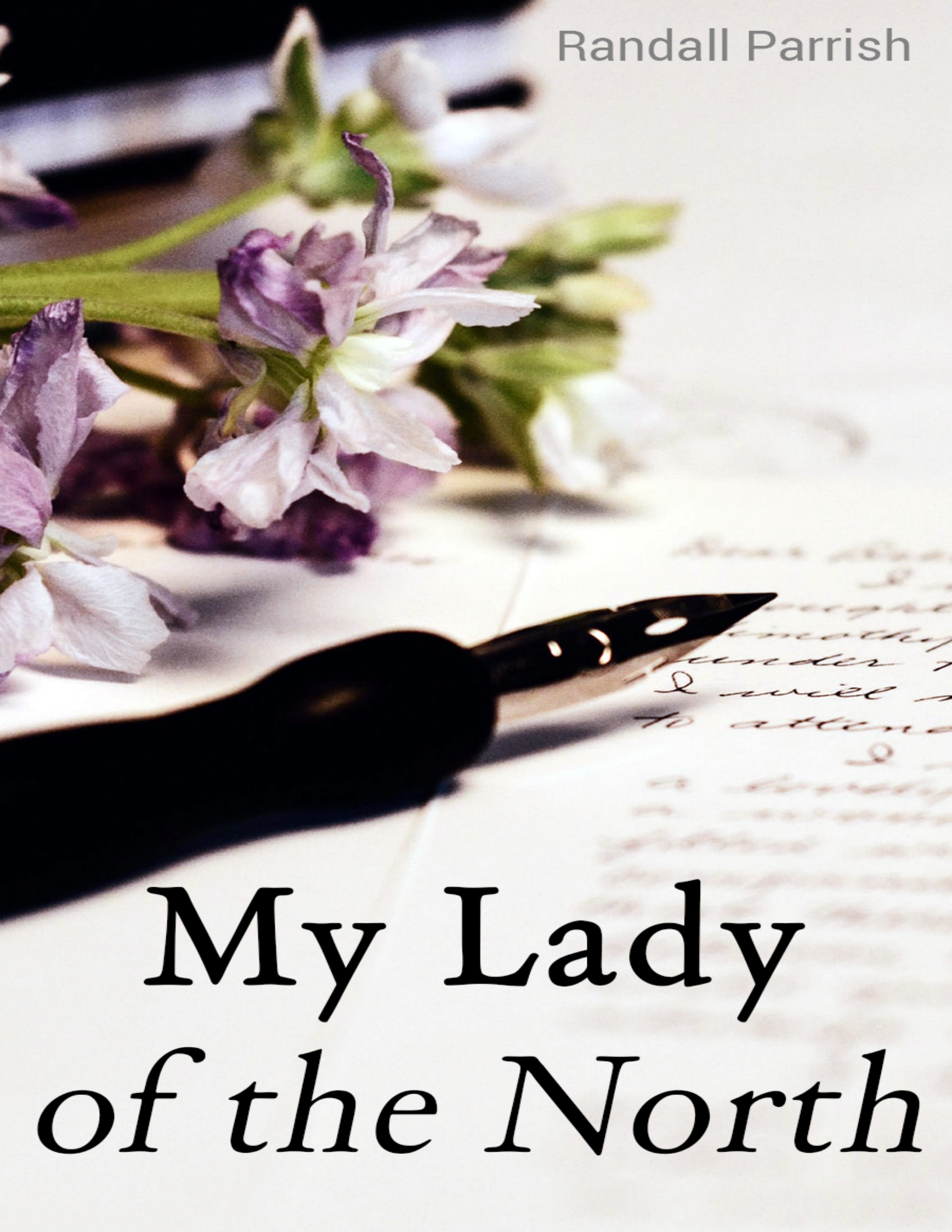

Randall Parrish

My Lady of the North

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Civil War Novel

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The Love Story of a Gray-Jacket

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CHAPTER I. — A DESPATCH FOR LONGSTREET

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It was a bare, plain interior—the low table at which he sat an unplaned board, his seat a box, made softer by a folded blanket. His only companions were two aides, standing silent beside the closed entrance, anxious to anticipate his slightest need.

He will abide in my memory forever as I saw him then—although we were destined to meet often afterwards—that old gray hero, whose masterly strategy held at bay for so long those mighty forces hurled on our constantly thinning lines of defence. To me the history of war has never contained his equal, and while I live I shall love and revere him as I can love and revere no other man.

“General Lee,” said one of the aides, as I passed the single sentry and drew aside the flap to step within, “this is Captain Wayne.”

He deliberately pushed aside the mass of papers which had been engaging him, and for an embarrassing moment fixed upon me a glance that seemed to read me through and through. Then, with simple dignity, far more impressive

than I can picture it in words, he arose slowly and extended his hand.

“Captain Wayne,” he said gravely, yet retaining his grasp, and with his eyes full upon mine, “you are a much younger man than I expected to see, yet I have selected you upon the special recommendation of your brigade commander for services of the utmost importance. I certainly do not hold your youth to be against your success, but I feel unwilling to order you to the performance of this duty, which, besides being beyond the regular requirements of the service, involves unusual risks.”

“Without inquiring its nature,” I said hastily, “I freely offer myself a volunteer for any service which may be required either by the army or yourself.”

The kindly face brightened instantly, almost into a smile, and a new look of confidence swept into the keen gray eyes.

“I felt, even as I spoke,” he said, with a dignified courtesy I have never marked in any one else, “that I must be doing wrong to question the willingness of an officer of your regiment, Captain Wayne, to make personal sacrifice. From our first day of battle until now the South has never once called upon them in vain. You are from the ranks, I believe?”

“I was a corporal at Manassas.”

“Ah! then you have won your grade by hard service. You take with you one man?”

“Sergeant Craig of my troop, sir, a good soldier, who knows the country well.”

He lowered his eyes to the numerous papers littering the table, and then, leaning over, traced lightly with a colored pencil a line across an outspread map.

“You speak of his knowing the country well; are you aware, then, of your destination?”

“I merely inferred from what Colonel Carter said that it was your desire to re-establish communication with General Longstreet.”

“That is true; but do you know where Longstreet is?”

“Only that we of the line suppose him to be somewhere west of the mountains, sir. It is camp gossip that his present base of supplies is at Minersville.”

“Your conjecture is partly correct, although I have more reason to believe that the head of his column has reached Bear Fork, or will by to-morrow morning. Kindly step this way, Captain Wayne, and make note of the blue lines I have traced across this map. Here, you will observe, is Minersville, directly beyond the high ridge. You will notice that the Federal lines extend north and south directly between us, with their heavier bodies of infantry along the Wharton pike, and so disposed as to shut off all communication between us and our left wing. Now, the message I must get into Longstreet's hands is imperative; indeed, I will say to you, the very safety of this army depends upon its reaching him before his advance passes Bear Fork. There remains, therefore, no time for any long detour; the messenger who bears it must take his life in his hands and ride straight westward through the very lines of the enemy.”

He spoke these words rapidly, earnestly; then suddenly he lifted his eyes to mine, and said firmly: “I am perfectly frank with you. Are you the man?”

I felt the hot blood leap into my face, but I met his stern gaze without flinching.

“If I live, General Lee, I shall meet his advance at Bear Fork by daybreak.”

“God guide you; I believe you will.”

His words seemed uttered unconsciously. He turned slightly, and glanced toward the door. “Major Holmes, will you kindly hand me the draft of that despatch?”

He took the paper from the outstretched hand of the aide, read it over slowly and with great care, wrote a word of explanation upon the margin, and then extended it to me.

“Commit that, word by word, to your memory; we must run no possible risk of its ever falling into the enemy's hands.”

I can see it now, that coarse yellow paper—the clear, upright penmanship, the words here and there misused and corrected, the sentence scratched out, the heavy underlining of a command, and his own strangely delicate signature at the bottom.

“Headquarters, Army Northern Virginia,

“In the field, near Custer House,

“Sept. 22, 2 P.m.

“Lieut.-Gen'l Longstreet,

“Commanding Left Wing.

“Sir: You will advance your entire force by the Connelton and Sheffield pikes, so as to reach Castle Rock with your full infantry command by daybreak, September 26th. Let this supersede all other orders. I propose to attack in force in the neighborhood of Sailor's Ford, and shall expect you to advance promptly at the first sound of our artillery. It is

absolutely essential that we form prompt connection of forces, and to accomplish this result will require a quick, persistent attack upon your part. You are hereby ordered to throw your troops forward without reserve, permitting them to be halted by no obstacle, until they come into actual touch with my columns. The success or failure of my plans will depend utterly upon your strict observance of these orders.

"R. E. LEE, *"Gen'l Commanding"*

I handed back the paper, and lifted my hand in salute.

"You have memorized it?"

"Word for word, sir."

"Repeat it to me."

He held the paper before him as I did so, and at the close lifted his eyes again to my face.

"Very good," he said quietly. "Now let there be no mistake; repeat it over to your companion as you proceed until he also has memorized it, and one of you must live long enough to reach Longstreet. I advise you to take the Langley road—it is the most protected—and not try to pass beyond the old Coulter plantation until after dark, or you will run the risk of being observed by the enemy's pickets. Beyond this I must leave all to your own discretion."

He paused, and I still lingered, thinking he might have something more to add.

"Are you one of the Waynes of Charlottesville?" he asked gravely.

"Colonel Richard Wayne was my father, sir."

"Ah, indeed! I remember him well"; and his face lit up with a most tender smile. "We were together in Mexico. A

Virginia gentleman of the old school. He is dead, I believe?”

“He was killed, sir, the first year of the war.”

“I remember; it was at Antietam. And your mother? If my memory is not at fault she was a Pierpont?”

“She is now in Richmond, sir, and the old plantation is but a ruin.”

“War is indeed sad,” he said slowly; “and I often feel that our Southern women are compelled to bear the brunt of it. What heroines they have proven! History records no equal to the daily sacrifices I have witnessed in the past three years. God grant it may be soon ended.”

Then, as if suddenly moved by the impulse of the moment, he again extended his hand.

“Well, lad,” he said kindly, the same grave smile lighting his face, “our country needs us. We must not waste time here in conversation. I am very glad to have been permitted to meet the son of my old friend, and trust you will remember me to your mother. But now good-bye, Captain, and may He in whose hand we all are guide and guard you. I know that a Wayne of Virginia will always do his duty.”

Bareheaded and with proudly swelling heart I backed out of the tent as I might have left the throne-room of an emperor, but as I grasped the reins and swung up into saddle, I became conscious that he had followed me. Craig flung up his hand in quick, soldierly salute, and then, with a single rapid stride, the General stood at his horse's head.

“Sergeant,” he said—and I was struck by the incisive military tone of his voice, so different from the gentleness shown within—“I am informed that you are intimately acquainted with the roads to the westward.”

“Every bridle-path, sir, either by night or day.”

“Then possibly you can inform me whether the Big Hickory is fordable at Deer Gap.”

“Not for infantry at high water, sir; but there is another ford two miles north where it is never over waist deep.”

“That would be at Brixton's Mill?”

“No, sir; the other way.”

Lee smiled, and rested his hand almost caressingly on the trooper's knee.

“You are a valuable man for us to risk on such a ride,” he said kindly. “But I desire you to understand, Sergeant, how deeply I value the service you are about to render, and that I shall never permit it to be forgotten or go unrewarded. And now, good-night, Sergeant; good-night, Captain Wayne.”

As we turned into the main road, riding slowly, I glanced backward. The General was yet standing there in front of his tent, gazing after us, the rays of the westering sun gleaming on his gray hair.

CHAPTER II. — THE NIGHT RIDE

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By five o'clock we were safe at Colchester, and while our horses rested and refreshed themselves on some confiscated grain, the two of us lay lazily back on a grassy knoll, well within the shadow of a ruined wall, and watched the round, red sun drop slowly down behind those western hills we had to climb.

We scarcely spoke regarding the work we knew was ahead, except to discuss briefly the better route to be selected for our hard night's ride. We were both old campaigners, inured by years of discipline to danger and obedience. This special duty, however arduous and desperate it might prove to be, was silently accepted as part of the service we owed the State. Reckless and hardened as I know Craig to have been, I have no doubt he reflected upon Lee and his kindly words and was touched and softened by their memory, as he lay there stretched at full length on the grass, his pipe glowing cheerily between his lips. But if so, his thoughts remained unuttered, nor did I feel inclined to dwell upon the theme; and so, in the strength of a simple comradeship which could remain silent, we waited patiently for the night to close us in.

As early as we deemed it safe to venture, we were again in saddle, riding now straight to the westward, along the smooth-beaten pike, until we caught sight of the black shadow of Colton Church in our front; then we swerved to the left, and still moving rapidly but with considerate care

for the horses, headed directly across the more broken country toward the foot-hills.

It proved to be a hard, toilsome climb up those long, steep slopes rising before us; for we were extremely careful now to keep well away from every known route of travel, and our horses, although selected from among the best mounts of the cavalry brigade, had already been thoroughly winded by their smart trot up the valley. The short grass under foot, crisp from the hot sun of the long afternoon, caused many a slip of the poorly shod hoofs, while the darkness had grown so close and dense about us that we could barely creep through it, with only faith and a doubtful memory as guides. Every road, we well knew, would be patrolled by Federal pickets; only the broken country between could yield us the faintest prospect of success. But at best it must largely be guesswork—Providence, luck, what you will—and the slightest swing of the pendulum could easily frustrate our best laid plans.

An hour of this work passed. Whether or not we were yet within the enemy's lines was largely conjecture, for no human eye could pierce the enveloping gloom, and no sound, either of warning or encouragement, reached us as we strained our ears. The Sergeant rode slightly in advance as we toiled up the higher terrace, for our sole dependence as to direction and distance was upon his memory, and even that could scarcely serve for much on such a night as this. I traced his passage upward as best I might, and pressed close after him, guided not so much by sight as by sound—the occasional rolling of a loosened stone, the rustling of leaves as he touched a bush in passage, the faint

clinking of his sabre, and the heavy breathing of his horse—until at last his long, slender figure rose sufficiently above the dark hill surface to be faintly silhouetted in deeper shadow against the dim reflection of the upper sky. Almost coincidently with this my horse ranged up beside his, where he had drawn rein in evident perplexity.

“What is it, Dan?” I questioned cautiously; for all I could feel reasonably assured of just then was that behind any rock or tree in our front there might be crouching a Federal picket.

“It's nothing Cap,” he answered quietly, turning his face toward me as he spoke. “I'm just tryin' ter 'member some landmark yereabout ter guide from. Blamed if ever I see such a dark night; it's like bein' inside a pocket, sir, an' I reckon as how it must be nigh onter ten year since I run loose in this yere country as a kid. Thet thar cut-off we took a while back has sort o' confused me, that's a fac', and I don't just know whar I am; but I reckon as how the main ridge road we 're a huntin' after oughter run somewhar out yonder.” He pointed forward into the night.

“I supposed from the map it would be found farther back and considerably to the right of us,” I ventured doubtfully.

“Never saw no map, Cap,” he returned, with the easy familiarity of a scout on service. “But if I recollect clear, it sure used ter run mighty close ter the east edge. I reckon it ain't changed none to speak of, an' so it'll have ter be somewhere just along thar.”

He spoke with such an air of certainty that I felt any controversy useless.

“Very well; hand me your rein, and see what you can discover out there on foot. Sitting here isn't apt to mend matters, and we surely cannot afford to cripple our horses among those rocks.”

The Sergeant, a gaunt, tireless mountaineer, slipped silently from his saddle, swung his light cavalry carbine from his back to the hollow of his arm, and in another moment was lost to sight in the darkness. A snake could not have slipped away more stealthily. I heard a stone rattle under his foot, a half-suppressed oath, and then the night had completely swallowed him.

How utterly alone I seemed; how intensely, painfully still everything was! The silence felt almost like a weight, so greatly it oppressed me. Even the accustomed voices of nature were hushed, as if war, with its unspeakable cruelty, had cast a spell over all things animate and inanimate. It was weird, uncanny. With every nerve strained I leaned forward across the pommel of my saddle, listening for the slightest sound out in that black void. My head burned and throbbed as with fever, and I felt that strange, unnatural stillness as though it had been a physical thing; surely others besides us were upon this hilltop! For I knew well—my every soldier instinct told me—that somewhere out in that impenetrable mystery were blazing the camp-fires of an enemy. Vigilant eyes were peering everywhere in search for such as we. How far away they might lurk I could not even conjecture—perhaps merely around some near projecting wall of rock—and we might even now be within the range of their ready rifles. I could hear the quickened

throbbing of my heart, and my hand fell heavily on a pistol butt in nervous expectancy.

The soft night wind, heavy with pine odors, began suddenly to play amid the leaves of a low tree beside me, and the pleasant rustling mingled like strains of music with the slow breathing of the horses, but no other sound broke a silence that had become a positive pain. Man at his best is largely a creature of impulse, and I confess to a feeling almost of terror as I sat there in utter loneliness. I glanced behind, hoping that there at least I might discover some object on which my gaze might settle, something that would relieve the intense nerve-strain of the black nothingness. I swept with staring eyes the half circle where I knew must lie the deep wide valley far beneath, but no welcome gleam of light greeted me. Far out yonder, as I well knew, was the cheery glow where our ragged, tired comrades rested around their night fires, but the bend of the land between shut it all off as completely as if I were already in another world, a denizen of those cold and silent stars so far away.

I recall it now as one of the loneliest moments of my life, one of those almost unaccountable conditions of mind and body when it seemed to me that the thin, sinewy fingers of an inexorable fate were closing down with a pressure which no strength of man might resist. I was worn with fatigue in the saddle, but did not dream of sleep; my mind, in a firm endeavor to cast aside the uncanny influences of the hour, recalled in swift panorama those three years of civil strife which had run their course since I, a slender, white-faced lad, had stolen forth into the moonlight from the portals of the old home, to ride away into the northward where the

throbbing drums called me. In those days I understood but little of the cause for which I was so eager to fight and suffer. Possibly I cared even less; yet I had ever since blindly followed the faded, tattered flag of my native State with the same passionate devotion that possessed thousands of others, and with no clearer thought than to remain beside it to the bitter end.

What strange, exciting years those had been; how filled with adventure! Like pictures painted on a screen there flashed across my memory in vivid colors the camps and marches, the long night vigils, the swift sweep of the charging squadrons, the deadly shock of battle, the scouting across unknown country, the hours of pain while the soft moon smiled down upon a stricken field, the weary weeks in the low-roofed hospital at Richmond. It seemed hardly possible that I could be that same slender, untried lad who stole forth with quaking heart, fearful of the very shadows of the oaks about the old home. What centuries of experience lay between! The same boy, yet moulded now into a man; into the leader of a troop of fighting men, hardened to steel by service, trusted by one whom the South most revered and loved—a veteran soldier in the ranks of the hardest fighting legions our world has ever known. Yet such had been the magic touch of war. So deeply had my every thought become merged in these musings that Craig, slipping silently as a ghost from out the engulfing darkness, laid hand upon my bridle-rein before I became aware of his approach.

“I got 'er all right now, Cap,” he announced quietly, peering up into my face. “We uns are not more nor a

hundred yards ter the right of the road, but I reckon you'll find ther way a bit rough."

He led both horses forward, moving slowly and with that silent caution so characteristic of his class. With scarcely the scraping of a hoof on the flinty rocks we came forth in safety upon the defined, hard-beaten track.

"The south is over yonder ter the left," he whispered, as he swung up into saddle, "an' the trend of the road is mighty nigh due west."

"But in which direction does their main camp lie, Sergeant?"

He shook his head gravely.

"Durn it; thet's just what I can't quite figure out, sir—whether we uns be to ther north or south of ther white church. Then, somehow or other, it seems like to me as if this yere road lay a bit too close ter the edge of ther plateau ter ever be the main pike what the Feds marched over. I reckon from ther direction it runs that maybe it might be a branch like, or a wood-road leadin' inter the other. If thet's the way it is, then them fellers we uns is tryin' ter dodge ought ter be down yonder ter the left somewhar."

I gazed vaguely out into the black vacancy to which he pointed.

"Well, if we should chance to run up against one of their picket posts we shall be soon enlightened," I returned, urging my horse carefully forward. "But we shall have to take the chances, for it would not prove healthy for either of us to be caught here by daylight."

I heard Craig chuckle grimly to himself, as if he found humor in the thought, but without other attempt to give

utterance to his feelings he ranged up close to my side.

Not daring to venture on any gait faster than a walk along this unknown and ill-defined mountain trail, we slowly and cautiously worked our way forward for more than an hour, meeting with no human obstacle to our progress, yet feeling that each step forward was surrounded by imminent peril. That we were now well within the guarded lines of the enemy we were both assured, although where or how we had succeeded in penetrating the cordon of picket posts unobserved we could only conjecture. The darkness about us seemed intensified by the high, overhanging bank of rock at our left; on the other side, and but dimly revealed against the sky-line, I could perceive Craig's gaunt figure as he leaned far over the high pommel of his cavalry saddle, his short carbine well advanced, his trained eyes seeking vainly to pierce the mystery in our front.

CHAPTER III. — AN UNWELCOME GUEST

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This was the sort of work I had long ago learned to love; it warmed the blood, this constant certainty of imminent peril, this intense probability that any moment might bring a flash of flame into our very faces. Each step we took was now a stern, grim play with Fate, where the stakes were life and death. I felt my pulses throb as I rode steadily forward, fairly thrusting the darkness aside, my teeth hard set, my left hand heavy on a revolver butt.

How, in such a situation, the nerves tingle and the heart bounds to each strange sight and sound! Halt!—what was that? Pooh! no more than the deeper shadow of a sharply projecting rock, around which we pick careful way, our horses crowding against each other in the narrow space. And that? Nothing but the faint moan of the night wind amid the dead limbs of a tree. Ah! mark that sudden flash of light! The hand that closes iron-like upon the loosened rein opens again, for it was merely a star silently falling from out the black depths of the sky. Then both of us halt at once, and peer anxiously forward. The figure standing directly in the centre of our path, can it be a sentry at last? A cautious step forward, a low laugh from the Sergeant, and we circle the gaunt, blackened stump, as silent ourselves as the night about us, but with fiercely beating, expectant hearts.

But hark! Surely that was no common sound, born of that drear loneliness! No cavalryman can mistake the jingle of

accoutrements or the dull thud of horses' hoofs. The road here must have curved sharply, for they were already so close upon us that, almost simultaneously with the sound, we could distinguish the deeper shadow of a small, compact body of horsemen directly in our front. To left of us there rose, sheer and black, the precipitous rock; to right we might not even guess what yawning void. It was either wit or sword-play now.

I know not how it may be with others in such emergencies, but with me it always happens that the sense of fear departs with the presence of actual danger. Before the gruesome fancies of imagination I may quake and burn like any maiden alone upon a city street at night, until each separate nerve becomes a very demon of mental agony; but when the real and known once fairly confronts me, and there is work to do, I grow instantly cool to think, resolute to act, and find a rare joy in it. It was so now, and, revolver in hand but hidden beneath my holster flap, I leaned over and touched Craig's arm.

“Keep quiet,” I whispered sternly. “Let them challenge first, and no firing except on my order.”

Almost with the words there came the sharp hail:

“Halt! Who comes there?”

I drew the cape of my riding-jacket closer, so as better to muffle the sound of my voice.

“Friends, of course; who would you expect to meet on this road?”

Fortune seemed with me in the chance answer, for he who had hailed exclaimed:

“Oh! is that you, Brennan?”

There was no time now for hesitancy; here was my cue, and I must plunge ahead, accepting the chances. I ventured it.

“No; Brennan couldn't come. I am here in his place.”

“Indeed! Who are you?”

“Major Wilkie.”

There was a moment's painful pause, in which I could hear my heart throb.

“Wilkie,” repeated the voice, doubtfully. “There is no officer of that name in the Forty-third.”

“Well, there chances to be such an officer on the staff,” I retorted, permitting a trace of anger to appear in my tone, “and I am the man.”

“What the devil is the difference, Hale, just what his name is?” boomed a deeper voice back in the group. “We are not getting up a directory of the Sixth Corps. Of course he's the man Brennan sent, and that is all we've got to look after.”

“Oh, all right, certainly, Major,” returned the first speaker, hastily. “But the night is so cussed black I supposed we must be at least a mile this side of where we were to meet. However, we have the lady here for you all right, and she is anxious enough to get on.”

The lady! Heavens! What odd turn of fortune's wheel was this? The lady! I heard Craig's smothered chuckle, but before I had sufficiently regained control over my own feelings to venture upon a suitable reply, the entire party had drawn forward, the leader pressing so close to my side that I felt safer with my face well shaded.

“Where is your escort, Major?” he asked, and the gruffness of his tone put me instantly on defence.

“Just behind us,” I returned, with affected carelessness, and determined now to play out the game, lady or no lady. I was extremely sorry for her, but the cause outweighed her comfort. “The Sergeant and I rode out ahead when we heard you coming. Where is the lady?”

He glanced around at the group huddled behind him.

“Third on the left.”

“All right, then. Nothing else, I believe”; for I was eager to get away. “Sergeant, just ride in there and lead, out her horse. We will have to be moving, gentlemen, for it is a rough road and a dark night.”

“Beastly,” assented the other, heartily.

I fairly held my breath as Craig rode forward. If one of them should chance to strike a match to light a pipe, or any false movement of Craig's should excite suspicion! If he should even speak, his soft Southern drawl would mean instant betrayal. And how coolly he went at it; with a sharp touch of the spur, causing his jaded horse to exhibit such sudden restlessness as to keep the escort well to one side, while he ranged close up to our unwelcome guest, and laying firm hand upon her horse's bit, led forth to where I waited. It was quickly, nobly done, and I could have hugged the fellow.

“Well, good luck to you, Major, and a pleasant ride. Remember me to Brennan. Deuced queer, though, why he failed to show up on such an occasion as this.”

“He was unfortunate enough to be sent out in the other direction with despatches—good-night, gentlemen.”

It was sweet music to me to listen to their hoof-beats dying rapidly away behind us as we turned back down the dark road, the Sergeant still riding with his one hand grasping the stranger's rein. I endeavored to scan her figure in the blackness, but found the effort useless, as little more than a shadow was visible. Yet it was impressed upon me that she sat straight and firm in the saddle, so I concluded she must be young. Rapidly I reviewed our predicament, and sought for some avenue of escape. If we were only certain as to where we were, we might plan with better prospect of success. The woman? Doubtless she would know, and possibly I might venture to question her without awakening suspicion. Surely the experiment was well worth trying.

“Madam,” I began, seeking to feel my way with caution into her confidence, “I fear you must be quite wearied by your long ride.”

She turned slightly at sound of my voice.

“Not at all, sir; I am merely eager to push on. Besides, my ride has not been a long one, as we merely came from General Sigel's headquarters.”

The voice was pleasantly modulated and refined.

“Ah, yes, certainly,” I stammered, fearful lest I had made a grave mistake. “But really I had supposed General Sigel was at Coultersville.”

“He advanced to Bear Creek yesterday,” she returned quietly. “So you see we had covered scarcely more than three miles when we met. How much farther is it to where Major Brennan is stationed?”

I fear I was guilty of hesitancy, but it was only for a moment.

“I am unable to tell exactly, for, as it chances, I have never yet been in the camp, but I should judge that two hours' riding will cover the distance.”

“Why,” in a tone of sudden surprise, “Captain Hale certainly told me it was all of twenty miles!”

“From Bear Creek?” I questioned eagerly, for it was my turn to feel startled now. “The map barely makes it ten.”

“It is but ten, and scarcely that, by the direct White Briar road, or, at least, so I heard some of the younger officers say; but it seems the Rebel pickets are posted so close to the White Briar that my friends decided it would be unsafe to proceed that way.”

This was news indeed—news so unexpected and startling that I forgot all caution.

“Then what road do they call this?”

She laughed at my evident ignorance, as well as the eagerness of my tone.

“Really, you are a most peculiar guide,” she exclaimed gayly. “You almost convince me that you are lost. Fortunately, sir, out of my vast knowledge of this mysterious region, I am able to enlighten you to some extent. We are now riding due southward along the Allentown pike.”

Craig leaned forward so as to look across her horse's neck to where I rode on the opposite side.

“May I speak a word, sir?” he asked cautiously.

“Certainly, Sergeant; do you make anything out of all this?”

“Yes, sir,” he answered eagerly. “I know now exactly how we missed it, and where we are. The cut-off to the White Briar I spoke to you about this afternoon cannot be more than a hundred yards below here.”

“Ride ahead carefully then, and see if you can locate it. Be cautious; there may be a picket stationed there. We will halt where we are until you return.”

He swung forward his carbine where it would be handy for instant service and trotted ahead into the darkness. The woman's horse, being comparatively fresh and restless, danced a little in an effort to follow, but I restrained him with a light hand on the bit, and for a moment we sat waiting in silence. Then her natural curiosity prompted a question.

“Why is it you seem so anxious to discover this cutoff?”

“We merely desire to take advantage of the more direct road,” I replied somewhat shortly. “Besides, we are much farther to the east than I had supposed, and therefore too close to the lines of the enemy.”

“How strange it is you should not have known!” she exclaimed in a voice of indignant wonder; but as I made no reply she did not venture to speak again.

My thoughts at that moment, indeed, were not with her, although I kept firm hold upon her rein. I was eager to be off, to make up by hard riding the tedious delay of this night's work, and constantly listening in dread for some sounds of struggle down the roadway. But all remained silent until I could dimly distinguish the returning hoof-beats of the Sergeant's horse; and so anxious was I to economize

time that I was already urging our mounts forward when his shadow grew black in front, and he wheeled in at my side.

“No picket there, sir.”

“Very well, Sergeant; when we come to the turn you are to ride a few rods in advance of us, and will set a good pace, for now we must make up for all this lost time.”

I caught the motion of his hand as it was lifted in salute.

“Very well, sir; here is the turn—to your right.”

I could dimly distinguish the opening designated, and as we wheeled into it he at once clapped spurs to his horse and forged ahead. In another moment he had totally disappeared, and as I urged our reluctant mounts to more rapid speed all sound of his progress was instantly lost in the pounding of our own hoofs on the hard road.

It was like riding directly against a black wall, and far from comforting to the nerves, for the path was a strange one, and not too well made. Fortunately the horses followed the curves without mishap, save an occasional awkward stumble amid loose stones, while the high walls of rock on either hand made a somewhat denser shadow where they shut off the lower stars, and thus helped me to guide our progress.

But it was no time for conversation, even had the inclination been mine, for every nerve was now strained to intensity as I spurred on my horse and held tightly to the bridle of the other, almost cursing, as I rode, the unlucky chance which brought us such a burden on a night like this.

CHAPTER IV. — A WOMAN WITH A TEMPER

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I thought the stars grew somewhat brighter as we galloped on, the iron-shod hoofs now and then striking out sudden sparks of yellow flame from the flinty surface of the road; but this may have resulted from the lowering of the rocky barriers on either side, making the arch of sky more clearly visible. The air perceptibly freshened, with a chilly mountain wind beating against our faces and rustling the leaves of the phantom trees that lined the way. The woman rode silently and well. I could make out her figure now, dim and indistinct as the outlines were in that darkness and wrapped in the loose folds of an officer's cloak. She was sitting firm and upright in the saddle; I even marked how, with the ease and grace of a practical horsewoman, she held the reins.

I think we must have been fully an hour at it, riding at no mean pace, and with utter disregard of danger. Although I knew little of where we were, and nothing as to the condition of the path we traversed, yet so complete was my confidence in Craig that I felt no hesitancy in blindly following the pace he set. Then a black shape loomed up before us so suddenly that it was only by a quick effort I prevented a collision. Even as I held my horse poised half in air, I perceived it was Craig who blocked the way.

“What is it, Sergeant?”

“A picket, sir, at the end of the road,” he said quietly.

“I kinder reckoned they'd hev some sort o' guard thar, so I crept up on the quiet ter be sure. The feller helped me out a bit by strikin' a match ter see what time 't was, or I reckon I'd a walked over him in ther dark.”

“Had we better ride him down?” I asked, thinking only how rapidly the night hours were speeding and of the importance of the duty pressing upon us.

“Not with ther woman, sir,” he answered in a low, reproachful voice. “Besides, we never could git through without a shot, an' if by any dern luck it should turn out ter be a cavalry outpost—an' I sorter reckon that's what it is—why, our horses are in no shape fer a hard run. You uns better wait here, sir, an' let me tend ter that soger man quiet like, an' then p'raps we uns kin all slip by without a stirrin' up ther patrol.”

“Well,” I said, reluctantly yielding to what I felt was doubtless the wiser course, and mechanically grasping the rein he held out to me, “go ahead. But be careful, and don't waste any time. If we hear the sound of a shot we shall ride forward under spur.”

“All right, sir, but there 'll be no fuss, fer I know just whar ther fellar is.”

Time seems criminally long when one is compelled to wait in helpless uncertainty, every nerve on strain.

“Hold yourself ready for a sudden start,” I said warningly to my companion. “If there is any noise of a struggle yonder I shall drive in the spurs.”

As I spoke I swung the Sergeant's horse around to my side, where I could control him more readily.

There was no reply from the woman, but I noticed she endeavored to draw together the flapping cape of her cloak, as though she felt chilled by the wind, and her figure seemed to stiffen in the saddle.

“Are you cold?” I questioned, more perhaps to throttle my own nervousness by speech than from better motive.

She shook her head; then, as if thinking better of it, answered lightly:

“The wind appears to find no obstacle in this cloak, but I am not suffering.”

I wrapped the loose rein of Craig's horse about the pommel of my saddle and bent toward her.

“Permit me,” I said; “you probably do not comprehend the intricacies of a cavalry cloak. If I fasten these upper frogs I think it will help to keep out the night air.”

Without protest she permitted me to draw the flapping cloth together and fasten it closer about her throat; but whatever tantalizing curiosity I may have felt to view her face was effectually blocked by the high collar behind which she immediately took refuge.

“I am sure that will be much better; you are very kind.” The words were pleasant enough, yet there was something in both tone and manner that piqued me, and I turned away without speaking.

It came at last—not the sharp flash of a musket cleaving the night in twain, but merely the tall figure of the Sergeant, stealing silently out of the gloom, like a black ghost, and standing at our very horses' heads.

“All clear, sir,” he reported in a matter-of-fact tone. “But we shall hev ter move mighty quiet, fer ther main picket