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THE SWORD OF
ANTIETAM: A STORY OF
THE NATION'S CRISIS

Joseph Altsheler

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Joseph A. Altsheler

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CHAPTER I. CEDAR MOUNTAIN

The first youth rode to the crest of the hill, and, still sitting on his horse, examined the country in the south with minute care through a pair of powerful glasses. The other two dismounted and waited patiently. All three were thin and their faces were darkened by sun and wind. But they were strong alike of body and soul. Beneath the faded blue uniforms brave hearts beat and powerful muscles responded at once to every command of the will.

“What do you see, Dick?” asked Warner, who leaned easily against his horse, with one arm over the pommel of his saddle.

“Hills, valleys, mountains, the August heat shimmering over all, but no human being.”

“A fine country,” said young Pennington, “and I like to look at it, but just now my Nebraska prairie would be better for us. We could at least see the advance of Stonewall Jackson before he was right on top of us.”

Dick took another long look, searching every point in the half circle of the south with his glasses. Although burned by summer the country was beautiful, and neither heat nor cold could take away its picturesqueness. He saw valleys in which the grass grew thick and strong, clusters of hills dotted with trees, and then the blue loom of mountains clothed heavily with foliage. Over everything bent a dazzling sky of blue and gold.

The light was so intense that with his glasses he could pick out individual trees and rocks on the far slopes. He saw an occasional roof, but nowhere did he see man. He knew the reason, but he had become so used to his trade that at the moment, he felt no sadness. All this region had been swept by great armies. Here the tide of battle in the mightiest of all wars had rolled back and forth, and here it was destined to surge again in a volume increasing always.

“I don’t find anything,” repeated Dick, “but three pairs of eyes are better than none. George, you take the glasses and see what you can see and Frank will follow.”

He dismounted and stood holding the reins of his horse while the young Vermonter looked. He noticed that the mathematical turn of Warner’s mind showed in every emergency. He swept the glasses back and forth in a regular curve, not looking here and now there, but taking his time and missing nothing. It occurred to Dick that he was a type of his region, slow but thorough, and sure to win after defeat.

“What’s the result of your examination?” asked Dick as Warner passed the glasses in turn to Pennington.

“Let x equal what I saw, which is nothing. Let y equal the result I draw, which is nothing. Hence we have $x + y$ which still equals nothing.”

Pennington was swifter in his examination. The blood in his veins flowed a little faster than Warner’s.

“I find nothing but land and water,” he said without waiting to be asked, “and I’m disappointed. I had a hope, Dick, that I’d see Stonewall Jackson himself riding along a slope.”

“Even if you saw him, how would you know it was Stonewall?”

“I hadn’t thought of that. We’ve heard so much of him that it just seemed to me I’d know him anywhere.”

“Same here,” said Warner. “Remember all the tales we’ve heard about his whiskers, his old slouch hat and his sorrel horse.”

"I'd like to see him myself," confessed Dick. "From all we hear he's the man who kept McClellan from taking Richmond. He certainly played hob with the plans of our generals. You know, I've got a cousin, Harry Kenton, with him. I had a letter from him a week ago—passing through the lines, and coming in a round-about way. Writes as if he thought Stonewall Jackson was a demigod. Says we'd better quit and go home, as we haven't any earthly chance to win this war."

"He fights best who wins last," said Warner. "I'm thinking I won't see the green hills of Vermont for a long time yet, because I mean to pay a visit to Richmond first. Have you got your cousin's letter with you, Dick?"

"No, I destroyed it. I didn't want it bobbing up some time or other to cause either of us trouble. A man I know at home says he's kept out of a lot of trouble by 'never writin' nothin' to nobody.' And if you do write a letter the next best thing is to burn it as quick as you can."

"If my eyes tell the truth, and they do," said Pennington, "here comes a short, thick man riding a long, thick horse and he—the man, not the horse—bears a startling resemblance to our friend, ally, guide and sometime mentor, Sergeant Daniel Whitley."

"Yes, it's the sergeant," said Dick, looking down into the valley, "and I'm glad he's joining us. Do you know, boys, I often think these veteran sergeants know more than some of our generals."

"It's not an opinion. It's a fact," said Warner. "Hi, there, sergeant! Here are your friends! Come up and make the same empty report that we've got ready for the colonel."

Sergeant Daniel Whitley looked at the three lads, and his face brightened. He had a good intellect under his thatch of hair, and a warm heart within his strong body. The boys, although lieutenants, and he only a sergeant in the ranks, treated him usually as an equal and often as a superior.

Colonel Winchester's regiment and the remains of Colonel Newcomb's Pennsylvanians had been sent east after the defeat of the Union army at the Seven Days, and were now with Pope's Army of Virginia, which was to hold the valley and also protect Washington. Grant's success at Shiloh had been offset by McClellan's failure before Richmond, and the President and his Cabinet at Washington were filled with justifiable alarm. Pope was a western man, a Kentuckian, and he had insisted upon having some of the western troops with him.

The sergeant rode his horse slowly up the slope, and joined the lads over whom he watched like a father.

"And what have the hundred eyes of Argus beheld?" asked Warner.

"Argus?" said the sergeant. "I don't know any such man. Name sounds queer, too."

"He belongs to a distant and mythical past, sergeant, but he'd be mighty useful if we had him here. If even a single one of his hundred eyes were to light on Stonewall Jackson, it would be a great service."

The sergeant shook his head and looked reprovingly at Warner.

"It ain't no time for jokin'," he said.

"I was never further from it. It seems to me that we need a lot of Arguses more than anything else. This is the enemy's country, and we hear that Stonewall Jackson is advancing. Advancing where, from what and when? There is no Argus to tell. The country supports a fairly numerous population, but it hasn't a single kind or informing word for us. Is Stonewall Jackson going to drop from the sky, which rumor says is his favorite method of approach?"

"He's usin' the solid ground this time, anyway," said Sergeant Daniel Whitley. "I've been eight miles farther south, an' if I didn't see cavalry comin' along the skirt of a ridge, then my eyes ain't any friends of mine. Then I came through a little place of not more'n five houses. No men there, just women an' children, but when I looked back I saw them women an' children, too, grinnin' at me. That means somethin', as shore as we're livin' an' breathin'. I'm bettin' that we new fellows from the west will get acquainted with Stonewall Jackson inside of twenty-four hours."

"You don't mean that? It's not possible!" exclaimed Dick, startled. "Why, when we last heard of Jackson he was so far south we can't expect him in a week!"

“You’ve heard that they call his men the foot cavalry,” said the sergeant gravely, “an’ I reckon from all I’ve learned since I come east that they’ve won the name fair an’ true. See them woods off to the south there. See the black line they make ag’inst the sky. I know, the same as if I had seen him, that Stonewall Jackson is down in them forests, comin’ an’ comin’ fast.”

The sergeant’s tone was ominous, and Dick felt a tingling at the roots of his hair. The western troops were eager to meet this new Southern phenomenon who had suddenly shot like a burning star across the sky, but for the first time there was apprehension in his soul. He had seen but little of the new general, Pope, but he had read his proclamations and he had thought them bombastic. He talked lightly of the enemy and of the grand deeds that he was going to do. Who was Pope to sweep away such men as Lee and Jackson with mere words!

Dick longed for Grant, the stern, unyielding, unbeatable Grant whom he had known at Shiloh. In the west the Union troops had felt the strong hand over them, and confidence had flowed into them, but here they were in doubt. They felt that the powerful and directing mind was absent.

Silence fell upon them all for a little space, while the four gazed intently into the south, strange fears assailing everyone. Dick never doubted that the Union would win. He never doubted it then and he never doubted it afterward, through all the vast hecatomb when the flag of the Union fell more than once in terrible defeat.

But their ignorance was mystifying and oppressive. They saw before them the beautiful country, the hills and valleys, the forest and the blue loom of the mountains, so much that appealed to the eye, and yet the horizon, looking so peaceful in the distance, was barbed with spears. Jackson was there! The sergeant’s theory had become conviction with them. Distance had been nothing to him. He was at hand with a great force, and Lee with another army might fall at any time upon their flank, while McClellan was isolated and left useless, far away.

Dick’s heart missed a beat or two, as he saw the sinister picture that he had created in his own mind. Highly imaginative, he had leaped to the conclusion that Lee and Jackson meant to trap the Union army, the hammer beating it out on the anvil. He raised the glasses to his eyes, surveyed the forests in the South once more, and then his heart missed another beat.

He had caught the flash of steel, the sun’s rays falling across a bayonet or a polished rifle barrel. And then as he looked he saw the flash again and again. He handed the glasses to Warner and said quietly:

“George, I see troops on the edge of that far hill to the south and the east. Can’t you see them, too?”

“Yes, I can make them out clearly now, as they pass across a bit of open land. They’re Confederate cavalry, two hundred at least, I should say.”

Dick learned long afterward that it was the troop of Sherburne, but, for the present, the name of Sherburne was unknown to him. He merely felt that this was the vanguard of Jackson riding forward to set the trap. The men were now so near that they could be seen with the naked eye, and the sergeant said tersely:

“At last we’ve seen what we were afraid we would see.”

“And look to the left also,” said Warner, who still held the glasses. “There’s a troop of horse coming up another road, too. By George, they’re advancing at a trot! We’d better clear out or we may be enclosed between the two horns of their cavalry.”

“We’ll go back to our force at Cedar Run,” said Harry, “and report what we’ve seen. As you say, George, there’s no time to waste.”

The four mounted and rode fast, the dust of the road flying in a cloud behind their horses’ heels. Dick felt that they had fulfilled their errand, but he had his doubts how their news would be received. The Northern generals in the east did not seem to him to equal those of the west in keenness and resolution, while the case was reversed so far as the Southern generals were concerned.

But fast as they went the Southern cavalry was coming with equal speed. They continually saw the flash of arms in both east and west. The force in the west was the nearer of the two. Not only was Sherburne there, but Harry Kenton was with him, and besides their own natural zeal they had all the eagerness and daring infused into them by the great spirit and brilliant successes of Jackson.

“They won’t be able to enclose us between the two horns of their horsemen,” said Sergeant Whitley, whose face was very grave, “and the battle won’t be to-morrow or the next day.”

“Why not? I thought Jackson was swift,” said Warner.

“Cause it will be fought to-day. I thought Jackson was swift, too, but he’s swifter than I thought. Them feet cavalry of his don’t have to change their name. Look into the road comin’ up that narrow valley.”

The eyes of the three boys followed his pointing finger, and they now saw masses of infantry, men in gray pressing forward at full speed. They saw also batteries of cannon, and Dick almost fancied he could hear the rumble of their wheels.

“Looks as if the sergeant was right,” said Pennington. “Stonewall Jackson is here.”

They increased their speed to a gallop, making directly for Cedar Run, a cold, clear little stream coming out of the hills. It was now about the middle of the morning and the day was burning hot and breathless. Their hearts began to pound with excitement, and their breath was drawn painfully through throats lined with dust.

A long ridge covered with forest rose on one side of them and now they saw the flash of many bayonets and rifle barrels along its lowest slope. Another heavy column of infantry was advancing, and presently they heard the far note of trumpets calling to one another.

“Their whole army is in touch,” said the sergeant. “The trumpets show it. Often on the plains, when we had to divide our little force into detachments, they’d have bugle talk with one another. We must go faster if we can.”

They got another ounce of strength out of their horses, and now they saw Union cavalry in front. In a minute or two they were among the blue horsemen, giving the hasty news of Jackson’s advance. Other scouts and staff officers arrived a little later with like messages, and not long afterward they heard shots behind them telling them that the hostile pickets were in touch.

They watered their horses in Cedar Run, crossed it and rejoined their own regiment under Colonel Arthur Winchester. The colonel was thin, bronzed and strong, and he, too, like the other new men from the West, was eager for battle with the redoubtable Jackson.

“What have you seen, Dick?” he exclaimed. “Is it a mere scouting force of cavalry, or is Jackson really at hand?”

“I think it’s Jackson himself. We saw heavy columns coming up. They were pressing forward, too, as if they meant to brush aside whatever got in their way.”

“Then we’ll show them!” exclaimed Colonel Winchester. “We’ve only seven thousand men here on Cedar Run, but Banks, who is in immediate command, has been stung deeply by his defeats at the hands of Jackson, and he means a fight to the last ditch. So does everybody else.”

Dick, at that moment, the thrill of the gallop gone, was not so sanguine. The great weight of Jackson’s name hung over him like a sinister menace, and the Union troops on Cedar Run were but seven thousand. The famous Confederate leader must have at least three times that number. Were the Union forces, separated into several armies, to be beaten again in detail? Pope himself should be present with at least fifty thousand men.

Their horses had been given to an orderly and Dick threw himself upon the turf to rest a little. All along the creek the Union army, including his own regiment, was forming in line of battle but his colonel had not yet called upon him for any duty. Warner and Pennington were also resting from their long and exciting ride, but the sergeant, who seemed never to know fatigue, was already at work with his men.

“Listen to those skirmishers,” said Dick. “It sounds like the popping of corn at home on winter evenings, when I was a little boy.”

“But a lot more deadly,” said Pennington. “I wouldn’t like to be a skirmisher. I don’t mind firing into the smoke and the crowd, but I’d hate to sit down behind a stump or in the grass and pick out the spot on a man that I meant for my bullet to hit.”

“You won’t have to do any such work, Frank,” said Warner. “Hark to it! The sergeant was right. We’re going to have a battle to-day and a big one. The popping of your corn, Dick, has become an unbroken sound.”

Dick, from the crest of the hillock on which they lay, gazed over the heads of the men in blue. The skirmishers were showing a hideous activity. A continuous line of light ran along the front of both armies, and behind the flash of the Southern firing he saw heavy masses of infantry emerging from the woods. A deep thrill ran through him. Jackson, the famous, the redoubtable, the unbeatable, was at hand with his army. Would he remain unbeaten? Dick said to himself, in unspoken words, over and over again, “No! No! No! No!” He and his comrades had been victors in the west. They must not fail here.

Colonel Winchester now called to them, and mounting their horses they gathered around him to await his orders. These officers, though mere boys, learned fast. Dick knew enough already of war to see that they were in a strong position. Before them flowed the creek. On their flank and partly in their front was a great field of Indian corn. A quarter of a mile away was a lofty ridge on which were posted Union guns with gunners who knew so well how to use them. To right and left ran the long files of infantry, their faces white but resolute.

“I think,” said Dick to Warner, “that if Jackson passes over this place he will at least know that we’ve been here.”

“Yes, he’ll know it, and besides he’ll make quite a halt before passing. At least, that’s my way of thinking.”

There was a sudden dying of the rifle fire. The Union skirmishers were driven in, and they fell back on the main body which was silent, awaiting the attack. Dick was no longer compelled to use the glasses. He saw with unaided eye the great Southern columns marching forward with the utmost confidence, heavy batteries advancing between the regiments, ready at command to sweep the Northern ranks with shot and shell.

Dick shivered a little. He could not help it. They were face to face with Jackson, and he was all that the heralds of fame had promised. He had eye enough to see that the Southern force was much greater than their own, and, led by such a man, how could they fail to win another triumph? He looked around upon the army in blue, but he did not see any sign of fear. Both the beaten and the unbeaten were ready for a new battle.

There was a mighty crash from the hill and the Northern batteries poured a stream of metal into the advancing ranks of their foe.

The Confederate advance staggered, but, recovering itself, came on again. A tremendous cheer burst from the ranks of the lads in blue. Stonewall Jackson with all his skill and fame was before them, but they meant to stop him. Numbers were against them, and Banks, their leader, had been defeated already by Jackson, but they meant to stop him, nevertheless.

The Southern guns replied. Posted along the slopes of Slaughter Mountain, sinister of name, they sent a sheet of death upon the Union ranks. But the regiments, the new and the old, stood firm. Those that had been beaten before by Jackson were resolved not to be beaten again by him, and the new regiments from the west, one or two of which had been at Shiloh, were resolved never to be beaten at all.

“The lads are steady,” said Colonel Winchester. “It’s a fine sign. I’ve news, too, that two thousand men have come up. We shall now have nine thousand with which to withstand the attack,

and I don't believe they can drive us away. Oh, why isn't Pope himself here with his whole army? Then we could wipe Jackson off the face of the earth!"

But Pope was not there. The commander of a huge force, the man of boastful words who was to do such great things, the man who sent such grandiloquent dispatches from "Headquarters in the Saddle," to the anxious Lincoln at Washington, had strung his numerous forces along in detachments, just as the others had done before him, and the booming of Jackson's cannon attacking the Northern vanguard with his whole army could not reach ears so far away.

The fire now became heavy along the whole Union front. All the batteries on both sides were coming into action, and the earth trembled with the rolling crash. The smoke rose and hung in clouds over the hills, the valley and the cornfield. The hot air, surcharged with dust, smoke and burned gunpowder, was painful and rasping to the throat. The frightful screaming of the shells filled the air, and then came the hissing of the bullets like a storm of sleet.

Colonel Winchester and his staff dismounted, giving their horses to an orderly who led them to the rear. Horses would not be needed for the present, at least, and they had learned to avoid needless risk.

The attack was coming closer, and the bullets as they swept through their ranks found many victims. Colonel Winchester ordered his regiment to kneel and open fire, being held hitherto in reserve. Dick snatched up a rifle from a soldier who had fallen almost beside him, and he saw that Warner and Pennington had equipped themselves in like fashion.

A strong gust of wind lifted the smoke before them a little. Dick saw many splashes of water on the surface of the creek where bullets struck, and there were many tiny spurts of dust in the road, where other bullets fell. Then he saw beyond the dark masses of the Southern infantry. It seemed to him that they were strangely close. He believed that he could see their tanned faces, one by one, and their vengeful eyes, but it was only fancy.

The next instant the signal was given, and the regiment fired as one. There was a long flash of fire, a tremendous roaring in Dick's ears, then for an instant or two a vast cloud of smoke hid the advancing gray mass. When it was lifted a moment later the men in gray were advancing no longer. Their ranks were shattered and broken, the ground was covered with the fallen and the others were reeling back.

"We win! We win!" shouted Pennington, wild with enthusiasm.

"For the present, at least," said Warner, a deep flush blazing in either cheek.

There was no return fire just then from that point, and the smoke lifted a little more. Above the crash of the battle which raged fiercely on either flank, they heard the notes of a trumpet rising, loud, clear, and distinct from all other sounds. Dick knew that it was a rallying call, and then he heard Pennington utter a wild shout.

"I see him! I see him!" he cried. "It's old Stonewall himself! There on the hillock, on the little horse!"

The vision was but for an instant. Dick gazed with all his eyes, and he saw several hundred yards away a thickset man on a sorrel horse. He was bearded and he stooped a little, seeming to bend an intense gaze upon the Northern lines.

There was no time for anyone to fire, because in a few seconds the smoke came back, a huge, impenetrable curtain, and hid the man and the hillock. But Dick had not the slightest doubt that it was the great Southern leader, and he was right. It was Stonewall Jackson on the hillock, rallying his men, and Dick's own cousin, Harry Kenton, rode by his side.

They reloaded, but a staff officer galloped up and delivered a written order to Colonel Winchester. The whole regiment left the line, another less seasoned taking its place, and they marched off to one flank, where a field of wheat lately cut, and a wood on the extreme end, lay before them. Behind them they heard the battle swelling anew, but Dick knew that a new force of the foe was

coming here, and he felt proud that his own regiment had been moved to meet an attack which would certainly be made with the greatest violence.

“Who are those men down in the wheat-field?” asked Pennington.

“Our own skirmishers,” replied Warner. “See them running forward, hiding behind the shocks of straw and firing!”

The riflemen were busy. They fired from the shelter of every straw stack in the field, and they stung the new Southern advance, which was already showing its front. Southern guns now began to search the wheat field. A shell struck squarely in the center of one of the shocks behind which three Northern skirmishers were kneeling. Dick saw the straw fly into the air as if picked up by a whirlwind. When it settled back it lay in scattered masses and three dark figures lay with it, motionless and silent. He shuddered and looked away.

The edge of the wood was now lined with Southern infantry, and on their right flank was a numerous body of cavalry. Officers were waving their swords aloft, leading the men in person to the charge.

“The attack will be heavy here,” said Colonel Winchester. “Ah, there are our guns firing over our heads. We need ‘em.”

The Southern cannon were more numerous, but the Northern guns, posted well on the hill, refused to be silenced. Some of them were dismounted and the gunners about them were killed, but the others, served with speed and valor, sprayed the whole Southern front with a deadly shower of steel.

It was this welcome metal that Dick and his comrades heard over their heads, and then the trumpets rang a shrill note of defiance along the whole line. Banks, remembering his bitter defeats and resolved upon victory now, was not awaiting the attack. He would make it himself.

The whole wing lifted itself up and rushed through the wheat field, firing as they charged. The cannon were pushed forward and poured in volleys as fast as the gunners could load and discharge them. Dick felt the ground reeling beneath his feet, but he knew that they were advancing and that the enemy was giving way again. Stonewall Jackson and his generals felt a certain hardening of the Northern resistance that day. The recruits in blue were becoming trained now. They did not break in a panic, although their lines were raked through and through by the Southern shells. New men stepped in the place of the fallen, and the lines, filled up, came on again.

The Northern wing charging through the wheat field continued to bear back the enemy. Jackson was not yet able to stop the fierce masses in blue. A formidable body of men issuing from the Northern side of the wood charged with the bayonet, pushing the charge home with a courage and a recklessness of death that the war had not yet seen surpassed. The Southern rifles and cannon raked them, but they never stopped, bursting like a tornado upon their foe.

One of Jackson’s Virginia regiments gave way and then another. The men in blue from the wood and Colonel Winchester’s regiment joined, their shouts rising above the smoke while they steadily pushed the enemy before them.

Dick as he shouted with the rest felt a wild exultation. They were showing Jackson what they could do! They were proving to him that he could not win always. His joy was warranted. No such confusion had ever before existed in Jackson’s army. The Northern charge was driven like a wedge of steel into its ranks.

Jackson had able generals, valiant lieutenants, with him, Ewell and Early, and A. P. Hill and Winder, and they strove together to stop the retreat. The valiant Winder was mortally wounded and died upon the field, and Jackson, with his wonderful ability to see what was happening and his equal power of decision, swiftly withdrew that wing of his army, also carrying with it every gun.

A great shout of triumph rose from the men in blue as they saw the Southern retreat.

“We win! We win!” cried Pennington again.

“Yes, we win!” shouted Warner, usually so cool.

And it did seem even to older men that the triumph was complete. The blue and the gray were face to face in the smoke, but the gray were driven back by the fierce and irresistible charge, and, as their flight became swifter, the shells and grape from the Northern batteries plunged and tore through their ranks. Nothing stopped the blue wave. It rolled on and on, sweeping a mass of fugitives before it, and engulfing others.

Dick had no ordered knowledge of the charge. He was a part of it, and he saw only straight in front of him, but he was conscious that all around him there was a fiery red mist, and a confused and terrible noise of shouting and firing. But they were winning! They were beating Stonewall Jackson himself. His pulses throbbed so hard that he thought his arteries would burst, and his lips were dry and blackened from smoke, burned gunpowder and his own hot breath issuing like steam between them.

Then came a halt so sudden and terrible that it shook Dick as if by physical contact. He looked around in wonder. The charge was spent, not from its lack of strength but because they had struck an obstacle. They had reckoned ill, because they had not reckoned upon all the resources of Stonewall Jackson's mind. He had stemmed the rout in person and now he was pushing forward the Stonewall Brigade, five regiments, which always had but two alternatives, to conquer or to die. Hill and Ewell with fresh troops were coming up also on his flanks, and now the blue and the gray, face to face again, closed in mortal combat.

"We've stopped! We've stopped! Do you hear it, we've stopped!" exclaimed Pennington, his face a ghastly reek of dust and perspiration, his eyes showing amazement and wonder how the halt could have happened. Dick shared in the terrible surprise. The fire in front of him deepened suddenly. Men were struck down all about him. Heavy masses of troops in gray showed through the smoke. The Stonewall Brigade was charging, and regiments were charging with it on either side.

The column in blue was struck in front and on either flank. It not only ceased its victorious advance, but it began to give ground. The men could not help it, despite their most desperate efforts. It seemed to Dick that the earth slipped under their feet. A tremendous excitement seized him at the thought of victory lost just when it seemed won. He ran up and down the lines, shouting to the men to stand firm. He saw that the senior officers were doing the same, but there was little order or method in his own movements. It was the excitement and bitter humiliation that drove him on.

He stumbled in the smoke against Sergeant Whitley. The sergeant's forehead had been creased by a bullet, but so much dust and burned gunpowder had gathered upon it that it was as black as the face of a black man.

"Are we to lose after all?" exclaimed Dick.

It seemed strange to him, even at that moment, that he should hear his own voice amid such a roar of cannon and rifles. But it was an undernote, and he heard with equal ease the sergeant's reply:

"It ain't decided yet, Mr. Mason, but we've got to fight as we never fought before."

The Union men, both those who had faced Jackson before and those who were now meeting him for the first time, fought with unsurpassed valor, but, unequal in numbers, they saw the victory wrenched from their grasp. Jackson now had his forces in the hollow of his hand. He saw everything that was passing, and with the mind of a master he read the meaning of it. He strengthened his own weak points and increased the attack upon those of the North.

Dick remained beside the sergeant. He had lost sight of Colonel Winchester, Warner and Pennington in the smoke and the dreadful confusion, but he saw well enough that his fears were coming true.

The attack in front increased in violence, and the Northern army was also attacked with fiery energy on both flanks. The men had the actual physical feeling that they were enclosed in the jaws of a vise, and, forced to abandon all hope of victory, they fought now to escape. Two small squadrons of cavalry, scarce two hundred in number, sent forward from a wood, charged the whole Southern army under a storm of cannon and rifle fire. They equalled the ride of the Six Hundred at Balaklava,

but with no poet to celebrate it, it remained like so many other charges in this war, an obscure and forgotten incident.

Dick saw the charge of the horsemen, and the return of the few. Then he lost hope. Above the roar of the battle the rebel yell continually swelled afresh. The setting sun, no longer golden but red, cast a sinister light over the trampled wheat field, the slopes and the woods torn by cannon balls. The dead and the wounded lay in thousands, and Banks, brave and tenacious, but with bitter despair in his heart, was seeking to drag the remains of his army from that merciless vise which continued to close down harder and harder.

Dick's excitement and tension seemed to abate. He had been keyed to so high a pitch that his pulses grew gentler through very lack of force, and with the relaxation came a clearer view. He saw the sinking red sun through the banks of smoke, and in fancy he already felt the cool darkness upon his face after the hot and terrible August day. He knew that night might save them, and he prayed deeply and fervently for its swift coming.

He and the sergeant came suddenly to Colonel Winchester, whose hat had been shot from his head, but who was otherwise unharmed. Warner and Pennington were near, Warner slightly wounded but apparently unaware of the fact. The colonel, by shout and by gesture, was gathering around him the remains of his regiment. Other regiments on either side were trying to do the same, and eventually they formed a compact mass which, driving with all its force back toward its old position, reached the hills and the woods just as the jaws of Stonewall Jackson's vise shut down, but not upon the main body.

Victory, won for a little while, had been lost. Night protected their retreat, and they fought with a valor that made Jackson and all his generals cautious. But this knowledge was little compensation to the Northern troops. They knew that behind them was a great army, that Pope might have been present with fifty thousand men, sufficient to overwhelm Jackson. Instead of the odds being more than two to one in their favor, they had been two to one against them.

It was a sullen army that lay in the woods in the first hour or two of the night, gasping for breath. These men had boasted that they were a match for those of Jackson, and they were, if they could only have traded generals. Dick and his comrades from the west began to share in the awe that the name of Stonewall Jackson inspired.

"He comes up to his advertisements. There ain't no doubt of it," said Sergeant Whitley. "I never saw anybody fight better than our men did, an' that charge of the little troop of cavalry was never beat anywhere in the world. But here we are licked, and thirty or forty thousand men of ours not many miles away!"

He spoke the last words with a bitterness that Dick had never heard in his voice before.

"It's simple," said Warner, who was binding up his little wound with his own hand. "It's just a question in mathematics. I see now how Stonewall Jackson won so many triumphs in the Valley of Virginia. Give Jackson, say, fifteen thousand men. We have fifty thousand, but we divide them into five armies of ten thousand apiece. Jackson fights them in detail, which is five battles, of course. His fifteen thousand defeat the ten thousand every time. Hence Jackson with fifteen thousand men has beaten our side. It's simple but painful. In time our leaders will learn."

"After we're all killed," said Pennington sadly.

"And the country is ripped apart so that it will take half a century to put the pieces back together again and put 'em back right," said Dick, with equal sadness.

"Never mind," said Sergeant Whitley with returning cheerfulness. "Other countries have survived great wars and so will ours."

Some food was obtained for the exhausted men and they ate it nervously, paying little attention to the crackling fire of the skirmishers which was still going on in the darkness along their front. Dick saw the pink flashes along the edges of the woods and the wheat field, but his mind, deadened for the time, took no further impressions. Skirmishers were unpleasant people, anyway. Let them

fight down there. It did not matter what they might do to one another. A minute or two later he was ashamed of such thoughts.

Colonel Winchester, who had been to see General Banks, returned presently and told them that they would march again in half an hour.

“General Banks,” he said with bitter irony, “is afraid that a powerful force of the rebels will gain his rear and that we shall be surrounded. He ought to know. He has had enough dealings with Jackson. Outmaneuvered and outflanked again! Why can’t we learn something?”

But he said this to the young officers only. He forced a cheerfulness of tone when he spoke to the men, and they dragged themselves wearily to their feet in order to begin the retreat. But though the muscles were tired the spirit was not unwilling. All the omens were sinister, pointing to the need of withdrawal. The vicious skirmishers were still busy and a crackling fire came from many points in the woods. The occasional rolling thunder of a cannon deepened the somberness of the scene.

All the officers of the regiment had lost their horses and they walked now with the men. A full moon threw a silvery light over the marching troops, who strode on in silence, the wounded suppressing their groans. A full moon cast a silvery light over the pallid faces.

“Do you know where we are going?” Dick asked of the Vermonter.

“I heard that we’re bound for a place called Culpeper Court House, six or seven miles away. I suppose we’ll get there in the morning, if Stonewall Jackson doesn’t insist on another interview with us.”

“There’s enough time in the day for fighting,” said Pennington, “without borrowing of the night. Hear that big gun over there on our right! Why do they want to be firing cannon balls at such a time?”

They trudged gloomily on, following other regiments ghostly in the moonlight, and followed by others as ghostly. But the sinister omens, the flash of rifle firing and the far boom of a cannon, were always on their flanks. The impression of Jackson’s skill and power which Dick had gained so quickly was deepening already. He did not have the slightest doubt now that the Southern leader was pressing forward through the woods to cut them off. As the sergeant had said truly, he came up to his advertisements and more. Dick shivered and it was a shiver of apprehension for the army, and not for himself.

In accordance with human nature he and the boy officers who were his good comrades talked together, but their sentences were short and broken.

“Marching toward a court house,” said Pennington. “What’ll we do when we get there? Lawyers won’t help us.”

“Not so much marching toward a court house as marching away from Jackson,” said the Vermonter.

“We’ll march back again,” said Dick hopefully.

“But when?” said Pennington. “Look through the trees there on our right. Aren’t those rebel troops?”

Dick’s startled gaze beheld a long line of horsemen in gray on their flank and only a few hundred yards away.

CHAPTER II. AT THE CAPITAL

The Southern cavalry was seen almost at the same time by many men in the regiments, and nervous and hasty, as was natural at such a time, they opened a scattering fire. The horsemen did not return the fire, but seemed to melt away in the darkness.

But the shrewdest of the officers, among whom was Colonel Winchester, took alarm at this sudden appearance and disappearance. Dick would have divined from their manner, even without their talk, that they believed Jackson was at hand. Action followed quickly. The army stopped and began to seek a strong position in the wood. Cannon were drawn up, their mouths turned to the side on which the horsemen had appeared, and the worn regiments assumed the attitude of defense. Dick's heart throbbed with pride when he saw that they were as ready as ever to fight, although they had suffered great losses and the bitterest of disappointments.

"What I said I've got to say over again," said Pennington ruefully: "the night's no time for fighting. It's heathenish in Stonewall Jackson to follow us, and annoy us in such a way."

"Such a way! Such a way!" said Dick impatiently. "We've got to learn to fight as he does. Good God, Frank, think of all the sacrifices we are making to save our Union, the great republic! Think how the hateful old monarchies will sneer and rejoice if we fall, and here in the East our generals just throw our men away! They divide and scatter our armies in such a manner that we simply ask to be beaten."

"Sh! sh!" said Warner, as he listened to the violent outbreak, so unusual on the part of the reserved and self-contained lad. "Here come two generals."

"Two too many," muttered Dick. A moment or two later he was ashamed of himself, not because of what he had said, but because he had said it. Then Warner seized him by the arm and pointed.

"A new general, bigger than all the rest, has come," he said, "and although I've never seen him before I know with mathematical certainty that it's General John Pope, commander-in-chief of the Army of Virginia."

Both Dick and Pennington knew instinctively that Warner was right. General Pope, a strongly built man in early middle years, surrounded by a brilliant staff, rode into a little glade in the midst of the troops, and summoned to him the leading officers who had taken part in the battle.

Dick and his two comrades stood on one side, but they could not keep from hearing what was said and done. In truth they did not seek to avoid hearing, nor did many of the young privates who stood near and who considered themselves quite as good as their officers.

Pope, florid and full-faced, was in a fine humor. He complimented the officers on their valor, spoke as if they had won a victory—which would have been a fact had others done their duty—and talked slightly of Jackson. The men of the west would show this man his match in the art of war.

Dick listened to it all with bitterness in his heart. He had no doubt that Pope was brave, and he could see that he was confident. Yet it took something more than confidence to defeat an able enemy. What had become of those gray horsemen in the bush? They had appeared once and they could appear again. He had believed that Jackson himself was at hand, and he still believed it. His eyes shifted from Pope to the dark woods, which, with their thick foliage, turned back the moonlight.

"George," he whispered to Warner, "do you think you can see anything among those trees?"

"I can make out dimly one or two figures, which no doubt are our scouts. Ah-h!"

The long "Ah-h!" was drawn by a flash and the report of a rifle. A second and a third report came, and then the crash of a heavy fire. The scouts and sentinels came running in, reporting that a great force with batteries, presumably the whole army of Jackson, was at hand.

A deep murmur ran through the Union army, but there was no confusion. The long hours of fighting had habituated them to danger. They were also too tired to become excited, and in addition, they were of as stern stuff at night as they had been in the morning. They were ready to fight again.

Formidable columns of troops appeared through the woods, their bayonets glistening in the moonlight. The heavy rifle fire began once more, although it was nearly midnight, and then came the deep thunder of cannon, sending round shot and shells among the Union troops. But the men in blue, harried beyond endurance, fought back fiercely. They shared the feelings of Pennington. They felt that they had been persecuted, that this thing had grown inhuman, and they used rifles and cannon with astonishing vigor and energy.

Two heavy Union batteries replied to the Southern cannon, raking the woods with shell, round shot and grape, and Dick concluded that in the face of so much resolution Jackson would not press an attack at night, when every kind of disaster might happen in the darkness. His own regiment had lain down among the leaves, and the men were firing at the flashes on their right. Dick looked for General Pope and his brilliant staff, but he did not see them.

“Gone to bring up the reserves,” whispered Warner, who saw Dick’s inquiring look.

But the Vermonter’s slur was not wholly true. Pope was on his way to his main force, doubtless not really believing that Jackson himself was at hand. But the little army that he left behind fighting with renewed energy and valor broke away from the Southern grasp and continued its march toward that court house, in which the boys could see no merit. Jackson himself, knowing what great numbers were ahead, was content to swing away and seek for prey elsewhere.

They emerged from the wood toward morning and saw ahead of them great masses of troops in blue. They would have shouted with joy, but they were too tired. Besides, nearly two thousand of their men were killed or wounded, and they had no victory to celebrate.

Dick ate breakfast with his comrades. The Northern armies nearly always had an abundance of provisions, and now they were served in plenty. For the moment, the physical overcame the mental in Dick. It was enough to eat and to rest and to feel secure. Thousands of friendly faces were around them, and they would not have to fight in either day or dark for their lives. Their bones ceased to ache, and the good food and the good coffee began to rebuild the worn tissues. What did the rest matter?

After breakfast these men who had marched and fought for nearly twenty hours were told to sleep. Only one command was needed. It was August, and the dry grass and the soft earth were good enough for anybody. The three lads, each with an arm under his head, slept side by side. At noon they were still sleeping, and Colonel Winchester, as he was passing, looked at the three, but longest at Dick. His gaze was half affection, half protection, but it was not the boy alone whom he saw. He saw also his fair-haired young mother in that little town on the other side of the mountains.

While Dick still slept, the minds of men were at work. Pope’s army, hitherto separated, was now called together by a battle. Troops from every direction were pouring upon the common center. The little army which had fought so gallantly the day before now amounted to only one-fourth of the whole. McDowell, Sigel and many other generals joined Pope, who, with the strange faculty of always seeing his enemy too small, while McClellan always saw him too large, began to feed upon his own sanguine anticipations, and to regard as won the great victory that he intended to win. He sent telegrams to Washington announcing that his triumph at Cedar Run was only the first of a series that his army would soon achieve.

It was late in the afternoon when Dick awoke, and he was amazed to see that the sun was far down the western sky. But he rubbed his eyes and, remembering, knew that he had slept at least ten hours. He looked down at the relaxed figures of Warner and Pennington on either side of him. They still slumbered soundly, but he decided that they had slept long enough.

“Here, you,” he exclaimed, seizing Warner by the collar and dragging him to a sitting position, “look at the sun! Do you realize that you’ve lost a day out of your bright young life?”

Then he seized Pennington by the collar also and dragged him up. Both Warner and Pennington yawned prodigiously.

“If I’ve lost a day, and it would seem that I have, then I’m glad of it,” replied Warner. “I could afford to lose several in such a pleasant manner. I suppose a lot of Stonewall Jackson’s men were shooting at me while I slept, but I was lucky and didn’t know about it.”

“You talk too long,” said Pennington. “That comes of your having taught school. You could talk all day to boys younger than yourself, and they were afraid to answer back.”

“Shut up, both of you,” said Dick. “Here comes the sergeant, and I think from his look he has something to say worth hearing.”

Sergeant Whitley had cleansed the blood and dust from his face, and a handkerchief tied neatly around his head covered up the small wound there. He looked trim and entirely restored, both mentally and physically.

“Well, sergeant,” said Dick ingratiatingly, “if any thing has happened in this army you’re sure to know of it. We’d have known it ourselves, but we had an important engagement with Morpheus, a world away, and we had to keep it. Now what is the news?”

“I don’t know who Morpheus is,” replied the sergeant, laughing, “but I’d guess from your looks that he is another name for sleep. There is no news of anything big happenin’. We’ve got a great army here, and Jackson remains near our battlefield of yesterday. I should say that we number at least fifty thousand men, or about twice the rebels.”

“Then why don’t we march against ‘em at once?”

The sergeant shrugged his shoulders. It was not for him to tell why generals did not do things.

“I think,” he said, “that we’re likely to stay here a day or two.”

“Which means,” said Dick, his alert mind interpreting at once, “that our generals don’t know what to do. Why is it that they always seem paralyzed when they get in front of Stonewall Jackson? He’s only a man like the rest of them!”

He spoke with perfect freedom in the presence of Sergeant Whitley, knowing that he would repeat nothing.

“A man, yes,” said Warner, in his precise manner, “but not exactly like the others. He seems to have more of the lightning flash about him. What a pity such a leader should be on the wrong side! Perhaps we’ll have his equal in time.”

“Is Jackson’s army just sitting still?” asked Dick.

“So far as scouts can gather, an’ I’ve been one of them,” replied Sergeant Whitley, “it seems to be just campin’. But I wish I knew which way it was goin’ to jump. I don’t trust Jackson when he seems to be nappin’.”

But the good sergeant’s doubts were to remain for two days at least. The two armies sat still, only two miles apart, and sentinels, as was common throughout the great war, became friendly with one another. Often they met in the woods and exchanged news and abundant criticism of generals. At last there was a truce to bury the dead who still lay upon the sanguinary field of Cedar Run.

Dick was in charge of one of these burial parties, and toward the close of the day he saw a familiar figure, also in command of a burial party, although it was in a gray uniform. His heart began to thump, and he uttered a cry of joy. The unexpected, but not the unnatural, had happened.

“Oh, Harry! Harry!” he shouted.

The strong young figure in the uniform of a lieutenant in the Southern army turned in surprise at the sound of a familiar voice, and stood, staring.

“Dick! Dick Mason!” he cried. Then the two sprang forward and grasped the hands of each other. There was no display of emotion—they were of the stern American stock, taught not to show its feelings—but their eyes showed their gladness.

“Harry,” said Dick, “I knew that you had been with Jackson, but I had no way of knowing until a moment ago that you were yet alive.”

“Nor I you, Dick. I thought you were in the west.”

“I was, but after Shiloh, some of us came east to help. It seemed after the Seven Days that we were needed more here than in the west.”

“You never said truer words, Dick. They’ll need you and many more thousands like you. Why, Dick, we’re not led here by a man, we’re led by a thunderbolt. I’m on his staff, I see him every day. He talks to me, and I talk to him. I tell you, Dick, it’s a wonderful thing to serve such a genius. You can’t beat him! His kind appears only a few times in the ages. He always knows what’s to be done and he does it. Even if your generals knew what ought to be done, most likely they’d do something else.”

Harry’s face glowed with enthusiasm as he spoke of his hero, and Dick, looking at him, shook his head sadly.

“I’m afraid that what you say is true for the present at least, Harry,” he said. “You beat us now here in the east, but don’t forget that we’re winning in the west. And don’t forget that here in the east even, you can never wear us out. We’ll be coming, always coming.”

“All right, old Sober Sides, we won’t quarrel about it. We’ll let time settle it. Here come some friends of mine whom I want you to know. Curious that you should meet them at such a time.”

Two other young lieutenants in gray uniforms at the head of burial parties came near in the course of their work, and Harry called to them.

“Tom! Arthur! A moment, please! This is my cousin, Dick Mason, a Yankee, though I think he’s honest in his folly. Dick, this is Arthur St. Clair, and this is Tom Langdon, both friends of mine from South Carolina.”

They shook hands warmly. There was no animosity between them. Dick liked the looks and manners of Harry’s friends. He could have been their friend, too.

“Harry has talked about you often,” said Happy Tom Langdon. “Says you’re a great scholar, and a good fellow, all right every way, except the crack in your head that makes you a Yankee. I hope you won’t get hurt in this unpleasantness, and when our victorious army comes into Washington we’ll take good care of you and release you soon.”

Dick smiled. He liked this youth who could keep up the spirit of fun among such scenes.

“Don’t you pay any attention to Langdon, Mr. Mason,” said St. Clair. “If he’d only fight as well and fast as he talks there’d be no need for the rest of us.”

“You know you couldn’t win the war without me,” said Langdon.

They talked a little more together, then trumpets blew, the work was done and they must withdraw to their own armies. They had been engaged in a grewsome task, but Dick was glad to the bottom of his heart to have been sent upon it. He had learned that Harry still lived, and he had met him. He did not understand until then how dear his cousin was to him. They were more like brothers than cousins. It was like the affection their great-grandfathers, Henry Ware and Paul Cotter, had felt for each other, although those famous heroes of the border had always fought side by side, while their descendants were compelled to face each other across a gulf.

They shook hands and withdrew slowly. At the edge of the field, Dick turned to wave another farewell, and he found that Harry, actuated by the same motive at the same time, had also turned to make a like gesture. Each waved twice, instead of once, and then they disappeared among the woods. Dick returned to Colonel Winchester.

“While we were under the flag of truce I met my cousin, Harry Kenton,” he said.

“One of the lucky fortunes of war.”

“Yes, sir, I was very glad to see him. I did not know how glad I was until I came away. He says that we can never beat Jackson, that nothing but death can ever stop him.”

“Youth often deceives itself, nor is age any exception. Never lose hope, Dick.”

“I don’t mean to do so, sir.”

The next morning, when Dick was with one of the outposts, a man of powerful build, wonderfully quick and alert in his movements, appeared. His coming was so quick and silent that he

seemed to rise from the earth, and Dick was startled. The man's face was uncommon. His features were of great strength, the eyes being singularly vivid and penetrating. He was in civilian's dress, but he promptly showed a pass from General Pope, and Dick volunteered to take him to headquarters, where he said he wished to go.

Dick became conscious as they walked along that the man was examining him minutely with those searching eyes of his which seemed to look one through and through.

"You are Lieutenant Richard Mason," said the stranger presently, "and you have a cousin, Harry Kenton, also a lieutenant, but in the army of Stonewall Jackson."

Dick stared at him in amazement.

"Everything you say is true," he said, "but how did you know it?"

"It's my business to know. Knowledge is my sole pursuit in this great war, and a most engrossing and dangerous task I find it. Yet, I would not leave it. My name is Shepard, and I am a spy. You needn't shrink. I'm not ashamed of my occupation. Why should I be? I don't kill. I don't commit any violence. I'm a guide and educator. I and my kind are the eyes of an army. We show the generals where the enemy is, and we tell them his plans. An able and daring spy is worth more than many a general. Besides, he takes the risk of execution, and he can win no glory, for he must always remain obscure, if not wholly unknown. Which, then, makes the greater sacrifice for his country, the spy or the general?"

"You give me a new point of view. I had not thought before how spies risked so much for so little reward."

Shepard smiled. He saw that in spite of his logic Dick yet retained that slight feeling of aversion. The boy left him, when they arrived at headquarters, but the news that Shepard brought was soon known to the whole army.

Jackson had left his camp. He was gone again, disappeared into the ether. "Retreated" was the word that Pope at once seized upon, and he sent forth happy bulletins. Shepard and other scouts and spies reported a day or two later that Jackson's army was on the Rapidan, one of the numerous Virginia rivers. Then Dick accompanied Colonel Winchester, who was sent by rail to Washington with dispatches.

He did not find in the capital the optimism that reigned in the mind of Pope. McClellan was withdrawing his army from Virginia, but the eyes of the nation were turned toward Pope. Many who had taken deep thought of the times and of men, were more alarmed about Pope than he was about himself. They did not like those jubilant dispatches from "Headquarters in the Saddle." There was ominous news that Lee himself was marching north, and that he and Jackson would soon be together. Anxious eyes scanned the hills about Washington. The enemy had been very near once before, and he might soon be near again.

Dick had an hour of leisure, and he wandered into an old hotel, at which many great men had lived. They would point to Henry Clay's famous chair in the lobby, and the whole place was thick with memories of Webster, Calhoun and others who had seemed almost demigods to their own generation.

But a different crowd was there now. They were mostly paunchy men who talked of contracts and profits. One, to whom the others paid deference, was fat, heavy and of middle age, with a fat, heavy face and pouches under his eyes. His small eyes were set close together, but they sparkled with shrewdness and cunning.

The big man presently noticed the lad who was sitting quietly in one of the chairs against the wall. Dick's was an alien presence there, and doubtless this fact had attracted his attention.

"Good day to you," said the stranger in a bluff, deep voice. "I take it from your uniform, your tan and your thinness that you've come from active service."

"In both the west and the east," replied Dick politely. "I was at Shiloh, but soon afterward I was transferred with my regiment to the east."

"Ah, then, of course, you know what is going on in Virginia?"

“No more than the general public does. I was at Cedar Run, which both we and the rebels claim as a victory.”

The man instantly showed a great increase of interest.

“Were you?” he said. “My own information says that Banks and Pope were surprised by Jackson and that the rebel general has merely drawn off to make a bigger jump. Did you get that impression?”

“Will you tell me why you ask me these questions?” said Dick in the same polite tone.

“Because I’ve a big stake in the results out there. My name is John Watson, and I’m supplying vast quantities of shoes and clothing to our troops.”

Dick turned up the sole of one of his shoes and picked thoughtfully at a hole half way through the sole. Little pieces of paper came out.

“I bought these, Mr. Watson, from a sutler in General Pope’s army,” he said. “I wonder if they came from you?”

A deeper tint flushed the contractor’s cheeks, but in a moment he threw off anger.

“A good joke,” he said jovially. “I see that you’re ready of wit, despite your youth. No, those are not my shoes. I know dishonest men are making great sums out of supplies that are defective or short. A great war gives such people many opportunities, but I scorn them. I’ll not deny that I seek a fair profit, but my chief object is to serve my country. Do you ever reflect, my young friend, that the men who clothe and feed an army have almost as much to do with winning the victory as the men who fight?”

“I’ve thought of it,” said Dick, wondering what the contractor had in mind.

“What regiment do you belong to, if I may ask? My motive in asking these questions is wholly good.”

“One commanded by Colonel Winchester, recently sent from the west. We’ve been in only one battle in the east, that fought at Cedar Run against Jackson.”

Watson again looked at Dick intently. The boy felt that he was being measured and weighed by a man of uncommon perceptions. Whatever might be his moral quality there could be no question of his ability.

“I am, as I told you before,” said Watson, “a servant of my country. A man who feeds and clothes the soldiers well is a patriot, while he who feeds and clothes them badly is a mere money grubber.”

He paused, as if he expected Dick to say something, but the boy was silent and he went on:

“It is to the interest of the country that it be served well in all departments, particularly in the tremendous crisis that we now face. Yet the best patriot cannot always get a chance to serve. He needs friends at court, as they say. Now this colonel of yours, Colonel Winchester—I’ve observed both him and you, although I approached you as if I’d never heard of either of you before—is a man of character and influence. Certain words from him at the right time would be of great value, nor would his favorite aide suffer through bringing the matter to his attention.”

Dick saw clearly now, but he was not impulsive. Experience was teaching him, while yet a boy, to speak softly.

“The young aide of whom you speak,” he said, “would never think of mentioning such a matter to the colonel, of whom you also speak, and even if he should, the colonel wouldn’t listen to him for a moment.”

Watson shrugged his shoulders slightly, but made no other gesture of displeasure.

“Doubtless you are well informed about this aide and this colonel,” he said, “but it’s a pity. If more food is thrown to the sparrows than they can eat, is it any harm for other birds to eat the remainder?”

“I scarcely regard it as a study in ornithology.”

“Ornithology? That’s a big word, but I suppose it will serve. We’ll drop the matter, and if at any time my words here should be quoted I’ll promptly deny them. It’s a bad thing for a boy to have

his statements disputed by a man of years who can command wealth and other powerful influences. Unless he had witnesses nobody would believe the boy. I tell you this, my lad, partly for your own good, because I'm inclined to like you."

Dick stared. There was nothing insulting in the man's tone. He seemed to be thoroughly in earnest. Perhaps he regarded his point of view as right, and Dick, a boy of thought and resource, saw that it was not worth while to make a quarrel. But he resolved to remember Watson, feeling that the course of events might bring them together again.

"I suppose it's as you say," he said. "You're a man of affairs and you ought to know."

Watson smiled at him. Dick felt that the contractor had been telling the truth when he said that he was inclined to like him. Perhaps he was honest and supplied good materials, when others supplied bad.

"You will shake hands with me, Mr. Mason," he said. "You think that I will be hostile to you, but maybe some day I can prove myself your friend. Young soldiers often need friends."

His eyes twinkled and his smile widened. In spite of his appearance and his proposition, something winning had suddenly appeared in the manner of this man. Dick found himself shaking hands with him.

"Good-bye, Mr. Mason," said Watson. "It may be that we shall meet on the field, although I shall not be within range of the guns."

He left the lobby of the hotel, and Dick was rather puzzled. It was his first thought to tell Colonel Winchester about him, but he finally decided that Watson's own advice to him to keep silent was best. He and Colonel Winchester took the train from Washington the next day, and on the day after were with Pope's army on the Rapidan.

Dick detected at once a feeling of excitement or tension in this army, at least among the young officers with whom he associated most. They felt that a storm of some kind was gathering, either in front or on their flank. McClellan's army was now on the transports, leaving behind the Virginia that he had failed to conquer, and Pope's, with a new commander, was not yet in shape. The moment was propitious for Lee and Jackson to strike, and the elusive Jackson was lost again.

"Our scouts discover nothing," said Warner to Dick. "The country is chockfull of hostility to us. Not a soul will tell us a word. We have to see a thing with our own eyes before we know it's there, but the people, the little children even, take news to the rebels. A veil is hung before us, but there is none before them."

"There is one man who is sure to find out about Jackson."

"Who?"

Dick's only answer was a shake of the head. But he was thinking of Shepard. He did not see him about the camp, and he had no doubt that he was gone on another of his dangerous missions. Meanwhile newspapers from New York and other great cities reflected the doubts of the North. They spoke of Pope's grandiloquent dispatches, and they wondered what had become of Lee and Jackson.

Dick, an intense patriot, passed many bitter moments. He, like others, felt that the hand upon the reins was not sure. Instead of finding the enemy and assailing him with all their strength, they were waiting in doubt and alarm to fend off a stroke that would come from some unknown point out of the dark.

The army now lay in one of the finest parts of Virginia, a region of picturesque mountains, wide and fertile valleys, and of many clear creeks and rivers coming down from the peaks and ridges. To one side lay a great forest, known as the Wilderness, destined, with the country near it, to become the greatest battlefield of the world. Here, the terrible battles of the Second Manassas, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, the Wilderness, Spottsylvania, and others less sanguinary, but great struggles, nevertheless, were to be fought.

But these were yet in the future, and Dick, much as his eyes had been opened, did not yet dream how tremendous the epic combat was to be. He only knew that to-day it was the middle of August,

the valleys were very hot, but it was shady and cool on the hills and mountains. He knew, too, that he was young, and that pessimism and gloom could not abide long with him.

He and Warner and Pennington had good horses, in place of those that they had lost at Cedar Run, and often they rode to the front to see what might be seen of the enemy, which at present was nothing. Their battlefield at Cedar Run had been reoccupied by Northern troops and Pope was now confirmed in his belief that his men had won a victory there. And this victory was to be merely a prelude to another and far greater one.

As they rode here and there in search of the enemy, Dick came upon familiar ground. Once more he saw the field of Manassas which had been lost so hardly the year before. He remembered every hill and brook and curve of the little river, because they had been etched into his brain with steel and fire. How could anyone forget that day?

“Looks as if we might fight our battle of last year over again, but on a much bigger scale,” he said to Warner.

“Here or hereabouts,” said the Vermonter, “and I think we ought to win. They’ve got the better generals, but we’ve got more men. Besides, our troops are becoming experienced and they’ve shown their mettle. Dick, here’s a farmer gathering corn. Let’s ask him some questions, but I’ll wager you a hundred to one before we begin that he knows absolutely nothing about the rebel army. In fact, I doubt that he will know of its existence.”

“I won’t take your bet,” said Dick.

They called to the man, a typical Virginia farmer in his shirt sleeves, tall and spare, short whiskers growing under his chin. There was not much difference between him and his brother farmer in New England.

“Good-day,” said Warner.

“Good-day.”

“You seem to be working hard.”

“I’ve need to do it. Farm hands are scarce these days.”

“Farming is hard work.”

“Yes; but it’s a lot safer than some other kinds men are doin’ nowadays.”

“True, no doubt, but have you seen anything of the army?”

“What army?”

“The one under Lee and Jackson, the rebel army.”

“I ain’t heard of no rebel army, mister. I don’t know of any such people as rebels.”

“You call it the Confederate army. Can you tell us anything about the Confederate army?”

“What Confederate army, mister? I heard last month when I went in to the court house that there was more than one of them.”

“I mean the one under Lee and Jackson.”

“That’s cur’us. A man come ridin’ ‘long here three or four weeks ago. Mebbe he was a lightnin’ rod agent an’ mebbe he had patent medicines to sell, he didn’t say, but he did tell me that General Jackson was in one place an’ General Lee was in another. Now which army do you mean?”

“That was nearly a month ago. They are together now.”

“Then, mister, if you know so much more about it than I do, what are you askin’ me questions for?”

“But I want to know about Lee and Jackson. Have you seen them?”

“Lord bless you, mister, them big generals don’t come visitin’ the likes o’ me. You kin see my house over thar among the trees. You kin search it if you want to, but you won’t find nothin’.”

“I don’t want to search your house. You can’t hide a great army in a house. I want to know if you’ve seen the Southern Army. I want to know if you’ve heard anything about it.”

“I ain’t seed it. My sight’s none too good, mister. Sometimes the blazin’ sun gits in my eyes and kinder blinds me for a long time. Then, too, I’m bad of hearin’; but I’m a powerful good sleeper.

When I sleep I don't hear nothin', of course, an' nothin' wakes me up. I just sleep on, sometimes dreamin' beautiful dreams. A million men wouldn't wake me, an' mebbe a dozen armies or so have passed in the night while I was sleepin' so good. I'd tell you anything I know, but them that knows nothin' has nothin' to tell."

Warner's temper, although he had always practiced self-control, had begun to rise, but he checked it, seeing that it would be a mere foolish display of weakness in the face of the blank wall that confronted him.

"My friend," he said with gravity, "I judge from the extreme ignorance you display concerning great affairs that you sleep a large part of the time."

"Mebbe so, an' mebbe not. I most gen'ally sleep when I'm sleepy. I've heard tell there was a big war goin' on in these parts, but this is my land, an' I'm goin' to stay on it."

"A good farmer, if not a good patriot. Good day."

"Good day."

They rode on and, in spite of themselves, laughed.

"I'm willing to wager that he knows a lot about Lee and Jackson," said Warner, "but the days of the rack and the thumbscrew passed long ago, and there is no way to make him tell."

"No," said Dick, "but we ought to find out for ourselves."

Nevertheless, they discovered nothing. They saw no trace of a Southern soldier, nor did they hear news of any, and toward nightfall they rode back toward the army, much disappointed. The sunset was of uncommon beauty. The hot day was growing cool. Pleasant shadows were creeping up in the east. In the west a round mountain shouldered its black bulk against the sky. Dick looked at it vaguely. He had heard it called Clark's Mountain, and it was about seven miles away from the Union army which lay behind the Rapidan River.

Dick liked mountains, and the peak looked beautiful against the red and yellow bars of the western horizon.

"Have you ever been over there?" he said to Pennington and Warner.

"No; but a lot of our scouts have," replied Pennington. "It's just a mountain and nothing more. Funny how all those peaks and ridges crop up suddenly around here out of what seems meant to have been a level country."

"I like it better because it isn't level," said Dick. "I'm afraid George and I wouldn't care much for your prairie country which just rolls on forever, almost without trees and clear running streams."

"You would care for it," said Pennington stoutly. "You'd miss at first the clear rivers and creeks, but then the spell of it would take hold of you. The air you breathe isn't like the air you breathe anywhere else."

"We've got some air of our own in Vermont that we could brag about, if we wanted to," said Warner, defiantly.

"It's good, but not as good as ours. And then the vast distances, the great spaces take hold of you. And there's the sky so high and so clear. When you come away from the great plains you feel cooped up anywhere else."

Pennington spoke with enthusiasm, his nostrils dilating and his eyes flashing. Dick was impressed.

"When the war's over I'm going out there to see your plains," he said.

"Then you're coming to see me!" exclaimed Pennington, with all the impulsive warmth of youth. "And George here is coming with you. I won't show you any mountains like the one over there, but boys, west of the Platte River, when I was with my father and some other men I watched for three days a buffalo herd passing. The herd was going north and all the time it stretched so far from east to west that it sank under each horizon. There must have been millions of them. Don't you think that was something worth seeing?"

“We’re surely coming,” said Dick, “and you be equally sure to have your buffalo herd ready for us when we come.”

“It’ll be there.”

“Meanwhile, here we are at the Rapidan,” said the practical Warner, “and beyond it is our army. Look at that long line of fires, boys. Aren’t they cheering? A fine big army like ours ought to beat off anything. We almost held our own with Jackson himself at Cedar Run, and he had two to one.”

“We will win! We’re bound to win!” said Dick, with sudden access of hope. “We’ll crush Lee and Jackson, and next summer you and I, George, will be out on the western plains with Frank, watching the buffalo millions go thundering by!”

They forded the Rapidan and rejoined their regiment with nothing to tell. But it was cheerful about the fires. Optimism reigned once more in the Army of Virginia. McClellan had sent word to Pope that he would have plenty of soldiers to face the attack that now seemed to be threatened by the South. Brigades from the Army of the Potomac would make the Army of Virginia invincible.

Dick having nothing particular to do, sat late with his comrades before one of the finest of the fires, and he read only cheerful omens in the flames. It was a beautiful night. The moon seemed large and near, and the sky was full of dancing stars. In the clear night Dick saw the black bulk of Clark’s Mountain off there against the horizon, but he could not see what was behind it.

CHAPTER III. BESIDE THE RIVER

Dick was on duty early in the morning when he saw a horseman coming at a gallop toward the Rapidan. The man was in civilian clothing, but his figure seemed familiar. The boy raised his glasses, and he saw at once that it was Shepard. He saw, too, that he was urging his horse to its utmost speed.

The boy's heart suddenly began to throb, and there was a cold, prickling sensation at the roots of his hair. Shepard had made an extraordinary impression upon him and he did not believe that the man would be coming at such a pace unless he came with great news.

He saw Shepard stop, give the pass word to the pickets, then gallop on, ford the river and come straight toward the heart of the army. Dick ran forward and met him.

"What is it?" he cried.

"General Pope's tent! Where it is! I can't wait a minute."

Dick pointed toward a big marquee, standing in an open space, and Shepard leaping from his horse and abandoning it entirely, ran toward the marquee. A word or two to the sentinels, and he disappeared inside.

Dick, devoured with curiosity and anxiety, went to Colonel Winchester with the story of what he had seen.

"I know of Shepard," said the colonel. "He is the best and most daring spy in the whole service of the North. I think you're right in inferring that he rides so fast for good cause."

Shepard remained with the commander-in-chief a quarter of an hour. When he came forth from the tent he regained his horse and rode away without a word, going in the direction of Clark's Mountain. But his news was quickly known, because it was of a kind that could not be concealed. Pennington came running with it to the regiment, his face flushed and his eyes big.

"Look! Look at the mountain!" he exclaimed.

"I see it," said Warner. "I saw it there yesterday, too, in exactly the same place."

"So did I, but there's something behind it. Lee and Jackson are there with sixty or eighty thousand men! The whole Southern army is only six or seven miles away."

Even Warner's face changed.

"How do you know this?" he asked.

"A spy has seen their army. They say he is a man whose reports are never false. At any rate orders have already been issued for us to retreat and I hear that we're going back until we reach the Rappahannock, behind which we will camp."

Dick knew very well now that it was Shepard who brought the news, and Pennington's report about the retreat was also soon verified. The whole army was soon in motion and a feeling of depression replaced the optimism of the night before. The advance had been turned into a retreat. Were they to go back and forth in this manner forever? But Colonel Winchester spoke hopefully to his young aides and said that the retreat was right.

"We're drawing out of a trap," he said, "and time is always on our side. The South to win has to hit hard and fast, and in this case the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Virginia may join before Lee and Jackson can come up."

The lads tried to reconcile themselves, but nevertheless they did not like retreat. Dick with his powerful glasses often looked back toward the dark bulk of Clark's Mountain. He saw nothing there, nor anything in the low country between, save the rear ranks of the Union army marching on.

But Shepard had been right. Lee and Jackson, advancing silently and with every avenue of news guarded, were there behind the mountain with sixty thousand men, flushed with victories, and putting a supreme faith in their great commanders who so well deserved their trust. The men of the valley and the Seven Days, wholly confident, asked only to be led against Pope and his army, and most of them expected a battle that very day, while the Northern commander was slipping from the well-laid trap.

Pope's judgment in this case was good and fortune, too, favored him. Before the last of his men had left the Rapidan Lee himself, with his staff officers, climbed to the summit of Clark's Mountain. They were armed with the best of glasses, but drifting fogs coming down from the north spread along the whole side of the mountain and hung like a curtain between it and the retreating army. None of their glasses could pierce the veil, and it was not until nearly night that rising winds caught the fog and took it away. Then Lee and his generals saw a vast cloud of dust in the northwest and they knew that under it marched Pope's retreating army.

The Southern army was at once ordered forward in pursuit and in the night the vanguard, wading the Rapidan, followed eagerly. Dick and his comrades did not know then that they were followed so closely, but they were destined to know it before morning. The regiment of Colonel Winchester, one of the best and bravest in the whole service, formed a part of the rearguard, and Dick, Warner and Pennington rode with their chief.

The country was broken and they crossed small streams. Sometimes they were in open fields, and again they passed through long stretches of forest. There was a strong force of cavalry with the regiment, and the beat of the horses' hoofs made a steady rolling sound which was not unpleasant.

But Dick found the night full of sinister omens. They had left the Rapidan in such haste that there was still a certain confusion of impressions. The gigantic scale of everything took hold of him. One hundred and fifty thousand men, or near it, were marching northward in two armies which could not be many miles apart. The darkness and the feeling of tragedy soon to come oppressed him.

He listened eagerly for the sounds of pursuit, but the long hours passed and he heard nothing. The rear guard did not talk. The men wasted no strength that way, but marched stolidly on in the moonlight. Midnight passed and after a while it grew darker. Colonel Winchester and his young officers rode at the very rear, and Pennington suddenly held up his hand.

"What is it?" asked Colonel Winchester.

"Somebody following us, sir. I was trained out on the plains to take notice of such things. May I get down and put my ear to the ground? I may look ridiculous, sir, but I can make sure."

"Certainly. Go ahead."

Pennington sprang down and put his ear to the road. He did not listen long, but when he stood up again he said:

"Horsemen are coming. I can't tell how many, but several hundreds at least."

"As we're the very last of our own army, they must be Southern cavalry," said Colonel Winchester. "If they want to attack, I dare say our boys are willing."

Very soon they heard clearly the gallop of the cavalry, and the men heard it also. They looked up and turned their faces toward those who must be foes. Despite the dimness Dick saw their eyes brighten. Colonel Winchester had judged rightly. The boys were willing.

The rear guard turned back and waited, and in a few minutes the Southern horsemen came in sight, opening fire at once. Their infantry, too, soon appeared in the woods and fields and the dark hours before the dawn were filled with the crackle of small arms.

Dick kept close to Colonel Winchester who anxiously watched the pursuit, throwing his own regiment across the road, and keeping up a heavy fire on the enemy. The Union loss was not great as most of the firing in the dusk, of necessity, was at random, and Dick heard bullets whistling all about him. Some times the bark flew from trees and now and then there was a rain of twigs, shorn from the branches by the showers of missiles.

It was arduous work. The men were worn by the darkness, the uncertainty and the incessant pursuit. The Northern rear guard presented a strong front, retreating slowly with its face to the enemy, and always disputing the road. Dick meanwhile could hear through the crash of the firing the deep rumble of Pope's great army with its artillery and thousands of wagons continually marching toward the Rappahannock. His mind became absorbed in a vital question. Would Lee and Jackson come up

before they could reach the bigger river? Would a battle be forced the next day while the Union army was in retreat? He confided his anxieties to Warner who rode by his side.

“I take it that it’s only a vanguard that’s pursuing us,” said the Vermonter. “If they were in great force they’d have been pushing harder and harder. We must have got a good start before Lee and Jackson found us out. We know our Jackson, Dick, and he’d have been right on top of us without delay.”

“That’s right, George. It must be their cavalry mostly. I suppose Jeb Stuart is there leading them. At any rate we’ll soon know better what’s doing. Look there toward the east. Don’t you see a ray of light behind that hill?”

“I see it, Dick.”

“Is it the first ray of the morning, or is it just a low star?”

“It’s the dawn, Dick, and mighty glad I am to see it. Look how fast it comes!”

The sun shot up, over the hill. The sky turning to silver soon gave way to gold, and the clear August light poured in a flood over the rolling country.

Dick saw ahead of him a vast cloud of dust extending miles from east to west, marking where the army of Pope pushed on its retreat to the Rappahannock. There was no need to search for the Northern force. The newest recruit would know that it was here.

The Southern vanguard was behind them and not many hundred yards away. Dick distinctly saw the cavalry, riding along the road, and hundreds of skirmishers pushing through the woods and fields. He judged that the force did not number many thousands and that it could not think of assailing the whole Union army. But with the coming of day the vigor of the attack increased. The skirmishers fired from the shelter of every tree stump, fence or hillock and the bullets pattered about Dick and his comrades.

The Union rear guard maintained its answering fire, but as it was retreating it was at a disadvantage. The regiments began to suffer. Many men were wounded. The fire became most galling. A sudden charge by the rearguard was ordered and it was made with spirit. The Southern van was driven back, but when the retreat was resumed the skirmishers and the cavalry came forward again, always firing at their retreating foe.

“I judge that it’s going to be a very hot morning,” said Colonel Winchester, wiping away a few drops of blood, where a bullet had barely touched his face. “I think the wind of that bullet hurt me more than its kiss. There will be no great battle to-day. We can see now that they are not yet in strong enough force, but we’ll never know a minute’s rest until we’re behind the Rappahannock. Oh, Dick, if McClellan’s army were only here also! This business of retreating is as bitter as death itself!”

Dick saw the pain on his colonel’s face and it was reflected on his own.

“I feel it, sir, in the same way. Our men are just as eager as the Johnnies to fight and they are as brave and tenacious. What do you think will happen, sir?”

“We’ll reach the Rappahannock and take refuge behind it. We command the railroad bridge there, and can cross and destroy it afterward. But the river is broad and deep with high banks and the army of the enemy cannot possibly force the passage in any way while we defend it.”

“And after that, sir?”

“God alone knows. Look out, Dick, those men are aiming at us!”

Colonel Winchester seized the bridle of Dick’s horse and pulled him violently to one side, pulling his own horse in the same direction in the same manner. The bullets of half a dozen Southern skirmishers, standing under the boughs of a beech tree less than two hundred yards away, hissed angrily by them.

“A close call,” said the colonel. “There, they’ve been scattered by our own riflemen and one of them remains to pay the toll.”

The reply of the Northern skirmishers had been quick, and the gray figure lying prone by the trunk of the tree told Dick that the colonel had been right. He was shaken by a momentary shudder,

but he could not long remember one among so many. They rode on, leaving the prone figure out of sight, and the Southern cavalry and skirmishers pressed forward afresh.

Many of the Union men had food in their saddle bags, and supplies were sent back for those who did not have it. Colonel Winchester who was now thoroughly cool, advised his officers to eat, even if they felt no hunger.

"I'm hungry enough," said Pennington to Dick. "Out on the plains, where the air is so fresh and so full of life I was always hungry, and I suppose I brought my appetite here with me. Dick, I've opened a can of cove oysters, and that's a great deal for a fellow on horseback to do. Here, take your share, and they'll help out that dry bread you're munching."

Dick accepted with thanks. He learned that he, too, could eat with a good appetite while bullets were knocking up dust only twenty yards away. Meanwhile there was a steady flash of firing from every wood and cornfield behind them.

As he ate he watched and he saw an amazing panorama. Miles in front the great cloud of dust, cutting across from horizon to horizon swelled slowly on toward the Rappahannock. Behind them rode the Southern cavalry and masses of infantry were pressing forward, too. Far off on either flank rolled the pleasant country, its beauty heightened by the loom of blue mountains.

Colonel Winchester had predicted truly. The fighting between the Northern rearguard, and the Southern vanguard never ceased. Every moment the bullets were whistling, and occasionally a cannon lent its deep roar to the crackling fire of the rifles. Daring detachments of the Southern cavalry often galloped up and charged lagging regiments. And they were driven off with equal courage and daring.

The three boys took especial notice of those cavalry bands and began to believe at last that they could identify the very men in them. Dick looked for his cousin, Harry Kenton. He was sure that he would be there in the front—but he did not see him. Instead he saw after a while an extraordinary figure on a large black horse, a large man in magnificent uniform, with a great plume in his hat. He was nearer to them than any other Southern horseman, and he seemed to be indifferent to danger.

"Look! look! There's Jeb Stuart!" exclaimed Dick. He had heard so much about the famous Stuart and his gorgeous uniform that he knew him instinctively, and, Warner and Pennington, as their eyes followed his pointing finger felt the same conviction.

Three of the Northern riflemen fired at once at the conspicuous target, and Dick breathed a little sigh of relief when all their bullets missed. Then the brilliant figure turned to one side and was lost in the smoke.

"Well," said Pennington. "We've seen Stonewall Jackson and Jeb Stuart both in battle against us. I wonder who will come next."

"Lee is due," said Warner, "but I doubt whether his men will let him expose himself in such a way. We'll have to slip under cover to get a chance of seeing him."

The hours went on, and the fight between rear guard and vanguard never ceased. That column of dust miles long was at the same distance in front, continuing in its slow course for the river, but the foes in contact were having plenty of dust showers of their own. Dick's throat and mouth burned with the dust and heat of the pitiless August day, and his bones ached with the tension and the long hours in the saddle. But his spirit was high. They were holding off the Southern cavalry and he felt that they would continue to do so.

About noon he ate more cold food, and then rode on, while the sun blazed and blazed and the dust whirled in clouds like the "dust devils" of the desert, continually spitting forth bullets instead of sand. Late in the afternoon he heard the sound of many trumpets, and saw the Southern cavalry getting together in a great mass. A warning ran instantly among the Union troops and the horsemen in blue and one or two infantry regiments drew closer together.

"They're going to charge in force," said Colonel Winchester to Dick. "See, our rearguard has lost touch with our main army, leaving a side opening between. They see this chance and intend to make the most of it."

“But our men are willing and anxious to meet them,” said Dick. “You can see it in their faces.”

He had made no mistake, as the fire in their rear deepened, and they saw the gathering squadrons of gray cavalry, a fierce anger seized the retreating Union rearguard. Those wasps had been buzzing and stinging them all day long and they had had enough of it. They could fight, and they would, if their officers would let them. Now it seemed that the officers were willing.

A deep and menacing mutter of satisfaction ran along the whole line. They would show the Southerners what kind of men they were. Colonel Winchester drew his infantry regiment into a small wood which at that point skirted the road.

“There is no doubt that we’ve found it at the right time,” said Warner.

Both knew that the forest would protect the infantry from the fierce charges of the Southern cavalry, while proving no obstacle to the Northern defense. His own cavalry was gathering in the road ready to meet Jeb Stuart and his squadrons.

The three boys sat on their horses within the covering of the trees, and watched eagerly, while the hostile forces massed for battle. The Southern cavalry was supported by infantry also on its flanks, and once again Dick caught sight of Jeb Stuart with his floating plume. But that time he was too far away for any of the Northern riflemen to reach him with a bullet, and as before he disappeared quickly in the clouds of dust and smoke which never ceased to float over both forces.

“Look out! The charge!” suddenly exclaimed Colonel Winchester.

They heard the thunder of the galloping horses, and also the flash of many rifles and carbines. Cavalry met cavalry but the men in gray reeled back, and as they retreated the Northern infantry in the wood sent a deadly fire into the flank of the attacking force. The Southern infantry replied, and a fierce battle raged along the road and through the woods. Dick heard once more the rattling of bullets on bark, and felt the twigs falling upon his face as they were shorn off by the missiles.

“We hold the road and we’ll hold it for a while,” exclaimed Colonel Winchester, exultation showing in his tone.

“Why can’t we hold it all the time?” Dick could not refrain from asking.

“Because we are retreating and the Southerners are continually coming up, while our army wishes to go away.”

Dick glanced through the trees and saw that great clouds of dust still were rolling toward the northwest. It must be almost at the Rappahannock now, and he began to appreciate what this desperate combat in the woods meant. They were holding back the Southern army, while their men could cross the river and reform behind it.

The battle swayed back and forth, and it was most desperate between the cavalry. The bugles again and again called the gray horsemen to the charge, and although the blue infantry supported their own horsemen with a heavy rifle fire, and held the wood undaunted, the Northern rear guard was forced to give way at last before the pressure of numbers and attacks that would not cease.

Their own bugles sounded the retreat and they began to retire slowly.

“Do we run again?” exclaimed Pennington, a tear ploughing its way through the smoky grime on his cheek.

“No, we don’t run,” replied Warner calmly, “We’re forced back, and the rebels will claim a victory but we haven’t fought for nothing. Lee and Jackson will never get up in time to attack our army before it’s over the river.”

The regiment began its slow retreat. It had not suffered much, owing to the shelter of the forest, and, full of courage and resolution, it was a formidable support on the flank of the slowly retreating cavalry.

The evening was now at hand. The sun was setting once more over the Virginia hills destined to be scarred so deeply by battle, but attack and defense went on. As night came the thudding of cannon added to the tumult, and then the three boys saw the Rappahannock, a deep and wide stream flowing between high banks crested with timber. Ahead of them Pope’s army was crossing on the bridge and

in boats, and masses of infantry supported by heavy batteries had turned to protect the crossing. The Southern vanguard could not assail such a powerful force, and before the night was over the whole Union army passed to the Northern side of the Rappahannock.

Dick felt a mixture of chagrin and satisfaction as he crossed the river, chagrin that this great army should draw back, as McClellan's had been forced to draw back at the Seven Days, and satisfaction that they were safe for the time being and could prepare for a new start.

But the feeling of exultation soon passed and gave way wholly to chagrin. They were retreating before an army not exceeding their own, in numbers, perhaps less. They had another great force, the Army of the Potomac, which should have been there, and then they could have bade defiance to Lee and Jackson. The North with its great numbers, its fine courage and its splendid patriotism should never be retreating. He felt once more as thousands of others felt that the hand on the reins was neither strong nor sure, and that the great trouble lay there. They ought not to be hiding behind a river. Lee and Jackson did not do it. Dick remembered that grim commander in the West, the silent Grant, and he did not believe he would be retreating.

Long after darkness came the firing continued between skirmishers across the stream, but finally it, too, waned and Dick was permitted to throw himself upon the ground and sleep with the sleeping thousands. Warner and Pennington slept near him and not far away was the brave sergeant. Even he was overpowered by fatigue and he slept like one dead, never stirring.

Dick was awakened next morning by the booming of cannon. He had become so much used to such sounds that he would have slept on had not the crashes been so irregular. He stood up, rubbed his eyes and then looked in the direction whence came the cannonade. He saw from the crest of a hill great numbers of Confederate troops on the other side of the river, the August sun glittering over thousands of bayonets and rifle barrels, and along the somber batteries of great guns. The firing, so far as he could determine, was merely to feel out or annoy the Northern army.

It was a strange sight to Dick, one that is not looked upon often, two great armies gazing across a river at each other, and, sure to meet, sooner or later, in mortal combat. It was thrilling, awe-inspiring, but it made his heart miss a beat or two at the thought of the wounds and death to come, all the more terrible because those who fought together were of the same blood, and the same nation.

Warner and Pennington joined him on the height where he stood, and they saw that in the early hours before dawn the Northern generals had not been idle. The whole army of Pope was massed along the left bank of the river and every high point was crowned with heavy batteries of artillery. There had been a long drought, and at some points the Rappahannock could be forded, but not in the face of such a defence as the North here offered.

Colonel Winchester himself came a moment or two later and joined them as they gazed at the two armies and the river between. Both he and the boys used their glasses and they distinctly saw the Southern masses.

“Will they try to cross, sir?” asked Dick of the colonel.

“I don't think so, but if they do we ought to beat them back. Meanwhile, Dick, my boy, every day's delay is a fresh card in our hand. McClellan is landing his army at Aquia Creek, whence it can march in two days to a junction with us, when we would become overwhelming and irresistible. But I wish it didn't take so long to disembark an army!”

The note of anxiety in his voice did not escape Dick. “You wish then to be sure of the junction between our two armies before Lee and Jackson strike?”

“Yes, Dick. That is what is on my mind. The retreat of this army, although it may have caused us chagrin, was most opportune. It gave us two chances, when we had but one before. But, Dick, I'm afraid. I wouldn't say this to anybody but you and you must not repeat me. I wish I could divine what is in the mind of those two men, Lee and Jackson. They surely have a plan of some kind, but what is it?”

“Have we any definite news from the other side, sir?”

“Shepard came in this morning. But little ever escapes him, and he says that the whole Southern army is up. All their best leaders are there. Lee and Jackson and Longstreet and the Hills and Early and Lawton and the others. He says that they are all flushed with confidence in their own courage and fighting powers and the ability of their leaders. Oh, if only the Army of the Potomac would come! If we could only stave off battle long enough for it to reach us!”

“Don’t you think we could do it, sir? Couldn’t General Pope retreat on Washington then, and, as they continued to follow us, we could turn and spring on them with both armies.”

But Colonel Winchester shook his head.

“It would never do,” he said. “All Europe, eager to see the Union split, would then help the Confederacy in every possible manner. The old monarchies would say that despite our superior numbers we’re not able to maintain ourselves outside the defenses of Washington. And these things would injure us in ways that we cannot afford. Remember, Dick, my boy, that this republic is the hope of the world, and that we must save it.”

“It will be done, sir,” said Dick, almost in the tone of a young prophet. “I know the spirit of the men. No matter how many defeats are inflicted upon us by our own brethren we’ll triumph in the end.”

“It’s my own feeling, Dick. It cannot, it must not be any other way!”

Dick remained upborne by a confidence in the future rather than in the present, and throughout the morning he remained with his comrades, under arms, but doing little, save to hear the fitful firing which ran along a front of several miles. But later in the day a heavy crash came from a ford further up the stream.

Under cover of a great artillery fire Stuart’s cavalry dashed into the ford, and drove off the infantry and a battery posted to defend it. Then they triumphantly placed heavy lines of pickets about the ford on the Union side.

It was more than the Union lads could stand. A heavy mass of infantry, Colonel Winchester’s regiment in the very front of it, marched forward to drive back these impertinent horsemen. They charged with so much impetuosity that Stuart’s cavalry abandoned such dangerous ground. All the pickets were drawn in and they retreated in haste across the stream, the water foaming up in spurts about them beneath the pursuing bullets.

Then came a silence and a great looking back and forth. The threatening armies stared at each other across the water, but throughout the afternoon they lay idle. The pitiless August sun burned on and the dust that had been trodden up by the scores of thousands hung in clouds low, but almost motionless.

Dick went down into a little creek, emptying into the Rappahannock, and bathed his face and hands. Hundreds of others were doing the same. The water brought a great relief. Then he went back to Colonel Winchester and his comrades, and waited patiently with them until evening.

He remembered Colonel Winchester’s words earlier in the day, and, as the darkness came, he began to wonder what Lee and Jackson were thinking. He believed that two such redoubtable commanders must have formed a plan by this time, and, perhaps in the end, it would be worth a hundred thousand men to know it. But he could only stare into the darkness and guess and guess. And one guess was as good as another.

The night seemed portentous to him. It was full of sinister omens. He strove to pierce the darkness on the other shore with his eyes, and see what was going on there, but he distinguished only a black background and the dim light of fires.

Dick was not wrong. The Confederate commanders did have a plan and the omens which seemed sinister to him were sinister in fact. Jackson with his forces was marching up his side of the Rappahannock and the great brain under the old slouch hat was working hard.

When Lee and Jackson found that the Union army on the Rapidan had slipped away from them they felt that they had wasted a great opportunity to strike the retreating force before it reached the Rappahannock, and that, as they followed, the situation of the Confederacy would become most

critical. They would leave McClellan and the Army of the Potomac nearer to Richmond, their own capital, than they were. Nevertheless Lee, full of daring despite his years, followed, and the dangers were growing thicker every hour around Pope.

Dick, with his regiment, moved the next morning up the river. The enemy was in plain view beyond the stream, and Shepard and the other spies reported that the Southern army showed no signs of retiring. But Shepard had said also that he would not be able to cross the river again. The hostile scouts and sharpshooters had become too vigilant. Yet he was sure that Lee and Jackson would attempt to force a passage higher up, where the drought had made good fords.

"It's well that we're showing vigilance," said Colonel Winchester to Dick. He had fallen into the habit of talking much and confidentially to the boy, because he liked and trusted him, and for another reason which to Dick was yet in the background.

"Do you feel sure that the rebels will attempt the crossing?" asked Dick.

"Beyond a doubt. They have every reason to strike before the Army of the Potomac can come. Besides, it is in accord with the character of their generals. Both Lee and Jackson are always for the swift offensive, and Early, Longstreet and the Hills are the same way. Hear that booming ahead! They're attacking one of the fords now!"

At a ford a mile above and also at another a mile or two further on, the Southern troops had begun a heavy fire, and gathered in strong masses were threatening every moment to attempt the passage. But the Union guns posted on hills made a vigorous reply and the time passed in heavy cannonades. Colonel Winchester, his brows knitted and anxious, watched the fire of the cannon. He confided at last to his favorite aide his belief that what lay behind the cannonade was more important than the cannonade itself.

"It must be a feint or a blind," he said. "They fire a great deal, but they don't make any dash for the stream. Now, the rebels haven't ammunition to waste."

"Then what do you think they're up to, sir?"

"They must be sending a heavy force higher up the river to cross where there is no resistance. And we must meet them there, with my regiment only, if we can obtain no other men."

The colonel obtained leave to go up the Rappahannock until nightfall, but only his own regiment, now reduced to less than four hundred men, was allotted to him. In truth his division commander thought his purpose useless, but yielded to the insistence of Winchester who was known to be an officer of great merit. It seemed to the Union generals that they must defend the fords where the Southern army lay massed before them.

Dick learned that there was a little place called Sulphur Springs some miles ahead, and that the river there was spanned by a bridge which the Union cavalry had wrecked the day before. He divined at once that Colonel Winchester had that ford in mind, and he was glad to be with him on the march to it.

They left behind them the sound of the cannonade which they learned afterward was being carried on by Longstreet, and followed the course of the stream as fast as they could over the hills and through the woods. But with so many obstacles they made slow progress, and, in the close heat, the men soon grew breathless. It was also late in the afternoon and Dick was quite sure that they would not reach Sulphur Springs before nightfall.

"I've felt exactly this same air on the great plains," said Pennington, as they stopped on the crest of a hill for the troops to rest a little. "It's heavy and close as if it were being all crowded together. It makes your lungs work twice as hard as usual, and it's also a sign."

"Tell your sign, old weather sharp," said Warner.

"It's simple enough. The sign may not be so strong here, but it applies just as it does on the great plains. It means that a storm is coming. Anybody could tell that. Look there, in the southwest. See that cloud edging itself over the horizon. Things will turn loose to-night. Don't you say the same, sergeant? You've been out in my country."

Sergeant Whitley was standing near them regarding the cloud attentively.

"Yes, Mr. Pennington," he replied. "I was out there a long time and I'd rather be there now fighting the Indians, instead of fighting our own people, although no other choice was left me. I've seen some terrible hurricanes on the plains, winds that would cut the earth as if it was done with a ploughshare, and these armies are going to be rained on mighty hard to-night."

Dick smiled a little at the sergeant's solemn tone, and formal words, but he saw that he was very much in earnest. Nor was he one to underrate weather effects upon movements in war.

"What will it mean to the two armies, sergeant?" he asked.

"Depends upon what happens before she busts. If a rebel force is then across it's bad for us, but if it ain't the more water between us an' them the better. This, I take it, is the end of the drought, and a flood will come tumbling down from the mountains."

The sun now darkened and the clouds gathered heavily on the Western horizon. Colonel Winchester's anxiety increased fast. It became evident that the regiment could not reach Sulphur Springs until far into the night, and, still full of alarms, he resolved to take a small detachment, chiefly of his staff, and ride forward at the utmost speed.

He chose about twenty men, including Dick, Warner, Pennington, Sergeant Whitley, and another veteran who were mounted on the horses of junior officers left behind, and pressed forward with speed. A West Virginian named Shattuck knew something of the country, and led them.

"What is this place, Sulphur Springs?" asked Colonel Winchester of Shattuck.

"Some big sulphur springs spout out of the bank and run down to the river. They are fine and healthy to drink an' there's a lot of cottages built up by people who come there to stay a while. But I guess them people have gone away. It ain't no place for health just at this time."

"That's a certainty," said Colonel Winchester.

"An' then there's the bridge, which, as we know, the cavalry has broke down."

"Fortunately. But can't we go a little faster, boys?"

There was a well defined road and Shattuck now led them at a gallop. As they approached the springs they checked their speed, owing to the increasing darkness. But Dick's good ears soon told him that something was happening at the springs. He heard faintly the sound of voices, and the clank and rattle which many men with weapons cannot keep from making now and then.

"I'm afraid, sir," he said to Colonel Winchester, "that they're already across."

The little troop stopped at the command of its leader and all listened intently. It was very dark now and the wood was moaning, but the columns of air came directly from the wood, bearing clearly upon their crest the noises made by regiments.

"You're right, Dick," said Colonel Winchester, bitter mortification showing in his tone. "They're there, and they're on our side of the river. Oh, we might have known it! They say that Stonewall Jackson never sleeps, and they make no mistake, when they call his infantry foot cavalry!"

Dick was silent. He shared his leader's intense disappointment, but he knew that it was not for him to speak at this moment.

"Mr. Shattuck," said Colonel Winchester, "how near do you think we can approach without being seen?"

"I know a neck of woods leading within a hundred yards of the cottages. If we was to leave our horses here with a couple of men we could slip down among the trees and bushes, and there ain't one chance in ten that we'd be seen on so dark a night."

"Then you lead us. Pawley, you and Woodfall hold the horses. Now follow softly, lads! All of you have hunted the 'coon and 'possum at night, and you should know how to step without making noise."

Shattuck advanced with certainty, and the others, true to their training, came behind him in single file, and without noise. But as they advanced the sounds of an army ahead of them increased, and when they reached the edge of the covert they saw a great Confederate division on their side of

the stream, in full possession of the cottages and occupying all the ground about them. Many men were at work, restoring the wrecked bridge, but the others were eating their suppers or were at rest.

“There must be seven or eight thousand men here,” said Dick, who did not miss the full significance of the fact.

“So it seems,” said Warner, “and I’m afraid it bodes ill for General Pope.”

CHAPTER IV. SPRINGING THE TRAP

Lying close in the bushes the little party watched the Southerners making themselves ready for the night. The cottages were prepared for the higher officers, but the men stacked arms in the open ground all about. As well as they could judge by the light of the low fires, soldiers were still crossing the river to strengthen the force already on the Union side.

Colonel Winchester suppressed a groan. Dick noticed that his face was pallid in the uncertain shadows, and he understood the agony of spirit that the brave man must suffer when he saw that they had been outflanked by their enemy.

Sergeant Whitley, moving forward a little, touched the colonel on the arm.

"All the clouds that we saw a little further back," he said, "have gathered together, an' the storm is about to bust. See, sir, how fast the Johnnies are spreadin' their tents an' runnin' to shelter."

"It's so, sergeant," said Colonel Winchester. "I was so much absorbed in watching those men that I thank you for reminding me. We've seen enough anyway and we'd better get back as fast as we can."

They hurried through the trees and bushes toward their horses, taking no particular pains now to deaden their footsteps, since the Southerners themselves were making a good deal of noise as they took refuge.

But the storm was upon them before they could reach their horses. The last star was gone and the somber clouds covered the whole heavens. The wind ceased to moan and the air was heavy with apprehension. Deep and sullen thunder began to mutter on the southwestern horizon. Then came a mighty crash and a great blaze of lightning seemed to cleave the sky straight down the center.

The lightning and thunder made Dick jump, and for a few moments he was blinded by the electric glare. He heard a heavy sound of something falling, and exclaimed:

"Are any of you hurt?"

"No," said Warner, who alone heard him, "but we're scared half to death. When a drought breaks up I wish it wouldn't break up with such a terrible fuss. Listen to that thunder again, won't you!"

There was another terrible crash of thunder and the whole sky blazed with lightning. Despite himself Dick shrank again. The first bolt had struck a tree which had fallen within thirty feet of them, but the second left this bit of the woods unscathed.

A third and a fourth bolt struck somewhere, and then came the rush and roar of the rain, driven on by a fierce wind out of the southwest. The close, dense heat was swept away, and the first blasts of the rain were as cold as ice. The little party was drenched in an instant, and every one was shivering through and through with combined wet and cold.

The cessation of the lightning was succeeded by pitchy darkness, and the roaring of the wind and rain was so great that they called loudly to one another lest they lose touch in the blackness. Dick heard Warner on his right, and he followed the sound of his voice. But before he went much further his foot struck a trailing vine, and he fell so hard, his head striking the trunk of a tree, that he lay unconscious.

The cold rain drove so fiercely on the fallen boy's face and body that he revived in two or three minutes, and stood up. He clapped his hand to the left side of his head, and felt there a big bump and a sharp ache. His weapons were still in his belt and he knew that his injuries were not serious, but he heard nothing save the drive and roar of the wind and rain. There was no calling of voices and no beat of footsteps.

He divined at once that his comrades, wholly unaware of his fall, when no one could either see or hear it, had gone on without missing him. They might also mount their horses and gallop away wholly ignorant that he was not among them.

Although he was a little dazed, Dick had a good idea of direction and he plunged through the mud which was now growing deep toward the little ravine in which they had hitched their horses. All were gone, including his own mount, and he had no doubt that the horse had broken or slipped the bridle in the darkness and followed the others.

He stood a while behind the trunk of a great tree, trying to shelter himself a little from the rain, and listened. But he could hear neither his friends leaving nor any foes approaching. The storm was of uncommon fury. He had never seen one fiercer, and knowing that he had little to dread from the Southerners while it raged he knew also that he must make his way on foot, and as best he could, to his own people.

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