

My Lady *of the South*



Randall Parrish

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I. Left Wounded on the Field

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I now recall our part in the battle merely in a series of detached pictures, having dull, blank spaces between. Nevertheless, how vividly bright with color each separate scene photographed itself upon the retina of the eye. I remember our battery first going into action along the western edge of the old cemetery, among the billowy graves, the cracked overturned stones; I recall the mass of green leaves, checkered by red blossoms, where the vine clambered over the large monument at one rear and how I entangled my foot in the creepers and nearly fell. I shall never forget the ghastly white face of Rosecran's side, his long brown beard blown backward by force of the wind, as he came furiously spurring up the road, his head bare, his hand pointing forward, screaming out his orders; I remember the wild clang and turmoil as our startled horses plunged to the left, dragging after them the black guns, with muzzles still smoking grimly, on a mad, reckless gallop down into the shelter of a shallow ravine splashing through the running water, and dashing in headlong impetuosity up the sharp incline of the opposite bank. I heard the wild yells of the excited drivers, the blows, the crunching of heavy wheels over the stones; I saw the leap of the caissons, the rush of the men. Panting for breath, stumbling over the rough ground, I raced beside Number Two for the crest, vaguely wondering why Wyatt was lashing his leaders so like a demon. I saw Somers go tumbling forward in a

shapeless heap, and one of the straining wheelers on Number One drop dead in the traces, dragged remorselessly onward by his team-mates. Yet I was there, my hands hard on the spokes, sluing the heavy guns into position, the very instant the released caissons were trotted to the rear down the protecting slope. Then it instantly became all clockwork, mechanism, discipline. I could scarcely distinguish faces or even forms; all was rush, riot, seeming confusion; yet I knew it must be Keane to right of me and Parkhurst at left. A sharp order hurtled into my numbed brain, and I echoed it automatically even as I heaved, the hot perspiration blinding my eyes, the mad lust of the fight throbbing through my veins. With one bound backwards I was at the breech, the slim muzzle deflected downward into the valley. I marked the vague figure of a man, unrecognizable, spring hastily back from the mouth of the gun, crouching down, rammer in hand; over that deadly smooth barrel I caught one glimpse of low tangled bushes, of drifting smoke clouds, of a solid gray mass breaking through, of sunlight shimmering along a front of levelled steel—then I jerked the lanyard, and mingled smoke and flame burst forth. All that followed was pandemonium, rush, roar, leaping, shapeless figures. I could perceive nothing clearly; all I remember was that we were firing canister, the deflected guns leaping madly back with the recoil, growing hot to the hand. I trod on bodies as I toiled; I heard through the stifling volume of smoke, the infernal uproar, a hoarse shouting of unrecognizable orders, the wild scream of a wounded horse, a single mad oath, an agonized voice yelling from behind, "Where in hell is the infantry?" Yet all that I actually realized

then were those distorted black shapes springing back and forth from that gun muzzle, and the lanyard grasped in my hand. That alone was my work, my duty, and I must stand to it until I died. Two years of iron discipline had made me into a machine.

Something burned my shoulder like a sudden spurt of flame; I felt sick from the shock, and clung desperately to the breech to keep from falling; I saw faces here and there amid the brown whirls of smoke, strange, unknown repulsive faces, rendered hideous from the strain of conflict; my gun toppled over, one wheel smashed into splinters; I saw Wyatt turn and run for the rear, and Parkhurst flung backward as though shot from a catapult; I jerked the rammer out of his dead, clutching hands, and began striking fiercely at that crush of gray figures leaping toward me. Then everything went blank, and I pitched over under the wreck.

It was dark when I slowly reopened my eyes, and endeavored to look about, dark and still, except for a faint gleam of distant stars, and the awful gurgling of some desperately wounded man lying not far away. My head throbbed feverishly from pain, and my right side ached horribly as I first attempted to move my body. Above me was the black breech of the gun, and my extended hand touched the single wheel upholding it, the spokes ragged from splinters. It hurt me so desperately to turn over that I remained motionless for a long time, staring straight up at the sky, listening intently for each sound, and endeavoring to think. In a measure the situation soon became sufficiently clear—that fierce charge of the enemy had reached us

unchecked, and we had lost the guns. Of this there could be no doubt; but what more? Had we also lost the battle?

How deadly still the night was; not a shot echoing anywhere, not a footstep, not a voice; only that awful gurgling breathing yonder to the left. One of my feet pressed against a body, and I moved it carefully, although even this slight action resulted in a sharp twinge of pain. I could perceive another form huddled in a shapeless heap against the wheel, and, as my hand reached out groping toward the right, it touched an ice-cold face. Someway my ordinarily reckless nerve had totally deserted me, and I drew back shuddering, a nameless fear clutching at my heart. I was afraid to ascertain the truth. Had I been badly injured? Was I crippled for life? To my mind that would have been far worse than death, and had ever been my dread in battle. Now I feared the reality had reached me. At length, mustering sufficient courage for the effort, my teeth clinched in final determination to know the worst, I endeavored to feel along my side where the twinges of pain seemed most severe, but only to discover my rough woollen shirt stiff from congealed blood. My lip, were dry and cracked, my tongue parched and swollen. Suddenly, in the stillness, I distinguished the sound of some one approaching, and sank down again, motionless, listening.

They came slinking toward me from out the night much as jackals might, creeping along from body to body, mumbling to each other as they groped around in the darkness, occasionally lifting their heads to listen like hunted wild beasts. I recognized them instantly as the scourge of the battlefield: human scavengers, foul vultures,

whatever uniform they might wear to hide their crime, midnight robbers of the dead. I lay there silent, almost breathless from the clutch of sudden terror, in my covert beneath the dismantled gun, while they swiftly rifled the pockets of that shapeless, hideous thing upheld by the wheel, they saw me lying there plainly enough, but nearer at hand were victims far easier of approach, and so they slunk growlingly past, leaving me unmolested. Yet I distinguished enough of their profane speech to render the situation clear. Our army had been pressed relentlessly back, driven pell-mell across the river in disorderly retreat and the victorious forces of the Confederacy held the field. I stared up at the pitiless stars, perspiration beading my forehead, my teeth clinched from despair and pain. With the first coming of another dawn details would search the field to collect the wounded; they would discover me lying there helpless, and hold me prisoner. A single shot rang out far to my right and the black figure of one of those skulking vultures went slinking past on a run, stumbling in his haste over the dead bodies. Already sentries diligently watched, and with the coming of daylight the Confederate burial parties would be busy.

The very sound of that distant musket shot served to arouse me to action. Slowly, and with no little pain, I succeeded in creeping forth from beneath the gun shadow, and sat up. Perhaps my wounds were not really serious; I might be merely dazed from the blow on the head, weakened and fevered by loss of blood. My side still throbbed severely, it is true, yet my limbs were intact, and I managed to draw myself erect by grasping the spokes of

the wheel, until I finally stood there faint and trembling. Nevertheless I realized my strength was coming back in response to movement, a fresh determination taking possession of my mind. I felt ready to endeavor, provided there remained anything to endeavor for. And was there not? The Federal army could not be very far away; they would have rallied, and reformed their shattered lines by now; those bronzed fighting men I knew so well, as eager as ever to redeem themselves from the bitter sting of defeat. I must endeavor to join them, not lie here to run the risk of capture on the morrow. There would be some hiding-place near by into which I could crawl before the revealing dawn came; far better a long day of suffering and hunger than months, perhaps years, of hopeless imprisonment. Swaying weakly on my feet, I grasped the gun, endeavoring to peer about through the darkness. I could recall so little of the surroundings—there was the black shadow of a wood to my front, but the river would surely be in the opposite direction and the narrow stream we had crossed while coming into action must be yonder to the left. I determined to creep down there anyway, for I must have water; my lips and throat were so dry I could not swallow. I made the endeavor on hands and knees, keeping well aloof from the numerous bodies, and crouching low as possible to escape the observation of any sentry near at hand. Thus I finally arrived at the edge of the bank, where the descent was steep, and slid silently down. Once beside the narrow stream I dipped my face in the running water, and drank greedily.

The cooling draught yielded me renewed life, and energy. Nothing about stirred; there was no sound excepting the

murmur of the shallow stream at my feet, and the faint stir of leaves overhead. I tore aside the rough woollen artillery shirt I wore and attempted to explore the wound in my side: it was a jagged, ugly gash, evidently torn by a splinter, but not dangerously deep, although it had bled profusely. I washed it out as best I might with the cold water, gritting my teeth to the sharp pain, and finally fastening a silk handkerchief over the wound to prevent chafing. Some object moved along the opposite bank, a short distance down stream, and I crouched lower within the shadow, watching intently. But I saw nothing to alarm me further, even the slight sound of movement dying away. Suddenly I seemed to recall to memory the vague glimpse of a distant house far down the valley, half revealed as our battery dashed forward into position. Assuredly I had actually seen this; it was no dream. There would undoubtedly be found opportunity for concealment among the out-buildings, provided I could attain to their shelter before daybreak; possibly for food also if any negroes yet remained there. Every inch of this open territory would be diligently searched for the wounded, and my sole chance for escape lay somewhere without the immediate zone of battle. I rubbed my forehead, endeavoring to recall more vividly the faint impression. It must have been two, perhaps three, miles distant, a large white house, almost completely surrounded by trees, and barely showing down the narrow gap of the valley. If I followed the stream I could scarcely go astray.

I struggled to my feet, experiencing a thrill of relief at the subsidence of pain, and the noticeable return of strength to

my limbs. I was less seriously injured than I had at first believed, and this knowledge added immeasurably to my stock of hope and courage. Of Irish blood, ardent, combative, the very sense of surrounding danger became a stimulant. I stole silently down beneath the gloom of the bank shadow for possibly a hundred yards, scanning the opposite shore with anxious eyes, yet perceiving nothing calculated to alarm. Then I crept up to the level above, discovering there the faint traces of a road, which I followed, walking forward cautiously. There were numerous fires glowing redly some distance to the right, across the ploughed field, and I could hear a vigorous hammering on iron. Once I sank down into a shallow depression as three shadowy horsemen rode silently past, and, a little beyond, cautiously circled a broken-down army wagon, with a man sleeping peacefully underneath. Then the road led downward into the broadening valley, running through a black fringe of trees, the gloom beneath the interlaced branches so dense I could scarcely discover the way, tripping continually over stumps and roots. It was a long two miles before I attained to the fragment of an enclosing rail fence, and could perceive the dark outlined shadow of a large shed beyond. However, the exercise of the tramp had served to strengthen my muscles, while the attendant excitement had completely swept away the cobwebs from my brain, the cool night acting as a tonic. I had become a man once more, energetic, resourceful; no longer the wounded, aimless thing that had crept, weak, dizzy, and despairing, from beneath the wrecked gun. I took a long

breath, peering about through the darkness, and then cautiously crept underneath the rails into the shed shadow.

II. Which I See and Hear

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THE faintest tinge of approaching dawn was already in the sky, as yet scarcely perceptible, but enabling my eyes, trained by the long night vigil, to distinguish the dim outlines of my immediate surroundings. Slightly beyond the ramshackle old shed, in the protection of which I crouched, were visible several small log huts, closely grouped together, undoubtedly the negro quarters of the plantation. These appeared deserted, the door of the nearest standing wide open. A low picket fence, originally painted white, but now sadly demoralized, one section lying flat on the ground, served to separate this portion of the estate from the house lot, while a thick hedge of trees thoroughly concealed the mansion itself from view. But the smouldering embers of a camp-fire glowed sullenly directly in front of the covered entrance, and I could both perceive and hear the restless movement of horses tied to the veranda rail. Creeping cautiously forward as far as the fence barrier would permit, I was enabled to distinguish the shadowy figure of a sentry wearily pacing back and forth in front of the broad porch. Beyond all question some Confederate general officer had very sensibly appropriated the place for his headquarters, while his personal escort were encamped within the yard.

I made my way slowly back, all immediate hope of obtaining food dismissed from my mind. Greatly as I felt the need, the risk was too desperate. I had far better seek some safe corner within the old shed, sleep there quietly

throughout the day if possible, and then try my luck he next night. Finding the door ajar, I crept in, discovering the interior well crowded with various implements of farm machinery and other odds and ends, among the intricacies of which I slowly picked a path back into the farthest corner. Here a variety of empty barrels and boxes offered a fairly secure hiding-place, and I crawled into a niche next the wall, and thankfully snuggled down, watching the advancing daylight slowly turn the rough interior gray. Almost before I realized the possibility I was sound asleep.

Some unusual noise aroused me, yet when I first opened my eyes I possessed no conception as to how long I had been sleeping. It was still bright daylight, however, and I could perceive a bit of sunlight streaming in through a crack of the western side wall. For a moment or two I lay there puzzled, hearing nothing, and unable immediately to determine what it was which had awakened me so suddenly. Then I distinguished voices conversing apparently not more than ten feet distant. Quietly as both parties spoke, their voices so subdued, indeed, as to render the words indistinguishable even at that distance and in the silence, I was enabled to determine the speakers to be a young white woman and a negro. There was no mistaking the intonation of the latter, but the other voice was so low, vibrant with the soft idiom of the South, that I lifted myself cautiously, peering out from behind the concealing boxes, in order that I might thus assure myself she was really white. The negro stood with his back toward me, a short, stockily built fellow, but bent somewhat by years and hard toil in the fields, his wool showing a dingy gray beneath the brim of his hat. By

every outward token he was an old-time slave, to whom freedom would possess no vital meaning.

Just beyond his broad, bent shoulders appeared the features of a young girl, a most piquant face, marked now by trouble and perplexity, yet clearly reflecting a nature in which all the joy of life naturally predominated. I caught merely a glimpse, for I dared not brave disclosure, yet so deeply did that single glance impress me that, had I never been again privileged to see her, I could not have entirely effaced the memory. Scarcely more than eighteen years of age, rather slight of figure, still retaining the form of girlhood, less than medium height, standing firmly erect, every movement displaying unconscious grace and vigor, her face bright with intelligence, animated by every passing emotion, her cheeks flushed with health, her hair of darkest brown, fluffed carelessly back from off the low, broad forehead, her eyes the deepest unfathomable gray-blue, oddly shadowed by long lashes densely black, her lips full, red, and arched, speaking softly the pleasant idiom of the Southland. For a single moment she appeared to me a vision, fulfilling my dreams of young womanhood; then I awoke to the reality—that in fair rounded flesh and pure red blood, she stood there, an ideal surely yet no less a living, breathing fact. My ears finally caught the words of the slave:

"But shorely, Miss Jean, I reckon I don't git dis jist straight, somehow. Why should n't ye do it, honey, when yo' pa an Massa George both want ye to? Dat's what I don't understan' nohow. Don't ye want ter marry Massa Calvert?"

The delicately arched mouth drew down severely, the blue-gray eyes drooping behind lowered lashes.

"I only wish I knew, Joe; I sure wish I knew," her soft voice filled with doubt. "I reckon I always expected to have to do this some day, but that never seemed so bad when it was a long way off. But now they insist it must be to-night, and—and it sure scares me."

"But don't ye love him, honey?"

The girl's eyes opened wide, gazing straight into the black, troubled face fronting her.

"I just don't know, Joe, that's a fact; but—but I'm afraid not. He is just the same to me now as he was when we were children and played together. Sometimes I don't mind being with him, and then there are other times when I am actually afraid to have him near me. I don't think I ever really care whether he is here or not, and—and I do get awfully tired of him when he talks to me; he—he treats me like a little girl, and acts so superior. It almost makes me hate him." She put her hands up to her head, rumpling up the brown hair, a little pucker showing across her forehead. "He has been away most of the last two years, and—and, well, I haven't missed him much! I know I have been lots happier here left alone."

"Ye shore have been happy 'nough," broke in the negro, soberly. "But ye shorely can't live yere alone no more for a while, Miss Jean. 'T ain't no laughing matter, far as I can see. De sojers was yere most ebery day, an' blame me if I can see which side was de worst, de Yanks or de Confeds. Dey steal, an' dey git drunk, an' dey fight, an' it wan't no fit place no longer fer any young gal to be all alone by herse'f, wid no one but an ol' nigger to look after her. It could be did, Missus, when dis country was peaceable like, but now de

Lord only knows what's goin' to happen next. Dis yere house would have been burnt to de groun' long afore dis if General Johnston had n't been a-living yere, an' now he's gone. Ye know all dat, Miss Jean, an' it shore looks best to me what yo' pa an' Massa George wants ye fer to do."

"Do you like Calvert Dunn, Joe?"

"Well, maybe I don't exactly like him. Miss Jean," scratching the gray wool under the edge of his hat, and evidently puzzled how to answer diplomatically. "Ye see, he never done treated dis nigger ver' nice, dat's a fact, fer shore. But I reckon it am just his way, an' he don't really mean nothin' by it, nohow. Anyhow he shore t'inks an almighty lot o' ye, Miss Jean, an' ye'd shore be perfectly safe where dey all live at Fairview, while yo' pa and Massa George was away a-fightin' agin de Yanks."

"The armies may come to Fairview yet, and there is no one there but old Judge Dunn and Lucille."

"An' ye don't believe nuffin' of de kind, honey. Dere's half de field han's left dere; some of dem niggers don't know der is any war. Dem armies never will git over de mountains nohow, an' if dey does, de ol' judge got a pow'ful lot o' fight left in him yit. I'd like to see de Yankee sojer what sets fut to his house, I shore would. It was de best place for ye to go to, child, anywhere in dese parts."

The girl sank down on a box, burying her face in her hands, and the negro stood helplessly looking at her, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other. Finally he blurted out,

"Ye shore ye don't want to marry Massa Calvert, Miss Jean?"

"Oh, really I don't know, Joe, I don't know," the soft voice trembling, the hands clasped. "I feel so different about it at some times than I do at others. I try to make myself realize that it is a duty, and that I am ungrateful not to yield to the wish of my people. Then occasionally he is so nice to me that I feel ashamed not to treat him better. But now, now when it comes to a final decision, and I know my whole future depends upon what I do, I experience a positive aversion for Calvert Dunn. I cannot express it rightly, but I possess no real confidence in the man; he does n't seem true to me, or manly. Besides, I feel as if I was being sold; as if my choice had nothing whatever to do with the matter. Choice!" She sprang to her feet with girlish impulsiveness, one hand pressing her temple. "I have been given no choice; they treat me like a child; they simply tell me I do not know my own mind; that they are the better judges as to my future happiness. But I am the one who will have to live with him, Joe, and put up with his tantrums; and he has tantrums; I already know him well enough for that. And I have n't a soul to turn to, only you; I am all alone. They won't even talk to me, except to give their orders."

"Ye pore little gal," and the old negro's hand was unconsciously stroking her ruffled hair. "I shore wish I could help you, Miss Jean, I shore does, honey, but yo' pa an' Massa George am pow'ful hard men to deal wid when dey once git deir minds sot, an' dey am bofe sot on dis all right. Dey would jist about skin dis nigger alive if he kicked up any muss. I certainly don't tink dat Massa Calvert was onywhere near good 'nough for ye, Miss Jean, an' no more does Diana. We done talked dat over more nor once, but I don't pertend

to set up my judgment agin yo' pa an' Massa George, honey. I reckon as how dey knows what am bes', an' dese am pow'ful dangerous times for a gal to live yere all alone. Was Massa Calvert comin' over yere to-night?"

"Yes; there is some early movement contemplated, and that has compelled them to force this matter. He has secured leave for thirty-six hours—just long enough to be married and carry me across the mountains to Fairview."

"An' what 'bout Diana an' me. Miss Jean? It's shore goin' to be mighty lonely yere widout ye, honey."

She clasped the gnarled black hand between her soft palms.

"I know that, Joe, and there is very little for you to look after since that Yankee cavalry company ran off all our stock; but I reckon you'll have to stay just the same, and keep the house until some of us get back again."

"Den ye're really a-goin', Miss Jean?"

"Yes, Joe, I'm going; there is no choice left me. They insist it is for the best, and have made all arrangements. Why, General Johnston's chaplain is waiting there in the house now, and Calvert is expected as soon as it is dark. I am almost ready to run away, if I only knew somewhere I could run to. I have n't any defence, even, for I do not know a thing against Calvert Dunn; so I've got to marry him," her voice choked, her handclasp tightening. "And—and, Joe, I know I'll be miserable, for I believe he is a cowardly brute."

"Ye does, honey?" in unmitigated astonishment at this sudden outburst.

"Yes, I do, although I hardly know why. I have not even dared to whisper it to myself before. It has been little mean,

contemptible things no true man would ever be guilty of. Look how he lashed you across the face with his riding-whip; look how he shot that poor dog because it failed to retrieve to his liking; look how he sneered at me for binding up the poor thing's wounds. Such things show what he is, rather than his soft words and outward veneer of courtesy. Besides, what real man would ever insist on a girl's marrying him when he knows she would almost give her life to escape?"

"Does Massa Calvert know dat?"

"He does, if he understands the English language. I told him plainly enough, and he only laughed. He said I was a child, and didn't know my own mind; then he endeavored to frighten me. Oh, Joe, Joe, if I only had some one I could go to for advice! But no one will even listen to me seriously. There does n't seem anything left me but to marry this man. Father and George both think so highly of him, they will not hear a word spoken against him. I simply had to talk with some one, Joe, and let out my heart; that's why I came out here to you. Oh, I know you can't help me, but you're sorry for me, ain't you, old Joe? It helps just to know some one understands, and is sorry. I tell you, all the slaves in the South are not black, and I reckon it's just as hard to be born free, and then sold, as any other way. I might have learned to like him if he had only come to me as a man should, striving to win me for himself, and treating me as if I possessed a mind and heart of my own; but no, he ignored me entirely, and appealed to papa and George, telling them of the danger I was in here, and of how valuable the two estates would be if joined together. That's the way they

have forced me along to the sacrifice—I'm sold for the price of the land."

"Ye pore little girl."

"Say poor little fool, rather," and she sprang to her feet, her cheeks burning with swift indignation. "I should have fought it, fought it; but all that is too late now. I am going, Joe; there is no use talking any longer, and so I am going to smile and look happy, and no one but you will ever know that I am not. You dear old black thing, you've been more like a father to me than any one else ever has. And I am going to have you and Aunt Diana with me at Fairview just as soon as I can. It will be a comfort just to have you there to look at when my heart seems like breaking. And he'll break it, Joe; I know he will, for he cares for no one but himself."

She was gone, vanishing almost as a shadow might, leaving the speechless black staring after her, his outstretched hands trembling as from palsy. Slowly his head drooped forward, and for some moments he remained thus, the picture of utter despair.

"Pore little lamb! pore little lamb!" he kept saying over and over. "An' she am right 'bout it too; dat Massa Calvert am not de kind fer Miss Jean."

Then he passed out also, and I was left alone within the shed.

III. A Military Secret

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MY interest in the situation thus oddly disclosed, awakened very largely, I must admit, by the extremely attractive personality of Miss Jean, and the deep, pathetic appeal in her soft voice, left me momentarily forgetful of my own unpleasant condition and requirements. Both parties to the dialogue had disappeared before I realized any personal necessity for action. By that time it was too late, as I durst not follow the retreating negro out into the open sunlight; nor did I feel, judging from the bitterness with which both he and the girl had referred to the Yankees, that this particular colored brother would prove very much inclined to assist one wearing my uniform. What, then, could be done? I reclined against a packing-case, with brain rested by sleep, reviewing the situation, and endeavoring to plan out some safe method of procedure. That I could in any way aid the young woman out of her present difficulty would have been a preposterous thought; interested I was, yet I had sufficient trouble on hand of my own. My wounds by this time gave me very little concern, and my mind was sufficiently clear and active. Except for some accident, escape ought not to prove so very difficult, although it was true I should be compelled to travel through the night. largely by instinct, knowing almost nothing regarding roads, direction, or where Confederate pickets might be encountered. Still ordinary precaution ought to yield me passage, and the river itself would be a sufficient guide. If I only possessed some

semblance of a Confederate uniform, the adventure would become much more simple, for in the confusion which must have followed the late engagement, there would be many scattered soldiers of all arms, wandering about, seeking their lost commands.

However, the first important and vital consideration was food, but that, as well as all else, must wait the coming of darkness. The sun had already disappeared behind the grove of trees in the west, and very soon, beneath the gathering gray of twilight, I ventured to creep forth from my covert and peer cautiously out through the partially opened door. There was a fire burning in the kitchen of the big plantation house, a heavily built negress bustling about busily within, her robust shadow clearly revealed by the reflection of the flames. This was probably Diana, and her affection for the Yankees was not apt to differ very widely from those of the others.

I must have watched her for fully ten minutes, unable to decide what I had better do, and becoming hungrier every second. The night shadows constantly deepened, and no alarming sound reached me from any direction. Finally Diana came forth on the back steps, holding a dish of something smoking hot in her hands, and began calling shrilly for Joe. There was no response. Muttering continually to herself, the negress passed across to the second cabin and, disappearing for a moment, came forth again empty-handed, and returned to her labors. Evidently Joe's supper had been carried to him, but the important question in my mind just then was, where was Joe? If he had been there he would certainly have answered her call. If not there, then

this was my one opportunity. I was far too desperate to hesitate long, and, in the thickening shadows, stole swiftly forward to the cabin which the negress had visited.

The door was latched, but had no lock; there was no sign of occupancy within, and a moment later I came hurriedly forth with what had been intended for Joe's supper, and bore it safely back, still hot and savory, to the shelter of the shed. It was a rasher of bacon and corn bread, ample in amount, admirably cooked, and I certainly enjoyed it to the very last crumb. At the close I hid the dish carefully and, now recklessly comfortable, felt amply prepared to face the adventures of the night.

There was no sound of horses' hoofs stamping in the front yard, nor could I perceive any sign of a pacing sentinel before the house. The guard of the night previous, whatever might be the cause, had very evidently been removed. I hardly know now why I first ventured in that direction, yet I skirted the low garden fence, where the night shadows were most dense, until I found myself crouching close against the latticed veranda. I stopped then suddenly enough, perceiving the figures of three men seated just beyond, evidently enjoying a quiet smoke after their evening meal. I might not have noticed their presence at all, but for the red glow on their cigars, as no one of them spoke for several moments. Indeed, they remained silent and motionless for so long that I became nervous under the strain, half inclined to believe their dim outlines some illusion of the night. I had even drawn back cautiously for a foot or two, intending to make off down the road, when a peculiar deep voice gave

utterance to a question, which as instantly stopped me with eagerly beating heart.

"Your news is not exactly clear to me, Chaplain. I understand you to say the plan is for McDermott's Division to take to the Minersville road at midnight, the others to follow along parallel lines hourly until daybreak?"

"Those are certainly Johnston's orders, Colonel Denslow. I distinctly heard them from his own lips, and was also present when his aides were sent out to the various division commanders."

"But nothing whatever has reached me, and we should naturally be third in line to follow McDermott, from our present position."

"Beyond doubt the orders to move are already at your headquarters. An orderly may be tearing down the road even now to recall you to camp. Your regiment is stationed to the left, just beyond the creek, is it not?"

"Yes," and the speaker, a tall, slender, yet broad-shouldered man, rose impatiently to his feet and gazed off in the direction indicated. "The Tenth Georgia Cavalry, Coulter's Brigade. I had no expectation of so hurried a movement. The Yankees are safely across the river entrenching, and all reports reaching us looked like a week's reorganization, and then a direct attack on their position. What is Johnston up to?"

"A flank movement in force, before they can complete their entrenchments. He believes our army in fighting mood, encouraged by victory, and in far better condition than that of the enemy. He proposes to strike suddenly on their right flank, and crumple them up. He will leave all his camp-fires

burning, both to-night and to-morrow night, so as to deceive the Federal scouts, fling his troops swiftly across the river before dawn Wednesday, and make the attack at daybreak. He expects to be in their camp before they are aware he has changed position. The success of the movement depends entirely on the promptness of the division commanders, and the condition of the roads. Our cavalry scouts report the plan perfectly feasible."

Colonel Denslow paced nervously back and forth across the broad veranda, the red glow of his cigar lighting up his face and revealing a closely trimmed gray beard.

"This sudden arrangement leaves me in rather a bad predicament," he confessed at last, pausing suddenly. "You know, of course, what you are here for to-night, Mordaunt, although I have not explained all the details; it is to marry my only daughter, Jean, to Lieutenant Calvert Dunn. The present condition of the country, and the danger involved in leaving a young girl here alone and unprotected, has hurried our arrangements, and prevented any formality. But Dunn has been detailed on Johnston's staff, and the Lord only knows where he may be now, if all you say is true. According to our plans he ought to have been here an hour ago, but no doubt he is riding with orders, cursing his luck with every step of his horse, and utterly unable to send us any word to account for the delay. And what, under these circumstances, can I or my son do? Any minute an orderly may come dashing down the west road. That will mean we must depart at once and leave Jean Denslow here alone, absolutely alone, with only an old negro and his wife on the place. Besides, if Johnston succeeds in his plan, and routs

the Yankees by striking them on the right flank, this plantation is likely to be in the direct line of their retreat. Great God, man! do you comprehend all that will mean to the girl? Here alone, defenceless, in the track of a beaten army! By Heaven, I would risk my commission rather than desert her to such a fate."

There was a hush, during which I could clearly distinguish the heavy breathing of the three men. Then the softer voice of the Chaplain asked,

"But what particular difference at this time would her marriage to Dunn make?"

"He intended to take her immediately, as his wife, across the mountains to Fairview. It is not very far away, yet so situated as to be out of the track of both armies, in an isolated valley among the hills. His father and sister are there. They would have ridden the distance to-night, and by to-morrow morning she would be in perfect safety."

"But why not have your son ride with her to this haven of refuge? He is here by permission of his superior officer, no doubt, and, if he started before any orders of recall reached him, no harm could result. By hard riding he might even be back to take his command in time for the proposed attack; and surely Lieutenant Dunn's people would receive and protect your daughter, even if the marriage had not already taken place."

The younger man, seemingly little more than a stripling, was on his feet now also, flinging his cigar into the grass.

"I could do it, father," he exclaimed eagerly. "Jean rides as well as any man, and I could be back in Minersville in forty-eight hours. Shall I go?"

"If necessary, yes, George, but we will wait here until the last possible moment in the hope that Dunn may appear. My heart is set on the consummation of this marriage. Chaplain; it has been the cherished plan of our families ever since the birth of Calvert and Jean, not only because it will unite us all more closely, who have been neighbors more than a hundred years, but because our plantations touch each other, and will form one magnificent property after the war. Jean, I regret to say, has been the one obstacle in the way heretofore—she is somewhat headstrong and filled with girlish notions—but she has at last consented to do as we wish, and I am actually afraid to permit her any opportunity for reconsideration. She is a strange girl, and I never know what her mood may be. Once the ceremony is over I shall feel safe, but not before. George, you had better see that the horses are saddled and ready; we will wait for Dunn till the last possible moment. If the orderly comes first, my boy, you are to ride away with your sister before you hear his orders. Have your horses tied there in the fence corner and Jean dressed for the journey."

I slowly drew back from my position as George disappeared around the opposite side of the house. I was a soldier, and had become possessed of an important military secret, which in every sense of my duty compelled me to bear to Rosecrans if possible. The slightest delay might prove disastrous; yet how was I to accomplish the work in time to be of value? I was well within the Confederate lines, on foot and a fugitive, my ragged uniform sure to betray me to any challenging sentinel. I comprehended something now of the lay of the land, the situation of the two armies, and

the direction of the contemplated movement. If I only possessed a horse and a Confederate uniform, I might discover a passage and arrive in time with my message of warning to prevent a grave disaster. Those horses tied to the fence corner! George was there, and probably the negro Joe as well, and they were so close to the house the slightest sound of a struggle would be heard instantly. That would mean four against one, the four armed. The orderly! Ay, there was a possible chance he would come riding down that road from the west alone, unsuspecting danger. And he would surely come, if what the Chaplain said was true. Any moment now we might hear the hoof-beats of his horse echoing through the darkness. It was a black, cloudy night, intensely still, and I would need to get some distance away before any attack on the speeding messenger would be safe. Yet, could I once succeed in waylaying him alone, I felt little (ear as to the results of the encounter. I was young, strong, long inured to fighting, and besides would possess all the advantage of surprise. I reached my decision as a soldier, with no other consideration in mind than the plain duty which this emergency brought. The training and discipline of years all combined to urge me forward in forgetfulness of self.

I crawled back along the fence shadow, grasping, as I passed, a loosened picket for a weapon, and pausing long enough behind the shed to fashion it so as to fit my hand. Then I walked boldly down the road to the westward. The gloom of the night was so dense I had to feel the ruts with my feet, yet I had travelled that way before through the darkness, and remembered some of the peculiarities of the