

**ALTSHELER
JOSEPH
ALEXANDER**

THE TREE OF
APPOMATTOX

Joseph Altsheler

The Tree of Appomattox

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Содержание

FOREWORD	5
CHAPTER I	9
CHAPTER II	16
CHAPTER III	26
CHAPTER IV	32
CHAPTER V	41
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	42

Joseph A. Altsheler

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FOREWORD

"The Tree of Appomattox" concludes the series of connected romances dealing with the Civil War, begun in "The Guns of Bull Run," and continued successively through "The Guns of Shiloh," "The Scouts of Stonewall," "The Sword of Antietam," "The Star of Gettysburg," "The Rock of Chickamauga" and "The Shades of the Wilderness" to the present volume. It has been completed at the expense of vast labor, and the author has striven at all times to be correct, wherever facts are involved. So far, at least, no historic detail has been challenged by critic or reader.

More than half a century has passed since the Civil War's close. Not many of the actors in it are left. It was one of the most tremendous upheavals in the life of any nation, and it was the greatest of all struggles, until the World War began, but scarcely any trace of partisan rancor or bitterness is left. So, it has become easier to write of it with a sense of fairness and detachment, and the lapse of time has made the perspective clear and sharp.

However lacking he may be in other respects, the author perhaps had an advantage in being born, and having grown up in a border state, where sentiment was about equally divided concerning the Civil War. He was surrounded during his early youth by men who fought on one side or the other, and their stories of camp, march and battle were almost a part of the air he breathed. So he hopes that this circumstance has aided him to give a truthful color to the picture of the mighty combat, waged for four such long and terrible years.

THE CIVIL WAR SERIES

VOLUMES IN THE CIVIL WAR SERIES

THE GUNS OF BULL RUN.
THE GUNS OF SHILOH.
THE SCOUTS OF STONEWALL.
THE SWORD OF ANTIETAM.
THE STAR OF GETTYSBURG.
THE ROCK OF CHICKAMAUGA.
THE SHADES OF THE WILDERNESS.
THE TREE OF APPOMATTOX.

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS IN THE CIVIL WAR SERIES

HARRY KENTON, A Lad Who Fights on the Southern Side.
DICK MASON, Cousin of Harry Kenton, Who Fights on the Northern Side.
COLONEL GEORGE KENTON, Father of Harry Kenton.
MRS. MASON, Mother of Dick Mason.
JULIANA, Mrs. Mason's Devoted Colored Servant.
COLONEL ARTHUR WINCHESTER, Dick Mason's Regimental Commander.
COLONEL LEONIDAS TALBOT, Commander of the Invincibles, a Southern Regiment.
LIEUTENANT COLONEL HECTOR ST. HILAIRE, Second in Command of the Invincibles.
ALAN HERTFORD, A Northern Cavalry Leader.

PHILIP SHERBURNE, A Southern Cavalry Leader.
WILLIAM J. SHEPARD, A Northern Spy.
DANIEL WHITLEY, A Northern Sergeant and Veteran of the Plains.
GEORGE WARNER, A Vermont Youth Who Loves Mathematics.
FRANK PENNINGTON, A Nebraska Youth, Friend of Dick Mason.
ARTHUR ST. CLAIR, A Native of Charleston, Friend of Harry Kenton.
TOM LANGDON, Friend of Harry Kenton.
GEORGE DALTON, Friend of Harry Kenton.
BILL SKELLY, Mountaineer and Guerrilla.
TOM SLADE, A Guerrilla Chief.
SAM JARVIS, The Singing Mountaineer.
IKE SIMMONS, Jarvis' Nephew.
AUNT "SUSE," A Centenarian and Prophetess.
BILL PETTY, A Mountaineer and Guide.
JULIEN DE LANGEAIS, A Musician and Soldier from Louisiana.
JOHN CARRINGTON, Famous Northern Artillery Officer.
DR. RUSSELL, Principal of the Pendleton School.
ARTHUR TRAVERS, A Lawyer.
JAMES BERTRAND, A Messenger from the South.
JOHN NEWCOMB, A Pennsylvania Colonel.
JOHN MARKHAM, A Northern Officer.
JOHN WATSON, A Northern Contractor.
WILLIAM CURTIS, A Southern Merchant and Blockade Runner.
MRS. CURTIS, Wife of William Curtis.
HENRIETTA CARDEN, A Seamstress in Richmond.
DICK JONES, A North Carolina Mountaineer.
VICTOR WOODVILLE, A Young Mississippi Officer.
JOHN WOODVILLE, Father of Victor Woodville.
CHARLES WOODVILLE, Uncle of Victor Woodville.
COLONEL BEDFORD, A Northern Officer.
CHARLES GORDON, A Southern Staff Officer.
JOHN LANHAM, An Editor.
JUDGE KENDRICK, A Lawyer.
MR. CULVER, A State Senator.
MR. BRACKEN, A Tobacco Grower.
ARTHUR WHITRIDGE, A State Senator.

HISTORICAL CHARACTERS

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, President of the United States.
JEFFERSON DAVIS, President of the Southern Confederacy.
JUDAH P. BENJAMIN, Member of the Confederate Cabinet.
U. S. GRANT, Northern Commander.
ROBERT E. LEE, Southern Commander.
STONEWALL JACKSON, Southern General.
PHILIP H. SHERIDAN, Northern General.
GEORGE H. THOMAS, "The Rock of Chickamauga."
ALBERT SIDNEY JOHNSTON, Southern General.
A. P. HILL, Southern General.

W. S. HANCOCK, Northern General.
GEORGE B. McCLELLAN, Northern General.
AMBROSE E. BURNSIDE, Northern General.
TURNER ASHBY, Southern Cavalry Leader.
J. E. B. STUART, Southern Cavalry Leader.
JOSEPH HOOKER, Northern General.
RICHARD S. EWELL, Southern General.
JUBAL EARLY, Southern General.
WILLIAM S. ROSECRANS, Northern General.
SIMON BOLIVAR BUCKNER, Southern General.
LEONIDAS POLK, Southern General and Bishop.
BRAXTON BRAGG, Southern General.
NATHAN BEDFORD FORREST, Southern Cavalry Leader.
JOHN MORGAN, Southern Cavalry Leader.
GEORGE J. MEADE, Northern General.
DON CARLOS BUELL, Northern General.
W. T. SHERMAN, Northern General.
JAMES LONGSTREET, Southern General.
P. G. T. BEAUREGARD, Southern General.
WILLIAM L. YANCEY, Alabama Orator.
JAMES A. GARFIELD, Northern General, afterwards President of the United States.
And many others

IMPORTANT BATTLES DESCRIBED IN THE CIVIL WAR SERIES

BULL RUN
KERNSTOWN
CROSS KEYS
WINCHESTER
PORT REPUBLIC
THE SEVEN DAYS
MILL SPRING
FORT DONELSON
SHILOH
PERRYVILLE
STONE RIVER
THE SECOND MANASSAS
ANTIETAM
FREDERICKSBURG
CHANCELLORSVILLE
GETTYSBURG
CHAMPION HILL
VICKSBURG
CHICKAMAUGA
MISSIONARY RIDGE
THE WILDERNESS
SPOTTSYLVANIA
COLD HARBOR
FISHER'S HILL
CEDAR CREEK

APPOMATTOX

CHAPTER I

THE APPLE TREE

Although he was an officer in full uniform he was a youth in years, and he had the spirits of youth. Moreover, it was one of the finest apple trees he had ever seen and the apples hung everywhere, round, ripe and red, fairly asking to be taken and eaten. Dick Mason looked up at them longingly. They made him think of the orchards at home in his own state, and a touch of coolness in the air sharpened his appetite for them all the more.

"If you want 'em so badly, Dick," said Warner, "why don't you climb the tree and get 'em? There's plenty for you and also for Pennington and me."

"I see. You're as anxious for apples as I am, and you wish me to gather 'em for you by making a strong appeal to my own desires. It's your clever New England way."

"We're forbidden to take anything from the people, but it won't hurt to keep a few apples from rotting on the ground. If you won't get 'em Pennington will."

"I understand you, George. You're trying to play Frank against me, while you keep yourself safe. You'll go far. Never mind. I'll gather apples for us all."

He leaped up, caught the lowest bough, swung himself lightly into the fork, and then climbing a little higher, reached for the reddest and ripest apples, which he flung down in a bountiful supply.

"Now, gluttons," he said, "satisfy yourselves, but save a lot for me."

Then he went up as far as the boughs would sustain him and took a look over the country. Apple trees do not grow very tall, but Dick's tree stood on the highest point in the orchard, and he had a fine view, a view that was in truth the most remarkable the North American continent had yet afforded.

He always carried glasses over his shoulder, and lately Colonel Winchester had made him a gift of a splendid pair, which he now put into use, sweeping the whole circle of the horizon. With their powerful aid he was able to see the ancient city of Petersburg, where Lee had thrown himself across Grant's path in order to block his way to Richmond, the Southern capital, and had dug long lines of trenches in which his army lay. It was Lee who first used this method of defense for a smaller force against a larger, and the vast trench warfare of Europe a half century later was a repetition of the mighty struggle of Lee and Grant on the lines of Petersburg.

Dick through his glasses saw the trenches, lying like a brown bar across the green country, and opposite them another brown bar, often less than a hundred yards away, which marked where the Northern troops also had dug in. The opposing lines extended a distance of nearly forty miles, and Richmond was only twenty miles behind them. It was the nearest the Army of the Potomac had come to the Southern capital since McClellan had seen the spires of its churches, and that was more than two years away.

Warner and Pennington were lying on the ground, eating big red apples with much content and looking up lazily at Mason.

"You're curving those glasses about a lot. What do you see, Dick?" asked Pennington at length.

"I see Petersburg, an old, old town, half buried in foliage, and with many orchards and gardens about it. A pity that two great armies should focus on such a pleasant place."

"No time for sentiment, Dick. What else do you see?"

"Jets of smoke and flame from the trenches, an irregular sort of firing, sometimes a half-dozen shots at one place, and then a long and peaceful break until you come to another place, where they're exchanging bullets."

"What more do you see, Brother Richard?"

"I see a Johnny come out of his trench hands up and advance toward one of our Yanks opposite, who also has come out of his trench hands up."

"What are they trading?" asked Warner.

"The Reb offers a square of plug tobacco, and the Yank a bundle of newspapers. Now they've made the exchange, now they've shaken hands and each is going back to his own trench."

"It's a merry world, my masters, as has been said before," resumed Warner, "but I should add that it's also a mad wag of a world. Here we are face to face for forty miles, at some points seeking to kill one another in a highly impersonal way, and at other points conducting sale and barter according to the established customs of peace. People at home wouldn't believe it, and later on a lot more won't believe it, when the writers come to write about it. But it's true just the same. What else do you see from the apple tower, Brother Richard?"

"A long line of wagons approaching a camp some distance behind the Confederate trenches. They must be loaded pretty heavily, because the drivers are cracking their whips over the horses and mules."

"That's bad. Provisions, I suppose," said Warner. "The more these Johnnies get to eat the harder they fight, and they're not supposed to be receiving supplies now. Our cavalry ought to have cut off that wagon train. I shall have to speak to Sheridan about it. This is no way to starve the Johnnies to death. Seest aught more, Brother Richard?"

"I do! I do! Jump up, boys, and use your own glasses! I behold a large man on a gray horse, riding slowly along, as if he were inspecting troops away behind the trenches. Wherever he passes the soldiers snatch off their caps and, although I can't hear 'em, I know they're cheering. It's Lee himself!"

Both Warner and Pennington swung themselves upon the lower boughs of the tree and put their glasses to their eyes.

"It's surely Lee," said Warner. "I'm glad to get a look at him. He's been giving us a lot of trouble for more than three years now, but I think General Grant is going to take his measure."

"They're terribly reduced," said Pennington, "and if we stick to it we're bound to win. Still, you boys will recall for some time that we've had a war. What else do you see from the heights of the apple tree, Dick?"

"Distant dust behind our own lines, and figures moving in it dimly. Cavalry practicing, I should say. Have you fellows fruit enough?"

"Plenty. You can climb down and if the farmer hurries here with his dog to catch you we'll protect you."

"This is a fine apple tree," said Dick, as he descended slowly. "Apple trees are objects of beauty. They look so well in the spring all in white bloom, and then they look just as well in the fall, when the red or yellow apples hang among the leaves. And this is one of the finest I've ever seen."

He did not dream then that he should remember an apple tree his whole life, that an apple tree, and one apple tree in particular, should always call to his mind a tremendous event, losing nothing of its intensity and vividness with the passing years. But all that was in the future, and when he joined his comrades on the ground he made good work with the biggest and finest apple he could find.

"Early apples," he said, looking up at the tree. "It's not the end of July yet."

"But good apples, glorious apples, anyhow," said Pennington, taking another. "Besides, it's fine and cool like autumn."

"It won't stay," said Dick. "We've got the whole of August coming. Virginia is like Kentucky. Always lots of hot weather in August. Glad there's no big fighting to be done just now. But it's a pity, isn't it, to tear up a fine farming country like this. Around here is where the United States started. John Smith and Rolfe and Pocahontas and the rest of them may have roamed just where this orchard stands. And later on lots of the great Americans rode about these parts, some of the younger ones carrying their beautiful ladies on pillions behind them. You are a cold-blooded New Englander, Warner, and you believe that anyone fighting against you ought to burn forever, but as for me I feel sorry for Virginia. I don't care what she's done, but I don't like to see the Old Dominion, the Mother of Presidents, stamped flat."

"I'm not cold-blooded at all, but I don't gush. I don't forget that this state produced George Washington, but I want victory for our side just the same, no matter how much of Virginia we may have to tread down. Is that farm house over there still empty?"

"Of course, or we wouldn't have taken the apples. It belongs to a man named Haynes, and he left ahead of us with his family for Richmond. I fancy it will be a long time before Haynes and his people sleep in their own rooms again. Come, fellows, we'd better be going back. Colonel Winchester is kind to us, but he doesn't want his officers to be prowling about as they please too long."

They walked together toward the edge of the orchard and looked at the farm house, from the chimneys of which no smoke had risen in weeks. Dick felt sure it would be used later on as headquarters by some general and his staff, but for the present it was left alone. And being within the Union lines no plunderer had dared to touch it.

It was a two-story wooden house, painted white, with green shutters, all closed now. The doors were also locked and sealed until such time as the army authorities wished to open them, but on the portico, facing the Southern lines were two benches, on which the three youths sat, and looked again over the great expanse of rolling country, dotted at intervals by puffs of smoke from the long lines of trenches. Where they sat it was so still that they could hear the faint crackle of the distant rifles, and now and then the heavier crash of a cannon.

Dick's mind went back to the Wilderness and its gloomy shades, the sanguinary field of Spottsylvania, and then the terrific mistake of Cold Harbor. The genius of Lee had never burned more brightly. He had handled his diminishing forces with all his old skill and resolution, but Grant had driven on and on. No matter what his losses the North always filled up his ranks again, and poured forward munitions and supplies in a vast and unbroken stream. A nation had summoned all its powers for a supreme effort to win, and Dick felt that the issue of the war was not now in doubt. The genius of Lee and the bravery of his devoted army could no longer save the South. The hammer strokes of Grant would surely crush it.

And then what? He had the deepest sympathy for these people of Virginia. What would become of them after the war? Defeat for the South meant nearer approach to destruction than any nation had suffered in generations. To him, born south of the Ohio River, and so closely united by blood with these people, victory as well as defeat had its pangs.

Warner and Pennington rose and announced that they would return to the regiment which was held in reserve in a little valley below, but Dick, their leave not having run out yet, decided to stay a while longer.

"So long," said Warner. "Let the orchard alone. Leave apples for others. Remember that they are protected by strict orders against all wandering and irresponsible officers, but ourselves."

"Yes, be good, Dick," said Pennington, and the two went down the slope, leaving Dick on the portico. He liked being alone at times. The serious cast of mind that he had inherited from his famous great grandfather, Paul Cotter, demanded moments of meditation. It was peaceful too on the portico, and a youth who had been through Grant's Wilderness campaign, a month of continuous and terrible fighting, was glad to rest for a while.

The distant rifle fire and the occasional cannon shot had no significance and did not disturb him. They blended now with the breeze that blew among the leaves of the apple trees. He had never felt more like peace, and the pleasant open country was soothing to the eye. What a contrast to that dark and sodden Wilderness where men fought blindly in the dusk. He shuddered as he remembered the forests set on fire by the shells, and burning over the fallen.

A light step aroused him and a large man sat down on the bench beside him. Dick often wondered at the swift and almost noiseless tread of Shepard, with whom he was becoming well acquainted. He was tall, built powerfully and must have weighed two hundred pounds, yet he moved with the ease and grace of a boy of sixteen. Dick thought it must come from his trade.

"I don't want to intrude, Mr. Mason," said Shepard, "but I saw you sitting here, looking perhaps too grave and thoughtful for one of your years."

"You're most welcome, Mr. Shepard, and I was thinking, that is in a vague sort of way."

"I saw your face and you were wondering what was to become of Virginia and the Virginians."

"So I was, but how did you know it?"

"I didn't know it. It was just a guess, and the guess was due to the fact that I was having the same thoughts myself."

"So you regard the war as won?" asked Dick, who had a great respect for Shepard's opinion.

"If the President keeps General Grant in command, as he will, it's a certainty, but it will take a long time yet. We can't force those trenches down there. Remember what Cold Harbor cost us."

Dick shuddered.

"I remember it," he said.

"It would be worse if we tried to storm Lee's lines. After Cold Harbor the general won't attempt it, and I see a long wait here. But we can afford it. The South grows steadily weaker. Our blockade clamps like a steel band, and presses tighter and tighter all the time. Food is scarce in the Confederacy. So is ammunition. They receive no recruits, and every day the army of Lee is smaller in numbers than it was the day before."

"You go into Richmond, Mr. Shepard. I've heard from high officers that you do. How do they feel there with our army only about twenty miles away?"

"They're quiet and seem to be confident, but I believe they know their danger."

"Have you by any chance seen or heard of my cousin, Harry Kenton, who is a lieutenant on the staff of the Southern commander-in-chief?"

Shepard smiled, as if the question brought memories that pleased him.

"A fine youth," he said. "Yes, I've seen him more than once. I'm free to tell you, Lieutenant Mason, that I know a lot about this rebel cousin of yours. He and I have come into conflict on several occasions, and I did not win every time."

"Nobody could beat Harry always," exclaimed Dick with youthful loyalty. "He was always the strongest and most active among us, and the best in forest and water. He could hunt and fish and trail like the scouts of our border days."

"I found him in full possession of all these qualities and he used them against me. I should grieve if that cousin of yours were to fall, Mr. Mason. I want to know him still better after the war."

Dick would have asked further questions about the encounters between Harry and the spy, but he judged that Shepard did not care to answer them, and he forbore. Yet the man aroused the most intense curiosity in him. There were spies and spies, and Shepard was one of them, but he was not like the others. He was unquestionably a man of great mental power. His calm, steady gaze and his words to the point showed it. No one patronized Shepard.

"I should like to go into Richmond with you some dark night," said Dick, who hid a strong spirit of adventure under his quiet exterior.

"You're not serious, Lieutenant Mason?"

"I wasn't, maybe, when I began to say it, but I believe I am now. Why shouldn't I be curious about Richmond, a place that great armies have been trying to take for three years? Just at present it's the center of the world to me in interest."

"You must not think of such a thing, Mr. Mason. Detection means certain death."

"No more for me than for you."

"But I have had a long experience and I have resources of which you can't know. Don't think of it again, Mr. Mason."

"I was merely jesting. I won't," said Dick.

He involuntarily looked toward the point beyond the horizon where Richmond lay, and Shepard meanwhile studied him closely. Young Mason had not come much under his notice until lately, but

now he began to interest the spy greatly. Shepard observed what a strong, well-built young fellow he was, tall and slender but extremely muscular. He also bore a marked resemblance to his cousin, Harry Kenton, and such was the quality of Shepard that the likeness strongly recommended Dick to him. Moreover, he read the lurking thought that persisted in Dick's mind.

"You mustn't dream of such a thing as entering Richmond, Mr. Mason," he said.

"It was just a passing thought. But aren't you going in again?"

"Later on, no doubt, but not just now. I understand that we're planning some movement. I don't know what it is, but I'm to wait here until it's over. Good-by, Mr. Mason. Since things are closing in it's possible that you and I will see more of each other than before."

"Of course, when I'm personally conducted by you on that trip into Richmond."

Shepard, who had left the portico, turned and shook a warning finger.

"Dismiss that absolutely and forever from your mind, Mr. Mason," he said.

Dick laughed, and watched the stalwart figure of the spy as he strode away. Again the singular ease and lightness of his step struck him. To the lad's fancy the grass did not bend under his feet. Upon Dick as upon Harry, Shepard made the impression of power, not only of strength but of subtlety and courage.

"I'm glad that man's on our side," said Dick to himself, as Shepard's figure disappeared among the trees. Then he left the portico and went down in the valley to Colonel Winchester's regiment, where he was received with joyous shouts by several young men, including Warner and Pennington, who had gone on before. Colonel Winchester himself smiled and nodded, and Dick saluted respectfully.

The Winchesters, as they loved to call themselves, were faring well at this particular time. Like the Invincibles on the other side, this regiment had been decimated and filled up again several times. It had lost heavily in the Wilderness and at Spottsylvania, but its colonel had escaped without serious hurt and had received special mention for gallantry and coolness. It had been cut up once more at Cold Harbor, and because of its great services and losses it was permitted to remain a while in the rear as a reserve, and obtain the rest it needed so sorely.

The brave youths were recovering fast from their wounds and exertions. Their camp was beside a clear brook and there were tents for the officers, though they were but seldom used, most of them, unless it should be raining, preferring to sleep in their blankets under the trees. The water was good to drink, and farther down were several deep pools in which they bathed. Food, as usual in the Northern army, was good and plentiful, and for the Winchesters it seemed more a period of play than of war.

"What did you see at the house, Dick?" asked Colonel Winchester.

"The spy, Shepard. I talked a while with him. He says the Confederacy is growing weaker every day, but if we try to storm Lee's lines we'll be cut to pieces."

"I think he's right in both respects, although I feel sure that some kind of a movement will soon be attempted. But Dick, a mail from the west has arrived and here is a letter for you."

He handed the lad a large square envelope, addressed in tall, slanting script, and Dick knew at once that it was from his mother. He seized it eagerly, and Colonel Winchester, suppressing the wish to know what was inside, turned away.

* * * *

I have not heard from my dearest boy since the terrible battles in the east [Mrs. Mason wrote], but I hope and pray that you have come safely through them. You have escaped so many dangers that I feel you must escape all the rest. The news reaches us that the fighting in Virginia has been of the most dreadful character, but when it arrives in Pendleton it has two meanings. Those of our little town who are for the Confederacy say General Grant's losses have been so enormous that he can go no farther, and that the last and greatest effort of the North has failed.

Those who sympathize with the Union say General Lee has been reduced so greatly that he must be crushed soon and with him the Confederacy. As you know, I wish the latter to be true, but I suspect that the truth is somewhere between the two statements.

But the truth either way brings me great grief. I cannot hate the Southern people. We are Southern ourselves in all save this war, and, although our dear little town is divided in feeling, I have received nothing but kindness from those on the other side. Dr. Russell often asks about you. He says you were the best Latin scholar in the Academy, and he expects you to have a great future, as a learned man, after the war. He speaks oftenest of you and Harry Kenton, and I believe that you two were his favorite pupils. He says that Harry's is the best mathematical mind he has ever found in his long years of teaching.

Your room remains just as it was when you left. Juliana brushes and airs it every day, and expects at any time to see her young Master Dick come riding home. She keeps in her mind two pictures of you, absolutely unlike. In one of these pictures you are a great officer, carrying much of the war's weight on your shoulders, consulted continually by General Grant, who goes wrong only when he fails to take your advice. In the other you are a little boy whom she alternately scolds and pets. And it may be that I am somewhat like Juliana in this respect.

The garden is very fine this year. The vegetables were never more plentiful, and never of a finer quality. I wish you were here for your share. It must be a trial to have to eat hard crackers and tough beef and pork day after day. I should think that you would grow to hate the sight of them. Sam, the colored man who has been with us so long, has proved as faithful and trustworthy as Juliana. He makes a most excellent farmer, and the yield of corn in the bottom land is going to be amazing.

They say that since the Federal successes in the West the operations of Skelly's band of guerrillas have become bolder, but he has not threatened Pendleton again. They say also that a little farther south a band of like character, who call themselves Southern, under a man named Slade, are ravaging, but I suppose that you, who see great generals and great armies daily, are not much concerned about outlaws.

Always keep your feet dry and warm if you can, and never fail to spread a blanket between you and the damp grass. Give my respects to Colonel Winchester. Tell him that we hear of him now and then in Kentucky and that we hear only good. Don't forget about the blanket.

* * * *

There was more, but it was these passages over which Dick lingered longest.

He read the letter three times—letters were rare in those years, and men prized them highly—and put it away in his strongest pocket. Colonel Winchester was standing by the edge of the brook, and Dick, saluting him, said:

"My mother wishes me to deliver to you her respects and best wishes."

A flush showed through the tan of the colonel's face, and Dick, noticing it, was startled by a sudden thought. At first his feeling was jealousy, but it passed in an instant, never to come again. There was no finer man in the world than Colonel Winchester.

"She is well," he added, "and affairs could go no better at Pendleton."

"I am glad," said Colonel Winchester simply. Then he turned to a man with very broad shoulders and asked:

"How are the new lads coming on?"

"Very well, sir," replied Sergeant Daniel Whitley. "Some of 'em are a little awkward yet, and a few are suffering from change of water, but they're good boys and we can depend on 'em, sir, when the time comes."

"Especially since you have been thrashing 'em into shape for so many days, sergeant."

"Thank you, sir."

An orderly came with a message for Colonel Winchester, who left at once, but Dick and the sergeant, his faithful comrade and teacher, stood beside the stream. They could easily see the bathers farther down, splashing in the water, pulling one another under, and, now and then, hurling a man bodily into the pool. They were all boys to the veteran. Many of them had been trained by him, and his attitude toward them was that of a school teacher toward his pupils.

"You have ears that hear everything, sergeant," said Dick. "What is this new movement that I've heard two or three men speak of? Something sudden they say."

"I've heard too," replied Sergeant Whitley, "but I can't guess it. Whatever it is, though, it's coming soon. There's a lot of work going on at a point farther down the line, but it's kept a secret from the rest of us here."

The sergeant went away presently, and Dick, going down stream, joined some other young officers in a pool. He lay on the bank afterward, but, shortly after dark, Colonel Winchester returned, gave an order, and the whole regiment marched away in the dusk. Dick felt sure that the event Sergeant Whitley had predicted was about to happen, but the colonel gave no hint of its nature, and he continued to wonder, as they advanced steadily in the dusk.

CHAPTER II

THE WOMAN AT THE HOUSE

The men marched on for a long time, and, after a while, they heard the hum of many voices and the restless movements that betokened the presence of numerous troops. Dick, who had dismounted, walked forward a little distance with Colonel Winchester, and, in the moonlight, he was able to see that a large division of the army was gathered near, resting on its arms. It was obvious that the important movement, of which he had been hearing so much, was at hand, but the colonel volunteered nothing concerning its nature.

The troops were allowed to lie down, and, with the calmness that comes of long experience, they soon fell asleep. But the officers waited and watched, and Dick saw other regiments arriving. Warner, who had pushed through some bushes, came back and said in a whisper:

"I've seen a half-dozen great mounds of fresh earth."

"Earth taken out to make a trench, no doubt," said Dick.

But Warner shook his head.

"There's too much of it," he said, "and it's been carried too far to the rear. In my opinion extensive mining operations have been going on here."

"For what?" asked Pennington. "Not for silver or gold. We're no treasure hunters, and besides, there's none here."

Warner shook his head again.

"I don't know," he replied, "but I'm quite sure that it has something to do, perhaps all to do, with the movement now at hand. To the right of us, regiments, including several of colored troops, are already forming in line of battle, and I've no doubt our turn will come before long."

"We must be intending to make an attack," said Dick, "but I don't suppose we'll move until day."

He had learned long since that night attacks were very risky. Friend was likely to fire into friend and the dusk and confusion invariably forbade victory. But the faculties that create anxiety and alarm had been dulled for the time by immense exertions and dangers, and he placidly awaited the event, whatever it might be.

"What time is it?" asked Pennington.

"Half past three in the morning," replied Dick, who was able to see the face of his watch.

"Not such a long wait then. Day comes early this time of the year."

"You lads can sit down and make yourselves comfortable," said Colonel Winchester. "It's desirable for you to be as fresh as possible when you're wanted. I'm glad to see the men sleeping. They'll receive a signal in ample time."

The young officers followed his suggestion, but they kept very wide awake, talking for a little while in whispers and then sinking away into silence. The noise from the massed troops near them decreased also and Dick's curiosity began to grow again. He stood up, but he saw no movement, nothing to indicate the nature of any coming event. He looked at his watch again. Dawn was almost at hand. A narrow band of gray would soon rim the eastern hills. An aide arrived, gave a dispatch to Colonel Winchester, and quickly passed on.

The men were awakened and stood up, shaking the sleep from their eyes and then, through habit, looking to their arms and ammunition. The thread of gray showed in the east.

"Whatever it is, it will come soon," whispered Warner to Dick.

The gray thread broadened and became a ribbon of silver. The silver, as it widened, was shot through with pink and red and yellow, the colors of the morning. Dick caught a glimpse of massed bayonets near him, and of the Southern trenches rising slowly out of the dusk not far away. Then the earth rocked.

He felt a sudden violent and convulsive movement that nearly threw him from his feet, and the whole world in front of him blazed with fire, as if a volcano, after a long silence, had burst suddenly into furious activity. Black objects, the bodies of men, were borne upon the mass of shooting flames, and the roar was so tremendous that it was heard thirty miles away.

Dick had been expecting something, but no such red dawn as this, and when the fires suddenly sank, and the world-shaking crash turned to echoes he stood for a few moments appalled. He believed at first that a magazine had exploded, but, as the dawn was rapidly advancing, he beheld in front of them, where Southern breastworks had stood, a vast pit two or three hundred feet long and more than thirty feet deep. At the bottom of it, although they could not be seen through the smoke, lay the fragments of Confederate cannon and Confederate soldiers who had been blown to pieces.

"A mine breaking the rebel line!" cried Warner, "and our men are to charge through it!"

Trumpets were already sounding their thrilling call, and blue masses, before the smoke had lifted, were rushing into the pit, intending to climb the far side and sever the Southern line. But Colonel Winchester did not yet give the word to his own regiment, and Dick knew that they were to be held in reserve.

Into the great chasm went white troops and black troops, charging together, and then Dick suddenly cried in horror. Those were veterans on the other side, and, recovering quickly from the surprise, they rushed forward their batteries and riflemen. Mahone, a little, alert man, commanded them, and in an instant they deluged the pit, afterward famous under the name of "The Crater," with fire. The steep slope held back the Union troops and from the edges everywhere the men in gray poured a storm of shrapnel and canister and bullets into the packed masses.

Colonel Winchester groaned aloud, and looked at his men who were eager to advance to the rescue, but it was evident to Dick that his orders held him, and they stood in silence gazing at the appalling scene in the crater. A tunnel had been run directly under the Confederates, and then a huge mine had been exploded. All that part was successful, but the Union army had made a deep pit, more formidable than the earthwork itself.

Never had men created a more terrible trap for themselves. The name, the crater, was well deserved. It was a seething pit of death filled with smoke, and from which came shouts and cries as the rim of it blazed with the fire of those who were pouring in such a stream of metal. Inside the pit the men could only cower low in the hope that the hurricane of missiles would pass over their heads.

"Good God!" cried Dick. "Why don't we advance to help them!"

"Here we go now, and we may need help ourselves!" said Warner.

Again the trumpets were sending forth their shrill call to battle and death, and, as the colonel waved his sword, the regiment charged forward with others to rescue the men in the crater. A bright sun was shining now, and the Southern leaders saw the heavy, advancing column. They were rapidly bringing up more guns and more riflemen, and, shifting a part of their fire, a storm of death blew in the faces of those who would go to the rescue.

As at Cold Harbor, the men in blue could not live before such a fire at close quarters, and the regiments were compelled to recoil, while those who were left alive in the crater surrendered. The trumpets sounded the unwilling call to withdraw, and the Winchester men, many of them shedding tears of grief and rage, fell back to their old place, while from some distant point, rising above the dying fire of the cannon and rifles, came the long, fierce rebel yell, full of defiance and triumph.

The effect upon Dick of the sight in the crater was so overwhelming that he was compelled to lie down.

"Why do we do such things?" he exclaimed, after the faintness passed. "Why do we waste so many lives in such vain efforts?"

"We have to try," replied Warner, gloomily. "The thing was all right as far as it went, but it broke against a hedge of fire and steel, crowning a barrier that we had created for ourselves."

"Let's not talk about it," said Pennington, who had been faint too. "It's enough to have seen it. I am going to blot it out of my mind if I can."

But not one of the three was ever able wholly to forget that hideous dawn. Luckily the Winchesters themselves had suffered little, but they were quite content to remain in their old place by the brook, where the next day a large man in civilian dress introduced himself to Dick.

"Perhaps you don't remember me, Mr. Mason," he said, "but in such times as these it's easy to forget chance acquaintances."

Dick looked at him closely. He was elderly, with heavy pouches under his eyes and a rotund figure, but he looked uncommonly alert and his pale blue eyes had a penetrating quality. Then Dick recalled him.

"You're Mr. Watson, the contractor," he said.

"Right. Shake hands."

Dick shook his hand, and he noticed that, while it was fat, it was strong and dry. He hated damp hands, which always seemed to him to have a slimy touch, as if their owner were reptilian.

"I suppose business is good with you, Mr. Watson," he said.

"It couldn't be better, and such affairs as the one I witnessed this morning mean more. But doubtless I have grieved over it as much as you. I may profit by the great struggle, but I have not wished either the war or its continuance. Someone must do the work I am doing. You're a bright boy, Lieutenant Mason, and I want you still to bear in mind the hint that I gave you once in Washington."

"I don't recall it, this instant."

"That to go into business with me is a better trade than fighting."

"I thank you for the offer, but my mind turns in other directions. I'm not depreciating your occupation, Mr. Watson, but I'm interested in something else."

"I knew that you were not, Lieutenant Mason. You have too much sense. Your kind could not fight if my kind did not find the sinews, and after the war the woods will be full of generals, and colonels and majors who will be glad to get jobs from men like me."

"I've no doubt of it," said Dick, "but what happened this morning made me think the war is yet far from over."

"We shall see what we shall see, but if you ever want a friend write to me in Washington. General delivery, there will do. Good-by."

"Good-by," said Dick, and, as he watched the big man walk away, he felt that he was beginning to understand him. He had never been interested greatly in mercantile pursuits. Public and literary life and the soil were the great things to him. Now he realized that the vast strength of the North, a strength that could survive any number of defeats, lay largely in her trade and commerce. The South, almost stationary upon the soil, had fallen behind, and no amount of skill and courage could save her.

Colonel Winchester gave the young officers who had been awake all night permission to sleep, and Dick was glad to avail himself of it. He still felt weak, and ill, and, with a tender smile, remembering his mother's advice about the blanket, he spread one in the shade of a small oak and lay down upon it.

Despite the terrible repulse of the morning most of the men had regained their usual spirits. Several were playing accordions, and the others were listening. The Winchesters were known as a happy regiment, because they had an able colonel, strong but firm, efficient and tactful minor officers. They seldom got into mischief, and always they pooled their resources.

One lad was reading now to a group from a tattered copy of "Les Miserables," which had just reached them. He was deep in Waterloo and Dick heard their comments.

"You wait till the big writers begin to tell about Chickamauga and Gettysburg and Shiloh," said one. "They'll class with Waterloo or ahead of it, and the French and English never fought any such campaign as that when Grant came down through the Wilderness. What's that about the French

riding into the sunken road? I'm willin' to bet it was nothing but a skirmish beside Pickett's charge at Gettysburg."

"And both failed," said Warner. "There are always brave men on every side in any war. I don't know whether Napoleon was right or wrong—I suppose he was wrong at that time—but it always makes me feel sad to read of Waterloo."

"Just as a lot of our own people were grieved at the death of Stonewall Jackson, although next to Lee he was our most dangerous foe," said Pennington.

The reader resumed, and, although he was interrupted from time to time by question or comment, his monotone was pleasant and soothing, and Dick fell asleep. When he awoke his nerves were restored, and he could think of the crater without becoming faint again.

That night Colonel Hertford of the cavalry came to their camp and talked with Colonel Winchester in the presence of Dick and his comrades of the staff. The disastrous failure of the morning, so the cavalryman said, had convinced all the generals that Lee's trenches could not be forced, and the commander-in-chief was turning his eye elsewhere. While the deadlock before Petersburg lasted he would push the operations in some other field. He was watching especially the Valley of Virginia, where Early, after his daring raid upon the outskirts of Washington, was being pursued by Sheridan, though not hard enough in the opinion of General Grant.

"It's almost decided that help will be sent to Sheridan," said Hertford, "and in that event my regiment is sure to go. Yours has served as a mounted regiment, and I think I have influence enough to see that it is sent again as cavalry, if you wish."

Colonel Winchester accepted the offer gladly, and his young officers, in all eagerness, seconded him. They were tiring of inactivity, and of the cramped and painful life in the trenches. To be on horseback again, riding over hills and across valleys, seemed almost Heaven to them, and, as Colonel Hertford walked away, earnest injunctions to use his influence to the utmost followed him.

"It will take the sight of the crater from my mind," said Warner. "That's one reason why I want to go."

Dick, searching his own mind, concluded it was the chief reason with him, although he, too, was eager enough for a more spacious life than that of the trench.

"I'm going to wish so hard for it," said Pennington, "that it'll come true."

Whether Pennington's wish had any effect or not, they departed two days later, three mounted regiments under the general command of Hertford, his right as a veteran cavalry leader. All regiments, despite new men, had been reduced greatly by the years of fighting, and the three combined did not number more than fifteen hundred horse. But there was not one among them from the oldest to the youngest who did not feel elation as they rode away on the great curve that would take them into the Valley of Virginia.

"It's glorious to be on a horse again, with the world before you," said Pennington. "I was born horseback, so to speak, and I never had to do any walking until I came to this war. The great plains and the free winds that blow all around the earth for me."

"But you don't have rivers and hills and forests like ours," said Dick.

"I know it, but I don't miss them. I suppose it's what you're used to that you like. I like a horizon that doesn't touch the ground anywhere within fifteen or eighteen miles of me. And think of seeing a buffalo herd, as I have, that's all day passing you, a million of 'em, maybe!"

"And think of being scalped by the Sioux or Cheyennes, as your people out there often are," said Warner.

Pennington took off his cap and disclosed an uncommonly thick head of hair.

"You see that I haven't lost mine yet," he said. "If a fellow can live through big battles as I've lived through 'em he can escape Sioux and Cheyennes."

"So you should. Look back now, and you can see the armies face to face."

They were on the highest hill, and all the cavalry had turned for a last glance. Dick saw again the flashes from occasional rifle fire, and a dark column of smoke still rising from a spot which he knew to be the crater. He shuddered, and was glad when the force, riding on again, passed over the hill. Before them now stretched a desolated country, trodden under foot by the armies, and his heart bled again for Virginia, the most reluctant of all the states to secede, and the greatest of them all to suffer.

Colonel Hertford, Colonel Winchester, and the colonel of the third regiment, a Pennsylvanian named Bedford, rode together and their young officers were just behind. All examined the country continually through glasses to guard against ambush. Stuart was gone and Forrest was far away, but they knew that danger from the fierce riders of the South was always present. Just when the capital seemed safest Early's men had appeared in its very suburbs, and here in Virginia, where the hand of every man and of every woman and child also was against them, it was wise to watch well.

As they rode on the country was still marked by desolation. The fields were swept bare or trampled down. Many of the houses and barns and all the fences had been burned. The roads had been torn up by the passage of artillery and countless wagons. All the people seemed to have gone away.

But when they came into rougher and more wooded regions they were shot at often by concealed marksmen. A half-dozen troopers were killed and more wounded, and, when the cavalymen forced a path through the brush in pursuit of the hidden sharpshooters, they found nothing. The enemy fairly melted away. It was easy enough for a rifleman, knowing every gully and thicket, to send in his deadly bullet and then escape.

"Although it's merely the buzzing and stinging of wasps," said Warner, "I don't like it. They can't stop our advance, but I hate to see any good fellow of ours tumbled from his horse."

"Makes one think of that other ride we took in Mississippi," said Dick.

"In one way, yes, but in others, no. This is hard, firm ground, and we're not persecuted by mosquitoes. Nor is the country suitable for an ambush by a great force. Ouch, that burnt!"

A bullet fired from a thicket had grazed Warner's bridle hand. Dick was compelled to laugh.

"You're free from mosquitoes, George," he said, "but there are still little bullets flying about, as you see."

A dozen cavalymen were sent into the thicket, but the sharpshooter was already far away. Colonel Hertford frowned and said:

"Well, I suppose it's the price we have to pay, but I'd like to see the people to whom we have to pay it."

"Not much chance of that," said Colonel Winchester. "The Virginians know their own ground and the lurking sharpshooters won't fire until they're sure of a safe retreat."

But as they advanced the stinging fire became worse. There was no Southern force in this part of the country strong enough to meet them in open combat, but there was forest and thicket sufficient to shelter many men who were not only willing to shoot, but who knew how to shoot well. Yet they never caught anybody nor even saw anybody. A stray glimpse or two of a puff of smoke was the nearest they ever came to beholding an enemy.

It became galling, intolerable. Three more men were killed and the number of wounded was doubled. The three colonels held a consultation, and decided to extend groups of skirmishers far out on either flank. Dick was chosen to lead a band of thirty picked men who rode about a mile on the right, and he had with him as his second, and, in reality, as his guide and mentor in many ways, the trusty Sergeant Whitley. It was altogether likely that Colonel Winchester would not have sent Dick unless he had been able to send the wise sergeant with him.

"While you are guarding us from ambush," he said to Dick, "be sure you don't fall into an ambush yourself."

"Not while Whitley, here, is with us," replied Dick. "He learned while out on the plains, not only to have eyes in the back of his head, but to have 'em in the sides of it as well. In addition he can hear the fall of a leaf a mile away."

The sergeant shook his head and uttered an emphatic no in protest, but in his heart he was pleased. He was a sergeant who liked being a sergeant, and he was proud of all his wilderness and prairie lore.

Dick gave the word and the little troop galloped away to the right, zealous in its task and beating up every wood and thicket for the hidden riflemen who were so dangerous. At intervals they saw the cavalry force riding steadily on, and again they were hidden from it by forest or bush. More than an hour passed and they saw no foe. Dick concluded that the sharpshooters had been scared off by the flanking force, and that they would have no further trouble with them. His spirits rose accordingly and there was much otherwise to make them rise.

It was like Heaven to be on horseback in the pleasant country after being cramped up so much in narrow trenches, and there was the thrill of coming action. They were going to join Sheridan and where he rode idle moments would be few.

"Ping!" a bullet whistled alarmingly near his head and then cut leaves from a sapling beyond him. The young lieutenant halted the troop instantly, and Sergeant Whitley pointed to a house just visible among some trees.

"That's where it came from, and, since it hasn't been followed by a second, it's likely that only one man is there, and he is lying low, waiting a chance for another bullet," he said.

"Then we'll rout him out," said Dick.

He divided his little troop, in order that it could approach the house from all sides, and then he and the sergeant and six others advanced directly in front. He knew that if the marksman were still hidden inside he would not fire now, but would seek rather to hide, since he could easily observe from a window that the building was surrounded.

It was a small house, but it was well built and evidently had been occupied by people of substance. It was painted white, except the shutters which were green, and a brick walk led to a portico, with fine and lofty columns. There was nobody outside, but as the shutters were open it was probable that someone was inside.

Dick disliked to force an entrance at such a place, but he had been sent out to protect the flank and he could not let a rifleman lie hidden there, merely to resume his deadly business as soon as they passed on. They pushed the gate open and rode upon the lawn, an act of vandalism that he regretted, but could not help. They reached the door without any apparent notice being taken of them, and as the detachments were approaching from the other sides, Dick dismounted and knocked loudly. Receiving no answer, he bade all the others dismount.

"Curley, you hold the horses," he said, "and Dixon, you tell the men in the other detachments to seize anybody trying to escape. Sergeant, you and I and the others will enter the house. Break in the lock with the butt of your rifle, sergeant! No, I see it's not locked!"

He turned the bolt, and, the door swinging in, they passed into an empty hall. Here they paused and listened, which was a wise thing for a man to do when he entered the house of an enemy. Dick's sense of hearing was not much inferior to that of the sergeant, and while at first they heard nothing, they detected presently a faint click, click. He could not imagine what made the odd sound, and, listening as hard as he could, he could detect no other with it.

He pushed open a door that led into the hall and he and his men entered a large room with windows on the side, opening upon a rose garden. It was a pleasant room with a high ceiling, and old-fashioned, dignified furniture. A blaze of sunlight poured in from the windows, and, where a sash was raised, came the faint, thrilling perfume of roses, a perfume to which Dick was peculiarly susceptible. Yet, for years afterward, the odor of roses brought back to him that house and that room.

He thought at first that the room, although the faint clicking noise continued, contained no human being. But presently he saw sitting at a table by the open window a woman whose gray dress and gray hair blended so nearly with the gray colors of the chamber that even a soldier could have

been excused for not seeing her at once. Her head and body were perfectly still, but her hands were moving rapidly. She was knitting, and it was the click of her needles that they had heard.

She did not look up as Dick entered, and, taking off his cap, he stood, somewhat abashed. He knew at once by her dress and face, and the dignity, disclosed even by the manner in which she sat, that she was a great lady, one of those great ladies of old Virginia who were great ladies in fact. She was rather small, Martha Washington might have looked much like her, and she knitted steadily on, without showing by the least sign that she was aware of the presence of Union soldiers.

A long and embarrassed silence followed. Dick judged that she was about sixty-five years of age, though she seemed strong and he felt that she was watching them alertly from covert eyes. There was no indication that anyone else was in the building, but it did not seem likely that a great lady of Virginia would be left alone in her house, with a Union force marching by.

He approached, bowed and said:

"Madame!"

She raised her head and looked at him slowly from head to foot, and then back again. They were fierce old eyes, and Dick felt as if they burned him, but he held his ground knowing that he must. Then she turned back to her knitting, and the needles clicked steadily as before.

"Madame!" repeated Dick, still embarrassed.

She lifted the fierce old eyes.

"I should think," she said, "that the business of General Grant's soldiers was to fight those of General Lee rather than to annoy lone women."

Dick flushed, but angry blood leaped in his veins.

"Pardon me, madame," he said, "but we have not come here to annoy a woman. We were fired upon from this house. The man who did it has had no opportunity to escape, and I'm sure that he's still concealed within these walls."

"Seek and ye shall—not find," she half quoted.

"I must search the house."

"Proceed."

"First question her," the sergeant whispered in the young lieutenant's ear.

Dick nodded.

"Pardon me, madame," he said, "but I must obtain information from you. This is war, you know."

"I have had many rude reminders that it is so."

"Where is your husband?"

She pointed upward.

"Forgive me," said Dick impulsively. "I did not intend to recall a grief."

"Don't worry. You and your comrades will never intrude upon him there."

"Perhaps you have sons here in this house?"

"I have three, but they are not here."

"Where are they?"

"One fell with Jackson at Chancellorsville. It was a glorious death, but he is not dead to me. I shall always see him, as he was when he went away, a tall, strong man with brown hair and blue eyes. Another fell in Pickett's charge at Gettysburg. They told me that his body lay across one of the Union guns on Cemetery Hill. That, too, was a glorious death, and like his brother he shall live for me as long as I live. The third is alive and with Lee."

She had stopped knitting, but now she resumed it, and, during another embarrassed pause, the click, click of the needles was the only sound heard in the room.

"I regret it, madame," resumed Dick, "but we must search the house thoroughly."

"Proceed," she said again in that tone of finality.

"Take the men and look carefully through every room," said Dick to the sergeant. "I will remain here."

Whitley and the troopers withdrew quietly. When the last of them had disappeared he walked to one of the windows and looked out. He saw his mounted men beyond the rose garden on guard, and he knew that they were as vigilant on the other sides of the house. The sharpshooter could not escape, and he was firmly resolved not to go without him. Yet his conscience hurt him. It was hard, too, to wait there, while the woman said not a word, but knitted on as placidly as if he did not exist.

"Madame," he said at last, "I pray that you do not regard this as an intrusion. The uses of war are hard. We must search. No one can regret it more than I do, in particular since I am really a Southerner myself, a Kentuckian."

"A traitor then as well as an enemy."

Dick flushed deeply, and again there was angry blood in his veins, but he restrained his temper.

"You must at least allow to a man the liberty of choice," he said.

"Provided he has the intelligence and honesty to choose right."

Dick flushed again and bit his lip. And yet he felt that a woman who had lost two sons before Northern bullets might well be unforgiving. There was nothing more for him to say, and while he turned back to the window the knitting needles resumed their click, click.

He waited a full ten minutes and he knew that the sergeant and his men were searching the house thoroughly. Nothing could escape the notice of Whitley, and he would surely find the sharpshooter. Then he heard their footsteps on a stairway and in another minute they entered the great room. The face of the sergeant clearly showed disappointment.

"There's nobody in the house," he said, "or, if he is he's so cleverly hidden, that we haven't been able to find him—that is so far. Perhaps Madame here can tell us something."

"I know nothing," she said, "but if I knew anything I would not tell it to you."

The sergeant smiled sourly, but Dick said:

"We must look again. The man could not have escaped with the guard that we've set around the house."

The sergeant and his men made another search. They penetrated every place in which a human being could possibly hide. They thrust their rifle barrels up the chimneys, and they turned down the bed covers, but again they found nothing. Dick meanwhile remained as before in the large room, covertly watching the woman, lest she give a signal to the rifleman who must be somewhere.

All the while the perfume of the roses was growing stronger and more penetrating, a light wind that had sprung up bringing it through the open window. It thrilled Dick in some singular manner, and the strangeness of the scene heightened its effect. It was like standing in a room in a dim old castle to which he had been brought as a prisoner, while the terrible old woman was his jailer. Then the click of the knitting needles brought him back to the present and reality, but reality itself, despite the sunshine and the perfume of the roses, was heavy and oppressive.

Dick apparently was looking from the window at the garden, brilliant with flowers, but in fact he was closely watching the woman out of the corner of his eye. He had learned to read people by their own eyes, and he had seen how hers burned when she looked at them. Strength of will and intent lie in the human eye. Unless it is purposely veiled it tells the mind and power that are in the brain back of it.

A fear of her crept slowly over him. Perhaps the fear came because, obviously, she had no fear at all of him, or of Whitley or of the soldiers. After their short dialogue she had returned to her old immobility. Neither her body nor her head moved, only her hands, and the motion was wholly from the wrists. She was one of the three Fates, knitting steadily and knitting up the destiny of men.

He shook himself. His was a sound and healthy mind, and he would allow no taint of morbidity to enter it. He knew that there was nothing supernatural in the world, but he did believe that this woman with the gray hair, the burning eyes and the sharp chin, looking as if it had been cut from a

piece of steel, was the possessor of uncanny wisdom. Beyond a doubt she knew where the marksman was hidden, and, unless he watched her ceaselessly, she would give him a signal of some kind.

Perhaps he was hidden in the garden among the rose bushes, and he would see her hand, if it was raised ever so slightly. Maybe that was why the window was open, because the clearest glass even could obscure a signal meant to be faint, unnoticed by all except the one for whom it was intended. He would have that garden searched thoroughly when the sergeant returned, and his heart beat with a throb of relief when he heard the stalwart Whitley's footstep once more at the door.

"We have found nothing, sir," said the sergeant. "We've explored every place big enough to hide a cat."

"Search the garden out there," said Dick. "Look behind every vine and bush."

"You will at least spare my roses," said the woman.

"They shall not be harmed," replied the lieutenant, "but my men must see what, if anything, is in the garden."

She said no more. She had not even raised her head when she spoke, and the sergeant and his men went into the garden. They looked everywhere but they damaged nothing. They did not even break off a single flower for themselves. Dick had felt confident that after the failure to find the sharpshooter in the house he would be discovered there, but his net brought in no fish.

He glanced at the sergeant, who happened to glance at him at the same time. Each read the look in the eyes of the other. Each said that they had failed, that they were wasting time, that there was nothing to be gained by hunting longer for a single enemy, that it was time to ride on, as flankers on the right of the main column.

"Madame," said Dick politely, "we leave you now. I repeat my regret at being compelled to search your house in this manner. My duty required it, although we have found nobody."

"You found nobody because nobody is here."

"Evidently it is so. Good-by. We wish you well."

"Good-by. I hope that all of you will be shot by our brave troops before night!"

The wish was uttered with the most extraordinary energy and fierceness. For the first time she had raised her level tone, and the lifted eyes that looked into Dick's were blazing with hate. He uttered an exclamation and stepped back. Then he recovered himself and said politely:

"Madame, I do not wish any such ill to you or yours."

But she had resumed her knitting, and Dick, without another word, walked out of the house, followed by the sergeant and his men.

"I did not know a woman could be so vindictive," he said.

"Our army has killed two of her sons," said the sergeant. "To her we, like all the rest of our troops, are the men who killed them."

"Perhaps that is so," said Dick thoughtfully, as he remounted.

They rode beside the walk and out at the open gate. Dick carried a silver whistle, upon which he blew a signal for the rest of his men to join them, and then he and the sergeant went slowly up the road. He was deeply chagrined at the escape of the rifleman, and the curse of the woman lay heavily upon him.

"I don't see how it was done," he said.

"Nor I," said the sergeant, shaking his head.

There was a sharp report, the undoubted whip-like crack of a rifle, and a man just behind, uttering a cry, held up a bleeding arm. Dick had a lightning conviction that the bullet was intended for himself. It was certain also that the shot had come from the house.

"Back with me, sergeant!" he exclaimed. "We'll get that fellow yet!"

They galloped back, sprang from their horses, and rushed in, followed by the original little troop that had entered, Dick shouting a direction to the others to remain outside. The fierce little old woman was sitting as before by the table, knitting, and she had never appeared more the great lady.

"Once was enough," she said, shooting him a glance of bitter contempt.

"But twice may succeed," Dick said. "Sergeant, take the men and go through all the house again. Our friend with the rifle may not have had time to get back into his hidden lair. I will remain here."

The sergeant and his men went out and he heard their boots on the stairway and in the other rooms. The window near him was still open and the perfume of the roses came in again, strangely thrilling, overpowering. But something had awakened in Dick. The sixth, and even the germ of a seventh sense, which may have been instinct, were up and alive. He did not look again at the rose garden, nor did he listen any longer to the footsteps of his men.

He had concentrated all his faculties, the known, and the unknown, which may have been lying dormant in him, upon a single object. He heard only the click of the knitting needles, and he saw only the small, strong hands moving swiftly back and forth. They were very white, and they were firm like those of a young woman. There were none of the heavy blue veins across the back that betoken age.

The hands fascinated him. He stared at them, fairly pouring his gaze upon them. They were beautiful, as the hands of a great lady should be kept, and it was all the more wonderful then that the right should have across the back of it a faint gray smudge, so tiny that only an eye like his, and a concentrated gaze like his, could have seen it.

He took four swift steps forward, seized the white hand in his and held it up.

"Madame," he said, and now his tone was as fierce as hers had ever been, "where is the rifle?"

She made no attempt to release her hand, nor did she move at all, save to lift her head. Then her eyes, hard, defiant and ruthless, looked into his. But his look did not flinch from hers. He knew, and, knowing, he meant to act.

"Madame," he repeated, "where is the rifle? It is useless for you to deny."

"Have I denied?"

"No, but where is the rifle?"

He was wholly unconscious of it, but his surprise and excitement were so great that his hand closed upon hers in a strong muscular contraction. Thrills of pain shot through her body, but she did not move.

"The rifle! The rifle!" repeated Dick.

"Loose my hand, and I will give it to you."

His hand fell away and she walked to the end of the room where a rug, too long, lay in a fold against the wall. She turned back the fold and took from its hiding place a slender-barreled cap-and-ball rifle. Without a word she handed it to Dick and he passed his hand over the muzzle, which was still warm.

He looked at her, but she gave back his gaze unflinching.

"I could not believe it, were it not so," he said.

"But it is so. The bullets were not aimed well enough." Dick felt an emotion that he did not wholly understand.

"Madame," he said, "I shall take the rifle, and again say good-by. As before, I wish you well."

She resumed her seat in the chair and took up the knitting. But she did not repeat her wish that Dick and all his men be shot before night. He went out in silence, and gently closed the door behind him. In the hall he met Sergeant Whitley and said:

"We needn't look any farther. I know now that the man has gone and we shall not be fired upon again from this house."

The sergeant glanced at the rifle Dick carried and made no comment. But when they were riding away, he said:

"And so that was it?"

"Yes, that was it."

CHAPTER III OVER THE HILLS

Dick and his little troop rode on through the silent country, and they were so watchful and thorough that they protected fully the right flank of the marching column. One or two shots were fired, but the reports came from such distant points that he knew the bullets had fallen short.

But while he beat up the forests and fields for sharpshooters he was very thoughtful. He had a mind that looked far ahead, even in youth, and the incident at the house weighed upon him. He foresaw the coming triumph of the North and of the Union, a triumph won after many great disasters, but he remembered what an old man at a blacksmith shop in Tennessee had told him and his comrades before the Battle of Stone River. Whatever happened, however badly the South might be defeated, the Southern soil would still be held by Southern people, and their bitterness would be intense for many a year to come. The victor forgives easily, the vanquished cannot forget. His imagination was active and vivid, often attaining truths that logic and reason do not reach, and he could understand what had happened at the house, where the ordinary mind would have been left wondering.

It is likely also that the sergeant had a perception of it, though not as sharp and clear as Dick's.

"When the war is over and the soldiers all go back, that is them that's livin'," he said, "it won't be them that fought that'll keep the grudge. It's the women who've lost their own that'll hate longest."

"I think what you say is true, Whitley," said Dick, "but let's not talk about it any more. It hurts."

"Me too," said the sergeant. "But don't you like this country that we're ridin' through, Mr. Mason?"

"Yes, it's fine, but most of it has been cropped too hard. I remember reading somewhere that George Washington himself said, away back in the last century, that slave labor, so careless and reckless, was ruining the soil of Virginia."

"Likely that's true, sir, but it won't have much chance to keep on ruinin' it. Wouldn't you say, sir, that was a Johnny on his horse up there?"

"I can soon tell you," said Dick, unslinging his glasses.

On their right was a hill towering above the rest. The slopes were wooded densely, but the crest was quite bare. Upon it sat a solitary figure on horseback, evidently watching the marching column.

Dick put his glasses to his eyes. The hill and the lone sentinel enlarged suddenly and came nearer. The pulses in his temples beat hard. Although he could not see the watcher's face clearly, because he too was using glasses, he knew him instantly. He would have known that heroic figure and the set of the shoulders and head anywhere. He felt astonishment at first, but it passed quickly. It was likely that they should meet again some time or other, since the field of battle had narrowed so much.

Sergeant Whitley, who invariably saw everything, had seen Dick's slight start.

"Someone you know, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, sergeant. It's my cousin, Harry Kenton. You've heard me talk of him often. A finer and braver and stronger fellow never lived. He's using glasses too and I've no doubt he's recognized me."

Dick suddenly waved his glasses aloft, and Harry Kenton replied in like manner.

"He sees and knows me!" cried Dick.

But the sergeant was very sober. He foresaw that these youths, bound by such ties of blood and affection, might come into battle against each other. The same thought was in Dick's mind, despite his pleasure at the distant view of Harry.

"We exchanged shots in the Manassas campaign," said Dick. "We were sheltered and we didn't know each other until several bullets had passed."

"Three more horsemen have joined him," said the sergeant.

"Those are his friends," said Dick, who had put the glasses back to his eyes. "Look how they stand out against the sun!"

The four horsemen in a row, at equal distances from one another, were enlarged against a brilliant background of red and gold. Their attitude was impressive, as they sat there, unmoving, like statues cut in stone. They were in truth Harry and Dalton, St. Clair and Happy Tom, and farther on the Invincibles were marching, the two colonels at their head, to the Valley of Virginia to reinforce Early, and to make headway, if possible, against Sheridan.

Harry was deeply moved. Kinship and the long comradeship of youth count for much. Perhaps for more in the South than anywhere else. Stirred by a sudden emotion he took off his cap and waved it as a signal of hail and farewell. The four removed their own caps and waved them also. Then they turned their horses in unison, rode over the hill and were gone from Dick's sight.

Sergeant Whitley was not educated, but his experience was vast, he knew men and he had the gift of sympathy. He understood Dick's feelings.

"All civil wars are cruel," he said. "The killing of one's own people is worst of all."

But as they went on, Dick's melancholy fell from him, and he had only pleasant recollections of the meeting. Besides, the continued movement and freedom were inspiring in the highest degree to youth. Although it was August the day was cool, and the blue sky of Virginia was never brighter. A refreshing breeze blew from dim, blue mountains that they could see far ahead, and, as they entered a wide stretch of open country where ambush was impossible, the trumpets called in the flankers.

"We shall make the lower mountains about midnight, and we'd better camp then until dawn. Don't you think so, gentlemen?" asked Colonel Hertford of his associate colonels, Winchester and Bedford.

"The plan seems sound to me," replied Bedford, the Pennsylvanian. "Of course, we want to reach Sheridan as soon as possible, but if we push the horses too hard we'll break them down."

Dick had dropped back with Warner and Pennington, but he heard the colonels talking.

"We all saw General Sheridan at the great battles in the West," he said. "I particularly remember how he planted himself and the batteries at Perryville and saved us from defeat, but he seems to be looming up so much more now in the East."

"He's become the Stuart of our side," said Warner. "I've heard some of the people at Washington don't believe in him, but he has General Grant's confidence and that's enough for me. Not that I put military authority over civil rule, but war has to be fought by soldiers. I look for lively times in the Valley of Virginia."

"Anyway, the Lord has delivered me from the trenches at Petersburg," said Pennington. "Think of me, used to roaming over a thousand miles of plains, shut up between mud walls only four or five feet apart."

"I believe that, with Sheridan, you're going to have all the roaming you want," said Dick.

They passed silent farm houses, but took nothing from them. Ample provision was carried on extra horses or their own, and the three colonels were anxious not to inflame the country by useless seizures. Twilight came, and the low mountains sank away in the dusk. But they had already reached a higher region where nearly all the hills were covered with forest, and Colonel Hertford once more spread out the flankers, Dick and the sergeant, as before, taking the right with their little troop.

The night was fortunately clear, almost as light as day, with a burnished moon and brilliant stars, and they did not greatly fear ambush. Dick shrewdly reckoned that Early would need all his men in the valley, and, after the first day at sharpshooting, they would withdraw to meet greater demands.

Nevertheless he took a rather wide circuit and came into a lonely portion of the hills, where the forest was unbroken, save for the narrow path on which they rode. The sergeant dismounted once and examined the ground.

"Nothing has passed here," he said, "and the woods and thickets are so dense that men can't ride through 'em."

The path admitted of only two abreast, and the forest was so heavy that it shut out most of the moonlight. But they rode on confidently, Dick and the sergeant leading. If it had not been for the size of the trees, Dick would have thought that he was back in the Wilderness. They heard now and then the wings of night birds among the leaves, and occasionally some small animal would scuttle across the path. They forded a narrow but deep stream, its waters black from decayed vegetation, and continued to push on briskly through the unbroken forest, until the sergeant said in a low voice to Dick:

"I think I hear something ahead of us."

They pulled back on the reins so suddenly that those behind almost rode into them. Then they sat there, a solid, compact little group, while Dick and the sergeant listened intently.

"It's hoofbeats," said Dick, "very faint, because they are far away."

"I think you are right, sir," said the sergeant.

"But they're coming this way."

"Yes, and at a steady pace. No stops and no hesitation."

"Which shows that it's somebody who doesn't fear any harm."

"The beats are pretty solid. A heavy man on a heavy horse."

"About three hundred yards away, don't you think?"

"About that, sir."

"Maybe a farmer going home?"

"Maybe, but I don't think so, sir."

"At any rate, we'll soon see, because our unknown comes on without a break. There he is now!"

They had a comparatively clear view straight ahead, and the figure of a man and a horse emerged from the shadows.

The sergeant raised his rifle, but, as the man came on without fear, he dropped it again. Some strange effect of the moonlight exaggerated the rider and his horse, making both look gigantic, blending them together in such manner that a tremendous centaur seemed to be riding them down. In an instant or two the general effect vanished and as a clear beam fell upon the man's face Dick uttered an exclamation of relief.

"Shepard!" he said, and he felt then that he should have known before that it was Shepard who was coming. He, alone of all men, seemed to have the gift of omniscience and omnipresence. The spy drew his horse to a halt directly in front of him and saluted:

"Lieutenant Mason, sir?" he said.

"I'm glad it's you, Mr. Shepard," said Dick. "I think that in this wood we'll need the hundred eyes that once belonged to Argus, but which he has passed on to you."

"Thank you, sir," said Shepard.

But the man at whom he looked most was the sergeant, and the sergeant looked most at him. One was a sergeant and the other was a spy, but each recognized in the other a king among men. Eyes swept over powerful chests and shoulders and open, bold countenances, and signified approval. They had met before, but they were more than well met here in the loneliness and the dark, amid dangers, where skill and courage, and not rank, counted. Then they nodded without speaking, as an Indian chief would to an Indian chief, his equal.

"You were coming to meet us, Mr. Shepard?" said Dick.

"I expected to find you on this path."

"And you have something to tell?"

"A small Confederate force is in the mountains, awaiting Colonel Hertford. It is inferior to his in numbers, but it knows the country thoroughly and has the sympathy of all the inhabitants, who bring to it news of everything."

"Do you know these Confederate troops?"

"Yes, sir. Their corps is a regiment called in General Lee's army the Invincibles, but it includes two other skeleton regiments. Colonel Talbot who leads the Invincibles is the commander of them all. He has, I should say, slightly less than a thousand men."

"You know a good deal about this regiment called the Invincibles, do you not, Mr. Shepard?"

"I do, sir. Its colonel, Talbot, and its lieutenant-colonel, St. Hilaire, are as brave men as any that ever lived, and the regiment has an extraordinary reputation in the Southern army for courage. Two of General Lee's young staff officers are also with them now."

"Who are they?"

"Lieutenant Harry Kenton and Lieutenant George Dalton."

Dick with his troop rode at once to Colonel Hertford and reported.

Colonel Hertford listened and then glanced at Dick.

"Kenton is your cousin, I believe," he said.

"Yes, sir," replied Dick. "He has been in the East all the time. Once in the second Manassas campaign we came face to face and fired at each other, although we did not know who was who then."

"And now here you are in opposing forces again. With the war converging as it is, it was more than likely that you should confront each other once more."

"But I don't expect to be shooting at Harry, and I don't think he'll be shooting at me."

"Will you ride into the woods again on the right, Mr. Shepard?" said Colonel Hertford. "Perhaps you may get another view of this Confederate force. Dick, you go with him. Warner, you and Pennington come with me."

Dick and Shepard entered the woods side by side, and the youth who had a tendency toward self-analysis found that his liking and respect for the spy increased. The general profession of a spy might be disliked, but in Shepard it inspired no repulsion, rather it increased his heroic aspect, and Dick found himself relying upon him also. He felt intuitively that when he rode into the forest with Shepard he rode into no danger, or if by any chance he did ride into danger, they would, under the guidance of the spy, ride safely out of it again.

Shepard turned his horse toward the deeper forest, which lay on the left, and very soon they were out of sight of the main column, although the sound of hoofs and of arms, clinking against one another, still came faintly to them. Yet peace, the peace for which Dick longed so ardently, seemed to dwell there in the woods. The summer was well advanced and as the light winds blew, the leaves, already beginning to dry, rustled against one another. The sound was pleasant and soothing. He and Harry Kenton and other lads of their age had often heard it on autumn nights, when they roamed through the forests around Pendleton in search of the raccoon and the opossum. It all came back to him with astonishing vividness and force.

He was boy and man in one. But he could scarcely realize the three years and more of war that had made him a man. In one way it seemed a century, and in another it seemed but yesterday. The water rose in his eyes at the knowledge that this same cousin who was like a brother to him, one with whom he had hunted, fished, played and swum, was there in the woods less than a mile away, and that he might be in battle with him again before morning.

"You were thinking of your cousin, Mr. Kenton," said Shepard suddenly.

"Yes, but how did you know?" asked Dick in surprise.

"Because your face suddenly became melancholy—the moonlight is good, enabling me to read your look—and sadness is not your natural expression. You recall that your cousin, of whom you think so much, is at hand with your enemies, and the rest is an easy matter of putting two and two together."

"You're right in all you say, Mr. Shepard, but I wish Harry wasn't there."

Shepard was silent and then Dick added passionately:

"Why doesn't the South give up? She's worn down by attrition. She's blockaded hard and fast! When she loses troops in battle she can't find new men to take their places! She's short in food,

ammunition, medicines, everything! The whole Confederacy can't be anything but a shell now! Why don't they quit!"

"Pride, and a lingering hope that the unexpected will happen. Yes, we've won the war, Mr. Mason, but it's yet far from finished. Many a good man will fall in this campaign ahead of us in the valley, and in other campaigns too, but, as I see it, the general result is already decided. Nothing can change it. Look between these trees, and you can see the Southern force now."

Dick from his horse gazed into a valley down which ran a good turnpike, looking white in the moonlight. Upon this road rode the Southern force in close ranks, but too far away, for any sound of their hoof beats to come to the watchers. The moon which was uncommonly bright now colored them all with silver, and Dick, with his imaginative mind, easily turned them into a train of the knights of old, clad in glittering mail. They created such a sense of illusion and distance, time as well as space, that the peace of the moment was not disturbed. It was a spectacle out of the past, rather than present war.

"You are familiar with the country, of course," said Dick.

"Yes," replied Shepard. "Our road, as you know, is now running parallel with that on which the Southern force is traveling, with a broad ridge between. But several miles farther on the ridge becomes narrower and the roads merge. We're sure to have a fight there. Like you, I'm sorry your cousin Harry Kenton is with them."

"It seems that you and he know a good deal of each other."

"Yes, circumstances have brought us into opposition again and again from the beginning of the war, but the same circumstances have made me know more about him than he does about me. Yet I mean that we shall be friends when peace comes, and I don't think he'll oppose my wish."

"He won't. Harry has a generous and noble nature. But he wouldn't stand being patronized, merely because he happened to be on the beaten side."

"I shouldn't think of trying to do such a thing. Now, we've seen enough, and I think we'd better go back to the colonels, with our news."

They rode through the woods again, and, for most of the distance, there was no sound from the marching troops. The wonderful feeling of peace returned. The sky was as blue and soft as velvet. The great stars glittered and danced, and the wind among the rustling leaves was like the soft singing of a violin. At one point they crossed a little brook which ran so swiftly down among the trees that it was a foam of water. They dismounted, drank hastily, and then let the horses take their fill.

"I like these hills and forests and their clear waters," said Dick, "and judging by the appearance it must be a fine country to which we're coming."

"It is. It's something like your Kentucky Blue Grass, although it's smaller and it's hemmed in by sharper and bolder mountains. But I should say that the Shenandoah Valley is close to a hundred and twenty miles long, and from twenty-five to forty miles wide, not including its spur, the Luray Valley, west of the Massanuttons."

"As large as one of the German Principalities."

"And as fine as any of them."

"It's where Stonewall Jackson made that first and famous campaign of his."

"And it's lucky for us that we don't have to face him there now. Early is a good general, they say, but he's no Stonewall Jackson."

"And we're to be led by Sheridan. I think he saved us at Perryville in Kentucky, but they say he's become a great cavalry commander. Do you know him, Mr. Shepard?"

"Well. A young man, and a little man. Why, you'd overtop him more than half a head, Mr. Mason, but he has a great soul for battle. He's the kind that will strike and strike, and keep on striking, and that's the kind we need now."

"Here are our own men just ahead. I see the three colonels riding together."

They went forward swiftly and told what they had seen, Shepard also describing the nature of the ground ahead, and the manner in which the two roads converged.

"Which column do you think will reach the junction first?" asked Colonel Hertford.

"They'll come to it about the same time," replied Shepard.

"And so a clash is unavoidable. It was not our purpose to fight before we reached General Sheridan, but since the enemy wants it, it must be that way."

Orders were issued for the column to advance as quietly as possible, while skirmishers were thrown out to prevent any ambush. Shepard rode again into the forest but Dick remained with Warner and Pennington. Warner as usual was as cool as ice, and spoke in the precise, scholarly way that he liked.

"We march parallel with the enemy," he said, "and yet we're bound to meet him and fight. It's a beautiful mathematical demonstration. The roads are not parallel in an exact sense but converge to a point. Hence, it is not our wish, but the convergence of these roads that brings us together in conflict. So we see that the greatest issues of our life are determined by mathematics. It's a splendid and romantic study. I wish you fellows would pay more attention to it."

"Mathematics beautiful and romantic!" exclaimed Pennington. "Why, George, you're out of your head! There's nothing in the world I hate more than the sight of an algebra!"

"The trouble is with you and not with the algebra. You were alluding in a depreciatory manner to my head but it's your own head that fails. When I said algebra was a beautiful and romantic study I used the adjectives purposely. Out of thousands of adjectives in the dictionary I selected those two to fit the case. What could be more delightful than an abstruse problem in algebra? You never know along what charming paths of the mind it will lead you. Moreover there is over it a veil of mystery. You can't surmise what delightful secrets it will reveal later on. What will the end be? What a powerful appeal such a question will always make to a highly intelligent and imaginative mind like mine! No poetry! No beauty! Why every algebraic problem from the very nature of its being is surcharged with it! It's like the mystery of life itself, only in this case we solve the mystery! And if I may change the metaphor, an algebraic formula is like a magnificent diamond, cutting its way through the thick and opaque glass, which represents the unknown! I long for the end of the war for many reasons, but chief among them is the fact that I may return to the romantic and illimitable fields of the mathematical problem!"

"I didn't know anyone could ever become dithyrambic about algebra," said Dick.

"What's dithyrambic?" asked Pennington.

"Spouting, Frank. But George, as we know, is a queer fellow. They grow 'em in Vermont, where they love steep mountains, deep ravines and hard mathematics."

They had been speaking in low tones, but now they ceased entirely. Shepard had come back from the forest, reporting that the junction of the roads was near, and the Confederate force was marching toward it at the utmost speed.

The hostile columns might be in conflict in a half hour now, and the men prepared themselves. Innumerable battles and skirmishes could never keep their hearts from beating harder when it became evident that they were to go under fire once more. After the few orders necessary, there was no sound save that of the march itself. Meanwhile the moon and stars were doing full duty, and the night remained as bright as ever.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIGHT AT THE CROSSWAYS

Colonel Hertford was near the head of the Union column, while the three youths rode a little farther back with Colonel Winchester, the regiment of Colonel Bedford bringing up the rear. Just behind Dick was Sergeant Whitley, mounted upon a powerful bay horse. The sergeant had shown himself such a woodsman and scout, and he was so valuable in these capacities that Colonel Winchester had practically made him an aide, and always kept him near for orders.

Dick noticed now that the sergeant leaned a little forward in his saddle and was using his eyes and ears with all the concentration of the great plainsman that he was. In that attitude he was a formidable figure, and, though he lacked the spy's subtlety and education, he seemed to have much in common with Shepard.

As for Dick himself his nerves had not been so much on edge since he went into his first battle, nor had his heart beat so hard, and he knew it was because Harry Kenton and those comrades of his would be at the convergence of the roads, and they would meet, not in the confused conflict of a great battle, when a face might appear and disappear the next second, but man to man with relatively small numbers. The moon was dimmed a little by fleecy clouds, but the silvery color, instead of vanishing was merely softened, and when Dick looked back at the Union column it, like the troop of the South, had the quality of a ghostly train. But the clouds floated away and then the light gleamed on the barrels of the short carbines that the horsemen carried. From a point on the other side of the forest came the softened notes of a trumpet and the great pulse in Dick's throat leaped. Only a few minutes more and they would be at the meeting of the ways.

Colonel Hertford sent a half dozen mounted skirmishers into the road, but the column moved forward at its even pace, still silvered in the moonlight, but ready for battle, wounds and death. Sergeant Whitley whispered to Dick:

"Other men than our own are moving in the forest. I can hear the tread of horses' hoofs on the dry leaves and twigs at the far edge. Our scouts should meet them in a moment or two."

It came as the sergeant had predicted, and Dick saw a tiny flash of fire, not much larger than a pink dot in the woods, heard the sharp report of a rifle and then the crack of another rifle in reply. Silence followed for an instant, but it was evident that the hostile forces were in touch and then in another moment or two the horses of the scouts crashed in the brush, as they rode back to the main column. They had seen enough.

Colonel Hertford gave the order and the entire Union force now advanced at a gallop. Through the woods, narrowing so rapidly, came the swift beat of hoofs on the other side, and it was apparent that coincidence would bring the two forces to the point of convergence at the same time. The moonlight seemed to Dick to grow so bright and intense that it had almost the quality of sunlight. Nature, in the absence of day, was making the field of battle as light as possible.

"What's the lay of the land at the point of meeting?" he whispered hurriedly to Shepard who had ridden up by his side.

"Almost level," came the quick response.

A few more rapid hoofbeats and the shrouding woods between disappeared. One column saw another column, both clad in the moonlight, in Dick's fancy, all in silver mail. The two forces wheeled and faced each other across the open space, their horses staring with red eyes, and the men looking intently at their opponents. Both were oppressed for an instant or two by a deep and singular silence.

Dick's eyes swept fearfully along the gray column of the South, and he saw the one whom he did not wish to see—at least not there—Harry Kenton himself, sitting on his bay horse with his friends

around him. The two elderly men must be Colonel Leonidas Talbot and Lieutenant-Colonel Hector St. Hilaire, and the three youths beside Harry were surely St. Clair, Langdon and Dalton.

As he looked, Colonel Leonidas Talbot raised his sword, and at the same time came the sharp command of Colonel Hertford. Rifles and carbines flashed from either side across the open space, and two streams of bullets crossed. In an instant the silver of the moonlight was hidden by clouds of smoke through which flashed the fire from hundreds of rifles and carbines. All around Dick's ears was the hissing sound of bullets, like the alarm from serpents.

The fire at close range was so deadly to both sides that holes were smashed in the mounted ranks. The shrill screams of wounded horses, far more terrible than the cries of wounded men, struck like knife points on the drums of Dick's ears. He saw Shepard's horse go down, killed instantly by a heavy bullet, but the spy himself leaped clear, and then Dick lost him in the smoke. A bullet grazed his own wrist and he glanced curiously at the thin trickle of blood that came from it. Yet, forgetting it the next instant, he waved his saber above his head, and began to shout to the men.

Rifles and pistols emptied, the Southern horsemen were preparing to charge. The lifting smoke disclosed a long line of tossing manes and flashing steel. At either end of the line a shrill trumpet was sounding the charge, and the Northern bugles were responding with the same command. The two forces were about to meet in that most terrible of all combats, a cavalry charge by either side, when enemies looked into the eyes of one another, and strong hands swung aloft the naked steel, glittering in the moonlight.

"Bend low in the saddle," exclaimed the sergeant, "and then you'll miss many a stroke!"

Dick obeyed promptly and their whole line swept forward over the grass to meet the men in gray who were coming so swiftly against them. He saw a thousand sabers uplifted, making a stream of light, and then the two forces crashed together. It seemed to him that it was the impact of one solid body upon another as solid, and then so much blood rushed to his head that he could not see clearly. He was conscious only of a mighty crash, of falling bodies, sweeping sabers, that terrible neigh again of wounded horses, of sun-tanned faces, and of fierce eyes staring into his own, and then, as the red mist thinned a little, he became conscious that someone just before him was slashing at him with a long, keen blade. He bent yet lower, and the sword passed over him, but as he rose a little he cut back. His edge touched only the air, but he uttered a gasp of horror as he saw Harry Kenton directly before him, and knew that they had been striking at each other. He saw, too, the appalled look in Harry's eyes, who at the same time had recognized his opponent, and then, in the turmoil of battle, other horsemen drove in between.

That shiver of horror swept over Dick once more, and then came relief. The charging horsemen had separated them in time, and he did not think it likely that the chances of battle would bring Harry and him face to face more than once. Then the red blur enclosed everything and he was warding off the saber strokes of another man. The air was yet filled with the noise of shouting men, and neighing horses, of heavy falls and the ring of steel on steel. Neither gave way and neither could advance. The three Union colonels rode up and down their lines encouraging their men, and the valiant Talbot and St. Hilaire were never more valiant than on that night.

A combat with sabers cannot last long, and cavalry charges are soon finished. North and South had met in the center of the open space, and suddenly the two, because all their force was spent, fell back from that deadly line, which was marked by a long row of fallen horses and men. They reloaded their rifles and carbines and began to fire at one another, but it was at long range, and little damage was done. They fell back a bit farther, the firing stopped entirely, and they looked at one another.

It was perhaps the effect of the night, with its misty silver coloring, and perhaps their long experience of war, giving them an intuitive knowledge, that made these foes know nothing was to be gained by further combat. They were so well balanced in strength and courage that they might destroy one another, but no one could march away from the field victorious. Perhaps, too, it was a feeling that the God of Battles had already issued his decree in regard to this war, and that as many

lives as possible should now be spared. But whatever it was, the finger fell away from the trigger, the saber was returned to the scabbard, and they sat on their horses, staring at one another.

Dick took his glasses from his shoulder and began to scan the hostile line. His heart leaped when he beheld Harry in the saddle, apparently unharmed, and near him three youths, one with a red bandage about his shoulder. Then he saw the two colonels, both erect men with long, gray hair, on their horses near the center of the line, and talking together. One gestured two or three times as he spoke, and he moved his arm rather stiffly.

The three Union colonels were in a little group not far from Dick, and they also were talking with one another. Dick wondered what they would do, but he was saved from long wonderment by the call of a trumpet from the Southern force, and the appearance of a horseman not older than himself riding forward and bearing a white flag.

"They want a truce," said Colonel Hertford. "Go and meet them, Mason."

Dick, willing enough, turned his horse toward the young man who, heavily tanned, was handsome, well-built and dressed with scrupulous care in a fine gray uniform.

"My name is St. Clair," he said, "and I'm an officer on the staff of Colonel Leonidas Talbot, who commands the force behind me."

"I think we've met once before," said Dick. "My name is Mason, Richard Mason, and I am with Colonel Arthur Winchester, who commands one of the regiments that has just been fighting you."

"It's so! Upon my life it's so, and you're the same Dick Mason that's the cousin of our Harry Kenton, the fellow he's always talking about! He's on General Lee's staff, but he's been detached for temporary duty with us. He's over there all right. But I've come to tell you that Colonel Talbot, who commands us, offers a flag of truce to bury the dead. He sees that neither side can win, that to continue the battle would only involve us in mutual destruction. He wishes, too, that I convey to your commander his congratulations upon his great skill and courage. I may add, myself, Mr. Mason, that Colonel Talbot knows a brave man when he sees him."

"I've no doubt the offer will be accepted. Will you wait a moment?"

"Certainly," replied St. Clair, giving his most elegant salute with his small sword.

Dick went back to the Union colonels, and they accepted at once. That long line of dead and wounded, and the mournful song of the wind through the trees, affected the colonels on both sides. More flags of truce were hoisted, and the officers in blue or gray rode forward to meet one another, and to talk together as men who bore no hate in their hearts for gallant enemies.

The troopers rapidly dug shallow graves with their bayonets in the soft soil, and the dead were laid away. The feeling of friendship and also of curiosity among these stern fighters grew. They were anxious to see and talk a little with men who had fought one another so hard more than three years. Nearly all of them had lost blood at one time or another, and the venom of hate had gone out with it.

Dick found Harry dismounted and standing with a group of officers, among whom were St. Clair and Langdon. The two cousins shook hands with the greatest warmth.

"Well, Dick," said Harry, "we didn't think to meet again in this way, did we?"

"No, but both of us at least have come out of it alive, and unwounded. I'm sorry to see that your friend there is hurt."

"It's nothing," said Langdon, whose left arm was in a hasty bandage. "A scratch only. I'll be able to use my arm as well as ever three days from now."

"Your force," said St. Clair, "was marching to reinforce General Sheridan in the Valley of Virginia. I'm not asking for information, which of course you wouldn't give. I'm merely stating the fact."

"And yours," said Dick, "was marching to reinforce General Early in the same valley. I, like you, am just making a statement."

"We've met, but you haven't been able to stop us."

"Nor have you been able to stop _us_."

"And so it's checkmate."

"Checkmate it is."

"Why don't you fellows give up and go home?" exclaimed Dick, moved by an irresistible impulse. "You know that your armies are wearing out, while ours are growing stronger!"

"We couldn't think of such a thing," replied St. Clair, in a tone of cool assurance. "My friend Langdon here, has taken an oath to sleep in the White House. We also intend to make a triumphal march through Philadelphia, and then down Broadway in New York. You would not have us break our oaths or change our purposes."

"It's true, Dick," said Harry, "we can't do either. We'd like to oblige you Yankees, but we must make those triumphal parades through Philadelphia and New York."

"I should have known that I couldn't reason with you Johnny Rebs," said Dick, smiling, "but I hope that none of you will get killed, and here and now I make you a promise."

"What is it, Dick?" asked Harry.

"When you suffer your final defeat, and all of you become my prisoners, I'll treat you well. I'll turn you loose in a Blue-grass pasture, and you can roam as you please within its limits."

"Thank you," said Happy Tom, "but I'm no Nebuchadnezzar. I can't live on grass. If I become a prisoner at any time I demand the very best of food, especially as you Yankees already have more than your share."

"There go the trumpets recalling us," said St. Clair. "The men have finished the gruesome task. I want you to know, Mr. Mason, that we bear you no animosity, and we're quite sure that you bear us none."

He extended his hand and Dick's met it in a warm grasp. Langdon also shook hands with him, and as his eyes twinkled he said:

"Don't fail to notice my haughty bearing when I march at the head of a triumphal troop down Broadway!"

"I promise," said Dick. Then he and Harry gave each other the final clasp. But with the pride of the young they strove not to show emotion.

"Take care of yourself, Dick, old man!" said Harry. "Don't get in the way of bullets and shell. Remember they're harder than you are."

"The same to you, Harry. It's not worth while to take any more risks than necessary."

Then, obeying the call of the trumpets, they mounted and rode to their own commands. There was something strange in this brief half hour of friendship, when they buried the dead together. Blue and gray formed again in long lines facing one another, but midway between was another long line of fresh earth, and it rose up suddenly, an impassable barrier to a charge by either force.

"We can't beat them and they can't beat us. That's been proved," said Colonel Hertford to Colonel Winchester and Colonel Bedford.

"So it has," said Colonel Winchester, "and I'd like to march from here. I don't care for any more fighting on this spot."

"Nor I. Hark, they've decided it for us!"

The Southern trumpet sounded another call, and the line of men in gray, turning away, began to march into the southwest. Colonel Hertford promptly gave an order, the Union trumpet sounded also, and the men in blue, curving also, rode toward the northwest.

Dick and his comrades were silent a long time. Their feelings were perhaps the same. To youth a year is a long time, and two years are almost a life time. Three years and more of it had made war to them a normal state. They had not thought much before of an end to the great struggle between North and South, and of what was to come after. Now they realized that peace, not war, was normal, and that it must return.

The moonlight faded and then the stars were dimmed, as the darkness that precedes the dawn came. The silvery veil that had been thrown over them vanished and the column became a ghostly

train riding in the dusk. But the road into which Shepard guided them led over a pleasant land of hills and clear streams. Although the scouts on their flanks kept vigilant watch, many of the men slept soundly in their saddles. Dick himself dozed awhile, and slept awhile, and, when he roused himself from his last nap, the dawn was breaking over the brown hills and the column was halting for food and a little rest.

It was August, the time of great heat in Virginia, but they were already building fires to cook the breakfast and make coffee, and most of the men had dismounted. Dick sprang down also and turned his horse loose to graze with the others. Then he joined Warner and Pennington and fell hungrily to work. When he thought of it afterward he could scarcely remember a time in the whole war when he was not hungry.

The sense of unreality disappeared with the brilliant dawn, though the night itself with the battle in the moonlight seemed to be almost a dream. Yet the combat had been fought, and he had met Harry Kenton and his friends. The empty saddles proved it.

"I see a great country opening out before us," said Warner. "I suppose it's this Valley of Virginia, of which we've all heard and seen so much, and in which once upon a time Stonewall Jackson thumped us so often."

"It's a branch of it," said Pennington, "but Stonewall Jackson is gone, God rest his soul—I say that from the heart, even if he was against us—and I've an idea that instead of getting thumped we're going to do the thumping. There's something about this man Sheridan that appeals to me. We've seen him in action with artillery, but now he's a cavalry commander. They say he rides fast and far and strikes hard. People are beginning to talk about Little Phil. Well, I approve of Little Phil."

"He'll be glad to hear of it," said Dick. "It will brace him up a lot."

"He may be lucky to get it," replied Pennington calmly. "There are many generals in this war, and two or three of them have been commander-in-chief, of whom I don't approve at all. I think you'll find, too, that history will have a habit of agreeing with me."

"But don't make predictions," said Dick. "There have been no genuine, dyed-in-the-wool prophets since those ancient Hebrews were gathered to their fathers, and that was a mighty long time ago."

"There you're wrong, Dick," said Warner, earnestly. "It's all a matter of mathematics, the scientific application of a romantic and imaginative science to facts. Get all your premises right, arrange them correctly, and the result follows as a matter of course."

The trumpet sounded boots and saddles, and cut him short. In a few more minutes they were all up and away, riding over the hills and across the dips toward the main sweep of the famous valley which played such a great part in the tactics and fighting of the Civil War. It had already been ravaged much by march and battle and siege, but its heavier fate was yet to come.

But Dick did not think much of what might happen as he rode with his comrades across the broken country and saw, rising before them, the dim blue line of the mountains that walled in the eastern side of the valley. The day was not so warm as usual, and among the higher hills a breeze was blowing, bringing currents of fresh, cool air that made the lungs expand and the pulses leap. The three youths felt almost as if they had been re-created, and Pennington became vocal.

"Woe is the day!" he said. "I lament what I have lost!"

"If what you have lost was worth keeping I lament with you," said Dick. "O, woe is the day!"

"O, woe is the day for me, too!" said Warner, "but why do we utter cries of woe, Frank?"

"Because of the narrow, little, muddy little, ugly little, mean little trench we've left behind us! O, woe is me that I've left such a trench, where one could sit in mud to the knees and touch the mud wall on either side of him, for this open, insecure world, where there is nothing but fresh air to breathe, nothing but water to drink, nothing but food to eat, and no world but blue skies, hills, valleys, forests, fields, rivers, creeks and brooks!"

"O, woe is me!" the three chanted together. "We sigh for our narrow trench, and its muddy bottom and muddy sides and foul air and lack of space, and for the shells bursting over our heads, and for the hostile riflemen ready to put a bullet through us at the first peep! Now, do we sigh for all those blessings we've left behind us?"

"Never a sigh!" said Dick.

"Not a tear from me," said Pennington.

"The top of the earth for me," said Warner.

Their high spirits spread to the whole column. So thoroughly inured were they to war that their losses of the night before were forgotten, and they lifted up their voices and sang. Youth and the open air would have their way and the three colonels did not object. They preferred men who sang to men who groaned.

"Do you know just where we're going, and where we expect to find this Little Phil of yours?" asked Warner.

"I've heard that we're to report to him at Halltown, a place south of the Potomac, and about four miles from Harper's Ferry," replied Dick.

"As that's a long distance, we'll have a long ride to reach it," said Warner, "and I'm glad of it. I'm enjoying this great trail, and I hope we won't meet again those fire-eating friends of yours, Dick, who gave us so much trouble last night."

"I hope so too," said Dick, "for their sake as well as ours. I don't like fighting with such close kin. They must be well along on the southwestern road now to join Early."

"There's no further danger of meeting them, at least before this campaign opens," said Warner. "Shepard has just come back from a long gallop and he reports that they are now at least twenty miles away, with the distance increasing all the time."

Dick felt great relief. He was softening wonderfully in these days, and while he had the most intense desire for the South to yield he had no wish for the South to suffer more. He felt that the republic had been saved and he was anxious for the war to be over soon. His heart swelled with pride at the way in which the Union states had stood fast, how they had suffered cruel defeats, but had come again, and yet again, how mistakes and disaster had been overcome by courage and tenacity.

"A Confederate dollar for your thoughts," said Warner.

"You can have 'em without the dollar," replied Dick. "I was thinking about the end of the war and after. What are all the soldiers going to do then?"

"Go straight back to peace," replied Warner promptly. "I know my own ambition. I've told you already that I intend to be president of Harvard University, and, barring death, I'm bound to succeed. I give myself twenty-five years for the task. If I choose my object now and bend every energy toward it for twenty-five years I'm sure to obtain it. It's a mathematical certainty."

"I'm going to be a great ranchman in Western Nebraska with my father," said Pennington. "He's under fifty yet, and he's as strong as a horse. The buffalo in Western Nebraska must go and then Pennington and Son will have fifty thousand fine cattle in their place. And you, Dick, have you already chosen the throne on which you're going to sit?"

"Yes, I've been thinking about it for some time. I've made up my mind to be an editor. After the war I'm going to the largest city in our state, get a place on a newspaper there and strive to be its head. Then I'll try to cement the reunion of North and South. That will be my greatest topic. We soldiers won't hate one another when the war is over, and maybe the fact that I've fought through it will give weight to my words."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said Warner. "When I'm president of Harvard I'll invite the great Kentucky editor, Richard Mason, to deliver the annual address to my young men. I like that idea of yours about making the Union firmer than it was before the war. Since the Northern States and the Southern States must dwell together the more peace and brotherly love we have the better it will be for all of us."

"When you give me that invitation, George, you'd better ask my cousin, Harry Kenton, at the same time, because it's almost a certainty that he will then be governor of Kentucky. His great grandfather, the famous Henry Ware, was the greatest governor the state ever had, and, as I know that Harry intends to study law and enter politics, he's bound to follow in his footsteps."

"Of course I'll ask him," said Warner in all earnestness, "and he shall speak too. You can settle it between you who speaks first. It will be an exceedingly effective scene, the two cousins, the great editor who fought on the Northern side and the great governor who fought on the Southern side, speaking from the same stage to the picked youth of New England. Pennington, the representative of the boundless West, shall be there too, and if the owner of fifty thousand fine cattle roaming far and wide wants to make an address he shall do so."

"I don't think I'd care to speak, George," said Pennington. "I'm not cut out for oratory, but I certainly accept right now your invitation to come. I'll sit on the stage with Dick and the Johnny Reb, his cousin Harry, and I'll smile and smile and applaud and applaud, and after it's all over I'll choose a few of your picked youth of New England, take 'em out west with me, teach 'em how to rope cattle, how to trail stray steers and how to take care of themselves in a blizzard. Oh, I'll make men of 'em, I will! Now, what is that on the high hill to the south?"

The three put their glasses to their eyes and saw a man on horseback waving a flag. The head of the horse was turned toward some hill farther south, and the man was evidently making signals to another patrol there.

"A Johnny," said Pennington. "I suppose they're sending the word on toward Early that we're passing."

"From hill to hill," said Dick. "A message can be sent a long way in that manner."

"I don't think it will interfere with us," said Warner. "They're merely telling about us. They don't intend to attack us. They haven't the men to spare."

"No, they won't attack, they know I'm here," said Pennington.

The three colonels did not stop the column, but they watched the signals as they rode. Nobody was able to interpret them, not even Shepard, but they felt that they could ignore them. Colonel Hertford, nevertheless, sent off a strong scouting party in that direction, but as it approached the horseman on the hill rode over the other side and disappeared.

All that day they advanced through a lonely and hostile country. It was a region intensely Southern in its sympathies, and it seemed that everybody, including the women and children, had fled before them. Horses and cattle were gone also and its loneliness was accentuated by the fact that not so long before it had been a well-peopled land, where now the houses stood empty and silent. They saw no human beings, save other watchmen on the hills making signals, but they were far away and soon gone.

By noon both horses and men showed great fatigue. They had slept but little the night before, and, toughened as they were by war, they had reached the limit of endurance. So the trumpet sounded the halt in a meadow beside a fine stream, and all, save those who were to ride on the outskirts and watch for the enemy, dismounted gladly. A vast drinking followed. The water was clear, running over clean pebbles, and a thousand men knelt and drank again and again. Then the horses were allowed to drink their fill, which they did with mighty gurglings of satisfaction, and the men cooked their midday meal.

Meanwhile they talked of Sheridan. All expected battle and then battle again when they joined him, and they looked forward to a great campaign in the valley. That valley was not so far away. The blue walls of the mountains that hemmed its eastern edge were very near now. Dick looked at them through his glasses, not to find an enemy, but merely for the pleasure of bringing out the heavy forests on their slopes. It was true that the leaves were already touched by the summer's heat, but in the distance at least the mass looked green. He knew also that under the screen of the leaves the grass preserved its freshness and there were many little streams, foaming in white as they rushed down the

steep slopes. It was a marvelously pleasing sight to him, and, as the wilderness thus called, he was once more deeply grateful that he had escaped from the muddy trench.

"We'll pass through a gap, sir, tomorrow morning," said Sergeant Whitley, "and go into the main valley."

"The gap would be the place for the Southern force to meet us."

But Sergeant Whitley shook his head.

"There are too many gaps and too few Southern troops," he said. "I think we'll find this one clear. Besides, Colonel Hertford is sure to send a scouting party ahead tonight. But if you don't mind taking a little advice from an old trooper, sir, I'd lie on the grass and sleep while we're here. An hour even will do a lot of good."

Dick followed his advice gladly and thanked him. He was always willing to receive instruction from Sergeant Whitley, who had proved himself his true friend and who in reality was able to teach men of much higher rank. He lay down upon the brown grass, and despite all the noise, despite all the excitement of past hours, fell fast asleep in a few minutes. He slept an hour, but it seemed to him that he had scarcely closed his eyes, when the trumpets were calling boots and saddles again. Yet he felt refreshed and stronger when he sprang up, and Sergeant Whitley's advice, as always, had proved good.

The column resumed its march before mid-afternoon, continuing its progress through a silent and empty country. The blue wall came closer and closer and Dick and his comrade saw the lighter line, looking in the distance like the slash of a sword, that marked the gap. Shepard, who rode a very swift and powerful horse, came back from another scouting trip and reported that there was no sign of the enemy, at least at the entrance to the gap.

Later in the afternoon, as they were passing through a forest several shots were fired at them from the covert. No damage was done beyond one man wounded slightly, and Dick, under orders, led a short pursuit. He was glad that they found no one, as prisoners would have been an incumbrance, and it was not the custom in the United States to shoot men not in uniform who were defending the soil on which they lived. He had no doubt that those who had fired the shots were farmers, but it had been easy for them to make good their escape in the thickets.

He thought he saw relief on Colonel Hertford's face also, when he reported that the riflemen had escaped, and, after spreading out skirmishers a little farther on either flank, the column, which had never broken its march, went on at increased pace. It was growing warm now, and the dust and heat of the long ride began to affect them. The blue line of the mountains, as they came close, turned to green and Dick, Warner and Pennington looked enviously at the deep shade.

"Not so bad," said Warner. "Makes me think a little of the Green Mountains of Vermont, though not as high and perhaps not as green."

"Of course," said Dick. "Nothing outside of Vermont is as good as anything inside of it."

"I'm glad you acknowledge it so readily, Dick. I have found some people who would not admit it at first, and I was compelled to talk and persuade them of the fact, a labor that ought to be unnecessary. The truth should always speak for itself. Vermont isn't the most fertile state in the Union and it's not the largest, but it's the best producer of men, or I should say the producer of the best men."

"What will Massachusetts say to that? I've read Daniel Webster's speech in reply to Hayne."

"Oh, Massachusetts, of course, has more people, I'm merely speaking of the average."

"Nebraska hasn't been settled long," said Pennington, "but you just wait. When we get a population we'll make both Vermont and Massachusetts take a back seat."

"And that population, or at least the best part of it," rejoined the undaunted Warner, "will come from Vermont and Massachusetts and other New England states."

"Sunset and the gap together are close at hand," said Dick, "and however the mountains of Virginia may compare with those of Vermont, it's quite certain that the sun setting over the two states is the same."

"I concede that," said Warner; "but it looks more brilliant from the Vermont hills."

Nevertheless, the sun set in Virginia in a vast and intense glow of color, and as the twilight came they entered the gap.

CHAPTER V

AN OLD ENEMY

Despite the brilliant sunset the night came on very dark and heavy with damp. The road through the gap was none too good and the lofty slopes clothed in forest looked menacing. Many sharpshooters might lurk there, and the three colonels were anxious to reach Sheridan with their force intact, at least without further loss after the battle with Colonel Talbot's command.

The column was halted and it was decided to send out another scouting party to see if the way was clear. Twenty men, of whom the best for such work were Shepard and Whitley, were chosen, and Dick, owing to his experience, was put in nominal command, although he knew in his heart that the spy and the sergeant would be the real leaders, a fact which he did not resent. Warner and Pennington begged to go too, but they were left behind.

Shepard had received a remount, and, as all of them rode good horses, they advanced at a swift trot through the great gap. The spy, who knew the pass, led the way. The column behind, although it was coming forward at a good pace, disappeared with remarkable quickness. Dick, looking back, saw a dusky line of horsemen, and then he saw nothing. He did not look back again. His eyes were wholly for Shepard and the dim path ahead.

The aspect of the mountains, which had been so inviting before they came to them, changed wholly. Dick did not long so much for green foliage now, as a chill wind began to blow. All of them carried cloaks or overcoats rolled tightly and tied to their saddles, which they loosed and put on. The wind rose, and, confined within the narrow limits of the pass, it began to groan loudly. A thin sheet of rain came on its edge, and the drops were almost as cold as those of winter.

Dick's first sensation of uneasiness and discomfort disappeared quickly. Like his cousin, Harry, he had inherited a feeling for the wilderness. His own ancestor, Paul Cotter, had been a great woodsman too, and, as he drew on the buckskin gauntlets and wrapped the heavy cloak about his body, his second sensation was one of actual physical pleasure. Why should he regard the forest with a hostile eye? His ancestors had lived in it and often its darkness had saved them from death by torture.

He looked up at the dark slopes, but he could see only the black masses of foliage and the thin sheets of driven rain. For a little while, at least, his mind reproduced the wilderness. It was there in all its savage loneliness and majesty. He could readily imagine that the Indians were lurking in the brush, and that the bears and panthers were seeking shelter in their dens. But his own feeling of safety and of mental and physical pleasure in the face of obstacles deepened.

"I've been just that way myself," said Sergeant Whitley, who was riding beside him and who could both see and read his face. "On the plains when we were so well wrapped up that the icy winds whistling around us couldn't get at us then we felt all the better. But it was best when we were inside the fort and the winter blizzard was howling."

"A lot of us were talking a little while back about what they were going to do after the war. What's your plan, sergeant, if you have any?"

"I do have a plan, Mr. Mason. I was a lumberman, as you know, before I entered the regular army, and when the fighting's done I think I'll go back to it. I can swing an axe with the best of 'em, but I mean after a while to have others swinging axes for me. If I can I'm going to become a big lumberman. I'd rather be that than anything else."

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