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BEFORE THE DAWN: A STORY OF THE FALL OF RICHMOND

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
A WOMAN IN BROWN

A tall, well-favoured youth, coming from the farther South, boarded the train for Richmond one raw, gusty morning. He carried his left arm stiffly, his face was thin and brown, and his dingy uniform had holes in it, some made by bullets; but his air and manner were happy, as if, escaped from danger and hardships, he rode on his way to pleasure and ease.

He sat for a time gazing out of the window at the gray, wintry landscape that fled past, and then, having a youthful zest for new things, looked at those who traveled with him in the car. The company seemed to him, on the whole, to lack novelty and interest, being composed of farmers going to the capital of the Confederacy to sell food; wounded soldiers like himself, bound for the same place in search of cure; and one woman who sat in a corner alone, neither speaking nor spoken to, her whole aspect repelling any rash advance.

Prescott always had a keen eye for woman and beauty, and owing to his long absence in armies, where both these desirable objects were scarce, his vision had become acute; but he judged that this lone type of her sex had no special charm. Tall she certainly was, and her figure might be good, but no one with a fair face and taste would dress as plainly as she, nor wrap herself so completely in a long, brown cloak that he could not even tell the colour of her eyes. Beautiful women, as he knew them, always had a touch of coquetry, and never hid their charms wholly.

Prescott's attention wandered again to the landscape rushing past, but finding little of splendour or beauty, it came back, by and by, to the lone woman. He wondered why she was going to Richmond and what was her name. She, too, was now staring out of the window, and the long cloak hiding her seemed so shapeless that he concluded her figure must be bad. His interest declined at once, but rose again with her silence and evident desire to be left alone.

As they were approaching Richmond a sudden jar of the train threw a small package from her lap to the floor. Prescott sprang forward, picked it up and handed it to her. She received it with a curt "Thanks," and the noise of the train was so great that Prescott could tell nothing about the quality of her voice. It might or might not be musical, but in any event she was not polite and showed no gratitude. If he had thought to use the incident as an opening for conversation, he dismissed the idea, as she turned her face back to the window at once and resumed her study of the gray fields.

"Probably old and plain," was Prescott's thought, and then he forgot her in the approach to Richmond, the town where much of his youth had been spent. The absence of his mother from the capital was the only regret in this happy homecoming, but he had received a letter from her assuring him of her arrival in the city in a day or two.

When they reached Richmond the woman in the brown cloak left the car before him, but he saw her entering the office of the Provost-Marshal, where all passes were examined with minute care, every one who came to the capital in those times of war being considered an enemy until proved a friend. Prescott saw then that she was not only tall, but very tall, and that she walked with a strong, graceful step. "After all, her figure may be good," he thought, revising his recent opinion.

Her pass was examined, found to be correct, and she left the office before his own time came. He would have asked the name on her pass, but aware that the officer would probably tell him to mind his own business, he refrained, and then forgot her in the great event of his return home after

so long a time of terrible war. He took his way at once to Franklin Street, where he saw outspread before him life as it was lived in the capital of the Confederate States of America. It was to him a spectacle, striking in its variety and refreshing in its brilliancy, as he had come, though indirectly, from the Army of Northern Virginia, where it was the custom to serve half-rations of food and double rations of gunpowder. Therefore, being young, sound of heart and amply furnished with hope, he looked about him and rejoiced.

Richmond was a snug little town, a capital of no great size even in a region then lacking in city growth, but for the time more was said about it and more eyes were turned upon it than upon any other place in the world. Many thousands of men were dying in an attempt to reach this small Virginia city, and many other thousands were dying in an equally strenuous effort to keep them away.

Such thoughts, however, did not worry Prescott at this moment. His face was set resolutely toward the bright side of life, which is really half the battle, and neither the damp nor the cold was able to take from him the good spirits that were his greatest treasure. Coming from the bare life of a camp and the somber scenes of battlefields, he seemed to have plunged into a very whirlwind of gaiety, and his eyes sparkled with appreciation. He did not notice then that his captain's uniform was stained and threadbare enough to make him a most disreputable figure in a drawing-room, however gallant he might appear at the head of a forlorn hope.

The street was crowded, the pressure of the armies having driven much of the life of the country into the city, and Prescott saw men, women and children passing, some in rich and some in poor attire. He saw ladies, both young and old, bearing in their cheeks a faint, delicate bloom, the mark of the South, and he heard them as they spoke to each other in their soft, drawling voices, which reminded him of the waters of a little brook falling over a precipice six inches high.

It is said that soldiers, after spending a year or two in the serious business of slaying each other, look upon a woman as one would regard a divinity—a being to be approached with awe and respect; and such emotions sprang into the heart of Prescott when he glanced into feminine faces, especially youthful ones. Becoming suddenly conscious of his rusty apparel and appearance, he looked about him in alarm. Other soldiers were passing, some fresh and trim, some rusty as himself, but a great percentage of both had bandaged limbs or bodies, and he found no consolation in such company, wishing to appear well, irrespective of others.

He noticed many red flags along the street and heard men calling upon the people in loud, strident voices to come and buy. At other places the grateful glow of coal fires shone from half-opened doorways, and the faint but positive click of ivory chips told that games of chance were in progress.

"Half the population is either buying something or losing something," he said to himself.

A shout of laughter came from one of the open doorways beyond which men were staking their money, and a voice, somewhat the worse for a liquid not water, sang:

"Little McClellan sat eating a melon
The Chickahominy by;
He stuck in his spade,
Then a long while delayed,
And cried: 'What a brave general am I!'"

"I'll wager that you had nothing to do with driving back McClellan," thought Prescott, and then his mind turned to that worn army by the Rapidan, fighting with such endurance, while others lived in fat ease here in Richmond.

Half a dozen men, English in face and manner and rolling in their walk like sailors, passed him. He recognized them at once as blockade runners who had probably come up from Wilmington to sell their goods for a better price at the capital. While wondering what they had brought, his attention was distracted by one of the auctioneers, a large man with a red face and tireless voice.

"Come buy! Come buy!" he cried. "See this beautiful new uniform of the finest gray, a sample of a cargo made in England and brought over five days ago on a blockade runner to Wilmington."

Looking around in search of a possible purchaser, his eye caught Prescott.

"This will just suit you," he said. "A change of a strap or two and it will do for either captain or lieutenant. What a figure you will be in this uniform!" Then he leaned over and said persuasively: "Better buy it, my boy. Take the advice of a man of experience. Clothes are half the battle. They may not be so on the firing line, but they are here in Richmond."

Prescott looked longingly at the uniform which in colour and texture was all that the auctioneer claimed, and fingered a small package of gold in his pocket. At that moment some one bid fifty dollars, and Prescott surveyed him with interest.

The speaker was a man of his own age, but shorter and darker, with a hawk-like face softened by black eyes with a faintly humourous twinkle lurking in the corner of each. He seemed distinctly good-natured, but competition stirred Prescott and he offered sixty dollars. The other man hesitated, and the auctioneer, who seemed to know him, asked him to bid up.

"This uniform is worth a hundred dollars if it's worth a cent, Mr. Talbot," he said.

"I'll give you seventy-five dollars cash or five hundred on a credit," said Talbot; "now which will you take?"

"If I had to take either I'd take the seventy-five dollars cash, and I'd be mighty quick about making a choice," replied the auctioneer.

Talbot turned to Prescott and regarded him attentively for a moment or two. Then he said:

"You look like a good fellow, and we're about the same size. Now, I haven't a hundred dollars in gold, and I doubt whether you have. Suppose we buy this uniform together, and take turns in wearing it."

Prescott laughed, but he saw that the proposition was made in entire good faith, and he liked the face of the man whom the auctioneer had called Talbot.

"I won't do that," he replied, "because I have more money than you think. I'll buy this and I'll lend you enough to help you in buying another."

Friendships are quickly formed in war time, and the offer was accepted at once. The uniforms were purchased and the two young men strolled on together, each carrying a precious burden under his arm.

"My name is Talbot, Thomas Talbot," said the stranger. "I'm a lieutenant and I've had more than two years' service in the West. I was in that charge at Chickamauga when General Cheatham, leading us on, shouted: 'Boys, give 'em hell'; and General Polk, who had been a bishop and couldn't swear, looked at us and said: 'Boys, do as General Cheatham says!' Well, I got a bad wound in the shoulder there, and I've been invalided since in Richmond, but I'm soon going to join the Army of Northern Virginia."

Talbot talked on and Prescott found him entertaining, as he was a man who saw the humourous side of things, and his speech, being spontaneous, was interesting.

The day grew darker and colder. Heavy clouds shut out the sun and the rain began to fall. The people fled from the streets, and the two officers shivered in their uniforms. The wind rose and whipped the rain into their faces. Its touch was like ice.

"Come in here and wait till the storm passes," said Talbot, taking his new friend by the arm and pulling him through an open door. Prescott now heard more distinctly than ever the light click of ivory chips, mingled with the sound of many voices in a high or low key, and the soft movement of feet on thick carpets. Without taking much thought, he followed his new friend down a short and narrow hall, at the end of which they entered a large, luxurious room, well lighted and filled with people.

"Yes, it's a gambling room—The Nonpareil—and there are plenty more like it in Richmond, I can tell you," said Talbot. "Those who follow war must have various kinds of excitement. Besides,

nothing is so bad that it does not have its redeeming point, and these places, without pay, have cared for hundreds and hundreds of our wounded."

Prescott had another errand upon which his conscience bade him hasten, but casting one glance through the window he saw the soaking streets and the increasing rain, swept in wild gusts by the fierce wind. Then the warmth and light of the place, the hum of talk and perhaps the spirit of youth infolded him and he stayed.

There were thirty or forty men in the room, some civilians and others soldiers, two bearing upon their shoulders the stripes of a general. Four carried their arms in slings and three had crutches beside their chairs. One of the generals was not over twenty-three years of age, but this war furnished younger generals than he, men who won their rank by sheer hard service on great battlefields.

The majority of the men were playing faro, roulette or keno, and the others sat in softly upholstered chairs and talked. Liquors were served from a bar in the corner, where dozens of brightly polished glasses of all shapes and sizes glittered on marble and reflected the light of the gas in vivid colours.

Prescott's mind traveled back to long, lonely watches in the dark forest under snow and rain, in front of the enemy's outposts, and he admitted that while the present might be very wicked it was also very pleasant.

He gave himself up for a little while to the indulgence of his physical senses, and then began to examine those in the room, his eyes soon resting upon the one who was most striking in appearance. It was a time of young men, and this stranger was young like most of the others, perhaps under twenty-five. He was of middle height, very thick and broad, and his frame gave the impression of great muscular strength and endurance. A powerful neck supported a great head surmounted by a crop of hair like a lion's mane. His complexion was as delicate as a woman's, but his pale blue eyes were bent close to the table as he wagered his money with an almost painful intentness, and Prescott saw that the gaming madness was upon him.

Talbot's eyes followed Prescott's and he smiled.

"I don't wonder that you are looking at Raymond," he said. "He is sure to attract attention anywhere. You are beholding one of the most remarkable men the South has produced."

Prescott recognized the name as that of the editor of the *Patriot*, a little newspaper published on a press traveling in a wagon with the Western army until a month since, when it had come over to the Army of Northern Virginia. The *Patriot* was "little" only in size. The wit, humour, terseness, spontaneous power of expression, and above all of phrase-making, which its youthful editor showed in its columns, already had made Raymond a power in the Confederacy, as they were destined in his maturity to win him fame in a reunited nation.

"He's a great gamester and thinks that he's a master of chance," said Talbot, "but as a matter of fact he always loses. See how fast his pile of money is diminishing. It will soon be gone, but he will find another resource. You watch him."

Prescott did not need the advice, as his attention was already concentrated on Raymond's broad, massive jaw and the aggressive curve of his strong face. His movements were quick and nervous; face and figure alike expressed the most absolute self-confidence. Prescott wondered if this self-confidence did not lie at the basis of all success, military, literary, mercantile or other, enabling one's triumphs to cover up his failures and make the people remember only the former.

Raymond continued to lose, and presently, all his money being gone, he began to feel in his pockets in an absent-minded way for more, but the hand came forth empty from each pocket. He did not hesitate.

A man only two or three years older was sitting next to Raymond, and he, too, was intent on the game. Beside him was a very respectable little heap of gold and notes, and Raymond, reaching over, took half of the money and without a word, putting it in front of himself, went on with his wagers.

The second man looked up in surprise, but seeing who had robbed him, merely made a wry face and continued his game. Several who had noticed the action laughed.

"It's Raymond's way," said Talbot. "I knew that he would do it. That's why I told you to watch him. The other man is Winthrop. He's an editor, too—one of our Richmond papers. He isn't a genius like Raymond, but he's a slashing writer—loves to criticize anybody from the President down, and he often does it. He belongs to the F. F. V.'s himself, but he has no mercy on them—shows up all their faults. While you can say that gambling is Raymond's amusement, you may say with equal truth that dueling is Winthrop's."

"Dueling!" exclaimed Prescott in surprise. "Why, I never saw a milder face!"

"Oh, he doesn't fight duels from choice," replied Talbot. "It's because of his newspaper. He's always criticizing, and here when a man is criticized in print he challenges the editor. And the funny thing about it is, that although Winthrop can't shoot or fence at all, he's never been hurt. Providence protects him, I suppose."

"Has he ever hit anybody?" asked Prescott.

"Only once," replied Talbot, "and that was his eleventh duel since the war began. He shot his man in the shoulder and then jumped up and down in his pride. 'I hit him! I hit him!' he cried. 'Yes, Winthrop,' said his second, 'some one was bound to get in the way if you kept on shooting long enough.'"

The place, with its rich colours, its lights shining from glasses and mirrors, its mellow odours of liquids and its softened sounds began to have a soporific effect upon Prescott, used so long to the open air and untold hardships. His senses were pleasantly lulled, and the voice of his friend, whom he seemed now to have known for a long time, came from far away. He could have closed his eyes and gone to sleep, but Talbot talked on.

"Here you see the back door of the Confederacy," he said. "You men at the front know nothing. You are merely fighting to defend the main entrance. But while you are getting yourselves shot to pieces without knowing any special reason why, all sorts of people slip in at this back door. It is true not only of this government, but also of all others."

A middle-aged, heavy-faced man in a general's uniform entered and began to talk earnestly to one of the other generals.

"That is General Markham," said Talbot, "who is specially interesting not because of himself, but on account of his wife. She is years younger than he, and is said to be the most brilliant woman in Richmond. She has plans for the General, but is too smart to say what they are. I doubt whether the General himself knows."

Raymond and Winthrop presently stopped playing and Talbot promptly introduced his new friend.

"We should know each other since we belong to the same army," said Raymond. "You fight and I write, and I don't know which of us does the more damage; but the truth is, I've but recently joined the Army of Northern Virginia. I've been following the army in the West, but the news didn't suit me there and I've come East."

"I hope that you have many victories to chronicle," said Prescott.

"It's been a long time since there's been a big battle," resumed the editor, "and so I've come up to Richmond to see a little life."

He glanced about the room.

"And I see it here," he added. "I confess that the fleshpots of Richmond are pleasant."

Then he began to talk of the life in the capital, the condition of the army and the Confederate States, furnishing a continual surprise to Prescott, who now saw that beneath the man's occasional frivolity and epicurean tastes lay a mind of wonderful penetration, possessing that precious quality generally known as insight. He revealed a minute knowledge of the Confederacy and its chieftains, both civil and military, but he never risked an opinion as to its ultimate chances of success, although

Prescott waited with interest to hear what he might say upon this question, one that often troubled himself. But however near Raymond might come to the point, he always turned gracefully away again.

They were sitting now in a cheerful corner as they talked, but at the table nearest them was a man of forty, with immense square shoulders, a heavy red face and an overbearing manner. He was playing faro and losing steadily, but every time he lost he marked the moment with an angry exclamation. The others, players and spectators alike, seemed to avoid him, and Winthrop, who noticed Prescott's inquiring glance, said:

"That's Redfield, a member of our Congress," and he named the Gulf State from which Redfield came. "He belonged to the Legislature of his State before the war, which he advocated with all the might of his lungs—no small power, I assure you—and he was leader in the shouting that one Southern gentleman could whip five Yankees. I don't know whether he means that he's the Southern gentleman, as he's never yet been on the firing line, but he's distinguishing himself just now by attacking General Lee for not driving all the Yankees back to Washington."

Redfield at length left the game, uttering with an oath his opinion that fair play was impossible in the Nonpareil, and turned to the group seated near him, regarding the Richmond editor with a lowering brow.

"I say, Winthrop," he cried, "I've got a bone to pick with you. You've been hitting me pretty hard in that rag of yours. Do you know what a public man down in the Gulf States does with an editor who attacks him! Why, he goes around to his office and cowhides the miserable little scamp until he can't lie down comfortably for a month."

A slight pink tint appeared in the cheeks of Winthrop.

"I am not well informed about the custom in the Gulf States, Mr. Redfield," he said, "but here I am always at home to my enemies, as you ought to know."

"Oh, nonsense!" exclaimed Raymond. "You two can't fight. We can't afford to lose Redfield. He's going to lead a brigade against the Yankees, and if he'll only make one of those fiery speeches of his it will scare all the blue-backs out of Virginia."

Redfield's red face flushed to a deeper hue, and he regarded the speaker with aversion, but said nothing in reply, fearing Raymond's sharp tongue. Instead, he turned upon Prescott, who looked like a mild youth fit to stand much hectoring.

"You don't introduce me to your new friend," he said to Talbot.

"Mr. Redfield, Captain Prescott," said Talbot. "Mr. Redfield is a Member of Congress and Captain Prescott comes from the Army of Northern Virginia, though by way of North Carolina, where he has been recently on some special duty."

"Ah, from the Army of Northern Virginia," said Redfield in a heavy growl. "Then can you tell me, Mr. Prescott, why General Lee does not drive the Yankees out of Virginia?"

A dark flush appeared on Prescott's face. Usually mild, he was not always so, and he worshiped General Lee.

"I think it is because he does not have the help of men like yourself," he replied.

A faint ray of a smile crossed the face of Raymond, but the older man was not pleased.

"Do you know, sir, that I belong to the Confederate Congress?" he exclaimed angrily; "and moreover, I am a member of the Military Committee. I have a right to ask these questions."

"Then," replied Prescott, "you should know that it is your duty to ask them of General Lee and not of me, a mere subaltern."

"Now, Mr. Redfield," intervened Raymond, "don't pick a quarrel with Captain Prescott. If there's to be a duel, Winthrop has first claim on you, and I insist for the honour of my profession that he have it. Moreover, since he is slender and you are far from it, I demand that he have two shots to your one, as he will have at least twice as much to kill."

Redfield growled out other angry words, which stopped under the cover of his heavy mustache, and then turned abruptly away, leaving Prescott in some doubt as to his personal courage but none at all as to his ill will.

"It is the misfortune of the South," said Raymond, "to have such men as that, who think to settle public questions by personal violence. They give us a bad name which is not wholly undeserved. In fact, personal violence is our great sin."

"And the man has a lot of power. That's the worst of it," added Talbot. "The boys at the front are hauled around so much by the politicians that they are losing confidence in everybody here in Richmond. Why, when President Davis himself came down and reviewed us with a great crowd of staff officers before Missionary Ridge, the boys all along the line set up the cry: 'Give us somethin' to eat, Mr. Jeff; give us somethin' to eat! We're hungry! We're hungry!' And that may be the reason why we were thrashed so badly by Grant not long after."

Prescott saw that the rain had almost ceased, and as he suggested that he must hurry on, the others rose to go with him from the house. He left them at the next corner, glad to have made such friends, and quickened his footsteps as he continued alone.

CHAPTER II
A MAN'S MOTHER

It was a modest house to which Prescott turned his steps, built two stories in height, of red brick, with green shutters over the windows, and in front a little brick-floored portico supported on white columns in the Greek style. His heart gave a great beat as he noticed the open shutters and the thin column of smoke rising from the chimney. The servants at least were there! He had been gone three years, and three years of war is a long time to one who is not yet twenty-five. There was no daily mail from the battlefield, and he had feared that the house would be closed.

He lifted the brass knocker and struck but once. That was sufficient, as before the echo died his mother herself, come before the time set, opened the door. Mrs. Prescott embraced her son, and she was even less demonstrative than himself, though he was generally known to his associates as a reserved man; but he knew the depth of her feelings. One Northern mother out of every ten had a son who never came back, but it was one Southern mother in every three who was left to mourn.

She only said: "My son, I feared that I should never see you again." Then she noticed the thinness of his clothing and its dampness. "Why, you are cold and wet," she added.

"I do not feel so now, mother," he replied.

She smiled, and her smile was that of a young girl. As she drew him toward the fire in a dusky room it seemed to him that some one else went out.

"I heard your footsteps on the portico," she said.

"And you knew that it was me, mother," he interrupted, as he reached down and patted her softly on the cheek.

He could not remember the time when he did not have a protecting feeling in the presence of his mother—he was so tall and large, and she so small. She scarcely reached to the top of his shoulder, and even now, at the age of forty-five, her cheeks had the delicate bloom and freshness of a young girl's.

"Sit by the fire here," she said, as she pushed him into an armchair that she pulled directly in front of the grate.

"No, you must not do that," she added, taking the poker from his hand. "Don't you know that it is a delight for me to wait upon you, my son come from the war!"

Then she prodded the coals until they glowed a deep red and the room was suffused with generous warmth.

"What is this bundle that you have?" she asked, taking it from him.

"A new uniform, mother, that I have just bought, and in which I hope to do you credit."

She flitted about the room attending to his wants, bringing him a hot drink, and she would listen to no account of himself until she was sure that he was comfortable. He followed her with his eyes, noting how little she had changed in the three years that had seemed so long.

She was a Northern woman, of a Quaker family in Philadelphia, whom his father had married very young and brought to live on a great place in Virginia. Prescott always believed she had never appreciated the fact that she was entering a new social world when she left Philadelphia; and there, on the estate of her husband, a just and generous man, she saw slavery under its most favourable conditions. It must have been on one of their visits to the Richmond house, perhaps at the slave market itself, that she beheld the other side; but this was a subject of which she would never speak to her son Robert. In fact, she was silent about it to all people, and he only knew that she was not wholly like the Southern women about him. When the war came she did not seek to persuade her son to either side, but when he made his choice he was always sure that he caused her pain, though she never said a word.

"Do you wear such thin clothing as this out there in those cold forests?" she asked, fingering his coat.

"Mother," he replied with a smile, "this is the style now; the shops recommend it, and you know we've all heard that a man had better be dead than out of the style."

"And you have become a great soldier?" she said, looking at him fondly.

He laughed, knowing that in any event he would seem great to her.

"Not great, mother," he replied; "but I know that I have the confidence of General Lee, on whose staff I serve."

"A good man and a great one," she said, clasping her hands thoughtfully. "It is a pity–"

She stopped, and her son asked:

"What is a pity, mother?"

She did not answer, but he knew. It was said by many that Lee hesitated long before he went with his State.

"Now," she said, "you must eat," and she brought him bread and meat and coffee, serving them from a little table that she herself placed by his side.

"How happens it, mother," he asked, "that this food is still warm? It must have been hours since you had breakfast."

A deep tint of red as of a blush suffused her cheeks, and she answered in a hesitating voice:

"Since there was a pause in the war, I knew that sooner or later you would come, and I remember how hungry you used to be as a growing boy."

"And through all these days you have kept something hot on the fire for me, ready at a moment's notice!"

She looked at him and there was a faint suspicion of tears in her eyes.

"Yes, yes, Robert," she replied. "Now don't scold me."

He had no intention of scolding her, but his thought was: "Has any other man a mother like mine?" Then he corrected himself; he knew that there must be myriads of others.

He said nothing in reply, merely smiling at her, and permitted her to do as she would. She went about the room with light, easy step, intent on her little services.

She opened the window shutters and the rich sunlight came streaming in, throwing a golden glow across the brown face of him who had left her a boy and come back a man. She sighed a little as she noticed how great was the change, but she hid the sigh from her son.

"Mother," he asked presently, "was there not some one else in this room when I came in? The light was faint, but I thought I saw a shadowy figure disappear."

"Yes," she answered; "that was Helen Harley. She was with me when you came. She may have known your footstep, too, and if not, she guessed it from my face, so she went out at once. She did not wish to be a mere curious onlooker when a mother was greeting her son, come home after three years in the war."

"She must be a woman now."

"She is a woman full grown in all respects. Women have grown old fast in the last three years. She is nearly a head taller than I."

"You have been comfortable here, mother?" he asked.

"As much so as one can be in such times," she replied. "I do not lack for money, and whatever deprivations I endure are those of the common lot—and this community of ill makes them amusing rather than serious."

She rose and walked to a door leading into the garden.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I shall return in a few moments."

When she came back she brought with her a tall young woman with eyes of dark blue and hair of brown shot with gold wherever the firelight fell upon it. This girl showed a sinuous grace when she walked and she seemed to Prescott singularly self-contained.

He sprang to his feet at once and took her hand in the usual Southern fashion, making a compliment upon her appearance, also in the usual Southern fashion. Then he realized that she had ceased to be a little girl in all other respects as well as in the physical.

"I have heard that gallantry in the face of the ladies as well as of the foe is part of a soldier's trade, Robert," she replied.

"And you do not know which requires the greater daring."

"But I know which your General ought to value the more."

After this she was serious. Neither of the younger people spoke much, but left the thread of the talk to Mrs. Prescott, who had a great deal to say. The elder woman, for all her gentleness and apparent timidity, had a bold spirit that stood in no awe of the high and mighty. She was full of curiosity about the war and plied her son with questions.

"We in Richmond know little that is definite of its progress," she said. "The Government announces victories and no defeats. But tell me, Robert, is it true, as I hear, that in the knapsacks of the slain Southern soldiers they find playing-cards, and in those of the North, Bibles?"

"If the Northern soldiers have Bibles, they do not use them," said Helen.

"And if the Southern soldiers have playing-cards, they do use them," said Mrs. Prescott.

Robert laughed.

"I daresay that both sides use their cards too much and their Bibles too little," he said.

"Do not be alarmed, Robert," said his mother; "such encounters between Helen and myself are of a daily occurrence."

"And have not yet resulted in bloodshed," added Miss Harley.

Prescott watched the girl while his mother talked, and he seemed to detect in her a certain aloofness as far as he was concerned, although he was not sure that the impression was not due to his absence so long from the society of women. It gave him a feeling of shyness which he found difficult to overcome, and which he contrasted in his own mind with her ease and indifference of manner.

When she asked him of her brother, Colonel Harley, the brilliant cavalry commander, whose exploits were recounted in Richmond like a romance, she showed enthusiasm, her eyes kindling with fire, and her whole face vivid. Her pride in her brother was large and she did not seek to conceal it.

"I hear that he is considered one of the best cavalry leaders of the age," she said, and she looked questioningly at Prescott.

"There is no doubt of it," he replied, but there was such a lack of enthusiasm in his own voice that his mother looked quickly at him. Helen did not notice. She was happy to hear the praises of her brother, and she eagerly asked more questions about him—his charge at this place, the famous ruse by which he had beaten the Yankees at that place, and the esteem in which he was held by General Lee; all of which Prescott answered readily and with pleasure. Mrs. Prescott looked smilingly at Miss Harley.

"It does not seem fair for a girl to show such interest in a brother," she said. "Now, if it were a lover it would be all right."

"I have no lover, Mrs. Prescott," replied Helen, a slight tint of pink appearing in her cheeks.

"It may be so," said the older woman, "but others are not like you." Then after a pause she sighed and said: "I fear that the girls of '61 will show an unusually large crop of old maids."

She spoke half humourously of what became in reality a silent but great tragedy, especially in the case of the South.

The war was prominent in the minds of the two women. Mrs. Prescott had truly said that knowledge of it in Richmond was vague. Gettysburg, it was told, was a great victory, the fruits of which the Army of Northern Virginia, being so far from its base, was unable to reap; moreover,

the Army of the West beyond a doubt had won a great triumph at Chickamauga, a battle almost as bloody as Gettysburg, and now the Southern forces were merely taking a momentary rest, gaining fresh vigour for victories greater than any that had gone before.

Nevertheless, there was a feeling of depression over Richmond. Bread was higher, Confederate money was lower; the scarcity of all things needed was growing; the area of Southern territory had contracted, the Northern armies were coming nearer and nearer, and a false note sometimes rang in the gay life of the capital.

Prescott answered the women as he best could, and, though he strove to keep a bold temper, a tone of gloom like that which afflicted Richmond appeared now and then in his replies. He was sorry that they should question him so much upon these subjects. He was feeling so good, and it was such a comfort to be there in Richmond with his own people before a warm fire, that the army could be left to take care of itself for awhile. Nevertheless, he understood their anxiety and permitted no show of hesitation to appear in his voice. Miss Harley presently rose to go. The clouds had come again and a soft snow was falling.

"I shall see you home," said Prescott. "Mother, will you lend me an umbrella?"

Mrs. Prescott laughed softly.

"We don't have umbrellas in Richmond now!" she replied. "The Yankees make them, not we, and they are not selling to us this year."

"Mother," said Prescott, "if the Yankees ever crush us it will be because they make things and we don't. Their artillery, their rifles, their ammunition, their wagons, their clothes, everything that they have is better than ours."

"But their men are not," said Helen, proudly.

"Nevertheless, we should have learned to work with our hands," said Prescott.

They slipped into the little garden, now bleak with winter waste. Helen drew a red cloak about her shoulders, which Prescott thought singularly becoming. The snow was falling gently and the frosty air deepened the scarlet in her cheeks. The Harley house was only on the other side of the garden and there was a path between the two. The city was now silent. Nothing came to their ears save the ringing of a church bell.

"I suppose this does not seem much like war to you," said Helen.

"I don't know," replied Robert. "Just now I am engaged in escorting a very valuable convoy from Fort Prescott to Fort Harley, and there may be raiders."

"And here may come one now," she responded, indicating a horseman, who, as he passed, looked with admiring eyes over the fence that divided the garden from the sidewalk. He was a large man, his figure hidden in a great black cloak and his face in a great black beard growing bushy and unkempt up to his eyes. A sword, notable for its length, swung by his side.

Prescott raised his hand and gave a salute which was returned in a careless, easy way. But the rider's bold look of admiration still rested on Helen Harley's face, and even after he had gone on he looked back to see it.

"You know him?" asked Helen of Robert.

"Yes, I know him and so do you."

"If I know him I am not aware of it."

"That is General Wood."

Helen looked again at the big, slouching figure disappearing at the corner. The name of Wood was famous in the Confederacy. The greatest of all the cavalry commanders in a service that had so many, a born military genius, he was an illiterate mountaineer, belonging to that despised, and often justly despised, class known in the South as "poor white trash." But the name of Wood was now famous in every home of the revolting States. It was said that he could neither read nor write, but his genius flamed up at the coming of war as certainly as tow blazes at the touch of fire. Therefore, Helen looked after this singular man with the deepest interest and curiosity.

"And that slouching, awkward figure is the great Wood!" she said.

"He is not more slouching and awkward than Jackson was."

"I did not mean to attack him," she said quickly.

She had noticed Wood's admiring glance. In fact, it brought a tint of red to her cheeks, but she was not angry. They were now at her own door.

"I will not ask you to come in," she said, "because I know that your mother is waiting for you."

"But you will some other time?"

"Yes, some other time."

When he returned to his own house Mrs. Prescott looked at him inquiringly but said nothing.

CHAPTER III
THE MOSAIC CLUB

Prescott was a staff officer and a captain, bearing a report from the Commander of the Army of Northern Virginia to the President of the Confederacy; but having been told in advance that it was perfunctory in its nature, and that no haste was necessary in its delivery, he waited until the next morning before seeking the White House, as the residence of the President was familiarly called at Richmond, in imitation of Washington. This following of old fashions and old ways often struck Prescott as a peculiar fact in a country that was rebelling against them.

"If we succeed in establishing a new republic," he said to himself, "it will be exactly like the one that we quit."

He was told at the White House that the President was then in conference with the Secretary of War, but Mr. Sefton would see him. He had heard often of Mr. Sefton, whose place in the Government was not clearly defined, but of whose influence there was no doubt. He was usually known as the Secretary. "The Secretary of what?" "The Secretary of everything," was the reply.

Mr. Sefton received Prescott in a large dark room that looked like a workshop. Papers covered the tables and others were lying on the floor, indicating the office of a man who worked. The Secretary himself was standing in the darkest corner—a thin, dark, rather small man of about forty, one who seemed to be of a nervous temperament ruled by a strong will.

Prescott remembered afterward that throughout the interview the Secretary remained in the shadow and he was never once able to gain a clear view of his face. He found soon that Mr. Sefton, a remarkable man in all respects, habitually wore a mask, of which the mere shadow in a room was the least part.

Prescott gave his report, and the Secretary, after reading it attentively, said in a singularly soft voice:

"I have heard of you, Captain Prescott. I believe that you distinguished yourself in the great charge at Gettysburg?"

"Not more than five thousand others."

"At least you came out of the charge alive, and certainly five thousand did not do that."

Prescott looked at him suspiciously. Did he mean to cast some slur upon his conduct? He was sorry he could not see the Secretary's face more clearly, and he was anxious also to be gone. But the great man seemed to have another object in view.

"I hear that there is much discontent among the soldiers," said Mr. Sefton in a gentle, sympathetic voice. "They complain that we should send them supplies and reinforcements, do they not?"

"I believe I have heard such things said," reluctantly admitted Prescott.

"Then I have not been misinformed. This illustrates, Captain, the lack of serious reflection among the soldiers. A soldier feels hungry. He wants a beefsteak, soft bread and a pot of coffee. He does not see them and at once he is angry. He waves his hand and says: 'Why are they not here for me?' The Government does not own the secret of Arabian magic. We cannot create something where nothing is."

Prescott felt the Secretary gazing at him as if he alone were to blame for this state of affairs. Then the door opened suddenly and several men entered. One, tall, thin and severe of countenance, the typical Southern gentleman of the old school, Prescott recognized at once as the President of the Confederacy. The others he inferred were members of his Cabinet, and he rose respectfully, imitating the example of Mr. Sefton, but he did not fail to notice that the men seemed to be disturbed.

"A messenger from General Lee, Mr. President," said Mr. Sefton, in his smooth voice. "He repeats his request for reinforcements."

The worried look of the President increased. He ran his hand across his brow.

"I cannot furnish them," he said. "It is no use to send any more such requests to me. Even the conscription will not fill up our armies unless we take the little boys from their marbles and the grandfathers from their chimney-corners. I doubt whether it would do so then."

Mr. Sefton bowed respectfully, but added nothing to his statement.

"The price of gold has gone up another hundred points, Mr. Sefton," said the President. "Our credit in Europe has fallen in an equal ratio and our Secretary of State has found no way to convince foreign governments that they are undervaluing us."

Prescott looked curiously at the Secretary of State—it was the first time that he had ever seen him—a middle-aged man with broad features of an Oriental cast. He it was to whom many applied the words "the brains of the Confederacy." Now he was not disturbed by the President's evident annoyance.

"Why blame me, Mr. President?" he said. "How long has it been since we won a great victory? Our credit is not maintained here in Richmond nor by our agents in Europe, but on the battlefield."

Mr. Sefton looked at Prescott as if to say: "Just as I told you." Prescott thought it strange that they should speak so plainly before him, a mere subordinate, but policy might be in it, he concluded on second thought. They might desire their plain opinion to get back informally to General Lee. There was some further talk, all of which they seemed willing for him to hear, and then they returned to the inner room, taking Mr. Sefton, who bade Prescott wait.

The Secretary returned in a half-hour, and taking Prescott's arm with an appearance of great familiarity and friendliness, said:

"I shall walk part of the way with you, if you will let me, Captain Prescott. The President asks me to say to you that you are a gallant soldier and he appreciates your services. Therefore, he hopes that you will greatly enjoy your leave of absence in Richmond."

Prescott flushed with pleasure. He liked a compliment and did not deem it ignoble to show his pleasure. He was gratified, too, at the confidence that the Secretary, a man whose influence he knew was not exaggerated, seemed to put in him, and he thanked him sincerely.

So they walked arm in arm into the street, and those who met them raised their hats to the powerful Secretary, and incidentally to Prescott also, because he was with Mr. Sefton.

"If we win," said Mr. Sefton, "Richmond will become a great city—one of the world's capitals."

"Yes—if we win," replied Prescott involuntarily.

"Why, you don't think that we shall lose, do you?" asked the Secretary quickly.

Prescott was confused and hesitated. He regretted that he had spoken any part of his thoughts, and felt that the admission had been drawn from him, but now thought it better to be frank than evasive.

"Napoleon said that Providence was on the side of the heaviest battalions," he replied, "and therefore I hope ours will increase in weight soon."

The Secretary did not seem to be offended, leaning rather to the other side as he commended the frankness of the young Captain's speech. Then he began to talk to him at great length about the army, its condition, its prospects and the spirit of the soldiers. He revealed a knowledge of the camp that surprised Prescott and aroused in him admiration mingled with a lingering distrust.

Mr. Sefton seemed to him different, indeed, from the average Southerner. Very few Southern men at that time sought to conceal their feelings. Whatever their faults they were open, but Mr. Sefton wore his mask always. Prescott's mind went back unconsciously to the stories he had read of the agile Italian politicians of the Middle Ages, and for a moment paused at the doctrine of reincarnation. Then he was ashamed of himself. He was wronging Mr. Sefton, an able man devoted to the Southern cause—as everybody said.

They stopped just in front of Mrs. Prescott's house.

"You live here?" said the Secretary. "I know your mother. I cannot go in, but I thank you. And Miss Harley lives in the next house. I know her, too—a spirited and beautiful woman. Good-day, Captain Prescott; I shall see you again before you return to the army."

He left Prescott and walked back toward the White House. The young captain entered his own home, thinking of what he had seen and heard, and the impression remained that he had given the Secretary full information about the army.

Prescott received a call the next morning from his new friend Talbot.

"You are invited to a meeting of the Mosaic Club to-night at the house of Mrs. Markham," he said.

"And what is the Mosaic Club?" asked Prescott.

"The Mosaic is a club without organization, by-laws or members!" replied Talbot. "It's just the choice and congenial spirits of Richmond who have got into the habit of meeting at one another's houses. They're worth knowing, particularly Mrs. Markham, the hostess to-night. She heard of you and told me to invite you. Didn't write you a note—stationery's too high."

Prescott looked doubtfully at his mother.

"Why, of course you'll go," she said. "You did not come home to sit here all the time. I would not have you do that."

Talbot called for him shortly after dusk and the two strolled together toward the street where the Markham residence stood.

"Richmond is to be a great capital some day," said Talbot as they walked on, "but, if I may use the simile, it's a little ragged and out-at-elbows now."

This criticism was drawn from him by a misstep into the mud, but he quickly regained the ill-paved sidewalk and continued his course with unbroken cheerfulness. The night was dark, the few and widely scattered street lamps burned dimly, and the city loomed through the dusk, misshapen and obscure.

"Do you know," said Talbot, "I begin to believe that Richmond wouldn't amount to much of a town in the North?"

"It would not," replied Prescott; "but we of the South are agricultural people. Our pride is in the country rather than the towns."

A cheerful light shone from the windows of the Markham house as they approached it. When they knocked at the door it was opened by a coloured servant, and they passed into a large room, already full of people who were talking and laughing as if they had known one another all their lives. Prescott's first glimpse was of Helen Harley in a flowered silk dress, and he felt a thrill of gladness. Then he was presented to his hostess, Mrs. Markham, a small woman, very blonde, bright in attire and wearing fine jewels. She was handsome, with keen features and brilliant eyes.

"You are from General Lee's camp," she said, "and it is a Yankee bullet that has enabled you to come here. If it were not for those Yankee bullets we should never see our brave young officers; so it's an ill ball that brings nobody good."

She smiled into his eyes, and her expression was one of such great friendliness and candour that Prescott liked her at once. She held him and Talbot a few moments longer with light talk, and then he passed on.

It was a large room, of much width and greater length, containing heavy mahogany furniture, while the floor was carpeted in dark colours. The whole effect would have been somber without the presence of so many people, mostly young, and the cheerful fire in the grate glowing redly across the shades of the carpet.

There were a half-dozen men, some in uniform and some in civilian garb, around Helen Harley, and she showed all a young girl's keen and natural delight in admiration and in the easy flow of talk. Both Raymond and Winthrop were in the circle, and so was Redfield, wearing a black frock coat of

unusual length and with rings on his fingers. Prescott wondered why such a man should be a member of this group, but at that moment some one dropped a hand upon his shoulder and, turning, he beheld the tall figure of Colonel Harley, Helen's brother.

"I, too, have leave of absence, Prescott," he said, "and what better could a man do than spend it in Richmond?"

Harley was a large, fair man, undeniably handsome, but with a slight expression of weakness about the mouth. He had earned his military reputation and he visibly enjoyed it.

"Where could one find a more brilliant scene than this?" continued the Colonel. "Ah, my boy, our Southern women stand supreme for beauty and wit!"

Prescott had been present before the war, both in his own country and in others, at occasions far larger and far more splendid; but none impressed him like the present, with the never-failing contrast of camp and battlefield from which he had come. There was in it, too, a singular pathos that appealed to his inmost heart. Some of the women wore dresses that had belonged to their mothers in their youth, the attire of the men was often strange and variegated, and nearly half the officers present had empty sleeves or bandaged shoulders. But no one seemed to notice these peculiarities by eye or speech, nor was their gaiety assumed; it was with some the gradual contempt of hardship brought about by use and with others the temporary rebound from long depression.

"Come," said Talbot to his friend, "you must meet the celebrities. Here's George Bagby, our choicest humourist; Trav. Daniel, artist, poet and musician; Jim Pegram, Innes Randolph, and a lot more."

Prescott was introduced in turn to Richmond's most noted men of wit and manners, the cream of the old South, and gradually all drew together in one great group. They talked of many things, of almost everything except the war, of the news from Europe, of the books that they had read—Scott and Dickens, Thackeray and Hugo—and of the music that they had heard, particularly the favourite arias of Italian opera.

Mrs. Markham and Miss Harley were twin stars in this group, and Prescott could not tell which had the greater popularity. Mrs. Markham was the more worldly and perhaps the more accomplished; but the girl was all youthful freshness, and there was about her an air of simplicity that the older woman lacked.

It gradually developed into a contest between them, heightened, so it seemed to Prescott, by the fact that Colonel Harley was always by the side of Mrs. Markham, and apparently made no effort to hide his admiration, while his sister was seeking without avail to draw him away. Prescott stood aside for a few moments to watch and then Raymond put his hand on his shoulder.

"You see in Mrs. Markham a very remarkable woman—the married belle," said the editor. "The married belle, I understand, is an established feature of life abroad, but she is as yet comparatively unknown in the South. Here we put a woman on the shelf at twenty—or at eighteen if she marries then, as she often does."

Coffee and waffles were served at ten o'clock. Two coloured women brought in the coffee and the cups on a tray, but the ladies themselves served it.

"I apologize for the coffee," said Mrs. Markham. "I have a suspicion that it is more or less bean, but the Yankee blockading fleet is very active and I dare any of you to complain."

"Served by your hand, the common or field bean becomes the finest mocha," said Mr. Pegram, with the ornate courtesy of the old South.

"And if any one dare to intimate that it is not mocha I shall challenge him immediately," said Winthrop.

"You will have to use a worse threat than that," said Mrs. Markham. "I understand that at your last duel you hit a negro plowing in a cornfield fifty yards from your antagonist."

"And scared the negro's mule half to death," added Raymond.

"But in your cause, Mrs. Markham, I couldn't miss," replied the gallant Winthrop, not at all daunted.

The waffles were brought in hot from the kitchen and eaten with the coffee. After the refreshments the company began to play "forfeit essay." Two hats were handed around, all drawing a question from one hat and a word from the other. It became the duty of every one to connect question and word by a poem, essay, song or tale in time to be recited at the next meeting. Then they heard the results of the last meeting.

"That's Innes Randolph standing up there in the corner and getting ready to recite," said Talbot to Prescott. "He's one of the cleverest men in the South and we ought to have something good. He's just drawn from one hat the words 'Daddy Longlegs' and from the other 'What sort of shoe was made on the last of the Mohicans?' He says he doesn't ask to wait until the next meeting, but he'll connect them extempore. Now we'll see what he has made out of them."

Randolph bowed to the company with mock humility, folded his hands across his breast and recited:

"Old Daddy Longlegs was a sinner hoary,
And punished for his wickedness according to the story;
Between him and the Indian shoes the likeness doth come in,
One made a mock o' virtue and one a moccasin."

He was interrupted by the entrance of a quiet little man, modestly clad in a civilian's suit of dark cloth.

"Mr. Sefton," said some one, and immediately there was a halt in the talk, followed by a hush of expectation. Prescott noticed with interest that the company looked uncomfortable. The effect that Mr. Sefton produced upon all was precisely the same as that which he had experienced when with the Secretary.

Mr. Sefton was not abashed. He hurried up to the hostess and said:

"I hope I am not intrusive, Mrs. Markham, but I owed you a call, and I did not know that your little club was in session. I shall go in a few minutes."

Mrs. Markham pressed him to stay and become one of them for the evening, and her manner had every appearance of warmth.

"She believes he came to spy upon us," said Raymond, "and I am not sure myself that he didn't. He knew well enough the club was meeting here to-night."

But the Secretary quickly lulled the feelings of doubt that existed in the minds of the members of the Mosaic Club. He yielded readily to the invitation of Mrs. Markham and then exerted himself to please, showing a facile grace in manner and speech that soon made him a welcome guest. He quickly drifted to the side of Miss Harley, and talked so well from the rich store of his experience and knowledge that her ear was more for him than for any other.

"Is Mr. Sefton a bachelor?" asked Prescott of Winthrop.

Winthrop looked at the young Captain and laughed.

"Are you, too, hit?" Winthrop asked. "You need not flush, man; I have proposed to her myself three times and I've been rejected as often. I expect to repeat the unhappy experience, as I am growing somewhat used to it now and can stand it."

"But you have not answered my question: is the Secretary married?"

"Unfortunately, he is not."

There was an adjoining room to which the men were permitted to retire for a smoke if the spirit moved them, and when Prescott entered it for the first time he found it already filled, General Markham himself presiding. The General was a middle-aged man, heavy and slow of speech, who

usually found the talk of the Mosaic Club too nimble for his wits and began his devotions to tobacco at an early hour.

"Have a cigar, Prescott," he said, holding up a box.

"That looks like a Havana label on the box," replied Prescott. "Are they genuine?"

"They ought to be genuine Havanas," replied the General. "They cost me five dollars apiece."

"Confederate money," added a colonel, Stormont; "and you'll be lucky if you get 'em next year for ten dollars apiece."

Colonel Stormont's eyes followed Prescott's round the room and he laughed.

"Yes, Captain Prescott," he said, "we are a somewhat peculiar company. There are now fourteen men in this room, but we can muster among us only twenty-one arms and twenty-four legs. It's a sort of general assembly, and I suppose we ought to send out a sergeant-at-arms for the missing members."

The Colonel touched his own empty left sleeve and added: "But, thank God, I've got my right arm yet, and it's still at the service of the Confederacy."

The Member of Congress, Redfield, came into the room at this moment and lighted a pipe, remarking:

"There will be no Confederacy, Colonel, unless Lee moves out and attacks the enemy."

He said this in a belligerent manner, his eyes half closed and his chin thrust forward as he puffed at his pipe.

An indignant flush swept over the veteran's face.

"Is this just a case of thumbs up and thumbs down?" he asked. "Is the Government to have a victory whenever it asks for it, merely because it does ask for it?"

Redfield still puffed slowly and deliberately at his pipe, and did not lower his chin a fraction from its aggravating height.

"General Lee overestimates the enemy," he said, "and has communicated the same tendency to all his men. It's a fatal mistake in war; it's a fatal mistake, I tell you, sir. The Yankees fight poorly."

The flush on the face of the Confederate colonel deepened. He tapped his empty sleeve and looked around at what he called the "missing members."

"You are in Congress, Mr. Redfield," he said, "and you have not seen the Yankees in battle. Only those who have not met them on the field say they cannot fight."

"I warn you that I am going to speak in Congress on the inaction of Lee and the general sloth of the military arm!" exclaimed Redfield.

"But, Mr. Redfield," said Prescott, seeking to soothe the Colonel and to still the troubled waters, "we are outnumbered by the enemy in our front at least two to one, we are half starved, and in addition our arms and equipment are much inferior to those of the Yankees."

Here Redfield burst into a passion. He thought it a monstrous shame, he said, that any subaltern should talk at will about the Southern Government, whether its military or civil arm.

Prescott flushed deeply, but he hesitated for an answer. His was not a hot Southern temper, nor did he wish to have a quarrel in a club at which he was only a guest. While he sought the right words, Winthrop spoke for him.

"I think, Mr. Redfield," said the editor, "that criticism of the Government is wholly right and proper. Moreover, not enough of it is done."

"You should be careful, Mr. Winthrop, how far you go," replied Redfield, "or you may find your printing presses destroyed and yourself in prison."

"Which would prove that instead of fighting for freedom we are fighting for despotism. But I am not afraid," rejoined the editor. "Moreover, Mr. Redfield, besides telling you my opinion of you here, I am also perfectly willing to print it in my paper. I shall answer for all that I say or write."

Raymond was sitting at a table listening, and when Winthrop finished these words, spoken with much fire and heat, he took out a note-book and regarded it gravely.

"Which would make, according to my entry here—if Mr. Redfield chooses to challenge—your ninth duel for the present season," he said.

There was an equivocal smile on the face of nearly every one present as they looked at the Member of Congress and awaited his reply. What that would have been they never knew, because just at that moment entered Mr. Sefton, breathing peace and good will. He had heard the last words, but he chose to view them in a humourous light. He pooh-poohed such folly as the rash impulses of young men. He was sure that his friend Redfield had not meant to cast any slur upon the army, and he was equally sure that Winthrop, whose action was right-minded were his point of view correct, was mistaken as to the marrow of Redfield's speech.

The Secretary had a peculiarly persuasive power which quickly exerted its influence upon Winthrop, Stormont and all the others. Winthrop was good-natured, avowing that he had no cause of quarrel with anybody if nobody had any with him, and Redfield showed clearly his relief. It seemed to Prescott that the Member of Congress had gone further than he intended.

No breath of these stormy airs was allowed to blow from the smoking-room upon the ladies, and when Prescott presently rejoined them he found vivacity and gaiety still prevalent. Prescott's gaze dwelt longest on Miss Harley, who was talking to the Secretary. He noted again the look of admiration in the eyes of Mr. Sefton, and that feeling of jealousy which he would not have recognized had it not been for Talbot's half-jesting words returned to him. He would not deny to himself now that Helen Harley attracted him with singular force. There was about her an elusive charm; perhaps it was the slight trace of foreign look and manner that added to her Southern beauty a new and piquant grace.

Mr. Sefton was talking in smooth, liquid tones, and the others had drawn back a little in deference to the all-powerful official, while the girl was pleased, too. She showed it in her slightly parted lips, her vivid eyes and the keen attention with which she listened to all that he said.

Mrs. Markham followed Prescott's look. An ironical smile trembled for a moment on her lips. Then she said:

"The Secretary, the astute Mr. Sefton, is in love."

She watched Prescott keenly to notice the effect upon him of what she said, but he commanded his countenance and replied with a pretense of indifference:

"I think so, too, and I give him the credit of showing extremely good taste."

Mrs. Markham said no more upon the subject, and presently Prescott asked of Miss Harley the privilege of taking her home when the club adjourned, after the universal custom among the young in Southern towns.

"My shoulder is a little lame yet, but I am sure that I shall guard you safely through the streets if you will only let me try," he added gallantly.

"I shall be pleased to have you go," she replied.

"I would lend you my carriage and horses," said Mrs. Markham, who stood by, "but two of my horses were killed in front of an artillery wagon at Antietam, another fell valourously and in like manner at Gettysburg, and the fourth is still in service at the front. I am afraid I have none left, but at any rate you are welcome to the carriage."

Prescott laughingly thanked her but declined. The Secretary approached at that moment and asked Miss Harley if he might see her home.

"I have just accepted Captain Prescott's escort, but I thank you for the honour, Mr. Sefton," she replied.

Mr. Sefton flashed Prescott a single look, a look that the young Captain did not like; but it was gone in a moment like a streak of summer lightning, and the Secretary was as bland and smiling as ever.

"Again do I see that we civilians cannot compete with the military," he said.

"It was not his shoulder straps; he was quicker than you," said Mrs. Markham with a soft laugh.

"Then I shall not be a laggard the next time," replied the Secretary in a meaning tone.

The meeting of the club came to an end a half-hour later, but first there was a little ceremony. The coffee was brought in for the third and last time and all the cups were filled.

"To the cause!" said General Markham, the host. "To the cause that is not lost!"

"To the cause that is right, the cause that is not lost," all repeated, and they drank solemnly.

Prescott's feelings as he drank the toast were of a curiously mingled nature. There was a mist in his eyes as he looked upon this gathering of women and one-armed men all turning so brave a face and so bold a heart to bad fortune. And he wished, too, that he could believe as firmly as they in the justice of the cause. The recurring doubts troubled him. But he drank the toast and then prepared for departure.

CHAPTER IV
THE SECRETARY MOVES

Nearly all the guests left the Markham house at the same time and stood for a few moments in the white Greek portico, bidding one another good-night. It seemed to Prescott that it was a sort of family parting.

The last good-by said, Robert and Helen started down the street, toward the Harley home six or seven blocks away. Her gloved hand rested lightly on his arm, but her face was hidden from him by a red hood. The cold wind was still blustering mightily about the little city and she walked close beside him.

"I cannot help thinking at this moment of your army. Which way does it lie, Robert?" she asked.

"Off there," he replied, and he pointed northward.

"And the Northern army is there, too. And Washington itself is only two hundred miles away It seems to me sometimes that the armies have always been there. This war is so long. I remember I was a child when it began, and now–"

She paused, but Prescott added:

"It began only three years ago."

"A long three years. Sometimes when I look toward the North, where Washington lies, I begin to wonder about Lincoln. I hear bad things spoken of him here, and then there are others who say he is not bad."

"The 'others' are right, I think."

"I am glad to hear you say so. I feel sorry for him, such a lonely man and so unhappy, they say. I wish I knew all the wrong and right of this cruel struggle."

"It would take the wisdom of the angels for that."

They walked on a little farther in silence, passing now near the Capitol and its surrounding group of structures.

"What are they doing these days up there on Shockoe?" asked Prescott.

"Congress is in session and meets again in the morning, but I imagine it can do little. Our fate rests with the armies and the President."

A deep mellow note sounded from the hill and swelled far over the city. In the dead silence of the night it penetrated like a cannon shot, and the echo seemed to Prescott to come back from the far forest and the hills beyond the James. It was quickly followed by another and then others until all Richmond was filled with the sound.

Prescott felt the hand upon his arm clasp him in nervous alarm.

"What does that noise mean?" he cried.

"It's the Bell Tower!" she cried, pointing to a dark spire-like structure on Shockoe Hill in the Capitol Square.

"The Bell Tower!"

"Yes; the alarm! The bell was to be rung there when the Yankees came! Don't you hear it? They have come! They have come!"

The tramp of swift feet increased and grew nearer, there was a hum, a murmur and then a tumult in the streets; shouts of men, the orders of officers and galloping hoof-beats mingled; metal clanked against metal; cannon rumbled and their heavy iron wheels dashed sparks of fire from the stones as they rushed onward. There was a noise of shutters thrown back and lights appeared at innumerable windows. High feminine voices shouted to each other unanswered questions. The tumult swelled to a roar, and over it all thundered the great bell, its echo coming back in regular vibrations from the hills and the farther shore of the river.

After the first alarm Helen was quiet and self-contained. She had lived three years amid war and its tumults, and what she saw now was no more than she had trained herself to expect.

Prescott drew her farther back upon the sidewalk, out of the way of the cannon and the galloping cavalry, and he, too, waited quietly to see what would happen.

The garrison, except those posted in the defenses, gathered about Capitol Square, and women and children, roused from their beds, began to throng into the streets. The whole city was now awake and alight, and the cries of "The Yankees! The Yankees!" increased, but Prescott, hardened to alarms and to using his eyes, saw no Yankees. The sound of scattered rifle shots came from a point far to the eastward, and he listened for the report of artillery, but there was none.

As they stood waiting and listening, Sefton and Redfield, who had been walking home together, joined them. The Secretary was keen, watchful and self-contained, but the Member of Congress was red, wrathful and excited.

"See what your General and your army have brought upon us," he cried, seizing Prescott by the arm. "While Lee and his men are asleep, the Yankees have passed around them and seized Richmond."

"Take your hand off my arm, if you please, Mr. Redfield," said Prescott with quiet firmness, and the other involuntarily obeyed.

"Now, sir," continued Robert, "I have not seen any Yankees, nor have you, nor do I believe there is a Yankee force of sufficient size to be alarming on this side of the Rapidan."

"Don't you hear the bell?"

"Yes, I hear the bell; but General Lee is not asleep nor are his men. If they had the habit of which you accuse them the Yankee army would have been in this city long ago."

Helen's hand was still lying on Prescott's arm and he felt a grateful pressure as he spoke. A thrill of delight shot through him. It was a pleasure to him to defend his beloved General anywhere, but above all before her.

The forces of cavalry, infantry and artillery increased and were formed about Capitol Square. The tumult decreased, the cries of the women and children sank. Order reigned, but everywhere there was expectation. Everybody, too, gazed toward the east whence the sound of the shots had come. But the noise there died and presently the great bell ceased to ring.

"I believe you are right, Captain Prescott," said the Secretary; "I do not see any Yankees and I do not believe any have come."

But the Member of Congress would not be convinced, and recovering his spirit, he criticized the army again. Prescott scorned to answer, nor did Helen or the Secretary speak. Soon a messenger galloped down the street and told the cause of the alarm. Some daring Yankee cavalrymen, a band of skirmishers or scouts, fifty or a hundred perhaps, coming by a devious way, had approached the outer defenses and fired a few shots at long range. The garrison replied, and then the reckless Yankees galloped away before they could be caught.

"Very inconsiderate of them," said the Secretary, "disturbing honest people on a peaceful night like this. Why, it must be at least half-past two in the morning."

"You will observe, Mr. Redfield," said Prescott, "that the Yankee army has not got past General Lee, and the city will not belong to the Yankees before daylight."

"Not a single Yankee soldier ought to be able to come so near to Richmond," said the Member of Congress.

"Why, this only gives us a little healthy excitement, Mr. Redfield," said the Secretary, smoothly; "stirs our blood, so to speak, and teaches us to be watchful. We really owe those cavalrymen a vote of thanks."

Then putting his hand on Redfield's arm, he drew him away, first bidding Prescott and Miss Harley a courteous good-night.

A few more steps and they were at Helen's home. Mr. Harley himself, a tall, white-haired man, with a self-indulgent face singularly like his son Vincent's, answered the knock, shielding from the wind with one hand the flame of a fluttering candle held in the other.

He peered into the darkness, and Prescott thought that he perceived a slight look of disappointment on his face when he saw who had escorted his daughter home.

"He wishes it had been the Secretary," thought Robert.

"I was apprehensive about you for awhile, Helen," he said, "when I heard the bell ringing the alarm. It was reported that the Yankees had come."

"They are not here yet," said Prescott, "and we believe it is still a long road to Richmond."

As he bade Helen good-night at the door, she urged him not to neglect her while he was in the capital, and her father repeated the invitation with less warmth. Then the two disappeared within, the door was shut and Robert turned back into the darkness and the cold.

His own house was within sight, but he had made his mother promise not to wait for him, and he hoped she was already asleep. Never had he been more wide awake, and knowing that he should seek sleep in vain, he strolled down the street, looking about at the dim and silent city.

He gazed up at the dark shaft of the tower whence the bell had rung its warning, at the dusky mass of the Capitol, at the spire of St. Paul's, and then down at a flickering figure passing rapidly on the other side of the street. Robert's eyes were keen, and a soldier's life had accustomed him to their use in the darkness. He caught only a glimpse of it, but was sure the figure was that of the Secretary.

Though wondering what an official high in the Government was about flitting through Richmond at such an hour, he remembered philosophically that it was none of his business. Soon another man appeared, tall and bony, his face almost hidden by a thick black beard faintly touched with silver in the light of the moon. But this person was not shifty nor evasive. He stalked boldly along, and his heavy footsteps gave back a hard metallic ring as the iron-plated heels of his boots came heavily in contact with the bricks of the sidewalk.

Prescott knew the second figure, too. It was Wood, the great cavalryman, the fierce, dark mountaineer, and, wishing for company, Robert followed the General, whom he knew well. Wood turned at the sound of his footsteps and welcomed him.

"I don't like this town nor its folks," he said in his mountain dialect, "and I ain't goin' to stay long. They ain't my kind of people, Bob."

"Give 'em a chance, General; they are doing their best."

"What the Gov'ment ought to do," said the mountaineer moodily, "is to get up ev'ry man there is in the country and then hit hard at the enemy and keep on hittin' until there ain't a breath left in him. But sometimes it seems to me that it's the business of gov'ments in war to keep their armies from winnin'!"

They were joined at the corner by Talbot, according to his wont brimming over with high spirits, and Prescott, on the General's account, was glad they had met him. He, if anybody, could communicate good spirits.

"General," said the sanguine Talbot, "you must make the most of the time. The Yankees may not give us another chance. Across yonder, where you see that dim light trying to shine through the dirty window, Winthrop is printing his paper, which comes out this morning. As he is a critic of the Government, I suggest that we go over and see the task well done."

The proposition suited Wood's mood, and Prescott's, too, so they took their way without further words toward Winthrop's office, on the second floor of a rusty two-story frame building. Talbot led them up a shabby staircase just broad enough for one, between walls from which the crude plastering had dropped in spots.

"Why are newspaper offices always so shabby," he asked. "I was in New York once, where there are rich papers, but they were just the same."

The flight of steps led directly into the editorial room, where Winthrop sat in his shirt sleeves at a little table, writing. Raymond, at another, was similarly clad and similarly engaged. A huge stove standing in the corner, and fed with billets of wood, threw out a grateful heat. Sitting around it in a semi-circle were four or five men, including the one-armed Colonel Stormont and another man in uniform. All were busy reading the newspaper exchanges.

Winthrop waved his hand to the new visitors.

"Be all through in fifteen minutes," he said. "Sit down by the stove. Maybe you'd like to read this; its Rhett's paper."

He tossed them a newspaper and went on with his writing. The three found seats on cane-bottomed chairs or boxes and joined the group around the stove.

Prescott glanced a moment at the newspaper which Winthrop had thrown to them. It was a copy of the Charleston *Mercury*, conducted by the famous secessionist Rhett, then a member of the Confederate Senate, and edited meanwhile by his son. It breathed much fire and brimstone, and called insistently for a quick defeat of the insolent North. He passed it on to his friends and then looked with more interest at the office and the men about him. Everything was shabby to the last degree. Old newspapers and scraps of manuscript littered the floor, cockroaches crawled over the desks, on the walls were double-page illustrations from *Harper's Weekly* and *Leslie's Weekly*, depicting battle scenes in which the frightened Southern soldiers were fleeing like sheep before the valiant sons of the North.

"It's all the same, Prescott," said Talbot. "We haven't any illustrated papers, but if we had they'd show the whole Yankee army running fit to break its neck from a single Southern regiment."

General Wood, too, looked about with keen eyes, as if uncertain what to do, but his hesitation did not last long. A piece of pine wood lay near him, and picking it up he drew from under his belt a great keen-bladed bowie-knife, with which he began to whittle long slender shavings that curled beautifully; then a seraphic smile of content spread over his face.

Those who were not reading drifted into a discussion on politics and the war. The rumble of a press just starting to work came from the next room. Winthrop and Raymond wrote on undisturbed. The General, still whittling his pine stick, began to stare curiously at them. At last he said:

"Wa'al, if this ain't a harder trade than fightin', I'll be darned!"

Several smiled, but none replied to the General's comment. Raymond presently finished his article, threw it to an ink-blackened galley-boy and came over to the stove.

"You probably wonder what I am doing here in the enemy's camp," he said. "The office of every newspaper but my own is the camp of an enemy, but Winthrop asked me to help him out to-night with some pretty severe criticism of the Government. As he's responsible and I'm not, I've pitched into the President, Cabinet and Congress of the Confederate States of America at a great rate. I don't know what will happen to him, because while we are fighting for freedom here we are not fighting for the freedom of the press. We Southerners like to put in some heavy licks for freedom and then get something else. Maybe we're kin to the old Puritans."

They heard a light step on the stair, and the two editors looked up expecting to see some one of the ordinary chance visitors to a newspaper office. Instead it was the Secretary, Mr. Sefton, a conciliatory smile on his face and a hand outstretched ready for the customary shake.

"You are surprised to see me, Mr. Winthrop," he said, "but I trust that I am none the less welcome. I am glad, too, to find so many good men whom I know and some of whom I have met before on this very evening. Good-evening to you all, gentlemen."

He bowed to every one. Winthrop looked doubtfully at him as if trying to guess his business.

"Anything private, Mr. Sefton?" he said "If so we can step into the next room."

"Not at all! Not at all!" replied the Secretary, spreading out his fingers in negative style. "There is nothing that your friends need not hear, not even our great cavalry leader, General Wood. I was passing after a late errand, and seeing your light it occurred to me that I might come up to you and speak of some strange gossip that I have been hearing in Richmond."

All now listened with the keenest interest. They saw that the wily Secretary had not come on any vague errand at that hour of the morning.

"And may I ask what is the gossip?" said Winthrop with a trace of defiance in his tone.

"It was only a trifle," replied the Secretary blandly; "but a friend may serve a friend even in the matter of a trifle."

He paused and looked smilingly around the expectant circle. Winthrop made an impatient movement. He was by nature one of the most humane and generous of men, but fiery and touchy to the last degree.

"It was merely this," continued the Secretary, "and I really apologize for speaking of it at all, as it is scarcely any business of mine, but they say that you are going to print a fierce attack on the Government."

"What then?" asked Winthrop, with increasing defiance.

"I would suggest to you, if you will pardon the liberty, that you refrain. The Government, of which I am but a humble official, is sensitive, and it is, too, a critical time. Just now the Government needs all the support and confidence that it can possibly get. If you impair the public faith in us how can we accomplish anything?"

"But the newspapers of the North have entire freedom of criticism," burst out Winthrop. "We say that the North is not a free country and the South is. Are we to belie those words?"

"I think you miss the point," replied the Secretary, still speaking suavely. "The Government does not wish to repress the freedom of the press nor of any individual, nor in fact have I had any such matter in mind in giving you this intimation. I think that if you do as I hear you purpose to do, some rather extreme men will be disposed to make you trouble. Now there's Redfield."

"The trouble with Redfield," broke in Raymond, "is that he wants all the twenty-four hours of every day for his own talking."

"True! true in a sense," said the Secretary, "but he is a member of the House Committee on Military Affairs and is an influential man."

"I thank you, Mr. Secretary," said Winthrop, "but the article is already written."

A shade crossed the face of Mr. Sefton.

"And as you heard," continued Winthrop, "it attacks the Government with as much vigour as I am capable of putting into it. Here is the paper now; you can read for yourself what I have written."

The galley-boy had come in with a half-dozen papers still wet from the press. Winthrop handed one to the Secretary, indicated the editorial and waited while Sefton read it.

The Secretary, after the perusal, put down the paper and spoke gently as if he were chiding a child: "I am sorry this is published, Mr. Winthrop," he said. "It can only stir up trouble. Will you permit me to say that I think it indiscreet?"

"Oh, certainly," replied Winthrop. "You are entitled to your opinion, and by the same token so am I."

"I don't think our Government will like this," said Mr. Sefton. He tapped the newspaper as he spoke.

"I should think it would not," replied Winthrop with an ironical laugh. "At least, it was not intended that way. But does our Government expect to make itself an oligarchy or despotism? If that is so, I should like to know what we are fighting for?"

Mr. Sefton left these questions unanswered, but continued to express sorrow over the incident. He did not mean to interfere, he said; he had come with the best purpose in the world. He thought that at this stage of the war all influences ought to combine for the public good, and also he did not wish his young friends to suffer any personal inconvenience. Then bowing, he went out, but he took with him a copy of the paper.

"That visit, Winthrop, was meant for a threat, and nothing else," said Raymond, when he was sure the Secretary was safely in the street.

"No doubt of it," said Winthrop, "but I don't take back a word."

They speculated on the result, until General Wood, putting up his knife and throwing down his pine stick, drew an old pack of cards from an inside pocket of his coat.

"Let's play poker a little while," he said. "It'll make us think of somethin' else and steady our nerves. Besides, it's mighty good trainin' for a soldier. Poker's just like war—half the cards you've got, an' half bluff. Lee and Jackson are such mighty good gen'rals 'cause they always make the other fellow think they've got twice as many soldiers as they really have."

Raymond, an inveterate gambler, at once acceded to the proposition; Winthrop and one of the soldiers did likewise, and they sat down to play. The others looked on.

"Shall we make the limit ten cents in coin or ten dollars Confederate money?" asked Winthrop.

"Better make it ten dollars Confederate; we don't want to risk too much," replied Raymond.

Soon they were deep in the mysteries and fascinations of the game. Wood proved himself a consummate player, a master of "raise" and "bluff," but for awhile the luck ran against him, and he made this brief comment:

"Things always run in streaks; don't matter whether it's politics, love, farmin' or war. They don't travel alone. At Antietam nearly half the Yankee soldiers we killed were red-headed. Fact, sure; but at Chancellorsville I never saw a single dead Yankee with a red head."

The luck turned by and by toward the General, but Prescott thought it was time for him to be seeking home and he bade good-night. Colonel Stormont accompanied him as he went down the rickety stairs.

"Colonel," asked Prescott, as they reached the street, "who, in reality, is Mr. Sefton?"

"That is more than any of us can tell," replied the Colonel; "nominally he is at the head of a department in the Treasury, but he has acquired a great influence in the Cabinet—he is so deft at the despatch of business—and he is at the White House as much as he is anywhere. He is not a man whom we can ignore."

Prescott was of that opinion, too, and when he got into his bed, not long before the break of day, he was still thinking of the bland Secretary.

CHAPTER V
AN ELUSIVE FACE

Walking abroad at noontime next day, Prescott saw Helen Harley coming toward Capitol Square, stepping lightly through the snow, a type of youthful freshness and vigour. The red hood was again over her head, and a long dark cloak, the hem of it almost touching the snow fallen the night before, enclosed her figure.

"Good-morning, Mr. Soldier," she said cheerily; "I hope that your dissipations at the Mosaic Club have not retarded the recovery of your injured shoulder."

Prescott smiled.

"I think not," he replied. "In fact, I've almost forgotten that I have a shoulder."

"Now, I can guess where you are going," she said.

"Try and see."

"You are on your way to the Capitol to hear Mr. Redfield reply to that attack of Mr. Winthrop's, and I'm going there, too."

So they walked together up the hill, pausing a moment by the great Washington monument and its surrounding groups of statuary where Mr. Davis had taken the oath of office two years before, and Mr. Sefton, who saw them from an upper window of that building, smiled sourly.

The doors of the Capitol were wide open, as they always stood during the sessions of Congress, and Robert and Helen passed into the rotunda, pausing a moment by the Houdon Washington, and then went up the steps to the second floor, where they entered the Senate Chamber, now used by the Confederate House of Representatives. The tones of a loud and tireless voice reached them; Mr. Redfield was already on his feet.

The honourable member from the Gulf Coast had risen on a question of personal privilege. Then he required the clerk of the House to read the offending editorial from Winthrop's newspaper, during which he stood haughtily erect, his feet rather wide apart, his arms folded indignantly across his breast, and a look of righteous wrath on his face. When the clerk finished, he spat plentifully in a spittoon at his feet, cleared his throat, and let loose the flood of rhetoric which was threatening already to burst over the dam.

The blow aimed by that villainous writer, the honourable gentleman said, was struck at him. He was a member of the Committee on Military Affairs, and he must reply ere the foul stain was permitted to tarnish his name. He came from a sunny land where all the women were beautiful and all the men brave, and he would rather die a thousand deaths than permit any obscure ink-slinger to impeach his fair fame. He carried the honour of his country in his heart; he would sooner die a thousand deaths than to permit—to permit–

He paused, and waved his hand as he sought for a metaphor sufficiently strong-winged.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Redfield, and I'll help you down," dryly said a thin-faced member from the Valley of Virginia.

The sound of subdued laughter arose and the Speaker rapped for order. Mr. Redfield glared at the irreverent member from the Valley of Virginia, then resumed his interrupted flight. Unfortunately for him the spell was broken. Some of the members began to talk in low whispers and others to read documents. Besides the murmur of voices there was a sound of scraping feet. But the honourable member from the sunny shores of the Gulf helped himself down, though somewhat angrily, and choosing a tamer course began to come nearer to the point. He called for the suppression of the offending newspaper and the expulsion of its editor from the city. He spoke of Winthrop by name and denounced him. Robert saw Mr. Sefton appear upon the floor and once nod his head approvingly as Mr. Redfield spoke.

The House now paid more heed, but the dry member from the Valley of Virginia, in reply to Mr. Redfield, called the attention of the members to the fact that they could not suppress the newspapers. They might deny its representatives the privileges of the House, but they could go no further. He was opposed to spreading the thing to so great an extent, as it would be sure to reach the North and would be a standing advertisement to the Yankees that the South was divided against itself.

Then a motion was made to deny the privileges of the House to Winthrop, or any representative of his paper, but it was defeated by a narrow margin.

"That, I think," said Robert, "will be the end of this affair."

"I am glad of it," responded Helen, "because I like Mr. Winthrop."

"And, therefore, you believe everything he says is correct?"

"Yes; why not?"

"Women have more personal loyalty than men," said Robert, not replying directly. "Shall we go now?" he asked a moment later; "I think we have heard all of interest."

"No, I must stay a little," she replied with some embarrassment. "The fact is—I am—waiting to see Mr. Sefton."

"To see Mr. Sefton!" Prescott could not refrain from exclaiming in his surprise.

She looked at him with an air half defiance, half appeal.

"Yes," she said, "and my business is of considerable importance to me. You don't think that a mere woman can have any business of weight with so influential a personage as Mr. Sefton. You Southern men, with all your courtesy and chivalry, really undervalue us, and therefore you are not gallant at all."

Her defiant look and manner told Prescott that she did not wish him to know the nature of her business, so he made a light answer, asking her if she were about to undertake the affairs of the Government. He had no doubt some would be glad to get rid of them.

He excused himself presently and strolled into the rotunda, where he gazed absently at the Washington statue and the Lafayette bust, although he saw neither. Conscious of a feeling of jealousy, he began to wish ill to the clever Secretary. "What business can she have with a man like Sefton?" he said to himself.

Passing out of the rotunda, he walked slowly down the steps, and looking back saw Helen and Mr. Sefton in close and earnest conversation. Then he went on faster with increased ill temper.

"I have a piece of news for you," said Mrs. Prescott the next morning to her son at the breakfast table.

He looked at her with inquiring interest.

"Helen Harley has gone to work," she said.

"Gone to work! Mother, what do you mean?"

"The heiress of seven generations must work like a common Northern mill-hand to support that pompous old father of hers, the heir of six Virginia generations, who certainly would not work under any circumstances to support his daughter."

"Won't you explain yourself more clearly, mother?"

"It's this. The Harleys are ruined by the war. The Colonel is absorbed in his career and spends all his salary on himself. The old gentleman doesn't know anything about his financial affairs and doesn't want to; it's beneath his dignity. Helen, who does know about them, is now earning the bread for her father and herself. Think of a Southern girl of the oldest blood doing such a thing! It is very low and degrading, isn't it?"

She looked at him covertly. A sudden thought occurred to him.

"No, mother," he replied. "It is not low and degrading. You think just the contrary, and so do I. Where has Helen gone to work?"

"In the Treasury Department, under Mr. Sefton. She is copying documents there."

Robert felt a sudden relief and then alarm that she should owe so much to Sefton.

"I understand that Harley senior stormed and threatened for awhile," continued his mother. "He said no female member of his family had ever worked before, and he might have added, few male members either. He said his family would be disgraced forever by the introduction of such a low Yankee innovation; but Helen stood firm, and, moreover, she was urged by the hand of necessity. I understand that she has quite a good place and her salary is to be paid in gold. She will pass here every day at noon, coming home for her luncheon."

Prescott spent most of the morning at home, the remainder with his new friends, wandering about the city; but just before noon he was in front of the Custom House, waiting by the door through which Helen must come. She appeared promptly at the stroke of twelve and seemed surprised to see him there.

"I came merely to tell you how much I admire your resolution," he said. "I think you are doing a noble thing."

The colour in her cheeks deepened a little. He knew he had pleased her.

"It required no great amount of courage," she replied, "for the work is not hard and Mr. Sefton is very kind. And, aside from the money I am happier here. Did you never think how hard it was for women to sit with their hands folded, waiting for this war to end?"

"I have thought of it more than once," he replied.

"Now I feel that I am a part of the nation," she continued, "not a mere woman who does not count. I am working with the others for our success."

Her eyes sparkled like the eyes of one who has taken a tonic, and she looked about her defiantly as if she would be ready with a fitting reply to any who might dare to criticize her.

Prescott liked best in her this quality of independence and self-reliance, and perhaps her possession of it imparted to her that slight foreign air which he so often noticed. He thought the civilization of the South somewhat debilitating, so far as women were concerned. It wished to divide the population into just two classes—women of beautiful meekness and men of heroic courage.

Helen had broken down an old convention, having made an attempt that few women of her class and period would have dared, and at a time, too, when she might have been fearful of the results. She was joyous as if a burden had been lifted. Prescott rarely had seen her in such spirits. She, who was usually calm and grave, seemed to have forgotten the war. She laughed and jested and saw good humour in everything.

Prescott could not avoid catching the infection from the woman whom he most admired. The atmosphere—the very air—took on an unusual brilliancy. The brick walls and the shingled roofs glittered in the crisp, wintry sunshine; the schoolboys, caps over their ears and mittens on their fingers, played and shouted in the streets just as if peace reigned and the cannon were not rumbling onward over there beyond the trees.

"Isn't this world beautiful at times?" said Helen.

"It is," replied Robert, "and it seems all the more strange to me that we should profane it by war. But here comes Mrs. Markham. Let us see how she will greet you."

Mrs. Markham was in a sort of basket cart drawn by an Accomack pony, one of those ugly but stout little horses which do much service in Virginia and she was her own driver, her firm white wrists showing above her gloves as she held the reins. She checked her speed at sight of Robert and Helen and stopped abreast of them.

"I was not deceiving you the other night, Captain Prescott," she said, after a cheerful good-afternoon "when I told you that all my carriage horses had been confiscated. Ben Butler, here—I call him Ben Butler because he is low-born and has no manners—arrived only last night, bought for me by my husband with a whole wheelbarrowful of Confederate bills: is it not curious how we, who have such confidence in our Government, will not trust its money."

She flicked Ben Butler with her whip, and the pony reared and tried to bolt, but presently she reduced him to subjection.

"Did I not tell you that he had no manners," she said. "Oh, how I wish I had the real Ben Butler under my hand, too! I've heard what you've done, Helen. But, tell me, is it really true? Have you actually gone to work—as a clerk in an office, like a low-born Northern woman?"

The colour in Helen's cheeks deepened and Robert saw the faintest quiver of her lower lip.

"It is true," she replied. "I am a secretary in Mr. Sefton's office and I get fifteen dollars a week."

"Confederate money?"

"No, in gold."

"What do you do it for?"

"For the money. I need it."

Mrs. Markham flicked the pony's mane again and once more he reared, but, as before, the strong hand restrained him.

"What you are doing is right, Helen," she said. "Though a Southern woman, I find our Southern conventions weigh heavily upon me: but," she added quizzically, "of course, you understand that we can't know you socially now."

"I understand," said Helen, "and I don't ask it."

Her lips were pressed together with an air of defiance and there was a sparkle in her eyes.

Mrs. Markham laughed long and joyously.

"Why, you little goose," she said, "I believe you actually thought I was in earnest. Don't you know that we of the Mosaic Club and its circle represent the more advanced and liberal spirit of Richmond—if I do say it myself—and we shall stand by you to the utmost. I suspect that if you were barred, others would choose the same bars for themselves. Would they not, Captain Prescott?"

"I certainly should consider myself included in the list," replied the young man sturdily.

"And doubtless you would have much company," resumed she. "And now I must be going. Ben Butler is growing impatient. He is not accustomed to good society, and I must humour him or he will make a scene."

She spoke to the horse and they dashed down the street.

"A remarkable woman," said Prescott.

"Yes; and just now I feel very grateful to her," said Helen.

They met others, but not all were so frank and cordial as Mrs. Markham. There was a distinct chilliness in the manners of one, while a second had a patronizing air which was equally offensive. Helen's high spirits were dashed a little, but Robert strove to raise them again. He saw only the humourous features of such a course on the part of those whom they had encountered, and he exerted himself to ridicule it with such good effect that she laughed again, and her happy mood was fully restored when she reached her own gate.

The next was a festal day in Richmond, which, though always threatened by fire and steel, was not without its times of joyousness. The famous Kentucky raider, Gen. John H. Morgan, had come to town, and all that was best in the capital, both military and civil, would give him welcome and do him honour.

The hum and bustle of a crowd rose early in the streets, and Prescott, with all the spirits of youth, eager to see and hear everything of moment, was already with his friends, Talbot, Raymond and Winthrop.

"Richmond knows how to sing and dance even if the Yankee army is drawing near. Who's afraid!" said Winthrop.

"I have declined an honour," said Raymond. "I might have gone in one of the carriages in the procession, but I would rather be here on the sidewalk with you. A man can never see much of a show if he is part of it."

It was a winter's day, but Richmond was gay, nevertheless. The heavens opened in fold on fold of golden sunshine, and a bird of winter, rising above the city, poured out a flood of song. The boys had a holiday and they were shouting in the streets. Officers in their best uniforms rode by, and

women, bringing treasured dresses of silk or satin from old chests, appeared now in gay and warm colours. The love of festivity, which war itself could not crush, came forth, and these people, all of whom knew one another, began to laugh and jest and to see the brighter side of life.

"Come toward the hotel," said Talbot to his friends; "Morgan and some of the great men of Kentucky who are with him have been there all night. That's where the procession starts."

Nothing loath, they followed him, and stayed about the hotel, talking with acquaintances and exchanging the news of the morning. Meanwhile the brilliant day deepened and at noon the time for the festivities to begin was at hand.

The redoubtable cavalry leader, whose fame was rivaling that of Stuart and Wood, came forth from the hotel, his friends about him, and the grand procession through the streets was formed. First went the Armory Band, playing its most gallant tunes, and after that the city Battalion in its brightest uniform. In the first carriage sat General Morgan and Mayor Joseph Mayo of Richmond, side by side, and behind them in carriages and on horseback rode a brilliant company; famous Confederate Generals like J. E. B. Stuart, Edward Johnson, A. P. Hill and others, Hawes, the so-called Confederate Governor of Kentucky, and many more.

Virginia was doing honour to Kentucky in the person of the latter's gallant son, John H. Morgan, and the crowd flamed into enthusiasm. Tumultuous applause arose. These were great men to the people. Their names were known in every household, and they resounded now, shouted by many voices in the crisp, wintry air. The carriages moved briskly along, the horses reared with their riders in brilliant uniforms, and their steel-shod hoofs struck sparks from the stones of the streets. Ahead of all, the band played dance music, and the brass of horn and trumpet flashed back the golden gleam of the sun. The great dark-haired and dark-eyed cavalryman, the centre and object of so much applause and enthusiasm, smiled with pleasure, and bowed to right and left like a Roman Caesar at his triumph.

The joy and enthusiasm of the crowd increased and the applause swelled into rumbling thunder. Richmond, so long depressed and gloomy, sprang up with a bound. Why cry when it was so much better to laugh! The flash of uniforms was in the eyes of all, and the note of triumphant music in every ear. What were the Yankees, anyway, but a leaderless horde? They could never triumph over such men as these, Morgan, Stuart, Wood, Harley, Hill, not to mention the peerless chief of them all, Lee, out there, always watching.

The low thunder of a cannon came faintly from the north, but there were few who heard it.

The enthusiasm of the crowd for Morgan spread to everybody, and mighty cheers were given in turn for all the Generals and the Mayor. The rebound was complete. The whole people, for the time being, looked forward to triumph, thorough and magnificent. The nearer the Yankees came to Richmond the greater would be their defeat and rout. High spirits were contagious and ran through the crowd like a fire in dry grass.

"Hurrah!" cried Talbot, clapping his hand heavily upon Prescott's shoulder. "This is the spirit that wins! We'll drive the Yankees into the Potomac now!"

"I've never heard that battles were won by shouting and the music of bands," replied Prescott dryly. "How many of these people who are making so much noise have anything whatever to do with the war?"

"That's your Puritan mind, old Gloomy Face," replied Talbot. "Nothing was ever won by being too solemn."

"And we mustn't hold too cheaply the enthusiasm of a crowd—even a crowd that is influenced merely by the emotion of the moment," said Raymond. "It is a force which, aimless in itself, may be controlled for good uses by others. Ha, look at Harley, there! Well done!"

Helen's brother was riding an unusually spirited horse that reared and curveted every time the band put forth an unusual effort. The Colonel himself was in gorgeous attire, wearing a brand new uniform with much gold lace, very large epaulets on his shoulders and a splendid silken sash around his waist. A great cavalry saber hung at his side. He was a resplendent figure and he drew much

applause from the boys and the younger women. His eyes shone with pleasure, and he allowed his horse to curvet freely.

A little girl, perhaps pressed too much by the unconscious crowd or perhaps driven on by her own enthusiasm, fell directly in front of the rearing horse of Harley. It was too late for him to stop, and a cry of alarm arose from the crowd, who expected to see the iron-shod hoofs beat the child's body into the pavement, but Harley instantly struck his horse a mighty blow and the animal sprang far over the child, leaving her untouched.

The applause was thunderous, and Harley bowed and bowed, lifting his plumed hat again and again to the admiring multitude, while sitting his still-rearing horse with an ease and grace that was beyond criticism.

"The man's whole character was expressed in that act," said Raymond with conviction; "vain to the last degree, as fond of display and colours as a child, unconsciously selfish, but in the presence of physical danger quick, resourceful, and as brave as Alexander. What queer mixtures we are!"

Mr. Harley was in one of the carriages of the procession and his eyes glittered with pleasure and pride when he witnessed the act of his son. Moreover, in his parental capacity he appropriated part of the credit and also took off his hat and bowed.

The procession advanced along Main Street toward the south porch of the City Hall, where General Morgan was to be presented formally to the people, and the cheers never ceased for a moment. Talbot and the two editors talked continually about the scene before them, even the minds of the two professional critics becoming influenced by the unbounded enthusiasm; but Prescott paid only a vague attention, his mind having been drawn away by something else.

The young Captain saw in the throng a woman who seemed to him somewhat different from those around her. She was not cheering nor clapping her hands—merely floating with the stream. She was very tall and walked with a strong and graceful step, but was wrapped to her cheeks in a long brown cloak; only a pair of wonderfully keen eyes, which once met the glance of his, rose above its folds. Her look rested on him a moment and held him with a kind of secret power, then her eyes passed on; but it seemed to him that under a show of indifference she was examining everything with minute scrutiny.

It was the lady of the brown cloak, his silent companion of the train, and Prescott burned with curiosity at this unexpected meeting. He watched her for some time and he could make nothing of her. She spoke to no one, but kept her place among the people, unnoticed but noticing. He was recalled to himself presently by Talbot's demand to know why he stared so much at the crowd and not at the show itself.

Then he turned his attention away from the woman to the procession, but he resolved not to lose sight of her entirely.

At the south porch of the City Hall General Morgan was introduced with great ceremony to the inhabitants of the Confederate capital, who had long heard of his gallant deeds.

After the cheering subsided, the General, a handsome man of thirty-six or seven, made a speech. The Southern people dearly love a speech, and they gave him close attention, especially as he was sanguine, predicting great victories. Little he dreamed that his career was then close to its bloody end, and that the brilliant Stuart, standing so near, would be claimed even sooner; that Hill, over there, and others beside him, would never see the close of the war. There was no note of all this in the air now, and no note of it in Morgan's speech. Young blood and lively hope spoke in him, and the bubbling spirits of the crowd responded.

Prescott and his comrades stood beside the porch, listening to the address and the cheers, and Prescott's attention was claimed again by the strange woman in the throng. She was standing directly in front of the speaker, though all but her face was hidden by those around her. He saw the same keen eyes under long lashes studying the generals on the porch. "I'm going to speak to that woman,"

resolved Prescott. "Boys," he said to his comrades, "I've just caught the eye of an old friend whom I haven't seen in a long time. Excuse me for a minute."

He edged his way cautiously through the throng until he stood beside the strange woman. She did not notice his coming and presently he stumbled slightly against her. He recovered himself instantly and was ready with an apology.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but we have met before. I seem to remember you, Miss, Miss–"

The woman looked startled, then set her lips firmly.

"You are rude, sir," she said. "Is it the custom of Southern gentlemen to accost ladies in this manner?"

She gave her shoulders a haughty shrug and turned her back upon him. Prescott flushed, but held his ground, and he would have spoken to her again had she given him the chance. But she began to move away and he was afraid to follow deliberately lest he make a scene. Instead, he went back to his friends.

The General's speech came to an end and was followed by a rolling thunder of cheers. Then all the people of consequence were presented to him, and forth from the Hustings court-room, where they had been biding their time, walked twenty of the most beautiful young ladies of Richmond, in holiday attire of pink, rose and lilac silk or satin, puffed and flounced, their hair adorned with pink and red roses from Richmond hothouses.

It was really a wonderful bit of feminine colouring amid the crowd, and the Southern people, ever proud of their women, cheered again. Helen was there—it was a holiday—in a wonderful old dress of rose-coloured satin, her cheeks glowing and her eyes shining, and as Prescott saw her he forgot the strange woman who had rebuffed him.

"The most beautiful girl of this score of beautiful girls is to present a wreath of roses to General Morgan. I wonder who it will be," said Raymond.

He looked quizzically at Prescott.

"I wonder," repeated Prescott, but he felt no doubt whatever upon the subject.

The cheering of the crowd ceased, and Helen, escorted by her brother, stepped from the unserried ranks of beauty to a table where the chaplet of roses lay. Then the General stood aside, and Helen, walking forward alone, made a little speech to General Morgan, in which she complimented him on his courage and brilliant achievements. She said that the sound of his voice would always strike terror in the North and kindle hope anew in the South. She was half afraid, half daring, but she spoke the words clearly. The big, black-bearded General stood before her, hat in hand and openly admiring. When she came to the end of her speech she reached up, rested the wreath for a moment on his bushy black crown of hair and then put it in his hands. Now the crowd gave its greatest burst of applause. The two figures standing there, the tall, brown soldier and the beautiful woman, appealed to all that was gallant in their nature.

"It does not look as if there would be any social ostracism of Miss Harley because she has turned working woman," said Winthrop.

"Cold and selfish emotions don't count at a time like this," said Raymond; "it's the silent pressure of time and circumstance that she'll have to reckon with."

Helen, her great deed performed, walked back, blushing somewhat, and hid herself among her companions. Then, the official ceremonies over, the occasion became informal, and soon generals and young women alike were surrounded by admirers, war and beauty having chances about equal in the competition. The good spirits of the crowd, moved by triumphant oratory, the beauty of the women and the blaze of uniforms, grew to such a pitch that no discordant note marred the cheerfulness of those gathered in the old Court House.

Prescott pressed into the crowd, but he found himself somewhat lost, or, rather, dimmed, amid the brilliant uniforms of the generals, who were as thick as corn in the field, and he despaired of securing more than a small part of Helen's attention. He had admired her beauty more than ever that

day; her timid dignity when all critical eyes were upon her impressed him, and yet he felt no jealousy now when he saw her surrounded and so sincerely flattered by others. He was surprised at himself, and a little angry, too, that it should be so, but search his mind as he would he could not find the cause. At last he secured a word or two with her and passed on toward the porch; but looking back saw the great cavalry leader, Wood, the mountaineer, talking to her, his tall figure towering a head over hers, his black eyes sparkling with a new fire and lighting up his face like a blaze. His uniform was not too bright and he was an imposing figure—lionlike was the simile that occurred to Prescott.

But he felt no pang—again he was surprised at himself—and went on his way to the parlour, where the decorations were yet untouched, and gazed at the crowd, portions of which still lingered in the streets.

His eyes unconsciously sought one figure, a figure that was not there, and he came to himself with a start when he realized the cause that had drawn him to the place. Displeased with himself, he rejoined his friends in the court-room.

"Let's go into the hall and see the ladies and the great men," said Talbot, and his comrades willingly went with him. It was indeed an animated scene in the building, the same high spirits and confident hope for the future that had marked the crowd prevailing here.

Despite the winter without, it was warm in the rooms of the City Hall, and Prescott, after awhile, went back to the porch from which General Morgan had made his speech. Many of the enthusiastic throng of spectators still lingered and small boys were sending off amateur fireworks. Going outside, he became once more one of the throng, simply because he had caught another glimpse of a face that interested and mystified him.

It was the tall woman of the brown cloak, still watching everything with eyes that missed no detail. She annoyed Prescott; she had become an obsession like one of those little puzzles the solution of which is of no importance except when one cannot obtain it. So he lingered in her neighbourhood, taking care that she should not observe him, and he asked two or three persons concerning her identity. Nobody knew her.

As the crowd, by and by, began to diminish, the woman turned away. The outlines of her figure were not disclosed, but her step was swinging and free, as that of one who had an abundance of health and vigour. She spoke to nobody, but seemed sure of her way.

She went up Main Street, and Prescott, his curiosity increasing, followed at a distance. She did not look back, and he closed up gradually the gap between them, in order that he might not lose sight of her if she turned around a corner. This she did presently, but when he hastened and passed the corner, too, he found himself face to face with the woman in brown.

"Well, sir?" she said sharply.

"Ah, I– Excuse me, I did not see you. I turned the corner with such suddenness," he said awkwardly, having an uneasy sense that he had been intrusive, yet anxious to solve the troublesome little mystery.

"You were following me—and for the second time to-day."

He was silent, but his flushed face confirmed the truth of her accusation. For the moment that he stood near he examined her features. He saw eyes so dark that he could not tell whether they were blue or black, eyelashes of unusual length, and a pale face remarkable for its strength. But it was youthful and finely cut, while a wisp of bronze hair at the edge of the hood showed a gleam of gold as the sunshine fell across it.

"I have heard that Southern gentlemen were always courteous, as I told you once before," she said.

"I thought I knew you, but made a mistake," Prescott replied, it being the first thing that came into his mind. "I fear that I have been rude and I ask your pardon."

He lifted his hat and bowed humbly.

"You can show contrition by ceasing to follow me," she said, and the sharp tone of her accusation was still in her voice.

Prescott bowed again and turned away. He fully meant to keep his implied promise, but curiosity was too strong for him, and watching once more from a distance, he saw her go up Shockoe Hill and into the Capitol through the wide-open doors. When he found it convenient presently to enter the Capitol in his turn, he saw no trace of her, and, disappointed and annoyed with himself, he went back to the City Hall. Here Talbot was the first whom he met.

"Where have you been?" asked his friend.

"Following a woman."

"Following a woman?"

Talbot looked at Prescott in surprise.

"I didn't know you were that kind of a man, Bob," he said; "but what luck?"

"None at all. I failed even to learn her name, where she lived or anything else about her. I'll tell you more this evening, because I want your advice."

The reception ended presently, and the ladies, escorted by the young men, went to their homes. Talbot, Winthrop and Raymond rejoined Prescott soon afterward near Shockoe Hill.

"Now tell us of the woman you were following," said Talbot.

"I don't think I shall," replied Prescott. "I've changed my intention about it—at least, for the present."

The affair had clung to his mind and the result of his second thought was a resolution to keep it to himself a while longer. He had formed a suspicion, but it might be wrong, and he would not willingly do injustice to any one, least of all to a woman. Her face, when he saw her close at hand, looked pure and good, and now that he recalled it he could remember distinctly that there had been in it a touch of reproach and the reproach was for him—she had seemed to ask why he annoyed her. No, he would wait before speaking of her to his friends.

Talbot regarded Prescott for a moment with an inquiring gaze, but said nothing more upon the subject.

Prescott left his friends at the Capitol and spent the remainder of the day with his mother, who on the plea of age had avoided the reception and the festivities, although she now had many questions to ask.

"I hear that great enthusiasm was shown and brilliant predictions were made," she said.

"It is quite true," he replied. "The music, the speeches and the high spirits, which you know are contagious in a crowd, have done good, I think, to the Southern cause."

"Did Morgan bring any new recruits for General Lee's army?"

"Now, mother," replied Prescott, laughing a little, "don't let your Northern blood carry you too far. I know, too, that wars are not won by music and shouting, and days like to-day bring nothing substantial—merely an increase of hope; but after all, that is what produces substantial results."

She smiled and did not answer, but went on quietly with her sewing. Prescott watched her for awhile and reflected what a beautiful woman his mother must have been, and was yet, for that matter.

"Mother," he said presently, "you do not speak it aloud, but you cannot disguise from me the fact that you think it would be better for the North to win."

She hesitated, but at last she said:

"I cannot rejoice whichever way this war ends. Are you not on the side of the South? All I can pray for is that it may end quickly."

"In your heart, mother, you have no doubt of the result."

She made no reply, and Prescott did not pursue the subject.

CHAPTER VI
THE PURSUIT OF A WOMAN

The silver lining which the reception to General Morgan put in the cloud always hanging over Richmond lasted until the next day, when the content of the capital was rudely shattered by news that important papers had been stolen from the office of the President in the granite building on Bank Street. The exact value of these papers the public did not know, but they contained plans, it was said, of the coming campaign and exact data concerning the military and financial condition of the Confederacy. They were, therefore, of value alike to the Government and its enemies, and great was the noise over their disappearance.

The theft, so supposition ran, was committed while nearly all the officials were present at the festivities of the preceding day, and when the guard about the public offices, never very strict, was relaxed more than usual. But the clue stopped there, and, so far as the city could hear, it bade fair to remain at that point, as the crush of great affairs about to decide the fate of a nation would not permit a long search for such a secret spring, though the leakage might prove expensive.

"Probably some faithless servant who hopes to sell them to the North for a large reward," said Raymond to Prescott.

"I think not," replied Prescott with emphasis.

"Ah, you don't? Then what do you think?" asked Raymond, looking at him sharply.

"A common spy," replied Prescott, not wishing to be surprised into further disclosure of his thought. "You know such must be here. In war no city or army is free from spies."

"But that's a vague generalization," said Raymond, "and leads to nothing."

"True," said Prescott, but he intended a further inquiry into the matter on his own account, and this he undertook as soon as he was free from others. He was perhaps better fitted than any one else in Richmond for the search, because he had sufficient basis upon which to build a plan that might or might not lead to a definite issue.

He went at once to the building in which the President had his office, where, despite the robbery of the day before, he roamed about among the rooms and halls almost as he pleased, inquiring and making suggestions which might draw from the attendants facts to them of slight importance. Yes, visitors had been there the day before, chiefly ladies, some from the farther South, drawn by veneration for their beloved President and a wish to see the severe and simple offices from which the destiny of eleven great States and the fate of the mightiest war the world had ever known was directed.

And who were the ladies? If their names were not known, could not a description of their appearance be given? But no one had any definite memory on these points; they were just like other sightseers. Was there a tall woman with a brown cloak among them? Prescott put this question to several people, but drew no affirmative reply until he found an old coloured man who swept the halls. The sweeper thought that he did remember seeing such a figure on the lower floor, but he was not sure, and with that Prescott was forced to be content.

He felt that his search had not been wholly in vain, leading as it did to what might be called the shadow of a clue, and he resolved to continue it. There had been leaks before in the Confederacy, some by chance and some by design, notably an instance of the former when Lee's message to his lieutenant was lost by the messenger and found by a Northern sympathizer, thus informing his opponents of his plan and compelling him to fight the costly battle of Antietam. If he pursued this matter and prevented its ultimate issue, he might save the Confederacy far more than he could otherwise.

Richmond was a small city, difficult of entrance without a pass, and for two or three days Prescott, abandoning the society of his friends, trod its streets industriously, not neglecting the smallest and meanest among them, seeking always a tall figure in a brown dress and brown cloak. It

became an obsession with him, and, as he now recognized, there was even more in it than a mere hunt for a spy. This woman troubled him; he wished to know who and what she was and why she, a girl, had undertaken a task so unfitting. Yet war, he remembered, is a destroyer of conventions, and the mighty upheaval through which the country was going could account for anything.

He found on the third day his reward in another glimpse of the elusive and now tantalizing brown figure under the brow of Shockoe Hill, strolling along casually, as if the beauty of the day and the free air of the heavens alone attracted.

The brown dress had been changed, but the brown cloak remained the same, and Prescott felt a pang of remorse lest he had done an injustice to a woman who looked so innocent. Until this moment he had never seen her face distinctly, save one glimpse, but now the brown hood that she wore was thrown back a little and there shone beneath it clear eyes of darkest blue, illuminating a face as young, as pure, as delicate in outline as he could have wished for in a sister of his own. No harm could be there. A woman who looked like that could not be engaged upon an errand such as he suspected, and he would leave her undisturbed.

But, second thought came. He put together again all the circumstances, the occasions upon which he had seen her, especially that day of the Morgan reception, and his suspicions returned. So he followed her again, at a distance now, lest she should see him, and was led a long and winding chase about the capital.

He did not believe that she knew of his presence, and these vague meanderings through the streets of Richmond confirmed his belief. No one with a clear conscience would leave such crooked tracks, and what other purpose could she have now save to escape observation until the vigilance of the sentinels, on edge over the robbery, should relax a little and she could escape through the cordon of guards that belted in Richmond.

She passed at last into an obscure side street and there entered a little brown wooden cottage. Prescott, watching from the corner, saw her disappear within, and he resolved that he would see her, too, when she came out again. Therefore he remained at the corner or near it, sauntering about now and then to avoid notice, but always keeping within a narrow circle and never losing sight of the house.

He was aware that he might remain there a long time, but he had a stiff will and he was bent upon solving this problem which puzzled and irritated him.

It was about the middle of the afternoon when he traced her to the cottage, but the fragment of the day remaining seemed long to him. Golden shadows hung over the capital, but at last the sun went down in a sea of flame and the cold night of winter gathered all within its folds.

Prescott shivered as he trod his beat like a policeman, but he was of a tenacious fiber, and scorning alike the warnings of cold and hunger, he remained near the house, drawing closer and watching it more zealously than ever in the moonlight. His resolution strengthened, too; he would stay there, if necessary, until the sunset of the next day.

More hours passed at a limping gait. The murmur of the city died, and all was dark and still in the side street. Far into the night, nearly twelve, it must have been, when a figure stole from the cottage and glanced up the little ravine toward the main street, where Prescott stood invisible in the shadow of a high wooden fence.

She did not come by the front door, but stole out from the rear. He was convinced that he was right in his suspicions, and now every action of this unknown woman indicated guilt to his mind.

He crouched down in an angle of the fence, hidden completely by its shadow and the night, though he could see her well as she came up the little street, walking with light step and watching warily on every side. He noticed even then how strong and elastic her figure appeared and that every step was instinct with life and vitality. She must be a woman of more than common will and mould.

She came on, slightly increasing her speed, and did not see the dark figure of the man by the fence. A hood was drawn to her eyes and a fold of her cloak covered her chin. He could see now only a wisp of face like a sickle of a silver moon, and the feeling that disturbed him in the day did not

return to him. He again imagined her cold and hard, a woman of middle age, battered by the world, an adventuress who did not fear to go forth in the night upon what he thought unholy errands.

She entered the main street, passed swiftly down it toward the barriers of the city, and Prescott, with noiseless footsteps, came behind; one shadow following the other.

None save themselves seemed to be abroad. The city was steeped in Sabbath calm and a quiet moon rode in a quiet heaven. Prescott did not stop now to analyze his feelings, though he knew that a touch of pique, and perhaps curiosity, too, entered into this pursuit, otherwise he should not have troubled himself so much with an unbidden task. But he was the hunter and she the hunted, and he was alive now with the spirit of the chase.

She turned toward the northwest, where the lines of earthwork were thinnest, where, in fact, a single person might slip between them in the darkness, and Prescott no longer had any doubt that his first surmise was correct. Moreover, she was wary to the last degree, looking cautiously on every side and stopping now and then to see that she was not followed. A fine moon sometimes shed its full rays upon her, and she seemed then to Prescott to be made of silver mist.

He, too, was most wary, knowing the need of it, and allowed the distance between them to lengthen, clinging meanwhile to the shadow of buildings and fences with such effect that when she looked back she never saw the man behind.

They passed into the suburbs, low and straggling, little groups of negro cabins stringing out now and then in the darkness, and the woman, save for her occasional pauses to see if she were pursued, kept a straight and rapid course as if she knew her mind and the way.

They came at last to a spot where there was a small break in the earthworks, and Prescott saw the sentinels walking their beats, gun on shoulder. Then the fugitive paused in the shadow of bushes and high grass and watched attentively.

The pursuit had become curiously unreal to Prescott. It seemed to him that he was in the presence of the mysterious and weird, but he was resolute to follow, and he wished only that she should resume her flight.

When the sentinels were some distance apart she slid between like a shadow, unseen and unheard, and Prescott, an adept at pursuit, quickly followed. They were now beyond the first line of earthworks, though yet within the ring of Richmond's outer defenses, but a single person with ordinary caution might pass the latter, too.

He followed her through bushes and clumps of trees which hung like patches of black on the shoulders of the hills, and he shortened the space between them, not caring now if she saw him, as he no longer had any doubt of her purpose. He looked back once and saw behind him an almost imperceptible glow which he knew was the city, and then on the left beheld another light, the mark of a Confederate fortress, set there as a guard upon the ways.

She turned to the right, leaving the fortress behind, passing into country still more desolate, and Prescott thought it was now time to end the pursuit. He pressed forward with increased speed, and she, hearing the sound of a footstep behind her, looked back. He heard in the dead stillness of the night the low cry of fright that broke from her. She stood for a moment as if the power of motion had departed, and then fled like a wounded deer, with Prescott, more than ever the hunter, swiftly following after.

He was surprised at her speed. Clearly she was long-limbed and strong, and for the time his energies were taxed to keep within sight of her fleeing figure. But he was a man, she a woman, and the pursuit was not long. At last she sank, panting, upon a fallen log, and Prescott approached her, a strange mingling of triumph and pity in his heart.

She looked up and there was appeal in her face. Again he saw how young she was, how pure the light of her eyes, how delicately moulded each feature, and surprise came, as a third emotion, to mingle with the triumph and pity, and not in a less degree.

"Ah, it is you," she said, and in her tone there was no surprise, only aversion.

"Yes, it is I," replied Prescott; "and you seemed to have expected me."

"Not in the way that you think," she replied haughtily.

A wonderful change came over her face, and her figure seemed to stiffen; every lineament, every curve expressed scorn and contempt. Prescott had never before seen such a remarkable transformation, and for the moment felt as if he were the guilty one and she the judge.

While he was wondering thus at her attractive personality, she rose and stood before him.

"Now, sir," she said, "you shall let me go, Mr.–Mr.–"

"I am Captain Robert Prescott of the Confederate Army," said Prescott. "I have nothing to conceal," and then he added significantly: "At present I am on voluntary duty."

"I have seen enough of you," she said in the same unbending tone. "You have given me a fright, but now I am recovered and I bid you leave me."

"You mistake, Madam or Miss," replied Prescott calmly, recovering his composure; "you and I have not seen enough of each other. I am a gentleman, I hope, at least I have passed for one, and I have no intent to insult you."

"What is your wish?" she asked, still standing before him, straight and tall, her tone as cold as ice.

"Truly," thought Prescott, "she can carry it off well, and if such business as this must be done by a woman, hers is a mind for the task." But aloud he said: "Madam—or—Miss—you see you are less frank than I; you do not supply the omission—certain documents important to the Government which I serve, and as important to our enemies if they can get them, were taken yesterday from the office of the President. Kindly give them to me, as I am a better custodian for them than you are."

Her face remained unchanged. Not by a single quiver of the lip or gleam of the eye did she show emotion, and in the same cold, even voice she replied:

"You are dreaming, Captain Prescott. Some freak of the fancy has mastered you. I know nothing of the documents. How could I, a woman, do such a thing?"

"It is not more strange than your flight from Richmond alone and at such an hour."

"What signifies that? These are times of war and strange times demand strange conduct. Besides, it concerns me alone."

"Not so," replied Prescott firmly; "give me the papers."

Her face now changed from its calm. Variable emotions shot over it. Prescott, as he stood there before her, was conscious of admiration. What vagary had sent a girl who looked like this upon such a task!

"The papers," he repeated.

"I have none," she replied.

"If you do not give them to me I shall be compelled to search you, and that, I fancy, you do not wish. But I assure you that I shall do it."

His tone was resolute. He saw a spark of fire in her eye, but he did not quail.

"I shall turn my back," he added, "and if the papers are not produced in one minute's time I shall begin my search."

"Would you dare?" she asked with flashing eyes.

"I certainly would," he replied. "I trust that I know my duty."

But in a moment the light in her eyes changed. The look there was an appeal, and it expressed confidence, too. Prescott felt a strange tremour. Her glance rested full upon him and it was strangely soft and pathetic.

"Captain Prescott," she said, "upon my honour—by the memory of my mother, I have no papers."

"Then what have you done with them?" said Prescott.

"I have never had any."

He looked at her doubtfully. He believed and yet he did not. But her eyes shone with the light of purity and truth.

"Then why are you out here at such an hour, seeking to escape from Richmond?" he asked at last.

"Lest I bring harm to another," she said proudly.

Prescott laughed slightly and at once he saw a deep flush dye her face, and then involuntarily he made an apology, feeling that he was in the presence of one who was his equal.

"But I must have those papers," he said.

"Then keep your threat," she said, and folding her arms proudly across her breast she regarded him with a look of fire.

Prescott felt the blood rising in his face. He could not fulfil his menace and now he knew it.

"Come," he said abruptly, "you must go back to Richmond with me. I can take you safely past the earthworks and back to the house from which you came; there my task shall end, but not my duty."

However, he comforted himself with the thought that she had not passed the last line of defenses and perhaps could not do so at another time.

The girl said nothing, but walked obediently beside him, tall, straight and strong. She seemed now to be subdued and ready to go wherever he directed.

Prescott recognized that his own position in following the course that he had chosen was doubtful. He might turn her over to the nearest military post and then his troubles concerning her would be at an end; but he could not choose that alternative save as a last resort. She had made an appeal to him and she was a woman, a woman of no ordinary type.

The night was far gone, but the moon was full, and now spread its veil of silver mist over all the hills and fields. The earth swam in an unreal light and again the woman beside Prescott became unreal, too. He felt that if he should reach out his hand and touch her he would touch nothing but air, and then he smiled to himself at such a trick of fancy.

"I have given you my name," he said. "Now what shall I call you?"

"Let it go for the time," she replied.

"I must, since I have no way to compel you," he said.

They approached the inner line of earthworks through which they had passed in the flight and pursuit, and now Prescott felt it his duty to find the way back, without pausing to reflect on the strangeness of the fact that he, a Confederate soldier, was seeking to escape the notice of the Confederate pickets for the sake of a spy belonging to the other side.

They saw again the sentinels walking back and forth, gun on shoulder, and waiting until they were farthest apart, Prescott touched the woman on the arm. "Now is our time," he said, and they slid with soundless footsteps between the sentinels and back into Richmond.

"That was well done!" said Prescott joyfully. "You can shut an army out of a town, but you can't close the way to one man or two."

"Captain Prescott," said the girl, "you have brought me back into Richmond. Why not let me go now?"

"I take you to the house from which you came," he replied.

"That is your Southern chivalry," she said, "the chivalry of which I have heard so much."

He was stung by the keen irony in her tone. She had seemed to him, for awhile, so humble and appealing that he had begun to feel, in a sense, her protector, and he did not expect a jeer at the expense of himself and his section. He had been merciful to her, too! He had sacrificed himself and perhaps injured his cause that he might spare her.

"Is a woman who plays the part of a spy, a part that most men would scorn, entitled to much consideration?" he asked bluntly.

She regarded him with a cold stare, and her figure stiffened as he had seen it stiffen once before.

"I am not a spy," she said, "and I may have reasons, powerful reasons, of which you know nothing, for this attempted flight from Richmond to-night," she replied; "but that does not mean that I will explain them to you."

Prescott stiffened in his turn and said with equal coldness:

"I request you, Madam or Miss, whichever you may be, to come with me at once, as we waste time here."

He led the way through the silent city, lying then under the moonlight, back to the little street in which stood the wooden cottage, neither speaking on the way. They passed nobody, not even a dog howled at them, and when they stood before the cottage it, too, was dark and silent. Then Prescott said:

"I do not know who lives there and I do not know who you are, but I shall consider my task ended, for the present at least, when its doors hide you from me."

He spoke in the cold, indifferent tone that he had assumed when he detected the irony in her voice. But now she changed again.

"Perhaps I owe you some thanks, Captain Prescott," she said.

"Perhaps, but you need not give them. I trust, madam, and I do not say it with any intent of impoliteness, that we shall never meet again."

"You speak wisely, Captain Prescott," she said.

But she raised the hood that hid her brow and gave him a glance from dark blue eyes that a second time brought to Prescott that strange tremour at once a cause of surprise and anger. Then she opened the door of the cottage and disappeared within.

He stood for a few moments in the street looking at the little house and then he hurried to his home.

CHAPTER VII
THE COTTAGE IN THE SIDE STREET

Prescott rose the next morning with an uneasy weight upon his mind—the thought of the prisoner whom he had taken the night before. He was unable to imagine how a woman of her manner and presence had ever ventured upon such an enterprise, and he contrasted her—with poor results for the unknown—with Helen Harley, who was to him the personification of all that was delicate and feminine.

After the influence of her eyes, her beauty and her voice was gone, his old belief that she was really the spy and had stolen the papers returned. She had made a fool of him by that pathetic appeal to his mercy and by a simulated appearance of truth. Now in the cold air of the morning he felt a deep chagrin. But the deed was past and could not be undone, and seeking to dismiss it from his mind he went to breakfast.

His mother, as he had expected, asked him nothing about his late absence the night before, but spoke of the reception to General Morgan and the golden haze that it cast over Richmond.

"Have you noticed, Robert," she asked, "that we see complete victory for the South again? I ask you once more how many men did General Morgan bring with him?"

"I don't know exactly, mother. Ten, perhaps."

"And they say that General Grant will have a hundred thousand new troops."

Prescott laughed.

"At that rate, mother," he replied, "the ten will have to whip the hundred thousand, which is a heavier proportion than the old one, of one Southern gentleman to five Yankees. But, seriously, a war is not won by mere mathematics. It is courage, enthusiasm and enterprise that count."

She did not answer, but poured him another cup of coffee. Prescott read her thoughts with ease. He knew that though hers had been a Southern husband and hers were a Southern son and a Southern home, her heart was loyal to the North, and to the cause that she considered the cause of the whole Union and of civilization.

"Mother," he said, the breakfast being finished, "I've found it pleasant here with you and in Richmond, but I'm afraid I can't stay much longer. My shoulder is almost cured now."

He swung his arm back and forth to show how well it was.

"But isn't there some pain yet?" she asked.

Prescott smiled a little. He saw the pathos in the question, but he shook his head.

"No, mother," he replied, "there is no pain. I don't mean to be sententious, but this is the death-grapple that is coming. They will need me and every one out there."

He waved his hand toward the north and his mother hid a little sigh.

Prescott remained at home all the morning, but in the afternoon he went to Winthrop's newspaper office, having a direct question in mind.

"Has anything more been heard of the stolen papers?" he asked of Winthrop.

"So far as I can learn, nothing," replied the editor; "but it's altogether likely that whoever took them has been unable to escape from the city. Besides, I understand that these plans were not final and the matter may not be so serious after all."

It seemed to Prescott in a moment of cold reason that the affair might well end now, but his desire would not have it so. He was seized with a wish to know more about that house and the woman in it. Who was she, why was she here, and what would be her fate?

The afternoon passed slowly, and when the night was advanced he set out upon his errand, resolved that he would not do it, and yet knowing that he would.

The little house was as silent and dark as ever, doors and shutters tightly closed. He watched it more than an hour and saw no sign of life. She must have gone from the city, he thought, and so concluding, he was about to turn away, when a hand was laid lightly upon his arm. It was the woman in brown, and the look upon her face was not all of surprise. It occurred suddenly to Prescott that she had expected him, and he wondered why. But his first question was rough.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Nothing that I wish," she replied, the faintest trace of humour showing in her tone; "much that I do not wish. The reproof that your voice conveys is unwarranted. I have tried again to leave Richmond, but I cannot get past the outer lines of defenses. I am the involuntary guest of the rebel capital."

"Hardly that," replied Prescott, still somewhat roughly. He did not relish her jaunty tone, although he was much relieved to know that she could not escape. "You came uninvited, and you have no right to complain because you cannot leave when you wish."

"I see that I am in the presence of a sincere rebel patriot," she said with irony, "and I did not know before that the words 'rebel' and 'patriot' could go together so easily."

"I think that I should surrender you to the authorities," said Prescott.

"But you will not," she said with conviction. "Your conscience would reproach you too much."

Prescott was silent, uncertain what to say or to do. The woman annoyed him, and yet he did not conceal from himself that the slight protecting feeling, born of the fact that she was a woman and, it seemed, helpless, remained in his mind.

"Are you alone in that house?" he asked, still speaking curtly and pointing toward the wooden cottage.

"No," she replied.

Prescott looked at her inquiringly. He thought that he detected the faintest twinkle in her eyes. Could it be that a woman in such a position was laughing at the man who had helped her? He felt his face grow red.

"You wish to know who is there?" she said.

"I do not wish to know anything of the kind."

"You do, and I shall tell you. It is merely a woman, an old maid, perhaps as friendless as myself, Miss Charlotte Grayson. I need not add that she is a woman of right mind and sympathies."

"What do you mean by that?"

"She wishes to see the quick end of this hateful rebellion. Oh, I tell you there are many who think as she does, born and bred within the limits of this Confederacy. They are far more numerous than you rebels suspect."

She spoke with sudden fire and energy, and Prescott noticed again that abrupt stiffening of the figure. He saw, too, another curious effect—her eyes suddenly turned from dark-blue to black, an invariable change when she was moved by a passion.

"It is always safe for a woman to abuse a man," replied Prescott calmly.

"I am not attacking you, but the cause you serve—a hateful cause. How can honest men fight for it?" she said.

Prescott heard footsteps in the main street—it was not many yards from there to the point in the little side street where he stood—and he shrank back in the shadow of the fence.

"You do not wish to be seen with me," she said.

"Naturally," replied Prescott. "I might have to answer inquiries about you, and I do not wish to compromise myself."

"Nor me?" she said.

"Perhaps it is too late for that," replied Prescott.

Her face flushed scarlet, and again he saw that sudden change of the eyes from dark-blue to threatening black. It occurred to him then that she was handsome in a singular, challenging way.

"Why do you insult me?" she asked.

"I was not aware that I had done so," he replied coolly. "Your pursuits are of such a singular nature that I merely made some slight comment thereon."

She changed again and under drooping eyelids gave him that old imploring look, like the appeal of a child for protection.

"I am ungrateful," she said, "and I give your words a meaning that you do not intend. But I am here at this moment because I was just returning from another vain attempt to escape from the city —not for myself, I tell you again, and not with any papers belonging to your Government, but for the sake of another. Listen, there are soldiers passing."

It was the tread of a company going by and Prescott shrank still farther back into the shadow. He felt for the moment a chill in his bones, and he imagined what must be the dread of a traitor on the eve of detection. What would his comrades say of him if they caught him here? As the woman came close to him and put her hand upon his arm, he was conscious again of the singular thrill that shot through him whenever she touched him. She affected him as no other woman had ever done —nor did he know whether it was like or dislike. There was an uncanny fascination about her that attracted him, even though he endeavoured to shake it off.

The tread of the company grew louder, but the night was otherwise still. The moon silvered the soldiers as they passed, and Prescott distinctly saw their features as he hid there in the dark like a spy, fearing to be seen. Then he grew angry with himself and he shook the woman's hand from his arm; it had rested as lightly as dew.

"I think that you had better go back to Miss Charlotte Grayson, whoever she may be," he said.

"But one cannot stay there forever."

"That does not concern me. Why should it? Am I to care for the safety of those who are fighting me?"

"But do you stop to think what you are fighting for?" She put her hand on his arm, and her eyes were glowing as she asked the question. "Do you ever stop to think what you are fighting for, the wrong that you do by fighting and the greater wrong that you will do if you succeed, which a just God will not let happen?"

She spoke with such vehement energy that Prescott was startled. He was well enough accustomed to controversy about the right or wrong of the war, but not under such circumstances as these.

"Madam," he said, "we soldiers don't stop in the middle of a battle to argue this question, and you can hardly expect me to do so now."

She did not reply, but the fire still lingered in her eyes. The company passed, their tread echoed down the street, then died away.

"You are safe now," she said, with the old touch of irony in her voice; "they will not find you here with me, so why do you linger?"

"It may be because you are a woman," replied Prescott, "that I overlook the fact of your being a secret and disguised enemy of my people. I wish to see you safely back in the house there with your friends."

"Good-night," she said abruptly, and she slid away from him with soundless tread. He had noticed her noiseless walk before, and it heightened the effect of weird mystery.

She passed to the rear of the house, disappearing within, and Prescott went away. When he came back in a half-hour he noticed a light shining through one window of the little house, and it seemed more natural to him, as if its tenant, Miss Charlotte Grayson, had no reason to hide her own existence. Prescott was not fond of secrecy—his whole nature was open, and with a singular sense of relief he turned away for the second time, going to Winthrop's office, where he hoped to find more congenial friends.

Raymond, as he expected, was there with his brother editor, and so was Wood, the big cavalryman, who regarded Robert for a moment with an eye coldly critical. Raymond and Winthrop, who stood by, knew the cause, but Wood quickly relaxed and greeted with warmth the addition to the party. Others came in, and soon a dozen men who knew and liked each other well were gathered about the stove, talking in the old friendly Southern way and exchanging opinions with calm certainty on all recondite subjects.

After awhile Winthrop, who passed near the window on some errand, exclaimed:

"Gentlemen, behold Richmond in her bridal veil."

They looked out and saw the city, streets and roofs alike, sheeted in gleaming white. The snow which had come down so softly spoke only of peace and quietness.

"It's battle smoke, not a bridal veil, that Richmond must look for now," said Wood, "an' it's a pity."

There was a touch of sentiment in his voice, and Prescott looked at him with approval. As for himself, he was thinking at that moment of an unknown woman in a brown, wooden cottage. With the city snowed-in she might find the vigilance of the sentinels relaxed, but a flight through the frozen wilderness would be impossible for her. He was angry at himself again for feeling concern when he should be relieved that she could not escape; but, after, all she was a woman.

"Why so grave, Prescott?" asked Raymond. "A heavy snow like this is all in our favour, since we stand on the defensive; it makes it more difficult for the Yankee army to move."

"I was thinking of something else," replied Prescott truthfully. "I am going home now," he added. "Good-night."

As he passed out into the street the snow was still falling, soon covering his cap and military cloak, and clothing him, like the city, in a robe of white.

Raymond had said truthfully that a deep snow was to the advantage of the South, but as for himself, he resolved that on the next day he would investigate the identity of Miss Charlotte Grayson.

Prescott knew to whom it was best to turn for information in regard to the mysterious Charlotte Grayson, and in the doing so it was not necessary for him to leave his own home. His mother was likely to know everybody at all conspicuous in Richmond, as under her peaceful exterior she concealed a shrewd and inquiring mind.

"Mother," he said to her the next day as they sat before the fire, "did you ever hear of any lady named Miss Charlotte Grayson?"

She was knitting for the soldiers at the front, but she let the needles drop with a faint click into her lap.

"Grayson, Charlotte Grayson?" she said. "Is that the name of a new sweetheart of yours, Robert?"

"No, mother," replied he with a laugh; "it is the name of somebody whom I have never seen so far as I know, and of whom I never heard until a day or two ago."

"I recall the woman of whom you speak," she said, "an old maid without any relatives or any friends in particular. She was a seamstress here before the war. It was said that she went North at its outbreak, and as she was a Northern sympathizer it would seem likely; but she was a good seamstress; she made me a mantle once and I never saw a better in Richmond."

She waited for her son to offer an explanation of his interest in the whilom seamstress, but as he did not do so she asked no questions, though regarding him covertly.

He rose and, going to the window, looked out at the deep and all but untrodden snow.

"Richmond is in white, mother," he said, "and it will postpone the campaign which all Southern women dread."

"I know," she replied; "but the battle must come sooner or later, and a snow in Richmond means more coal and wood to buy. Do you ever think, Robert, what such questions as these, so simple in peace, mean now to Richmond?"

"I did not for the moment, mother," he replied, his face clouding, "but I should have thought of it. You mean that coal and wood are scarce and money still scarcer?"

She bowed her head, for it was a very solemn truth she had spoken. The coil of steel with which the North had belted in the South was beginning to press tighter and tighter during that memorable winter. At every Southern port the Northern fleets were on guard, and the blockade runners slipped past at longer and longer intervals. It was the same on land; everywhere the armies of the North closed in, and besides fire and sword, starvation now threatened the Confederacy.

There was not much news from the field to dispel the gloom in the South. The great battle of Chickamauga had been won not long before, but it was a barren victory. There were no more Fredericksburgs nor Chancellorsvilles to rejoice over. Gettysburg had come; the genius of Lee himself had failed; Jackson was dead and no one had arisen to take his place.

There were hardships now more to be feared than mere battles. The men might look forward to death in action, and not know what would become of the women and children. The price of bread was steadily rising, and the value of Confederate money was going down with equal steadiness.

The soldiers in the field often walked barefoot through the snow, and in summer they ate the green corn in the fields, glad to get even so little; but they were not sure that those left behind would have as much. They were conscious, too, that the North, the sluggish North, which had been so long in putting forth its full strength, was now preparing for an effort far greater than any that had gone before. The incompetent generals, the tricksters and the sluggards were gone, and battle-tried armies led by real generals were coming in numbers that would not be denied.

At such a time as this, when the cloud had no fragment of a silver lining, the spirit of the South glowed with its brightest fire—a spectacle sometimes to be seen even though a cause be wrong.

"Mother," said Prescott, and there was a touch of defiance in his tone, "do you not know that the threat of cold and hunger, the fear that those whom we love are about to suffer as much as ourselves, will only nerve us to greater efforts?"

"I know," she replied, but he did not hear her sigh.

He felt that his stay in Richmond was now shortening fast, but there was yet one affair on his mind to which he must attend, and he went forth for a beginning. His further inquiries, made with caution in the vicinity, disclosed the fact that Miss Charlotte Grayson, the occupant of the wooden cottage, and the Miss Charlotte Grayson whom his mother had in mind, were the same. But he could discover little else concerning her or her manner of life, save an almost positive assurance that she had not left Richmond either at the beginning of the war nor since. She had been seen in the streets, rarely speaking to any one, and at the markets making a few scanty purchases and preserving the same silence, ascribed, it was said, to the probable belief on her part that she would be persecuted because of her known Northern sympathies. Had any one been seen with her? No; she lived all alone in the little house.

Such were the limits of the knowledge achieved by Prescott, and for lack of another course he chose the direct way and knocked at the door of the little house, being compelled to repeat his summons twice before it was answered. Then the door was opened slightly; but with a soldier's boldness he pushed in and confronted a thin, elderly woman, who did not invite him to be seated.

Prescott took in the room and its occupant with a single glance, and the two seemed to him to be of a piece. The former—and he knew instinctively that it was Miss Grayson—was meager of visage and figure, with high cheek bones, thin curls flat down on her temples, and a black dress worn and old. The room exhibited the same age and scantiness, the same aspect of cold poverty, with its patched carpet and the slender fire smouldering on the hearth.

She stood before him, confronting him with a manner in which boldness and timidity seemed to be struggling with about equal success. There was a flush of anger on her cheeks, but her lips were trembling.

"I am speaking to Miss Grayson?" said Prescott.

"You are, sir," she replied, "but I do not know you, and I do not know why you have pushed yourself into my house."

"My name is Prescott, Robert Prescott, and I am a captain in the Confederate Army, as you may see by my uniform."

He noticed that the trembling of her lip increased and she looked fearfully at him; but the red flush of anger on her cheek deepened, too. The chief impression that she made on Prescott was pathetic, standing there in her poverty of dress and room, and he hastened to add:

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