THE RED MIST

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Civil War Novel

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I On Special Service

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IT WAS already growing dusk when the Staunton Battery of Horse Artillery returned wearily to camp after hours of hard field drill, the men ever conscious that no evolution, however trivial, was being overlooked by "Stonewall" Jackson, sitting astride his sorrel on a little eminence to the left, his stern face unrelieved by even the semblance of a smile. He would criticise without mercy, but never praise, and the artillerymen insensibly stiffened to the work, as eager to do well as though they were in action.

The time was early spring, some remnants of snow still clinging to the hollows out of reach of the warming sun, and a chill wind blowing through the passes of the western mountains. The comparative idleness of the past winter months, given over to foraging and drill, together with the comforts of a permanent camp, had engendered forgetfulness of the hardships of the last campaign, and left the men eager to confront the dangers of the future. In no heart was there doubt of the final result—the Army of the Valley pinned its faith on "Old Jack." They were soldiers—veterans already—anxious for active service; their depleted ranks filled up once more with recruits, well drilled and efficient through constant training; and while many remembered with regret the old faces—the dead, the wounded, the missing—they nevertheless realized that never before were they in sterner mood or better prepared for grim fighting.

The winter quarters of the Staunton Artillery were slightly off the main road, back within the shelter of a grove of oak trees, and I remained for some time overseeing the care of the horses before approaching the hut where the non-commissioned officers had mess. We were all of us still at the table, discussing the incidents of the drill, when a lieutenant appeared suddenly in the doorway, and glanced inquiringly about the room, scarcely able to distinguish our faces in the dull light of the lantern which alone illumined the interior.

"Sergeant Wyatt?" he inquired briefly.

I arose to my feet.

"Here, sir," I answered in some surprise.

"You are requested to report to General Jackson at once."

"At Winchester, sir?"

"No; his headquarters for tonight are at Coulter's farm, on the dirt pike. You will ride your own horse."

I endeavored to circle the others, and thus reach the door in time to ask further questions, but was too late; the lieutenant, his message delivered, had already disappeared in the darkness. I stared after him in perplexity. What could Jackson possibly want of me? On whose recommendation had I been thus singled out for special service? How, indeed, had the commanding general even learned my name? I stood hesitating in the open door, listening to the hoof beats of the officer's horse, my mind filled with wonderment. But I was a soldier, thoroughly disciplined, and orders must be obeyed. The pause, the doubt, were but momentary. Five minutes later I was guiding my own horse down the same dark road, bending low in the saddle, obsessed with a

feeling that this mission, whatever it might turn out to be, promised a change in my fortunes.

It was an ugly path, rutted deep by artillery wheels, and dangerous for the horse. On either side glowed the blaze of camp fires, and the sound of voices could be heard. One group was lustily singing songs of the South, and I passed a shop, the door wide open, the farrier busy shoeing cavalry horses, their riders lounging idly without.

I was an hour reaching the dirt pike, although the distance was not great, and I knew the way well. There I encountered infantry pickets, who became more vigilant, and inquisitive, as I approached closer to the Coulter house. This was a double log cabin, erected in a grove of trees, some fifty feet or more back from the road, and surrounded by a slab fence. A squadron of cavalry were encamped in the yard, their horses saddled, and tied to the palings, while the lights gleaming through the windows, together with the dying glow of a fire to the right, dimly revealed a group of men clustered on the front porch. It was with some difficulty that I made my way through the obstructing guard to the foot of the steps, where an officer, whose face was indistinguishable, took my name, and repeated it to an orderly stationed at the closed door. The latter disappeared in a sudden blaze of light, and I stood there silently in the shadows waiting.

Ten minutes must have elapsed before the door opened again, and I heard my name called. The group of waiting officers fell aside, and I passed in between them, unable to recognize a face. Once within I glanced curiously about the bare room, noting its occupants, and their rude

surroundings. It was a rough appearing, commonplace interior, the log walls once whitewashed, but now streaked with dirt, the only furniture visible a few home-made chairs, and an ordinary kitchen table. A sturdy fire burned in the fireplace, and three lamps illumined the scene, revealing the presence of five men, among whom I instantly recognized Ewell, Ashby, together with Jackson, and his chief of staff. The fifth occupant of the room sat alone in one corner, his face partially concealed, revealing little other than a fringe of gray whiskers. Jackson and his aide were seated behind the table, which was littered with papers and maps, and as the former glanced up, at the announcement of the orderly, I came instantly to attention, my hand lifted in salute. The general's stern blue eyes surveyed me intently.

"Sergeant Wyatt, Staunton Artillery?"

"Yes, sir."

"How long, may I ask, have you been in the service?"

"Since May, '61, sir."

"Ah! indeed. And your age?"

"Twenty-four, sir."

He made some remark aside to the aide, who nodded back, and pointed to a map before them.

"You are a younger man in appearance than I had expected to see, Sergeant," Jackson said slowly. "Yet I have learned within the last year to have confidence in young men. War is a swift developer of manhood. Your colonel speaks of you in the highest terms, and informs me that you are a native of Green Briar County."

"Our home was at Lewisburg, sir."

"Then you are doubtless intimately acquainted with that section?"

"Very well, indeed, General."

Jackson sat motionless and in silence for what seemed a long while, his grave eyes on my face, but his mind evidently elsewhere, one hand unconsciously crumpling a folded paper. Ashby moved his chair, causing it to crunch noisily on the floor, and the commander aroused at the unusual sound.

"By any possibility are you related to Judge Joel Wyatt?" he questioned slowly.

"He was my father, sir."

"I thought it was not improbable. There is a noticeable resemblance, and I recall he lived west of the mountains. I knew your father in Mexico. Is he still living?"

"He has been dead two years."

"I regret to hear it. Your mother, unless I am mistaken, was a Farquhar, of North Carolina?"

"Yes, sir—she has returned to her old home."

"The best of southern blood, gentlemen," he said smilingly, glancing toward the others, but with watchful eyes instantly returning to scan me. "Was she driven out of Green Briar by the state of unrest in that section?"

"In a measure—yes," I replied promptly. "It was hardly safe for her to remain there alone. The county is filled with Union sympathizers, and roamed over by bands of guerrillas, claiming allegiance with both sides, but sparing no one. At present, I understand, Federal troops have been sent there from Charleston, and are in control."

"Your information is partially correct; but in order to perfect plans now contemplated I require a still more definite knowledge of existing conditions. I need to know accurately the number and distribution of the Union forces in Green Briar, and also more complete information regarding those irregulars who are in sympathy with us, as well as the character of their leaders. Judging from the recommendation given you by Colonel Maitland I felt that you were peculiarly adapted to render this service. However, Sergeant Wyatt, I propose stating plainly that this may prove an exceedingly dangerous detail, and if you decide to accept it, it must be done as a volunteer."

He paused questioningly, and I drew a quick breath, realizing suddenly the seriousness of the situation, and the importance of my decision.

"I am perfectly ready to go, sir."

"I have felt little doubt as to that, but I wish you to comprehend clearly that we can offer you no protection if your secret mission is discovered."

"I so understand, General Jackson, I know the usages of war, but this is not a question of danger, but of duty. You desire that I depart at once?"

Ewell broke in impatiently with his high pitched voice.

"May I ask if it be generally known in Green Briar that you are enlisted in the Confederate service?"

"To but very few, sir," I answered, turning to look across at my unexpected questioner. "To none I am at all likely to encounter. My mother and I left the county at the first outbreak. My father's affiliations were with the Union element."

"Most fortunate. Nothing could be better, General Jackson. The sergeant can very safely travel as a Federal officer in search of recruits. The matter of papers can, of course, be easily arranged."

Jackson turned toward his aide.

"What Federal troops are now garrisoning Charleston, Swan?"

"An Ohio brigade, with a regiment of Pennsylvania cavalry. There is also a company of heavy artillery outside the town."

The commander leaned his head on his hand.

"I would like to suggest, sir," I ventured to say respectfully, "that General Ewell's plan be adopted. I think I shall have no difficulty in assuming the role."

"You are willing then to assume the risk?" He looked at me gravely. "It may eventually mean a drum-head court-martial, and death as a spy."

"If I fail—yes, sir; but this method surely offers the greatest possibility of success."

"I can clearly perceive that, but it was not my original plan to send you into the lines of the enemy in Federal uniform. However General Ewell's judgment is probably correct. Have you a late Army List there, Colonel Swan?"

"Yes, sir, issued the fourteenth." He turned the pages slowly, leaning forward to the light. "Here is a Lieutenant Raymond, Third U. S. Cavalry, reported on recruiting detail. His regiment is stationed at Fairfax Court House."

"He will answer as well as any other. It is scarcely probable the man would be known in that remote section. What is the full name? and where is he from?"

"Charles H.; appointed from Vermont."

"Is this choice satisfactory to you, sergeant?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"You are prepared to depart immediately?"

"As soon as I can be furnished with the necessary papers and equipment."

"Colonel Swan will arrange the first, and the quartermaster can doubtless supply the other requirements. Orderly, have Major Kline step in here at once. Ah, Kline, have you among your trophies of war a Federal lieutenant's uniform which will probably fit this man?"

"I believe so, sir," and the officer addressed ran his eyes appraisingly over my figure. "Any particular regiment?"

"Third, United States Cavalry. Have it pressed and sent here at once, securely wrapped, together with saber and revolvers. Where is your horse, sergeant?"

"Tied to the palings outside."

"Do you desire a better mount?"

"No sir, the animal is fresh, and a good traveler."

"Then that will be all, Kline; except, of course, complete Federal cavalry equipment for the horse."

The officer saluted, and disappeared, the door instantly closing behind him, cutting off the hum of voices without. There was a moment of silence.

"You had better retain your present dress until after you leave the valley," counseled Jackson, slowly. "Swan will furnish you with a pass, which should be carefully destroyed after passing our pickets at Covington. It will be of no service to you beyond that point. My best wishes for your success, Sergeant Wyatt."

He stood up, and I felt the firm grasp of his hand. Then Ashby gripped my shoulder.

"Wyatt," he said kindly, "if you ever desire to change your arm of the service, you are the kind of man I want to ride with me."

I smiled in appreciation, but before I could answer, the man who had been sitting silently in the corner arose, and stood erect in the light. The gleam of the lamp instantly revealed his face still shadowed by the wide hat brim, the firm, bearded chin, the gravely smiling eyes.

"General Ashby," he said with quiet dignity, "Sergeant Wyatt, I am sure, performs this important duty without thought of reward. It is the South that has need of such men in every branch of her service." He came forward, and extended his hand cordially.

"I am General Lee, and am very glad to greet, and wish God speed to the son of Judge Wyatt. If you return in safety, you will report to me in person at Richmond. General Jackson will so arrange with your battery commander."

They were all upon their feet, standing in respectful attention. I murmured something, I scarcely knew what, bowing as I backed toward the door. And this was Lee—Robert E. Lee—this man with the kind, thoughtful face, the gentle voice, the gravely considerate manner. And he had greeted me in words of personal friendship, had spoken to me of my father. I know I straightened to soldierly erectness, every pulse thrilling with a new resolve. A moment I stood there, my eyes on the one face I saw before me, and then went out into the darkness. The orderly closed the door.

II An Unwelcome Companion

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IT WAS in the chill of a cold, gray morning that I rode into Strasburg, jogging along at the rear of a squadron of Fifth Virginia cavalrymen who chanced to be headed for the same place. These found quarters in the town, but I proceeded a mile or more south on the valley pike, until I reached a cabin hidden behind a low hill, and so surrounded by a dense growth of scrubby trees as to be nearly concealed from observation. Only a chance glance in that direction had revealed its presence, but its very look of desolation instantly attracted me. Here was a place to rest quietly for a few hours in safety. I turned my willing horse aside, following an ill-defined path through a tangled mass of shrubbery, until I attained the door. The building was a single-roomed cabin, exhibiting marks of age and neglect, yet still intact, heavy wooden shutters barring the windows, the door closed and securely fastened. The place to all appearances was deserted, and had been for a long while. Although situated scarcely a hundred feet back from the valley turnpike, which was never without its travelers, and along which armies marched and counter-marched, the surroundings were those of a remote wilderness. I bent down from my saddle, and rapped sharply on the wood. There was no response from within, not even when I struck more heavily with the butt of a revolver. There was a faint trail leading about the corner, and, grown curious and impatient, I dismounted, and leading my horse, pressed a

difficult passage through the bushes. To my surprise the rear door stood slightly ajar, and my eyes perceived the movement of an ill-defined shadow within.

"Hello, there!" I called out, yet instinctively drawing a step backward. "Is there any room here for a tired man?"

The tall, angular figure of a mountaineer immediately appeared in the doorway, and a gray, wrinkled face, scraggly bearded, looked forth, the eyes glinting, and filled with suspicion.

"Wus it you-all poundin' at the door?"

"I knocked—yes."

"Knocked! Ye made noise 'nough ter raise the dead."

"It seems I didn't raise you."

"I want lookin' fer no visitors. Wal, who be ye? an' whut do ye want yere?"

"I am a soldier," I replied, rather shortly, not particularly pleased with either the man's appearance or manner. "Myself and horse are about worn out. I mistook this for a deserted cabin."

"Wal, it ain't precisely. Are you Confed?"

"Of course—no Yank would be along this pike."

"I ain't so blamed sure o' thet. Whar be ye bound? an' whut may ye be up to a travelin' alone?"

I smiled, endeavoring to retain my temper.

"See, here, friend," I returned shortly. "I have as much reason to ask you such questions as you have me. However, I am willing enough to answer. I am on furlough, and am going home across the mountains to see my folks."

"Whar to?"

"Over Beckley way."

"The hell ye are! Don't ye know the Yanks are all through the kintry now? They'll gobble ye up afore ever ye git to New River."

"Oh, I reckon not—I know that section, and where to hide out. That is why I am going back there now. Do you know Raleigh County?"

The man, who was now standing upright in the doorway, one hand gripping the barrel of a musket, the early morning light on his withered face, stared unwinkingly into my eyes.

"I rather reckon I do, young man," he replied slowly. "Fur I was raised up on the Green Briar. What mout be yer name?"

"Cowan," I answered promptly, my mind instantly alert, and aware I had made a mistake."

"Ho! Ye don't say! One o' ol' Ned Cowan's boys?"

"No. I am a son of Widow Cowan, over on Coal Creek."

There was not the faintest glimmer in the cold, blue eyes, no evidence of any recollection in the wrinkled face. His jaws rose and fell on the tobacco which extended his cheek.

"I don't reckon I've been over that a way fer nigh on fifteen year," he said at last reflectively. "An' somehow I don't just recall no Widow Cowan—but I know ol' Ned mighty well. He's took to the brush with his whole breed since this fracus started, an' som' cusses burned his house, an' sent the ol' woman after 'em. It's plumb hell in Green Briar. Maybe yer a Cowan, but I'm damned if ye look like eny o' thet outfit ever I see afore. What part o' the army wus ye with?"

"Sixty-fifth Virginia—Covington Company, Captain Daniels."

The older man chewed awhile in silence, evidently impressed with the seeming frankness of the reply.

"Wal, ye mout be a Cowan, o' course. I ain't takin' no sides on thet fer I don't know all ther breed," he admitted reluctantly. "Enyhow I reckon it don't make no great difference, fer if ye be goin' ter Green Briar we kin ride awhile tergether. Two is better than one these days. Hitch yer hoss out thar in the scrub along side o' mine, an' then come in yere. We'll eat a bite fust, an' then lie down a spell, fer I've been a ridin' most o' ther night myself."

His voice was hardly as cordial as his words sounded, but I felt it best to accept the rather surly invitation. I led my horse down the dim path indicated, until I came to where the other animal—a rangy, ill-groomed sorrel—was securely hidden. I had blindly stepped into a trap, but just what kind I could not as yet determine. I must win the man's confidence, and learn what I could. The fellow, whoever he might prove to be, was evidently in concealment—but for what reason? Was he deserter? or spy? And, if it was true, as he claimed, that he was also bound for the Green Briar, how was I to easily avoid traveling in his company? To refuse would arouse suspicion at once, and might plunge me into greater peril. Yet, if, on the other hand, we did continue to consort, how was I to conceal my real purpose and identity? Once we were in the neighborhood of Lewisburg, my impromptu claim of being a Cowan would be easily exploded. I had assumed that particular name on the spur of the moment, chancing to remember there was such a family prominent along the Green Briar, but the deception would be very apparent so soon as we crossed the

mountains. Even now I had grave reason to doubt if I had actually deceived this man by my sudden invention. There had been a look in those glinting blue eyes that told of cunning suspicion. However, at present nothing remained but to play out the game and thus gain all the advantage possible. Whoever the man might prove to be—spy, scout, bushwhacker, or deserter—beyond all question he possessed intimate knowledge of the country lying beyond the Alleghanies. He knew the existing conditions there, and was acquainted with the people. Once his confidence could be fully secured, providing his sympathies were with the cause of the South, as was most probable, his information would be of the utmost value. And surely, if we journeyed together, there would be some revelation of his identity, his reason for being where he was, and the side he espoused in the quarrel. Reticent as he was, suspicious and close-mouthed, a silent, typical mountaineer, he could surely be induced to let fall some scrap of information. And somewhere along the way an opportunity must surely arise whereby I might escape from his company, if such a move became really desirable. The fellow could not remain on guard night and day, and once convinced of my honesty his suspicions would naturally relax. Revolving these thoughts rapidly in my mind I returned to the hut, carefully bearing the bundle containing the Federal uniform tucked under my arm. The gaunt mountaineer, busily engaged in preparing breakfast at the open fireplace, scarcely favored me with a glance of recognition, but began to arrange the scant supply of food on an overturned box.

"Just pitch in, an' help yerself, Cowan," he said affecting a cordiality of manner not altogether natural. "Thar ain't much of it, but we'll eat whut we've got, an' then rest awhile. If yer a goin' ter travel along with me it will be done mostly at night til' we git down Covington way."

I seated myself without ceremony.

"You are in hiding then?" I asked carelessly, not even glancing up at the expressionless face opposite.

"Wal, not exactly. Thars nuthin' I'm specially feered of, an' I reckon it's more habit than enything else. We've grown pretty skeery back in the hills—nobody thar knows their friends frum their enemies these days. Yer liable ter git popped at most eny time, an' never know who did it. Yer ain't been thar lately, I reckon? "

"No; not for over a year."

"Things has changed sum since then. Nobody lives ter hum eny more. It's sure hell in Green Briar these days—somebody is gettin' kilt every day er two. The cusses travel in gangs, murderin' an' burnin' from one end o' the county to the other." He spoke in an even drawling voice, with not the slightest show of emotion, as though telling an ordinary bit of news: "Damned if I know which outfit is the wus—the Yanks, or the Rebs."

"Which are you with?"

"Who, me!" He paused in his bolting of food, and gave vent to an unpleasant laugh. "I rather reckon it would puzzle the Lord Almighty ter find that out. I don't give a whoop fer neither of 'em. I'm fer ol' Jem Taylor, an' it keeps me tolor'ble busy tending ter his affairs, without botherin' 'bout no government."

"Then your name is Taylor?"

"I reckon it has been fer 'bout sixty years. Thars a slew o' Taylors over along Buffalo Crick, an' som' of 'em are Yanks, an' a parcel of 'em are Rebs, but they don't git ol' Jem ter take nary side. At that, I'm gittin' all the fightin' I hanker arter. Naturally, I'm a peaceful critter, if th' cusses let me alone."

"Quieted down some over there lately, hasn't it?"

"Not thet I've heard of."

"Why I understood that the Federal troops from Charleston were in control, and held the county?"

"Huh! Thar's a rigiment o' blue-coats at Lewisburg, an' a few cavalrymen ridin' ther pikes. Don't amount ter a hill o' beans as fer as ther boys are concerned. All they got ter do is go further back in the hills, an' be a bit more keerful. I reckon, young man, ye'll find plenty o' deviltry going on in Green Briar, if ye ever git out that away. Wal, thet's all thar is fer us ter eat, an' I'm goin' ter take a snooze."

He closed the door, fastening it securely with a wooden bar, and stretched himself out on the floor. The room was dark as the only window was tightly boarded up, and, using my bundle for a pillow, I lay down also. For a short time I remained staring up through the dim light, thinking, and endeavoring to plan some feasible course of action, but there was no reason to remain awake, nothing to fear immediately, for his heavy breathing was evidence enough that Taylor slept. Slowly my heavy eyes closed, and I lost consciousness.

The sun was below the mountain ridge, when the heavy hand of the old mountaineer shook me into sudden

wakefulness. I had aroused once during the day, and lay listening to the sound of heavy wagons passing along the pike—a strongly guarded train to judge by the voices of men, and the thud of steadily marching feet. Ammunition, no doubt, destined for the Army of the Valley, in preparation for the coming campaign. Then my eyes had closed again in dreamless sleep. With nothing left to eat we were not long in preparing for departure, I endeavoring vainly to get my silent companion to converse, being rewarded merely by grumbled and evasive answers. Finally I desisted in the attempt, content to follow his lead. Taylor, astride his sorrel, with gun resting grimly across his knees, rode straight through the brush, away from the pike, down the valley of a small stream. In crossing, the horses drank their fill.

"How about the valley road?" I asked as we climbed the opposite bank.

The leader glanced back at me.

"This yere way is nigher, an' a darn sight mor' quiet," he answered gruffly. "Soldiers been marching over the pike all day. Mout be all right fer yer, if yer've got a pass—but I ain't got none. We'll hev' good 'nough ridin' in 'bout a mile mor'."

"You are aiming for the cut-off?"

"I be—yer do kno' sumthin' of this yere kintry, I reckon, but yer've got more eddication than eny Cowan I ever hooked up with afore. Yer don't talk none like mountin' folks."

I drew a quick breath, sensing the return of suspicion.

"That's true," I admitted readily. "You see I went to school at Covington; they were going to make a preacher out of me."

"The hell they wus!" and he chuckled to himself. "A blue-bellied Presbyterian I'll bet a hog. Their the ol' stock—them Cowans—hell fire, infant damnation. So you wus goin' fer ter be a preacher—hey?"

"That was the program."

Taylor stared into my face, his vague suspicion seemingly gone.

"Well, I'll de damned—a preacher."

He rode on into the dusk, chuckling, and I followed, smiling to myself, glad that the man's good humor had been so easily restored.

We were fed at a hut far back in the foot-hills, where an old couple, the man lame, were glad enough to exchange their poor food for late news from the army, in which they had a son. Then we rode on steadily to the south along a deserted, weed-bordered road, meeting no one to obstruct our progress. Earlier in the war the Army of the Kanawa had passed along this way on forced march, and the ruts left by battery wheels were still in evidence, the frozen ridges making fast riding impossible. There were no villages, and only a few scattered houses, but the night was not so dark as to prevent fairly rapid progress. When dawn came we were to the west of Waynesboro, in broken country, and all through those long night hours scarcely a word had been exchanged between us. We camped finally in the bend of a small stream, where high banks concealed us from observation. There was little to eat in our haversacks, but we munched what we had, and Taylor, his eyes on the horses, broke the silence.

"I reckon the critters don't need mor'n a couple hours' rest," he said. "They ain't been rid noways hard, an' I'm fer gittin' through the gap durin' daylight—the road ain't overly good just now."

"Across the mountains? Is there a gap here?"

"Ther road ter Hot Springs is 'bout two miles below yer. I cum over it ten days ago an' I reckon I kin find my way back. It's 'bout forty miles frum thar ter Lewisburg, mostly hills, but a good trail. I know folks et Hot Springs who will take good keer o' us, onct we git thar."

We rested dozing, but neither sound asleep, for nearly three hours. Whatever might be in Taylor's mind, the lonely night had brought to me a new thought relative to my companion. The fellow was evasive, and once he had frankly lied in seeking to explain his presence in the valley, and the reason for his secrecy of movement. By now we were decidedly at cross-purposes, each vigilantly watching the other—Taylor in doubt as to what the bundle contained, which I never permitted out of my grasp, and myself as deeply interested in gaining possession of a packet of papers, a glimpse of which I had caught in an inside pocket of the mountaineer's coat. The belief that the fellow was either a Yankee spy, or a messenger between some Union emissary in the Confederate camp, and the Federal commander in western Virginia, became clear and distinct. His explanation that he had been seeking payment for losses occasioned by Confederate troops, was far from convincing. Had this been true he would certainly have been provided with a pass, and there would be no necessity for riding these back roads at night to avoid being challenged.

His mission, whatever it might be, was secret and dangerous. Of this his ceaseless vigilance was proof.

We rode on side by side through the rocky gap in the chain of mountains, and along the rough hills beyond, through gloomy stretches of wood, and over wind-swept ridges. It was cold and blustery, the clouds hanging low, and threatening storm. We were silent, suspicious of each other, never relaxing our vigilance. We encountered few travelers, and with these scarcely exchanged a word. Not a soldier was seen, although there was a Confederate garrison at Covington a few miles to the south. The light of a dying day still clung to the western sky when our wearied horses bore us into the village of Hot Springs. It was like a deserted hamlet, few houses appearing inhabited, and the shop windows boarded up. Occasionally a face peered at us cautiously through closed windows, and a man, tramping across the square, paused to stare curiously in our direction; but these were the only signs of life visible. Over a stone building—possibly the post-office—flapped a small Confederate flag, ragged and disreputable. Taylor, glancing neither to right or left, apparently indifferent to all this desolation, rode straight down the main street, and turned onto a pike road, leading to the left. A mile beyond, a frame house, painted white, barely visible through the deepening dusk, stood in a grove of oaks. The fence surrounding it had been broken down, and the gate stood wide open. The mountaineer turned up the broad driveway, and dismounted before the closed door. Almost at the same moment the portal opened slightly and a black face peered out.

III The Body on the Floor

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TAYLOR stood at the foot of the steps, pausing in uncertainty.

"Is that you, Sam?"

"Yas, sah, but I don't just make out who you gentl'men am, sah."

"Well, never mind thet now. Is Mister Harwood, yere?"

I insensibly straightened in my saddle. Harwood? What Harwood, I wondered—surely not Major Harwood of Lewisburg, my father's old friend! What was it I had heard about him a few months ago? Wasn't it a rumor that he was on General Ramsay's staff? And the daughter—Noreen—whatever had become of her? There was an instant's vision before me of laughing eyes, and wind-blown hair, a galloping horse, and the wave of a challenging hand. She had thus swept by me on the road as I took my mother southward.

"I don't peer fer to recollect no such name, sah," replied the negro, scratching his wool thoughtfully. "I done reckon as how you got the wrong house."

"No, I reckon not," said the other drily. "Git 'long in, an' tell him Jem Taylor is yere."

The door opened wider.

"Suah, I know you now, sah. Just step right 'long in, the both of yer. I'll look after them horses. You'll fin' Massa Harwood in the dinin' room, sah."

I followed the mountaineer up the steps, and into the hall, utterly indifferent as to whether my company was desired or not. But Taylor paid no apparent heed to my presence. The interior was that of an old fashioned residence, which, as yet, had not suffered from the ravages of war. Evidences of neglect were numerous enough, yet the furniture remained intact, and the walls firm. The hall was carpeted, and the stairs leading upward were covered with a rug of brightly woven rags, yielding a touch of color. It was not yet dark, but a lamp burned on a near-by table, and a cheerful fire glowed at the farther end. A door standing open revealed what must have been the parlor, a seemingly large room in which hair-cloth chairs and sofas were dimly visible. But a brighter glow of light streamed from a room beyond, and Taylor, evidently acquainted with the house, walked directly forward, around the bulge of the stairs, and stepped within the open door. Determined to miss nothing, I was so close behind, that my quick eyes caught what I believed to be a swift signal of warning to the man within. This, however, was an impression born from my own suspicion, rather than any real movement, for Taylor took but a single step across the threshold, and stopped, leaning on his gun. Behind him, standing in the open door, I had full glimpse of the interior.

There were two lights—one hanging above the table, the other on a sideboard to the right. The room itself was panelled in dark wood, the two windows heavily draped with hanging curtains, a few pictures decorating the walls. There was a fire-place, with a grate fire smouldering, and over it a pair of crossed swords and an old powder horn. The single

occupant sat upright, before him the remnants of a light repast, his hand toying with a spoon, and his eyes shifting from Taylor's face to that of mine. He was heavily built and broad of shoulder, the face, illumined by the hanging lamp, strong and masterful, the jaw prominent, the forehead broad, the nose roman. It would have been a hard face, but for a gleam of good humor in the eyes, and the softening effect of gray hair, and a gray moustache. The man had aged greatly, yet I recognized him instantly, my heart throbbing with the possibility that I also might be remembered. Yet surely there was no gleam of recollection in the eyes that surveyed me—and why should there be? I had been an uninteresting lad of fifteen when we last met. This knowledge gave me courage to meet that searching glance, and to lift my hand in the salute due to an officer of rank.

"Ah!" said Harwood in deep voice, "a soldier from the valley?"

"Yes, sir," respectfully, "the Sixty-fifth Virginia."

"Oh, yes; there was a company of mountainmen from Covington way in that command. Daniels your captain?"

"Yes, sir."

"Deserter?"

"No, sir; on thirty days' furlough."

"Oh, indeed! so 'old Jack' thinks he has plenty of time, and can let part of his army go home, does he? Well, that's his business, of course. How does it happen you wear artillery uniform?"

Expecting the question I answered unhesitatingly.

"They'd lost so many gunners, some of us were detailed to help. Recruits are coming in now."

"What was your battery?"

"Staunton Horse Artillery, sir."

"Stationed?"

"At Front Royal—that was our winter camp."

He nodded, tapping his spoon against the table, favorably impressed by my prompt replies. His keen eyes sought the face of the silent mountaineer.

"You know this man, Taylor?"

"Wal, I can't exactly say thet I dew, Major," he said drawlingly, shifting his feet uneasily. "He wus sorter wished on me, an' as he wus bound this way, I reckoned as how it wus best fer us to ride 'long together. He says he's a Cowan, frum over on Buffalo Crick."

"A Cowan!—you mean—"

"No, he don't claim ter be none o' ol' Ned's brood—his mar's a widder woman. They ain't no kin, I reckon."

Whatever thoughts might have been in Major Harwood's mind were concealed by an impassive face, as he sat there for a moment in silence, gazing at the two of us.

"No doubt you did what you believed to be best, Taylor," he said at last quietly. "We will talk it over later. You are both hungry enough to eat, I suppose? Draw up some chairs, and Sam will find something. No objection to remaining here over night, Cowan?"

"I'd be glad to get on, sir, but, my horse is about used up. The roads have been hard, and we have traveled rapidly."

"Well, there is plenty of room, and you are welcome. This house," he explained, "belongs to a friend of mine, who had

to leave the country—too Yankee for his neighbors. I find it rather convenient at times. Ah, Sam, that rasher of bacon looks prime—I'll try some myself."

The three of us talked upon many subjects, although Taylor said little, except when directly addressed, and I noted that few references were made to the war. Occasionally Harwood would carelessly, interject a question relating to Jackson, but I remained ever on guard, exhibiting a lack of information such as was natural to a soldier in the ranks, and thus more and more disarmed suspicion. I apparently knew little beyond the disposition of my own battery, and the fact that the main camp was still at Front Royal, engaged in constant drills. In return I ventured to question my host on the condition of things in Green Briar, but made no attempt to learn the number of troops in the region. That Harwood was in the Federal service I had no doubt, although he was not in uniform, and, if this was true, then it must be also a fact that Taylor was a Union spy. The meeting here had not been by chance, although a mystery involved the hidden reason why I, a known Confederate soldier, had been encouraged to accompany the mountaineer to this secret rendezvous. What could be Taylor's object in bringing me there to meet Harwood? Various theories flitted through my mind, as I sat there, endeavoring to carry on my share of conversation, but none wholly satisfied my judgment. At last the meal ended, and the Major pushed back his chair, and motioned for Sam to clear the table.

"You two men are tired out," he said genially, "and you had better turn in, and get a good night's sleep. We'll all of

us ride on into Green Briar to-morrow. I'll talk with you a minute Taylor in the parlor before you go; but Cowan does not need to wait. Help yourselves to the tobacco. Oh, Sam!"

"Yes, Major."

"Show this soldier up to the back bedroom, and see he has everything he needs."

"Yes, sah."

It was clearly apparent that Harwood desired a private word with Taylor, and so, after deliberately filling my pipe, I rose to my feet, stretching sleepily. The black returned with a small lamp in his hand, and led the way up the broad stairs. My last backward glance through the open door revealed the two sitting just as I had left them, except that Harwood was leaning slightly forward across the table, and speaking earnestly. A moment later I was left alone in a small room at the end of the upper hall. As the negro closed the door, clicking the latch into place, I glanced about me curiously. It was a narrow room, containing only a chair, a washstand and a single bed, a strip of rag carpet on the floor, and the one window so heavily curtained as probably to render the light invisible from without. I placed my bundle on the chair, and examined the door; it was securely latched, but there was no lock. Then I was not being held a prisoner. Still smoking I sat down on the edge of the bed, my mind busy with the situation.

It occurred to me now with new clearness of vision that Taylor had some special object in his friendliness. If he was a Union spy his natural preference would have been to travel alone. Instead, the fellow had almost insisted on my companionship; indeed, the tactiturn, silent mountaineer