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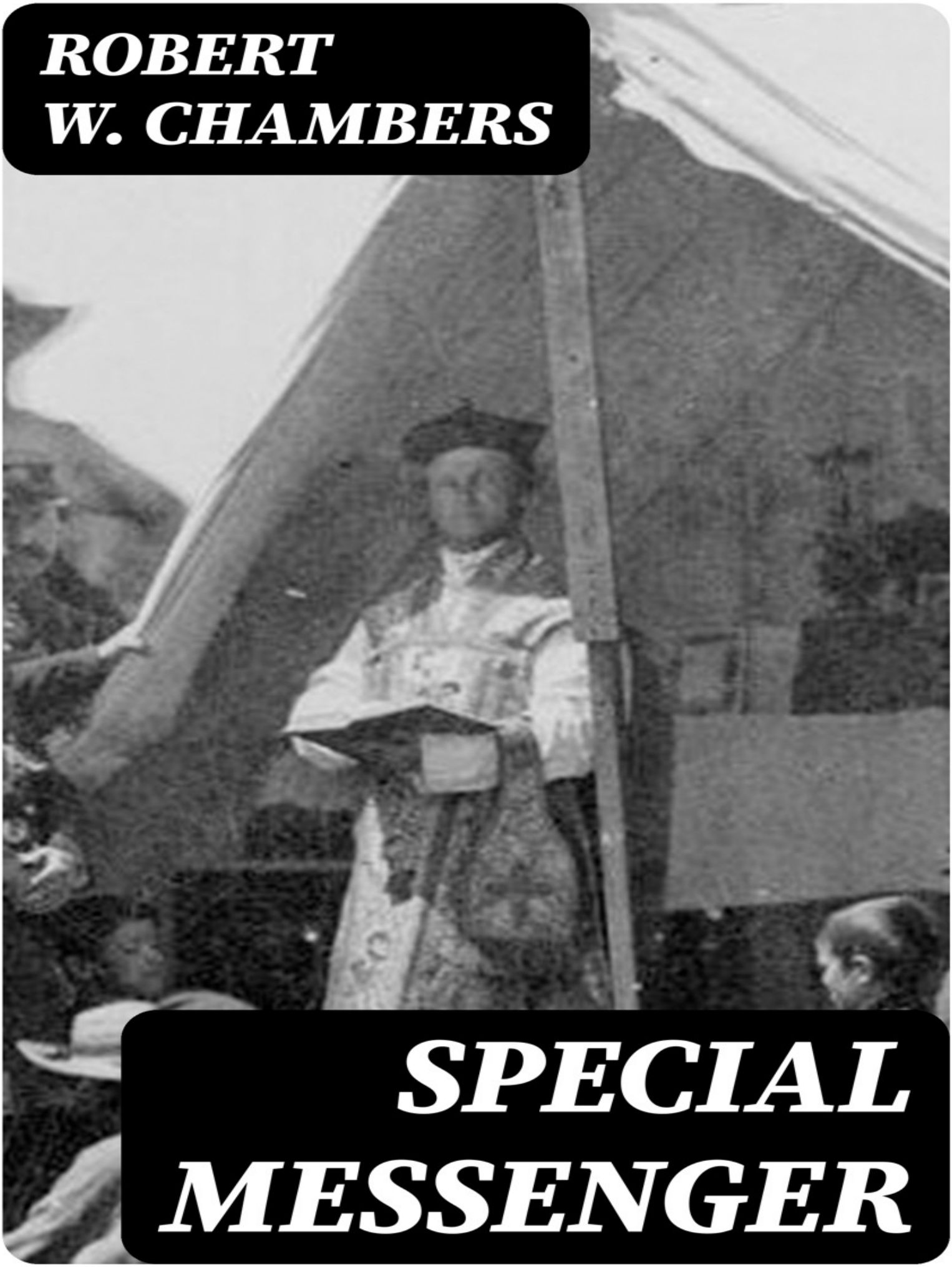

SPECIAL MESSENGER

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Special Messenger

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PREFACE

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In the personality and exploits of the “Special Messenger,” the author has been assured that a celebrated historical character is recognizable—Miss Boyd, the famous Confederate scout and spy.

It is not uncommon that the readers of a book know more about that book than the author.

R. W. C.

PART ONE

WHAT SHE WAS

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NONCOMBATANTS

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About five o’clock that evening a Rhode Island battery clanked through the village and parked six dusty guns in a pasture occupied by some astonished cows.

A little later the cavalry arrived, riding slowly up the tree-shaded street, escorted by every darky and every dog in the country-side.

The clothing of this regiment was a little out of the ordinary. Instead of the usual campaign head gear the troopers wore forage caps strapped under their chins, heavy visors turned down, and their officers were conspicuous in fur-trimmed hussar tunics slung from the shoulders of dark-

blue shell jackets; but most unusual and most interesting of all, a mounted cavalry band rode ahead, led by a bandmaster who sat his horse like a colonel of regulars—a slim young man with considerable yellow and gold on his faded blue sleeves, and an easy manner of swinging forward his heavy cut-and-thrust sabre as he guided the column through the metropolitan labyrinths of Sandy River.

Sandy River had seen and scowled at Yankee cavalry before, but never before had the inhabitants had an opportunity to ignore a mounted band and bandmaster. There was, of course, no cheering; a handkerchief fluttered from a gallery here and there, but Sandy River was loyal only in spots, and the cavalry pressed past groups of silent people, encountering the averted heads or scornful eyes of young girls and the cold hatred in the faces of gray-haired gentlewomen, who turned their backs as the ragged guidons bobbed past and the village street rang with the clink-clank of scabbards and rattle of Spencer carbines.

But there was a small boy on a pony who sat entranced as the weather-ravaged squadrons trampled by. Cap in hand, straight in his saddle, he saluted the passing flag; a sunburnt trooper called out: “That’s right, son! Bully for you!”

The boy turned his pony and raced along the column under a running fire of approving chaff from the men, until he came abreast of the bandmaster once more, at whom he stared with fascinated and uncloyed satisfaction.

Into a broad common wheeled the cavalry; the boy followed on his pony, guiding the little beast in among the mounted men, edging as close as possible to the

bandmaster, who had drawn bridle and wheeled his showy horse abreast of a group of officers. When the boy had crowded up as close as possible to the bandmaster he sat in silence, blissfully drinking in the splendors of that warrior's dusty apparel.

"I'm right glad you-all have come," ventured the boy.

The bandmaster swung round in his saddle and saw a small sun-tanned face and two wide eyes intently fixed on his.

"I reckon you don't know how glad my sister and I are to see you down here," said the boy politely. "When are you going to have a battle?"

"A battle!" repeated the bandmaster.

"Yes, sir. You're going to fight, of course, aren't you?"

"Not if people leave us alone—and leave that railroad alone," replied the officer, backing his restive horse to the side of the fence as the troopers trotted past into the meadow, fours crowding closely on fours.

"Not fight?" exclaimed the boy, astonished. "Isn't there going to be a battle?"

"I'll let you know when there's going to be one," said the bandmaster absently.

"You won't forget, will you?" inquired the boy. "My name is William Stuart Westcote, and I live in that house." He pointed with his riding whip up the hill. "You won't forget, will you?"

"No, child, I won't forget."

"My sister Celia calls me Billy; perhaps you had better just ask her for Billy if I'm not there when you gallop up to

tell me—that is, if you're coming yourself. Are you?" he ended wistfully.

"Do you want me to come?" inquired the bandmaster, amused.

"Would you really come?" cried the boy. "Would you really come to visit me?"

"I'll consider it," said the bandmaster gravely.

"Do you think you could come to-night?" asked the boy. "We'd certainly be glad to see you—my sister and I. Folks around here like the Malletts and the Colvins and the Garnetts don't visit us any more, and it's lonesome sometimes."

"I think that you should ask your sister first," suggested the bandmaster.

"Why? She's loyal!" exclaimed the boy earnestly. "Besides, you're coming to visit *me*, I reckon. Aren't you?"

"Certainly," said the bandmaster hastily.

"To-night?"

"I'll do my best, Billy."

The boy held out a shy hand; the officer bent from his saddle and took it in his soiled buckskin gauntlet.

"Good night, my son," he said, without a smile, and rode off into the meadow among a crowd of troopers escorting the regimental wagons.

A few moments later a child on a pony tore into the weed-grown drive leading to the great mansion on the hill, scaring a lone darky who had been dawdling among the roses.

"'Clar' tu goodness, Mars Will'm, I done tuk you foh de Black Hoss Cav'ly!" said the ancient negro reproachfully.

“Hi! Hi! Wha’ foh you mek all dat fuss an’ a-gwine-on?”

“Oh, Mose!” cried the boy, “I’ve seen the Yankee cavalry, and they have a horse band, and I rode with them, and I asked a general when they were going to have a battle, and the general said he’d let me know!”

“Gin’ral?” demanded the old darky suspiciously; “who dat gin’ral dat gwine tell you ’bout de battle? Was he drivin’ de six-mule team, or was he dess a-totin’ a sack o’ co’n? Kin you splain dat, Mars Will’m?”

“Don’t you think I know a general when I see one?” exclaimed the boy scornfully. “He had yellow and gilt on his sleeves, and he carried a sabre, and he rode first of all. And—oh, Mose! He’s coming here to pay me a visit! Perhaps he’ll come to-night; he said he would if he could.”

“Dat gin’ral ’low he gwine come here?” muttered the darky. “Spec’ you better see Miss Celia ’fo’ you ax dis here gin’ral.”

“I’m going to ask her now,” said the boy. “She certainly will be glad to see one of our own men. Who cares if all the niggers have run off? We’re not ashamed—and, anyhow, you’re here to bring in the decanters for the general.”

“Shoo, honey, you might talk dat-a-way ef yo’ pa wuz in de house,” grumbled the old man. “Ef hit’s done fix, nobody kin onfix it. But dess yo’ leave dem gin’rals whar dey is nex’ time, Mars Will’m. Hit wuz a gin’ral dat done tuk de Dominiker hen las’ time de blueco’ts come to San’ River.”

The boy, sitting entranced in reverie, scarcely heard him; and it was only when a far trumpet blew from the camp in the valley that he started in his saddle and raised his rapt

eyes to the windows. Somebody had hung out a Union flag over the jasmine-covered portico.

“There it is! There it is, Mose!” he cried excitedly, scrambling from his saddle. “Here—take the bridle! And the very minute you hear the general dashing into the drive, let me know!”

He ran jingling up the resounding veranda—he wore his father’s spurs—and mounted the stairs, two at a jump, calling: “Celia! Celia! You’ll be glad to know that a general who is a friend of mine——”

“Hush, Billy,” said his sister, checking him on the landing and leading him out to the gallery from which the flag hung; “can’t you remember that grandfather is asleep by sundown? Now—what is it, dear, you wish to tell me?”

“Oh, I forgot; truly I did, Celia—but a general is coming to visit me to-night, if you can possibly manage it, and I’m so glad you hung out the flag—and Moses can serve the Madeira, can’t he?”

“What general?” inquired his sister uneasily. And her brother’s explanations made matters no clearer. “You remember what the Yankee cavalry did before,” she said anxiously. “You must be careful, Billy, now that the quarters are empty and there’s not a soul in the place except Mose.”

“But, Celia! the general is a gentleman. I shook hands with him!”

“Very well, dear,” she said, passing one arm around his neck and leaning forward over the flag. The sun was dipping between a cleft in the hills, flinging out long rosy beams across the misty valley. The mocking birds had ceased, but a

thrasher was singing in a tangle of Cherokee roses under the western windows.

While they stood there the sun dipped so low that nothing remained except a glowing scarlet rim.

“Hark!” whispered the boy. Far away an evening gunshot set soft echoes tumbling from hill to hill, distant, more distant. Strains of the cavalry band rose in the evening silence, “The Star Spangled Banner” floating from the darkening valley. Then silence; and presently a low, sweet thrush note from the dusky garden.

It was after supper, when the old darky had lighted the dips—there being no longer any oil or candles to be had—that the thrush, who had been going into interminable ecstasies of fluty trills, suddenly became mute. A jingle of metal sounded from the garden, a step on the porch, a voice inquiring for Mr. Westcote; and old Mose replying with reproachful dignity: “Mars Wes’cote, suh? Mars Wes’cote daid, suh.”

“That’s my friend, the general!” exclaimed Billy, leaping from his chair. “Mose, you fool nigger, why don’t you ask the general to come in?” he whispered fiercely; then, as befitted the master of the house, he walked straight out into the hall, small hand outstretched, welcoming his guest as he had seen his father receive a stranger of distinction. “I am so glad you came,” he said, crimson with pleasure. “Moses will take your cap and cloak— Mose!”

The old servant shuffled forward, much impressed by the uniform revealed as the long blue mantle fell across his own ragged sleeve.

“Do you know why I came, Billy?” asked the bandmaster, smiling.

“I reckon it was because you promised to, wasn’t it?” inquired the child.

“Certainly,” said the bandmaster hastily. “And I promised to come because I have a brother about your age—’way up in New York. Shall we sit here on the veranda and talk about him?”

“First,” said the boy gravely, “my sister Celia will receive you.”

He turned, leading the way to the parlor with inherited self-possession; and there, through the wavering light of a tallow dip, the bandmaster saw a young girl in black rising from a chair by the center table; and he brought his spurred heels together and bowed his very best bow.

“My brother,” she said, “has been so anxious to bring one of our officers here. Two weeks ago the Yan—the Federal cavalry passed through, chasing Carrington’s Horse out of Oxley Court House, but there was no halt here.” She resumed her seat with a gesture toward a chair opposite; the bandmaster bowed again and seated himself, placing his sabre between his knees.

“Our cavalry advance did not behave very well in Oxley,” he said.

“They took a few chickens *en passant*,” she said, smiling; “but had they asked for them we would have been glad to give. We are loyal, you know.”

“Those gay jayhawkers were well disciplined for that business when Stannard took them over,” said the

bandmaster grimly. “Had they behaved themselves, we should have had ten friends here where we have one now.”

The boy listened earnestly. “Would you please tell me,” he asked, “whether you have decided to have a battle pretty soon?”

“I don’t decide such matters,” said the bandmaster, laughing.

“Why, I thought a general could always have a battle when he wanted to!” insisted the boy, surprised.

“But I’m not a general, Billy,” replied the young fellow, coloring. “Did you think I was?”

“My brother’s ideas are very vague,” said his sister quickly; “any officer who fights is a general to him.”

“I’m sorry,” said the bandmaster, looking at the child, “but do you know, I am not even a fighting officer? I am only the regimental bandmaster, Billy—a noncombatant.”

For an instant the boy’s astonished disappointment crushed out his inbred courtesy as host. His sister, mortified but self-possessed, broke the strained silence with a quiet question or two concerning the newly arrived troops; and the bandmaster replied, looking at the boy.

Billy, silent, immersed in reflection, sat with curly head bent and hands folded on his knees. His sister glanced at him, looked furtively at the bandmaster, and their eyes met. He smiled, and she returned the smile; and he looked at Billy and smiled again.

“Billy,” he said, “I’ve been sailing under false colors, it seems—but you hoisted them. I think I ought to go.”

The boy looked up at him, startled.

“Good night,” said the bandmaster gravely, rising to his lean height from the chair beside the table. The boy flushed to his hair.

“Don’t go,” he said; “I like you even if you don’t fight!”

Then the bandmaster began to laugh, and the boy’s sister bit her lip and looked at her brother.

“Billy! Billy!” she said, catching his hands in hers, “do you think the only brave men are those who gallop into battle?”

Hands imprisoned in his sister’s, he looked up at the bandmaster.

“If you were ordered to fight, you’d fight, wouldn’t you?” he asked.

“Under those improbable circumstances I think I might,” admitted the young fellow, solemnly reseating himself.

“Celia! Do you hear what he says?” cried the boy.

“I hear,” said his sister gently. “Now sit very still while Moses serves the Madeira; only half a glass for Mr. William, Moses—no, not one drop more!”

Moses served the wine with pomp and circumstance; the lean young bandmaster looked straight at the boy’s sister and rose, bowing with a grace that instantly entranced the aged servant.

“Celia,” said the boy, “we must drink to the flag, you know;” and the young girl rose from her chair, and, looking at the bandmaster, touched her lips to the glass.

“I wish they could see us,” said the boy, “—the Colvins and the Malletts. I’ve heard their ‘Bonnie Blue Flag’ and their stirrup toasts until I’m sick——”

“Billy!” said his sister quietly. And reseating herself and turning to the bandmaster, “Our neighbors differ with us,” she said, “and my brother cannot understand it. I have to remind him that if they were not brave men our army would have been victorious, and there would have been no more war after Bull Run.”

The bandmaster assented thoughtfully. Once or twice his worn eyes swept the room—a room that made him homesick for his own. It had been a long time since he had sat in a chair in a room like this—a long time since he had talked with women and children. Perhaps the boy’s sister divined something of his thoughts—he was not much older than she—for, as he rose, hooking up his sabre, and stepped forward to take his leave, she stood up, too, offering her hand.

“Our house is always open to Union soldiers,” she said simply. “Will you come again?”

“Thank you,” he said. “You don’t know, I think, how much you have already done for me.”

They stood a moment looking at one another; then he bowed and turned to the boy, who caught his hand impulsively.

“I knew my sister would like you!” he exclaimed.

“Everybody is very kind,” said the young bandmaster, looking steadily at the boy.

Again he bowed to the boy’s sister, not raising his eyes this time; and, holding the child’s hand tightly in his, he walked out to the porch.

Moses was there to assist him with his long blue mantle; the boy clung to his gloved hand a moment, then stepped

back into the doorway, where the old servant shuffled about, muttering half aloud: “Yaas, suh. Done tole you so. He bow lak de quality, he drink lak de Garnetts—what I tole yo’? Mars Will’m, ef dat ossifer ain’ er gin’ral, he gwine be mighty quick!”

“I don’t care,” said the boy, “I just love him.”

The negro shuffled out across the moonlit veranda, peered around through the fragrant gloom, wrinkled hands linked behind his back. Then he descended the steps stiffly, and teetered about through the shrubbery with the instinct of a watchdog worn out in service.

“Nuff’n to scare nobody, scusin’ de hoot owls,” he muttered. “Spec’ hit’s time Miss Celia bolt de do’, ’long o’ de sodgers an’ all de gwines-on. Shoo! Hear dat fool chickum crow!” He shook his head, bent rheumatically, and seated himself on the veranda step, full in the moonlight. “All de fightin’s an’ de gwines-on ’long o’ dis here wah!” he soliloquized, joining his shriveled thumbs reflectively. “Whar de use? Spound dat! Whar all de fool niggers dat done skedaddle ’long o’ de Linkum troopers? Splain dat!” He chuckled; a whip-poor-will answered breathlessly.

“Dar dat scan’lous widder bird a-hollerin’!” exclaimed the old man, listening. “’Pears lak we’s gwine have moh wah, moh daid men, moh widders. Dar de ha’nt! Dar de sign an’ de warnin’. G’way, widder bird.” He crossed his withered fingers and began rocking to and fro, crooning softly to himself:

“Butterfly a-flyin’ in de Chinaberry tree
(Butterfly, flutter by!),
Kitty gull a-cryin’ on the sunset sea

(Fly, li’l gull, fly high!),
Bully bat a-follerin’ de moon in de sky,
Widder bird a-hollerin’, ‘Hi, dar! Hi!’
Tree toad a-trillin’
(Sleep, li’l honey!
De moon cost a shillin’
But we ain’t got money!),
Sleep, li’l honey,
While de firefly fly,
An’ Chuck-Will’s Widder holler,
‘Hi, dar! Hi!’”

Before dawn the intense stillness was broken by the rushing music of the birds—a careless, cheery torrent of song poured forth from bramble and woodland. Distant and nearer cockcrows rang out above the melodious tumult, through which a low, confused undertone, scarcely apparent at first, was growing louder—the dull sound of the stirring of many men.

Men? The valley was suddenly alive with them, choking the roads in heavy silent lines; they were in the lanes, they plodded through the orchards, they swarmed across the hills, column on column, until the entire country seemed flowing forward in steady streams. Sandy River awoke, restlessly listening; lights glimmered behind darkened windows; a heavier, vaguer rumor grew, hanging along the hills. It increased to a shaking, throbbing monotone, like the far dissonance of summer thunder!

And now artillery was coming, bumping down the dim street with clatter of chain and harness jingling.

Up at the great house on the hill they heard it—the boy in his white nightdress leaning from the open window, and his sleepy sister kneeling beside him, pushing back her thick hair to peer out into the morning mist. On came the battery, thudding and clanking, horses on a long swinging trot, gun, caisson, forge, mounted artillerymen succeeding each other, faster, faster under the windows. A guidon danced by; more guns, more caissons, then a trampling, plunging gallop, a rattle of sabres—and the battery had passed.

“What is that heavy sound behind the hills?” whispered the boy.

“The river rushing over the shallows—perhaps a train on the trestle at Oxley Court House—” She listened, resting her rounded chin on her hands. “It is thunder, I think. Go to bed now for a while——”

“Hark!” said the boy, laying his small hand on hers.

“It is thunder,” she said again. “How white the dawn is growing. Listen to the birds—is it not sweet?”

“Celia,” whispered the boy, “that is not thunder. It is too hushed, too steady—it hums and hums and hums. Where was that battery galloping? I am going to dress.”

She looked at him, turned to the east and stared at the coming day. The air of dawn was full of sounds, ominous, sustained vibrations.

She rose, went back to her room, and lighted a dip. Then, shading the pallid smoky flame with her hand, she opened a door and peered into the next bedroom. “Grandfather!” she whispered, smiling, seeing that he was already awake. And as she leaned over him, searching the dim and wrinkled eyes, she read something in their unwonted luster that

struck her silent. It was only when she heard her brother's step on the stairs that she roused herself, bent, and kissed the aged head lying there inert among the pillows.

"It is cannon," she breathed softly—"you know that sound, don't you, grandfather? Does it make you happy? Why are you smiling? Look at me—I understand; you want something. Shall I open the curtains? And raise the window? Ah, you wish to hear. Hark! Horsemen are passing at a gallop. What is it you wish—to see them? But they are gone, dear. If any of our soldiers come, you shall see them. That makes you happy?—*that* is what you desire?—to see one of our own soldiers? If they pass, I shall go out and bring one here to you—truly, I will." She paused, marveling at the strange light that glimmered across the ravaged visage. Then she blew out the dip and stole into the hall.

"Billy!" she called, hearing him fumbling at the front door.

"Oh, Celia! The cavalry trumpets! Do you hear? I'm going out. Perhaps *he* may pass the house."

"Wait for me," she said; "I am not dressed. Run to the cabin and wake Moses, dear!"

She heard him open the door; the deadened thunder of the cannonade filled the house for an instant, shut out by the closing door, only to swell again to an immense unbroken volume of solemn harmony. The bird-music had ceased; distant hilltops grew brighter.

Down in the village lights faded from window and cabin; a cavalryman, signaling from the church tower, whirled his flaming torch aside and picked up a signal flag. Suddenly the crash of a rifled cannon saluted the rising sun; a shell