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Short Story: 'Luck' by Mark Twain

SUSAN CLARK: Now, the Special English program AMERICAN STORIES.

Our story today is called "Luck." It was written by Mark Twain. Here is Shep O'Neal with the story.

(MUSIC)

SHEP O'NEAL: I was at a dinner in London given in honor of one of the most celebrated English military men of his time. I do not want to tell you his real name and titles. I will just call him Lieutenant General Lord Arthur Scoresby.

I cannot describe my excitement when I saw this great and famous man. There he sat, the man himself, in person, all covered with medals. I could not take my eyes off him. He seemed to show the true mark of greatness. His fame had no effect on him. The hundreds of eyes watching him, the worship of so many people did not seem to make any difference to him.

Next to me sat a clergyman, who was an old friend of mine. He was not always a clergyman. During the first half of his life he was a teacher in the military school at Woolwich. There was a strange look in his eye as he leaned toward me and whispered – "Privately – he is a complete fool." He meant, of course, the hero of our dinner.

This came as a shock to me. I looked hard at him. I could not have been more surprised if he has said the same thing about Napoleon, or Socrates, or Solomon. But I was sure of two things about the clergyman. He always spoke the truth. And, his judgment of men was good. Therefore, I wanted to find out more about our hero as soon as I could.

Some days later I got a chance to talk with the clergyman, and he told me more. These are his exact words:

About forty years ago, I was an instructor in the military academy at Woolwich, when young Scoresby was given his first examination. I felt extremely sorry for him. Everybody answered the questions well, intelligently, while he – why, dear me – he did not know anything, so to speak. He was a nice, pleasant young man.

It was painful to see him stand there and give answers that were miracles of stupidity.

I knew of course that when examined again he would fail and be thrown out. So, I said to myself, it would be a simple, harmless act to help him as much as I could.

I took him aside and found he knew a little about Julius Ceasar's history. But, he did not know anything else. So, I went to work and tested him and worked him like a slave. I made him work, over and over again, on a few questions about Ceasar, which I knew he would be asked.

If you will believe me, he came through very well on the day of the examination. He got high praise too, while others who knew a thousand times more than he were sharply criticized. By some strange, lucky accident, he was asked no questions but those I made him study. Such an accident does not happen more than once in a hundred years.

Well, all through his studies, I stood by him, with the feeling a mother has for a disabled child. And he always saved himself by some miracle.

I thought that what in the end would destroy him would be the mathematics examination. I decided to make his end as painless as possible. So, I pushed facts into his stupid head for hours. Finally, I let him go to the examination to experience what I was sure would be his dismissal from school. Well, sir, try to imagine the result. I was shocked out of my mind. He took first prize! And he got the highest praise.

I felt guilty day and night – what I was doing was not right. But I only wanted to make his dismissal a little less painful for him. I never dreamed it would lead to such strange, laughable results.

I thought that sooner or later one thing was sure to happen: The first real test once he was through school would ruin him.

Then, the Crimean War broke out. I felt that sad for him that there had to be a war. Peace would have given this donkey a chance to escape from ever being found out as being so stupid. Nervously, I waited for the worst to happen. It did. He was appointed an officer. A captain, of all things! Who could have dreamed that they would place such a responsibility on such weak shoulders as his.

I said to myself that I was responsible to the country for this. I must go with him and protect the nation against him as far as I could. So, I joined up with him. And anyway we went to the field.

And there – oh dear, it was terrible. Mistakes, fearful mistakes – why, he never did anything that was right – nothing but mistakes. But, you see, nobody knew the secret of how stupid he really was. Everybody misunderstood his actions. They saw his stupid mistakes as works of great intelligence. They did, honestly!

His smallest mistakes made a man in his right mind cry, and shout and scream too – to himself, of course. And what kept me in a continual fear was the fact that every mistake he made increased his glory and fame. I kept saying to myself that when at last they found out about him, it will be like the sun falling out of the sky.

He continued to climb up, over the dead bodies of his superiors. Then, in the hottest moment of one battle down went our colonel. My heart jumped into my mouth, for Scoresby was the next in line to take his place. Now, we are in for it, I said...

The battle grew hotter. The English and their allies were steadily retreating all over the field. Our regiment occupied a position that was extremely important. One mistake now would bring total disaster. And what did Scoresby do this time – he just mistook his left hand for his right hand...that was all. An order came for him to fall back and support our right. Instead, he moved forward and went over the hill to the left.

We were over the hill before this insane movement could be discovered and stopped. And what did we find? A large and unsuspected Russian army waiting! And what happened – were we all killed? That is exactly what would have happened in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred. But no – those surprised Russians thought that no one regiment by itself would come around there at such a time.

It must be the whole British army, they thought. They turned tail, away they went over the hill and down into the field in wild disorder, and we after them. In no time, there was the greatest turn around you ever saw. The allies turned defeat into a sweeping and shining victory.

The allied commander looked on, his head spinning with wonder, surprise and joy. He sent right off for Scoresby, and put his arms around him and hugged him on the field in front of all the armies. Scoresby became famous that day as a great military leader – honored throughout the world. That honor will never disappear while history books last.

He is just as nice and pleasant as ever, but he still does not know enough to come in out of the rain. He is the stupidest man in the universe.

Until now, nobody knew it but Scoresby and myself. He has been followed, day by day, year by year, by a strange luck. He has been a shining soldier in all our wars for years. He has filled his whole military life with mistakes. Every one of them brought him another honorary title. Look at his chest, flooded with British and foreign medals. Well, sir, every one of them is the record of some great stupidity or other. They are proof that the best thing that can happen to a man is to be born lucky. I say again, as I did at the dinner, Scoresby's a complete fool.

(MUSIC)

SUSAN CLARK: You have just heard the story "Luck." It was written by Mark Twain and adapted for Special English by Harold Berman. Your narrator was Shep O'Neal. Listen again next week at this same time for another American Story told in Special English on the Voice of America. This is Susan Clark.