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THE GUNS OF SHILOH: A STORY OF THE GREAT WESTERN CAMPAIGN

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I. IN FLIGHT

Dick Mason, caught in the press of a beaten army, fell back slowly with his comrades toward a ford of Bull Run. The first great battle of the Civil War had been fought and lost. Lost, after it had been won! Young as he was Dick knew that fortune had been with the North until the very closing hour. He did not yet know how it had been done. He did not know how the Northern charges had broken in vain on the ranks of Stonewall Jackson's men. He did not know how the fresh Southern troops from the Valley of Virginia had hurled themselves so fiercely on the Union flank. But he did know that his army had been defeated and was retreating on the capital.

Cannon still thundered to right and left, and now and then showers of bursting shell sprayed over the heads of the tired and gloomy soldiers. Dick, thoughtful and scholarly, was in the depths of a bitterness and despair reached by few of those around

him. The Union, the Republic, had appealed to him as the most glorious of experiments. He could not bear to see it broken up for any cause whatever. It had been founded with too much blood and suffering and labor to be dissolved in a day on a Virginia battlefield.

But the army that had almost grasped victory was retreating, and the camp followers, the spectators who had come out to see an easy triumph, and some of the raw recruits were running. A youth near Dick cried that the rebels fifty thousand strong with a hundred guns were hot upon their heels. A short, powerful man, with a voice like the roar of thunder, bade him hush or he would feel a rifle barrel across his back. Dick had noticed this man, a sergeant named Whitley, who had shown singular courage and coolness throughout the battle, and he crowded closer to him for companionship. The man observed the action and looked at him with blue eyes that twinkled out of a face almost black with the sun.

"Don't take it so hard, my boy," he said. "This battle's lost, but there are others that won't be. Most of the men were raw, but they did some mighty good fightin', while the regulars an' the cavalry are coverin' the retreat. Beauregard's army is not goin' to sweep us off the face of the earth."

His words brought cheer to Dick, but it lasted only a moment. He was to see many dark days, but this perhaps was the darkest of his life. His heart beat painfully and his face was a brown mask of mingled dust, sweat, and burned gunpowder. The thunder of the

Southern cannon behind them filled him with humiliation. Every bone in him ached after such fierce exertion, and his eyes were dim with the flare of cannon and rifles and the rolling clouds of dust. He was scarcely conscious that the thick and powerful sergeant had moved up by his side and had put a helping hand under his arm.

"Here we are at the ford!" cried Whitley. "Into it, my lad! Ah, how good the water feels!"

Dick, despite those warning guns behind him, would have remained a while in Bull Run, luxuriating in the stream, but the crowd of his comrades was pressing hard upon him, and he only had time to thrust his face into the water and to pour it over his neck, arms, and shoulders. But he was refreshed greatly. Some of the heat went out of his body, and his eyes and head ached less.

The retreat continued across the rolling hills. Dick saw everywhere arms and supplies thrown away by the fringe of a beaten army, the men in the rear who saw and who spread the reports of panic and terror. But the regiments were forming again into a cohesive force, and behind them the regulars and cavalry in firm array still challenged pursuit. Heavy firing was heard again under the horizon and word came that the Southern cavalry had captured guns and wagons, but the main division maintained its slow retreat toward Washington.

Now the cool shadows were coming. The sun, which had shown as red as blood over the field that day, was sinking behind the hills. Its fiery rays ceased to burn the faces of the men. A

soft healing breeze stirred the leaves and grass. The river of Bull Run and the field of Manassas were gone from sight, and the echo of the last cannon shot died solemnly on the Southern horizon. An hour later the brigade stopped in the wood, and the exhausted men threw themselves upon the ground. They were so tired that their bodies were in pain as if pricked with needles. The chagrin and disgrace of defeat were forgotten for the time in the overpowering desire for rest.

Dick had enlisted as a common soldier. There was no burden of maintaining order upon him, and he threw himself upon the ground by the side of his new friend, Sergeant Whitley. His breath came at first in gasps, but presently he felt better and sat up.

It was now full night, thrice blessed to them all, with the heat and dust gone and no enemy near. The young recruits had recovered their courage. The terrible scenes of the battle were hid from their eyes, and the cannon no longer menaced on the horizon. The sweet, soothing wind blew gently over the hills among which they lay, and the leaves rustled peacefully.

Fires were lighted, wagons with supplies arrived, and the men began to cook food, while the surgeons moved here and there, binding up the wounds of the hurt. The pleasant odors of coffee and frying meat arose. Sergeant Whitley stood up and by the moonlight and the fires scanned the country about them with discerning eye. Dick looked at him with renewed interest. He was a man of middle years, but with all the strength and elasticity

of youth. Despite his thick coat of tan he was naturally fair, and Dick noticed that his hands were the largest that he had ever seen on any human being. They seemed to the boy to have in them the power to strangle a bear. But the man was singularly mild and gentle in his manner.

"We're about half way to Washington, I judge," he said, "an' I expect a lot of our camp followers and grass-green men are all the way there by now, tellin' Abe Lincoln an' everybody else that a hundred thousand rebels fell hard upon us on the plain of Manassas."

He laughed deep down in his throat and Dick again drew courage and cheerfulness from one who had such a great store of both.

"How did it happen? Our defeat, I mean," asked Dick. "I thought almost to the very last moment that we had the victory won."

"Their reserves came an' ours didn't. But the boys did well. Lots worse than this will happen to us, an' we'll live to overcome it. I've been through a heap of hardships in my life, Dick, but I always remember that somebody else has been through worse. Let's go down the hill. The boys have found a branch an' are washin' up."

By "branch" he meant a brook, and Dick went with him gladly. They found a fine, clear stream, several feet broad and a foot deep, flowing swiftly between the slopes, and probably emptying miles further on into Bull Run. Already it was lined by hundreds

of soldiers, mostly boys, who were bathing freely in its cool waters. Dick and the sergeant joined them and with the sparkle of the current fresh life and vigor flowed into their veins.

An officer took command, and when they had bathed their faces, necks, and arms abundantly they were allowed to take off their shoes and socks and put their bruised and aching feet in the stream.

"It seems to me, sergeant, that this is pretty near to Heaven," said Dick as he sat on the bank and let the water swish around his ankles.

"It's mighty good. There's no denyin' it, but we'll move still a step nearer to Heaven, when we get our share of that beef an' coffee, which I now smell most appetizin'. Hard work gives a fellow a ragin' appetite, an' I reckon fightin' is the hardest of all work. When I was a lumberman in Wisconsin I thought nothin' could beat that, but I admit now that a big battle is more exhaustin'."

"You've worked in the timber then?"

"From the time I was twelve years old 'til three or four years ago. If I do say it myself, there wasn't a man in all Wisconsin, or Michigan either, who could swing an axe harder or longer than I could. I guess you've noticed these hands of mine."

He held them up, and they impressed Dick more than ever. They were great masses of bone and muscle fit for a giant.

"Paws, the boys used to call 'em," resumed Whitley with a pleased laugh. "I inherited big hands. Father had em an' mother

had 'em, too. So mine were wonders when I was a boy, an' when you add to that years an' years with the axe, an' with liftin' an' rollin' big logs I've got what I reckon is the strongest pair of hands in the United States. I can pull a horseshoe apart any time. Mighty useful they are, too, as I'm likely to show you often."

The chance came very soon. A frightened horse, probably with the memory of the battle still lodged somewhere in his animal brain, broke his tether and came charging among the troops. Whitley made one leap, seized him by the bit in his mighty grasp and hurled him back on his haunches, where he held him until fear was gone from him.

"It was partly strength and partly sleight of hand, a trick that I learned in the cavalry," he said to Dick as they put on their shoes. "I got tired of lumberin' an' I wandered out west, where I served three years on horseback in the regular army, fightin' the Indians. Good fighters they are, too. Mighty hard to put your hand on 'em. Now they're there an' now they ain't. Now you see 'em before you, an' then they're behind you aimin' a tomahawk at your head. They taught us a big lot that I guess we can use in this war. Come on, Dick, I guess them banquet halls are spread, an' I know we're ready."

Not much order was preserved in the beaten brigade, which had become separated from the rest of the retreating army, but the spirits of all were rising and that, so Sergeant Whitley told Dick, was better just now than technical discipline. The Northern army had gone to Bull Run with ample supplies, and now they

lacked for nothing. They ate long and well, and drank great quantities of coffee. Then they put out the fires and resumed the march toward Washington.

They stopped again an hour or two after midnight and slept until morning. Dick lay on the bare ground under the boughs of a great oak tree. It was a quarter of an hour before sleep came, because his nervous system had received a tremendous wrench that day. He closed his eyes and the battle passed again before them. He remembered, too, a lightning glimpse of a face, that of his cousin, Harry Kenton, seen but an instant and then gone. He tried to decide whether it was fancy or reality, and, while he was trying, he fell asleep and slept as one dead.

Dick was awakened early in the morning by Sergeant Whitley, who was now watching over him like an elder brother. The sun already rode high and there was a great stir and movement, as the brigade was forming for its continued retreat on the capital. The boy's body was at first stiff and sore, but the elasticity of youth returned fast, and after a brief breakfast he was fully restored.

Another hot day had dawned, but Dick reflected grimly that however hot it might be it could not be as hot as the day before had been. Scouts in the night had brought back reports that the Southern troops were on the northern side of Bull Run, but not in great force, and a second battle was no longer feared. The flight could be continued without interruption over the hot Virginia fields.

Much of Dick's depression returned as they advanced under

the blazing sun, but Whitley, who seemed insensible to either fatigue or gloom, soon cheered him up again.

"They talk about the Southerners comin' on an' takin' Washington," he said, "but don't you believe it. They haven't got the forces, an' while they won the victory I guess they're about as tired as we are. Our boys talk about a hundred thousand rebels jumpin' on 'em, an' some felt as if they was a million, but they weren't any more than we was, maybe not as many, an' when they are all stove up themselves how can they attack Washington in its fortifications! Don't be so troubled, boy. The Union ain't smashed up yet. Just recollect whenever it's dark that light's bound to come later on. What do you say to that, Long Legs?"

He spoke to a very tall and very thin youth who marched about a half dozen feet away from them. The boy, who seemed to be about eighteen years of age, turned to them a face which was pale despite the Virginia sun. But it was the pallor of indoor life, not of fear, as the countenance was good and strong, long, narrow, the chin pointed, the nose large and bridged like that of an old Roman, the eyes full blue and slightly nearsighted. But there was a faint twinkle in those same nearsighted eyes as he replied in precise tones:

"According to all the experience of centuries and all the mathematical formulae that can be deduced therefrom night is bound to be followed by day. We have been whipped by the rebels, but it follows with arithmetical certainty that if we keep

on fighting long enough we will whip them in time. Let x equal time and y equal opportunity. Then when x and y come together we shall have x plus y which will equal success. Does my logic seem cogent to you, Mr. Big Shoulders and Big Hands?"

Whitley stared at him in amazement and admiration.

"I haven't heard so many big words in a long time," he said, "an' then, too, you bring 'em out so nice an' smooth, marchin' in place as regular as a drilled troop."

"I've been drilled too," said the tall boy, smiling. "My name is George Warner, and I come from Vermont. I began teaching a district school when I was sixteen years old, and I would be teaching now, if it were not for the war. My specialty is mathematics. X equals the war, y equals me and x plus y equals me in the war."

"Your name is Warner and you are from Vermont," said Dick eagerly. "Why, there was a Warner who struck hard for independence at Bennington in the Revolution."

"That's my family," replied the youth proudly. "Seth Warner delivered a mighty blow that helped to form this Union, and although I don't know much except to teach school I'm going to put in a little one to help save it. X equalled the occasion, y equalled my willingness to meet it, and x plus y have brought me here."

Dick told who he and Whitley were, and he felt at once that he and this long and mathematical Vermont lad were going to be friends. Whitley also continued to look upon Warner with much

favor.

"I respect anybody who can talk in mathematics as you do," he said. "Now with me I never know what x equals an' I never know what y equals, so if I was to get x an' y together they might land me about ten thousand miles from where I wanted to be. But a fellow can bend too much over books. That's what's the matter with them eyes of yours, which I notice always have to take two looks where I take only one."

"You are undoubtedly right," replied Warner. "My relatives told me that I needed some fresh air, and I am taking it, although the process is attended with certain risks from bullets, swords, bayonets, cannon balls, and shells. Still, I have made a very close mathematical calculation. At home there is the chance of disease as well as here. At home you may fall from a cliff, you may be drowned in a creek or river while bathing, a tree may fall on you, a horse may throw you and break your neck, or you may be caught in a winter storm and freeze to death. But even if none of these things happens to you, you will die some day anyhow. Now, my figures show me that the chance of death here in the war is only twenty-five per cent greater than it was at home, but physical activity and an open air continuously increase my life chances thirty-five per cent. So, I make a net life gain of ten per cent."

Whitley put his hand upon Warner's shoulder.

"Boy," he said, "you're wonderful. I can cheer up the lads by talkin' of the good things to come, but you can prove by

arithmetic, algebra an' every other kind of mathematics that they're bound to come. You're goin' to be worth a lot wherever you are."

"Thanks for your encomiums. In any event we are gaining valuable experience. Back there on the field of Bull Run I was able to demonstrate by my own hearing and imagination that a hundred thousand rebels could fire a million bullets a minute; that every one of those million bullets filled with a mortal spite against me was seeking my own particular person."

Whitley gazed at him again with admiration.

"You've certainly got a wonderful fine big bag of words," he said, "an' whenever you need any you just reach in an' take out a few a foot long or so. But I reckon a lot of others felt the way you did, though they won't admit it now. Look, we're nearly to Washington now. See the dome of the Capitol over the trees there, an' I can catch glimpses of roofs too."

Dick and George also saw the capital, and cheered by the sight, they marched at a swifter gait. Soon they turned into the main road, where the bulk of the army had already passed and saw swarms of stragglers ahead of them. Journalists and public men met them, and Dick now learned how the truth about Bull Run had come to the capital. The news of defeat had been the more bitter, because already they had been rejoicing there over success. As late as five o'clock in the afternoon the telegraph had informed Washington of victory. Then, after a long wait, had come the bitter despatch telling of defeat, and flying fugitives

arriving in the night had exaggerated it tenfold.

The division to which Dick, Warner, and Whitley belonged marched over the Long Bridge and camped near the capital where they would remain until sent on further service. Dick now saw that the capital was in no danger. Troops were pouring into it by every train from the north and west. All they needed was leadership and discipline. Bull Run had stung, but it did not daunt them and they asked to be led again against the enemy. They heard that Lincoln had received the news of the defeat with great calmness, and that he had spent most of a night in his office listening to the personal narratives of public men who had gone forth to see the battle, and who at its conclusion had left with great speed.

"Lots of people have laughed at Abe Lincoln an' have called him only a rail-splitter," said Whitley, "but I heard him two or three times, when he was campaignin' in Illinois, an' I tell you he's a man."

"He was born in my state," said Dick, "and I mean to be proud of him. He'll have support, too. Look how the country is standing by him!"

More than once in the succeeding days Dick Mason's heart thrilled at the mighty response that came to the defeat of Bull Run. The stream of recruits pouring into the capital never ceased. He now saw men, and many boys, too, like himself, from every state north of the Ohio River and from some south of it. Dan Whitley met old logging friends from Wisconsin whom he had

not seen in years, and George Warner saw two pupils of his as old as himself.

Dick had inherited a sensitive temperament, one that responded quickly and truthfully to the events occurring about him, and he foresaw the beginning of a mighty struggle. Here in the capital, resolution was hardening into a fight to the finish, and he knew from his relatives when he left Kentucky that the South was equally determined. There was an apparent pause in hostilities, but he felt that the two sections were merely gathering their forces for a mightier conflict.

His comrades and he had little to do, and they had frequent leaves of absence. On one of them they saw a man of imposing appearance pass down Pennsylvania Avenue. He would have caught the attention of anybody, owing to his great height and splendid head crowned with snow-white hair. He was old, but he walked as if he were one who had achieved greatly, and was conscious of it.

"It's Old Fuss and Feathers his very self," said Whitley.

"General Scott. It can be no other," said Dick, who had divined at once the man's identity. His eyes followed the retreating figure with the greatest interest. This was the young hero of the War of 1812 and the great commander who had carried the brilliant campaign into the capital of Mexico. He had been the first commander-in-chief of the Northern army, and, foreseeing the great scale of the coming war, had prepared a wide and cautious plan. But the public had sneered at him and had

demanded instant action, the defeat at Bull Run being the result.

Dick felt pity for the man who was forced to bear a blame not his own, and who was too old for another chance. But he knew that the present cloud would soon pass away, and that he would be remembered as the man of Chippewa and Chapultepec.

"McClellan is already here to take his place," said Whitley. "He's the young fellow who has been winning successes in the western part of Virginia, an' they say he has genius."

Only a day or two later they saw McClellan walking down the same avenue with the President. Dick had never beheld a more striking contrast. The President was elderly, of great height, his head surmounted by a high silk hat which made him look yet taller, while his face was long, melancholy, and wrinkled deeply. His collar had wilted with the heat and the tails of his long black coat flapped about his legs.

The general was clothed in a brilliant uniform. He was short and stocky and his head scarcely passed the President's shoulder. He was redolent of youth and self confidence. It showed in his quick, eager gestures and his emphatic manner. He attracted the two boys, but the sergeant shook his head somewhat solemnly.

"They say Scott was too old," he said, "and now they've gone to the other end of it. McClellan's too young to handle the great armies that are going into the field. I'm afraid he won't be a match for them old veterans like Johnston and Lee."

"Napoleon became famous all over the world when he was only twenty-six," said Warner.

"That's so," retorted Whitley, "but I never heard of any other Napoleon. The breed began and quit with him."

But the soldiers crowding the capital had full confidence in "Little Mac," as they had already begun to call him. Those off duty followed and cheered him and the President, until they entered the White House and disappeared within its doors. Dick and his friends were in the crowd that followed, although they did not join in the cheers, not because they lacked faith, but because all three were thoughtful. Dick had soon discovered that Whitley, despite his lack of education, was an exceedingly observant man, with a clear and reasoning mind.

"It was a pair worth seeing," said the sergeant, as they turned away, "but I looked a lot more at Old Abe than I did at 'Little Mac.' Did you ever think, boys, what it is to have a big war on your hands, with all sorts of men tellin' you all sorts of things an' tryin' to pull you in all sorts of directions?"

"I had not thought of it before, but I will think of it now," said Warner. "In any event, we are quite sure that the President has a great task before him. We hear that the South will soon have a quarter of a million troops in the field. Her position on the defensive is perhaps worth as many more men to her. Hence let x equal her troops, let y equal her defensive, and we have x plus y, which is equal to half a million men, the number we must have before we can meet the South on equal terms."

"An' to conquer her completely we'll need nigh on to a million." said the sergeant.

Shrewd and penetrating as was Sergeant Whitley he did not dream that before the giant struggle was over the South would have tripled her defensive quarter of a million and the North would almost have tripled her invading million.

A few days later their regiment marched out of the capital and joined the forces on the hills around Arlington, where they lay for many days, impatient but inactive. There was much movement in the west, and they heard of small battles in which victory and defeat were about equal. The boys had shown so much zeal and ability in learning soldierly duties that they were made orderlies by their colonel, John Newcomb, a taciturn Pennsylvanian, a rich miner who had raised a regiment partly at his own expense, and who showed a great zeal for the Union. He, too, was learning how to be a soldier and he was not above asking advice now and then of a certain Sergeant Whitley who had the judgment to give it in the manner befitting one of his lowly rank.

The summer days passed slowly on. The heat was intense. The Virginia hills and plains fairly shimmered under the burning rays of the sun. But still they delayed. Congress had shown the greatest courage, meeting on the very day that the news of Bull Run had come, and resolving to fight the war to a successful end, no matter what happened. But while McClellan was drilling and preparing, the public again began to call for action. “On to Richmond!” was the cry, but despite it the army did not yet move.

European newspapers came in, and almost without exception they sneered at the Northern troops, and predicted the early

dissolution of the Union. Monarchy and privileged classes everywhere rejoiced at the disaster threatening the great republic, and now that it was safe to do so, did not hesitate to show their delight. Sensitive and proud of his country, Dick was cut to the quick, but Warner was more phlegmatic.

"Let 'em bark," he said. "They bark because they dislike us, and they dislike us because they fear us. We threatened Privilege when our Revolution succeeded and the Republic was established. The fact of our existence was the threat and the threat has increased with our years and growth. Europe is for the South, but the reason for it is one of the simplest problems in mathematics. Ten per cent of it is admiration for the Southern victory at Bull Run, and ninety per cent of it is hatred—at least by their ruling classes—of republican institutions, and a wish to see them fall here."

"I suspect you're right," said Dick, "and we'll have to try all the harder to keep them from being a failure. Look, there goes our balloon!"

Every day, usually late in the afternoon, a captive balloon rose from the Northern camp, and officers with powerful glasses inspected the Southern position, watching for an advance or a new movement of any kind.

"I'm going up in it some day," said Dick, confidently. "Colonel Newcomb has promised me that he will take me with him when his turn for the ascension comes."

The chance was a week in coming, a tremendously long time

it seemed to Dick, but it came at last. He climbed into the basket with Colonel Newcomb, two generals, and the aeronauts and sat very quiet in a corner. He felt an extraordinary thrill when the ropes were allowed to slide and the balloon was slowly going almost straight upward. The sensation was somewhat similar to that which shook him when he went into battle at Bull Run, but pride came to his rescue and he soon forgot the physical tremor to watch the world that now rolled beneath them, a world that they seemed to have left, although the ropes always held.

Dick's gaze instinctively turned southward, where he knew the Confederate army lay. A vast and beautiful panorama spread in a semi-circle before him. The green of summer, the green that had been stained so fearfully at Bull Run, was gone. The grass was now brown from the great heats and the promise of autumn soon to come, but—from the height at least—it was a soft and mellow brown, and the dust was gone.

The hills rolled far away southward, and under the horizon's rim. Narrow ribbons of silver here and there were the numerous brooks and creeks that cut the country. Groves, still heavy and dark with foliage, hung on the hills, or filled some valley, like green in a bowl. Now and then, among clumps of trees, colonial houses with their pillared porticoes appeared.

It was a rare and beautiful scene, appealing with great force to Dick. There was nothing to tell of war save the Northern forces just beneath them, and he would not look down. But he did look back, and saw the broad band of the Potomac, and beyond it the

white dome of the Capitol and the roof of Washington. But his gaze turned again to the South, where his absorbing interest lay, and once more he viewed the quiet country, rolling away until it touched the horizon rim. The afternoon was growing late, and great terraces of red and gold were heaping above one another in the sky until they reached the zenith.

"Try the glasses for a moment, Dick," said Colonel Newcomb, as he passed them to the boy.

Dick swept them across the South in a great semi-circle, and now new objects rose upon the surface of the earth. He saw distinctly the long chain of the Blue Ridge rising on the west, then blurring in the distance into a solid black rampart. In the south he saw a long curving line of rising blue plumes. It did not need Colonel Newcomb to tell him that these were the campfires of the army that they had met on the field of Bull Run, and that the Southern troops were now cooking their suppers.

No doubt his cousin Harry was there and perhaps others whom he knew. The fires seemed to Dick a defiance to the Union. Well, in view of their victory, the defiance was justified, and those fires might come nearer yet. Dick, catching the tone of older men who shared his views, had not believed at first that the rebellion would last long, but his opinion was changing fast, and the talk of wise Sergeant Whitley was helping much in that change.

While he yet looked through the glasses he saw a plume of white smoke coming swiftly towards the Southern fires. Then he remembered the two lines of railroad that met on the battlefield,

giving it its other name, Manassas Junction, and he knew that the smoke came from an engine pulling cars loaded with supplies for their foes.

He whispered of the train as he handed the glasses back to Colonel Newcomb, and then the colonel and the generals alike made a long examination.

"Beauregard will certainly have an abundance of supplies," said one of the generals. "I hear that arms and provisions are coming by every train from the South, and meanwhile we are making no advance."

"We can't advance yet," said the other general emphatically. "McClellan is right in making elaborate preparations and long drills before moving upon the enemy. It was inexperience, and not want of courage, that beat us at Bull Run."

"The Southerners had the same inexperience."

"But they had the defensive. I hear that Tom Jackson saved them, and that they have given him the name Stonewall, because he stood so firm. I was at West Point with him. An odd, awkward fellow, but one of the hardest students I have ever known. The boys laughed at him when he first came, but they soon stopped. He had a funny way of studying, standing up with his book on a shelf, instead of sitting down at a desk. Said his brain moved better that way. I've heard that he walked part of the way from Virginia to reach West Point. I hear now, too, that he is very religious, and always intends to pray before going into battle."

"That's a bad sign—for us," said the other general. "It's

easy enough to sneer at praying men, but just you remember Cromwell. I'm a little shaky on my history, but I've an impression that when Cromwell, the Ironsides, old Praise-God-Barebones, and the rest knelt, said a few words to their God, sang a little and advanced with their pikes, they went wherever they intended to go and that Prince Rupert and all the Cavaliers could not stop them."

"It is so," said the other gravely. "A man who believes thoroughly in his God, who is not afraid to die, who, in fact, rather favors dying on the field, is an awful foe to meet in battle."

"We may have some of the same on our side," said Colonel Newcomb. "We have at least a great Puritan population from which to draw."

One of the generals gave the signal and the balloon was slowly pulled down. Dick, grateful for his experience, thanked Colonel Newcomb and rejoined his comrades.

CHAPTER II. THE MOUNTAIN LIGHTS

When Dick left the balloon it was nearly night. Hundreds of campfires lighted up the hills about him, but beyond their circle the darkness enclosed everything. He still felt the sensations of one who had been at a great height and who had seen afar. That rim of Southern campfires was yet in his mind, and he wondered why the Northern commander allowed them to remain week after week so near the capital. He was fully aware, because it was common talk, that the army of the Union had now reached great numbers, with a magnificent equipment, and, with four to one, should be able to drive the Southern force away. Yet McClellan delayed.

Dick obtained a short leave of absence, and walked to a campfire, where he knew he would find his friend, George Warner. Sergeant Whitley was there, too, showing some young recruits how to cook without waste, and the two gave the boy a welcome that was both inquisitive and hearty.

"You've been up in the balloon," said Warner. "It was a rare chance."

"Yes," replied Dick with a laugh, "I left the world, and it is the only way in which I wish to leave it for the next sixty or seventy years. It was a wonderful sight, George, and not the least

wonderful thing in it was the campfires of the Southern army, burning down there towards Bull Run."

"Burnin' where they ought not to be," said Whitley—no gulf was yet established between commissioned and non-commissioned officers in either army. "Little Mac may be a great organizer, as they say, but you can keep on organizin' an' organizin', until it's too late to do what you want to do."

"It's a sound principle that you lay down, Mr. Whitley," said Warner in his precise tones. "In fact, it may be reduced to a mathematical formula. Delay is always a minus quantity which may be represented by y. Achievement is represented by x, and, consequently, when you have achievement hampered by delay you have x minus y, which is an extremely doubtful quantity, often amounting to failure."

"I travel another road in my reckonin's," said Whitley, "I don't know anything about x and y, but I guess you an' me, George, come to the same place. It's been a full six weeks since Bull Run, an' we haven't done a thing."

Whitley, despite their difference in rank, could not yet keep from addressing the boys by their first names. But they took it as a matter of course, in view of the fact that he was so much older than they and vastly their superior in military knowledge.

"Dick," continued the sergeant, "what was it you was sayin' about a cousin of yours from the same town in Kentucky bein' out there in the Southern army?"

"He's certainly there," replied Dick, "if he wasn't killed in

the battle, which I feel couldn't have happened to a fellow like Harry. We're from the same little town in Kentucky, Pendleton. He's descended straight from one of the greatest Indian fighters, borderers and heroes the country down there ever knew, Henry Ware, who afterwards became one of the early governors of the State. And I'm descended from Henry Ware's famous friend, Paul Cotter, who, in his time, was the greatest scholar in all the West. Henry Ware and Paul Cotter were like the old Greek friends, Damon and Pythias. Harry and I are proud to have their blood in our veins. Besides being cousins, there are other things to make Harry and me think a lot of each other. Oh, he's a grand fellow, even if he is on the wrong side!"

Dick's eyes sparkled with enthusiasm as he spoke of the cousin and comrade of his childhood.

"The chances of war bring about strange situations, or at least I have heard so," said Warner. "Now, Dick, if you were to meet your cousin face to face on the battlefield with a loaded gun in your hand what would you do?"

"I'd raise that gun, take deliberate aim at a square foot of air about thirty feet over his head and pull the trigger."

"But your duty to your country tells you to do otherwise. Before you is a foe trying to destroy the Union. You have come out armed to save that Union, consequently you must fire straight at him and not at the air, in order to reduce the number of our enemies."

"One enemy where there are so many would not count for

anything in the total. Your arithmetic will show you that Harry's percentage in the Southern army is so small that it reaches the vanishing point. If I can borrow from you, George, x equals Harry's percentage, which is nothing, y equals the value of my hypothetical opportunity, which is nothing, then x plus y equals nothing, which represents the whole affair, which is nothing, that is, worth nothing to the Union. Hence I have no more obligation to shoot Harry if I meet him than he has to shoot me."

"Well spoken, Dick," said Sergeant Whitley. "Some people, I reckon, can take duty too hard. If you have one duty an' another an' bigger one comes along right to the same place you ought to 'tend to the bigger one. I'd never shoot anybody that was a heap to me just because he was one of three or four hundred thousand who was on the other side. I've never thought much of that old Roman father—I forget his name—who had his son executed just because he wasn't doin' exactly right. There was never a rule that oughtn't to have exceptions under extraordinary circumstances."

"If you can establish the principle of exceptions," replied the young Vermonter very gravely, "I will allow Dick to shoot in the air when he meets his cousin in the height of battle, but it is a difficult task to establish it, and if it fails Dick, according to all rules of logic and duty, must shoot straight at his cousin's heart."

The other two looked at Warner and saw his left eyelid droop slightly. A faint twinkle appeared in either eye and then they laughed.

"I reckon that Dick shoots high in the air," said the sergeant.

Dick, after a pleasant hour with his friends, went back to Colonel Newcomb's quarters, where he spent the entire evening writing despatches at dictation. He was hopeful that all this writing portended something, but more days passed, and despite the impatience of both army and public, there was no movement. Stories of confused and uncertain fighting still came out of the west, but between Washington and Bull Run there was perfect peace.

The summer passed. Autumn came and deepened. The air was crisp and sparkling. The leaves, turned into glowing reds and yellows and browns, began to fall from the trees. The advancing autumn contained the promise of winter soon to come. The leaves fell faster and sharp winds blew, bringing with them chill rains. Little Mac, or the Young Napoleon, as many of his friends loved to call him, continued his preparations, and despite all the urgings of President and Congress, would not move. His fatal defect now showed in all its destructiveness. To him the enemy always appeared threefold his natural size.

Reliable scouts brought back the news that the Southern troops at Manassas, a full two months after their victory there, numbered only forty thousand. The Northern commander issued statements that the enemy was before him with one hundred and fifty thousand soldiers. He demanded that his own forces should be raised to nearly a quarter of a million men and nearly five hundred cannon before he could move.

The veteran, Scott, full of triumphs and honors, but feeling himself out of place in his old age, went into retirement. McClellan, now in sole command, still lingered and delayed, while the South, making good use of precious months, gathered all her forces to meet him or whomsoever came against her.

Youth chafed most against the long waiting. It seemed to Dick and his mathematical Vermont friend that time was fairly wasting away under their feet, and the wise sergeant agreed with them.

The weather had grown so cold now that they built fires for warmth as well as cooking, and the two youths sat with Sergeant Whitley one cold evening in late October before a big blaze. Both were tanned deeply by wind, sun and rain, and they had grown uncommonly hardy, but the wind that night came out of the northwest, and it had such a sharp edge to it that they were glad to draw their blankets over their backs and shoulders.

Dick was re-reading a letter from his mother, a widow who lived on the outskirts of Pendleton. It had come that morning, and it was the only one that had reached him since his departure from Kentucky. But she had received another that he had written to her directly after the Battle of Bull Run.

She wrote of her gratitude because Providence had watched over him in that dreadful conflict, all the more dreadful because it was friend against friend, brother against brother. The state, she said, was all in confusion. Everybody suspected everybody else. The Southerners were full of victory, the Northerners were hopeful of victory yet to come. Colonel Kenton was with the

Southern force under General Buckner, gathered at Bowling Green in that state, but his son, her nephew Harry, was still in the east with Beauregard. She had heard that the troops of the west and northwest were coming down the Ohio and Mississippi in great numbers, and people expected hard fighting to occur very soon in western and southern Kentucky. It was all very dreadful, and a madness seemed to have come over the land, but she hoped that Providence would continue to watch over her dear son.

Warner and the sergeant knew that the letter was from Dick's mother, but they had too much delicacy to ask him questions. The boy folded the sheets carefully and returned them to their place in the inside pocket of his coat. Then he looked for a while thoughtfully into the blaze and the great bed of coals that had formed beneath. As far as one could see to right and left like fires burned, but the night remained dark with promise of rain, and the chill wind out of the northwest increased in vigor. The words just read for the fifth time had sunk deep in his mind, and he was feeling the call of the west.

"My mother writes," he said to his comrades, "that the Confederate general, Buckner, whom I know, is gathering a large force around Bowling Green in the southern part of our state, and that fighting is sure to occur soon between that town and the Mississippi. An officer named Grant has come down from Illinois, and he is said to be pushing the Union troops forward with a lot of vigor. Sergeant, you are up on army affairs. Do you know this man Grant?"

Sergeant Whitley shook his head.

"Never heard of him," he replied. "Like as not he's one of the officers who resigned from the army after the Mexican War. There was so little to do then, and so little chance of promotion, that a lot of them quit to go into business. I suppose they'll all be coming back now."

"I want to go out there," said Dick. "It's my country, and the westerners at least are acting. But look at our army here! Bull Run was fought the middle of summer. Now it's nearly winter, and nothing has been done. We don't get out of sight of Washington. If I can get myself sent west I'm going."

"And I'm going with you," said Warner.

"Me, too," said the sergeant.

"I know that Colonel Newcomb's eyes are turning in that direction," continued Dick. "He's a war-horse, he is, and he'd like to get into the thick of it."

"You're his favorite aide," said the calculating young Vermonter. "Can't you sow those western seeds in his mind and keep on sowing them? The fact that you are from this western battle ground will give more weight to what you say. You do this, and I'll wager that within a week the Colonel will induce the President to send the whole regiment to the Mississippi."

"Can you reduce your prediction to a mathematical certainty?" asked Dick, a twinkle appearing in his eye.

"No, I can't do that," replied Warner, with an answering twinkle, "but you're the very fellow to influence Colonel

Newcomb's mind. I'm a mathematician and I work with facts, but you have the glowing imagination that conduces to the creation of facts."

"Big words! Grand words!" said the sergeant.

"Never let Colonel Newcomb forget the west," continued Warner, not noticing the interruption. "Keep it before him all the time. Hint that there can be no success along the Mississippi without him and his regiment."

"I'll do what I can," promised Dick faithfully, and he did much. Colonel Newcomb had already formed a strong attachment for this zealous and valuable young aide, and he did not forget the words that Dick said on every convenient occasion about the west. He made urgent representations that he and his regiment be sent to the relief of the struggling Northern forces there, and he contrived also that these petitions should reach the President. One day the order came to go, but not to St. Louis, where Halleck, now in command, was. Instead they were to enter the mountains of West Virginia and Kentucky, and help the mountaineers who were loyal to the Union. If they accomplished that task with success, they were to proceed to the greater theatre in Western Kentucky and Tennessee. It was not all they wished, but they thought it far better than remaining at Washington, where it seemed that the army would remain indefinitely.

Colonel Newcomb, who was sitting in his tent bending over maps with his staff, summoned Dick.

"You are a Kentuckian, my lad," he said, "and I thought

you might know something about this region into which we are going."

"Not much, sir," replied Dick. "My home is much further west in a country very different both in its own character and that of its people. But I have been in the mountains two or three times, and I may be of some help as a guide."

"I am sure you will do your best," said Colonel Newcomb. "By the way, that young Vermont friend of yours, Warner, is to be on my staff also, and it is very likely that you and he will go on many errands together."

"Can't we take Sergeant Whitley with us sometimes?" asked Dick boldly.

"So you can," replied the colonel, laughing a little. "I've noticed that man, and I've a faint suspicion that he knows more about war than any of us civilian officers."

"It's our task to learn as much as we can from these old regulars," said a Major Hertford, a man of much intelligence and good humor, who, previous to the war, had been a lawyer in a small town. Alan Hertford was about twenty-five and of fine manner and appearance.

"Well spoken, Major Hertford," said the thoughtful miner, Colonel Newcomb. "Now, Dick, you can go, and remember that we are to start for Washington early in the morning and take a train there for the north. It will be the duty of Lieutenant Warner and yourself, as well as others, to see that our men are ready to the last shoe for the journey."

Dick and Warner were so much elated that they worked all that night, and they did not hesitate to go to Sergeant Whitley for advice or instruction. At the first spear of dawn the regiment marched away in splendid order from Arlington to Washington, where the train that was to bear them to new fields and unknown fortunes was ready.

It was a long train of many coaches, as the regiment numbered seven hundred men, and it also carried with it four guns, mounted on trucks. The coaches were all of primitive pattern. The soldiers were to sleep on the seats, and their arms and supplies were heaped in the aisles. It was a cold, drizzling day of closing autumn, and the capital looked sodden and gloomy. Cameron, the Secretary of War, came to see them off and to make the customary prediction concerning their valor and victory to come. But he was a cold man, and he was repellent to Dick, used to more warmth of temperament.

Then, with a ringing of bells, a heave of the engine, a great puffing of smoke, and a mighty rattling of wheels, the train drew out of Washington and made its noisy way toward Baltimore. Dick and Warner were on the same seat. It was only forty miles to Baltimore, but their slow train would be perhaps three hours in arriving. So they had ample opportunity to see the country, which they examined with the curious eyes of youth. But there was little to see. The last leaves were falling from the trees under the early winter rain. Bare boughs and brown grass went past their windows and the fields were deserted. The landscape looked chill

and sullen.

Warner was less depressed than Dick. He had an even temperament based solidly upon mathematical calculations. He knew that while it might be raining today, the chances were several to one against its raining tomorrow.

"I've good cause to remember Baltimore," he said. "I was with the New England troops when they had the fight there on the way down to the capital. Although we hold it, it's really a Southern city, Dick. Most all the border cities are Southern in sympathy, and they're swarming with people who will send to the Southern leaders news of every movement we make. I state, and moreover I assert it in the face of all the world, that the knowledge of our departure from Washington is already in Southern hands. By close mathematical calculation the chances are at least ninety-five per cent in favor of my statement."

"Very likely," said Dick, "and we'll have that sort of thing to face all the time when we invade the South. We've got to win this war, George, by hard fighting, and then more hard fighting, and then more and more of the same."

"Guess you're right. Arithmetic shows at least one hundred per cent of probability in favor of your suggestion."

Dick looked up and down the long coach packed with young troops. Besides the commissioned officers and the sergeants, there was not one in the coach who was twenty-five. Most of them were nineteen or twenty, and it was the same in the other coaches. After the first depression their spirits rose. The temper

of youth showed strongly. They were eager to see Baltimore, but the train stopped there only a few minutes, and they were not allowed to leave the coaches.

Then the train turned towards the west. The drizzle of rain had now become a pour, and it drove so heavily that they could see but little outside. Food was served at noon and afterward many slept in the cramped seats. Dick, despite his stiff position, fell asleep too. By the middle of the afternoon everybody in their coach was slumbering soundly except Sergeant Whitley, who sat by the door leading to the next car.

All that afternoon and into the night the train rattled and moved into the west. The beautiful rolling country was left behind, and they were now among the mountains, whirling around precipices so sharply that often the sleeping boys were thrown from the seats of the coaches. But they were growing used to hardships. They merely climbed back again upon the seats, and were asleep once more in half a minute.

The rain still fell and the wind blew fiercely among the somber mountains. A second engine had been added to the train, and the speed of the train was slackened. The engineer in front stared at the slippery rails, but he could see only a few yards. The pitchy darkness closed in ahead, hiding everything, even the peaks and ridges. The heart of that engineer, and he was a brave man, as brave as any soldier on the battlefield, had sunk very low. Railroads were little past their infancy then and this was the first to cross the mountains. He was by no means certain of his track,

and, moreover, the rocks and forest might shelter an ambush.

The Alleghanies and their outlying ridges and spurs are not lofty mountains, but to this day they are wild and almost inaccessible in many places. Nature has made them a formidable barrier, and in the great Civil War those who trod there had to look with all their eyes and listen with all their ears. The engineer was not alone in his anxiety this night. Colonel Newcomb rose from an uneasy doze and he went with Major Hertford into the engineer's cab. They were now going at the rate of not more than five or six miles an hour, the long train winding like a snake around the edges of precipices and feeling its way gingerly over the trestles that spanned the deep valleys. All trains made a great roar and rattle then, and the long ravines gave it back in a rumbling and menacing echo. Gusts of rain were swept now and then into the faces of the engineer, the firemen and the officers.

"Do you see anything ahead, Canby?" said Colonel Newcomb to the engineer.

"Nothing. That's the trouble, sir. If it were a clear night I shouldn't be worried. Then we wouldn't be likely to steam into danger with our eyes shut. This is a wild country. The mountaineers in the main are for us, but we are not far north of the Southern line, and if they know we are crossing they may undertake to raid in here."

"And they may know it," said the colonel. "Washington is full of Southern sympathizers. Stop the train, Canby, when we come to the first open and level space, and we'll do some scouting

ahead."

The engineer felt great relief. He was devoutly glad that the colonel was going to take such a precaution. At that moment he, more than Colonel Newcomb, was responsible for the lives of the seven hundred human beings aboard the train, and his patriotism and sense of responsibility were both strong.

The train, with much jolting and clanging, stopped fifteen minutes later. Both Dick and Warner, awakened by the shock, sat up and rubbed their eyes. Then they left the train at once to join Colonel Newcomb, who might want them immediately. Wary Sergeant Whitley followed them in silence.

The boys found Colonel Newcomb and the remaining members of his staff standing near, and seeking anxiously to discover the nature of the country about them. The colonel nodded when they arrived, and gave them an approving glance. The two stood by, awaiting the colonel's orders, but they did not neglect to use their eyes.

Dick saw by the engineer's lantern that they were in a valley, and he learned from his words that this valley was about three miles long with a width of perhaps half a mile. A little mountain river rushed down its center, and the train would cross the stream about a mile further on. It was still raining and the cold wind whistled down from the mountains. Dick could see the somber ridges showing dimly through the loom of darkness and rain. He was instantly aware, too, of a tense and uneasy feeling among the officers. All of them carried glasses, but in the darkness they

could not use them. Lights began to appear in the train and many heads were thrust out at the windows.

"Go through the coaches, Mr. Mason and Mr. Warner," said Colonel Newcomb, "and have every light put out immediately. Tell them, too, that my orders are for absolute silence."

Dick and the Vermonter did their work rapidly, receiving many curious inquiries, as they went from coach to coach, all of which they were honestly unable to answer. They knew no more than the other boys about the situation. But when they left the last coach and returned to the officers near the engine, the train was in total darkness, and no sound came from it. Colonel Newcomb again gave them an approving nod. Dick noticed that the fires in the engine were now well covered, and that no sparks came from the smoke-stack. Standing by it he could see the long shape of the train running back in the darkness, but it would have been invisible to any one a hundred yards away.

"You think we're thoroughly hidden now, Canby?" said the colonel.

"Yes, sir. Unless they've located us precisely on advance information. I don't see how they could find us among the mountains in all this darkness and rain."

"But they've had the advance information! Look there!" exclaimed Major Hertford, pointing toward the high ridge that lay on their right.

A beam of light had appeared on the loftiest spur, standing out at first like a red star in the darkness, then growing intensely

brighter, and burning with a steady, vivid light. The effect was weird and powerful. The mountain beneath it was invisible, and it seemed to burn there like a real eye, wrathful and menacing. The older men, as well as the boys, were held as if by a spell. It was something monstrous and eastern, like the appearance of a genie out of the Arabian Nights.

The light, after remaining fixed for at least a minute, began to move slowly from side to side and then faster.

"A signal!" exclaimed Colonel Newcomb. "Beyond a doubt it is the Southerners. Whatever they're saying they're saying it to somebody. Look toward the south!"

"Ah, there they are answering!" exclaimed Major Hertford.

All had wheeled simultaneously, and on another high spur a mile to the south a second red light as vivid and intense as the first was flashing back and forth. It, too, the mountain below invisible, seemed to swing in the heavens. Dick, standing there in the darkness and rain, and knowing that imminent and mortal danger was on either side, felt a frightful chill creeping slowly down his spine. It is a terrible thing to feel through some superior sense that an invisible foe is approaching, and not be able to know by any kind of striving whence he came.

The lights flashed alternately, and presently both dropped from the sky, seeming to Dick to leave blacker spots on the darkness in their place. Then only the heavy night and the rain encompassed them.

"What do you think it is?" asked Colonel Newcomb of Major

Hertford.

"Southern troops beyond a doubt. It is equally certain that they were warned in some manner from Washington of our departure."

"I think so, too. It is probable that they saw the light and have been signalling their knowledge to each other. It seems likely to me that they will wait at the far end of the valley to cut us off. What force do you think it is?"

"Perhaps a cavalry detachment that has ridden hurriedly to intercept us. I would say at a guess that it is Turner Ashby and his men. A skillful and dangerous foe, as you know."

Already the fame of this daring Confederate horseman was spreading over Virginia and Maryland.

"If we are right in our guess," said Major Hertford, "they will dismount, lead their horses along the mountain side, and shut down the trap upon us. Doubtless they are in superior force, and know the country much better than we do. If they get ahead of us and have a little time to do it in they will certainly tear up the tracks."

"I think you are right in all respects," said Colonel Newcomb. "But it is obvious that we must not give them time to destroy the road ahead of us. As for the rest, I wonder."

He pulled uneasily at his short beard, and then he caught sight of Sergeant Whitley standing silently, arms folded, by the side of the engine. Newcomb, the miner colonel, was a man of big and open mind. A successful business man, he had the qualities

which made him a good general by the time the war was in its third year. He knew Whitley and he knew, too, that he was an old army regular, bristling with experience and shrewdness.

"Sergeant Whitley," he said, "in this emergency what would you do, if you were in my place?"

The sergeant saluted respectfully.

"If I were in your place, sir, which I never will be," he replied, "I would have all the troops leave the train. Then I would have the engineers take the train forward slowly, while the troops marched on either side of it, but at a sufficient distance to be hidden in the darkness. Then, sir, our men could not be caught in a wreck, but with their feet on solid earth they would be ready, if need be, for a fight, which is our business."

"Well spoken, Sergeant Whitley," said Colonel Newcomb, while the other officers also nodded approval. "Your plan is excellent and we will adopt it. Get the troops out of the train quickly but in silence and do you, Canby, be ready with the engine."

Dick and Warner with the older officers turned to the task. The young soldiers were out of the train in two minutes and were forming in lines on either side, arms ready. There were many whisperings among these boys, but none loud enough to be heard twenty yards away. All felt intense relief when they left the train and stood upon the solid, though decidedly damp earth.

But the cold rain sweeping upon their faces was a tonic, both mental and physical, after the close heat of the train. They did not

know why they had disembarked, but they surmised with good reason that an attack was threatened and they were eager to meet it.

Dick and Warner were near the head of the line on the right of the tracks, and Sergeant Whitley was with them. The train began to puff heavily, and in spite of every precaution some sparks flew from the smoke-stack. Dick knew that it was bound to rumble and rattle when it started, but he was surprised at the enormous amount of noise it made, when the wheels really began to turn. It seemed to him that in the silence of the night it could be heard three or four miles. Then he realized that it was merely his own excitement and extreme tension of both mind and body. Canby was taking the train forward so gently that its sounds were drowned two hundred yards away in the swirl of wind and rain.

The men marched, each line keeping abreast of the train, but fifty yards or more to one side. The young troops were forbidden to speak and their footsteps made no noise in the wet grass and low bushes. Dick and Warner kept their eyes on the mountains, turning them alternately from north to south. Nothing appeared on either ridge, and no sound came to tell of an enemy near.

Dick began to believe that they would pass through the valley and out of the trap without a combat. But while a train may go two or three miles in a few minutes it takes troops marching in the darkness over uncertain ground a long time to cover the same distance. They marched a full half hour and then Dick suppressed a cry. The light, burning as intensely red as before, appeared

again on the mountain to the right, but further toward the west, seeming to have moved parallel to the Northern troops. As Dick looked it began to flash swiftly from side to side and that chill and weird feeling again ran down his spine. He looked toward the south and there was the second signal, red and intense, replying to the first.

Dick heard a deep "Ah!" run along the line of young troops, and he knew now that they understood as much as he or any of the officers did. He now knew, too, that they would not pass out of the valley without a combat. The Southern forces, beyond a doubt, would try to shut them in at the western mouth of the valley, and a battle in the night and rain was sure to follow.

The train continued to move slowly forward. Had Colonel Newcomb dared he would have ordered Canby to increase his speed in order that he might reach the western mouth of the valley before the Southern force had a chance to tear up the rails, but there was no use for the train without the troops and they were already marching as fast as they could.

The gorge was now not more than a quarter of a mile away. Dick was able to discern it, because the darkness there was not quite so dark as that which lay against the mountains on either side. He was hopeful that they might yet reach it before the Southern force could close down upon them, but before they went many yards further he heard the beat of horses' feet both to right and left and knew that the enemy was at hand.

"Take the train on through the pass, Canby!" shouted Colonel

Newcomb. “We’ll cover its retreat, and join you later—if we can.”

The train began to rattle and roar, and its speed increased. Showers of sparks shot from the funnels of the two engines, and gleamed for an instant in the darkness. The beat of horses’ feet grew to thunder. Colonel Newcomb with great presence of mind drew the two parallel lines of his men close together, and ordered them to lie down on either side of the railroad track and face outward with cocked rifles. Dick, the Vermonter, and Sergeant Whitley lay close together, and the three faced the north.

“See the torches!” said Whitley.

Dick saw eight or ten torches wavering and flickering at a height of seven or eight feet above the ground, and he knew that they were carried by horsemen, but he could not see either men or horses beneath. Then the rapid beat of hoofs ceased abruptly at a distance that Dick thought must be about two hundred yards.

“Lie flat!” cried Whitley. “They’re about to fire!”

CHAPTER III. THE TELEGRAPH STATION

The darkness to the north was suddenly split apart by a solid sheet of flame. Dick by the light saw many men on horseback and others on foot, bridle rein over arm. It was well for the seven hundred boys that they had pressed themselves against the solid earth. A sheet of bullets swept toward them. Most passed over their heads, but many struck upon bones and flesh, and cries of pain rose from the lines of men lying along the railroad track.

The seven hundred pulled trigger and fired at the flash. They fired so well that Dick could hear Southern horses neighing with pain, and struggling in the darkness. He felt sure that many men, too, had been hit. At least no charge came. The seven hundred shouted with exultation and, leaping to their feet, prepared to fire a second volley. But the swift command of their officers quickly put them down again.

"Don't forget the other Confederate column to the south of us," whispered Whitley. "They did not fire at first for fear their bullets would pass over our heads and strike their own comrades. For the same reason they must have dropped back a little in order to avoid the fire of their friends. Their volley will come from an angle about midway between our left and rear."

Just as he spoke the last words the rifles flashed at the

surmised angle and again the bullets beat among the young troops or swept over their heads. A soldier was killed only a few feet from Dick. The boy picked up his rifle and ammunition and began to fire whenever he saw the flash of an opposing weapon. But the fire of both Confederate columns ceased in a minute or two, and not a shot nor the sound of a single order came out of the darkness. But Dick with his ear to the soft earth, could hear the crush of hoofs in the mud, and with a peculiar ability to discern whence sound came he knew that the force on the left and rear was crossing the railroad track in order to join their comrades on the north. He whispered his knowledge to Whitley, who whispered back:

"It's the natural thing for them to do. They could not afford to fight on in the darkness with two separate forces. The two columns would soon be firing into each other."

Colonel Newcomb now gave an order for the men to rise and follow the railroad track, but also to fire at the flash of the rifles whenever a volley was poured upon them. He must not only beat off the Southern attack, but also continue the journey to those points in the west where they were needed so sorely. Some of his men had been killed, and he was compelled to leave their bodies where they had fallen. Others were wounded, but without exception they were helped along by their comrades.

Warner also had secured a rifle, with which he fired occasionally, but he and Dick, despite the darkness, kept near to Colonel Newcomb in order that they might deliver any orders that

he should choose to give. Sergeant Whitley was close to them. Dick presently heard the rush of water.

"What is that?" he exclaimed.

"It's the little river that runs down the valley," replied Warner. "There's a slope here and it comes like a torrent. A bridge or rather trestle is only a little further, and we've got to walk the ties, if we reach the other side. They'll make their heaviest rush there, I suppose, as beyond a doubt they are thoroughly acquainted with the ground."

The Northern troops left the track which here ran along an embankment several feet high, and took shelter on its southern side. They now had an advantage for a while, as they fired from a breastwork upon their foes, who were in the open. But the darkness, lit only by the flashes of the rifles, kept the fire of both sides from being very destructive, the bullets being sent mainly at random.

Dick dimly saw the trestle work ahead of them, and the roaring of the little river increased. He did not know how deep the water was, but he was sure that it could not be above his waist as it was a small stream. An idea occurred to him and he promptly communicated it to Colonel Newcomb.

"Suppose, sir," he said, "that we ford the river just below the trestle. It will deceive them and we'll be half way across before they suspect the change."

"A good plan, Mr. Mason," said Colonel Newcomb. "We'll try it."

Word was quickly passed along the line that they should turn to the left as they approached the trestle, march swiftly down the slope, and dash into the stream. As fast as they reached the other side of the ford the men should form upon the bank there, and with their rifles cover the passage of their comrades.

The skeleton work of the trestle now rose more clearly into view. The rain had almost ceased and faint rays of moonlight showed through the rifts where the clouds had broken apart. The boys distinctly heard the gurgling rush of waters, and they also saw the clear, bluish surface of the mountain stream. The same quickening of light disclosed the Southern force on their right flank and rear, only four or five hundred yards away. Dick's hasty glance backward lingered for a moment on a powerful man on a white horse just in advance of the Southern column. He saw this man raise his hand and then command the men to fire. He and twenty others under the impulse of excitement shouted to the regiment to drop down, and the Northern lads did so.

Most of the volley passed over their heads. Rising they sent back a return discharge, and then the head of the columns rushed into the stream. Dick felt swift water whirling about him and tugging at his body, but it rose no higher than his waist, although foam and spray were dashed into his face. He heard all around him the splashing of his comrades, and their murmurs of satisfaction. They realized now that they were not only able to retreat before a much superior force, but this same stream, when crossed, would form a barrier behind which they could fight two

to one.

The Confederate leader, whoever he might be, and Dick had no doubt that he was the redoubtable Turner Ashby, also appreciated the full facts and he drove his whole force straight at the regiment. It was well for the young troops that part of them were already across, and, under the skillful leadership of Colonel Newcomb, Major Hertford, and three or four old, regular army sergeants, of whom the best was Whitley, were already forming in line of battle.

"Kneel," shouted the colonel, "and fire over the heads of your comrades at the enemy!"

The light was still growing brighter. The rain came only in slight flurries. The clouds were trooping off toward the northeast, and the moon was out. Dick clearly saw the black mass of the Southern horsemen wheeling down upon them. At least three hundred of the regiment were now upon the bank, and, with fairly steady aim, they poured a heavy volley into the massed ranks of their foe. Dick saw horses fall while others dashed away riderless. But the Southern line wavered only for a moment and then came on again with many shouts. There were also dismounted men on either flank who knelt and maintained a heavy fire upon the defenders.

The lads in blue were suffering many wounds, but a line of trees and underbrush on the western shore helped them. Lying there partly protected they loaded and pulled trigger as fast as they could, while the rest of their comrades emerged dripping

from the stream to join them. The Confederates, brave as they were, had no choice but to give ground against such strong defense, and the miner colonel, despite his reserve and his middle years, gave vent to his exultation.

"We can hold this line forever!" he exclaimed to his aides. "It's one thing to charge us in the open, but it's quite another to get at us across a deep and rushing stream. Major Hertford, take part of the men to the other side of the railroad track and drive back any attempt at a crossing there. Lieutenant Mason, you and Lieutenant Warner go ahead and see what has become of the train. You can get back here in plenty time for more fighting."

Dick and Warner hurried forward, following the line of the railroad. Their blood was up and they did not like to leave the defense of the river, but orders must be obeyed. As they ran down the railroad track a man came forward swinging a lantern, and they saw the tall gaunt figure of Canby, the chief engineer. Behind him the train stretched away in the darkness.

"I guess that our men have forded the river and are holding the bank," said Canby. "Do they need the train crew back there to help?"

He spoke with husky eagerness. Dick knew that he was longing to be in the middle of the fight, but that his duty kept him with the train.

"No," he replied. "The river bank, and the road along its shore give us a great position for defense, and I know we can hold it. Colonel Newcomb did not say so, but perhaps you'd better bring

the train back nearer us. It's not our object to stay in this valley and fight, but to go into the west. Is all clear ahead?"

"No enemy is there. Some of the brakemen have gone on a mile or two and they say the track hasn't been touched. You tell Colonel Newcomb that I'm bringing the train right down to the battle line."

Dick and Warner returned quickly to Colonel Newcomb, who appreciated Canby's courage and presence of mind. As the train approached the four cannon were unloaded from the trucks, and swept the further shore with shell and shrapnel. After a scattered fire the Southern force withdrew some distance, where it halted, apparently undecided. The clouds rolled up again, the feeble moon disappeared, and the river sank into the dark.

"May I make a suggestion, Colonel Newcomb?" said Major Hertford.

"Certainly."

"The enemy will probably seek an undefended ford much higher up, cross under cover of the new darkness and attack us in heavy force on the flank. Suppose we get aboard the train at once, cannon and all, and leave them far behind."

"Excellent. If the darkness covers their movements it also covers ours. Load the train as fast as possible and see that no wounded are left behind."

He gave rapid orders to all his officers and aides, and in fifteen minutes the troops were aboard the train again, the cannon were lifted upon the trucks, Canby and his assistants had all steam up,

and the train with its usual rattle and roar resumed its flight into the west.

Dick and Warner were in the first coach near Colonel Newcomb, ready for any commands that he might give. Both had come through the defense of the ford without injury, although a bullet had gone through Dick's coat without touching the skin. Sergeant Whitley, too, was unharmed, but the regiment had suffered. More than twenty dead were left in the valley for the enemy to bury.

Despite all the commands and efforts of the officers there was much excited talk in the train. Boys were binding up wounds of other boys and were condoling with them. But on the whole they were exultant. Youth did not realize the loss of those who had been with them so little. Scattered exclamations came to Dick:

"We beat 'em off that time, an' we can do it again."

"Lucky though we had that little river before us. Guess they'd have rode us right down with their horses if it hadn't been for the stream an' its banks."

"Ouch, don't draw that bandage so tight on my arm. It ain't nothin' but a flesh wound."

"I hate a battle in the dark. Give me the good sunshine, where you can see what's goin' on. My God, that you Bill! I'm tremendous glad to see you! I thought you was lyin' still, back there in the grass!"

Dick said nothing. He was in a seat next to the window, and his face was pressed against the rain-marked pane. The rifle that

he had picked up and used so well was still clutched, grimed with smoke, in his hands. The train had not yet got up speed. He caught glimpses of the river behind which they had fought, and which had served them so well as a barrier. In fact, he knew that it had saved them. But they had beaten off the enemy! The pulses in his temples still throbbed from exertion and excitement, but his heart beat exultantly. The bitterness of Bull Run was deep and it had lasted long, but here they were the victors.

The speed of the train increased and Dick knew that they were safe from further attack. They were still running among mountains, clad heavily in forest, but a meeting with a second Southern force was beyond probability. The first had made a quick raid on information supplied by spies in Washington, but it had failed and the way was now clear.

Ample food was served somewhat late to the whole regiment, the last wounds were bound up, and Dick, having put aside the rifle, fell asleep at last. His head lay against the window and he slept heavily all through the night. Warner in the next seat slept in the same way. But the wise old sergeant just across the aisle remained awake much longer. He was summing up and he concluded that the seven hundred lads had done well. They were raw, but they were being whipped into shape.

He smiled a little grimly as the unspoken words, "whipped into shape," rose to his lips. The veteran of many an Indian battle foresaw something vastly greater than anything that had occurred on the plains. "Whipped into shape!" Why, in the mighty war

that was gathering along a front of two thousand miles no soldier could escape being whipped into shape, or being whipped out of it.

But the sergeant's own eyes closed after a while, and he, too, slept the sleep of utter mental and physical exhaustion. The train rumbled on, the faithful Canby in the first engine aware of his great responsibility and equal to it. Not a wink of sleep for him that night. The darkness had lightened somewhat more. The black of the skies had turned to a dusky blue, and the bolder stars were out. He could always see the shining rails three or four hundred yards ahead, and he sent his train steadily forward at full speed, winding among the gorges and rattling over the trestles. The silent mountains gave back every sound in dying echoes, but Canby paid no heed to them. His eyes were always on the track ahead, and he, too, was exultant. He had brought the regiment through, and while it was on the train his responsibility was not inferior to that of Colonel Newcomb.

When Dick awoke, bright light was pouring in at the car windows, but the car was cold and his body was stiff and sore. His military overcoat had been thrown over him in the night and Warner had been covered in the same way. They did not know that Sergeant Whitley had done that thoughtful act.

Dick stretched himself and drew deep breaths. Warm youth soon sent the blood flowing in a full tide through his veins, and the stiffness and soreness departed. He saw through the window that they were still running among the mountains, but they did

not seem to be so high here as they were at the river by which they had fought in the night. He knew from his geography and his calculation of time that they must be far into that part of Virginia which is now West Virginia.

There was no rain now, at least where the train was running, but the sun had risen on a cold world. Far up on the higher peaks he saw a fine white mist which he believed to be falling snow. Obviously it was winter here and putting on the big military coat he drew it tightly about him. Others in the coach were waking up and some of them, grown feverish with their wounds, were moving restlessly on their seats, where they lay protected by the blankets of their fellows.

Dick now and then saw a cabin nestling in the lee of a hill, with the blue smoke rising from its chimney into the clear, wintry air, and small and poor as they were they gave him a singular sense of peace and comfort. His mind felt for a few moments a strong reaction from war and its terrors, but the impulse and the strong purpose that bore him on soon came back.

The train rushed through a pass and entered a sheltered valley a mile or two wide and eight or ten miles long. A large creek ran through it, and the train stopped at a village on its banks. The whole population of the village and all the farmers of the valley were there to meet them. It was a Union valley and by some system of mountain telegraphy, although there were no telegraph wires, news of the battle at the ford had preceded the train.

"Come, lads," said Colonel Newcomb to his staff. "Out with

you! We're among friends here!"

Dick and Warner were glad enough to leave the train. The air, cold as it was, was like the breath of heaven on their faces, and the cheers of the people were like the trump of fame in their ears. Pretty girls with their faces in red hoods or red comforters were there with food and smoking coffee. Medicines for the wounded, as much as the village could supply, had been brought to the train, and places were already made for those hurt too badly to go on with the expedition.

The whole cheerful scene, with its life and movement, the sight of new faces and the sound of many voices, had a wonderful effect upon young Dick Mason. He had a marvellously sensitive temperament, a direct inheritance from his famous border ancestor, Paul Cotter. Things were always vivid to him. Either they glowed with color, or they were hueless and dead. This morning the long strain of the night and its battle was relaxed completely. The grass in the valley was brown with frost, and the trees were shorn of their leaves by the winter winds, but to Dick it was the finest village that he had ever seen, and these were the friendliest people in the world.

He drank a cup of hot coffee handed to him by the stalwart wife of a farmer, and then, when she insisted, drank another.

"You're young to be fightin'," she said sympathetically.

"We all are," said Dick with a glance at the regiment, "but however we may fight you'll never find anybody attacking a breakfast with more valor and spirit than we do."

She looked at the long line of lads, drinking coffee and eating ham, bacon, eggs, and hot biscuits, and smiled.

"I reckon you tell the truth, young feller," she said, "but it's good to see 'em go at it."

She passed on to help others, and Dick, summoned by Colonel Newcomb, went into a little railroad and telegraph station. The telegraph wires had been cut behind them, but ten miles across the mountains the spur of another railroad touched a valley. The second railroad looped toward the north, and it was absolutely sure that it was beyond the reach of Southern raiders. Colonel Newcomb wished to send a message to the Secretary of War and the President, telling of the night's events and his triumphant passage through the ordeal. These circumstances might make them wish to change his orders, and at any rate the commander of the regiment wished to be sure of what he was doing.

"You're a Kentuckian and a good horseman," said Colonel Newcomb to Dick. "The villagers have sent me a trusty man, one Bill Petty, as a guide. Take Sergeant Whitley and you three go to the station. I've already written my dispatches, and I put them in your care. Have them sent at once, and if necessary wait four hours for an answer. If it comes, ride back as fast as you can. The horses are ready and I rely upon you."

"Thank you, sir, I'll do my best," said Dick, who deeply appreciated the colonel's confidence. He wasted no time in words, but went at once to Sergeant Whitley, who was ready in five minutes. Warner, who heard of the mission, was

disappointed because he was not going too. But he was philosophical.

"I've made a close calculation," he said, "and I have demonstrated to my own satisfaction that our opportunities are sixty per cent energy and ability, twenty per cent manners, and twenty per cent chance. In this case chance, which made the Colonel better acquainted with you than with me, was in your favor. We won't discuss the other eighty per cent, because this twenty is enough. Besides it looks pretty cold on the mountains, and its fine here in the village. But luck with you, Dick."

He gave his comrade's hand a strong grasp and walked away toward the little square of the village, where the troops were encamped for the present. Dick sprang upon a horse which Bill Petty was holding for him. Whitley was already up, and the three rode swiftly toward a blue line which marked a cleft between two ridges. Dick first observed their guide. Bill Petty was a short but very stout man, clad in a suit of home-made blue jeans, the trousers of which were thrust into high boots with red tops. A heavy shawl of dark red was wrapped around his shoulders, and beneath his broad-brimmed hat a red woolen comforter covered his ears, cheeks, and chin. His thick hair and a thick beard clothing his entire face were a flaming red. The whole effect of the man was somewhat startling, but when he saw Dick looking at him in curiosity his mouth opened wide in a grin of extreme good nature.

"I guess you think I'm right red," he said. "Well, I am, an' as

you see I always dress to suit my complexion. Guess I'll warm up the road some on a winter day like this."

"Would you mind my callin' you Red Blaze?" asked Sergeant Whitley gravely.

"Not-a-tall! Not-a-tall! I'd like it. I guess it's sorter pictorial an' 'maginative like them knights of old who had fancy names 'cordin' to their qualities. People 'round here are pretty plain, an' they've never called me nothin' but Bill. Red Blaze she is."

"An' Blaze for short. Well, then, Blaze, what kind of a road is that we're goin' to ride on?"

"Depends on the kind of weather in which you ask the question. As it's the fust edge of winter here in the mountains, though it ain't quite come in the lowlands, an' as it's rained a lot in the last week, I reckon you'll find it bad. Mebbe our hosses will go down in the road to thar knees, but I guess they won't sink up to thar bodies. They may stumble an' throw us, but as we'll hit in soft mud it ain't likely to hurt us. It may rain hard, 'cause I see clouds heapin' up thar in the west. An' if it rains the cold may then freeze a skim of ice over the road, on which we could slip an' break our necks, hosses an' all. Then thar are some cliffs close to the road. If we was to slip on that thar skim of ice which we've reckoned might come, then mebbe we'd go over one of them cliffs and drop down a hundred feet or so right swift. If it was soft mud down below we might not get hurt mortal. But it ain't soft mud. We'd hit right in the middle of sharp, hard rocks. An' if a gang of rebel sharpshooters has wandered up here they

may see us an' chase us 'way off into the mountains, where we'd break our necks fallin' off the ridges or freeze to death or starve to death."

Whitley stared at him.

"Blaze," he exclaimed, "what kind of a man are you anyway?"

"Me? I'm the happiest man in the valley. When people are low down they come an' talk to me to get cheered up. I always lay the worst before you first an' then shove it out of the way. None of them things that I was conjurin' up is goin' to happen. I was just tellin' you of the things you was goin' to escape, and now you'll feel good, knowin' what dangers you have passed before they happened."

Dick laughed. He liked this intensely red man with his round face and twinkling eyes. He saw, too, that the mountaineer was a fine horseman, and as he carried a long slender-barreled rifle over his shoulder, while a double-barreled pistol was thrust in his belt, it was likely that he would prove a formidable enemy to any who sought to stop him.

"Perhaps your way is wise," said the boy. "You begin with the bad and end with the good. What is the name of this place to which we are going?"

"Hubbard. There was a pioneer who fit the Injuns in here in early times. I never heard that he got much, 'cept a town named after him. But Hubbard is a right peart little place, with a bank, two stores, three churches, an' nigh on to two hundred people. Are you wrapped up well, Mr. Mason, 'cause it's goin' to be cold

on the mountains?"

Dick wore heavy boots, and a long, heavy military coat which fell below his knees and which also had a high collar protecting his ears. He was provided also with heavy buckskin gloves. The sergeant was clad similarly.

"I think I'm clothed against any amount of cold," he replied.

"Well, you need to be," said Petty, "'cause the pass through which we're goin' is at least fifteen hundred feet above Townsville —that's our village—an' I reckon it's just 'bout as high over Hubbard. Them fifteen hundred feet make a pow'ful difference in climate, as you'll soon find out. It's not only colder thar, but the winds are always blowin' hard through the pass. Jest look back at Townsville. Ain't she fine an' neat down thar in the valley, beside that clear creek which higher up in the mountains is full of the juiciest an' sweetest trout that man ever stuck a tooth into."

Dick saw that Petty was talkative, but he did not mind. In fact, both he and Whitley liked the man's joyous and unbroken run of chatter. He turned in his saddle and looked back, following the stout man's pointing finger. Townsville, though but a little mountain town built mainly of logs, was indeed a jewel, softened and with a silver sheen thrown over it by the mountain air which was misty that morning. He dimly saw the long black line of the train standing on the track, and here and there warm rings of smoke rose from the chimneys and floated up into the heavens, where they were lost.

He thought he could detect little figures moving beside the

train and he knew that they must be those of his comrades. He felt for a moment a sense of loneliness. He had not known these lads long, but the battle had bound them firmly together. They had been comrades in danger and that made them comrades as long as they lived.

"Greatest town in the world," said Petty, waving toward it a huge hand, encased in a thick yarn glove. "I've traveled from it as much as fifty miles in every direction, north, south, east, an' west, an' I ain't never seed its match. I reckon I'm somethin' of a traveler, but every time I come back to Townsville, I think all the more of it, seein' how much better it is than anything else."

Dick glanced at the mountaineer, and saw that there could be no doubt of his sincerity.

"You're a lucky man, Mr. Petty," he said, "to live in the finest place in the world."

"Yes, if I don't get drug off to the war. I'm not hankerin' for fightin' an' I don't know much what the war's about though I'm for the Union, fust to last, an' that's the way most of the people 'bout here feel. Turn your heads ag'in, friends, an' take another look at Townsville."

Dick and Whitley glanced back and saw only the blank gray wall of the mountain. Petty laughed. He was the finest laugher that Dick had ever heard. The laugh did not merely come from the mouth, it was also exuded, pouring out through every pore. It was rolling, unctuous, and so strong that Petty not only shook with it, but his horse seemed to shake also. It was mellow, too,

with an organ note that comes of a mighty lung and throat, and of pure air breathed all the year around.

"Thought I'd git the joke on you," he said, when he stopped laughing. "The road's been slantin' into the mountains, without you knowin' it, and Townsville is cut off by the cliffs. You'll find it gettin' wilder now 'till we start down the slope on the other side. Lucky our hosses are strong, 'cause the mud is deeper than I thought it would be."

It was not really a road that they were following, merely a path, and the going was painful. Under Petty's instructions they stopped their mounts now and then for a rest, and a mile further on they began to feel a rising wind.

"It's the wind that I told you of," said Petty. "It's sucked through six or seven miles of pass, an' it will blow straight in our faces all the way. As we'll be goin' up for a long distance you'll find it growin' colder, too. But you've got to remember that after you pass them cold winds an' go down the slope you'll strike another warm little valley, the one in which Hubbard is layin' so neat an' so snug."

Dick had already noticed the increasing coldness and so had the sergeant. Whitley, from his long experience on the plains, had the keenest kind of an eye for climatic changes. He noticed with some apprehension that the higher peaks were clothed in thick, cold fog, but he said nothing to the brave boy whom he had grown to love like a son. But both he and Dick drew their heavy coats closer and were thankful for the buckskin gloves, without

which their hands would have stiffened on the reins.

Now they rode in silence with their heads bent well forward, because the wind was becoming fiercer and fiercer. Over the peaks the fogs were growing thicker and darker and after a while the sharp edge of the wind was wet with rain. It stung their faces, and they drew their hat brims lower and their coat collars higher to protect themselves from such a cutting blast.

"Told you we might have trouble," called Petty, cheerfully, "but if you ride right on through trouble you'll leave trouble behind. Nor this ain't nothin' either to what we kin expect before we git to the top of the pass. Cur'us what a pow'ful lot human bein's kin stand when they make up their minds to it."

"Are the horses well shod?" asked Whitley.

"Best shod in the world, 'cause I done it myself. That's my trade, blacksmith, an' I'm a good one if I do say it. I heard before we started that you had been a soldier in the west. I s'pose that you had to look mighty close to your hosses then. A man couldn't afford to be ridin' a hoss made lame by bad shoein' when ten thousand yellin' Sioux or Blackfeet was after him."

"No, you couldn't," replied the sergeant. "Out there you had to watch every detail. That's one of the things that fightin' Indians taught. You had to be watchin' all the time an' I reckon the trainin' will be of value in this war. Are we mighty near to the top of the pass, Mr. Petty?"

"Got two or three miles yet. The slope is steeper on the other side. We rise a lot more before we hit the top."

The wind grew stronger with every rod they ascended, and the horses began to pant with their severe exertions. At Petty's suggestion the three riders dismounted and walked for a while, leading their horses. The rain turned to a fine hail and stung their faces. Had it not been for his two good comrades Dick would have found his situation inexpressibly lonely and dreary. The heavy fog now enveloped all the peaks and ridges and filled every valley and chasm. He could see only fifteen or twenty yards ahead along the muddy path, and the fine hail which gave every promise of becoming a storm of sleet stung continually. The wind confined in the narrow gorge also uttered a hideous shrieking and moaning.

"Tests your nerve!" shouted Petty to Dick. "There are hard things besides battles to stand, an' this is goin' to be one of the hard ones, but if you go through it all right you kin go through any number of the same kind all right, too. Likely the sleet will be so thick that it will make a sheet of slippery ice for us comin' back. Now, hosses that ain't got calks on thar shoes are pretty shore to slip an' fall, breakin' a leg or two, an' mebbe breakin' the necks of thar riders."

Dick looked at him with some amazement. Despite his announcement of dire disaster the man's eyes twinkled merrily and the round, red outline of his bushy head in the scarlet comforter made a cheerful blaze.

"It's jest as I told you," said Petty, meeting the boy's look. "Without calks on thar shoes our hosses are pretty shore to slip

on the ice and break theirselves up, or fall down a cliff an' break themselves up more."

"Then why in thunder, Blaze," exclaimed Whitley, "did we start without calks on the shoes of our horses?"

Red Blaze broke into a deep mellow laugh, starting from the bottom of his diaphragm, swelling as it passed through his chest, swelling again as it passed through throat and mouth, and bursting upon the open air in a mighty diapason that rose cheerfully above the shrieking and moaning of the wind.

"We didn't start without em," he replied. "The twelve feet of these three hosses have on 'em the finest calked shoes in all these mountains. I put 'em on myself, beginnin' the job this mornin' before you was awake, your colonel, on the advice of the people of Townsville who know me as one of its leadin' an' trusted citizens, havin' selected me as the guide of this trip. I was jest tellin' you what would happen to you if I didn't justify the confidence of the people of Townsville."

"I allow, Red Blaze," said the sergeant with confidence, "that you ain't no fool, an' that you're lookin' out for our best interests. Lead on."

Red Blaze's mellow and pleased laugh rose once more above the whistling of the wind.

"You kin ride ag'in now, boys," he said. "The hosses are pretty well rested."

They resumed the saddle gladly and now mounted toward the crest of the pass. The sleet turned to snow, which was a relief

to their faces, and Dick, with the constant beating of wind and snow, began to feel a certain physical exhilaration. He realized the truth of Red Blaze's assertion that if you stiffen your back and push your way through troubles you leave troubles behind.

They rode now in silence for quite a while, and then Red Blaze suddenly announced:

"We're at the top, boys."

CHAPTER IV. THE FIGHT IN THE PASS

The three halted their horses and stood for a minute or two on the very crest of the pass. The fierce wind out of the northwest blew directly in their faces and both riders and horses alike were covered with snow. But Dick felt a wonderful thrill as he gazed upon the vast white wilderness. East and west, north and south he saw the driving snow and the lofty peaks and ridges showing through it, white themselves. The towns below and the cabins that snuggled in the coves were completely hidden. They could see no sign of human life on slope or in valley.

"Looks as wild as the Rockies," said the sergeant tersely.

"But you won't find any Injuns here to ambush you," said Red Blaze, "though I don't make any guarantee against bushwhackers and guerillas, who'll change sides as often as two or three times a day, if it will suit their convenience. They could hide in the woods along the road an' pick us off as easy as I'd shoot a squirrel out of a tree. They'd like to have our arms an' our big coats. I tell you what, friends, a mighty civil war like ours gives a tremenjeous opportunity to bad men. They're all comin' to the top. Every rascal in the mountains an' in the lowlands, too, I guess, is out lookin' for plunder an' wuss."

"You're right, Red Blaze," said the sergeant with emphasis,

"an' it won't be stopped until the generals on both sides begin to hang an' shoot the plunderers an' murderers."

"But they can't ketch 'em all," said Red Blaze. "A Yankee general with a hundred thousand men will be out lookin' for what? Not for a gang of robbers, not by a jugful. He'll be lookin' for a rebel general with another hundred thousand men, an' the rebel general with a hundred thousand men will be lookin' for that Yankee general with his hundred thousand. So there you are, an' while they're lookin' for each other an' then fightin' each other to a standstill, the robbers will be plunderin' an' murderin'. But don't you worry about bein' ambushed. I was jest tellin' you what might happen, but wouldn't happen. We kin go down hill fast now, and we'll soon be in Hubbard, which is the other side of all that fallin' snow."

The road down the mountain was also better than the one by which they had ascended, and as the horses with their calked shoes were swift of foot they made rapid progress. As they descended, the wind lowered fast and there was much less snow. Red Blaze said it was probably not snowing in the valley at all.

"See that shinin' in the sun," he said. "That's the tin coverin' on the steeple of the new church in Hubbard. The sun strikes squar'ly on it, an' now I know I'm right 'bout it not snowin' down thar. Wait 'til we turn 'roun' this big rock. Yes, thar's Hubbard, layin' out in the valley without a drop of snow on her. It looks good, don't it, friends, with the smoke comin' out of the chimneys. That little red house over thar is the railroad an' telegraph station, an'

we'll go straight for it, 'cause we ain't got no time to waste."

They emerged into the valley and rode rapidly for the station. Farmers on the outskirts and villagers looked wonderingly at them, but they did not pause to answer questions. They galloped their tired mounts straight for the little red building, which was the station. Dick sprang first from his horse, and leaving it to stand at the door, ran inside. A telegraph instrument was clicking mournfully in the corner. A hot stove was in another corner, and sitting near it was a lad of about Dick's age, clad in mountain jeans, and lounging in an old cane-bottomed chair. But Dick's quick glance saw that the boy was bright of face and keen of eye. He promptly drew out his papers and said:

"I'm an aide from the Northern regiment of Colonel Newcomb at Townsville. Here are duplicate dispatches, one set for the President of the United States and the other for the Secretary of War. They tell of a successful fight that we had last night with Southern troops, presumably the cavalrymen of Turner Ashby. I wish you to send them at once."

"He's speakin' the exact truth, Jim," said Red Blaze, who had come in behind Dick, "an' I've brought him an' the sergeant here over the mountains to tell about it."

The boy sprang to his instrument. But he stopped a moment to ask one question.

"Did you really beat 'em off?" he asked as he looked up with shining eye.

"We certainly did," replied Dick.

"I'll send it faster than I ever sent anything before," said the boy. "To think of me, Jim Johnson, sending a dispatch to Abraham Lincoln, telling of a victory!"

"I reckon you're right, Jim, it's your chance," said Red Blaze.

Jim bent over the instrument which now began to click steadily and fast.

"You're to wait for answers," said Dick.

The boy nodded, but his shining eyes remained bent over the instrument. Dick went to the door, brushed off the snow, came back and sat down by the stove. Sergeant Whitley, who had tied the horses to hitching posts, came in, pulled up an empty box and sat down by him. Red Blaze slipped away unnoticed. But he came back very soon, and men and women came with him, bringing food and smoking coffee. There was enough for twenty.

Red Blaze had spread among the villagers, every one of whom he knew, the news that the Union arms had won a victory. Nor had it suffered anything in the telling. Colonel Newcomb's regiment, by the most desperate feats of gallantry, had beaten off at least ten thousand Southerners, and the boy and the man in uniform, who were resting by the fire in the station, had been the greatest two heroes of a battle waged for a whole night.

Curious eyes gazed at Dick and the sergeant as they sat there by the stove. Dick himself, warm, relaxed, and the needs of his body satisfied, felt like going to sleep. But he watched the boy operator, who presently finished his two dispatches and then lifted his head for the first time.

"They've gone straight into Washington," he said. "We ought to get an answer soon."

"We'll wait here for it," said Dick.

The three messengers were now thoroughly warmed at the stove, they had eaten heartily of the best the village could furnish, and a great feeling of comfort pervaded them. While they were waiting for the reply that they hoped would come from Washington, Dick Mason and Sergeant Whitley went outside. No snow was falling in the valley, but off on the mountain crest they still saw the white veil, blown by the wind.

Red Blaze joined them and was everywhere their guide and herald. He ascribed to them such deeds of skill and valor that they were compelled to call him the best romancer they had met in a long time.

"I suppose that if Mr. Warner were here," said the sergeant, "he would reduce these statements to mathematics, ten per cent fact an' ninety per cent fancy."

"Just about that," said Dick.

Red Blaze came to them presently, bristling with news.

"A farmer from a hollow further to the west," he said, "has just come in, an' he says that a band of guerillas is ridin' through the hills. 'Bout twenty of them, he said, led by a big dark fellow, his face covered with black beard. They've been liftin' hosses an' takin' other things, but they're strangers in these parts. Tom Sykes, who was held up by them an' robbed of his hoss, says that the rest of 'em called their leader Skelly. Tom

seemed to think that mebbe they came from somewhere in the Kentucky mountains. They called themselves a scoutin' party of the Southern army."

Dick started violently.

"Why, I know this man Skelly," he said. "He lives in the mountains to the eastward of my home in Kentucky. He organized a band at the beginning of the war, but over there he said he was fightin' for the North."

"He'll be fightin' for his own hand," said the sergeant sternly. "But he can't play double all the time. That sort of thing will bring a man to the end of a rope, with clear air under his feet."

"I'm glad you've told me this," said Red Blaze. "Skelly might have come ridin' in here, claimin' that he an' his men was Northern troops, an' then when we wasn't suspectin' might have held up the whole town. I'll warn 'em. Thar ain't a house here that hasn't got two or three rifles an' shotguns in it, an' with the farmers from the valley joinin' in Hubbard could wipe out the whole gang."

"Tell them to be on guard all the time, Red Blaze," said Whitley with strong emphasis. "In war you've got to watch, watch, watch. Always know what the other fellow is doin', if you can."

"Let's go back to the station," said Dick. "Maybe we'll have an answer soon."

They found the young operator hanging over his instrument, his eyes still shining. He had been in that position ever since they

left him, and Dick knew that his eagerness to get an answer from Washington kept him there, mind and body waiting for the tick of the key.

Dick, the sergeant, and Red Blaze sat down by the stove again, and rested there quietly for a quarter of an hour. Red Blaze was thinking that it would be another cold ride back over the pass. The sergeant, although he was not sleepy, closed his eyes and saw again the vast rolling plains, the herds of buffalo spreading to the horizon, and the bands of Sioux and Cheyennes galloping down, their great war bonnets making splashes of color against the thin blue sky. Dick was thinking of Pendleton, the peaceful little town in Kentucky that was his home, and of his cousin, Harry Kenton. He did not know now where Harry was, and he did not even know whether he was dead or alive.

Dick sighed a little, and just at that moment the telegraph key began to click.

"The answer is coming!" exclaimed the young operator excitedly and then he bent closer over the key to take it. The three chairs straightened up, and they, too, bent toward the key. The boy wrote rapidly, but the clicking did not go on long. When it ceased he straightened up with his finished message in his hand. His face was flushed and his eyes still shining. He folded the paper and handed it to Dick.

"It's for you, Mr. Mason," he said.

Dick unfolded it and read aloud:

"Colonel John D. Newcomb:

"Congratulations on your success and fine management of your troops. Victory worth much to us. Read dispatch to regiment and continue westward to original destination.

A. LINCOLN."

Dick's face glowed, and the sergeant's teeth came together with a little click of satisfaction.

"When I saw that it was to be read to the regiment I thought it no harm to read it to the rest of you," said Dick, as he refolded the precious dispatch and put it in his safest pocket. "Now, sergeant, I think we ought to be off at full speed."

"Not a minute to waste," said Sergeant Whitley.

Their horses had been fed and were rested well. The three bade farewell to the young operator, then to almost all of Hubbard and proceeded in a trot for the pass. They did not speak until they were on the first slope, and then the sergeant, looking up at the heights, asked:

"Shall we have snow again on our return, Red Blaze? I hope not. It's important for us to get back to Townsville without any waste of time."

"I hate to bring bad news," replied Red Blaze, "but we'll shore have more snow. See them clouds, sailin' up an' always sailin' up from the southwest, an' see that white mist 'roun' the highest peaks. That's snow, an' it'll hit the pass just as it did when we was comin' over. But we've got this in favor of ourselves an' our hosses now: The wind is on our backs."

They rode hard now. Dick had received the precious message

from the President, and it would be a proud moment for him when he put it in the hands of the colonel. He did not wish that moment to be delayed. Several times he patted the pocket in which the paper lay.

As they ascended, the wind increased in strength, but being on their backs now it seemed to help them along. They were soon high up on the slopes and then they naturally turned for a parting look at Hubbard in its valley, a twin to that of Townsville. It looked from afar neat and given up to peace, but Dick knew that it had been stirred deeply by the visit of his comrades and himself.

"It seems," he said, "that the war would pass by these little mountain nests."

"But it don't," said Red Blaze. "War, I guess, is like a mad an' kickin' mule, hoofs lashin' out everywhar, an' you can't tell what they're goin' to hit. Boys, we're makin' good time. That wind on our backs fairly lifts us up the mountain side."

Petty had all the easy familiarity of the backwoods. He treated the boy and man who rode with him as comrades of at least a year's standing, and they felt in return that he was one of them, a man to be trusted. They retained all the buoyancy which the receipt of the dispatch had given them, and Dick, his heart beating high, scarcely felt the wind and cold.

"In another quarter of an hour we'll be at the top," said Petty. Then he added after a moment's pause: "If I'm not mistook, we'll have company. See that path, leadin' out of the west, an' runnin' along the slope. It comes into the main road, two or three hundred

yards further on, an' I think I can see the top of a horseman's head ridin' in it. What do you say, sergeant?"

"I say that you are right, Red Blaze. I plainly see the head of a big man, wearing a fur cap, an' there are others behind him, ridin' in single file. What's your opinion, Mr. Mason?"

"The same as yours and Red Blaze's. I, too, can see the big man with the fur cap on his head and at least a dozen following behind. Do you think it likely, Red Blaze, that they'll reach the main road before we pass the mouth of the path?"

A sudden thought had leaped up in Dick's mind and it set his pulses to beating hard. He remembered some earlier words of Red Blaze's.

"We'll go by before they reach the main road," replied Red Blaze, "unless they make their hosses travel a lot faster than they're travelin' now."

"Then suppose we whip up a little," said Dick.

Both Red Blaze and the sergeant gave him searching glances.

"Do you mean—" began Whitley.

"Yes, I mean it. I know it. The man in front wearing the fur cap is Bill Skelly. He and his men made an attack upon the home of my uncle, Colonel Kenton, who is a Southern leader in Kentucky. He and his band were Northerners there, but they will be Southerners here, if it suits their purpose."

"An' it will shorely suit their purpose to be Southerners now," said Red Blaze. "We three are ridin' mighty good hoss flesh. Me an' the sergeant have good rifles an' pistols, you have good pistols,

an' we all have good, big overcoats. This is a lonely mountain side with war flyin' all about us. Easy's the place an' easy's the deed. That is if we'd let 'em, which we ain't goin' to do."

"Not by a long shot," said Sergeant Whitley, resting his rifle across the pommel of his saddle. "They've got to follow straight behind. The ground is too rough for them to ride around an' flank us."

Dick said nothing, but his gauntleted hand moved down to the butt of one of his pistols. His heart throbbed, but he preserved the appearance of coolness. He was fast becoming inured to danger. Owing to the slope they could not increase the speed of their horses greatly, but they were beyond the mouth of the path before they were seen by Skelly and his band. Then the big mountaineer uttered a great shout and began to wave his hand at them.

"The road curves here a little among the rocks," said the sergeant, who unconsciously took command. "Suppose we stop, sheltered by the curve, and ask them what they want."

"The very thing to do," said Dick.

"Sass 'em, sergeant! Sass 'em!" said Red Blaze.

They drew their horses back partially in the shadow of the rocky curve, but the sergeant was a little further forward than the others. Dick saw Skelly and a score of men emerge into the road and come rapidly toward them. They were a wild-looking crew, mounted on tough mountain ponies, all of them carrying loot, and all armed heavily.

The sergeant threw up his rifle, and with a steady hand aimed

straight at Skelly's heart.

"Halt!" he cried sharply, "and tell me who you are!"

The whole crew seemed to reel back except Skelly, who, though stopping his horse, remained in the center of the road.

"What do you mean?" he cried. "We're peaceful travelers. What business is it of yours who we are?"

"Judgin' by your looks you're not peaceful travelers at all. Besides these ain't peaceful times an' we take the right to demand who you are. If you come on another foot, I shoot."

The sergeant's tones were sharp with resolve.

"Your name!" he continued.

"Ramsdell, David Ramsdell," replied the leader of the band.

"That's a lie," said Sergeant Whitley. "Your name is Bill Skelly, an' you're a mountaineer from Eastern Kentucky, claimin' to belong first to one side and then to the other as suits you."

"Who says so?" exclaimed Skelly defiantly.

The sergeant beckoned Dick, who rode forward a little.

"I do," said the boy in a loud, clear voice. "My name is Dick Mason, and I live at Pendleton in Kentucky. I saw you more than once before the war, and I know that you tried to burn down the house of Colonel Kenton there, and kill him and his friends. I'm on the other side, but I'm not for such things as that."

Skelly distinctly saw Dick sitting on his horse in the pass, and he knew him well. Rage tore at his heart. Although on "the other side" this boy, too, was a lowlander and in a way a member of that vile Kenton brood. He hated him, too, because he belonged

to those who had more of prosperity and education than himself. But Skelly was a man of resource and not a coward.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.