

Otis James

The Minute Boys of York Town



James Otis

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CHAPTER I

TWO YOUNG VIRGINIANS

When Uncle 'Rasmus loses his temper because of some prank which we lads of James Town may have played upon him, he always says that no good can ever come of that in which "chillun an' women are mixed."

It had never entered my mind that there was in such a remark any cause for anger on my part, until that day when Saul Ogden repeated it, shaking his head dolefully as Uncle 'Rasmus always did, and speaking in the negro dialect so faithfully that one, not seeing him, might well have supposed his skin was black.

Of course you remember the engagement at Spencer's Ordinary, which place is the same as if I had said Spencer's Tavern, on the 26th of June in the year of Grace 1781, when Lieutenant-Colonel Simcoe of the Queen's Rangers, and Lieutenant-Colonel Tarleton with his Legion of Horse, began to "prance" around here, as Uncle 'Rasmus would put it, and we Virginians were disturbed in more ways than one.

There were a number of our people who would have been loyal to the king if Governor Dunmore had not written himself down such a consummate ass, and many even at this time whose sympathies were all with the struggling colonists, but who yet hoped matters could be settled without loss of honor to either side, meaning that the so-called rebels and his majesty might come together in friendship once more.

But when this "prancing" began; when Colonel Tarleton rode rough-shod over our people of Virginia without seeming to understand the meaning of the word "humanity," then it was that even those who had hoped against hope that the colonies might remain in peace and harmony with the mother country, began to realize it was no longer possible.

It had required five long, weary years, during which our Americans in the North had borne nearly all the brunt of this struggle against the king, and I dare not say how much of friendship, to persuade those few in Virginia who strove to hold some shred of loyalty to the king, that the time had come when they must take sides with those who had the best interests of the country at heart, no longer looking to royalty for relief.

Saul Ogden is my cousin, being but three days younger than I, who was, in August of 1781, just turned fifteen, and although it may seem strange to the lads of New England that we two Virginians knew so little concerning what was being done in this America of ours, it is true that until the engagement at Spencer's Ordinary there had never been a thought in our minds that we might be called upon, or that it would be possible for us to take any part in the bloody struggle which had been prolonged until it seemed of a verity that the people of New York and Boston must have come to an end of all their resources, so far as struggling against the king's soldiers was concerned.

It is true Saul and I had heard now and then that even boys in Massachusetts and in New York were enrolled, or had agreed among themselves, to act as Minute Boys, ready to do whatsoever they might, at any time, regardless of all things else save the proving of that Declaration of Independence to the satisfaction of the whole wide world.

It was on the day before the action at Spencer's Ordinary that I, Fitzroy Hamilton, and Saul, my cousin, met for the first time a little French lad by name of Pierre Laurens, who had come up from New Orleans with his widowed mother to visit at my home, after having spent a summer in Boston.

A companionable sort of a lad was this little French boy who waved his hands and shrugged his shoulders when he talked, as if they were in some way connected with his tongue; one who was able to tell many an entertaining story, and who had seen so much of this land of America that it was to Saul and me as if he was some great traveler, while we were only two country louts, never having strayed a dozen miles from home.

It is not of Pierre whom I have set myself down to tell; but it was necessary I should refer to him in order that you might understand how we two lads of James Town, who seldom went away from the plantation save to ride into the settlement, and whose longest journey had been from the James to the York river across that neck where one may best arrive at York Town, came to know that we might serve the Cause as Minute Boys.

It was little Frenchie who took it upon himself to tell us what he knew, he having met several lads in Boston who called themselves Minute Boys. He held up before Saul and me pictures of the duty we owed our homes, as if we Virginians needed to be taught our duty, and painted in glowing colors the honor and glory which was to be won by those lads who stood ever ready to perform the work of Minute Boys, until we were quite aflame with the idea.

I doubt much, however, whether anything would have come of it had it not been for that same engagement at Spencer's Ordinary, when Lieutenant-Colonel Simcoe, counting to ride over the Pennsylvania men under Colonel Butler as he had ridden over us Virginians, found much to his displeasure that it was not always possible for his high mightiness to do exactly as he wished.

Do not get the idea that I intend to make it appear as if the king's troops were worsted at Spencer's Tavern; but it was a drawn battle, as I have heard even those who really loved the king, admit, and it must have been a startling surprise to the swaggering Simcoe to have received even a check.

It was only natural that after this engagement Saul and I, egged on by Pierre, should talk quite seriously of forming a company of Minute Boys; but no sooner would we begin, and I strive to point out how we might do this thing or that which would advantage our colony of Virginia, than Saul would break in with the saying of Uncle 'Rasmus's, that where "chillun an' women were mixed" matters went awry.

Yet despite my cousin's seeming scorn, Pierre continued to urge that we enroll ourselves as Minute Boys, and when Saul asked irritably whether he believed any good would come to the Cause if only three lads were banded together, agreeing to do whatsoever they might, thereby, as you can see, throwing cold water on the scheme, Pierre, his hands waving and his shoulders shrugged nearly to his ears, would insist again and again that if no more than three should set themselves about striving to do something in aid of those who were battling against the king, much of good might be accomplished.

Then Saul, without really meaning to be unkind, would cry out that Colonel Simcoe had better have a care when our company of three Virginia Minute Boys set out on the war-path, and while his friendly scorn fretted me now and then, it did not distress Pierre in the least.

I say it did not distress him, and yet I may be mistaken, for after Saul had repeated Uncle 'Rasmus's maxim, and spoken sneeringly of the fear which a company of Minute Boys numbering three might produce throughout the colony, little Frenchie said, waving his hands as if to brush my cousin aside:

"Oh, well, if you are afraid, then it would not be of avail even though you had a company of twenty."

"Afraid!" Saul cried, the red blood flushing his face as he advanced almost threateningly toward the little fellow from New Orleans. "Do you dare come here and tell a Virginian that he is afraid of any person who walks this earth even though he wear a crown?"

"I did not say you *were* afraid," Pierre replied sweetly, still shrugging his shoulders and waving his hands. "I said *if* you were afraid, then it would not do for you to talk of being a Minute Boy. It is only those lads in the colonies who dare do this or dare do that, who could be of value to the Cause."

Now it is just possible little Frenchie was irritated when he made this reply; but however it came about, certain it is from that moment Saul ceased to throw cold water upon the plan of raising a company of Minute Boys, and no longer quoted Uncle 'Rasmus, or spoke scornfully of what might be accomplished, yet at the same time he was not enthusiastic about it until after that sixth of July, when at Green Spring plantation the British under my Lord Cornwallis met the Americans commanded by General Lafayette, the king's troops getting much the best of the battle.

I had thought Saul might strive to get even with Pierre by pointing out that the young French general was defeated where an American might have been victorious; but no, he held his peace concerning the nationality of the commander of the army, and seemed all afire with a desire to do something with his own hands that should be of benefit to the Cause.

He insisted we form ourselves into a company of Minute Boys at once, even though there were but three of us, claiming even as little Frenchie had claimed days and days before, that it might be possible even for so small a number to accomplish considerable of good, and promising that as the time went by we would be able to add to our numbers.

And thus it was that Saul and I, two Virginia lads, joined with Pierre, a Frenchie, to form a company of Minute Boys in aid of the Cause of Liberty, and even went so far, after agreeing among ourselves that we were to stand by each other so long as life should last, to write a letter to Master Patrick Henry telling him of what we had done and offering our services, much the same as if they might be of great value.

The strangest part of all, as it seemed to me, was that Master Henry did actually answer the letter which Saul wrote; did really speak of us as if it might be possible that we do somewhat of good to the Cause, and commending us for coming together in such a fashion. It was much as if he believed he was writing to three men of importance in Virginia, who could do this, or do that, according to their will, instead of three lads who had hardly ever, with the exception of Pierre, ventured off the Hamilton plantation.

I questioned seriously whether Master Henry really understood Saul's letter; if he was aware of the fact that we were lads only just turned fifteen, and argued that he must have read the missive so hurriedly that he thought three influential planters, if you please, who may formerly have been lukewarm to the Cause, were now turned about ready to do whatsoever they might.

Had Saul and I been alone I could have convinced my cousin that I was in the right; but little Frenchie must needs start up, insisting that Master Henry knew to whom he was writing; that a great man like Master Patrick Henry would not read a letter which, if it had come from men, was of importance, so hurriedly as not to understand who had written it. He argued from all this, that our calling ourselves Minute Boys, even though we might not succeed in doing much that would advantage the colony, was of moment even in the eyes of so able a man as he who had been governor of Virginia.

I must say this for Pierre, that when he starts out to convince you of a matter there is in his manner and his voice such winning qualities, that even though at the outset you were positive he was in the wrong, before many minutes had passed you were saying to yourself that all his words were true, all his beliefs noble, and all that he would do exactly right.

It was one thing to call ourselves Minute Boys; to write to Governor Henry and to be praised by him, and quite another matter to be able to do anything whatsoever in aid of the Cause.

It is true that we did not go far afield in search of opportunities, and for the very good reason that we knew not where to go. Between our town of James and the village of York we knew our way as well as we did through the pantry to that jar of cake which Aunt Dinah always kept so well filled; but beyond that it was all a strange world to us, so strange that we doubted whether we might make our way even so far as Baltimore without writing ourselves down as the veriest country louts.

Then came that day when my Lord Cornwallis led his red-coated men into James Town itself, and we found ourselves not only surrounded by these soldiers of the king, but literally over-run by them. So high and mighty was his majesty's officer that he quartered his soldiers here, there, or in

the other place, at whatsoever house pleased his fancy, insisting that we Virginians who claimed we had the right to break off from the mother country, should take care of those who had come to shoot us down.

Then of a verity did it seem to me the time had come when we Minute Boys might do something, and I said as much to Saul and Pierre.

My cousin held his peace, looking around eagerly as if striving to see here or there some opportunity, while little Frenchie shrugged his shoulders as if the matter was of little consequence to him, and I, irritated by his movements, taunted him with being a coward, saying it was all very well for him, while the British soldiers were at a distance, to talk loudly about forming a company of Minute Boys, but instantly the enemy were come within reach he was well content to lie down at their feet.

I was ashamed of myself even as I spoke, and looked to see Pierre fly into a rage; but, instead, he shrugged his little shoulders yet higher, advising that I go back into the stable yard where Uncle 'Rasmus, with the hounds around him, was sunning himself, and there take advice from the old negro who claimed that where "chillun an' women were mixed" no good could come.

"And to what end should I take advice from Uncle 'Rasmus?" I cried in a rage, whereupon Pierre, waving his hands with the palms uppermost, said in a most friendly way:

"To the end, my dear Fitz, that you may come to understand there is a time for work and a time for remaining idle; that he who would accomplish something does not set out upon a task which, even before beginning it, he knows to be impossible."

"All of which means what?" Saul demanded, and I understood that the lad's heart was heavy, for within the hour he had been crowded against the wall, and a red-coated captain of the Foot had shaken him soundly because he did not give way to the swaggerers who had come into Virginia to teach us manners.

"All of which means that the time will come when we shall be able to do something to please even your Governor Henry," Pierre said sulkily, and then turned away, himself to take counsel of Uncle 'Rasmus, leaving Saul and me gazing into each other's faces like a couple of simples, until my cousin said with a mirthless laugh:

"I am beginning to believe, Fitz, that little Frenchie has more in his head than ever you or I can hope to find in ours."

It was the first time I had ever heard him suggest that Pierre was wise beyond his years. In fact, he had always looked upon the little fellow as a pleasant companion, and I had believed that I was more than his equal when it came to such tasks as Minute Boys should do. I had set it down in my mind that when the time for real work arrived, if it ever did, it would be Saul and I who would do credit to our town of James.

My Lord Cornwallis did not linger at James Town; but continued on down the river until he was come to Portsmouth, having stopped meanwhile on the way to "give Lafayette a lesson," as some of our Tory neighbors suggested.

Then, as you very well know, it began to appear as if this valiant officer, who represented the king in Virginia, was beginning to get uneasy because the young French general was pressing him rather warmly, and continued what was well nigh a retreat until that first day of September in the year of Grace 1781, when he entered York Town, and immediately began to fortify the settlements of York and Gloucester as if counting to make there a permanent abiding place.

It never occurred to me that my Lord Cornwallis had really beaten a retreat before the Americans, and was now come to where he must have aid from New York or from overseas in order to get out from what was much like a trap, until Uncle 'Rasmus, when we lads were gathered about him in the stable-yard, said, shaking his grey head as he chewed meditatively on a straw:

"It kind 'er 'pears to me, chillun, like as ef dat yere Britisher what's flutterin' 'roun' ober York way wid his hosses, an' his guns, an' his shinin' sword, was heapin' up a sight ob misery for hisself."

"But surely, Uncle 'Rasmus, after the engagement at Green Spring, you can't believe it would be possible for the French general to do him any harm?" Saul cried, surprised by the old negro's words, which seemed much like a prophecy.

"I ain' sayin', chile, dat de French gin'ral is gwine for to hurt de Britishers so berry much; but it kind'er 'pears to me dis erway: You see dey's come down yere to de jumpin'-off place, an' dere ain' much chance for 'em to get away 'cept dey goes by water. Now I'se done hear dat dere's a power ob French vessels hangin' 'roun' off de Capes, des like as if dey was waitin' to swaller up de red-coated gen'men."

"If he can't get away by water he'll go back by land," Saul suggested, and Uncle 'Rasmus shook his head mournfully, as if it pained him to believe that my Lord Cornwallis had come into a veritable trap.

"What 'bout dat yere Virginia gen'man dey's got up Norf – what 'bout Gin'ral Washington? Do you count, chillun, de's gwine for ter lay stock still when he's got de chance ob nabbin' all dis yere stuff what dey 'lows b'longs to de king? Ef it was some ob yere po' wuffless Northern trash what was runnin' dis yere war for de people ob America, den it might be dat Lord Cornwallis was gwine to turn 'roun' slap when he done got ready. But mark you, chillun, it's one ob our Virginia gen'men dats lookin' after tings. He knows de lan' 'roun' erbout; kase why? Kase he's bin here, chillun; he's bin right on dis yere plantation, an' he knows dat when you strikes de town ob York you'se got to be sumfin like a flea, able to hop a mighty big hop."

"Even suppose my Lord Cornwallis does beat back the Americans who are led by one of my countrymen; he might find it very difficult to break through their ranks, if he wanted to go back toward Richmond by the same way he came," Pierre said with a wave of the hand which I never hope to fully describe, for there was ever much of feeling in his gestures.

We remained there in the stable yard until the sun was low in the western sky, discussing the situation with Uncle 'Rasmus as our oracle. It is true we lads could not speak intelligently upon military matters, and as I look back now upon that day, I realize how much of folly there was in our words; but our hearts were nigh to bursting with the desire to do something toward ridding our colony of Virginia of those swaggering, insolent, red-coated men, all of whom we believed to be quite as brutal as Colonel Tarleton and his followers.

The result of that afternoon's conversation with Uncle 'Rasmus, if such it can be called, was that we three lads decided to go over to York Town, and see for ourselves how the Britishers were disposed there, and what they had done in the way of throwing up fortifications, for word had come through the negroes that not only the town of York, but Gloucester also, was being fortified thoroughly well.

It is not above eight miles from our plantation to the town of York, and we counted to ride there and back before the next noon, until Uncle 'Rasmus, as if terrified by such a proposition, insisted that we ought never even think of trusting the horses so near the British encampment. He told us what we very speedily came to know was true, that these servants of the king would not hesitate to despoil us Virginians who might be accused of what they were pleased to term disloyalty, even to the extent of taking from us our lives.

I could not then believe the old negro was talking other than veriest nonsense; but before another week had passed I came to understand all too well that we of Virginia who were called rebels, had no rights which these red-coated gentry were bound to respect.

It seemed fortunate that Uncle 'Rasmus succeeded in convincing us it would be in the highest degree dangerous to ride good saddle horses, and there were none other on the Hamilton plantation, within the British lines at York Town, and finally we agreed among ourselves, so eager had we grown to know what was being done by my Lord Cornwallis, to walk there and back. It would not be a severe journey, for we might count on going and returning between sunrise and sunset, and yet not exert ourselves overly much.

It is not necessary I should set down anything concerning our movements from the time we parted with Uncle 'Rasmus, until next morning, an hour after sunrise, when we were come within view of York Town, having walked at a rapid pace, for even though it was yet early in September, there was a bit of frost in the air which induced one to move rapidly lest he become chilled.

It was when we were come so near the end of our journey, that we saw ahead of us, less than a quarter of a mile away, Horry Sims, who lived on the old Livingston plantation, three miles above my home, and he appeared to be talking earnestly with a mounted officer who was in command of mayhap a dozen men.

Now Horry Sims was a lad who might fairly have been called a friend of mine, because we had had no angry words together such as could not readily be wiped out; but since two or three years neither Saul nor I chummed very much with the lad. It was believed, and with good cause, that his father yet remained loyal to the king, and was not only ready to make a display of love for his majesty; but appeared so willing to show disloyalty to his neighbors that it almost amounted to eagerness.

Uncle 'Rasmus declared again and again that Master Sims had had a hand in whatsoever of mischief had been done in Virginia, and perhaps Saul and I might have believed the old negro had he not set down so much of evil to the account of Horry's father that it was impossible one man could have compassed it all.

Certain it is, however, we had come to look upon Master Sims as a rank Tory, and, fancying his son might hold the views of his father, we two lads, meaning Saul and me, had kept away from him, not in the way of enmity, but rather to avoid the lad, although we treated him fairly when he came where we were.

After all we believed we knew, it should not have seemed strange to us that Horry Sims was talking in an apparently friendly fashion with this officer in his majesty's service, yet we were surprised, for now was come the time, if he felt so disposed, when it was possible for him to do much of harm to his neighbors, and on the instant I stepped aside from the highway that I might be screened by the bushes, beckoning my companions to do the same.

We had thus hidden ourselves from view of those who were ahead of us, as I believed, before they came to know that we were in the vicinity, and Saul, thinking that now was the time when we might do Minute-Boy duty, whispered to me:

"Shall we creep among the shrubbery until we are come where it is possible to hear the conversation of those beyond?"

Before I could make reply, little Frenchie, shrugging his shoulders, whispered:

"How far think you, it would be possible to go without being overheard by some of those who wear red coats? If it was night, or if yonder men were deaf, then might you do it."

"It is certain they would hear you before you were where it could be possible to distinguish a word of the conversation," I said in reply to Saul's suggestion, and he was seemingly satisfied that such would be the case, for instead of making any attempt at an argument, he crept more closely to my side, pulling Pierre with him until we three, in order to hold in view that group of red, in the midst of which was Horry Sims, were forced to part the foliage with our hands that we might peer between the leaves.

Perhaps our suspicions of the lad prompted us to see more than really was presented; but certain it is I fancied that the officer, who was mounted, plied Horry with questions, to which the lad replied as if it gave him pleasure to impart information. I also suspected they were saying somewhat concerning our plantation, for now and again Horry pointed in the direction of my home, and the foot soldiers looked back as if fancying they might see the buildings in the distance, all of which was the more real to me because betwixt where we stood and the Hamilton plantation there was no other dwelling.

We remained there in hiding a full half hour, and then it appeared to me as if the officer and Horry Sims parted in friendly fashion, the lad to continue on toward York Town, and the officer and his men to march in our direction, as if counting to follow back on our trail.

As a matter of course there was nothing we lads could do save remain in hiding, trusting that our whereabouts would not be discovered, for, although we had been doing no harm, if a servant of his majesty should come to understand that we three lads were striving to keep out of sight, he might take it into his thick head to fancy we were bent on mischief.

In those days it was only needed that an officer in the service of the king should have a suspicion, in order to straightway plunge into difficulties that person toward whom the suspicions were directed.

We held ourselves in cover, therefore, and I confess to a sense of most profound relief when the squad continued on without giving heed to the possibility that there had been witnesses to the meeting with Horry Sims.

"Now it is only for us to know where those gentlemen with the red coats may be going," little Frenchie said, shrugging his shoulders as we came out from the bushes and turned our faces in the direction from which we had just come, whereupon Saul asked hotly:

"Are you not for York Town? Have your legs grown weary with walking three or four miles?"

"The town of York will remain where it is yet many a day, and I dare venture to say my Lord Cornwallis will not take his departure suddenly, therefore shall we have plenty of time in which to look at the British encampment," Pierre replied, retracing his steps as if he had no care whether we followed.

"But why go back?" I cried impatiently. "Of what avail for us to follow that squad, who are most likely out foraging?"

"I have seen soldiers nearabout New Orleans, therefore do I know that when foragers go out they take with them huge wagons to bring back such as may be found. Those who have just passed are empty-handed, save for muskets, and never one of them carried his full complement of accoutrements."

"Well, suppose he doesn't?" Saul asked sulkily, but yet following little Frenchie nevertheless, for there was something about the lad which caused you to do that which pleased him whether it was to your liking or not.

"Then it must be they are out on some special duty," Pierre continued, "and I am of the mind that we shall find more amusement in watching them, than if we follow on the heels of your Tory friend who seems also to count on visiting York Town."

Whether Pierre had any suspicions of what might be afoot, I cannot say; but certain it is he pressed forward, striving to accommodate his pace with that of the soldiers, so that he might not come directly on their heels, and Saul and I, inwardly angry with ourselves for thus copying the movements of the little lad from New Orleans, kept well alongside him till we had covered a distance of mayhap a mile, when my cousin suddenly halted, saying almost angrily:

"We are showing ourselves simples in thus turning back simply because a squad of British soldiers have gone ahead!"

"Yet those same gentlemen who wear red coats are marching in the direction of the Hamilton plantation," little Frenchie said with another shrug of his shoulders and a wave of his hands, as if to intimate that there was very much more which he might say, and I, understanding somewhat of the gesture, cried out impatiently:

"Why do you say that? What have they to do on the Hamilton plantation?"

"It is that which I would learn," Pierre replied. "It is what I believe it would be better for us to see than if we wandered through the British encampment at York Town."

Until that instant I had never fancied my father's property might be in any danger from the king's men. True it is that he was known as one devoted to the cause of liberty; but thus far the war had been at such a distance from us that we had seen little of its horrors, and for the first time I began to realize there might be somewhat of mischief afoot, therefore pressed forward hotly, Pierre holding me back from time to time lest we overtake the soldiers.

The Britishers must have walked more rapidly than we fancied, for when finally we were come within view of my home, we saw riding out from the stable-yard, each man mounted and more than one with a led-horse by his side, all the company that had passed us on the road, and the animals which they rode and led were horses belonging to my father! Yea, among them Saul's mare and my own favorite colt, which I cherished as the dearest thing on earth next to my mother!

"What does it mean?" I cried, speaking with difficulty because of that seeming lump in my throat, and little Frenchie, shrugging his shoulders in a manner that set every nerve in my body aquiver, replied as if it was a matter of small moment:

"They have been to the Hamilton plantation in order to get mounts for the officers of my Lord Cornwallis's army, and from this on your colt will carry a burly Englishman bedecked with gilt lace and red cloth, instead of the lad who loves her so dearly."

CHAPTER II

SILVER HEELS

It was for a moment as if I could scarcely credit my senses. The idea that any one, even those belonging to the plantation, should bestride my own colt, my little Silver Heels, as I had named her!

She had been given to me when a baby, and no hand save mine had touched her, except when some of the negroes would rub her coat to silken glossiness in order to curry favor with me. Now she was being ridden and roughly handled by a red-faced private of Simcoe's Queen's Rangers!

When my surprise had given way to anger, which it did within a very few seconds, I would have run swiftly forward, claiming my own Silver Heels, and defying, if needs be, all that company of red-coats, for the rage in my heart was so great that I had no thought of prudence nor of my inability to cope even with a single one of those Rangers; but that Pierre, seizing me firmly by the arm, actually dragged me amid the foliage where we might be screened from view, for the men – the thieves, I should say, were by this time riding directly toward us.

"Have you lost your wits entirely?" Pierre whispered angrily, and forgetting to shrug his shoulders. "Of what avail for you to demand your Silver Heels when the king's officers would have her for their own? Do you count on being carried to the guard-house at York Town as a malcontent, or even worse, a dangerous rebel?"

"I care not where they carry me, so I take Silver Heels from yon brute that is bestride her!"

"And how will you take her?" little Frenchie whispered, this time shrugging his shoulders and waving his hands, I having so far obeyed him as to be standing by his side beneath the shelter of leaves. "Do you fancy that after Colonel Simcoe's men have seized a likely lot of horse-flesh, a lad such as you may wrest from them their spoils?"

"But Silver Heels is my own, my very own! No one, not even the king himself, has the right to take her!" I cried in my folly.

"But some one has taken her, and he is stronger than you, my friend Fitz," Pierre said, stroking the sleeve of my coat as he would the back of an angry cat. "It is no less than Colonel Simcoe of the Queen's Rangers, a trusted officer of my Lord Cornwallis, who thus gathers in mounts for his men that they may the better punish the rebels of Virginia, among whom may be counted your father, and even you, lad, since you are pleased to call yourself a Minute Boy. Will you not listen to reason?" little Frenchie continued in a coaxing tone. "Did you not see Horry Sims talking with these very men, and pointing in the direction of the Hamilton plantation? Do you not know he was telling them that a rank rebel owned the place – one whose stables were filled with the best horse-flesh in Virginia? Before those men took your Silver Heels they knew right well to what plantation she belonged, and even though you had had by your side a dozen neighbors and friends, the result would have been the same. Now what would it avail that you should pour out your unreasoning wrath? Simply to the end that they might abuse, or, perhaps, imprison?"

Even before Pierre had ceased speaking did I come to understand how useless it would be for me to make any attempt at taking poor little Silver Heels from those who had stolen her, and I crouched yet further among the foliage as the horsemen approached, for there had come into my mind on the instant a certain thought, call it plan if you will, the carrying out of which depended upon holding myself free.

Then, like a great wave upon the seashore, there flowed into my heart the memory that it was Horry Sims who had directed these men where to go – Horry Sims who had ever envied me the possession of Silver Heels, and who, most like knowing that these red-coated minions of the king were looking for horse-flesh, pointed out the Hamilton plantation, counting that I would lose my colt.

He, the son of the rankest Tory in Virginia, without cause for enmity against me, had laid train for the cruelest blow that could be struck at my heart!

During all this while Saul had not spoken; but now it was, even as the horsemen were well abreast our hiding place, he turned fiercely upon me, clutching both shoulders of my coat as if I were an enemy whom he would bring face to face with himself, and whispered in hoarse anger:

"It is well you formed your company of Minute Boys just as you did, Fitz Hamilton, for now has come the time when they shall see service! Are we, simply because of being lads, to remain idle while our own horses are being stolen?"

On the instant my heart went out in sympathy to Saul, for I knew full well that he loved his mare even as I did my own colt Silver Heels, and, harking back to the thought which had come into my mind a few seconds before, I said to him stoutly, shaking my fist in the direction of that popinjay of an officer who was riding so proudly in advance of his squad of thieves:

"We will make them pay for this day's work, Saul Ogden, and while we are casting up the reckoning with those who wear red coats, there is one not far away who must also be held accountable for that which has just been done!"

"Meaning Horry Sims!" Saul cried, actually trembling in his impotent rage.

"Meaning that worse than Tory, for it was with no idea of serving the king, or aiding the king's cause, that the miserable scoundrel pointed out to those horse thieves where your mare and my colt might be found!"

"He shall have cause to regret that he saw this day's sun rise," Saul said in a low tone, his voice aquiver with anger, and then, the horsemen having passed, he stepped out into the road, turning his face toward York Town.

"Where would you go?" Pierre cried excitedly, following the lad to seize him by the skirt of his coat. "Would you venture into the British encampment at a time when your heart is so filled with anger that it is not possible you could hold it in check?"

"Ay, that is exactly where I count on going. You need have no fear, Pierre Laurens, that I shall do aught which may deprive me of my liberty, for I will hold myself in the presence of those who wear red coats as gentle as any dame in silken skirts, until I have got back my mare, or shot her with my own hand to spare the poor creature the abuse that would come from such handling! If, however, in the meanwhile I should come across Horry Sims where were none of his kidney who could fall upon me with too great force, then is it certain you would see whether a Minute Boy, and of late I'm beginning to be proud of that title – you would see whether a Virginian, a member of a company of Minute Boys, even though they number only three, could do anything toward paying off his just and lawful debts."

To have argued with Saul at that time would have been worse than useless, as I knew full well, for when the cloud of anger was upon him he would not listen to prayers or to arguments, and in good truth I was more than willing he should go his way, counting to make it my own, for at that time I believe it would have been actually impossible for me to have turned my back on poor little Silver Heels, even though by going into the British encampment at York Town I could do her no good.

Pierre soon realized that he could not hope to turn Saul from the path he had set out on, and he showed himself the dear little comrade I have ever since known him to be, by ranging alongside first of Saul and then of me as we went in single file, knowing full well that we might encounter great danger, and yet holding himself ready to bear full share of it.

We were not in the mood for conversation, Saul and I, as we pressed forward on the way to York Town, giving no heed to anything around us, and little Frenchie soon came to understand this, for after striving to speak first with one and then the other in a friendly fashion and receiving no reply, he held his peace, but now and again taking us by the hand as if to show his friendliness and loyalty to his friendships.

I was burning with the desire to come up with Horry Sims, who it was reasonable to believe had gone into the town of York and to that end quickened my pace, although knowing full well it was best I did not speak with the viper that day.

There was yet before us, if we both lived, plenty of time in which to settle the debt, and if I attempted to wipe off the score before having done that which was in my mind, then might it be that I sacrificed Silver Heels herself simply to gratify my desire for revenge.

That which I had in my mind! It was as wild a scheme as ever entered a boy's brain, I am willing to confess, and yet it was neither more nor less than the following of poor little Silver Heels until I could see where she was quartered, after which, devoting all my time and my energy to her rescue, for it was to me almost as if she was a human being in the hands of a vengeful enemy.

All this may seem wild or witless when spoken by a lad of fifteen, but I had the will and determination of a man who had grown grey-headed, and knew that I lacked not the courage once my anger had been aroused.

In cold blood I could be as timorous as any girl; but once the fever of rage beset me, I lost sight of all the odds that might be against me, which, mayhap, is much the same as saying that at heart I was a coward, and when I showed any token of bravery, if indeed I ever did, it was the madness of anger, rather than true courage.

Be that as it may, I am not more disposed at this day to discuss such a question than I was on that morning when, with the blood seemingly boiling in my veins, I trod on the heels of Saul as we plodded our way toward York Town in moody, angry silence, while little Frenchie ran by the side of first one and then the other, mutely striving to show the wealth of friendship which was in his heart.

It was well for us that the miles were long and reasonably many on the road to the town of York, else might we have blundered into the British encampment to our sorrow, for we had no plan save that of following our horses, and it was not until we were come within sight of the village, having met neither man, woman nor child on our way, that Pierre said, shrugging his shoulders and waving his hands as he ran swiftly ahead to turn and face us:

"Are you members of the Minute-Boy company intent on blundering into the very midst of our Lord Cornwallis's army without knowing what it is you count on doing?"

"We count on finding our horses!" Saul exclaimed, sturdily striving to push little Frenchie aside, but failing because the lad stood firm.

"Ay, that is your desire, my dear friend; but tell me how you would compass it? By pressing on in sulky fashion and telling every red-coated soldier you meet that you are here to force the British troops into giving up your property?"

Both Saul and I came to a sudden halt, astonished by the quick change in Pierre's manner, for now his voice was filled with scorn, and one might have said he was chiding us as an elder chides a child.

"There is little need of telling why we have come," I replied, impatient because the lad would thus delay us. "Surely we may wander at will through the town of York."

"In New Orleans I have been among soldiers who were encamped and did not find it possible to wander at will," Pierre said, again shrugging his shoulders in that peculiar manner which set my nerves attingling. "It will be strange indeed if my Lord Cornwallis allows the rabble to enter his lines at pleasure."

"Rabble?" Saul cried in anger. "Do you call us of Hamilton plantation a rabble?"

"I am not the one who would thus misname you," and Pierre held out his hands deprecatingly; "but unless I am much mistaken in these red-coated followers of the king, they will give even worse names to those who are suspected of being friendly to the Cause which the colonists have thus far upheld so nobly. It might be, mayhap, that if you were of the rabble you would be permitted to enter the enemy's lines simply because of your curiosity; but I doubt me much whether a Minute Boy would be allowed to inspect the encampment lest he give information to General Lafayette."

"We are not known as Minute Boys!" Saul cried fiercely, striving to wave Pierre aside, but the little Frenchie held his ground as he said with a peculiar laugh:

"Ay, but you are known as worse, my lad; you are known as coming from the Hamilton plantation – from a place which General Cornwallis and Colonel Simcoe have set down as a nest of rebels, otherwise they would not have made such a wholesale seizure of horse-flesh without having given some notice. Once let you be recognized, and I question whether you may not have some trouble to return at will."

"Who knows – " Saul began, and then stopped abruptly because, as I understood full well, he realized that Horry Sims was somewhere nearabout York Town, perhaps within the British encampment, and he must have stood fairly well with a certain portion of Simcoe's Rangers after giving such information as he did concerning the Hamilton plantation.

If we were seen loitering about the works, it was certain Horry would point us out as having a leaning toward the Cause. As much as this last did he know for a fact, because many a time since General Cornwallis had come into Virginia had we lads discussed the situation, when neither Saul nor I were backward in saying that it would give us greatest pleasure if we were of age to be taken into the ranks of the American army as soldiers.

"Perhaps you who have seen so much of military encampments can tell us what we ought to do," Saul said sneeringly, and a deep flush came over Pierre's face as he understood the meaning of my cousin's tone; but like the true little comrade that he was, he gave due heed to the grief in Saul's heart and seemingly paid no attention to the sneer, as he replied in a friendly tone:

"I am not setting myself up as having more of wisdom than either you or Fitz; but I truly believe it is within my power to give good advice to two lads who are yet so angry as to have lost sight of prudence. You have due reason to believe that Horry Sims, who has already this morning done you grievous wrong, is in York Town, and if there was enough of vileness in his heart for him to point out to those soldiers of the king your horses that he might strike a heavy blow, then would he do yet worse on seeing you within the encampment. I have never met the lad but once. He has no cause for enmity against me; I am so poor in this world's goods that it is beyond his power to deprive me of anything save liberty, and on seeing me alone I dare venture to say he would have no thought that I might have been your comrade this morning; but – "

"Yet he knows that you and your mother are guests at the Hamilton plantation," Saul added sharply.

"My mother and I are French, who have lately come from New Orleans, and he can not point us out as having said a word of disrespect against the king."

For my part it was needless for Pierre to argue. I had come to understand before he was done with speaking that it would be better for him to reconnoitre the ground; that he could learn as much, if not more, than the three of us, meanwhile running comparatively no risk, and when Saul would have argued I cried out impatiently:

"Can you not see that it is better Pierre go alone? Do you not realize that, however eager we may be, it is not possible we could gain possession of the horses within any very short time, and all we are needing now is to know where they are quartered? Let Pierre do as he suggests, and learn so much as he can. Then, when we are minded to venture our heads within the lion's jaws, it will seemingly be the first visit to the town of York instead of the second. Thereby shall we stand less risk of being suspected of an intent to do harm."

Saul soon gave way, although he was burning to venture so far as might be possible inside the British lines, because running into real danger was as a balm to his heart while he yet smarted under the loss of his mare.

Therefore it was I told little Frenchie to go his way, taking due care to his own safety, and endeavor to find out where the stolen horses had been quartered, pressing upon him, although there

was no necessity of so doing, that we were more eager to learn where Silver Heels and Saul's mare were, than to know the whereabouts of the other horses.

"And do you poor lads believe it may be possible for you to wrest from the grasp of these red-coated soldiers that which they have laid hands upon?" Pierre asked in a tone of sadness, and I replied, striving in vain to repress the tone of irritation:

"We shall at least make an attempt, Pierre Laurens, even though there is little hope of success. I could not find it in my heart to remain idle while Silver Heels is in the possession of a Britisher, no matter how much of danger I might be sticking my nose into. Now go, and if so be your visit is vain, then will I take the chances myself, although I have come to believe with you, that Saul and I should not be seen loitering around the village this morning of all others, because it would easily be guessed why we had come."

Pierre made as if to speak, and then, most like realizing the uselessness of attempting, while we were in such angry frame of mind, to combat any plans we had formed, he turned on his heel and strode off in the direction of the town from whence we could hear now and then the beating of drums, the hum of voices, and noises which betokened the digging up of earth.

Saul had thrown himself face downward amid the bushes, striving, as I understood from the pain in my own heart, to prevent giving noisy token to his grief, and I was in no mood to exchange words with him, therefore we two lads lay concealed by the side of the road, giving no heed to what might happen to our disadvantage; but dwelling only upon the loss which had come to us.

To some it may seem veriest folly that we should so mourn over the loss of our horses; but let him who laughs once have companionship with such a colt as Silver Heels, as I have had, and then if he can have mirth in his heart when she has been taken away from him, most like to be abused as are horses in the army, then will I say that he has not within him the instincts of a true man.

Silver Heels had come to know me as I knew her; at my faintest call she would gallop to my side however tempting the grass when she was hungry, and no dumb animal could have given greater proof of joy at being with me, than did she time and time again when we scampered here or there, bent only on pleasure.

I could not have said how long little Frenchie remained absent, for neither Saul nor I took heed to the passage of time as we lay there amid the foliage eating our hearts out with sorrow.

Certain it is, however, that the afternoon was well spent before we saw him coming up the road, and our surprise can well be imagined when we learned that he had with him as companion none other than Horry Sims.

"He has taken up with that snake of a Tory brood simply because of believing that those on the Sims plantation stand higher in favor with the red-coated soldiers than do we of the Hamilton plantation!" Saul cried angrily, and so incautiously loud that I pressed my hand over his mouth as I whispered in reproof:

"You have no right, Saul Ogden, to cast aught of discredit upon Pierre, even though you have known him so short a time. He has shown himself a good friend, and, to my satisfaction at least, has proved that he would not turn traitor, more especially when it might be simply to his own advantage."

Now little Frenchie knew full well where he had left us by the roadside, for I saw him mark the dead cottonwood tree 'neath the foot of which we were lying, and yet he went on his way past us, giving no heed, but talking busily, and, as it seemed, interestedly with Horry Sims.

I must admit that just for the instant there came into my heart a great fear lest that which Saul had said might be true, and then I thrust it from me, saying in my mind that I would not so wrong a lad who had all the marks of gentlemanly breeding. Surely, even though he might at some other time be willing to play us false, he would not do so while we were in such deep sorrow.

"If he is playing fair with us, why should he at this minute be hand in glove with that Tory scoundrel?" Saul whispered hoarsely, as he sat up to gaze after the two who were walking rapidly

down the road in the direction of our home. "Why did he not have speech with us? Surely he knows where we are."

"To have spoken when he passed would have been to tell Horry Sims that we were lying in hiding while he went into York Town to pick up such information as might be possible. The chances are the lad met the young Tory – came across him by accident, of course, and could do no less than show a friendly front, unless he was minded to much the same as tell him we were counting on making reprisals because of the loss of our horses."

Although this was the reasonable, and, to my mind, the only explanation of little Frenchie's behavior, Saul would not at first admit it; but insisted that there must be treachery somewhere else than in Horry Sims's heart, and thus he argued until I verily believe he convinced himself that our little comrade from New Orleans could have done no different. Then came the question as to whether we should remain where we were, or start homeward, for now it was too late for us to make any venture into the town of York even though we had been so minded.

Saul was for pushing on hurriedly, and, overtaking the young Tory, flog him within an inch of his life. It was all I could do to hold him back sufficiently long to repeat again and again that a flogging was all too poor a punishment for the crime he had committed, and that if we should lay hand against him now we might, and very likely would, put a stumbling block in our way, for until the moment came when we could repay the debt in full, it was absolutely necessary we seem to hold ourselves friendly with this fellow who had dealt us such a cruel blow.

I forced Saul to listen to me so long that it would have been useless to set out in pursuit, and after that again came the question as to whether we ought to go on our way homeward, or wait where we were.

It was fortunate we spent so much time in such discussion; fortunate that Saul differed from me as to what we had best do, for while we lay there disputing we heard a crashing of the underbrush where the growth was thick, and a moment later little Frenchie, looking heated and so nearly breathless that for a full minute he could not speak so we might understand, came into view.

Panting, and with the perspiration streaming down his face, he threw himself headlong on the ground beside me, breathing like one who had been running a race, until it was possible to have control over his voice, when he said hurriedly, as if eager we should understand all the reasons for his movements without loss of time:

"I was forced to go a certain distance with that young villain, else would he have mistrusted that you might be near about."

"How did you get rid of him?" I asked. "Why might he not suspect something when you broke away instead of continuing on so far as his home, which lay directly in your path, if you were heading for the Hamilton plantation?"

"I made out that I knew of a short way through the woods, which would take me directly out of his path, and when we were come to that trail which leads off toward the York river I left him, although he was mightily surprised at hearing that such a course would bring me to your home more directly than if I continued on the road."

"Where did you pick him up?" Saul asked impatiently. "Why did you waste time on the scoundrel? It would seem to me that after all he has done it was your business to flog, rather than make friends with him."

By this time Pierre had so far recovered his breath that it was possible for him to speak distinctly, and without undue effort. Rising to his feet and shrugging his shoulders as he spread his hands palm outward, he said in his mild voice, and with that peculiar accent:

"To have done so, my friend, would have been to show myself an enemy to you. While I was striving to make my way inside the British lines, pretending that I was simply bent on curiosity, he came up, seemingly having a right of way everywhere within the encampment, and when he greeted me civilly, evidently wondering why I was there alone, I could do no less than treat him as I would

have done yesterday, in the hope that something might drop from his lips which would aid me in my search."

"And did it?" I asked eagerly, for now I began to understand that by bearing himself friendly toward Horry Sims, Pierre had succeeded where otherwise the chances were he must have failed.

"Indeed it did," the lad said in a tone of triumph. "It was far better than if I had indulged in a game of fisticuffs with him, because his red-coated friends would speedily have come to his relief."

"What did you learn?" Saul demanded fiercely.

"Where your mare and Fitzroy's Silver Heels are stabled," was the quiet reply, whereupon I sprang up as if within my body was a stout steel spring which had lately been released.

"You learned where they were stabled?" I cried excitedly.

"Ay, that I did," Pierre replied with a shrug of the shoulders, "and without any great labor, for Horry Sims led me at once, and meeting with no interference from the soldiers, to where all the horses which had been taken from the Hamilton plantation were quartered, showing them to me as if it caused him great pain in the heart because such an injury had been done a neighbor."

"What did he say about it?" Saul demanded.

"He told me that he was walking along bent only on coming into that town of York in order to see the British encampment, when a squad of Rangers rode past him leading your mare and Fitzroy's Silver Heels. Then I asked if he had no suspicion such a thing might have been thought upon by the Britishers, and he replied that until he was come this time to York Town he had never seen the Rangers. In fact, had not believed they were with my Lord Cornwallis's army, all of which went to prove that he, the snakey Tory, told the red-coated soldiers where they might find the largest and best supply of saddle beasts."

"Did he explain how it chanced he could wander at will inside the encampment, and also take with him a companion?" I asked.

"He told me he had come upon a lieutenant of Tarleton's Legion, who, when Cornwallis was in James Town, had been quartered at the Sims plantation, and that this officer had made the way plain for him, saying he might visit the encampment at will."

If there had been any question in our minds up to this time as to the guilt of Horry Sims, no doubt now remained. We knew, because of having seen the scoundrel, that he had had speech with Simcoe's Rangers before the horses were seized, and his story that one of Tarleton's officers had been quartered at the Sims plantation during Cornwallis's short stay in James Town I knew to be absolutely false. He had played the traitor deliberately, and as the price of his treachery gained admission to the encampment, most like vouched for by the officer who had met him on the road that morning.

"The hope is," Pierre said after a short pause and with that indescribable gesture, "that the Tory Horry will not suspect I took the trail to York river for any other purpose than that of gaining the Hamilton plantation as quickly as might be."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because it is not well he should know I have been in your company this day, else he might suspect that we know of his treachery. It is in my mind that we must keep him to the belief that we know nothing whatsoever concerning his misdeeds of this day."

"But how can we come at the scoundrel save he does know that same thing?" Saul cried, he ever being hot-headed and not inclined to listen to any plans or arguments when he was burning for revenge, or excited by the desire for pleasure.

"I have in mind," Pierre said, waving his hands in that odd fashion, "that which I believe will give the Tory lad into our keeping, where we may do by him without fear of interference –"

"What is it?" I asked eagerly, for all that time we had been awaiting the lad's return from the town of York I had turned over and over in my mind without avail, plans for laying the Tory villain by the heels.

"It may not be that I shall explain everything now," little Frenchie said as he shrugged his shoulders, "and for the very reason that it is not as yet plain in my own mind. I have a plan which, if it can be worked out, will not only give him to our hands; but also gain possession of at least the mare and Silver Heels despite the fact that they are within the British encampment."

CHAPTER III

UNCLE 'RASMUS'S ADVICE

Plead though I might, little Frenchie would give us no hint as to the plan of which he had spoken; but when we were on our homeward way, walking well within the cover of the foliage lest we inadvertently come upon Horry Sims, he turned the conversation upon such of the fortifications of the town of York as he had seen, and both by his tone and by his manner did I understand that he would give us no inkling whatsoever of that which he had in mind concerning Silver Heels and Saul's mare.

The lad must have seen more of military movements than we had fancied, for he knew full well all the names of the different kinds of fortification, and could explain their construction, speaking at times almost as a veteran soldier might have spoken.

Although Saul and I knew nothing whatsoever concerning such matters, we understood from Pierre's speech that he had not only taken note of each half-completed redoubt or bastion; but knew full well what part each might be called to play in the defences of the town, if so be our American army made an attack.

He told us that the British line extended on an irregular course from the river to the sloping grounds in the rear of the village near what is known as the Pigeon Quarter, and was seemingly intended, when completed, to entirely surround York Town. Across the peninsula of Gloucester and just in the rear of that settlement, he said that another line of entrenchments was being thrown up.

From what he had seen of the completed work, as well as that which was half finished, or but just begun, he announced that there would be seven redoubts and six batteries on the land side, all to be connected by entrenchments, and that on the river bank preparations were making for a line of batteries, the largest, or grand battery, being near the church.

As for outworks, Pierre said there would be three redoubts on the margin of the ravine to the southwest of the town, another a little eastward of the road to Hampton, two on the extreme right near the river, and the Fusileer's redoubt on the left.

He also told us that my Lord Cornwallis had made his headquarters at Governor Nelson's house, for it can well be understood that our governor of Virginia, noted for more than a leaning toward the cause of liberty, would not remain within the limits of York Town, or anywhere that it was likely the Britishers could get hold of him, while General Cornwallis was occupying this portion of our state of Virginia.

More than this: Little Frenchie in his quiet way had learned that my Lord Cornwallis's army numbered nearabout seven thousand men, meaning that such number of British troops were encamped either at Gloucester or in the town of York.

When I questioned him as to how he had gathered all this information, which it seemed to me none save an adroit man might gain, he put me off with a laugh, declaring that while Englishmen and Frenchmen were natural enemies, these red-coated soldiers seemed to take an especial liking for a small French boy who had lived no nearer France than New Orleans.

It came into my mind more than once that mayhap Pierre had found even among the king's troops an old friend, improbable though this possibility might be; but if such was the case the lad never admitted it, and to this day it is impossible for me to say how he learned so much concerning York Town and the enemy who occupied it, in that one visit of four or five hours.

The pain in my heart caused by the theft of Silver Heels was in no degree lessened as we journeyed on, now listening to what little Frenchie had to say regarding the situation of affairs at York Town, and again, either Saul or I breaking out in some wild plan for regaining possession of our horses, which, if put into execution, would have led to our arrest, if not to our death.

Then we were arrived home, and although I might have expected it, I was thoroughly surprised at finding everything in confusion. The greatest excitement prevailed everywhere among the people, and work was seemingly at a stand-still.

As a matter of course, my father was not at home, he being with the American army somewhere in the North, and I wondered much that Dalton, the overseer, had not set matters straight, for many hours had elapsed since the visit of the red-coated thieves.

Uncle 'Rasmus was the only one among the slaves or the servants who appeared to have regained possession of his senses, and he was sitting in the stable-yard as I had seen him almost every day of my life when the sun was shining, meditatively chewing a straw and looking straight ahead as if he could see in the distance that which was not visible to other eyes.

The old fellow was apparently unmoved by the bustle and confusion everywhere around him, and I, certain of finding in him a sympathizer, went to speak with him even before visiting my mother.

"Are all the horses gone, Uncle 'Rasmus?" I asked, seating myself by his side, while Saul and Pierre followed my example.

"All de saddle hosses, chile. De Britishers done took ebry las' hoof dat was wuff takin'."

"And Silver Heels with them," I said in a tearful voice.

"Yes, chile, Silber Heels is wid de res'. I kind'er 'lowed it was gwine ter break your heart, honey, but dere was nuffin' ole 'Rasmus could do to stop it, kase it seemed like dis yere stable-yard was plum full ob red-coats, all ob 'em swearin' an' laughin', till it seemed like dey was jes' achin' to 'buse some ob us niggers scandalous, an' I 'low dey would, ef we'd giben 'em de least little word ob back talk."

"Do you know who sent them here, Uncle 'Rasmus?" Saul asked suddenly, and the old negro nodded his head as he replied:

"I'se done gone hab my 'spicions, chile. Dere's plenty ob plantations nearer de town ob York dan dis yere, an' yet 'cordin' to what I heard de sogermen say, dey haben't been anywhere else yet. So I was 'lowin' dat some ob de folks 'roun' here, dem as claim to hab a mighty big love for us, set 'em on."

"Can't you guess who it was, Uncle 'Rasmus?" Saul continued, and the old man replied in a dreamy tone:

"I done hab my 'spicions; but in dese yere times when you don' know who's your friend more'n half de time, dere ain' any sense in talkin' right out what you'se tinkin'. I'se 'lowin' I can guess who set de red-coats aflame."

"You couldn't guess in a week," Saul interrupted, "because you're thinking it might be some one of the planters, like Master Sims, instead of which it was that worthless son of his – Horry."

Watching Uncle 'Rasmus closely, I fancied that this information was not new to him, and straightway fell awondering how it was that this old negro who seldom strayed out of the stable-yard, let alone going away from the plantation, should have an inkling of what might be done so far away as the Sims place.

"Pierre has been to York Town, Uncle 'Rasmus, and he knows where Silver Heels and Saul's mare are quartered."

"An' is dat all he knows, chile?"

"It strikes me that's finding out considerable in one day," and then I explained how it was little Frenchie was able to move about York Town as he had, after which Uncle 'Rasmus asked in a hopeful tone:

"Did he fin' out, chile, which ossifer was gwine to ride Silber Heels, an' which one laid his mark on Saul's mare?"

As a matter of course Pierre could not give the information; but he explained with great minuteness where the horses were stabled, and I was impatient with him because of wasting so many words when it could do no good.

Much to my surprise Uncle 'Rasmus drank it all in, and when little Frenchie had come to an end of his overly long story the old negro said, taking the straw from his mouth and holding it in the air as if to ascertain from which direction came the wind:

"I reckon I'se 'bleeged to be goin', chillun. For an ole man like Uncle 'Rasmus it's quite a journey from here to de town ob York, an' ef I counts on doin' it 'twixt now an' sunrise, I'd better get my ole legs amovin'."

"York Town, Uncle 'Rasmus?" I cried in surprise, and well I might, for within the past three years I had never seen the old negro go as far from the house as the cotton fields.

"Dat's what I said, chile, an' I'se 'bleeged to be amovin'."

"But why are you going there, Uncle 'Rasmus?" I cried, catching him by the arm to insure his attention, and he replied dreamily, but, as it seemed to me, with a certain air of decision:

"I 'low it's time I was lookin' arter Marse Hamilton's house down yander, whar ole Mary libed when he done set her free."

"There's no need of your looking after that old shanty, Uncle 'Rasmus," I cried. "Surely father gives no heed to it now; it isn't worth half a dozen shillings, except for firewood."

"I know dat, honey; I'se done foun' all dat out, but sumfin's tellin' me dat it's time I was lookin' arter Marse Hamilton's property what's been lef dere in de town ob York, whar de Britishers am rampagin' an' rarin' 'roun' like dey was gone crazy."

"But you'll starve to death there, Uncle 'Rasmus. I don't fancy there are very many of old Mary's goods left in the hovel, for if I remember rightly young Dinah laid claim to the greater portion, and how will you get along for something to eat?"

"I was kind'er 'lowin', chile, as how you an' Saul, an' maybe little Pierre as you call him, would tend out on de ole man, des enough to fetch now an' den what he was needin' to hol' de soul in his body."

"But if, as Pierre says, the British entrenchments run back of the town as far as the Pigeon Quarter, then old Mary's cabin must be inside, and how would we be able to get through the lines?"

"Well, chile, I ain' got any great lub for de Britishers; but I'se 'lowin' dey ain' so hard-hearted as to hold out a couple ob chillun what wanted to feed a pore ole nigger. It kind'er seems as if dey'd be 'shamed to let your Uncle 'Rasmus starbe, eben ef he is no 'count kase ob bein' so ole, specially ef all dey'd hab to do to keep him erlong, was to let a couple or three chillun in de lines."

It was all blind to me, this sudden whim of Uncle 'Rasmus to take up his quarters in old Mary's cabin, which was hardly more than the veriest shanty, and while I stood looking at the old man, trying to get some glimmer of truth out of what was fast becoming a mystery, little Frenchie's face lighted up wondrously, as he leaped forward, seizing the old darkey by both hands while he cried joyously:

"It's a great plan, Uncle 'Rasmus, it's a great plan! I'll go with you a good part of the way so's to help along, for of course you count on carrying something."

"I spects I'se boun' to hab a blanket, chile, an' sumfin in de way ob food, kase I ain' sich a foolish ole nigger as to tink I could get trou a sogerman's lines in de night, an' so I'll be needin' sumfin for a bed ef nothin' more."

"But if you are foolish enough to go to York Town, what's the sense of starting to-night? Why not wait till morning? You say yourself you don't expect to get through the lines after dark, therefore why sleep on the ground when you could stay here in comfortable quarters?" Saul cried, whereupon Pierre, turning from Uncle 'Rasmus, said to the lad:

"Can't you understand that this old negro is paving a way for you and Fitz to get at your horses?"

"I may be a thick-head; but I surely can't see how taking up his quarters in old Mary's cabin, where we've got to carry food to him every day or two, is helping us along very fast," Saul cried angrily, and little Frenchie, throwing back his shoulders, laughed heartily, finding something so comical in Saul's words that it was a full minute before he could make reply.

Then he said, his voice all atremble with mirth:

"Don't you see that Uncle 'Rasmus is making a reasonable excuse for you to go into the town of York every day, if so be you're minded? Can't you understand that once he's in old Mary's cabin there's good reason why we should spend the night with him now and then? Suppose we carried Uncle 'Rasmus food three days running, it would become necessary to explain that the old man had been intending to come out to the plantation; but since we had lost our horses we were forced to feed him as best we might, because he was too feeble to walk home. Can't you also see," Pierre continued eagerly, "why the old man wants to get there in the night? He counts on sneaking through the lines, instead of meekly lying down on the ground, as he has said, and intends, if so be it is possible, to get into old Mary's cabin without making known to the Britishers that he has just come into the village; but rather counts on letting it be understood that he has been there ever since they entered the town."

"It's amazin' how some ob dese yere chillun can pick up an idee what oder folks am tryin' to hide," Uncle 'Rasmus said as he patted little Frenchie on the head, and then hobbled toward his cabin as if he was so feeble that only with the greatest exertion could he drag one foot after another.

Surely I was thick-headed on that afternoon, for even after Pierre had made full explanation of Uncle 'Rasmus's intended movements, it was a good five minutes before the whole scheme came plain in my mind, and then I realized that this old negro of ours was about to do more toward regaining possession of Silver Heels, if indeed she ever did come into my possession again, than all of us lads with our noisy talk.

He would take up his abode in the town of York, sneaking through the lines, if so be it was possible, to the end that the British might not know he had just come in from the outside, and once there the way was open for all three of us lads to wander at least so far through the town as old Mary's cottage. It would be strange indeed, after the red-coats were accustomed to seeing us come and go, for there could be no question but that we would get permission to minister to the poor old negro, if we could not venture further and further inside the lines until, should fortune favor us, we might be able to go whithersoever we desired.

At all events, with Uncle 'Rasmus dwelling in the town – with Uncle 'Rasmus ill and needing our attention, we would be enabled to spend our time in York without arousing even the suspicions of that miserable snake whom people call Horry Sims.

Of course, so far as the little scoundrel was concerned, he might well wonder how it chanced that Uncle 'Rasmus had gone into the town of York, for whenever any of the lads had come around the Hamilton plantation they had been accustomed to seeing the old negro sitting in his favorite place in the stable-yard; but I could see now as the scheme came home to me, that it would be possible, in case Horry Sims made inquiries, to let it be understood that Uncle 'Rasmus had gone there some days before my Lord Cornwallis's army entered the town, being stricken so ill he could not be safely moved.

In fact, I saw nothing but brightness in the future, and all through this old negro whom I had seen sitting in the stable-yard chewing straw day after day until he had come to seem much like one of the dogs or the horses, having no mind of his own; but implicitly obeying the will of his master.

Having come to fully understand all of benefit which might accrue to us in this move of Uncle 'Rasmus, I would have aided the old negro to the best of my ability, and insisted that he wait until I go to this plantation or that where I might borrow a horse to carry him; but he would have none of it.

He was bent on entering the town of York in his own way, and alone. The only assistance he would agree to, was that we might carry his blankets and scanty store of provisions a certain portion of the distance, and when I would have insisted on bringing out some delicacies from the house, he positively refused to accept them, whereupon I urged almost angrily to be allowed to do as I pleased, until little Frenchie, whose head is ever clear, said to me laughingly:

"Can't you understand, you thick-headed Fitz, that it would be strange if Uncle 'Rasmus was disabled in old Mary's cabin with all sorts of delicacies in the way of food? If the Britishers should grow suspicious and look into the matter, wouldn't they think it odd the old man had been allowed

to remain in that hovel while there were yet horses in the stables of the Hamilton plantation to bring him back where he belonged?"

Surely there was good reason why I should be called thick-headed, for this was not the only time since morning that I had shown myself to be a stupid; yet I was not so simple but I could readily understand that even though we might have the advantage of being able to go and come from the town of York to the plantation at will, we would not be so far advanced toward the recovery of the stolen horses as to be able to say that our work was in a fair way of being performed.

It was one thing, and I grant you an important one, to enter the town without giving rise to suspicions; but quite another and more serious to take from the quarters of the British army horses which would be guarded by soldiers, and get away with them through the lines of sentinels out over the entrenchments.

"Then this Minute-Boy business that you talked about Fitz, is to be dropped?" Saul asked a few moments after Uncle 'Rasmus had left us, and I turned upon him in astonishment, whereupon he, reading the question which must have been plainly written on my face, added:

"It would seem as if we were turning all our attention to getting back the mare and Silver Heels, in which case, as a matter of course, there can be no other work for us. If we should be so fortunate as to succeed, it would become necessary to scurry out of this part of the country, lest my Lord Cornwallis lay us by the heels, for I suppose they would set it down as stealing if we should reclaim our own."

"And why might it not be that you would continue the work of Minute Boys, even while striving to get back the horses which were taken from you?" little Frenchie asked as if in wonderment. "It is not to be supposed we can go into the town of York, and, without delay, take from the stables where Simcoe's Rangers keep their horses, two of the best; but many days will pass, yea *must* pass, before the work can be accomplished. In the meanwhile, if we are free to go in and out of the town, why might it not be possible for us to carry much of information to the Americans? It would seem as if our work as Minute Boys was but just beginning."

"What between your plans and those of Uncle 'Rasmus's, I confess to being thoroughly mixed," Saul muttered impatiently. "In the first place, even though you deem it of so much importance, I fail to see how being able to go in and out of the town will add to the possibility of getting our horses. Unless I am much mistaken in regard to military matters, it will not be a simple affair to steal either the mare or Silver Heels from the soldiers. Then, if we are bending all our efforts to that one purpose, how are we to serve the colony? What we could learn in the town of York that would be of importance to the Americans, passes my understanding."

"We shall see," Pierre said laughingly, with a shrug of the shoulders and a wave of his hand. "It shall be for a little French boy from New Orleans, who never saw the land where his father and mother were born, to teach you Virginians how it may be possible to bear a hand in this business, which is like to grow exceeding warm when our French general closes in on Cornwallis's army, for now has come the time to hold the king's men as a strong man holds a child in his grasp, if so be your General Washington is minded to give him the authority."

"To hear you talk, Pierre, one might suppose you had served with soldiers all your short life," Saul cried irritably, and again little Frenchie laughed as he replied:

"My father was a soldier, and fought bravely. I have heard him and his comrades conversing; I have seen them draw plans for a campaign, and discuss the strength of fortifications, until it seemed to me, even though I have had no experience in such matters, that I knew much concerning them."

Then the conversation ceased, Saul seemingly giving himself up to a sulky mood, while I had so much food for reflection with dwelling upon what we might do and the possibilities of running our necks into a British noose, that I was not minded to give play to my tongue.

Uncle 'Rasmus remained within his cabin a good half hour, while we lads awaited him, having no inclination to meet our mothers just at this time lest we be ordered to keep within the bounds of the plantation, and thereby prevented from carrying out our plans, foolhardy though they might be.

When the old negro did appear among us again he was ready for the journey; that is to say, he had with him two blankets and a small bundle, or package, which I doubted not contained the store of food he was minded to carry with him to York Town. In addition to this outfit I noticed that he had his heaviest cane, which was fashioned with a handle much like a crutch, and I dimly wondered, hardly knowing that I did so, whether he had taken this particular stick just at this time as a weapon, or simply to guide his faltering steps.

"I reckon I'se done put ole 'Rasmus's business on dis yere plantation in shape, an' now, chillun, I'se gwine ter be moseyin' erlong, an' ef you'se countin' to help de ole man, it won't be out ob de way ef yer carry dese yere blankets an' de little bundle, kase I ain' been much used to totin' stuff dese las' years."

"Of course we're going to help you, Uncle 'Rasmus," I said quickly, taking the blankets from his hands. "We count on keeping right by your side from here until you come within sight of the town of York."

"I'se 'lowin', chile, dat our roads don' come together till we get to a dead cottonwood tree, whar you say you an' Saul lay hid while de little French boy went on inter de town."

"But which way are you going, Uncle?" Saul cried. "There's no other road than the nearest course from here to York."

"I'se 'lowin' your ole Uncle 'Rasmus knows better'n dat," he cried. "He's libed on dis yere plantation nigh to forty years, an' it would seem kind'er strange ef he didn't know all de rabbit an' de coon paths trou dis yere growth. Ef it won't tucker you chillun out to carry de blankets an' de bundle, an' leabe 'em at de ole cottonwood, I'll get 'em 'twixt now an' mornin'. Ef so be you'se feelin' kind'er trubbled 'bout de ole man, come to see him whenever you gets ready. He's gwine ter be right dar in ole Mary's cabin, sure's you're bawn."

It was a surprise to me that Uncle 'Rasmus should be able to find his way anywhere between the two rivers, for I hardly remembered of seeing him stray from the bounds of the plantation; but certain it was, at least to my mind, that he should go his gait, for now had we come to put all our dependence upon him, so far as making any move toward recovering the stolen horses was concerned.

In fact it now began to seem to me, so far as proving ourselves Minute Boys, that unless we could get within the British entrenchments we could do naught of good for those men who, I doubted not, were slowly making their way toward the town of York to hold my Lord Cornwallis prisoner until the time should come when they might lay their hands heavily upon him.

Thus it was that Uncle 'Rasmus went off by himself, going down past the line of grape-vines across the creek, as I supposed, while we three struck out along the road until we had traveled perhaps a quarter of a mile, when little Frenchie suddenly halted and said as he turned upon us:

"Why is it that all three shall travel twelve miles or more this day, and repeat the same journey to-morrow forenoon?"

"You know why it is," Saul cried angrily. "You claimed to understand all that Uncle 'Rasmus had in his crazy head."

"I did understand, and it is because of seeing what we may do with his help, I am asking why the three of us should go from here to York and back this night, simply to retrace our steps to-morrow morning?"

"What else may we do?" I asked impatiently.

"Two might go on with the blankets and the bundle, and, arriving at the dead cottonwood, remain there all night, while the third, staying behind now, can set off from the plantation at break of day, bringing with him such an amount of food as will explain why we wish to visit old Mary's cabin."

"Then those who went on to-night would sleep on the ground, whereas the one who remained here would take his rest in bed," Saul said grimly, and with that shrug of the shoulders which sometimes irritated and sometimes pleased me, Pierre replied:

"Yes, that is true, and if you have not yet slept on the ground, you could be the one to stay here. It makes no difference which two of us go on; but it seems important that one remain here in order to bring fresh food in the morning, thus making a pretext for entering the British lines."

I was not so thick-headed but that I could understand what the lad was driving at and straightway said to Saul:

"Suppose you go back home? Make such excuses for Pierre and me as seems to you best. Perhaps it would be as well if you confided our secret in mother, for we must have some one on the plantation who will work with us, else we shall not be able to get provisions in sufficient quantity to keep all of us from hunger."

"And suppose she demands that you return, and I take her command to you?"

"She cannot call us back before to-morrow night in case only one stays on the plantation now," Pierre said, "and by that time we will have been able to get a look around the town – mayhap be so fortunate as to see some way by which we can work our will. At all events, it seems best that we do as I have said, although I am willing to fall in with whatsoever other plan you lads may propose."

"Turn you back, Saul. It is not well we should stand here quibbling about a trifle when there is a possibility that such sneaks as Horry Sims may come along and wonder why we are carrying blankets toward the town of York at this hour of the day."

I spoke impatiently because I was growing anxious, and had begun to fear that some one might come who would suspect that we were plotting mischief against the red-coated trespassers.

My cousin wheeled sharply around as if angry, and under other circumstances I would have held him back lest we part in unfriendly fashion; but at this moment there was so much of fear in my heart lest we be prevented from carrying out the half-formed plan, that I could not parley with my kinsman as I should have done. Rather was it a relief to me when he turned about to retrace his steps, and, clutching little Frenchie by the arm, I said curtly:

"Now step out, lad, and if so be we hear any one approaching either from the front or rear, it is for us to seek cover amid the foliage, even as rabbits do, for we must not be seen 'twixt now and the time we make ready to enter the town bearing provisions for Uncle 'Rasmus."

Pierre did as he was bidden, making no protest at my rough handling of him, and from that time until we were come to the dead cottonwood neither of us spoke. I fancy that his heart, like mine, was filled with forebodings of the future, and with questions as to whether he was not on a road which would lead to the gallows.

It was not yet dark when we arrived at our destination without having seen man or woman on the road, all of which caused me yet more anxiety, for I failed to understand why it was that on this day when the curious people of Virginia should have been going to and fro to see the king's soldiers, none save ourselves were abroad.

Pierre and I sought the same resting place as had Saul and I earlier in the day. The little French lad spread out the blankets as if making ready to spend the night, and I asked if he did not count on seeing Uncle 'Rasmus very soon, whereupon he said with a laugh and a shrug, that it made no difference to him when the old negro arrived at the rendezvous, although it would please him better did the old man come later rather than earlier; but he was intending to get what rest he could while he had at his command such an apology for a bed.

"We needn't expect him before midnight at the soonest," Pierre said as he nestled down on the blankets, motioning for me to follow his example, "and 'twixt now and then we may get a fairly good night's rest if we do not spend too much time in talking."

We were where it would be impossible for any passers-by on the highway to see us, unless peradventure they were so curiously inclined as to make their way through the underbrush, which

was thick at this point, and I understood, as little Frenchie had intimated, that it was better for us to hold our peace, because the sound of our voices would carry far on the night air, and no one could say when such as Horry Sims might come sneaking around.

Excited and anxious though I was, slumber came to my eyelids within a very few moments after I had stretched myself out to rest, and I was all unconscious of what might be happening around me until a light pressure on my shoulder caused me to spring to a sitting posture very suddenly.

Then it was I could distinguish, even in the gloom of the night, Uncle 'Rasmus's form, and I cried out to know how long he had been there, whereupon the old negro put his hand upon my lips in token that I should speak with more of caution, whispering at the same time he aroused Pierre:

"I des come up, honey, an' can't 'ford to lose any mo' time. Yere po' ole uncle des hobbles 'roun' like er toad, an' it takes him a mighty long while to get ober much ob de groun'. I'se pow'ful sorry to 'sturb you chillun; but allow it's time for me to be toddlin' erlong, ef I counts on gettin' whar de Britishers are before sunrise. I'll be needin' dese yere blankets, and it sure am a pity to turn two likely babies out in de cold."

"Don't fret yourself about us, Uncle 'Rasmus," I said quickly, leaping to my feet, followed by Pierre.

Then we two lads rolled the blankets into as small a compass as possible, putting inside them the package of food, and fastening the whole upon the old man's shoulders according to his directions, in such a manner that it would not impede him in his movements.

"I'se surely gwine to 'spect you chillun 'fore anudder night-fall," the old man said after we had explained to him why Saul was not with us. "I clean forgot to tell ole Missey dat I was 'bleeged to go erway, an' am countin' on your doin' it, honey," he added, turning to me.

Before I could make reply the old man was striding off in the direction of the village, walking as spritely, so it seemed to me, as I myself might have done.

"Be careful, uncle! Don't run your woolly pate into danger when there's no necessity for it!" I cried after him, and back to me on the night air came the quavering voice:

"De ole fox allers looks arter hisself when de houn's are 'roun'; but it's de cubs what are mos' likely fo' to get inter trubble."

Then little Frenchie and I were alone. Standing within the shelter of the foliage at the foot of the dead cottonwood, and placing my hands on his shoulders, for just then I literally ached to come into close touch with a friend, I said, striving to hold my voice steady:

"It may be, Pierre, that Saul and I had no right to drag you into this mad scheme of ours, for even since Uncle 'Rasmus has set off does it come to me that it is reckless for us to risk our lives in the hope of getting back the horses. I have little faith that we shall be able to accomplish anything as Minute Boys, therefore we must set it down in all honesty to ourselves that we are pressing forward simply to recover that which has been stolen, and we have no right to lead you into danger."

"Do not think I am boasting, Fitz Hamilton," and Pierre shrugged his shoulders in a way that caused me to laugh despite the heaviness of my heart; "but yet there comes in upon me the thought that mayhap it is I, the French lad from New Orleans, who is dragging you and Saul, rather than that you are dragging him."

CHAPTER IV

THE TOWN OF YORK

I had not counted that it would be possible for us to indulge in slumber after Uncle 'Rasmus had carried off the blankets; but yet before he was well on his way toward the village both of us were wrapped in sleep as profound as even when our bed was softer.

Neither the thought of poor Silver Heels in the hands of a brutal British officer, nor the possibility that we might come to grief when, on the morrow, we ventured into the town of York, prevented me from gaining all the rest a lad needs, as may be judged by the fact that not until the sun was an hour high in the heavens, and Saul was shaking me into consciousness, did I have knowledge of my surroundings.

Then it was, with a feeling of shame, that I started to my feet, none the worse for having been stretched out so long on the bare ground; but deep down in my heart was a painful sense of having shown myself a child, by thus indulging in repose when others stood ready to aid in the task which should have been all my own.

"Have you lads given over going into the village this morning, that you sleep so late and so soundly?" Saul asked with a note of scorn in his tones, and I replied quickly, as if making apology for having been such a laggard:

"Even though we had risen as early as did you, it would not have been wise for us to go forward, yet I am free to admit that it might have been more seemly had we opened our eyes before sunrise."

"It is to my mind that we were wise to get all the sleep possible," little Frenchie said with a shrug of the shoulders. "A good soldier should be able to sleep anywhere and at any time, and it is his duty to take advantage of every opportunity to rest, in order that he may be the better able to undergo fatigue when it becomes necessary."

"But you are not a soldier," Saul said sharply, as if offended by the words; but Pierre, nothing daunted, replied cheerily:

"Yet am I in a fair way to be one, having enrolled myself as a Minute Boy. I am much the same as an apprentice, according to my way of thinking, and, being so, should copy after my elders – "

"Meaning that you ought to sleep like a laggard until the sun is high in the heavens?" Saul cried and I, growing irritated because he persisted in harping upon our indolence, said, speaking quite as sharply as had he:

"We have done no harm by being laggards. I would like for you to explain how we might have been advantaged by awakening at daybreak and sitting here waiting for you to come? It seems to me just as well that we should sleep, as sit around twiddling our thumbs."

"I was astir a full hour before daybreak, attending to the work set me, else I would not be here thus early, ready to make the venture as agreed upon."

One might have fancied Saul was eager to be praised for his early rising, and I might have said something calculated to irritate him, but that Pierre cried with a laugh:

"So you were, my brave Minute Boy; but remember that most like you crawled into bed a good two hours before Fitz and I did, and it is also reasonable to suppose you were not awakened at midnight to give up your blankets."

This remark seemed to anger Saul instead of soothing him, and, fearing we might have then and there a wordy battle between the excitable little French boy and my quick tempered cousin, I broke in by saying:

"Look you here, lads, there is no reason why you should squabble as to who turned out of bed first this morning. That is over and done with, and it strikes me we had best look forward rather than backward. Did you speak with my mother, Saul?"

"Ay, that I did."

"And was she opposed to our going into York?"

"I would not be willing to say quite as much as that; but certain it is her heart was troubled sorely when I told her what we counted on doing. I believe of a verity if Uncle 'Rasmus had not already left the plantation, she would have set her face against it. As it is, knowing that now most like the old negro is housed up in the cabin, unless the Britishers, suspecting intended mischief, have given the poor fellow lodgings in a guard-house, she realizes that we can do no less than continue as we have begun, although her command is that we do not run our heads into danger unnecessarily. She says it is foolish for us to venture our liberty, and perhaps our lives, in the effort to reclaim two horses, when it is possible to buy others that would serve us equally well."

"We could never find a colt that would be as dear to me as is Silver Heels," I interrupted hotly, all the grief which had come upon me the evening previous returning to my heart, and setting my pulse beating so loudly that it seemed as if the lads might hear the blood leaping through my veins.

"What did you bring in the way of provisions?" Frenchie asked, and his question reminded me that we had gone supperless to bed.

"Enough to keep us all from hunger a full week, I believe," Saul replied with an air of pride, as if he alone should have the credit, not only for bringing, but for providing, the supplies.

Then it was he opened the sack he carried, and displayed an ample store of cold boiled ham, corn-bread, fried hominy and fried ham, saying as he did so:

"If so be we are allowed to remain with Uncle 'Rasmus, some of us should be able to catch fish enough to add to this store until it will serve as a week's rations."

Pierre and I at once set about making a hearty meal, giving no heed to the possibility that we might come to short rations later, and even sulky Saul was not averse to joining us.

Before we had satisfied our hunger my cousin was in a more pleasant frame of mind and condescended to explain to us all that had been said and done on the plantation after we left. As nearly as I could make out it seemed that my mother was willing we should go our own pace, although as a matter of course she, like any other woman, was frightened at the idea of our venturing among enemies, for surely with my father in the so-called rebel army, we could count that these red-coated gentry would be anything but friendly to those who came from the Hamilton plantation.

It heartened me wonderfully, if indeed I had needed heartening after remembering that poor little Silver Heels was awaiting my coming, to know that mother had not really set her face against what we would do, and I contented myself so far as was possible, by saying that we would let nothing stand in the way of carrying out the scheme that was afoot unless having become convinced that we were venturing on too dangerous ground.

When breakfast had been eaten and we had divided Saul's burden into two parcels for the more convenient carrying, came the question as to when we should make the attempt to gain speech with Uncle 'Rasmus in the old cabin.

Saul was for setting off at once, although the sun was no more than two hours' high, while Frenchie argued strongly that we should wait until the forenoon was half spent, when there would likely be many visitors in the village, and we would attract less attention than if we were the first comers.

This last seemed to me the wisest course, and despite Saul's grumbling, for he claimed that we were wilfully wasting time, even going so far as to hint that we were afraid to really make the trial, we remained within shelter of the foliage near by the dead cottonwood until, I should say ten o'clock in the forenoon.

"Are you ready now?" Saul cried impatiently, after having tried half a dozen times in vain to force us forward. "Will you make the venture now, or shall we turn back to the plantation, and say that our hearts failed us at the last moment?"

I looked at Pierre, who rose to his feet as if in answer to the question he saw in my eyes, and straightway we set off toward the town of York, little Frenchie insisting that we walk leisurely, as if having nothing of moment on our minds, and arguing that if we pressed forward at a rapid pace we might come upon those who would suspect we had some other aim than that of feeding an old slave.

I am free to confess that my heart beat much more rapidly than it should have done when we approached the guard stationed here and there at intervals along the entire line of entrenchments on which soldiers were working with pick and shovel.

Until that moment I had not questioned whether we might be allowed to enter the town; but now it seemed certain that whoever accosted us could read our purpose on our faces and mentally nerved myself either for disappointment or for disaster.

"Who shall do the talking?" Saul asked when we were come near to a battery in which the guns were already mounted although the entrenchments on either side were far from being completed, and I fancied the lad was eager to act as spokesman; but I dared not trust him because of his quick temper. Therefore it was I said, firmly believing I spoke the truth:

"Pierre is the one of us three who can best perform the part. If his tongue fails us, then can we make certain, Saul, that either you or I would have brought disaster. The lad has a quicker wit, knows far more about military encampments, although he boasts not, and can hold his temper in check."

I have an idea that my cousin was not well pleased at being thus put under the command, as you might say, of little Frenchie; but there was no time for him to have made protest even though he was so disposed, because we were come so near the outposts that all our conversation might have been heard by the red-coated soldier who paced to and fro with a bayonet on his musket, looking as if ready to spit or strike any of us rebels who dared approach him.

I believe none of us, except little Frenchie, could have worked the trick. He advanced within four or five paces of the sentinel, touched his hat in regular military salute, and asked if it might be possible for him to speak with the officer of the day.

This puzzled me not a little, for I had no idea whatsoever who the "officer of the day" might be, or what his duties; but it appeared that Pierre knew what he was about, for straightway the sentinel, seeming to understand that this little lad was familiar with military usages, called up the officer of the guard, and, without waiting to be questioned, Pierre addressed him, stating courteously but without too many words, that there was an old slave in the town whom we feared stood in need of food and care, therefore had we come to hunt him up.

When the officer asked where we counted on finding this slave, I had wit enough to step forward quickly and make reply, for Pierre, who had but little knowledge of the town of York, and none whatsoever as to the location of old Mary's cabin, could not have given answer.

The whole matter was far more simple than I had hoped for. Pierre's story was so straight, he was so exceeding courteous, and apparently so ready to tell everything about himself and us, that even the most suspicious person would have been disarmed, and within five minutes after requesting permission, we were allowed to pass the sentinel, with no limit set as to the time we might remain in the lines.

Saul, who I verily believed was disgruntled because little Frenchie had been allowed to act the part of leader, now took upon himself the command of our company by marching in advance, for he knew as well as did I where old Mary's cabin was located.

You may be certain we kept our ears and eyes wide open as we walked through the village toward the Pigeon Quarter, and I was greatly disappointed because our way did not lead us past where the horses of Simcoe's Rangers were stabled, although certain it is, it would have given me greatest pain to have seen Silver Heels roughly used.

There were many visitors in York on this forenoon; people from roundabout who had Tory inclinations, or who were ready to sell to the enemies of their country such of vegetables or farm produce as might bring them in a few shillings. A number from Gloucester who had been allowed to

come across the river, and I even saw two lads whom I knew lived on Mobjack bay, roaming around with mouths wide open in astonishment at this vast encampment wherein, to their uneducated eyes, were soldiers enough to over-run all our colonies.

Squads of Britishers were marching here and there; officers lounged through the narrow streets, most like making their way to the entrenchments. From every direction could be heard sounds telling of pick and shovel, the shouts of teamsters as they hauled heavy guns into position, the beating of drums, the shrill cry of fifes, and, in fact, all that bustle, noise and confusion which I have since learned attends a military encampment.

As a matter of course we did not dare linger here or there, although very much was going on which it would have pleased me to observe; but we took good care to continue without hesitation toward the Pigeon Quarter, contenting ourselves with seeing what we might as we walked at a reasonably rapid pace.

Strange as it may seem, I had given no thought as to whether Uncle 'Rasmus had succeeded in entering the village during the night; but took it for granted that he must have done so, until we were come within a stone's throw of old Mary's cabin, and then it was as if my heart stood still, for there were many chances that the old negro might have been arrested while trying to pass the guard and we would find in the hovel a squad of red-coats waiting to make prisoners of those who presented themselves there.

I had so worked up my fears as to feel certain the moment had arrived when we were come to grief, that it was with difficulty I could check a cry of mingled relief and triumph on seeing Uncle 'Rasmus's black face at the window.

I had never thought there was anything of beauty in the old negro's features, and, as a matter of fact, wrinkled and black as it was, one might truly have said that at times it was almost repulsive, yet as I saw him then it was as if I had never looked upon anything more beautiful.

I ran hurriedly, excitedly, into the cabin, throwing myself into the old fellow's arms much as though welcoming him from the grave.

"Fo' de Lawd's sake, honey, wha's gettin' on to you so pow'ful bad?" the old man cried in surprise, for probably this was the first time in all my life when I had shown real affection for him. "Hab de Britishers bin cuttin' up 'roun' de plantation since I done lef'?"

"No; everything was quiet there when Saul set out this morning; but, oh, Uncle 'Rasmus! I had come to fancy you might have been taken prisoner, and that we were all in danger of being arrested for conspiring against the king."

"Ho, ho!" the old negro laughed. "Why, honey, you don' 'spects Uncle 'Rasmus is gwine ter git his brack head inter trubble arter all dese yere years, does yer?"

"But we knew you were counting on slipping through the lines, and if you'd been caught in anything of the kind – "

"Did you eber try fo' to ketch a 'possum, honey, when he kind'er had a inklin' you was arter him? I 'lows Uncle 'Rasmus is gettin' mighty ole; but he ain' so feeble yet but he kin hol' his own agin dese yere red-coated sogers. Why bress yer soul, honey, I des walked right in like I was comin' home, an' don' 'low one o' 'em knowed dat a wuffless ole nigger was anywhar nigh him."

Little Frenchie had taken the precaution to close the door immediately after our entrance, and while Uncle 'Rasmus and I were talking with no little show of excitement, the lad moved here and there, pulling a ragged curtain in front of one window, or closing the shutter of another, so that we might not attract attention from any passers-by, although this cabin of old Mary's was in what might well be called the outskirts of the village, where was little danger many people would come our way.

"Tell us how you got in here, Uncle 'Rasmus?" I asked, for after seeing the long line of sentinels which guarded the half-formed entrenchments, it seemed to me little less than marvelous that one could have made his way through without being challenged.

"I des walked right trou, honey. Course I wasn' no ways tryin' to 'tract 'tention; but kind'er waited for a chance when dere wasn' too man sogers 'round. It was easy, chillun, an' I'd bin out ob dis yere house long ago huntin' for Silber Heels, ef it hadn' been dat I was tryin' to wait till you done come."

Then Uncle 'Rasmus insisted on knowing how my mother had received the news that we were bent on making a visit to York Town.

When Saul had told him all that had been said and done on the plantation after his departure, the old negro suggested that we lounge around the village, following the example of the curious visitors, lest some one note the fact that we were apparently taking council together, and it would not seem reasonable we would willingly remain with an old negro shut up in such a wretched cabin, when there was so much to be seen on the outside.

In view of all that occurred before this day was come to a close, it may be well that I describe the hovel which we called old Mary's cabin, even though there was nothing in or around it worthy of particular notice under ordinary circumstances. The fact that later it served us much as a citadel in the midst of our enemies, who were in turn surrounded by their foes, renders it necessary I go into detail concerning it for the better understanding of what happened later.

An ordinary hut built of logs, perhaps twenty feet square, with a door made of puncheon planks, by which I mean planks that have been hewn out of the log with an axe rather than cut by a saw, and two windows, in one of which four panes of glass were broken, but both protected by shutters which swung from the outside. The building consisted of one room on the floor where the occupants were supposed to eat, sleep and live, while above was a loft formed by the roof, and approached through a scuttle situated directly opposite the door, at the rear of the hovel.

To gain access to this scuttle one was forced to climb a sort of ladder which had been formed by nailing strips of wood against the logs, and, as I learned before we were come to an end of using this cabin as a place of refuge, it was by no means a simple task to ascend, even for lads who were accustomed to swarming up trees, or shinning the slender masts of our river craft.

The loft was, as I have said, formed by the roof, and its floor, like the one below, was made of puncheon planks, yet not so closely laid together but that there were crevices through which one's foot might slip if he walked carelessly. At either end small holes had been cut between the logs, perhaps four or five inches square, which served as windows, although there was nothing to prevent the wind or the rain from entering.

I judged that when old Mary lived in the place these apertures were closed, most like with boards, or perhaps with cloth, but now they stood naked, and the wind, coming in across the river, found direct vent through the attic, thus insuring good ventilation if not comfort.

On the outside, and at the rear, was a chimney built of sticks and clay, with a hole cut through the logs near the floor of the lower room, where was a fireplace of stones laid up with mortar, and the inside of this rude chimney was plentifully bedaubed with mud to the depth of two or three inches, as a safeguard against fire.

Just outside the front door, not more than ten feet away, was a small well, which had once been stoned up properly, but was now fallen into such a state of decay that I questioned whether the water in it could be wholesome. At the time this seemed of but little moment, for it would not be a great task to bring from the river all the water one would need to drink, and I failed to give heed to the fact that if we were ever to use this cabin as a place of refuge the hour might come when we would suffer from thirst.

After Uncle 'Rasmus had taken care of the provisions we brought, by stowing them in a poor apology for a cupboard near the side of the fireplace, he insisted that we lads go out and look about the town, claiming that the time might come when it would be much to our advantage to know where this regiment or that legion was quartered, and insisting also that we must show ourselves as curious, rather than hugging the hovel so closely.

I was eager to make my way toward that part of the village where the horses of Simcoe's Rangers were stabled, hoping I might get a glimpse of poor little Silver Heels, and, therefore, not averse to following the old negro's advice.

Uncle 'Rasmus announced that it was his intention to remain close within the building, as if it was not possible for him to move around, and this was necessary if we lads counted on making his helplessness an excuse for coming frequently to the town of York.

It was as if Saul had determined on this day to be as disagreeable as possible. As I have already set down, he reproached us with indolence when he first came up in the early morning, and grumbled as we came toward the village because little Frenchie insisted on walking leisurely, lest suspicion might be aroused. While we remained in old Mary's cabin with Uncle 'Rasmus, he cried out loudly at our wasting time when we might accomplish something, although the lad knew full well that much time must be spent, and many plans made, before we could hope even to set about our purpose.

He was the first to leave the cabin when Uncle 'Rasmus insisted that we play the part of curious ones, and pressed on ahead as if he would go his own way, leaving us behind, until Pierre said to me in a whisper:

"It is not well that we separate – at least, not until we have made some agreement as to a rendezvous later."

Then it was that I quickened my pace to overtake Saul, who had just disappeared around the corner of that shop wherein a man named Bemis, who had lately come from Baltimore, displayed stuffs for dresses and gewgaws of all kinds intended to attract the attention of the women and girls.

I was for going directly to where the Rangers were quartered, and therefore felt not a bit hurt that my cousin should start off by himself without giving heed to our wishes, and, finding it was impossible to overtake him at any ordinary pace, I quickened to a run. In consequence I turned the corner of the shop rapidly, coming directly upon, and almost over-running, a lad who had halted Saul, and was engaged with him in angry altercation.

While one might have counted ten I was too nearly dazed with having come into violent contact with the fellow, to fully realize the situation, and then a cry of mingled surprise and dismay burst from my lips, for I found myself clutching and being clutched by none other than Horry Sims.

Even then no great harm might have been done had it not been for Saul's ill temper. Little Frenchie, seeing that we had thus inadvertently come upon the lad whom we knew to be an enemy to us as well as a traitor to his country, would have treated the matter as a pleasing incident, and began by saying with a friendly shrug of his shoulders and a wave of the hands, that he was glad we had found a friend in the town because we were feeling like cats in a strange garret, when Saul interrupted him as he cried angrily:

"There is no reason, Pierre Laurens, why you should put on a false face. You know full well, after all that happened yesterday when this little villain sent the Britishers to take Fitzroy's horse and mine, that we are not pleased at seeing him, and that we count on dealing out to him the punishment he deserves."

I was well nigh paralyzed at thus hearing my cousin make public that which we had agreed should be held a secret. It alarmed me more than I can well say, for I had come to believe it was in the highest degree necessary, if we would succeed in regaining possession of the horses, to prevent this Tory scoundrel from suspecting we knew of all his villainy, and I held up my hand warningly, whereat Saul cried hoarsely, being unable to keep the slightest check over his temper:

"It is not for you, Fitzroy Hamilton, to play a double part! After what I saw on the road yesterday morning, we know all this little scoundrel has done, and have already agreed that he shall pay the penalty for his treachery."

There was no longer opportunity to check my cousin. The cat was out of the bag, so to speak. We had, at the very moment when we were counting on beginning our work, shown Horry Sims that we knew of his treachery, and thereby made of him an open enemy, one who would do all he might

against us, which promised to be no little, for after having given information as to where the best horses in the vicinity could be found, it was reasonable to suppose he stood on friendly terms with the king's officers.

"Who says I told where the soldiers could find your horses?" Horry asked with a pretense of ignorance, and Saul cried fiercely:

"No one says so. All three of us lads saw you on the road when you halted the squad of Rangers, and pointed out the direction of the Hamilton plantation, after which they rode straight away there and took possession of the horses, as you know full well."

"If you are so wise as to what happened yesterday, why was it you treated me in friendly fashion last night?" Horry screamed, growing angry now that his surprise at being thus accused had passed away in a measure, and no doubt feeling safe in his position because he was surrounded by those whom he believed would stand his friends, and who were all powerful in that town of York.

"It was because we counted on using you to serve our own ends," Saul replied, seizing Horry Sims by the coat-collar, as if fancying the young Tory was eager to make his escape. "It was a foolish scheme, hatched by Fitz and Pierre; but I will have none of it! When a lad proves himself an enemy to me, as you have since yesterday morning, I count on standing up manfully, accusing him of his crime instead of crawling around like a red Indian, hiding my own feelings with the hope of getting the advantage of him in some way."

"Well, now that you have stood up, as you call it, what do you count on doing?" Horry asked with a sneer, and Saul, shaking him vigorously, replied threateningly:

"I count on flogging you until it is a question whether you can leave this town without assistance."

"It may not be safe to venture anything of the kind," and Horry looked around in the hope that some of the Britishers might be near at hand. "Of course when there are three to one, I cannot expect to hold my ground; but let me warn you of this, Saul Ogden: Whatever you do to me while the odds are in your favor, shall be paid back an hundred fold before you are outside these lines! Now I know why that little French sneak claimed that there was a short cut through the woods from the York road to the Hamilton plantation. You fellows were hiding somewhere nearabout, and he counted on joining you without my knowledge."

"Well, is it necessary we shall explain to you what we do, or where we are going?" Saul shrieked, anger now having so far gotten the better of him that he was hardly responsible for the words which came from his mouth.

Pierre and I looked at each other in dismay which amounted almost to fear. We had but just succeeded in paving a way for ourselves to enter the town at will, and through Saul's hasty temper all the fat was in the fire!

I could see no other course than to warn Uncle 'Rasmus as soon as might be possible. Then take to our heels, trusting to the poor chance that we might gain the plantation without being laid by the heels, and all through an unthinking lad who had agreed, equally with us, that we must not let Horry Sims know we were aware of his treachery.

"It's a case of getting away from here as soon as may be," I whispered to Pierre, while Saul stood shaking Horry Sims and uttering threats which might have been heard fifty yards away. "My cousin must pay the penalty for thus losing his temper and destroying all our chances of regaining the horses, for in order to save Uncle 'Rasmus, as well as ourselves, we must leave him here to fight his battles with the Tory."

"I am not so certain that we should leave either of them," little Frenchie said thoughtfully, and seemingly forgetting to shrug his shoulders. "It is true the fat is all in the fire so far as our playing friendly with Horry Sims is concerned; but it seems to me possible that we can yet prevent that scoundrel from upsetting all our plans, even though it may be a dangerous venture."

"Of what are you talking?" I cried in amazement. "The mischief has already been done. It is no longer possible for us to hold the lad in check, because he will go straight away to such officers as he knows, giving information that we are here. Once it is learned we claimed that Uncle 'Rasmus had been held in the cabin through his helplessness, and we were come to aid him, all our scheming will be made public, and we called upon to pay the penalty, whatever it may be."

"But Horry Sims has not yet laid information," Pierre whispered hurriedly. "If it be possible for you to call Saul off and make him understand now, on the instant, before any come nearer, that he must hold himself in check, we, meaning you and I, may be able to deal with the Tory by such methods that he can not do us one whit of harm until we are ready to give him the opportunity."

I looked at the little French lad in amazement, too much bewildered to be able to make reply, for it seemed to me he was talking veriest folly, and yet there was on his face an expression of determination in which I could see no token of fear, or even uneasiness of mind.

CHAPTER V

OUR PRISONER

Even as I gazed at little Frenchie in what was very like bewilderment, I noted that the lad was looking here and there furtively, as if to make certain there were no eavesdroppers near, and on the instant the haze of perplexity was cleared from my mind, allowing me to realize that the French lad had some plan on foot whereby the mischief wrought through Saul might be counteracted.

Although the situation seemed to me so desperate, and the possibility of extricating ourselves from the difficulties into which we had been suddenly thrown was so slight that I could see no ray of light, yet had I come to have such great faith in Pierre Laurens's quick wit and cool-headedness, that straightway much of the trouble was taken from my mind, and I laid my hand on his shoulder as if to say I depended upon him to draw us out from this slough into which my cousin's ill temper had plunged us.

Meanwhile Saul was giving no heed to anything save the desire to flog Horry Sims for what he had done to our harm, and Pierre whispered to me sharply and quickly:

"Is there no place near by where we can remain in hiding for a time?"

During an instant I failed to remember anything whatsoever concerning this shop of Master Bemis's, although it was familiar to me, owing to my having visited it a dozen times or more. Then I suddenly recalled to mind that just around the corner, in the rear, was an old shed sometimes used for the stabling of horses, which had frequently been half-filled with rubbish of such sort as empty cases, lumber or straw.

This much I explained to Pierre in the fewest words possible, and a look of relief came over little Frenchie's face as he went directly up to Saul, laying one hand on my cousin's shoulder, and with the other clutching the Tory sneak by the coat-collar.

Mayhap not more than thirty seconds had passed from the time my cousin announced his intention of paying off the score we held against Horry Sims, until Pierre said in a low, sharp tone to Saul, and conveying much of reproof:

"You have forgotten that by giving way to anger you not only endanger yourself, but Fitz and me, to say nothing of Uncle 'Rasmus. Now pull yourself up with a sharp turn; check that ill temper of yours if you would keep yourself at liberty – mayhap if you would hold the breath of life in your body."

As he spoke it seemed to me that Horry Sims had a dim understanding of what was about to come upon him, for he lunged quickly here and there like some trapped animal, and I fancied he was about to raise his voice in a cry for help, when I sprang forward and clapped my hand over his mouth.

"What are you about now?" Saul asked angrily. "What right have you to interfere when I count on dealing with this Tory villain even as he deserves?"

"I have every right," and now Pierre spoke in a sharper tone than I had ever before heard him use. "Even though there be no other reason, I shall protect myself, and it would seem, if you keep on at this pace, Saul Ogden, that Fitz and I must consider you equal enemy with this Tory. We are undone from this moment, and can count surely on being thrust into the guard-house as malcontents and rebels, unless you find strength of will enough in that hulking body of yours to behave in a decent fashion."

Nothing in the way of argument could have moved Saul so quickly as did reproof from the little French lad, who until this moment he had most like considered a child as compared with himself. Now, however, that the boy was talking in manly fashion, and with sound doctrine, my cousin gave way before him on the instant, becoming as meek and docile as any lamb.

"What would you have me do? I had no right to give rein to my temper, and yet I swear to both of you that I could not have held it in check."

"This is no time for making excuses," Pierre said, still speaking in a commanding tone. "The wonder of it is that we have had so many minutes allowed us, and now it stands us in hand to get this fellow out of sight."

"Out of sight? Where?" and Saul was in as thick a cloud of bewilderment as I had been, whereupon, pushing Horry Sims forward, with my hand still pressed over his mouth, I said hurriedly:

"Pierre would have us hide him in the shed. I know not how that may advantage us; but let me tell you, Saul Ogden, that little Frenchie has got more sound sense in one side of that head of his than you and I in both ours put together. Now do as he has said, and we will listen to him afterwards."

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