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**ROBERT**  
**WILLIAM**

SPECIAL MESSENGER

Robert Chambers

**Special Messenger**

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# **Robert W. Chambers Special Messenger**

**TO**

**GEORGE F. D. TRASK**

**IN MEMORY OF**

**OUR FIRST MARTIAL EXPLOITS**

**IN THE NURSERY**

Thou hast given a banner to them that fear Thee, that it may be displayed  
because of the truth.  
—*Psalm lx, 4.*

## PREFACE

In the personality and exploits of the “Special Messenger,” the author has been assured that a celebrated historical character is recognizable—Miss Boyd, the famous Confederate scout and spy.

It is not uncommon that the readers of a book know more about that book than the author.

*R. W. C.*



## ***PART ONE***

### **WHAT SHE WAS**

#### **I**

#### **NONCOMBATANTS**

About five o'clock that evening a Rhode Island battery clanked through the village and parked six dusty guns in a pasture occupied by some astonished cows.

A little later the cavalry arrived, riding slowly up the tree-shaded street, escorted by every darky and every dog in the country-side.

The clothing of this regiment was a little out of the ordinary. Instead of the usual campaign head gear the troopers wore forage caps strapped under their chins, heavy visors turned down, and their officers were conspicuous in fur-trimmed hussar tunics slung from the shoulders of dark-blue shell jackets; but most unusual and most interesting of all, a mounted cavalry band rode ahead, led by a bandmaster who sat his horse like a colonel of regulars—a slim young man with considerable yellow and gold on his faded blue sleeves, and an easy manner of swinging forward his heavy cut-and-thrust sabre as he guided the column through the metropolitan labyrinths of Sandy River.

Sandy River had seen and scowled at Yankee cavalry before, but never before had the inhabitants had an opportunity to ignore a mounted band and bandmaster. There was, of course, no cheering; a handkerchief fluttered from a gallery here and there, but Sandy River was loyal only in spots, and the cavalry pressed past groups of silent people, encountering the averted heads or scornful eyes of young girls and the cold hatred in the faces of gray-haired gentlewomen, who turned their backs as the ragged guidons bobbed past and the village street rang with the clink-clank of scabbards and rattle of Spencer carbines.

But there was a small boy on a pony who sat entranced as the weather-ravaged squadrons trampled by. Cap in hand, straight in his saddle, he saluted the passing flag; a sunburnt trooper called out: "That's right, son! Bully for you!"

The boy turned his pony and raced along the column under a running fire of approving chaff from the men, until he came abreast of the bandmaster once more, at whom he stared with fascinated and uncloyed satisfaction.

Into a broad common wheeled the cavalry; the boy followed on his pony, guiding the little beast in among the mounted men, edging as close as possible to the bandmaster, who had drawn bridle and wheeled his showy horse abreast of a group of officers. When the boy had crowded up as close as possible to the bandmaster he sat in silence, blissfully drinking in the splendors of that warrior's dusty apparel.

"I'm right glad you-all have come," ventured the boy.

The bandmaster swung round in his saddle and saw a small sun-tanned face and two wide eyes intently fixed on his.

"I reckon you don't know how glad my sister and I are to see you down here," said the boy politely. "When are you going to have a battle?"

"A battle!" repeated the bandmaster.

"Yes, sir. You're going to fight, of course, aren't you?"

"Not if people leave us alone—and leave that railroad alone," replied the officer, backing his restive horse to the side of the fence as the troopers trotted past into the meadow, fours crowding closely on fours.

"Not fight?" exclaimed the boy, astonished. "Isn't there going to be a battle?"

"I'll let you know when there's going to be one," said the bandmaster absently.

"You won't forget, will you?" inquired the boy. "My name is William Stuart Westcote, and I live in that house." He pointed with his riding whip up the hill. "You won't forget, will you?"

"No, child, I won't forget."

"My sister Celia calls me Billy; perhaps you had better just ask her for Billy if I'm not there when you gallop up to tell me—that is, if you're coming yourself. Are you?" he ended wistfully.

"Do you want me to come?" inquired the bandmaster, amused.

"Would you really come?" cried the boy. "Would you really come to visit me?"

"I'll consider it," said the bandmaster gravely.

"Do you think you could come to-night?" asked the boy. "We'd certainly be glad to see you—my sister and I. Folks around here like the Malletts and the Colvins and the Garnetts don't visit us any more, and it's lonesome sometimes."

"I think that you should ask your sister first," suggested the bandmaster.

"Why? She's loyal!" exclaimed the boy earnestly. "Besides, you're coming to visit *me*, I reckon. Aren't you?"

"Certainly," said the bandmaster hastily.

"To-night?"

"I'll do my best, Billy."

The boy held out a shy hand; the officer bent from his saddle and took it in his soiled buckskin gauntlet.

"Good night, my son," he said, without a smile, and rode off into the meadow among a crowd of troopers escorting the regimental wagons.

A few moments later a child on a pony tore into the weed-grown drive leading to the great mansion on the hill, scaring a lone darky who had been dawdling among the roses.

"Clar' tu goodness, Mars Will'm, I done tuk you foh de Black Hoss Cav'ly!" said the ancient negro reproachfully. "Hi! Hi! Wha' foh you mek all dat fuss an' a-gwine-on?"

"Oh, Mose!" cried the boy, "I've seen the Yankee cavalry, and they have a horse band, and I rode with them, and I asked a general when they were going to have a battle, and the general said he'd let me know!"

"Gin'ral?" demanded the old darky suspiciously; "who dat gin'ral dat gwine tell you 'bout de battle? Was he drivin' de six-mule team, or was he dess a-totin' a sack o' co'n? Kin you splain dat, Mars Will'm?"

"Don't you think I know a general when I see one?" exclaimed the boy scornfully. "He had yellow and gilt on his sleeves, and he carried a sabre, and he rode first of all. And—oh, Mose! He's coming here to pay me a visit! Perhaps he'll come to-night; he said he would if he could."

"Dat gin'ral 'low he gwine come here?" muttered the darky. "Spec' you better see Miss Celia 'fo' you ax dis here gin'ral."

"I'm going to ask her now," said the boy. "She certainly will be glad to see one of our own men. Who cares if all the niggers have run off? We're not ashamed—and, anyhow, you're here to bring in the decanters for the general."

"Shoo, honey, you might talk dat-a-way ef yo' pa wuz in de house," grumbled the old man. "Ef hit's done fix, nobody kin onfix it. But dess yo' leave dem gin'ral whar dey is nex' time, Mars Will'm. Hit wuz a gin'ral dat done tuk de Dominiker hen las' time de blueco'ts come to San' River."

The boy, sitting entranced in reverie, scarcely heard him; and it was only when a far trumpet blew from the camp in the valley that he started in his saddle and raised his rapt eyes to the windows. Somebody had hung out a Union flag over the jasmine-covered portico.

"There it is! There it is, Mose!" he cried excitedly, scrambling from his saddle. "Here—take the bridle! And the very minute you hear the general dashing into the drive, let me know!"



He ran jingling up the resounding veranda—he wore his father’s spurs—and mounted the stairs, two at a jump, calling: “Celia! Celia! You’ll be glad to know that a general who is a friend of mine—”

“Hush, Billy,” said his sister, checking him on the landing and leading him out to the gallery from which the flag hung; “can’t you remember that grandfather is asleep by sundown? Now—what is it, dear, you wish to tell me?”

“Oh, I forgot; truly I did, Celia—but a general is coming to visit me to-night, if you can possibly manage it, and I’m so glad you hung out the flag—and Moses can serve the Madeira, can’t he?”

“What general?” inquired his sister uneasily. And her brother’s explanations made matters no clearer. “You remember what the Yankee cavalry did before,” she said anxiously. “You must be careful, Billy, now that the quarters are empty and there’s not a soul in the place except Mose.”

“But, Celia! the general is a gentleman. I shook hands with him!”

“Very well, dear,” she said, passing one arm around his neck and leaning forward over the flag. The sun was dipping between a cleft in the hills, flinging out long rosy beams across the misty valley. The mocking birds had ceased, but a thrasher was singing in a tangle of Cherokee roses under the western windows.

While they stood there the sun dipped so low that nothing remained except a glowing scarlet rim.

“Hark!” whispered the boy. Far away an evening gunshot set soft echoes tumbling from hill to hill, distant, more distant. Strains of the cavalry band rose in the evening silence, “The Star Spangled Banner” floating from the darkening valley. Then silence; and presently a low, sweet thrush note from the dusky garden.

It was after supper, when the old darky had lighted the dips—there being no longer any oil or candles to be had—that the thrush, who had been going into interminable ecstasies of fluty trills, suddenly became mute. A jingle of metal sounded from the garden, a step on the porch, a voice inquiring for Mr. Westcote; and old Mose replying with reproachful dignity: “Mars Wes’cote, suh? Mars Wes’cote daid, suh.”

“That’s my friend, the general!” exclaimed Billy, leaping from his chair. “Mose, you fool nigger, why don’t you ask the general to come in?” he whispered fiercely; then, as befitted the master of the house, he walked straight out into the hall, small hand outstretched, welcoming his guest as he had seen his father receive a stranger of distinction. “I am so glad you came,” he said, crimson with pleasure. “Moses will take your cap and cloak— Mose!”

The old servant shuffled forward, much impressed by the uniform revealed as the long blue mantle fell across his own ragged sleeve.

“Do you know why I came, Billy?” asked the bandmaster, smiling.

“I reckon it was because you promised to, wasn’t it?” inquired the child.

“Certainly,” said the bandmaster hastily. “And I promised to come because I have a brother about your age—’way up in New York. Shall we sit here on the veranda and talk about him?”

“First,” said the boy gravely, “my sister Celia will receive you.”

He turned, leading the way to the parlor with inherited self-possession; and there, through the wavering light of a tallow dip, the bandmaster saw a young girl in black rising from a chair by the center table; and he brought his spurred heels together and bowed his very best bow.

“My brother,” she said, “has been so anxious to bring one of our officers here. Two weeks ago the Yan—the Federal cavalry passed through, chasing Carrington’s Horse out of Oxley Court House, but there was no halt here.” She resumed her seat with a gesture toward a chair opposite; the bandmaster bowed again and seated himself, placing his sabre between his knees.

“Our cavalry advance did not behave very well in Oxley,” he said.

“They took a few chickens *en passant*,” she said, smiling; “but had they asked for them we would have been glad to give. We are loyal, you know.”

“Those gay jayhawkers were well disciplined for that business when Stannard took them over,” said the bandmaster grimly. “Had they behaved themselves, we should have had ten friends here where we have one now.”

The boy listened earnestly. “Would you please tell me,” he asked, “whether you have decided to have a battle pretty soon?”

“I don’t decide such matters,” said the bandmaster, laughing.

“Why, I thought a general could always have a battle when he wanted to!” insisted the boy, surprised.

“But I’m not a general, Billy,” replied the young fellow, coloring. “Did you think I was?”

“My brother’s ideas are very vague,” said his sister quickly; “any officer who fights is a general to him.”

“I’m sorry,” said the bandmaster, looking at the child, “but do you know, I am not even a fighting officer? I am only the regimental bandmaster, Billy—a noncombatant.”

For an instant the boy’s astonished disappointment crushed out his inbred courtesy as host. His sister, mortified but self-possessed, broke the strained silence with a quiet question or two concerning the newly arrived troops; and the bandmaster replied, looking at the boy.

Billy, silent, immersed in reflection, sat with curly head bent and hands folded on his knees. His sister glanced at him, looked furtively at the bandmaster, and their eyes met. He smiled, and she returned the smile; and he looked at Billy and smiled again.

“Billy,” he said, “I’ve been sailing under false colors, it seems—but you hoisted them. I think I ought to go.”

The boy looked up at him, startled.

“Good night,” said the bandmaster gravely, rising to his lean height from the chair beside the table. The boy flushed to his hair.

“Don’t go,” he said; “I like you even if you don’t fight!”

Then the bandmaster began to laugh, and the boy’s sister bit her lip and looked at her brother.

“Billy! Billy!” she said, catching his hands in hers, “do you think the only brave men are those who gallop into battle?”

Hands imprisoned in his sister’s, he looked up at the bandmaster.

“If you were ordered to fight, you’d fight, wouldn’t you?” he asked.

“Under those improbable circumstances I think I might,” admitted the young fellow, solemnly reseating himself.

“Celia! Do you hear what he says?” cried the boy.

“I hear,” said his sister gently. “Now sit very still while Moses serves the Madeira; only half a glass for Mr. William, Moses—no, not one drop more!”

Moses served the wine with pomp and circumstance; the lean young bandmaster looked straight at the boy’s sister and rose, bowing with a grace that instantly entranced the aged servant.

“Celia,” said the boy, “we must drink to the flag, you know;” and the young girl rose from her chair, and, looking at the bandmaster, touched her lips to the glass.

“I wish they could see us,” said the boy, “—the Colvins and the Malletts. I’ve heard their ‘Bonnie Blue Flag’ and their stirrup toasts until I’m sick—”

“Billy!” said his sister quietly. And reseating herself and turning to the bandmaster, “Our neighbors differ with us,” she said, “and my brother cannot understand it. I have to remind him that if they were not brave men our army would have been victorious, and there would have been no more war after Bull Run.”

The bandmaster assented thoughtfully. Once or twice his worn eyes swept the room—a room that made him homesick for his own. It had been a long time since he had sat in a chair in a room like this—a long time since he had talked with women and children. Perhaps the boy’s sister divined

something of his thoughts—he was not much older than she—for, as he rose, hooking up his sabre, and stepped forward to take his leave, she stood up, too, offering her hand.

“Our house is always open to Union soldiers,” she said simply. “Will you come again?”

“Thank you,” he said. “You don’t know, I think, how much you have already done for me.”

They stood a moment looking at one another; then he bowed and turned to the boy, who caught his hand impulsively.

“I knew my sister would like you!” he exclaimed.

“Everybody is very kind,” said the young bandmaster, looking steadily at the boy.

Again he bowed to the boy’s sister, not raising his eyes this time; and, holding the child’s hand tightly in his, he walked out to the porch.

Moses was there to assist him with his long blue mantle; the boy clung to his gloved hand a moment, then stepped back into the doorway, where the old servant shuffled about, muttering half aloud: “Yaas, suh. Done tole you so. He bow lak de quality, he drink lak de Garnetts—what I tole yo’? Mars Will’m, ef dat ossifer ain’ er gin’ral, he gwine be mighty quick!”

“I don’t care,” said the boy, “I just love him.”

The negro shuffled out across the moonlit veranda, peered around through the fragrant gloom, wrinkled hands linked behind his back. Then he descended the steps stiffly, and teetered about through the shrubbery with the instinct of a watchdog worn out in service.

“Nuff’n to scare nobody, scusin’ de hoot owls,” he muttered. “Spec’ hit’s time Miss Celia bolt de do’, ’long o’ de sodgers an’ all de gwines-on. Shoo! Hear dat fool chickum crow!” He shook his head, bent rheumatically, and seated himself on the veranda step, full in the moonlight. “All de fightin’s an’ de gwines-on ’long o’ dis here wah!” he soliloquized, joining his shriveled thumbs reflectively. “Whar de use? Spound dat! Whar all de fool niggers dat done skedaddle ’long o’ de Linkum troopers? Splain dat!” He chuckled; a whip-poor-will answered breathlessly.

“Dar dat scan’lous widder bird a-hollerin’!” exclaimed the old man, listening. “Pears lak we’s gwine have moh wah, moh daid men, moh widders. Dar de ha’nt! Dar de sign an’ de warnin’. G’way, widder bird.” He crossed his withered fingers and began rocking to and fro, crooning softly to himself:

“Butterfly a-flyin’ in de Chinaberry tree  
(Butterfly, flutter by!),  
Kitty gull a-cryin’ on the sunset sea  
(Fly, li’l gull, fly high!),  
Bully bat a-follerin’ de moon in de sky,  
Widder bird a-hollerin’, ‘Hi, dar! Hi!’  
Tree toad a-trillin’  
(Sleep, li’l honey!  
De moon cost a shillin’  
But we ain’t got money!),  
Sleep, li’l honey,  
While de firefly fly,  
An’ Chuck-Will’s Widder holler,  
‘Hi, dar! Hi!’”

Before dawn the intense stillness was broken by the rushing music of the birds—a careless, cheery torrent of song poured forth from bramble and woodland. Distant and nearer cockcrows rang out above the melodious tumult, through which a low, confused undertone, scarcely apparent at first, was growing louder—the dull sound of the stirring of many men.

Men? The valley was suddenly alive with them, choking the roads in heavy silent lines; they were in the lanes, they plodded through the orchards, they swarmed across the hills, column on column,

until the entire country seemed flowing forward in steady streams. Sandy River awoke, restlessly listening; lights glimmered behind darkened windows; a heavier, vaguer rumor grew, hanging along the hills. It increased to a shaking, throbbing monotone, like the far dissonance of summer thunder!

And now artillery was coming, bumping down the dim street with clatter of chain and harness jingling.

Up at the great house on the hill they heard it—the boy in his white nightdress leaning from the open window, and his sleepy sister kneeling beside him, pushing back her thick hair to peer out into the morning mist. On came the battery, thudding and clanking, horses on a long swinging trot, gun, caisson, forge, mounted artillerymen succeeding each other, faster, faster under the windows. A guidon danced by; more guns, more caissons, then a trampling, plunging gallop, a rattle of sabres—and the battery had passed.

“What is that heavy sound behind the hills?” whispered the boy.

“The river rushing over the shallows—perhaps a train on the trestle at Oxley Court House—” She listened, resting her rounded chin on her hands. “It is thunder, I think. Go to bed now for a while—”

“Hark!” said the boy, laying his small hand on hers.

“It is thunder,” she said again. “How white the dawn is growing. Listen to the birds—is it not sweet?”

“Celia,” whispered the boy, “that is not thunder. It is too hushed, too steady—it hums and hums and hums. Where was that battery galloping? I am going to dress.”

She looked at him, turned to the east and stared at the coming day. The air of dawn was full of sounds, ominous, sustained vibrations.

She rose, went back to her room, and lighted a dip. Then, shading the pallid smoky flame with her hand, she opened a door and peered into the next bedroom. “Grandfather!” she whispered, smiling, seeing that he was already awake. And as she leaned over him, searching the dim and wrinkled eyes, she read something in their unwonted luster that struck her silent. It was only when she heard her brother’s step on the stairs that she roused herself, bent, and kissed the aged head lying there inert among the pillows.

“It is cannon,” she breathed softly—“you know that sound, don’t you, grandfather? Does it make you happy? Why are you smiling? Look at me—I understand; you want something. Shall I open the curtains? And raise the window? Ah, you wish to hear. Hark! Horsemen are passing at a gallop. What is it you wish—to see them? But they are gone, dear. If any of our soldiers come, you shall see them. That makes you happy?—*that* is what you desire?—to see one of our own soldiers? If they pass, I shall go out and bring one here to you—truly, I will.” She paused, marveling at the strange light that glimmered across the ravaged visage. Then she blew out the dip and stole into the hall.

“Billy!” she called, hearing him fumbling at the front door.

“Oh, Celia! The cavalry trumpets! Do you hear? I’m going out. Perhaps *he* may pass the house.”

“Wait for me,” she said; “I am not dressed. Run to the cabin and wake Moses, dear!”

She heard him open the door; the deadened thunder of the cannonade filled the house for an instant, shut out by the closing door, only to swell again to an immense unbroken volume of solemn harmony. The bird-music had ceased; distant hilltops grew brighter.

Down in the village lights faded from window and cabin; a cavalryman, signaling from the church tower, whirled his flaming torch aside and picked up a signal flag. Suddenly the crash of a rifled cannon saluted the rising sun; a shell soared skyward through the misty glory, towered, curved, and fell, exploding among the cavalymen, completely ruining the breakfasts of chief-trumpeter O’Halloran and kettle-drummer Pillsbury.

For a moment a geyser of ashes, coffee, and bacon rained among the men.

“Hell!” said Pillsbury, furiously wiping his face with his dripping sleeve and spitting out ashes.

“Young kettle-drums, he don’t love his vittles,” observed a trooper, picking up the cap that had been jerked from his head by a whirring fragment.

“Rich feedin’ is the sp’ilin’ o’ this here hoss band,” added the farrier, stanching the flow of blood from his scalp; “quit quar’lin’ with your rations, kettle-drums!”

“Y’orter swaller them cinders,” insisted another; “they don’t cost nothin’!”

The band, accustomed to chaffing, prepared to retire to the ambulance, where heretofore their fate had always left them among luggage, surgeons, and scared camp niggers during an engagement.

The Rhode Island battery, placed just north of the church, had opened; the cavalry in the meadow could see them—see the whirl of smoke, the cannoneers moving with quick precision amidst obscurity—the flash, the recoil as gun after gun jumped back, buried in smoke.

It lasted only a few minutes; no more shells came whistling down among the cavalry; and presently the battery grew silent, and the steaming hill, belted with vapor, cleared slowly in the breezy sunshine.

The cavalry had mounted and leisurely filed off to the shelter of a grassy hollow; the band, dismounted, were drawn up to be told off in squads as stretcher-bearers; the bandmaster was sauntering past, buried in meditation, his sabre trailing a furrow through the dust, when a clatter of hoofs broke out along the village street, and a general officer, followed by a plunging knot of horsemen, tore up and drew bridle.

The colonel of the cavalry regiment, followed by the chief trumpeter, trotted out to meet them, saluting sharply; there was a quick exchange of words; the general officer waved his hand toward the south, wheeled his horse, hesitated, and pointed at the band.

“How many sabres?” he asked.

“Twenty-seven,” replied the colonel—“no carbines.”

“Better have them play you in—*if you go*,” said the officer.

The colonel saluted and backed his horse as the cavalcade swept past him; then he beckoned to the bandmaster.

“Here’s your chance,” he said. “Orders are to charge anything that appears on that road. You’ll play us in this time. Mount your men.”

Ten minutes later the regiment, band ahead, marched out of Sandy River and climbed the hill, halting in the road that passed the great white mansion. As the outposts moved forward they encountered a small boy on a pony, who swung his cap at them gayly as he rode. Squads, dismounted, engaged in tearing away the rail fences bordering the highway, looked around, shouting a cheery answer to his excited greeting; the colonel on a ridge to the east lowered his field glasses to watch him; the bandmaster saw him coming and smiled as the boy drew bridle beside him, saluting.

“If you’re not going to fight, why are you here?” asked the boy breathlessly.

“It really looks,” said the bandmaster, “as though we might fight, after all.”

“*You, too?*”

“Perhaps.”

“Then—could you come into the house—just a moment? My sister asked me to find you.”

A bright blush crept over the bandmaster’s sun-tanned cheeks.

“With pleasure,” he said, dismounting, and leading his horse through the gateway and across the shrubbery to the trees.

“Celia! Celia!” called the boy, running up the veranda steps. “*He* is here! Please hurry, because he’s going to have a battle!”

She came slowly, pale and lovely in her black gown, and held out her hand.

“There is a battle going on all around us, isn’t there?” she asked. “That is what all this dreadful uproar means?”

“Yes,” he said; “there is trouble on the other side of those hills.”

“Do you think there will be fighting here?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

She motioned him to a veranda chair, then seated herself. "What shall we do?" she asked calmly. "I am not alarmed—but my grandfather is bedridden, and my brother is a child. Is it safe to stay?"

The bandmaster looked at her helplessly.

"I don't know," he repeated—"I don't know what to say. Nobody seems to understand what is happening; we in the regiment are never told anything; we know nothing except what passes under our eyes." He broke off suddenly; the situation, her loneliness, the impending danger, appalled him.

"May I ask a little favor?" she said, rising. "Would you mind coming in a moment to see my grandfather?"

He stood up obediently, sheathed sabre in his left hand; she led the way across the hall and up the stairs, opened the door, and motioned toward the bed. At first he saw nothing save the pillows and snowy spread.

"Will you speak to him?" she whispered.

He approached the bed, cap in hand.

"He is very old," she said; "he was a soldier of Washington. He desires to see a soldier of the Union."

And now the bandmaster perceived the occupant of the bed, a palsied, bloodless phantom of the past—an inert, bedridden, bony thing that looked dead until its deep eyes opened and fixed themselves on him.

"This is a Union soldier, grandfather," she said, kneeling on the floor beside him. And to the bandmaster she said in a low voice: "Would you mind taking his hand? He cannot move."

The bandmaster bent stiffly above the bed and took the old man's hand in his.

The sunlit room trembled in the cannonade.

"That is all," said the girl simply. She took the fleshless hand, kissed it, and laid it on the bedspread. "A soldier of Washington," she said dreamily. "I am glad he has seen you—I think he understands: but he is very, very old."

She lingered a moment to touch the white hair with her hand; the bandmaster stepped back to let her pass, then put on his cap, hooked his sabre, turned squarely toward the bed and saluted.

The phantom watched him as a dying eagle watches; then the slim hand of the granddaughter fell on the bandmaster's arm, and he turned and clanked out into the open air.

The boy stood waiting for them, and as they appeared, he caught their hands in each of his, talking all the while and walking with them to the gateway, where pony and charger stood, nose to nose under the trees.

"If you need anybody to dash about carrying dispatches," the boy ran on, "why, I'll do it for you. My father was a soldier, and I'm going to be one, and I—"

"Billy," said the bandmaster abruptly, "when we charge, go up on that hill and watch us. If we don't come back, you must be ready to act a man's part. Your sister counts on you."

They stood a moment there together, saying nothing. Presently some mounted officers on the hill wheeled their horses and came spurring toward the column drawn up along the road. A trumpet spoke briskly; the bandmaster turned to the boy's sister, looked straight into her eyes, and took her hand.

"I think we're going," he said; "I am trying to thank you—I don't know how. Good-by."

"Is it a charge?" cried the boy.

"Good-by," said the bandmaster, smiling, holding the boy's hand tightly. Then he mounted, touched his cap, wheeled, and trotted off, freeing his sabre with his right hand.

The colonel had already drawn his sabre, the chief bugler sat his saddle, bugle lifted, waiting. A loud order, repeated from squadron to squadron, ran down the line; the restive horses wheeled, trampled forward, and halted.

"Draw—sabres!"

The air shrilled with the swish of steel.

Far down the road horsemen were galloping in—the returning pickets.

“Forward!”

They were moving.

“Steady—right dress!” taken up in turn by the company officers—“steady—right dress!”

The bandmaster swung his sabre forward; the mounted band followed.

Far away across the level fields something was stirring; the colonel saw it and turned in his saddle, scanning the column that moved forward on a walk.

Half a mile, and, passing a hill, an infantry regiment rose in the shallow trenches to cheer them. Instantly the mounted band burst out into “The Girl I Left Behind Me”; an electric thrill passed along the column.

“Steady! Steady! Right dress!” rang the calm orders as a wood, almost behind them, was suddenly fringed with white smoke and a long, rolling crackle broke out.

“By fours—right-about—wheel!”

The band swung out to the right; the squadrons passed on; and—“Steady! Trot! Steady—right dress—gallop!” came the orders.

The wild music of “Garryowen” set the horses frantic—and the men, too. The band, still advancing at a walk, was dropping rapidly behind. A bullet hit kettle-drummer Pillsbury, and he fell with a grunt, doubling up across his nigh kettle-drum. A moment later Peters struck his cymbals wildly together and fell clean out of his saddle, crashing to the sod. Schwarz, his trombone pierced by a ball, swore aloud and dragged his frantic horse into line.

“Right dress!” said the bandmaster blandly, mastering his own splendid mount as a bullet grazed its shoulder.

They were in the smoke now, they heard the yelling charge ahead, the rifle fire raging, swelling to a terrific roar; and they marched forward, playing “Garryowen”—not very well, for Connor’s jaw was half gone, and Bradley’s horse was down; and the bandmaster, reeling in the saddle, parried blow on blow from a clubbed rifle, until a stunning crack alongside of the head laid him flat across his horse’s neck. And there he clung till he tumbled off, a limp, loose-limbed mass, lying in the trampled grass under the heavy pall of smoke.

Long before sunset the echoing thunder in the hills had ceased; the edge of the great battle that had skirted Sandy River, with a volley or two and an obscure cavalry charge, was ended. Beyond the hills, far away on the horizon, the men of the North were tramping forward through the Confederacy. The immense exodus had begun again; the invasion was developing; and as the tremendous red spectre receded, the hem of its smoky robe brushed Sandy River and was gone, leaving a scorched regiment or two along the railroad, and a hospital at Oxley Court House overcrowded.

In the sunset light the cavalry returned passing the white mansion on the hill. They brought in their dead and wounded on hay wagons; and the boy, pale as a spectre, looked on, while the creaking wagons passed by under the trees.

But it was his sister whose eyes caught the glitter of a gilt and yellow sleeve lying across the hay; and she dropped her brother’s hand and ran out into the road.

“Is he dead?” she asked the trooper who was driving.

“No, miss. Will you take him in?”

“Yes,” she said. “Bring him.”

The driver drew rein, wheeled his team, and drove into the great gateway. “Hospital’s plum full, ma’am,” he said. “Wait; I’ll carry him up. Head’s bust a leetle—that’s all. A day’s nussin’ will bring him into camp again.”

The trooper staggered upstairs with his burden, leaving a trail of dark, wet spots along the stairs, even up to the girl’s bed, where he placed the wounded man.



The bandmaster became conscious when they laid him on the bed, but the concussion troubled his eyes so that he was not certain that she was there until she bent close over him, looking down at him in silence.

“I thought of you—when *I* was falling,” he explained vaguely—“only of you.”

The color came into her face; but her eyes were steady. She set the flaring dip on the bureau and came back to the bed. “We thought of you, too,” she said.

His restless hand, fumbling the quilt, closed on hers; his eyes were shut, but his lips moved, and she bent nearer to catch his words:

“We noncombatants get into heaps of trouble—don’t we?”

“Yes,” she whispered, smiling; “but the worst is over now.”

“There is worse coming.”

“What?”

“We march—to-morrow. I shall never see you again.”

After a silence she strove gently to release her hand; but his held it; and after a long while, as he seemed to be asleep, she sat down on the bed’s edge, moving very softly lest he awaken. All the tenderness of innocence was in her gaze, as she laid her other hand over his and left it there, even after he stirred and his unclosing eyes met hers.

“Celia!” called the boy, from the darkened stairway, “there’s a medical officer here.”

“Bring him,” she said. She rose, her lingering fingers still in his, looking down at him all the while; their hands parted, and she moved backward slowly, her young eyes always on his.

The medical officer passed her, stepping quickly to the bedside, stopped short, hesitated, and bending, opened the clotted shirt, placing a steady hand over the heart.

The next moment he straightened up, pulled the sheet over the bandmaster’s face, and turned on his heel, nodding curtly to the girl as he passed out.

When he had gone, she walked slowly to the bed and drew the sheet from the bandmaster’s face.

And as she stood there, dry-eyed, mute, from the dusky garden came the whispering cry of the widow bird, calling, calling to the dead that answer never more.

## ***PART TWO***

### **WHAT SHE BECAME**

#### **II**

#### **SPECIAL MESSENGER**

On the third day the pursuit had become so hot, so unerring, that she dared no longer follow the rutty cart road. Toward sundown she wheeled her big bony roan into a cow path which twisted through alders for a mile or two, emerging at length on a vast stretch of rolling country, where rounded hills glimmered golden in the rays of the declining sun. Tall underbrush flanked the slopes; little streams ran darkling through the thickets; the ground was moist, even on the ridges; and she could not hope to cover the deep imprint of her horse's feet.

She drew bridle, listening, her dark eyes fixed on the setting sun. There was no sound save the breathing of her horse, the far sweet trailing song of a spotted sparrow, the undertones of some hidden rill welling up through matted tangles of vine and fern and long wild grasses.

Sitting her worn saddle, sensitive face partly turned, she listened, her eyes sweeping the bit of open ground behind her. Nothing moved there.

Presently she slipped off one gauntlet, fumbled in her corsage, drew out a crumpled paper, and spread it flat. It was a map. With one finger she traced her road, bending in her saddle, eyebrows gathering in perplexity. Back and forth moved the finger, now hovering here and there in hesitation, now lifted to her lips in silent uncertainty. Twice she turned her head, intensely alert, but there was no sound save the cawing of crows winging across the deepening crimson in the west.

At last she folded the map and thrust it into the bosom of her mud-splashed habit; then, looping up the skirt of her kirtle, she dismounted, leading her horse straight into the oak scrub and on through a dim mile of woodland, always descending, until the clear rushing music of a stream warned her, and she came out along the thicket's edge into a grassy vale among the hills.

A cabin stood there, blue smoke lazily rising from the chimney; a hen or two sat huddled on the shafts of an ancient buckboard standing by the door. In the clear, saffron-tinted evening light some ducks sailed and steered about the surface of a muddy puddle by the barn, sousing their heads, wriggling their tails contentedly.

As she walked toward the shanty, leading her horse, an old man appeared at the open doorway, milking stool under one gaunt arm, tin pail dangling from the other. Astonished, he regarded the girl steadily, answering her low, quick greeting with a nod of his unkempt gray head.

"How far is the pike?" she asked.

"It might be six mile," he said, staring.

"Is there a wood road?"

He nodded.

"Where does it lead?"

"It leads just now," he replied grimly, "into a hell's mint o' rebels. What's your business in these parts, ma'am?"

Her business was to trust no one, yet there had been occasions when she had been forced to such a risk. This was one. She looked around at the house, the dismantled buckboard tenanted by roosting chickens, the ducks in the puddle, the narrow strip of pasture fringing the darkening woods. She looked into his weather-ravaged visage, searching the small eyes that twinkled at her intently out of a mass of wrinkles.

"Are you a Union man?" she asked.

His face hardened; a slow color crept into the skin above his sharp cheek bones. “What’s that to you?” he demanded.

“Here in Pennsylvania we expect to find Union sentiments. Besides, you just now spoke of rebels—”

“Yes, an’ I’ll say it again,” he repeated doggedly; “the Pennsylvania line is crawlin’ with rebels, an’ they’ll butt into our cavalry before morning.”

She laughed, stepping nearer, the muddy skirt of her habit lifted.

“I must get to Reynolds’s corps to-night,” she said confidently. “I came through the lines three days ago; their cavalry have followed me ever since. I can’t shake them off; they’ll be here by morning—as soon as there’s light enough to trace my horse.”

She looked back at the blue woods thoughtfully, patting her horse’s sleek neck.

He followed her glance, then his narrowing eyes focused on her as she turned her head toward him again.

“What name?” he asked harshly, hand to his large ear.

She smiled, raising her riding whip in quaint salute; and in a low voice she named herself demurely.

There was a long silence.

“Gosh!” he muttered, fascinated gaze never leaving her; “to think that you are that there gal! I heard tell you was young, an’ then I heard tell you was old an’ fat, ma’am. I guess there ain’t many has seen you to take notice. I guess you must be hard run to even tell me who ye be?”

She said quietly: “I think they mean to get me this time. Is there a clear road anywhere? Even if I leave my horse and travel afoot?”

“Is it a hangin’ matter?” he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

Presently he said: “The hull blame country’s crawlin’ with rebel cavalry. I was to Mink Creek, an’ they was passin’ on the pike, wagons an’ guns as fur as I could see. They levied on Swamp Holler at sunup; they was on every road along the State line. There ain’t no road nor cow path clear that way.”

“And none the other way,” she said. “Can’t you help me?”

He looked at her gravely, then his small eyes swept the limited landscape.

“A hangin’ matter,” he mused, scratching his gray head reflectively. “An’ if they ketch you here, I guess I’ll go to Libby, too. Hey?”

He passed his labor-worn hand over his eyes, pressing the lids, and stood so, minute after minute, buried in thought.

“Waal,” he said, dropping his hand and blinking in the ruddy glow from the west, “I guess I ain’t done nothin’ fur the Union yet, but I’m a-goin’ to now, miss.”

He looked around once more, his eyes resting on familiar scenery, then he set down milking stool and pail and shuffled out to where her horse stood.

“Guess I’ll hev to hitch your hoss up to that there buckboard,” he drawled. “My old nag is dead two year since. You go in, miss, an’ dress in them clothes a-hangin’ onto that peg by the bed,” he added, with an effort. “Use ’em easy; they was *hers*.”

She entered the single room of the cabin, where stove, table, chair, and bed were the only furniture. A single cheap print gown and a sunbonnet hung from a nail at the bed’s foot, and she reached up and unhooked the garment. It was ragged but clean, and the bonnet freshly ironed.

Through the window she saw the old man unsaddling her horse and fitting him with rusty harness. She closed the cabin door, drew the curtain at the window, and began to unbutton her riding jacket. As her clothing fell from her, garment after garment, that desperate look came into her pale young face again, and she drew from her pocket a heavy army revolver and laid it on the chair beside her. There was scarce light enough left to see by in the room. She sat down, dragging off her spurred boots, stripping the fine silk stockings from her feet, then rose and drew on the faded print gown.

Now she needed more light, so she opened the door wide and pushed aside the curtain. A fragment of cracked mirror was nailed to the door. She faced it, rapidly undoing the glossy masses of her hair; then lifting her gown, she buckled the army belt underneath, slipped the revolver into it, smoothed out the calico, and crossed the floor to the bed again, at the foot of which a pair of woman's coarse, low shoes stood on the carpetless floor. Into these she slipped her naked feet.

He was waiting for her when she came out into the yellow evening light, squatting there in his buckboard, reins sagging.

"There's kindlin' to last a week," he said, "the ax is in the barn, an' ye'll find a bin full o' corn meal there an' a side o' bacon in the cellar. Them hens," he added wistfully "is Dominickers. *She* was fond o' them—an' the Chiny ducks, too."

"I'll be kind to them," she said.

He rested his lean jaw in one huge hand, musing, dim-eyed, silent. Far away a cow bell tinkled, and he turned his head, peering out across the tangled pasture lot.

"We called our caow Jinny," he said. "She's saucy and likes to plague folks. But I don't never chase her; no, ma'am. You jest set there by them pasture bars, kinder foxin' that you ain't thinkin' o' nothin', and Jinny she'll come along purty soon."

The girl nodded.

"Waal," he muttered, rousing up, "I guess it's time to go." He looked at her, his eyes resting upon the clothing of his dead wife.

"You see," he said, "I've give all I've got to the Union. Now, ma'am, what shall I tell our boys if I git through?"

In a low, clear voice she gave him the message to Reynolds, repeating it slowly until he nodded his comprehension.

"If they turn you back," she said, "and if they follow you here, remember I'm your daughter."

He nodded again. "My Cynthy."

"Cynthia?"

"Yaas, 'm. Cynthia was *her* name, you see; James is mine, endin' in Gray. I'll come back when I can. I guess there's vittles to spare an' garden sass—"

He passed his great cracked knuckles over his face again, digging hastily into the corners of his eyes, then leaned forward and shook the rusty reins.

"Git up!" he said thoughtfully, and the ancient buckboard creaked away into the thickening twilight.

She watched him from the door, lingering there, listening to the creak of the wheels long after he had disappeared. She was deadly tired—too tired to eat, too tired to think—yet there was more to be done before she closed her eyes. The blanket on the bed she spread upon the floor, laid in it her saddle and bridle, boots, papers, map, and clothing, and made a bundle; then slinging it on her slender back, she carried it up the ladder to the loft under the roof.

Ten minutes later she lay on the bed below, the back of one hand across her closed eyes, breathing deeply as a sleeping child—the most notorious spy in all America, the famous "Special Messenger," carrying locked under her smooth young breast a secret the consequence of which no man could dare to dream of.

Dawn silvering the east aroused her. Cockcrow, ducks quacking, the lowing of the cow, the swelling melody of wild birds—these were the sounds that filled her waking ears.

Motionless there on the bed in the dim room, delicate bare arms outstretched, hair tumbled over brow and shoulder, she lay, lost in fearless retrospection—absolutely fearless, for courage was hers without effort; peril exhilarated like wine, without reaction; every nerve and contour of her body was instinct with daring, and only the languor of her dark eyes misled the judgment of those she had to deal with.

Presently she sat up in bed, yawned lightly, tapping her red lips with the tips of her fingers; then, drawing her revolver from beneath the pillow, she examined the cylinder, replaced the weapon, and sprang out of bed, stretching her arms, a faint smile hovering on her face.

The water in the stream was cold, but not too cold for her, nor were the coarse towels too rough, sending the blood racing through her from head to foot.

Her toilet made, she lighted the fire in the cracked stove, set a pot of water boiling, and went out to the doorstep, calling the feathered flock around her, stirring their meal in a great pan the while her eyes roamed about the open spaces of meadow and pasture for a sign of those who surely must trace her here.

Her breakfast was soon over—an ash cake, a new egg from the barn, a bowl of last night's creamy milk. She ate slowly, seated by the window, raising her head at intervals to watch the forest's edge.

Nobody came; the first pink sunbeams fell level over the pasture; dew sparkled on grass and foliage; birds flitted across her line of vision; the stream sang steadily, flashing in the morning radiance.

One by one the ducks stretched, flapped their snowy wings, wiggled their fat tails, and waddled solemnly down to the water; hens wandered pensively here and there, pecking at morsels that attracted them; the tinkle of the cow bell sounded pleasantly from a near willow thicket.

She washed her dishes, set the scant furniture in place, made up the bed with the clean sheet spread the night before, and swept the floor.

On the table she had discovered, carefully folded up, the greater portion of a stocking, knitting needles still sticking in it, the ball of gray yarn attached. But she could not endure to sit there; she must have more space to watch for what she knew was coming. Her hair she twisted up as best she might, set the pink sunbonnet on her head, smoothed out the worn print dress, which was not long enough to hide her slim bare ankles, and went out, taking her knitting with her.

Upon the hill along the edges of the pasture where the woods cast a luminous shadow she found a comfortable seat in the sun-dried grasses, and here she curled up, examining the knitting in her hands, eyes lifted every moment to steal a glance around the sunlit solitude.

An hour crept by, marked by the sun in mounting splendor; the sweet scent of drying grass and fern filled her lungs; the birds' choral thrilled her with the loveliness of life. A little Southern song trembled on her lips, and her hushed voice murmuring was soft as the wild bees' humming:

“Ah, who could couple thought of war and crime  
With such a blessed time?  
Who, in the west wind's aromatic breath,  
Could hear the call of Death?”

The gentle Southern poet's flowing rhythm was echoed by the distant stream:

“... A fragrant breeze comes floating by,  
And brings—you know not why—  
A feeling as when eager crowds await  
Before a palace gate  
Some wondrous pageant—”

She lifted her eyes, fixing them upon the willow thicket below, where the green tops swayed as though furrowed by a sudden wind; and watching calmly, her lips whispered on, following the quaint rhythm:

“And yet no sooner shall the Spring awake  
The voice of wood and brake  
Than she shall rouse—for all her tranquil charms—  
A million men to arms.”

The willow tops were tossing violently. She watched them, murmuring:

“Oh! standing on this desecrated mold,  
Methinks that I behold,  
Lifting her bloody daisies up to God,  
Spring—kneeling on the sod,  
And calling with the voice of all her rills  
Upon the ancient hills  
To fall and crush the tyrants and the slaves  
Who turn her meads to graves.”

Her whisper ceased; she sat, lips parted, eyes fastened on the willows. Suddenly a horseman broke through the thicket, then another, another, carbines slung, sabres jingling, rider following rider at a canter, sitting their horses superbly—the graceful, reckless, matchless cavalry under whose glittering gray curtain the most magnificent army that the South ever saw was moving straight into the heart of the Union.

Fascinated, she watched an officer dismount, advance to the house, enter the open doorway, and disappear. Minute after minute passed; the troopers quietly sat their saddles; the frightened chickens ventured back, roaming curiously about these strange horses that stood there stamping, whisking their tails, tossing impatient heads in the sunshine.

Presently the officer reappeared and walked straight to the barn, a trooper dismounting to follow him. They remained in the barn for a few moments only, then hurried out again, heads raised, scanning the low circling hills. Ah! Now they caught sight of her! She saw the officer come swinging up the hillside, buttons, spurs, and sword hilt glittering in the sun; she watched his coming with a calm almost terrible in its breathless concentration. Nearer, nearer he came, mounting the easy slope with a quick, boyish swing; and now he had halted, slouch hat aloft; and she heard his pleasant, youthful voice:

“I reckon you haven’t seen a stranger pass this way, ma’am, have you?”

“There was a lady came last night,” she answered innocently.

“That’s the one!” he said, in his quick, eager voice. “Can you tell me where she went?”

“She said she was going west.”

“Has she gone?”

“She left the house when I did,” answered the girl simply.

“Riding!” he exclaimed. “She came on a hoss, I reckon?”

“Yes.”

“And she rode west?”

“I saw her going west,” she nodded, resuming her knitting.

The officer turned toward the troopers below, drew out a handkerchief and whipped the air with it for a second or two, then made a sweeping motion with his arm, and drawing his sabre struck it downward four times.

Instantly the knot of troopers fell apart, scattering out and spurring westward in diverging lines; the officer watched them until the last horse had disappeared, then he lazily sheathed his sabre, unbuckled a field glass, adjusted it, and seated himself on the grass beside her.

“Have you lived here long?” he asked pleasantly, setting the glass to his eye and carefully readjusting the lens.

“No.”

“Your father is living, is he not?”

She did not reply.

“I reckon Gilson’s command met him a piece back in the scrub, driving a wagon and a fine horse.”

She said nothing; her steady fingers worked the needles, and presently he heard her softly counting the stitches as she turned the heel.

“He said we’d find his ‘Cynthy’ here,” observed the youthful officer, lowering his glass. “Are you Cynthia Gray, ma’am?”

“He named me Cynthia,” she said, with a smile.

He plucked a blade of grass, and placing it between his white teeth, gazed at her so steadily that she dropped a stitch, recovered it, and presently he saw her lips resuming the silent count. He reseated himself on the grass, laying his field glass beside him.

“I reckon your folk are all Yankee,” he ventured softly.

She nodded.

“Are you afraid of us? Do you hate us, ma’am?”

She shook her head, stealing a glance at him from her lovely eyes. If that was part of her profession, she had learned it well; for he laughed and stretched out, resting easily on one elbow, looking up at her admiringly under her faded sunbonnet.

“Are you ever lonely here?” he inquired gravely.

Again her dark eyes rested on him shyly, but she shook her head in silence.

“Never lonely without anybody to talk to?” he persisted, removing his slouched army hat and passing his hands over his forehead.

“What have I to say to anybody?” she asked coquettishly.

A little breeze sprang up, stirring his curly hair and fluttering the dangling strings of her sunbonnet. He lay at full length there, a slender, athletic figure in his faded gray uniform, idly pulling the grass up to twist and braid into a thin green rope.

The strange exhilaration that danger had brought had now subsided; she glanced at him indifferently, noting the well-shaped head, the boyish outlines of face and figure. He was no older than she—and not very wise for his years.

Presently, very far away, the dulled report of a carbine sounded, stirring a deadened echo among the hills.

“What’s that?” she exclaimed.

“Yank, I reckon,” he drawled, rising to his feet and fixing his field glass steadily on the hills beyond.

“Are you going to have a battle here?” she asked.

He laughed. “Oh, no, Miss Cynthia. That’s only bushwhacking.”

“But—but where are they shooting?”

He pointed to the west. “There’s Yankee cavalry loafing in the hills. I reckon we’ll gobble ’em, too. But don’t *you* worry, Miss Cynthia,” he added gallantly. “I shall be here to-night, and by sunrise there won’t be a soldier within ten miles of you.”

“Within ten miles,” she murmured; “ten miles is too near. I—I think I will go back to the house.”

He looked down at her; she raised her dark eyes to him; then he bowed and gallantly held out both hands, and she laid her hands in his, suffering him to lift her to her feet.

The brief contact set the color mounting to his sunburnt temples; it had been a long while since he had touched a young girl’s hand.

“I wonder,” she said, “whether you would care to share my dinner?”



She spoke naturally, curiously; all idea of danger was over; she was free to follow her own instincts, which were amiable. Besides, the boy was a gentleman.

“If it wouldn’t be too much to ask—too inconvenient—” He hesitated, hat in hand, handsome face brightening.

“No; I want you to come,” she answered simply, and took his hand in hers.

A deeper color swept his face as they descended the gentle slope together, she amused and quietly diverted by his shyness, and thinking how she meant to give this boyish rebel a better dinner than he had had for many a long mile.

And she did, he aiding her with the vegetables, she mixing johnnycake for the entire squad, slicing the bacon, and setting the coffee to boil.

Toward midday the scouting squad returned, to find their officer shelling peas on the cabin steps, and a young girl, sleeves at her shoulders, stirring something very vigorously in a large black kettle—something that exhaled an odor which made the lank troopers lick their gaunt lips in furtive hope.

The sergeant of the troop reported; the officer nodded and waved the horsemen away to the barn, where they were presently seen squatting patiently in a row, sniffing the aroma that floated from the cabin door.

“Did your men find the lady?” she asked, looking out at him where he sat, busy with the peas.

“No, Miss Cynthia. But if she went west she’s run into the whole Confederate cavalry. Our business is to see she doesn’t double back here.”

“Why do you follow her?”

“Ah, Miss Cynthia,” he said gravely, “she is that ‘Special Messenger’ who has done us more damage than a whole Yankee army corps. We’ve got to stop her this time—and I reckon we will.”

The girl stirred the soup, salted it, peppered it, lifted the pewter spoon and tasted it. Presently she called for the peas.

About two o’clock that afternoon a row of half-famished Confederate cavalymen sat devouring the best dinner they had eaten in months. There was potato soup, there was johnnycake, smoking hot coffee, crisp slices of fragrant bacon, an egg apiece, and a vegetable stew. Trooper after trooper licked fingers, spoon, and pannikin, loosening leather belts with gratified sighs; the pickets came cantering in when the relief, stuffed to repletion, took their places, carbine on thigh.

Flushed from the heat of the stove, arms still bared, the young hostess sat at table with the officer in command, and watched him in sympathy as he ate.

She herself ate little, tasting a morsel here and there, drinking at times from the cup of milk beside her.

“I declare, Miss Cynthia,” he said, again and again, “this is the finest banquet, ma’am, that I ever sat down to.”

She only thought, “The boy was starving!” and the indulgent smile deepened as she sat there watching him, chin resting on her linked hands.

At last he was satisfied, and a little ashamed, too, of his appetite, but she told him it was a pleasure to cook for him, and sent him off to the barn, where presently she spied him propped up in the loft window, a map spread on his knees, and his field glass tucked under one arm.

And now she had leisure to think again, and she leaned back in her chair by the window, bared arms folded, ankles crossed, frowning in meditation.

She must go; the back trail was clear now. But she needed her own clothing and a horse. Where could she find a horse?

Hour after hour she sat there. He had cantered off into the woods long since; and all through the long afternoon she sat there scheming, pondering, a veiled sparkle playing under her half-closed lids. She saw him returning in the last lingering sun rays, leading his saddled horse down to the brook, and stand there, one arm flung across the crupper, while the horse drank and shook his thoroughbred

head and lipped the tender foliage that overhung the water. There was the horse she required! She must have him.

A few minutes later, bridle over one arm, the young officer came sauntering up to the doorstep. He was pale, but he smiled when he saw her, and his weather-beaten hat swept the grass in salute as she came to the door and looked down at him, hands clasped behind her slender back.

“You look dreadfully tired,” she said gently. “Don’t you ever sleep?”

He had been forty-eight hours in the saddle, but he only laughed a gay denial of fatigue.

She descended the steps, walked over to the horse, and patted neck and shoulder, scanning limb and chest and flank. The horse would do!

“Will you hitch your horse and come in?” she asked sweetly.

“Thank you, ma’am.” He passed the bridle through the hitching ring at the door, and, hat in hand, followed her into the cabin. His boots dragged a little, but he straightened up, and when she had seated herself, he sank into a chair, closing his sunken eyes for a moment, only to open them smiling, and lean forward on the rough table, folding his arms under him.

“You have been very good to us, Miss Cynthia,” he said. “My men want me to say so.”

“Your men are welcome,” she answered, resting her cheek on her hand.

There was a long silence, broken by her: “You are dying for sleep. Why do you deny it? You may lie down on my bed if you wish.”

He protested, thanking her, but said he would be glad to sleep in the hay if she permitted; and he rose, steadying himself by the back of his chair.

“I always sleep bridle in hand,” he said. “A barn floor is luxury for my horse and me.”

That would not do. The horse must remain. She *must* have that horse!

“I will watch your horse,” she said. “Please lie down there. I really wish it.”

“Why, ma’am, I should never venture—”

She looked at him; her heart laughed with content. Here was an easy way for stern necessity.

“Sleep soundly,” she said, with a gay smile; and before he could interpose, she had slipped out and shut the door behind her.

The evening was calm; the last traces of color were fading from the zenith. Pacing the circle of the cabin clearing, she counted the videttes—one in the western pasture, one sitting his saddle in the forest road to the east, and a horseman to the south, scarcely visible in the gathering twilight. She passed the barnyard, head lifted pensively, carefully counting the horses tethered there. Twelve! Then there was no guard for the northern cattle path—the trail over which she and they had come!

Now walking slowly back to the cabin, she dropped her slippers and mounted the steps on bare feet, quietly opening the door. At first in the dim light she could see nothing, then her keen ear caught the quiet sound of his breathing, and she stole over to the bed. He lay there asleep.

Now seconds meant eternity, perhaps; she mounted the ladder to the attic, tiptoed over the loose boards, felt around for her packet, and loosened the blanket.

By sense of touch alone she dressed, belting in the habit with her girdle, listening, every sense alert. But her hand never shook, her fingers were deft and steady, fastening button and buckle, looping up her skirt, strapping the revolver to her girdle. She folded map and papers noiselessly, tucking them into her bosom; then, carrying her spurred boots, she crept across the boards again, and descended the ladder without a sound.

The fading light from the window fell upon the bed where he lay; and she smiled almost tenderly as she stole by him, he looked so young lying there, his curly head pillowed on his arms.

Another step and she was beside him; another; she stopped short, and her heart seemed to cease at the same instant. Was she deceived? Were his eyes wide open?

Suddenly he sat bolt-upright in the bed, and at the same instant she bent and struck him a stunning blow with the butt of her revolver.

Breathless, motionless, she saw him fall back and lie there without a quiver; presently she leaned over him, tore open his jacket and shirt, and laid her steady hand upon his heart. For a moment she remained there, looking down into his face; then with a sob she bent and kissed him on the lips.

At midnight, as she was riding out of the hill scrub, a mounted vidette hailed her on the Gettysburg pike, holding her there while horseman after horseman galloped up, and the officer of the guard came cantering across the fields at the far summons.

A lantern glimmered, flared up; there was a laugh, the sound of a dozen horses backing, a low voice: "Pass! Special Messenger for headquarters!"

Then the lantern-light flashed and went out; shadowy horsemen wheeled away east and west, trotting silently to posts across the sod.

Far away among the hills the Special Messenger was riding through the night, head bent, tight-lipped, her dark eyes wet with tears.

### **III**

## **ABSOLUTION**

Just before daylight the unshaven sentinels at headquarters halted her; a lank corporal arrived, swinging a lighted lantern, which threw a yellow radiance over horse and rider. Then she dismounted.

Mud smeared her riding jacket; boots and skirt were clotted with it; so was the single army spur. Her horse stretched a glossy, sweating neck and rolled wisely-suspicious eyes at the dazzling light. On the gray saddle cloth glimmered three gilt letters, C. S. A.

“What name, ma’am?” repeated the corporal, coming closer with lifted lantern, and passing an inquiring thumb over the ominous letters embroidered on the saddle cloth.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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