lie at night and, looking through the clapboard roof, see the stars shine down upon him clear and cold. We wonder if he, like the astrologers of old, could read those stars and from them learn what the future had in store for him. We wonder if, while lying asleep, with the snow sifting in upon him, he ever dreamed of the time, when he would ride alone through the deserts of Asia, when he should knock at palace gates and stand before kings. Perhaps, had some fairy whispered to him the things he should experience within a few years, he would have thought it only the idle fancy of a dream and would have awakened in the morning to the realization of the hardships of pioneer life. The parents of young MacGahan were Irish Catholics. Their home was near a place called Pigeon Roost. Here was a school that was then, as it is now, called “Pigeon Roost.” This school Januarius attended till he was seventeen. He must have been a good student for at that age he was given a certificate to teach. He at once applied for his home school. But the directors thought him too young to teach and they refused him the position. This was one of the very best things that could have happened to him. Determining to leave home, he set his face toward the great world without, where he would carve out his destiny.

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MacGahan's Birthplace

The day he left his hillside home in Perry county, with all of his earthly possessions tied in a very small package, he was seventeen years old. Half of his life had already been spent, for just seventeen years afterward he gave up his life for a friend, under the shadows of the minarets of Constantinople.

He first went into the Western States, where he pursued several vocations. Finally he went to Europe to study, and entered the law school at Brussels. When the Franco-Prussian War broke out he went into the field as correspondent for the *New York Herald*. Journalism was henceforth to be the work of his life. During the time of the Commune in Paris, we find him busy writing such glowing accounts and descriptions of the scenes, as to call particular attention to his ability. During this time he was arrested by the Communists and escaped death only through the intervention of the American Minister.

In the fall of 1871, when Russia was about to move on Khiva, our hero was ordered by the Herald to accompany the army of the Czar. MacGahan was at Saratof on the Volga. The Russian army was 2,000 miles away at Kazala. It was the dead of winter, but no weather or distance was too great for the intrepid journalist. For six weeks, when the mercury was thirty degrees below zero, he continued his journey across the ice bound steppes of Russia, the Ural Mountains, and the boundless wastes of Siberia, where the howling wind of the north swept in fierce blasts. Reaching Kazala he discovered that the Russian army had already gone and was nearing Khiva. He prepared at once to leave. The natives tried to prevent him, but slipping away in the night, he started upon what is one of the most daring rides in history. Alone and unattended, a mere speck on the desert, he searched for the Russian army. For twenty-nine days under the broiling sun, which poured down its pitiless heat, he went without a plan except to ride as fast and far as possible. Without a sufficient amount of water and food; with a boiling sun by day and a deadly chill by night; sleeping on the desert sands; chased by Cossacks, he at last reached the goal, just as the first column of the Russian hosts was attacking the enemy. Dashing into the hottest of the fight, he wrote such a vivid description that it won the admiration of the Russian generals and army. When Khiva fell he was one of the first to enter its portals, and his account of the city's capitulation stands as a masterpiece of military journalism. Returning to Russia the Czar bestowed upon him the Order of St. Stanislaus. For the next five years his experience is varied and hurried. He visits his home in Perry county for the last time. He goes to Cuba to report the Virginius complication. He hurries to Spain to report the Carlist outbreak. For ten months he accompanies the army of Don Carlos. He is captured by the Republicans, who mistake him for a Carlist, and condemned to death. He is again saved through the intervention of the American Minister. Then he goes to England, where he accompanies Captain Young into the Arctic regions in search of Sir John Franklin.

In 1876, he read a brief sketch of the atrocities the Turks were committing in Bulgaria. He surmised at once what it all meant. Going into the employ of the *London Daily News*, he took his departure to

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join the Turkish army. This was to prove the great work of Januarius A. MacGahan. In depicting the horrors and brutalities of the scenes, his description was so thrilling that the world stood aghast. He told how the Bulgarian Christians were being robbed and murdered by Mohammedan Turks; how their fields and homes and cities were being burned and laid waste; and of the commission of many almost unmentionable crimes. It was too much for the civilized world to stand. Men paled with anger and involuntarily clenched their hands as the burning words of MacGahan struck into their hearts. Gladstone was fired into a revolt against such barbarities. But Lord Beaconsfield, the Premier, winked at it. Under pressure, he sent a man by the name of Baring to investigate and break down the testimony of MacGahan. But Baring returned and not only substantiated what MacGahan had written but stated that half had not been told. England was compelled to stand aside. She withdrew her fleet and Turkey was without a protector.

MacGahan, in the meantime, went from village to village, in Bulgaria, assuring the people that the Czar would avenge all this and that he himself would be back again within a year with a Russian army for their release. The people had faith in his words and wherever he went, he was hailed as “MacGahan, the Liberator of Bulgaria.” Hastening to St. Petersburg, he laid the matter before the Czar, and in a very short time an order went forth for the immediate mobilization of the Russian forces. MacGahan rode with the advance guard. During the war that followed, in which the Turk was driven from Bulgaria, MacGahan was alike the idol of the Russian army and Bulgarian people. He continued to write reams of description. At last Plevna fell and, in the mad rush that followed, our Knight-errant went with the army, which did not stop until the spires and minarets of Constantinople were in sight. A treaty of peace was signed in which Bulgaria’s independence was recognized. All of this because one boy, reared in the woods of Perry county, had lived. But the war clouds had scarcely rolled away when a friend of his fell sick with a malignant fever. MacGahan nursed him into health, but he himself was stricken and in a few days died at San Stefano a suburb of Constantinople, (June 9, 1878). The next day they laid him in his far-off foreign grave, around which stood weeping mourners of a dozen nationalities. Here for six years his body rested, but, in 1884, the Ohio legislature arranged for its removal to the land of his nativity. On the 11th of September, 1884, his remains were laid in their final sepulcher in the beautiful cemetery at New Lexington, where only a few years ago the teachers of the county placed a granite boulder to his memory. But the true monument to MacGahan is greater than chiseled granite, marble column or tablet of bronze. His monument is free Bulgaria.



Spot Where MacGahan is Buried

*“Your years, though few, to shield the weak you spent;
Your life, though brief, accomplished its intent;
All diplomatic Shylocks, bloody Turks, despite,
'Twas not in vain the Lord gave you a pen to write.”*

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