LOVE UNDER FIRE

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Civil War Novel

e-artnow, 2022
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EAN 4066338125248

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CHAPTER I

BETWEEN THE LINES

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I had drifted slowly across the river, clinging with one arm thrown over a log, expecting each moment the musket of some startled picket would spit red through the dark, and scarcely daring to guide my unwieldy support by the slightest movement of hand in the water. The splash of motion might mean death in an instant, for keen eyes, sharpened by long night vigils, were on the stream, and those who had ventured the deed before me had failed utterly. Yet the southern bank remained silent, so black I could scarcely discern its vaguest outlines, while, by good fortune, the sweep of the current served me almost as well as a pair of oars. Thus, trusting to luck, and without exerting a muscle, I finally came to a full stop on a narrow spit of sand, so far out in the stream I could scarcely touch bottom, until the sweep of the current drifted my log inward, and thus left me flat on the wet sand facing the bank, the wood-covered crest, as revealed dimly against the slightly lighter sky, appearing almost to overhang the water.

This shadow served me well, yet did not invite to recklessness. There were surely pickets posted along here, because the gleam of camp-fires had been plainly visible during the early evening from the bluffs opposite, but there was nothing observable from where I lay, my head cautiously uplifted, peering across the log. It was several

minutes before I even ventured to creep up the sand-spit into the denser blackness of the over-hanging bank, but, once there safely, I discovered the drift had landed me at the mouth of a narrow gully, apparently a mere crevice in the rocky shore-line. It was the occasional downpour of water after rain which had caused the accumulation of debris on which my log had grounded. At times the dry gulch would hold a roaring torrent, although now it was no more than a gash in the bank.

I was not altogether certain within half a mile of where I was, but this made small difference, so far as my present purpose was concerned. The lines of the enemy were extended from the upper ford east as far as Sailor Springs, and I was certainly well within those limits, probably somewhat to the right of the centre. However, that was a minor detail, as it made little difference where I succeeded in penetrating the cordon of pickets, so long as I returned with the information sought. If I had, through mere chance, discovered a weak spot, then God was good.

My heart beat rapidly as I stared blindly up into the black recess of that narrow defile, listening intently for the slightest unusual sound which would indicate the near presence of anything human. It was caution, not fear, however, which caused me to breathe quickly--my sole, overpowering dread being that I might have to return, and face Sheridan with a report of failure. I preferred anything rather than that. I thought of his stern eyes as he looked me over in the late sunlight of the evening before; the sharp rasp in his voice, as he said, "Geer, this is no boy's work," and the quiet, confident reply of my captain, "Galesworth

will do it for you, General, if any one can." The memory of that scene seemed to stiffen my nerves; I had to make good here in the dark, alone, and so, on hands and knees, I began creeping slowly up underneath the tangle of bushes. The path was steep and stony, so densely overhung with branches as to appear like a tunnel. There were loose stones which I had to guard against dislodging, and the drier leaves rustled as I pressed them, aside. This endeavor to avoid noise made progress slow.

I must have been fully ten minutes, thus endeavoring to break through, seeing and hearing nothing alarming, yet constantly feeling an odd premonition of danger, when I finally attained the top of the bank, perhaps twenty feet back from the river, and looked out through a slight fringe of bushes. The first thing noticeable was the dull red glow of a fire, nearly extinguished, some few yards in advance. The little gleam of light thrown out as the wind stirred the smouldering embers served to reveal the dirty flap of a tent set up at the edge of a grove of saplings, and a horse, standing with lowered head, sharply outlined against the canvas. I could even perceive the deep-seated cavalry saddle, and catch the shine of accoutrements. All these details came to me in a sudden flash of observation, for, almost simultaneously with my rising above the edge of the bank, my ears distinguished voices conversing, and so closely at hand as to almost unnerve me. I gripped a root between my fingers to keep from falling, and held on motionless, striving to locate the speakers. They were to my left, scarcely four yards distant, yet so dimly revealed against the background of leaves I could tell nothing of their

rank--merely that one was short, and heavily built, while the other, a much taller, and seemingly more nervous man, was wrapped in a long cavalry cape. It was his voice speaking, a rather peculiar voice, as though he possessed some slight impediment of speech.

"Do not look at it in that way, General," he protested earnestly. "I am not opposing your plan, but merely urging the extreme peril of the undertaking--"

"Human life cannot be considered at such a time, Hardy," broke in the other warmly. "The cause for which we battle, the duty confronting us, outweighs all else. A life may be sacrificed, but that single life may save thousands."

"True; very true. I am sufficiently a soldier to realize that. Yet what you propose seems an impossibility. Two aides have endeavored this service already, and failed, their lives forfeited. Others stand ready to go the moment the word is spoken, but what possibility is there of success, that any volunteer could get through alive?"

"Practically none," admitted the other, his deep voice more grave. "There is only one in whom I feel the slightest hope, Hardy; that is why I have sent for you. I naturally hesitate to say so, but I believe the moment has now come which demands this sacrifice. You recall the offer of service made us last night, Major?"

The man addressed took a single step backward, one hand flung up, as though warding off a blow.

"You--" he stammered, "can you mean Billie?"

"Yes; the South can have no more urgent need than now. These despatches must reach Beauregard, and I must have the report from Carroll. If the latter is not already in

Beauregard's possession, then it must be sought even in the enemy's camp. Every hour of delay adds to our danger. If Carroll is dead I must know it; if he has gained the information he was sent after, then I must have it. I can stand this waiting no longer--there is too much at stake. As you say two men have already fallen endeavoring to pierce the lines, and I doubt if there is a soldier in my command who could succeed. Billie might have a chance, and I know no one else who would--do you? I sent for you to gain your consent, and I ask it, Major, in the name of the South."

The taller man remained silent, his hands clasped, and head sunk on his breast. Finally he glanced up into the face of the other, with shoulders thrown back.

"No Hardy ever yet failed in duty," he said sternly, "nor will one now. Where are the papers?"

"In my tent, but the bearer will be safer not to come here for them. Even my orderly may be a spy. An aide shall deliver them at Three Corners in an hour--will that be too early?"

"No; which aide? There should be no mistake."

"There will be none. I will send Lieutenant West, and he shall act as escort as far as the outer pickets; beyond that--"

"Wit and good luck, of course. What is the word?"

"'Cumberland'; now listen, and repeat exactly what I say to Billie." His voice fell into lower, more confidential tones, and, listen as I would, I could catch only now and then a word, or detached sentence. "The upper road"; "yes, the wide detour"; "coming in by the rear will be safer"; "that isn't a bad story"; "he's a tartar to lie too"; "just the thing, Major, just the thing"; then, "But that's enough for the

outlines; details must take care of themselves. Let's waste no more time; there are only four more hours of darkness."

The two men separated hurriedly with a warm hand-clasp, the stocky general entering the tent, and brusquely addressing some one within, while the major swung into the saddle of the waiting horse, and driving in the spurs rode swiftly away, instantly disappearing.

There was no doubt as to my own duty. By the merest accident I had already become possessed of most important information. What it was all about was still only guess-work, yet it was evidently enough a most serious matter. I could better serve the cause of the Union by intercepting these despatches, and running down this spy, than by carrying out Sheridan's original instructions. And it seemed to me I could do it; that I already knew a way in which this might be accomplished. Our army had held all this ground only a few months before, and I recalled clearly to mind the exact spot where the aide was to meet the despatch-bearer. The "Three Corners"; surely that must be where the roads met at the creek ford, with the log meeting house perched on the hill above. It would be to the west of where I was, and not more than two miles distant.

CHAPTER II

AFTER THE DESPATCH-BEARER

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I was cool-headed, and accustomed to this species of adventure, or I should never have been there. Yet, I confess my nerves tingled as I crept cautiously forward through the fringe of bushes, seeking the exact spot where the major had disappeared down what must have been some species of road. There were sentinels posted about the tent; I saw the silhouette of one, and heard several voices conversing gruffly as I slunk past, yet could not definitely locate these last in the gloom. There was a little row of tents--three or four--back of the larger one occupied by the general; but these were unlighted and silent. I crept past them unobserved, emerging into a more open space, where my groping hands encountered wheel-tracks, and the beaten earth of a road.

This apparently ran nearly east and west, as I recalled direction, and I turned to the right, bending low in the shadows, and advancing at a crouching run. Seemingly there was nothing to obstruct progress. The noise of stomping and restless horses reached me from the left, evidence of a nearby cavalry or artillery camp; yet I saw no one, perceived no light even, until after advancing at least a quarter of a mile. Then a sudden slight turn in the road brought me upon a rude shack, showing a blacksmith's fire glowing within, and the smith himself pounding busily away

at an anvil. The gleam of the forge shot out redly across the road. As I crept closer I could perceive the figures of others lounging about inside--soldiers, no doubt, although I could not be certain. There was a ragged Confederate cavalry jacket hanging over a rain-barrel just outside the window, and, getting hold of it, I slipped it on over my woollen shirt. The night air was chill, my clothes still damp from the river, and besides it might help later on. As I did this a rider came flying up the road, bending low over his pommel. He went past at a slashing gallop, his face showing an instant in the red glare of the flame. That, no doubt, would be the aide with the despatches, yet, in spite of his haste, he would have to wait to the end of the hour for Billie. One or two of the men came lazily to the front of the shop to watch him go by, and I crouched down behind the rain-barrel until they went back again. Then I skirted the bar of flame, and ran on down the road, a bit recklessly, fearing the horseman might get too far ahead.

It was intensely dark, one of those dense nights when the blackness appears to press down upon one, and there were noises on either side to make me aware that I was in the midst of a great encampment. Fires shone dimly through the trees, and I could hear voices and hammering. I supposed the road I was travelling ran directly through the main camp, with troops on either side, and, for that reason, was not patrolled by pickets. Anyhow I passed without challenge, although I met a few fellows slinking along about as I was--soldiers out of bounds most likely, as afraid of me as I was of them. At least whenever I bumped into one, he got out of the way fast enough. And I never paused to explain--all I

wanted to do was to arrive at those cross-roads in advance of Billie.

However I failed in this ambition, but merely because the road I was following did not keep on directly west, but drifted off toward the river. I only became aware of this change in direction when we intersected a cross-road, and then I ran squarely up against a picket-post, the men having a fire burning to keep them warm. The light of the flames revealed everything within a radius of a hundred feet, and I could distinguish a dozen infantrymen sitting and lying about, while a couple of others marched back and forth across the road. I wanted to get farther south, but had only wriggled through the bushes a few yards in that direction before sinking to my knees in mud and water, and being compelled to crawl back. There was nothing left except to circle the fire in the opposite direction, and come out on the road below. I must have used up a good quarter of an hour getting through. Twice I made missteps, and some racket, but there was no challenge. I emerged at the opening of a small ravine, where I could lie down flat behind a low rock, and look back up the road, which ran down hill. I felt reasonably certain Billie would have to come this way if he intended to cross the river at Carter's Ford, and I knew of no other place he could cross this side the big bridge. The aide would be riding with him, of course, and that would make me certain of my man when he came, although how I was ever going to manage was more than I had as yet figured out.

I must have been there some twenty minutes, maybe more, burrowing down into the mud under the lee of the

stone, staring straight up the hill at the fire. The post was relieved while I lay there, the fellows going off duty tramping past so close I could have touched them. I could still hear the tread of their feet when one of the new guard yelled out "Halt!" and I saw two or three men spring up from around the fire, while the corporal in command ran out into the middle of the road. Some sort of a rig was coming down the hill, with a cavalry officer--judging from his cape--riding along close beside it. I was not able to see very plainly the way the light fell, but the contrivance looked to me like one of those old-fashioned, two-wheeled carryalls, with a low top over it, and drawn by a horse not much bigger than a pony. The officer dug in his spurs and got ahead, leaning over to whisper to the corporal, who stepped back saluting. The carryall never stopped at all, the pony trotting along unconcernedly, and it was so dark beneath the top I could not see sign of anybody. It was a queer-looking outfit, but I had no doubt this would be Billie, and the despatches.

The officer was still riding ahead when they passed me, his cape blown up over his hat, and his head bent forward to make out the road, as though his eyes still remained blinded by the firelight. Without definite plan, yet firmly determined not to be left behind, I squirmed across the road, ran up close to the carryall, and caught hold at the rear. The soldiers back in the glare saw nothing, while the mingled noise of hoofs and wheels left me unheard. I discovered my fingers grasping some narrow wooden slats, held up firmly against the back of the vehicle by a chain at each end. For a moment, running and hanging on as I was in total darkness, I was unable to figure out what sort of an arrangement this

could possibly be. Then I managed to feel it out with one hand--it was simply a shelf, capable of being lowered the length of the supporting chains, on which packages, or baggage, might be carried, while above was a roll of canvas, to be used as protection from rain. Here was opportunity, and I went at it with eagerness. It proved a hard job, running over that rough road in the dark, while the pony trotted tirelessly, but I got those chains unfastened, one at a time, and then the shelf settled naturally down into position. It was narrow, and I felt some question as to the strength of the supports, but risking all this, managed to work my way up until I half lay, half crouched, along the slats, holding on grimly as the two wheels bounced briskly from side to side, threatening to send me sprawling out into the road. By this time the officer had reined back his horse, but was still out of sight, and I succeeded in unbuckling the straps, and lowering the strip of canvas over me, stuffing the edges beneath my body so as to keep them from flapping. I was tired and sore, but now reasonably safe, with my eyes at an opening through which I could gaze out. I began to feel happy, too, thinking of the surprise which was about to come to Billie.

We clattered on down a long slope, apparently making no effort to avoid noise. It seemed we must be drawing near the river, yet the night was so dark, and our passage so rapid, I could make out no familiar landmarks through my peep-hole. Indeed I had about all I could do to hold on. We were halted twice, but a word from the officer passed us along safely. One picket-post had a fire glowing in close against the rocks, and the sergeant stood within a foot of

me. I caught the word "Cumberland," but whatever else of explanation may have been uttered failed to reach my ears, muffled as they were beneath the canvas. A few hundred yards beyond this point, at the end of a deep cut, the officer drew up his horse sharply, leaned over the wheel, and shook hands with the person inside.

"I have attained my limit," he said. "That was our last picket-post back yonder, and my orders were strict. You know the road, of course."

"Perfectly, Lieutenant," responded a low voice, muffled under the hood. "I have travelled it often before. I thank you so much, and think it will all come out right this time."

"I have no doubt of that," he replied, with a little laugh. "Hope I may renew the acquaintance under more pleasant circumstances. Meanwhile, good luck and good-bye."

He sat erect upon his horse, watching as we clattered past, appearing scarcely more than a dim shadow, yet I thought he held his hat in his hand. Billie laid on the gad, however, as if to make up for lost time, and the pony trotted off at such a burst of speed as to keep me busy clinging to my perch. It was an exceedingly rough road, rutty and stony, up hill and down, while the pony condescended to walk on the steepest grades only, and occasionally took the declines at a gallop, the carryall bounding from side to side as though mad. Apparently no fear of possible disaster disturbed Billie, however, for I could hear every few moments the slash of a whip on the animal's flank. I knew that, by this time, we must certainly be well between the lines, but, for the life of me, could not determine where. I thought I knew the surrounding country as I had scouted

over it for months, tracing roads and bridle-paths, yet I was puzzled now. If this road continued to run north and south, as it had back yonder, then we should have forded the river long before this, yet we had splashed through no water, nor did I recall our making any turn.

One fact alone seemed certain: as I knew neither where we were, nor whither bound, and as we were already assuredly beyond the last Confederate outpost, it behooved me to act as quickly as possible. Billie was headed somewhere, and the sooner I stopped him the better--besides, my position was neither comfortable nor safe. I rolled off from the edge of the canvas, and, gripping the chains tightly, managed to sit up, in spite of the vicious pitching of the vehicle. Billie's evident eagerness to arrive at his unknown destination only added to my own recklessness, and I hung on desperately, swearing a little, I fear, under my breath.

CHAPTER III

A FRIEND RATHER THAN AN ENEMY

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There was only one way in which I could hope to get in--through the back. That was an exceedingly ticklish job, yet I had tackled many a ticklish job before during the two years of my scouting service, and the knowledge of danger was merely the prick of a spur. The rusty buckles holding the flap in place resisted the grip of my fingers, and, opening a knife with my teeth, I cut the leather, severing enough of the straps so the entire flap could be thrown back, yet holding it down closely to its place until I was ready for action. Through a narrow opening I could perceive a dim outline of the driver. He was at the right of the seat, leaning forward, so as to peer out from under the hood, loosened reins in one hand, a whip in the other. The darkness of the night enabled me to perceive little except a vague sense of shape, a head crowned by a soft hat, and an apparently slender figure.

Whatever slight noise I made was lost in the rattle of the wheels, while the driver, utterly thoughtless as to any danger menacing him from behind, concentrated his entire attention upon the road, and his efforts to accelerate the speed of the pony. The present opportunity was as good as I could ever hope for. I grasped the back of the seat with one hand, a revolver in the other, pressed back the flap with my shoulder, and inserted my head within. Not until my voice sounded at his very ear did the fellow realize my presence.

"Pull up!" I said sternly. "Not a movement now; this is a gun at your ear."

There was a sharp catch of the breath, a half turning of the head in the surprise of the shock, but his hands held to reins and whip. Tossed about as I was the fellow's coolness angered me.

"Pull up," I said; "do you think I'm playing with you?"

He drew in on the reins, letting the whip drop between his feet, and the pony slowed down to a walk, and finally stopped. I could catch merely a glimpse of the man's profile beneath the broad brim of the hat, but his coolness and silence aroused my suspicions.

"No tricks now," I threatened. "If you value your life do exactly as I say."

"Who are you?" It was a rich contralto voice, that of a boy rather than a man, the slight blur of the South distinguishable even in those few words.

"Only a Yankee, son," I replied, satisfied I held the upper hand, and clambering in over the back of the seat. He shrank back from contact with me farther into the corner, but there was nothing in the slight movement to cause alarm. I laughed softly.

"Don't exactly admire my color of uniform, do you?" I asked easily. "Well, I can't help that, and you'll not find me such a bad fellow if you act right. Where were you going in such a hurry?"

There was no answer. I could hear his rapid breathing, and catch a glimpse of a beardless cheek.

"Don't you intend to tell me?"

Still silence, the shapeless figure motionless.

"Come, Billie," I urged, "what is the use of keeping up this game?"

He straightened up in surprise, startled into speech.

"You--you call me what? Why do you say 'Billie'?"

"Because I'm on. I haven't been hanging to the back of this outfit for the last eight miles just for fun, or exercise either. I'm after those despatches you're taking to Beauregard."

"Oh!"

"That's the state of affairs, and the sooner you hand over those particular papers, Billie, the quicker this revolver play ends. Where are they?"

"I haven't any," the slightly tremulous note had gone out of the voice. It was firm with purpose now, even a bit sarcastic. "You've merely got on the wrong trail, Yank. I reckon you mistook me for Billie Hardy."

"I reckon I did," I returned, mocking him, "and I 'm still satisfied I've got the right party. You don't get out that easy, son; come now, produce."

"Suppose I don't."

"Then there won't be much argument," I returned sharply, beginning to lose patience. "I'll simply take them, if I have to shoot you first. Come now, which shall it be?"

He straightened up, convinced apparently of my intentions.

"Neither, Mr. Yankee," indignantly. "I told you once you were mistaken. Now I'll prove it--see here!" The soft hat was whipped off the head, and the slender figure leaned forward to where the slight gleam of the stars rendered the face visible. "Do you make war on women?"

I was too astounded for reply; dumfounded, dazed by this evidence of my stupidity. This was a woman beyond all doubt--her hair, released by the sudden removal of the hat, swept in a dark wave over her shoulders, and she flung it back with a movement of the hand. The gleam of the stars gave me the contour of her face, and the sparkle of her eyes. A woman, young, pretty--and actually laughing at me, her white teeth clearly visible. Whatever of conceit or audacity may be part of my nature, deserted me in a flash, and I could only stare in helpless amazement.

"My God! I believe you are!" I ejaculated at last, the words bursting forth unconsciously. "How could I have made--who are you anyhow?"

The restrained laughter rippled forth, as though the expression of my face appealed to her sense of humor. Evidently the lady was no longer afraid of me, nor greatly distressed over the situation.

"Isn't it too funny," she exclaimed cheerfully, "and won't Billie laugh about this when I tell him!"

"Maybe he will," I acknowledged rather regretfully, "but it doesn't make me laugh." Then a vague suspicion gripped me. "Why did you think I took you for Billie?"

"Why, that was what you called me, wasn't it? The officer who escorted me past the pickets said Billie Hardy was going to try to run the lines to-night. So it was easy enough to guess who you were after, Mr. Yankee. It was lucky for Billie you got me instead--or for you," she added doubtfully.

"Oh, I guess I would have pulled through."

"Maybe," the tone decidedly provoking, "but I reckon you don't know Billie."

She began to gather up her hair, coiling the strands about her head carelessly, and I watched the simple operation, all the life gone out of me, unable to decide what to do. It was useless to go back; almost equally useless to go forward. I had no information to take into our lines of any value, and had failed utterly in my efforts to intercept the important despatches for Beauregard. The knowledge of my mistake stung me bitterly, yet I could blame no one for the failure except myself. The apparent carelessness of the girl puzzled me--why should she be so completely at her ease in this adventure? Only at the first had she exhibited the slightest excitement. This seemed hardly natural--alone, thus suddenly attacked by a stranger, an enemy, and openly threatened.

"You seem perfectly contented," I said. "Are you not frightened?"

"Frightened!" and she paused in her hair-dressing to bend slightly forward so as to look into my shadowed face. "Why, of course not; why should I be?"

"But I am a stranger to you--a Yank. You are on the other side, are you not?"

"Oh, of course," her lips revealing again the white teeth. "But I don't think all Yankees are demons. I don't believe you are. I like your voice. You see, I was educated in the North, and so am not prejudiced. Please won't you take off your hat, just for a minute?"

I did so, almost mechanically, not even realizing why she asked, until she bent forward, her eyes on my face.

"No, I am not frightened with you. I was just a little, at first, of course, but not now. You look as though you would

fight too, but not with a woman." She stopped with an odd little shrug of the shoulders. "What do you expect me to do--sit here all night?"

I looked about into the darkness, suddenly recalled to the absurdity of our situation by this question. The stars were glittering overhead, yielding a dim light, yet nothing around us afforded any guess as to where we were. The pony stood with drooping head, his flanks still heaving from his late run. To the right the ground appeared open and level, a cultivated field, while upon the other side was a sharp rise of land covered with brush. It was a lonely, silent spot, and my eyes turned back inquiringly to my companion.

"Why, no," I replied rather foolishly. "But I confess I am all at sea just now; where are we?"

It seemed very easy for her to laugh, and evidently my confession was amusing.

"You must pardon me," she excused herself, "but I thought you were a scout."

"I am," vexed at her propensity to poke fun. "I have been detailed for that service for more than two years. Moreover, I was a good enough scout to pass within the lines of your army to-night, and to travel the whole length of your camp--"

"And then get lost an hour later," she interrupted archly. "Tell me, do you know the points of the compass?"

"Certainly; that is north, and this road runs west, but I have no recollection of it. What puzzled me was our failure to cross the river."

"Oh," with a quick glance toward me. "That is easily explained; we turned the corner of the bluff instead. This is

the old road to Jonesboro, and has been used very little since the new road was opened. I chose it because I thought I would be less likely to meet with any chance travellers."

I began to comprehend more clearly where we were. The extreme right of the position held by our army would be, at least, ten miles east, and the Confederate left scarcely nearer. Beauregard was off in here somewhere,--at Bird's Ferry according to our camp reports the evening previous. This knowledge prompted me to ask,

"Which way is the river?"

"To the right about three miles."

"And Bird's Ferry?"

I could not be certain she smiled, yet I thought so.

"Yonder," pointing. "The river curves to the south, and this road comes down to it at Jonesboro; there is a bridge there. The ferry is fifteen miles farther up."

The apparent innocence of her answer completely disarmed me. Indeed these facts were exactly as I remembered them now that I had our present position in mind. The peculiar winding course of the river would leave me nearer our lines at Jonesboro than where we then were. Indeed foraging parties were covering much of the territory between, and it was the nearest point where I could cross the stream otherwise than by swimming.

"Are you going to Jonesboro?" I asked.

She nodded silently.

"Then may I ride that far with you?" I asked, rather doubtful of what she would say to such a request. "Of course you will be aiding the enemy, for I expect to discover some of our troops in that neighborhood."

"How can I help myself?" banteringly. "You are a man, and armed. Practically I am your prisoner."

"Oh, I don't want you to feel that way toward me. I have acted as a gentleman, have I not, ever since I understood?"

"You certainly have, and I am not ungrateful. Then you do not order me to take you; you merely ask if I will?"

"That is all."

"And that sounds so much better, I think. I don't mind your being a Yankee if you continue to act that way. Shall I drive?"

"If you will; you know the road, and the tricks of the pony."

She laughed again, gathering up the reins, and reaching down after the whip. At the first movement the little animal broke into a brisk trot as though he understood his driver.

CHAPTER IV

THE COMING OF DAWN

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The road was rough, apparently little travelled, and our lively passage over it not greatly conducive to conversation. Besides I hardly knew what to say. The consciousness of total failure in all my plans, and the knowledge that I would be received at headquarters in anything but honor, weighed heavily upon me, yet this depression did not seal my lips half as much as the personality of the young woman at my side. Pleasant and free as her manner had been, yet I was clearly made to realize there was a distinct limit to any familiarity. I could not define the feeling, but it had taken possession of me, and I knew the slightest overstepping of the boundaries would result in trouble. We were neither enemies nor friends; merely acquaintances under a temporary flag of truce. No doubt, trusting me as an honorable soldier, even though wearing an enemy's uniform, she was almost glad to have my protection along this lonely road, but, when the time came to part, she would be equally relieved to have me go. I was nothing to her; if ever remembered again it would be merely to laugh over my discomfiture in mistaking her for another. It hurt my pride to think this, to thus realize her complete indifference. She was a young woman, and I a young man, and nothing in my nature made surrender easy. I desired, at least, to leave behind me some different impression of my own personality.

I was not a fool, nor a failure, and I could not bear to have her conceive me as a mere blundering block-head, a subject for subsequent laughter. The silence in which she drove stirred me to revolt. Apparently she felt no overwhelming curiosity as to whom I was, no special desire to exchange further speech. The flapping of the loosened curtain was annoying, and I leaned over and fastened it down securely into place. She merely glanced aside to observe what I was doing, without even opening her lips.

"This is a miserably gloomy road," I ventured desperately. "I wonder you dared to travel it alone at night."

"Its very loneliness makes it safe," was the response, rather indifferently uttered. "Meeting others was the very thing I was most anxious to avoid."

"Indeed! You are tantalizing; you cannot expect me to be devoid of curiosity."

"Of course not," turning her face toward me, "neither can you expect me to gratify it."

"You mean you could not trust me?"

"Rather that you would not believe me, if I did. The reason for this trip is so simple and commonplace that if I were to confess its purpose to you, you would suppose I were attempting deceit. Oh, yes, you would, so I might just as well remain still. Besides it can make no difference anyway. When we reach Jonesboro this morning you will go back to your army, and I shall meet friends. There is scarcely one chance in a thousand we shall ever see each other again. We are the merest strangers--enemies, indeed, for I am a Rebel clear through. We don't even know each others' names."

"Do you care to know mine?"

She hesitated, and I thought her eyes dropped.

"I--I hardly know," doubtfully. "Yet you have been very kind, and, perhaps, sometime I might serve you. Yes, you may tell me."

"Robert Galesworth."

"Of what rank?"

"Lieutenant, Ninth Illinois Cavalry, but detailed for special service."

"Thank you. I--I am rather glad you told me."

"And you," I insisted, determined this confidence should be mutual. "May I not, in return, be told your name?"

"I am Willifred Gray," she said quietly. "That is all--just Willifred Gray."

There was something about the manner in which she said this which held me silent. I should have liked to ask more, a second question trembling on my lips, but the words would not come. It was altogether new to me, this fear of offending a woman, so new it almost angered, and yet something about her positively held me as though in bonds. To this day I do not know the secret of it, but I sat there silently staring out into the night.

I could see a little now, becoming aware that dawn was approaching, the sky shading to a dull gray in the east, and casting a weird light over the landscape. It was a gloomy scene of desolation, the road a mere ribbon, overgrown with grass and weeds, a soggy marsh on one side, and a line of sand-hills on the other, sparsely covered by some stunted growth. Far away, across the level, my eyes caught a glimmer of water, locating the river, but in no direction was

there any sign of a house, or curl of smoke. The unproductive land--barren and swampy--sufficiently accounted for lack of inhabitants, and told why it had been avoided by the foragers of both armies. Seeking safety the girl had chosen her course wisely--here was desolation so complete as to mock even at the ravages of war. The gray in the east changed to pink, delicately tinting the whole upper sky, objects taking clearer form, a light breeze rustling the long grass. Tirelessly the pony trotted, his head down, the lines lying loose. I turned to gaze at my companion, and our eyes met. Hers were either gray or blue; I could not be certain which, so quickly were they lowered, and so shadowed by long lashes. And they were merry eyes, smiling, and deep with secrets no man could hope to solve. Perhaps she deemed it only fair that I should look at her as she had been observing me; perhaps it was but the coquetry of the "eternal feminine" conscious of her own attraction, but she sat there silent, the lashes shading her eyes, the clear light of the dawn upon her face. I cannot describe what I saw, only it was a young face, the skin clear and glowing with health, the nose beautifully moulded, the throat white and round, the red lips arched like a bow, and a broad forehead shadowed by dark hair. She had a trooper's hat on, worn jauntily on one side, crossed sabres in front, and her shoulders were concealed by a gray cavalry cape. Suddenly she flashed a glance at me, her eyes full of laughter.

"Well, Mr. Lieutenant Galesworth, have you looked long enough?"

The swift question confused me, but I found answer.

"No; but as long as I dare. You were observing me also."

"Naturally--womanly curiosity is my excuse. Would you like to know what conclusion I came to?"

"From your eyes it may not prove altogether flattering."

"Oh, my eyes are not to be trusted. I warn you frankly of that at the very start. All I shall say is you appear better than I had expected--only, really, you need a shave."

"Better how? In what way?"

"Well, younger for one thing; somehow your statement that you were a lieutenant made me suspect your age--or possibly it was your voice."

"I am twenty-four."

"And look to be scarcely twenty. How did you ever gain a commission? Were you in battle?"

The question decidedly hurt my pride, yet I managed to control my tongue.

"I have met colonels in both armies no older than I," I returned swiftly. "Of course I have been in battle, wounded for the matter of that, and three months a prisoner."

"Oh, I did not mean to question your right to the shoulder straps. War makes men fast; I know that for my home has been in the track of both armies."

"You live in this neighborhood?"

"Yes, about twenty miles south of where we are now. Shall I tell you what I am doing here?"

I bowed, eager to learn although I had not been brash enough to inquire.

"You have been wondering all night," carelessly. "If you had asked I should have refused to answer, but will now reward your remarkable patience with a full confession. I am