ALTSHELER JOSEPH ALEXANDER

THE ROCK OF CHICKAMAUGA: A STORY OF THE WESTERN CRISIS

Joseph Altsheler

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Altsheler J.

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Содержание

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FOREWORD

"The Rock of Chickamauga," presenting a critical phase of the great struggle in the west, is the sixth volume in the series, dealing with the Civil War, of which its predecessors have been "The Guns of Bull Run," "The Guns of Shiloh," "The Scouts of Stonewall," "The Sword of Antietam" and "The Star of Gettysburg." Dick Mason who fights on the Northern side, is the hero of this romance, and his friends reappear also.

THE CIVIL WAR SERIES

VOLUMES IN THE CIVIL WAR SERIES

THE GUNS OF BULL RUN.
THE GUNS OF SHILOH.
THE SCOUTS OF STONEWALL.
THE SWORD OF ANTIETAM.
THE STAR OF GETTYSBURG.
THE ROCK OF CHICKAMAUGA.
THE SHADES OF THE WILDERNESS.
THE TREE OF APPOMATTOX.

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MRS. MASON, Mother of Dick Mason.
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COLONEL LEONIDAS TALBOT, Commander of the Invincibles, a Southern Regiment.
LIEUTENANT COLONEL HECTOR ST. HILAIRE, Second in Command of the Invincibles.
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WILLIAM L. YANCEY, Alabama Orator.
JAMES A. GARFIELD, Northern General, afterwards President of the United States.

And many others

IMPORTANT BATTLES DESCRIBED IN THE CIVIL WAR SERIES

BULL RUN
KERNSTOWN
CROSS KEYS
WINCHESTER
PORT REPUBLIC
THE SEVEN DAYS
MILL SPRING
FORT DONELSON
SHILOH
PERRYVILLE
STONE RIVER
THE SECOND MANASSAS
ANTIETAM
FREDERICKSBURG
CHANCELLORSVILLE
GETTYSBURG
CHAMPION HILL
VICKSBURG
CHICKAMAUGA
MISSIONARY RIDGE
THE WILDERNESS
SPOTTSYLVANIA
COLD HARBOR
FISHER'S HILL
CEDAR CREEK
APPOMATTOX

CHAPTER I. AT BELLEVUE

"You have the keenest eyes in the troop. Can you see anything ahead?" asked Colonel Winchester.

"Nothing living, sir," replied Dick Mason, as he swept his powerful glasses in a half-curve. "There are hills on the right and in the center, covered with thick, green forest, and on the left, where the land lies low, the forest is thick and green too, although I think I catch a flash of water in it."

"That should be the little river of which our map tells. And you, Warner, what do your eyes tell you?"

"The same tale they tell to Dick, sir. It looks to me like a wilderness."

"And so it is. It's a low-lying region of vast forests and thickets, of slow deep rivers and creeks, and of lagoons and bayous. If Northern troops want to be ambushed they couldn't come to a finer place for it. Forrest and five thousand of his wild riders might hide within rifle shot of us in this endless mass of vegetation. And so, my lads, it behooves us to be cautious with a very great caution. You will recall how we got cut up by Forrest in the Shiloh time."

"I do, sir," said Dick and he shuddered as he recalled those terrible moments. "This is Mississippi, isn't it?"

Colonel Winchester took a small map from his pocket, and, unfolding it, examined it with minute care.

"If this is right, and I'm sure it is," he replied, "we're far down in Mississippi in the sunken regions that border the sluggish tributaries of the Father of Waters. The vegetation is magnificent, but for a home give me higher ground, Dick."

"Me too, sir," said Warner. "The finest state in this Union is Vermont. I like to live on firm soil, even if it isn't so fertile, and I like to see the clear, pure water running everywhere, brooks and rivers."

"I'll admit that Vermont is a good state for two months in the year," said Dick.

"Why not the other ten?"

"Because then it's frozen up, solid and hard, so I've heard."

The other boys laughed and kept up their chaff, but Colonel Winchester rode soberly ahead. Behind him trailed the Winchester regiment, now reorganized and mounted. Fresh troops had come from Kentucky, and fragments of old regiments practically destroyed at Perryville and Stone River had been joined to it.

It was a splendid body of men, but of those who had gone to Shiloh only about two hundred remained. The great conflicts of the West, and the minor battles had accounted for the others. But it was perhaps one of the reliefs of the Civil War that it gave the lads who fought it little time to think of those who fell. Four years crowded with battles, great and small, sieges and marches absorbed their whole attention.

Now two men, the dreaded Forrest and fierce little Joe Wheeler, occupied the minds of Winchester and his officers. It was impossible to keep track of these wild horsemen here in their own section. They had a habit of appearing two or three hundred miles from the place at which they were expected.

But the young lieutenants while they watched too for their redoubtable foes had an eye also for the country. It was a new kind of region for all of them. The feet of their horses sank deep in the soft black soil, and there was often a sound of many splashings as the regiment rode across a wide, muddy brook.

Dick noted with interest the magnolias and the live oaks, and the great stalks of the sunflower. Here in this Southern state, which bathed its feet in the warm waters of the Gulf, spring was already far along, although snows still lingered in the North.

The vegetation was extravagant in its luxuriance and splendor. The enormous forest was broken by openings like prairies, and in every one of them the grass grew thick and tall, interspersed with sunflowers and blossoming wild plants. Through the woods ran vast networks of vines, and birds of brilliant plumage chattered in the trees. Twice, deer sprang up before them and raced away in the forest. It was the wilderness almost as De Soto had traversed it nearly four centuries before, and it had a majesty which in its wildness was not without its sinister note.

They approached a creek, deeper and wider than usual, flowing in slow, yellow coils, and, as they descended into the marsh that enclosed its waters, there was a sharp crackling sound, followed quickly by another and then by many others. The reports did not cease, and, although blood was shed freely, no man fell from his horse, nor was any wounded mortally. But the assault was vicious and it was pushed home with the utmost courage and tenacity, although many of the assailants fell never to rise again. Cries of pain and anger, and imprecations arose from the stricken regiment.

"Slap! Slap!"

"Bang! Bang!"

"Ouch! He's got his bayonet in my cheek!"

"Heavens, that struck me like a minie ball! And it came, whistling and shrieking, too, just like one!"

"Phew, how they sting! and my neck is bleeding in three places!"

"By thunder, Bill, I hit that fellow, fair and square! He'll never trouble an honest Yankee soldier again!"

The fierce buzzing increased all around them and Colonel Winchester shouted to his trumpeter:

"Blow the charge at once!"

The man, full willing, put the trumpet to his lips and blew loud and long. The whole regiment went across the creek at a gallop—the water flying in yellow showers—and did not stop until, emerging from the marsh, they reached the crest of a low hill a mile beyond. Here, stung, bleeding and completely defeated by the enemy they stopped for repairs. An occasional angry buzz showed that they were not yet safe from the skirmishers, but their attack seemed a light matter after the full assault of the determined foe.

"I suppose we're all wounded," said Dick as he wiped a bleeding cheek. "At least as far as I can see they're hurt. The last fellow who got his bayonet in my face turned his weapon around and around and sang merrily at every revolution."

"We were afraid of being ambushed by Forrest," said Warner, speaking from a swollen countenance. "Instead we struck something worse; we rode straight into an ambush of ten billion high-powered mosquitoes, every one tipped with fire. Have we got enemies like these to fight all the way down here?"

"They sting the rebels, too," said Pennington.

"Yes, but they like newcomers best, the unacclimated. When we rode down into that swamp I could hear them shouting, to one another: 'That fat fellow is mine, I saw him first! I've marked the rosy-cheeked boy for mine. Keep away the rest of you fellows!' I feel as if I'd been through a battle. No more marshes for me."

Some of the provident produced bottles of oil of pennyroyal. Sergeant Daniel Whitley, who rode a giant bay horse, was one of the most foreseeing in this respect, and, after the boys had used his soothing liniment freely, the fiery torment left by the mosquito's sting passed away.

The sergeant seemed to have grown bigger and broader than ever. His shoulders were about to swell through his faded blue coat, and the hand resting easily on the rein had the grip and power of a bear's paw. His rugged face had been tanned by the sun of the far south to the color of an Indian's. He was formidable to a foe, and yet no gentler heart beat than that under his old blue uniform. Secretly he regarded the young lieutenants, his superiors in military rank and education, as brave children,

and often he cared for them where his knowledge and skill were greater than theirs or even than that of colonels and generals.

"God bless you, Sergeant," said Dick, "you don't look like an angel, but you are one—that is, of the double-fisted, fighting type."

The sergeant merely smiled and replaced the bottle carefully in his pocket, knowing that they would have good use for it again.

The regiment after salving its wounds resumed its watchful march.

"Do you know where we're going?" Pennington asked Dick.

"I think we're likely if we live long enough to land in the end before Vicksburg, the great Southern fortress, but as I gather it we mean to curve and curl and twist about a lot before then. Grant, they say, intends to close in on Vicksburg, while Rosecrans farther north is watching Bragg at Chattanooga. We're a flying column, gathering up information, and ready for anything."

"It's funny," said Warner thoughtfully, "that we've already got so far south in the western field. We can't be more than two or three hundred miles from the Gulf. Besides, we've already taken New Orleans, the biggest city of the South, and our fleet is coming up the river to meet us. Yet in the East we don't seem to make any progress at all. We lose great battles there and Fredericksburg they say was just a slaughter of our men. How do you make it out, Dick?"

"I've thought of several reasons for it. Our generals in the West are better than our generals in the East, or their generals in the East are better than their generals in the West. And then there are the rivers. In the East they mostly run eastward between the two armies, and they are no help to us, but a hindrance rather. Here in the West the rivers, and they are many and great, mostly run southward, the way we want to go, and they bring our gunboats on their bosoms. Excuse my poetry, but it's what I mean."

"You must be right. I think that all the reasons you give apply together. But our command of the water has surely been a tremendous help. And then we've got to remember, Dick, that there was never a navy like ours. It goes everywhere and it does everything. Why, if Admiral Farragut should tell one of those gunboats to steam across the Mississippi bottoms it would turn its saucy nose, steer right out of the water into the mud, and blow up with all hands aboard before it quit trying."

"You two fellows talk too much," said Pennington. "You won't let President Lincoln and Grant and Halleck manage the war, but you want to run it yourselves."

"I don't want to run anything just now, Frank," rejoined Dick. "What I'm thinking about most is rest and something to eat. I'd like to get rid, too, of about ten pounds of Mississippi mud that I'm carrying."

"Well, I can catch a glint of white pillars through those trees. It means the 'big house' of a plantation, and you'll probably find somewhere back of it the long rows of cabins, inhabited by the dark people, whom we've come to raise to the level of their masters, if not above them. I can see right now the joyous welcome we'll receive from the owners of the big house. They'll be standing on the great piazza, waving Union flags and shouting to us that they have ready cooling drinks and luxurious food for us all."

"It's hardly a joke to me. Whatever the cause of the war, it's the bitterness of death for these people to be overrun. Besides, I remember the words of that old fellow in the blacksmith shop before we fought the battle of Stone River. He said that even if they were beaten they'd still be there holding the land and running things."

"That's true," said Warner. "I've been wondering how this war would end, and now I'm wondering what will happen after it does end. But here we are at the gate. What big grounds! These great planters certainly had space!"

"And what silence!" said Dick. "It's uncanny, George. A place like this must have had a thousand slaves, and I don't see any of them rushing forward to welcome their liberators."

"Probably contraband, gone long ago to Ben Butler at New Orleans. I don't believe there's a soul here."

"Remember that lone house in Tennessee where a slip of a girl brought Forrest down on us and had us cut pretty nearly to pieces."

"I couldn't forget it."

Nor could Colonel Winchester. The house, large and low, stood in grounds covering an area of several acres, enclosed by a paling fence, now sagging in many places. Great stone posts stood on either side of the gateway, but the gate was opened, and it, too, sagged.

The grounds had evidently been magnificent, both with flowers and forest trees. Already many of the flowers were blooming in great luxuriance and brilliancy, but the walks and borders were untrimmed. The house was of wood, painted white with green shutters, and as they drew nearer they appreciated its great size, although it was only two stories in height. A hundred persons could have slept there, and twice as many could have found shade in the wide piazzas which stretched the full length of the four sides.

But all the doors and shutters were closed and no smoke rose from any chimney. They caught a glimpse of the cabins for the slaves, on lower ground some distance behind the great house. The whole regiment reined up as they approached the carriage entrance, and, although they were eight hundred strong, there was plenty of room without putting a single hoof upon a flower.

It was a great place. That leaped to the eye, but it was not marked upon Colonel Winchester's map, nor had he heard of it.

"It's a grand house," he said to his aides, "and it's a pity that it should go to ruin after the slaves are freed, as they certainly will be."

"But it was built upon slave labor," said Warner.

"So it was, and so were many of the most famous buildings in the world. But here, I'm not going to get into an argument about such questions with young men under my command. Besides, I'm fighting to destroy slavery, not to study its history. Sergeant Whitley, you're an experienced trailer: do you see any signs that troops have passed here?"

"None at all, sir. Down near the gate where the drive is out of repair I noticed wheel tracks, but they were several days old. The freshest of them were light, as if made by buggies. I judge, sir, that it was the family, the last to leave."

"And the wagons containing their valuables had gone on ahead?"

"It would seem so, sir."

Colonel Winchester sighed.

"An invader is always feared and hated," he said.

"But we do come as enemies," said Dick, "and this feeling toward us can't be helped."

"That's true. No matter what we do we'll never make any friends here in one of the Gulf states, the very core of Southern feeling. Dick, take a squad of men and enter the house. Pennington, you and Warner go with him."

Dick sprang down instantly, chose Sergeant Whitley first and with the others entered the great portico. The front door was locked but it was easy enough to force it with a gun butt, and they went in, but not before Dick had noticed over the door in large letters the name, "Bellevue." So this was Bellevue, one of the great cotton plantations of Mississippi. He now vaguely remembered that he had once heard his uncle, Colonel Kenton, speak of having stopped a week here. But he could not recall the name of the owner. Strong for the Union as he was Dick was glad that the family had gone before the Northern cavalry came.

The house was on a splendid scale inside also, but all the rugs and curtains were gone. As they entered the great parlor Dick saw a large piece of paper, and he flushed as he read written upon it in tall letters:

TO THE YANKEE RAIDERS:

YOU NEED NOT LOOK FOR THE SILVER.
IT HAS BEEN TAKEN TO VICKSBURG.

"Look at that!" he said indignantly to Warner. "See how they taunt us!"

But Warner laughed.

"Maybe some of our men at New Orleans have laid us open to such a stab," he said. Then he added whimsically:

"We'll go to Vicksburg with Grant, Dick, and get that silver yet."

"The writing's fresh," said Sergeant Whitley, who also looked at the notification. "The paper hasn't begun to twist and curl yet. It's not been posted up there many hours."

Colonel Winchester entered at that moment and the notice was handed to him. He, too, flushed a little when he read it, but the next instant he laughed. Dick then called his attention to the apparent fact that it had been put there recently.

"May I speak a word, Colonel," said Warner, who had been thinking so hard that there was a line the full length of his forehead.

"Yes, George, a dozen if you like. Go ahead. What is it?"

"The sergeant, who has had much experience as a trailer, told us that the tracks made by the buggy wheels were several days old. The slaves probably had been sent southward before that time. Now some one who saw our advance has come back, and, whoever it was, he was thoroughly familiar with the house. He couldn't have been a servant. Servants don't leave taunts of that kind. It must have been somebody who felt our coming deeply, and if it had been an elderly man he would have waited for action, he wouldn't have used saucy words. So, sir, I think it must have been a boy. Just like Pennington there, for instance."

"Good, George, go on with your reasonings."

"As surely, sir, as z plus y equals the total of the two, the one who put up the placard was a son of the owner. He alone would feel deeply enough to take so great a risk. The conditions absolutely demand that the owner has such a son and that he has done it."

"Very good, George. I think you're right, and this youth in giving way to a natural burst of anger, although he did not mean to do so, has posted up for us a warning. A lad of his spirit would go in search of Forrest, and we cannot forget our experience with that general in Tennessee. Now, boys, we'll make ready for the night, which is not far away."

The house was built for a Southern climate, although Dick had learned that it could be cold enough in Central Mississippi in midwinter. But it was spring now and they opened all the doors and windows, letting the pleasant air rush through the musty house.

"It may rain," said Colonel Winchester, "and the officers will sleep inside. The men will spread their blankets on the piazzas, and the horses will be tethered in the grounds. I hate to see the flowers and grass trodden down, but nature will restore them."

Some of the soldiers gathered wood from heaps nearby and fires were kindled in the kitchen, and also on the hearths in the slave quarters. Colonel Winchester had been truly called the father of his regiment. He was invariably particular about its health and comfort, and, as he always led it in person in battle, there was no finer body of men in the Union service.

Now he meant for his men to have coffee, and warm food after this long and trying ride and soon savory odors arose, although the cooking was not begun until after dark, lest the smoke carry a signal to a lurking enemy. The cavalrymen cut the thick grass which grew everywhere, and fed it to their horses, eight hundred massive jaws munching in content. The beasts stirred but little after their long ride and now and then one uttered a satisfied groan.

The officers drank their coffee and ate their food on the eastern piazza, which overlooked a sharp dip toward a creek three or four hundred yards away. The night had rushed down suddenly after the fashion of the far South, and from the creek they heard faintly the hoarse frogs calling. Beyond the

grounds a close ring of sentinels watched, because Colonel Winchester had no mind to be surprised again by Forrest or by Fighting Joe Wheeler or anybody else.

The night was thick and dark and moist with clouds. Dick, despite the peace that seemed to hang over everything, was oppressed. The desolate house, even more than the sight of the field after the battle was over, brought home to him the meaning of war. It was not alone the death of men but the uprooting of a country for their children and their children's children as well. Then his mind traveled back to his uncle, Colonel Kenton, and suddenly he smote his knee.

"What is it, Dick," asked Colonel Winchester, who sat only two or three yards away.

"Now I remember, sir. When I was only seven or eight years old I heard my uncle tell of stopping, as I told you, at a great plantation in Mississippi called Bellevue, but I couldn't recall the name of its owner. I know him now."

"What is the name, Dick?"

"Woodville, John Woodville. He was a member of the Mississippi Senate, and he was probably the richest man in the State."

"I think I have heard the name. He is a Confederate colonel now, with Pemberton's army. No doubt we'll have to fight him later on."

"Meanwhile, we're using his house."

"Fortune of war. But all war is in a sense unfair, because it's usually a question of the greater force. At any rate, Dick, we won't harm Colonel Woodville's home."

"Yet in the end, sir, a lot of these great old country places will go, and what will take their place? You and I, coming from a border state, know that the colored race is not made up of Uncle Toms."

"Well, Dick, we haven't won yet, and until we do we won't bother ourselves about the aftermath of war. I'm glad we found so large a place as this. At the last moment I sent part of the men to the cabins, but at least three or four hundred must lie here on the piazzas. And most of them are already asleep. It's lucky they have roofs. Look how the clouds are gathering!"

As much more room had been made upon the piazzas by the assignment of men to the cabins, Colonel Winchester and some of his officers also rested there. Dick, lying between the two blankets which he always carried in a roll tied to his saddle, was very comfortable now, with his head on his knapsack. The night had turned cooler, and, save when faint and far lightning quivered, it was heavy and dark with clouds. But the young lieutenants, hardened by two years of war and life in the open, felt snug and cosy on the broad, sheltered piazza. It was not often they found such good quarters, and Dick, like Colonel Winchester, was truly thankful that they had reached Bellevue before the coming storm.

It was evident now that the night was going to be wild. The lightning grew brighter and came nearer, cutting fiercely across the southern sky. The ominous rumble of thunder, which reminded Dick so much of the mutter of distant battle, came from the horizon on which the lightning was flashing.

Colonel Winchester, Pennington and Warner had gone to sleep, but Dick was wakeful. He had again that feeling of pity for the people who had been compelled to flee from such a house, and who might lose it forever. It seemed to him that all the men, save himself and the sentinels, were asleep, sleeping with the soundness and indifference to surroundings shown by men who took their sleep when they could.

The horses stamped and moved uneasily beneath the threat of the advancing storm, but the men slept heavily on.

Dick knew that the sentinels were awake and watchful. They had a wholesome dread of Forrest and Wheeler, those wild riders of the South. Some of them had been present at that terrible surprise in Tennessee, and they were not likely to be careless when they were sure that Forrest might be near, but he remained uneasy nevertheless, and, although he closed his eyes and sought a soft place for his head on the saddle, sleep did not come.

He was sure that his apprehension did not come from any fear of an attack by Forrest or Wheeler. It was deeper-seated. The inherited sense that belonged to his great grandfather, who had lived his life in the wilderness, was warning him. It was not superstition. It seemed to Dick merely the palpable result of an inheritance that had gone into the blood. His famous great-grandfather, Paul Cotter, and his famous friend, Henry Ware, had lived so much and so long among dangers that the very air indicated to them when they were at hand.

Dick looked down the long piazza, so long that the men at either end of it were hidden by darkness. The tall trees in the grounds were nodding before the wind, and the lightning flashed incessantly in the southwest. The thunder was not loud, but it kept up a continuous muttering and rumbling. The rain was coming in fitful gusts, but he knew that it would soon drive hard and for a long time.

Everybody within Dick's area of vision was sound asleep, except himself. Colonel Winchester lay with his head on his arm and his slumber was so deep that he was like one dead. Warner had not stirred a particle in the last half-hour. Dick was angry at himself because he could not sleep. Let the storm burst! It might drive on the wide roof of the piazza and the steady beating sound would make his sleep all the sounder and sweeter. He recalled, as millions of American lads have done, the days when he lay in his bed just under the roof and heard hail and sleet drive against it, merely to make him feel all the snugger in the bed with his covers drawn around him.

The fitful gusts of rain ceased, and then it came with a steady pour and roar, driving directly down, thus leaving the men on the outer edges of the piazzas untouched and dry. Still, Dick did not sleep, and at last he arose and walked softly into the house. Here the sense of danger grew stronger. He was reminded again of his early boyhood, when some one blindfolded was told to find a given object, and the others called "hot" when he was near or "cold" when he was away. He was feeling hot now. That inherited sense, the magnetic feeling out of the past, was warning him.

Dick felt sure that some one not of their regiment was in the building. He neither saw nor heard the least sign of a presence, but he was absolutely certain that he was not alone within Bellevue. Since the lightning had ceased it was pitchy dark inside. There was a wide hall running through the building, with windows above the exits, but he saw nothing through them save the driving rain and the dim outline of the threshing trees.

He turned into one of the side rooms, and then he paused and pushed himself against the wall. He was sure now that he heard a soft footstep. The darkness was so intense that it could be felt like a mist. He waited but he did not hear it again, and then he began to make his way around the wall, stepping as lightly as he could.

He had gone through most of the rooms at their arrival and he still retained a clear idea of the interior of the house. He knew that there was another door on the far side of the chamber in which he stood, and he meant to follow the wall until he reached it. Some one had been in the room with him and Dick believed that he was leaving by the far door.

While he heard no further footsteps he felt a sudden light draught on his face and he knew that the door had been opened and shut. He might go to Colonel Winchester and tell him that a lurking spy or somebody of that character was in the house, but what good would it do? A spy at such a time and in such a place could not harm them, and the whole regiment would be disturbed for nothing. He would follow the chase alone.

He found the door and passed into the next room. Its windows opened upon the southern piazza and two or three shutters were thrown back. A faint light entered and Dick saw that no one was there but himself. He could discern the dim figures of the soldiers sleeping on the piazza and beyond a cluster of the small pines grown on lawns.

Dick felt that he had lost the trail for the time, but he did not intend to give it up. Doubtless the intruder was some one who knew the house and who was also aware of his presence inside. He also felt that he would not be fired upon, because the stranger himself would not wish to bring the

soldiers down upon him. So, with a hand upon his pistol butt, he opened the side door and followed once more into the darkness.

The ghostly chase went on for a full half-hour, Dick having nothing to serve him save an occasional light footfall. There was one period of more than half an hour when he lost the fugitive entirely. He wandered up to the second floor and then back again. There, in a room that had been the library, he caught a glimpse of the man. But the figure was so shadowy that he could tell nothing about him.

"Halt!" cried Dick, snatching out his pistol. But when he leveled it there was nothing to aim at. The figure had melted away, or rather it had flitted through another door. Dick followed, chagrined. The stranger seemed to be playing with him. Obviously, it was some one thoroughly acquainted with the house, and that brought to Dick's mind the thought that he himself, instead of the other man, was the stranger there.

He came at last to a passage which led to the kitchen, a great room, because many people were often guests at Bellevue, and here he stopped short, while his heart suddenly beat hard. A distinct odor coming from different points suddenly assailed his nostrils. He had smelled it too often in the last two years to be mistaken. It was smoke, and Bellevue had been set on fire in several places.

He inhaled it once or twice and then he saw again the shadowy figure flitting down to the passage and to a small door that, unnoticed by the soldiers, opened on the kitchen garden in the rear of the house.

Dick never acted more promptly. Instantly he fired his pistol into the ceiling, the report roaring in the confined spaces of the house, and then shouting with all his might: "Fire! Fire! Fire!" as he dashed down the passage he ran through the little door, which the intruder had left open, and pursued him in the darkness and rain into the garden. There was a flash ahead of him and a bullet whistled past his ear, but he merely increased his speed and raced in the direction of the flash. As he ran he heard behind him a tremendous uproar, the voices and tread of hundreds of soldiers, awakened suddenly, and he knew that they would rush through Bellevue in search of the fires.

But it was Dick's impulse to capture the daring intruder who would destroy the house over their heads. Built of wood, it would burn so fast, once the torches were set, that the rain would have little effect upon the leaping flames, unless measures were taken at once, which he knew that the regiment would do, under such a capable man as Colonel Winchester. Meanwhile he was hot in pursuit.

The trail which was not that of footsteps, but of a shadowy figure, ran between tall and close rows of grapevines so high on wooden framework that they hid any one who passed. The suspicion that Dick had held at first was confirmed. This was no stranger, no intruder. He knew every inch of both house and grounds, and, after having set the house on fire, he had selected the only line of retreat, but a safe one, through the thick and lofty vegetation of the garden, which ran down to the edge of the ravine in the rear, where he could slip quietly under the fence, drop through the thick grass into the ravine unseen by the pickets, and escape at his leisure in the darkness.

Dick was so sure of his theory that he strained every effort to overtake the figure which was flitting before him like a ghost. In his eagerness he had forgotten to shout any alarm about the pickets, but it would have been of no avail, as most of them, under the impulse of alarm, had rushed forward to help extinguish the fires.

He saw the fugitive reach the end of the garden, drop almost flat, and then slip under a broken place in the palings. At an ordinary time he would have stopped there, but all the instincts of the hunter were aroused. It was still raining, and he was already soaked. Wet branches and leaves struck him in the face as he passed, but his energy and eagerness were undimmed.

He, too, dropped at the hole under the broken palings and slid forward face foremost. The wet grass was as slippery as ice, and after he passed through the hole Dick kept going. Moreover, his speed increased. He had not realized that the garden went to the very edge of the ravine, and he was

shooting down a steep slope to the depth of thirty feet. He grasped instinctively at weeds and grass as he made his downward plunge and fetched up easily at the bottom.

He sprang to his feet and saw the shadowy fugitive running down the ravine. In an instant he followed headlong, tripped once or twice on the wet grass, but was up every time like lightning, and once more in swift pursuit. The fugitive turned once, raised his pistol and pulled the trigger again, evidently forgetful that it was empty. When the hammer snapped on the trigger he uttered a low cry of anger and hurled the useless weapon into the grass. Then he whirled around and faced Dick, who was coming on, eager and panting.

Dick's own pistol was empty and he did not carry his small sword. He stopped abruptly when the other turned, and, in the dim light and rain, he saw that his opponent was a young man or rather youth of about his own size and age. When he saw the lad cast the pistol aside Dick, moved by some chivalrous impulse, dropped his own in the grass.

Then the two stared at each other. They were far beyond the line of the pickets, and as they stood in the deep ravine there was no chance that any one would either see or hear them. As Dick gazed intently, the face and figure of his antagonist shaped themselves more distinctly in the dim light. He beheld before him a tall youth, extremely well built, fair of face, his brown hair slightly long. He wore rain-soaked civilian's garb.

He saw that the youth was panting like himself, but it was not wholly the result of flight. His face expressed savage anger and indignation.

"You dirty Yankee!" he said.

Dick started. No one had ever before addressed him with such venom.

"If by Yankee you mean loyalty to the Union then I'm one," he said, "and I'm proud of it. What's more I'm willing to tell who I am. My name is Richard Mason. I'm from Kentucky, and I'm a lieutenant in the regiment of Colonel Arthur Winchester, which occupies the building behind us."

"From Kentucky and consorting with Yankees! A lot of you are doing it, and you ought to be on our side! We hate you for it more than we do the real Yankees!"

"It's our right to choose, and we've chosen. And now, since you're talking so much about right and wrong, who may you be, Mr. Firebug?"

Even in the dark Dick saw his opponent's face flush, and his eyes flash with deadly hostility.

"My name is Victor Woodville," he replied, "and my father is Colonel John Woodville, C.S.A. He is the owner of the house in which your infamous Yankee regiment is encamped."

"And which you have tried to burn?"

"I'd rather see it burn than shelter Yankees. You'd burn it anyway later on. Grant's troops have already begun to use the torch."

"At any rate you'll go before our colonel. He'll want to ask you a lot of questions."

"I'm not going before your colonel."

"Oh, yes, you are."

"Who's going to take me?"

"I am."

"Then come on and do it."

Dick advanced warily. Both had regained their breath and strength now. Dick with two years of active service in the army had the size and muscles of a man. But so had his opponent. Each measured the other, and they were formidable antagonists, well matched.

Dick had learned boxing at the Pendleton Academy, and, as he approached slowly, looking straight into the eyes of his enemy, he suddenly shot his right straight for Woodville's chin. The Mississippian, as light on his feet as a leopard, leaped away and countered with his left, a blow so quick and hard that Dick, although he threw his head to one side, caught a part of its force just above his ear. But, guarding himself, he sprang back, while Woodville faced him, laughing lightly.

Dick shook his head a little and the singing departed. Just above his ear he felt a great soreness, but he was cool now. Moreover, he was losing his anger.

"First blow for you," he said. "I see that you know how to use your fists."

"I hope to prove it."

Woodville, stepping lightly on his toes and feinting with his left, caught Dick on his cheek bone with his right. Then he sought to spring away, but Dick, although staggered, swung heavily and struck Woodville on the forehead. The Mississippian went down full length on the slippery grass but jumped to his feet in an instant. Blood was flowing from his forehead, whence it ran down his nose and fell to the earth, drop by drop. Dick himself was bleeding from the cut on his cheek bone.

The two faced each other, cool, smiling, but resolute enemies.

"First knockdown for you," said Woodville, "but I mean that the second shall be mine."

"Go in and try."

But Woodville drew back a little, and as Dick followed, looking for an opening he was caught again a heavy clip on the side of the head. He saw stars and was not able to return the blow, but he sprang back and protected himself once more with his full guard, while he regained his balance and strength.

"Am I a firebug?" asked Woodville tauntingly.

Dick considered. This youth interested him. There was no denying that Woodville had great cause for anger, when he found his father's house occupied by a regiment of the enemy. He considered it defilement. The right or wrong of the war had nothing to do with it. It was to him a matter of emotion.

"I'll take back the epithet 'firebug,'" he said, "but I must stick to my purpose of carrying you to Colonel Winchester."

"Always provided you can: Look out for yourself."

The Mississippian, who was wonderfully agile, suddenly danced in—on his toes it seemed to Dick—and landed savagely on his opponent's left ear. Then he was away so quickly and lightly that Dick's return merely cut the air.

The Kentuckian felt the blood dripping from another point. His ear, moreover, was very sore and began to swell rapidly. One less enduring would have given up, but he had a splendid frame, toughened by incessant hardship. And, above all, enclosed within that frame was a lion heart. He shook his head slightly, because a buzzing was going on there, but in a moment or two it stopped.

"Are you satisfied?" asked young Woodville.

"You remember what Paul Jones said: 'I've just begun to fight.'"

"Was it Paul Jones? Well, I suppose it was. Anyhow, if you feel that way about it, so do I. Then come on again, Mr. Richard Mason."

Dick's blood was up. The half-minute or so of talk had enabled him to regain his breath. Although he felt that incessant pain and swelling in his left ear, his resolution to win was unshaken. Pride was now added to his other motives.

He took a step forward, feinted, parried skillfully, and then stepped back. Woodville, always agile as a panther, followed him and swung for the chin, but Dick, swerving slightly to one side, landed with great force on Woodville's jaw. The young Mississippian fell, but, while Dick stood looking at him, he sprang to his feet and faced his foe defiantly. The blood was running down his cheek and dyeing the whole side of his face. But Dick saw the spirit in his eye and knew that he was far from conquered.

Woodville smiled and threw back his long hair from his face.

"A good one for you. You shook me up," he admitted, "but I don't see any sign of your ability to carry me to that Yankee colonel, as you boasted you would do."

"But I'm going to do it."

The rain increased and washed the blood from both their faces. It was dark within the ravine, but they had been face to face so long that they could read the eyes of each other. Those of Woodville like those of Dick ceased to express great anger. In the mind of each was growing a respect for his antagonist. The will to conquer remained, but not the desire to hate.

"If you're going to do it, then why don't you?" said Woodville.

Dick moved slowly forward, still watching the eyes of the Mississippian. He believed now that Woodville, agile and alert though he might be, had not fully recovered his strength. There was terrific steam in that last punch and the head of the man who had received it might well be buzzing yet.

Dick then moved in with confidence, but a lightning blow crashed through his guard, caught him on the chin and sent him to earth. He rose, though still half-stunned, and saw that the confident, taunting look had returned to Woodville's face. Fortunate now for Dick that the pure blood of great woods rangers flowed in his veins, and that he had inherited from them too an iron frame. His chin was cut and he had seen a thousand stars. But his eyes cleared and steadily he faced his foe.

"Do I go with you to your colonel?" asked Woodville, ironically.

"You do," replied Dick firmly.

He looked his enemy steadily in the eye again, and he felt a great sense of triumph. After such severe punishment he was stronger than ever and he knew it.

Therefore he must win. He struck heavily, straight for the angle of Woodville's chin. The Mississippian evaded the blow and flashed in with his left. But Dick, who was learning to be very wary, dodged it and came back so swiftly that Woodville was caught and beaten to his knees.

But the son of the house of Bellevue was still so agile that he was able to recover his feet and spring away. Dick saw, however, that he was panting heavily. The blow had taken a considerable part of his remaining strength. He also saw that his antagonist was regarding him with a curious eye.

"You fight well, Yank," said Woodville, "although I ought not to call you Yank, but rather a traitor, as you're a Kentuckian. Still, I've put my marks on you. You're bleeding a lot and you'd be a sight if it weren't for this cleansing rain."

"I've been putting the map of Kentucky on your own face. You don't look as much like Mississippi as you did. You'll take notice too that you didn't burn the house. If you'll glance up the side of this ravine you'll see just a little dying smoke. Eight hundred soldiers put it out in short order."

Woodville's face flushed, and his eyes for the first time since the beginning of the encounter shone with an angry gleam. But the wrathful fire quickly died.

"On the whole, I'm not sorry," he said. "It was an impulse that made me do it. Our army will come and drive you away, and our house will be our own again."

"That's putting it fairly. What's the use of burning such a fine place as Bellevue? Still, we want you. Our colonel has many questions to ask you."

"You can't take me."

Dick judged that the crucial moment had now come. Woodville was breathing much more heavily than he was, and seemed to be near exhaustion. Dick darted boldly in, received a swinging right and left on either jaw that cut his cheeks and made the blood flow. But he sent his right to Woodville's chin and the young Mississippian without a sound dropped to the ground, lying relaxed and flat upon his back, his white face, streaked with red, upturned to the rain.

He was so still that Dick was seized with fear lest he had killed him. He liked this boy who had fought him so well and, grasping him by both shoulders, he shook him hard. But when he loosed him Woodville fell back flat and inert.

Dick heard the waters of a brook trickling down the ravine, and, snatching off his cap, he ran to it. He filled the cap and returned just in time to see Woodville leap lightly to his feet and disappear with the speed of a deer among the bushes.

CHAPTER II. FORREST

Dick dashed after the fugitive, but he had disappeared utterly, and the dense bushes impeded the pursuer. He was hot and angry that he had been deluded so cleverly, but then came the consolation that, after all, he had won in the fistic encounter with an antagonist worthy of anybody. And after this came a second thought that caused him to halt abruptly.

He and Woodville had fought it out fairly. Their fists had printed upon the faces of each other the stamp of a mutual liking. Why should he strive to take young Woodville before Colonel Winchester? Nothing was to be gained by it, and, as the Mississippian was in civilian's garb, he might incur the punishment of a spy. He realized in a flash that, since he had vindicated his own prowess, he was glad of Woodville's escape.

He turned and walked thoughtfully back up the ravine. Very little noise came from the house and the thin spires of smoke had disappeared. He knew now that the fires had been put out with ease, thanks to his quick warning. Before starting he had recovered both his own pistol and Woodville's, and he was particularly glad to find the latter because it would be proof of his story, if proof were needed. The rain had not ceased nor had the heavy darkness lifted, but the looming shadow of the big house was sufficient guide. He found the place where he had slipped down the bank and the torn bushes and grass showed that he had made a fine trail. He pulled himself back up by the bushes and reentered the garden, where he was halted at once by two watchful sentries.

"Lieutenant Richard Mason of Colonel Winchester's staff," he said, "returning from the pursuit of a fugitive."

The men knew him and they said promptly:

"Pass Lieutenant Mason."

But despite the dark they stared at him very curiously, and when he walked on toward the piazza one of them muttered to the other:

"I guess he must have overtook that fugitive he was chasin'."

Dick walked up the steps upon the piazza, where some one had lighted a small lamp, near which stood Colonel Winchester and his staff.

"Here's Dick!" exclaimed Warner in a tone of great relief.

"And we thought we had lost him," said Colonel Winchester, gladness showing in his voice. Then he added: "My God, Dick, what have you been doing to yourself?"

"Yes, what kind of a transformation is this?" added a major. "You've certainly come back with a face very different from the one with which you left us!"

Dick turned fiery red. He suddenly became conscious that he had a left ear of enormous size, purple and swollen, that his left eye was closing fast, that the blood was dripping from cuts on either cheek, that the blood had flowed down the middle of his forehead and had formed a little stalactite on the end of his nose, that his chin had been gashed in five places by a strong fist, and that he had contributed his share to the bloodshed of the war.

"If I didn't know these were modern times," said Warner, "I'd say that he had just emerged from a sanguinary encounter bare-handed in the Roman arena with a leopard."

Dick glared at him.

"It was you who gave the alarm of fire, was it not?" asked Colonel Winchester.

"Yes, sir. I saw the man who set the fires and I pursued him through the garden and into the ravine that runs behind it."

"Your appearance indicates that you overtook him."

Dick flushed again.

"I did, sir," he replied. "I know I'm no beauty at present, but neither is he."

"It looks as if it had been a matter of fists?"

"It was, sir. Both of us fired our pistols, but missed. Then we threw our weapons to one side and clashed. It was a hard and long fight, sir. He hit like a pile driver, and he was as active as a deer. But I was lucky enough to knock him out at last."

"Then why does your face look like a huge piece of pickled beef?" asked the incorrigible Warner mischievously.

"You wait and I'll make yours look the same!" retorted Dick.

"Shut up," said Colonel Winchester. "If I catch you two fighting I may have you both shot as an example."

Dick and Warner grinned good-naturedly at each other. They knew that Colonel Winchester did not dream of carrying out such a threat, and they knew also that they had no intention of fighting.

"And after you knocked him out what happened?" asked the colonel.

Dick looked sheepish.

"He lay so still I was afraid he was dead," he replied. "I ran down to a brook, filled my cap with water, and returned with it in the hope of reviving him. I got there just in time to see him vanishing in the bushes. Pursuit was hopeless."

"He was clever," said the Colonel. "Have you any idea who he was?"

"He told me. He was Victor Woodville, the son of Colonel John Woodville, C.S.A., the owner of this house."

"Ah!" said Colonel Winchester, and then after a moment's thought he added: "It's just as well he escaped. I should not have known what to do with him. But we have you, Dick, to thank for giving the alarm. Now, go inside and change to some dry clothes, if you have any in your baggage, and if not dry yourself before a fire they're going to build in the kitchen."

"Will you pardon me for speaking of something, sir?"

"Certainly. Go ahead."

"I think the appearance of young Woodville here indicates the nearness of Forrest or some other strong cavalry force."

"You're right, Dick, my officers and I are agreed upon it. I have doubled the watch, but now get yourself to that fire and then to sleep."

Dick obeyed gladly enough. The night had turned raw and chill, and the cold water dripped from his clothes as he walked. But first he produced Woodville's pistol and handed it to Colonel Winchester.

"There's my antagonist's pistol, sir," he said. "You'll see his initials on it."

"Yes, here they are," said Colonel Winchester: "'V.W., C.S.A.' It's a fine weapon, but it's yours, Dick, as you captured it."

Dick took it and went to the kitchen, where the big fire had just begun to blaze. He was lucky enough to be the possessor of an extra uniform, and before he changed into it—they slept with their clothes on—he roasted himself before those glorious coals. Then, as he was putting on the fresh uniform, Warner and Pennington appeared.

"What would you recommend as best for the patient, Doctor," said Warner gravely to Pennington.

"I think such a distinguished surgeon as you will agree with me that his wounds should first be washed and bathed thoroughly in cold water."

"And after that a plentiful application of soothing liniment."

"Yes, Doctor. That is the best we can do with the simple medicines we have, but it especially behooves us to reduce the size of that left ear, or some of the boys will say that we have a case of elephantiasis on our hands."

"While you're reducing the size of it you might also reduce the pain in it," said Dick.

"We will," said Pennington; "we've got some fine horse liniment here. I brought it all the way from Nebraska with me, and if it's good for horses it ought to be good for prize fighters, too. That

was surely a hefty chap who fought you. If you didn't have his pistol as proof I'd say that he gave you a durned good licking. Isn't this a pretty cut down the right cheek bone, George?"

"Undoubtedly, but nothing can take away the glory of that left ear. Why, if Dick could only work his ears he could fan himself with it beautifully. When I meet that Woodville boy I'm going to congratulate him. He was certainly handy with his fists."

"Go on, fellows," said Dick, good-naturedly. "In a week I won't have a wound or a sign of a scar. Then I'll remember what you've said to me and I'll lick you both, one after the other."

"Patient is growing delirious, don't you think so, Doctor?" said Warner to Pennington.

"Beyond a doubt. Violent talk is always proof of it. Better put him to bed. Spread his two blankets before the fire, and he can sleep there, while every particle of cold and stiffness is being roasted out of him."

"You boys are very good to me," said Dick gratefully.

"It's done merely in the hope that your gratitude will keep you from giving us the licking you promised," said Pennington.

Then they left him and Dick slept soundly until he was awakened the next day by Warner. The fire was out, the rain had ceased long since and the sun was shining brilliantly.

"Hop up, Dick," said Warner briskly. "Breakfast's ready. Owing to your wound we let you sleep until the last moment. Come now, take the foaming coffee and the luscious bacon, and we'll be off, leaving Bellevue again to its masters, if they will come and claim it."

"Has anything happened in the night?"

"Nothing since you ran your face against a pile driver, but Sergeant Daniel Whitley, who reads the signs of earth and air and wood and water, thinks that something is going to happen."

"Is it Forrest?"

"Don't know, but it's somebody or something. As soon as we can eat our luxurious breakfasts we mean to mount and ride hard toward Grant. We're scouts, but according to Whitley the scouts are scouted, and this is a bad country to be trapped in."

Dick was so strong and his blood was so pure that he felt his wounds but little now. The cuts and bruises were healing fast and he ate with a keen appetite. He heard then of the signs that Whitley had seen. He had found two broad trails, one three miles from the house, and the other about four miles. Each indicated the passage of several hundred men, but he had no way of knowing whether they belonged to the same force. They were bound to be Confederate cavalry as Colonel Winchester's regiment was known to be the only Union force in that section.

Dick knew their position to be dangerous. Colonel Winchester had done his duty in discovering that Forrest and Wheeler were raiding through Mississippi, and that a heavy force was gathering in the rear of Grant, who intended the siege of Vicksburg. It behooved him now to reach Grant as soon as he could with his news.

Refreshed and watchful, the regiment rode away from Bellevue. Dick looked back at the broad roof and the great piazzas, and then he thought of young Woodville with a certain sympathy. They had fought a good fight against each other, and he hoped they would meet after the war and be friends.

It was about an hour after sunrise, and the day was bright and warm. The beads of water that stood on every leaf and blade of grass were drying fast, and the air, despite its warmth, was pure and bracing. Dick, as he looked at the eight hundred men, tanned, experienced and thoroughly armed, under capable leaders, felt that they were a match for any roving Southern force.

"Just let Forrest come on," he said. "I know that the Colonel is aching to get back at him for that surprise in Tennessee, and I believe we could whip him."

"You're showing great spirit for a man who was beaten up in the prize ring as you were last night. I thought you'd want to rest for a few days."

"Drop it, George. I did get some pretty severe cuts and bruises, but I was lucky enough to have the services of two very skillful and devoted young physicians. Their treatment was so fine that I'm all right to-day."

"Unless I miss my guess, we'll need the services of doctors again before night comes. No mountains are here, but this is a great country for ambush. It's mostly in forest, and even in the open the grass is already very tall. Besides, there are so many streams, bayous, and ponds. Notice how far out on the flanks the skirmishers and scouts are riding, and others ride just as far ahead."

Two miles from Bellevue and they came to a small hill, covered with forest, from the protection of which the officers examined the country long and minutely, while their men remained hidden among the deep foliaged trees. Dick had glasses of his own which he put to his eyes, bringing nearer the wilderness, broken here and there by open spaces that indicated cotton fields. Yet the forest was so dense and there was so much of it that a great force might easily be hidden within its depths only a mile away.

"Have we any information at all about Forrest's strength?" whispered Pennington to Dick.

"His full force isn't down here. It is believed he has not more than a thousand or twelve hundred men. But he and his officers know the country thoroughly, and of course the inhabitants, being in full sympathy with them, will give them all the information they need. The news of every movement of ours has been carried straight to the rebel general."

"And yet the country seems to have no people at all. We come to but few houses, and those few are deserted."

"So they are. What was that? Did you see it, Frank?"

"What was what?"

"I forgot that you are not using glasses. I caught a momentary glitter in the woods. I think it was a sunbeam passing through the leaves and striking upon the polished barrel of a rifle. Ah! there it is again! And Colonel Winchester has seen it too."

The colonel and his senior officers were now gazing intently at the point in the wood where Dick had twice seen the gleam, and, keener-eyed than they, he continued to search the leafy screen through his own glasses. Soon he saw bayonets, rifles, horses and men advancing swiftly, and then came two of their own scouts galloping.

"The enemy is advancing!" they cried. "It's Forrest!"

A thrill shot through Dick. The name of Forrest was redoubtable, but he knew that every man in the regiment was glad to meet him again. He glanced at Colonel Winchester and saw that his face had flushed. He knew that the colonel was more than gratified at this chance.

"We'll make our stand here," said Colonel Winchester. "The hill runs to the right, and, as you see over there, it is covered with forest without undergrowth. Thus we can secure protection, and at the same time be able to maneuver, mounted."

The regiment was posted rapidly in two long lines, the second to fire between the intervals of the first. They carried carbines and heavy cavalry sabers, and they were the best mounted regiment in the Northern service.

Yet these men, brave and skillful as they were, were bound to feel trepidation, although they did not show it. They were far in the Southern forest, cut off from their army, and Forrest, in addition to his own cavalry, might have brought with him fresh reserves of the enemy.

Dick, Warner, and Pennington, as usual, remained close to their colonel, and Sergeant Daniel Whitley was not far away. But Colonel Winchester presently rode along the double line of his veterans, and he spoke to them quietly but with emphasis and conviction:

"My lads," he said, "you see Forrest's men coming through the woods to attack us. Forrest is the greatest cavalry leader the South has, west of the Alleghanies. Some of you were with me when we were surprised and cut up by him in Tennessee. But you will not be surprised by him now, nor will you be cut up by him. All of you have become great riders, a match for Forrest's own, and as I look

upon your faces here I know that there is no fear in a single heart. You have served under Grant, and you have served under Thomas. They are two generals who always set their faces toward the front and never turn them toward the rear. You will this day prove yourselves worthy of Grant and Thomas."

They were about to cheer, but he checked it with the simple gesture of a raised hand. Then they did a thing that only a beloved leader could inspire. Every man in the regiment, resting his carbine across the pommel of his saddle, drew his heavy cavalry saber and made it whirl in coils of glittering light about his head.

The great pulse in Dick's throat leaped as he saw. The long double line seemed to give back a double flash of flame. Not a word was said, and then eight hundred sabers rattled together as they were dropped back into their scabbards. Colonel Winchester's face flushed deeply at the splendid salute, but he did not speak either. He took off his cap and swept it in a wide curve to all his men. Then he turned his face toward the enemy.

The Southern trumpet was singing in the forest, and the force of Forrest, about twelve hundred strong, was emerging into view. Dick, through his glasses, saw and recognized the famous leader, a powerful, bearded man, riding a great bay horse. He had heard many descriptions of him and he knew him instinctively. He also recognized the fact that the Winchester regiment had before it the most desperate work any men could do, if it beat off Forrest when he came in his own country with superior numbers.

Neither side had artillery, not even the light guns that could be carried horse- or muleback. It must be left to carbine and saber. Colonel Winchester carefully watched his formidable foe, trying to divine every trick and expedient that he might use. He had a memory to avenge. He had news to carry to Grant, and Forrest must not keep him from carrying it. Moreover, his regiment and he would gain great prestige if they could beat off Forrest. There would be glory for the whole Union cavalry if they drove back the Southern attack. Dick saw the glitter of his colonel's eye and the sharp compression of his lips.

But the men of Forrest, although nearly within rifle shot, did not charge. Their bugle sang again, but Dick did not know what the tune meant. Then they melted away into the deep forest on their flank, and some of the troop thought they had gone, daunted by the firm front of their foe.

But Dick knew better. Forrest would never retreat before an inferior force, and he was full of wiles and stratagems. Dick felt like a primitive man who knew that he was being stalked by a saber-toothed tiger through the dense forest.

Colonel Winchester beckoned to Sergeant Whitley. "Pick a half-dozen sharp-eyed men," he said, "and ride into those woods. You're experienced in this kind of war, Whitley, and before you go tell me what you think."

"General Forrest, sir, besides fighting as a white man fights, fights like an Indian, too; that is, he uses an Indian's cunning, which is always meant for ambush and surprise. He isn't dreaming of going away. They're coming back through the thick woods."

"So I think. But let me know as soon as you can."

Ten minutes after the sergeant had ridden forward with his comrades they heard the sound of rapid rifle shots, and then they saw the little band galloping back.

"They're coming, sir," reported the sergeant. "Forrest has dismounted several hundred of his men, and they are creeping forward from tree to tree with their rifles, while the others hold their horses in the rear."

"Then it's an Indian fight for the present," said Colonel Winchester. "We'll do the same."

He rapidly changed his lines of battle. The entire front rank was dismounted, while those behind held their horses. The four hundred in front, spreading out in as long a line as possible in order to protect their flanks, took shelter behind the trees and awaited the onset.

The attack was not long in coming. The Southern sharpshooters, creeping from tree to tree, began to fire. Scores of rifles cracked and Dick, from a convenient place behind a tree, saw the

spouts of flame appearing along a line of four or five hundred yards. Bullets whizzed about him, and, knowing that he would not be needed at present for any message, he hugged the friendly bark more tightly.

"It's lucky we have plenty of trees," said a voice from the shelter of the tree next to him. "We have at least one for every officer and man."

It was Warner who spoke and he was quite cheerful. Like Colonel Winchester, he seemed to look forward to the combat with a certain joy, and he added:

"You'll take notice, Dick, old man, that we've not been surprised. Forrest hasn't galloped over us as he did before. He's taking the trouble to make the approach with protected riflemen. Now what is the sergeant up to?"

Sergeant Whitley, after whispering a little with Colonel Winchester, had stolen off toward the right with fifty picked riflemen. When they reached the verge of the open space that lay between the two sides they threw themselves down in the thick, tall grass. Neither Dick nor Warner could see them now. They beheld only the stems of the grass waving as if under a gentle wind. But Dick knew that the rippling movement marked the passage of the riflemen.

Meanwhile the attack in their front was growing hotter. At least six or seven hundred sharpshooters were sending a fire which would have annihilated them if it had not been for the trees. As it was, fragments of bark, twigs, and leaves showered about them. The whistling of the bullets and their chugging as they struck the trees made a continuous sinister note.

The Union men were not silent under this fire. Their own rifles were replying fast, but Colonel Winchester continually urged them to take aim, and, while death and wounds were inflicted on the Union ranks, the Southern were suffering in the same manner.

Dick turned his eyes toward the right flank, where the fifty picked riflemen, Sergeant Whitley at their head, were crawling through the tall grass. He knew that they were making toward a little corner of the forest, thrust farther forward than the rest, and presently when the rippling in the grass ceased he was sure that they had reached it. Then the fifty rifles cracked together and the Southern flank was swept by fifty well-aimed bullets. Lying in their covert, Whitley's men reloaded their breech-loading rifles and again sent in a deadly fire.

The main Northern force redoubled its efforts at the same time. The men in blue sent in swarms of whistling bullets and Dick saw the front line of the South retreating.

"We're rousing the wolves from their lairs," explained Pennington exultantly as he sprang from his tree, just in time for a bullet to send his hat flying from his head. Fortunately, it clipped only a lock of hair, but he received in a good spirit Warner's admonishing words:

"Don't go wild, Frank. We've merely repelled the present attack. You don't think that Forrest with superior forces is going to let us alone, do you?"

"No, I don't," replied Pennington, "and don't you get behind that tree. It's mine, and I'm coming back to it. I've earned it. I held it against all kinds of bullets. Look at the scars made on each side of it by rebel lead."

The firing now died. Whitley's flank movement had proved wholly successful, and Colonel Winchester reinforced him in the little forest peninsula with fifty more picked men, where they lay well hidden, a formidable force for any assailant.

The silence now became complete, save for the stamping of the impatient horses and the drone of insects in the woods and grass. Dick, lying on his stomach and using his glasses, could see nothing in the forest before them. It was to him in all its aspects an Indian battle, and he believed in spite of what Warner had said that the enemy had retired permanently.

Colonel Winchester and all the officers rose to their feet presently and walked among the trees. No bullets came to tell them that they were rash and then the senior officers held a conference, while all the men remounted, save a dozen or so who would ride no more. But the colonel did not abate one whit of his craft or caution.

They resumed the march toward Grant, but they avoided every field or open space. They would make curves and lose time in order to keep in the dense wood, but, as Dick knew, Colonel Winchester still suspected that Forrest was hovering somewhere on his flank, covered by the great forest and awaiting a favorable opportunity to attack.

They approached one of the deep and narrow streams that ultimately find their way to the Mississippi. It had only one ford, and the scouts galloping back informed them that the farther shore was held by a powerful force of cavalry.

"It's Forrest," said Colonel Winchester with quiet conviction. "Knowing every path of the woods, they've gone ahead of us, and they mean to cut us off from Grant. Nevertheless we'll make a way."

He spoke firmly, but the junior officers of the staff did not exactly see how they were going to force a ford defended by a larger number of cavalry under the redoubtable Forrest.

"I didn't think Forrest would let us alone, and he hasn't," said Pennington.

"No, he hasn't," said Warner, "and it seems that he's checkmated us, too. Why, that river is swollen by the rains so much that it's a hard job to cross it if no enemy were on the other side. But you'll note, also, that the enemy, having got to the other side, can't come back again in our face to attack us."

"But we want to go on and they don't," said Dick. "They're satisfied with the enforced status quo, and we're not. Am I right, Professor?"

"You certainly are," replied Warner. "Now, our colonel is puzzled, as you can tell by his looks, and so would I be, despite my great natural military talents."

The Winchester regiment fell back into the woods, leaving the two forces out of rifle shot of each other. Sentinels were posted by both commanders not far from the river and the rest, dismounting, took their ease, save the officers, who again went into close conference.

Afterward they sat among the trees and waited. It was low ground, with the earth yet soaked from the heavy rain of the night before, and the heat grew heavy and intense. The insects began to drone again, and once more mosquitoes made life miserable. But the soldiers did not complain. It was noon now, and they ate food from their knapsacks. Two springs of clear water were found a little distance from the river and all drank there. Then they went back to their weary waiting.

On the other side of the river they could see the dismounted troopers, playing cards, sleeping or currying their horses. They seemed to be in no hurry at all. Colonel Winchester sent divisions of scouts up and down the stream, and, both returning after a while, reported that the river was not fordable anywhere.

Colonel Winchester sat down under a tree and smoked his pipe. The longer he smoked the more corrugated his brow became. He looked angrily at the ford, but it would be folly to attempt a passage there, and, containing himself as best he could, he waited while the long afternoon waned. His men at least would get a good rest.

Dick and his comrades, selecting the dryest place they could find, spread their blankets and lay down. Protecting their faces from the mosquitoes with green leaves, they sank into a deep quiet. Dick even drowsed for a while. He could not think of a way out of the trap, and he was glad it was the duty of older men like Colonel Winchester and the majors and captains to save them.

The heat of the day increased with the coming of afternoon, and Dick's eyelids grew heavier. He had become so thoroughly hardened to march and battle that the presence of the enemy on the other side of a river did not disturb him. What was the use of bothering about the rebels as long as they did not wish to fire upon one?

His eyes closed for a few minutes, and then his dreaming mind traversed space with incredible rapidity. He was back in Pendleton, sitting on the portico with his mother, watching the flowers on the lawn nod in the gentle wind. His cousin Harry Kenton saluted him with a halloo and came bounding toward the porch, and the halloo caused Dick to awake and sit up. He rubbed his eyes violently and

looked around a little bit ashamed. But two captains older than himself were sound asleep with their backs against trees.

Dick stood up and shook himself violently. Whatever others might do he must not allow himself to relax so much. He saw that the sun was slowly descending and that the full heat of the afternoon was passing. Colonel Winchester had withdrawn somewhat among the trees and he beckoned to him. Sergeant Whitley was standing beside the colonel.

"Dick," said Colonel Winchester, "colored men have brought us news that Colonel Grierson of our army, with a strong raiding force of nearly two thousand cavalry is less than a day's march away and on the same side of this river that we are. We have received the news from three separate sources and it must be true. Probably Forrest's men know it, too, but expect Grierson to pass on, wholly ignorant that we're here. I have chosen you and Sergeant Whitley to bring Grierson to our relief. The horses are ready. Now go, and God speed you. The sergeant will tell you what we know as you ride."

Dick sprang at once into the saddle, and with a brief good-bye he and the sergeant were soon in the forest riding toward the southeast. Dick was alive and energetic again. All that laziness of mind and body was gone. He rode on a great ride and every sense was alert.

"Tell me," he said, "just about what the news is."

"Three men," replied the sergeant, "came in at different times with tales, but the three tales agree. Grierson has made a great raid, even further down than we have gone. He has more than double our numbers, and if we can unite with him it's likely that we can turn Forrest into the pursued instead of the pursuer. They say we can hit his trail about twenty-five miles from here, and if that's so we'll bring him up to the ford by noon to-morrow. Doesn't it look promising to you, Lieutenant Mason?"

"It does look promising, Sergeant Whitley, if we don't happen to be taken by the Johnnies who infest this region. Besides, you'll have to guide through the dark to-night. You're trained to that sort of thing."

"You can see pretty well in the dark yourself, sir; and since our way lies almost wholly through forest I see no reason why we should be captured."

"That's so, sergeant. I'm just as much of an optimist as you are. You keep the course, and I'm with you to the finish."

They rode rather fast at first as the sun had not yet set, picking their way through the woods, and soon left their comrades out of sight. The twilight now came fast, adding a mournful and somber red to the vast expanse of wilderness. The simile of an Indian fight returned to Dick with increased force. This was not like any battle with white men in the open fields. It was a combat of raiders who advanced secretly under cover of the vast wilderness.

The twilight died with the rapidity of the South, and the darkness, thick at the early hours, passed over the curve of the earth. For a time Dick and the sergeant could not see many yards in front and they rode very slowly. After a while, as the sky lightened somewhat and their eyes also grew keen, they made better speed. Then they struck a path through the woods leading in the right direction, and they broke into a trot.

The earth was so soft that their horses' feet gave back but little sound, and both were confident they would not meet any enemy in the night at least.

"Straight southeast," said the sergeant, "and we're bound to strike Grierson's tracks. After that we'd be blind if we couldn't follow the trail made by nearly two thousand horsemen."

The path still led in the direction they wished and they rode on silently for hours. Once they saw a farmhouse set back in the woods, and they were in fear lest dogs come out and bark alarm, but there was no sound and they soon left it far behind.

They passed many streams, some of which were up to their saddle girths, and then they entered a road which was often so deep in mud that they were compelled to turn into the woods on the side. But no human being had interfered with their journey, and their hopes rose to the zenith.

They came, finally, into an open region of cotton fields, and the sergeant now began to watch closely for the great trail they hoped to find. A force as large as Grierson's would not attempt a passage through the woods, but would seek some broad road and Sergeant Whitley expected to find it long before morning.

It was now an hour after midnight and they reckoned that they had come about the right distance. There was a good moon and plenty of stars and the sergeant gave himself only a half-hour to find the trail.

"There's bound to be a wide road somewhere among these fields, the kind we call a county road."

"It's over there beyond that rail fence," said Dick. They urged their horses into a trot, and soon found that Dick was right. A road of red clay soft from the rains stretched before them.

"A man doesn't have to look twice here for a trail. See," said the sergeant.

The road from side to side was plowed deep with the hoofs of horses, every footprint pointing northward.

"Grierson's cavalry," said Dick.

"I take it that it can't be anything else. There is certainly in these parts no rebel force of cavalry large enough to make this trail."

"How old would you say these tracks are?"

"Hard to tell, but they can't have been made many hours ago. We'll press forward, lieutenant, and we can save time going through the fields on the edge of the road."

Although they had to take down fences they made good speed and just as the sun was rising they saw the light of a low campfire among some trees, lining either bank of a small creek. They approached warily, until they saw the faded blue uniforms. Then they galloped forward, shouting that they were friends, and in a few minutes were in the presence of Grierson himself.

He had been making a great raid, but he was eager now for the opportunity to strike at Forrest. He must give his horses a short rest, and then Dick and the sergeant should guide him at speed to the ford where the opposing forces stood.

"It's twenty-five miles, you tell me?" said Grierson to Dick.

"As nearly as I can calculate, sir. It's through swampy country, but I think we ought to be there in three or four hours."

"Then lead the way," said Grierson. "Like your colonel, I'll be glad to have a try at Forrest."

Sergeant Whitley rode in advance. A lumberman first and then a soldier of the plains, he had noted even in the darkness every landmark and he could lead the way back infallibly. But he warned Grierson that such a man as Forrest would be likely to have out scouts, even if they had to swim the river. It was likely that they could not get nearer by three or four miles to Colonel Winchester without being seen.

"Then," said Grierson, who had the spirit of a Stuart or a Forrest, "we'll ride straight on, brushing these watchers out of our way, and if by any chance their whole force should cross, we'll just meet and fight it."

"The little river is falling fast," said the sergeant. "It's likely that it'll be fordable almost anywhere by noon."

"Then," said Grierson, "it'll be all the easier for us to get at the enemy."

Dick, just behind Grierson, heard these words and he liked them. Here was a spirit like Colonel Winchester's own, or like that of the great Southern cavalry leaders. The Southerners were born on horseback, but the Northern men were acquiring the same trick of hard riding. Dick glanced back at the long column. Armed with carbine and saber the men were riding their trained horses like Comanches. Eager and resolute it was a formidable force, and his heart swelled with pride and anticipation. He believed that they were going to give Forrest all he wanted and maybe a little more.

Up rose the sun. Hot beams poured over forest and field, but the cavalrymen still rode fast, the scent of battle in their nostrils. Dick knew that these Southern streams, flooded by torrents of rain, rose fast and also fell fast.

"How much further now, sergeant?" asked Grierson, as they turned from a path into the deep woods.

"Not more than three miles, sir."

"And they know we're coming. Listen to that!"

Several rifles cracked among the trees and bullets whizzed by them. Forrest's skirmishers and scouts were on the south side of the stream. As they had foreseen, the river had sunk so much that it was fordable now at many points. Dick was devoutly grateful that they had found Grierson. Otherwise the Winchester regiment would have been flanked, and its destruction would have followed.

Skirmishers were detached from Grierson's command and drove off the Southern riflemen. Dick heard the rattling fire of their rifles in the deep wood, but he seldom saw a figure. Then he heard another fire, heavy and continuous, in their front, coming quite clearly on a breeze that blew toward them.

"Your whole regiment is engaged," exclaimed Grierson. "Forrest must have forded the river elsewhere!"

He turned and shook aloft his saber.

"Forward, lads!" he shouted. "Gallant men of our own army will be overwhelmed unless we get up in time!"

The whole force broke into a gallop through the woods, the fire in their front rapidly growing heavier. In ten minutes they would be there, but rifles suddenly blazed from the forest on their flank and many saddles were emptied. Nothing upsets like surprise, and for a few moments the whole command was in disorder. It was evident that Forrest was attacking Winchester with only a part of his force, while he formed an ambush for Grierson.

But the Northern cavalrymen had not learned in vain through disaster and experience. Grierson quickly restored order and drew his men back into the forest. As the enemy followed the Northern carbines began to flash fast. The troopers in gray were unable to flank them or drive them back. Grierson, sure of his superior numbers, pushed on toward Winchester, while fighting off the foe at the same time.

Dick and the sergeant kept in the van, and presently they came within sight of Colonel Winchester's men, who, dismounted, were holding off as best they could the overwhelming attack of Forrest. The Southern leader, after sending the majority of his men to a new crossing lower down had forced the ford before the Winchester regiment, and would have crushed it if it had not been for the opportune arrival of Grierson.

But a tremendous cheer arose as the Northern cavalry leader, who was already proving his greatness, charged into the battle with his grim troopers. The men in blue were now more numerous, and, fighting with the resolve to win or die, they gradually forced back Forrest. Dick began to foresee a victory won over the great Southern cavalryman.

But the astute Forrest, seeing that the odds were now heavily against him, ordered a retreat. The trumpets sang the recall and suddenly the Southern horsemen, carrying their dead with them, vanished in the forest, where the Northern cavalry, fearful of ambushes and new forces, did not dare to pursue.

But Winchester and Grierson were shaking hands, and Winchester thanked the other in brief but emphatic words.

"Say no more, colonel," exclaimed Grierson. "We're all trying to serve our common country. You'd help me just the same if we had the chance, and I think you'll find the road clear to Grant. While the siege of Vicksburg was determined on long ago, as you know, I believe that he is now moving toward Grand Gulf. You know he has to deal with the armies of Johnston and Pemberton."

"We'll find him," said Winchester.

A quarter of an hour later his regiment was galloping toward Grant, while Grierson's command rode eastward to deal with other forces of the Confederacy.

CHAPTER III. GRANT MOVES

The Winchester regiment had not suffered greatly. A dozen men who had fallen were given speedy burial, and all the wounded were taken away on horseback by their friends. Dick rejoiced greatly at their escape from Forrest, and the daring and skill of Grierson. He felt anew that he was in stronger hands in the West than he had been in the East. In the East things seemed to go wrong nearly always, and the West they seemed to go right nearly always. It could not be chance continued so long. He believed in his soul that it was Grant, the heroic Thomas, and the great fighting powers of the western men, used to all the roughness of life out-of-doors and on the border.

They turned their course toward the Mississippi and that afternoon they met a Union scout who told them that Grant, now in the very heart of the far South, was gathering his forces for a daring attack upon Grand Gulf, a Confederate fortress on the Mississippi. In the North and at Washington his venture was regarded with alarm. There was a telegram to him to stop, but it was sent too late. He had disappeared in the Southern wilderness.

But Dick understood. He had both knowledge and intuition. Colonel Winchester on his long and daring scout had learned that the Confederate forces in the South were scattered and their leaders in doubt. Grant, taking a daring offensive and hiding his movements, had put them on the defensive, and there were so many points to defend that they did not know which to choose. Joe Johnston, just recovered from his wound at Fair Oaks the year before, and a general of the first rank, was coming, but he was not yet here.

Meanwhile Pemberton held the chief command, but he seemed to lack energy and decision. There were forces under other generals scattered along the river, including eight thousand commanded by Bowen, who held Grand Gulf, but concert of action did not exist among them.

This knowledge was not Dick's alone. It extended to every man in the regiment, and when the colonel urged them to greater speed they responded gladly.

"If we don't ride faster," he said, "we won't be up in time for the taking of Grand Gulf."

No greater spur was needed and the Winchester regiment went forward as fast as horses could carry them.

"I take it that Grant means to scoop in the Johnnies in detail," said Warner.

"It seems so," said Pennington. "This is a big country down here, and we can fight one Confederate army while another is mired up a hundred miles away.

"That's General Grant's plan. He doesn't look like any hero of romance, but he acts like one. He plunges into the middle of the enemy, and if he gets licked he's up and at 'em again right away."

Night closed in, and they stopped at an abandoned plantation—it seemed to Dick that the houses were abandoned everywhere—where they spent the night. The troopers would have willingly pushed on through the darkness, but the horses were so near exhaustion that another hour or two would have broken them down permanently. Moreover, Colonel Winchester did not feel much apprehension of an attack now. Forrest had certainly turned in another direction, and they were too close to the Union lines to be attacked by any other foe.

The house on this plantation was not by any means so large and fine as Bellevue, but, like the other, it had broad piazzas all about it, and Dick, in view of his strenuous experience, was allowed to take his saddle as a pillow and his blankets and go to sleep soon after dark in a comfortable place against the wall.

Never was slumber quicker or sweeter. There was not an unhealthy tissue in his body, and most of his nerves had disappeared in a life amid battles, scoutings, and marchings. He slept heavily all through the night, inhaling new strength and vitality with every breath of the crisp, fresh air. There was no interruption this time, and early in the morning the regiment was up and away.

They descended now into lower grounds near the Mississippi. All around them was a vast and luxuriant vegetation, cut by sluggish streams and bayous. But the same desolation reigned everywhere. The people had fled before the advance of the armies. Late in the afternoon they saw pickets in blue, then the Mississippi, and a little later they rode into a Union camp.

"Dick," said Colonel Winchester, "I shall want you to go with the senior officers and myself to report to General Grant on the other side of the Mississippi. You rode on that mission to Grierson and he may want to ask you questions."

Dick was glad to go with them. He was eager to see once more the man who had taken Henry and Donelson and who had hung on at Shiloh until Buell came. The general's tent was in a grove on a bit of high ground, and he was sitting before it on a little camp stool, smoking a short cigar, and gazing reflectively in the direction of Grand Gulf.

He greeted the three officers quietly but with warmth and then he listened to Colonel Winchester's detailed account of what he had seen and learned in his raid toward Jackson. It was a long narrative, showing how the Southern forces were scattered, and, as he listened, Grant's face began to show satisfaction.

But he seldom interrupted.

"And you think they have no large force at Jackson?" he said.

"I'm quite sure of it," replied Colonel Winchester.

Grant chewed his cigar a little while and then said:

"Grierson is doing well. It was an achievement for you and him to beat off Forrest. It will raise the prestige of our cavalry, which needs it. I believe it was you, Lieutenant Mason, who brought Grierson."

"It was chiefly, sir, a sergeant named Whitley. I rode with him and outranked him, but he is a veteran of the plains, and it was he who did the real work."

The general's stern features were lightened by a smile.

"I'm glad you give the sergeant credit," he said. "Not many officers would do it."

He listened a while longer and then the three were permitted to withdraw to their regiment, which was posted back of Grand Gulf, and which had quickly become a part of an army flushed with victory and eager for further action.

Before sunset Dick, Warner, and Pennington looked at Grand Gulf, a little village standing on high cliffs overlooking the Mississippi, just below the point where the dark stream known as the Big Black River empties into the Father of Waters. Around the crown of the heights was a ring of batteries and lower down, enclosing the town, was another ring.

Far off on the Mississippi the three saw puffing black smoke marking the presence of a Union fleet, which never for one instant in the whole course of the war relaxed its grip of steel upon the Confederacy. Dick's heart thrilled at the sight of the brave ships. He felt then, as most of us have felt since, that whatever happened the American navy would never fail.

"I hear the ships are going to bombard," said Warner.

"I heard so, too," said Pennington, "and I heard also that they will have to do it under the most difficult circumstances. The water in front of Grand Gulf is so deep that the ships can't anchor. It has a swift current, too, making at that point more than six knots an hour. There are powerful eddies, too, and the batteries crowning the cliffs are so high that the cannon of the gunboats will have trouble in reaching them."

"Still, Mr. Pessimist," said Dick, "remember what the gunboats did at Fort Henry. You'll find the same kind of men here."

"I wasn't trying to discourage you. I was merely telling the worst first. We're going to win. We nearly always win here in the West, but it seems to me the country is against us now. This doesn't look much like the plains, Dick, with its big, deep rivers, its high bluffs along the banks, and its miles and miles of swamp or wet lowlands. How wide would you say the Mississippi is here?"

"Somewhere between a mile and a mile and a half."

"And they say it's two or three hundred feet deep. Look at the steamers, boys. How many are there?"

"I count seven pyramids of smoke," said Warner, "four in one group and three in another. All the pyramids are becoming a little faint as the twilight is advancing. Dick, you call me a cold mathematical person, but this vast river flowing in its deep channel, the dark bluffs up there, and the vast forests would make me feel mighty lonely if you fellows were not here. It's a long way to Vermont."

"Fifteen hundred or maybe two thousand miles," said Dick, "but look how fast the dark is coming. I was wrong in saying it's coming. It just drops down. The smoke of the steamers has melted into the night, and you don't see them any more. The surface of the river has turned black as ink, the bluffs of Grand Gulf have gone, and we've turned back three or four hundred years."

"What do you mean by going back three or four hundred years?" asked Warner, looking curiously at Dick.

"Why, don't you see them out there?"

"See them out there? See what?"

"Why, the queer little ships with the high sides and prows! On my soul, George, they're the caravels of Spain! Look, they're stopping! Now they lower something in black over the side of the first caravel. I see a man in a black robe like a priest, holding a cross in his hand and standing at the ship's edge saying something. I think he's praying, boys. Now sailors cut the ropes that hold the dark object. It falls into the river and disappears. It's the burial of De Soto in the Father of Waters which he discovered!"

"Dick, you're dreaming," exclaimed Pennington.

"Yes, I know, but once there was a Chinaman who dreamed that he was a lily. When he woke up he didn't know whether he was a Chinaman who had dreamed he was a lily or a lily now dreaming he was a Chinaman."

"I like that story, Dick, but you've got too much imagination. The tale of the death and burial of De Soto has always been so vivid to you that you just stood there and re-created the scene for yourself."

"Of course that's it," said Pennington, "but why can't a fellow create things with his mind, when things that don't exist jump right up before his eyes? I've often seen the mirage, generally about dark, far out on the western plains. I've seen a beautiful lake and green gardens where there was nothing but the brown swells rolling on."

"I concede all you say," said Dick readily. "I have flashes sometimes, and so does Harry Kenton and others I know."

"Flashes! What do you mean?" asked Warner.

"Why, a sort of lightning stroke out of the past. Something that lasts only a second, but in which you have a share. Boys, one day I saw myself a Carthaginian soldier following Hannibal over the Alps."

"Maybe," said Pennington, "we have lived other lives on this earth, and sometimes a faint glimpse of them comes to us. It's just a guess."

"That's so," said Warner, "and we'd better be getting back to the regiment. Grand Gulf defended by Bowen and eight thousand good men is really enough for us. I think we're going to see some lively fighting here."

The heavy boom of a cannon from the upper circle of batteries swept over the vast sheet of water flowing so swiftly toward the Gulf. The sound came back in dying echoes, and then there was complete silence among besieged and besiegers.

The Winchesters had found a good solid place, a little hill among the marshes, and they were encamped there with their horses. Dick had no messages to carry, but he remained awake, while his comrades slept soundly. He had slept so much the night before that he had no desire for sleep now.

From his position he could see the Confederate bluffs and a few lights moving there, but otherwise the two armies were under a blanket of darkness. He again felt deeply the sense of isolation and loneliness, not for himself alone, but for the whole army. Grant had certainly shown supreme daring in pushing far into the South, and the government at Washington had cause for alarm lest he be reckless. If there were any strong hand to draw together the forces of the Confederacy they could surely crush him. But he had already learned in this war that those who struck swift and hard were sure to win. That was Stonewall Jackson's way, and it seemed to be Grant's way, too.

Still unable to sleep, he walked to a better position, where he could see the shimmering dark of the river and the misty heights with their two circles of cannon. A tall figure standing there turned at his tread and he recognized Colonel Winchester.

"Uneasy at our position, Dick?" said the colonel, fathoming his mind at once.

"A little, sir, but I think General Grant will pull us through."

"He will, Dick, and he'll take this fort, too. Grant's the hammer we've been looking for. Look at his record. He's had backsets, but in the end he's succeeded in everything he's tried. The Confederate government and leaders have made a mess of their affairs in the West and Southwest, and General Grant is taking full advantage of it."

"Do we attack in the morning, sir?"

"We do, Dick, though not by land. Porter, with his seven gunboats, is going to open on the fort, but it will be a hazardous undertaking."

"Because of the nature of the river, sir?"

"That's it. They can't anchor, and with full steam up, caught in all the violent eddies that the river makes rounding the point, they'll have to fire as best they can."

"But the gunboats did great work at Fort Henry, sir."

"So they did, Dick, and we've come a long way South since then, which means that we're making progress and a lot of it here in the West. Well, we'll see to-morrow."

They walked back to their own camp and sleep came to Dick at last. But he awoke early and found that the thrill of expectation was running through the whole army. Their position did not yet enable them to attack on land, but far out on the river they saw the gunboats moving. Porter, the commander, divided them into two groups. Four of the gunboats were to attack the lower circle of batteries and three were to pour their fire upon the upper ring.

Dick by day even more than by night recognized the difficulty of the task. Before them flowed the vast swift current of the Mississippi, gleaming now in the sunshine, and beyond were the frowning bluffs, crested and ringed with cannon. Grant had with him twenty thousand men and his seven gunboats, and Bowen, eight thousand troops. But if the affair lasted long other Southern armies would surely come.

Dick and his comrades had little to do but watch and thousands watched with them. When the sun was fully risen the seven boats steamed out in two groups, four farther down the river in order to attack the lower batteries, while the other three up the stream would launch their fire against those on the summit.

He watched the crest of the cliffs. He saw plainly through his glasses the muzzles of cannon and men moving about the batteries. Then there was a sudden blaze of fire and column of smoke and a shell struck in the water near one of the gunboats. The boat replied and its comrades also sent shot and shell toward the frowning summit. Then the batteries, both lower and upper, replied with full vigor and all the cliffs were wrapped in fire and smoke.

The boats steamed in closer and closer, pouring an incessant fire from their heavy guns, and both rings of batteries on the cliffs responded. The water of the river spouted up in innumerable

little geysers and now and then a boat was struck. Over both cliffs and river a great cloud of smoke lowered. It grew so dense that Dick and his comrades, watching with eagerness, were unable to tell much of what was happening.

Yet as the smoke lifted or was shot through with the blaze of cannon fire they saw that their prophecies were coming true. The boats in water too deep for anchorage were caught in the powerful eddies and their captains had to show their best seamanship while they steamed back and forth.

The battle between ship and shore went on for a long time. It seemed at last to the watching Union soldiers that the fire from the lower line of batteries was diminishing.

"We're making some way," said Warner.

"It looks like it," said Dick. "Their lower batteries are not so well protected as the upper."

"If we were only over there, helping with our own guns."

"But there's a big river in between, and we've got to leave it to the boats for to-day, anyhow."

"Look again at those lower batteries. Their fire is certainly decreasing. I can see it die down."

"Yes, and now it's stopped entirely. The boats have done good work!"

A tremendous cheer burst from the troops on the west shore as they saw how much their gallant little gunboats had achieved. Every gun in the lower batteries was silent now, but the top of the cliffs was still alive with flame. The batteries there were far from silent. Instead their fire was increasing in volume and power.

The four gunboats that had silenced the lower batteries now moved up to the aid of their comrades, and the seven made a united effort, steaming forward in a sort of half-moon, and raining shot and shell upon the summits. But the guns there, well-sheltered and having every advantage over rocking steamers, maintained an accurate and deadly fire. The decks of the gunboats were swept more than once. Many men were killed or wounded. Heavy shot crashed through their sides, and Dick expected every instant to see some one of them sunk by a huge exploding shell.

"They can't win! They can't win!" he exclaimed. "They'd better draw off before they're sunk!"

"So they had," said Warner sadly. "Boats are at a disadvantage fighting batteries. The old darky was right when he preferred a train wreck to a boat wreck, 'ef the train's smashed, thar you are on the solid ground, but ef the boat blows up, whar is you?' That's sense. The boats are retiring! It's sad, but it's sense. A boat that steams away will live to fight another day."

Dick was dejected. He fancied he could hear the cheering of their foes at what looked like a Union defeat, but he recalled that Grant, the bulldog, led them. He would never think of retiring, and he was sure to be ready with some new attempt.

The gunboats drew off to the far western shore and lay there, puffing smoke defiantly. Their fight with the batteries had lasted five hours and they had suffered severely. It seemed strange to Dick that none of them had been sunk, and in fact it was strange. All had been hit many times, and one had been pierced by nearly fifty shot or shell. Their killed or wounded were numerous, but their commanders and crews were still resolute, and ready to go into action whenever General Grant wished.

"Spunky little fellows," said Pennington. "We don't have many boats out where I live, but I must hand a bunch of laurel to the navy every time."

"And you can bind wreaths around the hair of those navy fellows, too," said Warner, "and sing songs in their honor whether they win or lose."

"Now I wonder what's next," said Dick.

To their surprise the gunboats opened fire again just before sundown, and the batteries replied fiercely. Rolling clouds of smoke mingled with the advancing twilight, and the great guns from either side flashed through the coming darkness. Then from a stray word or two dropped by Colonel Winchester Dick surmised the reason of this new and rather distant cannonade.

He knew that General Grant had transports up the river above Grand Gulf, and he believed that they were now coming down the stream under cover of the bombardment and the darkness. He

confided his belief to Warner, who agreed with him. Presently they saw new coils of smoke in the darkness and knew they were right. The transports, steaming swiftly, were soon beyond the range of the batteries, and then the gun boats, drawing off, dropped down the river with them.

Long before the boats reached a point level with Grant's camp the army was being formed in line for embarkation on the gunboats and transports. The horses were to be placed on one or two of the transports and the men filled all the other vessels.

"You can't down Grant," said Pennington. "A failure with him merely means that he's going to try again."

"But don't forget the navy and the Father of Waters," said Dick, as their transports swung from the shore upon the dark surface of the river. "The mighty rivers help us. Look how we went up the Cumberland and the Tennessee and now we've harnessed a flowing ocean for our service."

"Getting poetical, Dick," said Warner.

"I feel it and so do you. You can't see the bluffs any more. There's nothing in sight, but the lights of the steamers and the transports. We must be somewhere near the middle of the stream, because I can't make out either shore."

There were two regiments aboard the transport, the Winchester and one from Ohio, which had fought by their side at both Perryville and Stone River. Usually these boys chattered much, but now they were silent, permeated by the same feelings that had overwhelmed Dick. In the darkness—all lights were concealed as much as possible—with both banks of the vast river hidden from them, they felt that they were in very truth afloat upon a flowing ocean.

They knew little about their journey, except that they were destined for the eastern shore, the same upon which Grand Gulf stood, but they did not worry about this lack of knowledge. They were willing to trust to Grant, and most of them were already asleep, upon the decks, in the cabins, or in any place in which a human body could secure a position.

Dick did not sleep. The feeling of mystery and might made by the tremendous river remained longer in his sensitive and imaginative nature. His mind, too, looked backward. He knew that the great grandfathers of Harry Kenton and himself, the famous Henry Ware and the famous Paul Cotter, had passed up and down this monarch of streams. He knew of their adventures. How often had he and his cousin, who now, alas! was on the other side, listened to the stories of those mighty days as they were handed from father to son! Those lads had floated in little boats and he was on a steamer, but it seemed to him that the river with its mighty depths took no account of either, steamer or canoe being all the same to its vast volume of water.

He was standing by the rail looking over, when happening to glance back he saw by the ship's lantern what he thought was a familiar face. A second glance and he was sure. He remembered that fair-haired Ohio lad, and, smiling, he said:

"You're one of those Ohio boys who, marching southward from its mouth in the Ohio, drank the tributary river dry clear to its source, the mightiest achievement in quenching thirst the world has ever known. You're the boy, too, who told about it."

The youth moved forward, gazed at him and said:

"Now I remember you, too. You're Dick Mason of the Winchester regiment. I heard the Winchesters were on board, but I haven't had time to look around. It was hot when we drank up the river, but it was hotter that afternoon at Perryville. God! what a battle! And again at Stone River, when the Johnnies surprised us and took us in flank. It was you Kentuckians then who saved us."

"Just as you would have saved us, if it had been the other way."

"I hope so. But, Mason, we left a lot of the boys behind. A big crowd stopped forever at Perryville, and a bigger at Stone River."

"And we left many of ours, too. I suppose we'll land soon, won't we, and then take these Grand Gulf forts with troops."

"Yes, that's the ticket, but I hear, Mason, it's hard to find a landing on the east side. The banks are low there and the river spreads out to a vast distance. After the boats go as far as they can we'll have to get off in water up to our waists and wade through treacherous floods."

The question of landing was worrying Grant at that time and worrying him terribly. The water spread far out over the sunken lands and he might have to drop down the river many miles before he could find a landing on solid ground, a fact which would scatter his army along a long line, and expose it to defeat by the Southern land forces. But his anxieties were relieved early in the morning when a colored man taken aboard from a canoe told him of a bayou not five miles below Grand Gulf up which his gunboats and transports could go and find a landing for the troops on solid ground.

Dick was asleep when the boats entered the bayou, but he was soon awakened by the noise of landing. It was then that most of the Winchester and of the Ohio regiment discovered that they were comrades, thrown together again by the chances of war, and there was a mighty welcome and shaking of hands. But it did not interfere with the rapidity of the landing. The Winchester regiment was promptly ordered forward and, advancing on solid ground, took a little village without firing a shot.

All that day troops came up and Grant's army, after having gone away from Grand Gulf in darkness, was coming back to it in daylight.

"They say that Pemberton at Vicksburg could gather together fifty thousand men and strike us, while we've only twenty thousand here," said Pennington.

"But he isn't going to do it," said Warner. "How do I know? No, I'm not a prophet nor the son of a prophet. There's nothing mysterious about it. This man Grant who leads us knows the value of time. He makes up his mind fast and he acts fast. The Confederate commander doesn't do either. So Grant is bound to win. Let z equal resolution and y equal speed and we have z plus y which equals resolution and speed, that is victory."

"I hope it will work out that way," said Dick, "but war isn't altogether mathematics."

"Not altogether, but that beautiful study plays a great part in every campaign. People are apt to abuse mathematics, when they don't know what they're talking about. The science of mathematics is the very basis of music, divine melody, heaven's harmony."

"You needn't tell me," said Pennington, "that a plus b and z minus y lie at the basis of 'Home, Sweet Home' and the 'Star Spangled Banner.' I accept a lot of your tales because you come from an old state like Vermont, but there's a limit, George."

Warner looked at him pityingly.

"Frank," he said, "I'm not arguing with you. I'm telling you. Haven't you known me long enough to accept whatever I say as a fact, and to accept it at once and without question? Not to do so is an insult to me and to the truth. Now say over slowly with me: 'The basis of music is mathematics.'"

They said slowly together:

"The basis of music is mathematics."

"Now I accept your apologies," said Warner loftily.

Pennington laughed.

"You're a queer fellow, George," he said. "When this war is over and I receive my general's uniform I'm coming up into the Vermont mountains and look your people over. Will it be safe?"

"Of course, if you learn to read and write by then, and don't come wearing your buffalo robe. We're strong on education and manners."

"Why, George," said Pennington in the same light tone, "I could read when I was two years old, and, as for writing, I wrote a lot of text-books for the Vermont schools before I came to the war."

"Shut up, you two," said Dick. "Don't you know that this is a war and not a talking match?"

"It's not a war just now, or at least there are a few moments between battles," retorted Warner, "and the best way I can use them is in instructing our ignorant young friend from Nebraska."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.