

Brady Cyrus Townsend, Gillette William

Secret Service



Cyrus Brady
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«Public Domain»

Brady C.

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Secret Service Being the Happenings of a Night in Richmond in the Spring of 1865 Done into Book Form from the Play by William Gillette

I DEDICATE MY SHARE OF THIS JOINT PRODUCTION

TO

The many people of the stage, personally known and unknown by me, who have so often interested, amused, instructed, and inspired me by their presentations of life in all its infinite variety. They are a much misunderstood people by the public generally, and I take this occasion to testify that, in my wide acquaintance with stage people, I have found them as gentle, as generous, as refined, and as considerate as any group of people with whom I have associated in my long and varied career.

PREFACE

Once upon a time a novel of mine was turned into a play. The dramatist who prepared the story for stage production sent me a copy of his efforts toward that end. About the only point of resemblance between his production and mine was the fact that they both bore the same title, the hero in each had the same name, and the action in both cases took place on this earth.

I was a young author then, and timid. I ventured humbly to enquire why the drama differed so entirely from the novel; and this ingenious, I might almost say ingenuous, explanation was vouchsafed me:

“Well, to tell you the truth, after I had read a chapter or two of your book, I lost it, and I just wrote the play from my own imagination.”

I do not wish to criticise the results of his efforts, for he has since proved himself to be a dramatist of skill and ability, but to describe that particular effort as a dramatisation of my book was absurd. Incidentally, it was absurd in other ways and, fortunately for the reputation of both of us, it never saw the light.

When my dear friends, the publishers, asked me to turn this play into a novel, I recalled my experience of by-gone days, and the idea flashed into my mind that here was an opportunity to get even, but I am a preacher as well as a story-writer, and in either capacity I found I could not do it. Frankly, I did not want to do it.

My experience, however, has made me perhaps unduly sensitive, and I determined, since I had undertaken this work, to make it represent Mr. Gillette's remarkable and brilliant play as faithfully as I could, and I have done so. I have used my own words only in those slight changes necessitated by book presentation instead of production on the stage. I have entered into as few explanations as possible and have limited my own discussion of the characters, their motives, and their actions, to what was absolutely necessary to enable the reader to comprehend. On the stage much is left to the eye which has to be conveyed by words in a book, and this is my excuse for even those few digressions that appear.

I have endeavoured to subordinate my own imagination to that of the accomplished playwright. I have played something of the part of the old Greek Chorus which explained the drama, and there has been a touch of the scene-painter's art in my small contribution to the book.

Otherwise, I have not felt at liberty to make any departure from the setting, properties, episodes, actions, or dialogue. Mine has been a very small share in this joint production. The story and the glory are Mr. Gillette's, not mine. And I am cheerfully determined that as the author of the first, he shall have all of the second.

*Cyrus Townsend Brady.
St. George's Rectory,
Kansas City, Mo., November, 1911.*

BOOK I

WHAT HAPPENED AT EIGHT O'CLOCK

CHAPTER I

THE BATTERY PASSES

Outside, the softness of an April night; the verdure of tree and lawn, the climbing roses, already far advanced in that southern latitude, sweetly silvered in the moonlight. Within the great old house apparently an equal calm.

Yet, neither within nor without was the night absolutely soundless. Far away to the southward the cloudless horizon, easily visible from the slight eminence on which the house stood, was marked by quivering flashes of lurid light. From time to time, the attentive ear might catch the roll, the roar, the reverberation of heavy sound like distant thunder-peals intermingled with sharper detonations. The flashes came from great guns, and the rolling peals were the sound of the cannon, the detonations explosions of the shells. There was the peace of God in the heaven above; there were the passions of men on the earth beneath.

Lights gleamed here and there, shining through the twining rose foliage, from the windows of the old house, which stood far back from the street. From a room on one side of the hall, which opened from the broad pillared portico of Colonial fashion, a hum of voices arose.

A group of women, with nervous hands and anxious faces, working while they talked, were picking lint, tearing linen and cotton for bandages. Their conversation was not the idle chatter of other days. They "told sad stories of the death of kings!" How "Tom" and "Charles" and "Allen" and "Page" and "Burton" had gone down into the Valley of the Shadow of Death, whence they had not come back. How this fort had been hammered yesterday, the other, the day before. How So-and-So's wounds had been ministered to. How Such-a-One's needs had been relieved. How the enemy were drawing closer and closer and closer, and how they were being held back with courage, which, alas! by that time was the courage of despair. And much of their speech was of their own kind, of bereft women and fatherless children. And ever as they talked, the busy fingers flew.

Upstairs from one of the front rooms the light shone dimly through a window partly covered by a half-drawn Venetian blind. One standing at the side of the house and listening would have heard out of the chamber low moanings, muttered words from feverish lips and delirious brain. The meaningless yet awful babble was broken now and again by words of tenderness and anguish. Soft hands were laid on the burning brow of the poor sufferer within, while a mother's eyes dropped tears upon bloodstained bandages and wasted frame.

And now the gentle wind which swept softly through the trees bore a sudden sharper, stranger sound toward the old house in the garden. The tramp of horse, the creak of wheels, the faint jingling of arms and sabres drew nearer and rose louder. Sudden words of command punctured the night. Here came a battery, without the rattle of drum or the blare of bugles, with no sound but its own galloping it rolled down the street. Lean, gaunt horses were ridden and driven by leaner and gaunter men in dusty, worn, ragged, tattered uniforms. Only the highly polished brass guns – twelve-pounder Napoleons – gleamed bright in the moonlight.

The sewing women came out on the porch and the blind of the window above was lifted and a white-haired woman stood framed in the light.

No, those watchers did not cheer as the battery swept by on its way to the front. For one thing, a soldier lay upstairs dying; for another, they had passed the time when they cheered that tattered flag. Now they wept over it as one weeps as he beholds for the last time the face of a friend who dies.

Once they had acclaimed it as the sunrise in the morning, now they watched it silently go inevitably to the sunset of defeat.

The men did not cheer either. They were not past cheering – oh, no! They were made of rougher stuff than the women, and the time would come when, in final action, they would burst forth into that strange, wild yell that struck terror to the hearts of the hearers. They could cheer even in the last ditch, even in the jaws of death – face the end better for their cheering perhaps; but women are more silent in the crisis. They bear and give no tongue.

The officer in command saw the little group of women on the porch. The moonlight shone from the street side and high-lighted them, turning the rusty black of most of the gowns, home-dyed mourning, – all that could be come at in those last awful days in Richmond, – into soft shadows, above which their faces shone angelic. He saw the woman's head in the window, too. He knew who lay upon the bed of death within the chamber. He had helped to bring him back from the front several days before. He bit his lips for a moment and then, ashamed of his emotion, his voice rang harsh. With arm and sabre the battery saluted the women and passed on, while from the window of the great drawing-room, opposite the room of the lint-pickers and bandage-tearers, a slender boy stared and stared after the disappearing guns, his eyes full of envy and vexatious tears as he stamped his foot in futile protest and disappointment.

The noise made by the passing cannon soon died away in the distance. Stillness supervened as before; workers whispered together, realising that some of those passing upon whom they had looked would pass no more, and that they would look upon them never again. Upstairs the moans of the wounded man had died away, the only thing that persisted was the fearful thundering of the distant guns around beleaguered Petersburg. Within the drawing-room, the boy walked up and down restlessly, muttering to himself, evidently nerving himself to desperate resolution.

"I won't do it," he said. "I won't stay here any longer."

He threw up his hands and turned to the portraits that adorned the room, portraits that carried one back through centuries to the days of the first cavalier of the family, who crossed the seas to seek his fortune in a new land, and it was a singular thing that practically every one of them wore a sword.

"You all fought," said the boy passionately, "and I am going to."

The door at the other end was softly opened. The great room was but dimly lighted by candles in sconces on the wall; the great chandelier was not lighted for lack of tapers, but a more brilliant radiance was presently cast over the apartment by the advent of old Martha. She had been the boy's "Mammy" and the boy's father's "Mammy" as well, and no one dared to speculate how much farther into the past she ran back.

"Is dat you, Mars Wilfred?" said the old woman, waddling into the room, both hands extended, bearing two many-branched candle-sticks, which she proceeded to deposit upon the handsome mahogany tables with which the long drawing-room was furnished.

"Yes, it is I, Aunt Martha. Did you see Benton's Battery go by?"

"Lawd lub you, chile, Ah done seed so many guns an' hosses an' soljahs a-gwine by Ah don't tek no notice ob 'em no mo'. 'Peahs lak dey keep on a-passin' by fo'ebah."

"Well, there won't be many more of them pass by," said the boy in a clear accent, but with that soft intonation which would have betrayed his Southern ancestry anywhere, "and before they are all gone, I would like to join one of them myself."

"Why, my po' li'l lamb!" exclaimed Martha, her arms akimbo, "dat Ah done nussed in dese ahms, is you gwine to de fight!"

The boy's demeanour was anything but lamb-like. He made a fierce step toward her.

"Don't you call me 'lamb' any more," he said, "it's ridiculous and –"

Mammy Martha started back in alarm.

"'Peahs mo' lak a lion'd be better," she admitted.

"Where's mother?" asked the boy, dismissing the subject as unworthy of argument.

“I reckon she’s upstairs wid Mars Howard, suh. Yo’ bruddah – ”

“I want to see her right away,” continued the boy impetuously.

“Mars Howard he’s putty bad dis ebenin’,” returned Martha. “Ah bettah go an’ tell her dat you want her, but Ah dunno’s she’d want to leab him.”

“Well, you tell her to come as soon as she can. I’m awfully sorry for Howard, but it’s living men that the Confederacy needs most now.”

“Yas, suh,” returned the old nurse, with a quizzical look out of her black eyes at the slender boy before her. “Dey suah does need men,” she continued, and as the youngster took a passionate step toward her, she deftly passed out of the room and closed the door behind her, and he could hear her ponderous footsteps slowly and heavily mounting the steps.

The boy went to the window again and stared into the night. In his preoccupation he did not catch the sound of a gentler footfall upon the stairs, nor did he notice the opening of the door and the silent approach of a woman, the woman with white hair who had stood at the window. The mother of a son dead, a son dying, and a son living. No distinctive thing that in the Confederacy. Almost any mother who had more than one boy could have been justly so characterised. She stopped half-way down the room and looked lovingly and longingly at the slight, graceful figure of her youngest son. Her eyes filled with tears – for the dying or the living or both? Who can say? She went toward him, laid her hand on his shoulder. He turned instantly and at the sight of her tears burst out quickly:

“Howard isn’t worse, is he?” for a moment forgetful of all else.

The woman shook her head.

“I am afraid he is. The sound of that passing battery seemed to excite him so. He thought he was at the front again and wanted to get up.”

“Poor old Howard!”

“He’s quieter now, perhaps – ”

“Mother, is there anything I can do for him?”

“No, my son,” answered the woman with a sigh, “I don’t think there is anything that anybody can do. We can only wait – and hope. He is in God’s hands, not ours.”

She lifted her face for a moment and saw beyond the room, through the night, and beyond the stars a Presence Divine, to Whom thousands of other women in that dying Confederacy made daily, hourly, and momentary prayers. Less exalted, more human, less touched, the boy bowed his head, not without his own prayer, too.

“But you wanted to see me, Wilfred, Martha said,” the woman presently began.

“Yes, mother, I – ”

The boy stopped and the woman was in no hurry to press him. She divined what was coming and would fain have avoided it all.

“I am thankful there is a lull in the cannonading,” she said, listening. “I wonder why it has stopped?”

“It has not stopped,” said Wilfred, “at least it has gone on all evening.”

“I don’t hear it now.”

“No, but you will – there!”

“Yes, but compared to what it was yesterday – you know how it shook the house – and Howard suffered so through it.”

“So did I,” said the boy in a low voice fraught with passion.

“You, my son?”

“Yes, mother, when I hear those guns and know that the fighting is going on, it fairly maddens me – ”

But Mrs. Varney hastily interrupted her boy. Woman-like she would thrust from her the decision which she knew would be imposed upon her.

“Yes, yes,” she said; “I know how you suffered, – we all suffered, we – ” She turned away, sat down in a chair beside the table, leaned her head in her hands, and gave way to her emotions. “There has been nothing but suffering, suffering since this awful war began,” she murmured.

“Mother,” said Wilfred abruptly, “I want to speak to you. You don’t like it, of course, but you have just got to listen this time.”

Mrs. Varney lifted her head from her hands. Wilfred came nearer to her and dropped on his knees by her side. One hand she laid upon his shoulder, the other on his head. She stared down into his up-turned face.

“I know – I know, my boy – what you want.”

“I can’t stay here any longer,” said the youth; “it is worse than being shot to pieces. I just have to chain myself to the floor whenever I hear a cannon-shot or see a soldier. When can I go?”

The woman stared at him. In him she saw faintly the face of the boy dying upstairs. In him she saw the white face of the boy who lay under the sun and dew, dead at Seven Pines. In him she saw all her kith and kin, who, true to the traditions of that house, had given up their lives for a cause now practically lost. She could not give up the last one. She drew him gently to her, but, boy-like, he disengaged himself and drew away with a shake of his head, not that he loved his mother the less, but honour – as he saw it – the more.

“Why don’t you speak?” he whispered at last.

“I don’t know what to say to you, Wilfred,” faltered his mother, although there was but one thing to say, and she knew that she must say it, yet she was fighting, woman-like, for time.

“I will tell you what to say,” said the boy.

“What?”

“Say that you won’t mind if I go down to Petersburg and enlist.”

“But that would not be true, Wilfred,” said his mother, smiling faintly.

“True or not, mother, I can’t stay here.”

“Oh, Wilfred, Russell has gone, and Howard is going, and now you want to go and get killed.”

“I don’t want to be killed at all, mother.”

“But you are so young, my boy.”

“Not younger than Tom Kittridge,” answered the boy; “not younger than Ell Stuart or Cousin Steven or hundreds of other boys down there. See, mother – they have called for all over eighteen weeks ago; the seventeen call may be out any moment; the next one after that takes me. Do you want me to stay here until I am ordered out! I should think not. Where’s your pride?”

“My pride? Ah, my son, it is on the battlefield, over at Seven Pines, and upstairs with Howard.”

“Well, I don’t care, mother,” he persisted obstinately. “I love you and all that, you know it, – but I can’t stand this. I’ve got to go. I must go.”

Mrs. Varney recognised from the ring of determination in the boy’s voice that his mind was made up. She could no longer hold him. With or without her consent he would go, and why should she withhold it? Other boys as young as hers had gone and had not come back. Aye, there was the rub: she had given one, the other trembled on the verge, and now the last one! Yes, he must go, too, – to live or die as God pleased. If they wanted her to sacrifice everything on the altar of her country, she had her own pride, she would do it, as hundreds of other women had done. She rose from her chair and went toward her boy. He was a slender lad of sixteen but was quite as tall as she. As he stood there he looked strangely like his father, thought the woman.

“Well,” she said at last, “I will write to your father and – ”

“But,” the boy interrupted in great disappointment, “that’ll take forever. You never can tell where his brigade is from day to day. I can’t wait for you to do that.”

“Wilfred,” said his mother, “I can’t let you go without his consent. You must be patient. I will write the letter at once, and we will send it by a special messenger. You ought to hear by to-morrow.”

The boy turned away impatiently and strode toward the door.

“Wilfred,” said his mother gently. The tender appeal in her voice checked him. She came over to him and put her arm about his shoulders. “Don’t feel bad, my boy, that you have to stay another day with your mother. It may be many days, you know, before – ”

“It isn’t that,” said Wilfred.

“My darling boy – I know it. You want to fight for your country – and I’m proud of you. I want my sons to do their duty. But with your father at the front, one boy dead, and the other wounded, dying – ”

She turned away.

“You will write father to-night, won’t you?”

“Yes – yes!”

“I’ll wait, then, until we have had time to get a reply,” said the boy.

“Yes, and then you will go away. I know what your father’s answer will be. The last of my boys – Oh, God, my boys!”

CHAPTER II

A COMMISSION FROM THE PRESIDENT

The door giving entrance to the hall was opened unceremoniously by the rotund and privileged Martha. She came at an opportune time, relieving the tension between the mother and son. Wilfred was not insensible to his mother's feelings, but he was determined to go to the front. He was glad of the interruption and rather shamefacedly took advantage of it by leaving the room.

"Well, Martha, what is it?" asked Mrs. Varney, striving to regain her composure.

"Deys one ob de men fum de hossible heah, ma'am."

"Another one?"

"Ah 'clah to goodness, ma'am, dey jes' keeps a-comin' an' a-comin'. 'Peahs like we cain't keep no close fo' ourse'f; de sheets an' tablecloths an' napkins an' eben de young misstess' petticoats, dey all hab to go."

"And we have just sent all the bandages we have," said Mrs. Varney, smiling.

"Den we got to git some mo'. Dey says dey's all used up, an' two mo' trains jes' come in crowded full o' wounded sojahs – an' mos' all ob 'em dreffeul bad!"

"Is Miss Kittridge here yet, Martha?"

"Yas'm, Ah jes' seed her goin' thu de hall into de libr'y."

"Ask her if they have anything to send. Even if it's only a little let them have it. What they need most is bandages. There are some in Howard's room, too. Give them half of what you find there. I think what we have left will last long enough to – to –"

"Yas'm," said old Martha, sniffing. "Ah'm a-gwine. Does you want to see de man?"

"Yes, send him in," said Mrs. Varney.

There was a light tap on the door after Martha went out.

"Come in," said the mistress of the house, and there entered to her a battered and dilapidated specimen of young humanity, his arm in a sling. "My poor man!" exclaimed Mrs. Varney. "Sit down."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Martha," she called to the old woman, who paused at the door on her way to the stairs, "can't you get something to eat and drink for this gentleman?"

"Well, the pantry ain't obahflowin', as you know, Mrs. Varney. But Ah reckon Ah might fin' a glass o' milk ef Ah jes' had to."

"All our wine has gone long ago," said Mrs. Varney to the soldier, "but if a glass of milk –"

"I haven't seen a glass of milk for three years, ma'am," answered the man, smiling; "it would taste like nectar."

"Martha will set it for you in the dining-room while you are waiting. What hospital did you come from, by the way?"

"The Winder, ma'am."

"And is it full?"

"They are laying them on blankets on the floor. You can hardly step for wounded men."

"I suppose you need everything?"

"Everything, but especially bandages."

"Have you been over to St. Paul's Church? The ladies are working there to-night."

"Yes, ma'am, I've been over there, but they're not working for the hospital; they're making sand-bags for fortifications."

"And where are you from?"

"I'm a Louisiana Tiger, ma'am," answered the man proudly.

"You don't look much like it now," said the woman, smiling.

“No, I guess the lamb is more like me now, but just wait until I get well enough to go to the front again,” admitted the soldier cheerfully.

At this moment one of the ladies who had been working in the other room came in carrying a small packet of bandages done up in a coarse brown paper.

“Oh, Miss Kittridge,” said Mrs. Varney, “here is the gentleman who – ”

Miss Kittridge was a very business-like person.

“This is every scrap we have,” she said, handing the soldier the parcel with a little bow. “If you will come back in an hour or two, perhaps we shall have more for you.”

“Thank you, ladies, and God bless you. I don’t know what our poor fellows in the hospitals would do if it weren’t for you.”

“Don’t forget your milk in the dining-room,” said Mrs. Varney.

“I’m not likely to, ma’am,” returned the soldier, as, in spite of his wounded arm, he bowed gracefully to the women.

In the hall Martha’s voice could be heard exclaiming:

“Come right dis way, you po’ chile, an’ see what Ah’s got fo’ you in de dinin’-room.”

“You must be tired to death,” said Mrs. Varney to Miss Kittridge, looking at the white face of the other woman. Her brother had been killed a few days before, but the clods had scarcely rattled down upon his coffin before she was energetically at work again – for other women’s brothers.

“No, no,” she said bravely; “and our tiredness is nothing compared to the weariness of our men. We are going to stay late to-night, Mrs. Varney, if you will let us. There’s so many more wounded come in it won’t do to stop now. We have found some old linen that will make splendid bandages, and – ”

“My dear girl,” said the matron, “stay as long as you possibly can. I will see if Martha can’t serve you something to eat after a while. I don’t believe there is any tea left in the house.”

“Bread and butter will be a feast,” said Miss Kittridge.

“And I don’t believe there is much butter either,” smiled the older woman.

“Well, it doesn’t matter,” said the other. “Is – is your son – is there any change?”

“Not for the better,” was the reply. “I am afraid his fever is increasing.”

“And has the surgeon seen him this evening?”

“Not to-night.”

“Why not!” exclaimed Miss Kittridge in great surprise. “Surely his condition is sufficiently critical to demand more than one brief visit in the morning.”

“I can’t ask him to come twice with so many waiting for him,” said Mrs. Varney.

“But they would not refuse you, Mrs. Varney,” said Miss Kittridge quickly. “There’s that man going back to the hospital, he’s in the dining-room yet. I’ll call him and send word that – ”

She started impulsively toward the door, but Mrs. Varney caught her by the arm.

“No,” she said firmly; “I can’t let you.”

“Not for your own son?”

“I am thinking of the sons of other mothers. The surgeon has done all that he can for him. And think how many other sons would have to be neglected if he visited mine twice. He will come again to-morrow.”

The second woman stood looking at her in mingled sympathy and amazement, and there was a touch of pride in her glance, too. She was proud of her sex, and she had a right to be there in Richmond that spring, if ever.

“I understand,” said Miss Kittridge at last. “I suppose you are right.”

They stared at each other, white-faced, a moment, when there entered to them youth and beauty incarnate. There was enough resemblance between the pale, white-haired mother and the girlish figure in the doorway to proclaim their relationship. The girl’s cheek had lost some of its bloom and some of its roundness. There was too much that was appalling and fearful in and about Richmond

then not to leave its mark even upon the most youthful and the most buoyant, yet things did not come home to the young as they did to those older. She was still a lovely picture, especially in the soft radiance of the candles. She carried her hat in her hand. The flowers upon it were assuredly those of yester-year, it would not have passed muster as the mode anywhere except in besieged Richmond; and her dress, although it fitted her perfectly, was worn and faded and had been turned and patched and altered until it was quite beyond further change, yet she wore it as airily as if it had been tissue of silver or cloth of gold.

The mother's face brightened.

"Edith dear," she exclaimed, "how late you are! It is after eight o'clock. You must be tired out."

"I am not tired at all," answered the girl cheerily. "I have not been at the hospital all afternoon; this is my day off. How is Howard?"

"I wish I could say just the same, but he seems a little worse."

The girl's face went suddenly grave. She stepped over to her mother, took her hand and patted it softly.

"Is there nothing you can do?"

"My dear," said her mother, "Howard – we – are all in God's hands."

She drew a long breath and lifted her head bravely.

"Miss Kittridge," said the girl, "I have something very important to tell mother, and – "

Miss Kittridge smiled back at her.

"I am going right away, honey. There is lots of work for us to do and – "

"You don't mind, I hope," said Edith Varney, calling after her as she went into the hall.

"No, indeed," was the reply.

Mrs. Varney sat down wearily by the table, and Edith pulled up a low stool and sat at her feet.

"Well, my dear?"

"Mamma – what do you think? What do you think?"

"I think a great many things," said Mrs. Varney, "but – "

"Yes, but you wouldn't ever think of this."

"Certainly I shall not, unless you tell me."

"Well, I have been to see the President."

"The President – Mr. Davis!"

"Yes."

"And what did you go to see the President for?"

"I asked him for an appointment for Captain Thorne."

"For Captain Thorne! My dear – "

"Yes, mother, for the War Department Telegraph Service. And he gave it to me, a special commission. He gave it to me for father's sake and for Captain Thorne's sake, – he has met him and likes him, – and for my own."

"What sort of an appointment?"

"Appointing him to duty here in Richmond, a very important position. He won't be sent to the front, and he will be doing his duty just the same."

"But, Edith, you don't – you can't – "

"Yes, it will, mother. The President, – I just love him, – told me they needed a man who understood telegraphing and who was of high enough rank to take charge of the service. As you know, most of the telegraph operators are privates, and Captain Thorne is an expert. Since he's been here in Richmond he's helped them in the telegraph office often. Lieutenant Foray told me so."

Mrs. Varney rose and moved away. Edith followed her.

"Now, mamma!" she exclaimed; "I feel you are going to scold me, and you must not, because it's all fixed and the commission will be sent over here in a few minutes – just as soon as it can be made out – and when it comes I am going to give it to him myself."

Mrs. Varney moved over toward the table and lifted a piece of paper, evidently a note.

"He is coming this evening," she said.

"How do you know?" asked her daughter.

"Well, for one thing," said her mother, "I can remember very few evenings when he hasn't been here since he was able to walk out of the hospital."

"Mamma!"

"And for another thing, this note came about half an hour ago."

"Is it for me?"

"For me, my dear, else I shouldn't have opened it. You can read it, if you like."

"Has it been here all this time?" exclaimed Edith jealously.

"All this time. You will see what he says. This will be his last call; he has his orders to leave."

"Why, it's too ridiculous!" said the girl; "just as if the commission from the President wouldn't supersede everything else. It puts him at the head of the Telegraph Service. He will be in command of the Department. He says it is a good-bye call, does he?" She looked at the note again and laughed, "All the better, it will be that much more of a surprise. Now, mamma, don't you breathe a word about it, I want to tell him myself."

"But, Edith dear – I am sorry to criticise you – but I don't at all approve of your going to the President about this. It doesn't seem quite the proper thing for a young lady to interest herself so far –"

"But listen, mamma," and as she spoke the light went out of Miss Edith's face at her mother's grave and somewhat reproving aspect. "I couldn't go to the War Department people. Mr. Arrelsford is there in one of the offices, and ever since I – I refused him, you know how he has treated me! If I had applied for anything there, it would have been refused at once, and he would have got them to order Captain Thorne away right off. I know he would – why, that is where his orders came from!"

"But, my dear –"

"That is where they came from. Isn't it lucky I got that commission to-day. There's the bell; I wonder who it can be?" She stopped and listened while the door opened and Jonas, the butler, entered. "Is it Captain Thorne?" asked Edith eagerly.

"No, ma'am."

"Oh!"

"It's another offisuh, ma'am. He says he's fum de President an' he's got to see Miss Edith pussonally."

Jonas extended a card which, as he spoke, Edith took and glanced at indifferently.

"Lieutenant Maxwell," she read.

"Ask the gentleman in, Jonas," said Mrs. Varney.

"It's come," whispered Edith to her mother.

"Do you know who he is?"

"No – but he's from the President – it must be that commission."

At this moment old Jonas ushered into the drawing-room a very dashing young officer, handsome in face, gallant in bearing, and dressed in a showy and perfectly fitting uniform, which was quite a contrast to the worn habiliments of the men at the front. Mrs. Varney stepped forward a little, and Lieutenant Maxwell bowed low before her.

"Good-evening, ma'am. Have I the honour of addressing Miss Varney?"

"I am Mrs. Varney, sir."

"Madam," said the Lieutenant, "I am very much afraid this looks like an intrusion on my part, but I come from the President, and he desires me to see Miss Varney personally."

"Any one from the President could not be otherwise than welcome, sir. This is my daughter. Edith, let me present Lieutenant Maxwell."

The young Lieutenant, greatly impressed, bowed profoundly before her, and taking a large brown envelope from his belt, handed it to her.

“Miss Varney,” he said, “the President directed me to deliver this into your hands, with his compliments. He is glad to be able to do this, he says, not only at your request, but because of your father and for the merits of the gentleman in question.”

“Oh, thank you,” cried the girl, taking the envelope.

“Won’t you be seated, Lieutenant Maxwell?” said Mrs. Varney.

“Yes, do,” urged the girl, holding the envelope pressed very tightly to her side.

“Nothing would please me so much, ladies,” answered the Lieutenant, “but I must go back to the President’s house right away. I’m on duty this evening. Would you mind writing me off a line or two, Miss Varney, just to say you have received the communication?”

“Why, certainly, you want a receipt. I’ll go upstairs to my desk; it won’t take a moment. And could I put in how much I thank him for his kindness?”

“I am sure he would be more than, pleased,” smiled Lieutenant Maxwell, as Edith left the room and hastened up the stairs.

“We haven’t heard so much cannonading to-day, Lieutenant,” said Mrs. Varney. “Do you know what it means?”

“I don’t think they are quite positive, ma’am, but they can’t help looking for a violent attack to follow.”

“I don’t see why it should quiet down before an assault.”

“Well, there is always a calm before a storm,” said the Lieutenant. “It might be some signal, or it might be they are moving their batteries to open on some special point of attack. They are trying every way to break through our defences, you know.”

“It’s very discouraging. We can’t seem to drive them back this time.”

“We’re holding them where they are, though,” said Maxwell proudly. “They’ll never get in unless they do it by some scurvy trick; that’s where the danger lies. We are always looking out for it, and – ”

At this moment Edith Varney reëntered the room. She had left her hat upstairs with the official-looking envelope, and had taken time to glance at a mirror and then to thrust a red rose in her dark hair. The impressionable young Lieutenant thought she looked prettier than ever.

“Lieutenant Maxwell,” she said, extending a folded paper, “here is your receipt – ”

The butler’s words to some one in the hall interrupted her further speech.

“Will you jes’ kin’ly step dis way, suh!” she heard Jonas say, and as Edith turned she found herself face to face with Captain Thorne!

CHAPTER III

ORDERS TO CAPTAIN THORNE

On the sleeves of Captain Thorne's coat the insignia of a Captain of Confederate Artillery were displayed; his uniform was worn, soiled, and ill-fitting, giving honourable evidence of hard service; his face was pale and thin and showed signs of recent illness, from which he had scarcely recovered. In every particular he was a marked contrast to Lieutenant Maxwell.

"Miss Varney," he said, bowing low.

"We were expecting you," answered Edith, giving her hand to Thorne. "Here's Captain Thorne, mamma!"

Mrs. Varney shook hands with him graciously while her daughter turned once more to the other man, with the acknowledgment of the order, which she handed to him.

"I wasn't so very long writing it, was I, Lieutenant Maxwell?" she asked.

"I've never seen a quicker piece of work, Miss Varney," returned that young man, putting the note in his belt and smiling as he did so. "When you want a clerkship over at the Government offices, you must surely let me know."

"You would better not commit yourself," said Edith jestingly; "I might take you at your word."

"Nothing would please me more," was the prompt answer. "All you have got to do is just apply, and refer to me, of course."

"Lots of the other girls are doing it," continued Edith half-seriously. "They have to live. Aren't there a good many where you are?"

"Well, we don't have so many as they do over at the Treasury. I believe there are more ladies over there than men. And now I must go."

"A moment," said Mrs. Varney, coming forward with Thorne. "Do you gentlemen know each other?"

Captain Thorne shook his head and stepped forward, looking intently at the other.

"Let me have the pleasure of making you acquainted, then. Captain Thorne – Lieutenant Maxwell."

Thorne slowly inclined his head. Maxwell also bowed.

"I have not had the pleasure of meeting Captain Thorne before, although I have heard of him a great many times," he said courteously.

"Yes?" answered the other, who seemed to be a man of few words.

"In fact, Captain, there is a gentleman in one of our offices who seems mighty anxious to pick a fight with you."

"Really!" exclaimed Captain Thorne, smiling somewhat sarcastically; "pick a fight with me! To what office do you refer, sir?"

"The War Office, sir," said Lieutenant Maxwell, rather annoyed, he could not exactly say why.

"Dear, dear!" continued Thorne urbanely; "I didn't suppose there was anybody in the War Office who wanted to fight!"

"And why not, sir?" asked Lieutenant Maxwell haughtily, while Edith barely stifled a laugh, and her mother even smiled.

"Well, if he wanted to fight, he'd hardly be in an office at a time like this, would he?"

Captain Thorne's sarcasm seemed to perturb the youngster, but his good breeding got the better of his annoyance.

"I'd better not tell him that, Captain," he said with a great effort at lightness; "he would certainly insist upon having you out."

"That would be too bad," said the Captain. "It might interfere with his office hours and –"

“He doesn’t believe it, Miss Varney,” said Maxwell, turning to the younger woman, “but it is certainly true. I dare say you know the gentleman – ”

“Please don’t, Lieutenant,” interrupted Edith quickly. “I would rather not talk about it, if you please.”

“Of course,” said Maxwell, “I didn’t know there was anything – ”

“Yes,” said Edith. “Let’s talk about something else. You know there is always the weather to fall back on – ”

“I should say so,” laughed the Lieutenant, “and mighty bad weather for us, too.”

“Yes, isn’t it?”

They turned away, talking and laughing somewhat constrainedly, while Mrs. Varney picked up the note that was still lying on the table.

“From your note, I suppose you are leaving us immediately, Captain Thorne. Your orders have come?”

“Yes, Mrs. Varney,” said the Captain. “I am afraid this must be the last of my pleasant calls.”

“Isn’t it rather sudden? Are you quite well? It seems to me they ought to give you a little more time to recover.”

“I have no doubt that I am, or feel, much better than I look,” said the Captain, “and we have to be ready for anything, you know. I have been idle too long already.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Mrs. Varney. “Well, it has been a great pleasure to have you call upon us. When you are away, we shall greatly miss your visits.”

“Thank you; I shall never forget what they have been to me.”

“Lieutenant Maxwell is going, mamma,” said Edith.

“So soon! Please excuse me a moment, Captain. I am very sorry you have to hurry away, Lieutenant; we shall hope for the pleasure of seeing you again, if your duties permit.”

“I shall certainly avail myself of your invitation, if you will allow me.” He saluted Captain Thorne. “Good-evening, sir.”

Thorne, of course, returned the courteous salute of his junior.

“Lieutenant Maxwell,” he said pleasantly, as Mrs. Varney followed Lieutenant Maxwell into the hall.

“Now remember, you are to come some time when duty doesn’t call you away so soon,” she said, as he bowed himself out.

“Trust me not to forget that, Mrs. Varney,” said the Lieutenant, as he disappeared on the porch.

Captain Thorne and Edith were left alone. The girl stepped over to a small table on which stood a vase of roses, and, with somewhat nervous hands, she busied herself arranging them. The young officer watched her in silence for a little while, the moments tense with emotion.

“Shall I see Mrs. Varney again?” he began at last.

“Oh, I suppose so, but not now. I heard her go upstairs to Howard.”

“How is he?”

“Desperately ill.”

“I am sorry.”

“Yes,” said the girl.

“I have a very little time to stay and – ”

“Oh – not long?” asked Edith.

“No, I am sorry to say.”

“Well, do you know,” she looked at him archly, “I believe you will have more time than you really think you have. It would be odd if it came out that way, wouldn’t it?” she continued, as she played with the flower in her hand.

“Yes, but it won’t come out that way,” said Thorne, as he stepped closer to her.

“You don’t know,” she faltered, as Thorne drew the flower from her and took her hand in his. They stood there quiet a moment, and she did not draw her hand away. “Well, it makes no difference how soon you are going away; you can sit down in the meantime if you want to.”

“It is hardly worth while,” he said; “my time is so short.”

“You would better,” interrupted the girl; “I have a great many things to say to you.”

“Have you?” he asked, sitting down on the little sofa by her side in compliance with her invitation.

“Yes.”

“But I have only one thing to say to you – Miss Varney and – that is” – Thorne took her other hand in both of his – “good-bye.”

Very different words had trembled on his lips, as he knew and as the girl knew.

“But I don’t really think you will have to say that, Captain Thorne,” said Edith slowly.

“I know I will.”

“Then,” said Edith more softly, “it will be because you want to say it.”

“No,” said Thorne, resolutely and of his own motion releasing her hands, which she had allowed him to hold without remonstrance; “it will be because I must.”

He rose to his feet and took up his hat from the table as if, the thing being settled, he had only to go. But the girl observed with secret joy that he made no other effort at departure.

“Oh, you think you must, do you, Captain Thorne?” said Edith, looking up at him mischievously. “You are a very wise person, but you don’t know all that I know.”

“I think that is more than likely, Miss Varney, but won’t you tell me some of the things that you know that I don’t, so that I can approach your knowledge in that respect?”

“I wouldn’t mind telling you one thing, and that is that it is very wrong for you to think of leaving Richmond now.”

“Oh, but you don’t know.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, what do you know?” asked Thorne curiously.

“Whatever you were going to say. Most likely it was that there’s something or other I don’t know about, but I do know this. You were sent here to recover, and you haven’t nearly had enough time for it yet.”

“I do look as if a high wind would blow me away, don’t I?” he laughed.

“No matter how you look, you ought not to go. You are just making fun of it, as you always do of everything. No matter, you can have all the fun you like, but the whole thing is settled; you are not going away at all, you are going to stay here,” she concluded with most decided but winning emphasis.

“Oh, I’m not going? Well, that is quite a change for me,” said Thorne composedly. He laid his hat back on the table and came closer to Edith. “Perhaps you wouldn’t mind telling me what I am going to do.”

“I don’t mind at all, and it is this. You see, I have been to see – I am almost afraid to tell you.”

“Don’t tell me,” said the man with sudden seriousness, laying aside all his pleasantry, “because it can’t be true. I have my orders, and I am leaving to-night.”

“Where – to Petersburg – to the front?”

“We can’t always tell where orders will take us,” he said evasively, again sitting down beside her on the lounge.

He could scarcely tear himself away from her, from the delicious yet painful emotion aroused by her presence. He ought to have gone long since, yet he was with her, as he supposed, for the last time. Surely he might indulge himself a little. He loved her so desperately, so hopelessly.

“But listen,” said the girl; “supposing there were other orders, orders from a higher authority, appointing you to duty here?”

“It would not make any difference.”

“You don’t mean you would go in spite of them!” cried the girl in sudden alarm.

Thorne looked at her gravely and nodded his head.

“But if it were proved that your first orders were a mistake – ”

She stretched out her hand toward him, which Thorne clasped closely again.

“But it wasn’t a mistake, and I must go,” he said slowly, rising to his feet once more, but still holding her hand.

“Is it something dangerous?” asked the girl apprehensively.

“Oh, well, enough to make it interesting.”

But Edith did not respond to his well simulated humour. She drew her hand away, and Thorne fancied with a leap of his heart that she did it with reluctance. She began softly:

“Don’t be angry with me if I ask you again about your orders. I must know.”

“But why?” asked Thorne curiously.

“No matter, tell me.”

“I can’t do that. I wish I could,” he answered with a slight sigh.

“You needn’t,” said the girl triumphantly; “I do know.”

The Captain started and, in spite of his control, a look of dismay and apprehension flitted across his face as the girl went on:

“They’re sending you on some mission where death is almost certain. They will sacrifice your life, because they know you are fearless and will do anything. There is a chance for you to stay here, and be just as much use, and I am going to ask you to take it. It isn’t your life alone – there are – others to think of and – that’s why I ask you. It may not sound well, perhaps I ought not – you won’t understand, but you – ”

As she spoke she rose to her feet, confronting him, while she impulsively thrust out her hand toward him again. Once more he took that beloved hand in his own, holding it close against him. Burning avowals sprang to his lips, and the colour flamed into her face as she stood motionless and expectant, looking at him. She had gone as far as a modest woman might. Now the initiative was his. She could only wait.

“No,” said the man at last, by the exercise of the most iron self-control and repression, “you shall not have this against me, too.”

Edith drew closer to him, leaving her hand in his as she placed her other on his shoulder. She thought she knew what he would have said. And love gave her courage. The frankness of war was in the air. If this man left her now, she might never see him again. She was a woman, but she could not let him go without an effort.

“Against you! What against you? What do you mean?” she asked softly.

The witchery of the hour was upon him, too, and the sweetness of her presence. He knew he had but to speak to receive his answer, to summon the fortress and receive the surrender. Her eyes dropped before his passionately searching look, her colour came and went, her bosom rose and fell. She thought he must certainly hear the wild beating of her heart. He pressed her hands closely to his breast for a moment, but quickly pulled himself together again.

“I must go,” he said hoarsely; “my business is – elsewhere. I ought never to have seen you or spoken to you, but I had to come to this house and you were here, and how could I help it? Oh – I couldn’t for my whole – it’s only you in this – ” He stopped and thrust her hands away from him blindly and turned away. As there was a God above him he would not do it. “Your mother – I would like to say good-bye to her.”

“No, you are not going,” cried the girl desperately, playing her last card. “Listen, they need you in Richmond: the President told me so himself – your orders are to stay here. You are to be given a special commission on the War Department Telegraph Service, and you – ”

“No, no, I won’t take it – I can’t take it, Miss Varney.”

“Can’t you do that much for – me?” said the girl with winning sweetness, and again she put out her hands to him.

“It is for you that I will do nothing of the kind,” he answered quickly; “if you ever think of me again after – well, when I am gone, remember that I refused.”

“But you can’t refuse; it is the President’s desire, it is his order, you have got to obey. Wait a moment, I left it upstairs. I will fetch it for you and you will see.”

She turned toward the door.

“No,” said Thorne, “don’t get it, I won’t look at it.”

“But you must see what it is. It puts you at the head of everything. You have entire control. When you see it I know you will accept it. Please wait.”

“No, Miss Varney, I can’t – ”

“Oh, yes, you can,” cried Edith, who would hear no denial as she ran swiftly toward the door.

CHAPTER IV

MISS MITFORD'S INTERVENTION

The Captain stared after her departing figure; he listened to her footfalls on the stair, and then came to an instant resolution. He would take advantage of her opportune withdrawal. He turned back to the table, seized his hat, and started for the door, only to come face to face with another charming young woman, who stood breathless before him to his great and ill-concealed annoyance. Yet the newcomer was pretty enough and young enough and sweet enough to give any man pause for the sheer pleasure of looking at her, to say nothing of speaking to her.

The resources of an ancient wardrobe, that looked as though it had belonged to her great-grandmother, had been called upon for a costume which was quaint and old-fashioned and altogether lovely. She was evidently much younger than Edith Varney, perhaps just sixteen, Wilfred's age. With outstretched arms she barred the door completely, and Thorne, of course, came to an abrupt stop.

"Oh, good-evening," she panted, as soon as she found speech; she had run without stopping from her house across the street.

"Good-evening, Miss Mitford," he answered, stepping to one side to let her pass, but through calculation or chance she kept her position at the door.

"How lucky this is!" she continued. "You are the very person I wanted to see. Let's sit down and then I'll tell you all about it. Goodness me, I am all out of breath just running over from our house."

Thorne did not accept her invitation, but stood looking at her. An idea came to him.

"Miss Mitford," he said at last, stepping toward her, "will you do something for me?"

"Of course I will."

"Thank you very much, indeed. Just tell Miss Varney when she comes down – just say good-night for me and tell her that I've gone."

"I wouldn't do such a thing for the wide, wide world," returned Caroline Mitford in pretended astonishment.

"Why not?"

"It would be a wicked, dreadful story, because you wouldn't be gone."

"I am sorry you look at it that way," said Thorne, "because I am going. Good-night, Miss Mitford."

But before he could leave the room, the girl, who was as light on her feet as a fairy, caught him by the arm.

"No – you don't seem to understand. I've got something to say to you."

"Yes, I know," said Thorne; "but some other time."

"No, now."

Of course, he could have freed himself by the use of a little force, but such a thing was not to be thought of. Everything conspired to keep him when his duty called him away, he thought quickly.

"There isn't any other time," said Caroline, "it is to-night. We are going to have a Starvation party."

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Thorne; "another!"

"Yes, we are."

"I can't see how it concerns me."

"It is going to be over at our house, and we expect you in half an hour."

"I shouldn't think you would want to play at this time."

"We are not going to play. We are going to make bandages and sandbags and –"

"You won't need me."

"Yes, you can tell us the best way to –"

"Thank you, Miss Mitford, I can't come. I have my orders and I am leaving to-night."

“Now, that won’t do at all,” said the girl, pouting. “You went to Mamie Jones’ party; I don’t see why you should treat me like this.”

“Mamie Jones!” said Thorne. “Why, that was last Thursday, and now I have got orders, I tell you, and – ”

But Caroline was not to be put off.

“Now, there’s no use talking about it,” she said vehemently.

“Yes, I see that.”

“Didn’t you promise to obey orders when I gave them? Well, these are orders.”

“Another set,” laughed Thorne.

“I don’t know anything about any others. These are mine.”

“Well, but this time – ”

“This time is just the same as all the other times, only worse; besides I told her you would be there.”

“What’s that?”

“I say she expects you, that’s all.”

“Who expects me?”

“Why, Edith, of course; who do you suppose I was talking about all this time?”

“Oh, she expects me to – ”

“Why, of course, she does. You are to take her over. You needn’t stay if you don’t want to. Now I will go and tell her you are waiting.”

“Oh, very well,” said Thorne, smiling; “if she expects me to take her over I will do so, of course, but I can’t stay a moment.”

“Well,” said Caroline, “I thought you would come to your senses some time or another. See here, Mr. Captain, was she ‘most ready?”

“Well, how do I know.”

“What dress did she have on?”

“Dress?”

“Oh, you men! Why, she’s only got two.”

“Yes; well, very likely, this was one of them, Miss Mitford.”

“No matter, I am going upstairs to see, anyway. Captain Thorne, you can wait out there on the veranda or, perhaps, it would be pleasanter if you were to smoke a cigar out in the summerhouse at the side of the garden. It is lovely there in the moonlight, and – ”

“I know, but if I wait right here – ”

“Those are my orders. It’s cooler outside, you know, anyway, and – ”

“Pardon me, Miss Mitford, orders never have to be explained, you know,” interrupted the Captain, smiling at the charming girl.

“That’s right; I take back the explanation,” she said, as Thorne stepped toward the window; “and, Captain,” cried the girl.

“Yes?”

“Be sure and smoke.”

Thorne laughed, as he lighted his cigar and stepped out onto the porch, and thence into the darkness of the garden path.

“Oh,” said Caroline to herself, “he is splendid. If Wilfred were only like that!” she pouted. “But then – our engagement’s broken off anyway, so what’s the difference. If he were like that – I’d – No! – I don’t think I’d – ”

Her soliloquy was broken by the entrance of Mrs. Varney, who came slowly down the room.

“Why, Caroline dear! What are you talking about, all to yourself?”

“Oh – just – I was just saying, you know – that – why, I don’t know what I was – Do you think it is going to rain?” she returned in great confusion.

“Dear me, child; I haven’t thought about it. Why, what have you got on? Is that a new dress, and in Richmond?”

“A new dress? Well, I should think so. These are my great-grandmother’s mother’s wedding clothes. Aren’t they lovely? Just in the nick of time, too. I was on my very last rags, or, rather, they were on me, and I didn’t know what to do. Mother gave me a key and told me to open an old horsehair trunk in the attic, and these were in it.” She seized the corners of her dress and pirouetted a step or two forward to show it off, and then dropped the older woman an elaborate, old-fashioned courtesy. “I ran over to show them to Edith,” she resumed. “Where is she? I want her to come over to my house.”

“Upstairs, I think. I am afraid she can’t come. I have just come from her room,” Mrs. Varney continued as Caroline started to interrupt, “and she means to stay here.”

“I will see about that,” said Caroline, running out of the room.

Mrs. Varney turned and sat down at her desk to write a letter which evidently, from her sighs, was not an easy task. In a short time the girl was back again. Mrs. Varney looked up from writing and smiled at her.

“You see it was no use, Caroline,” she began.

“No use,” laughed the girl; “well, you will see. I didn’t try to persuade her or argue with her. I just told her that Captain Thorne was waiting for her in the summerhouse. Yes,” she continued, as Mrs. Varney looked her astonishment; “he is still here, and he said he would take her over. You just watch which dress she has on when she comes down. Now I will go out there and tell him she’ll be down in a minute. I have more trouble getting people fixed so that they can come to my party than it would take to run a blockade into Savannah every fifteen minutes.”

Mrs. Varney looked at her departing figure pleasantly for a moment, and then, with a deep sigh, resumed her writing, but she evidently was not to conclude her letter without further interruption, for she had scarcely begun again when Wilfred came into the room with a bundle very loosely done up in heavy brown paper. As his mother glanced toward him he made a violent effort to conceal it under his coat.

“What have you got there, Wilfred?” she asked incuriously.

“That? Oh, nothing; it is only – say, mother, have you written that letter yet?”

“No, my dear, I have been too busy. I have been trying to write it, though, since I came down, but I have had one interruption after another. I think I will go into your father’s office and do it there.” She gathered up her paper and turned to leave the room. “It is a hard letter for me to write, you know,” she added as she went away.

Wilfred, evidently much relieved at his mother’s departure, took the package from under his coat, put it on the table, and began to undo it. He took from it a pair of very soiled, dilapidated, grey uniform trousers. He had just lifted them up when he heard Caroline’s step on the porch, and the next moment she came into the room through the long French window. Wilfred stood petrified with astonishment at the sudden and unexpected appearance of his young beloved, but soon recovered himself and began rolling the package together again, hastily and awkwardly, while Caroline watched him from the window. She coldly scrutinised his confusion while he made his ungainly roll, and, as he moved toward the door, she broke the silence.

“Ah, good-evening, Mr. Varney,” she said coolly.

“Good-evening,” he said, his voice as cold as her own.

They both of them had started for the hall door and in another second they would have met.

“Excuse me,” said Caroline, “I’m in a hurry.”

“That’s plain enough. Another party, I suppose, and dancing.”

“What of it? What’s the matter with dancing, I’d like to know.”

“Nothing is the matter with dancing if you want to, but I must say that it is a pretty way of going on, with the cannon roaring not six miles away.”

“Well, what do you want us to do? Cry about it! I have cried my eyes out already; that would do a heap of good now, wouldn’t it?”

“Oh, I haven’t time to talk about such petty details. I have some important matters to attend to,” he returned loftily.

“It was you that started it,” said the girl.

Wilfred turned suddenly, his manner at once losing its badly assumed lightness.

“Oh, you needn’t try to fool me,” he reproached her; “I know well enough how you have been carrying on since our engagement was broken off. Half a dozen officers proposing to you – a dozen for all I know.”

“What difference does it make?” she retorted pertly. “I haven’t got to marry them all, have I?”

“Well, it isn’t very nice to go on like that,” said Wilfred with an air into which he in vain sought to infuse a detached, judicial, and indifferent appearance. “Proposals by the wholesale!”

“Goodness me!” exclaimed Caroline, “what’s the use of talking about it to me. They’re the ones that propose, I don’t. How can I help it?”

“Oh,” said Wilfred loftily, “you can help it all right. You helped it with me.”

“Well,” she answered, with a queer look at him, “that was different.”

“And ever since you threw me over – ” he began.

“I didn’t throw you over, you just went over,” she interrupted.

“I went over because you walked off with Major Sillsby that night we were at Drury’s Bluff,” said the boy, “and you encouraged him to propose. You admit it,” he said, as the girl nodded her head.

“Of course I did. I didn’t want him hanging around forever, did I? That’s the only way to finish them off. What do you want me to do – string a placard around my neck, saying, ‘No proposals received here. Apply at the office’? Would that make you feel any better? Well,” she continued, as the boy shrugged his shoulders, “if it doesn’t make any difference to you what I do, it doesn’t even make as much as that to me.”

“Oh, it doesn’t? I think it does, though. You looked as if you enjoyed it pretty well while the Third Virginia was in the city.”

“I should think I did,” said Caroline ecstatically. “I just love every one of them. They are going to fight for us and die for us, and I love them.”

“Why don’t you accept one of them before he dies, then, and have done with it? I suppose it will be one of those smart young fellows with a cavalry uniform.”

“It will be some kind of a uniform, I can tell you that. It won’t be any one that stays in Richmond.”

“Now I see what it was,” said Wilfred, looking at her gloomily. “I had to stay in Richmond, and – ”

The boy choked up and would not finish.

“Well,” said Caroline, “that made a heap of difference. Why, I was the only girl on Franklin Street that didn’t have a – some one she was engaged to – at the front. Just think what it was to be out of it like that! You have no idea how I suffered; besides, it is our duty to help all we can. There aren’t many things a girl can do, but Colonel Woolbridge – he’s one of Morgan’s new men, you know – said that the boys fight twice as well when they have a – sweetheart at home. I couldn’t waste an engagement on – ”

“And is that why you let them all propose to you?” rejoined the youth bitterly.

“Certainly; it didn’t hurt me, and it pleased them. Most of ’em will never come back to try it again, and it is our duty to help all we can.”

“And you really want to help all you can, do you?” asked Wilfred desperately. “Well, if I were to join the army would you help me – that way?”

This was a direct question. It was the *argumentum ad feminam* with a vengeance. Caroline hesitated. A swift blush overspread her cheek, but she was game to the core.

“Why, of course I would, if there was anything I – could do,” she answered.

“Well, there is something you can do.” He unrolled his package and seized the trousers by the waistband and dangled them before her eyes. “Cut those off,” he said; “they are twice too long. All you have to do is to cut them here and sew up the ends, so that they don’t ravel out.”

Caroline stared at him in great bewilderment. She had expected something quite different.

“Why, they are uniform trousers,” she said finally. “You are going to join the army?” She clapped her hands gleefully. “Give them to me.”

“Hush! don’t talk so loud, for Heaven’s sake,” said Wilfred. “I’ve got a jacket here, too.” He drew out of the parcel a small army jacket, a private soldier’s coat. “It’s nearly a fit. It came from the hospital. Johnny Seldon wore it, but he won’t want it any more, you know, and he was just about my size, only his legs were longer. Well,” he continued, as the girl continued to look at him strangely, “I thought you said you wanted to help me.”

“I certainly do.”

“What are you waiting for, then?” asked Wilfred.

The girl took the trousers and dropped on her knees before him.

“Stand still,” she said, as she measured the trousers from the waistband to the floor.

“This is about the place, isn’t it?”

“Yes, just there.”

“Wait,” she continued, “until I mark it with a pin.”

Wilfred stood quietly until the proper length had been ascertained, and then he assisted Caroline to her feet.

“Do you see any scissors about?” she asked in a businesslike way.

“I don’t believe there are any in the drawing-room, but I can get some from the women sewing over there. Wait a moment.”

“No, don’t,” said the girl; “they would want to know what you wanted with them, and then you would have to tell them.”

“Yes,” said the boy; “and I want to keep this a secret between us.”

“When are you going to wear them?”

“As soon as you get them ready.”

“But your mother – ”

“She knows it. She is going to write to father to-night. She said she would send it by a special messenger, so we ought to get an answer by to-morrow.”

“But if he says no?”

“I am going anyway.”

“Oh, Wilfred, I am so glad. Why, it makes another thing of it,” cried the girl. “When I said that about staying in Richmond, I didn’t know – Oh, I do want to help all I can.”

“You do? Well, then, for Heaven’s sake, be quick about it and cut off those trousers. So long as I get them in the morning,” said Wilfred, “I guess it will be in plenty of time.”

“When did you say your mother was going to write?”

“To-night.”

“Of course, she doesn’t want you to go, and she’ll tell your father not to let you. Yes,” she continued sagely, as Wilfred looked up, horror-stricken at the idea; “that’s the way mothers always do.”

“What can I do, then?” he asked her.

“Why don’t you write to him yourself, and then you can tell him just what you like.”

“That’s a fine idea. I’ll tell him that I can’t stay here, and that I’m going to enlist whether he says so or not. That’ll make him say yes, won’t it?”

“Why, of course; there’ll be nothing else for him to say.”

“Say, you are a pretty good girl,” said Wilfred, catching her hand impulsively. “I’ll go upstairs and write it now. You finish these as soon as you can. You can ask those women for some scissors, and when they are ready leave them in this closet, but don’t let any one see you doing it, whatever happens.”

“No, I won’t,” said Caroline, as Wilfred hurried off.

She went over to the room where the women were sewing, and borrowed a pair of scissors; then she came back and started to cut off the trousers where they were marked. The cloth was old and worn, but it was, nevertheless, stiff and hard, and her scissors were dull. Men spent their time in sharpening other things than women’s tools during those days in Richmond, and her slender fingers made hard work of the amputations. Beside, she was prone to stop and think and dream of her soldier boy while engaged in this congenial work. She had not finished the alteration, therefore, when she heard a step in the hall. She caught up the trousers, striving to conceal them, entirely forgetful of the jacket which lay on the table.

“Oh,” said Mrs. Varney, as she came into the room; “you haven’t gone yet?”

“No,” faltered the girl; “we don’t assemble for a little while, and – ”

“Don’t assemble?”

“I mean for the party. It doesn’t begin for half an hour yet, and – ”

“Oh; then you have plenty of time.”

“Yes,” said Caroline. “But I will have to go now, sure enough.” She turned away and, as she did so, her scissors fell clattering to the floor.

“You dropped your scissors, my dear,” said Mrs. Varney.

“I thought I heard something fall,” she faltered in growing confusion.

She came back for her scissors, and, in her agitation and nervousness, she dropped one of the pieces of trouser leg on the floor.

“What are you making, Caroline?” asked Mrs. Varney, looking curiously at the little huddled-up soiled piece of grey on the carpet, while Caroline made a desperate grab at it.

“Oh, just altering an old – dress, Mrs. Varney. That’s all.”

Mrs. Varney looked at her through her glasses. As she did so, Caroline’s agitated movement caused the other trouser leg, with its half-severed end hanging from it, to dangle over her arm.

“And what is that?” asked Mrs. Varney.

“Oh – that’s – er – one of the sleeves,” answered Caroline desperately, hurrying out in great confusion.

Mrs. Varney laughed softly to herself. As she did so, her glance fell upon the little heap of grey on the table. She picked it up and opened it. It was a grey jacket, a soldier’s jacket. It looked as if it might be about Wilfred’s size. There was a bullet hole in the breast, and there was a dull brown stain around the opening. Mrs. Varney kissed the worn coat. She saw it all now.

“For Wilfred,” she whispered. “He has probably got it from some dead soldier at the hospital, and Caroline’s dress that she was altering – ”

She clasped the jacket tightly to her breast, looked up, and smiled and prayed through her tears.

CHAPTER V

THE UNFAITHFUL SERVANT

But Mrs. Varney was not allowed to indulge in either her bitter retrospect or her dread anticipations very long. Her reverie was interrupted by the subdued trampling of heavy feet upon the floor of the back porch. The long drawing-room extended across the house, and had porches at front and back, to which access was had through long French windows. The sound was so sudden and so unexpected that she dropped the jacket on the couch and turned to the window. The sound of low, hushed voices came to her, and the next moment a tall, fine-looking young man of rather distinguished appearance entered the room. He was not in uniform, but wore the customary full-skirted frock coat of the period, and carried his big black hat in his hand. For the rest, he was a very keen, sharp-eyed man, whose movements were quick and stealthy, and whose quick, comprehensive glance seemed to take in not only Mrs. Varney, but everything in the room. Through the windows and the far door soldiers could be seen dimly. Mrs. Varney was very indignant at the entrance of this newcomer in this uncereemonious manner.

“Mr. Arrelsford!” she exclaimed haughtily.

In two or three quick steps Mr. Benton Arrelsford of the Confederate Secret Service was by her side. Although she was alone, through habit and excessive caution he lowered his voice when he spoke to her.

“Your pardon, Mrs. Varney,” he said, with just a shade too much of the peremptory for perfect breeding, “I was compelled to enter without ceremony. You will understand when I tell you why.”

“And those men – ” said Mrs. Varney, pointing to the back windows and the far door. “What have we done that we should be – ”

“They are on guard.”

“On guard!” exclaimed the woman, greatly surprised and equally resentful.

“Yes, ma’am; and I am very much afraid we shall be compelled to put you to a little inconvenience; temporary, I assure you, but necessary.” He glanced about cautiously and pointed to the door across the hall. “Is there anybody in that room, Mrs. Varney?”

“Yes, a number of ladies sewing for the hospital; they expect to stay all night.”

“Very good,” said Arrelsford. “Will you kindly come a little farther away? I would not have them overhear by any possibility.”

There was no possibility of any one overhearing their conversation, but if Mr. Arrelsford ever erred it was not through lack of caution. Still more astonished, Mrs. Varney followed him. They stopped by the fireplace.

“One of your servants has got himself into trouble, Mrs. Varney, and we’re compelled to have him watched,” he began.

“Watched by a squad of soldiers?”

“It is well not to neglect any precaution, ma’am.”

“And what kind of trouble, pray?” asked the woman.

“Very serious, I am sorry to say. At least that is the way it looks now. You’ve got an old white-haired butler here – ”

“You mean Jonas?”

“I believe that’s his name,” said Arrelsford.

“And you suspect him of something?”

Mr. Arrelsford lowered his voice still further and assumed an air of great importance.

“We don’t merely suspect him; we know what he has done.”

“And what has he done, sir?”

“He has been down to Libby Prison under pretence of selling things to the Yankees we’ve got in there, and he now has on his person a written communication from one of them which he intends to deliver to some Yankee spy or agent, here in Richmond.”

Mrs. Varney gasped in astonishment at this tremendous charge, which was made in Arrelsford’s most impressive manner.

“I don’t believe it,” she said at last. “He has been in the family for years; he wouldn’t dare.”

Arrelsford shook his head.

“I am afraid it is true,” he said.

“Very well,” said Mrs. Varney decidedly, apparently not at all convinced. “I will send for the man. Let us see – ”

She reached out her hand to the bell-rope hanging from the wall, but Mr Arrelsford caught her arm, evidently to her great repugnance.

“No, no!” he said quickly, “not yet. We have got to get that paper, and if he’s alarmed he will destroy it, and we must have it. It will give us the clue to one of their cursed plots. They have been right close on this town for months, trying to break down our defences and get in on us. This is some rascally game they are at to weaken us from the inside. Two weeks ago we got word from our secret agents that we keep over there in the Yankee lines, telling us that two brothers, Lewis and Henry Dumont – ”

“The Dumonts of West Virginia?” interrupted Mrs. Varney, who was now keenly attentive to all that was said.

“The very same.”

“Why, their father is a General in the Yankee Army.”

“Yes; and they are in the Federal Secret Service, and they are the boldest, most desperately determined men in the whole Yankee Army. They’ve already done us more harm than an army corps.”

“Yes?”

“They have volunteered to do some desperate piece of work here in Richmond, we have learned. We have close descriptions of both these men, but we have never been able to get our hands on either of them until last night.”

“Have you captured them?”

“We’ve got one of them, and it won’t take long to get the other,” said Arrelsford, in a fierce, truculent whisper.

“The one you caught, was he here in Richmond?” asked Mrs. Varney, greatly affected by the other’s overwhelming emotion.

“No, he was brought in last night with a lot of men we captured in a little sortie.”

“Taken prisoner?”

“Yes, but without resistance.”

“I don’t understand.”

“He let himself be taken. That’s one of their tricks for getting into our lines when they want to bring a message or give some signal.”

“You mean that they deliberately allow themselves to be taken to Libby Prison?”

“Yes, damn them!” said Arrelsford harshly. “I beg your pardon, ma’am, but – ”

Mrs. Varney waved her hand as if Mr. Arrelsford’s oaths, like his presence, were nothing to her.

“We were on the lookout for this man, and we spotted him pretty quickly. I gave orders not to search him, and not to have his clothes taken away from him, but to put him in with the others and keep the closest watch on him that was ever kept on a man. We knew from his coming in that his brother must be here in the city, and he’d send a message to him the first chance he got.”

“But Jonas, how could he – ”

“Easily enough. He comes down to the prison to sell things to the prisoners with other negroes. We let him pass in, watching him as we watch them all. He fools around a while, until he gets a

chance to brush against this man Dumont. My men are keeping that fellow under close observation, and they saw a piece of paper pass between them. By my orders they gave no sign. We want to catch the man to whom he is to deliver the paper. He has the paper on him now.”

“I will never believe it.”

“It is true, and that is the reason for these men on the back porch that you see. I have put others at every window at the back of the house. He can’t get away; he will have to give it up.”

“And the man he gives it to will be the man you want?” said Mrs. Varney.

“Yes; but I can’t wait long. If that nigger sees my men or hears a sound, he will destroy it before we can jump in on him. I want the man, but I want the paper, too. Excuse me.” He stepped to the back window. “Corporal!” he said softly. The long porch window was open on account of the balmy air of the night, and a soldier, tattered and dusty, instantly appeared and saluted. “How are things now?” asked Arrelsford.

“All quiet now, sir.”

“Very good,” said Arrelsford. “I was afraid he would get away. We’ve got to get the paper. If we have the paper, perhaps we can get the man. It is the key to the game they are trying to play against us, and without it the man is helpless.”

“No, no,” urged Mrs. Varney. “The man he is going to give it to, get him.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” assented Arrelsford; “but that paper might give us a clue. If not, I’ll make the nigger tell. Damn him, I’ll shoot it out of him. How quickly can you get at him from that door, Corporal?”

“In no time at all, sir. It’s through a hallway and across the dining-room. He is in the pantry.”

“Well,” said Arrelsford, “take two men, and – ”

“Wait,” said Mrs. Varney; “I still doubt your story, but I am glad to help. Why don’t you keep your men out of sight and let me send for him here, and then – ”

Arrelsford thought a moment.

“That may be the better plan,” he admitted. “Get him in here and, while you are talking to him, they can seize him from behind. He won’t be able to do a thing. Do you hear, Corporal?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Keep your men out of sight; get them back there in the hall, and while we’re making him talk, send a man down each side and pin him. Hold him stiff. He mustn’t destroy any paper he’s got.”

The Corporal raised his hand in salute and left the room. The men disappeared from the windows, and the back porch looked as empty as before. The whole discussion and the movements of the men had been practically noiseless.

“Now, Mr. Arrelsford, are you ready?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mrs. Varney rang the bell on the instant. The two watched each other intently, and in a moment old Martha appeared at the door.

“Did you-all ring, ma’am?”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Varney; “I want some one to send to the hospital.”

“Luthah is out heah, ma’am.”

“Luther? He’s too small, I don’t want a boy.”

“Well, den, Jonas – ”

“Yes, Jonas will do; tell him to come in here immediately.”

“Yas’m.”

“Perhaps you had better sit down, Mrs. Varney,” said Arrelsford; “and if you will permit me, I will stand back by the front window yonder.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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