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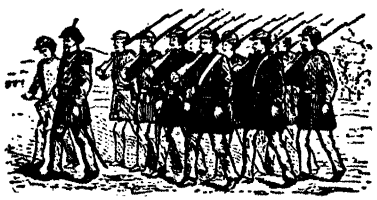
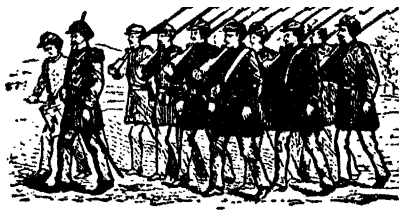
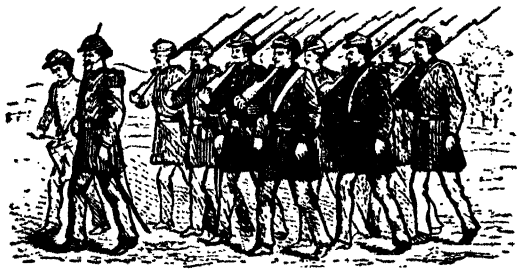
Unvexed to the Sea







A novel of the Vicksburg Campaign

by Gerry Morrison

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Unvexed to the Sea

1

Dawn, somewhere in Missouri
December 24, 1862

"TUBACCA. I'll git some tubacca," Willie Heap said to himself, his frantic brain grasping for a straw, searching for any relief from the hell which would surely face him at the end of this everlasting train ride.

"I'll git some tubacca when we stop. I'll git some an' I'll chaw. I'll chaw un they'll think I'm jus' like all the rest. I'll larn real quick an afore they know I'm there, I'll be jus' like they be."

A most significant name, Willie Heap, for he was heaped and huddled on the hard, caned coach seat, his nose pressed against the dirty glass, his frightened eyes searching the unfamiliar Missouri countryside for any object that might remind him of home. A snow-covered hayrick; a propped-up weathered barn with its sagging door banging in the wind: these things had meaning. The grease from the end of his nose, joining with the dirt of the window, formed a tiny circle on the pane. A grimy parabolic circle large enough to encompass all of Willie's eighteen years upon this earth. His piteous

eyes peered through the circle and watched the countryside as it raced by at twenty miles per hour. The smoking comet plunged and swayed over the uneven roadbed, heading for a world beyond all worlds. Memphis, Tennessee, three hundred and fifty miles south of Willie's northern Missouri farm home, was outside this circle, outside this world. St. Joseph, St. Louis, Cairo, Memphis, words beyond comprehension.

"Please, God, don't let me die. Please don't."

Willie didn't own a watch, but from the half-light on the horizon, the kerosene-lighted farm windows winking through the trees along the right of way and from the gnawing in his stomach, he guessed it was "nigh on to five o'clock." Maw would be fixin' the fire now. He could hear the clink of the iron lids on the stove top, the rattle of the cob bucket as she bounced the long fresh red cobs into the firebox. A clatter like "all-get-out" and she was shaking down the ashes, opening up the damper. Ten minutes, then it would be warm enough to go down and dress in the little space between the reservoir on the back of the stove and the chimney.

Willie was hungry. Farm boys eat early.

Self-conscious, glancing shyly about to make sure that all of the occupants on the coach were still asleep, he slid a hand into his homemade knapsack and came out with a sandwich wrapped in newspaper. Maw had fixed him up real good. Huge slices of soft homemade bread with fat baked shoulder ham in between. Salty country butter too, smeared on thick.

"Lan' knows when you'll ever be fed."

Having eaten, he felt better.

The bread smelled like Maw.

Brushing the crumbs from his baby-fuzzed chin, straightening his unpressed home-sewed blue uniform, Willie tried to think.

Worryin'. What were all those men going to say? What would the sergeant do and say when he found out that Willie Heap, age eighteen, wet the bed? Just thinking about it made him squirm. "Wisht I'da gone and went when the train stopped last time."

Willie did get off the train but couldn't do anything when he saw all the other recruits, lined up beside the track, shouting, laughing, joking, trying to cut their initials in the fresh snow. Besides, the train had sided right in the middle of some town. Willie was sure he saw a girl peeking out from under a shaded window across the street.

A Chicago pocket prowler, who had followed an exuberant mob of Illinois volunteers on board the troop train after having spent the day slitting pockets and lifting wallets of their well-wishers at a crowded Springfield recruiting rally, was now searching the coaches looking for the one thing his winnings could not purchase—food. He smiled when he spotted his prey—a fuzzy-faced rube with a lap full of crumbs. Sliding into an empty seat immediately behind his victim the pickpocket leaned down with his razor-sharp chivy.

Slit. Slash.

The back of the tenderfoot's haversack opened up to reveal a stack of newspaper-wrapped sandwiches. Apples too. It was as easy as prowling a pocket and skinning a wallet during the Christmas rush on State Street.

Willie Heap's farm-trained nose picked up the odor of fresh-baked bread. He didn't want to turn around to see who was eating it. That would be embarrassing. It made him feel good. It smelled like Maw. Willie was glad that somebody else had a mother that could bake good bread. "I wisht I had me some sugar bread." Sugar sprinkled atop freshly buttered hot bread was about the best thing in all the world.

2

The great armada moved slowly down the Mississippi River under sunless skies on the day before Christmas. Two of Admiral Porter's gunboats were in the lead, followed by four transports, another gunboat, then four more transports and so on, over one hundred craft in all. William Tecumseh Sherman with the entire "right wing" of the Army of the Tennessee, thirty-two thousand strong, was moving down from Memphis intent upon destroying the last Confederate stronghold upon the Mississippi River, Vicksburg, Mississippi.

Captain Clyde Herring stood at the railing near the stern of transport number one. To the rear, as far as the eye could see up the churning river, was an endless weaving line of boats. It reminded Clyde of a huge river serpent, squirming, twisting down the current,

slowly and relentlessly south. Unopposed, it stretched out mile after mile, head alert, watchful, ready to strike death with its yawning, cannoned mouth and flaming tongue.

A few miles ahead, asleep and unawares, lay Vicksburg, the Confederate gateway to the West—a tempting rabbit ready to be gobbled up by this writhing river-born monster.

The flotilla moved silently down the current toward the point where the Yazoo River meets the Mississippi, nine miles north of Vicksburg. Stealth and surprise were the orders of the day. The fires under the boilers in all boats had been extinguished. No smoking, no lights, no shouts, no shots. The army was poised, ready to strike at dusk with deadly surprise as the unsuspecting city celebrated a quiet Christmas.

General Sherman's plan was A-B-C simple. The rendezvous point was the mouth of the Yazoo River. At the designated hour engines on the boats would suddenly come to life for a short, quick dash up the river to the landing site; assault troops would cross the Chickasaw bayou, scale the undefended bluffs, and move immediately into the city from the north.

"Christmas dinner in Vicksburg!"

Grant with the rest of the Army of the Tennessee would keep General Pemberton and the bulk of the Rebels pinned down up at Corinth, Mississippi, or better yet would come storming down from the north by land to attack the city from the rear. Square-jawed General Sherman, wild-eyed and confident, was to capture, by surprise, the Gibraltar of the South.

"Vicksburg!" Captain Herring murmured to himself. "My first battle and we capture a great city."

The captain gazed at the two hundred men on his boat and wondered at the whirlwind of events that had swept him from behind a teller's booth in a Decatur, Illinois bank and placed him in command of an infantry company, all within the space of a month's time.

It seemed like a dream now, the fevered recruiting speeches of Congressman McClernand who was now General John A. McClernand; the two days of drill followed by the magnificent review and parade at the Macon County Fairgrounds; the immediate departure by troop train to Memphis; the embarkation by river boat for Vicksburg. In the rush, Colonel Thayer, the captain's own bri-

gade commander, had been left behind in Decatur, shuttering up his clothing store.

Here I am, thought Herring, a captain and already in command of nearly two hundred of my fellow townsmen. Ready to lead them into combat. This is a great responsibility. Decatur will be proud when our company marches out to glorious combat tomorrow.

"The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed is the Lord."

3

Hurry up and wait! I've been trailing this headquarters up and down the state of Mississippi for three weeks and now they drag me out of a warm buffalo robe at five o'clock in the morning! Alan Miller was using his daily quota of "soldiers' prerogatives"—"cussing out the brass"—as he waded, ankle-deep in muck up the company street. Slipping and sliding, the tall lean scout swore at the country bumpkins who had been using the street instead of the company latrines.

Ahead of him the grizzled orderly growled, "This way," and motioned to a path between the two center tents of field headquarters.

"Over there," said the orderly, pointing down the path to where a short, stocky general, slouched and grizzled, sat slumped by a campfire in front of a mud-splattered tent.

"Captain Miller, reporting as directed, sir," Alan snapped as he took a position in front of the squat man and his fire.

Alan received a grunt for a reply.

Silence.

A mule brayed somewhere in the woods.

Silence.

"Has the Old Man gone to sleep?" he asked himself. A cold north wind made Alan hunch his shoulders and pull his buckskin leather jacket in tight around the neck. "At least he could invite me to draw in and share the fire."

The General sat there, staring at the fire. He wore an old sugarloaf hat, with a limp, drooping brim. The collar of his soiled private's overcoat was pulled up so that it combined with the hat to hide most of his face. The coat was without epaulets. Two stars had

been stitched on the shoulders. A much-chewed cigar poked out through a week's growth of beard.

"Captain Miller!"

Alan almost jumped out of his boots. "Yes, sir."

"You're General Sherman's liaison officer?" the voice was almost musical.

"Yes, sir."

"How long will it take you to ride cross-country to the mouth of the Yazoo River?"

"You mean . . . south . . . to the Yazoo?"

"That's right."

"But, there's a few Rebels between here and there, sir. Maybe thirty or forty thousand."

"I'm well aware of the Rebels, Captain."

"In that case, I'd say four days, after I get through the lines. Maybe more if I run into trouble."

"You make it in four. No more."

For the first time the General raised his head enough for Alan to see the sharp, black eyes that stared out at him from beneath the wilted hat brim—keen, watchful eyes which said more than the hard, straight mouth.

"Sherman expects me to make a co-ordinated attack with him on Vicksburg when he strikes from the river on the twenty-ninth. I'm not going to be there."

This being the twenty-third, it was fairly obvious. The army had been retreating north for the last three days. Vicksburg was two hundred miles to the south. Alan said nothing.

"Sherman doesn't know about Van Dorn's raid."

Alan knew that four million dollars worth of Northern supplies for the Vicksburg campaign had gone up in smoke when Van Dorn, the Confederate cavalry raider, burned the Holly Springs, Mississippi, depots Saturday night forcing Grant to withdraw his army back toward Memphis.

"I want you on the bluffs at Vicksburg overlooking the Yazoo on the twenty-seventh. Fire four star rockets. Sherman will know then, that I won't be there."

Alan wanted to ask, "Why don't you telegraph Sherman this information and be done with it?" The General answered this unspoken question.

"I can't trust this information on the wires. Too many wire tappers. If Pemberton gets wind of the fact that I'm pulling back north to Grand Junction he'll head for Vicksburg and there goes Sherman! Draw your rockets from Signal Corps."

Alan saluted and backing out, thought, No need to argue, the old devil looks as if he means it.

Good thing the Rebels didn't capture his command flag, he mused as he passed a flag with two stars jammed in the mud out front on the headquarters street, else nobody'd be able to find Ulysses S. Grant.

4

If Virginia was the head of the Confederacy, Alabama the stomach, Florida and Texas its extremities, then the Southern-Mississippi Railroad, running between Vicksburg and Jackson, and the Mobile and Ohio could be called the main artery from the heart to the stomach. The Southern-Mississippi was the only link over which could flow the food and supplies from Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. At the moment the artery desperately needed a transfusion. Its engines were worn out, the rolling stock near collapse and its meager hoard of repair parts exhausted.

The Western Limited came to a grinding, convulsed stop.

Malvina McClellan's eyes snapped open as the back-breaking jolt caromed on through the cars to the rear. Two seats ahead a soldier's knapsack came tumbling down from the overhead rack to smash onto the head below.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" The soldier's startled oath rang through the car of mumbling, grumbling half-awakened occupants. Malvina turned to the window to conceal the flush which rose on her throat and cheeks.

Malvina gazed from the window of the stalled train. "As Papa would say, 'They're running this railroad by guess and by gosh.' "

Trains left their destination at any time during the day of scheduled departure and arrived at the announced destination any time during the ensuing week.

The departure last night in Mobile and the first six hours of the trip home from boarding school had been exciting. The passengers

on Malvina's coach were all soldiers and Malvina felt that she had probably talked to every man aboard at some time or other during the evening, before the kerosene lanterns at either end of the coach flickered out from want of fuel. Men who acted like little boys—the eager, the anxious, the sullen, even the angry—came seeking her attentions; asking without asking, for her reassurances.

"This is mah wife. Course she ain't nearly as purty as you."

"She's lovely." Malvina studied the faded daguerreotype carefully. "Have you been married long?"

"No. We was hitched right 'fore I left fer the army. Most of a year ago. Ah'm sure right anxious to see her."

"I can well imagine."

"Do you mind if I set down beside you for a minute, ma'am?"

"Oh, no. Please do."

"It's my leg, ma'am. It ain't quite what it should be."

"When were you wounded?"

"Shiloh. Seems as if the whole Confederate army was wounded there. I was talkin' to two boys in the next coach. One had his arm shot clear off, 'tother an eye."

"It's terrible."

"They was at Shiloh too."

"I know. So many of the boys from home were wounded there."

"Where is your home, ma'am?"

"Vicksburg."

"My wife's from there. That's where I'm goin' now."

"You will be home in time for Christmas."

"Yes, ma'am. My wife'll be at the station. Excuse me, ma'am. It was good jus' being able to talk to someone as purty as you. Right good."

Malvina awakened from a fretful nap and turned to the window. Daylight and a slow steady rain were ushering in this day before Christmas. The train, halted alongside a pile of cut timber, was at last wooded up and, like a tired old man arising to meet another dreary day, groaned, creaked, strained, and slowly began to move.

I'm going home now, for the last time. Now the Academy has closed. How strange being home in the winter. For the past eight years every fall I have been hustled off to one school or another for

young ladies—piano, singing, French, Latin, and painting. Now home to Papa, Belle, Robert, David and . . .

Malvina's hand was unnaturally hot as it searched for and clutched a crumpled letter in her skirt pocket.

My Dearest Malvina,

Your father informed me of your decision to remain in Vicksburg after the Christmas holidays. Naturally I share your disappointment about this termination of your studies but, at the same time, rejoice in the fact that you will soon be with me again, this time forever. My dear, it is my fondest hope that you will write, setting the date for our marriage. An immediate date would bring joy to my heart . . .

Justin

The language of Justin; stately, formal and stilted—gallant to a fault.

The very thought of Justin caused the muscles in her chest to tighten. Somehow, breathing became more difficult.

"I love him, I really do," she whispered to the girl whose mirrored reflection she saw in the dirty window and the ghost in the window seemed to whisper in reply, "Then why didn't you answer his letter? Why have you failed to write one single letter during the last four weeks?"

"I did mean to write but there was so much to do. Examinations, recitals, parties. Just saying good-by to all the girls at school took every evening, nearly, for two weeks."

"You promised to set the date for the wedding when you finished school. School is finished and you can't put it off any longer."

"I know. I know!"

"Justin is a determined man and he will not accept schoolgirl evasions."

"I know. I know!"

Malvina turned away from her tormentor in the window as the engine bell began to ring. There were cattle ahead and sometimes they threw the engines off the track. There would be another delay as the fireman dashed ahead on foot to shoo away the stubborn animals.

The restless soldiers moving aimlessly through the swaying train

all paused to admire the profile of the girl with the smooth, jet black hair seated by the window who looked as if she had arrived but a moment before, fresh from her bath. Twelve hours on a grimy, smoking train without opportunity to freshen one's toilette was sufficient to destroy any lady's aplomb, anyone's except Malvina's. The area surrounding her seemed cleaner, allowing her to breathe fresh air while the rest of the coach stifled in a stale, smoky gas which seeped from the cracked stove at the end.

5

At Shady Oaks, the McClellan plantation outside of Vicksburg, Malvina's younger sister, Belle, slept the sleep of a lusty, restive child. The bedclothes were heaped about her pretty neck and shoulders but her tiny feet were uncovered and pink with cold. The kneaded pillow beneath her creamy-white face was covered with angry red hair—snarled, curled, tangled, twisted. Even in sleep, life for Belle was intense.

Careful footsteps in the hall outside her bedroom touched something in the murky reaches of consciousness, causing her to turn her head once more.

Quiet now, as the hushed steps receded down the long, lazy-spiral staircase, until . . . a door closed somewhere in the depths of the house. "Papa," she whispered.

The heavy footsteps on the graveled garden path, the creak of the back gate, finally brought her to conscious wakefulness. Poor Papa, he was so worried, perhaps she ought to dress and walk with him.

The warmth of the great feather bed which pillowed around her long legs and thighs and nestled into her back and over her shoulders, dissuaded her. No, she decided, it's hardly light, and besides, everything will be all wet. He won't really walk anyway. He will just sit there in the arbor and smoke and stare.

Awake, Belle's sixteen-year-old mind quickly skipped to things of importance. Boys. Parties. Christmas on the morrow.

So much to do. So little time.

Oh, dear, I don't see how I'll ever be able to crowd everything in. Tea this afternoon at Redley's. All of the girls from school will

be there. Tonight! The Military Ball at the Phelan plantation. Right now I can hear that sly Sarah Shoemaker simpering, "What are you going to wear to the ball tonight?"

Belle smiled as she pictured the cow-eyed Sarah. Tears in my eyes I'll say, "Oh, it's just awful. I don't think I'm going. I really, truly don't! 'Cause I've got nothing to wear except last year's ol' cotillion dress." "That ol' blue silk?" she'll say, "with the lace sheath?" . . . "Yes."

Sitting erect with excitement, Belle stifled her laughter. She leaped from her bed, ran to the walnut chiffonier and pulled out the new gown "Papa ordered special from Atlanta." Clasping the dress to her shoulders Belle danced her first waltz of the day. Head tilted and turning, prinking and preening, planning and plotting, "I'll show that ol' Sara Shoemaker, I will. Just let her try to catch my fish."

Tomorrow they would drive into Vicksburg early in the morning for Christmas dinner at the town house, Twin Chimneys. Her brothers, Robert and David, would be there: Robert in his new officer's uniform; David, the eldest, home for the day; and then Malvina would be arriving in the afternoon from Mobile.

Her bare feet on the cold mahogany floor reminded her of her father sitting alone in the garden. Poor Papa, maybe she ought to go out to the cookhouse and have the housemaid fix him some coffee. No. He would only scold "Belle baby." She could hear him say, "When are you ever going to realize there's a war going on? We've only a pound or so of coffee beans left. When they're gone, that's all. No more. After that we'll have to use parched rye or sweet corn, just like everyone else."

I'll wait, she thought as she popped back into the billowy warmth of the bed, 'til I hear him come back into the house.

As she savored those last few minutes in bed each morning, Belle selected some eligible boy (on occasions a not-too-eligible younger married man) and pretended she was having dinner in the dining room of the Preston House in Vicksburg. This morning's "beau" was the young master of the Phelan plantation, the host of tonight's Military Ball, Justin Phelan.

6

Justin Phelan was awakened by hot, acid nausea welling up in his throat. He fought it back and calculated his chances of living through this "morning after." A quick mental tabulation of last night's alcoholic consumption did not heighten his prospects of lasting out one more day as master of Hillcrest. Turning his head, he inspected the beautiful olive-colored face of the girl at his side.

Damn, he thought, I've got to stop this monkey business. I should have made her go back down to the cabins last night. She'll be getting the notion that she's too good to live with the other kitchen hands. Well. It's too late now.

Justin hauled his long, lithe body over the edge of the bed, steadied himself for a moment by holding onto the back of a chair, then quickly proceeded to dress.

The neighboring squires might say of Justin Phelan that he drank too much, owned too many beautiful young mulattoes, sired too many quadroons, but they could not criticize his management of Hillcrest. Justin ran the vast plantation in the same efficient manner his father had before him.

"Old Jus' is a heller," his neighboring riding pals would chuckle, "but he's got his Paw beat when it comes to a dollar. A man's gotta get up mighty early if he's gonna get the best of young Phelan."

Whether he had slept eight, two, or no hours, Justin was always up and on the job by five each morning. Ten overseers needed stern direction; three thousand acres required astute planning; two hundred blacks presented at least two hundred daily problems. To be sole owner and master of Hillcrest at thirty was a man-size job.

Booted, jacketed, riding crop in one hand, broad-brimmed straw hat in the other, he walked into the overseer's mess hall at five o'clock sharp. Counting noses as he moved to take his place at the head of the table, he noted that Jensen was still on the sick list. A doubling up of work assignments would be necessary.

"Rader," he ordered without greetings of any sort, "you take Jensen's crew out to the east section with all the plows. I want that ready for corn by the middle of February."

"Corn?" Rader frowned. "You're putting our best cotton lan' into corn?"

"Corn makes fodder, forage, meal, and whisky for the army," Justin replied, his eyes searching the other employees, "and before the summer's over corn'll probably be used for beer, starch, cakes, bread, and coffee. I have every warehouse here and at Edwards Depot full of cotton. This season we'll raise corn."

"Cotton's worth a hundred a bale right now, hundred and fifty if you can get it to Memphis. It'll be bringin' better'n that by spring," one of the men ventured.

"That's right," Justin agreed, "and we've plenty of the stuff to sell. Two thousand bales. But what is it going to be worth next fall? Not enough to buy the kerosene to burn it."

"I don't see how you figure."

"No? Why are we sitting on top of two years' crops right now? We're waiting for buyers and railroad cars that never show up. I was in Charleston a month ago and there isn't a blockade runner there that will touch a bale of cotton, even if I would get it to him. We're putting in corn, boys . . . every acre we can plant. Rice in the river bottom, rye in the pasture land. Next year, if we're still going, we'll be turning this corn into beef and mutton. People'll get used to going naked but they won't ever get accustomed to being hungry."

After breakfast, when all the field work had been assigned, Justin returned to the house. The mansion was a problem. Justin's father had built this great house and, while it was a thing of pride, it was a headache. Twenty-four rooms, some as large as forty feet square with towering twenty-foot ceilings, made an ordinary man feel like a pea on a billiard table.

Maybe someday, he thought, I will fill it with little Phelans. He sighed as he recalled Cleo in his upstairs bedroom. He summoned the staff and gave his domestic orders that sent them scurrying to make final preparations for the night's Military Ball.

He pictured Cleo's lean, smooth body and said to himself, "What the hell. I might as well. Then I'll kick her out, sleep till twelve and still have time to make the rounds of the fields and I must be sure to tell Mandy to put the fresh linens on the beds." He started up the well staircase, which turned in lazy curves to the airy rooms

above. "One never knows what guest may want to stay over after the ball tonight."

As Cleo lay nude upon the silk sheets with the quilts at her feet, she listened and thought she could hear Justin's voice somewhere in the lower part of the house. Like a golden cat she flexed and stretched in the first warm rays of the morning sun, savoring and exploring the luxury of Justin Phelan's bed. Her tawny body was sinewy, lean, and flat like a boy's; flat, yet round; thighs curved and firm; breasts high; body savage and feverish as it tasted the delights of this, her first day in bondage.

Cleo had been carefully raised by her mother, Fat Mamma, for the task she had so admirably performed for her new master, Justin. Mamma conceived Cleo from a union with a Spanish trader who, when he was called back to Spain, arranged for Mamma's freedom; an act she soon had reason to regret. Life as a freedwoman in New Orleans was uncertain and difficult. By the time Cleo was eight and it was apparent she would be a beauty, Mamma resolved to sell her into slavery. Mamma's reasons were threefold. First, she would provide herself with a nest egg for her old age; she would prevent her daughter from suffering the hardships which had attended her own freedom, and, by carefully training Cleo and carefully selecting a master, she could start her daughter out in life with every advantage a Negro mother in New Orleans could give her daughter. Justin, without his knowledge, had been selected as Cleo's first master when Fat Mamma saw him bidding for a pair of young mulattoes at the market, some three years before.

Cleo had now reached sixteen. Mamma had arranged a meeting through a slave-broker acquaintance and Justin had made the purchase instantly upon inspection. Three thousand dollars. Mamma had collected close to fifteen hundred.

When Cleo had first heard Justin's footsteps on the polished staircase she sighed. "Wo'k to do." She rose, crossed the room to the washbasin. "Gotta fresh'n m'self."

Fat Mamma had told her daughter oft-repeated times, "No man, no matta how dirty he be, doan keer atall fo no dirty woman." Cleo had learned her lessons well.

Returning to the bed she paused to straighten the rumpled bed clothes and to admire the gold ring with the ruby stone that flashed

on her finger. A half-smile dashed across her lips, and her dark chocolate eyes showed light with merriment for a moment, as she inspected the new possession Justin had given her last evening. She could hear Fat Mamma now, "Doan nebber gib nothin', girl, less'n fust you git!" The smile was still on her lips when the door of the master's bedroom opened slowly.

7

A wispy, miasmal fog hung in the valley below Shady Oaks, lazing, weaving through the walnut grove beyond the creek. Chris McClellan from his arbor seat at the end of the garden path glanced up at the bedroom window where his younger daughter Belle was dreaming, nursed his pipe, and thought.

All was gray, like the gray of the troops that marched the streets of Vicksburg. Up and down, up and down. Every day in front of his office at the foundry.

Shady Oaks was Chris's one luxury: five hundred acres of gently rolling pasture and timberland; four Morgan riding horses; the imported English hunters (Darley Arabian line); the stables; the big white house and gardens; the cabins for Jefferson, Fanny, their four boys and the boys' children—twenty in all, at the last count. Slaves? "Actually, I'm their slave," he often said. "It keeps me busy every time I go out to the farm just thinking up jobs to keep them all busy. Right now I'm feeding thirty mouths, taking care of thirty babies (large and small) when I could get along with only one woman in the house and three men at the stables. Sell them? Ridiculous. Free them? They'd starve to death!"

Chris loved Shady Oaks, which provided a retreat for his children, a place where they could spend their summers away from the heat and dust of Vicksburg. Children? again Chris laughed. David, twenty-eight, was manager of the McClellan Cotton Mills at the state capital in Jackson; Robert, twenty-one, had received his commission in the army only last week; Malvina was returning from school down at Mobile; only Belle, sixteen, his baby, was with him now.

He had retired last year, turning the cotton mill in Jackson over to David and the foundry at Vicksburg over to Robert. He was

thankful that the army had considered David more vital as a producer of canvas and tentage than wearing a uniform. David had reluctantly accepted this decision. Not so with Robert. Robert had enlisted. Now he, Chris, must again assume his managerial duties at the foundry.

It was not the mill or the foundry that gave rise to these sleepless nights, these pensive walks in the early dawn. Chris searched the fog-filled valley below for the answer to a question he had not voiced, even to himself. It was everywhere, this question. On the streets, in the newspapers, behind the words in almost every conversation.

"Are they coming?"

"I was talkin' to a man who just came in from across the river. He said that he saw with his own eyes all sorts of Yankee gunboats in rendezvous north of the Yazoo."

The storm gathered.

Piteous faces, reassuring one another that the meager forces in the city's defense could "repel a hundred thousand Yankees, if they're foolish enough to send down that many."

The angular, thin-visaged man slowly rose and walked to the garden gate. I'm old, he thought. Old at fifty-five.

In the beginning there had been no decision to make. The war was a fact. There was no choice. The "Uncle Tom's Cabins" and the John Browns had issued an indictment against all Southerners and some indefinable something called honor was suddenly at stake. Orators on both sides filled the air and the volcano began to rumble as the masses stirred with a vague feeling that somehow they had been wronged. The choice had been simple.

Pickwick it was who said, "It's best on these occasions to do what the mob do."

"But suppose there are two mobs?"

"Shout with the largest."

The mob had been a sizable one, five million strong in the South alone, half of whom were members of the superior race. Five hundred thousand of these had been willing and able to shoulder muskets in defense of their hearthstones. It was December now, nearly two years since the first wild shot had been fired at Sumter, and the mob's roar, somewhat fainter by 157,000 voices (dead, missing,

and wounded at Manassas, Shiloh, Seven Pines, Seven Days, Cedar Mountain, Manassas again, Antietam, Murfreesboro) could still be heard above the cannons' roar. "The South will never be subdued by Lincoln's hirelings!"

"Lincoln, man of compromise, man of destiny, will reunite the Union."

The McClellan cotton mill and the foundry were loaded to the ceiling with war orders. Orders that could not be filled even if the war lasted ten more years. Raw materials were the big problem. Where to find them? Prices were outrageous. No one could make a profit on tentage paying seventy-five dollars a bale for the cotton. The quartermaster saw to this by writing contracts based on prices pegged at the 1861 level! Somehow maybe they could manage, if Pemberton kept the river open. Here was the hitch. Friday's paper told of heavy Federal troop build-ups to the north in Memphis.

Tapping the long-dead ashes from his pipe, Chris rose and slowly made his way back toward the house.

It's time to make a decision. Should I try to sell the foundry? The cotton mill? If so, who would buy? If they bought how would they pay? Confederate money? What to do? It is not fair to the family to sit by and see everything destroyed. My duty is to my country, yes, but to myself and to my family first.

He sighed, "It's Christmas. I think I'll treat myself to a cup of coffee."

8

In the faint gray-black of dawn, as the hall clock chimed five, Robert McClellan entered the door of the town house, Twin Chimneys, and tiptoed his way through the long lower hallway of the McClellan family home in Vicksburg. "I shouldn't have stayed out so late," Robert admonished himself as he started climbing the stairway. "Can't wake up ole David," he grinned to himself as he tiptoed into the bedroom (referred to, by the family, as the "boys' old room"), trying to hush his new calfskin cavalry boots which were squeaking as if they were alive. Two days in uniform had not been enough to wear the shine from his handsome handmade footwear, the newness from his immaculately tailored uniform, or to

dim the excitement he felt from having finally entered the Army of the Confederacy. Captain Robert McClellan, appointed by order of the President of the Confederate States of America, Jefferson Davis.

Robert crossed to the bootjack beneath the window and, securing the heel firmly in its grip and stifling his grunts and moans, finally managed to tug his feet from the new boots.

"Whew!" he sighed. "Maybe I can breathe now."

After removing his white gloves, crossbelts and long gray jacket, he slumped down on the bench beneath the window and lighted a pipe. One brief smoke before retiring.

Twin Chimneys, located on one of the hills above Vicksburg, was a perfect vantage point to view the city. Like no other city on earth, it had not been built—rather, it had grown on top of the old Spanish Fort Nogales. Someone once said that Vicksburg looked as if God had taken all his leftovers and dumped them in a conglomerate mess at the junction of the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers. The terrain was a hodgepodge of bluffs, streams, hills, gullies, and ravines. Man had compounded the felony by building a city on top of this topsy-turvy formation.

"Picturesque," the natives called it, after which it became difficult to find another word that would describe Vicksburg.

Robert sat gazing out of the window nursing his pipe, contemplating the half-dawn which crept over the city below, the first flickering lights, the long plumes of smoke rising from the chimneys, as the city slowly rose to make ready for Christmas. He was thinking about his new life, which perhaps might become his new career, these first two days in the army had been so delightful. There would be a need for a large standing army after the war. Perhaps there would be assignments in New Orleans, Charleston, or in the army of occupation up North. This was not particularly appealing, since he did not like cold weather, but New York City might not be bad. Washington was fine. Chicago? Heaven forbid! . . . and those Yankee women! Cold-blooded, skinny, pale faces covered over with rouge. Women who did their own housework!

As yet, Robert's army duties had not been defined. He had been assigned temporarily to the Quartermaster division. There would not be a permanent assignment until General Pemberton returned with the army from the northern part of the state.

It's probably my own fault, he thought, trying to rationalize this desire to stay in the army rather than work in his father's foundry. Papa has never given me a decent chance, at least not like David. He sent David over to Jackson to take over the management of the cotton mill and let him run it alone. But not me! I get the foundry here in Vicksburg. Right where he could keep an eye on me. I'm manager in name only. Now, for the first time, I'm free from the McClellan apron strings. I can be a man in a man's world.

And tonight! Ah! Robert sighed as he pictured the cute little blonde from New Orleans, Susan Leigh. When she looked up at me with those big brown eyes I felt ten feet tall.

After the party he'd stopped by the officers' quarters in the Vicksburg Hotel and there he had been made a part of the Command Staff officers' circle. Genuine male camaraderie around the smoke-hazed poker table. Shirt sleeves rolled up and cigar in mouth he had cheerfully lost over two hundred dollars at Bluff.

Life was good.

Robert contemplated awakening "Old David"; he felt the need to share his enthusiasm for army life. He rejected the idea only after recalling David's round-the-clock schedule at the cotton mill in Jackson.

Robert yawned, stretched, slipped out of his trousers and crawled into the adjoining bed. A party tonight, another tomorrow night. He liked this army life.

9

East of Vicksburg where the Jackson road crossed the Big Black River, there stood a small, two-story clapboard house with two dormer windows beneath the hip roof. In the early morning, approaching the house from the east, the twin windows caught and reflected the light of the rising sun like two glass eyes, peering from beneath eyebrows arched in perpetual surprise. Behind one of these windows, watching the first light of this day before Christmas, stood a large, dark, muscled man in rough homespun jacket and cap. Impatient, he turned to the bleak bedroom and frowned as he observed his brother still asleep in the huge wooden bed.

He shoulda been up with me. It's after five. If he's gonna spend

his furlough out here, then he's got to earn his board and keep. Knute Chaffin had been working by lantern light for over an hour. Milking, slopping the hogs, letting the chickens out and starting breakfast on the wood cookstove in the kitchen below. Too bad the chickens and cows don't take furloughs and vacations, then maybe us farmers could get some rest too.

Knute's dark, heavy-browed eyes gazed with contempt at the neatly folded pile of clothing on the chair and he addressed the gray homespun uniform, "Damn fool business!"

Knute hated the army, the war and all it represented; he wasn't an abolitionist, as his neighbors sometimes whispered, he simply thought it was a "damn fool business." His reasoning wasn't articulate: Why should I go fight somebody else's war? I don't own no slaves. Let them that has, do. The hell of it is, they don't. Them that should be fightin' this war, them there, like Justin Phelan that's got hundreds of slaves, they're the one's stayin' home. They write the laws. The poor little fish like Tod there, him that ain't got no slaves and never will have none, he's the one that's in the army gettin' his ass shot off. If there's any justice to that I'd like to hear about it. If that's bein' an abolitionist, then by God I am one!

"Come on, Tod. Get outa bed."

Tod sighed, rose, and hobbled across the room searching on the crude chest for his steel-rimmed spectacles in order to find his clothes and dress for another day.

"Come on down. Breakfast is fixed. We gotta git goin'. Gotta patch the fence down along the river."

A stranger, observing Knute and Tod together for the first time, would not have believed they were brothers. They were completely dissimilar. Rather than being opposites, one would say of them that they were contrary, each denying every possibility of the other. Tod was slight in stature, blond, with a sensitive, intelligent face. Gray was the word for Knute. A two-hundred-pound mass of gray; his skin, his eyes, his mind, his emotions; only his hair escaped. It was a tangled mass of black.

Knute's two-hundred-acre farm on the river bottom was his life. He was a misanthrope who did not believe in men, and positively disbelieved in women. Here he lived a life of seclusion, refusing to participate in community affairs, appearing in town only on rare occasions to purchase the necessities of life. This monastic isolation

and his success as a farmer had earned him the envy and hatred of most of his neighbors. Everything Knute touched turned to green. The neighboring plantation, across the Big Black River to the north, belonging to Justin Phelan, considered it a good year when twenty bushels of corn were gathered from an acre of land. Knute's carefully fertilized, crop-rotated fields brought in yields three to four times greater. The banker in Jackson knew that Knute's two hundred acres, tilled by Knute and a hired hand, produced a greater profit than any five hundred acres cultivated on the slave-worked plantations. His neighbors knew this too and disliked him even more.

Tod finger combed his mussy hair and, as he fastened the collar of his soiled, ill-fitting butternut brown army shirt, glanced sleepily at his brother with something akin to affection. He understood his brother's love for the land and had given Knute the idea for crop rotation. He had discovered the principle of "infields" and "outfields" while reading ancient Roman history. He too, liked the peace and quiet of the countryside, but not the unnatural isolation. Two years of army life, including the horrors of Shiloh, had helped reduce the values he had once placed on human life. The altruistic ideals he taught in his position as teacher at the Female Academy in Columbus, Mississippi, had been lost in the mud and blood of the last two years.

Tod was bone-weary this morning. He was too tired to go back to the dirt, the routine, the stagnation that faced him in Vicksburg. His leg shattered at Shiloh made marching with a field unit an impossibility, and this probably meant he would be assigned to the defenses being built north of the city, with the dull and monotonous repetition of picket duty.

"Why are you going back?" Knute had posed the question. "Why are ya? Wanna get the other leg shot off?"

Why am I going? What are my reasons? Tod had spent many hours pondering this question and, as yet, had been unable to come up with any satisfactory answer. Certainly it was not the usual dread of Yankee vengeance and the love of property, or the hope he would be rewarded with a slice of land and a Negro upon cessation of hostilities.

"What do you need to care for? You ain't got no slaves! You just like to loll around that girls' school; like gettin' invited to all

them swell houses; gettin' to rub shoulders with all them stuck-ups," Knute sneered.

Denial, yet . . . he knew Knute was right. The great houses were the last bastions and "the stuck-ups" were the only champions of enlightenment in a cultural wasteland. Destruction of the South meant for Tod the razing of the last seed of civilization in America. From what he knew of the Yankees they could only lead the way back toward barbarism. These things he felt but could not voice to Knute. "I don't know why I'm fighting," he answered his brother. "Because I'm a damn fool, I guess."

"You're that all right."

As the mule team stopped at the river's edge, Knute swung down, tied them to the fence and climbed back into the wagon to unload the posts and railings they would use in this day of fence repairing. Reaching to hoist a corner post, Knute broke wind, belched, and sighed, "Ah, now maybe I can get some work done."

Tod smiled sadly to himself as he moved to help his brother. ". . . and there are even savages in our own sacred forest."

10

Twelve miles away from the Chaffin farm, on the shabby river front of Vicksburg, Big Beulah stood, hands on hips, surveying the barroom as two of her girls completed hanging Christmas decorations. The ceiling was covered from end to end with bastard pine garlands and popcorn strings. Christmas, Sixty-two was to be different. In former years Beulah had closed up shop during the Christmas holidays, giving her girls a chance to spend a few days with their families and visit their children.

"It's the only Christian and decent thing to do," she explained. "It gives the girls a chance to relax and have a little fun. Besides, my customers are all gentlemen and no gent ain't gonna be goin' to no pleasure house on Christmas Eve."

Until today, she had kept the bar of her river-front establishment open on Christmas Eve for her regulars who worked on the holidays. Night watchmen, river pilots, bargemen. "The boys gotta have someplace where they can come wet their whistles. No hanky-panky. No, sir. I jest keep the bar open."

Christmas, Sixty-two was special and even the bar was closed as she prepared for the biggest blowout ever to be held on the river front. Beulah was throwing a military ball in honor of her only son, Piney, recently enrolled as a private in the Army of the Confederate States of America.

Pious know-it-alls around Vicksburg who knew the twenty-year-old Piney before he donned the Confederate Gray, described him as a pasty-faced, chinless little pimp. This was the opinion of those sanctimonious individuals who go around judging others by their actions and conduct; those biased and hypocritical old busybodies who were jealous because their own sons did not demonstrate the love and affection which Piney bestowed upon Big Beulah. Piney was his mother's "little helper." He helped by working the railroad stations and uptown hotels. He solicited for the house, collected for the girls, and kept Beulah's charges in line when they felt the urge to move on to another house or run off with some enamored river-boat captain. Big Beulah was justifiably proud of her dutiful son.

The girls respected Piney too. "He's real thoughtful," they would say. "When Piney beats you up he's allus real careful to hit ya where the marks don't show. That is, they don't show till after ya got a customer, then it don't make no difference."

Piney's enlistment had fomented a near-catastrophic crisis. Consternation reigned for a day or two when Piney came home the first time from the recruiting office. He had been rejected on the grounds that all enlisted men must have a "white man's name" . . . a last name. Piney was just Piney. He had been "just Piney" for twenty years. The name of his father had been lost somewhere in the wastelands of Big Beulah's memory. She pounded her brow in agony and thought over the long list of gentlemen friends, casual and otherwise, she'd known on and off since 1842. Not wanting to slight any of her old beaus and customers, or give credit where credit was not due, Beulah gave up the ghost. A name was selected by lottery. Eight numbers were put in a hat, one for each column on the front page of the Vicksburg *Daily Citizen*, and a drawing was held to select a number. Number six was the winner. Beulah started reading down column number six and Pucket was the first name she encountered.

The Reverend Jonathan Pucket, exchange minister from Jackson, will

conduct services this Sunday at the First Methodist church. Reverend Pucket's sermon is entitled, "For the sin ye do, by two and two, ye must pay for one by one."

Beulah was beside herself in her preparations for the Military Ball. Invitations had been sent to General Pemberton and his staff and she had been more than a little peeved when she received a letter from some lowly adjutant, declining the invitation. Piney filled the gap in the guest list by inviting ten of his new-found cronies from the recruiting station.

Midnight was to be the climax when Eddie Roadheaver, an engineer on the Clinton Coal Barge Line, would arrive dressed as Santa and bearing Piney's gifts.

Tonight after Piney received his Christmas gifts he would be the first private in the Confederate army who could boast of owning a full dress sword: a gold-handled affair Beulah had purchased from a sailor who had purchased it from a soldier who had picked it up on the battlefield at Shiloh. The hilt, "U.S.A."-inscribed, had been changed to read "C.S.A." by a jeweler friend in Jackson. Her crowning gift was to be another little item she had taken in on trade from a barge-captain customer. A one-pounder brass cannon.

"My Piney's gonna have his own artillery," the misty-eyed Beulah explained as she visualized her son making a single-hand defense of the river front against hoards of yelling, screaming Yankee rapists.

11

It was five A.M., on the dot, when a bugler stepped into the old cotton warehouse, placed a brass instrument to his lips, and performed his daily duty.

Piney Pucket, scrunched down in a threadbare gray blanket spread over a straw pallet, was jerked erect by the blast and let out a long string of choice water-front oaths that would have assured him of a lifelong career as a mule skinner, had some officer from the Quartermaster Corps, Transport Division, been present.

"Next time that son-of-a-bitch blows that goddam horn in my

ear, I'm gonna take it away from 'im, straighten it out, and shove it right up where it belongs!"

After his ears stopped ringing and the shock wore off, Piney crawled back under the blanket for a much-needed beauty nap. "The barracks oughta be quiet after all them farmers get out of here," he grumbled. "Maybe I oughta go down, grab a boat an' blow outta here today. No. Maw's gonna have her party tonight. Gotta be here for that. An besides, they're gonna show us how to shoot on Monday. Gotta be here for that too."

"Grabbing a boat and blowing out" was the only solution Piney could see for escaping the "perdicument" into which he had allowed himself to become involved. His foolish burst of patriotism (prompted by the threat of conscription), his vague notions concerning the true nature of the art of soldiering (all servicemen in his acquaintance seemed to spend most of their time in whorehouses), and the desire to please his flag-waving, patriotic Rebel mother had led to his "joining the forces." Seventy-two hours in the army had been enough to show Piney the errors in his thinking. Enlisting in the army had been a big mistake and the only solution to the problem was to skip out across the river, catch a boat heading up the Arkansas, and strike west for California. California seemed like a good safe place to "set out the war." There was only one hitch to this California idea. Indians! Fear of the noble redskin was keeping Piney in the army through Monday. Once in possession of the knowledge of the care and handling of the musket, his timid and pusillanimous spirit would be ready to face the perils of the great American West.

"Up! Double quick!" bellowed the sergeant.

Piney was up, assisted by a size-twelve boot in the rear.

"Well now, seein's how you've had ten more minutes sleep than alla other boys, I guess maybe my special private must be all rested up fer some extra duty. Get movin', you little pimp! Pick up that sandbag! Never mind yer pants! Harch!"

Piney, sans pants, clutching a fifty-pound sandbag to his skinny stomach, started his eight-hour tour around the perimeter of the drill field.

"Monday, when they give me a musket, the first thing I'm gonna do, is take it an' shoot that son-of-a-bitch, right inna pod!"

2

Midnight, December 24

THE UNION ARMY TROOP TRAIN, after starting and stopping, wheezing and puffing, wriggling and squirming through the yards in Memphis, Tennessee, finally came to a stop on a river-front siding. The eyes of the Union Recruits squinted into the darkness outside; mouths steamed up the glass and questioned . . .

"Whereabouts you s'pose we are?"

"There's a brakey down there. Damn windows are all nailed down, else I'd ask 'im."

"Couldn't git offa this son-a-bitchin' contraption even if we wanted. They've gone an locked alla doors."

"Helluva way to spend Christmas, ridin' this stinkin' hog train."

"Looks like we're inna town. When we get offa here you and me's gonna git a jug of 'Oh-be-joyful.' Gotta dollar. That oughta buy more'n 'nuff fer the two of us."

Willie Heap, huddled in the corner of his seat, looked, listened, and worried.

Willie was hungry. He had not eaten since yesterday morning, but it was not hunger that disturbed Willie. It was his torn knapsack. "Hope Maw never finds out I ripped the knapsack she made me. Don't see how I ever done that. I musta caught it on somethin'. Lost all my sandwiches and my apples and my housemaid. My Bible's the only thing I didn't lose."

In the seat behind Willie a well-fed Chicago pickpocket was also worried. Worried about the nailed-down windows and locked doors of the troop train, the detachment of armed soldiers lining up beside the coaches, forming a corridor of rifles; a bayonet-lined walk leading directly into a large warehouse-like building on the other side of the platform.

The door of the coach rattled, opened, and a bewhiskered sergeant appeared at the end of the aisle.

"All right. Get your stuff. Fall in line."

Willie looked and acted like an owl confronted by a lantern when he stepped out of the darkness into the huge gas-lit warehouse. Long tables, made of planks stretched over packing boxes, lined both sides of the room. Behind these, stacked to the ceiling, were huge piles of military equipment of every description. A line of recruits slowly filed down each side, as quartermaster corps men behind the counters passed out and checked off the issue of supplies.

Willie was thankful he had received his mustering-in papers, physical examination, and uniform at home. The Union recruits from his car, who were still in civilian dress, were required to disrobe, "right in front of everyone," and receive a physical checkup. Willie looked the other way and down at the floor when he passed this line of naked, joking men.

The line began to move and Willie was shoved up in front of a corporal, who stood behind a sign marked "Station One."

"One rifle. Enfield. Muzzle loading. Caliber .577."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me, sojur."

"Pick up your equipment."

"Sign here. Just initials. All right. 'X' it then."

"Keep moving."

Willie moved.

Cartridge box with twenty rounds.
One belt and crossbelt.
One shelter half, rubber.
One blanket, wool.
One haversack.
One overcoat, large.
One knapsack.
"Sign here. Keep moving!"

Willie was elated as he struggled under this growing load of new equipment. He had a new knapsack! That worry was over. An overcoat, too! He had never owned an overcoat before, only one of Paw's old mackinaws. This overcoat was long (Size: large), blue, and had shiny brass buttons.

"Take a plate. Grab some chow. Keep moving."

Salt beef and "desecrated" vegetable stew was served by a greasy private from a huge iron pot that looked like a horse-tank full of dead leaves. Bread, coffee. The food was cold, but anything tasted good.

"Put your dirty plates in the barrel. Line up. Keep moving."

More issue. Food this time. Three days' marching rations, someone said. Three pounds of hard bread, two pounds of salt pork, coffee, sugar, salt.

"*Put 'em in your knapsack, Stupid!*"

"Which is the knapsack? What an army!"

Last stop. More ammunition. Forty rounds.

"Forty dead men!"

Keep moving.

Out the other end of the building. Another corridor of guards.

"What the hell. What are we? Prisoners?" someone growled.

"March!"

The line filed across a creaking wharf, down a gangplank and onto a swaying river transport. The lanterns, marking the end of the gangplank, flickered in rhythm to the marching men. The flat-deck boat was pitch black.

"One hundred and ninety-nine, two hundred. All right. That's all," a voice counted in the semidarkness. A chain rattled as the gangplank was raised; a door closed, locking the other recruits in the warehouse. The army was taking precautions to make sure that none of General McClernand's volunteers lost his patriotism and

decided to go home, now that he was getting into Rebel country.

Willie Heap found a corner by the wheelhouse where he could put down his issue of equipment. By the light from an open fire door he watched an older re-enlisted veteran nearby, observing what he should do next. First, put on your overcoat, then the belt and crossbelt. The canteen and cartridge box fasten to the belt. Put the rations in the haversack which you hang over your left shoulder. Everything else went inside the knapsack, and then over this tie the blanket which was first rolled up inside the shelter half and secured with a piece of tent rope.

I feel like old Maude must feel when Paw gits her all harnessed up an' ready to go plow corn. Willie loved to plow corn. He liked the feel of the fresh, moist black loam as it squeezed up between his toes. Willie liked to plow barefoot.

A voice, somewhere in the darkness, asked, "Where's this tub headin' for?"

"Sherman's army. Down near Vicksburg," a deck hand replied.

"What for?"

"Now whatta ya suppose? Replacements. That's what you all are."

"Replacements? For what?"

"Fer them that's gonna get killed down there in the next day or two. Somethin' big's comin' off. Supposed to start tonight."

"Mary, Mother of God!"

2

Alan Miller reined his horse to a stop at the top of a rise in the road. He sat hunched forward in the saddle, searching the gloom below for some sign, some signal of danger.

Alan had been making excellent time since he left Grant's headquarters. His horse was still fresh and he planned to ride another twenty miles in this almost total blackness, before sunrise, when he would be forced to hole up in the woods for the day.

About noon he had circled around a Confederate cavalry outpost south of Holly Springs without detection. Now, at midnight, he had not as yet encountered a single Confederate to challenge his ride across country to set off the four signal rockets—Grant's message to Sherman. This lack of resistance troubled the Union scout.

In twelve hours he should have sighted at least some Confederate troops. Signs, yes. The roads were strewn with human spoor, equipment, horse droppings, wheel-rutted roads; the trail of a large body of men moving through the country at a fast pace. He knew they were marching fast, as the trailings the army left were confined entirely to the roads—a leisurely moving army messed up the countryside for a quarter of a mile on both sides of the road.

The Union Army of the Tennessee was split. Confederate General John C. Pemberton, having forced Grant to retreat north toward Memphis, was now free to turn and dash south to meet General Sherman at Vicksburg. He was using Stonewall Jackson tactics. Divide and conquer. Letting one army do the job of two.

Alan debated as to whether he should turn back and inform Grant about the Confederate movement. No. The first thing they teach you at West Point is that an order is to be obeyed without question.

Moving behind the enemy lines was an old story to Alan Miller. From his dress to his horse, Alan was a Southern man. His buckskin jacket and pants were the kind used by many Texans in the Rebel army; his carefully cultivated Texan accent would verify his assumed birthplace; the soft felt hat bore an Atlanta hatmaker's mark and his calfskin boots had been taken from a dead Confederate officer. Only his carbine bore a USA marking. It was a new seven-shot Spencer repeater, prized by any cavalryman, Confederate or Union, who could lay his hands on one of these remarkable rifles. In the event he should be stopped and required to show credentials, he could produce a counterfeit set of orders from General Joe Johnston addressed to General Pemberton at Vicksburg. The orders gave the defender of Vicksburg a detailed location of Johnston and his army. Alan had these papers sewed inside a patch on his trouser leg, giving further evidence that he was a Rebel courier afraid of capture by some Yankee patrol. His true identification papers, his pass back through the Federal lines, were concealed within the horn on his CSA-marked saddle.

Alan was happy to be on the move again. The days of idleness, sitting around Grant's headquarters, had been a dismal assignment. It brought back the painful memories of the two years he had spent at West Point. Two years of gnawing inactivity that finally erupted into open rebellion against regimentation—a rebellion ending in

expulsion. Not wishing to face family recriminations at his home in Ohio, Alan headed west for the Nebraska territory. Ironically, in order to support himself, he put his two years of West Point training to work by joining the Army of the Frontier.

In the years just before the Civil War, living with mountain men and trappers in the desert and plains, the West Point rebel had become a highly skilled scout. General Sherman had recognized these skills and had assigned Alan to his headquarters as a liaison officer in the rank of Captain.

Alan's troubles began at a valley crossroads, where his mount clattered out upon the loose timbers of a small bridge he had failed to see in time to bring the horse to a quiet walk.

Reining to a halt, Alan listened for any signs of damage the noise might have caused. Frogs and crickets croaked and chirped in the stream below, a hound howled somewhere in the distance, then . . . "Clomp." A single sound that told all. It was the sound of the hoof of an impatient, restless horse, somewhere in the gloom and darkness of the tree-shaded road to his front. All of Alan's senses were alive now, someone was waiting in the shadows up ahead. It was useless to turn back. Move on and have done with it.

The Butternut cavalrymen were waiting around the bend in the road. As he approached the men Alan could see the shadowy forms of other horsemen beside the road and among the trees. No commands. No calls of "Halt." Alan rode abreast of the horsemen and stopped. A match flared in his face, held for a minute and then died out.

"Who are you? Where you goin'?" one of the gray figures drawled.

"Captain Alan Miller, General Johnston's headquarters. I'm carryin' a dispatch to General Pemberton." Alan used his best Texan.

"Where is the general now?"

"Which general?" Alan asked.

"Johnston."

"Over in East Tennessee."

"You sure you ain't a Yankee?" the surly sergeant leader questioned.

"No, sir, I'm workin' for the other concern." The answer brought a chuckle from someone of the men in the background.

"You rode all the way from Tennessee?"

"I ain't gonna walk as long as I got this critter."

"How'd you get through all them Yankees back up the road there?"

"Well, when I came through, them Yankees was a headin' north. A draggin' their tails behind 'em, an' their path was lit up for 'em by a great big bonfire at Holly Springs. Accordin' to a civilian lady I talked with, about five million dollars worth of Yankee stuff went up in smoke. Grant and the whole army is retreatin' north."

The questioners whistled, murmured among themselves, impressed and elated with this eyewitness account of their recent victory over the Yankees.

"Where'bouts is Pemberton now?" Alan asked boldly.

"Near Vicksburg likely," the sergeant replied instantly. "We're part of the rear guard."

"I'd better get travelin' then, if I've got to ride all the way into Vicksburg," Alan sighed, straightening up in the saddle. "Is this the best road?"

"It's the shortest, but you're going to find it all filled up with wagon trains and troops. If I was you I'd go south to Jackson, then across to Vicksburg. You'll save time," the sergeant in charge of the detachment volunteered.

Alan thanked him for the advice, nudged his pony and moved on without challenge. A sigh of relief. Once inside the main body of the army and he would be accepted as belonging.

A few miles farther up the road he encountered the rear of General Pemberton's army. The road was jammed with wagons, ordnance, ambulances, and Butternuts marching four abreast. Alan marveled at the discipline. No straggling. The columns were closed up tight and marching fast, for their victory had helped to salve tired feet and sleepless eyes.

The moon was out now, enabling Alan to see the immense scene before him. The winding road was crammed as far as the eye could see with company after company of tired, silent, gray-clothed men. Alan noticed one man start to veer out of the column toward the side of the road. A companion dragged him back into line. He had gone to sleep while marching.

Following the sergeant's suggestion, Alan left the army at the next village. He found a road heading south and turned off, prodding his horse toward Jackson, the state capital of Mississippi.

3

The two lead gunboats were pulling out of the channel and up into the mouth of the Yazoo. The trap was closed. No need for silence now! Drive in hard and smash them! Sparks flew from the great smokestacks, paddle wheels churned as they shoved the boats, one on either side of the river's mouth, placing two sentinels in position to guard the invasion "point of departure." Transport number one, with Captain Clyde Herring and his Decatur company, went surging forward, heading up the river toward the landing area.

The captain was nervous, searching the gloomy depths between the trees lining the shore. Instinctively he moved around to the west side of the transport and behind the cabin house, the side away from the enemy.

On the bridge of one of the gunboats a general in a long blue muddy overcoat, closed with one button, stood with hands in pockets watching the transports with small bright eyes. His chin, covered with a close-cropped beard, was squared. Outwardly his wrinkled face was calm. Inwardly, William Tecumseh Sherman was a seething turmoil.

Captain Herring closed his eyes for a moment and tried to unscramble his orders from the jumble of disjointed thoughts tumbling in his mind: Transport number one will be landing at Landing Stage Number One at midnight.

Memorized words without meaning, until now. Clyde's frightened eyes searched his men for some sign of reassurance. Frightened eyes met his eyes, asking for the same.

Form into a line of skirmishers. How? What is the command? Will the men do what I tell them?

A scraping noise beneath the boat, muffled commands, the engines reversed and the boat slowed to a stop. A naval officer, the landing master, dropped the chains from a section of railing.

"It's all yours, Captain," he addressed Herring.

"Follow me," the words choking in his dry throat.

Holding his breath, Clyde stumbled forward into the black, sloshing water. It was only knee deep, yet he fell and thought he was going to drown before he regained his feet and struggled on to the shore.

"I'm alive! I'm on land and I'm alive!" These were his thoughts as he stood on the river bank clutching his sword and gasping for breath. He was surprised when he turned to discover that he was not alone. The water was filled with grunting, cursing, floundering men trying to make their way to shore.

It wasn't very difficult, getting the men grouped into squads to form his skirmish line.

He took his place in front of the shivering line and composed his next order. "Maybe the area is clear," he prayed, again closing his eyes as he called his next command. "Forward."

His water-filled boots were heavy as he struggled across the little sandbar and toward a thicket of trees to his front. He looked back and the long line of men was moving too.

I am in command. He was elated.

Silence everywhere. Only the scraping of feet across the sand. Somewhere to the rear he heard the faint churning of the transport as it backed out into the river.

We're all alone now, he thought.

The lone blue line went to pieces in the cottonwood thicket that separated the river from a broad mile-wide bayou shelf beneath the two-hundred-foot-high, cannon-crowned bluffs north of Vicksburg. The vines and brambles, interlaced with trees, delayed, tripped, and scrambled; served as a natural abatis to disrupt the Union attacking forces before they reached the Confederate outposts' rifle pits on the other side. General Pemberton had prepared his defenses well. Carefully cleared "lines of fire" pinpointed this little landing area. Artillery, on the cliffs behind, were sighted-in ready to pulverize any landing attempt.

The captain burst through the brush, stopped to survey the broad stretch of ground just ahead and the towering cliffs in the distance. The thrashing and crashing of the men in the brush concealed the sound of the musket fire that began when he had first appeared in the clearing. It was a moment or two before he associated the zipping, snapping sound in the air around his head, the spurts of light in the darkness, with musket fire. The enemy outposts just ahead were blinking, winking with death.

Somewhere, far to the front, came a deep-throated grumble, then a whistling, shrieking, roaring sound and . . . crash! A flaming explosion on the left roared out of the thicket. An anguished voice

cried out in pain. The captain dropped to the ground and crawled back behind a rotten log, squirming in beside three of his men.

"There ain't enough trees to protect all the officers," a private complained.

The earth beneath Clyde's nose was wet and smelled of mold and rotten leaves. Soon he knew it would smell of blood and rotten flesh. As the storm of guns rained shell and death upon the river bank, he hugged the earth and shuddered as he thought of his orders. "Clear the area. Search out and eliminate."

Dear God. Please don't let me die.

4

By midnight Big Beulah's Military Ball honoring her son, Piney, was in full swing. The screams of excited girls, the shouts of drunken soldiers from the water-front establishment could be heard all the way over on the Louisiana side of the river. General Sherman, north of the city, could have oriented his entire attack on Vicksburg by directing his captains to guide their troops on Big Beulah's laughter.

The party, by Big Beulah's standards, was the most sedate and genteel affair she had ever given. It was almost midnight and as yet there had not been a single fight, none of the girls had allowed herself to be lured upstairs by any of the male guests, and only two of the soldiers had passed out. Beulah was beside herself with joy. Every time she looked at her son, Private Piney, resplendent in a handsome uniform she had ordered special from an officers' tailor in Jackson, tears welled up in her eyes.

Piney was dancing with a girl called April who was radiant with pleasure at having been singled out, for the moment, by the guest of honor. The hero was far from being radiant. As he guided the girl over the rough dance floor, his mind was two thousand miles west of Vicksburg. Tonight was the night. He planned on leaving the Confederacy immediately after the party. He would hire a Negro fisherman to take him across the river from where he would start his journey to California. Piney's day of parade-ground extra-duty passed, as all things pass in this ever flowing stream of earthly life, but it was the sandbagged straw that broke the camel's back. How-

ever it was important that his new army acquaintances think of him as a man, not a coward avoiding combat, when he skipped out tonight.

The bells in the Methodist church tolled midnight, signaling the arrival of Christmas and Beulah's Santa Claus, Eddie Roadheaver.

Eddie was only vaguely aware of the bells as he staggered along the docks toward the party, cotton whiskers hanging by one dab of paste, red coat sagging with two half-empty whisky bottles. Two friends, noting his meandering course, led him to the threshold of Beulah's place and shoved him inside.

"Up, Blitzer! Up, Dancer!" Eddie shouted and fell flat on the floor. "Up, Santa!" screamed one of the girls as she relieved him of the sack of presents he carried on his back.

As Eddie was settling to the floor the news flashed from the picket lines north of the city announcing that a Federal invasion of great strength was unfolding. General Pemberton's adjutant alerted all troops within minutes, issuing orders to cancel all leaves and passes.

It was one of Beulah's beautiful gifts that proved to be Piney's downfall. The cannon, upon presentation, was a roaring success. Piney's army pals swarmed around the piece, loaded it and had fired the first round minutes after Santa's arrival. The shot, after passing squarely through the open doorway, arced out across the wharf, landing in the street somewhere near army headquarters. This was the shot that brought a detachment of troops swarming down on the party.

"Sorry, folks," the lieutenant in charge of the detachment shouted as he broke in on the noisy party, "the Yankees have landed north of town, you soldiers report to your units at once."

Piney and his friends were ordered to line up in the street, face right and march off, followed by the regulars.

Beulah was saddened as her party came to a sudden end, but as she watched her contribution to the defense of Vicksburg marching off down the street with his friends towing the cannon she was bursting with pride, and when Piney broke away from the others and started to run down toward the river by himself, she was doubly proud. Four of the regulars managed to catch him out near the end of the docks.

"Look at my Piney," she beamed, turning to the girls who were

clustered around her. "He's so anxious to get to the fighting ahead of the others that they're havin' to hold him back."

5

Every lamp in every room was aglow for the Phelan Military Ball. The great house at the top of Blackburn Hill stood like a beacon proclaiming to the countryside that all was well. Peace on Earth. It was a reassuring sight, especially on Christmas Eve. Solid and forever, they seemed to say. . . . This is our way of life, the pomp and splendor. The lights. The gilded magnificence.

This ostentatious show in a time of darkness was important to those who were not invited to the great ball, those who would never be invited to a ball or to a great house. It was reassuring to the blacks in their doorless, windowless cabins.

"We belong to the richest man."

An empty honor? Nonsense!

The forty-acre-and-a-mule poor white in his candlelit shack felt bigger and better and proud as he bathed in the light of the reflected glory of the fine and wealthy plantation owner. Here was something concrete. "We are a part. This is what we're fighting for. White man down hyer, no matter whether he got money or not. He's looked up to . . . respected."

Everyone who was anyone was inside the great candlelit ballroom, standing proud in his pre-war finery, declaiming loudly that the worst was over. "This spring will be the turning point. Washington will soon sue for peace." They smiled and pretended the fathers and sons who were away would soon return and everyone who was anyone was related. Kith and kin. Cousins and nephews. "I declare, there just isn't anyone in this whole wide county that is not a cousin or a nephew or a somethin' or t'other." No strangers here. Everyone knew everyone for "a ways back."

The string trio of flute, viola, and piano in the main hall was quiet, sipping a well-earned drink; intermission before the Grand Walk. The men, oldsters and planters, crowded around the punch bowls cussing and discussing, proclaiming and declaiming, feeling younger and bolder as they put away Justin's best brandy and champagne. The military, all officers of field grade or better, stood

straight and trim where the light was best, to show off their decorations and their insignia of rank.

"Let's toast the ladies. God bless them all. Without them the war would be lost!" Old and young they were exciting, radiant, talking of blood and thunder. With the military, the planters, the business men, always the ladies were eager and interested, conversing fluently and with intelligence on any subject. "I toast the ladies. God bless them all, sir."

A breather now, before the Grand Walk and the last turn of dances. The party would end early. Christmas tomorrow. The services at the church. The family dinners. Here in this intermission before the Grand Waltz was an opportunity to visit the basement dining room. A chance to sample the hams, the chickens, the turkeys, the partridge crowding the huge buffet. Time for the young matrons, who were still fortunate enough to have husbands at home, to seek them out from among the coveys of younger belles. For the men it was a breather, a pause for a good cigar out on the piazza. For the girls it was a tittering trip to the upstairs bedrooms to blot shining noses, recapture wandering wisps of hair, adjust sagging petticoats and quickly return. It was the last chance for boys and girls with newly acquainted dancing partners to tread the terraced gardens, and re-align for the Grand Waltz of the evening.

The polkas, the reels, the country dances filled the program during the early part of the ball. These were for strangers, a chance to "get acquainted." The Grand Waltz was saved until last, for "no lady would ever waltz with anyone except a cousin or a sweetheart."

Chris McClellan, tall, angular, with dignified white straight hair, lounged against the Carrara marble mantel at the end of the library talking with several of his Vicksburg business cronies. He talked little, just listened as the conversation vibrated from man to man.

"You're not telling me a thing. I've spent plenty of time up in St. Louis, Chicago, New York. I know all about those Yankee traders. Close-mouthed, bad-mannered Shylocks!"

"Pemberton reminds me of the man that kept climbing trees trying to catch a woodpecker. When criticized he remarked, 'Well, I might not catch any but I'll sure worry them like hell!' That's all he's been doing . . . worryin' Grant."

"See where the baboon up in Washington is going to issue an Emancipation Proclamation?"

"Ha! That don't worry me none. I've still got a pack of hounds."

"My ni-gras will fight for me."

Chris rose and stretched.

"Talk. Talk. Talk. Everyone talks and no one listens," Chris sighed as he drifted out onto the veranda, filled his pipe and sat down on the railing. Gazing to the west, he caught a flash of light on the horizon in the direction of Vicksburg. A series of flashes, then the faint, muffled boom of cannon reached his ears. A Yankee boat trying to run past the Vicksburg batteries? Chris fervently hoped that this was the explanation.

Justin Phelan was bored. Young Robert McClellan, now Captain McClellan, had been extolling the virtues of the army for over ten minutes. For Malvina's sake he tried to be decent to the lad. One doesn't go around snubbing one's future brother-in-law, but he was strongly tempted.

"Come on, Bob. I want to introduce you to a cousin of mine from Mobile." Justin beckoned for the lad to follow him. In a low voice that spoke of things unmentionable, he murmured, "From what I hear, she's quite a girl. Might be worth your time."

Free, Justin, the host, moved among his guests. A hand on a shoulder here, a cheek to kiss, a nicety to whisper in an eager ear. Suave, smooth, always the gentleman, with never a clue as to what was going on behind his steel-blue eyes, women saw in them mystery, passion, and a wild excitement.

The social amenities completed, Justin was now ready to select a partner for the Grand Walk, the last round of dances—and perhaps for the night. Secretly he was happy that Malvina had not arrived in time for the party. Tonight he was not in the mood for a courtly ride over to the McClellan summer home, for an eggnog with the family, and then a dreary drive home alone to Cleo. This selection of a partner he was about to make was important. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Kirby Jackson's young widow, Mary. She was a most attractive brunette with an exciting full figure. Belle McClellan? He had inspected her during the evening too, caught some of her saucy glances, but no. Not tonight. Justin was a prudent man. As long as he had settled on Malvina as the future Mrs. Phelan, then Belle must wait. Time enough for that in the future.

No need to jeopardize a good thing. The McClellan mills and foundries would be useful to Justin.

In all of her sixteen summers, Belle had never experienced an evening comparable to this one. It was heaven. Malvina had not arrived. Belle's dance program looked like the roster of General Pemberton's staff.

It had been great fun playing one suitor against another; juggling names on her program. She had watched Malvina and knew exactly how to act when the scratched partner for the next dance appeared, unaware that he had been substituted for a more desirable partner. Her hands would go to the forehead, she would shake her pretty head sadly and condemn her addled mind to shame and ignominy. "Oh, dear, Ah'm so ashamed. Ah really am. Ah had your name down fo' the las' dance. The one befo' this one. Ah looked everywhere fo' you. Felt just like a silly ninny when the dance started an' Ah saw you out there dancin' with anotha' girl. Ah said Ah'd nevah speak to yo' again. Ah really did." Afterward, on the dance floor, she would giggle with her accomplice who would be bursting with pride that he was handsome and dashing enough to charm this lovely girl into telling ladylike lies.

Now Belle was standing with a group of older women, sipping a glass of punch, watching Justin as he nodded, smiled, and whispered his way along the other side of the room. It was a dangerous game she was playing. Purposely she had kept her dance program clear of all names for the last dance, the Grand Waltz. She had turned down a dozen eligible partners. Papa would be furious when he saw her with Malvina's beau, but this was her first and perhaps only chance to score a triumph over her sister. Besides, she told herself, a lady can make anything respectable, dependin' on how she does it.

She waited, but it was almost time for the dancing to resume when Justin finally reached Belle's group. Simpering and wreathed in smiles the assemblage turned en masse to meet their host.

"Mrs. Ackerman. I haven't seen you in ages. How's Tom? Is his leg all right now?"

"Mabel Ann Cosgrove. Excuse me, ladies, but Mabel and I have secrets." He whispered something in her ear that sent the old grandmother into gales of laughter.

"Justin! You devil!" and she playfully pushed him away.

"Belle. I've been watching you all evening. I couldn't keep my eyes off you. The most beautiful girl at my party. I'll be seeing you tomorrow."

Smiling, he turned without warning and moved to the other end of the refreshment table. Mary Anderson was standing there, a half-filled glass in her hand, gazing around the room uncertainly. He took her by the elbow and started to lead her toward the end of the room, to the point where the Grand March would begin.

Shocked beyond the point of thinking, Belle looked frantically around the room, searching for some point of escape, a place to run and hide. She held her breath trying to stifle her tears and indignation. At that very moment her father stepped into the room from off the terrace. Running across the room she called, "Papa."

Chris turned and waited for his daughter.

"Papa. Will you be my partner for this last dance? I saved it for you."

He smiled and took his daughter's arm. The trio was playing "Dixie," and they moved to take their positions.

Chris was proud of his lovely partner, but he was not flattered or deceived by this unexpected burst of daughterly love. He knew Belle; she had her reasons.

Justin moved down the center of the long room with Mary Anderson at his side. Heads turned, lips whispered. Chris frowned and thought to himself . . . Perhaps it's better that Malvina didn't arrive in time for the party.

6

Knute Chaffin could not explain the inner compulsion which moved him to start walking out along the Jackson road. It was after ten o'clock, long past bedtime, still he walked. Tod, his brother, had retired, worn out from the day spent at fence building. He was planning to join his regiment at Vicksburg tomorrow, and would need the rest.

The road was smooth and soon Knute found himself at the river. He stopped to peer into the gloom. Beyond the bridge, far up at the top of Blackburn Hill, he could see the Phelan house. Lights were

shining everywhere. He could hear music. Knute hated music, yet he crossed the bridge, his heavy steps echoing on the wooden flooring. He continued up the road in a lubberly walk until he reached the outbuildings and then he stopped, turned, crawled through the hedge and, crouching low, made his way up to the trimmed, formal terraced gardens. There, hiding among the bushes, Knute watched.

The Phelan house was a tremendous two-story affair with two wings. Through the French doors leading into the house he could see the bright chandelier-lighted rooms and the beautiful women, dancing sedately with their uniformed escorts. He could see the occasional couples as they walked out onto the veranda for a bit of fresh air. Beyond the driveway to the rear, he could see the rigs, the carriages, the sulkies, tied up by the carriage house. The grooms were holding their own party inside the keeper's cottages.

The music played, the couples danced. Justin Phelan came out into the garden once with a tall, gray-haired man. Knute couldn't hear the words they spoke, but he followed their every move and gesture with glowing, hate-filled eyes.

Knute did not know why he disliked his hilltop neighbor. But nevertheless, he hated Justin when he saw him in a red coat riding horses that could be used for tilling corn, galloping after foxes and coons, wasting time when he should be working; he saw Justin as a desecrator, a devil who sinned against soil: The Phelans got more lan' than they can till, good clay bottom that holds manure like a China bowl holds water, but they don't do nothin' with it. Won't sell to po' people. I'd like to have that bottom eighty. With manure you could raise a right smart bit of truck on it. He ain't no farmer; he's a tick that's suckin' off the lifeblood, gettin' fat an' fallin' off.

Finally the music stopped and the guests started to leave. Horses pranced, whinnied; laughter, good-bys and more good-bys. Buggy wheels squeaked. Axle grease was hard to come by now in this second year of the war.

At last it was all quiet and the lights were snuffed out in the lower rooms, but Knute still crouched in the bushes. One light burned in an upstairs bedroom. Then a buggy returned. A lady in a white gown alighted, glanced about and went quickly up the steps to the front door.

"Put the team in the stables for the night," Knute could hear

plainly the woman instruct her driver. "You sleep there," then she disappeared into the dark house.

"Yes'm, Missus Anderson," and the driver moved out in the direction of the stables. It was another twenty minutes before the light in the upstairs window was extinguished.

When Knute tried to get to his feet he almost fell. His legs had gone to sleep. He moved back out through the hedge and started down the road toward the river. He had not yet reached the stables when he first saw a figure, partially concealed by the shadows of the trees along the road, moving down the hill. Cautiously, he too moved into the shadows to follow. It was a woman. She would run, stop, walk, then run, then stop again. Finally, at the bridge over the Big Black, she came to a halt and leaned against the railing. Knute waited, but she did not move.

It was late and soon it would be daylight. Knute was tired and needed a little sleep if he was to work tomorrow. Boldly he walked out into the road and moved onto the bridge. When he was opposite the woman she turned, looked at him and spoke.

"Out mighty late, ain't you, mista'?"

Normally Knute would have stalked on without reply. Tonight everything was different.

"What cha doin' here?"

"Goin' away."

"Where?"

"Doan no, Norf, I spects. How far is Norf?"

"They'll be after you in the mornin' with their dogs."

"Yas suh, 'spect so. 'Til de stop lookin', Ah could stay wif yo."

"Where?"

"In dis hyer house you got. In dis hyer hayloft. Where ever."

Knute tried to think: The mulatto wench belonged to Phelan and Phelan deserved to lose her. Served him right. She's worth probably three thousand dollars. "It's not my doings," he said to himself, " 'specially if she stayed in the barn. I wouldn't even know about it."

Knute started down the road toward his house. The girl followed, a few paces to his rear.

As they turned into the lane leading up to the house, the girl said in a low voice, "Ah kin stay in dis hyer house tonight an go out to de barn inna mawnin'. Ah'm real nice."

Knute, his mind preoccupied with Phelan and what the planter would do when he missed his slave, failed to understand this offer. "Go on out to the barn. There's a horse blanket in the harness shed."

"Yes, suh, if yo' say so," Cleo demurred.

7

About the time the ball was breaking up at the Phelan plantation, David in the library of the McClellan town house in Vicksburg, put down the book he was trying to read and stared into the fire. Victor Hugo was not fit company for a man alone on Christmas Eve, especially *Les Miserables*. David could not understand how a brilliant writer like Hugo could harbor such ideas about slavery. Whenever a discussion concerning slavery arose David simply would state flatly: "If the slaves were set free, then the Southern people would have no choice other than to become atheists, for the Bible justifies slavery and states finally that it shall be perpetuated. It's all there in black and white for those who care to read. The Savior sanctions slavery because he does not say a word against it. Saint Paul was a slave owner. The Apostle was a planter. The Negro is inferior, a savage, needs our care. It's a scientific fact that the Negro skull will not hold as many ounces of shot as a white man's." David classified all dissenters as atheists.

Belle called David an old man; Malvina called her brother a bachelor; Robert called him a bore; their father called him a fine, level-headed son. These opinions, held severally by the family, encompassed the personality of David.

Rising, he went to the hallway, donned a jacket and cap. Taking care to cover his throat and chest with a good wool muffler, he strolled out into the night. I suppose I should have gone out to the ball, instead of staying here in Vicksburg; maybe a walk will do me good.

8

Malvina's train had been traveling steadily for two hours, since it left Jackson. With luck, she guessed they would reach Vicksburg by

eleven o'clock. At Jackson a group of ladies had a canteen set up at the station for servicemen. There had been hot coffee and biscuits and then, while they were waiting for the trainmen to load the tender with cordwood, everyone had gathered in a spontaneous songfest. Tired as she was after two days on the train, it had been jolly singing the old familiar Christmas carols. Now, two hours later, the songs continued here and there, back through the train, and everyone seemed happy as they approached Vicksburg. One group of soldiers had been able to buy some whisky at Jackson and, aided by a mouth harp, were having a loud and hilarious time with their own version of "The Girl I Left Behind Me."

"Oh, she jumped in bed and covered up her head
And she swore he could not find her,
But he knew damn well
That she lied like hell
And he jumped right in behind her."

Malvina looked out of the window to conceal her blush and to enjoy a private chuckle.

It was almost midnight before the train finally chugged and puffed into the Vicksburg station. Four hours to travel thirty-two miles!

"All out. End of the line."

Malvina had to struggle alone with her three bandboxes and huge carpet sack. The soldiers were in a hurry to get home for Christmas.

David had walked all the way down to the river docks, and was about to start back for Twin Chimneys, when he heard the clanging bell of the train from Jackson, pulling into the station. He crossed over to watch the arrival.

When David first saw his sister, she was standing on the platform, beautiful and helpless, surrounded by luggage and looking hopelessly for a hack.

"Malvina!" he called.

"David! Oh, David. You're an angel, sent right from heaven." They ran to each other's arms.

"We didn't expect you until tomorrow." David held his sister at

arm's length in order to see her better. "More beautiful than ever."

"I must be a sight! Two days on that awful old train. But how did you ever know? To meet the train tonight I mean. I didn't expect to find anyone."

"I'll get a hackie," David turned to search the street behind the station. "You stay right here until I get back."

"Don't worry, I'm not going any place, David, I'm here to stay," Malvina laughed.

"Oh, you don't know how thankful I am to be here," Malvina sighed when at last she was comfortably seated in front of the fireplace at Twin Chimneys, sipping hot coffee and brandy. "I didn't think the train would ever make it." David smiled, basking in the warmth of the fire and his sister's glowing beauty. "Are Papa and Belle and Robert coming into town tonight after the party?"

"No, they'll stay out at Shady Oaks and drive in tomorrow morning."

"Why didn't you go to Justin's party tonight?" Malvina asked.

David was trying to think of some answer to her question when they heard the first rumblings from the north.

"What's that?" Malvina whispered.

"I don't know. It sounded like thunder or else cannon."

"It wouldn't be cannon," Malvina assured him. "The soldiers on the train tonight were saying that the Yankees had been defeated at Holly Springs—that they were no longer any threat to Vicksburg."

"Good," David applauded. "It just goes to prove what I've always said. Grant was lucky to get out alive at Shiloh."

The rumbling, rolling sound from the north grew louder.

3

IT WAS CHRISTMAS at Twin Chimneys, but somehow, something was missing. Everyone was there; Robert, Malvina, Belle, David, Papa. The dinner was lovely; the gifts were opened and, as always, exceeded everyone's expectations. A sapphire heart pin for Malvina, a blue brocaded gown for Belle to wear at the New Year's ball, an officer's dress sword for Robert and a teakwood merchant's trunk for David. Belle was bursting with gossip from last night's ball, Malvina had amusing anecdotes to tell about school, Chris was his usual charming self, David as always was amusingly serious, and Robert, yes, it was Robert, looking noble and brave in his officer's gray, who had brought the touch of grimness to the festive dinner, the reality of war into the house.

Robert brought the news that Sherman's army was converging on the flats above the city. Advance units had landed and were being successfully contained by the Confederate skirmishers.

"Pray that Sherman does attack," Robert said. "Then we will destroy the Army of the Tennessee forever."

A messenger arrived about an hour after Robert had to leave for "officer's call" with a letter addressed to Malvina.

"Justin is not coming," Malvina thought as she retired to the study to open the note.

The letter confirmed her premonition. He would be unable to see her tonight. He must spend the day searching for an escaped slave. "My dearest Malvina," it began, and ended, "Yours, Justin."

His Malvina. My Justin.

Malvina folded the letter and walked aimlessly over to the window and there stood gazing out into the drab December dusk. Desperately her eyes searched the tiny patches of light showing through the trees as if she were searching the heavens for the answer to the question she had avoided all semester at the Academy.

Their acquaintance had had its beginning two summers previous when she was eighteen. Until this summer when Justin first started coming to see her father concerning a business deal, she had looked upon him as teen-age girls always look upon a thirty-year-old man. Justin was middle-aged. The formal courtship began casually one evening when he invited her to ride with him over to the Blackburns', who were holding a birthday ball.

Malvina had been attending parties and balls with her father since she was twelve, yet on this night she had the feeling that she was dancing for the first time in her life. Dancing with the "One and two and dip and" youths of her own age group had cast Malvina in the role of the leader. This night, with Justin's strong arms enfolding her, she danced to a different tune. It was as if she had been carried away by the rhythm of the music into a world apart, banishing from the mind the conscious part of the dance. They had moved as a single body, each knowing instinctively the other's movement.

"His Malvina . . ."

Justin commanded, demanded, and possessed. It was his way. While they were driving home after the ball the bond established on the dance floor was not broken. He took her in his arms and kissed her—a deliberate, burning kiss that crushed and tasted of tobacco and maleness. Malvina the impeccable had melted in the hands of Justin Phelan.

The remainder of the summer was a heart-pounding dream; Justin

was with her every evening. In the fall just before she returned to school they announced their engagement.

Looking back upon the experience, Malvina marveled and wondered, not at what had occurred to her, but rather at what had not happened. During the two short months before she left for Mobile, she had been transformed from a sedate young lady into a mass of nerves and vibrating female cells, wracked between reason and burning desire, inflamed with passions which demanded fulfillment.

Fulfillment was not to be hers, at least not from Justin Phelan. Malvina wondered and even marveled. Was it chivalry? Honor of Southern womanhood? No. These were flimflam words in Justin's code of behavior. Justin took what he wanted, when he wanted. She knew that she would have been his for the asking, without questions, without thought of the consequences, without regret. Justin did not ask. It seemed as if he took particular delight in leading her to the edge of the lovers' couch, then turning and walking away alone into the night, leaving her to writhe and call out, in her heart, for his return.

The next summer, last summer, he was ever so attentive, courteous, and thoughtful, yet he never again attempted to recapture the feeling of passionate belonging they had attained that first summer. Malvina was like an exotic bird, admired and pampered in an ivory cage. Her every want was fulfilled, without fulfillment.

"Malvina, are you going to stand in here all night staring out of the window?" Belle stood in the doorway.

"I'm sorry."

"Justin is not coming?" Belle taunted.

"No, he's busy," she said lightly. "You and I will go out to Shady Oaks in the morning, and he will join us there for dinner tomorrow night."

The following morning was bright and shiny, and the ride out to the country was delightful. Seated beside Belle in the family carriage, Malvina smiled as she recalled the countless trips out to the plantation, Shady Oaks, they had all made together during their childhood. Robert, barefoot, running along beside the carriage, or hanging onto the rear springs and allowing his feet to drag, had sent up clouds of dust marking their path through the countryside.

As they neared Shady Oaks, Malvina noticed that Belle had closed

her eyes and was leaning her head back on the carriage, pretending to sleep. "What's the matter, darling? Sleepy? Whatever time did you get home from the ball Christmas Eve?" Malvina asked.

"About two, I guess."

"Did you have fun?"

"Wonderful!" Belle wrinkled her pretty forehead, allowing the drama of her inner struggle to register before she spoke again. "Malvina, I didn't want to mention this, but I suppose it's a sister's duty to tell you."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"It's about Justin. Everyone that saw him at the ball was embarrassed to tears. It was shameful. The way he carried on with that awful Mary Anderson."

"Justin was with Mary?" Malvina laughed, then remembering Mary's late husband, she smiled sadly, "Poor Mary. She's a lovely girl. She has a terrible time; I feel so sorry for her."

"You wouldn't if you'd seen her last night. She was a regular brazen hussy."

Malvina frowned. "I can't believe it."

Belle was amazed and more than a bit disappointed with her sister's attitude. "Well, if you don't have any pride or shame, I do. And so does Papa. You should have seen her, not even wearing her widow's black and throwing herself all over him."

"I'm sorry, Belle, but I just can't share your indignation. Shall we talk about something else?"

Belle closed her eyes and dismissed her sister as an imbecile.

Malvina had known Mary all of her life. She and Mary had been roommates at school for one year. Still . . . ?

It had not occurred to Malvina to ever be jealous of Justin. She knew he must go out with other women. She had visited his plantation house several times and could not help noticing the several strikingly attractive young Negress housemaids, yet she had not thought of Justin in any terms other then her own simple code of conduct.

When Justin arrived at Shady Oaks that afternoon, Belle planted herself in the sitting room and proceeded to chatter like a magpie, posing, simpering, driving her sister to near distraction. Justin

seemed amused at the situation, but finally took pity on Malvina and suggested a ride before dinner. "The fresh air will do us good."

The ride down to the river was strained. There was the usual "How have you been?" "How was school?" "I'm sorry about yesterday," but nothing was said of any import. It was as if they were playing chess, checkmating the trite with the banal. The gulf from September to December was difficult to bridge. It was not until they had turned around and were heading toward home that Justin mentioned the Christmas ball.

"I missed you at my party."

"You did?" Malvina waited.

"Very much. I was forced to end up the evening with Mary Anderson."

Malvina felt as if she was choking with fury. He had stolen the lead! The cad was admitting his infidelity before she had an opportunity to accuse him! And there he sat, cool, calm, collected. Always she prided herself upon her ability to think quickly, to maintain poise and self-confidence and to hide any feelings behind a cool, placid exterior. Now she felt naked.

He has destroyed me for the second time. Two summers ago he had me so mixed up I couldn't think and now . . . "Mary is a lovely girl," she managed to say. "You have very good taste, Justin."

"I think so. That's why I asked you to marry me."

Oh! This man! He never gives me a chance!

"I'm sorry you couldn't be with us for Christmas dinner yesterday," Malvina felt that she must change the subject. She could not cope with Justin today.

"Not half as sorry as I am. I lost a slave, we had to go out looking for her." Justin studied his fiancée in silence for a few minutes. "Have you been thinking about your promise, Malvina?"

"Our marriage?"

"Yes. Do you want to discuss it now?"

Confusion mounted upon confusion. I must think, she cried out to herself. I'm stifled and I cannot breathe.

"Take me home, please."

"If you wish."

He doesn't care how I feel, she thought. He's sitting there as cool as a cucumber and he doesn't care!

As Malvina alighted from his sulky and turned to look at him, her eyes were filled with the fury of all women of all the ages. "You're not coming in to dinner?"

"No. Under the circumstances, I'd better run along. I still have a slave hand to find, you know."

"I'm sorry."

"Good night, Malvina. I'll see you tomorrow night."

He told me he would see me tomorrow! He didn't ask me! Malvina stormed toward the house. "Looking for his slave! Well, he shan't turn me into one!"

"Malvina!" Justin called.

She stopped, turned, her eyes filled with angry tears.

"I almost forgot," he said. "I had one of the boys deliver your Christmas present. His name is Prince."

Turning to where he pointed, Malvina saw, tied at the hitching rack, a beautiful saddled Arabian gelding. Speechless, she swung back to Justin, but he was gone.

"And I forgot to give him his present," she sobbed.

2

Malvina went searching for Belle, she found her upstairs, sprawled out in her bed, nightgown in a tumbled heap around her hips and her two bare, shapely legs stretched high in the air. Belle was "growing her legs," a pet theory that by stretching her legs, she could make them grow long and tapered and could gain the height she so desperately wanted. This height, in turn, would give her a kind of superiority over Malvina.

"Pull your gown down and try to act like a lady," Malvina said quietly. "I can't entrust this to Jefferson or the groom. I want you to take this note over to Mr. Justin Phelan, and his horse."

"You're not going to keep that beautiful horse?" Belle was shocked.

"I most certainly am not. Now hurry, Belle, please."

When there were no male guests in the house, Belle usually dressed like an urchin. As Belle left for the stables Malvina was pleased to note that she had on her new riding skirt and she had brushed her hair into soft, golden waves. But when Belle came

racing out of the paddock on the Arabian, her carefully groomed hair was streaming to the rear like the flaming tail of a bright comet, and her skirts flew high in the wind. Malvina sighed and sadly shook her head.

Prince, who had been living a leisurely life on a rich diet of oats and alfalfa, was gasping and fighting for wind by the time Belle pulled him into the hitching rack at Phelan's house.

Justin, from his study window, saw his neighbor as she raced up the driveway. He smiled to himself when he saw her slide out of the sidesaddle, booted legs flashing. He met her at the door.

"Well, this is a delightful surprise. Won't you come in, Belle?" Belle tried a demure smile, but the effort was destroyed by her impish, devilish eyes. "To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

"Malvina wanted me to deliver this." Belle thrust the letter into his hand.

Justin's face became grave as he read:

My Dear Justin, I am sure that what I have to say will not come as a great shock to you but I wish to end our engagement. I have always believed that the relationship between a man and a woman should begin with love and ascend to a happy marriage. Ours seems to be descending to an unhappy tolerance. This I want to prevent. Perhaps, sometime in the future, we can see each other as friends. I am truly sorry, Malvina.

Justin stood contemplating the letter.

"She told me to leave Prince, too," Belle added. "I'm sorry."

Justin looked up into a pair of sharp eyes that reflected anything but sadness. "You are?"

Belle thought for a moment and then blurted, "No, I'm not. I'm glad. Even though she is my own sister, I must say that she isn't good enough for you."

"Oh?" In spite of his concern over Malvina, Justin was amused by the youngster. "Why isn't she good enough for me?"

"Because she doesn't appreciate you." Belle paused and partially closing her eyes in an effort to look alluring, she whispered, "I certainly wouldn't treat you like this."

"What would you do, Belle?" he baited, as he stepped toward the girl.

"I wouldn't let that old Mary Anderson make me jealous."

"Mary is very pretty."

"She is not! She's old and ugly. She's not half as pretty as I am." Belle was beautiful at the moment, her head held high, eyes flashing, her lovely body proud and erect.

"I don't think her legs are as pretty as yours," his lips carried a taunting half-smile.

Belle, for all her worldly make-believe, was shocked. This was the first time a man had ever mentioned her legs. Gentlemen just didn't speak about such things. Confused, she blurted, "How did . . . ?"

"I was watching from the window when you dismounted a moment ago. Very pretty." His words produced the expected effect. Belle started backing toward the door.

"A gentleman would have turned his head," she stammered.

"I'm no gentleman," and from all outward appearance, he was deadly serious as he moved toward her, giving every indication that he was about to take her in his arms.

Belle spun around and raced for the door.

By the time Justin arrived at the window, she was in the saddle and galloping down the drive. He laughed aloud as he again watched her disappear around the bend in the road. "That one is a little devil and she *does* have beautiful legs!"

Halfway home Belle pulled the Arabian to a walk. "I forgot to leave Prince!" She shrugged the problem away. "Well, he's Malvina's. Let her worry."

3

Chris McClellan sat at his old desk in his old office of the McClellan and Sons Foundry while David fumed and fussed at a sheet of figures.

It was a dingy, dirty little office. Everything was coated with dust and black, greasy grime from the coke ovens and the furnaces below. The air in the office was always acidy with fumes from the flues. It was perfume to Chris's nose. Today the noise of the workmen downstairs drowned out the intermittent boom of the cannon above town.

It was comforting to know that McClellan and Son were still supplying the needs of the community as it had for four generations. It was true that the needs were different now from the products of grandfather's day. No plowshares were scheduled on this day's production, just one smooth-bore "Napoleon." Still, it was what the community needed. At the moment.

The past months had been a great worry to Chris, even though he had written the war off as lost, Chris was still torn between love and loyalty for the South and the love and security he wanted to provide for his own family. In the early days of the war, there had been no problem. It had not been a matter of choice. "We are a free and independent people. It is our right to withdraw our state from a Union that tramples our rights, our way of life." Now, nearly two years later, Chris knew that those early sentiments, whether right or wrong, had been conceived in vain.

As he began to idly fill his pipe, he thought, We lost our case during the first ten weeks of the war. In order to win we should have installed a government with ten times the strength of the present one. We should have given it unlimited tax powers, control of all railroads, all heavy industry, state militia and a just conscription law. (Here was the paradox.) We are fighting for States Rights, yet to win them it is first necessary for us to give them up! Only an all-powerful central government could have led us to victory. Yes, we were doomed to defeat from the beginning. Is it disloyal, the desire to protect one's family, their fortune? Should I sell the factories to the government?

David, bless his soul, was no help. He had been horrified at the first and only suggestion to sell the plants. "Sell? Join the traitors to our cause?" he had stormed. "It's our great fortune to be living today, to be granted this opportunity of participating in these events."

Robert had disapproved of the plan too, Chris recalled. "Sell? And what are we going to do after we whip the Yankees? Our neighbors would write *traitor* on our backs and ride us out of town on a rail. Vicksburg is safe. Has anyone ever attacked the Rock of Gibraltar? There isn't an army in the world that can capture this city."

"Do you think the Yankees will ever give up trying?" Chris had questioned Robert.

"Let them try!" Robert had cried defiantly.

"And I'm afraid they will," Chris had said sadly. "Vicksburg is the

last port of entry into the Confederacy. The destruction of Vicksburg will complete the blockade."

"Let them try," Robert laughed. "Just let them try and they'll bloody their noses against a stone wall. If Vicksburg falls the Confederacy will fall; it cannot happen. Don't you realize that we are sitting on top of the life line of the Confederacy? Through the ports here and at Port Gibson we can supply our troops with the food and the clothing they need, not to mention the medical supplies and quicksilver from Mexico. No. President Davis would bring General Lee and his army to Mississippi before he would allow Vicksburg to fall."

And so they had reasoned and argued. Chris turned to watch his son poring over the books of McClellan and Son. In his heart Chris knew that the problems with which he wrestled had been answered, the questions were only academic, the decision ordained by the circumstance of place.

"David?"

"Yes, Papa."

"About the idea I had last month. To sell the plants to the government? I've decided against it."

A smile wreathed David's face. "That's the way I like to hear you talk, Papa. If we all pitch in and do our share, we'll have won this war by September."

4

The sound, the rapid clicking, awakened Knute from a deep sleep. Outside it was light, but there was no way to tell what time it was. Instinctively, Knute knew it was late. He was like a man trapped in a burning building as he struggled into his shirt and pants, burst out of the room and ran down the stairs. The clicking noise came from a wooden spoon flicking against the side of a crock. The girl Cleo stood by the table mixing something in the bowl. Ham and potatoes were frying on the stove. Knute stopped at the foot of the stairs and allowed his eyes to dart around the bare room as if he were counting each priceless possession. Then, as if satisfied that the girl was not a thief, he rushed to the sitting-room door to peer into the shuttered parlor. The hour hand of the mantel clock was at eleven.

"It's eleven! It's eleven o'clock and you let me sleep!" Knute stormed as he turned to look at the girl for the first time. "I ain't never slept like this before, never in my whole life. You shoulda woke me up."

"Ah slep' in da ba'n. Ah ha'n't no way o' know'n. Ah figgah it whar time fo' to fix dinnah." Cleo's soft voice seemed to caress each word with a velvet tongue, producing sounds to match the beauty of her tawny face; sounds to match her amber-colored eyes, provocative and stormy. "Ah fixed yo somethin'. Ah thot yawl might be hongry. Soda biscuits is done if yawl jes wash an set."

Knute was not in the habit of washing before eating, but today he washed. He sat, he ate, and he watched this golden girl as she tended to the food.

From far off, up on the hill, came the sound of dogs. The hounds were searching the woods.

Cleo's amber eyes turned black with hate, she grew taut and alert, her nostrils dilated and her tongue poised in the rosy depths of her half-parted lips, as if ready to cry a warning.

"Go upstairs," Knute whispered. "Close the shutters. Stay there till I come for you." Knute rose and walked out to the yard as four huge dogs came baying up the lane. Justin Phelan and one of his overseers followed the animals. Justin reined to a stop in front of Knute. The master of Hillcrest, though red-eyed and unshaven, was a commanding figure astride his coal-black stallion.

"You want somethin'?" Knute spoke first, his eyes peering up through his shaggy eyebrows.

"We don't, but the dogs do." It was the foreman who answered. "Seems like this is the end of the trail."

"We've lost something," Justin eyed his neighbor coldly. "Have you seen her?"

"What you lost?" The candor on Knute's face gave way to a leer of contempt.

"What do our dogs usually go lookin' for?" the overseer asked.

"I ain't seen no foxes, 'er no coons, four-legged or two-legged." Knute chuckled.

"Can we look in your barn?" Justin was courteous.

"So long as you don't go disturbin' my cows."

The overseer cantered to the barn and entered. Justin nudged his horse and slowly crossed the barnyard, arriving at the barn door as

the overseer came back out. "Nothin' in there." Justin waited until the man had remounted his horse; together they recrossed the yard to grinning Knute.

Suddenly, as if he had been awakened from a deep sleep, Knute abandoned his gate post and ran in a clumsy bear-like waddle to the barn, to peer into the gloomy depths. Bafflement gave way to shock and then to blind anger as, pointing to the empty stall and saddle rack, he turned to Justin and shouted in anguish. "Who took my sorrel? The saddle's gone, too."

"The sorrel with the star patch?" Justin asked. He knew the horse.

"Yes," Knute cried. "She's gone. I put her up last night!"

"Come on," Justin called to his overseer and spurred his horse. "Let's look for that sorrel!"

"You owe me for a horse if you don't find her," Knute yelled as the horsemen, following the dogs, raced down the lane. Sick with worry, Knute turned and started back toward the house.

"Somebody stole my sorrel last night! I wonder if Tod was . . . Tod!" It was like a dream. He tried to recall. "Tod's leg was hurting and when he left this morning. . . ." Now he could remember. Tod had said he was riding the horse to Vicksburg; he would return her next week.

5

The cannonade which had plowed the thicket from end-to-end was slacking off. Only an occasional shell fell into the area now, just enough to keep Captain Clyde Herring and his green troopers glued to their exposed positions. The Confederates were waiting for daylight when the skirmishers could move in and mop up the beleaguered Yankees. This intermittent fire of the Confederates kept the men pinned down in their positions of doubtful security, a mound of earth, a stump, the spidery cover of a brushpile.

Captain Herring had not moved an inch from his original position he shared behind the tree-trunk shelter. Clyde knew he should investigate the condition of his command; that he could bolster their morale by showing himself; that a leader can only gain respect and command through a display of courage. He knew all of these things, but could not force himself to move. Honor, duty, self-respect were

now hollow affectations of a society which had died at the first sound of the distant guns.

He hugged the cold ground in the early morning dew, waiting in agony for the sound of the distant "thrump" which would signal that another shell was on its way. Praying. Waiting for the demoniac yell of the approaching projectile as it came in with the swooshing roar of a hundred onrushing trains.

"Hug the ground closer. Close your eyes and pray, damn it. Pray that it will fall on someone else. Anyone else, dear God, but not me. Let me live and I'll do anything you want me to do! Our Father who . . ."

Crash! The explosion! Those who lived forgot to thank their God for saving them.

"I've got no business being here. No more business being here than I did up in that bank at Decatur. I've learned one thing, that's for sure. If I ever get out of here I'm not going back."

All of Clyde's adult life since graduating from the Academy had been spent seated behind a teller's window, waiting on someone else. He had counted out other men's triumphs, disappointments, successes and failures: a bystander who counted out one, two, three, ten, twenty, one hundred, two hundred, three hundred.

"You don't look like no banker, Clyde." His customers liked to tease him about his blond hair, his classic features, his deep, resonant voice. "You look more like an actor feller than a banker."

"I'm going to do what I should have done five years ago. I'm going to be an actor, like I've always wanted to be. I'm going to join a stock company and I'm going to act and I'm not going to worry about what my father says or my uncle says. I'm the one that counts. I'm the one that dies."

The dry leaves of a bush rattled as someone came tramping up through the brush from the rear.

Captain Clyde Herring, not wishing to expose himself, twisted his head around and glanced over his shoulder. All he could see was a polished pair of officers' boots standing directly over his head. Glancing up, he made out a towering, bearded man in officer's blue. The man wore a colonel's insignia on his shoulder.

"Captain! Don't you believe in saluting your superior officers?" the colonel yelled.

"Yes, sir, but they're shooting, sir and . . . all around, sir . . ."

"Attention!" The man shouted, his voice resounding across the enemy-studded flats to the front.

As Captain Herring crawled to his feet, he expected to feel at any moment the thud of a bullet as it came plowing into his exposed back. He hunched his neck down into the stiff coat collar, hoping he would present a smaller target.

"I've been looking for you for the last thirty minutes." The colonel was livid with rage.

"Yes, sir."

"Where are your men?"

"They're along here, sir," Herring gestured vaguely toward the thicket.

"Do you have your pickets out?"

"No, sir. They started shelling and . . ."

"Well, get them out! Round up some men and post your pickets. Immediately!" the officer interrupted. "Then form your company in a line of skirmishers. The Rebels will be counterattacking here the minute it's light."

"Yes, sir."

The colonel spun and plunged back through the brush. Clyde's feeble salute fell into the darkness.

The first streaks of dawn were visible over the bluffs to the east. Shoulder muscles taut with tension, buttocks pulled up tight, Clyde started through the brush to find his men. He came upon one group of four huddled in a small sand depression. Only one man bothered to look up at the captain. He seemed to register surprise that the leader was still alive. No one spoke.

"Warren? Is that you?" the captain whispered. The man nodded, yes. "Where'bouts are the men?" Warren shook his head and gave the captain a blank look.

"Take two of these men and move out to the front about forty yards. Set up a picket line." No one moved. The captain looked around uncomfortably and moved on. "You do that. Right now."

The Confederates saved the captain further embarrassment. At that moment he saw a dark gray line of men against the darker gray of the sky coming up out of the flats. They knelt and fired their muskets. From the wavering mist of the gray line came a new sound. "Whit! Whit! Whit!" the bullets spat in the air. In panic, the captain turned and plunged into the thicket. Tripping over a vine, he

fell headlong into a shallow of stagnant water. The delay only served to give him added strength in his frantic battle through the brush. When he reached the beach, he was happy to see groups of men all along the line running from the Rebels.

"There's thousands of 'em. Out there. Comin' this way," he heard someone shout.

The river bank ahead was a moving, living mass of confusion. Companies seeking regiments, officers seeking their companies, men hunting missing horses, and everybody looking for something that could not be found.

As if by magic, the impossible came true. A double line of blue moved out from the debarkation tangle and a regimental flag proclaimed the men to be the Fourteenth Iowa. The veteran regiment had landed, were aligned and ready to push off to meet the expected Rebel beachhead counterattack.

"Fix bayonets!"

"Forward!" The line moved in perfect order, passing through the Illinois men who were running back toward the river.

"Steady, men."

"You're gonna get killed in there. Rebels everywhere," one of the fleeing men warned the advancing Iowans.

"Steady."

"Make ready. Aim. Fire!" Flame leaped from the Springfields, minie balls screamed and crashed into the brush ahead.

The colonel followed the Iowa men and an aide followed the colonel. Captain Herring, sitting on the sand, trying to regain his breath, heard the colonel as he turned to the aide to say, "When we come back, get me the name of the captain in charge of this rabble on the beach. I'm going to have him court-martialed."

6

Piney Pucket was pacing, fretting within the confines of his prison quarters, completing his second day in the guard house. The Vicksburg city jail, which consisted of nothing more than a four-walled yard filled with criminals and convicts (black and white), also served in these days of crisis as the military stockade.

"If I ever get my hands on that son-of-a-bitch of a sergeant, I'll

kill 'im." At that moment Piney wanted to remain in the army long enough to shoot his tormentor in the back.

At that moment, the hated sergeant looked up from his packing crate desk to question the lean, sad-eyed soldier who had just reported.

"Tod Chaffin?"

"That's right."

"I've been directed to appoint you as a sergeant. You'll take over a section of the defenses at Chickasaw Bluffs."

"But, Sergeant," Tod protested, "I was told that, because of my leg, I'd be assigned only to noncombat duty."

"You won't be doing any marching. You and your assigned detachment will be hauled out to the bluffs in wagons. You'll be under guard because the men are all prisoners in the stockade."

"Prisoners?" Tod was doubly shocked.

"General Pemberton's ordered every so'jur in Vicksburg out to the defenses. Them in the stockade too. You'll get a cadre of five guards and your orders are to shoot any man who refuses to pull duty or tries to escape. Any questions?"

"No, sir." Tod knew the army and the futility of arguing with orders.

Piney managed to get into the center of one of the wagons when they were loaded at the jail. His struggle to gain identity had been a long uphill climb and it was important that none of Big Beulah's girls ever learn of this, his first arrest. Piney had vague recollections of having been lifted from the warmth and security of his mother's side as many as three times in one night on countless occasions, to be deposited among the clothing in a half-open lower bureau drawer. This was his trundle bed. As he grew older and too large to be fitted into a drawer, and when Beulah's customers objected to the presence of a sleeping boy in the lovers' bed, he was shuttled about, sleeping in any room that was vacant for the night, or with any one of the girls who might be ill. Piney's struggle to escape this overpowering circle of his mother and her girl friends and gain some degree of manly importance had been attained, to a degree, by establishing a rigid set of standards. As a youngster he had resolved never to be arrested; never to strike a woman in the face and never to catch a dose. As he had anticipated, the magnitude of this code

of ethics was an object of awe and admiration among the harbor clientele at Big Beulah's, setting him apart as a man of principle. The arrest, this chink in his defensive armor, must remain a secret forever.

It was not until after the wagons were beyond the limits of town and were drawing to a halt in a small forest clearing that Piney took notice of his surroundings. There, standing hub to hub beside the road, noses pointed into the sky, was a long line of cannon. Several hundred artillerymen lounged around the tents on the other side of the road. "Good God!" said Piney in horror, "I'm at the front!"

Within the hour Tod arrived at the Brigade headquarters tent, located in a valley back of the north bluffs, with his two wagonloads of recruits.

"Guide!" the adjutant called. "Take the sergeant and his men to the outposts in front of Fort Georgia."

"But, sir," Tod spoke up. "These men are all from the guardhouse. They haven't been trained together."

"I know," the officer smiled. "Up in the outposts we can be sure they'll fight. If they head out for the rear, we'll shoot 'em and if they go the other way, Sherman will take care of 'em."

It took Tod almost an hour to lead his men down the snaky trail which wound through the trench-scarred side of the loess bluff behind his outpost positions. Now, fifteen hundred yards to the front of the main defenses, he was issuing smoothbore, caliber sixty-nine muskets and placing his men into position.

"Men," Tod addressed his command, "it isn't necessary for me to tell you that we're the goats. We've been staked out as bait. When the Yankees stop to gobble us up, it will give the main line of resistance time to organize. To survive, we must stop this first attack. If we do, then we'll have the honor of waiting for the second and then the third. . . . Your chances of living through any one of these attacks are very slim, but you'll have no chance at all unless you listen carefully to the musket instruction we're about to give. If you don't want to die this afternoon, please listen to me."

Piney, from the depths of his new rifle pit, watched with open-mouthed admiration the gimp-legged sergeant's casual unconcern for danger as he stood there in the open field with his back toward

the direction from which the Yankees would come. This man was a soldier and totally unafraid. Somehow Piney felt safer when Tod chose his particular pit for the command post.

"I'm Tod Chaffin," Tod introduced himself to Piney and another sullen, bearded prisoner, as he slid down into the pit. Piney and the other soldier nodded. Neither bothered to offer Tod their names.

Tod led them through the procedure of loading and firing of the musket. It was flattering when Tod remarked, "I like the way you handle your piece, soldier. Stick close to me. I'm going to need you.

"All right. Let's go through the drill once more and this time we'll actually load up," Tod directed. "Ready? Bite the tip off the paper cartridge. Now dump the powder in the muzzle, punch the wad down with your ramrod. Ram in the ball. Now put the cap on and she's primed, ready to go." Tod leaned his musket against the front of the pit, then he spread his blanket on the ground and stretched out for a snooze.

Piney held on to his gun and climbed up on the earthen step along the front of the pit, to scan the ground ahead, looking for the enemy. His growing confidence in the sergeant was now shaken by the casual way the new leader regarded their dangerous position. "Somebody oughta be lookin' out for Yanks." So Piney himself looked, peered, squinted, and scanned, but all he could see to the front were trees, brush, bayous, and swamps stretching out across the broad delta to the front.

General Sherman had planned his attack for the day after Christmas, but moving an army by transport on a shallow river was more of a task than he'd reckoned. It was the afternoon of the twenty-ninth before he had all of his troops, twenty thousand, in position along the river bank and ready to push off. The "jump off" was set for four o'clock in the afternoon with artillery and the gunboats opening with preparatory fire at three-forty-five.

The first "boom" of the gunboat cannons came as a shock to Piney's taut nerves, causing him to stumble back off the fire-step onto the sergeant. He saw the series of smoke puffs appear over the line of trees shielding the river, but had not connected them with gunfire until the sound reached his ears seconds later. The full realization of his plight came to him as he crouched on the floor of the pit and listened to the shells scream overhead, crashing upon the bluffs to the rear.

Tod crawled out from beneath Piney's legs, yawned and stretched. "Looks like they're starting," he observed, as he climbed up on the fire-step.

"What is it?" said Piney through chattering teeth.

"Artillery," Tod said as he climbed out of the pit to look around. "They're going to try knocking out the guns up on the hill before the infantry starts across."

"Men!" he shouted, "this shelling will last about ten minutes, then the Yank infantry will show up out here to the front. I don't want anyone to fire a single musket until I give the command. Understand? I may wait until they're thirty yards from us before I yell, so don't get nervous. Aim low. Remember to cock your pieces before you fire. Take careful aim, right at their bellies. Remember. Wait until I yell 'Fire'!"

Piney could feel the cold wet of sweat as it dripped from his armpits and trickled down over his ribs. He had lifted his head high enough to see over the edge of the pit. Sergeant Chaffin, from this worm's-eye view, seemed to be twelve feet tall and the target of every shell that whined overhead. Piney felt an immense relief when the sergeant finally climbed back down into the pit.

Before the men could become accustomed to the sound of the boom in the distance, the swish of shells overhead, the crash of the explosion in the rear, the cannonade stopped. Silence filled the delta. Then, from among the trees two thousand yards ahead, a double line of blue-coated skirmishers burst into view. To the right and to the left, as far as the eye could see, the lines continued unbroken: a solid blue wave rolling silently forward, ready to engulf everything.

"Looks like they want to fight," someone shouted from a neighboring pit. A nervous chuckle ran through the men, helping to relieve the tension.

The bearded man in Tod's pit pulled out a small bottle of whisky and threw it on the ground.

"What you do that for?" Piney asked.

The man was serious: "Don't want to go facin' no Maker with a whisky smell on me."

Piney thought this over, reached into a pocket and pulled out a pack of cards, allowing them to flutter down like pigeons to join the whisky bottle. "I ain't got no religion, but . . ."

The blue line came on. A thousand yards now. Silent, except for the tread of twenty thousand footsteps.

"When you shoot, don't jerk the trigger. Hold your breath and squeeze it slowly," Tod murmured to Piney out of the side of his mouth, without taking his eyes off the advancing enemy.

"Load at will," Tod called in a low voice. "Load."

Piney nervously examined his rifle to see if the primer was right.

The Union line of men to the front halted, fired, reloaded as the second line fired. Puffs of smoke ran down the line. Minie balls whined harmlessly over the pits. The line came forward again, advancing with a steady beating tramp as if they were going to march right over the rifle pits without missing a step.

Tiny clouds of black powder smoke rose over the advancing line.

Now an ominous growl and a low, sullen roar of a different kind rushed over the field as the Confederate guns on the hill opened fire on the Yankee line.

"Steady, men. Hold it. Ready. Aim. . . ."

Piney pushed the muzzle of his gun over the parapet and sighted down the barrel. The bluecoats were right on top of the pit! He could see their faces clearly. Grim, dirty, evil with intent to kill.

"Fire!"

Piney squeezed as he had been told. The man toward whom he'd aimed plunged forward on his face. Piney felt better now, having fired once. He turned back to the pit, loaded and moved up to the shelf to aim again. Instead, he closed his eyes and fired at a huge dark man who was standing on the very edge of the pit. The Yank's rifle struck Piney on the shoulder as the man fell dead into the pit. Confused, he turned to Tod who was reloading. The sergeant's mouth was black with powder. The sergeant grinned. Reassured, Piney completed loading, climbed back onto the fire-step. He was now without fear. A veteran. One minute and two shots in battle and a veteran, educated to live with death. Much to his surprise, Piney saw that the enemy to his immediate front had turned and was streaming to the rear like sheep. Together with his sergeant, he aimed, squeezed and fired. An officer who was waving his saber, trying to rally the men, fell dead.

Through the smoke, the ground to the front was alternately visible and invisible. The Yanks were reforming. Reload. Wait. The dead Yank in the pit wore a knife. Piney stuck it in his belt.

Again they came, running this time. Yelling. An officer was in front. Wait. Aim low. Fire. Again Piney turned, reloaded. Again the pits were overrun before he could turn and fire.

"Come on," Tod yelled, climbing out of the pit. He knew that the pit, once overrun, was a death trap.

Piney turned to his bearded companion and together they joined the sergeant.

A haze of blue smoke filled the battlefield, a continuous roar filled the air, beat upon the ears.

Three Yanks came out of the smoke, paused, fired. The bearded man dropped dead beside Piney.

Tod Chaffin raised his gun, aimed and fired; then he took on the look of a man who had just been hit with a walnut log. He dropped his gun as if it was too heavy to hold and slowly sank to the ground.

Piney saw his sergeant fall and turned to face the two remaining Yanks who came charging at him with lowered bayonets.

The two Iowans who rushed in to kill the little pimp met an intense, fierce animal inflamed with rage.

"The sons-a-bitches killed my sergeant."

Piney, blind with hate, summoned strength and using his rifle as a club, swung, beat, mauled. Fighting in wild, blind frenzy, he lost all sense of time or place. He didn't recall drawing the knife he had taken off the dead Yank until he noticed the blood pumping up and out and around his hand as he pulled it from the chest of the last Yank he had downed.

It was quiet in Piney's smoke-filled circle as he crawled to the sergeant. "He's still alive," Piney mumbled, dragging him back into the rifle pit.

7

Robert McClellan sat at the Army Rear Headquarters in Vicksburg waiting. The command post was a furor of activity. Couriers rushing in and out, clerks preparing daily reports, officers sitting around on the long benches, waiting. He had been instructed to report to General Pemberton's offices at seven. It was now nine and still no sign of the general. An orderly had informed Robert that Pember-

ton had been out in the field since three, directing the placement of troops as if he was personally responsible for every rifle pit and gun position in the line. Robert was learning the first great military axiom. Always report on time and then wait.

It was almost ten before General Pemberton, surrounded by a group of dust-covered staff officers, swept into the large room where Robert was waiting. The general was a handsome man of medium stature with a fine, straight nose, close-cropped mustache and beard that contoured his lips and chin. His heavy head of hair gave a false impression of height and the intense dark eyes and ramrod-stiff bearing endowed him with the authority his rank demanded. General John Pemberton was a soldier first and last.

The general stood in front of a huge wall map showing the entire Vicksburg defense system and jammed an arrow-like finger at a spot on the map for the benefit of his Chief of Staff and the several tactical officers who clustered about.

"Colonel, I want the next three brigades that arrive to be placed in a line extending from this point north. I also want you to remove two thousand men from the defenses in front and to the south of the city and have them marched to a position north of where these new brigades will be placed." Pemberton spoke in a sharp, brusque manner.

"But, General," the colonel frowned, "do you think this is advisable? This new position is at least ten miles north of the city. The Federals will never attack that far north."

"You've heard my order," Pemberton snapped and turned his back to his staff. Then, speaking more to himself and the map than to his officers, he reasoned. "In the twenty miles of the river north of the city, there are only five approaches Sherman can use. Five areas that are not blocked by swamps or bayous. These lower three approaches next to the city were explored in the attack yesterday. Having suffered over two thousand casualties, Sherman will not try this route again. He must use the two northern approaches. Mark my words, the next attack will be a flanking movement to the left of yesterday's attack area. I want to be there to greet him." Pemberton turned to face his staff. "Well? What are you waiting for?"

The general took his seat at a desk after the staff officers had departed, and was signing papers when the adjutant motioned Robert to come forward.

"General, sir," the adjutant spoke, "Captain McClellan is reporting for duty, sir."

Pemberton looked up, returned Robert's salute without rising, and sat studying the new officer. "Any relation to a classmate of mine by the name of George McClellan?"

"No, sir." Robert tried to smile. "We're not related, sir."

"Um. Where have you been doing duty?"

"I've just received my commission, General," Robert stammered, handing over his appointment and commission papers.

"I see. . . ." The general mused as he studied the transcript. "Do you know the local countryside? Are you familiar with the roads and rail transportation between here and Jackson?" The general fired quick, direct questions.

"Yes, sir."

"Good." Pemberton glanced at the adjutant. "Assign Captain McClellan to quartermaster, the procurement division. On the way down from Holly Springs I noticed that the warehouses along the railroad were jammed with supplies, corn, wheat, tobacco, cotton, sorghum, peas, beans. They are sitting there rotting for lack of transportation."

Turning to Robert, the general continued. "McClellan, when you report to Colonel Andrews over at quartermaster, tell him that I want to see him this afternoon."

"What does he want?" Andrews frowned.

"I don't know, sir, but from the remarks he made this morning, I would guess that he's disturbed about the supplies the government tithe collectors have warehoused around over the state."

"The same old story!" Andrews slapped his fist on the top of his desk. "Damn it. Pemberton's an engineer. He knows the condition of the railroads around here. I've got agents out all over the state buying supplies and materials, then what happens? They're assembled at the depots and there they sit, waiting for rail transportation. Is he going to let me commandeer a few trains? Of course not. Even when I'm lucky enough to get my hands on a train I'm usually stopped. Stopped by some goddammed railhead."

Robert knew the problems of railheads. Most of the rail lines were local or short-line companies. At the railheads, where one line joins another, it was always necessary to unload all freight and trans-

fer it to the cars of the next line. Companies had no exchange system set up for rolling stock and were afraid of losing their valuable cars if they allowed another company to take them on.

Robert returned to his quarters after his first day of assigned duty without any clear concept of what his new work would entail. Cal, his Negro servant, was busy polishing his boots.

"I want you to fix my supper early tonight, Cal. I'm going out."

"Yassah, Mahsa Bob. Yassah."

Robert had decided to cast aside the heavy mantle of war for tonight and attend a party the Prices were holding. There was a chance that the little cousin that Justin had introduced him to might be in attendance.

8

The clientele of Big Beulah's place was in near revolt. For the second time in less than a week, she had closed her doors for the night.

"There's an excuse for closin' up fer Christmas," one regular complained, "but to shut up on Thursday night, right in the middle of the week, just ain't right."

"She should'na gone in business," another agreed. "A business has a responsibility to its customers. Thursday night is my regular night an' it's too hard on a man's system to go two weeks."

"I git cramps myself," the first dissatisfied patron moaned.

Beulah realized that by closing shop so soon again she might lose some customers, but Piney had asked her to serve dinner for his friend, Sergeant Chaffin, and had given specific orders that she must keep all of the girls and their customers out of sight, explaining that the sergeant was quite refined and a gentleman. Piney's orders were Beulah's command.

Piney, at Tod's request, had been sent back to Vicksburg with his wounded sergeant. At the hospital, it was found that Sergeant Chaffin had been struck by a spent shell, and while the head wound was painful, he was up and about in a day, his head swathed in bandages. It was rumored, Beulah learned from Piney, that Sergeant Chaffin might be promoted to the rank of First Sergeant, or perhaps even to Lieutenant for his gallantry in the Yazoo River

battle. If this happened, Piney would be made his second in command.

Even the connections and the money Beulah had at her disposal were put to a test when she attempted to assemble the ingredients for the dinner. Fine china, silver service, linens, all had to be begged, bought, or stolen; the bar had to be screened off, the parlor redecorated, and food procured. The big problem had been to lure Pierre, the French chef at the Preston House, into feigning illness for one night, in order that he could come down and personally prepare the meal.

The last and probably the most delicate problem was the question of girls. The tough job had been to find a suitable companion for Sergeant Chaffin. Piney, wanting to conceal the true nature of Big Beulah's occupation and still provide his sergeant with the kind of an evening he might enjoy, had insisted that the sergeant's companion be a lady. Here Beulah effected a compromise. Not knowing any ladies, and assuming that Southern ladies would frown upon attending a supper at her house, she did the next best thing. Beulah found a girl who wanted to be a lady. Loulie Schmidt, the sixteen-year-old daughter of Hans Schmidt, a cotton barge operator, was the aspirant for ladyhood selected.

Suzanne LaFevre, a petite little French lady who had been brought to Vicksburg from Paris by the son of a leading banking family, had been selected as Piney's dinner partner.

Loulie was a beautiful, moody, and petulant child who had aspirations of doing more with her life than spending it as the wife of some river boatman. Aspirations which had turned her father's simple home life into a living hell. She read books he could not understand, raided his money belt for cash to spend on cheap jewelry and clothes. Her spare time was spent hanging around the opera house trying to attract the attention of the actors in the itinerant stock companies playing Vicksburg. On one occasion she made plans to run away with the lead in *The Prisoner of Monterrey*. Naturally, Hans was delighted when Beulah came to him with an offer to introduce his boy-crazy daughter to a refined schoolteacher from the Columbus Female Academy.

Loulie, however, was not particularly impressed with her escort for the evening. He did have a delicate, handsome face, but he was not tall nor was he dark. He wore glasses, had a game leg, and the

big turban-like bandage on his head made him look like a "Turk or an Arab or somethin'." She also found fault with his voice. It was soft and gentle. Loulie liked the big, rounded, booming tones used by stock-company actors. Still, she thought, his short leg don't show much when he sets down. And he must be important, 'cause Beulah wouldn't be putting on airs like this for somebody that's a nobody.

When supper was served, Loulie was a bit apprehensive, fearful that there was not going to be enough to eat. The tiny pieces of pickled meat Pierre served for the first course were not very filling and the equally tiny cup of cold potato soup was just as skimpy. But three more courses and eight glasses of wine later she was feeling marvelous and was again worried, for fear she would not be able to eat everything in the courses to come.

"Would you care for some port?" Tod asked as the plates were being cleared away and another set distributed.

"I don't mind if I do," she looked up at Tod with the largest, roundest, most vapid eyes he had ever seen. "Mrs. Pucket says you're a schoolteacher."

"That's right. I teach at the Columbus Female Academy."

"How much money do teachers make?" The question came while Tod was taking a sip of wine and he almost choked.

"Not much, I'm sorry to say," he laughed.

"How much?"

"Thirty dollars a month."

Loulie thought this over in silence and eliminated him as a possible means of escaping her father's cotton barge. She came out of her reverie with "Do you like shows?"

Tod was secretly amused by this girl who was obviously determined to find out everything about him in the shortest possible time. "Yes. Very much. I try to see most of the plays that come through town."

"Did you see *The Prisoner of Monterrey*?"

"No, I don't think I did."

"That's too bad." She felt sorry for him. "It was awful good. I saw it twelve times. I know the actor that played the part of the prisoner. James McCready."

"Shakespeare is my favorite. I never miss any of those."

"I saw one once. It was kinda silly, though. They talked all the time and didn't do nothin'."

Tod chuckled. "I'm afraid this is a failing which has afflicted most of us. We talk all the time and do nothing."

Loulie thought this over.

By the time the party moved to the sitting room for coffee and brandy, they were feeling the effects of the wine and were making as much noise as a party of twice their size. Beulah smiled contentedly as she vanished into the labyrinths of the second floor.

"*Parlez-vous Francaise?*" Suzanne asked Tod.

"*Oui, un petit peu,*" he smiled and shrugged, indicating that he might not be too sure of himself with the language, but plunged into the tongue and was happy to find that they could converse. Suzanne giggled at his little errors and Tod explored the pleasantries of the delightful language. When Loulie rose and walked over to the organ Tod realized that they were being rude, but was reluctant to discontinue this pleasant experience.

Loulie's attempt to play "Just Before the Battle, Mother" was not too successful. It only served as a note of discordant warning, heralding the explosion which was about to come. She rose from the stool, walked slowly and a bit unsteadily back to the center table where she filled a glass with brandy, drank it and turned to Tod.

"If you're so friggin' smart, then why ain't you an officer?" she blurted.

"What?" Tod looked up with surprise at the swaying girl.

"If you're so friggin' smart, talkin' to her like that, then how come you're just a friggin' sergeant?" With this outburst Loulie burst into tears, turned and ran out of the room and up the stairs. Tod followed the girl as best he could on his bad leg, calling for her to come back.

An open door led Tod into a bedroom where he found Loulie lying face down on the bed, sobbing. As he leaned down, placing his hands on her shoulders, she spun over, threw her arms around his neck and pulled him onto the bed. Her lips searched out his in an avid, frantic kiss. Tod, until seconds before, had looked upon the girl as a youngster, similar to the young ladies he taught at the Academy. But the kiss removed any thought of discrepancies in their

age. Moments later he was cradled in Loulie Schmidt's rigid embrace.

9

Captain Alan Miller's trip from Holly Springs to Jackson and on to the heights of Chickasaw Bluffs north of Vicksburg, where he now stood overlooking the Yazoo Valley, was as uneventful as he had predicted it would be. Now to get rid of those rockets.

When the last rocket was in the air, Alan turned and rode quickly into the pine-dominated valley at his rear before some curious Rebel came along to investigate the fireworks.

General Sherman had finished his midnight supper and was standing on the bridge of Admiral Porter's gunboat, at the mouth of the Yazoo, having his last cigar of the day. He studied the bluffs which ranged across the front and tried to settle on a plan of action.

It was quiet along the front. Both sides, like two bloody dogs, had pulled back to recover and lick their wounds. Campfires along the river's edge marked the rally points for the troops that were still filtering back from the day's disastrous assault against the Confederate works on the bluffs. Today's attack had been a bloody failure.

Slightly to General Sherman's left and far to the front, a light arched into the sky from behind the bluffs and burst. A yellow rocket. Another. It was yellow. Still another. Yellow, too. A fourth. It was red! The message from Grant. There would be no co-ordinated attack. Somehow Grant had failed!

Why couldn't the fourth rocket have been blue instead of red? Sherman cursed.

A signal corpsman stepped out of the darkness, saluted. "I have a message, sir. A rocket signal was picked up just now from the hills to the front. Three yellow and one red."

"I know. I know! I saw it myself!" Sherman turned back to the railing. Why wasn't Grant attacking from the rear? Now what to do?

Sherman reasoned that Grant must be still holding General Pemberton in northern Mississippi, which would mean that the defenses to his front, here north of Vicksburg, were thinly manned with per-

haps no more than one man for every twenty feet of fortification, and this strength would be concentrated near the city.

"I'll flank to the left. We'll embark tonight, go ten miles upstream to the north, and I'll hit them there. They can't be strong all along the Yazoo."

Willie Heap was standing by the railing of his transport watching the yellow rockets bursting over the distant bluffs with wide-eyed amazement, when a gunboat, anchored along the nearby shore, suddenly belched fire and noise. Willie turned away from the railing, blood streaming down his face, resolving to never again pick "buggers" out of his nose while watching rockets bursting in the air.

By the time the light of the final red rocket had faded from the sky, Alan was on the road heading back east toward Jackson. Returning to Sherman's headquarters meant circling far to the south of Vicksburg, crossing the river above New Carthage and working back up the Louisiana side of the river. This route encompassed at least two hundred miles of riding, but there was no other way for him to return to the Army of the Tennessee.

By four o'clock in the early morning, Alan was exhausted and nearly fell asleep in his saddle. The dark silhouette of a tree-lined drive drew him off the black Vicksburg-Jackson road into the stables behind a house and slave quarters of a sleeping plantation. Quietly putting his horse in one of the empty stalls, Alan crawled into the hayloft for a much needed sleep. It was daylight before he awoke. Warm sunshine was pouring in through the open feed door.

"I'm hungry," Alan stretched and scratched vainly at the dry hay leaves that had worked their way down inside his shirt. Rising he pulled off the offending shirt, shook it out and tying the doeskin garment around his waist went below to tend to his horse. As he walked toward the grain bins in the back of the stable, he noticed a box stall, and with a horseman's natural curiosity about such things, opened the door a crack. Inside stood a beautiful Arabian. Concentrating on the beauty of the beast, Alan failed to hear the footsteps as they approached him over the straw-littered walkway to his rear.

"What do you think of him?" a woman's voice asked.

Alan spun, dropped to one knee, drawing his pistol in a single

motion. His eyes and the gun bored up into a pair of gray-green eyes in a lovely face.

"I'm flattered by your courtly manners, but not by your attitude. Are you always so afraid of ladies?" Malvina's voice was filled with contempt.

Alan slid his pistol back into its holster without taking his eyes from the girl's face; he rose to tower above her. It was now Malvina's turn to look up, to study this lean, leathery giant of a man. He's as tall as Justin, she thought, and handsome, too. From the sun wrinkles around his eyes and the slightly slouched shoulders, she judged him to be a farmer.

"What are you doing, sir? Making plans to steal my horse?"

"No, ma'am, but I must confess that she's about the purtiest little ho'se I ever did see." Malvina liked his slow, Texas drawl, but puzzled at his choice of words. "Confess" was not a farmer's word. "What do you call it? The breed? Arabian?"

"Yes." This man was not the rustic he appeared to be. "What are you doing here? In our barn?"

"I took the liberty of usin' your hayloft last night. It was a mite late when I retired, so I decided not to disturb my hosts."

Malvina concealed the warmth she felt when the stranger smiled, behind a cold, placid stare. "I'm glad to see that you are making yourself comfortable." She allowed her eyes to drop to his muscled, bare shoulders.

It seemed to Malvina that his embarrassment was all pretense; his nervous dropping of the shirt, his fumbling with the sleeves was more of a taunt than any overzealous desire to cover up. "I'm terribly sorry, ma'am. I clean forgot."

"I'm sure you did," Malvina said dryly. "Are you in the army?"

"Yes, ma'am." Alan was all smiles and graciousness, except for his eyes. They were studying, calculating.

"Which side?" she challenged.

Alan was alert now. Here was more danger than he had met up front shooting off the rockets last night. "You're referrin' to this git-up?" he grinned, indicating his Western garb. "I'm a scout. Liaison officer with Johnston. I've just been over Vicksburg way."

"No," Malvina shook her head, "I'm not referring to your clothing, or lack of it. It just seems peculiar to me why a Southern boy,

deep inside his own land, would be so nervous that he'd draw his pistol when surprised by a lady."

"I see what you mean."

"I thought you would."

"Ma'am, my name is Alan Miller. Captain Alan Miller. In the business I'm in and with the papers I carry, I can't afford to take any chances, not even with ladies."

"Captain Miller," Malvina mused. "I don't see any insignia of rank. When were you promoted? This very moment?"

Deadly calm crept into Alan's voice as he eyed the girl. "You're a bit sassy, ain't you? You wouldn't happen to be one of them little ole Abolitionist gals now, would you?"

The blood rushed to Malvina's face, washing away the white calm. "How dare you!"

"You made the dare, ma'am. I just took it up," Alan replied with an easy laugh. "It don't feel good, that little ole shoe on the other foot. I'm sorry."

Malvina smiled for the first time with her eyes as well as with her lips. She extended her hand. "I'm sorry, too. You must think I'm awfully rude. I'm Malvina McClellan. Welcome to Shady Oaks."

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am," Alan smiled as he reached to take her hand, then he chuckled. "I've always said that we'd win this war a darn sight sooner if we'd just let our ladies do the fightin' and leave us menfolks at home to talk and argue."

"Can we fix you some breakfast?"

"Thank you, ma'am, but I've got some grub here in my saddlebag."

"Come to the house with me and we'll see what 'Lijah has on the stove."

"Well, if you're sure it won't put you out."

By the time Alan had succeeded in consuming 'Lijah's breakfast of biscuits, honey, ham and eggs, Malvina was chattering away as she sat opposite him at the table, plying him with questions concerning the military situations in the north of Mississippi and at Vicksburg.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Alan sighed as he pushed back, "but I'd best get movin'. I've got a long ways to go today, if I catch up with General Johnston."

"Of course. I'm so greedy for news that I've been selfish."

As they stood up from the table, Belle came bounding into the kitchen. She stopped short when she saw the stranger. "Oh, I didn't know we had company."

"This is Captain Miller, Belle. My sister Belle," said Malvina.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Captain Miller." Belle's saucy eyes inspected Alan's handsome face carefully.

"The captain was just leaving." Malvina added, somehow annoyed at Belle's interruption.

Yes, dammit, Alan thought, as he studied the two sisters trying to decide which one was more beautiful.

"Captain, I was just thinking," Malvina said. "Your horse must be exhausted after your long trip. Will you take my Arabian when you leave?"

"What?" Alan turned to the girl in amazement.

"Please. I'd like you to have him." Malvina was serious.

"But . . ." Belle started to protest, then sealed her lips. This was perfect! Giving away Justin's gift.

"You can't be serious, ma'am." Alan frowned, trying to fathom this unexpected burst of generosity.

"I want you to take him. It's a loan. You can bring him back the next time you come this way."

"But that might be never," Alan said.

"I'll take that chance. I insist. Please take him. His name is Prince." There was an urgency in Malvina's voice.

"Well . . ." Alan hesitated.

Saddled, astride Prince, Alan looked down at Malvina and removed his hat. "I still don't feel right about taking your horse, ma'am."

"Good. Then I know you'll bring him back in a week or two."

Alan thought he could see some softness behind those gray eyes for the first time. "I'll try to do that . . . Malvina. Right soon." He touched the horse with his heels and rode down the lane.

Malvina stood watching the stranger, hearing in her mind the sound of his voice as he pronounced her name, until he had vanished over the crest of the hill. Belle, from the kitchen door, stood watching her sister and thought, wait until Justin hears about this!

4

deer maw an paw

heer is mi furst month pay. all of it. $11. i sent it 2 u 2 keep fer me. it ain't safe 2 keep heer. tuday we got pade an i went 2 the sutlers tent. he sells stuf. i wuz goin 2 bi me a lemon. the man askt haf a dolar. i ain't never had no lemon. i ain't goin 2 pay no haf a dolar fer 1. they wuz yella. i allus thot they wuz wite.

i am gud. i miss u so much. i wish i cud cum home. the army went sumplac an left me heer with sum other boys. we are enjuneers. they sho us how 2 bild a brig. mosly it is jus diggin with a spade an i alredy no how to du that. paw i wish u cud see this durt down heer. it ain't gud enuf fer a ioway hog 2 root in. i got a nice sute of close. i wish u cud see me in it. mi shurt is 2 big at the nck an 2 short elsewhere. my overkote is 2 big 2. somebody said i luk like a nubin in a shuk. i dont think so. the slepin part ain't ben gud. what we wuz afrade of has tuk plase. they giv us ech a haf a muzlin tent an a blanket. we wuz supozed 2 sleep 2 together. that makes a hole tent an 2 blankets. i

wish i kud wake up at nite. the oficer in charg makes me slep alone. i wet on the boy i was slepin with. i dug me a hole an put the blanket in the bottom an the tent on top. it is awl rite les it rains. then the water runs in the hole. when it rains i slep settin up with my overkote over mi hed.

the ets r jus awful. they put 12 of us tugether an call it a mess and 1 of the men is the kook. r kook aint no kook at all. he is jus a farmer an he dont never wash his hans an he chaws tubaka. he makes flapjaks out of flower and water an grees an salt an we fri them in r mess pans. they r awful tuf and give us a belly ake. fer diner we have meet an taters an bred an cofe an a spun of brown sugar. when we et we sav bak the bred an uze it to wipe owt the plate an then we et the dish rag. sumtimes we hav yanke beens an rice but i don like rice much.

i am slepy. las nite on pay day sum women wuz in kamp an they an sum of the felas wuz hevin fun an yellin round mos of the nite. i did not get much slep. the women was kin 2 sum of the felas i ges. the felas kep kalin the women sistur. plez rite. fill up a hole sheet. it sur makes me feel gud when they call out William Heap at male call.

your son
willie.

2

Alan Miller rode down the muddy highway leading into Jackson from the north. Both he and the Arabian were tired. In the last three weeks they had made a complete three-hundred-and-sixty-degree encirclement of Vicksburg. Alan's better senses told him that he should stop over in Jackson for a day or two of much needed rest; instead he turned off short of the city, onto a road leading west. Toward Vicksburg, toward Shady Oaks.

It was difficult to determine whether anything had been accomplished by his tortuous three weeks' trip. He had missed General Sherman, who had lost command of the Right Wing of the Army of the Tennessee to the Illinois politician—General John A. McClernand. McClernand, looking for an easy victory over the Rebels, had disengaged the army from its Vicksburg Campaign, ordering it to go tooting up the Arkansas River to gobble up a minor objective, The

Post of Arkansas. Checking in at the Army Rear Headquarters at Youngs Point on the Mississippi, Alan had received orders to report back to General Grant who was in Memphis, reorganizing and refitting his mauled army. Arriving at Memphis, after a long boat trip, he received orders sending him back to his original starting point, Jackson, Mississippi.

And that damned army adjutant! The way he avoided looking me in the eye when he gave me my orders! Like a crooked judge sending a widow with ten children to the gallows for stealing a loaf of bread. "Captain!" he had said—inspecting a piece of paper on his desk. "Your orders are to proceed immediately to Jackson and then to Vicksburg where you will sketch, map, or secure the complete plans for existing and any future defenses around these cities. An agent will contact you at regular intervals at the Preston House in Vicksburg. You will give him all materials you have collected. Finance has been instructed to issue you the monies you will need during the stay. Any questions?"

"I could start by asking, why pick on me. But I won't," Alan replied. "How long do I remain in Vicksburg?"

"Until the city has been captured."

"That may be ten years from now."

"If this order changes, our agent will notify you."

"Yes sir." Alan saluted and headed for the finance office. No use arguing with the desk-bound parrot.

It was dark and very late when Alan arrived at Shady Oaks. There was a night light shining in the big house. After bedding down Prince, Alan made his way quietly to the hayloft bedchamber.

The next morning from his position on the bench in front of the tack room, Alan could hear Malvina protesting as she approached the barn with Jefferson. The darky was doing an admirable job acting out the role Alan had bribed him to perform.

"Jefferson, what is it?" Her voice rang out over the stillness of the stable yard like a silver bell.

"Lak Ah say, Miss Malvina, de is somethin' peculla out in de bahn," Alan heard his accomplice explain. The Negro's simple mind was intent upon earning the dollar Alan promised him.

"I don't see what's so important that you couldn't tell me in the

house. Is one of the horses sick?" the girl remarked angrily as she strode into the barn.

Malvina stopped short within the doorway. She seemed to fight with her emotions for a moment in a battle between mounting anger at Jefferson and surprised pleasure at seeing Alan. "Captain Miller! What a delightful surprise."

"Miss McClellan. I'm sorry to be deceivin' you this way," Alan said as he walked forward to meet her.

"Jefferson was right. There is 'somethin' mighty peculiar in the barn,' " she laughed.

"I didn't want to come in, but I did want to see you again before I stole my own horse and left."

"My sister Belle is going to be terribly disappointed. We had a wager. She didn't think I'd ever see Prince again." Malvina walked to the box stall to look at the Arabian.

"You'll never know how close your sister came to winning that bet," Alan smiled. "I fought with my conscience all the way in from Jackson last night. Actually it was a matter of determining which would be the greater loss. The horse or the opportunity of seeing you again."

Malvina turned and watched Alan in guarded silence as he walked to a place by her side. "I'm flattered, Captain Miller," she said at last.

"Actually, I'm forced to admit that I'm a coward. Down in my part of the country they hang horse thieves," Alan smiled.

They were standing inches apart. Malvina was forced to tilt her head back slightly in order to look up into the tall captain's face. "Your fears of hanging were baseless, Captain. I'd have you shot. There isn't a limb here at Shady Oaks high enough to get you off the ground."

"Don't think I'm not grateful for the use of Prince. He's a great animal and it gave my poor critter a much-needed three weeks in the pasture."

"You came in last night then? I suppose you slept in the barn as usual?" Malvina scolded.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"What kind of folks do you think we McClellans are, Captain Miller, that you couldn't come to the door and ask for a room for the night?"

"It was late. Besides, I was afraid Prince might get lonesome. You see, we've been bunkmates every night for almost three weeks."

"For Prince's sake you're forgiven. Come. Let's go in and ask 'Lijah to find you some breakfast." Alan stepped back as she started for the door.

Again it was almost noon before Alan was able to mount his own dapple gray and start for Vicksburg. It was dark when he had checked in at the Preston House. He had spent a half-day eating one breakfast and looking into the eyes of one girl.

I wonder, he thought as he busied himself arranging his meager possessions in the hotel room which was to be his new home, I wonder whether it was wise to accept Malvina's invitation to dinner.

3

A new day was seeping out of the blackness. Justin Phelan stood at his half-opened bedroom window, buttoning his shirt as he watched the activity in the driveway and stables below. Overseers were arriving at the mess hall. Stableboys readied the teams. A haze of smoke hovered over the field hands' cabins as the mammies fried hogback for their menfolks, fixed corn bread for the noonday "packin" meal. Another day like all days.

Justin felt tired. During the last six months he had allowed his affairs to become dangerously entangled. The plantation, the cotton dealings, Chris McClellan, Malvina, Mary Anderson, even little Belle McClellan were all involved in this shapeless mass. His life was a ball of cord, entwined, tangled, and twisted. The time was propitious for self-appraisal and he had initiated the first step in his plans for reorganization by sleeping out the night alone.

Grandfather was so right, he reflected, as he turned to go below, when he took me aside, and told me always to remember that "every pleasure has its poison and every sweet its snare."

Every pleasure . . . Mary Anderson. Of all the stupid mistakes I've ever made, this one heads the list! Flaunting Mary right in front of Chris, knowing that Belle would run straight to Malvina with the news! Prepare yourself for getting down on your knees and begging Malvina to forgive and forget. And little Mary is a bit of a problem too. A note every morning! "My Darling. My Precious.

Those heavenly moments in your arms. My sacrifice for you!" Sacrifice indeed! It's flattering, but a bit naive to think I would believe that I could have inspired her to the performance she gave here in my bedroom on Christmas Eve. She's about as innocent as a female mink.

After the breakfast coffee with the overseers, Justin stood at his usual post near the great circular stone water trough in the center of the paddock, watching the overseers move out with the hands to the fields. The cords in his neck stood out and his lips were squeezed bloodless as he thought about his missing mulatto, Cleo.

Justin's worry was not one concerning a slave who had run away. He had lost slaves before. The problem here was that Cleo had assumed rights which were not hers. She had assumed herself to be a woman.

What to do? Find her first, of course. Then what? Clap her in chains? Mate her to my biggest nigger buck? Sell her to some whoremaster? No. There is wisdom to be gained from Cleo; then temper the wisdom with prudence.

Every pleasure has its poison . . . slavery.

In Vicksburg, during the early part of the week, he had listened to the excited voices, the hysterical words of hope and encouragement.

"Pemberton's got Grant on the run. Grant has been whipped. All the troops north of the city have been withdrawn. The Federal threat to the river has ended. New Orleans will be back in the Confederacy by spring. The last we'll ever see of those nigger lovers."

Excited, back-slapping words.

Words devoid of fact, Justin thought.

The Federal threat to the river had ended, and in the same breath he was informed that there were no supplies arriving from the states south and west of the river. Quinine and saltpeter had ceased coming in from Mexico.

Since before the war, Justin had been in agreement with Chris McClellan. Chris had always maintained, privately, that the war would be a monstrous mistake. All of this talk of secession. These wild dreams of a great new Southern Empire comprised of Mexico, Central America, Texas, and Cuba. "This is fundamentally wrong," Chris confided one afternoon as they sat in the McClellan garden

arbor sipping their drinks. "If anyone should secede it is the North. They'd be better off without us, unless we make some changes. We're trying to hang on to a system of political economy that is dead and outmoded. We should be looking ahead, not back. Our land is worn-out, tired. And so are our methods of farming."

"Yes, but without slaves this land would be worthless," Justin argued.

"I can't agree. There isn't a major county in the world today which bases its economy upon slavery. It's too expensive. Do you realize that there is more slaveless-tilled land in the South than slave-tilled? One twentieth of one per cent of the landowners, less than twenty-five hundred, own one hundred slaves or more?"

"How can we do it? Produce our cotton and still make a profit?" Justin was interested.

"The answer is simple," Chris explained. "Move the mill to the cotton fields. I'm doing it now, in a small way. I've purchased a mill site in Jackson, the machinery is on its way here now from New England. I'm going to operate the first cotton mill in Mississippi. And I'm going to make it pay."

From this day, Chris became a part of Justin's plans. He was convinced that his father-in-law-to-be had reasoned soundly. Whether the war was won or lost he was determined to rid himself of his slaves. He was convinced that the large landowner, once freed of the responsibility of caring for and supporting the old and decrepit slaves, the maintenance of all hands during the slack seasons, and given the right to hire the efficient, fire the shiftless, could put the cotton business on a profitable basis. Then, if the producer owned the means of processing his own produce, the profits would be proportionately higher. Justin had the capital, Chris had the know-how and a mill. The next problem was to interest Chris in the idea of joining forces to expand the cotton-mill business. Late in the first summer of the courtship he had fallen in love with Malvina. This realization brought into being all the precepts of Southern honor he had been taught to believe. Malvina was to be loved and cherished and honored. He had placed her in a niche alone and above any other woman he had ever known. Now what to do? Malvina had first refused his Christmas gift and called off their engagement. Now it seemed she had given his gift away.

Justin paced the confines of his scalehouse office, pausing at his desk to pick up the printed note he had found in his mail on the previous day. He smiled as he reread the mysterious message.

You will be interested in knowing that a certain Arabian saddle horse named Prince, which you gave to a certain unappreciative person, has been given to a stranger.

Signed
The Informer.

"The Informer" had such pretty legs, Justin sighed as his reverie was broken by the appearance of his head overseer.

"Are you ready to go?"

"Yes, let's get it over with. . . ." Justin rose, picked up his riding crop and the two men headed for the stables and their horses.

4

Knute rose from the stool beside Old Bessy and hung the pail of foamy, warm milk on a peg high on the wall beside the barn door, out of the reach of the hungry cats that yowled and rubbed around his legs begging for their breakfast. He walked to the half-open doorway where he could look out through the orchard, across the hillside pasture and down to the cornfields on the bottom land. The quiet trees standing along the river bank behind the field were veiled in a smoky fog.

Today his eyes did not move slowly to the peach trees, to the apples, to the plums, then to the meadow, and on to the field, counting each cherished growing thing as his mind chanted, "This is mine. That is mine." Instead, his eyes drifted back toward the house to watch the lamplighted kitchen window, to wait for the shadowy shape of Cleo as she moved about preparing his breakfast.

Standing in the doorway, his rough, calloused hands biting into the wood of the door, clinging to something secure, Knute wavered, fought with fears that could not be named. The peace of blessed solitude, the comfortable sameness of his daily routine, these things were gone. His heart and his mind now seethed in a torment of doubts and indecision. He must choose a way, and this choice must be his alone. Should Cleo go or should she stay?

He hesitated.

Every morning for as long as he had owned the farm, he had walked with his cows to the lower pasture, inspecting the fences, the trees, the crops. This morning he turned, opened the gate, and as the cattle started down the lane alone, Knute walked toward the house with his pail of milk, the tempo of his steps ever increasing.

"Yo' breakfast's ready." Cleo was at the iron cookstove taking up the fried ham when Knute entered the kitchen.

"You got no other clothes?" Knute asked, noticing Cleo's faded dress as he crossed to the table.

"Jes this'n," she replied, disappointed that her clever pinning, tucking, and folding, which had transformed the shapeless sack-like Mother Hubbard into a clinging, a figure-tight tunic, had gone unnoticed.

"I figured so." He mumbled as he sat down at the table without removing his hat. The habit of years spent alone could not be changed in a day.

"The cow is giving more milk now." Knute cut his slice of ham into squared bite-size pieces. "Ain't you hungry?" He noticed she had prepared only a small slice for herself.

Cleo shook her head and studied her new master with dark fathomless eyes.

They ate in silence and after he had finished, he stood up, walked to the door and turned. "I'll be in at noon."

Celo nodded.

"If you want," he added, "there's some clothes in the trunk up in the bedroom. They belonged to Mom. If you want, you can take one and do something with it. If you want. Watch the road," he warned as he opened the door to go. "If anyone comes up the lane, you hide."

It was near noon when Knute, who had been cutting out unproductive trees in the back of the orchard, saw Phelan and one of his overseers as they turned off the road toward the house. He ran, trying to reach the house before his neighbor. As he opened the yard gate, panting and out of breath, he found Justin and his man standing on the back porch waiting. The door of the kitchen stood open behind them.

"What are you doin' in my house?" Knute growled, glaring up at the pair standing on the top kitchen step. He raised his arm and

was surprised to find he still carried the ax with which he had been trimming the apple trees.

"We thought you were inside," Justin searched Knute's face.

"We knocked and didn't think you heard us," the overseer grinned.

"What are you doin' here?"

"I'm still looking for a runaway slave." Justin's voice was soft and gentle.

"I told you. I ain't seen none."

"I know, but I just thought I'd ask again."

"One of my men says he saw a nigger over here. I didn't know you owned any slaves, Chaffin." It was the overseer who spoke.

"I don't. There ain't no niggers here an' you get out." The knuckles of Knute's hand were red under the skin from the blood which rushed to the fingers, crushing down on the ax handle.

"I saw your horse out in the pasture. The one with the white star on the forehead. The one you claimed was stolen," Justin said.

"It come back. One day. Just by itself," Knute stammered.

"That's the way my slave had better do!" Justin snapped. "Come back! All by herself."

"You better go in the house and eat, Chaffin." The overseer eyed Knute, a bitter smile lurking on his lips. "The ham cookin' in there on the stove is starting to burn."

Knute could see the gray smoke and smell the burning grease from where he stood. He started up the steps but Justin continued to stand in his path.

"Did that ham cook itself, Chaffin?" Justin's face was taut, he spoke in a whisper.

Knute drew back the hand holding the ax and advanced another step toward Justin. "Get out of here."

The leaded butt of a leather-covered whip crashed down on the top of Knute's skull sending him staggering back into the yard. The overseer followed, ready to deliver another blow when Justin called, "Don't." And then to Knute, who crouched on the ground shaking his head, he warned, "If that slave of mine isn't home by tomorrow morning, I'm coming back with the sheriff."

Knute, on his knees, glared like a hurt animal and answered by throwing his ax with all the strength he could muster. Justin

stepped easily aside, allowing the weapon to crash into the side of the house.

"Remember what I said, Chaffin. Tomorrow morning."

"Better have all the fun you can tonight," the overseer leered. Slowly the two men walked across the yard to their horses.

5

Malvina was dreaming through her regular afternoon chess game with Chris when Belle, who had been sitting by the window playing with a kitten, suddenly jumped to her feet and ran upstairs. A knock on the door a moment later revealed the reason for her flying departure.

"Good afternoon, Justin. This is a surprise," Malvina greeted with a half-smile. "Won't you come in and sit down?"

"Take my chair there at the table, Justin," Chris said. "You'll see, there on the board before you, the remains of a game which I have no desire to complete. Excuse me, Malvina. I'm going into the study to read. Pray forgive me, Justin."

"I hope I'm not intruding," Justin questioned, his eyes searching Malvina's face for some clue as to her feelings. "I felt that I had been away from you long enough."

"Oh?" Malvina could scarcely conceal her pride as Justin lowered himself into the chair opposite her. Her intuition had been vindicated, Justin had come to eat humble pie.

"Yes," he continued. "I am still at a loss to explain your strange behavior on Christmas Day." He studied the chessmen as he talked. "When you left for school last fall I assumed that he would be married in the spring, after you returned from school. The fact that you returned earlier than expected did not alter these plans in my mind. Today I am assuming nothing. I have come to again ask you to be my wife." Justin unconsciously moved the queen three squares diagonally to his left, checkmating Malvina's black king.

That man, she raged to herself, has made the one move Daddy could have made to win! Her irritation blocked the meaning of Justin's words from her mind.

Justin rose and stepped to a position around the table and behind Malvina's chair. He bent down placing his lips close to her ear. His hands rested on her bare shoulders. "Malvina, I love you more than anything in all the world," he whispered, kissing her on the neck.

What's wrong with me, she thought. This is the thing for which I planned, the thing I wanted, and here I am angry because he's checkmated my king!

Malvina burst into laughter.

Justin straightened, turned, and walked silently to the window. When Malvina regained control of herself, she turned to see him standing in taut indignation, legs spread, shoulders erect, his hands clenched behind his back.

Malvina crossed to his side.

"I'm sorry," she said, touching him lightly on the shoulder in the hope he would turn and take her in his arms. He did not turn nor did he answer.

"Please, Justin, I don't know what came over me."

When Justin did turn to look down at Malvina, his eyes were snapping with the fire of anger he fought to control.

"Is it so ridiculous? My proposal of marriage?"

"No," Malvina smiled sadly. "No, Justin. It's what I want."

"I don't understand you, Malvina."

"I've given you my answer, Justin. I said, it was what I wanted."

His hands were rough and almost brutal as they grasped her shoulders and pulled her to his body. His lips were hot as they crushed hers.

"Malvina."

"Yes, Justin?" Her lips felt bruised and her heart beat against his chest with such fury that he must know the turmoil that racked her body. If he lets go of me, I shall fall, she thought.

Justin did not let go.

"I love you, Malvina," he whispered fiercely.

She nodded.

"We'll be married in June."

"Just as you say."

His arm was firm and strong as he led her to the sofa in front of the fire. "If I can secure passage we will go to France for our honeymoon."

"I'd like that." Smiling, Malvina fought in vain to regain control.

Belle, who had been spying from the darkness at the top of the stairs, tiptoed down and broke their embrace.

"Oh, excuse me. I didn't know there was anyone here. I was going to the kitchen for some milk."

Justin rose, adjusted his rumpled jacket. "Good afternoon, Belle."

"Did Malvina tell you that Prince has been returned?" Belle addressed Justin but her eyes were studying the designs on the carpet.

I'll murder that girl, thought Malvina. She loved Justin for his reply.

"Yes, she told me," he lied, turning to Malvina. "I must be going now."

"So soon?"

"Yes. I'll see you tomorrow night?"

"Of course. Come for dinner," Malvina replied without thinking.

"I thought we were going into town tomorrow," Belle interrupted from the kitchen door. "I thought you'd invited that handsome Captain Miller to dinner."

Malvina closed her eyes for a moment before she spoke. She needed time to regain control of her temper and to fight down the sickening feeling that filled her. Frantically she sorted through a dozen inane excuses that could not be uttered.

"Belle's right, I had forgotten," she stammered, hating her sister and herself even more. "I did invite a Captain Miller to dinner tomorrow evening. A . . . a friend of Robert's."

"Well then," steel crept back into Justin's eyes and voice. "Perhaps you'd better tell me when we can meet again."

"Any night," she replied eagerly, trying to reassure him.

"Except tomorrow?"

"Come in town and have dinner with us. You'll like Captain Miller."

"Thank you, but I will forego that pleasure," Justin turned and walked to the door. "Good night, Malvina. Good night, Belle."

And he was gone!

Malvina stood facing the closed door, fighting for breath. She dared not turn to face her sister. Her brain was red with hate. Turning, without risking a glance at her sister, she ran from the room. She could hear Belle from somewhere in the distance say, "I'm sorry I said that about tomorrow night."

The following evening, fatigued from a sleepless night on a tear-stained pillow plus a long silent ride into town with Belle, Malvina was in a sorry mood to receive and entertain a guest. She had hoped and expected the captain would be late, so her irritation was increased when, with military punctuality, Alan appeared at the McClellan town house at eight. A servant answered the door and ushered him into the spacious hall.

Twin Chimneys was cruciform with a long staircase leading up through the central structure. Dark paneled doors led into wings on either side of the hallway.

"Who is it, Matty?" Malvina called from the top of the stairs.

"Captain Miller, ma'am."

"Tell him to make himself comfortable. I'll be right down."

"Yes'm." The servant bowed to Captain Miller, "In tyer, suh."

The room was a lofty wainscoted library, rich in dark paneling, fine bindings, and general elegance. A spare, erect, gray-haired man sat in a chair by the window reading. He rose and moved forward to greet Alan as he entered.

"I'm Chris McClellan, Malvina's father," Chris extended a hand of greeting. Alan was impressed by his dignified and soldierly bearing, his quiet demeanor.

"I'm delighted to make your acquaintance, sir. I hope I'm not inconveniencing you tonight." Alan felt ill at ease in his new Confederate dress uniform. He would have been much more comfortable in his greasy buckskins.

"An officer of the Confederacy is always welcome in this house. Sit down, please. First let me pour you some blackberry brandy."

"Thank you, sir."

"You're new here in Vicksburg, I understand," Chris said, after they were seated with their drinks in hand.

"Yes, sir. I'm on detached service from Johnston," Alan replied.

"What does it look like? The military situation?"

"That's hard to say, sir. Bein' just a captain I'm hardly in a position to see the over-all picture, but frankly I don't think things look too good."

"I'm sorry to hear you say this. I'm sorry because I, too, feel the same way." Chris sighed. "Did we suffer many casualties during Sherman's attack at Haines Bluff?"

"We didn't. Sherman lost over two thousand men."

"They suffer all sorts of casualties, yet they return. It was the same at Shiloh. It's a terrible thing. This war."

Alan studied the old man before he ventured his reply, a reply offered as bait. "Let them return. The Yankees can win this war only by exterminating us."

"Your sentiments are noble and as they should be, but they do not alter the fact that the day we fired on Sumter was the darkest day in the history of this nation. Had they only tried to find a compromise!"

"Those Abolitionists wouldn't compromise," Alan egged Chris on.

"They wouldn't fight. Not with bullets. We, on the other hand, had many reasons for fighting, but unfortunately, no cause."

"I don't think the South is alone in that respect," Alan volunteered.

"Again I must disagree. This was so, but not now. Mr. Lincoln has just given the North a cause. The Emancipation Proclamation. The Northerner now has a reason for giving his life on Southern soil. He has a cause."

"And that's just what he will do," a determined feminine voice declared. The men turned to observe Belle who had entered from a side door. "They'll die. It will take seven Yankees to lick one Southerner."

"Have you met my younger daughter, Belle?" Chris addressed Alan.

"Yes. I've had that pleasure. How are you tonight, Miss Belle?" Alan smiled.

Chris, with a benevolent smile, placed his arm around Belle's shoulder. "My little volcano."

Belle turned to study the captain as Malvina made her entrance into the library.

"Good evening, Captain Miller," Malvina managed a smile. "I hardly recognized you in your new uniform."

"The Texas wildcat has been tamed," said Alan smiling.

The dinner was served beautifully; the turkey was delicious. Captain Miller seemed to enjoy his conversation with Chris, and Chris, enjoying the company of a good listener, kept him long over the brandy.

Malvina fought a sick feeling in her stomach. She thought her

pounding head would burst with each gale of laughter or clink of bottle upon glass. Silently she prayed for strength to last out the meal. Secretly she hoped for Alan's immediate departure after dinner.

Why, she thought, must I always want the things I cannot have? Possessing Justin was not enough. No, I must yearn for this stranger, to taunt Justin and . . . court disaster.

"Excuse me, Captain Miller," Malvina interrupted as she rose from the table, "I've a terrible headache, would you think me horribly rude if I asked to be excused?"

Chris and Alan were both standing, offering their condolences, when Matty entered to announce, "Mr. Justin is outside to see Mista Robert, ma'am."

Suddenly the pain eased and she no longer felt faint. "Ask him to come in, Matty."

"I done that, ma'am, but he say no. He wait in the liberry fo' Mista Robert."

"Excuse me," Malvina rushed past Matty. Outside the library door she paused. She was calm and impassive when she stepped into the room to greet Justin. "Good evening, Justin. Won't you join us for coffee and brandy?"

Justin turned to study her face before he spoke. "Thank you, Malvina. Robert asked me to meet him here. I'll wait."

"Please, Justin?" she pleaded.

In silence he pulled a leather case from his pocket, clipped, lighted, and took a long draught from a cigar. Only then did he answer. "I'll wait here." His voice was cold with finality.

Malvina's voice constricted as she matched his icy tones. "I'm sorry I intruded." She turned and walked into the hall without bothering to close the door. There she called so that Justin would hear her, "Captain Miller! Alan! Would you come here, please?"

"Yes?" Alan questioned as he arrived at her side in the hallway. He was puzzled. This was the first time Malvina had used his given name.

"Will you please get my cape? It's on the rack. If you don't mind I'd like to have you take me for a ride. I think the air will help my headache. There is too much cigar smoke in here."

As Alan helped Malvina into her wrap he inspected the tall

Southerner who stood at the far end of the library, wreathed in cigar smoke. The stranger's eyes met Alan's and locked for a moment in open hostility.

"Your friend is throwing daggers in this direction," Alan breathed into her ear as he leaned over to adjust her collar.

"Are you afraid?" Malvina taunted.

"For myself? No. But if he ever says what he's thinking at this moment, I'll be forced to kill him."

This man is serious, Malvina thought. The evenly spaced quiet words had not been spoken in jest. Dear God! What have I done?

They were silent while a stable hand hitched a trotter to the English chaise; Alan helped Malvina into the black single-seater and, at her suggestion, drove to the top of Sky Parlor hill.

"Shall we stop?" Malvina asked. "The lights of the city are so pretty."

Without a word, Alan reined the trotter into a small park-like area beside the road, tied the horse to a tree and assisted Malvina down from the rig. He helped her over the rocks to a huge boulder on the crest of the hill and spreading his coat on the dry grass in the leeward side of the rock, he gently but firmly seated her and took his place at her side.

Below, the river lazed in a hairpin turn, a pencil line of trees marking the black water. Far to the north a pinpoint of light appeared for a moment and then blacked out, as a fireman stoked the boiler on one of the Yankee gunboats anchored above the city.

"What exactly have you accomplished by inviting me to dinner tonight?" It was Alan who finally spoke.

Malvina turned to the man at her side. It was too dark for her to see his face. "Accomplished? What do you mean?"

"You know precisely what I mean."

"I'm sorry."

It was agony, the slowness with which he gathered her into his arms. Agony, because there was nothing she could do, had she had the will to resist. His arm slipped beneath her knees, another around her shoulders and she was lifted from the rock and lowered to where her back and head reclined upon his gray coat. His arms enfolded her and it seemed years before his lips touched hers. Touched, descending, erasing all conscious thought. His hand slipped from her

shoulder and her body ached for its return. Blessed relief when at last it came to rest, cupping her breast. He released her lips only to whisper, "I love you, Malvina."

Her lips answered frantically by seeking his. She felt his hand cradling her breast, his fingers caressing in a gentle kiss.

"Alan. Please don't. Please." Her plaintive whisper was agonized and naked.

There was a moment of apprehension as she waited. Then, he gently removed his hand. He kissed her tenderly on the lips and whispered, "I was beginning to be afraid that you didn't love me, Malvina. You waited so long."

He was a good man. This man. And what have I done? To him, to Justin.

"I'm so awful, Alan," Malvina sobbed.

"Malvina. When I said I loved you, these were words I've never said before in all my life. I opened my lips and my heart said—Malvina, I love you."

"Take me home, Alan. Please."

"Wait." Alan continued his urgent whisper. "Perhaps I should ask your forgiveness for thrusting myself upon you at a time when your thoughts and heart were with someone else. But I cannot help myself; I shall take every opportunity to repeat—Malvina, I love you."

"I . . . I don't know." Malvina arose, sobbing. "What have I done?" She stumbled through the darkness toward the chaise. "What have I done?"

6

Chris and Belle had joined Justin in the library to wait until Robert arrived. Belle was at first delighted with this opportunity to be with Justin, but she soon became fidgety and longed for Robert to come. He finally appeared, all apologies for "official duties at headquarters."

"Where's Vina?" Robert blurted.

"She went riding with Captain Miller," Belle quickly volunteered, watching Justin.

"Miller? Who's Captain Miller?" he asked.

Justin interrupted. "You sent word that you wanted to see me tonight."

Robert led Justin into the sitting room across the hall, where he carefully drew the drapes and turned the large brass key in the paneled door before addressing Justin. "I came across some information that should prove useful to you, but I must be careful."

"Yes?"

"I met a man from England the other evening at the hotel. A man named James McPherson. He's here on a secret mission to buy cotton."

"He shouldn't have any trouble buying all he needs." Justin eyed the young captain without enthusiasm. The only reason he had answered Robert's request for this cloak-and-dagger meeting was that it gave him an excuse to see Malvina.

"Well, you see he had a special problem. He wants to buy from one supplier that can give him all the cotton he needs and at the same time can help him move it through the blockade."

"How can I do that?" Justin frowned.

"You're about the only planter I could think of who has enough teams and wagons to move any large amount of cotton."

"To Charleston?"

"No. To the river. Somewhere up along the Yazoo, north of Vicksburg."

Justin studied the youngster before he replied. He was sure he could sniff the faint odor of swindle. "When did you say you met this McPherson?"

"The other night. Monday night, I think."

"And he's from England?"

"Yes, sir. He showed me his papers."

"What do you get out of this?"

"Nothing," Robert hastened to assure him. "You being my friend, I thought it was an opportunity for you to move all that cotton you've got stored in the warehouse at Edwards Depot."

"I see. And he's willing to buy, based on delivery at some landing on the Yazoo? This doesn't explain your interest in the deal."

"Well," Robert hesitated. "He did promise to let me use one of his riding horses, if I could put him next to someone that could help him out. I need a spare mount now and he has four in the stables. I was admiring them and . . ."

Now he had the answer. "When can I meet this McPherson?" Justin interrupted.

"Any time you say. I'll see him in the morning at the hotel."

"Good. Tell him to come to my place Saturday evening. After dark."

7

Tod Chaffin sat at the desk in his book-strewn room toying with a pen and idly drawing meticulously shaded letters on a precious sheet of paper. Tod reasoned that a letter to Miss Loulie Schmidt would suffice to terminate an affair which had been born in a moment of carelessness and was growing into monstrous proportions. He had now been at the desk for over two hours without writing a word. His accomplishments to date consisted of a page filled with beautifully executed letter "S's." In his mind he had also written a dozen notes to his delightful French dinner companion, Suzanne La Fevre.

Tod was standing precariously on the first step of the very long approach which leads to the understanding of women. Having for the first time in his life assumed the role of the bold ravisher, he now carried the unwanted weighty load of responsibility and retribution for his deed. Loulie, the ravished, was not about to let him forget this accountability. Daily she pressed her advantage, appearing at his door at all hours, at the quarters, on the street. Earlier in the evening she had come to his room with a gift; a tiny bag of coffee which her father, Herr Schmidt, had obtained somewhere. Once in his room and comfortably curled on his couch, Loulie had directed the conversation to painfully embarrassing topics.

"Tod," she had asked with shattering directness, "now that your're a lieutenant, how much money do you make?"

"I haven't been paid yet, but I think about one hundred dollars," Tod replied.

"That's a lot better'n thirty for teachin' school, ain't it?" Loulie mused and then continued her interrogation. "When you get married, where would you like to live?"

"I haven't thought about it, Loulie," Tod stammered.

"I have, a lot. Ever since that other night. You know. Do you

think I was awful? Lettin' you do that to me? 'Course I couldn't really help myself, not after all those drinks. I never let anybody do that before, but I'm glad it was you. You were a naughty boy, you know that, don't you, Tod?"

Tod held his head in shame.

"If I hadn't loved you, right from the very start, I wouldn't have done it."

Seating himself beside Loulie and placing his arms around her, in an effort to assuage her fragile feelings, Tod whispered in her ear. "You were my first too."

Loulie almost made the mistake of blurting out that the artlessness of his lovemaking made her aware of this. Instead she chose to put her lips into use with a silent kiss of surrender.

The choking feeling which welled up in his pounding chest, the physical response he felt toward the warmth and softness of this girl beside him were too strong to resist. Tod relaxed on the couch and pulled the girl to him.

"We can't here," Loulie whispered as she pulled away to avoid further wrinkles in her dress. "Real soon though, I don't want Paw to know and, besides, we should wait."

"For what?"

"I don't think we should. Not unless . . . we're married." Loulie whispered, her head bowed demurely. As she posed, her eyes inspected the scuffed tips of her white canvas shoes; she wondered where she could get some chalk whitening.

"Of course," Tod stammered. "You're absolutely right."

"That we should wait 'till we're married?" Loulie asked hopefully.

"Oh, no. I meant. . . ." Tod hesitated, trying to organize his thoughts.

"That we should do it and then go get married?" Loulie offered helpfully.

"No," Tod replied in desperation. "I meant that we were unwise, the other night . . . at the party."

"Oh." Loulie thought about the unwise act and, then for some mysterious reason, announced that she had to leave immediately.

"Good night, Loulie," Tod said as he eagerly led her to the door. "I'll see you real soon."

"Yeah," Loulie nodded in positive agreement, and, as an after-

thought invited, "You can give me a stand-up good-night kiss if you want."

Somewhere, far in the distance, a cannon boomed and then boomed again. Tod huddled lower in his rifle pit as each shell came swooping over his head screaming, "Tod, Tod, Tod! Let me in! Let me into your body where I can rip and tear."

The crash of the door slamming back against the wall under the weight of Knute's shoulder brought consciousness to Tod. Sitting upright on his couch, he stared at his wild-eyed brother.

"Knute! What are you doing here?" Tod asked as Knute staggered across the room and sat down on the chair by the desk. Instead of replying the huge man stared at the wall.

The fatigue in Knute's grizzled face was accentuated by his sagging lips and shaggy eyebrows. He peered at Tod with the frantic eyes of a hurt and hunted animal. "What am I going to do with her, Tod?" he cried plaintively.

"Do with whom? What are you talking about?"

"Her. Cleo," and his eyes drifted back to the wall.

"What in the devil is the matter with you? Who is Cleo?"

"Phelan's slave. She's been hidin' at the farm, and now he's going to get the sheriff and take her."

"Phelan's slave? At the farm?" This was beyond belief. "For how long?"

"Since the day you came back to Vicksburg."

"All of this time? She's been with you?"

Knute nodded. "I gave her Mom's clothes. Was that the right thing to do, Tod?"

"If she's Phelan's nigger, then give her back."

A film of hate closed over Knute's eyes as he shook his craggy head.

Tod tried to read the answer in Knute's pleading eyes. "You want to hide her? Is that it?"

"Where is this girl?" Tod paced back and forth trying to think.

"Outside, in my wagon. Covered up in some straw in the bottom."

"Go bring her in."

Knute rose and lumbered out of the room.

Cleo walked into the room, moving with the grace of a jungle

cat, serene, calm, calculating, her long black hair hanging in waves down below her shoulders. Knute trailed along behind, busily brushing bits of straw and chaff from her shawl with his hamlike hands.

"Cleo. This is Tod."

Uncertain of what was expected of him Tod looked into her eyes and, fearing the things he saw, nodded an embarrassed greeting.

Cleo, head erect, chin held high, met Tod's nervous eyes with an unwavering gaze.

Turning to Knute, Tod said, "You stay here with Cleo. I'll go get someone who can help you, I think."

8

It was five o'clock in the gray of dawn before Tod could locate Piney Pucket at the noncommissioned officers' quarters.

"Pucket, you're wanted downstairs in the orderly room," a runner called to the sleeping Piney.

"Who wants me?" Piney snarled from his cot as his mind raced back over the night's poker game trying to think who might have detected the markings on the cards he had used to take six hundred dollars.

"I don't know. Some lieutenant's down there asking for you."

Piney relaxed and climbed back into his uniform.

I hope to God we're not going back out to the fortifications, he thought.

"Piney," Tod whispered, when they were outside on the street, "I need some help. Rather my brother does. There's a girl he wants to hide for a few days. Do you know of some place where we could keep her? She's a Negro."

In his innocence, Tod had turned to his wordly aide, and in all Vicksburg, no one was better qualified for finding shelter for homeless girls than Piney. In Big Beulah's loving-armed fortress and palace of pleasure, Piney had served honorably as her chief recruiting sergeant.

"Maybe," Piney ventured. In all dealings with flesh, the little corporal had learned that caution and reluctance were valuable tools.

He employed the tactics used by the small-loan bank intent upon extracting stiffer terms and steeper rates of interest. Take it easy. Play it slow and they'll give you the moon, if they are desperate.

"I'll do anything you ask, if you can help me out," Tod pleaded.

"I don't know. It's risky business, hiding out slaves."

Tod agreed. "I hate to ask you, but I don't know what else to do."

"If I do anything I'll want my sergeant's stripes."

Tod was disappointed and hurt to discover this greed in what he thought was a loyal and trusted friend. The hour was too late and the situation too desperate to argue.

"Where is this girl now?" Piney asked.

"In my room, over at the officers' quarters."

Oh, oh. Piney thought this over. He's got himself in a corner. Come daylight and Lieutenant Chaffin is going to be in bad trouble. "When I said sergeant's stripes, I meant First Sergeant."

"That's impossible." Tod was shocked at Piney's audacity. "How could I get you such a rating?"

"This is for you to figure out, Lieutenant." Piney liked his lieutenant, admired his courage, and felt a bit embarrassed at having to make these stringent demands. It was regrettable, but Piney was practical, recognizing the fickle whims of the army and of war. Today's golden goose can be a dead duck tomorrow. Eat your golden egg today, let tomorrow take care of itself.

Streaks of light were appearing in the eastern sky. The time was late.

"I'll tell you what," Tod said. "I'll put through for a sergeant's rating tomorrow. But First Sergeant! I'll have to see people. I'll need time."

"One week?"

"All right. One week."

"I hate to be like this, Lieutenant," Piney excused himself, "but you know yourself what the penalty is. Helpin' a runaway slave."

On her cushioned, high-stool throne at the end of the bar and behind the cash box, Big Beulah having surveyed the few remaining drinkers in her front barroom and decided they were drinkers, not lovers, was counting the night's receipts and making ready to turn

her post over to her second in command, when Piney came slipping in through the back entrance.

"Piney!" she bellowed, and her deep-voiced greeting caused one tipsy customer to toss his drink down the front of his stained shirt. "Sam!" she yelled to her chief bartender, "set 'em up for everyone. Drinks on the house for Corporal Piney Pucket."

Piney managed a weak smile in return for the bleary eyes and dirty faces turning his way in recognition. "Sergeant Pucket, Mom," he said as he struggled to extract himself from the smothering arms of his mother. "They promoted me tonight."

Big Beulah's lips trembled as prideful tears cut ravines through the rouged spots on her fat cheeks.

"And," Piney continued, after he was out of her arms and far enough away to insure safety, "by this time next week I'll be a First Sergeant."

"Champagne for everybody!" Beulah yelled through her tears of joy. "Lock up the cash box, Sam. We're havin' a party."

Piney's shoulders ached from the congratulations the clientele pounded on his shoulders. When he was able to extract himself from the thirsty and appreciative well-wishers, he secured Beulah by the arm and led her into the back kitchen.

"Whatcha leavin' the party for?" Beulah questioned after they were safely in the dimly lighted kitchen.

"I've got somethin' I want you to take care of," Piney said and her eyes turned to the kitchen table where he pointed.

Cleo and Big Beulah inspected one another in guarded silence. Instinctively each knew all there was to know about the other.

5

As the Vicksburg to Jackson train came laboring into the Jackson station amid a cloud of cinders and pine wood smoke, Malvina, from her seat by the coach window, saw David standing in back of the crowd which had gathered on the station platform.

Malvina was amused at the way David fussed with her luggage and fluttered around her like a setting hen with one chick. Oh, dear, she thought, trying to remember precisely what she had written in her letter informing her brother that she was coming to Jackson for an extended visit. Do you suppose David thinks I am in trouble?

"David," she said impulsively as they were walking to the hotel. "I know this visit is unexpected but I was afraid I might explode, if I didn't get away. I had to escape the scene of my misdeeds. I needed to be alone."

"Malvina! What have you done?" David stopped in the middle of the walk, blocking his sister's path.

"I haven't committed any crime or disgraced myself," she laughed. "I came to see you because I felt that you were the only person in whom I could find a little understanding. I knew that you would let me alone while I worked out the answer. Please don't worry about me. I'm not ill. I just want to be alone."

"Of course, Malvina," he said with relief. "Whatever you say."

David had meant well when he had used his influence and secured a room for Malvina at the Bowman Hotel. The management of the hostelry apologized for the room, placing the blame for the lack of suitable accommodations on the Legislature which was in session, the military, and the war. None of these excuses could explain its dreariness. One sleepless night spent contemplating the sagging plaster directly over her bed was enough to force Malvina to abandon her plans for a week of solitude and flee to her Academy friend, Josephine Renshaw's, family home.

The Renshaws, one of Jackson's oldest and finest families, were delightful hosts, and Josephine took particular pains to see that Malvina was made to feel at home.

The responsibilities imposed upon the "better families" by their communities and the army were sometimes almost overpowering. It was a burdensome load which had to be shared if the South was to continue with its way of life. The rights and privileges enjoyed by those of property carried with them obligations which must be met cheerfully and willingly. Malvina joined Josephine and her friends in their merry-go-round of activities.

> *Rush, hurry, run. Forget about everything and everyone. Fill the mind with idle talk, add a touch of laughter and stir the whole with a feverish motion of "do good." No time for Justin or for Alan or for self. Join in the fun. Around and around we go.*

"We must hurry over to help attend the canteen at the railroad station. Four hundred infantrymen are passing through on their way to Vicksburg."

Tough, wiry veterans, laughing at their own bare feet and ragged clothes, others with wan faces peering through train windows, weak, hungry and cold; dirty and verminous.

Back to the station to meet another troop train.

The Renshaws had been asked to provide food for the officers on board the train. The enlisted men could eat the biscuits and tea at the canteen. Josephine and Malvina loaded the servants into the carriages and rode with them on the trip to the station.

"And they looked so nice, our white-jacketed Negroes, as they walked along the station platform with our huge silver trays, set with all our best porcelain, linens, and sterling," Josephine told her parents about the event, later that night at dinner. "The flowers were nice too. I'm so glad we thought about the flowers."

THE NEXT MORNING

Visit the sick and wounded.

The pestilence house in the cold cotton warehouse north of town.

"Ladies sure don't come visitin' here much, ma'am." The man was withered and shriveled away, skin hard and sallow, his lips white and dry. A man crumbling with death. "Sure wish you didn't have to wear that there white cloth over your mouth and nose. I'll bet you're right purty, ma'am."

"Ladies come once, but never again." This man's eyes were lusterless. "Camp fever they call it. It's a funny thing, but did you know that the niggers never catch it?" For some reason this fact gave him stature; it was important to die of a disease which killed only the superior race.

Typhus!

AND THE NEXT

"Today we're going to visit the legislature. This will be fun. Uncle Ward is in the Senate and Cousin Rob is a Representative. Won't they be surprised when we appear in the gallery?" Josephine was excited.

It matches my mood, Malvina thought, this somber building,

standing here in the shaded square. A bit faded, but noble. The Capitol of our glorious state.

The noise of the legislative session, in progress in the chambers above, reached their ears as they climbed the spiral staircase and walked through the narrow hall leading into the Senate Chamber.

The president of the Senate sat on a high platform occupying the recess in the wall at the far end of the room. Only his head and shoulders were visible; the rest of him was hidden from vulgar view by a mahogany pulpit. On the wall, behind the president, hung a picture of United States Senator George Poindexter and a framed but faded copy of the Declaration of Independence.

The chamber itself was filled today. Members were sitting with chairs tilted back against the wall, and a few rocked to and fro in rocking chairs. Two or three members were eating apples, three or four smoked cigars, and dozens inspected their feet resting upon the desks before them.

Uncle Ward was completing his address . . .

". . . and the victorious armies of the South must punish the North. Her chief cities should be seized and reduced to ashes, her armies scattered, her states subjected and her people compelled to defray the expenses of a war. They should pay, to each and every one of our sons, the sum of one hundred dollars for every month they have been forced to fight for our honor. Gentlemen, this would be but token compensation for the fearless and invincible race of warriors, rivaling any that ever followed the standards of Alexander, or Caesar, or Napoleon. And in conclusion, I say, let, then, the lightnings of the nation's wrath scathe our foul oppressors. Let the thunderbolts of war be hurled back upon our dastardly invaders until the recognition of Southern Independence shall be extorted from the reluctant North and terms of peace be dictated by a victorious Southern army at New York or Chicago."

AND ANOTHER DAY

We meet at the church, each one with a covered dish, our needles, and our silver thimbles. The Thursday Ladies' Bandage Company.

"What did you send John Thomas for Christmas, Rebecca?"

"A pair of slippers. Ah embroidered them myself."

"I sent my Tom a needlebook and a pincushion. He was sayin' the hardest job he has to do is keepin' his uniform in repair."

And the knitting needles clicked and the socks grew in size.

"What are you crocheting, dear?"

"A gentleman's mitt. It covers just the back of the hand and the palm. See? There are no fingers. Leaves them free for the trigger on the gun or the pistol."

"How, darling? How are you doing it?"

"Well, you start with the filoselle and make a chain of forty-seven stitches, then miss the last stitch, work down the chain with sixteen plain crochet stitches, then make one chain, miss one, and work one plain for fifteen times. It's very simple."

THE DAY BEFORE THE BALL

Fast day. The food we save will go to feed our noble boys. For dinner we'll have chicken potpie with brandy cream for dessert, in the afternoon an opportunity to mend and press our dresses for the Military Ball tomorrow evening.

Patch, repair, and mend. Make do with what we have. Brazen new dresses composed from the best parts of two old gowns. Sleeves of one color, waists of another. Victory dresses. Priceless possessions now, these dresses hanging in a row. The breakfast dress of rose cassimere and the afternoon dress of white cassimere and the dinner dress of violet-colored silk and the carriage dress of gray velvet and the evening dress of striped foulard.

"My wardrobe is still incomplete," said Malvina wryly to herself. "I need a dress of white satin. A wedding dress."

Late in the afternoon, Malvina donned a braided walking dress and with her face hidden in a hooded cape walked the streets of Jackson asking herself the questions she had so desperately avoided in the past few days.

Where are you going, Malvina?

Walking . . . in mental circles. It's very painful too. Frustrating, because the labyrinth of paths and lanes always leads back to the point from which I started. Justin and our marriage. Even if I didn't love Justin, I should go to him and explain my childish reasons for giving his gift to a stranger.

Or is it because you *do* love Alan?

I don't know. I don't know. How could I love someone I have known for only a few hours? I only know that I had every right to run away until I know my own mind.

Clickety, clickety, clack. Hard little heels clattering over a board sidewalk.

Late in the afternoon of the Military Ball at the armory, Malvina and Josephine had both concluded they would never be dressed in time, even if the ball were to be held on the following evening.

"I sometimes wonder," Malvina said to Josephine, as she sat at the dressing table in her robe, hair still damp from the steam of her bath, "why we girls go to all this trouble? Bathing, primping, combing and curling? And just to please some simple-minded man."

"That is the reason," the pantaletted Josephine replied, her back modestly turned to her friend as she struggled into her camisole. "They're simple-minded. If they were intelligent, they would then see our pure, true, and inner beauty without this covering of paint, powder, frills, and jewels." Josephine stood contemplating the instrument of torture which her maid, Cory, had laid out on the bed. Her stays, whaleboned and steel-filled. "I'll help you into yours if you'll squeeze me into mine."

"Your what?" Malvina laughed.

"My iron maiden."

"Thank goodness for my corselet," Malvina laughed as she braced one knee in the center of Josephine's back and pulled on the long leather lacings.

"Please, not so tight, Malvina," Josephine pleaded. "I don't care if I do spill all over the dance floor tonight."

Malvina's own tiny black velvet French corset fitted around her waist and the upper part of her hips to form a miniature island of black amid a sea of white linen. "You should get a corselet, like mine."

"Mama won't let me," Josephine pouted. "It's the same with hoops. She makes me put on seven petticoats."

"Why so many, for heaven sakes?"

"Mamma says," Josephine imitated her mother's prim manner of speaking, "a young lady must wear enough petticoats to completely conceal the outline of her body."

Malvina smiled as she donned her chemise and a single petticoat.

Perhaps, she thought, there are advantages, being the eldest daughter in a motherless family. "Help me with my necklace, will you, Josephine?"

"Is this the one your daddy brought from France?" Josephine asked and without waiting for a reply, "It's blue, to match your dress."

Malvina smiled sadly as she walked to the mirror for a final bit of grooming. "It's blue to match my mood." The sapphire nestled into the hollow of her slender white throat.

"We should have a simply wonderful time tonight. I hear tell all of General Johnston's staff will be there," Josephine bubbled.

"Oh?" Malvina frowned. Suppose Alan should be there? No. That was impossible. He was in Vicksburg. Still . . . Her hand trembled as she wound the bandelet around her head, a narrow band of white velvet embroidered in blue and white stones, tying it in the back, allowing the ribbons to terminate in flowing ends. Her soft, shimmering black hair curled in and around the white ribbon.

"Alan! Justin! I must not allow myself to think. Why did I ever . . . ?" She turned to Josephine, her voice trembling, "Please. Let's hurry. I want to dance forever."

The Renshaws and their guests, fashionably late, entered the battle-flagged armory to take over their chairs in the section of reserved seats set aside for Jackson's first families. It was now ten o'clock and the ball was in full swing.

The Festival, planned and arranged for the purpose of raising funds for Jackson's military charities, was a combined carnival and ball. The walls of the armory were lined with money-raising booths, picture galleries, needlework bazaars, food and refreshment stands, all operated by various church groups and social circles.

Malvina and Josephine, after having paid their social amenities to the Festival committee, were quickly whisked away to the dance floor by two young uniformed acquaintances of Josephine. The orchestra was playing a lively quadrille as they joined the dancing squares upon the floor.

2

In the sheltering shadows of a flag-draped post Alan Miller stood watching Malvina dance with a young colonel. The mission upon which he was now engaged was not unlike the one which had occupied his time during the last ten days: watching for an opportunity to speak to Malvina alone was, in some respects, as difficult as spying upon and mapping the defenses of Vicksburg.

Alan's Jackson trip, scheduled after he had completed his Vicksburg assignment, had been a welcome surprise after he had learned from a McClellan housemaid that "Miss Vina's gone down ter Jackson an ain't 'spected back fo' weeks mayhaps."

The mapping of the Vicksburg defenses had been relatively easy. General Pemberton, with an engineer's natural thoroughness, had facilitated his task by maintaining an accurate and detailed sketch map of the Vicksburg defenses on the wall of his War Room. To gain access to this room had been Alan's first job.

After a few calls, he had learned that the Headquarters Duty Officer, a Captain Sparks, was a gregarious individual with a fondness for whisky. Limiting his visits to the early morning hours when the headquarters were deserted, Alan would report in with a bottle of bourbon tucked away somewhere on his person and, as they sat spinning tales, talking about women, liquor, war, Alan carefully memorized the defense positions, one section at a time. One week later, Alan had his memory map on fresh sheets of mapping paper. The summons and pick-up occurred at three o'clock in the morning, a few days later.

"Mista Alan Miller!" A voice calling outside his room had awakened him from a sound sleep. "Got a message fo' Mista Alan Miller," the voice said.

Rising, Alan found a small Negro boy, cap in hand, standing in the hallway outside his room.

"A man say to say to you . . . a friend in need am a friend . . . Ah don't know . . . Ah forgot," the boy admitted as his memory failed.

"A friend in need is a friend indeed!" Alan quickly donned his uniform and followed the boy.

The rendezvous was a river-front bar. The Negro lad pointed out a dark bewhiskered river boatman seated at one of the tables on the far side of the room. "Dar him dere."

"What's the name of this tavern?" Alan asked the boy.

"Big Beulah's, suh," and the boy, hat still in hand, backed away into the darkness.

Now, from his vantage point at the end of the ballroom, Alan watched Malvina and marveled at her beauty. He scrutinized the cool, impersonal way she treated her partner of the dance. The other girls, crossing his line of vision, reflected happiness, seductiveness, dreaminess. Malvina danced in white marble perfection. No color shone in her cheeks, no fire blazed in her cool, secret, almond-shaped eyes.

Alan watched as she completed the dance and hastened to the section reserved for the festival sponsors.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Renshaw," Malvina said as she picked up and donned her cape. "The air and smoke have given me a headache. I'm going outside for a moment."

Without waiting for a reply, Malvina turned and made her way out through the rear doors of the armory. She had walked to the low balustrade and was standing looking out into the darkness of the parade ground when she heard a door open and close behind her. She did not turn until she heard the measured, booted steps of a man approaching. The shadowy figure moved softly through the half-light directly to her side before he stopped and whispered, "Malvina."

A little sob broke from her lips, "Alan!"

He enfolded her in his arms, pressing kisses upon her face and hair and lips—kisses so wild that they fell on her neck and shoulders as she held him tightly to her bosom.

"Why?" he whispered. "Why did you run away?"

"Oh, darling, darling. I tried. I ran away and tried to think of everything but you."

He pressed away her fears with a lingering kiss.

With a little moan of happiness she cried, "Take me away, Alan. Take me right now."

She felt his momentary hesitation and answered his thought, "We'll both ride your mount."

Malvina rode, half in the saddle and half on Alan's lap, her arms wound tightly around his neck as he guided his horse with one hand through the streets of Jackson. He held her with one arm, pulling her close to him.

In silence they rode into the country.

The crunch of hooves upon the earth, the creaking of the saddle leather, the thump of Alan's heart matched the cadenced rhythm of their slow trip along the darkened road.

At the end of the second mile, just as she was beginning to feel the ache in her arms from clinging so tightly, Alan reined to a halt in front of a tiny, rough-hewn building. He lifted her into his arms and slipped off his horse, cradling her as he would a child. A faint light, shining from one window, penciled a path through the darkness to the door where he finally lowered her feet to the ground. He opened the door to reveal the interior of a roadside inn. A fire slumbered in the stone fireplace, a candle flickered on the tiny back bar on the opposite side of the room.

"I stopped here the other day, when I came through from Vicksburg," said Alan.

A grimy man appeared from a room somewhere in the rear, produced a bottle of muscadine wine upon Alan's order, and vanished again into the darkness. They were alone.

Malvina sat down on a deerskin-covered settee facing the fireplace as Alan jousted the huge backlog in the hearth with a pair of tongs and added a few small logs to the fore-fire. As the flames blazed up, they raised their glasses in a silent toast.

Smiling he put her glass down in front of the glowing fire. "Good evening, Malvina," he said softly.

Malvina studied his calm, handsome face, his brown shoulder-length hair. "Who are you?" she said slowly. "You who call yourself Alan Miller?"

"A scoundrel. A blackguard and a man who dearly loves you." He moved to take her in his arms again.

"No," Malvina shook her head. "Finish your wine and talk to me, you . . . whoever you are."

Humbly he placed his head on her breast. "I love you, Malvina," he said kissing her softly.

"I love you too, Alan." She whispered as he raised his lips to

hers again. She felt the fierce beating of his heart and the kiss continued, unending.

"Please, Alan, please be reasonable," but her words were lost, drowned with another kiss.

"Who are you? This strange man I've given my heart to?" Malvina asked later, arms upraised as she stood in front of the fireplace catching back her hair.

Alan studied the girl before him, her hair a glowing halo around her face, her lips darkened from his kisses. "I'm nobody," he said smiling, "a soldier. My father was in politics and was moderately honest."

"Where? Where are you from? Where were you born?"

"After an uneventful childhood and some schooling," Alan continued, ignoring her question, "my father secured an appointment for me at West Point."

"I thought so," Malvina laughed. "I've been suspicious from the very first time I met you."

"Of what?"

"Of your carefully rehearsed role of the bumpkin."

"Oh, that I am," Alan assured her. "I was, without a doubt, the Academy's worst student of military arts and sciences. I was much less interested in Wellington and the lessons learned at Austerlitz than I was in Emerson and Byron and Keats, and you can imagine how that went down at the Point."

Malvina laughed in sheer delight. "And the warrior put down the sword and took up the pen?"

"No. But after two years of suffering military discipline, I ran away. Went out West. I got a job scouting for the U. S. Army in Colorado and Wyoming, until this affair began."

"Oh, Alan, I'm so happy." Malvina sat at Alan's feet and clasped his knees.

He smiled down at her. "I feel miserable. Why are you so happy?"

"Because of the things you've said about yourself. You're what I've always wanted, Alan."

"An irresponsible boy? Perhaps . . ." He spoke slowly. "Wait, Malvina. Wait until you hear all of my story."

"There's more?" She laughed. "What is it? A wife and ten children in Austin?"

"No. I wish it were that simple. It has to do with the war. There is a war going on. Right this very minute."

"Is that all?" Malvina smiled with relief. "Tonight, let's keep the war right where it belongs. On the battlefields in far-off places."

Alan's fingers explored the line of Malvina's face, caressing, memorizing its beauty. Impulsively he reached down and lifted her into his arms. "I love you, Malvina. Remember. I've never said these words to another woman before."

"I love you, my darling." This time it was Malvina who sought and found his lips.

Was it minutes or hours or even days later? Only the proprietor of the tavern knew. He coughed and hesitantly appeared at last with an exorbitant bill for the wine. The fire had burned down to a bed of glowing embers, and Malvina knew it was long after midnight. Alan paid and they departed in silence.

"Let's ride until tomorrow. Until forever," Malvina whispered after she was settled in Alan's arms once again and the sleepy gelding moved slowly into the road. "I don't want to go back, ever."

"I know," he said gently, "but this time you're not leaving me. I'll be with you again, tomorrow."

"Not tomorrow. Today. It's already today. Tomorrow, too, and the tomorrow after tomorrow. Forever."

"Forever?" His voice was a question.

"What do you suppose the Renshaws must think? They'll be so worried. And poor David. He'll think I've been captured and carried away by some horrible Yankee." Malvina dismissed her worries, snuggling close inside Alan's rain cape.

3

Big Beulah was not on her behind-the-cash-box stool tonight. One of the older girls, Effie, was seated on the end-of-the-bar observation post, handing out towels and making collections. Beulah was uptown closeted with the Provost Marshal and several of his lieutenants at the Confederate Army headquarters.

Beulah's interest in the military, or rather the military's interest

in Beulah, had begun earlier in the week. Tuesday evening to be exact.

In addition to performing the duties of proprietress, hostess, and cashier, Beulah also served as production or traffic manager of the establishment. From her stool she would assess the crowd, sorting the drinkers from the lovers, determining the hour-by-hour availability of supply and demand like an army logistics expert. This elevated position also enabled her to keep a sharp eye out for various nefarious deals which were always transpiring at the tables. The water front was the headquarters for those engaged in infamy, and Beulah managed to make a tidy sum each month as a silent third party. In the role of an attorney she witnessed arguments, acted as go-between, made collections, held deferred payments, all for a modest fee—usually twenty per cent.

On this particular Tuesday evening she had spotted the stranger sitting alone at one of the back tables. He appeared to be a riverman. Doubtless the captain or owner of a small boat. He drank, kept an eye on the door, and brushed aside the various girls Beulah sent out through the room periodically on solicitous missions.

Beulah didn't cotton to strangers. New patrons, if they wanted to assure themselves of a white girl and Beulah's blessings, always came, for the first time, with a regular.

When a tall young captain dressed in Confederate gray entered and joined the stranger, Beulah knew there was trouble afoot.

Early in the war Beulah had been forced to make the choice as to whether she should solicit her trade among the river-front crowd and enlisted men, or the uptowners and the army officers. The two groups, like oil and water, would not mix. Beulah chose the river-front crowd. They were big spenders, and seldom complained about dirty linens, congestion in the halls upstairs, or waiting in line. The better-educated uptown sports brought with them entertainment demands which shocked Beulah's sense of propriety. Her girls were all "good girls" and she was determined to keep them this way.

The handsome army captain received her full attention. She noted the leather folder he carried in his hand and that when he left, after taking one polite sip of his drink, the folder remained on the table with the riverman.

"Sam," she whispered, "fix up an extra strong drink, a Special, and send it over to the riverman there in the corner. Tell him it's on the house." Sam emptied a double envelope of white powder into a glass of whisky.

Stiffs were always carried out of Big Beulah's through the back door. This was another inviolate rule. "Drunks give a house a bad name. Some of my customers are good Southern Baptists and they don't wanna be seen associatin' with rum pots." Despite this stony attitude, Beulah could not bear seeing anyone tossed into the back alley. The inebriates were always laid out in neat rows along the far side of the unused kitchen where they could sleep off their "snootfuls" and depart at will. Therefore it was not an unusual sight when the riverman slowly slumped down in his chair and Sam dragged him out into the kitchen. The excitement along the bar was caused by Big Beulah's vacating the throne to follow the pair.

One look at the carefully drawn maps inside the stranger's leather folder was enough to convince Beulah that something important was afoot. As a true daughter of the Confederacy and mother of a "First Sergeant-to-be," Beulah had made the five-block trek up to the Provost Marshal's office with Alan Miller's carefully copied maps of the Vicksburg defenses.

Tonight's visit to the Provost Marshal's office, her second trip uptown, was at the request of the investigating officer assigned to trace down the imprisoned and silent riverman's accomplice who had delivered the map-filled folder to her place of business.

"And this is all you can recall, Mrs . . ." The lieutenant hesitated.

"Uh . . . Pucket." Beulah nodded. She was nervous about using Piney's assumed name, but wanted to avoid the long, complicated explanation concerning her true name—Beulah Gossling Kittoe Adams Buck.

"Now. . . . This courier you described was a captain, beardless, wore his hair long and . . ." The officer who was reading down the notes he had taken hesitated. "Uh . . . he was as handsome as a speckled pup?"

Beulah nodded in solemn agreement, "That's the way one of my girls described him."

"Thank you, Mrs. Pucket."

"Uh," Beulah paused, backed toward the door, "do you happen to know my son Piney? He's a sergeant."

"I'm afraid I haven't had the pleasure," the lieutenant said. "Good night, Mrs. Pucket. We are greatly indebted to you. Your vigilance has been of untold service to the Confederacy."

"Thank you, sir. Tweren't nothin', I'm sure." The flustered Beulah bowed. "If I see anything else that don't look right and proper, I'll sure let you know."

"You do that, Mrs. Pucket."

4

When word reached General Grant at Bear Creek, Mississippi (twenty miles north of Vicksburg), that ex-Congressman, now General McClernand, had his entire army of 30,000 men floundering in the backwaters of the Arkansas River, his blood pressure seemed to rise a hundred points. Grant was aghast and wrote his superior, Major General Henry Halleck, Commander of the Department of Missouri, for permission to relieve McClernand as commander of the Right Wing of the Army of the Tennessee, and that he was ordering him back from his wild-goose chase up to the Port of Arkansas. The only solution to the problem of too many generals was to assume command of the Vicksburg campaign himself, divide the army into four corps, assigning them to Sherman, McClernand, Hurlbut, and McPherson.

McClernand, the politician, resentful of the demotion, turned to his good friend Mr. Lincoln.

Mr. Lincoln, after a talk with General Halleck, wrote McClernand, tactfully washing his hands of the "family controversy." He had at last decided that the army was no place for amateurs, whose errors of judgment are visited with prompt and terrible penalties. Besides, there was a Presidential election coming up and the Republican party could not afford any more penalties.

A staff meeting was called aboard the headquarters boat, *Magnolia,* anchored off shore opposite Bear Creek with Commodore Porter, Generals McClernand, Sherman, Hurlbut, McPherson, and

Grant. Within minutes the air in the main cabin was filled with the odor of cigar smoke, wet clothing, a smoking coal stove, and smoldering tempers.

Thatch-headed Sherman searched his cigar-stuffed pockets for an "envelope-back" plan he had been working on. Failing to find this master plan, he propped his one spurred boot on Grant's desk and proceeded to expound.

"I'm for turning around, going back to Memphis and starting in again from fresh. We'll come down through northern Mississippi and take Vicksburg from the rear."

Grant murmured, "The railroads are gone now. Van Dorn tore them out. Two hundred miles."

"We'll rebuild them," countered Sherman.

Admiral Porter voiced Grant's unspoken opinion. "If we go back the newspapers will call it a retreat."

"To hell with the newspapers. I'm in favor of chasing every reporter out of army headquarters." Sherman was convinced the newspapers were out to persecute him.

The gentle, one-hundred-and-thirty-five-pound commander in chief listened to their talk in silence. There was no indication of his thoughts as he placidly stroked his beard with his left hand and chewed on a burned-out cigar.

"No. We must go forward," Grant said. "We must find some way to by-pass Vicksburg and come up on it from the underside. We cannot go back."

"There's an embryo canal at Young's Point on the other side of the river, opposite the mouth of the Yazoo," Admiral Porter suggested eagerly. "General Williams started to dig one there about a year ago and gave up."

"How far is this from Vicksburg?" Grant asked.

"About nine miles west. The river sweeps in from the west," Porter gestured with his arm, "doubles back south toward the city forming a hairpin turn in front of Vicksburg. If we could cut through the shank we'd be out of the range of the Vicksburg batteries and a passage through this S-shaped neck of land would bring my boats out on the river below Vicksburg."

In his heart Grant had little faith in the canal, but as he chewed his cigar he thought, Keep 'em busy, fire a lot of buckshot. Maybe one of them will hit the target. He sent General Ross with a detach-

ment to blow the levee across the river from Helena, Arkansas, opening a route into Yazoo Pass. It was a good idea, except that Pemberton had been expecting just such a move. Confederate engineers and impressed slaves were already there among the dense forests of sycamore and oak, cutting the trees, allowing them to fall across the river. After a two weeks' struggle with the huge tree trunks weighing up to six tons each, the troops had progressed up the Coldwater River a scant twenty miles and were still facing a hopelessly tree-clogged stream.

The Mississippi is one of the crookedest rivers in the world. In some places it is necessary to sail thirty miles to advance eight as it flows through soft alluvial soil, cutting fresh channels right or left at the slightest obstacle, continuing, leaving an old bed for the new. Sixty miles north of Vicksburg the half-moon-shaped mud puddle called Lake Providence had been created by the Mississippi at some capricious moment long ago.

Plan three; McPherson and his men were sent to Lake Providence where they would attempt to find a way through the cypress swamps to Bayou Baxter, to Bayou Macon, to the Macon River, to the Tensas, to the Red, and then into the Mississippi, four hundred miles below Vicksburg. Grant had everyone working now, sloshing around in the rain and swamps, blowing stumps, digging red clay.

Standing before the map in Washington, Lincoln sagely commented on "Grant's Big Ditch."

"Of course, men who are in command and on the spot, know a great deal more than I do. But immediately in front of Vicksburg, where the river is a mile wide, the Rebels plant batteries, which absolutely stop our entire fleet. Therefore it does seem to me that upon narrow streams like the Yazoo, Yallabusha and Tallahatchie, not wide enough for a long boat to turn around in, if any of our steamers which go there ever come back, there must be some mistake about it. If the enemy permits them to survive, it must be either through lack of enterprise or lack of sense."

5

After sitting idly around Quartermaster headquarters for over a month without assignment, Captain Robert McClellan was debat-

ing whether he should ask his father to write a letter of protest to President Davis, when the call-to-duty finally came.

The personnel officer at Quartermasters was not at all pleased with having Robert in the officers' corps. He would have preferred to select his own officer material, but, as his assistant said, "We've got him and there's not a God damn thing we can do about it."

"I suppose you're right, well, we'll just have to wait and put him in some spot where he can't do any harm."

"If I could suggest, sir," the junior officer ventured, "we need an inspection officer in the Bolton Depot area. Colonel Lawler, out there has everything under tight control, and . . ."

Robert could scarcely believe his good fortune, a command and an assignment both at the same time. The assignment directed him to proceed immediately to the area "in and around Bolton Junction" where he was to inspect the stores in the various depots along the railroad. There he would check inventories, condemn for auction any spoilage. His new command consisted of a lame but seemingly intelligent lieutenant named Chaffin, a scrawny little sergeant named Pucket, and two enlisted men.

Colonel Lawler, forewarned, was on hand to greet McClellan when he arrived. "Welcome to the depot," he smiled. "Make yourself at home. Consider my quarters your quarters as long as you're here."

"Thank you, sir," Robert snapped.

"Your men can pitch their tents in the woods behind the warehouses and they can mess with my detachment here." The colonel was a dumpy, red-faced, former auctioneer from Baton Rouge.

"That's very thoughtful, sir."

"When you get settled, Captain," the colonel boomed, "I'll assign you a man to show you where everything is located."

"That will be fine, sir. Is he available now?"

"Now?" The colonel was a bit taken aback. "You want to start now?"

"Yes, sir."

"I thought you'd want to rest up for a day or two. You know, just take it easy. How about comin' ova to my quarters, havin' a few drinks, a cigar. . . ."

"I'd like to get started now." Robert was determined and firm.

"Well . . . if that's the way you want, I'll go round up my man." The colonel departed, mumbling to himself, "God damn that headquarters personnel officer. He told me he was goin' be right careful about who he sent out here. I've a feelin' I'd better keep an eye peeled for trouble."

Naturally, it was Piney who first called Robert's attention to the hominy. It often happens in the field of discovery, that the pioneer, the envisaged genius who first breaks through the darkness and points out the path which leads to a brighter, happier, more comfortable and prosperous future, is passed over and forgotten during the excitement of later discoveries. Such was the case with Piney. Robert, by the time he found the "Whisky ruse," was so excited and pleased with himself that he completely forgot to mention Piney in his forty-page, itemized accounting.

The hominy disclosure came during the first afternoon of inspection. A corporal guide who had led the inspection team into a dark, windowless, barrel-filled warehouse explained, "This hyar's all hominy and that there pile along that there wall is the spiled 'uns." He pointed to a ceiling-high stack of at least two hundred kegs.

"Triggs," Robert addressed his pad-carrying clerk, "you and Taylor count the barrels. List them under Spoilage-to-be-auctioned."

"You want to see in one of 'em?" the guide asked.

"Yes. Will you take your hatchet and open that one over there?" Robert indicated the nearest keg.

The minute the first board was lifted from the top of the keg it was apparent the contents were fit only for hog swill. A rancid, sour odor of fermenting corn filled the building.

"That'll do. Close it up." Robert turned and walked to the door for some fresh air. His inspection was completed.

During the opening of this first keg, Sergeant Pucket had been standing in the background, leaning against a stack of barrels, his shrewd little rat-like eyes inspecting the fat guide carefully. "That son-of-a-bitch is a ringer," he remarked under his breath. "An' that colonel's a son-of-a-corkscrew."

Piney had spent too many years sizing up suckers and customers not to be able to look at a man and catalogue him into one of the eight general classifications he used in assessing the character

of every man he met. In Piney's eyes every male was either a nickel-and-dimer or a Good-Time Charley; a sucker and egg man or a would-be; a squaw man or a rum pot; a son-of-a-pitchfork or a bunko. The colonel and his fat corporal were "bunkos."

Piney followed Captain McClellan to the door and, when they were out of earshot of the guide, whispered in his ear, "Captain, let me go back in there and open up one of them barrels way up on top of the stack. One of them that's hard to get at."

"What for?" Robert questioned.

"I gotta feelin' you fell fer the bait."

"The bait?"

"Yah. I'm thinkin' we opened the only sour barrel in the whole warehouse. If you'll take the guide on to the next warehouse and leave me here to close up that keg, I'll take a look."

"All right." Robert was too unsure of himself to tell the sergeant to mind his own business. He took the guide, who was only too willing to turn over the odorous job of renailing the barrel to someone else, and proceeded to the next building.

Piney was right in his surmise. He opened three different containers and each was filled with sweet, plump, top-quality hominy.

Robert, waiting until evening before checking the results of Piney's secret inspection, joined Lieutenant Chaffin and Sergeant Pucket as they sat by the campfire in front of their tent eating their suppers. He was shocked when he learned of the deception. The thought of any officer of the Confederacy stooping to thieving was incomprehensible.

"I'd wait, if I were you," Tod counseled. "Let's keep our findings a secret, find out the extent of this thing, and then make a report back to headquarters in Vicksburg."

"What are they up to?"

Piney acquainted the captain with a few facts. The Quartermaster chicanery was common knowledge to the water-front clientele at Beulah's. Some of the rivermen were actively engaged in the disposal of this contraband merchandise. "This colonel is as slippery as an eel dipped in lard," Piney volunteered. "What does he do with, well say, these two hundred barrels of hominy we looked at today? He gets 'em marked down as condemned. The regulations say that they gotta be sold at auction fer spoilage. So, someone else

that's in on the deal, comes in and buys 'em fer a dollar a barrel. They turn around then and sell it fer what it's worth. Twenty-five or thirty dollars a barrel."

The next day brought to light an attempt to get a mark of "condemned" placed on three hundred barrels of salt pork, and on the following day eight defective kegs containing medical whisky were brought to Robert's attention. The kegs were leaking, thus making them unfit for shipment.

The defective whisky kegs looked legitimate. It seemed prudent that they should be sold immediately, before the remainder of their contents had dripped away into the dust. No means of sub-rosa profits seemed apparent here, until Piney noticed the tiny shed alongside the whisky warehouse. A midnight reconnaissance soon brought new meaning to the faulty whisky kegs. The colonel, having secured a large supply of old discarded whisky barrels, was distributing the contents of one full keg of whisky into four of the old kegs. By substituting the partially filled containers for full barrels the colonel could keep his inventory of accountable whisky balanced, disposing of the surplus along the docks in Vicksburg.

With a report filled with damning evidence, Robert was ready to rush back to Vicksburg after four days on the job. On the morning of the fifth day he alerted his crew.

"You've completed your inspecting already, Captain McClellan?" Colonel Lawler asked idly.

"Yes, sir." Robert was nervously anxious to be on his way.

"Good. Good luck, Captain." Colonel Lawler stood watching the captain as he mounted and rode to meet his men.

"I'd like to be in Vicksburg and see that snooper's face when he turns in his report and gets reassigned to the infantry," Lawler murmured. A round-the-clock detail of trusted men had been recording Piney's midnight forays.

A junior officer in the area accounting department, a notch in a minor cog of Lawler's machine, received Robert's report and, while the proud captain stood eagerly waiting for his masterpiece to be read, attempted to dismiss him with a perfunctory "Thanks."

"Aren't you going to give it to the colonel?" Robert asked nervously.

"I'll call it to his attention this afternoon," junior replied.

"It's rather important, Lieutenant," Robert said and added hopefully, "I think I should give it to the colonel personally."

"I'll give it to the colonel! Good day, sir!"

As Robert left the headquarters building, the junior officer was stuffing the last page of the report into the waiting-room stove.

6

Piney was given his second assignment on the day following his return to Vicksburg from Bolton Depot. His new captain had directed him to deliver a message to a certain Justin Phelan, who lived east of Vicksburg. The prideful swelling in his chest which accompanied this singularly important directive vanished wth an audible "swhoosh" when Captain McClellan added these fateful words, "Go down to the stables and take my horse, Sergeant."

Sergeant Puckct, who had never been astride a horse, stood at the hotel stable doors, watching an orderly saddle a sleek, muscled mount and when the stableboy handed him the reins his fingers were stiff with fear. The test ahead of him was almost more than he could bring himself to face. Mustering all of his nerve and strength, Piney tugged on the reins and the horse responded. The animal, docile as a kitten, followed him down the street, around the corner and into the first alley.

"I know what I'm going to do," Piney thought, carried away by the new-found power. "I'm going to ride down to the house and let Mom and the girls see me on a horse."

At ten o'clock in the morning, the girls at Big Beulah's were in no mood for witnessing a one-man cavalry review. When the sounds of Beulah's shouting from the street first reached their ears, several of the girls arose and headed for the window, slop-jar in hand, prepared to drown out the noise. The second-floor street-side windows of the house were soon dotted with frowsy, bleary-eyed blondes and redheads gazing down at their uniformed protector and benefactor. Beulah, standing beside the mounted Piney, was shouting at the top of her voice, "Com'ere, girls, and look! Look at my Piney ridin' on a horse!"

"Hey, girls, look," one old girl yelled in good nature. "Look at the horse's ass settin' on a horse's ass."

Piney's horseback trip to the Phelan plantation which should have consumed an hour and a half, took four hours. Piney walked his horse every step of the way. Returning, it was a different story. Justin Phelan, answering Robert's summons for a meeting, mounted his horse and took off for Vicksburg at a brisk canter. Piney followed at a half-gallop, clutching the saddle horn and riding with a spine-jolting, off-rhythm post. Back at the hotel when he climbed off, his quivering legs folded up beneath him and he settled onto the nearest pile of hay in a state of near shock.

7

When Tod Chaffin returned to Vicksburg after the inspection trip with Captain McClellan to Bolton Depot, he expected to catch up on his rest and perhaps do some long neglected reading. He had scarcely been in his room an hour when he was summoned to his door by a loud and determined knock. Upon opening the door he was confronted by a formidable array of two: Loulie and Herr Schmidt. Papa Schmidt was a huge, florid-faced man with a tremendous paunch. His shirt bosom was streaked with tobacco drizzle, and despite the cold weather he was coatless, his shirt sleeves rolled to expose his hairy, muscle-roped arms.

"Is dis him?" Schmidt was speaking to his daughter. Loulie nodded, yes.

"Dis little snot?" Schmidt questioned in disbelief. Loulie reappraised the bespectacled Tod and was forced to admit that this was the man.

"What . . . w—what's the matter?" Tod stammered.

"Get yer coat, you miserable bastard. You're goin' mit us," Schmidt barked.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Knockin' up my Loulie, den he asks, vat's wrong?" Had Tod been ten pounds heavier and without glasses, Schmidt would have crushed him into a senseless pulp. The size and insignificance of his daughter's seducer added to the fatherly shame which boiled within him. He felt the frustration a man of physical action has when he is confronted by an impasse to his muscular self-expression.

Tod turned to Loulie, his eyes frightened and pleading for an intelligent explanation.

"I didn't come around . . . after the party at Beulah's." Loulie found it difficult to explain these things in front of her father. "I'm gonna have a baby."

In horror and disbelief he stammered, "Are you sure?"

Loulie nodded, yes.

"I . . . I don't understand," Tod stammered.

"Maybe dis vill help you," Schmidt roared as he gathered the front of Tod's shirt into his huge ham-like hand and jerked him out into the hallway. "You're goin' mit us. You'll marry her now. Dis night."

Tod was at a loss to know what to do as he stood shivering in his shirt sleeves outside the residence of the Justice of Peace at eight o'clock in the evening, with the new Mrs. Chaffin at his side. Later he could not recall a single incident of the trip to the Justice of the Peace, or the ceremony.

It was Loulie who suggested the Preston House as the proper place to spend the first night of their honeymoon, the starting point of their life of holy matrimony.

A more perceptive man, or perhaps Tod in a lesser state of shock, would have been suspicious when he found a room reserved in his name and a sea chest containing all of Loulie's worldly possessions waiting for him at the hotel. Instead, Tod accepted it as natural, docilely signed the guest book, and allowed a porter to lead him and his bride to their third-floor wedding chamber.

Loulie, who had never been inside a hotel, was a bit disappointed at the cubbyhole which was to be her first home. But the excitement of the day, the exhilaration she felt from escaping her father's stern parental hand, and the anticipation of the many new adventures awaiting her, far outweighed the drab little room. When Tod returned from a nervous visit down the hall he found her in pantalettes and chemise, changing from her wedding dress.

"Feel better?" Loulie asked as he closed the door and slumped down upon the bed. "See my new dress? It's an evening dress. I've never had one before. Papa gave me the money and I bought it secondhand off one of the girls down at Beulah's. It ain't new but almost." Loulie moved about the room in her undergarments, with

a casual air of unconcern. It was as if her husband of two hours was a familiar object of two years.

"Loulie," Tod began, "I haven't had a chance to talk to you about the . . . baby. You're sure?"

"Course I am. I'll get dressed and then we'll go over to your place and get your good uniform and then we'll come back here to eat." Loulie was busy changing her stockings.

"Yes . . . sure. We've got to eat."

"We'll eat in the dining room," Loulie explained excitedly. "I've never et there. Once, one of my gentleman friends at the theater was gonna bring me here, but something happened and he didn't."

"When do you expect it?" Tod pursued.

"Expect what?" Loulie was inspecting her rounded calf and trim ankle as she held one leg out, twisting the foot and toes in tiny circles.

"The baby!" Tod could not understand her casual attitude concerning this earth-shaking event.

"Oh, I don't know. However long it takes such things." Lowering her leg, Loulie turned from where she was seated on the foot of the bed and allowed her round, vacant eyes to rest upon her new husband. If any expression could be detected, it was one of condescension, wavering between self-pity and remorseful disgust with herself for having to settle on a weak fish like Tod. "Are you gonna set there all night like a bump onna log? We're gonna dress and then we're gonna have dinner in the dining room and have champagne and then we're gonna go to the opera house. If you think I'm gonna set around an' blubber with you, then you gotta 'nother think comin'."

Days later, Tod recalled his wedding night as a series of disconnected incidents, each bordering on the ludicrous. They were vague, isolated incidents that had nothing to do with the heady, physical, anticipatory memories usually associated with weddings. There was the hotel dining room. No memories of food or champagne or his bride. He only recalled a pair of large wooden fans, covered with damask cloth, suspended over the table and set in motion by means of a rope dropped from a pulley by the doorway.

The opera house, the play and its contents all were blank. Only the playbill which he and Loulie had inspected while waiting for

their tickets harbored a place in his memory. The bill, in vivid red and blue inks, seemed to be emblazoned on his mind.

MISS SUSAN FIELD

Who will appear in her
Unrivalled Specialty

"Winona, the Child of the Prairie."

Act. I The Old Home Act. II Alone in the World
Act. III The Frozen Gulf

"The Great Iceberg Scene"
The most thrilling mechanical
spectacle ever performed on the
American stage.

Act. IV Wedding Bells.

There was his recollection of a moment of naturalness, at the hotel, after they had returned from the opera house and were together in the hard bed. A moment of excitement in the dark when he felt the warmth of the flannel-gowned girl at his side and reached to touch her breast. Loulie had allowed his hand to rest there for a moment before she rolled over on her side, turning her back on the new husband.

"Don't do that," she had said. "You can't do that now. If you do it might hurt me or kill the baby."

The young lieutenant, the former teacher from the girls' Academy, added this to his fund of knowledge concerning women.

8

Justin Phelan stood at the bar in the Preston House sipping his drink and waiting for the shifty-eyed little sergeant he had sent upstairs to fetch the mysterious James McPherson.

A fresh sign hanging behind the bar read:

Drinks. Fifteen cents each.

No bills changed except at heavy discount. Gentlemen will please refrain from eating the ice in their tumblers after drinking.

"Wait until the Yankees feel the pinch," the headlines read. "Then they'll change their tune. Cotton is King."

It was almost gone now, the ice. No longer does it exist, that which we had but a moment ago. To dally over his drink meant risk of censure from the miserly barkeep. To procrastinate, to wait for the mysterious McPherson, meant risk of censure from friends and neighbors. The cold crystal eye in his glass faded and vanished into his drink, diluting the strength—his strength.

Those ideals which were once held important, concern over the principles of honor and integrity . . . these ideals were going, too, diluted and washed away.

There was a truth on the sign behind the bar. "No paper money changed except at heavy discount."

Lithographic paper money, promising to pay the bearer ten dollars, six months after a treaty of peace between the United States.

"Shine 'em up? Black your boots, sir?" A black-faced urchin interrupted Justin's reveries.

"Sure. Why not?" And I'll pay him with a scrap of paper marked "Good for five cents in freight or passage on the Mississippi-Tennessee Railroad Company"! Maybe he can use it. Maybe he'll be going somewhere.

The three muffled booms, like the impatient stampings of a giant, rattled the glasses on the back bar, set the overhead chandelier to swinging.

"Mortars!" some knowing infantryman shouted.

"Down by the river."

"Them's Yankee mortar boats. I'd know 'em anywhere," a third said and, as if by signal, the uniformed customers turned and rushed out of the hotel, leaving a frustrated bartender calling after them for his money.

Justin had not seen McPherson enter the room; suddenly he appeared by his side.

"Do you think it's safe here?" he asked.

With a thunderous roar of cannon from somewhere to the west, the Confederate batteries answered the mortar boats. Justin waited for the angry shelling to subside, eying his future business associate with cold indifference.

"Well," McPherson smiled nervously, "from the sounds, it would appear that the Yankees have moved in right on top of us."

"They'll move out again after they've tasted the shells off the bluffs out front." Justin had taken an instant dislike to this smiling, oily man.

"Let's hope so," McPherson grinned nervously. "Conducting business here in Vicksburg is about as easy as running a china shop in the center of a cricket field."

Justin declined to comment, forcing McPherson to lead the way.

"I understand you have some cotton for sale," McPherson said, eying him with a calculating stare.

"I have," Justin replied, "but then, so has every other planter around Vicksburg."

"I also understand that you have sufficient wagons, horses, and men to transport this cotton."

"That depends. I could move it a short way."

"Fifty miles?"

"Perhaps."

"How do you grade your cotton?"

"Good middling."

"What's your asking price?"

"Thirty cents a pound," Justin replied.

"I'm paying fifteen."

"It's been nice talking to you, Mr. McPherson," Justin sighed and started to rise.

"Just a minute," McPherson hastened to say. "I might go more."

"How much more?"

"Five cents."

"Make it ten and I might be interested." Justin stood by the table, looking down on the dealer.

"I understand Sherman likes to burn cotton," said McPherson.

"He can go ice-skating too, when hell freezes over." Justin lowered himself back into the chair. "I'll deliver two thousand bales at twenty-five cents."

McPherson knew by the finality of the planter's tone that this was the price.

"Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars," McPherson calculated. "I'll give you a draft on the Richmond bank on the day of delivery."

"You'll give me twenty-five thousand in gold or sterling, no paper, on delivery. And a draft for two hundred and twenty-five thousand on the Bank of England," Justin replied.

"I can't do that," McPherson protested.

"You can if you want my cotton," Justin smiled, "and with cotton selling for sixty cents in New York you'll do all right."

"New York prices are no concern of mine," McPherson said.

"I'm sorry, I forgot—London. It's worth even more there. Eighty cents," Justin watched the little poker-faced buyer for some sign of nervousness. The close-mouthed "Englishman" pried his thin lips open wide enough to admit a thin cigar.

When Robert had first broached the cotton deal, Justin had started checking with his brokers in Richmond. The only McPherson and Son known to the trade was located in Bridgeport, Connecticut. He admired this little Yankee for his unmitigated nerve, but he certainly would trust him no further than a blind mule could kick.

"When can you start making delivery?" McPherson asked.

"Where?"

"Where is unimportant at the moment," McPherson said nervously. "I can assure you the haul will not exceed fifty miles."

"I'll start hauling two weeks from next Monday. I'll need that long to get my wagons in shape."

McPherson lowered his voice. "I'll lead the first wagon train to an unloading point which I will reveal on the first night we haul. All deliveries to be made after dark."

"As you say." Justin rose, offering his hand to seal the bargain. It was distasteful business, but necessary. "I will pick you up here at the hotel two weeks from Sunday evening."

"Good." McPherson stood and took Justin's hand.

"Twenty-five thousand, in gold or sterling," Justin said as he turned and left the hotel bar.

It was early in the evening and Justin, as he turned his horse up the street toward Sky Parlor Hill and Twin Chimneys, hoped he would be able to catch Chris McClellan before he retired for the night. Tonight was the ideal time to wrap up all of his future business plans, then perhaps he could turn his attention to a problem of real importance, Malvina.

Justin had not seen Malvina since the night of the ill-fated dinner party.

It was foolish, he knew, this stiff-back pride, this vain tenacity, this battle of wills with Malvina. Well, time enough to swallow

pride, to eat crow and beg her pardon. Business before pleasure.

Chris was home, reading in the library, when Justin arrived and, as always, was delighted to see his young country neighbor.

"Chris," Justin began, after they had completed the formalities concerning weather, family, and health, "I sold all my cotton tonight. All that I had warehoused out at Bolton Depot." As he told the story of his deal he watched the older man's face for signs of disapproval. There were none. Justin concluded, "Which leads me to believe he's one of the McPhersons from McPherson and Sons of Bridgeport."

"I know the firm," Chris said slowly.

"Are they all right?" Justin asked.

"Oh, yes. Reliable. An old and prosperous concern."

"So . . ." Justin toyed with his unlighted cigar, "you can see my problem."

Chris thought for a long time before he spoke. "Justin, I've never said what I'm about to say aloud to anyone. It would be treason. In times like these, a man's first duty is to his home, and home is a matter of time as well as place. The home for which we've been fighting and dying is gone and never again can we return to it. Our home . . . the South . . . lies somewhere in the future. A place we must build after the war is over. If you can live with yourself and your neighbors, then perhaps you've done the right thing."

"My neighbors don't worry me, Chris," Justin smiled. "My only concern is with you and your opinion of me."

"I've told you how I feel, Justin," Chris replied.

"I have some other plans, too," Justin smiled.

"So?"

"Within a week or two I'm putting all my slaves up for auction."

"I think it's a wise move," Chris said slowly. "We've been clinging to slavery like bats on a cave roof. The days for slavery are numbered." He paused a moment. "What are you going to do with your land?"

"I'll try to hire hands," Justin answered. "And if I can't, I'll just let the land stand idle."

Chris nodded in agreement.

"In addition I'm going to take the slave and cotton money and buy every scrap of bottom cotton land I can find."

"I don't know why you came, son," Chris sighed. "Everything you're doing seems precisely right. Win or lose, the land is the only thing which will have any value when the war is over."

"I have one more thing I want to talk about." Justin rose and walked to the window. With his back to Chris he continued. "I'll have over two hundred thousand dollars in the Bank of England when this is all over. I want to become a partner and invest it with McClellan and Sons. I want to put up the money to build two or three more cotton mills after the war."

"I can think of no one, except my own sons, with whom I would rather be associated in business. I would be delighted to have you as my partner," Chris's answer was immediate and without hesitation.

As the two men shook hands, consummating the gentleman's agreement prior to a formal and detailed working out of a partnership with their lawyers, Justin made his last move. "Chris," he began, "I'm full of ideas tonight. I've saved one more until last because it's the most important."

The older man smiled knowing full well the topic to be discussed.

"Malvina. I love her very much, Chris, and I desperately want her to be my wife. I think she loves me. During the last year we've been at constant loggerheads. Malvina has been searching for something, and I know that I have been a bastard, but this is our problem. We must work it out between ourselves. It has been my idea, right or wrong, that I should complete my business with you before I pressed Malvina for an answer. I did not want either you or Malvina to think that our business dealings would have anything to do with personal matters, friendships or families. I want your permission to again ask for Malvina's hand."

Chris gazed into the eyes of his handsome neighbor and placing an arm around his shoulder replied, "I will be proud if Malvina consents to be your wife."

9

Aunt Della's arrival from New Orleans was as quiet and unobstrusive as one of Admiral Porter's gunboats trying to pass in front of the batteries at Vicksburg.

Chris and Belle were enjoying a quiet dinner when the noise from the driveway exploded in their ears. Belle dropped her knife at the sound, Chris spilled his wine trying to lower his shaking hand to the table, and their eyes locked in shocked disbelief.

"Aunt Della!" Their voices were as one.

From the front doorway, Chris and Belle beheld, at the head of the driveway, the imposing figure of Aunt Della, atop the springboard seat of a lumber wagon, thrashing the free ends of her reins upon the backs of two skinny, sway-backed mules.

"Move! You ornery, no-count, good-fer-nothin' lazy critters! Move, I say!" And the words she spoke, while innocent in themselves, bore the anger and meaning of a mule skinner's cherished oaths.

"Well, don't just stand there like dummies," she screamed at her brother and niece in the doorway. "Go get somebody to lead these useless critters to the stable."

Belle accompanied her aunt to her assigned room while Chris saw that the "critters" were attended to. As Della busied herself "putting away her things," Belle inspected her aunt for any outward signs of "indignities" she might have suffered at the hands of "vile Yankees." Della looked as solid and formidable as ever. If anything, she seemed to have gained weight.

It was midnight before the McClellans had learned the whys and wherefores of this surprising, but welcome, visit. Aunt Della had simply bought herself a span of mules, stormed into the New Orleans provost marshal's office and demanded a pass back into the Confederacy. "An' I tole this Yankee hireling of Ben Butler's, 'I want a pass an' I want it right now.' "

"What do they look like, Aunt Della? The Yankees?" Belle asked eagerly.

"Mean, thin, hawk-faced rapists hidin' behind puritanical masks. They all talk loud an' through their noses."

"Those horrible Yankees." Belle tossed her pretty head. "Why doesn't somebody do something?"

"I did something," Aunt Della continued. "This Butler Yankee I asked for a pass, pointed to another door and said, 'In there, Missus. In there is where they give passes.' I looked up and there right over the door to which he pointed was a stars and stripes flag and I said, 'I refuse to walk under that flag.' "

Chris smiled as Belle applauded.

"And he said, 'That is the flag of the U—nited States,' and I said, 'then you should paint a black wench on it with a Yankee horse thief embracing her!' "

"I'm surprised they ever gave you a pass," Chris chuckled.

"Well, then he said, 'With that attitude, madam, you can go to h-e-l-l,' " Della spelled the four-letter word in order to shield Belle's delicate ears. "At this point I was on my way out of this room, fouled by the smell of Yankees, when out of somewhere they started playin' the National Anthem. Well, sir, I just stopped and stood there a-holdin' both hands over my ears till it was over. An officer feller then came up and gave me my pass."

"We may have them here, you know," Chris said. "They're all about us, to the north and south."

"That's pure moonshine," Della assured him. "Come summertime an' they'll all go. My doctor back home tole me. He said the Yankees has got too thin a blood. They won't be able to stan' it down hyer when it gits hot."

Chris smiled. He was happy to have his sister with him. Belle needed an older woman to watch over her, right at this particular time. "We're delighted you came, Della," he assured his sister.

"An it's mighty good to be here. I'm tellin' you it's the first breath of fresh air I've had in months. The air down home just stinks from them Yankees. I can't describe it, but I can sure smell one of them thieves a mile off. I'd as leave set down an' sup with a pig at a swill barrel as to set in the same room with one of them Yanks. They smell of avarice and greed and l-u-s-t."

"What does lust smell like, Aunt Della?" Belle was better at her spelling than Della reckoned.

10

The six weeks following the Haines Bluff disaster were filled with agonizing dread as Captain Clyde Herring waited for the tap on the shoulder; for the awful moment he would turn to face an arresting officer prepared to lead him away to court-martial. It was not until he was assigned to a new company, a ragtag conglomerate

dredged up from the remains of at least ten other broken companies, that he felt free to breathe freely once again.

"Orders from Colonel Halop, sir," the orderly said, handing Herring a written communique.

The order directed Herring to form a combat patrol of twenty men, including one carpenter, one blacksmith, and proceed immediately by land to the old Johnston plantation, where they were to reconnoiter the plantation ruins and investigate a sawmill on the grounds, bringing back a report on whether it could be repaired and put into operating condition. The plantation was about fifteen miles south and east along the river and within seven miles of Vicksburg. Guerrillas and snipers had been reported throughout the area, all men in the patrol were to be fully armed, carry a combat load of ammunition and food for two days.

A more miserable day for a fifteen-mile hike could not have been chosen. A cold, steady rain poured over the swampland, creating the impression that God was trying to return the land to the inland sea whence it came. The little column, with its scouts out front, sloshed along a sunken road which ran east, parallel with the river and through a forest of melancholy scrub pine.

"Sunny South!" Herring snorted as he slipped and slid along behind his men.

It was nearly dark when the sergeant guide halted the column and sent a skirmish line of five men sweeping out across the broad lawns of what had once been a prosperous plantation—the celebrated plantation of the Rebel, General Albert Sidney Johnston, killed at Shiloh. It had been an extensive establishment, worked by over three hundred Negroes, and boasted its own steam sugar refinery, large sawmill, cotton gins, and machine shop. It now stood in ghostly ruins. Roofless gutted buildings, blackened with smoke, pitted from gunboat shells.

The main dwelling, once palatial in its proportions and architecture, was a mass of burned-out ruins, quiet, silent, deserted.

Night ushered in the continued storm of wind and pouring rain. The men clustered inside the shell of the old machine shop, stretching their shelter-halves over the blackened rafters, trying to improvise some protection from the elements.

It was amazing how men could adjust and make the best of any

situation, Captain Herring thought as he sat on an old anvil beneath a half-sagging shelter, heavy with rain water, and watched his little command grouped around the fire. Some men were roasting wet socks on the end of a stick; others were heating water for coffee in what had once been a poultry watering pan. Still another, having located two skinny roosters in an abandoned shed, had the dressed birds simmering and roasting on an old iron buggy axle which was suspended over the blaze.

The bonfire had begun to burn down and the men were making preparations for turning in when a corporal who had been out in the darkness roaming around, burst into view wearing an outfit which sent the men into convulsed gales of laughter. He appeared, prancing in a hip-wiggling walk, wearing a pair of women's pantalettes and a large ostrich feather hat. Somewhere in the ruined house he had found a trunk filled with ladies' clothes. As Herring watched the soldier's innocent buffoonery the vague plots and plans which until now had been without shape or meaning suddenly fell into shape.

"Corporal," Herring called. "Were there any other clothes where you found these? Men's clothing?"

"I think so," the lad replied.

"Take a man or two and go get them. I think we'll take them back to camp with us. They'd make good costumes for some theatrical."

Later, sometime during the early hours of the morning, Clyde Herring slipped out of his uniform and in the light of the glowing embers of the fire, dressed himself in one of Albert Sidney Johnston's old discarded blue suits. When the detachment awakened the next morning they found Captain Herring's uniform but no Captain Herring. After a thorough search of the area it was concluded that Confederate guerrillas must have captured and spirited the captain away while he was out in the bushes attending to nature. No one missed Albert Sidney Johnston's old faded blue suit.

11

Willie Heap sat huddled in his little lean-to, aching, shivering, and shaking, waiting for the dawn to break, for the morning gun to announce the beginning of another day. Outside the rain came down in a steady drizzle. Willie twisted his body like a contortionist trying to avoid the tiny water spouts.

Willie was sick. There wasn't a bone or a muscle or an organ in his body that did not cry out with some ailment. His bowels, trying to sustain his frail body on a diet of salt horse and hardtack, were racked with diarrhea. Complicating this embarrassing affliction was his inability to use the sinks like the other men. Each company had its own latrine, or sink: a rail, supported on two blocks of wood, running along the front of a shallow trench. Willie could not walk in the same area as the sink, much less bring himself to the point of using it. The sight of a dozen men, sitting side by side, their pants draped down around their ankles, shocked Willie's sense of decency to the point of physical illness.

Adding to Willie's discomfiture was a filthy uniform filled with graybacks. Gray lice were one of the worst problems facing the wintering field army. Company commanders tried to keep the hard-shelled parasites under partial control by having the men air their uniforms, and by heating great kettles of water where the men could boil the uniforms and then dry them as they played cards, talked, or sang around the campfires. Willie avoided any gathering of this nature.

"I wisht I had my Maw. She could fix somethin' to settle my stomach and I could eat somethin' then. Somethin' hot." Willie, remembering his mother's parting advice, stayed clear of the sawbones in their medical shack.

"They ain't nothin' but quacks and butchers," she'd warned him. "You could be sick and dyin' of all the ails the flesh is heir to an' still get no help from them robbers. Take now my sister's husband, your Uncle Karl. A doctor killed him. Just as sure as I'm born, they killed him.

"It all started with that quack doctor in Corning. It wasn't really pore Karl's fault at all. I really felt sorry for him. He got this bad cold, an' 'stead of takin' some sulphur and molasses or quinine

like he shoulda, he went to this doctor feller. It was him that started givin' pore Karl the devil's brew. He kept givin' the pore man whisky till at last he was hopelessly addicted."

Willie wasn't going to be any addict, not if he could help it.

Willie needed the warmth of hot food to settle his stomach; the warmth of a campfire to take the chill from his skinny body; the warmth of companionship and voices to drive the loneliness from his heart.

From the safety and shelter of his tent he watched the other men as they formed mess groups to mix bread in the three-legged iron company skillets or build roaring fires to roast wild pigs, fry potatoes and chickens. Willie saw these things but was afraid to join the groups.

He huddled in his lean-to and planned a move that might end all his troubles. Today was payday. For the second month since his arrival in the army he would receive eleven dollars in crisp new bills.

"I might, I just might go spend it all an' buy me a brand-new watch." Instinctively Willie knew that the aching loneliness would go away in part if he could creep into the soldier circles around the campfires, if he could be a small part of this soldier community. Few if any of the men owned watches and Willie reasoned that a watch would set him apart, give him stature in the eyes of his fellow soldiers. His eyes lighted up with excitement as he sat in the darkness, imagining the attention he would receive were he the owner of a watch.

"Private Willie Heap," the bearded sergeant, the one with the dented canteen which stopped a bullet at Donelson, would say, "I'd sure be obliged to you if you'd tell me the time of day."

Or the lieutenant, even the lieutenant, might drop back from the head of the column as they were marching out to the canal. "Private Heap. Would you tell me what time it is? I must know so that I can halt the column and give these men a ten-minute rest." And then, during the rest, the tired men would slip up to Willie and whisper . . . "Set your watch back ten minutes, Willie. The lieutenant won't know, and we can get a *twenty*-minute rest."

The morning progressed . . . daylight, the morning sun, roll call, chow, then a line-up and a march over to the paymaster. The pay-

master, a major, stood behind his strongbox, handing out envelopes as the men filed up and put their mark on the pay-roll voucher. A troop of cavalry surrounded the pay area, protecting the major and his money. Then, as before, the men were dismissed for an hour. Giving them a break, a chance to visit the sutler's tent before they formed again and marched out to the diggings along the river.

Willie followed the crowd toward the sutler's tent, his heart pounding with excitement as he clutched his envelope. Maw would raise Cain when she didn't get his eleven dollars this month. This would be the first time he'd ever done anything he wasn't supposed to do. But he'd see . . . he'd wait and see.

Willie stood in the background watching the men fighting for a chance to buy rancid sardines, petrified bologna, cough candy, wooden combs, eyeless needles, pointless pins, and razor soap.

"Erplugerterbacker, please."

"Ercaneroysters, please."

A sharp-eyed little man who came from who knows where, had set up business on a cyprus stump near the sutler's tent. Willie sidled up to a point where he would be close enough to inspect the jeweler's merchandise without attracting too much attention. The man was displaying a watch fob made from a silver dollar. In his hand he was holding four chains to which were attached four watches. The instruments glistened and twisted in the air like four dogs on leashes.

Willie stood there watching for almost an hour. It was almost time for the assembly bugle to blow when the man spotted him leaning against the tree.

"Hey, friend," he called, "can I do you for somethin?"

Willie looked around to the rear to see who the man was talking to. There wasn't anyone back there.

Willie swallowed, but didn't answer.

"How about a tie pin? Or a watch maybe?"

Willie pushed the lump in his throat to one side long enough to gulp. "How much? The watch?"

The jeweler was by his side now, talking fast and low. "This is a genuine imported watch. Twenty-eight-carat solid-gold case and a genuine imported Swiss movement. Twenty-one jewels and a hand-engraved scroll on the back where you can put your 'nitials."

"How much?"

"Since it's late and since you boys is gonna have to be goin', I'll give you a good price. This is an eighty-dollar watch. I paid over forty for 'em in New York City. I'll sell it to you for twenty."

Willie felt sick. His hopes, his dreams, shattered by two heart-twisting words . . . "twenty dollars."

"I ain't got but eleven." Willie's answer was a lifeless whisper.

Out of the corner of his eye, the watchmaker saw the company bugler pick up his instrument and start out for the parade ground. "I'll tell you what I'll do. I've got one here that's got a slight scratch on it. A little one that you can't hardly see, but since it's my policy to sell nothin' but A-number-one merchandise, I'll mark it down, just for you. If you promise not to tell any of the other fellas, I'll let you have it for eleven dollars."

Willie's hand trembled so much that he was afraid he was going to drop the new watch into the mud as he handed the man his pay envelope and took possession of the gleaming new instrument.

"Here, let me wind it for you," the jeweler said. Taking the watch, he set the hour hand at eight and twisted the huge knob on the stem, winding the watch until it was tight, then he held the instrument up to Willie's ear for a final confirming and sales-clinching demonstration. The loud tick-tick-tick was the most beautiful sound Willie had ever heard.

The march out to the canal was like a dream. Willie could feel the watch resting there in his pocket with every step he took.

When at last they did arrive and the lieutenant called, "Fall out!" Willie's hand shook like a leaf as he reached into his pocket to pull out the golden dream.

Willie looked at his watch, rubbed his eyes and looked again. The company had been marching for an hour, yet the minute and hour hands had not moved. The watch still read eight o'clock. Frantically he raised it to his ear. Silence. Had the watch stopped? In breathless desperation he tried the winding knob. "Maybe it ain't been wound proper." The knob did not budge. In bewildered panic he pried open the back of the shiny case. The watch was without a works!

Somehow, as he consummated the sale, the jeweler had switched timepieces.

12

"Help me tie my sleeves, Josephine," Malvina pleaded as she struggled with the row of ribbons inside the arm of her stone-colored silk walking dress.

Josephine, who had been sitting on the bed watching her friend dress, arose to assist in tying the bows. As she worked with the under-arm lacings of the skin-tight sleeve she warned, "Ah declair if you expect to be wearin' this dress much longer, then you best not gain one more ounce of flesh."

"They are ridiculous aren't they?" Malvina laughed. "Well, at least fashion can't decree them to be any tighter."

"Ah guess my worryin' about you puttin' on flesh is silly too, 'specially after the way you've been galvantin' around eva afternoon and evenin' this last week or so." Josephine pursed and bowed her mouth as she completed tying the last velvet ribbon. "There."

"Don't scold," Malvina smiled. "You sound like Papa."

"Ah suppose you're goin' ridin' again this afternoon with Captain Miller?"

"Ah suppose I am," Malvina mimicked Josephine, including her wistful sigh.

"Ah declair," Josephine shook her head in wonderment, "that Captain is about the courtin'est man Ah eva did see."

"Oh, Josephine," Malvina turned to hug her friend, "I'm so happy."

"Of course you're happy. Ah'd be happy too if Ah had me a man that come moonin' at mah eva beck and call and a courtin' eva blessed time Ah paid a mind."

"Isn't he handsome?" Malvina waltzed to the window to peer down at the driveway below. "And he loves me!"

"Malvina McClellan!" Josephine's voice brimmed with stern disapproval. "Look at that dress!"

"What's wrong with it?" Malvina gasped.

"What's wrong with it? It's too short, that's what's wrong with it! Ah can see your ankles!" Josephine's pretty face was creased with frowns.

"Oh, dear," Malvina pretended great concern. "What ever will I do?"

"You'll take it right off this minute and put on somethin' less immodest," Josephine declared.

"It's too late," Malvina laughed. "Alan's coming down the drive now. Anyway if he's going to be my husband it's better that he learn the awful truth before it's too late."

"What awful truth?" Josephine asked, concerned over what might be an imperfection in her ideal.

"That I have ankles, silly!" Malvina's laugh harmonized as in song with the great hall clock which was intoning two o'clock, as she strode down the stairs to meet Alan.

It was a pleasant afternoon. The sun was warm, yet the chill of winter was ever present. It was as though late fall and early spring had met and were quarreling for possession of the day.

The drive precluded conversation and handholdings, for Malvina had begged Alan to let her drive and the horse was a beautiful black spirited animal. It was not until they had reached the point where the earthworks crossed the road south of the city that the young lovers were free to devote their attentions to anything other than the road.

"I'm exhausted," Malvina groaned as she sank down onto a felled tree trunk, part of a forward retaining wall for the new breastworks. "Where ever did you find that animal?"

"I rented him from an officer down at headquarters for the sum of one quart of whisky," Alan laughed as he secured the black gelding to a neighboring fence.

"Are you sure the officer didn't in turn give the whisky to the horse? He is a devil; I felt as though the reins were pulling my arms right from their sockets."

Swiftly Alan bent over and kissed her. She felt smothered with happiness and pain as the rough bark of the oak ridged her back. She finally pulled free from his arms. "Enough. Don't you know what you're doing to me?"

"Tell me," Alan whispered.

"I can't breathe," she said. "Come," and she rose quickly from the log. "Let's go for a walk."

After they had been strolling hand-in-hand for a few minutes along the tops of the earthen breastworks, she said, "I've been thinking. Monday we rode to the west of Jackson and went for a walk along the earthworks. Tuesday we rode north of town and again walked the earthworks. Yesterday we rode east and of course walked the earthworks. Today . . ."

"Now you know," Alan interrupted.

"That you're an inveterate earthworks walker?"

"No. You now know why I'm the worst officer in the army," Alan replied.

"I don't understand."

"I'm charged with the task of inspecting the defenses of Jackson and I am using you to make tolerable an otherwise extremely boring assignment," Alan smiled.

"Seriously?" Malvina began laughing.

"I speak the painful truth," Alan said. "You are what is known in the army as a field expedient."

"I like that . . . a field expedient. At last I can contribute something to the war effort."

"You can contribute something else," said Alan tightening his arms around her waist and drawing her to him. "Say yes to my plans for the evening."

"Ummm?"

"We'll ride out to our favorite inn beside the river. I went out there this morning and arranged for our dinner. Fried squirrel, pan bread, and a bottle of French wine I bribed from the barkeep at the hotel in Jackson."

"And will we eat by the fireplace?"

Alan nodded.

"By candlelight?"

"One candle. There's a war going on and we must conserve."

"But one candle will only last . . ."

"Long enough to eat fried squirrel and pan bread."

"Captain Miller. You think of everything," Malvina sighed. "But we must not stay until two o'clock in the morning as we did the last time."

"You don't like my conversation," Alan complained.

"Your conversation is fine, Captain Miller," Malvina said as she

tapped a stern finger on the end of Alan's nose. "It's the lack of conversation that troubles me. I don't have the will power to resist those silent lips."

"Very well," Alan sighed. "I promise to deliver you to your doorstep in Jackson by midnight."

"Well," Malvina hesitated, "Well . . . at least by one o'clock or at the very latest, one-thirty."

"Now. Shall we inspect the earthworks, Miss McClellan?"

"Indeed we should, Captain Miller. Duty before pleasure."

6

MRS. LOULIE SCHMIDT CHAFFIN sat at a table in Big Beulah's place looking at the man her father brought back with him on his last trip up the river. The stranger was tall, had blond curly hair, and displayed a beautiful set of white teeth when he laughed. His weak chin and finely featured face might have been considered feminine by some men, but to Loulie, Cyril Clyde was one of the most handsome men she had ever seen.

And his voice! It was the thrillingest voice in the world! Low and rumbly and way down deep in the cellar like. When he said, "Pleased to meet you, Loulie," after her father introduced them, Loulie got all goose-pimply.

"It's real interesting," Loulie thought, "the way my Paw treats me now that I'm married. When I was home, he acted like I was a baby or something. Now that I'm married to that silly old Tod, he treats me like I'm all grown up."

Loulie had been surprised and delighted when her father appeared at the dingy one-room flat Tod rented and asked for her help.

"Dis feller I pick up svimming river," Hans told her. "An actor feller, he says. Vas a Yankee, I'm tinking, but for forty dollars in gold vy should I argue? Zo I'm tinking maybe he vould like job in opera house and I'm tinking my Loulie she come take him to opera house, but not mit out first zome gold? Huh?"

Two weeks of married life were enough to convince Loulie of one thing. She was little better off with Tod than she had been with her father; her only accomplishment had been to exchange a cabin on a tow barge for a dark one-room rented flat in town. The freedom she'd gained was questionable. Tod was stricter than Hans had ever been and Tod stayed home every night reading some silly book, which ruled out all possibilities of sneaking out for a night at the opera house. Yes, Loulie would be delighted to go with her father to meet the actor.

"Your father said you were well acquainted with the manager of the opera house here in Vicksburg," Clyde was saying.

Loulie's "Huh?" bespoke her vacant mind. She had been listening to the music of his voice, forgetting to listen to his words.

The actor repeated the question.

I'll say I know the manager, Loulie thought. She could still feel old Fishback's fat, wet hands pawing around inside her blouse. At fourteen, she had learned the price which must be paid if she wanted to sit in the upper balcony of the opera house every afternoon for free. It was necessary to allow Mr. Fishback, the manager, permission to join her after the first curtain went up. He was not particularly objectionable, once you got used to his damp hands. In many ways he was real nice and thoughtful. He always brought her some candy or an apple and he would leave just before the end of the first act. The box office closed then and it was necessary for him to go check the receipts. The only objection Loulie ever had to the arrangement was that it was awfully hard to concentrate on the melodrama with a moist hand inside her undergarment. All things considered, it was a good arrangement. Mr. Fishback's wife was a jealous woman and came to get him after every show, eliminating any chance for dalliance beyond the balcony.

"Yes, I know the manager," Loulie told her new acquaintance.

"Do you suppose you could give me an introduction?" Herring asked.

"Well. . . ." Loulie hesitated, remembering her father's instructions.

"I can make it worth your while," Herring pursued. "Twenty dollars in gold tonight and twenty tomorrow morning when we go to see him."

It took Loulie some time to get the full implication of this offer. It had not occurred to her that the stranger would be interested in her personally. "Well, I don't know. . . ."

"I'll get the woman that runs this place to fix us up with a room to stay in tonight. Then, in the morning, we can go up to the opera house."

Loulie watched apprehensively as Clyde rose and crossed the room to where Big Beulah sat on her stool. This was the first time she'd ever done anything like this . . . and right in front of her father! She saw Clyde whisper to Beulah; Beulah glanced questioningly at Hans who stood at the bar drinking beer. Hans nodded. Fatherly pride swelled in Hans' breast when he saw his Loulie following the actor fellow upstairs. "*Bei Gott*, she's going to be a fine voman."

Loulie still did not feel quite right and the uneasiness did not disappear until after she was in bed waiting for Clyde to get out of his clothes.

"Them must be real New York clothes," Loulie said as she watched Clyde carefully fold Albert Sidney Johnston's old frock tail coat and place it on a chair.

Clyde Herring awoke in the stale-smelling room in Big Beulah's, washed away the dry, cottony feeling in his mouth with a long drink from the half-filled brandy bottle on the stand beside the bed, and turned to contemplate the sleeping, childlike face of the girl beside him. Loulie's face, in sleep, wore the innocent beauty of a virgin.

For the first time in my life I'm happy, Clyde thought. Ridiculous, but it's true. I've disgraced my family, thrown away my career, deserted my country, changed my name to Cyril Clyde, spent the night in a whorehouse with a strange girl, and I'm happy. I'm free."

He was amazed at himself, at the ease with which he carried off his deception. He was proud of the debonair manner with which he'd whisked Loulie off into a bedroom, right before the eyes of her father. Back in Decatur he had not had the courage to ask a girl for a kiss after walking her home from church. This discovery of his new being was exhilarating.

"Awake, arise, or be forever fall'n, dear," Clyde quoted Milton and practiced with his best declamatory voice as he aroused Loulie from sleep. "We've much to do, my pretty sweet."

Loulie studied her new roommate with round, bright, vacant eyes. She looked and everything she saw she liked. Take for instance, his name . . . Cyril. Cyril sounded exciting, like the names of other actors she'd known. Reginald, Gerald, Horatio. It didn't sound stupid or farmish, like Tod. Tod Clodhopper. That's what her husband should be called. In her mind's eye, she could see herself in a bright red silk dress, walking the streets of New Orleans, or Charleston, or Chicago . . . maybe New York, with Clyde at her side. They would be on their way to the theater, or perhaps on their way to some fine restaurant after the theater.

"We've much to do this day," Clyde boomed. "First the opera house which is to provide the bread for our board, then to the costumers to clothe this all too feeble flesh, and then to find a roof to protect your lovely head."

Loulie sat upright in the bed, nude, hands folded in a prayer-like attitude beneath her chin, listening to her lover—hypnotized by the sheer magic of his golden voice.

"I say. Out!" Clyde spit the "t" in "out" in the best Shakespearean manner, allowing it to snap like the tip of a whip. "If you're not out of that bed within thirty seconds, I shall be forced to turn you over my knee and spank your pretty bottom."

Loulie sighed, then giggled with delight at the thought of living with Cyril. Life in the theater was just heavenly!

The Vicksburg opera house was a huge old open building, more like a barn than a theater. It was filled with three tiers of balconies, patched and repainted scenery, dirt, debris, and the stale, musty odor of the unaired accumulation of twenty years. It was the only auditorium-type building in Vicksburg, and was in constant use by the community civic organizations, church groups, and traveling

stock companies. To Loulie it was the most exciting place on earth. To Clyde it was the threshold of a new life.

The manager, Mr. Fishback, was secretly delighted when Loulie brought Clyde into his office. Actors were difficult to find during the war, even "down-at-the-heels" actors in dusty, hand-me-down frock tail coats. He was particularly happy when he found that Clyde wanted to do male roles. There was an overabundance of the falsetto-voiced "female impersonators." The army didn't want these pretty-faced boys, and the "heavies" and male leading men were difficult to find.

Clyde was relieved when Mr. Fishback discreetly avoided any questions about his not being in the service. Actors were supposed to be cosmopolites, devoid of citizenship. Clyde was hired at a starting salary of twenty-five dollars per week, and he was to go into rehearsal immediately for a forthcoming production of *Hamlet*.

Mr. Fishback wiped his wet palms on his trouser legs in pent-up excitement as he watched Loulie walk out of the theater hand-in-hand with her actor friend. He was thinking of the afternoons to come when Loulie would be in the upper balcony watching her lover play Hamlet.

2

"What are you doing today, son?" Beulah asked Piney as he came strolling into the kitchen while she was having her "eye-opener" cup of coffee. It was unusual having Piney around during the mid-afternoon.

"They gave me the day off. I'm going out on special duty tonight."

"Who for?"

"The new captain. Captain McClellan. I've got to take some Englishman by the name of McPherson out to the Phelan place."

Piney's second trip out to Justin Phelan's Hillcrest was far more pleasant than his first. This time he led Robert McClellan's mount behind McPherson's buggy and rode in the seat beside the little Englishman.

The conversation between McPherson and his erstwhile guide

was a dilatory affair with each man uttering occasional and reluctant monosyllables like two river-boat gamblers playing out a hand of five card straight.

McPherson, preoccupied with his forthcoming cotton deal, dismissed his guide as a nobody while Piney occupied himself breaking down McPherson into bite-sized parts. He knew that McPherson pretended to be an Englishman, but several things about the man didn't jibe. While his speech was very, very English, Piney felt that he could detect the harsh quality he associated with the traveling bummers he had met from New England. The summers before the war had brought a flock of northern peddlers into Vicksburg, salesmen representing various New England manufacturers. This crowd had, without exception, presented Piney with troubles. They were always anxious to sample the Southern wares Piney solicited, but never wanted to pay the asking price. If he said two dollars, they would offer one, and then haggling began. They seemed to think the fruits of sin were sweeter when purchased at a knocked-down price. Piney had been forced to listen to too much haggling to be deceived by McPherson. One thing about the man which didn't seem quite right was his reticence. Englishmen away from home were always politely gregarious and anxious to please. McPherson was as close-mouthed as a beekeeper in a honey factory.

Piney reached Hillcrest with his passenger after dark and McPherson vanished immediately into the scalehouse office with Justin, leaving Piney sitting in the rig in front of the stables.

Hitching the team to a fence, Piney drifted into the blackness, circling and coming up behind the little stone building. From a position beneath the candle-lit window, he could see the two occupants. The thick stone walls prevented their conversation from reaching his ears.

In town, in the pitch black of the river front, he could move without fear through streets filled with drunks, roustabouts, cutthroats and thieves, but here, alone in a place where the only sounds were strange and unidentifiable, he felt jumpy.

As he started back towards the safety of his rig, a white object posted on the side of the stable attracted his attention. Piney struck a lucifer and, moving it closer to the poster, read . . . "Notice. $100 reward will be paid for the apprehension or information leading to the apprehension of a negro bitch answering to the name of

Cleo. Age, about sixteen; black hair; olive complexion. . . . Owner Justin Phelan."

Piney extinguished the match and stood smiling to himself in the darkness, as he sorted over in his mind several ideas for putting this information to practical use.

As Piney came through the front door, the sharp look in his beady little eyes caused Big Beulah to refrain from booming out her usual rafter-ringing greeting of welcome. She followed him as he made his way along the side of the barroom to the door leading out into the kitchen.

"What is it, son?" she wheezed as she lowered herself into one of the rickety kitchen chairs.

Piney dropped into a chair beside her at the table and half whispered. "I found out about that girl upstairs. Cleo."

Beulah looked at him, waiting.

"I found this tonight." Piney produced the handbill he had pulled from the door of Justin's barn, handing it to Beulah.

"That's her all right," she said, after carefully reading the description. "So?"

"I'm gonna turn her in." Piney searched Beulah's eyes for approval or disapproval.

"For a hundred dollars?" Beulah frowned.

"Fer a thousand dollars," Piney grinned.

Beulah nodded in approval. "But what about your Lieutenant? What about him?"

"We're quits," Piney scowled.

"How come?"

"He welched on a business deal," Piney stated flatly.

Beulah nodded in approval. This was one sin—violating the code of the river front—which could not go unpunished.

On the day following his meeting with McPherson, Justin had been surprised when the little sergeant came riding up to his office.

Piney greeted the planter by tossing the handbill onto his desk. "I know where she is."

"Excellent," Justin replied.

"I can take you to her for a price." Piney's eyes had difficulty in trying to look straight into Justin's. They would hold for a sec-

ond, then drop their glance to the floor, scrubbing Justin's boots as he talked.

"The price is printed on the handbill," Justin answered coolly. "A joke. Ha-ha."

"It's against the law, hiding out runaway slaves," Justin said, testing out the little sergeant.

Piney didn't scare. A sneerish smile crossed his lips; he turned to leave.

"Five hundred," Justin called. Piney kept walking. He was starting to pull himself into the saddle when Justin arrived beside his horse.

"Where is she?" Justin asked.

Piney held out his hand for the money.

"We'll pick up a thousand at the bank in Vicksburg," Justin told him.

"I'll bring her to you after we've been to the bank in Vicksburg," Piney replied.

Justin was standing at the bar, sipping a drink, when Piney led Cleo into the barroom downstairs. She stopped in the doorway, her eyes meeting Justin's. Then, slowly, she walked across the room to the outside door and stood waiting for Justin to join her.

"You've been away a long time, Cleo," he said after they were outside in his rig.

"Yes, suh." Cleo sat on the edge of the seat, back straight, chin held proud and high.

"It cost me a lot of money to get you back." His voice was soft, without anger.

"I'se worth it." The words were not words of vanity. They were a statement of fact. Warm, vibrant, filled with meaning.

Justin looked at the beautiful girl for a long while. To take her back to Hillcrest unpunished was an open invitation for trouble, yet—the memory of her lithe, tawny body, reclining on the silk sheets of his bed, supple and yielding. . . . Suddenly he burst into laughter, seeming to enjoy some until-now forgotten joke.

"Yes, Cleo. I believe you *are* worth it."

The reins snapped and Justin started for Hillcrest with his slave.

3

James McPherson sat on the rear deck of the little steam tugboat watching the perspiring Negroes as they rolled the last of the huge bales of cotton down the river bank. Another crew at water's edge pushed, pulled, and levered (with the aid of long poles) the bound five-hundred-pound bundles up the loading ramp and onto the deck of the last of five government barges. Four other barges, piled high with yellow bales, floated in the backwater, waiting for the fifth to be loaded.

McPherson sighed as he rolled the tip of a black cigar in his mouth, moistening the end before he lighted it. At his side, pen and tally sheet in hand, sat an uniformed Union Quartermaster, Captain John Hughes, laboriously marking off each bale as it came tumbling down the river embankment.

The greedy captain was supplying U. S. Army Quartermaster transportation and a bogus order declaring the cotton to be the property of the United States Government for the sum of twenty-five dollars a bale.

On shore, sitting statue-stiff on his black stallion, Justin Phelan was directing the unloading of his last wagon train from Bolton Junction.

McPherson lighted his cigar, and allowing the smoke to seep out through his nearly compressed lips, contemplated the last seventy-two hours and the effects, if any, they might have on his immediate future.

His difficult mission of buying cotton for the McPherson mills was nearing completion. All that needed to be done was to get the cargo up the river to the northern railhead in Memphis and transferred to a private warehouse. Shipping the cotton east would come some time later. Railroad rolling stock even in the North was not plentiful, in this third year of the war, and his purchases would probably fill twenty-five carloads.

These were the things he should do, but. . . .

James McPherson, like so many sons of successful men, grew up to be an almost exact opposite to his proud and shrewd father. Where James Senior was openhanded with his customers, Junior used the "underhand" approach. When Senior told a customer,

"Your word's as good as gold," Junior echoed his father's policy, but in a slightly altered form, "Your gold is as good as your word."

"When you deal with Old McPherson," his customers would say, "you always know just where you stand all of the time. He'll ask a stiff price, drive a hard bargain, but he's honest and delivers what he says he will."

The wellspring of new life which was surging through this dwarfed New England sapling had been released four days previously when Justin picked him up at the Preston House in Vicksburg. The plan had been for James to ride out to the plantation and spend the night there in order that he and Phelan could leave early for Bolton Junction to inspect the cotton on the following day.

Justin had met him at the hotel in a two-seated rig. In the back seat where he tossed his bags was the most beautiful olive-skinned girl James had ever seen. She sat on the leather cushion, head held high, eyes straight to the front, proud and self-possessed, disdaining to give him the slightest glance. The girl reminded McPherson of a queen sitting in a golden coach, waiting impatiently for her lackeys to mount the coach seat and take her to the castle.

Adding to the mystery of the beautiful girl was Justin's behavior. Familiar with the Southern gentleman's courtesy and breeding, he thought it peculiar and strange when his host instructed him to climb into the front seat and they drove off without his being introduced to the girl passenger. Phelan treated her as though she were a piece of baggage or some other inanimate object. Not once during the entire trip out to the plantation did he give any indication that he was even aware of her presence.

They had several drinks after their arrival at the plantation, and then Justin excused himself. "McPherson, I've got to go out to the fields, inspect the hands and make plans for tomorrow. So, if you can entertain yourself, I'll be on my way. There's plenty of liquor and the library is full of books. Call the servants if you need anything."

McPherson thanked his host and followed a servant upstairs to his room.

He had been sitting at the window for perhaps thirty minutes, watching the activities in the paddock and stable yards, when the noise began. At first he thought the shouting and laughing which

came from somewhere below was merely the house servants enjoying a joke, kicking up their heels while the master was away. But when he heard the crash of crockery breaking, McPherson decided to go down and investigate.

Following the noise which was coming from the back part of the house, James opened a door into what was undoubtedly a large serving room and there found the cause of the disturbance.

At one end of the room were seven or eight house servants crowding and cowering around a young mulatto girl who sat on the floor, screaming and holding her hand to her cheek. Her face had been gashed open and was streaming blood. Strewn around her on the floor were the remains of what had once been a set of serving china. At the other end of the room stood the handsome girl from the carriage, feet spread apart, defiantly waving a porcelain plate in either hand. The girl, mysteriously lovely in the carriage, now flamed with dazzling beauty. Her anger was awesomely terrible, as if the sight of blood had aroused some killer instinct in her nature as she glided toward the women at the other end of the room, causing them to retreat and huddle back against the wall in horror, abandoning the wounded girl sitting on the floor bespattered by the broken crockery.

McPherson stood in the doorway; no one noticed the white man's arrival.

Cleo, moving with catlike grace, stopped when she reached the center of the room. She stood in a half-crouch, glaring at the frightened servants scattered along the wall.

"Say it!" she shouted to the bleeding girl on the floor. "Say it, so's all dese niggahs can hear!"

"Go 'way, Cleo," one of the older woman called. "Yo' go 'way an lebe dis po' gal be."

"Wha yo' manners is?" another called.

"Say it, les' Ah muhudah yo'," Cleo advanced another step nearer the girl. "Say Ah's de numba one 'roun hyer."

"Yo' is de numba one, Cleo. Eva one knows dat," one of the group tried to assure her.

"Dis hyer bitch. She say it, too." Cleo raised her arm to throw another plate.

"Yo' is, Cleo! Yo' is!" the wounded girl screamed.

"Doan yo' fo'git it no moah." Cleo slammed the remaining plate

against the wall over the heads of the huddled group of servants. The china shattered down over their heads. She spun on her toes to leave and came face to face with McPherson.

For a moment Cleo and McPherson stood facing one another, their eyes locked in cold appraisal, Cleo's chest heaving as if she'd been running a great distance, her eyes flashing with fury. She straightened up from her crouched position and with shoulders erect walked slowly up to McPherson. "Do yo' all want somethin', mista?" Her eyes narrowed to tiny slits; a half-smile hovered on her lips.

James stepped back, allowing her to come through the door. He turned, following her into the library.

"So you are now number one?" James remarked after they were alone.

"Ah'm the numba one—numba one." Cleo was standing just inside the room, carefully inspecting the cotton buyer. "Would yo' all like fo' me to git yo' somethin'? Some brandy, maybe?"

"A brandy would be fine," he smiled.

"Where is Mista Justin?" Cleo asked as she picked up a decanter to pour.

"Out making plans for tomorrow, I guess."

Cleo walked and did not stop until she stood inches from James.

Cleo was tall, towering over diminutive McPherson by at least a half-foot. He was forced to look up at the girl with the drink. Her provocative eyes sparkled like the amber liquor in the glass.

Instinctively James knew the girl was another man's woman, possessed by Phelan in all ways, yet he also knew, were she to give but a single sign, he would gladly jeopardize the cotton deal which he had pursued so diligently during the past months.

Reason, judgment, and profit were crowded from his mind as he gazed up at the regal beauty before him. Nothing mattered; he must have Cleo.

The urge to overpower this girl was hampered by the glass he held in his hand. Turning to place it upon the table he found that Cleo had retreated swiftly to the fireplace on the opposite side of the room.

"What yo' doin' hyer?" Cleo asked, as McPherson retrieved his drink and started across the room toward her.

"Buying cotton. From your master."

Cleo smiled. "Nobody's ma master."

"No? Don't you belong to Phelan?"

"If Ah wants, Ah does," she said meaningfully.

McPherson considered carefully the girl's words. They said so much.

"Do you want?" he asked.

Her eyes were searching. "Yo'?"

"Yes."

"D'pens."

"Upon what?"

It was Cleo's turn to consider her words. "On yo'. Ah yo' a Yankee?"

"No. English."

"Whe'a dat?"

"Across the ocean."

"Whe'abots from Spain?"

"Nearby."

"Ma mammy's man, he's from dare," she commented, then, "What yo' do?"

James smiled. She wants my pedigree, he thought. "I run factories. I make cotton cloth."

"What's yo' name?"

"McPherson. James McPherson."

Cleo thought this over. "Yo take me there, den maybe Ah be yores."

"Maybe?"

"Maybe, Ah doan know." She smiled knowingly.

"I'll take you to Cuba. Then New York," James baited.

"Whe'a dat?"

"Up North."

"Wid de Yankees?"

"Yes."

Cleo smiled slowly. She knows everything, McPherson thought. She knows I'm not English.

Cleo pushed away from the fireplace and walked slowly across the room; the bottom of her bell-shaped skirt swirled gently from the rhythm of her hips. She walked deliberately into his arms, pushing her body against his until her thighs and legs were glued against his. He could feel her hard, firm buttocks beneath the thin

dress, the taut muscles convulsing when he pulled her closer. As he strained to kiss her, she twisted away. At the door she turned.

"If'n Ah go ter New Yo'k, Ah'll be yo' lady," she stated.

"My lady?" James questioned the strange term.

"Das right," she said, waiting for his reply.

"I don't know what you mean," he countered.

"Yo' will." And she was gone.

Twice during the night James tiptoed into the hallway to listen outside of Justin's door. It was quiet within the room. He sighed with relief. Cleo did not spend her first night home with her master.

4

Major General Ulysses S. Grant sat on a cot in a Sibley tent, one boot on and one off, contemplating his big toe. The uninitiated might suppose the general to be inspecting his foot. Seasoned staff members waiting impatiently outside the tent for their commanding officer would describe this meditation as normal "sole searching." What they did not know was that what would happen today might change the course of the war . . . maybe the general's future with the Army of the United States.

The general sat up, stamped his foot into his other boot, and followed by his smartly dressed staff slogged along at an unmilitary gait through the great army encampment along the river bank out to the mouth of the canal. The company streets stretched out into a miniature city. Tents; "shebangs" tricked out with Yankee ingenuity; huts equipped with lean-to bedrooms; fireplaces with mantelpieces; front porches with roofs supported by pilasters of rough pine. Thousands of idle hands of an idle army whittling the time away.

Three chances, three plans to circumvent Vicksburg: Lake Providence, the canal, and Yazoo Pass. Word yesterday told of the fate of plan number one: the levees were cut at the Lake Providence bypass, allowing the waters and the first gunboat to enter. She cut out her bottom on an underwater stump, sank gently to the bottom, and blocked the pass.

Plan two: On the levee, hands in pockets, cigar in mouth, Gen-

eral Grant slumped against a tree, surveying the ditch that was to be a canal which would by-pass the batteries of Vicksburg. On his left raged the Mississippi River, churning with the waters of the spring rise. Admiral Porter's gunboats, under a full head of steam, circled in the river waiting. The army's finest engineering minds had planned carefully for this day when the spring-flooded river would sweep through the new man-made canal, forming a new river bed, leaving the Confederate batteries, nine miles east at Vicksburg, guarding the empty Mississippi River bed. Today was the day. The flood waters were at their peak. But they continued racing down their old and natural bed, ignoring the best-laid plan of the United States Army Engineers. Someone had erred. Some river water oozed into the canal, turning it into a muddy ditch, too wet for diggers and not wet enough for steamboats.

Later in the day, Admiral Porter dragged one boat down through the ooze. At the south end, it came out facing the guns of Fort Warrenton, which promptly blasted it into kingdom come. Failure number two.

If Major General Ulysses S. Grant felt any discouragement over the failure of the canal, it did not show on his calm, expressionless face as he sat hunched behind a bonfire in front of his tent, waiting for his supper to be served. A runner approached and saluted.

"Message from General Sherman's headquarters, sir."

The general grunted, opened the message and read.

The staff, sitting around their tents some distance away, could not determine the tenor of the message. No smile or frown, curse or laugh to indicate whether the news was good or bad.

It had been over a month since Sherman's men with a detachment of gunboats, had started inching through Yazoo Pass, 270 miles north of Vicksburg, in an attempt to close on the city from above. Removing the trees and barricades left in their path, they managed to creep forward a mile a day up to the Coldwater River and finally into the Tallahatchie, pushing south toward Vicksburg. Maybe. Maybe a route into Vicksburg from the north could be found after all.

General Pemberton, divining Sherman's move, sent Major General W. W. Loring, a crusty old character, out from Vicksburg to set up store at Greenwood, a little hamlet located where the Talla-

hatchie met the Yellobusha. There he obstructed the river by sinking an old steamboat, threw up a line of defense on the only dry ground on the peninsula, an entrenchment of cotton bales and earth, and named the obstruction Fort Pemberton.

The Tallahatchie was a narrow little creek called a river. The Union boats, loaded to the gunwale with infantry, pushed down in single file. The only way the river pilots could stay in the river and not go aground was by guiding down between the rows of trees which stuck up above the banks inundated by the spring flood. When the lead boat poked its nose around the bend of the river above Fort Pemberton, a well-placed eighteen-pound solid shot from a rifled Whitworth gun entered one of the portholes striking and exploding a shell which killed fourteen men. This was the end of the fight. The Northern infantry could not unload and maneuver in water which was over their heads. The only visible earth was covered by the Rebels and Fort Pemberton.

General Grant folded the message from Sherman into a neat, crumpled ball and filed it in the fire. Failure number three.

An orderly came up with the general's supper, a tin plate containing some potatoes and a piece of beef fried crisp and black. Major General Ulysses S. Grant hated the sight of blood.

Nearing bedtime the general was still in front of his tent, staring into the fire thinking, digesting the stringy fried beef. Somewhere off among the thousands of campfires which flickered and smoked and sputtered along the soggy river bank, a nasal voice harmonized with an out-of-tune guitar.

"Oh,
Here we are in the land of niggers
Killin' snakes and scratchin' chiggers,
Scratch away, scratch away, scratch away
Dixie Land.
Oh, I wish I was in I-way
U. S. of A.
There ain't no state like I-O-way
It's the place where I will stay
Away, someday
I'll stay up north in I-way

Away, someday
I'll go back home to I-way."

Major General Ulysses S. Grant smiled and tapped an appreciative off-time toe to the off-key tune. The general knew two tunes: one was "Yankee Doodle"; the other wasn't.

It was long after taps. The camp was quiet. The army was sleeping as best it could in its rude shelters and tents. The general's fire was reduced to a few smoldering sticks, but still he sat in front of his tent, thinking. No papers to read, no maps to study. The general carried all of his reference materials around inside his shaggy head.

January, February, and now it was March. The navy was rushing around, acting, as one of the farmers put it, "Like a blind mule slompin' around in a yaller jacket's nest," trying desperately to find a path around Vicksburg, through the labyrinth of swamps, rivers, and bayous. General Grant sat and thought.

The people of the North were getting impatient. General Burnside had been defeated terribly at Fredricksburg. Rosecrans' flounderings at Stone River had gained nothing except loss of life, and here on the banks of the Mississippi, ten miles from Vicksburg, General Grant sat on his backside, wasting precious time digging ditches. Newspapers were clamoring for Grant's removal. Leading Republican Congressmen were making daily visits to President Lincoln, urging the removal of this stocky leather salesman and the appointment of General John A. McClernand.

5

The day after James McPherson had completed the loading of the Phelan cotton saw him closeted with Justin at the Preston House.

Justin sat on the bed counting out twenty-five thousand dollars in gold, as McPherson at the desk drew up the draft for deferred payment.

"Does the gold count out?" McPherson asked.

"To the dollar." Justin was sacking the heap of shiny, twenty-dollar gold pieces.

"And here's your draft," McPherson said, walking across the room

and handing the document to Justin. "Do you have the bill of sale ready?"

Justin took the paper. He read it before he answered.

Inscribed in carefully penned words was a most revealing bit of news, confirming Justin's earlier suspicions.

National Bank of New York City
Pay to the bearer Justin Phelan, $225,000.00
Signed,
James McPherson
Purchasing Agent
McPherson and Sons, Bridgeport, Connecticut

Justin studied the draft in silence, trying to justify his dealings with this Yankee, contemplating his future actions. He knew that his act, in the eyes of his neighbors, was traitorous to the cause for which they fought. All Yankees, any Yankees, were enemies, to be despised and killed. At the same time, he knew that the planters in the neighboring northern part of the state adjacent to the Tennessee border were trafficking in cotton with the legal blessings of both the governments, North and South. Buyers with United States Treasury Department receipts were swarming over the border country buying cotton and paying in gold.

The dealers were using army transportation facilities and certain stations along the river, and the railroads had been designated at collecting points. The Confederate government, while not officially sanctioning this practice, turned its head willingly. Yankee gold was precious stuff when you were in England or France trying to buy arms and ammunition. It seemed to Justin that patriotism was simply a matter of geography. McPherson had come into the central part of the state, because he was looking for the better grades of delta cotton which he thought he could buy at distress prices.

"I said," McPherson smiled, "do you have a bill of sale for me?"

Justin looked at the draft on the New York National Bank and shook his head. "No."

McPherson didn't argue the point. "There is one other thing, Phelan. Another deal I'd like to make."

"What's that?" Justin asked slowly.

"There's a housemaid out at your place. I'd like to buy her."

"Which one?"

"A mulatto. She's called Cleo." McPherson smiled to himself at the look which came over Justin's poker face.

"You son-of-a-bitch. Have you . . . ?" Justin jumped to his feet, towering over McPherson.

James stepped back, shaking his head in frantic denial.

Cold rage almost wiped reason from Justin's mind. That bitch! She's trapped McPherson just to get back at me. His first thoughts were to beat her within an inch of her life. No. As much as he would like to revenge himself upon Cleo, he could not allow this insignificant Yankee trader to walk off with so fair a prize.

"She's not for sale," Justin shouted.

McPherson shrugged and hastened to explain. "I knew you were planning to sell out your slaves, and I thought—perhaps you would sell her."

Furious, Justin clapped his hat on his head, snapped the carpet-bag with the gold shut, and left the room without a word.

6

The foundry of McClellan and Sons was located down below the town, adjacent to the river, the ferry, and the railhead of the Vicksburg-Jackson railroad. Justin asked a workman for the whereabouts of Chris and was informed that "the boss" was somewhere back by the forge.

Starting for the rear of the building Justin was forced to pick his way through heaps of raw materials which were waiting to be wrought into plates. Scrap-iron . . . iron in every form was waiting, having been brought in from the farm yards, back alleys, and junk piles to undergo a new transmutation.

Farther on a furnace was open, giving birth to a heap of now ductile waxy fagot, cherry red and so bright that the eye could hardly look at it. The fagot was being dragged forward onto the anvil, then a ponderous steam-driven hammer started reducing the mass of locks, bolts, pokers, screws, and horseshoes into a rough squared joint one fourth its former size. A bloom was being formed.

Justin found Chris near the forge where a crew of men were swinging a white-hot bloom, under the massive head of the forge.

"Hello," Chris shouted above the din of the hammer. "What are you . . ." he paced his words between the deafening crashes of the forge hammer, "doing here?"

Justin tried once to answer, but the competing forge drowned out his words. Borrowing Chris's tactics, he answered. "Want to talk . . . when we can. . . ."

Chris nodded, and after a few minutes, after he had assured himself that the forge was now functioning properly, led the way back to his second-story office.

"This is a pleasant surprise," Chris smiled after they were comfortably seated. "Can I fix you a drink? Some brandy?"

Justin declined. "You recall our conversation a few weeks back?" Justin began. "The one concerning my coming in with you?"

Chris did.

"I'm ready now. I'm prepared to put up a quarter of a million dollars. Gold. United States gold. Is that enough to get us started?" Justin asked.

The suddenness and size of Justin's contribution to the new partnership was staggering. Chris was at a loss as to what he should say.

"The money is on deposit with the United States National Bank in New York. We can use it to buy the machinery now or we can wait until after the war," Justin said, matter-of-fact and final in his directions. "Whenever you say, we'll meet with your lawyer and draw up the partnership papers."

"I suppose I've been negligent," Chris began. "But I haven't talked with David yet about this proposition. However, if you'd like we'll drive over to Jackson tomorrow. If he agrees we'll draw up the papers over there."

"Fine!"

Chris sighed with contentment. It was good, this new partnership. He felt as if a great load had been lifted from his shoulders. Justin had great strength. Strength that would be needed before this war was ended. And, if Justin became a member of the family . . . Chris frowned. Unless Malvina came home there was little chance of that taking place. Yes, taking Justin to Jackson tomorrow seemed like an excellent idea.

"Are you still planning on selling off your slaves?" Chris asked abruptly.

"Yes. Within a week or two. The advertisements for the auction are being posted tomorrow."

"I'm puzzled to know what to do about mine," Chris said.

Justin laughed in mirthless disgust. "That isn't the problem—what to do about slavery. The war answered that. The question is what should be done with the Negro. We've got him—right here in our midst. What are we going to do with him?"

"I don't know." Chris frowned. "It's a question I can't answer."

"I've given up," Justin smiled sadly. "I'm just going to avoid the problem or the answer by ridding myself of everything I own, except land."

Chris nodded. "I think that's wise."

"Well," Justin rose to leave. "We'll go over by train?"

Smiling, Chris took his outstretched hand. "If there is a train running," he said.

In these few minutes had just been born the firm of Phelan-McClellan and Sons.

By four o'clock on the following afternoon the partnership had become a fact. David was enthusiastically in favor of the proposed expansion. The agreement was drawn up, signed, sealed, and the new partners, with the lawyers, were at the hotel celebrating the new firm when David introduced the topic which was now uppermost in both Chris's and Justin's mind.

"After we're through with dinner," David said, "let's all drive over to Renshaws' and see Malvina. She'll sure be surprised when she hears about what's happened today."

"How is Malvina?" Chris asked.

"Oh, fine," David replied and then without thinking added, "In love, but fine."

"What are you talking about?" Chris interrupted.

"I don't think we should talk about it here, but . . ." David faltered.

"But what?" Chris demanded.

David turned to Justin. "I'm sorry I blurted this out . . . it's Malvina's place, but . . . well . . . at least she thinks she's in love."

"With whom, for heaven's sake?" Chris allowed his normally controlled voice to rise above the clatter of the dining room.

"There's an army chap. A Captain Miller. . . ."

"Never mind," Chris snapped. "I've met him. How long has this been going on?"

"Over a month. They're together all the time. He seems to be a decent enough fellow, but . . ." David did not complete his appraisal of the captain. The look of apprehension on his father's face, the brooding dark cloud of anger on Justin's, was enough to put an end to the conversation.

The clatter of horses' hoofs on the driveway, the metallic and impatient rattle of the knocker on the front door, brought an abrupt end to Malvina's four weeks of idyllic happiness. Josephine's greetings and Chris's rumbling response were sounds of foreboding.

Alan, seated beside her on the living-room sofa, feeling the tension in the fingers of the hand he held, turned, questioningly.

"Papa," she breathed and, answering Alan's unspoken question, shook her head admitting guilt. "No, I have not told him about you."

The seriousness of the situation was re-emphasized when she heard Josephine exclaiming, "Justin Phelan! Well, if this isn't a gran' surprise. A mos' welcome one too, Ah might add."

The moment she had so long postponed was now at hand. All of the excuses, pretexts, and doubts that had hounded her during the last months, which had lost their significance in the strength and security of Alan's embracing arms, now came flooding back.

"Look who's here, Malvina," Josephine babbled from the doorway. "Your daddy! Isn't this a surprise?"

"Indeed it is," Malvina smiled as she observed Chris standing rigidly stern in the doorway. Flanking him were David and Justin, perplexed and unsmiling.

"Justin. David. I'm overwhelmed. Come in and sit down."

As the trio trooped into the room to range awkwardly along the far side, Alan rose to stand beside her. He had arrived only an hour before from a hurried trip to Vicksburg and was still dressed in his Western garb; buckskin jacket and breeches, beaded moccasins. To David, the scout looked positively savage as he stood towering head and shoulders above his sister.

"Alan," Malvina said, turning slightly to the captain, "you've met my father . . . David." Alan nodded, acknowledging the re-

newed acquaintance, and turned to meet Justin's hate-filled eyes.

"And this is Justin Phelan. Captain Alan Miller."

Malvina felt warm and good when Alan moved across the room to take Justin's hand, who stood in stony silence beside her father.

"I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, sir." Alan's lips wore a smile that was not to be found in his eyes. For a moment after Alan extended his hand, Malvina was afraid Justin would decline the formality. She shuddered to think what Alan might do. It was a relief when Justin took the outstretched hand and mumbled some acknowledgment.

Alan turned, hesitating, not knowing exactly what was expected of him. Dressed in his primitive attire, his long brown hair hanging to his shoulders, he looked like a wild buffalo standing in a room filled with French Regency furniture. Malvina called lightly, "Alan, please come here. I need your strength to face this formidable family of mine."

And it was a formidable array, standing grim and silent along the wall. A determined family of vigilantes who had rushed to save their sister, daughter, and fiancée from this tall barbarian stranger.

Silence.

Josephine exclaimed at last, "What's got into eva one? Has the cat got eva one's tongue?"

"Josephine," Malvina smiled at the girl's perplexed inquiry, "would you mind taking Alan into the library for a few minutes? There's something I want to talk over with Daddy."

"Of course not," Josephine replied eagerly. "That is if Captain Miller doesn't object."

Malvina walked with Alan to the doorway. She closed the door behind him and turned to face Justin and the family.

"Before anyone says anything that he might regret later," she began, "let me speak my piece."

Chris shook his head in dismay. His daughter!

"Justin," she said, turning to her former fiancé, "I'm terribly sorry that I have not had the opportunity to explain things to you. I was planning upon returning to Vicksburg tomorrow. . . ." Her face saddened," I am in love with someone else—with Alan Miller."

Silence greeted her pronouncement.

"I do not know whether David had told you. . . . I would assume he has, otherwise you would not have rushed over here as

you did." She turned, pleading, to her father's anguished face, "Let me assure you, Papa, that Captain Miller is a fine and honorable gentleman. After you get to know Alan, I am sure you will agree with me."

Chris desperately wanted to ask Malvina if there had been a mention of marriage, but in deference to Justin refrained. There were too many feelings to be considered, too many ramifications in need of sober thought. Chris rose and said, "Since you are going back home tomorrow, I will wait and return with you."

"Of course, Papa," she replied, then with a long look at Justin, she added, "Justin, would you care to wait and accompany us too?"

"No, thanks," Justin replied slowly. "I have business here in Jackson."

"Good night, Malvina," Chris said. "We'll come for you in the morning."

They left without further comment.

Malvina stood in the doorway, after they had departed, hesitating before she went to Alan. What did the visit portend? This wonderful newborn love seemed to be in danger of being overwhelmed by the magnitude and weight of the past. Her hopes; the happiness and contentment she felt with Alan; the jealousy she harbored for everyone and everything which deprived her of Alan, even for a moment; the passionate longing for his arms and lips; were these things to be denied and taken away? The afternoon rides along the country roads, side by side, snug beneath a great robe; the walks through the wintry woods; the evenings spent sitting in front of the fire; would these delights be destroyed?

Malvina found herself clutching the door jamb and her voice was frantic as she called, "Alan! Alan! Please. Come to me quickly!"

"They've gone?" Alan asked as he led her to the sofa. He took her in his arms and with a burst of words came the tumbled story of her former engagement to Justin . . . "and we were to have been married this spring. He was waiting for me to set the date, that afternoon when you first came."

Alan smiled down at her, his lips touching her hair as he whispered, "I arrived just in time."

"Oh, yes, darling. Yes!" Their lips met and it was Alan who finally held her away. "Malvina." His tone was stern. In fear she

lifted her head from his shoulder to look into his eyes. "Last night when I was in Vicksburg, I was. . . ."

"My darling," Malvina interposed. "Yesterday seemed interminable and by suppertime I did not think I would ever be able to endure the evening without seeing you. I missed you so."

Alan's lips lightly brushed her cheek as he continued speaking with whispered kisses. "At the hotel, I passed the time reading a story I found in an old magazine. It was a love story."

"I like love stories," Malvina sighed. "Was this a sad love story or a happy love story?"

"You will have to decide for yourself. The heroine of this story had two loves. One . . ."

"Suitor A?"

"Suitor A was a childhood acquaintance who professed great love for the heroine, wooing her on every occasion, begging for her hand in marriage."

"He sounds frightfully dull," Malvina's eyes were closed as she nestled her face on Alan's chest. "Childhood sweethearts usually are. Now tell me about Suitor B."

"He was a stranger."

"Ah! And did he wear a buckskin shirt and moccasins?" Malvina tilted her head back, gazing up with adoring eyes. "And was he the most handsome man in all the world?"

"Suitor B," Alan continued doggedly, "was passably handsome . . . no, I would rather say that he was agreeable in appearance. He too wooed the beautiful young lady and for some unexplainable reason she fell in love with him, rejecting Suitor A."

"Naturally," Malvina nodded in vigorous agreement. "Were I the beautiful young heroine, I would do the same." Malvina pulled away from Alan's arms, sitting erect and turning to inspect him carefully. "I'm glad you are not agreeable in appearance. I am far more fortunate than the heroine of your story for I have a strong and handsome and . . . noble suitor."

"As for being noble, I am afraid you will change your opinion once you have heard the end of this story," Alan warned sternly.

"Suitor B perhaps," Malvina conceded as she returned to her place in Alan's arms, "but not my Alan. He is noble, both in heart and mind."

"Shall I continue?" Alan asked. "He wooed the heroine, made

violent protestations of undying love, but never once did he offer to marry the girl."

Malvina was silent for a long time. "Why?" Her voice was constrained with fear. "Was there something . . . did he have a wife . . . in Texas?"

"No," Alan smiled. "He was duty-restrained. Whether right or wrong I do not know. According to the story he thought he was bound by moral obligation to temporarily withhold the proposal of marriage."

Malvina sighed and her voice was choked with happiness as she whispered fervently. "I know. I knew from the beginning that he was an honorable man."

"Suitor B?"

"Suitor B," Malvina nodded.

Reaching down with his free arm, Alan lifted Malvina gently to his lap. "Malvina," he said, "I want you, my darling, above all things. In a very few days I shall ask you to marry me. I too have one thing I must do before I am free to ask you to be my wife. And . . . if you will have me."

"Yes, Alan, yes." She held his hand to her cheek.

"Wait, wait until you know everything about me. Then give me your answer."

"I know all the things there are to know. You're good and you're kind and you're brave. And above all I love you."

His emotions would not let him speak. Malvina saw the deep distress in his face as she hastened to answer the question she thought she saw written in his eyes. "My answer will always be yes, Alan. I love you, Alan Miller. I love you with every fiber in my body, with every beat within my heart."

Slowly he kissed her. He lifted her from his lap and she walked with him to the door. "I will see you in the morning, my darling," he said as he turned, "before you leave."

Malvina felt a tear on her cheek, and wished it would remain there always, for it was Alan's.

7

Malvina's return to Vicksburg gave Aunt Della an opportunity to come into her own. Malvina was Della's favorite niece, giving spe-

cial meaning to the "fuss and bother" she heaped upon the girl.

"Malvina McClellan," was her scowling hands-on-hips greeting, "what on earth have you been doing to yourself?"

"What's wrong, Aunt Della?"

"Just look at you," Della ranted, "skinny as a beanpole. I'll wager you haven't eaten a square meal since you've been away. Nothing but skin and bones. Now I suppose we'll have to spend all our time in the kitchen trying to fatten you up."

"Don't you dare try to fatten me," Malvina laughed.

"Just look at that dress. Falling off you. If you think all I have to do is spend my time taking up and remaking all your clothes, then you've got another think coming."

"Aunt Della, you'll never change, will you," Malvina laughed, throwing her arms around her beloved aunt.

"Don't try to sugar-talk me either. I know all of your little tricks," Della warned, then stepped back to glare at her niece. "Well, tell me about him."

"About who?" Malvina teased.

"Now who would I be talking about? This young man your daddy was telling me about. This captain something or other."

"Captain Miller? There isn't much to tell you really. He'll be here in a little while, then you can learn about him firsthand."

"Who is he?" Della always believed in getting right to the heart of matters.

"Well," Malvina smiled, looking off into space, "he is the handsomest, most brilliant, and bravest captain in the entire Confederate Army and I love him very much."

"No. I don't want that. I could ask fifty girls to describe their beaus to me and I'd get the same reply. Who is he?"

"His name is Captain Miller and he comes from Texas. Anything else you'll have to ask him," Malvina replied. "He'll be here at any moment now."

"Oh, dear," Della exclaimed as she rushed for the stairway. "I've got to change. Come along with me, Belle. That dress you've got on is a sight."

Malvina sank into a chair with a sigh of relief as Della and Belle vanished up the stairway.

Chris, who had been standing silently by waited until Malvina regained her composure before he asked, "Are you sure, Malvina?"

"Yes, Papa, I'm quite sure," she smiled.

"You know how much I love you, Malvina," he said softly, his voice filled with emotion.

"I know you do, Papa, but this is right. Please believe me."

"Baby," Chris said as he placed his arm around Malvina's shoulder, "forgive me, rushing in as I did at Jackson. So many sins and wrongs have been committed by parents upon their children in the name of love, so maybe I'm entitled to this one mistake?"

"I understand your feelings, Papa. It is only natural and right that you should worry about me. I love Alan very much."

Their talk was interrupted by the arrival of Robert, resplendent in his gray uniform and gleaming sword.

"Vina!" he shouted as he came running into the room to scoop his sister up in his arms. "How are you, Sis?"

"I have two broken ribs, a twisted spine and I wish I were back in Jackson again where the gentlemen are more refined," Malvina scolded, straightening her clothes. She looked up, laughed, and ran to kiss her brother. "How am I? Wonderful! Marvelous! And before all the other meddling, gossiping, and oversolicitous members of my family have a chance to ruin my news, let me be the first to tell you. I'm in love and with a wonderful man."

"Well, congratulations," he grinned. "How is old Justin?"

"No, it is not Justin Phelan."

"No?" Robert was puzzled, unaware that what he said was in the least bit embarrassing to Malvina. "What happened to you and Justin?"

"Robert," Malvina pleaded, "forget Justin for a moment. He has nothing to do with the conversation. He has nothing to do with my gay, happy mood which is rapidly fading away." Malvina allowed her voice to trail off to a sad and dejected tone.

"Is it someone else?" Robert asked.

"Yes, Robert," she said as she turned back to the perplexed brother and whispered in shocked voice, "There is someone new. Captain Alan Miller. Do you know him?"

Robert slowly shook his head. "I don't think I know him."

"Well," Malvina continued with her whisper, "you shall in a moment. I think I hear his horse coming up the driveway now."

"Darling!" Malvina ran with arms outstretched to greet Alan. "I thought you'd never arrive." Her eager lips prevented any explana-

tions. "First come in the library and see Papa and meet my brother Robert."

After the introductions, Malvina said, "Robert has been appointed to the court-martial board. He was telling us about it."

"Yes, I was just saying that my first case was a real interesting affair. I defended the spy that they caught with the defense maps of Vicksburg. I didn't really do anything because he was caught with all the maps on his person and he confessed. But we had to give him a trial anyway."

"What was his name?" Alan asked casually.

"He wouldn't tell anyone. He was dressed like a riverman but he was a Yankee. No doubt about that. The hanging's tomorrow."

"Isn't it frightful?" Malvina said, shaking her head. "Imagine. Yankee spies right here in Vicksburg."

"I can tell you this much," Robert said, his arms folded, his chin held high. "After sitting in on this case, I wouldn't trust anyone."

Alan nodded in sad and silent agreement.

8

The condemned spy walked down the steps of the Vicksburg courthouse and climbed into the death cart. The bearded man seemed to be without emotion, fending off the prying stares of the assembled crowd of curiosity seekers with a stoic gaze. A troop of cavalry screened the little two-wheeled vehicle as it passed from sight around the corner of the courthouse, heading out Cemetery Road.

The finely kept hilltop cemetery was crowded with spectators. Big Beulah and all her girls were there—all of the girls except those who had had to stay over with customers. Beulah felt, because of her contributions to this affair, that it was her duty to see the "villain get his just deserts." As she remarked afterwards, "It was the best-organized hangin' I'd ever seen."

"They had this here platform with the rope hangin', clear down at the far end of the graveyard," one of the girls explained to a customer that night. "You know that there big white monument for the Confederate dead? Well, that's where the hangin' was. Right smack beside it. Then right smack in front, right where the son-of-a-bitch could look down in, was the final restin' place. A hole. Six

feet long and shoulder-wide. And then they put the rope around his neck and ast him if he had anything to say, and he shook his head no. That was when I started to bawl. If he'da said somethin' than I think I coulda hated him, but as it was, I jus' stood there blubberin'. Then somebody knocked the props out from under the platform and he just hung there by his neck, his eyes poppin' big as saucers, and his tongue lollin' outa the side a' his mouth. I never in all my life seen anythin' look like he did."

Alan watched the death dance. "Perhaps I should tell them not to tear the gallows down," he murmured grimly to himself. "They may need them again tomorrow morning if my second attempt to secure the maps of Vicksburg fails."

Dressed as a private soldier, in an old suit of butternut, Alan Miller, sat on his horse outside the Confederate Army headquarters. A pouring rain, "a gully-washer" these rains were called back home, and a cold March wind beat down on the sheet of oilcloth tentage he was using for a raincoat. The side-street hitching-rack vigil was not at all comfortable, but there was no other vantage point from where he could observe the kerosene-lantern-lighted windows of the headquarters building.

Through the rain-streaked panes Alan could see his acquaintance, Captain Sparks, sitting with his chair leaned back against the wall, finishing off a bottle of his favorite whisky. It was nearly dawn—four o'clock—and the day officer would not report until six. Alan had two hours in which to accomplish his mission. Sometime during these next two hours Sparks would have to "make a trip out behind the building." Longing for the warmth of his dry buckskins, Alan hunched beneath the flimsy oilcloth and waited.

All instincts had warned him against attempting this task he had assigned to himself, but instincts must go unheeded. The riverman courier had failed to escape from Vicksburg and to deliver the defense plans to Grant. That duty must now be performed.

Through the window across the street he saw Captain Sparks get up out of his chair, stretch, scratch himself, and amble out of the room through a door in the rear. With the speed of a cat, Alan slid from his horse, dashed across the empty muddy street, up the steps and into the headquarters building.

Silently he cursed the unpredictability of a drinking man when he heard the stumbling footsteps of Sparks returning to the orderly room by the front entrance, for Alan had stationed himself in a position where he could throttle the man as he came into the room from the rear. Now they would be a room apart.

Sparks walked in through the front door and cursed the wind which had blown out his lantern. As the officer mumbled and fumbled for a match, Alan moved silently across the black room clutching his only weapon, a large bowie knife. He held the blade of the knife in his gloved hand, intent upon using it as a billy. His training on the Western plains told him that he should kill this man, even though he had grown to like the simple-minded Sparks during their week of camaraderie. Instinct said to kill him, and again he violated all warnings. Alan chose to be merciful.

When Sparks was but one step from striking distance a phosphorus match flared up in Alan's face, blinding him for a moment. The befogged Sparks only had time to see the white bone-handled bowie knife as it slashed down to break his wrist. The agonized scream of pain was silenced as Alan hurled his one-hundred-ninety pounds into the man. He slashed down with a second blow. The heavy butt of the knife handle caught the captain behind the ear. He slumped to the floor unconscious.

Alan jerked open the door of the war room and ran along the length of the briefing room pulling the large paper plans from the walls. Maps in hand, he quickly crumpled them into a bundle and plunged out of the room through the front door. Headquarters officers, sleeping in the upper floors, aroused by Spark's scream, came pounding down the stairs to investigate as Alan raced across the street.

Alan's mount, spurred on, plunged down the muddy side street and vanished into a darkened alley.

As Alan raced his horse in the direction of Sky Parlor Hill toward Twin Chimneys, instinct again told him that the precious moments of advantage he could gain—the time consumed by the headquarters officers in finding their way around the darkened headquarters locating a lantern and rousing a guard unit to make a pursuit—might mean the difference between freedom or a swing at the end of the hangman's rope. Again he allowed heart to rule his head. Just before the McClellan driveway he pulled his straining

horse to a nervous walk. As yet, he could not detect any sounds of pursuit. Stuffing the bundle of maps into his saddlebag, he dismounted; he tied his horse behind a hedge for concealment. Swiftly he moved around the right wing of the house beneath a rear bedroom window.

Malvina had been lulled to sleep by the sound of the drizzling rain on the roof. When she first heard the clink of a pebble against her windowpane she thought the rain had turned to hail. The second stone brought her to the window.

"Malvina," Alan called hoarsely. "Can you come down? I must see you for a moment."

Bewildered, she searched out a robe, groped her way quietly down the stairs and through to the kitchen door.

"Alan! What on earth . . . ?" she cried, as Alan stepped into the shelter of the darkened kitchen.

"Malvina!" he whispered, "Malvina," holding her close to him, for a moment, feeling the softness of her against his pounding heart.

"You're soaking wet," she cried as her fingers touched the shoulders of his sodden shirt. "Let me find a lamp. I'll get one of Robert's dry shirts."

"No. No, wait." His voice was urgent, fearful that he could not dissuade her from lighting the lamp. "There isn't time. Listen to me."

"Of course, Alan," Malvina replied without understanding. "But, please, let me fix you something warm to drink and then tell me what's wrong."

The sound of a cavalry detachment pounding past the house on the road leading south out of Vicksburg, added urgency to his entreaties. "Malvina, please. Please listen, for you've got to believe in me. There isn't time to explain. I've been called away. I'll be gone for a week or maybe two. I'm sorry, but I can't tell you any more. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Oh, no, Alan!" Malvina cried softly. "You can't go away now!"

"I must. This is the one thing I must do. This is the duty I told you about. When I come back, then I will be free," he pleaded.

"Yesterday, I . . . I waited all evening for your return, and now you are leaving me again without a word of explanation . . . I

don't understand, Alan." Her voice was choked with tears. "I'm trying, but I don't understand."

"Malvina," Alan whispered urgently. "Remember in Jackson? Our agreement, duty before pleasure? After this one assignment, it will all be over."

"After what assignment, Alan?" she asked plaintively. "I'm the girl you love. I'm not a child. I deserve to know. . . . You can't leave me like this, please."

Malvina felt the arms around her tighten as the sounds of another group of horsemen reined to a halt somewhere out in front of the house.

Alan's warning "Sh!" commanded silence. Only the sound of the wooden-cogged kitchen clock creaking and groaning; the rain water pouring down from the gutters over the kitchen stoop, reached their ears as they stood listening—breathlessly waiting.

It was after the snorting horses, the unintelligible shouts of cavalrymen, the drumming of hooves as the horsemen continued their dash out of the city, had receded that she felt the arms which were holding her still, relax.

All her hopes for keeping Alan with her this night faded with the receding horsemen. She knew that nothing she could say or do would dissuade him. Now another new and as yet nameless fear crept into her voice as she asked, "What is it, Alan? Are you hiding? What is going on out there?"

"I will explain everything when I return, until then you must believe in me, Malvina." He kissed her gently on the lips, and turned. Then he released her and in two strides quietly opened the kitchen door and walked off into the rain-swept dawn.

A moment later, somewhere to the front of the house, she heard the clatter of his horse's hooves, racing off into the night.

It seemed to Malvina as she stood in the open kitchen doorway leaning against the sill that her mind was like the hard-packed clay in the yard gathering the run-off water in great shimmering pools, incapable of absorbing them. She could not accept that which had just happened. Her mind was a torment of conflicting thoughts and there was a sickness within her stomach. Desperately she tried to recall every word Alan had spoken but try as she might it was impossible to sort the real from the fanciful.

The muscles of her face were taut and strained as she turned back to the kitchen, closed the door and slowly started groping her way toward the back stairway.

"Is that you, Malvina?" a sleepy voice called from the upstairs.

"Yes, Aunt Della, everything is all right. Everything is fine."

Aware that her trembling limbs would not carry her another step, she sank into a chair beside the kitchen table exhausted. Slumping forward, head cradled in her arms, she burst into uncontrolled sobbing.

7

THERE WAS A STRANGENESS in the air in the spring of Sixty-three. Something was afoot and it wasn't the infantry slogging around in the swamp. The Army of the Mississippi, 45,000 strong, was beginning to concentrate along the banks of the river north of Milliken's Bend, Louisiana. Every high and dry piece of ground for miles around was utilized for encampments, drill fields, and training areas. Mountains of supplies were beginning to accumulate along the floating docks.

"Is the Army of the Mississippi, like the mud turtles that are beginning to appear along the banks of the river, going to come out of its shell and do something?" the *Chicago Tribune*'s field correspondent wrote as the lead paragraph of his weekly column as he caught a glimpse of Major General U. S. Grant slouching around army headquarters, hands stuffed in pockets, preoccupied, deep in thought.

The navy was also showing new signs of life. Gunboats, mortar

boats, and transports were coming out of all the creeks and bayous, where they had been floundering around all winter, to line up in apple-pie order opposite army headquarters at the Bend.

Rumors flew thick and fast. One reliable source said that the corps and regiments were reorganizing for a move back up the river to Memphis, Tennessee, where General Halleck would take over the army. Another equally reliable source had it that Grant was lining up the troops for a giant review and farewell parade before turning over the command to General Nathaniel P. Banks. The aides and staff officers joined the common soldiers in the game of guessing what was going on under the dilapidated old hat when General Grant took his evening stroll down to the river and stood on the docks looking off to the east toward Vicksburg. Everyone guessed, surmised, and speculated. Only one man knew the answer.

Vicksburg, twenty miles to the east, strong and haughty like a petulant old hen, hovered over her brood of chicks, watching the movements of the foe down on the river flats to its front. When irritated, she would fuss in a fit of temper with her monster guns which bristled tier above tier from the river bank up the two-hundred-and-sixty-foot slope to the top of the heights.

General Grant on the mud banks across the river scratched his stubbled chin, lit up a new cigar, turned and walked back to his tent. If anything was going to happen which would alleviate the cold chills that were running up and down the backs of the people in the North, the information belonged solely to General Grant. President Lincoln suffered from cold chills along with everyone else.

2

March came in like a lion and went out like a lion, snapping at the rear of a scampering lamb. The early part of April was one of the worst in memory. One rainy day followed another in an endless procession. Old-timers of Vicksburg described the spring of Sixty-three as the "worst wet spell since Forty-two." The oldsters had a theory about the weather. "It's the cannon. All the smoke forms clouds and the explosions shake 'em down again."

Despite the weather, spring was coming with a glint of brave words, shouting defiance against the terrible Yankees.

A CHALLENGE

Whereas it has become necessary for the young men of our country to enlist to do the dirty work of driving the mercenaries from our sunny south; I hereby challenge any abolitionist or Black Republican lady of character, if there can be such a one found among the Negro equality tribe, to meet me at the Mason Dixon line with a pair of Colt's repeaters or any other weapon they may choose, that I may receive satisfaction for the insult.

Signed,
A lady of the Confederacy

The two thousand five hundred townspeople in Vicksburg went about their separate business as best they could and, were it not for the thousands of troops in and about the city, a stranger would not have gotten the impression that here lived a people at war. The opera house was to open within a week with a new production of *Hamlet*; whisky was high (five dollars a quart); haircuts and cigars were only one dollar. The patriotic citizens were planting kitchen gardens, but food was not a great problem.

The talk around the after-dinner cigars, and this was more than just rumor, was that England would intervene this summer. An English trade commission had actually come up the river from New Orleans bringing assurances that the sympathies of all Europe were with the Confederacy and its cause.

Any economist knew that one hard blow would knock the North out of the war. Intervention by England would more than suffice.

There was hope in the military circles too. The winter campaign had been fought brilliantly. General Pemberton with his army, like a great cat, lay stealthily behind the defenses, warily watching the enemy down in the bottom lands, anticipating and blocking every move with a countermove. Each expedition of attack had been brilliantly defeated with a minimum loss of life or effort.

The only serious problem facing the army was the "crop deserters." Farmer-soldiers were leaving in great numbers to go home.

They all told their comrades in arms that they would return "jest as soon as I git somethin' planted fer the old woman and the kids." Seven dollars a month was not a very substantial salary, particularly when the army was paying plantation owners thirty dollars a head for the slaves they sent to work on the defenses.

"Don't seem hardly fair, them black bastards bein' worth more 'un four times what we are," the soldiers grumbled, but then the planters were grumbling too. "How can we plant crops with all our hands working on Pemberton's fortification?"

Despite Grant's huge army camped up along the river, within twenty miles of Vicksburg, General Johnston, commander of the Western Confederate forces, did not believe it to be any great threat to the city or the war.

General Pemberton, his defenses having secured all land approaches, was now directing his attentions to blocking the one route through which the desperate Yankee army might circumvent Vicksburg—the Mississippi River which flowed beneath the city's cannon-bristled bluffs.

3

Piney Pucket had been living a life of ease and luxury during his first three months in the service of his country. With the exception of the one miserable experience in battle out at Haines Bluff, the army had been good to him and he was beginning to enjoy garrison life.

When the duty officer at headquarters called him in, Sergeant Pucket assumed that because of his reputation as a fixer, a man with connections, he was going to receive another choice detail.

"I'm told you know the river front," the officer said.

"Grew up down there," Piney informed him.

"Good. Report to Captain Elsworth immediately," the adjutant instructed.

Piney, to his dismay, found Elsworth down at the river with a detachment of fifty infantrymen and a flock of rowboats. The patrol was to go directly across the river to a scrawny little village named Desoto and establish a signal rocket station. The now deserted

town, the railhead for the Shreveport-Vicksburg railroad, consisted of a dilapidated station and a few warehouses.

Piney felt as though the world had come to an end. The far side of the river was in Indian territory and the woods were teeming with Yankees.

When word of Piney's assignment reached the water front, Beulah turned out the girls en masse to bid farewell to her hero son. The "girls," carried away with their patriotism, besieged the members of the tiny command with kisses and tearful good-bys and, after the captain caught four men and two girls tiptoeing off behind the shelter of a warehouse, the warm embraces having turned the enthusiastic "Godspeeds" and tearful "good-bys" into practical commercial solicitations, he was forced to throw up a rifle-and-bayonet cordon between Beulah's beauties and the grateful soldiers.

Desoto, Louisiana, was the end of the line for the Shreveport-Vicksburg railroad and Piney Pucket. The captain fanned out a perimeter defense and assigned Piney and a detachment of men the task of preparing the houses, depots, and warehouses for firing. Cotton and gunpowder were to be strewn through the building which would then be fired if the Yankees attempted to run the batteries by night. The burning houses were to provide light for the battery of Confederate gunners across the river at Vicksburg. Rockets were also lined up in the ground outside the depot. These too were to be set off as signals.

Piney's world crumbled to bits when the officer, as he was lining up his men preparing to re-embark for Vicksburg, singled out Piney. "Sergeant Pucket, you and a detail of ten men will remain here until further notice. It will be your duty to fire the signal rockets and then fire the houses on the first sign of any attempt by the Yankees to run the batteries. Only after the houses have been fired will you return with your men to the Vicksburg side of the river. I will leave you with three rowboats. You will post guards at all times and during the daytime your men will cut trees, lashing them together into fire rafts. The rafts will be stacked with pine and dry cypress and primed with gunpowder. These rafts will be tied along the river bank above the bend and will also be fired and released at the first sighting of enemy boats."

Piney and ten dejected privates stood on the west bank of the river amid a stack of provisions and three barrels of powder, watch-

ing the rest of the detachment as it rowed back to the safety of Vicksburg.

"Ah'm goin' to change mah name from Adam to Zeke," one of the privates complained. "Evah time there's an outhouse to be dug mah name's the first one called."

It was growing dark. The twinkling lights of Vicksburg winked across the black water of the river. Piney could see the lights of Big Beulah's place at the foot of the hill, safe and secure, warm and snug. He was homesick and lonesome. This would be the first night he had ever spent away from Vicksburg.

4

The crowd at Justin Phelan's plantation was large. Slave buyers had converged upon Hillcrest from every part of Mississippi. The tiers of planked bleachers which had been constructed across the center of the barn were filled with planters waiting for some particular piece of merchandise to be led out on the block.

"I've got sixteen. Who'll give me fifty? Sixteen, sixteen, who'll give me fifty?" The auctioneer, fat and red-faced, leaned on his lectern, mallet poised as if ready to smash down a "sold" without warning, and peered out over the smoke-clouded barn. The perspiring salesman was flanked by two clerks, recording and counting up the record of the purchases. "Gentlemen! Gentlemen! May I call your attention to the fact that here is a prime hand and the price that I have been offered is absolutely ridiculous. Now I want fifty. Sixteen I've got and I want sixteen-fifty."

In front and directly below the auctioneer and standing on a raised wooden box was the object of this heated sales battle. A large, shiny black male Negro with a flat nose and thick protruding lips stood on the "deal box" holding a handkerchief bundle of possessions in hand.

"This buck will be twenty-five this spring. He's a prime hand and he can carpenter. He's docile. No troublemaker and he's sired five children. Here's a nigger that's worth at least two thousand five hundred and all you've offered me so far is sixteen." The auctioneer mopped the sweat from his face and glared at the buyers. "For the last time, I've got sixteen, who'll make it a quarter? Sixteen. Going

once. Sixteen going twice." He paused, the hammer held high above his head, searching the faces of the competing buyers, watching for a nod, a raised forefinger, the wink of an eye. The hammer wavered, "Sixteen three times and SOLD! To Scott of Raymond."

"Niggers ain't sellin' worth a pinch," one of the planters said as he lowered himself onto a vacant spot on the bench.

"Well," the man at his side tugged an ear lobe and speculated. "It's about right. I allus figger they're worth as much per hundred dollars as cotton's bringin' a pound. Eighteen cents is all you can git fer cotton now and that last buck sold fer sixteen hundred. That ain't too far off."

The questioner shook his head, spat a yellowish-brown parabola of tobacco juice which rainbowed out between the shoulders of the two men to his front and struck the hard-packed earth of the sales ring with a splert.

Chris McClellan, leaning on a guard rail, turned to Justin who was standing at his side. "How do you feel about it, Justin?"

"The sale?" Justin countered.

Chris nodded.

"All right. I'm satisfied. Perhaps if I'd waited another week or two, the market would be stronger, but at the same time, there might not be any market left."

Again Chris nodded in agreement.

An overseer was leading out a pair of Negroes this time, male and female. They were old. The man was dressed in a blue-checkered shirt and brown trousers. His skin was inky black and the thick crinkly wool which stood out around his head was white as cotton. The woman needed a cane for support.

"All right," the auctioneer began his chant again. "This pair is to be sold singly, but the buyer will take both. They're man and wife. Granny is a good nursemaid and the man is excellent in the stable. Now what am I bid?"

The old man, standing in front of his wife, jerked off his hat, bowed to the buyers, then danced a little jig to show off his agility.

"Those are the ones I feel sorry for," Chris remarked.

"I'll lose by it, but I'm not breaking up any families," Justin replied.

"What about her?" Chris asked, nodding toward the next slave to go on the block, a large, fat mammy with a bundle on her head, followed by a brood of children.

"They'll all go together," Justin replied.

The mother brought eight hundred dollars. The children went for seven dollars a pound.

The household slaves sold last. Cleo, the new mistress of the eight older household servants Justin was keeping to run the house, watched in stony silence as one barefoot girl was led to the deal block. The girl held one hand over her cheek until the auctioneer's assistant forced her to reveal an ugly, flame-red, partially healed gash which split her cheek from eyebrow to chin.

"Bitch!" Cleo whispered to herself as the auctioneer gaveled, "Sold."

"I would imagine you are feeling rather depressed," Chris said after the last hand had been led away. "Why don't you ride over to the house with me and have dinner? There's no one there except Belle and myself."

"Malvina isn't home?" Justin asked slowly.

"No. She's in Vicksburg with Della," Chris replied.

"I'd be delighted to join you, sir."

5

James McPherson hovered in the background of the sales barn at Justin Phelan's slave auction, taking care to conceal his presence from Justin.

Since his last meeting with Justin he had made an overland trip on horseback to Memphis, inspected his warehoused cotton and attended to getting it loaded out for the East. He had timed his return to Vicksburg to coincide with Phelan's advertised slave auction, his original purpose for delaying in the Vicksburg area.

Five o'clock came and the auctioneer rang down his hammer on the last "Sold." Cleo had not been put on the block. McPherson drifted out of the sales barn with the departing buyers, mounted his horse and rode several miles toward the city before pulling his mount to a halt, turning around and heading back toward Hillcrest.

The main house was dark. A light shone from the main kitchen

building in the rear. McPherson dismounted, tied up his horse and walked back to the lighted kitchen.

Cleo opened the door. Her face was cold and serene as she stood looking slightly down on McPherson.

"Hello, Cleo," he greeted.

"I thought you was up Nawth." Her eyes were cold, emotionless.

"I was. I came down today."

"Fo' the sale?"

"Yes." McPherson studied the girl, waiting for some clue which would indicate how she felt.

"Yo' wants ter see Mista Justin?"

"No. Not particularly."

"He ain't hyer." She acted as if she was going to close the door in his face. "He's ovah at McClellans'. Down the road a piece. The otha' way."

"Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"No, suh." She gave no indication of considering the request. "He down theya if yo' wants to see him."

"I came to get you today, Cleo. I was going to buy you."

"Ah ain't fo' sale."

"So I learned. I'm sorry."

For the first time she acted as though she was considering what he had said. "Why?"

"I want you. I came all the way back from Memphis just to get you."

"What fo'?"

"I'd rather not talk about it standing here in the rain." McPherson turned and started to walk toward his horse.

"Whur yo' goin' now? Back Nawth?" Cleo raised her husky voice enough to arrest his footsteps.

"No. I'm going to Vicksburg."

"Whur'bouts in Vicksburg?"

"The Preston House." He turned, waiting to see where this line of questioning was leading.

Cleo stood silhouetted in the doorway, lithe and tall, her body leaning gently against the door. Her eyes searched his for perhaps a moment, then without a word she turned, closing the door behind her.

6

When she looked up from the book she was reading, Belle McClellan rose from her chair with excitement, for there outside on the driveway were her father and Justin Phelan. Of all the times her father could have brought Justin to the house, this was the worst. High on her left cheek, shining bright and rosy, was a pimple! Aunt Della said they were caused by eating too much frosted maple cake. Malvina said it was "orneriness" coming out, but whatever the cause, this was not the time to be exposed to Justin Phelan's critical scrutiny.

A jack-rabbit jump to the library table for the paste pot and Belle was gone.

Justin and Chris were in the library enjoying a much needed drink when Belle put in her appearance. Chris choked and fought to hide a smile when he saw his daughter standing in the doorway. Justin rose and solemnly greeted the girl with a slight bow. "Good evening, Belle. You look lovely this evening."

Chris questioned the veracity of Justin's compliment. Belle stood in the doorway teetering on a pair of Malvina's heeled dancing slippers, attired in one of Malvina's black lace dresses, a beautiful evening gown cut dangerously low in front and designed for a more fully developed body. The despised "blemish" was covered with a round black silk beauty spot.

The "femme fatale" seated herself at Justin's side and entered into the conversation with a new voice, which was completely unfamiliar to either Chris or Justin. It was soft, low, whispery, and completely false.

At dinner, while her father and Justin discussed the sale, Belle planned her next move.

"Justin," Belle murmured as he was preparing to depart, "if you will help me with my wrap, I'll walk with you to the carriage."

"I'd be delighted to help you with your wrap, Belle," he said, crossing to the hall tree and returning with a long black velvet hooded cape, which also belonged to Malvina. "However, will you settle for walking with me to the hitching rack? I came over on horseback."

Chris watched with amused perplexity as they walked out into the yard, Belle's hand resting lightly on Justin's arm.

"We've missed you, Justin," Belle whispered when they reached Justin's mount. "Terribly."

"I've been very busy," he replied. "I'm closing down Hillcrest."

"I know. Papa told me. Nevertheless, we've still missed seeing you."

"We?" he teased.

"All right," she allowed her voice to rise to its natural vivacious level. "I've missed you!"

Justin placed both hands upon her shoulders and looking down into her soft brown eyes replied, "I'm happy to know this, Belle. Let's make up for my remission in part by attending the opening of the opera house in Vicksburg tomorrow night. They're presenting *Hamlet*."

"You mean . . ." Belle stammered. "You mean me? You and me?"

"You. Belle McClellan." His voice was soft and low.

"Why . . . yes. Yes, of course . . . I . . . I'd love to go."

"Good." Justin leaned forward, gently kissed her half-parted lips, turned and swung aboard his horse. "Good night, Belle. I'll call for you tomorrow at five."

Unlike the sleeping princess who was awakened by a kiss, Belle stood transfixed, clinging to the gate for support.

That night for Belle was longer than eternity by three full hours. It was after midnight before her heart stopped pounding; her lips could still feel the imprint of his first kiss. It was as though Justin had touched them with a fiery brand. Breathing was next to impossible and her mind was a foment of bubbling thoughts, hopes, dreams, and nightmarish despairs. When the hall clock struck one a new fear assaulted her; "What if I can't go to sleep? What if I lie here all night and then tomorrow I'll have nothing but red eyes with black circles underneath?"

It was four before she exhausted herself to the point of sleep. At noon of the following day she was awakened by 'Lijah, beautiful and refreshed.

Justin called for her at five. They reached Vicksburg in time for

a snack at the Washington Hotel and were in their seats at the opera house when the curtain rose.

The trip into town had been dreadful. What does a sixteen-year, eleven-month, twenty-four-day-old girl say to a mature, intelligent and breath-takingly handsome man of the world? Belle felt like a dolt and confined herself to monosyllabic replies to Justin's questions and polite remarks. It was a relief when the theater lights were extinguished and the play began.

The play was thrilling and the actor who played Hamlet was the best Belle had ever seen. He was handsome and his legs looked almost like a girl's in the black cotton tights. She particularly liked the way he postured and posed when he unloosed his sword.

"Who is the actor playing Hamlet?" she asked Justin at the end of the first act.

"I don't remember, Cyril something or other," he told her. "I've never seen him before."

HAMLET: The air bites shrewdly; it is very cold.
HORATIO: It is indeed, an unhappy and an eager air.
HAMLET: What hour now?
HORATIO: Methinks it lacks of twelve.
HAMLET: No, it has struck.
HORATIO: Indeed. I heard it not.
HAMLET: Hear it not, Horatio? Heard you not one, Mississippi? Two, Alabama? Three, Georgia?

The audience applauded wildly.

HAMLET: Four, Louisiana? Five, Virginia? Six, Texas? Seven, North Carolina? Eight, South Carolina? Nine, Florida? Ten, Tennessee? Eleven, Kentucky? Twelve, Arkansas? And Delaware, Missouri, and Maryland who will soon be ours again.

The speech was interrupted by uproarious standing ovations. When at last they were quieted, Hamlet continued.

HAMLET: . . . And there struck the last syllable of recorded time. If, Horatio, your auricular nerve was dead to that, it must be the dull,

cold ear of death with which you are struck. The dead heard it, looked up and wondered at the miracle. The living heard it and rejoiced, and as our army stood shoulder to shoulder, in the front, the people were standing shoulder to shoulder to the rear.

Bedlam reigned throughout the theater. The audience stood shoulder to shoulder screaming and cheering, waving their hands aloft in a prideful salute to this noble sentiment.

Belle squeezed in tight against Justin, tears streaming down her face as she applauded and stamped her tiny feet with joyous exhilaration. Impulsively she threw her arms around Justin's neck and they kissed long and hard before the eyes of the cheering crowd. But the cheering crowd did not have eyes for Justin and Belle. Their looks of adoration were for the clever actor who provided them with this wonderful moment of escape: Cyril Clyde.

The drive alone with Justin from the theater up to Twin Chimneys, which should have been a joyous affair, was sheer agony. Belle was firmly convinced that her wildly throbbing heart would break free from her body at any moment and go flying off into the starless night. Expectations, foretasting the thrill of Justin's good-night kiss, screamed for the end of this never-ending ride: time, striving to forestall the moment when Justin would leave, protested the brevity of the drive which seemed to be only two heartbeats long. Eyes closed, Belle sat waiting breathlessly as the carriage pulled to a halt. Awareness came when she felt Justin's hand upon her arm. He had alighted and was fondly helping her down from the carriage. The throbbing of Belle's heart now suffered the cold shock of rejection as Justin led her up what seemed to be an interminable distance to the front door. Then, at the door, as Belle was preparing to "die of despair and broken heart," he turned and holding her face in his hands kissed her as if he wished to devour her soft youthful lips.

"Good night, Belle," he whispered at last.

"Good night, darling Justin."

"I'm coming for you tomorrow night. We'll have dinner at the hotel and a drive along the river afterward."

"Yes, Justin."

"Good night."

Belle leaned against the doorsill fighting for breath.

If only Malvina were awake! How deliciously glorious it would be to watch her sister's face as she told her about Justin!

Belle wanted to shout, to cry out to the world the joy she felt in her heart. This night had been too wonderful for a sixteen-year, eleven-month, twenty-four-day-old girl to contain.

7

Loulie Schmidt Chaffin sat in the gallery of the Vicksburg opera house and waited for the curtain to go up on the first act of *Hamlet*. Loulie had never seen the play but from what she had observed at rehearsals and heard as Cyril memorized his lines in their hotel room, she predicted the play would be a "bust." *The Prisoner of Monterey* in Loulie's expert opinion was a much better drama as were a half-dozen others she could name. *The Drunkard's Doom*, or *The Last Nail, A Father's Love and A Mother's Care; Cora* or *The Virgin of the Sun*, were all top flight dramas.

Loulie was in a bitter mood. Life as mistress to an actor was not nearly as exciting as she had thought it would be. True, she was now living in a hotel instead of a smelly rooming house, but this was about the only improvement she had made in her lot.

"All men are alike. All they want is to eat, bounce you on the bed ten minutes, and then sleep."

Loulie's dreams of the giddy round of parties and restaurants, a wardrobe filled with clothes, a dressing table heaped with diamonds and furs, turned out to be a dull routine of rehearsals in a cold empty theater, dinner at a small hotel, sitting around for hours in a drab room staring at the wall, brushing fingernails, while Cyril rehearsed his lines with the effeminate actor who was playing Horatio, and then to bed.

Another disillusioning truth, Loulie discovered, was that actors as a class were a very dull lot. Their conversation covered three phases of a single subject, the personal pronoun, I: "What I have done," "What I am doing," "What I'm going to do."

Loulie sat alone in the balcony brooding and growing angrier by the moment. Her melancholy lament began with Tod.

"At least he bought a seat for me on the main floor and didn't leave me to set alone up here in the gallery!"

There was only one thing for which she could be thankful. Tonight, the opening night, was sold out and Mr. Fishback would not be around after the curtain went up.

"That'd be the last straw," she whined to herself, "for old wet hands to come up here and start fumblin' around."

It was a relief when the house lights were dimmed and the concert began. After the concert came the "moving tableaux." Loulie knew the two male dancers who performed the ballet, having watched them in rehearsal several times.

"Those dancers are a funny pair," she had remarked to Cyril. "Every time I talk to Gus, the big one, Gerald, the little one, comes rushing over and drags Gus off into the corner somewhere. He acts like a girl would if I was tryin' to steal her boy."

Try as she might, Loulie could not stay awake during *Hamlet.* She nodded off during the third scene of the first act which was not more than three minutes into the show—the ghosts were still on stage.

The buoyant exhilaration Clyde felt, as he stood in back of the front drop listening to the last few spattering hands of applause, was the most happy and satisfying feeling he had ever experienced. Eight curtain calls on this, his maiden effort in the mimic art! The sense of greenness which he had been concealing beneath a bold front gave way to one of confidence. He was now secure in his art. He was at home. The theater was where he belonged; where he would always stay.

As he walked slowly across the backstage area, heading for the green room, the dressing rooms beneath the stage, he chuckled at the audacity that had taken hold of him, leading him blindly through a maze including renunciation of family, chicanery and desertion. The proscenium arch was his footlighted loophole.

The thing which amazed Clyde was the ease with which this transformation from bank clerk to thespian had been accomplished. It was true that he was proficient in the tricks and mannerisms of the Decatur Amateur Dramatic Associations, but to step into a leading role and star in his maiden effort with a professional company, convinced him that he possessed a talent extraordinary.

The basement dressing room was a foul hole; an airless dungeon filled with the smells of perspiring bodies, dirty, sweat-soaked cos-

tumes and the heavy odor of grease paint. To Clyde, as he sat in the two-by-four "star's" cubicle removing his make-up, it smelled of fame and success.

A stagehand entered with a folded program. "Some woman asked me to give this to you," he said.

Thinking it to be a note from Loulie, Clyde almost stuffed it into his dressing-gown pocket without a glance, but the urgent desire for acclamation and praise, even Loulie's dubious praise, was too strong to resist.

The note was an invitation begging his presence at a Theater Supper ". . . which I am giving at my home tonight. I will have my carriage return and wait for you in front of the theater."

Signed

Mrs. Mary Anderson.

The address was that of a street on the hill. Cyril Clyde was being invited into society.

Clyde chuckled at the irony of the situation as he recalled his father's admonitions concerning the odium which is attached to the acting profession.

"I don't want to hear another word about it," his father had shouted when Clyde once broached the idea of becoming an actor. "You're going into the bank where you'll be looked up to and respected. No son of mine is going to go cavorting around the country with a bunch of half-naked, drunken, and degraded play actors. I'd rather see you six feet under the ground than to have you drag our good name through the gates of hell to consort with the very offal of humanity. Play actors!"

Poor Papa. Well, the folks back home would probably think he was dead. At least he was sure that he'd been reported missing in action. Someday, when he was successful and famous, he would return to Decatur for a benefit performance of his greatest Broadway role.

Loulie. Here was a problem which needed his immediate attention, particularly if he planned on attending Mrs. Anderson's theater party tonight. When the final curtain fell on the play, he decided that it had also fallen on the last scene of his affair with Loulie. His stepping-stone bedmate had served out her usefulness.

She was an extra expense and now that he was about to move into another social stratum . . . The play had four weeks to run before moving on to Jackson and his original plan had called for a gradual breaking away in order that he would be free by the time the move came. Now, with Mrs. Anderson's letter in his pocket, Loulie's time was short.

"It sure took you long enough," Loulie said when Clyde reappeared on stage, dressed, caped and ready to leave. "What were you doin' settin' down there pattin' yerself on the back?"

This had been the tenor of Loulie's attitude for the last week. It was well that he was bringing the affair to a close.

"I'm sorry you waited, Loulie," he smiled. "I apologize for my negligence, but I completely forgot about a 'change' rehearsal we're holding tonight."

"Watta you mean, rehearsal?" she snarled.

"Just that. The director thinks the show is running long, so he's going to make some cuts. I'm on my way up to his house now," Clyde explained softly.

Loulie pondered this new development with growing suspicion. She was not familiar enough with the workings of the theater to dispute the news, but instinct told her this was a "sell." She wanted to tag along, but the thought of sitting around for half the night in a room filled with perspiring actors was more than she could stomach.

"All right," she sulked. "What time'll you be home?"

"I don't know, Loulie." He pulled his cape around his shoulders and walked out.

Loulie reached the alley entrance to the theater in time to see Clyde crawl into a big black carriage and drive off. "And that son-of-a-bitch said he was going to rehearse!"

Mrs. Mary Anderson's theater party was in full swing when Cyril Clyde arrived. The young widow lived in a large house on "the hill" and was obviously a woman of property. She was an attractive woman in her mid-twenties and the party was a gathering of the Vicksburg unmarried and unattached literary set.

Clyde's pride knew no bounds under the enthusiastic praise the gathering heaped upon him. Glowing with cordiality and French

champagne he even consented to play his inspired "clock scene" again. It was "sure fire," earning him appreciative back slaps from the men, glowing praise from the women.

It was four before the party started to break up, five before he could pull his arm away from Mary's possessive hand and bid good night.

"Please come see me again, Cyril," she whispered. "On Friday perhaps for dinner?"

Clyde was delighted to accept an after-theater dinner date for Friday. Particularly a dinner date for a party for two.

Cyril Clyde checked in at the Preston House. He had no desire to account for his actions to Loulie Schmidt Chaffin.

8

Tod Chaffin, having anxiously awaited the opening of *Hamlet*, left the opera house before the play was half over, disgusted with the player who was murdering the Dane. Disturbed, he had walked slowly down to the river and was returning to his room when he saw Loulie standing on the curbing watching the actor and carriage vanish up the street. Surprised at seeing his wife again, he stood dumbly watching as Loulie, obviously agitated about something, hurried off in the direction of the Washington Hotel. The night clerk informed Tod that Mrs. Clyde and her husband occupied room 216.

It was now Loulie's turn to share Tod's recent experience. The last man she expected to find in the hallway when she opened the door, was her husband.

"Uh . . . Tod . . ." she managed to gasp.

"Hello, Loulie," Tod thought he could see a slight trace of emotion in Loulie's moon face. It was not chagrin or embarrassment. If anything, it was disappointment.

"What do you want?" Her tone of voice was that of someone greeting a stranger who had knocked upon the wrong door.

"What do I want?" thought Tod; only Loulie could come up with a question like this. A question he couldn't answer. Particularly here, in the hallway of a hotel, in the middle of the night.

"May I come in, Loulie?"

"I don't know," she hesitated, "I don't think you ought. I'm alone, but . . . I'm not alone."

That was obvious. The room was littered and strewn with men's clothing and costumes. "Maybe, if we left the door open, it would be all right," she at last conceded.

"I'm your husband, Loulie. Remember?"

"Not any more you ain't," she was defending herself, as if she expected him to walk in and crawl into bed immediately. "I'm living here now and I changed my name to Clyde."

"I wondered where you were, Loulie," he said after stepping into the doorway. "I thought about you a lot. Worried."

"I know. I shoulda come and told you where I was, but I was busy."

"How do you feel?"

"All right." She answered matter-of-factly.

"How's the baby coming?"

"What baby?" And then she remembered. "Oh. There ain't gonna be any baby."

"But I thought. . . ." Tod could not believe his ears.

"I know. I was wrong. There ain't one." Loulie seemed anxious to forget the subject. "You still living at the rooming house?"

"There isn't going to be a baby?" Tod's question was a cry of anguish.

"Of course there ain't," Loulie flared, angry that he should question her. "That's just somethin' I tole you, stupid."

Tod backed out into the hallway, shaking his head in disbelief. Tears of anger and frustration welled in his eyes as he sought some word that would express his feelings.

"You. You!" Sobbing, he ran down the stairs and out of the hotel.

Loulie stood in the door after he had gone, thinking about the things she'd meant to say to Tod; worrying about her situation as it stood at this moment. "Maybe I shouldn'a chased him off," she thought. "Maybe I. . . ."

Loulie felt like crying too. "Wish I knew what to do, damn 'em! All they want's one thing. They git that an' then they're through with you."

9

The Army of the Confederacy commanded the bodies of Piney Pucket and his ten men but it could not discipline their minds. Four days on the enemy side of the Mississippi had turned them into a nervous, frightened mob.

Beulah, on her first visit over to her son's command post, noticed that Piney was not his usual sullen self. He talked longer and louder than usual, he seemed unable to sit still more than a minute at a time.

Instinctively she knew that it was the overpowering weight of his command responsibilities which was causing this irrational behavior and her heart burst with a desire to help and comfort him. She returned to Vicksburg and immediately went about making plans for a big surprise party for the night of April sixteenth.

Through long experience with the male animal, Beulah reasoned that a party and girls was a sure cure for any ill that might be visited upon man. Poor Piney and his men were badly in need of therapy. During the brief hour she had spent on the other side of the river, Piney had acted like a caged lion. The slightest noise or rustling of the wind in the trees outside the depot would cause him to stiffen, glance apprehensively over his shoulder or start a tour of inspection.

The inspection consisted of a trip around the "inside" of the old depot command post, pausing to peer cautiously out of each window.

She returned to Vicksburg filled with awe and admiration for the way he was running his command. "While we was having coffee, a soldier come running in and said something about there bein' Yankees out in the woods. You know what my Piney said?" Beulah waited while the girls around the kitchen table pondered this weighty question. "Give up? Well, he said, 'Go get some men and go clean 'em out!' Just like that he made a decision. I was thinkin' at the time, if we had more generals who could make up their minds like that we'd be a lot better off than we are right now."

"Then what happened?" one of the girls asked eagerly.

"Nothin'. It was a mule out in the bushes thrashin' around."

"Did they catch it?"

"Catch it hell! They killed it. They musta shot five hundred bullets into that woods. Sounded like a battle goin' on. 'Twas a Yankee mule run off. Had U.S.A. stamped right on its rump. Piney had it skinned and is gonna make me a pocket purse."

"U.S.A.?" the girl puzzled.

"United States Ass, stupid! It had run off from the army. Just goes to prove what I've been sayin' all along. That not even a jackass can stand livin' with a Yankee."

Piney had no way of knowing that he, his detachment, and the Mississippi River were the only objects between Major General U. S. Grant's forty-five thousand Union troops, and Vicksburg. General Grant was not personally aware of Piney's outpost, but he was very much aware of the river.

Grant's cabin at Milliken's Bend was blue with smoke and heated argument. The dumpy general, in deference to his corps commanders, McClernand, Sherman, and McPherson, had asked them for the answer to the old familiar question—How are we going to reduce Vicksburg and open up the Mississippi River? Sherman, who admitted no opposition, was leading the discussion group, overriding every argument.

"Lincoln and Halleck are impatient." Sherman spoke in quick, sharp tones, all the time making odd gestures, which, no less than the intonation of his voice, served to emphasize his language. "We have not proved that the armies cannot take Vicksburg from the north. If we attempted a crossing to the south we would be putting Vicksburg between our armies and our base of supplies. Right where Pemberton wants us. There is only one move that we can make, gentlemen, and that is to return to Memphis and move down from the north along the line of the railroads attacking Vicksburg from the east. This is the only strategy which will have any chance of success."

Grant, lying back in his chair, removed his cigar from his lips and blew the smoke slowly from his mouth, building a plan in the cloud which formed above his head. "I don't believe in strategy, General Sherman. Not in the popular understanding of the term. If I used strategy at all it would be to get as close to the enemy as practicable with as little loss as possible."

Sherman, who never hesitated to interrupt anyone and who could

not bear being interrupted himself, questioned, "What then?"

"Then? Up, guards, and at 'em," replied the general with more than usual spirit. Again he lapsed into his accustomed taciturnity. Complacent and calm, Grant listened as Sherman, acting like a windmill in a high wind, outlined his "Memphis Plan." Sherman was never quiet. His fingers nervously twitched at his red whiskers; they played a tattoo on the table and chair; he combed them through his hair. One moment his legs would be crossed, and the next both feet on the floor. He would sit for a moment, and then jump to his feet talking.

Grant waited until Sherman paused to catch his breath and then he spoke. "The inland route is out!" This took care of Sherman. "Vicksburg must be taken from the rear. Porter will prepare to run the batteries within the week. McClernand and the Thirteenth Corps will move south along this side of the river. McPherson will follow with the Seventeenth Corps. Sherman will remain here to create a diversion. We'll cross the river below Vicksburg and come up on it from the under side, the south side. Any questions?"

McClernand and Porter approved of the plan. Sherman objected violently. He created his first "diversion" by going back to his headquarters, where he wrote a long seven-point letter re-outlining his Memphis plan, knowing full well that the commanding officer would not read anything.

After seven days of dilatory work, Piney's men had succeeded in building one fire raft, nothing more. They were too busy defending themselves against stray mules, a 'possum and several will-o'-the-wisps to take time out for building fire rafts.

Piney's superior in Vicksburg, General Pemberton, was also having his troubles. *His* superior, General Johnston, had taken away his cavalry, leaving the defender of Vicksburg sitting blind. Dispatch after dispatch was sent to Johnston begging for mounted men, but the pleas went unanswered.

"Grant isn't going anyplace," Johnston growled. "And even if he does, let him go. He won't get anywhere except back up to Memphis . . . maybe."

Wild ducks circling over the backwaters north of Vicksburg were disturbed and upset when they found their favorite feeding and

nesting places filled with Yankee naval craft. Admiral Porter had the stream jammed with craft whose boilers were concealed with strange protective stacks of cotton, hay, and sacks of grain.

"The hay and grain will be wanted below for forage," Grant explained to Porter.

That portion of the river free from military boats teemed with rowboats carrying military volunteers out to run the "iron pots." The proposed plan for running the Vicksburg batteries was too dangerous for civilian pilots and engineers, and they were being replaced by infantry volunteers.

The straight-backed naval officers were aghast at the caliber of men they were forced to accept as pilots. It was a wild, undisciplined lot of Western rivermen who finally filled the vacated civilian berths.

"Howdy, Cap'n. You don't want a pilot er somethin' for this ere craft, do ye?" an unshaven army private would ask.

"We need experienced men, yes."

"Well, I reckon I know suthin' about that ere sort of business, provided you want a feller of jest about my size."

"I should pity the steamer you piloted," the officer shook his head in dismay. "Are you acquainted with the river? Do you know where the snags are?"

"Well, I'm purty well acquainted with the river, but them there snags, I don' know exactly so much about them."

"Don't know about the snags? Don't know about the snags! You'd make a pretty pilot!"

"What do I want to know *where* them snags are, old sea horse? I know where they *ain't* and there's where I intend to do my sailin'."

Amid conflicting reports Pemberton, commander of the coveted fortress at Vicksburg, tried, without the aid of cavalry, to guess his opponent's intentions. Guessing, he found to his disgust, was a most unmilitary method of divining Grant's strategic designs. Every report was at variance with the other. McClernand's Thirteenth Corps, moving south along the west side of the river, the Louisiana side, could only be interpreted as a feint, a diversion to draw attention away from Grant's main effort. Pemberton's staff agreed. McClernand's huge corps could not exist more than one week without a line of supply and the only line of supply was the Mississippi River, blocked solid by the Rebel guns of Vicksburg. What about

the cotton-bale-decked assemblage of gunboats sitting on the river above at Milliken's Bend? Only one answer made sense. It was a naval escort and a covering force for the Federals' retreat back to Memphis.

Beulah with ten of her girls made the trip across the river for Piney's surprise party, early on the afternoon of the sixteenth. The celebrants, loaded down with liquor, picnic baskets, made the crossing in an old cotton-barge tug which Beulah had hired.

Beulah, after the barge had docked, tried to maintain some order and discipline among her charges. "As long as it's daylight you gotta behave yourselves," she admonished one buxom little lass named Angela who had immediately offered to accompany one of the men in Piney's task force through an abandoned warehouse.

"You all come set down like ladies and gents. Drink your liquor and eat the picnic. There'll be no whorin' till sunset!"

And the sun, on the evening of the sixteenth of April, set clear and beautiful, much to Admiral Porter's disgust. He had hoped for a murky night. Instead, the stars came out in full radiance. As the night deepened, a slight haze dimmed the river, but the eye had no difficulty in making out the dark line of the opposite shore.

The Union volunteers on the boats, waiting for the fateful signal to cast off, moved about performing their duties quietly, as if an indiscreet utterance might raise the Confederate batteries.

It was straight up ten o'clock when Porter gave the order, and a red light, the signal to make sail, was flashed from the quarter-deck of the *Benton*. The clank of windlasses was accompanied by the shrill music of the boatswain's whistle and the flagship slowly pulled out into the river. The engineer cut her engine and allowed the current to start the gunboat moving slowly downstream at three knots per hour. The other gunboats, the *Lafayette*, towing the *Price*, *Carondelet*, *Pittsburgh*, *Louisville* and *Mound City*, all ironclads except the *Price*, followed the *Benton* at intervals of a few minutes. Then came the transports, three in all. The *Forest Queen*, *Henry Clay* and *Silver Wave*, each towing barges loaded with coal which would be used by the boats after they were below the batteries. The *Tuscumbia*, an ironclad, brought up the rear of the convoy.

The river with silent power and without haste moved the vanguard of the Army of the Tennessee down toward the City of the Bluffs. The flotilla, if successful in its endeavor to run the batteries at Vicksburg, would provide cannon for Grant's proposed attempt at crossing the river below the city—supplies and ammunition for the subsequent attack.

It was nearly midnight and Beulah, alone with Piney in the depot, was beginning to think about rounding up the girls to go home. Vicksburg, across the river on the hill, was buried in darkness. Only one or two lights winked and twinkled in the distance.

The party had been a great success. The deserted depot attested to that fact. Girl and boy, ten couples had vanished somewhere into the darkened area around the command post.

"How much longer do you think they're gonna leave you over here, Piney?" Beulah asked.

Piney growled he didn't know.

"Let's walk down and see if the tug's ready," Beulah suggested. "Then I'll start beating the bushes for the girls. I want to get them back before one. The place'll be packed and there'll be a line waitin' a mile long with only five girls left at the house."

The turbid river waters flowed black and inky as mother and son stood on the rickety pier at water's edge. Piney gazed longingly at the towering hills across the way. Beulah was looking north up the river. It was Beulah who saw the first dark form upon the water. "What's that? Up there, to the north?" she asked casually.

Piney looked and upon closer inspection made out a huge shadowy mass hugging the Louisiana shore line. Whatever it was, this thing he saw, it was emerging from concealment somber and silent against the foliage-lined bank. As it reached a break in the shore line, it became clearly visible for a second. The low hull of a gunboat was creeping stealthily forward through the night! Immediately to its rear was another and then still another!

There are those who can be surprised into being heroes. Others, though humble, harbor an innate nobeleness that will assert itself, regardless of circumstances. Beulah was innately noble, Piney was surprised.

"Jeez! Look at them boats!" he cried as he ran for the rocket

bank in front of the depot, his hand searching for a match. Had Piney taken the time to think of the consequence of his actions, Admiral Porter might have successfully run the batteries in secrecy.

A rocket shot up and pierced the sky, and then another, signaling the batteries at Vicksburg that something was amiss.

The Vicksburg batteries upstream, first to be alerted and with a line of ships at their immediate front, opened fire with all guns. In a moment the whole bluff was ablaze with the flashes and quaking to the roar of heavy guns, rising tier above tier along the entire water front of the city. The gunboats on the river promptly responded with grape and shrapnel, firing at the city rather than the batteries. The long decks on the boats were now alive with men. Swarthy gunners manning the pieces, officers superintending the firing, powder boys rushing to and fro with ammunition. An iron rain fell everywhere, upon the dim gliding boats and the sleeping city of shadows.

It was bedlam on the land's-end post opposite Vicksburg. It seemed to Piney as if every shell hurled from the Vicksburg batteries was aimed directly at his depot. The air was filled with flying shells all whining and screaming, fighting for space in the atmosphere around the tiny building. Disputing the right to this space were the men of his command and Beulah's girls as they came racing for the dubious safety of headquarters.

Modesty was the one thing the girls from Beulah's lacked. They were shocked and excited by the sudden rain of iron which descended on them, but their nude or semi-nude condition did not "give them a bother."

"It ain't much fun runnin' through a cinder-bed railroad yard in the dark, holdin' yer petticoat in one hand and a bottle of whisky in the other, but what the hell. So I got excited and dropped somethin'. At least I didn't drop the liquor!"

The male is inherently more modest than the female. Most of Piney's command hesitated long enough in their respective love bowers to gather up and don pants and shirts. A few even remembered to pick up their muskets.

The girls were the first to reach the depot, filling the room with babbling voices and excited profanity. It was Beulah who brought order out of chaos.

"All right, girls!" she yelled in a voice which outroared the can-

nonade. "All of you come over here to my side of the room. Wrap yourselves up in blankets and be quiet. Piney, you take charge of your men."

The men were dribbling in by now.

Confronted with a decision, in front of his mother, the girls, and his men, Piney reached for and attained a level of manhood, meeting the challenge admirably. The gnawing fear which had slowly taken possession of his soul during the last week was cast aside.

In a sharp voice of command which demanded obedience, he sent men to launch the fire raft, others to fire the houses, and he himself walked calmly through the shot and shell, leading the girls and Beulah down to the tug at the dock.

The range of the batteries at Vicksburg covered a stretch of nearly seven miles overlooking the river which was roughly shaped to resemble the letter S on its side. At some points the boats passed within two hundred yards of the ten-inch guns, firing at point-blank range. As they moved around the bends the shots were coming toward them at once from right and left, front and rear. Shells screamed and shrieked through the air. They rattled and crashed, penetrating the sides of the barges, or exploding on board in great fountains of fire. One plunging shot reached its mark with a rush of steam; a tremendous explosion and the air over the spot on the river was filled with cinders and splinters. There arose from the shore a shrill, sharp, ragged yell. The Rebel yell, vociferous and exultant. A barge, covered with straw, caught like tinder, and great sheets of flame rose far toward the sky, filling the night with more than a noonday glare. Men leaped into the water and tried to climb aboard the floating bales of hay. The *Henry Clay* and her barge was an abandoned, sinking, flaming wreck.

At this point Piney's contribution to the defense of Vicksburg put in her proud appearance. His lone fire raft came sweeping along the current at three knots an hour.

The raft, filled with cotton and dry bush, saturated with rosin, pitch, turpentine, and gunpowder, flaming with resinous wood, illuminated the river. Above the raft floated a whirling, writhing pall of black smoke from the midst of which trailed flying showers of scintillating sparks. In its glare every boat on the river was exposed to the careful aim of the shore batteries.

Beulah turned to her blanket-clad tribe on the pier and described the scene perfectly. "Ain't that a sight for sore eyes?"

Admiral Porter's cannoneers were too busy to pay any heed to the old cotton-barge tug that came putt-putting across the river, arriving at the docks miraculously untouched and unscathed.

It was at about this time when from above the flames leaping from the cannon mouths and exploding shells, a gleam of light first pale and soft, then red and lurid, at last glaring, rose above the city. Steady and with wonderful brilliancy upon the hill on which the city stands, the beacon fire assumed a circular outline on the upper edge, throwing its beams along each arm of the bend in the river, the convex side of which is turned toward Vicksburg. The beacon fire was touched off too late to assist the Vicksburg battery gunners, but it did provide everyone with a magnificent view of the rear end of the last boat in Admiral Porter's seven-gunboat, two-transport convoy, as it strained to safety around the bend below the city.

10

The mysterious life force which pushes out from the earth each spring, awakening and forcing tiny blades of grass from sleep, urging the flowers into bloom, must somehow worm its way up through the soles of the feet, Malvina thought as she sat watching Aunt Della. The force is selective too. It seems to confine itself to the tender feet of women.

Aunt Della was directing the servants around like a general of the armies. The housemaids were her troops; the broom, the mop and pail her artillery; the enemy was dirt, and the campaign . . . spring house-cleaning.

"Malvina, why are you sitting there mooning?" Aunt Della asked as she fussed about the room and then without waiting for a reply turned on a housemaid who was feather-dusting the books, "You've been brushing that one book for ten minutes! You're going to wear it out. Now get along to something else."

Malvina sighed, moving with her pen and ink and diary into the kitchen. 'Lijah was sitting at the center table, peeling winter apples for a cobbler.

"It's strange," Malvina thought as she crossed the room to sit down opposite 'Lijah, "but I feel closer to this lovable old mammy of mine than I ever have toward Aunt Della."

Malvina could not remember the time when 'Lijah was not a part of the McClellan household. Without education she seemed to carry around in her constantly bobbing head the wisdom of the ages.

"Mornin', Miz 'vina," 'Lijah looked up from her peeling as Malvina sat down. "Fixin' ter write dis hyer Cap'n man?"

"No, I'm trying to keep a diary, 'Lijah."

"What's dat?"

"A place where I can write every day. You see he went away and I can't write to him, so I use this book as a place to write down all of the things I would have said to him in my letters."

"He doan say wheah he goin'?"

"No. Something to do with the army."

'Lijah shook her head sadly and sighed. The sigh came from the very depths of her soul. "Hope he doan turn out lak my man."

Malvina knew the story, having heard it countless times, but it would be cruel to deny the old soul this moment of exquisite misery.

"He went away long fo' de wah. Twelve years Christmas comin'. The triflin'est, no-goodest man a body eva did hyear of."

"Was he a good man, 'Lijah?"

"Good fo' no count. Dat's what he was. Lazin' 'round, triflin', ignorant, jus' a gay deceivah. But he waren't one of dem smart-ellick niggers!" 'Lijah defended her memory of the long-departed lover. "No, suh. He war jus' a lovin' man. Dat's what he war."

"My man's a loving man too," Malvina whispered.

'Lijah giggled and nodded. "Dat's de only kine. De trubbleenest kine, dat's fo' sure, but de only kine wuth trubblin' with— When's he comin' back?"

"I don't know. He didn't say."

"You just keep hopin' and writin' in dat book, honey. He come if you wisht it hard 'nuff."

Robert's unexpected arrival ended all attempts to continue with the diary.

"Hello, hello, Sis," Robert boomed.

"What's this we hear about a new assignment?" Malvina asked as she made room for her brother at the table.

"It's true. I'm leaving immediately for Raymond with a regiment of mounted infantry."

"I thought you were attached to headquarters?" Malvina frowned at the thought of Robert being with the infantry.

"I am," he replied as he picked up a knife to cut a slice of 'Lijah's burnt-sugar cake. "I'm a liaison officer. I'll be back and forth between here and Raymond with messages."

"Why Raymond? What's over there?" Malvina was referring to a tiny hamlet located a few miles south and west of Jackson.

"I don't know," Robert shook his head to show his perplexity. "There's all sort of rumors flying around. The Federals across the river are up to something. Nobody knows just what. They pulled most of their troops out of Milliken's Bend but nobody knows for sure where they've gone."

"But why Raymond? They surely don't expect the Yankees to pop up way over there," Malvina puzzled.

"We don't have any cavalry, so I guess General Pemberton's sending a regiment over there, just in case. I only know they've been awfully worried up at headquarters ever since someone stole the defense maps."

"I thought they caught and hanged that man."

"They hanged the first one. But about three weeks ago, someone broke into headquarters around three in the morning, overpowered the duty officer and escaped with the maps."

"Do they . . . do they know who the man was?"

"No. A spy. He was dressed in a private's uniform. They found his cap and he was armed with a bowie knife. That's about all they found out. Oh . . . he got away on horseback."

Robert finished his cake, bade everyone good-by and was on his way. Malvina fled the kitchen, for fear Della and 'Lijah might look into her eyes and read there the questions which flooded her mind, clouding her thoughts.

The theft of the maps had occurred three weeks ago at three in the morning. The thief had lost his cap.

Malvina's last cherished picture of Alan was that of her lover in a private's homespun, hatless, dripping wet, standing in the kitchen

doorway. She had felt the knife in his belt as he held her in their last embrace.

Alan, please come back and tell me that these evil thoughts are false and traitorous to our love. Please let it not be your hand that has struck the blow that would brand you with the damning word, "traitor." Please, God, let it not be so.

11

By some unexplained law, dandies, fools, and supercilious braggarts gravitate into Army staff positions. Alan Miller, having reconfirmed this opinion, deserted the saloon of the side-wheeler transport General Grant's command staff was using as a headquarters boat, and made his way out onto the rain-swept deck. The slow rain which drizzled over his head and shoulders was far better than the small talk and brave words which driveled over him inside the smoke-filled deckhouse.

Leaning against the wet railing he searched the surrounding gloom, hoping to find some relief from the irritation which possessed him in the murky depths and eternal grayness of the fog-bound river.

"Gray is the color of our times and gray is the color of Alan Miller," he murmured, impatient with himself, the army, the circumstances which stood in the way of his return to Vicksburg and Malvina.

The last three weeks, following his delivery of the Vicksburg defense maps to Grant's adjutant, had been a hopelessly frustrating period of inactivity. All of his requests for a transfer back to Sherman's Corps had been denied—"We'll be needing you here"—thus preventing any attempt to accomplish his first goal, the resignation of his commission as a scout.

Entreaties for a reassignment in Vicksburg were side-tracked—"Wait. Be patient. You'll get an assignment before long. There are big things a-making,"—frustrating his desires to be with Malvina again in order that he might confess his true identity and face the problems of the future.

A feeble light from a farmhouse on the far side of the river pene-

trated the gloom, blinking momentarily through the lightening fog, recalling the events of his escape ride from Vicksburg following his last meeting with Malvina. It seemed like ages but actually it had been a scant four weeks since he had kissed her good-by and run for his horse tethered behind the entrance gates at Twin Chimneys.

Aware of the tumult his theft of the plans from General Pemberton's Vicksburg headquarters had created, and the time lost during his midnight visit at the McClellan house, Alan had pushed his horse to its limit, trying to gain as much distance as possible before daylight. If he did not reach the river south of town at a point where he could effect a safe crossing he would be forced to hole up for the day and in even greater danger from his pursuers.

He had traveled about six miles when suddenly his horse stopped, wheeled to the rear, ears cocked forward and straining. After a few seconds of silence Alan heard the first faint thud of hoofs on the road somewhere to the rear. The cavalry was fanned out scouring the countryside, searching for him. Continuing on this road was now out of the question. Turning off the road to the right, Alan pushed his horse into the woods and followed a tiny creek. A short distance into the forest he encountered a fence, which led over the hill to a small homestead.

The farmyard was as dark as the regions of hell. After placing his horse in the lean-to stable, he quietly walked toward the house and rapped loudly on the door.

It is better, he thought, to bluff it out with the occupants, than to take chances of being tracked down on the open road.

Silence answered his summons.

Pulling on the thong latch, lifting the inside bar, he opened the door and stepped cautiously into the room. The house was evidently untenanted. No answer came to his low-voiced summons save a mocking echo from the bare walls.

As he moved to find a place along the wall where he could spread out his blanket and catch a few hours sleep, an inner something, a warning signal, caused him to drop to his knees and freeze. There was some living thing here in the darkness—in this room. His sense of hearing became painfully acute as it monitored the danger-filled silence. Then . . . he heard the sound of low, heavy breath-

ing somewhere on the other side of the room. Pistol drawn, he waited and searched the darkness.

There are degrees of blackness. At last his eyes were able to detect a darker shadow, a mass blending into shadow. When the black mass moved he raised his pistol, cocked the weapon as he took dead aim.

The click of another hammer being cocked replied.

"I wouldn't be shootin' none if I war you, mister," a female voice said. "I got my ole man's blunderbuss pointed right square at whar you be a settin'."

Alan relaxed his aim.

"Now if you'll jus' set there real quiet like till it gits light and I hava squint at ye, then we'll do some talkin'," the voice continued.

Alan searched out a match, struck it, allowing the flame to illuminate his face.

"There's a candle to yer front and right on the window ledge," the voice directed.

The candlelight revealed a tall, gaunt, hollow-cheeked woman sitting on a bunk bed, cradling a shotgun. Her long, stringy black hair hung in greasy hanks; cold, sharp eyes told Alan that his captor meant business.

"What you doin', breakin' in on a helpless woman, this time of night?" she asked.

Alan questioned her protestations of helplessness, but decided against voicing his feelings. Instead he replied, "I was looking for a place to sleep. I thought the house was deserted."

"Well, it ain't. You be a Yankee?"

"No," he lied. "I'm on my way across the river, headin' for the Indian Territory with a message."

The woman studied him for a long time, then without comment, put down her gun and rose. "I 'spect you're famished. Men allus are. I'll fix somethin' if you'll kindle the far."

Alan ate fried pork and biscuits in silence and then curled up on his blankets, following the woman's instructions to "git some sleep."

He was awakened by her gently shaking his shoulder. "Wake up now. It's nigh onto dark and I've got supper fixed," she said.

Indeed she did have supper fixed. Fried pork, fricasseed gray

squirrel, boiled hogback, a pitcher of sweet milk, cold biscuits and cornbread. "I'll git some apples an' treat ye," the woman said, rising and departing into the other part of the house.

"Do you live here alone?" Alan asked after she returned and they were munching on the apples.

"Have sense my ole' man jined the forces and went away to have hisself a squint of fightin'," she sighed. "He had no right goin' an leavin' me with all the farm ter tend, but he did. He war jus' like all men. Runnin' away ter war ter git outta his rightful responsibilities."

"Where is your husband?" Alan wondered at her brusque hospitality, her lack of curiosity as to who he was, his name.

"Who knows. Dead more'n likely. Gone mor'n a year now, ain't heard nothing. You got a wife and young uns, no doubt?"

Alan shook his head.

The woman considered him a moment and then invited, "Come with me. I'll show you 'round fore it gits dark."

Behind the house was a smokehouse, or meat house, a windowless hut built of logs. The woman had a few meager family provisions stored there. Under the shelter were two bales of cotton, looking as handsome as a lady in the brown sacking and new hoops. A few flocks of hens and geese, and a surly bull and a few cows waiting to be milked rounded out her livestock.

"That's it," she said as she turned back toward the house. "I've got two hundred acres here. Forty in cotton, the rest in timber."

"What is that?" Alan asked, pointing to a lean-to which seemed to be tacked onto the back of the house.

"A bridal house," she replied. "Nothin' in it 'cept a bed. Me and my man slept there our first year. His folks owned this hyer place. They lived in the house till they died."

"I'd best be going. Here's a dollar for your victuals. It's Yankee money, but it's good," Alan said, pressing the money into her hand as he turned toward the lean-to barn.

The woman said nothing. She stood leaning against the fence until Alan led his horse out of the lean-to, mounted and was ready to leave.

"Good-by. Thanks again," he called.

"If'n ye want," she said, "ye can come back after ye're through with the wa' and stay hyer. I'll be needin' a man."

Smiling, Alan turned his horse and rode into the gathering dusk. There was nothing he could say in answer to her pathetic offer. Two hours later he crossed the river without encountering the Rebel cavalry.

Alan sighed, loosened his grip on the railing and walked slowly back to the sheltering eaves of the deckhouse.

The way he must go was clear. The duty to the army and to himself had been performed. All that needed to be done was to resign his commission, cross through the lines, return to Vicksburg and make his confession to Malvina.

"This is *all* that needs to be done?" Alan laughed mirthlessly. Stealing those maps was child's play compared to facing Malvina.

A shadowy figure, moving cautiously up through the ration and supply-littered deck from the stern, paused opposite Alan to inquire, "Captain Miller?"

"Yes?" Alan replied.

"Lieutenant Parks, sir. General McClernand's headquarters. I have orders for you to report to the general's adjutant immediately," the voice said.

"McClernand?" Alan frowned. "What the devil do they want with me over there?"

"I don't know, sir. The Corps has just received orders to move out to the south immediately."

"Right now?" Alan questioned.

"Yes, sir. You are to bring along all your gear. You won't be coming back."

General Grant, who had hesitated, just two years previous, about asking for a colonelcy, feeling somewhat doubtful about whether he would be equal to the responsibility, had at last made up his mind. He had decided upon a plan of action. March orders had been issued directing General McClernand's Corps to move out with McPherson's and Sherman's Corps to follow—upon a maneuver which was contrary to every known military axiom. The army was to march directly south along the Louisiana side of the river until it was entirely free of the Vicksburg defenses. It would then cross the river, with the aid of Admiral Porter's gunboats and transports. Grant then proposed to immediately launch his army of fifty

thousand men in an encircling, cross-country attack upon Vicksburg from the underside. This simple maneuver only violated three basic laws of military science—An attacking force must have a protected line of communication; it must have adequate lines of supply; it must have a permanent base of supply. If Grant's army crossed the Mississippi it would be without supply lines and communications lines and the enemy would still be sitting on the river at Vicksburg shutting him off from his only base of supply at Milliken's Bend.

Grant's only chance for success in his wild scheme of crossing the Mississippi lay in keeping Pemberton confused and in doubt as to the purpose of his actions. Otherwise, the Confederate general and all his forces would march down the river and be waiting on the other side of every landing attempt. Accordingly, Grierson was sent through the interior of the state to rattle his cavalry saber and cry wolf, Steele made a feint at Rolling Fort to the north, and Sherman was directed to stage a feint at Haines Bluff.

"Crazy" Sherman, after studying Grant's plan, had good sound reasons for his doubts about his superior's sanity. On the surface of things it looked as though Old Stone Face had lost most of his marbles. The army's only line of supply and communication was a long, feeble, half-under-water cow path wide open to attack. Every flake of powder, each square of hardtack would have to be carried over a single corduroyed road down the Louisiana side of the river. Grant's line of supply ran through a country that was wild, entirely unknown, very sparsely inhabited, full of hills and gloomy ravines. Sherman, using the army rule of thumb which stated that the average soldier requires four pounds of supplies daily and that a single wagon dragged by six mules over bad roads will supply five hundred men, providing it can make the trip both ways between army and base in the same day, could not reach any sane answer to the supply problem.

An army of fifty thousand men at two days' march from its base required four hundred wagons. The eight thousand horses in its cavalry and artillery, each animal consuming twenty-five pounds of forage daily, required another four hundred wagons. These eight hundred wagons drawn by forty-eight hundred mules required an additional one hundred eight wagons drawn by one thousand eight animals which were fed by forty-eight more wagons, and so on.

Grant's army needed one thousand two hundred wagons and seven thousand animals to supply it during a two-day march. Increase seven thousand by three times, then double this figure! There were not that many mules in the entire West! The distance from Milliken's Bend to Grand Gulf was an eight-day march and the road was a one wagon-width road!

April sixteenth arrived on schedule and despite Sherman's doubts and protestations the order stood. Reveille was sounded at four. A drum rolled, another, then another responded, until the riverside echoed with the roll of drums, rattling and jarring on sleeping ears. The peaceful quiet was replaced by noise and tumult, coughing and swearing as the army rose in a babble of sound. Campfires sputtered then flared and crackled into new life as the wet pine pitch was tossed on the embers, sending their sparks high in the damp morning air.

The men moved aimlessly around in their assembly areas waiting for the orderly sergeant to yell, "Fall in." Time to say farewell to bread trays, water buckets, little piles of clean straw, stacks of wood, carefully cut and corded. Much throwing away, much picking up of the discarded by someone else. Very little was left behind except the deserted "shebangs" when the command came and the column moved off into a steady, persistent, pelting rain which soaked to the skin.

The Mississippi River, fed by innumerable tributaries, is subject to sudden and great changes in its volume of water. The country around, low and marshy, is often flooded for leagues by the swellings of the river, the streams expanding into an almost illimitable ocean, spreading through somber forests and over gloomy morasses, a congenial home for reptiles of every description. Majestic trees, draped with funeral moss, overhang these gloomy waters, while the rankest undergrowth of every tough, creeping, climbing, intertwining shrub renders the boundless thicket almost impenetrable. This was the route of march.

The only road ahead lay through a vast bog, intersected with numerous bayous. The wheels of the first battery of heavy artillery moving down the road cut through the slime and the soft black mud, rendering the path a perfect mud-bath, through which the men and horses waded knee-deep and where the hubs of subsequent wheels often disappeared from sight. Within the first hour the army

was bogged down completely. Engineers were called forward to start building corduroy roads with logs.

Pioneers would race out into the surrounding forests or neighboring swamps to fell, split, and trim trees into ten-foot lengths, then carry them back, eight men on a log, to the road bed. The corduroy was a solid platform of logs, laid side by side, sometimes many logs deep and filled with small limbs. Foot by foot, log by log, the road was built at the rate of one mile an hour.

"You know what we're doin', boys?" a voice complained as the sloshing, grunting column struggled along through the mire. "We're crossin' the goddamn Mississippi . . . endwise!"

Another halt! Another bridge to be built. While the marchers dropped out of line on the road, lying on their backs supported by their still unstrapped knapsacks, soaking up the rain like sponges.

"On your feet! Fall in!"

"God dammit, I was jus' beginnin' ter get this puddle a water I'm settin' in warmed up!"

Five minutes on the road, an hour and five off, as a caisson painfully toiling along the road careened its wheels in mud, sinking from sight, blocking the forward movement of the entire army. Every effort of the horses to pull the gun out only buried the unfortunate weapon deeper in the mire. Drivers and infantrymen to the rear must now plunge into the mud, working with shoulders at the wheels and under the muzzle, and lift the buried piece out of the hole and onto firmer ground. After bridging four bayous by constructing over two thousand feet of bridging, the vanguard of the Army of the Mississippi arrived seven days later at Grand Gulf, fifty miles below Vicksburg.

It was Wellington who said, "Every army moves like a serpent, travels on its belly." The army not only moved like a serpent but looked like a serpent. It coiled up the west side of the Mississippi with its head opposite Grand Gulf, Mississippi, its tail in Memphis, Tennessee, and its tongue, in the form of Colonel Grierson, flicking out and away toward Jackson, Mississippi.

All that needed to be done now was to discover whether or not the serpent was a water snake, for the Army of the Mississippi was still on the wrong side of its mile-wide namesake.

General Grant's plan called for Admiral Porter's gunboats and General McClernand's assault troops to be brought into position on

the twenty-ninth at Hard Times, Louisiana, across the river from Grand Gulf, Mississippi. The plan was based upon army intelligence reports stating that the city was lightly fortified. The crossing was expected to be effected with little or no opposition. But General Pemberton at Vicksburg who had been nervously scattering his troops hither and yon, fussing and fretting like a mother hen with a flock of chicks in the high weeds, had sent one of his generals (Bowen) down to Grand Gulf with instructions to fortify the town by planting batteries on the hill and digging rifle pits at the river's edge. Admiral Porter and the gunboats opened fire and after bombarding the town for five hours, found the defending guns, high above his naval guns to be at too great an elevation to be effectively silenced. Bowen added to Porter's difficulties by moving his field guns from point to point, concentrating them wherever they could do the most damage to the attacking forces. Admiral Porter's energies of valor and skill were exhausted; he was compelled to withdraw his boats, leaving the batteries of Grand Gulf uninjured. It was Vicksburg all over again. No one could successfully assault those "pressapisses" from the river.

That evening while the best minds of Grant's staff were racked in despair an old Negro came shuffling into headquarters to tell one of the general's aides about a "fine place to land at De Shroons plantation 'cross from Bruinsburg." General Grant ordered a repeat of the Vicksburg maneuver—disembark the troops, run the boats past the Grand Gulf batteries at night, march the troops back into the forests and overland to meet the ferry transports three miles below at De Shroons. The Negro's information proved to be accurate. The crossing of the great Mississippi was effected without incident. The Rebels were not on hand to contest the landing.

All night long the transports wheezed and groaned, shuttling back and forth from shore to shore. As soon as a transport unloaded its troops, the gangway was hauled in, the vessel dropped out into the river and another vessel took the vacant place. By dawn the roadway at the landing was churned into a mud knee-deep as regiment after regiment came sloshing ashore "profaning the sacred soil of the Confederacy." The air around the landing area resounded with the rattling of canteens against bayonet scabbards, the crack of whips, the snorting of artillery horses, the oaths of despair and frustration uttered by the teamsters and mule scrubbers.

General Grant, his feet planted firmly on the Mississippi side of the river at last, a cold soggy cigar clamped in his broad teeth, stood as placid as a Sphinx amid the turmoil and ordered, "I deem it a matter of vast importance that the highlands to the front should be reached without resistance. We will not wait for Sherman. General McClernand with his corps will march directly for the interior of Mississippi." As the advance units of the army moved out, the low complainings of the marching men and the urgings of the officers—"Close up, boys. Close up"—caused a momentary flicker of excitement to register in the eyes of the silent general.

Inland about two miles a tired cavalry officer, commanding an advance Union patrol, stopped at a Negro cabin to inquire the road and the distance to Jackson. The surprised and goggle-eyed Negro scratched his head and pondered the question. "How fa' ter Jackson? Right smart way I reckon. Fo' thousand miles?"

8

CHRIS, with bowed head, gazed at the pattern in the turkey-red carpet of his study in Vicksburg. "I fear that the hourglass of the Confederacy has been turned upside down and our time is rapidly running out." He looked up at Robert to inquire, "Are the Yankee landings on this side of the river serious?"

"We don't know. The reports coming in this afternoon were conflicting." Robert seemed baffled by this strange turn of events which completely upset his ideas of the impregnability of Vicksburg.

Chris had just returned to Vicksburg. Malvina, anxious over the whereabouts of Captain Miller, had insisted upon going to Jackson. She had remained with Josephine Renshaw when he received an urgent note from his foundry foreman in Vicksburg dictating his immediate return. "The plant will be forced to close down after this week unless a new shipment of raw materials arrives."

The materials had not arrived. It had been Chris's painful duty to pass out final pay envelopes to his workers at noon. The fires in the furnace were banked. McClellan and Sons, Blacksmith and Foundry,

had closed down for the first time in its forty-two years of existence. Robert's news of the enemy's landings a few miles south of town completed the dismal picture.

"There is no cause for alarm," Robert consoled. "The consensus of opinion at headquarters is that Sherman, north of the city, will make another attempt to take Vicksburg from that direction. They seem to think the landing below Grand Gulf is a feint to draw off some of the troops before Sherman makes his big effort."

"What about the cavalry raids east of Jackson?"

"Just that. A raid, another attempt to pull troops out of Vicksburg," Robert replied. "There really isn't anything to worry about. General Bowen is at Grand Gulf with six thousand men. Actually, the officers at headquarters think these attacks—Sherman, the cavalry, Bruinsburg—are nothing more than a series of diversions to cover Grant's withdrawal to Memphis. I'm sure General Johnston thinks so too, otherwise he would have sent us some cavalry. Besides, President Davis has ordered General Pemberton to hold Vicksburg at all costs."

"You knew I had to close the foundry today?" Chris sighed.

"Aunt Della told me," Robert nodded. "It won't be for long, Papa. Once the Federals withdraw to Memphis, plenty of scrap will come pouring in again."

2

A Union colonel, who was trying to conduct business from a camp chest, was having difficulties with a pesky wind which threatened to blow his secret papers over the hill and into the hands of the Rebels.

"Miller?" the colonel asked.

"Yes, sir."

"You are to report to General McClernand's headquarters up front."

"Thank God," Alan thought. "McClernand's out somewhere in the direction of Jackson."

"When the troops reach Port Gibson you are to pass through the Confederate lines and make a visual reconnaissance of the Vicksburg-to-Jackson area. We want the location, movement, and size of

the troop concentrations. You will report back to me at Raymond no later than the twelfth."

"Raymond?" Alan frowned. Raymond was south of Jackson in the central part of the state.

"That's right," the officer confirmed. "If our plans work out we'll be there at that time."

"And if they don't?" Alan smiled.

"Wait for us in Raymond!" The colonel seemed positive about the future plans of the corps, for his confidence, like that of General Grant, had returned:

I was now in the enemy's country with a vast river and the stronghold of Vicksburg between me and my base of supplies. But I was on dry ground and on the same side of the river as the enemy. I felt a degree of relief scarcely ever equalled since. All of the campaigns, labors, hardships . . . previous to this time, had been made and endured for the accomplishment of this one objective.

The march through the Mississippi countryside in from the river was exhilarating and exciting for the Northerners. The country through which they tramped was beautiful with flowering shrubs embroidering the hillsides and luxuriant vegetation threading the valleys.

"No wagon trains encumber this march," Alan observed as he rode through the marching men. The men carried boxes of hardtack on their shoulders; some rolled barrels of salt pork along the road as boys would a hoop. The troops were acting more like children going to a picnic than soldiers marching into battle.

"Come on out from under that there hat," a private yelled at Alan. "We know thar's a pesky officer hidden up under thar. We kin see yer legs hangin' down!"

Alan found McClernand's headquarters shortly after two. General Grant was on hand, looking over McClernand's shoulder, urging a concentrated attack, at the crack of dawn on the Rebel positions to the front.

Alan noted that General Grant, like his troops, was traveling light. His baggage consisted of one toothbrush and a horn comb.

At dawn on Saturday General McClernand's Thirteenth Corps moved out against the Rebels over ground broken by narrow ridges

and buttes separated by brush-choked ravines. The terrain afforded great advantages for defensive warfare and the Confederate general, John Bowen, had selected his positions well. After the initial brush of the pickets, Grant saw that a direct attack was impossible. The position was impregnable from the front and Bowen's small force appeared likely to stay in their entrenchments forever. McClernand developed his attack to the right with Logan going around to the left. The Rebels withdrew at dusk, losing five cannon, one thousand men, and the colors of the Fifteenth Alabama.

During the night Alan, from the door of a shack he was using for his quarters, could see fires in the direction of Bayou Pierre. The retreating Rebels were burning the bridges. From the direction of Grand Gulf came low rumbles as the Confederates exploded the magazines in the untenable river fortress. General Grant in writing his report to Halleck exaggerated his victory slightly. He told the conservative Halleck that he had been opposed by eleven thousand Rebels.

Alan, attired in Confederate gray, crossed the Big Black River south of Vicksburg with members of General McPherson's advance cavalry patrol. Leaving the patrol near Warrenton he rode out through the thickets and canebrakes on a circular route which would take him through the Confederate lines and bring him out in the vicinity of Shady Oaks.

General Grant sat on a borrowed horse amid the ruins of Grand Gulf considering the advisability of following the directives of his superior, General Halleck—establish a base of supplies at Grand Gulf; send a Corps to assist General Banks in reducing Port Hudson; wait until the Corps returns with Banks before attempting any further moves against Vicksburg or Jackson—when a message arrived from Banks: "Impossible for me to arrive at Port Gibson before May tenth."

The carelessly wadded-up message went into General Grant's sagging coat pocket as he mentally began phrasing a new set of plans:

The news from Banks forced upon me a different plan of campaign from the one intended. To wait for his cooperation would detain me

at least one month . . . the enemy would be reinforced by more men than I would receive from Banks. I therefore am determined to move independently of Banks, cut loose from my base, destroy the Rebel force in the rear of Vicksburg and invest or capture the city.

President Lincoln and General Halleck were notified of the decision in writing, mailed up river by slow boat. The general reasoned that by the time cautious Halleck received the communique and sent a disapproving answer, the plan would be either a proven success or a failure.

General Pemberton sat in his rocking chair contemplating General Joe Johnston's ambiguous order of the previous day:

If Grant's army lands on this side of the river, the safety of Mississippi depends on beating it. For that objective you should unite your whole force.

Reports and rumors had been flying around headquarters like flies over an enlisted men's latrine and, if one report, concerning three thousand Federals at Bethel Church, was true, it meant that Grant had a sizable force already across the river south of Vicksburg.

What to do?

Uniting forces according to Johnston's orders was impossible. With Sherman re-forming at Haines Bluff, eight miles north of the city; with fifty miles of river front from Vicksburg to Grand Gulf to guard; with an impregnable blue screen of Yankee cavalry beyond the Big Black, concealing the number of Federals on the Vicksburg side of the river; with only five guns to protect the southern approaches to the city, General Pemberton rocked, reasoned, and pondered.

What to do? Shall I rush to meet Grant and leave Vicksburg unprotected. No. Wait until the situation develops clearly. Wait until the enemy declares himself.

3

Tod Chaffin had received orders to march with a company at dawn. It was now nearly midnight, long past bedtime, and he knew, if he

were to endure a long march, he should be in bed sleeping. Instead, he walked the streets of Vicksburg in a halting, swinging gait.

Tod felt as the victims in the torturer's iron maiden must have felt when the door slowly started to close, shutting out the last glimpse of the outside world. There was no hope; no chance of ever attaining the dreams and aspirations for which he had striven so desperately.

It would have been much better had I stayed with Knute on the farm. At least there I could have had my dreams: There the stables made lovely castles; horse tanks exciting Roman ruins; the hillside pastures became towering Alpine peaks.

It was after midnight when he returned to climb the steps to his dismal attic-like room. A stream of light leaked from beneath the door, causing him to wonder, Did I forget to put out the candle when I left?

He found Loulie in a petticoat and black stockings, propped up on the unmade bed reading a dime novel. Her dress hung over the back of the only chair, her kicked-off shoes rested one upon another in the center of the room.

"Where you been?" she asked. The tone of her voice was that of the irate wife whose husband had been out too late with "the boys." Nothing about her attitude gave any indication that she had been away for over three weeks, living with another man.

"What . . . what are you doing here?" Tod stammered in amazement.

"Why should'n I be here? I'm your wife, ain't I? This here's our home, ain't it?" Loulie's aggressiveness was something with which Tod was not prepared to grapple.

"Yes . . . but you said . . ."

"I come back."

"I see . . . but . . ." Tod turned to the open door, thinking that if he did not get out of the stale room he would lose what little semblance of sanity he now retained.

"Where you goin'?" Loulie was out of bed, moving across the room.

"I . . . I don't know."

"Come on. Close the door and let's go to bed," Loulie said as she slipped her arm around his waist. Tod could feel the softness of her breast against his ribs. "You look all tuckered out."

"I'm going away tomorrow. My company is being sent out to Bolton Junction." Tod despised himself as he reached and pushed the door closed.

"In that case you better get right to bed. Here, let me help you outa your coat," Loulie said as she started to unbutton the garment.

The darkness, the bed, the warmth and softness of the flannel-gowned girl at his side conspired with nature to destroy the struggling man.

What am I doing? he thought as Loulie, hitching up her gown enough to free one leg, allowed it to creep up and over his. Excitement crept up into his groin and he was pridefully ashamed of himself as Loulie's hand crept down across his bare stomach with agonizing slowness, pausing for what seemed like eternity before reaching out to claim its prize.

"You're not very tired," Loulie whispered.

He hesitated, trying to summon up the words he knew must be said. He hesitated and was lost. In the darkness he felt the covers slip away as Loulie raised herself and gently lowered her body onto his.

4

In the dawn-lit room, Loulie Schmidt Chaffin lay sprawled out across the bed, pretending sleep as Tod fumbled around dressing, gathering together his gear, preparing to meet his company. She waited until he was ready to depart before she spoke.

"How long you gonna be gone?"

"I don't know," Tod replied, startled by the sudden voice from the direction of the bed.

"You'd better leave me some money. I'll need some to pay the rent and eat." Loulie smiled with satisfaction as she heard the gratifying tinkle of coins falling on the table, followed by the rustle of paper money as Tod emptied his purse.

After he had gone, after the front door closed and the halting, limping footsteps on the walk outside had faded into the distance, Loulie arose, lighted a candle and gathered up the money. Climbing back into bed, she sat with the money cradled in the hammock

formed by her nightgown and counted her windfall. Thirty-six dollars.

Loulie felt good as she retrieved a shoe from the center of the room, using it as a receptacle for her money.

I wisht I had some ginger snaps. Ginger snaps are good, or maybe some gum drops or lemon drops.

It was a smart thing, coming back to Tod, she thought. Tod's a lot better man than that old conceited Cyril. Wisht Tod didn't have that bad leg. An' if he was taller and didn't have that high squeaky voice he'd just be about perfect.

The warm inner feeling brought about by thirty-six dollars, the pleasure of conquering a man, gave way to the hate she held for Cyril Clyde. "I'll fix that S.O.B.! I will, if it's the last thing I ever do," she murmured between clenched teeth as she reckoned up several ways she could exact her revenge.

"Maybe I'll turn him in as a spy. He's a Yankee, you can bet your bottom dollar on that. Or maybe I'll go tell Mr. Fishback what he's done and get him fired. I can do it too."

Loulie scrunched down in the bed, making herself comfortable for the long mental ordeal. "I'm gonna think careful and then I'm gonna pick a way that'll fix him good. There ain't nobody gonna walk off and leave Loulie Schmidt suckin' the hind tit . . . Loulie Schmidt Chaffin."

5

Had Piney Pucket's company left Vicksburg on any other day but Monday, Big Beulah's orders, directing all girls to assemble at ten o'clock in front of the Preston House, would have caused open rebellion. Sunday, however, had been a day of rest for the girls and the monumental task of getting up in the daytime was accomplished with a minimum of grumbling.

"Jeez," one of the girls remarked as she minced up the street. "This is the first time I've had a dress on in over two years."

The streets were alive with soldiers, animals, and vehicles. Noise, confusion, and meaningless activity filled the city as the various companies, ordered out to take up defensive positions near the Big Black and at Raymond, jostled each other on their way.

Drums clamored for attention, whips cracked, mules squealed, teamsters cursed. As each company moved out, waving their hats and calling, "God bless you, ladies. We'll fight for you! We'll take care of you!" Wilma began shouting back, telling the boys, in detail, about what she could do for them.

"There he is! Over there! There's Piney!" Beulah's voice clarioned down the street.

Piney, who had just reached the area designated as his assembly point, felt the eyes of every soldier on the street on him as he lined up his men in their proper place in the company front formation. At this point, Beulah and her tittering girls moved in, pushed Piney's company commander aside, and crowded up around Piney.

"You shouldna come down here, Maw!" the yellow-haired sergeant hissed.

"We come to wish you Godspeed in the battles to come," Beulah recited. "Wilma has wrote a po'm."

Beulah moved her two hundred odd pounds ceremoniously to the rear, allowing the simpering Wilma to take her place in front of Piney and his men.

Wilma produced a paper from her purse, cleared her throat and began to read in a thin singsong voice.

"A po'm. By Wilma.

'Tis hard for youens to sleep in camp
'Tis hard for youens to fight
'Tis hard for youens through mud to tramp
In mud to sleep at night.
But, tis harder for weuns from youens to part
Since youens have stole weuns hearts."

Wilma joined in the splattering of applause which Beulah led.

A pasty-faced and woebegone Piney, moved out at the head of a column of brown, brawny, wiry veterans, who wore the expression of intense, fierce animals going forth to find and destroy the Yankee vermin.

Beulah's calliope voice was muffled to a sobbing whisper, "Dear God, please bring 'im back."

6

The forests and countryside up from the Big Black were bursting with beauty and new life as Alan Miller guided his horse through a route of forest paths, selected for the purpose of avoiding the main roads. Alan longed for the company of Malvina, wishing she was with him to share the sights and sounds and smells. Moving out of the lowlands up into the forests he came upon the maple, the wild olives, the white-stemmed sycamores with their creamy foliage, and the great angel-white blossoms of the flowering dogwood.

When he at last reached the crest of the hills across the valley from Shady Oaks, Alan paused to turn back for one last look at the countryside. Dusk was settling over the forests, fog trails grayed the valleys, leaving only the blue dreamy hills feathered with timber. With a sigh of regret he wheeled his mount and cantered into the valley below the McClellan country house.

A Negro, standing in the stable door, informed Alan, "Ain't nobody yer. Folks they all be in Vicksburg, maybe."

7

General Grant, learning that General Johnston was assembling a reinforcing army of twelve thousand men north and east of Jackson, changed his plans again, deciding to get between Johnston and Pemberton, defeating them one after the other. Jackson, the capital of Mississippi, stood sixty miles east of Vicksburg. This was a formidable and dangerous distance for Grant's army without a supply or ammunition train.

As McClernand's Brigades assembled, Grant sent cavalry units fanning out rapidly along the south and east banks of the Big Black to take possession of every ford, ferry, and bridge. It was vital that General Pemberton in Vicksburg be kept in the dark concerning the Federal activities beyond the river.

To move his army without transportation, feed his army without food, Grant borrowed a page from Van Dorn's manual of the previous winter's campaign in northern Mississippi.

The countryside would provide food and transportation.

"We will forage liberally on the country," the order read. Forage companies of fifty men and two officers were designated to start out each morning for the purpose of collecting foodstuffs, assembling it at designated road crossings for pickup by the army commissary. Army commissary cleaned the countryside surrounding Port Gibson of everything movable. Twenty-five hundred Negroes, all wagons, carriages, oxen, mules, horses were lined up in a comic-opera ammunition and supply train.

It was seldom that the army adjutant general assigned the proper personnel to the proper tasks. Civilian blacksmiths usually became army dentists, hopeless myopics became infantry snipers. Sammy Neofes of the New York City slums was the exception to prove the rule. Sammy was designated as a forager.

How Sammy managed to become involved with the great Western Federal army was a matter known only to Sammy Neofes.

While the army had been the piper that had lured Sammy out of New York City and across the Hudson River, it had not been his intention to get himself involved fighting any war. As a child on the streets of New York selling newspapers he had read and heard about the fabulous wealth in the California gold fields. To go West had been his burning ambition. The fact that he was thirteen years too late had not occurred to Sammy. California meant gold; and the army meant California.

Sammy first signed up in New York, receiving a bounty of four hundred dollars as a substitute for a prosperous clothing merchant. He went along with his outfit as far as Washington and there deserting, he struck out west. In Omaha he re-enlisted again, this time collecting another four hundred dollars bounty money from a wealthy farmer. His fateful mistake had occurred when he decided to let the army haul him as far south as Memphis where he intended to head west along the Santa Fe trail for California. Army provost guards in Memphis had frustrated his designs by herding all recruits aboard cattle barges which were in turn shoved out into the main current of the Mississippi River. The current ran straight south.

Living with two hundred Iowa hayseeds on a filthy cattle barge had been hell and Sammy would have "gone over the side" had it not been for the disquieting rumors—judiciously spread by the

guards assigned to each barge—concerning the Rebel guerrilla-infested shores of the great river.

"You know what them bastards do?" a wide-eyed rube from Spirit Lake, Iowa, told Sammy. "One of the sergeants told me this. If them Rebels catcha deserter they will nail 'im naked an' spread-eagled an' alive on a barn door an' float 'im down the river with a note, nailed right onto his tongue readin', 'The Confederate States of America hereby and herewith returns another cowardly Yankee deserter.' "

Sammy had stayed with the army all the way down to the landing at Bruinsburg.

Sammy marched out along a country road with his company worried about this first mission—foraging. Sammy's mind was filled with timorous doubts; he was not at all sure as to what this work would entail. It was not until the company had visited the first roadside farmhouse that he realized the detail was a dream come true. Legalized thievery. Sammy became an eagle among the trembling doves.

Initially the foraging was carried out with order and military dispatch. The officers supervised the careful collection of ducks, chickens, hogs, and cows, placing guards on the houses and outbuildings, making sure nothing was disturbed except the livestock. The men raced around the farmyard like terrier pups catching the chickens and ducks. They shouted and tumbled on the ground grappling with the squawking poultry and gleefully lugged their gunny-sacked captives to the roadside collection post. This took place in the first farmyard.

Their first encounter with a Negro at a plantation was sport too. The main buildings of the first plantation were at the far end of a long cabin-lined lane. As the company turned up the lane, the cabins divulged a hoard of screaming Negro women and children, running for the shelter of the main house. One old gray-haired darky, overcome by curiosity about "de Lincoln sojurs," and determined to see for himself if "de Yankees got horns," waited in the middle of the lane for the column.

"Somebody grab that nigger," a voice in the column shouted. "We'll boil him for supper tonight."

The old darky's eyes, as large as saucers, rolled in terror as he

turned and raced for the "big house" with the speed and agility of a ten-year-old.

At the house the terrorized females moaned and wailed as the old man related his adventures. "Law sakes a'mighty, doan go near dem dar Yankees. Deys killin' Soufern people and eatin' dem wheneber dey gits a chance. De Lawd's trufe, I sw'ar it am."

As the day progressed, fun became work and the work was boring. Late in the afternoon Sammy was instructed to take a detachment into the next plantation while the company moved on down the road to the succeeding farm.

"This place we're gonna do different," Sammy told the men. "We're gonna start foragin' the houses."

In one of the stables the men found a carriage to which they hooked up two oxen. The carriage was soon loaded high with hams, sides of bacon, canned fruit. The lady owner of the plantation sat in the kitchen weeping over her loss of foodstuff.

When the column formed to leave, Sammy spotted a Negro girl of fifteen or sixteen standing in the doorway of one of the cabins. He turned to his troopers, instructing them to proceed down the road and join the company. "I'll be along later."

"What cha gonna do, Sammy? Change yer luck?"

Sammy grinned but didn't answer as he started toward the girl.

"Go way, white man!" she said when he stepped up onto the porch.

When Sammy didn't stop she warned him again, smiling, "You go way from me now!"

Sammy followed the smiling, protesting girl as she backed conveniently across the partition-divided hut into one of the two compartments. The bedroom. It contained a bedstead and a mattress stuffed with the fibers of dried Spanish moss.

When he was through and getting ready to leave, the girl asked, as was custom, "fo' somethin'."

"I jus' give it to you," Sammy said. "You're free. I give you yer freedom."

8

"Uncle Billy" was the affectionate name General Sherman's men gave their leader before they began the four-day, eighty-mile hike at

breakneck speed from Haines Bluff down the muddy west bank of the river to join the rest of the army. After marching, swimming, drinking mud for three days the men began wondering if "old mush-head had any seeds left in his pumpkin." On the fourth day they were suddenly marching, swimming, drinking dust.

It was unbelievable that dirt which was an ankle deep-mud one day could turn to shoe-top dust in a period of forty-eight hours.

"Ain't no mystery," someone announced. "With fifty thousand men marchin' down one goddammed road, the head of the column has wet feet, the middle's on dry ground, and the ass end is sloggin' through dust."

Way up front, out ahead of the choking cloud bank of dust, Sherman caught up with Grant along the Grand Gulf-Raymond-Jackson road. He was appalled to find the army plunging inland toward Raymond without any sign of a wagon train except a grotesque and motley ragtag collection of barouches loaded to the top with ammunition boxes, and drawn by skinny mules in plough harness, straw collars and rope lines and occasionally handsome silver-plated harnesses. Long-coupled wagons pulled by oxen, large wooden boxes mounted on a pair of wheels pulled by cows, in fact any and everything with wheels that could be found around a farm was in the column and loaded down with ammunition. The provisions carried by the men were as varied as their equipages. Behind the teams some had hitched bleating sheep or cows, struggling to get away, while across the shoulders of the men as well as on the backs of the mules were seen ducks, geese, hens, and chickens, some alive and others dressed for the pot.

"Stop the troops!" Sherman cried. "Wait until your army is properly supplied with wagons!"

Instead of heeding his junior officer's advice, Grant ordered the stunned Sherman to cover the rear. He then climbed aboard his borrowed mount and rode off to the front, appearing along the column of marching men, urging them to hurry.

The grumbling, swearing Sherman, waiting for his troops to come up, sat down to "put his protest in writing." He saw the perils and difficulties of the army, and he said so. Grant saw perils too. Particularly if he did not get his army between the vacillating Pemberton in Vicksburg and the turbulent Johnston at Jackson before they

could reinforce one another. Grant's answer to Sherman was to order every man forward, toward Jackson.

"We cannot brook any delays."

9

Grant's orders to abolish a base of operations, to send everything forward, produced a collection of conglomerate rifle companies composed of quartermaster corpsmen, medical corpsmen, teamsters, musicians, stragglers and riffraff. These reserve companies, trailing in the wake of the main army, were made up of shirkers, weaklings, and misfits, led by officers of comparable quality. Discipline did not exist among the members of this armed mob; this reserve army was made up of men dedicated to the service of their country for reward.

Slouching along in one of the straggling, open columns, goggle-eyed and open-mouthed, was Willie Heap.

The countryside adjacent to the river was a tropical paradise, composed of the estates and homes of a wealthy, cultured people. The houses were the finest Southern country houses money could build, villa style, with wide porticoes or galleries and glazed windows opening on shaded porches, overlooking beautiful gardens.

Willie, trailing along behind a band of water-seeking marauders as they stomped through one of the deserted mansions, could not believe the things he saw. Gold mirrors lined the spaces on the walls not occupied by treasures of art; great chandeliers swung their rock-crystal pendants from the lofty ceilings; brocatelles and velvets covered the soft-cushioned lounges and graceful fauteuils; satin and lace curtains flowed round the tall windows.

"Hey, look at me!" someone yelled.

Willie looked and what he saw was the funniest sight he ever saw in all his born days.

One of the fellows, a cut-up, had slashed the face out of a life-sized oil painting, probably the portrait of the mistress of the plantation, and was standing behind the frame, his bearded face poked through the hole in the canvas where the woman's likeness had been.

Willie got to giggling so hard he couldn't stop. He was convulsed

when someone picked up an ink well and heaved it at the clown. The throw went wide, missed the target and smashed one of the floor-to-ceiling mirrors. The crashing glass was a signal for everyone to start smashing glass. By the time Willie found something he could throw, the glass had been all broken. Willie had to content himself by cutting his initials, "W. H. 1863," on the front of the rosewood piano.

Rivaling the houses as objects of awe were the slaves.

The Negroes, abandoned as the plantation owners fled with their families ahead of the advancing Federals, turned like children to the only secure thing they knew, the next white man to come along the turnpike—"Masta Lincoln's sojers!"

"Glory be ter God. De Yankees is comin' ter marry all we niggah," the women cried as each one rushed to select a good strong white soldier. Some of the men entertained the company by undressing the giggling Negresses and re-outfitting them in gowns from Paris, bonnets from London, and shawls from Italy: the contents of trunks and bureaus found in the main house.

It took the harassed company commander, a former grade-school teacher from Peoria, four hours to get his men all together and back on the road. By this time, the regiment was long gone and out of sight, leaving the nervous officer alone with his motley company in a strange and enemy country. One hour on the road and it was time to halt for the evening meal. The site selected was a country churchyard, overgrown and filled with weeds, half hidden by trees.

The fuzzy-faced Missouri boy ate his salt beef and hardtack, worrying about the men who were stomping around over the graves in the cemetery. When the men began the sacrilegious game of tipping over headstones, Willie became so upset he left the churchyard and joined some of the men leaning on a rail fence watching a woman in a neighboring field plowing a patch of young cotton.

"Call that there thing a plow?" one of the spectators spoke in contempt of the wooden, iron-tipped cultivator pulled by a tall bony horse, hitched with a tangle of old straps and ropes.

Willie solemnly inspected the objects of derision—the plow and the harness—with the practiced eye of a farmer and nodded in solemn agreement. It was a sight.

The woman came to the end of the furrow she was scratching in the thin sandy soil with the plow and stopped the horse directly

in front of Willie to give it a rest. It was then he received another shock. She reached into her apron pocket, pulled out a pouch tied to the end of a sassafras stick, and plopped it into her mouth. When the woman removed the pouch, pursed her lips and squirted out a thin stream of brown juice, Willie comprehended the meaning of the little bag. She was dipping snuff!

A more experienced officer, lost from his regimental unit as the schoolteacher captain from Peoria was lost, would have posted security guards and camped for the night, depending on the light of a new day to assist him in finding his unit. Instead he formed up the men and started out along the pitch-black forest road. Sometime around ten he made a left turn instead of a right and ended up about midnight at Hankinson's Ferry on the Big Black. The Union guards at the Ferry, assuming the company to be another outpost unit, ordered the ferry to take them across.

On the road once again the little unit stumbled, grumbled, moved by halts, fits, and starts up the road south of Vicksburg.

One of General Bowen's advance units gobbled up the entire company shortly after two A.M.

Willie was half asleep, his legs moving automatically to keep him in place in the column, when he was frightened into awareness by a wild yell and the roar of muskets. Wounded and dying men screamed and fell, the others, including Willie, stumbling around in the darkness or huddled together waiting for the next blast of musketry which would end their lives.

"Don't shoot! We give up," the men shouted, pleading for mercy.

"Throw down your guns, then come forward, single file down the middle of the road," a drawling voice instructed.

"Be right smart. Git!" A voice out of the darkness growled after he had walked a short distance. "Turn left and assemble around that fire over thar."

In the nearby woods Willie could see by the light of a low-burning campfire, his captain and most of the men of his company huddled in an uncertain and fearful circle. In the background a menacing band of glistening rifles formed a prisoner pen. The flickering light revealed a few of the faces behind the rifles. Dark, gaunt Rebels with fiendish eyes and murderous grins.

Willie's shaking knees refused to hold him up. He was forced to sit down when he reached the fire.

10

Alan Miller could not be certain, since he had not met Malvina's Aunt Della, whether the frigid reception he received was an indication of a change which might have taken place in Malvina's attitude toward him, or whether the aunt was just a naturally "crusty" old lady.

Puzzled, Alan left the McClellan house and was standing beside the carriage house, trying to determine his course of action, when 'Lijah appeared from around the corner of the building.

"Yo'," she said, a scowl creasing her jet-black brow. "Is yo' mah Mis Malvina's Cap'n?"

Alan said he was. He hoped.

"Is yo' de Cap'n dat trabbled away an lef de po' gal ter pine her po' heart nigh away?" she continued.

"I'm the guilty man," said Alan assuming the proper expression of penitence.

"Den yo' scat yo'self ova ter Jackson as fast as yo' kin scat, afo' dat po' gal grieves herself ter death," she admonished.

"She is all right then? Malvina?" Alan asked eagerly.

"Course she's all right. Dat is if'n yo' wants ter call cryin' herself ter sleep ebery night with a broken heart, all right."

With a joyous yell, Alan swept 'Lijah up into his arms, hugging her and kissing her on both cheeks.

"Now yo' stop dat monkeyshinin'," the startled mammy protested. "Yo' take dem kisses an' put 'em whar dey belong. Yo' mind what I tell yo' now!"

Tears were streaming down 'Lijah's face as Alan vaulted onto his horse and raced down the driveway, turning onto the road leading east toward Jackson.

11

The Northern vandalls have invaded our state. They have come to rob and steal, to plunder, to burn, and to starve to death our women and children. Under such circumstances we should meet them as we would meet the savage. Partisan bands should lie in wait for them on the roadsides, and behind trees; they should be hunted down in any

way that can be made effectual until the state is relieved of their presence. A dozen well-directed shots from the bush will at any time put a brigade to flight.——

Jackson Mississippian

Justin put down the newspaper which he had been reading and walked to the window of his library.

The slaves had been gone less than two weeks and already the white stables looked less white with their cuffs of ragged and uncut weeds around the foundations. Even the paddock and driveway showed signs of neglect. It was evident that aristocracy and slavery, as with the head and the feet, could not exist one without the other.

Justin's eye drifted to a broken pane in the stable window. The slave carpenter had been sold. No one to make repairs now. The gaping hole glared back eye to eye.

Turning, he crossed to the mantel, pulling the servants' bell cord.

Cleo answered the summons.

"Cleo," Justin said, holding out a letter which he had addressed to Belle McClellan, "have one of the boys run this letter into Vicksburg. It's to go to Miss Belle McClellan."

"Yassuh," Cleo took the letter but did not offer to leave.

"Is that all, Mista Justin? Sho' they ain't nothin' else yo' wants?"

"Yes. One thing," he said, ignoring her invitation. "Have my things packed. My weapons too. I'm leaving for Jackson. I will want to take along three of my best riding horses. You take charge here while I am gone."

"How long are yo' goin' ter be gone?" Cleo asked.

"I don't know," he answered as he turned and walked back to the window.

In the service hall, Cleo contemplated the letter. "Belle McClellan ain't gonna see dis hyer letter," and she consigned the note, informing Belle that Justin Phelan had been called away to Jackson and would be unable to escort her to the Military Ball in Vicksburg on Saturday night, to the flames in the fireplace.

"Joe boy!" she called to one of the old men servants. "Yo' gits ready to scat inter Vicksburg right now and yo' is takin' me along. Ah got a mos' 'portant letta fo' Mista Justin."

12

The room clerk in the hallway outside of James McPherson's room whispered with an exaggerated lift of his eyebrows, "There's somebody downstairs to see you. She says she's gotta message for you. Said she had to deliver it personal. Shall I send her up?"

James, seated on the edge of his bed, was tempted to hurl a boot at the leering clerk. He refrained long enough to ask, "Did she say who the message was from?"

"Yah. Cleo."

James was on his feet searching for his coat. "Yes. Send her right up."

The room clerk, satisfied that his suppositions were correct, departed, eager to lead the beautiful Cleo back up to McPherson's room.

McPherson's bitterness over the debasing waiting game he had been forced to play with Cleo, the humiliation of subjugating his own will to the caprices of a Negro slave, were reflected in the impersonal look he gave Cleo when the clerk led her into the room.

"Do you want anything else?" the room clerk simpered.

"That's all, thanks." James and the girl stood measuring one another. "What brought you to town?"

"I been thinkin' 'bout dat yo' was sayin'," she began, after he had closed the door.

"Yes?"

"Bout me goin' wif yo'. Ah'm ready."

"Right now?"

Cleo shook her head. "Mista Justin he's goin' 'way, maybe Saturday. Ah'll come den."

She allowed McPherson to take her into his arms for a moment, long enough for him to place a hand upon her breast, before she pulled away. "Ah gotta go. Mista Justin, he's still home."

She paused as she was leaving, "Yo' get in trubble yo' know. Takin' niggas."

"I'll take my chances." The nearness and worth of the prize warranted the risk.

"How we goin' ter go?"

"I don't know as yet. I'll find a way." He knew the way and it was simple. Money.

13

There was no indication of "the horrors and havoc" of the war in the preparations for the second annual Spring Military Ball to be given by the Vicksburg commandant and his staff. General Pemberton was far too busy to attend, but there were enough idle officers around headquarters to handle the preparatory details.

At Twin Chimneys, plans and preparations for the ball were also under way. Belle McClellan's courtship with Justin Phelan having progressed through a theater date, a dinner date, and a Sunday afternoon buggy ride into the country, was destined to reach a "serious stage" at the ball. Belle had willed this to be so. Tonight was to be the night when Justin would utter three precious words, "I love you."

The magic of three:

I
love
you.
Music,
Dancing,
Gaiety,
Merrymaking,
Love-making,
Matchmaking,
I
Love
You.

It was five and Justin would not call until seven and the ball would not commence until eight.

Belle started "remaking" her face for the third time.

Loulie Schmidt Chaffin was as excited as a pigeon over a parade when she received a note from her husband Tod, informing her he would be back in town on Saturday for the purpose of taking her to the Military Ball.

It was now five o'clock and she was bathed, powdered, and dressed except for donning the gown she had borrowed from her friend Suzanne. Tod was due to arrive soon, the ball was at eight.

Loulie started making plans for the dance with the decision to show off her best features. She hoisted her petticoats and removed her pantalettes.

Mary Anderson gave the Military Ball and its attending problems much thought and soul-searching. This self-analysis centered itself upon her latest conquest, Cyril Clyde. The propriety of attending a public function with an actor and a stranger needed serious consideration. While her affair with Cyril was not a matter of public knowledge, many tongues would waggle if she appeared in the company of a "stage actor," particularly now that she was a widow. It was important for Justin, whom she had not seen since the night of another Military Ball, over four months ago, to know that in addition to her plantation, town house, and family she also was a desirable woman, worthy of the attentions of a handsome well-dressed man-about-town.

Mary purchased Clyde a new outfit and asked him to escort her to the ball.

When Clyde arrived at seven, Mary was ready, wearing a lovely new calico, the latest in Paris fashions, secured after a tremendous cost of time, effort, money, and the smuggling connections of a friend of her former husband. It was important that she look her best tonight. Opportunities to meet Justin Phelan were not plentiful.

. . . The hall clock dragged at a tortoise pace from seven until eight-thirty and Justin had not arrived. It took Della, 'Lijah, and Chris thirty minutes to calm the hysterical Belle, assuring her time and again that Justin was a gentleman and would not forsake a lady.

"But how could he do such a thing?" Belle wailed. "He could have sent a letter or something."

"Belle, darling," Chris consoled. "I've known Justin for many years and I know he would not do this purposely. The only explanation is that he has been confronted by some emergency."

"My whole life is ruined. I'm going down to the river and jump in. That's what I'm going to do," she wept.

"Before or after the ball?" Chris smiled.

"Right this very moment," Belle exclaimed indignantly. "How could I face those awful girls at the dance, if I came without Justin?"

"Well," Chris sighed, turning to Della, "I might as well get undressed, if we aren't going to the ball."

"Not going to the ball?" Belle was shocked at the thought. "Then who will take me?"

"But," Chris chuckled, "I thought you said you weren't going?"

"And not get to wear my new dress? . . . Malvina's dress?" she amended.

Chris and Belle arrived at the ball shortly after nine.

The spacious parlors of the riverside mansion where the ball was being held were teeming with gaiety. All of the boys in gray were not fighting; all of the ladies were not sitting at home sewing and praying. The walls of mirrors around the room reflected a dazzling kaleidoscope. Heroic officers postured in brilliant uniforms of gray and gold, festooned with crimson sashes and dangling, jangling silver swords, while the ladies balanced the picture with their gowns of many colors, gathered from the depths of attic trunks, patched together from the best parts of two or more "last year's things." Antique relics of heavy silk stood side by side with gowns of silk, muslin, and calico of the latest mode. No one gave mind, for this was war.

Belle searched the opulent rooms from top to bottom, but there was not a sign of Justin. Her broken heart was partially mended when a young colonel wearing an artilleryman's insignia asked Chris for his daughter's arm and led Belle to the rhythm of the military band into the ballroom.

Loulie Schmidt Chaffin could not remember ever having had so much fun. Why Tod, with a bad leg, ever brought her to a dance was something she would never understand, nor did she try, for

once inside the elegant house she made the most of her opportunities. Her fun and frolic came to a sudden stop only after she spotted Cyril Clyde dancing with Mary Anderson in his arms. The hate, the plans for revenge came flooding back into her mind and suddenly crystallized.

Tod! Tod would be the perfect instrument of revenge.

Mary Anderson was bored. The object of her affections, the real purpose behind attending the ball, Justin, was not in attendance. Re-establishing contacts with her former associates and family friends whom she had been avoiding during this sojourn with Cyril pointed up the truth of what her close friends had been trying to tell her. Cyril was a pretender, an amateur gentleman, a very bad actor and, to make matters worse, a great disappointment as a lover. Cyril was much too much in love with himself, to be able to afford lavishing any great amount of affection on anyone.

Cyril was doing an excellent job tonight however, Mary admitted. He looked and acted the part he was playing perfectly. An actor, pretending to be a gentleman.

Belle McClellan sought out Robert during the intermission in the dancing prior to the Grand Promenade. She found him on the piazza which graced the front of the house at the second-story level.

"Robert, dear," Belle greeted, "I've been looking for you."

"Good evening, Belle." Robert turned to a small blond lieutenant at his side. "Belle, I want you to meet Lieutenant Chaffin. Lieutenant, my sister Belle."

"Good evening, Miss McClellan," Tod bowed.

"Chaffin and I were on duty together out at Edwards Depot," Robert continued. "Having a good time?"

"All right, I guess," Belle shrugged. "You haven't seen Justin tonight, have you?"

"No." Robert pondered the question. "I saw Malvina though, Thursday, over in Jackson."

Belle flinched and wondered if the association of Justin and Malvina would go on forever. "Oh?"

"Yes, she seemed to be . . ." Robert was interrupted by a shrill scream which came from the direction of the rose garden.

Loulie had excused herself at intermission and moved to where she could keep an eye on Cyril and "his slut," following them as they walked out of the house into the garden.

"Cyril!" Loulie called.

Clyde froze. The voice was only too familiar. "Loulie! What are you doing here?"

"I could ask the same thing of you," Loulie flared. "I wanna talk with you."

Clyde hesitated. He glanced at Mary, but if he was expecting help to extricate himself from the embarrassing spot he was doomed to disappointment.

"Go ahead and talk to the girl, Cyril," Mary smiled, carefully inspecting the moon-faced Loulie. "I see some friends of mine over by the lily pond. I'll go talk to them."

Cyril took Loulie by the arm and started leading her toward a secluded arbor area at the end of the garden.

"Well, I certainly didn't expect to see you here tonight," Clyde said when they were safely within the shelter of the hedged rose garden.

"I'll bet you didn't," Loulie replied meaningfully. "Where you been?"

"What do you mean?" Clyde stalled.

"What do you mean?" she mocked. "What do I mean! You know damned well what I mean!"

"Sh!" Clyde hushed as Loulie's voice began to rise. "Now don't get all excited. I'll tell you how it was."

"You just do that," Loulie sneered.

"I thought that we were getting on one another's nerves and it would be better for both of us if we stopped seeing each other for a few days."

"Sleeping with each other you mean!"

"Don't be vulgar, Loulie," he chided.

"Whattcha mean? Vulgar? You been thinkin' of me, huh? Alla time you been friggin' that rich twitch and thinkin' about me?"

"Loulie! Please!" Clyde pleaded. "I didn't intend to hurt you. Honest. I just thought it was best."

"Thanks."

Clyde placed his arm around Loulie's shoulder, thinking a little attention would soften the girl and bridge this awkward situation.

"Come on now. Say you forgive me."

"Will you come with me? Right now?" Loulie asked.

"Well," Clyde hesitated.

"We'll go to the hotel an' start fresh like nothin's happened?" Loulie baited.

"I can't do that right now," Clyde stalled. "I've got to take Mary home."

"Afterwards then?" Loulie pursued relentlessly.

"Look. You tell me where you're staying and I'll come see you tomorrow," Clyde suggested eagerly.

"You can see me now," Loulie said, pulling away suddenly, and before Clyde's horrified eyes she reached up, grasped her borrowed dress by the neck, and with one quick jerk ripped it open to the waist. She pulled one of the severed halves aside to reveal a pink-tipped breast. "I'll bet you'd forgot what they look like, didn't you?" she snarled.

"Loulie!" the shocked Clyde stammered. "Are you drunk?"

His answer was a shrill scream, followed by another and another. Loulie closed her eyes tight and, clutching her torn dress to her throat, started stumbling toward the house yelling at the top of her voice. "Help! Tod! Help! Rape!"

Tod Chaffin reached his wife after a goggle-eyed captain led the wailing Loulie to a garden bench where a matronly chaperon was trying to cover Loulie's shapely and generous breasts with a handkerchief. A large crowd clustered around the girl as he pushed his way through to her side.

"Loulie!" Tod panted. "What in the world is the matter?"

Loulie held her face in her hands, to cover the lack of tears, and continued her dry sobs.

"Loulie! Answer me!" Tod lowered himself to the bench beside his wife, taking her in his arms. "What is it, Loulie?"

"A man tried to do something to me," she managed to say without raising her head.

"Who?" Tod gasped.

"Cyril Clyde, the actor. He coaxed me into going to the rose arbor with him and look what he did," Loulie pulled aside the protecting linen to reveal the ripped dress and the rounded white curve

of her breasts to her husband and the wide-eyed cluster of officers who ringed the garden bench.

"He grabbed me and tried to tear off my dress, see." Again she pulled one side of the rent gown down enough to give the assembled swains an eye-feasting treat.

Tod hastened to cover his wife and asked, "Are you all right?"

Loulie demurely nodded.

A sigh of relief swept through the assembled gallants. The sanctity of Southern womanhood had been saved.

Until this moment Tod had not thought of himself as being a member of the Southern aristocracy. In the uniform of an officer of the Confederate States of America, he had become an officer and a gentleman. A glance at the righteous ring of honor-struck men, a moment's attention to the murmured threats of tar and feathers, killing the blackguard, reminded him that his duties were preordained, without question; they must be accepted.

Cyril Clyde, after the shock and implications of Loulie's act had registered on his befuddled brain, fled the rose arbor looking for Mary. Mary was nowhere to be found. The first sight of Loulie stumbling out of the hedge had been enough to send the widow flying through the shadows to her carriage.

Tod found Clyde at the side of the house, nervously trying to light a cigar.

"Cyril Clyde?" Tod questioned formally.

"That's right," Clyde did not know Loulie's husband, but guessed his identity from her description.

"I am Tod Chaffin. My wife Loulie tells me she was accosted by you in the rose arbor." Tod spoke slowly and carefully, aware of the two dozen or more fellow officers who had trailed him around the corner of the house, intent upon seeing "justice done."

Cyril Clyde, alias Clyde Herring, had grown up in a middle-class family in Decatur, Illinois, and was not conversant with the code which forbade the malignment of a fellow man even in a whisper; a code in which to speak of a lady (all females were ladies except Negroes) was unthinkable, and backbiting beneath the dignity of a gentleman. Cyril spoke his mind, loud and clear, in his best Shake-

spearean voice. "Your wife, and I am sure you are quite aware of this idiosyncrasy of her character, is a bold-faced liar."

The unwritten law read: "If any man feels disposed to speak disrespectfully of another, society demands a straightforward, outspoken personal reflection, which the parties must settle between themselves on the field of honor."

The way was unmistakably clear. "You will answer for this insult, sir." Tod spoke quietly, in a manner befitting a gentleman. "At dawn tomorrow morning in the woods behind Sky Parlor Hill. The choice of weapons will be yours."

A rustle of nods and a murmur of approval ran through the crowd of officers as Tod spun on his heel and limped back toward the party. Sympathetic hands beat on his shoulders. At least a dozen officers vied for the honor of representing him as his second.

The magnitude of what he had done did not become a realization until he had taken Loulie home and was on his way to the Preston House where he was to meet his seconds, Robert McClellan and friends. Desperately he tried to build his anger to the proper pitch, but somehow he could not bring himself to the point of feeling any resentment toward his antagonist. In his heart he knew Cyril Clyde had spoken the truth.

Loulie Schmidt Chaffin sat on the unmade bed in a tattered dress and giggled over her deception. She regretted only having been forced to leave the party before the Grand Promenade and supper. At the serving tables she had noticed they were preparing to serve strawberries and cream, sweetened with sorghum sugar. Loulie "just dearly loved" strawberries and cream.

Loulie sat with her knees tucked beneath her chin, smiling and trying to picture the quaking Clyde in the early morning dawn on Sky Parlor Hill. She considered the duel, wondering who would be killed, Tod or Clyde.

There was only one flaw in Loulie's thinking and planning. She had failed to reckon with a quirk in Clyde's personality. Clyde Herring loved life more than honor.

At dawn, Robert and his friends searched the town, looking for "that cad Clyde." They did not think to look in the dressing room underneath the stage at the opera house.

14

James McPherson was standing in front of the mirror in his hotel room in Vicksburg, adjusting his cravat when the knock came at the door. Thinking it was the houseboy, he called, "Come in." The door opened and Cleo, draped in a black shawl, stepped into the room. Only her face was visible. Against the dark passageway, her pale, beautiful face had the clarity of a Spanish Madonna.

"Cleo!" James exclaimed. "I didn't think you would come."

"I said I would."

"I know, but. . . ." He was hesitant to ask why she had come, fearful of the answer he might receive. "Are you . . . did you come . . . to stay?"

"I've come . . . to go," Cleo replied.

"With me?"

She nodded.

Desperately he wanted to take her into his arms, but remembering the hostile rebuff from the last visit he hesitated.

"When we goin' to go?" she asked.

"Tomorrow. I must make arrangements."

"He might come afta me."

"Phelan?"

Again she nodded. Her fear made her even more desirable.

"I must take that chance. Today is Sunday. I can't do anything until tomorrow," James explained.

"Where I stay?"

James was puzzled at the question. "Why . . . here . . . with me."

"I can't. Not hyer," Cleo stated finally.

"But . . . ?"

"Not till afta we get to where eva we're goin'. Not till afta we'ah married."

The price he must pay for this beautiful girl had been named. James hesitated as a customer might hesitate before saying yes to a costly purchase. Hesitating out of custom, even though both the buyer and seller were aware the sale had been made.

James took a deep breath, fighting his desire. "I'll go down now to the clerk. You'll stay in this room. I'll get another room for myself."

15

Cyril Clyde's performance in *Hamlet* was up to the standards of his usual performance, but something was amiss. Instead of cheers he received boos when he began his now famous ad lib. The boos were followed by a hail of ripe eggs and Cyril Clyde backed off-stage into the arms of an irate Mr. Fishback.

"I don't understand it," Clyde stammered, trying to wipe the runny, smelly goo from his costume with the corner of a moth-eaten velvet drop.

"No?" Fishback stormed. "I'll be lucky if they don't burn down the theater, if they don't ride me out of town on the same rail with you!"

"But. . . ." Clyde still did not know the reason for the egg storm.

"You're fired!" Fishback screamed. "Now get out! Get out at once!"

Gerald, the dancer, found Clyde in the dressing room. The handsome actor was seated at the dressing table, head buried in his arms, sobbing like a baby.

"Don't cry, Cyril, please don't cry," Gerald whispered, placing a consoling arm around the actor's shoulders.

"Why, Gerald? Why? What happened?" Clyde cried.

"You don't know, then?"

"Know what?"

"Gus heard them plotting before the show. I wanted to warn you but Gus wouldn't let me."

"Warn me about what?" Clyde pleaded.

"It's because you wouldn't fight that silly old duel. Those ruffians down at the hotel had it all planned to break up the show tonight, then they're going to tar and feather you and ride you out of town on a rail."

The threat of physical violence dried Clyde's eyes instantly. "Are you sure?"

"They broke up the show."

"What am I going to do?"

"They'll be waiting outside in the alley," Gerald added.

"What am I going to do?" The sob was returning to Clyde's voice.

"Maybe I could help you, if you wanted," Gerald smiled sweetly.

"What could you do?"

"Well, we could put you in a woman's costume, with a veil. I'll go with you when you walk out and they would never dare molest a woman," Gerald suggested.

"Maybe, but they'll be waiting for me at the hotel," Clyde said, shaking his head in dismay.

"You can stay with me," Gerald said shyly. "If you want."

"Where's your partner, Gus? I thought you and Gus . . . ?"

"We had a fight," Gerald pouted. "I don't like Gus any more."

16

Loulie Schmidt Chaffin was in the balcony of the opera house an hour before curtain time. She would not have missed the egging for anything in the world.

The alley episode was fun too. Loulie saw Gerald coming out of the stage entrance with the tall veiled lady and recognized Cyril instantly by his walk. Momentarily she contemplated telling the crowd of soldiers who were loitering in the alley what was actually beneath the old black costume dress. She thought about the idea and rejected it.

Loulie chuckled to herself, He's gonna get just what he deserves.

17

Robert McClellan, on one of his seesaw trips between Vicksburg and Jackson, and with an extra hour to pass, had stopped by the Renshaw residence in Jackson to see his sister.

"Is it true that General Johnston is on his way to Jackson?" Malvina asked the moment she was alone with her brother.

"Yes, he's coming," Robert assured her.

"When is he expected to arrive?"

"Why are you so anxious about General Johnston?"

"Why do you think I came to Jackson?" Malvina asked with a patient sigh. "To be with Josephine? No, Robert. Remember the man I love? Alan Miller? Alan is a courier with Johnston."

"Well, they'll probably get here Monday and I wouldn't count on much of his time if he's with Johnston," Robert warned.

"Why?"

"They'll be very busy, preparing to defend Jackson," Robert explained.

"Defend Jackson? Do you mean to say there's danger of the Federals attacking Jackson?" Malvina frowned at the very thought of such a possibility.

"Perhaps."

"The Yankees won't stand a chance once Alan arrives in Jackson," said Malvina with a positive nod of her head. "He knows the Jackson defenses by heart."

"Pemberton is trying to avoid making Napoleon's mistake. That's why he's waiting for Grant in Vicksburg," Robert explained. "You know what happened to Napoleon when he uncovered Paris?" Malvina did not have this bit of knowledge at her finger tips. Robert supplied the answer: "Alexander's Cossacks moved in and captured the city."

"Oh." This explained everything.

"You see it's a military axiom that a large body of troops must operate from a base of supplies which are always covered and guarded in all forward movements," Robert expounded. "For this reason the Federals cannot move away from the river. The river is their base of supplies."

This last axiom didn't make much sense to Malvina and it didn't make much sense to General Pemberton either when, after sending a patrol down along the river into Grand Gulf, he found the place deserted and empty.

18

Malvina McClellan was in the dining room having a second cup of after-dinner coffee with Josephine and her mother when the maid announced, "Dere's a Cap'n Milla hyer to see yo', Miz Malvina."

Malvina was not at all sure her tremulous limbs would carry her as

far as the sitting room. The sight of the tall, handsome scout was enough to restore her faltering strength.

"Alan. Oh, Alan, my darling. Thank you, dear God." The uncertainties, the apprehensions vanished in the warmth of his arms. Her doubts were answered by his wordless lips. When she felt his arms relax for a second, when she thought he might release her from his grasp, she struggled, pushing closer, whispering, "No. Hold me. Hold me. Hold me tight. Don't ever let me go. . . . Oh, darling, darling, darling," Malvina whispered and kissed Alan, laughed and kissed him in order that she would not cry.

Lifting her chin, which she had buried in his chest, Alan feathered Malvina's eager lips with his finger, asking for silence. "Hush," he whispered. "I can only stay a moment. I must talk to you."

"We have forever, darling," Malvina sang gaily. "Forever and ever and ever."

"No. Please. Remember what I told you before I left? There was something I must explain?"

"And after which you would ask me to be your wife?" she implored.

"That's right."

"The answer is yes." Malvina laughed, like a happy child. "There, everything is settled."

"Please be serious," Alan pleaded. "Please let me explain."

"Yes, Alan," she murmured, sobering her gaiety.

"What I have to tell you has nothing to do with our love. It has to do with the war," he began. "I am going to give up my commission in the army. Then I want you to be my wife."

"Your commission?" Malvina frowned, not understanding what or where the conversation was leading. "I don't see what this has to do with you and me. What is your concern. . . ."

"I am resigning my commission, Malvina. My commission in the Army of the United States."

"Your . . ." her voice faltered in disbelief of what she had heard.

"Yes. I'm a captain in Sherman's Corps."

"I . . ." Malvina tried forming a sentence to express in part the shock which numbed her soul, but it was as if she had been stricken by a paralysis. All powers of reasoning, of thought, of speech were gone.

"Malvina. I didn't want to fall in love with you. It happened be-

fore I could explain who and what I was. Humbly, I repeat, I love you and I beg you to be my wife."

Malvina's eyes had been closed while Alan spoke. They remained closed now, knowing that were she to look at him she could not trust herself to say the thing that must be said.

"Go, Alan. Please. At once. I won't notify the authorities of your despicable activities until tomorrow. This will give you an opportunity to get safely back within your own lines, to the safety of your beloved Sherman."

"Malvina," he pleaded as she backed away from him, "I understand how you feel. I love you, Malvina."

Alan was at the door when Malvina answered. "For my sake, as well as your own, if you do love me, then don't come back. I do not want to be burdened with the responsibility for your arrest and execution as a spy."

The hours throughout the night following Alan's departure were a walk down a path through the shadowy valley, her mind overpowered and placed in a closure, as she suffered the torture of her heart in silence and alone.

The reserve, pride, and reticence, the blessings of her birthright, served Malvina to good purpose, giving her the strength to suffer through the first shock of disillusionment. She thanked God that this lost love had not been lavished on a weakling. Although Alan was a Yankee, it was consoling to know he was an honorable man and a gentleman.

It was mid-morning when the Renshaw maid entered the library to announce, "Pardon, ma'am. Dere's a Mista Phelan at de do', ma'am." The girl's voice seemed to be coming from some faraway place.

Malvina, sitting bolt upright at a corner desk, her diary spread upon her lap, raised her eyes to question the Negress. "Justin Phelan? Here?" It was as if she had no comprehension.

"Yes, ma'am. In de hall."

"Show him in."

"Good morning, Malvina," Justin greeted as he entered the library.

Malvina arose as Justin crossed the room to take her outstretched hands in warm greeting.

How unlike my uncombed, untamed Alan, she thought as she noted Justin's spotless linen, his immaculate suit and boots. Instantly she hated herself for the comparison. Driving it from her mind she stammered, "What . . . what brings you to Jackson?"

"Many things. One of which is you."

"How thoughtful," she said. "Please come sit down."

"Thank you."

"How have you been, Justin?" she asked after they were seated.

"Under the circumstances, I suppose I can say I am quite well, thank you. And you?"

In spite of the sadness in her heart, Malvina smiled at Justin's stilted formalties. So typical of her father and all the men she knew . . . except Alan. Their language was stately, dignified, and formal. It seemed to be a rule with the gentlemen she knew never to employ a simple or direct form of expression when they could possibly think of a verbose and high-sounding circumlocution that would even vaguely suggest their meaning.

"I too am as well as can be expected," she at last replied. "Is there any news of the war?"

"Bad news," Justin answered. "The situation in the south looks very grave. Refugees are pouring in from all the plantations south of the Big Black bearing horrible tales of the Yankees."

"Are we in danger?"

"I do not know. I am afraid we are. Consequently I have come to Jackson for the purpose of raising a company."

They were silent, each lost in his own thoughts.

Finally Malvina said, "Justin. I must tell you something. I don't know why, nor do I tell you this expecting any sympathy. I only know I must speak to someone."

"Then perhaps you should keep your silence," Justin warned.

"No. It must come out. Alan, the man to whom I gave my heart, is from the North."

If Justin was surprised by her revelation, no outward sign showed on his calm, handsome face.

"I am sorry, Malvina," he replied gallantly. "Is there anything. . . ."

"Anything you can do?" Malvina smiled sadly. "No. Are you good at mending broken hearts?"

"Malvina, you are not deserving of this . . ."

"Chicanery?" she volunteered. "No, Alan told me of his own accord. We were both victims of this terrible time."

What am I saying? Malvina thought. Again, I'm making excuses. Am I trying to exonerate Alan and myself within the framework of a single platitude?

"I came by to ask you to have dinner with me tonight," Justin said, without further reference to her confession.

"I would love to have dinner with you, but not tonight. Father is coming. Tomorrow evening?"

"Excellent. I will call for you at eight."

After Justin departed Malvina sat in the silent parlor haunted by the memories of Justin and of Alan. In her mind's eye she could picture them each sitting on a chair, one on either side of the mantel, Justin erect and straight, stiff and formal, ruled by the code, the rod of iron. Opposite him was Alan, relaxed and slightly stooped, dressed in buckskin, silent and watchful, quick to anger, eager to laugh, a man of impulse.

Suddenly she felt a great weight, as if the atmosphere was pressing her into the floor. "Alan, Alan," she whispered, and her entreaty was drowned in sobs.

19

Alan Miller, riding toward his rendezvous point with McClernand's Corps at Raymond, encountered the first of the road-clogging stream of refugees a few miles south of Jackson.

"Raymond's gone!" the panic-stricken cried, shaking their heads in despair. "The Yankees looted and burned the town this morning."

"Go back, mister! They'll be comin' this way by the thousands. Jackson's gonna be next."

The despair Alan saw written on the faces of the women, children, and old men, struggling north with their pitifully bundled possessions, was matched by the sickening hopelessness he carried in his own heart.

"Yes, everything is gone," he thought as he pushed his mount

through the ever-increasing stream of carts, wagons and humanity. "Your homes, your way of life is gone—and my love, Malvina."

Alan rode on toward his destination, McClernand's headquarters at Raymond, not as a soldier completing an assigned mission, but rather as a refugee himself. He fled south trying to escape his thoughts of Malvina by following duty's furrows.

Raymond contained the smoking, red-hot embers of some Confederate warehouses, and the skeleton staff of McClernand's rear command post. The colonel who had given Alan his original assignment was "up front somewhere" and no one seemed much interested in Alan's "report of enemy troop locations and movements."

"It really doesn't make much difference now what the enemy does or is doing," one of the rear-echelon tacticians explained. "Pemberton had his forces strung out along the Big Black for over forty miles and even if he managed to assemble them all today he could not attack this week. In the meantime Sherman is moving between our corps and McPherson's who is containing Pemberton along the river. Sherman has been ordered to destroy or drive Johnston and his forces out of Jackson."

"When will Sherman attack Jackson?" Alan asked.

"Tomorrow at the latest," the aide spoke with assurance. "Once we are between Johnston and Pemberton it will all be over except for the mopping up."

Leaving word that he was returning to Jackson where he would report back in to his superior, General Sherman, Alan dismissed himself. His mission was now clearly defined. I must see that Malvina is safely out of Jackson before the attack, he thought as he turned and galloped north along the Raymond-Jackson road.

That night had been a night of terror. After spending the early part of the evening with the Renshaws and her father discussing the advisability of fleeing to Vicksburg, Malvina had retired with the noise of cannon booming unceasingly closer and closer. Sleep was an impossibility. Finally, around midnight, she solicited Josephine's company and together they sat until the wee hours of the morning at an upstairs window, huddled between two quilts, watching the flames on the skyline in the direction of Raymond. Between awed silences they whispered confidences, tried to plan for the unknown tomorrow.

Justin arrived unexpectedly at dawn with the fateful news. "The roads between Jackson and the Big Black are swarming with enemy cavalry. You and your father must leave at once for Vicksburg."

"Is it possible to get through?" Malvina had asked.

"I think so," he replied. "Where is your father?"

"At the mill. He and David left to go down there around three this morning."

Chris McClellan was seated at the window of David's office watching the angry red glow in the southern sky when Alan Miller walked into the room unannounced.

"Captain Miller!" Chris exclaimed as he rose to greet the tall scout.

"Mr. McClellan. I'm surprised to find you here, sir. I came to see David," Alan said.

"He's in the back. . . ."

"No, I can talk to you," Alan interrupted. "I didn't know you were here. I came concerning Malvina."

"Malvina?" Chris frowned. "She's at the Renshaws'."

"I'm worried about her safety," Alan said. "I think you and she should leave for Vicksburg immediately."

"Yes?" Chris questioned.

"A tremendous battle is forming. Right here. Jackson will be the center."

"When?" Chris was emphatic and serious.

"No later than tomorrow, perhaps even yet today."

Chris sighed. "I thought as much. . . ."

A clatter of heels on the bare wooden stairway leading up to the office interrupted Chris. Malvina came bursting into the room, followed by Justin. She stopped short when she saw Alan.

"Alan!" The surprise of finding him with her father seemed to unnerve Malvina completely.

"Good morning, Malvina," Alan said softly as he eyed Justin who stood just inside the doorway, one hand hovering over a pistol in his belt.

"What are you doing in Jackson?" Malvina's cultivated voice rose to a near shout as she struggled to regain her composure. "Leave here at once!"

"Malvina!" Chris was shocked at his daughter's behavior.

"I'm sorry, Papa," Malvina's finger continued to point at Alan like a pistol aimed at his heart. Turning her head slightly she asked, "Justin, will you see that this man leaves immediately?"

"Wait, Malvina," Chris spoke up. "I'm at a loss to understand your attitude, but Captain Miller came here to warn us. He has information concerning an imminent attack upon Jackson by the Union armies, and was urging that some one of us conduct you out of town before it was too late."

"I see." Malvina stood proudly erect, her eyes staring straight ahead, avoiding Alan's gaze. "This is very noble of you, Captain Miller, but neither your advice nor your service are needed. Justin has offered to conduct us safely to Vicksburg."

Alan directed all his attention toward the alert, stern-faced Justin If Justin attempted to draw his pistol, what should he do? Arrest would mean death at the end of a hangman's rope; resisting would mean wounding or perhaps killing the man Malvina admired, or perhaps now loved.

"How do you intend to return?" Alan asked slowly.

Justin was relieved when the scout gave him an opportunity to speak. Desperately he had been searching Malvina's words for a clue to her wishes. Should he attempt to arrest this spy or was it Malvina's wish that he should go free?

"Over the Vicksburg-Jackson road. I came in that way this morning," he answered.

"I am certain the road has been closed by now." For the first time Alan felt free to turn to Malvina. "The only possible way for you to reach Vicksburg will be to go south of Jackson to the Mississippi Springs road, then turn west and continue through Raymond, directly to the Big Black. You will not encounter any major military forces along this route."

Before anyone could comment, Alan turned to Chris, "Good day, sir. May I repeat, it is important that you be on your way within an hour."

"Thank you, Captain," Chris said as Alan turned on his heel and walked out of the room without another glance at Malvina.

Malvina closed her eyes. She could not bear to see the hurt on Alan's face as he left the room. The guilt she felt, over having misjudged his intentions, flared up in angry accusation.

"Are you going to believe him?" Malvina said angrily after Alan was gone.

"I don't see why we shouldn't," Chris said slowly, baffled by Malvina's attitude.

"It's a trap. It's a trap to get us all captured," she flared.

"I hardly believe that we would be of much military importance to the Yankees," Chris said slowly.

Malvina did not reply. Her father was right. Alan had made this effort for her sake.

"The road to the east was open this morning. . . ." Justin began.

"No. Papa is correct," Malvina nodded, turning to Justin. "Alan would know of conditions which you or I would have no way of learning. We'll go by way of Mississippi Springs and Raymond." Pausing she asked, "Where is David?"

"Back in the mill," Chris sighed.

"Did I hear my name taken in vain?" David asked cheerfully.

"Yes," Chris answered. "We are all leaving for Vicksburg. At once."

"You're running away?" David said casually as he pretended to busy himself at the desk. "Not me. I'll stay here. The looms of this mill will never stop as long as I have a breath left in my body."

Chris knew, from David's tone of voice, his son meant precisely what he said.

"Malvina," Chris sighed, "you and Justin will make the trip without me. I'll stay here with David."

"That's the spirit, Papa!" David beamed, slapping Chris on the shoulder. "Let them come! The slaughter pens are ready!"

Chris could not help but laugh. "God bless you, son."

20

A once-red-wheeled carriage, pulled by two thoroughbreds and leading two riding horses, left Clinton for Jackson only a few minutes after units of General McPherson's Union cavalry swept into town, cutting the Vicksburg-Jackson railroad. The carriage plowed through the ankle-deep mud, bucking an endless stream of carriages and wagons laden with household goods, old men, women, and children who were flying straight into the face of the enemy.

Cleo sat beside James McPherson proud and erect, appraising the mud-caked stream of white refugees moving west as though the wrath of God was after them.

The bottom rail sat right on top.

21

Malvina awakened at dawn with a feeling indescribable. She was hungry, chilled and worse yet . . . she knew she "looked a sight." Through the open doorway of the roadside cowshed shelter where she had spent the night with Josephine and a dozen other refugee women and children, she could see the gray, leaden skies of another bleak and cheerless day. Rain beat like hailstones on the roof.

How can I stand another day like yesterday?

Departure from Jackson had not been the simple thing it seemed earlier during the planning stages in David's office. The return to the Renshaws' house for the purpose of picking up Malvina's trunks resulted in the addition of another passenger. Papa Renshaw decided to send Josephine to the safety of relatives in Vicksburg. This meant waiting while the excitable, fluttery Josephine packed additional bags and trunks.

She fussed, hesitated, and debated, wasting precious hours in selecting the frocks she wanted to take. It was as though she was going to Vicksburg to attend a series of holiday parties. Then Mr. Renshaw appeared in the driveway, just as they were about to depart, with two bags of meal and three dressed chickens. Hidden in the meal was the choice family silver. The dressed chickens were stuffed with jewelry.

Additional delays were encountered when Robert hove onto the scene out of breath and bubbling with excitement. He had been ordered back to Vicksburg and had come to take Malvina with him.

"You're too late, Robert, Justin has offered to conduct us back to Shady Oaks," she had informed her brother.

"Part way, at least. Until I know Malvina is safe," Justin amended.

"No need to go if you've got other things to do," Robert had answered blithely. "I've got a good man going with us. Ran into him down in Raymond yesterday. One of my men from the Ed-

ward's Depot assignment. He's waiting out front in the drive."

"Bring him up," Chris said, "I'd like to meet him before you go."

"Folks," Robert had said as he led his companion for the trip into the room, "I want you to meet a former member of my command. Sergeant Pucket."

Piney's watery eyes wavered around the room and settled on Justin Phelan.

"Jesus Christ," he mumbled to himself. "The nigger lover I took for a thousand dollars!"

Piney would have turned tail and bolted had it not been for Malvina. He stood transfixed in open-mouthed awe when she turned to acknowledge Robert's introduction. Malvina was the most beautiful woman Piney had ever seen. The contempt and disrespect he held for all women crumbled at the sight of Malvina's delicate beauty.

The expedition finally got under way after Robert and Piney shed their uniforms and dressed as civilians.

Malvina had been certain that the poor carriage, its rear seat piled high with bags, bedding, trunks, and food for the trip, would give up and collapse before they ever left the Renshaws' driveway. Adding to the probability of failure from the start was a drenching rain which threatened to inundate the entire city. Piney in the driver's seat shook the reins, the wheels turned, and the expedition was under way.

Traveling the road to Raymond proved to be a near impossibility. At times the thoroughfare threatened to become a stationary river of mud halted by a human dam. From the south came a flood of panic-stricken populations, flying into Jackson at the approach of the enemy. Whole families of country folk, fugitives from the homes none thought of defending; flocks and herds; horses; wagons of heaped household stuff and farm products; men, women, children, dogs and cats; riding, walking, running, driving, leading their bewildered four-footed chattels. All rushing with clamor and alarm toward the doubtful security of Jackson. Opposing these refugees were the citizens of Jackson who were fleeing south to escape the coming battle. The road was a scene of panic. A battle of the weak, made strong from fear, fighting for the right to flee. It was a contest of wills and judgment concerning a haven of refuge, fought on a mud-churned country road.

"Raymond has burned!" cried the fugitives from the south.

"Jackson is surrounded! The legislature has fled the capitol with the archives!" cried the advocates of fleeing toward the south.

Standing in the doorway of a dilapidated cowshed, Malvina was trying to brush her rain-soaked hair when Justin appeared, to rouse his little band of travelers. They were on the road by six, hoping to avoid some of the congestion which they had encountered on the previous afternoon. The plan was good. Many fugitives were still huddling beneath makeshift shelters where they had spent the night. Pale and trembling women with trunks and bedding sat helplessly beneath dripping trees. Others were crawling from bush tents in the thickets, trying to cover their half-nakedness with quilts and silk drapes.

Malvina's plans for stopping at a friend's house in Raymond to repair the ravages of a night spent in the crude shelter ended at the outskirts of the village. Raymond was a city of rubble-filled gardens and broken walls. Broad semicircular flights of marble steps and towering chimneys guarded the smoldering ruins of the once-proud homes. The church was a stone tower surmounting roofless walls. Raymond was dead.

Late in the afternoon, Malvina's soaring hopes that they would reach the Confederate lines along the Big Black without incident were shattered when Justin, who had been riding far to the front, came galloping back with the report of a Union cavalry roadblock a mile or so to the front.

"A woman told me that the Yankees are searching the person of every woman who wishes to continue on across the river to our lines. They are supposed to be issuing passes after the inspection but so far no one has received a pass."

"How awful!" Malvina gasped. "What are we going to do?"

Justin frowned. "One thing is certain, we cannot stay along this road tonight. Yankee patrols will be sure to come along."

"No filthy ole dirty Yankee is goin' to search mah person," Josephine declared indignantly. "Ah would rather stand naked, defenseless, unarmed, without food, befo' a tribe of wild and savage Indians, ready to be butchered, rather than allow one Yankee to touch the mud-soaked hem of mah petticoat."

Justin directed Piney to turn off the main road into a cow path

leading up through a gully. The precarious path finally came to an end at a small abandoned farmhouse far up in the hills north of the Raymond road.

"Our home for the night," Robert announced triumphantly, swinging down from his mount.

"No," Justin interrupted. "We'll bury the Renshaw silver here, abandon the carriage and all luggage, and attempt to find our way through to the river tonight after dark."

Malvina caught a glimpse of herself in a cracked wall mirror when she and Josephine entered the tumble-down farmhouse. The dejected wet feathers on her hat plume hung like the tail on a wet cat and the poor dyes in the calico trimming had faded, allowing little rivulets of coloring to run down her face. "I look like one of the wild Indians Alan is always talking about," she remarked to Josephine without thinking.

"Whateva happened to that handsome lover of yours?" Josephine asked casually as she busied herself tugging and pulling a ball gown down over the top of her regular dress. "See what I'm doing? This way I can take four of my best dresses along with me."

Malvina tried to conceal the tears which came welling up into her eyes with the pretending hand she raised to rub her brow. In silence she whispered an answer to the question which Josephine had innocently asked, Alan, my lover, is a traitorous Yankee spy!

Justin came into the house a moment later to announce that he was ready to start the trip across country, through the hills to the river.

22

The Big Black River was a welcome sight to Malvina and her weary band of travelers as they came to the end of their cross-country trek. The hillside beyond the Jackson-Vicksburg bridge was dotted with white tents and, in the dawn's gray light, looked like a lawn covered with the soft sprinklings of a first snow. The breakfast cook-fires, sputtering into life, outlined the great encampment, declaring that Pemberton's army stood ready to defend Vicksburg and the countryside beyond the river.

The fugitives disbanded at the bridge. Despite her pleadings,

Justin insisted upon returning immediately to Jackson. Robert, due to report in Bovina, instructed Piney to accompany the girls.

There are events in a man's life he never forgets, scenes which never fade from his sight, and sounds which are forever fresh in his hearing.

The events, the scenes, the sounds in Piney's life which began in the parlor of the Renshaws' mansion in Jackson, rose to an indelible climax as the horse he was driving neared the McClellan country home, Shady Oaks, outside of Vicksburg.

"I don't know how we'll ever be able to thank you for what you've done," Malvina said as Piney was preparing to continue on to Vicksburg. "Can you come to dinner one night soon?"

"Oh, no," Piney stammered, instantly hating himself for his cowardice.

"But I insist. It's the least we can do. I want my sister and aunt to meet our savior. Where can we reach you?"

"I . . . I don't know."

"I'll talk to Robert and have him arrange it," she decided. "Thank you, Sergeant Pucket, so much for bringing us home safely." As Piney's horse slowly turned, she called, "Good luck."

The trip from Jackson to Shady Oaks had been like a dream which bordered on a nightmare. During the first two days of the journey in the carriage, Malvina had sat at his side on the narrow leather spring seat, touching him from ankle to shoulder, and the warmth and softness of the girl beside him produced sensations which drove Piney nearly to distraction.

The last leg of the trip, through the hills to the river and the crossing, was sheer hell. For Malvina had shared a riding horse with Justin, and the sight of Justin, his arms around Malvina as they rode up the winding cow paths and down through muddy hillside lanes, drove Piney crazy for another reason. In his mind's eye he recalled the sight of the sultry Cleo as she had joined Justin that morning at Beulah's place. Those same hands which had helped Cleo into the carriage held Malvina in place on the saddle.

As Piney rode away from Shady Oaks toward Vicksburg his spirits soared and his mind raced over the implications of the dinner invitation, the compliments Malvina had paid him. She likes me. She invited me to meet her family. She called me her savior.

His wildly pounding heart threatened his skinny rib cage unless he could find some means of appeasing the love he felt for the beautiful girl.

Desperately Piney longed for the ability to inscribe on paper the love he felt in his heart. He would entitle his poem, "An Ode to Malvina McClellan, The Only Woman in the World Worth a Damn Except My Mother, Beulah."

23

Chris McClellan stood looking down through the rain-streaked window of David's office in the cotton mill, at the panic and confusion which reigned at the railroad station below. Men and women dressed in the habits of the "better class" (those with money to buy rail passage out of the threatened city) pushed and bickered and fought like animals for positions along the edge of the platform where they could wait for a train which would never arrive.

Distant rumblings from the east broke the silence, foretold with a thunderous roar of the coming of a far more horrible storm.

"I wonder," Chris mused to himself, "how well we can weather it?"

The waiting period was brief.

First came the Confederate stragglers, drifting to the rear, pretending they were on assigned missions; upon business of a military nature. Then came the cowardly and the wounded, running in panic, proclaiming "all is lost." Last came the true sons of the Confederacy, marching four abreast, contained in units by outriding officers.

"What is the noise?" David asked as he joined his father at the window. "Is it starting to rain again?"

"A rain of lead and steel," Chris answered bitterly. "Stay by my side here for a moment and you will be able to witness the arrival of our lawful owners."

"What do you mean?" cried David.

"Our defenses have crumbled. The troops are in full retreat."

The scene below was at first wild, exciting, tumultous. Civilians running for the shelter of doorways and buildings, fighting with the

Confederate rear guard who sought the same shelter for positions of advantage. Guns popped, sabers clanked, women screamed, and the first Yankee skirmishers appeared in the streets.

Women, forgetting themselves in the excitement, screamed, "Kill them! Kill them!"

A Yankee cannon, rolled into position at the head of the street, belched fire and flame.

By units they came; massed blue squares formed to comb each block, building by building, searching out, destroying any blobs of gray which might be left to profane the field of solid blue.

Chris watched with bowed head.

David, at his side, stood silent, transfixed.

A squad, commanded by a saber-bearing officer, moved through the iron gates which led into the mill yard.

"Not while I'm alive," Chris heard David murmur. Bending over a desk, David's hand came forth bearing an ancient pistol.

"David!" Chris called sharply. "What are you doing?"

David did not answer as he plunged through the door and clattered down the stairs.

When Chris reached the foot of the stairs he found David standing in the mill entrance, legs spread, a defiant force of one.

"Stop where you are!" David shouted to the Yankees in the yard.

"Sorry, sir," the officer answered. "But we've got to search this hyer place for Rebs."

"Your search has ended," David replied.

"Better put that gun down, sir," the officer warned, "we're comin' in."

"No, you're not!" David cried, raising his pistol and pointing it at the officer.

A sergeant with the detachment raised his carbine and a single shot rang out, echoing and re-echoing around the brick-walled mill enclosure.

David turned slowly to Chris. The first thing Chris saw was the look of surprise and bewilderment on his son's face, as if he could not understand this effrontery. Then Chris noticed the blood welling up and bursting through a small round hole in the center of his forehead. Still alive, David moved toward his father, his head wagging from side to side, babbling like a lunatic.

Clutching the dying boy to his chest, Chris heard his last and only intelligible words: "I feel cold. In my heart, I feel cold."

Things were relatively quiet in Jackson when the troops first arrived. This was during the period when General Grant was on a tour of inspection with General Sherman. The conquering generals went to the state capitol for the formal hoisting of the Stars and Stripes, after which they departed for their hotel.

Discipline did not break down completely until after dark. Perhaps the men wanted to wait until after the generals had retired, or maybe (as civilians claimed) they were too ashamed of their acts to perform them in broad daylight. Tumult, violence, riot, pillage and burning began with the setting of the sun. Thieves, released from the jails, Negroes from the town as well as those who trailed after the army, joined with the soldiers to turn the city into a flaming pyre.

Stores were first plundered, then soldiers with fireballs—cotton saturated with turpentine—walked the streets throwing the flaming missiles into doors and windows, standing guard until the flames were in full control.

The streets teemed with Sherman's men who roamed, singly and in groups, seeking their own particular brand of pleasure. Wine cellars and shops provided the thirsty with the finest Madeira, brandies, rye, and corn. Rare pianos and organs dragged from private homes into the streets provided music for the vocal. Others, and these were the majority, forsook pleasures for the more serious business of seeking other people's fortunes. Citizens who stayed in the city to protect their homes were dragged into the streets by bands of marauding soldiers while their homes were sacked and looted of everything which could be carried away.

The city was lighted bright as day from the flames of a dozen fires when Alan Miller, with General Sherman's headquarters staff, arrived.

Apprehensive over the fires raging in the direction of the railroad tracks, Alan rode down to the station to investigate. Angry flames flicked through the windows of the McClellan and Sons cotton mills as an uncontrolled blaze finished gutting the two-story building. Volunteer fire-fighters stood on the street watching the

conflagration. Uniformed vandals had chopped their fire hoses into ribbons.

The old gray-haired man walked the streets of Jackson seemingly without purpose. He patiently handed over his wallet to one group of marauding soldiers; gave his ring and watch to a dirty sergeant and his corporal companion without protest. He seemed not to notice or care. His eyes, glazed and lifeless, searched the faces of the men who stopped him, looking without seeing.

"That last old buzzard. Made ye feel creepy, didn't it?" the corporal said to the sergeant.

"Yeh. Kinda like robbin' a dead man that ain't quite dead."

Two Negro women mill hands found Chris sitting, cradling the lifeless body of his son in his arms, when they decided to take "a quick look" into David's office before fleeing the burning mill.

"Mista Chris, whatta yo' settin' there fo?" one of the women asked.

"Better fo' yo' ter be gettin' outa tcheer right smart, 'cause fo' long it's gonna get mighty hot, mighty shortly."

The women led the old man out of the mill, leaving him beside the railroad tracks.

"Was dat Mista David he was holdin'?" the first woman asked the other as they departed down the tracks, arms loaded with bolted tentage.

"Guess so," the second woman answered. "Couldn't rightly see his face."

"Maybe we ought ter gone back ter git him," the first mused.

"Too late now, honey," was the reply. The sky to the rear was aflame with flying sparks as the roof of the mill collapsed upon the raging inferno of cotton, lint and oil-soaked machinery of what was once McClellan and Sons Cotton Works.

It was midnight. A soldier rolled the city alarm bell twelve times and then added one more "for the pot." The lonely figure walked through the sea of flame toward a church steeple which protruded above the billowing, black smoke, on his way to say requiem for his son in a chapel whose walls were buckling beneath the heat of a flaming roof.

A wrinkled old Negro who had worked for David at the mill found Chris huddled by the broken and charred wall of the church.

"Yo'kain't stay hyer, Mista Chris. Dis hyer murderin' Yanks will kill yo' fo' sure as certain."

"God has failed us." Chris, his eyes wide, wild, and without vision, spoke not to the Negro, but to the dark, smoke-filled sky. "Wrong is sitting above, in the very courts of heaven."

"Bless der Lord and der lovely Jesus, if dat ain't true. But you come with me," the old man said.

Chris rose and followed his benefactor like an obedient child. Two helpless old men in a land of chaos, leaning upon one another to form a part of a man.

"Ain't dis hyer a sight? Dis shootin' and burnin' and carryin' on? Ain't no fit place ter be. Nigger and white man bof, dey done gone wild."

Weary, hungry, begrimed with dust and sweat, the two old men hobbled down the railroad tracks away from the burning Jackson, in the direction of Vicksburg.

9

"YOU FEELIN' ALL RIGHT dis mawnin', Mista Chris?" the old Negro asked his companion as they plodded down the center of the railroad track, moving west out of Bolton, one crosstie at a time.

If "Mista Chris" heard, he gave no heed. His hurt and frightened eyes were without recognition, his parched, dry lips moved in whisper, "God have mercy on their souls!"

"Ah doan think de Lord gonnah have no mercy on dem Yankees, Mista Chris. Fact is, Ah feel sorry fo' de good Lord. He gonna hab his han's full, sortin' out all dem daid Yankees, tryin' ter find jus' one lamb amongst all der trillions of dem sinners. Las' night while you was asleepin' in der barn, Ah went ober to a horse-critter camp a lookin' fer somethin' fo' us ter eat. Well, suh, Ah went up to dis hyer one bonfire wheah dere was all kines of officers an' I say ter one real high gineral wid gold signs, Ah say, 'Can't yo' gib a po' soul a drop o' spirits fo' de Lord's sake?' An' he say, 'Go way frum here, Nigga. Ahm not gonna be gibben no licka to no black

heathen.' Ah say ter him, 'Ah ain't no heathen. Ah'm a Baptist, Ah is.' An he say, 'Yo is a Baptist! Ah'm a Baptist.' Mista Chris? How can dat be?"

The Yankee "horse-critter" company, a part of McPherson's corps, was moving out of Bolton, heading west on the Jackson-Vicksburg road. The Yankees were looking for signs of a reported eight regiments of Rebels accompanied by ten batteries of artillery. General Grant had intercepted another Johnston-to-Pemberton communique.

General Pemberton:
As soon as your reinforcements are all up, they must be united with the rest of the army. . . . Can Grant supply himself from the Mississippi? Can you not cut him off from it and above all, should he be compelled to fall back from want of supplies, beat him———
Johnston.

General Pemberton was a man beset by four insoluble problems: Davis, Johnston, Grant, and Sherman.

President Davis ordered: "Defend Vicksburg."

General Johnston's order contradicted itself: "Turn north and join me. Turn south and cut Grant off from his base of supplies."

Sherman? Where was Sherman? "Surely he must still be to the north of Vicksburg at Haines Bluff, ready to pounce on the city the minute I turn my back."

Grant and his whole army seemed to have vanished into a fog of rumors and conjecture. The attacks on Raymond and Jackson, Pemberton reasoned, were nothing more than massive cavalry raids. Only cavalry could operate without baggage, commissary, quartermaster and ammunition trains.

Napier (erudite and brilliant) had said:

> *"He who wars, walks in a mist through which the keenest eyes cannot always discern the right path."*

Turenne had said:

> *"Speak to me of a general who has made no mistake and you speak to me of one who has seldom made war."*

Pemberton, like the cornered fox, surrounded and beset by a pack of howling hounds, began a circling, backtracking movement, destined to lead the hounds up to the very mouth of the lair. "Defend Vicksburg!" "Join Johnston!" "Attack Grant's base!" Pemberton hesitated, vacillated, waited, and then called a meeting of his subordinates.

The assembled staff officers summed up their anxieties, confusions, prejudices, and ignorances, and expressed themselves by democratic vote. The Ayes won. Having chosen the worst of Napier (to walk in the mist along the wrong path), they decided to march the army south, cross Baker Creek, moving between the Yankees and their base.

Pemberton's advance units, heading south from Edwards Depot, reached the rain-swollen Baker Creek where they found the bridges out and the stream unfordable. Turning an army around on a one-way, tree-lined forest cow path, was not a simple maneuver. When an army reverses itself under such circumstances, it invariably finds its wagon trains in the lead and the fighting troops bringing up the rear.

So be it! Send the cavalry to the rear! Form a new point! Put out a screen!

After an all-day, all-night march the Confederates found themselves right back at the point from which they had started, Edwards Depot.

General Pemberton now decided to join his superior, Johnston, and unite both armies. The decision came too late! His cavalry was coming back with reports that Grant and the entire Army of the Mississippi was upon him; that there was no way to side-step or avoid the long delayed showdown fight.

Pemberton was secretly happy about this inability to join Johnston. Now he could obey President Davis' order and defend Vicksburg.

Pemberton selected the ground he wished to defend with a skilled eye gained at the United States Military Academy. Champion's Hill was a high ridge sitting astride all north-south roads between Raymond and Brownsville, all east-west roads between Vicksburg and Jackson. This hill was thickly covered with large trees and underbrush, making it difficult to penetrate with troops even when not defended. Pemberton's infantry dug in on the west bank of

Baker Creek, Bowen in the center, Stevenson on the left, and Loring on the right. "You will do your duties nobly in the coming contest, for I have staked my reputation, my own fate and that of the army on the results of the battle which we will surely fight this day!"

The leading Yankee troops charged up Champion's Hill and captured the Rebel battery which commanded the Jackson road on its first assault.

Pemberton massed his reserves and hurled them into the center of the line, and the Yankees went staggering back to the rear for a half-mile before Grant was able to rush enough reinforcements up to stem the tide of retreat.

The retreat was Pemberton's salvation. The troops Grant used to plug his center came from Logan on the right. Logan at the moment of the withdrawal of his troops had flanked the entire Confederate army and was sitting astride the only road Pemberton could use for a withdrawal into Vicksburg.

In Vicksburg there was little evidence that a crucial battle was forming a few miles east of town. Robert, on one of his regular trips to and from the city, caught up with the army field headquarters at Champion's house. After listening to the ladies from the neighborhood who were assembled on the front porch singing "Dixie," Robert remounted his horse, having decided to move up to the army forward command post, when a colonel came storming out of the woods. "Captain," he called, "what are you supposed to be doing?"

"Well. . . ." Robert began.

"Never mind. You've got a new command," the colonel interrupted. "There's a company of stragglers which the provost has rounded up in the woods. Go take charge and march them over to Stevenson's area on the north. Report to Colonel Henderson."

"Yes, sir," Robert saluted.

Robert found the company, under the command of a young lieutenant, sprawled out along the bank of a stream. He had expected the company to be made of impressed shirkers and riffraff, but to his surprise, the unit was of a most respectable nature. The men were Mississippians, veterans with rusty, worn uniforms, forage caps with broken visors tugged down over the eyes; brave men, tolerant of authority but without respect for it.

"Shall I move them out, sir?" the lieutenant asked.

Robert nodded.

"Where to?"

Robert pointed in a northerly direction and walked forward to take his position at the head of his first infantry combat command.

Robert led his men up a flooded stream bed for a short distance, then turned and plunged into the woods, using as a guide the faint desultory popping of muskets which echoed from the other side of the thickly wooded hill. He was beside himself with fear and doubts. His fear arose not from concern for his own personal welfare, but the realization that his insignia of rank in no way qualified him to command two hundred men.

The first sign of trouble came when Robert and the lieutenant, having reached a tiny hillside clearing, were assembling the company after it had become separated in the thick brush.

The men were slowly forming into a company front of sorts when a wounded man, clutching a shell-shattered arm, came bursting out of the thicket to the front.

"Where'bouts is Stevenson's corps?" Robert called.

The man turned his pain-filled eyes in Robert's direction for a moment, then stumbled on into the woods toward the rear. The muted cry of the dying man was a loud and eloquent command to the veterans in the company. They moved forward in battle line without orders. Robert and the lieutenant followed. The men crossed the clearing in short rushes and then, once inside the woods, continued forward, moving from tree to tree. Robert's first fears and doubts were allayed now. These men knew how to fight and how to look after themselves.

All was silent on the little hillside timber patch save for the crackling of twigs under booted feet, the rustle of leaves against the gleaming bayonets. Each man moved forward, pale, solemn, absorbed and possessed, each in his own thoughts, feeling the weight of the ominous silence. Robert stumbled through the tangled undergrowth behind his men, expecting at any moment to see the flash of a gun; to feel the hot message of death inside his body.

The Yankees came from out of nowhere. A roar of human voices, screaming out from inhuman throats, burst through the brush ahead. A living wall of blue poured through the woods in a roaring tor-

rent; the flame of destruction was lighted. They were preceded by little globes of pearly smoke breaking out with spurtive quickness. Shells rained through the trees, crackling, spilling, exploding, melting the grass. With a shout of defiance, the Rebel gray line leaped forward. The foe was met. Desperate and bloody, the men fought amid the unbroken deafening roar of musketry.

The sheets of flame issuing from the blue line formed a cloud of smoke which in turn formed into a murky fog as the smoke trapped under the trees blanketed everything. At intervals, Robert could see the faces of the foe, blackened with powder, glaring with demoniac fury. Men bereft of all human impulses, filled with fiendish desire to kill.

Encouraged by a temporary cessation, Robert rose from behind the bush where he had taken refuge at the first onslaught and tried to see through the curtain of smoke, heavy with the sulphurous breath of gunpowder. The little groups of men here and there moved in and out of the smoky haze, firing at nothing.

Ping! Ping! rang the rifles.

Z-zzzzoit! sang the bullets.

The Yankees, crouching behind the trees, began creeping forward through the bushes, seeking and killing Butternuts.

"We will not be stopped by all the Rebels on this side of hell," cried the thrice-wounded General Logan, their droopy-mustached leader. "We're taking Vicksburg today, boys!"

A Rebel started to run from one tree to another. A kneeling squirrel hunter from Kankakee, Illinois, rifle at his shoulder, grinned, spat tobacco juice, scrunched one eye and fired. A puff of blue smoke rose from the mouth of his rifle, and the Rebel sprang in the air like a jack rabbit.

"Everybody for himself!" a Confederate voice rang out, and Pemberton's patchwork defense came unstitched. The enemy pressed on after the few remaining Confederates in a howling, rushing mass.

"Stop! Halt! Surrender!" their cries rang through the woods. There was no stopping, no halting, no surrendering. Like howling, mad dogs the enemy pursued the fleeing Rebels.

Bewildered, Robert turned, unsure in which direction he should try to flee. A piteously wounded horse, head drooped, eyes glassy and gummy, waited dumbly for the slow coming of death. The ani-

mal stood over his dead rider, who lay on his back, eyes open mirroring his fleeing comrades, his brothers in death, the wounded, and the dying. Robert ran manfully, following for a few paces the trailing zigzags of blood left by one of his men. When he reached the place where his march had begun, he found the creek was peopled with the injured washing their wounds; the exhausted, bending over, gulping the stagnant water; others were resting with their heads submerged by the waters they had desperately sought to quench their dying thirsts.

Three thousand dead and wounded lay in the brush and gullies of Champion's Hill; three thousand more had been swept up into captivity. The rest streamed back along the roads leading to Vicksburg.

"Go back!" shouted the Confederate provost guards. "Go back or we'll blow you to hell. No man goes to the rear without orders!" The words fell unheeded on the road filled with hobbling, bleeding men making their way slowly toward a place of safety, across the Big Black River.

Robert walked with the massed army, shaking his head in disbelief at this thing which had happened to him and to his men. I didn't draw my pistol. I hid in the brush and I didn't fire a single shot.

That night on the porch of a farmhouse filled with Confederate dying and wounded, General Grant slept. It was a restless night. Abstract estimates of battle losses took on reality in the presence of the unutterable agony of the unattended wounded; sleep for the general was impossible under the focus of longing eyes. Concentration upon plans for renewing the Union attack on the morrow was difficult while listening to the whispers of trembling lips through which one could see a quaking, dying heart.

The general's sleep was made more difficult by the fires, started by cannon sparks. They had spread through the dry woods with licking flames. The dreadful odor of burning flesh soiled the night. The cartridges in the cartridge boxes of the dead and wounded ignited and exploded, giving the illusion of another battle. The ghosts of fallen heroes continued the fight all through the night.

2

Malvina's plans for closing Shady Oaks and moving into Vicksburg were rejected by Aunt Della in cold and haughty contempt. Her answer to the threat of a Yankee invasion was to search out the old target pistol, plant herself in a chair on the front veranda, and wait in bold defiance.

"Listen to that," she chortled, as the incessant rumble, which told of the battle of Champion's Hill, rolled in from the east. "We're giving them fits. Maybe now they'll go back up North and leave us alone!"

"But Aunt Della," Malvina pleaded, "the Federals were swarming into Jackson when Robert, Justin, and I left. They must have captured the city, because there has been fighting all morning over to the east."

Della turned to face the distant rumblings, increased the tempo of her rocking-chair oscillations and dismissed the entire Federal Army of the Mississippi with one word, "Fiddlesticks."

Belle, who had been standing in the doorway during Malvina's warning to Aunt Della, clutched the side of the door for support. She felt as though she would faint. The worst of all the conjured nightmarish dreams which had plagued her since Malvina's return from Jackson, came true in three fateful words, "Robert, Justin, and I." The gnawing, unvoiced doubts concerning Justin, his failure to write, his mysterious silence, were answered by Malvina's casual pronouncement . . . Robert, Justin, and I!

"Belle, baby," Malvina said as she turned to her sister, "what's wrong? You look as white as a sheet. The trip out from town must have been too much for you. Here, let me take you upstairs. I'll have 'Lijah fix you some hot tea."

"No, I'm all right," Belle protested.

"Come, dear. Please come."

Belle longed for anything but a trip upstairs with Malvina, but she was too weak to protest. The very touch of Malvina's hand upon her arm filled her with revulsion. "Robert, Justin, and I!"

"There, how does that feel?" Malvina asked after Belle was stretched out on the lounge in the upstairs sitting room with a damp cloth clutched to her face.

Belle's curiosity concerning Justin exceeded her faintness. "When did you come back from Jackson, Malvina?" she asked.

"Last night."

"Is Justin over at Hillcrest?"

"No," Malvina replied. "He returned to Jackson. He came as far as the river to make sure I got back safely."

"That was nice of him."

"I thought so, too," Malvina replied. "It was really unnecessary, but he insisted."

The subject of Justin was one which neither girl wished to discuss. Malvina was postponing any revelations concerning Alan until Chris returned; the secret of Belle's brief romance with Justin was also confined to Chris. Like reluctant duelists the girls parried questions, Malvina retreating at even the slightest aggression by Belle. Had Belle been less concerned with her own problems, she would have suspected something strange in Malvina's reply to her inquiry concerning Alan's whereabouts.

"Alan is in Jackson," Malvina stammered, immediately changing the subject. "I think we had better start packing some of our things here at the farm, Belle."

3

"Mista Chris," the old darky whispered, shaking his partner into wakefulness, "if we is goin' ter foot it all der way inter Vicksburg dis hyer day, den we bes' be gettin' goin'."

Chris lay on the straw pallet his companion had prepared on the floor of an old cattle shed, fixing his troubled gaze upon the shadowy figure bending over him.

"Who are you?" Chris asked. The days of darkness had departed as suddenly as they had come, bringing with them the fearful memory: "David, my son, is dead."

"Now doan yo' fret 'bout who Ah is," the old Negro grinned. "Yo' jes' figger out who yo' is."

"I know who I am," Chris thought. "I am a soul dragged up from the land of the dead into the tormented world of the living. Dear God, how I envy David."

"Come along, Mista Chris. Time fo' ter be makin' our way fo' dere is mo' fightin'."

"Where are we?" Chris asked at last.

"Ah doan rightly know, suh. We cross de ribber on de ribber bridge las' night."

As they walked along the railroad tracks, leading west from the Big Black toward Vicksburg, Chris observed the fields and roads crowded with Confederate troops, animals, and equipment. They were young men like David, eager with life, anxious to get on with this thing that needed to be done, impatient and anxious to take their chances, in order that they might quickly return to the things and the loved ones they adored.

It is a pity that war is not the province of old men, he thought. Their few torpid years of complaining, groaning, and faultfinding would not be a very great loss to mankind.

4

The stillness of Knute Chaffin's world was shattered by the roll of a drum, somewhere outside his bedroom window. Startled, he sat up in bed, thinking he had been dreaming. Then the squeaking of the pitcher-head pump beside the house told him he was not alone. Someone was in the yard. Someone was on his property.

Struggling out of bed, he rushed to the bedroom window, threw it open and peered below. It was pitch black outside but he could make out the forms of several figures standing around his pump platform.

"Get away from my pump!" he yelled, choking with anger.

The order went unheeded. He was answered by the challenging squeak of the pump, the slosh of water falling into a bucket. Struggling into his clothes, Knute lumbered down through the house and onto the porch, after pausing to pick up and load his shotgun.

The men around the pump were Confederate soldiers. Sullenly and reluctantly they backed away from the pump and out of the yard, all the time eying Knute's menacing gun.

Daylight was beginning to break and in the morning light he could see across the river and up the hill toward the Phelan place. A city of canvas had sprung up overnight and every available bit of

ground on the slope was occupied by tents. Campfires burning in and around the shelters outlined them against the blackness of the hill.

Soldiers were everywhere. The road in front of the house was jammed with horses, wagons, ambulances, cannon and men, spilling off the road in all directions, taking up defensive positions in front of the bridge.

Turning, he saw for the first time a sight which made him sick at his stomach. There, on the far side of his own pasture, soldiers were digging up the sod, heaping it around and on top of his stone fence; the rail fencing behind the barn was being used for a breastworks. General Pemberton, retreating from Champion's Hill, had chosen Knute's farm as his next position of defense.

The magnitude of the spectacle taking place about the farm seemed to overwhelm the simple man, reducing his anger to a dumb state. Forgetting the soldiers at the pump, Knute stumbled around the farmyard cradling the old shotgun in his arms, as the soldiers, intent upon digging themselves a place of security before the inevitable Yankee onslaught, wielded their shovels and spades in the darkness. Silently he walked from place to place, watching his fields, his fences, his growing things as they were dug, chopped, and trampled recklessly into formlessness.

"The cow. I gotta go milk the cow. Her bag'll cake if she ain't milked."

A gun from one of the batteries dug in on the bluff high on the other side of the river fired a single sighting shot to register in and establish range. The shell shrieked over the barn with a demoniac wail, causing the cow to bolt out through the thin barn door in terror. Knute sat on the tiny three-legged milk stool with an empty pail clutched between his legs and cried like a baby.

5

General Pemberton had selected his defensive position upon the Big Black River with care and cunning. A tête-de-pont formed by fallen trees and dirt-covered cotton-bale parapets connected by trenches to artillery placements, was thrown across the Vicksburg-Jackson road at that point where the river makes a turn west and

washes close up to the hill. The eastern approaches were low, swampy bottom lands, providing ideal fields of fire for the guns on the high ground to the west.

Three crossings, a railroad bridge and two hastily constructed pontoon bridges, answered the supply problem, insuring the defending troops of adequate ammunition and easy access to the safety of the western bank. The engineers worked feverishly all night, sinking three steamboats to form a foundation for one bridge; felling trees, building rafts, and hauling cotton bales for the second. Lumber torn from nearby farm buildings provided serviceable roads over all three bridges.

Light of the first dawn was breaking when a mounted Yankee regimental officer gave the order to form into a line of skirmishers, take cover and be prepared to move out on command.

Peering through the brush which he had quickly selected as his place of concealment, Sammy Neofes could see a broad expanse of low, flat river bottom to his front. Except for the restless musket fire which broke the morning stillness, the area to the front was quiet. Occasionally during the next hour, a line of blue could be seen emerging from one clearing or crossing one of the numerous patches on the higher ground, but for the most part the entire bottom looked deserted.

"Sure as hell don't look like there's no war goin' on," someone over in the neighboring bushes observed.

Sammy's normal reaction to the kaleidoscopic events, brought about by the ever-changing tasks and moods of the army, was one of calm appraisal, decision, and then action. First he contemplated going to the rear for ammunition, but this seemed impractical, since there was no ammunition to the rear. Instead, he opened a cartridge, smeared his face with powder (put on his war paint), and made plans for staying in the bushes when his company moved forward.

High on the hill to the rear a messenger on a sweat-flecked horse rode up to a group of officers clustered under a tree searching the front with field glasses.

"General Grant?" the messenger inquired.

The stocky general shifted the stub of his cigar, "Here, boy."

"A letter from General Halleck, sir."

"What is it, sir?" an aide watching Grant's deepening frown asked.

General Grant spat out his cigar. "General Halleck orders us to return to Grand Gulf and operate with Banks against Port Hudson. Under no circumstances are we to advance east against Jackson."

"What are we going to do, sir?"

Doubtless it was preoccupation with the task at hand, rather than rudeness, which caused Grant to wad the letter into a ball, stuff it into a pocket filled with other forgotten correspondence. He turned back to studying the field ahead.

"But, sir," the dispatch carrying officer protested, "I insist upon having this order obeyed."

At this moment a roar of cannon and musketry rolled up from below, announcing Lawler's opening attack. General Grant heaved himself into the saddle and rode away, leaving the red-faced messenger talking to himself.

Later Grant mused, "I never did see that messenger again."

In the woods where Sammy Neofes was hiding, Grant watched the attack to his front with fascination.

The Union general, Lawler, had maneuvered his troops close in on the Confederate tête-de-pont before attacking. The assault was announced when the shirt-sleeved general burst out of the brush at the head of his troops. The Yankees fired one volley, lowered their muskets until the bayonets were pointing due west and then charged with a wild yell. So sudden was the attack that the Confederates, crouching behind the breastworks, were taken completely by surprise. They managed to fire once but were unable to reload before the insane Federals had waded through the blood-stained bayou and were upon them. The Confederate line burst like a dropped ripe pumpkin. White flags appeared everywhere. The river bank was taken without further resistance.

From his position of observation Sammy could see the panic-stricken Confederates throwing away their arms and leaping into the river.

Fifteen hundred prisoners and eighteen cannon came into the Federals' possession.

"We whipped 'em," Sammy yelled in elation.

"Look at 'em yellow-bellies run," cried another hero from behind another bush.

6

It was not the first volley of cannon fire echoing off the bluffs to the rear that turned Knute Chaffin's attention from the feverish digging, the mounted couriers dashing hither and yon, the sword-swinging officers, the bone-weary infantrymen in his farmyard, back to the bottom land which stretched out from his pastures to the east. There coming up out of the bayous was a long and seemingly endless line of yelling blue-coated Yankees, led by a shirt-sleeved, bearded, saber-waving demon. Knute lumbered toward the house, lugging his shotgun and vaguely determined to do something to prevent a second profanation of his beautiful fields. As he reached the edge of the orchard he was knocked to the ground by two Confederates who came bursting through a hole in the fence. Staggering to his feet he observed the desecrators of his fields streaming to the rear, toward the river, in utter and demoralized rout. Fom the direction of the river, he could see a pall of black oily smoke rising from the bridges, and then, as a breeze whipped the smoke aside, he saw the carefully constructed bridges bathed in flames. Hundreds of trapped graycoats milled around the approaches. Their cries for help went unheeded as the engineers scrambled up the western bluffs to positions of safety.

Remembering the Yankees, Knute spun and raced for the house. As he entered the farmyard, all thoughts of Yankees were forgotten. Shocked, mouth agape, he stood staring at the side of his house. Now he knew where the engineers had obtained the siding they had used to construct their bridges. Every board had been stripped away from the entire downstairs.

The furniture, Maw's sacred parlor, stood exposed for all to see. The bare studding and frame holding up the roof and second story gave the house the slattern look of a grinning gap-toothed hag. Frantic, he remembered the burning bridge. They were burning his siding. The barn! It too was stripped. The ancient hand-hewn posts supporting the roof stood alone. All was gone. The

sides, the doors, the windows. Feed stalls and mangers marked one side; a small pile of last year's alfalfa marked the other.

Knute went stumbling toward the barn, still clutching the old shotgun in his gnarled hands.

Somewhere out on the flats a musket cracked, sending forth a ball of lead, ripping the air with a venomous ping. Unfired muskets need clearing at the end of a fight. Veterans called it target practice.

Knute stumbled, though there was nothing over which to stumble. He pitched forward into the dust-filled yard beside the exposed uprights of the barn. His coarse, chapped lips chewed into the dust and moved feebly, articulate in their agony. Deep red blood mixed with the air from his lungs, bubbled up to fill his lips with a myriad of tiny rosy balloons which grew, expanded, and burst. The blood trickled into the dust.

7

"I'm not going to pack," Belle announced as she walked into Malvina's room.

Malvina, who had been standing in the center of her room packing jewelry, pictures, plus drawers, chiffoniers, desks, filled with clothing, turned to inquire, "Now what is wrong?"

"I asked Aunt Della for 'Lijah to help me and she said I couldn't have 'Lijah and so I'm not going to do a thing. If the Yankees want my things then they are just welcome to them," Belle pouted.

"Well, gather together your overnight things and your jewelry," Malvina sighed. "It's obvious we can't take much into Vicksburg in a single wagon. Let us hope and pray the Yankees will leave us alone. I don't know how much time we have left."

"Maybe we won't have to move at all," Belle said hopefully, "The cannon fire down at the river has ceased."

It was true. There had been the one flurry of musket fire and a brief cannonade from the direction of the river; otherwise the morning had been reassuringly quiet. "Dear God," Malvina prayed, "please let the victory be ours."

"Well, if 'Lijah can't help me, then I shan't do a single thing," said Belle with a defiant toss of her head as she left the room.

Malvina was furious with her sister. It was not Belle's spoiled-child behavior which caused Malvina to stop packing, stalk out of her own room, slam the door in disgust and storm downstairs. It was jealousy. Malvina felt cheated that she could not enjoy the luxury of a tantrum too.

"Why must I always be the strong one?" she had protested countless times in the past.

"Because," 'Lijah had explained, "you is de eldest. When de goslings ain't got no mamma, den de eldest mus' be de goose."

"I'm the goose all right. Always it's Malvina who stands on the bank to make certain everyone else who is having fun in the water doesn't drown."

The downstairs, Malvina was forced to admit, was rapidly taking shape despite Della's fuming and fussing. All of the furniture had been pushed against the walls and covered with sheeting; rugs were being rolled and tied; pictures and drapes were down and packed away; with luck the servants would have the house ready for closing by noon. 'Lijah was a gem, accomplishing five tasks while Della was still explaining how to do the first.

The crunch of buggy wheels on the gravel driveway brought Malvina to the front door. There, perched on the seat of what was obviously a hired rig, sat Sergeant Pucket.

"Sergeant Pucket!" Malvina called in amazement. "What ever are you doing here?"

Of all the things Malvina might have chosen to ask, this was the one Piney was least prepared to answer. On the way out from Vicksburg he had grappled with the possibility of having to explain his rash act and could think of nothing which seemed adequate. "I just can't say, 'I came because I love you, Malvina McClellan.' No, I can't say that."

Piney sat on the buggy seat, looking and feeling like a prize ass, and said nothing.

"Can you come in or are you on your way someplace else?" asked Malvina, smiling to cover his obvious embarrassment.

"No. No, I came out here," Piney stammered. "No, I drove by. I thought . . . I stopped."

"How thoughtful of you," Malvina was sincerely touched. "Come in. I'll have 'Lijah prepare some coffee."

"You're goin' someplace?" Piney asked, observing the covered furniture.

"Only back to Vicksburg," Malvina explained as she led him back into the kitchen.

"I could haul some things back in my buggy," Piney volunteered.

"That would be such a great help," Malvina sighed. "You're a dear and I shall be ever so grateful to you."

While 'Lijah and Della supervised the overloading of the wagon and Piney's buggy, Malvina made a final inspection of the house. It was sad, walking slowly from one deserted room to another, through an empty house crowded with ghostly associations. The game table, cleared of chessmen, the closed piano where Belle belabored Schubert, the locked bookcases with their beautifully leather-bound sets. The sheeted parlor chairs seemed to conceal the ghosts of Papa, David, Robert.

The road to Vicksburg was clogged with humanity, trekking toward the last known bastion of safety. First families from the surrounding plantations rode in their fine carriages followed by convoys of wagons filled with slaves and personal effects. Shirt-tail farmers and their wives rode astride plow horses pulling wagons loaded with children and furniture; lone women pushed perambulators heaped to overflowing with babies, cooking utensils and clothing. Mingled with the vehicles were men in partial uniform, unencumbered by weapons. Apparently they were deserters or soldiers separated from their units.

It was a stifling hot day and the red dust churned up by the turning wheels and scuffling tired feet threw up a pall which all but blotted out the sun. The dirt-caked trees of the roadside formed a canopy, shutting out all air. Malvina had the feeling they were driving through a dust tunnel.

A mile or two outside of Vicksburg a dilapidated cart, loaded with a piano, snapped an axle and settled itself in the center of the road like a spraddle-legged Circassian walnut setting hen. All of the feeble efforts to remove the instrument from the wedged wheels were in vain. The road to Vicksburg was blocked.

"Well, isn't somebody going to do something?" Della bellowed from the wagon in the rear.

Piney Pucket flinched, tried to make himself smaller in the buggy where he sat beside Malvina. He silently cursed the moment he had decided to attempt helping his loved one reach Vicksburg. He knew the someone referred to by the fat one was Piney Pucket, but his mind was void of ideas. Frantically he tried to concentrate on the problem, but his only thought was one of self-pity.

"I'm settin' here all covered with dirt and sweat and she can smell me. Why does the dirt all stick on me and it don't on her?" Malvina sat cool and impeccable as she surveyed the confusion up front. "If I don't think of somethin', she will and then I'll look like an ass!"

"Malvina!" The voice from the rear commanded. "Are you and that young man just going to sit there all day?"

"Why don't you see if we can turn the wagon around, Sergeant?" Malvina said softly. "We passed a lane leading up to a house a short distance back; if we drove up there maybe we can find a way through the fields which will enable us to by-pass the broken cart."

The lane led to another lane and this led through the fields to a point where the convoy could rejoin the road to Vicksburg. Jefferson found the way through the fields as Piney meekly guided his team along behind the McClellan wagon.

My ears is a mile long, Piney thought, an' they got hair on them, an' if I say anything it'd be hee-haw.

The streets, the sidewalks, even the alleys of Vicksburg were jammed to overflowing. Vehicles, animals, men, women, and children moved in aimless confusion up and down the main streets, across and back on the side streets, weaving and interweaving a mantle of dust and dirt. At the corners, anxious groups formed to exchange rumors, ask unanswerable questions, wait hopelessly for tidings. The news which did arrive seemed always to be news of disaster. Even the hope which had initially prompted each gathering was hope of an inferior quality. "We have lost, but have we lost everything?"

Unarmed infantrymen, beaten and demoralized, sat along the curbings watching as the ambulances and siege guns rumbled past. When on occasion a prayerful refugee paused to ask an anxious question, a wan and hollow-eyed soldier would turn from the parade

of gun carriages and wagons to stare in sullen silence at the hopeful intruder. "Thorton? Naw. Never heard of him, ma'am." Or the embittered man might jeer with a toothless grin, "He's probably in hell pumpin' thunder at three cents a clap."

Units were arriving now, crowding into the city as the Yankees closed in around "the Gibraltar of the South." Lines of footsore marchers, preceded by sabered officers, came slogging through the dusty streets, moving in a semblance of order. Soldiers? They were motley crews dressed in ragged uniforms, shuffling through the dust on burlap-covered feet, with eyes bitter and vindictive, staring out of lean, wild, and haggard faces.

"Are they ourn?" was the anxious whisper. The concern was prompted by the number who wore Federal blouses and caps. "They look mean 'nuff ter be Yankees!"

"The forts at Haines Bluff have fallen to Porter's gunboats!" The news spread down the street from lip to lip with the speed of the wind. "General Pemberton has just ordered all noncombatants to leave the city." The milling increased for a moment, the dust boiled up a trifle thicker, the disorganization and tumult increased, but no one left the block they had staked out as their final "waiting place"; the vacant lot, the section of curbing which was their "resting place"; the borrowed lawn which was their "squattin' place."

It was impossible for Piney to make any time in the melee. He tried standing up in the buggy, shouting and brandishing his whip. His efforts were fruitless. The buggy and the McClellan wagon moved when the crowd moved. It was after eight when the little caravan finally reached Twin Chimneys on the hill in the southern section of Vicksburg. The trip from the farm, a distance of ten miles, had taken eight hours.

Clutching her jewelry case, Malvina led the way into the house while the sergeant and Jefferson unloaded. Belle, in keeping with the strange mood which had possessed her of late, departed in the direction of her room while Della bustled off to "open up and air out."

The library was cool, serene, and quiet. It was so good to be home. The mounting hysteria which had threatened to take possession of Malvina's senses during the last few hours of the ride began to subside when bathed with the peace which comes from association

with familiar things. Her need now was to be alone where she could think. A need which could scarcely be fulfilled with Aunt Della's busy trail echoing through the house.

She walked slowly to the front window, raised it, and sank with a weary sigh onto the sofa where she could look out across the dark lawn and through the bordering blue-black trees. The blackness of a moonless night enfolded the light flickering checkerboard pattern outline of the city. None of the noise, the confusion, the dust and stench of the sweat-drenched refugees who crowded the streets below could reach her now. "I am safe and secure in my father's house," she thought, "quiet and cool, unviolated by the uproar on the streets of Vicksburg."

A soft, magnolia-scented breeze ruffled the curtain, fanned her cheeks. The blackness beyond the city lights carried the gaze unbroken to pencil thin pillars of flame upon the eastern horizon. The Yankees were creating Mississippi headstones! In the morning, when the embers of the burned plantation houses had cooled, the gaunt blackened chimneys standing on the perimeter of the once proud homestead would indeed be headstones.

"Alan! Alan! Alan! Alan!" cried Malvina, "There, I said it. Aloud and clear. Alan!"

The name which had been seething like a living, cancerous thing within her heart had been brought to the surface and spat out in the direction of the Yankee beacon on the horizon.

"Vina!" came Della's voice from somewhere in the house. "Vina! What is that? Is that you?"

Malvina's head was buried in her arms convulsed in violent sobs.

"What on earth is wrong with you, child?" Della chided when she found the weeping Malvina in the library. "I'm having 'Lijah fix some hot water and I want you to bathe and get to bed."

A church bell, probably from the Methodist church, tolled out a call to the believers.

"Come, come. Come, all ye faithful."

"All right, Aunt Della," Malvina sighed. "I'll freshen up, but I'm not going to bed. I'm going out. To the church."

Piney Pucket had worked with Jefferson, feverishly tugging, lifting, carrying the crates, barrels, boxes, and trunks from the wagon to the service area of the McClellan home, expecting to have Mal-

vina join him at any moment. The work was finally completed, Jefferson departed with his team, and Piney was left standing awkwardly in the driveway, self-consciously scuffing the gravel with his boot. 'Lijah finally came to his rescue.

"If'n I was yo'," she said from the kitchen steps, "I'd come back and see Miss 'Vina in the mawnin'. Dis hyer trip has mose undone her and it ain't likely dat she'll be back out."

Piney silently climbed into his buggy and departed down the hill toward the city.

On the outskirts of the business district he was forced to pull up behind a line of vehicles which had been held up by a cordon of soldiers. As the line gradually worked forward, Piney learned the reason for the roadblock. Stragglers were being rounded up by the provost.

"Where are you goin?" the captain barked at Piney. Then, noting the sergeant's stripes on Piney's dust-covered sleeve, modified the question by mollifying his tone, "Sergeant."

"I'm taking this team back to the livery," Piney replied. "It's hired."

"What outfit you with?" the captain questioned.

"None now, I'm on detached service."

"Do you have orders?"

Piney shook his head.

"You've just been attached. I'll take the team. Join the crowd over in the pasture."

"But. . . ."

"No buts about it, Sergeant, or else you're gonna be in trouble," the captain barked. "On the double."

"Yes, sir," Piney murmured and to himself added, "Ya son-of-a-bitch."

It was after nine before Malvina finished her bath, dressed and was on her way down to the church. Why she had selected this night of all nights to attend church was something she could not answer. Perhaps it was because the church was the only place which still maintained some semblance of organization and stability. It seemed important tonight to have something secure, to be able to attend a meeting which was ruled by love instead of hate.

The scenes Malvina encountered upon reaching the business dis-

trict were ones which desperately needed the wisdom and the hand of God if they were ever again to boast of order and peace. A confused mass of men and horses, cannon, and the debris of a beaten army surged and crowded the business district. An effort was under way by the provost to gather up these frizzled ends of companies and regiments but, with the streets jammed with a panic-stricken mob of soldiers, carriages and wagons filled with women and children, men on horseback, all mixed, mingled and interwoven; with everyone convinced the Yanks were close behind, attempts to bring and regain a semblance of organization to the army became a near impossibility.

"I'm the only one left alive outa my whole regiment," a dirty soldier was telling an assembled crowd of news-eager civilians. "They was slaughtered. When we tried to retreat across the river we was mowed down by hundreds of cannon."

"Sherman is sweeping down from the north with his hordes," a thin bespectacled planter added. "He's been ordered to sack and burn and destroy the entire city."

"They're rapin' and robbin' and burnin' every step of the way," his wife added. "We're on our way south."

"No use goin' down there," someone said. "I just come from there, and they got lines of soldiers set up to kill everybody that crosses the Yazoo. Ever'body, that is, 'cept Nigger wenches. An' you know what they want them for."

Everyone grinned and nodded one to another in grim satisfaction.

"Maybe the new blood'll help improve the Yankee strain."

Everyone laughed. It was a relief to laugh.

The rumors grew thicker and more diversified as the crowds grew.

"We have been whipped like blazes."

"At least ten thousand was captured at the river . . . all the batteries was taken."

"The Yanks are goin' to make a night attack and gobble up the rest of us. Them of us that don't get drowned tryin' to swim the river."

It was at the church grounds where Malvina heard the worst rumor.

"Pemberton has skipped out. Deserted. Sneaked across the river on a cotton barge and surrendered."

Slowly Malvina made her way into the hot, crowded church. "God is on our side."

In another section of town, down in the gully inside an old deserted barn, another minister told his congregation to prepare. He was black and he was wet with sweat.

"Sinner, you'd better 'pent. Danger is abroad. 'Pent else yo' is a gone sucker, agoin' ter the devil. Goin' way down dere to hell and yo' is goin' ter roll round on de red-hot sheet-iron floah thar and yo'll climb up de red-hot walls and fall back agin and cry out in 'ternal misery.

"Yo' listen t'yere ter me. That's a day a-comun. I hear de rumblin' ob de chariots. I see de flashin' ob de guns. White folks' blood is a runnin' on de groun' like a riber and de heads heaped up dat high. O Lawd, hasten de day. O Lawd, roll on de chariots an' gib de black people res' and peace. I declar I hear de rumblin' o' de wheels. Mista Linkum's sojers is a comin'."

8

The burned-out bridges on the Big Black stopped the powerful Yankee attack. Discipline in the advance units broke around the bridgehead while the engineers were being brought up to reconnoiter and rebuild the river crossings.

Sammy Neofes drifted with the men in his company over to an open field which was being used as a temporary impound for the hundreds of prisoners who were being brought in out of the captured works and from hiding in the woods along the river.

It was Sammy's first close-up look at his antagonists.

"Kee-riste!" some gaping Yankee down along the rail fence which served to separate the captives from the growing crowd of non-captives, swore. "They're a mean-lookin' bunch o' sons-a-bitches."

"Yah," was the gutturalized reply. "All dey say about dem must be true."

The handkerchief-size pasture looked like a dark green cheese blotched with gray mold. The prisoners were spilled over the entire

field in small groups. Each group sat, stood, or sprawled in back-protecting circles, facing the curious Yankees. They were silent, sullen, and vindictive. The cluster nearest Sammy met their enemies' curious stares with hate- and scorn-filled eyes. They were a rough-looking lot. Brown, brawny, wiry, with intense faces, fierce and animal.

"Ever see such a piss-pore bunch?" some Yankee down the line commented.

They were a dejected-looking lot. Some were wrapped in rag carpets; those with covered feet wore shoes of rough untanned hide. Most of the men had their heads bound in red handkerchiefs, wore red shirts, stiff-brimmed hats, homespun butternut-colored pants. A few sported Federal caps, Federal buttons, and even Federal blouses.

One barefoot private sat by himself away from his companions, as if the weakness he was demonstrating had ostracized him from his fellow countrymen. Some Yankee had offered him a chunk of raw pork and the half-starved soldier had accepted. He was gnawing away on the fat, slick, green pork like a beast of prey.

In one corner of the pasture, aloof and alone, stood an assemblage of young field officers. They were dressed in gray cassimere trimmed with black. One wore a soft black hat adorned with a black ostrich plume. All wore elegantly fitted boots.

"Acting Sergeant Neofes," Sammy heard a voice call and turned to discover he was being paged by a company lieutenant.

"Yeh." Sammy only used the prefix "sir" when he addressed an officer to ask for a favor.

"Round up the men," the lieutenant instructed. "We're moving out at once."

"Where to?" Sammy growled.

Sammy's sullen inquiry seemed to put the eager but unsure lieutenant on the defensive. "General Sherman has crossed the river up north successfully and is pushing down on the Confederate left. I guess we're going to try crossing the river here."

At the Confederate field headquarters on the Justin Phelan plantation, General Pemberton received the news of Sherman's flanking movement. His face seemed to be that of a man of stone as he thought to himself . . . On this day, fifteen years ago I entered

West Point. This day marks the bright beginning and the ignominious end to a military career.

"Upon landing on the other side of the river you will form your patrol in a line of skirmishers, and move out to the high ground immediately west of the bridge," a colonel was instructing Sammy's lieutenant, a Lieutenant Smith. "When you reach the crest of the hill, form a perimeter defense with your left on the Vicksburg-Jackson road and the right extending beyond the white stables on the plantation occupying the hill. After the hill has been secured you will send a detachment on to the next piece of high ground to serve as an outpost. Your company will remain on the hill until the engineers have repaired the bridge and the main army has crossed and passed through your positions. Any questions?"

"No, sir," Lieutenant Smith replied.

"I've got one," Sammy murmured to himself. "Why in hell did they pick us for this job?"

"I don't believe you will encounter any resistance on the other side," the colonel continued, "with the exception of a few snipers. Keep a sharp eye out. Shoot first and ask questions afterward."

"Yes, sir."

"This is it," Sammy thought. "Right out in front of the whole kit and kaboodle. That's where we're goin'."

Lieutenant Smith, much to Sammy's relief, climbed into the lead boat of a hastily collected fleet of Negro fishing skiffs which had been rounded up from hiding along the river bank. Sammy was to bring up the rear.

The crossing was without incident; the patrol formed quickly along either side of the road and moved out up the hill without a shot being fired by either side. Sammy, however, did not draw a good deep breath until they were in the plantation farmyards at the top of the hill and the men had taken up positions around the outside edge of the plantation buildings.

Lieutenant Smith set up his headquarters in the plantation scale-house and immediately took off for a circuit of his defenses leaving Sammy in charge of the command post.

"Big God damn place, ain't it?" a gawky corporal, Sammy's only companion, remarked as he stood looking through one of the open scale-house windows. "Wonder who it belongs too?"

"Phe-lan. Justin Phe-lan," Sammy read from one of the ledger covers on the office desk.

"Must be a rich bastard. Shore makes my ole man's place in Illinois look puny," the corporal mused.

Sammy wandered over to the window joining the corporal.

The farmyard, the paddock, the buildings seemed empty and deserted at first glance until Sammy noticed a pair of round white eyes peering from beneath one of the drawn window shades of the house. Careful inspection of the other windows revealed eyes everywhere.

"What are they?" Sammy whispered. "Snipers?"

"I dunno," the corporal replied, moving back away from the open window, searching for his rifle.

At this moment, the question was answered. A kinky-headed little Negro, unable to hold himself any longer, ran out of the house through one of the side doors, ducked behind a bush, relieved himself and went scampering back into the house like a hound dog with a bee on its tail.

"Niggers," Sammy snorted. "The house is full of niggers!"

By now the place was swarming with soldiers returning for a closer look at the house and buildings. Sammy skipped over to the main house in time to join the first group of curious infantrymen. He was amazed at the immensity and the emptiness of the house. The huge dining room, filled with elegant furniture, was cleaned of silver, china, and linens.

"It's them niggers," a soldier guessed. "They took everything they could carry."

"Let's go clean 'em out," someone shouted and the men went boiling out of the house in an angry wave, flooding across the lawns toward the Negro cabins. The surmise proved to be correct. The men soon came streaming back laden with silverware, spoons, goblets, and every manner of silver and crystal. Others, failing to find the desired loot, turned to military agriculture, poking the yards around the cabins with ramrods; piercing the gardens and grounds around the main house with sabers; upturning the flower beds with spades.

"This sure is good for the garden soil, airin' it this way," shouted one digger.

"If you find any worms, save 'em fer me an' we'll go fishin'," a companion rejoined.

When one of the miners would find a hastily buried treasure, the cry would go up, "Struck a vein!" and the area immediately surrounding the find be filled with eager diggers.

Sammy, surveying the activity and deciding the gains did not compensate for the effort, wandered back into the house to search on his own.

Wandering aimlessly into the upper part of the house, Sammy was idly looking around in one of the bedchambers when he heard a giggle and a shuffling of bare feet somewhere behind his back. Spinning, he surveyed the large airy bedroom. It was empty. For a moment he thought he was losing his mind. For a moment. Then, it came again. It was a woman's giggle and it was coming from the direction of the ceiling-high bookcases. As he stood watching, a center section of cases slowly opened like a door. There, standing in the entrance to a servants' passage, a merry widow's walk between the walls, were two Negro girls.

The two smirking youngsters, scarcely more than fifteen, were barefoot, wore calico dresses and very little else. The outlines of their budding breasts and round slim hips were clearly visible beneath the scrubbed, sack-like Mother Hubbards.

"Whatta you want?" Sammy growled.

"Mista, we was wonderin' if you got any coffee. If'n you'll gib us a han'ful, we'll giv yo' anythin', lasses, suga', anythin'," the darker of the two grinned.

"Anything?" Sammy smirked.

"Anythin'," was her promise.

"You ain't old enough," Sammy taunted.

"Ah is too," the girl's eyes sparkled with merriment. "I'se ole nuff ter be 'greeable."

"Doan yo' listen ter her," the girl's companion interrupted. "I'se older than she an' I'se more white. She ain't nothin' but a nigga."

Sammy studied each girl in turn, selecting the lighter of the two.

"I'll stan' the doah," the rejected girl volunteered eagerly. "Somebody come Ah'll yell out."

A common saying around the headquarters of the provost marshal was that "for sixteen dollars a month no one can expect all of the moral values."

Later Sammy took the girl as far as the living room where some of the men, having reduced a rosewood piano to kindling with an ax were laying the wood for a fire in the center of the walnut floor. Another man with four chickens skewered on his bayonet stood ready to start roasting dinner.

"Go up an' get the other girl and you can have supper with us," Sammy told his dusky companion.

While dinner was cooking the men amused the girls by playing baseball, using Lowestoft china cups for baseballs and rifle butts for bats. The girls were an excellent cheering section, waiting open-mouthed and breathless for a bad pitch or a hit.

The party became exciting when one of the older mulatto girls joined the group revealing to the men the burial place of a half-keg of liquor. It was an unfamiliar liquor to the Northerners. It was made from molasses.

"Sixty-rod whisky," someone explained. "Kills a man at that distance."

After they had drunk their way through the keg of "tarantula juice," Sammy amused the party by undressing his companion and redressing her in a brassiere fashioned from two crystal punch cups held in place by a cord hung around the girl's neck. The costume was completed with a loincloth made from a velvet drapery pull.

When Sammy's girl danced a coon jig to the music of a jew's harp and a mouth organ, the bouncing punch cups and gyrating drapery tassel attracted so much attention that no one noticed as the bonfire in the center of the room burned a hole through the floor, allowing the roasting chickens and fire to drop through into the cellar below.

No one felt like eating anyway!

9

The awful rose of another dawn, softened and sombered in color by the thick morning mist over the river, was blossoming over Vicksburg when Chris and his Negro companion, having climbed the long hill leading up from the main part of town, sat down on the

stone fence outside Twin Chimneys to catch their breath before continuing on to the house.

"Yo' sho' dis hyer is yo' place?" the old Negro asked.

"Yes, this is my home," Chris said, turning to inspect the familiar mansion.

"Yo' sho' yo' ain' havin' nother of dem hallucicumnations like the fus' day er two when we come in from Jackson?"

"No. I'm all right now. Thanks to you, we are home," Chris said, laying a weary hand upon his companion's shoulder.

"Yo' is home," the old man corrected.

"We are home," Chris replied. "This will be your home now. That is, if 'Lijah will permit it!"

"Who she?"

" 'Lijah? She's the mammy of my children," Chris explained. "Her man walked away and left her many years ago and since that time she has not had any truck with menfolks."

"Das bad," the Negro contemplated. "A woman scorned by a man fo' plumper pastures am a fergittinless woman."

"You mean greener pastures," Chris corrected.

"No, suh," the philosopher grinned, the smile spreading from ear to ear as he obviously enjoyed the memory of bygone years. "Ah means rounder, plumper pastures wheah a man can stray and graze to his heart's contentment."

Chris, entrapped by the Negro's rascality and bubbling humor, smiled for the first time since David's death. "Let's go look into the lion's mouth."

"Mista Chris!" 'Lijah beamed as Chris entered the kitchen followed by his shuffling, hat-in-hand companion. "Wheah evah ha' yo' been?"

"It's a long story, 'Lijah. Can you spare us some coffee or tea?" Chris sank with a weary sigh into a kitchen chair.

"Who dat?" 'Lijah did not bother to look or even point to the old man who stood in the doorway nervously creasing and then uncreasing his hat.

"His name is Tom. He has been a great help to me during the last few days and I am deeply indebted to him. He saved my life in Jackson."

"He goin' ter stay tyer?"

"Yes, this is to be his home," Chris said.

"Well den," 'Lijah sized the new member of the household from head to toe. "In dat case, dis time, mind yo', dis time and dis time only, yo' kin breakfast in tyer. Afta dat, on de poach wit' Jefferson."

"Yes, ma'am," Tom nodded obediently. "Ah sho' do dat, ma'am."

Needing the assurance that Robert was still alive and the reassurance his only son at his side could give him, Chris sent Jefferson out to look for Robert and secluded himself in his room under the pretense of resting. Only after Jefferson returned with Robert, during the afternoon, would Chris consent to face his family.

"There's nothing to worry about, Dad," Robert told his father. "We've cleaned out all the supplies from here to the Big Black and have plenty of cattle, sheep, and hogs to feed the army for at least a week. More than enough to last until Johnston attacks from Jackson and drives Grant back across the Mississippi. We did leave thirty thousand bushels of corn at Snyder's Mill. There wasn't enough transportation." Robert lapsed into silence.

"You haven't told us anything about what happened over at Jackson," Malvina had been apprehensive over Chris's behavior since his return. "How was David when you left?"

"Yes, how is old David?" Robert asked.

It was minutes before Chris lifted his eyes from the worn spot on the carpet he had been studying and allowed his gaze to search the faces of his family.

"Old David," he said slowly as though each word was a stone of overwhelming weight which he was lifting from the depths of his soul, ". . . is dead."

Belle burst into tears and ran from the room. Malvina and Robert sat in stunned silence, unable to comprehend the meaning of his words.

10

"Last January," Sherman commented, as he stood with General Grant and Admiral Porter at his side on the heights at Haines Bluff, overlooking the junction of the Yazoo and the Mississippi, "when I was trying to get my command back off those flats below and onto my transports, I did not expect ever to be standing here."

Grant did not bother to comment and the loquacious Sherman

continued. "Until this minute I have felt no positive assurance of the success of this campaign. I know that this is the end of one of the greatest campaigns in military history. I'm honored to have been allowed to share in it. I think, General, a report should be made at once to General Halleck and to Washington announcing the completion of a successful campaign."

To the rear, the troops of Sherman, McPherson, and McClernand, swinging in rout step along the roads converging on Vicksburg, were of the same opinion.

"They're nothing but a demoralized mob," an adjutant in McPherson's headquarters told his superior. "This last battle is going to be a snap."

His superior, a colonel, nodded in agreement, offering his own sage prognostication. "We have fought our last battle. If we attack Vicksburg tonight or in the morning, there will be one rush, and then it will all be over."

General Pemberton, nearly mad with grief and disappointment, stood on the Jackson-Vicksburg road east of Vicksburg and prayed for time. Only one brigade, General Louis Hebert's Louisianians and Mississipians, was in position to meet the oncoming Yankees. General Smith's division would not be in the northeastern corner of the works to meet Sherman's corps until late afternoon.

Smith arrived in position at five o'clock. Sherman's skirmishers appeared at five-twenty. Vicksburg was saved.

11

Willie Heap sat alone upon the decomposed manure floor in a dark corner of the barn prison and daydreamed about food. In his imagination he could picture his mother as she completed fixing the table for Sunday dinner. She would turn, wiping the butter from her fingers on her tiny over-apron, survey the kitchen eating room and call, "Papa! Willie! Dinner's all fixed an' on! Come! Come 'fore it's all cold and ain't fit to eat!"

It was easy to see. Plain as all git out. Right there in front of his eyes.

The familiar white oilcloth table covering, scrubbed thin by thrice daily washings, was heaped with all the things Willie liked to eat—

fried ham, hickory-smoked, crispy around the edge with most all the fat fried away; baked mealy taters; a whole pitcher full of milk, cold, right out of the milk house; yeller butter; hot bread and honey; best of all, milk gravy, real thick with hunks of ham and pan-scraped crumbles. Then there was apple pie with raisins peeking through a brown latticed top, and ice cream, homemade ice cream which had been sampled earlier (Willie, the turner of the freezer, always got to lick the paddle). Willie hunched in his barn corner, nibbled on his last piece of hardtack, and dreamed.

When the first shock of capture wore off and after Willie found out the fiendish Rebels were not going to shoot or torture any of the members of his hapless company, captivity became a livable situation. All of the lost company except the officers had been confined in one barn. The barn was dark, smelled of horse and cow manure and was crowded at night when all of the men lay down to sleep, but it wasn't any worse than the Sibley tents had been up at the river camp on Milliken's Bend.

Willie was better off than his fellow captives because Willie didn't talk. By keeping to himself he missed hearing the disquieting rumors, the gossip, which plagued the more imaginative and gregarious members of the captive company.

Pemberton's outpost line, on the south flank, along the Big Black, composed of elements of Bowen's troops, had a comparatively easy time during the Federal run around Jackson. It was not until real danger of a cut-off arose that the general ordered a withdrawal of the troops north to Fort Garrott and South Fort in the defenses at Vicksburg.

"We're moving out," the lieutenant told the sergeant. "Line up the prisoners in a file of two. Get yourself a detail of ten men for guards."

"Are we takin' in the prisoners with us, sir?" the sergeant asked.

The lieutenant leveled a withering gaze at his noncom and asked, "What would you do? Shoot them?"

When the sergeant, burning under his superior officer's sarcasm, ordered the prisoners into a line-up outside the barn, his rich Louisiana-accented command of "evebody lahn up aught tyear" passed through Willie's Missouri-attuned ears as something foreign. Everyone lined up "aught tyear" except Willie. A rifle-toting inspection

detail found Willie sitting alone in his corner and dragged him out by the collar of his jacket.

"Look what we found, Sarge," the leader of the detail said, depositing the quaking Willie in a heap at the noncom's feet.

"Whatcha yawl tryin' anyhow?" the sergeant roared at Willie. "Hidin' out? Thinkin' we was agoin' off an' leaven yawl. Thinkin' yawl could 'scape?"

Willie was too frightened to utter anything except an unintelligible croak. There wasn't time for him to tell the sergeant he didn't think.

"Stan' up! On yo' feet!" the sergeant shouted. Two Rebels had to lift and hold the shaking boy in an upright position.

The sergeant, with a moment to spare and an opportunity to unleash some of his pent-up anger on an enemy, continued his tirade.

"Ah'll show yo' what we do with 'scaped prisoners an' spies," he snarled, drawing a razor-sharp bowie knife from his belt. "Drop yo' pants!"

Willie stared at his tormentor in shocked silence.

"Drop 'em, Ah say," and without waiting to see if the order would be obeyed, he slashed Willie's suspenders. Snip! Slash! Willie's size "too large" pants fell down around his ankles in a heap.

"Whatta yo gonna do, Sarge?" one of the men holding Willie laughed when he saw the boy's shaking, skinny legs.

"Cut off his balls," the sergeant snarled.

"Don't do that, Sarge," Willie's other supporter begged, playing the joke for all it was worth. "How's a gelded Yankee gonna keep them freed nigger wenches happy?"

"Ah'm still gonna cut'em off." The fierce-eyed sergeant spat, reaching with his knife-free hand for Willie's privates. The climax, the joke which would send everyone, Rebels and Yankees alike, into side-aching gales of laughter came as expected. "Now that's a dirty Yankee trick," the sergeant howled. "They is grow'd so small, Ah kain't git hold of 'em."

One of the men holding the prisoner's arms noticed the look in Willie's eyes and called it to the sergeant's attention. "Look, Sarge. There's somepin wrong wi' 'im."

"What'sa matter, sojer?" the sergeant asked in a kindly tone.

The words did not seem to register on Willie's mind. He stood

there between his two captors wearing a most peculiar expression. His eyes seemed glazed and his tongue hung out of his half-open mouth like a reddish piece of leather.

"Sojer! Ansah me! What'sa matta?" the sergeant asked urgently.

A large drop of spittle formed and dripped from Willie's mute tongue.

The sergeant, vaguely aware of what had happened, ordered his men to lead Willie back into the barn.

"Ya gonna leave 'im here?" one of the men protested.

"Yes, I'm gonna leave 'im here," the sergeant whispered, then turning found his full voice and shouted, "Prisoner detail . . . Tenchun! Fo'ward! Harch!"

12

Tod Chaffin returned to Vicksburg after sitting out ten days in command of a guard detail at Snyder's Mill. The assignment, like every other army assignment to date, had ended in dismal failure. The thirty thousand bushels of warehoused corn which he had been directed to defend were lost in the panic-stricken retreat back into the Vicksburg defenses.

The trip from Snyder's Mill back to Vicksburg had been a nerve-racking affair, both for himself and for his men. The men were worried for fear a sudden Yankee attack would prevent them from reaching the safety of Vicksburg. Tod was worried for fear he *would* reach the city. Returning to Vicksburg meant returning to reality, Loulie, the scene of the disgraceful Military Ball. It was a relief when his unit was met on the outskirts of the city, directed to proceed north and join General Smith's division at North Fort Hill.

Tod's section of the fortifications consisted of a series of partially dug rifle pits connecting two redoubts. At some time in the past, a gang of slaves had worked for a day in a lackadaisical manner accomplishing next to nothing. Their scratchings consisted of a series of depressions. Each earthen dimple indicated where the plans engineer had envisioned a six-foot-deep rifle pit, complete with fire step and connecting trenches. Tod and his men stacked their muskets, requisitioned the few shovels available in the neighboring redoubt, and went to work. The precious shovels, one for each five

men, were passed about while the non-shovel workers picked away at the hard earth with bayonet and pointed boards.

Tod, for all his lack of military training, had gained an eye and an appreciation for the requirements of defensive warfare. His three forays on the field of combat, including Shiloh, had all been confined to defensive fighting. Inspecting the ground to his front, which he would be expected to defend, Tod decided that Pemberton and his engineers had taken optimum advantage of the terrain surrounding Vicksburg.

The city occupied a high, uneven, rolling and hilly plateau which had been cut up and slashed with gullies, washes, and ravines. It was ideal ground for defense and the defenses had been laid out with consummate skill. Tod's assigned sector was typical of the defensive positions along the entire Confederate perimeter. The pits were located at the points or small ends of V-shaped and steep-banked gullies. In every case the only entrance to the flat, coverless gulch placed the enemy in the open, looking right down the barrels of the defending riflemen. The defenses could be likened to the cork in the small end of a funnel. As one of the men put it, "This is gonna be jest like shootin' fish in a rain barrel."

At the Confederate field headquarters, shortly after noon, General Pemberton received a reply to the message he had sent while at the Big Black River crossing. It read:

If Haines Bluff be untenable, Vicksburg is of no value, and cannot be held. If, therefore you are invested in Vicksburg, you must ultimately surrender. Under such circumstance, instead of losing both troops and place, you must, if possible, save the troops. If it is not too late, evacuate Vicksburg and its dependences and march to the northeast.

Johnston

While Pemberton was reading this message from his superior a courier entered announcing a Federal attack by Sherman on the northeast.

Grant with two hundred and forty-eight guns and thirty-four thousand men reckoned the fortifications to his front were soft.

"The Confederates are demoralized."

Sherman agreed and launched his attack at two o'clock.

Tod and his men were not ready for an attack when it came. The rifle pits were now deep enough to afford protection but there was much work still to be done. Fire steps, ports, connecting trenches, cutbacks for protection against mortar fire, none of these refinements had been started when the cry went up, "Look down yonder! There at the head of the draw. Yankees!"

Tod, standing on the edge of his rifle pit, turned to look. At the far end of the dry gully, a thousand yards to the front, the Yankees came, dressed in their colors as on a parade ground. Their step was steady as they marched up the hill. The Confederate guns to the rear, in the redoubt, opened first, hurling shot and shell down "dead-man's alley" with deadly accuracy. The shells smashed ugly gaps in the tailored lines, the same shell often cutting down a man in each succeeding file like tenpins in a row. Still they came swiftly, silently, steadily, breathless and bleeding, closing up the ranks in cadence to cover the gaps left by fallen comrades. Only the third and fourth ranks wavered; theirs was a difficult task, climbing and slipping over the bodies of their comrades from ranks one and two.

"This ain't a battle, it's a target practice," someone shouted and Tod, feeling sick at his stomach, directed his portion of the slaughter.

"Now, boys," Tod called, finding his voice, "fire steady, aim low, fire!"

"Aim at their belly buttons," a sergeant amended, "gives 'em more time to prepare to meet their Makers!"

The approaching Yanks paused for the first time to fire a volley. A sheet of flame ran from end to end of the front rank, filling the air over the rifle pits with harmless angry spits and hums.

And still they came, so close now that grape and canister was substituted for shell in the guns on the redoubt. The slaughter increased with the shotgun like blasts of the cannon. Instead of turning and running, the Yanks closed up over the bodies of their comrades and continued forward, a silent line of men who seemed determined to march over the top of the pits and through the forts. Tod felt uneasy for the first time.

The Yankees, those who were still alive, were too close now to be hurt by artillery.

"Charge bayonets. Forward, double quick. March!" came the nasal, strident command from some surviving captain. The rumble and

mumble, the grunts of tired men as they scrambled up and over the freshly dug, loose dirt on the other side of the pits, told the defenders to prepare for hand-to-hand fighting.

"Give 'em hell!"

A flag or two appeared at the top of the ridge.

The clank of steel against steel echoed up and down the line, then a yell, the high wailing Confederate yell, announced the foe had been repulsed. A handful of survivors who had lived through the death march clung to the outer slopes of the rifle pits, unwilling to run the gantlet back to the safety of their own lines.

The afternoon, until dusk, was spent in sniping, at point-blank range, at any head that might appear on either side of the works.

When darkness finally settled over a battlefield turned blue and red with Federal dead and wounded, those Yankees who were still alive crawled and then ran, stumbling over their own dead and wounded, until they reached the safety of the Federal lines.

General Grant, watching the attack from a vantage point with General Sherman, turned to his junior officer and said, "As soon as you can reorganize, we'll try it again."

13

Cyril Clyde had little stomach for the plan proposed and put into execution by his friend and benefactor Gerald. The small sampling of acclaim and public adoration, the taste of such luxuries as clothing and women, had all been to his liking. Clyde had no desire to give them up. It was irritating and unreasonable, he thought, that he should be required to risk his career upon the uncertainties of a midnight flight in the flatboat Gerald had purchased from a Negro fisherman.

"We're leaving tonight," Gerald had announced upon his arrival home from the theater.

"Can't we wait and see what happens?" Cyril suggested hopefully.

"Every hour we wait lessens our chances of getting out of Vicksburg," Gerald declared. "The Yankees are closing in rapidly. It may even be too late now."

"But," Cyril began his argument.

"No, we're leaving tonight. If we can get to New Orleans we can find work. From there, New York."

Reluctantly, Cyril began gathering together his costumes. The ambition-ridden gambler who had risked his life in the pursuit of a golden dream now clung tenaciously to the dubious security of the known. Vicksburg had softened Cyril. Loulie, Mary Anderson, his triumphant Hamlet were delicious conquests, precious golden moments. Clyde would have preferred to hide beneath a degrading female disguise; subject himself to Gerald's amorous and jealous attentions, rather than admit his moments of triumph were lost and gone forever.

A loud, determined knocking on the rooming-house door, the shuffle of heavy-booted feet in the hallway outside, brought a halt to the packing. A wordless exchange of questioning glances, each saying Who could that be? and each answering I don't know, passed between the roommates.

"Just a minute," Gerald called, motioning to Cyril that he should get into his disguise. "Who is it?"

The knock was repeated, louder and with insistence.

"In a moment," Gerald repeated as Cyril struggled with the dexterity of a quick-change artist into his dress, wig, and shawl.

A corporal and a detail of three burly privates from the provost's office greeted Gerald when he opened the door.

"Get your hat and coat and come with us," the corporal told Gerald.

"What for? Why?" Gerald stammered.

"We've got orders to bring you in. Your girl friend too." The corporal spoke in the bored, matter-of-fact tones of a man who would brook no argument.

"Her?" Gerald stammered.

"Them's my orders," the corporal addressed his gaze to Gerald. He could not force himself to look upon the ridiculous-looking creature that called itself a woman.

14

There was a time when opposing generals could climb to the top of the nearest piece of high ground, turn and watch their troops deploy

into battle formation, and then at a signal from one of the commanders the battle would commence. The leaders could see the losses and the gains, move their reserves to danger areas, play the entire battle like a great game of human chess. War was a game in those days. It was a sport of kings, inspiring to watch, with regiments, brigades, corps aligned in apple-pie order, dressed on their guidons, battle flags flying. All of the rules were rapidly changing now and there was no one more aware of this transition than Generals Grant, Sherman, McPherson, and McClernand as they huddled around a set of purloined Confederate maps and pondered the problem of cracking the defenses around Vicksburg. One more attempt would be made to align the troops as skirmishers, to march them abreast, row after row guiding on their battle flags. One more grand maneuver against the enemy. One last try before throwing away the book and blowing taps for the "old way of doing battle."

It was necessary to make this attempt, Grant reasoned. Johnston was in the rear, at Jackson, with an army equal in size to that of the Army of the Mississippi. It would be impossible to fight both Johnston and Pemberton. The only course was to destroy the tigress in her lair, then turn on the roaming, lurking mate. Second, there was the belief that a concentrated assault was sure to succeed. Everyone knew that Pemberton's army was shattered, scattered and demoralized. Third, it would be expensive for Halleck to send reinforcements to Vicksburg. Closing up the campaign would save money. Last, the troops were impatient, they were confident they could take the city in one try.

It was agreed. Timepieces were synchronized. The cannonade would commence at two o'clock. The troops, all three corps along the entire thirteen-mile front, would move against the fortifications at six o'clock.

The men were awake, up, had their fires going and were cooking their salt pork by four o'clock. This was the day. Orders had not been issued as yet, but an hour before General Grant made up his mind, rumors down at the latrine had set the hour of jump off. The latrine rumors were confirmed just before dawn when the shelling started. Far over to the front and to the right, the gunboats and mortar boats on the river opened with a storm of iron hail. The

batteries on the hills to the rear joined in to vomit a torrent of shot and steel.

Infantrymen, squatting around their breakfast fires, lifted their grimy, unshaven faces, squinted into the hot, brilliant sunshine of the new May day and grinned with satisfaction as the air overhead filled with angry, screeching shells.

"Give 'em hell, boys. Give 'em hell."

Across the way, over on the fort-crowned hills around Vicksburg, the heavens were black with smoke and the earth belched and trembled with the impact of exploding shells as the missiles plowed the works from end to end. Through the dust and pall which arose to hang over the Confederate works, a Rebel hospital and the Vicksburg courthouse could be seen far in the distance.

"If I ain't too tired," a Yankee drawled, "I'm gonna climb up on top of that air courthouse tonight and take a squint around."

15

Captain Alan Miller left General Frank Blair's division headquarters making his way forward to regiment where he planned to join one of the lead-off companies in the attack on the Confederate fortifications. He would have been far more comfortable had he been able to remove his jacket and knapsack. The day was bright and clear and the morning sun beat down relentlessly on his back. It was not discipline or a desire for self-torture which kept his blue private's jacket in place. Underneath, he wore the Confederate gray. His knapsack carried the balance of his Rebel officer's uniform. The plan called for his going forward with one of the assault units and assisting in the capture of General Pemberton when the Confederate fortifications crumbled later in the day.

At the company assembly areas the men stood around exchanging names and letters "just in case." Their officers, outwardly calm, moved aimlessly about, anxiously consulting their timepieces, waiting. A drawing was in progress. Regiments were drawing lots to see who would lead the brigade. Companies were doing likewise, determining their positions in the assault. After the drawing Alan searched out a Captain Hughes, the commander of the first support company of the leading regiment.

The artillery emptied its limber-boxes as the minute hand ticked seconds away from the hour of one. The ear-paralyzing noise subsided and a fearful silence fell over the area. The regimental commander, a Chicago livestock dealer made colonel, divested of coat and vest, shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbow, sprang to the head of the lead company brandishing a silver saber. He delivered a speech which touched briefly on . . . "Glory of the flag . . . honor to die for our beloved country . . . privilege that is ours today . . . giving my blood in order that man can be free. . . ." and with a single blood-tingling word, "Forward," ended the hours of nervous waiting.

Alan followed the support company led by the surly captain named Hughes from St. Louis, whose only response to Alan's explanation as to why he would be with the company during the attack was a long careful look, a slow shaking of the head, and the comment, "Goddammed fool."

The approach to the Confederate works led up Graveyard Road, then up through a narrow defile to a point near the crest of the hill where the gully broadened. There ahead a scant three hundred yards was the freshly dug earth and felled trees marking the Confederate outer works of the "Graveyard Road Bastion."

The saber-waving colonel slashed the air and moved out ahead of the first company of men who had deployed. The balance of the regiment was forming into a column of companies.

"Here they come!" a voice yelled from somewhere behind the fortification, and a scorching sheet of flame, unmerciful in its intensity, leaped out from the embrasure. The first blast killed the colonel and all but eight men of the lead company. Company after company formed and vanished. Four regiments took their position at the point where the gully widened, four regiments fell.

Up and down the line for thirteen miles the storm of grape and canister thundered, the song of the minie echoed all of the way into Vicksburg. Twenty thousand muskets and one hundred fifty cannon in the Rebel line belched forth death and destruction. The field of battle became a field of death.

Alan took one look at the carefully constructed fort to the front and guessed the outcome of the attack. As the Hughes-commanded company formed to follow the lead unit, Alan darted to the right, joining a storming party of engineers who were attempting to move

up with axes, to destroy the abattis in front of the works, and with poles and boards to bridge the pits.

When the reports of the bewildering chaos of the battle came filtering back to headquarters, Grant was ready to abandon the attempt. It was McClernand, obsessed with the idea he was to be the hero of Vicksburg, who changed the commander's plans. From the Illinois politician's sector came the illusory report of two Rebel forts partially carried. McClernand begged Grant to renew attacks on all sectors in order to relieve the pressure at his front.

Grant doubted that the general could have investigated and verified the positions of his regiments, but there were three Federal flags flying from the Confederate fort at McClernand's front.

Another attack by McPherson and Sherman was ordered. It was spirited but fruitless, except in carnage. A survivor later verified McClernand's report. The attacking regiments had indeed succeeded in carrying the forts and in planting their battle flags . . . at the cost of not coming out again.

Alan Miller hugged the ground behind the frail barricade of boards and poles he shared with three assault engineers. There was no advance, no retreat. The Rebel snipers, now that the assault troops had been killed or driven away, were perched impudently along the top of the breastworks waiting and searching for targets. Survival now depended upon staying under cover and waiting for darkness. A fifth occupant of the tiny barricade had attempted earlier to flee back down the gully. As he had raised himself to a kneeling position, preparing for the dash down the hill, a carefully aimed bullet caught him right at the base of the skull.

Sherman's second assault and the appearance of fresh troops at the head of the gully came as a surprise to Alan. No one could imagine why any commander in his right mind would be foolish enough to sacrifice and trade more live men for dead.

It was a small group, composed of no more than one hundred men who had volunteered, with the promise of an immediate discharge and three hundred dollars, to assault the fort once again. The scheme was well planned, led by a young captain, and it looked for a few minutes as though they might attain success. They came up the hill with a wild whoop and on the dead run. Sixty of the

hundred reached the fort, found a salient in the bastion, and vanished from view.

Alan, taking advantage of the diversion, shed his jacket, strapped on a pistol, darted from under cover and raced up the hill following the attackers through the salient into the fort. He reached the entrance in time to see the volunteers with lowered bayonets plunging on towards a sally port. The maneuver was never completed. A double rank of Confederates rose from behind a parapet to their rear and opened fire in unison. The fight was short, desperate, and of little profit to the volunteers. Their army discharges came from the Rebel muskets; their bonus was death.

Alan rose from behind a sandbagged sniper's post where he had taken cover, called to the nearest officer in his best Texas accent, "Right smaht shootin', fella. It'll be a cold day in hell 'fore them Yanks try that again." Before the officer could comment, Alan turned and made his way leisurely through the sally port, passing on to the inner fort and to the rear.

10

CAPTAIN JOHN HUGHES from St. Louis, Missouri, whose company Alan Miller had accompanied up the hill in the first Yankee assault, lay between two dying privates, a few yards short of the Confederate outer-works, and debated his chances of living through a dash to the rear. As he hugged the sweat-soaked earth, feigning death and pondering his predicament, the Rebels, deciding to insure the complete annihilation of the few live holdouts on the slope, began lighting the fuses on shells, rolling the projectiles down the hill where they exploded with a roar of flying iron upon the heads of the survivors.

Hughes, from his burrowed-in position, saw the round, smoking missile as it struck a rock some ten feet to his immediate front, bounced into the air, and disappeared above his worm's-eye view. It landed on the first bounce with a bone-smashing crunch atop his left leg, skittering away, to roll on down the hill. He managed to move his head enough to survey the damaged leg through pain-

filled eyes. The jagged end of the fibula bone had ripped through the cloth and was projecting a good two inches outside his pant leg.

A drenching rain began to fall at sundown, quenching the thirst of the men, cooling the brow of the dying, cleansing the clotted blood from the faces of the dead who lay in front of the Confederate works. Three thousand Federals reaped the benefits.

The rain was a blessing to the wounded, those who were fortunate enough to have fallen with their noses off the ground. The others, those who lay face down, drowned.

Captain John Hughes, bedeviled with a screaming thirst, was able to cool his own fever-burned throat, satiate the agonizing desire for drink, by cupping a hand next to his mouth, allowing the palm to slowly fill with rain water, then lapping the liquid with his tongue like a dog. Around midnight his hopes for rescue rose when litter parties started coming up from the rear. Hope died when the Rebels, fearful that the Yankees would plant snipers up close to the fort among the dead, opened fire upon the rescuers.

The wounded, those who were still in possession of their muskets, fired off their pieces in anxious hope of attracting the attention of the stretcher bearers. Their shots brought a hail of Confederate minie balls down upon each area marked by a flash of powder.

Just before dawn Hughes thought the stretcher bearers were returning when he heard a new set of sounds, scufflings, grunts, and hoarse whispers. The "ya'wls," "kaints" soon informed the hopeful Yankees that Rebel scavenger parties were out searching the bodies of the dead and wounded for arms, cartridges, and cartridge caps. General Pemberton had found upon inspecting his ordnance supplies that he had a million more cartridges than caps. Orders were issued to collect ammunition from the Yankee dead and to cease all desultory firing except during actual attacks.

Somewhere up the hill, a few yards away, Hughes could hear two members of a Rebel crew grunting and panting as they struggled with some obstacle in the dark. When the job was at last completed one of the happy workers drawled. "Now here was a gent. He came up this hyer hill as he should. Good pair of boots, pants, lots to eat, sixty Yankee dollars in his jeans, and he war no mean judge of whisky." The gurgling of an upturned canteen verified the testimony. "Hyer is the kind of fellow I like to fight. God rest his soul."

When the dawn at last broke over the battlefield, Hughes could

see the dead man to his front who had won so much praise from the two happy Rebel scavengers during the night. The corpse sprawled white and naked upon the ground, stripped of everything except one glove and one sock. In one of the fat-paunched general's rigid outstretched hands the Rebels had left their calling card—a piece of hardtack inserted between the man's death-frozen fingers.

Another new specter unearthed by the scrounging Rebels was now within the limited range of Hughes's prone vision. A blue-shirted shoeless soldier, his eyes torn out with a minie ball, his nose gone, sat leaning against a rock, tremulously fingering his knees.

Whether it was the rumor that Johnston was forming an army of forty thousand men at Jackson, a reluctance to throw good men after bad, or the theory that evil denied ceases to be evil, which caused Grant to leave his wounded on the battlefield for two days and two nights, mattered little to the unfortunates left there on the field to die.

The Rebels entrenched above the dead and dying speculated about Grant's truculence.

"Them dead out there is bloated big as horses," one Rebel sniper observed.

"Black as niggers," a second whispered. "Wonder why that is? That dead Yankees turn black? Reckon it's 'cause they're fish eaters?"

"Ah think they all gotta touch of tar brush in 'em. All them New England slavers was nigger lovers," a third concluded.

"You know how Grant 'tends to get us outa these trenches?" the first asked.

"How's that?"

"Plans to stink us out," was the answer.

This was very funny. The laughter of the men behind the parapets carried all of the way down to the wounded on the clay flats in front. Captain John Hughes roused from the coma into which he had slipped long enough to feel the burning of the ninety-degree afternoon heat and whisper into the dust beneath his parched lips a prayer asking for a drink of water.

"How long, O God? How much longer can I endure this torture?"

The dull, aching, teeth-clenching throb in his useless leg made it

easy to count the rhythmic beats of his heart. He inspected his fingernails to see if they had turned white or purple as they do when one bleeds to death. The nails were warm and ruddy and he knew the hemorrhaging had stopped.

The eyeless, noseless man on the slope up above was still alive. The dumb, mute passivity of his shock had given away to screaming agony, emphasizing the air with bloodcurdling, nerve-shattering moans as he attempted to kill himself. The instrument of liberation was an officer's saber which his groping fingers had found in the mud. Blindly he sawed away at the flesh on his ankle, hoping to sever a vein and drain off the last remaining blood. The dull-edged dress sword only scratched and bruised the skin, causing more pain.

"For the love of God, kill me!" he screamed, pleading with the Rebels in the fort to finish the work they had begun.

"Them fellers down there ain't Yanks no more," a Rebel sniper groaned, turning his back in an effort to shut out the sights. "They're feller beings!"

"Tonight, after dark, we're fillin' up some canteens and are going down there," a second sniper declared. "Least we can do is give 'em a drink."

"Least I can do now is help out that one pore bastard," his rifle-pit partner replied. A single shot rang out in the vicinity of the North Fort and the eyeless, noseless Yankee died, falling thus in "God's own Holy cause of freedom."

2

Piney Pucket in command of a detail of twenty stragglers the provost had rounded up out of the alleys and back rooms of Vicksburg, scuffed around in the ankle-deep dust in the rear of the fortifications impatiently waiting as an officer detailed the new assignment. With a heart filled with love and a mind made sick with longing for a woman, Piney had no time for such trivia as the defense of his homeland, miscreant Yankees, or "the profanation of sacred soil."

"In just thirty minutes both sides are going to run up flags of truce. The Yankees want to evacuate their wounded. We will help by lugging out some of the dead between the lines," the officer concluded.

General Pemberton, after waiting three days for Grant to do something about the dead and wounded lying unburied and unattended in front of the forts, had pleaded:

In the name of humanity I ask for a cessation of hostilities for two and one half hours in order that the wounded may be recovered, the dead be given the honor of Christian burial.

Grant agreed to a truce.

The sight which greeted Piney's first peek over the top of the parapet almost made him sick at his stomach. The ground to the front looked like a country swept by a tornado. The earth was littered with canteens, haversacks, knapsacks, cartridge boxes, bits of clothing. The trees and bushes were mutilated beyond recognition, tops blown off, bark splintered and ripped as if chewed by some gigantic pest. The hard gray soil was furrowed and plowed, fitfully strewn with near-naked bodies, bloated and turned black by the heat.

"Jesus. They look like dead hogs."

"An' they ain't all dead!"

"Mother! Mother!" a voice called from out of the litter of bodies.

White flags of truce began popping up along the lines as the hour of the truce arrived, followed by heads peering cautiously out of the breastworks and rifle pits like chipmunks after a hawk passes.

Piney and his men found their detail to be loathsome and profitless. In disgust they discovered every body had been looted. The task assigned to Piney was to carry away the dead at a spot where the Yankees had used their own dead and wounded to build a breastworks of bodies. A cannon having hit the fragile barricade had strewn the surrounding earth with arms, legs, bodies, and heads.

"Hey, Sarge," one of the men asked, "do we gotta pick up all the pieces?"

Piney, glancing down for the first time, became violently ill and threw up his breakfast.

The detail, with two men assigned to carry each body, had made its way to the rear of the fortifications and was heading for an old icehouse, designated as a burial pit, when one of the men yelled.

"Sarge! This'n we got here ain't dead yet."

Investigating, Piney discovered the Yankee was indeed alive. The two litter carriers had lowered the poor fellow to the ground, where he lay moaning piteously and rubbing his hand over a gaping wound from which his brains were oozing.

"Take 'im over to that house and give 'im some water," Piney instructed.

The men complied. One held the wounded man's head under the pump spout while the second worked the pump handle. The dying man gratefully opened his parched mouth to receive the cool water.

"Hey, Sarge," the man on the pump handle called after a few minutes. "Commere."

"Look," the second man said, pointing to the wounded Yankee after Piney arrived at the pump. "He drowned."

Promptly at the end of the two and one-half hours, the truce flags were lowered, the men returned to their trenches and the fight began again, creating new dead and fresh wounded.

3

Captain John Hughes's road to awareness was as rough as the rutted, rock-strewn road over which the two-wheel ambulance was traveling. Consciousness brought with it a perplexing question. How, after three days in an immovable face-down position, could he be on his back with his feet higher than his head?

The jagged ends of leg bones, grating one against the other, ended the search for an answer.

The walking wounded had one sure way of finding their way back to the hospital; they followed the trails of blood left by the terrible ambulances.

The afternoon was waning fast when the ambulance bearing Captain Hughes reached the field hospital. It was a hospital in name only; nothing more than a motley collection of tents pitched in a farm pasture. The adjacent farm buildings, the cowsheds, wagon sheds, hay barns, hen coops, and even the Negro cabins, had also been pressed into service.

Vision blinded by pain kept the captain from seeing the cow-barn

receiving room, the stream of blood running off the operating table into an old milk tub, the four-by-six pit filled with bloody arms and legs. Unconsciousness saved him from the unbearable agony brought on when his leg was twisted beneath him as the stretcher bearers dumped his body on the corn-shuck-covered floor of a hog-house shelter.

4

JACKSON *MISSISSIPPIAN*

I have today received authority from the Secretary of War, at Richmond, to raise a corps of Partisan Rangers, to serve for the war, where they are most urgently needed at this time, to check and intercept the marauding parties of our vandal enemies.
Bold, true, and earnest men of any age will be received in this corps. Each man will furnish his horse, saddle, bridle, double-barrel shotgun or rifle, and clothing.
Fifty dollars bounty and commutation paid to all who join now.
We will rendezvous at Jackson, Mississippi, on Tuesday the tenth of June, next.

Justin Phelan

After posting the recruiting notice of his Partisan Ranger company, Justin Phelan delegated the actual job of signing men to his friends in Jackson and left early one morning for Vicksburg. During the preceding week a strange new feeling had permeated his thinking, urging him to abandon everything and rush back to Malvina.

"My God," he thought, as he planned a circling route around the Yankee army which would enable him to slip into Vicksburg from the south, "and before all of this, I thought I was in love!"

Just before dawn he arrived at the docks at Vicksburg after having rowed, with the help of two impressed Negroes, upstream over fifteen miles. Weary and in need of a bath, he paid off the Negroes and made tracks up the hill to the Preston House. He would have gone directly to see Malvina, had it not been for the early hour and the knowledge she would still be asleep.

While Justin Phelan still was splashing water on his face and laying out a clean frilled shirt, Alan, who was not so considerate of his loved one's rest, appeared at the McClellan kitchen door.

"What yo' want?" the frightened 'Lijah, who was in the kitchen "fixin' the fire" scolded when she turned to find a soldier in gray silhouetted in the doorway. "Yo' go way now. We got nothin' fo' sojers. We got no more to eat than'll do us."

"I want to see Miss Malvina," Alan smiled. "Tell her Captain Miller is here."

"Cap'n Miller?" It took a few seconds for the name to penetrate the old woman's mind. The name, the associations came like a clap of thunder. "Cap'n Miller!" she shouted. "Yas suh!" and she was off, skirts flying, in the direction of Malvina's bedroom.

Malvina would not believe her old mammy's excited explanation.

"Alan is here?"

"Yes'm. Dat what he say."

In an attempt to hurry, Malvina had difficulty in finding one of her slippers. The sleeves in her robe seemed determined to avoid her groping arms. Everything conspired against her.

Alan, waiting in the kitchen, could hear her steps coming down the stairs. He took a deep breath to try to stifle the pounding of his heart.

"Malvina!" he whispered.

Malvina stopped short in the doorway, her sleep-tossed hair hung loose over her shoulders, her hands closed the thin robe outlining her breasts.

"What are you doing here?" her question was half a whisper, half a sigh.

Alan searched her eyes. "I was ordered here," he replied.

The sight of the gray uniform angered her. Her soft, red lips firmed. "Don't you think you've done enough for your country?"

"I asked for this assignment because I love you. I could not stay away."

"Is this why you came dressed in gray? As a spy? I have not changed my mind, Alan. I will report you." Malvina turned away, unable to meet his eyes.

"I love you, Malvina. . . ."

"Love!" Malvina interrupted and turned her back as if to leave. "They will hang you." She said it bitterly.

Alan moved toward her trying to resist his desire to take her in his arms.

"Why *did* you come?" Malvina whispered, sensing his nearness.

"I tried to stay away, Malvina. I couldn't. . . ."

"David is dead," she said, trying to feed her bitterness. "He was killed by your men."

"Malvina, you know I am sorry. I came through the lines last night in the company of two hundred Union soldiers. I doubt if there are more than two of us alive tonight."

"I know," Malvina said, "I know it was not your fault but when will it all end? This terrible war?" She turned and seemed to sway. Alan took her gently by the shoulders.

"My part has ended now, Malvina. I'm going to resign my commission."

"Why did you have to come back?" she cried, resisting his circling arms. "It would have been so much easier, so much better if you had stayed away."

"Why does the sun rise each day, knowing it will bring more fighting, more dying? I came because I could not do otherwise."

The jingling of spurs, the crunch of boots on the graveled walk outside the kitchen door caused Malvina to stand back. Alan turned to the doorway as Justin Phelan stepped into the kitchen entrance. Justin paused when he saw Alan.

"Justin!" Malvina gasped.

The planter stood facing Alan, his hand hovering over a belted pistol. Alan waited, alert to the implications of Justin's attitude, prepared for any movement.

"I . . . I thought you were in Jackson." Malvina hated herself for being flustered, Justin for this untimely appearance, and Alan for his calmness.

"I was concerned for you," he said, in a voice filled with bitterness. Without once taking his eyes from Alan's, he added, "I see now I need not have bothered."

"Alan just came a moment ago," Malvina said, despising herself for explaining.

Coldly, Justin asked, "And when is he leaving?"

"He," Alan said quietly, "is not leaving."

"You've returned to be hanged, I gather," Justin said.

"I have not come back to be hanged, or to trade insults with

you." Anger punctuated his words. "Why I came, what I am doing here, or when I shall leave, is none of your affair."

"It is the business of every loyal Confederate to report and destroy spies in our midst." Justin too was calm, taking care to select each word. He was like a fencer during the initial crossing of blades, feeling out, testing his opponent.

"Then I would suggest, Mr. Phelan," Alan replied softly, "that you go and make your report at once. If you remain here you will be obliged to make an attempt to take me. A task you are not capable of fulfilling."

"If you were a gentleman, or even understood the meaning of the word, I would make you pay for those remarks on the field of honor."

"Justin, please," Malvina pleaded, "please go and come back in an hour. Please?"

"There is a field of honor," Alan said slowly. "It surrounds Vicksburg and is thirteen miles in length. Men from both the North and South are meeting there night and day to defend their honor and the honor of their country. I'll meet you on that field any time you choose."

"In a suit of gray?" Justin's laugh was too loud.

Malvina saw only a blur of action as Alan's hand swept down to his side and came up bearing a pistol.

"This is not the time or place for a debating society and I am sure our performance has been most distasteful to Malvina. One of us must go." Alan's voice was soft and quiet. Then he barked, "At once!"

Justin slowly backed out of the kitchen, then stalked off down the driveway.

"Oh, Alan," Malvina pleaded, after the sound of Justin's angry bootsteps had receded, "why did you come? Why?" She slumped down at the table, burying her face in her arms.

Alan gazed at her with longing. "I came because I am selfish," he said slowly, "because I am a coward, because I am greedy . . . because I love you." He desperately wanted to touch the mass of silken hair which spilled over the table, masking completely Malvina's face and her arms.

"I am selfish," he continued, "because I have placed my own need for you above my duty to my fellow men. I am a coward too,

afraid to face life without you. I excuse this by saying man is only half a man without the woman he loves. I am greedy too, wanting more than I deserve. I have loved you, Malvina, and felt your love for me. Surely. . . ."

"And you are persistent," Malvina murmured sadly without lifting her head. "Why have you come to torture me again? Please, Alan. Please go, now."

"This is your wish?" he whispered, kneeling beside her. "Truly, Malvina?"

She looked down at him. "Yes," she answered. "That is my wish."

Slowly Alan arose, walked to the door and out of the house.

Malvina sat alone in the kitchen, her head buried in her arms, listening to his measured footsteps until the last faint echo died away.

A gentle spring breeze rearranged a strand of the coal-black hair upon the table. All was quiet.

"He did not even say good-by," she thought, and then a picture of Justin waiting, gun in hand to ambush him, flashed into mind. She jumped to her feet and ran to the door calling, "Alan! Alan! Come back!" Her voice carried across the yard to the little hill beyond and echoed back softly, "Alan."

5

The distant booming of the guns at the forts joined with the dismal beat of her aching heart, synchronized with the throb of a mind crowded with doubts, to create a dirge of remorse which drowned out all thoughts of rest and sleep. At least, Malvina thought as she preceded her father into the library after breakfast, last night's midnight-till-dawn hours had not been spent in vain.

"What is it you want?" Chris asked as he noted how carefully Malvina closed the door leading into the hallway.

"Papa," Malvina began after she was seated facing Chris across the chess table, "there is something I must tell you. Something which perhaps I should have mentioned long before this . . . when we were all in Jackson."

"What is it, Malvina?" Chris frowned.

"I have been concealing something from you, not because I was

afraid but because I was uncertain as to how I felt, or what I wanted. I know now. It all became clear last night. Justin was here yesterday morning. I didn't tell you this either, but he helped make everything clear."

"Justin? I thought he was in Jackson."

"He came all the way here from Jackson just to see if I was all right," Malvina said.

"Is it Justin? Your trouble?" Chris asked.

"No. It is Alan."

"Oh," Chris made no effort to conceal his disappointment.

"I know," Malvina smiled sadly, "you have never really approved of Alan and now you'll disapprove even more. Alan, Captain Miller, is a member of the Army of the United States."

"A spy!" Chris could not believe his ears.

"A scout with Sherman's army. A spy if you wish," Malvina conceded.

Chris shook his head in disbelief, "But . . . when did you find this out?"

"Two weeks ago. From the first Alan told me there was something about himself he was withholding. I refused to believe it could be anything important. He revealed he had come to Jackson ahead of the invasion as a Union scout. He . . . he begged me to marry him."

"He had the audacity to do this?" Chris exclaimed. "And what did you tell him?"

"What could I say? I told him I would notify the military provost and have him arrested."

"Naturally."

"But it was not as simple as that," Malvina added. "I found I could not put something out of my heart simply because the mind willed it. I love Alan and then yesterday he came again."

"He came here? To Vicksburg?"

"Yes. Through the lines. He came again to tell me he loved me; that he was resigning his commission. Again, I sent him away. Again I tried to do what I knew was right, but I failed. Papa, last night I decided that I must go to Alan."

Chris was silent for a long time. At last he sighed, "Is there no other way, Malvina? Nothing will change your mind?"

"Nothing. I love him, Papa."

"And Justin? What has he to do with this?"

"Justin arrived a few moments after Alan. They had words, angry words. I think it was then that I made up my mind, although I did not know it until last night. Justin shouted things about our code of honor, words which for the first time had no meaning for me." Malvina paused and when she again began to speak it was as though she were talking to herself. "It has been a year since I first realized there was something amiss between Justin and myself. Yesterday I saw both Alan and Justin clearly for the first time. Justin lives two lives. One is the way it has been taught that gentlemen should act, the other, the true Justin, no one knows. Not even Justin."

"And this Captain Miller?" Chris protested. "Do you think it is honorable, this service . . . this spying?"

"To us? No. For the North, yes. There he is looked upon as a brave and courageous man. But this is not the question, Papa. It is important that he knows what he is doing; that he does not pretend in his own heart to be something else."

"Yes," Chris conceded. "It is important, but are you sure it is Alan you love? Where is Captain Miller now?"

"I don't know," Malvina answered in a whisper. "I sent him away . . . I didn't ask."

"And now?" Chris spoke wearily.

"I shall go seek him out." Malvina replied firmly. Then, seeing her father's fears she pleaded, "I must, Papa. I must."

6

Malvina's thinly veiled request at the breakfast table for a moment to "discuss something of a personal nature" had not gone unnoticed by Belle. By the time Malvina closed the reading-room door, Belle was outside the open library window listening.

Justin was back in Vicksburg and Malvina had relinquished all claims!

Ended were the weeks in which she had been oppressed with doubts, plagued with delusive fantasy and grotesque youthful dreams. Everything was clear now. In the open. Malvina was definitely going to marry a Yankee and Justin was hers.

Belle went up to her room and completed her toilette at a leisurely pace. There was no great need for haste now. As she combed her hair she wondered how she should approach Justin and what she should say.

She found him at the Preston House.

"Belle, what are you doing down here?" Justin greeted, having eagerly answered the hotel clerk's summons to "see a Miss McClellan in the lobby."

"I became tired of waiting," Belle answered coolly, her eyes sparkling with impudence.

"Waiting?" Justin frowned as he stood, readjusting his thinking, reappraising the younger McClellan sister.

"The dance. The engagement we had for the ball?" Belle was now pridefully furious that he had come to Vicksburg without bothering to see her.

"I told you . . . in my letter." It was Justin's turn to be annoyed.

"Your letter?" Belle said with smug assurance, confident she was leading Justin into a trap.

"That's right. You'll recall I sent it in with one of my boys on the morning of the dance."

Instinctively Belle knew Justin was speaking the truth.

"It didn't come," she whispered, trying to think back to that awful day, recall the incidents leading up to the party.

"Cleo! Damn that wench!" Justin was swearing to himself, then addressed Belle with a sad smile. "I went to Jackson that day."

"I know," Belle replied, her harshness mellowing to the point where she too could afford to smile. "I learned this many days later . . . from Malvina."

Aren't you going to do something to make amends? she thought, then added, aloud, "Malvina is going away with that Captain Miller."

Belle's bombshell failed to explode. Justin was seemingly unperturbed by her pronouncement.

"I suspected this," he replied slowly. He gazed at her beautiful, impudent face, aware of the clear freshness of her skin. Why not? he thought.

"Unfortunately," he said with unexpected charm, "I cannot take

you to a military ball tonight but I can begin making amends by asking you to have dinner with me tonight, at the Preston House."

"I don't see how," Belle murmured to herself as she made her way back up the hill toward Twin Chimneys, "men can be so unpredictable."

7

Alan Miller, after spending a long and tedious morning searching for a room in the crowded, besieged city, was at the moment sitting in a musty, dark-draped front room of a small rooming house waiting to see "if the young lady that has the upper back room" was going to pay up or vacate.

Vicksburg was jammed to overflowing with entire families crowding into single rooms. Alan felt fortunate in finding a possible vacancy.

What to do, where to go, were decisions he had not reached. The shock and finality of Malvina's refusal had so befogged his thinking, destroyed his plans, that his only thought was to hole up and think it all out. Logic told him that he should leave Vicksburg, but he could not bring himself to make the move.

"Mrs. Chaffin is coming down now," the landlady announced as she lumbered into the sitting room and deposited her mountainous figure into a groaning rocker. "I told her you was willin' to take over her room."

Loulie appeared in the doorway, stopping to peer into the dark room.

"In here, dearie," the landlady called. "This here's the man I was tellin' you about."

Alan, rising to greet Loulie, found himself staring in fascination at the girl. She had the largest, roundest, most vacant eyes he had ever seen.

"I understand you might be leaving your room," Alan said kindly.

"I might, but then again I might not," Loulie replied, giving Alan in turn a head-to-toe inspection.

"You're two weeks behind on your rent, dearie, and the next week's money is due today," the landlady reminded. "This here

gentleman has agreed to pay up the two weeks if he can have the room."

"Whatta I get?" Loulie asked Alan.

"I'll pay you the equivalent of two weeks, too," Alan said.

"You a captain?" Loulie asked suddenly.

"That's right," Alan smiled.

"Come up and help me get my stuff and you can have the room," Loulie announced and the deal was closed.

Packing Loulie's clothes consisted of her dumping the contents of two dresser drawers into an oversized bandbox and closing the lid.

"Can I help you carry your baggage downstairs?" Alan asked.

"Not yet," Loulie replied, concentrating her attention on the dollar sign she was drawing with her finger in the accumulated dust on the bureau top. "You know Tod Chaffin?"

"No," Alan answered. "Is he your brother?"

"Yah," Loulie lied. "How come you ain't at the fort?"

"I'm on special duty."

"Oh," Loulie thought about this. "You married?"

"No," Alan smiled.

"I ain't got no place to go," Loulie's eyes studied the carpet of lint under the bed. "You think I could stay here?"

"I . . . I don't think so," Alan stammered.

"I could fix me a bed on them chairs over there. Ain't nothin' goin' to happen . . . not less'n I say so. I ain't that kind," Loulie said primly.

"I don't think it would work out," Alan floundered. "I . . . I don't think the landlady would approve."

"She don't care," Loulie shrugged.

"I still don't think so."

"Maybe you don't think I'm pretty enough?" Loulie fingered her hair idly, then turned to erase the dusty dollar sign. "When I'm fixed up I look real good."

"I'm sure you do, but . . ."

Loulie, her face flushed with anger, turned, picked up the box and started for the door. "There's some as don't think like you, Captain High-an'-mighty," she flung over her shoulder. "My last roommate was a real actor on the stage. He wanted to take me to New York, he did. Only I wouldn't go." She slammed the door. "I ain't that kind of girl! So there!"

8

As Belle McClellan walked over the moss-carpeted floor of the river's edge, making her way through a narrow vine-clad aisle leading up to Justin's hide-away, she turned and smiled. The heady chain of events which had occurred during the past day and night had been predicated upon luck—the spur-of-the-moment plan to run away with Justin; the thrilling dugout ride down the river teeming with Federal gunboats—and had culminated in triumph. Now she was alone with Justin, waiting for him to secure the boat under the bushes at the river's edge and join her in the clearing.

Robert, the dependable parrot of army rumor, had provided the idea for her plan.

"The situation looks fine," she overheard him telling Chris, "except for musket caps. General Johnston is trying to smuggle them in but so far without success. Yesterday they floated three hollow logs filled with caps down the river but every one of them got away."

"What are they going to do?" Chris had asked.

"They're asking for civilian volunteers. Anyone who thinks they can smuggle them into the city," Robert explained.

"Where do the volunteers get orders for smuggling?" She had asked innocently as she inspected the seam of her apron pocket.

"At headquarters."

Justin had been drinking steadily for two days.

"There's a Miss McClellan out in the lobby, sir," the bartender at the Preston House saloon said, leaning over Justin's table.

"Justin Phelan is destined to die and vanish in a dead sea of eternal monotony," Justin mumbled without looking up.

"I beg your pardon?" The bartender was puzzled.

"Do you see those?" Justin pointed to the circles of wet made by the condensed moisture on the outside of his glass. "They are pictures of my life. Mimic representations of Justin Phelan's useless life. Tight little pens enclosing nothing. Soon they will dry and vanish without leaving a mark."

"Yes, sir," the bartender agreed timidly. "What shall I tell Miss McClellan?"

"Tell her anything," Justin mumbled. "Tell her I'm drunk. No. Tell her I've gone to Jackson."

"I can't do that, sir. She knows you're here in the bar."

Belle pretended not to notice Justin's soiled linen, his unshaven face and disheveled hair when he finally appeared in the lobby. "Good afternoon, Justin," she greeted.

"Was I expected at your house this afternoon?" Justin's fingers searched his brow for an answer.

"No. You were coming up this evening and that's why I had to see you," Belle hastened to explain. "I don't want you to come see me tonight because I won't be there."

"Oh?"

"I have an order to report to the Army Ordnance in Jackson and I plan to leave right away." Belle paused before asking the fateful question. "When are you going back to Jackson?"

For some hazy reason, the excuse he had given the bartender for not seeing Belle, seemed logical now. "Tonight. I'm going to Jackson tonight."

"Then I'm going with you," Belle said, taking advantage of this perfect opening. "At least until I get through the lines."

Justin's drink-befuddled mind could not find an honorable reason why he should not befriend the daughter of his closest friend.

"My blankets and food are beneath this tree," Justin said after joining Belle. He led the way through an opening in the overhanging branches of a huge willow tree. The lacy twigs touched the ground on every side of the center trunk, forming a leafy tent, impervious to sunlight.

"What a wonderful hiding place," Belle exclaimed.

"Yes," Justin replied. "I camped here when I came in Monday. My horses are pastured up this draw. We'll stay here today, then after dark we'll start for Jackson. Fix yourself a pallet with the blankets. You must be very tired. I'll go tend to the horses."

"You'll come back soon?" Belle asked.

"Yes. Just as soon as I check to see if they are all right."

Belle stretched out on a blanket and tried to keep her weary eyes open. When she awakened Justin was by her side, leaning against the tree trunk.

"What time is it?" Belle gasped.

"About noon." Justin smiled.

"I've been asleep six hours," Belle reckoned. "I'm sorry, Justin."

"Sorry? Why sorry? You were up all night."

"Have you been asleep?" Belle asked.

"I've cat-napped. Are you hungry? I have some dried beef and crackers."

Belle was hungry and the crackers and beef washed down with brandy were excellent.

"Let's go exploring," Belle decided suddenly, after they had finished eating.

"Exploring?"

"We're on our own private deserted island," Belle said, clapping her hands in little-girl enthusiasm.

With a sigh and the patient smile of a condescending parent, Justin rose to lead the way through a path wrapped and garlanded, festooned and crowned with perfumed jasmines and monkey-cap. The trail Justin selected led down the precipitous side of a dry creek to the floor of the stream which was a fairyland of ferns, mosses, anemones, yellow myrtles, and maypops.

"Justin," Belle called excitedly to her companion, "come look what I found."

Justin made his way around the bend in the creek to find her seated spraddle-legged on the hard sand of the dry channel, filling her lap with treasures picked from the conglomeration of pebbles. Wonderful snail shells, strange fossils, queer balls of clay, which Justin broke open to reveal the hidden treasures of bright red, yellow, and white "Indian Paints."

"Justin," Belle whispered in a hoarse voice as she idly began painting a yellow cross on his cheek with the moist earth, "let's go swimming."

"Now?" Justin frowned.

Belle nodded. "It's hot. We would both feel better."

"Someone on the river might see or hear us," Justin protested.

"Not in the cove here. I'll undress behind these bushes. You go over there," Belle directed. Her heart was pounding so hard in her ears she could scarcely hear her own words.

Belle was undressed except for her pantalettes when the boldness which had engineered this entire trip, even the walk, failed. "Justin," she called; her voice was barely audible.

"Yes?" His voice reached her ears at the same moment his arms enfolded her from behind. She would always remember how dark his arms looked crossed and gathered tight over the whiteness of her stomach, his hand as it slowly moved up to encase her breast.

"Justin. Oh, darling, why didn't you . . . ?" Belle could not finish her question. Hands twisted her around, crushing her breasts against her lover's bare chest—lips found her lips.

"I love you so," she whispered. "Tell me you love me, Justin."

"I love you." His words were harsh, resentful. His hands were rough in their haste to remove the last thin barrier of cloth.

Silently, urgently, in the half-light of the fern-shaded creek bank they touched, caressed, kissed, and felt the surge of passion and pain that is love.

9

Chris McClellan was angry when he returned to Twin Chimneys for breakfast after his usual early morning walk. Talk on the street corners was irritating. A battle of words was flying between the civil authorities and the military, the city officials having flatly refused to accumulate, warehouse, and redistribute supplies. The officials expressed nothing but contempt for Pemberton's warnings that every crumb of food and forage would be necessary before the siege was lifted.

"Can you imagine?" a friend had buttonholed Chris. "Pemberton wants to strip every store, warehouse, and home in Vicksburg, put everything into an army warehouse and then redistribute through rationing. You knew they impressed all chewing tobacco. Pemberton claims he needs it for his soldier boys."

Chris considered the idea. "General Pemberton must know what he's doing."

"When Johnston is preparing to relieve the siege any day?" the man guffawed. "Richmond was aghast when they learned we were besieged. They have ordered Johnston to drive Grant back across the river."

"Let us hope and pray that this can be accomplished," Chris sighed.

Malvina was waiting at the front door when Chris arrived home. She held a letter in her hand.

"Oh, Papa! Something terrible . . . it's Belle." She was in tears. "She wasn't here all night. She left this note."

The message, in Belle's dashing schoolgirl hand, told of her volunteering to assist in the smuggling of cartridge caps, her proposed trip to Jackson. It did not mention Justin or her plans for him.

"Why on earth did she do something like this," Malvina questioned, "without saying a word to us?"

Chris answered her with silence.

"I'm going after her," Malvina declared. "If she hasn't returned by Sunday, I'll go through the lines. I had planned to go into Yankee territory anyway if I didn't find Alan here. I'm going to Sherman's headquarters, and then I can go on to Jackson."

David, Robert, Belle—all gone—and now Malvina, Chris thought in silent anguish.

10

Malvina's days of indecision ended several days prior to Belle's disappearance. Life now had meaning and purpose for her. The purpose was Alan Miller, and fulfillment through love.

Now, her search, walking the streets of Vicksburg, looking hopefully into the face of each passer-by, waiting for the moment when she could utter the joyous cry, "Alan!" was also ended. Belle's foolish behavior gave her purpose.

Malvina's plans for leaving Vicksburg on the following day were altered shortly after her father had returned from his walk. The air was suddenly filled with rushing sounds and Vicksburg became a volcano of erupting shot and shell. The seven o'clock, four-hour bombardment heralded the "daily at seven, afternoon at four" shelling which was to be the city's fare for the next thirty days. The din and rumble resounded like thunder bursting from the very center of the earth, scattering fragments from its bowels over the trembling hills, shattering stately homes into masses of cracked and crumbling heaps of masonry and kindling.

The cannonade which seemed to be coming from all sides at the same time was so furious and so thick that some shells, crowded for

air space, collided and exploded in mid-air. Others, and this was the greater part, shricked their piercing death wail as they came thundering in to plow bloody furrows up and down the hillside city.

Malvina stood beside the parlor window clutching a drape as if the flimsy cloth might give some protection against the flying iron.

It was majestic, grand, and sublime.

It was awful.

It was terrible.

Della spent the entire four hours of the bombardment in bed with her head under a pillow praying. Anyone in the room would have heard a murmur of an occasional "amen" and a few "hallelujahs."

"O Lord, please let our boys stop them nutmeg-shelling rascals. Direct their hands upon the guns. Let them aim with an aim which will kill every one of those mackerel-catching, cod-livered, nigger-lovin' Yankees. . . ." and her voice faded until the last syllables were unintelligible.

Jefferson brought home the idea of digging a cave. "Eber'body's doin' it," he explained. "Dey is diggin' 'em in de gullies war der bullets kain't git to em."

Malvina doubted the advisability of such an excavation, but allowed the plan to proceed.

"Ah ain't goin' in no hole in de groun'," 'Lijah declared emphatically. "No, suh. Ain't goin' ter catch me in no mole hole, cavin' down on top o' my haid. If'n I gonna die, den so be it, but I'se gonna be 'terred inna graveyard Christian-like."

The Jefferson-constructed cave was a T-shaped, head-high excavation which branched into two wings six feet in from the entrance. The two rooms, "the right wing and the left wing," were large enough for two rudely constructed bunk beds, with space for a table and four chairs in the hallway in between. The entrance tunnel was bordered with two benches each wide enough to provide sleeping space.

That evening after her father and aunt were safely situated in their cave, Malvina announced her intention of leaving Vicksburg at dawn the next day.

"How?" Chris questioned.

"I'll hire a boat down at the river. Jefferson can row me across," she explained.

"But they'll stop you. The gunboats are apprehending all boats that attempt to cross," Chris pleaded.

"And that is precisely what I want them to do. I'll ask my captors to take me to Admiral Porter and I will make him take me to General Sherman." Malvina detailed her simple and all-too-direct plan with assurance.

"They won't do that, Malvina baby," Chris said. "You'll be imprisoned."

"They wouldn't dare!" Malvina stated flatly. "There's no need trying to dissuade me, Papa. I'm leaving in the morning."

11

The full implications of besiegement, the realization that she had become a part of the battle, registered on Beulah at two-fifteen, Thursday afternoon. Suddenly and without warning, a whizzing, shrieking sound was heard coming from over the roofs of the city on the hill to the rear followed by a crash which ripped a hole of approximately the same size and shape as a man in the rear wall of her back parlor. The missile repeated the destruction to the mirrored back bar of the front barroom.

The Yankee thirty-four-pound shell had cleared the city and fallen, ripping its way without exploding through Beulah's place. Rafters, studding, and glass were still falling when a second shot could be heard screaming in the path of the first. This shell exploded on impact, tearing away the entire lower back side of the whorehouse, causing the upper floor to tilt at a crazy angle.

Miraculously, none of Beulah's girls or their patrons were hit by either of the shells, yet the injury suffered was catastrophic. The number of strained muscles, twisted backs, torn ligaments was excessive. Partially and totally unclothed men and women rolled around in the teetering, tilting upstairs, screaming and cursing, convinced that the earth was caving in. No single patron or partner escaped without a harrowing tale of terror to relate.

12

Captain John Hughes lay among the maimed, gashed, dying, and dead of his hog-house hospital, occupying the same spot upon which he had been placed three days before. As yet neither he nor any of the men in his building had seen a doctor or received any care except the twice daily visit from two infantrymen orderlies who came around to pass out food and empty the slop buckets.

Large green flies and gnats buzzed around the building, feasting upon the open green-and-black wounds. Only one man, an elderly private with a shattered leg, made any effort to resist the crawling, creeping things. He sat propped up against the wall, picking maggots a half-inch long from his wound with a piece of straw. His belly-wounded neighbor unable to lift his own shattered arms to brush away the flies which formed black, crawling blotches on his eyes, ears, mouth, and nose, occupied his time by following the methodical picking with rolling eyes.

Late in the afternoon four orderlies appeared with two litters to start the lackadaisical move of the wounded to the surgeon's receiving building.

In the rush to win glorious battles, the Army of the United States had forgotten to attend to one detail. It had neglected to train a medical staff. There were no well-instructed nurses, no sick diet kitchens, no prompt supply of medicine, no means for humanely transporting the injured. The doctors, for the most part untrained, added to the horror.

The move to the surgery tent was one which most men would have preferred to avoid, but here, ironically, was the one phase of the medical corps operation which was functioning with West Point efficiency. Each wounded man, even though he might have to wait as long as a week, would face the examining surgeon.

The receiving tent was not a tent at all. It was a huge, dirt-floored cotton-shed. By the light of a smoking lantern which hung from the rafters overhead, Hughes could see the countless windrows of wounded, dressed and aligned as a regiment on parade. Each row was separated from the next by an oozy, muddy, blood-soaked aisle.

A bearded sergeant, arm in sling, who occupied the neighboring

blanket filled the captain in on what he could expect. "Ain't no cause to fret yet. It'll be two days at least 'fore they get to us. That's what ya got. Two days to prepare to meet yer Maker. Friend of mine went through yesterday. He was just like you. Had a busted leg. They cut it off, only the doctor that done the cuttin' was drunk and sawed off his good leg. Know what they did? Turned 'im over and cut off the other. Them butchers up there ain't got nuff sense to doctor a domenecker hen that's sick from a sore ass. If'n I was you I'd let someone set that leg and stay away from up front. They do nothin' but amputate and every amputation means death."

A twenty-dollar bribe paid to each of two orderlies prepared the way for the leg setting. Fortified with five swallows of whisky and held by the two orderlies, Hughes thrashed and screamed as the bearded sergeant used his good arm to pull and twist the broken leg until the bones were somewhere near their proper positions.

13

Sammy Neofes and the remnants of his old company had spent a relatively easy two weeks digging gun emplacements a mile to the rear of the lines facing Vicksburg. Sammy's duties consisted of rousing the men each morning at the sound of the rolling drums, marching them to the work area, playing cards with the other non-coms while the men wielded the shovels and picks, then a short ten-minute hike back into camp at night.

Sammy's work was also easier now that he had a servant. Securing Negro helpers from among the thousands of contraband who were trailing the army was a simple task. The problem was in trying to keep them. After one day of scrubbing company kettles, cooking for two hundred men, a Negro usually decided the work was easier under the slave system and "seceded once moah."

Sammy solved this problem, once he found a desirable servant (a gray-haired, simple, but hard-working old Negro), by issuing him a cap and jacket and swearing him into the service.

The "swearing-in ceremonies" had been a solemn and serious affair, conducted over a borrowed Bible.

"Take hold of the Bible," Sammy intoned.

"Yas, suh, Ah do dat," the blue-clad Negro eagerly complied.

"Do you solemnly swear that you will support the Constitution of the United States and see that there are no grounds floating on the coffee at all times?"

"Yas, suh. Ah do dat. Ah allers settle him in de coffeepot."

"And do you solemnly swear that you will support the Constitution of the United States and not spit on the plates when cleaning them nor wipe them on your shirt sleeves?"

"Lordy, suh, Ah neber, neber do dat. Ah allers wash him nice. Mah ole woman's am mighty 'tickler bout dat."

"You are now solemnly sworn a commissioned chief cook and kettle washer of Company K and your name is Brooklyn."

Sunday, May thirty-first, had been a good day. Sammy had picked up forty dollars in the non-com card game, the work project was completed by four o'clock and he had his men back to their area by five. Sammy's plans for a leisurely supper and visit to one of the Negro encampments in the nearby woods were blasted, as he walked across the company area, by Brooklyn, much excited.

"Colonel Sammy, suh," Brooklyn saluted the sergeant. "Deh is a Cap'n sumpin-er-nother ovah at der tent. He say yo' is ter kum on de double."

"Yeh?" Sammy frowned upon receiving this disquieting piece of news.

"Ah tell him dat yo' is a colonel and dat he bettah double ovah hyer ter see yo'," Brooklyn explained.

"You told him that, huh?"

"Dat's what Ah say, and he say, 'Yo' git dat black ass of yours outa hyer and bring me back dat buck-ass sergeant . . . fast.'" Brooklyn assumed a look of contempt he wore when addressing inferiors, "Colonel Sammy?"

"Yeh?" Sammy answered, his mind putting two-and-two together and disliking the answer he got.

"Dat dehr cap'n ain't got no' mo' notion of de military producall ez er possum. Ain' dat right, Colonel?"

"Yeh, that's right," and Colonel Sammy broke army customs and regulations by crossing the company assembly area "on the trot."

"Sergeant Neofes?" a huge, dark, fiercely bearded captain asked as he arose from beneath a tree where he had been reading a paper.

"Yeh," Sammy answered, inspecting the over-six-feet officer.

"What?" the officer roared with a voice like an angry bull.

Sammy stood staring at the man, frowning and perplexed at his attitude.

"Atten-chun!" The captain's command must have been heard all of the way into Vicksburg. Sammy came to an attention . . . of sorts. "I am your new company commander, Captain Wilks. Hereafter when you address me you will salute and say, 'Sir!' "

"I'm gonna kill me a son-of-a-bitch of a captain, that's what I'm gonna do," Sammy murmured to himself.

"What did you say?" the captain barked.

"Nuthin'," Sammy said.

"Nuthin' . . . what?" The captain was young . . . twenty, a West Pointer with intentions of climbing to the top of his profession fast.

Sammy gulped a belated "Sir" fully expecting to feel the smashing weight of the officer's muscled two hundred pounds come smashing down on top of his head.

"Feed the company, strike camp, and have the men in formation ready to march by six o'clock," the captain snapped.

"Yes, sir," Sammy turned and was about to leave when something grabbed his arm and spun him around like a top.

"Hereafter when you receive an order you will wait until you're dismissed, then you will salute, and after the salute has been returned you will do an about-face and depart." The captain spoke from between clenched teeth, without relaxing the hand he held plastered to Sammy's forehead.

"Dismissed."

Sammy's hand stayed in place until the captain tossed him a casual salute and turned away.

Brooklyn, who had been watching the meeting of his colonel and the new captain, shook his head sadly and mentally revised the army order of rank—Sergeant, Lieutenant, Colonel, Cap'n, General.

"Where'bouts we headin', Sarge?" one of the men in the company asked after the column had been on the road for almost an hour.

"I don't know," Sammy growled, wiping the caked dust from his lips. "The bastard didn't tell nobody nothin'."

"Silence in the ranks!" the captain bellowed from his position at the head of the column.

Silence reigned.

It was nearly seven and the sun was still up. The sweat-soaked company moved at a killing pace set by the new captain through clouds of dust which all but buried the marching column, hovering heavily over the road, choking out every breath of air. The road led east from the main army camp in the general direction of Jackson.

"Company——Halt!"

The column came to a rump-bumping stop.

"Fall out. Ten-minute halt," the captain called. The men crept into the dust-laden weeds along the side of the road.

The day grew into evening, then into night and the continuing march grew into an endless series of fifty-minute sprints and ten-minute rest halts. Relentlessly the captain continued the back-breaking, foot-blistering pace. Rest periods became hell periods, fighting off mosquitoes that drew more blood than the Rebels.

Dawn finally came and with the word, "Halt for breakfast. Thirty minutes."

Coffee, sowbelly, cold Yankee beans.

"On your feet! Company! Ten-chun. Forward, march!"

The company moved out with most of the men, having used their thirty minutes sleeping, trying to eat their raw pork ration on the march.

General Johnston had moved part of his army up to the Big Black in the rear of McPherson's Corps. Grant ordered Sherman, with as many men as could be spared, to drive him back into Jackson again.

14

The sickening pain which had become a permanent part of his every conscious moment was subsiding by now. It was possible to see without being blinded by the sheets of nausea red which flamed up, burning and blinding, finally consuming consciousness. It was possible to move, to enjoy the luxury of holding aloft a hand and indulging in the simple enjoyment of flexing a finger. John Hughes felt as though he had been reborn, given a new life. Annoying and tedious bits of daily living took on great importance. They became incidents to be rediscovered and re-enjoyed. The flesh around his

shattered leg was pink and firm, there were no black or green signs of gangrene. There would be no need now for an amputation.

The waiting station outside the operating room was a horror chamber beyond description. Here the shattered wounded and dying men lay within earshot of the grating saw; within sight of a bare-armed surgeon holding a knife in his teeth as he freed his hands in order to wipe them off on his blood-stained apron; within smelling distance of the "slaughter pen," flooded with clotted blood like a butcher's shambles.

As Hughes waited his turn, he watched as they carried in a poor fellow who had somehow managed to survive the trip to the hospital while carrying a bullet in his head. The surgeon ran his dirty finger into the jagged hole for an exploratory search for the bullet, and failing to find the object of his search, picked up an unwashed, blood-covered bullet prober with which to continue his prodding at a deeper level. The surgeon was successful in finding the piece of lead. The soldier died before it could be removed. One set of orderlies carried the man outside, placing him on top of a wagon heaped with corded victims of the surgeon's knife and saw, while a second set of orderlies carried John into the room, placing him on the slimy operating table.

The chief surgeon, after a long healthy pull from a bottle of medical whisky, turned his attention to John. A twenty-dollar gold piece bought a fresh bottle of whisky; a second piece of gold from John's money belt bought reprieve from the surgeon's knife.

15

Alan Miller walked the perimeter of the barred and locked room atop the Warren County Courthouse he shared with four deserters who had been swept up and placed under arrest by the army provost. He cursed the day he had rented a room from Loulie Schmidt Chaffin and incurred her enmity. The cell was a wretched hole, a room no more than twenty square feet, having an iron stove in the center with a rusty funnel ascending to a hole in the roof. His cellmates were equally as wretched. A scummy crew, two of whom spent their every waking hour astride some planks playing whist

with a dog-eared and dirty pack of cards. The other two, a tall blond man and a small, wiry, effeminate individual, sat huddled close together in a dark corner of the room ignoring all overtures of friendliness.

Pausing before the chin-high barred window, the only opening in the cramped, airless cell, Alan looked out on the starless night.

"A night as black as my future," he murmured as he reckoned his chances of living for another twenty-four hours. He knew his moments upon this earth were numbered once his forged papers came under the close scrutiny of the Confederate security officers. The interrogation officer, with time to check and verify the story he had given at the time of his arrest, would soon discover his true identity. The next pair of feet to climb the stairway outside the cell could very well be the guard sent to lead him to the gallows. "I've got to do something and I've got to do it quick. But what?"

Alan turned back into the room to scrutinize his cellmates. Escape from the prison and the hangman's noose was a remote possibility, and then only if he could enlist the aid of his fellow prisoners. The chances for success looked very grim.

There was little hope of interesting the two card players in an escape plan. They were simple, bumpkin-like fellows in homespun clothes with vacant faces. They were good-humored and made constant light of their predicament. From their remarks it was conceivable that they had not the remotest comprehension of what they had been fighting for, or how they had deserved to be shut up in the dreary prison. They took each day as a Godsend, to be well warmed and well foddered without the necessity of bothering themselves about the possible hunger and sweat of tomorrow. Prison life seemed to them the high point of their lifetime.

The two prisoners who were keeping themselves aloof seemed to be a step up in intelligence from the card players, yet they were hardly the type who would be willing to risk their necks in a do-or-die escape attempt.

Had he been arrested under any other circumstances, save hiding in a rooming house, he could have explained his purpose and reason for being in Vicksburg. The irony of the present situation was that even if his false papers were accepted as being genuine he would still be in trouble.

I'll be cheating the hangman when they string me up as a deserter, Alan thought with a grim smile. They'll be hanging a spy without ever knowing it. So . . . what have I got to lose?

Circling the cell for the last time he formulated the words which he hoped would put into action the only feasible escape plan he had conceived. Pausing beside the smaller of the two secretive prisoners, a thin, well-muscled youth, he said. "Miller's my name. Alan Miller. What are you in here for?"

"Draft evasion," the lad replied, eyeing Alan suspiciously. "You?"

"Same." Alan paused, carefully inspecting the pair. "Either of you want to get out of here?"

"The jail?" Cyril questioned, suspiciously glancing around to see if anyone was listening.

Alan nodded.

"When?"

"Tonight," Alan replied.

"How?" Cyril sneered.

"Are you with me?" Alan said, trying to size up the courage of this slightly effeminate man.

"We might be," Gerald spoke up. "How do you expect to get out?"

"I'm going out the same way the smoke from that stove goes. Through the hole in the ceiling," Alan replied.

"Why do you want to help us?" Cyril asked, glancing up at the chimney hole which was in the center of the eighteen-foot-high ceiling.

"Because I need your help," Alan directed his words to Gerald. "I think that if I climb on top of the stove and you can manage to get on my shoulders, I can toss you high enough for you to catch hold of the roof and pull yourself out."

"And then?" Gerald was still suspicious.

"We'll make a rope of our belts and suspenders. I'll help lift your friend here up and then the two of you can pull me up on the roof," Alan detailed.

"What about them?" Gerald indicated the two card players.

"They wouldn't be interested. They like it here."

"What do we do after we get to the roof?" Gerald was still suspicious.

"I don't know. We'll find some way down," Alan said.

"And after that?" Gerald asked.

"We'll split up. Every man for himself."

This last remark sealed the bargain, convincing Gerald that Alan had no designs on Cyril. "Let's go."

Alan's escape plan did not extend beyond the smoke hole in the ceiling. The route from the courthouse roof to the ground, the extent to which the building was guarded, and the reaction of the other two prisoners to a jail break were elements that could not be predicted.

The first of the unknowns, the two card players, presented no problem. They were mildly curious when Alan pulled down the soot-filled tin chimney, hoisted the wiry Gerald to his shoulder and boosted him through the hole in the ceiling. They lost interest and had returned to their game by the time Cyril was following Gerald's airy footsteps. With his two accomplices pulling, one on each arm, Alan finally managed to squirm through the narrow ceiling opening into the attic beyond.

"What are we going to do now?" Gerald whispered from the darkness as Alan joined his partners.

"Let's take a look and see," Alan replied. The light from a flickering match revealed the low-ceilinged attic to be piled high with bundles of dust-laden papers and ledgers: the place was being used as a storeroom. "We're going down through the same door these papers came up," Alan answered.

A trap door located at the far end of the attic opened the way to the stairs below. The stairway did not lead to freedom. Armed sentries guarded the stone steps leading up to the courthouse front doors.

A quick window survey of the rear of the building revealed the only possible avenue of escape. The ground behind the courthouse dropped off into a deep gully and seemed to be unguarded. Twisting some tattered drapes he found in the judge's chamber behind the courtroom, Alan fashioned a rope which covered the first twenty feet of the thirty-foot drop from the rear windows to the ground below. Minutes later the trio, after stopping to shake hands, vanished into the brush-clogged gully, Cyril and Gerald heading for the river, Alan in the direction of the McClellan home.

11

THE RIVER looked quiet and peaceful in the morning light. Malvina McClellan, looking out across the black, muddy waters, could see low barge-like boats tied and nestled beneath the deep shadows of the Louisiana shore. The tranquil June morning, the slow sluggish water, gave no indication there was a battle in progress, that an attempt was under way to annihilate an entire city, an army, and a people.

Malvina was waiting at the city docks for Jefferson who had gone to get a fishing skiff they had rented on the previous evening. Despite the excitement and elation she felt in setting out to find Alan, Malvina could not help feeling guilty about leaving her father and family in the beleaguered city. Her own danger did not concern her in the least.

"Nothing will happen to me," she had declared fiercely to Chris the night before. "I shall find Alan and I shall return with him and then we will stay here with you until the city has been liberated and you are once more free."

"Or when we surrender," Chris added quietly.

"Yes," Malvina agreed. "Now that it has been said, this is what will surely happen. Vicksburg will be surrendered."

"And to the victor goes the spoils," Chris had added with bitterness.

"Meaning me? Am I so spoiled?" Malvina said, putting her arm through his. "If I am it was your own doing."

"No," Chris had said slowly. "I was just thinking that we will probably all be Yankees soon. Della and I by conquest. You by request."

"Very pretty," Malvina had laughed, "but entirely inaccurate. I too am protesting, I say to myself, 'Alan is an enemy,' but my heart says, 'He is the man you love.' "

"I know," Chris sighed.

"I know you do," Malvina said, rising to kiss her father. "I'm going in the morning. You'll be all right? You, Aunt Della, 'Lijah?"

Chris had not bothered to answer. He smiled, arose from their favorite spot by the window chess table and started to leave. At the door of the library he turned to say, "Good night, baby. Be careful, and bring him back home safely. I want you to be married here."

In the early morning light Malvina's reluctant oarsman argued over every foot of the river as he pulled on the oars. "Them cannon boats am gonna shoot us ter deaf." Malvina was almost ready to agree, growing anxious concerning the Yankee navy's ominous silence as Jefferson rowed to within fifty feet of the first boat in the flotilla.

"Stand off there," a voice, at last, came from somewhere inside the floating box, a large flat-bottom barge surrounded on four sides with a high steel wall. "What do you want?"

"To see your commanding officer," said Malvina, sitting primly in the back of the fishing skiff facing the blanched and trembling Jefferson.

"Pull off! Go away!" the challenger directed.

"Keep right on rowing, Jefferson," Malvina directed in a lowered voice. The fishing boat was alongside the black monster before an iron fire door near the prow creaked open and a face appeared.

"What do you want, ma'am?" a young bearded sailor wearing officer's braid demanded.

"To see your commanding officer," Malvina repeated firmly.

"I command this boat," the man said. "The flotilla commander's headquarters are on that steamer upstream." He indicated a twin-deck river steamer anchored a mile up river.

"Then we shall go there," Malvina said, turning to Jefferson.

"I can't let you do that, ma'am," the officer stammered.

"And why not?"

"Civilians can't go on that boat alone," he explained.

"Then you take me," Malvina demanded.

"I can't do that either, ma'am," he apologized. "We're going to start firing in ten minutes."

"Very well," Malvina said with a toss of her gay bonnet, "I'll wait until you're through firing. I shan't be unreasonable."

"Well," the officer hesitated.

"Shall I remain here or shall I come aboard?" Malvina asked.

The officer turned and vanished from the fire door. A scuffling and clanking inside the boat answered Malvina's question. Two large loading doors at mid-deck swung open.

"Down here, miss," a sailor called.

Eager hands helped Malvina step up from the skiff onto the mortar boat.

"You can return to Vicksburg, Jefferson," Malvina directed. "I'll be all right now."

"Yas'm," the wide-eyed Jefferson murmured, laying to the oars in frantic haste. There was no telling what the monstrous Yankees might decide to do next.

Aboard, Malvina found herself ringed by the curious, grinning, unshaven, and dirty crew of the boat.

"To your positions, men!" the officer barked and the crew sprang to the boat's one gun, taking positions of readiness as though awaiting inspection by the commanding admiral.

"Lieutenant Walker, ma'am," the officer introduced himself. "We're to start firing at seven, ma'am, for an hour, ma'am. If you'll just sit over here where you won't be in the way."

Malvina followed Lieutenant Walker, allowing him to seat her on a wall bench at the rear of the mortar.

"Here is some cotton, ma'am. Stuff this in your ears. It's necessary. The concussion."

Malvina was fascinated and at the same time horrified as she

watched the crew ready the first projectile for firing. The novelty of having an observer aboard eased Lieutenant Walker's task. The men snapped through their routine with the precision of a drill team.

The missile, an immense globe of iron weighing two hundred and eighty-five pounds, was called a bomb. The mortar was a massive squat black engine for war occupying one entire end of the boat. The gun was charged, elevated, the bomb hoisted into the yawning mouth of the mortar, the fuse was cut and the crew lined up behind the gun, awaiting the command to fire.

"We will fire the opening round," the captain explained to Malvina as he nervously consulted his watch, anxiously awaiting the hour of seven. "The other boats of the flotilla will fire successively."

Malvina watched the prelude to Vicksburg's bloody June first awakening. The fuse was lighted and, on command, fire laid to the mortar.

The explosion and concussion were stunning. In unison the crew rose to a tiptoe position, opening their mouths in order to lessen the effects of the teeth-rattling explosion. A fire door at the far end of the boat slammed open, the frail craft reared, bucking one end up in the water. The missile curved and circled up into the heavens. The river, to the rear, seemed to explode. Looking up, Malvina could count ten of the tremendous shells, circling, flowing, hissing, following each other in their fiery paths toward Vicksburg. The noise was deafening as the echoing reverberations rolled up and down the river.

"I am a part of this," Malvina thought incredulously. "This missile they are lighting here before me may be the one which kills my dear father."

The firing ceased as abruptly as it began.

"The fleet fired two hundred and forty bombs," the lieutenant announced proudly.

Malvina walked slowly to the port side to look out at the river and her beloved city. Dead fish floated by, killed by the heavy reverberations. Swarms of disturbed bees buzzed angrily through the air as they deserted the trees in the neighboring swamps. A fire burned brightly along the docks in Vicksburg.

"You're a Rebel, aren't you, ma'am?" the captain asked when he was free to again turn his attention to his fair visitor.

"My home is in Vicksburg," Malvina replied and added bitterly, "was in Vicksburg."

"You'll be arrested as a spy, if you go back to headquarters," the captain said, trying to spare Malvina.

"I'll take that chance," Malvina replied firmly. "You said you would take me. Shall we go?"

A half-hour later the lieutenant's apprehension concerning the advisability of taking a Secesh lady to headquarters was proved unfounded. For as he led the bewitching Malvina along the upper deck of the headquarters steamer, following an admiral's aide, the "Old Man" stepped out of his cabin, inspected the beautiful visitor from head to toe, replaced his permanent scowl with a fatuously silly grin, and boomed, "Well, well, well. Whatever have I done to deserve the honor of receiving so fair a guest?"

Malvina curtsied demurely as the admiral continued his gasconade.

"Won't you come in, my dear, and share my breakfast? It's a humble sailor's fare, but this is war."

"Thank you kindly, sir, for your hospitality," Malvina smiled. It was a simple smile but it served its purpose.

"Aide," the old man roared. "Take the lieutenant below to the officers' mess. See that he's well cared for." Then to the nervously beaming lieutenant he tossed a congratulatory fillip. "Good job, lad. Sterling!"

"I hope you like brandy, young lady," the admiral said as he led Malvina into the privacy of his cabin. "I just happen to have a bottle of some very fine old stuff. Goes awfully well with your morning coffee."

Malvina discovered the simple sailor's fare consisted of a platter of fried fresh eggs, juicy ham, and canned figs.

2

Alan Miller spent the night following his escape from the county jail, milling with the crowd in front of the county courthouse. He was there when the provost guards rushed in, then out of the building, and knew that his escape had been discovered. He was correct in his surmise as to what the provost would do. They

charged off toward the river, never thinking or stopping to look for their quarry in the shadow of the jailhouse bars.

The Warren County Courthouse was the assembly point and meeting place, night and day, for sweethearts, wives, officers, lovers, and plain citizens. It was the central dispersing point for news and rumors, and the amount of news one could gather in one night at the courthouse was amazing.

"A courier came through the lines last night with eighteen thousand caps on his person and word that Johnston is on his way in from Jackson with thirty thousand men. We will be liberated by Wednesday."

"Johnston sent us two hundred thousand caps last night, none got through. I talked to the courier. Johnston is not coming."

"They're reducing the meat ration by half tomorrow."

"The Yankees are firing poison bullets. Everyone that is hit dies from gangrene poison. A doctor told me so."

"Richmond threw off its siege. Charleston resisted. Guess we got nothin' to worry 'bout."

Alan mingled in the crowds, listening to the rumors, the half-truths, the fabrications, and marveled at the willful gullibility of the human mind. "And I am the world's greatest practitioner of hopeful thinking?" he sighed as he circled aimlessly around the edges of the courthouse crowd, knowing that he might at any moment be caught up in the human whirlpool and swept back into captivity. "What earthly reason did I have for coming back here to Vicksburg—for believing Malvina would have experienced a change of heart? And why am I not making tracks toward the river at this very moment?"

He kept with the crowd and waited.

The shelling began, as always, promptly at seven o'clock. It began with the distant, dull, heavy "clump" and was followed by another and another, ten in all. Seconds later the shells could be seen, ponderous, heavy black objects, trailing fire and tumbling end over end, arcing and screaming with demoniacal fury down upon the city. The similarity between this and previous shellings ended with the firing. The explosions, the toppled buildings, the great geysers of earth and dust, told of a new and terrible weapon. A gigantic bomb.

Alan joined the crowd collected around one of the giants which had failed to explode. It was an awesome thing, weighing over two hundred pounds. The day of warfare fought with solid shot, garish

uniformed tin soldiers lined up in ordered ranks, had ended. This was war at its ultimate, designed to destroy all forms of life.

The bomb with the defective fuse gave Alan an excuse to go rushing up the hill to the McClellan home. He found Chris and 'Lijah in the kitchen at Twin Chimneys, bending over a steaming kettle on the stove.

"Well, good morning, Captain," Chris greeted him after a moment's hesitation. "Won't you come in and join us for a cup of tea? It isn't really tea. We're brewing our own special substitute for tea—dried blackberry leaves."

"I would be delighted, sir," Alan said as he removed his hat and entered the kitchen.

" 'Lijah and I have been arguing about the proper method of brewing this dried brush."

"Good morning, 'Lijah," Alan greeted.

"Don't be good mawninin' me," 'Lijah scowled. "Bombs has beena whoompin' all ovah de place an' dey ain't nothin' good 'bout dat."

"You have come to see Malvina?" Chris said as he continued to hold Alan's hand. "Well, she isn't here. She left this morning."

"Where? Where has she gone?" Alan stammered.

"Across the river. She said she was going to Sherman's headquarters to look for you."

"My God!" Alan exploded. "Only Malvina would attempt a thing like that!"

Chris smiled and sat down. "Only Malvina," he agreed. "Sit down. 'Lijah will have our brew ready in a moment."

In frustration Alan pounded his fist into his palm. "I can't cross until dark."

"You will attempt to find her?" Chris asked.

"I'll swim the river tonight."

"I tried to detain her, but there is no dissuading a woman in love," Chris said.

"You don't object then?" Alan asked. "To me?"

"I objected," Chris said with a weary sigh. "You are our enemy. Your soldiers killed my son, David."

"I know. I am truly sorry, sir. I met David only the one time. He was a fine man."

Chris continued, without giving heed to Alan's condolences, "I

have been forced to the conclusion that if I love my daughter, I must in turn respect her choice of a husband. I know you love my daughter. I am forced to approve," Chris smiled. "You must understand that every father is jealous of the man his daughter loves."

"Hyer's your—" 'Lijah could not bring herself to say tea, "blackberry leaves."

"Malvina left you this note," Chris dug an envelope from some inner pocket, "in case you should come here."

Alan excused himself and read:

My Darling Alan:

I know that what you have had to do in the past has been because it was right—for you. I know that I love you and must find you.

If we should miss one another, wait for me in Vicksburg.

Yours,

Malvina.

Dusk was settling fast over the city as Alan said good-by to Chris and started toward the river. The day had been a happy one in spite of his anxiety. They had talked war, politics, business, and Alan's favorite topics, the Far West, the mountains, California, and the great Northwest. They talked of everything except the subject uppermost in both their minds—Malvina. They began their talk as strangers and ended in friendship.

The late afternoon was spent in the library, sipping the contents of Chris's last bottle of French brandy, listening to the occasional shells which came "crumping" into the city, talking about the future, plans for survival, what might happen after the war.

"There's no chance of our succeeding?" This was more of a statement on Chris's part than a question.

Alan shook his head. "I don't see how. General Halleck has at last recognized the genius of Grant's campaign and is rushing thirty thousand more troops down the river. With these forces Grant can defeat Johnston even if the general is successful in assembling a new army. I don't know about the campaign in the east, but the war here in the west is over."

Chris nodded in agreement. "We are a city in exile."

"Nothing will be accomplished here," Alan concluded, "except the punishment of the innocent."

Alan made his way slowly down the hill into town from the McClellan home. There was no need to hurry, it would be at least thirty minutes before it was dark enough for an attempt at crossing the river. The walk gave him an opportunity to take an honest look at the ugly, squat little river town. Few of the houses were painted; the drab weathered siding seemed to have taken on the color of the surrounding soil, brownish gray, like the loess which had blown eons ago into the Mississippi basin. Here and there a burned house yawned with fanged and jagged jaws, staring into the growing night with blank empty eye sockets. Turning off the near-deserted Main Street, Alan made his way down to the river front, Levee Street at the foot of Walnut Hill.

Moving into the shadowy shelter of a shell-battered warehouse at the river's edge, Alan started removing his jacket when a voice from behind whispered in his ear, "Good evening, Captain. Beautiful night for a swim, ain't it?"

Turning, Alan found himself face-to-face with a pouch-mouthed, leering sergeant who had all the markings of a provost bully.

"Good evening, Sergeant," Alan replied slowly, measuring his companion for size and weight. "No, I can't agree. The water looks cold, wet, and exceedingly dirty."

"See those lights? Way over yonder there, up river?" The sergeant pointed out a chain of pinpoint lights on the far side of the channel. "Them's Yankee mortar boats. They're what's been shelling the city. If you get over there with them, then you got no more worries. The war's over. They'll make you a prisoner of war and you can set it out nice an' safe in some prison camp."

"Are you planning on making this swim to freedom, Sergeant?" Alan smiled.

"I ain't," the sergeant growled, "but I'm thinkin' maybe you was thinkin' about it. Can I hold yer coat?"

"And if I was?" Alan taunted.

"Then I'm here to stop you. I'm doin' it now." The sergeant stood big with evil design. "Nobody's allowed down here at night. Move on!"

Alan contemplated obeying, delaying his swim until later, but ruled against the plan. The sergeant did not look like the kind of man one could trust. Without warning Alan ducked, lunged forward

bringing his shoulder up and under the man's chest, blocking at the same time any possible use of his arms. As the sergeant staggered backward Alan placed the momentum of his move and the weight of his body into a smashing left which caught the stumbling man on the point of the chin. He fell like a struck ox, moaned, and lost consciousness.

Alan quickly shucked off his Confederate uniform and kicked off his boots. His body arced out and into the water scarcely causing a ripple in the swirling, sullen stream.

3

Bathing in woodland streams, eating cold biscuits and sipping brandy from tin cups, cat-napping and making love in secluded woodland glens; two nights of Justin's company on the road, two days in Justin's arms as they "hid out" in order to avoid roving bands of Yankees, had been very much to Belle's liking. Now that she was comfortably situated in a hotel in Jackson, her only problem was to insure a continuance of the "heavenly" companionship. Justin, at the moment, was insisting upon taking her to Johnston's Ordnance department where she would receive her consignment of musket caps for Vicksburg.

"Do I have to?" Belle asked plaintively.

"Of course you do," he said impatiently. "It's your duty. I'm going back with you as far as the Vicksburg lines."

"But couldn't I just forget about it?" she pleaded. "I want to stay here with you."

Justin looked at her incredulously—duty was duty. "No, dear. We'll draw the caps tomorrow and leave for Vicksburg on Thursday. I would go with you all the way, except that I must be here on the tenth to form up my Ranger Company."

Belle ceased pleading, snuggled up into Justin's arms, resolving to do anything short of antagonizing him in order to remain in Jackson with her lover.

Damn the war, Justin sighed, feeling the warmth of the girl's body against his, I'd truly like to keep Belle here with me all the time. Lifting her off her feet, he kissed her softly on the lips and slowly carried her across the room toward their unmade bed.

4

Malvina McClellan stood on deck of the huge hospital steamer watching and marveling at the activities on the shore below. The sound of many voices filled the cool morning air, mingling with the raucous bray of hungry mules, the more musical neighing of cavalry and artillery horses. It had been dark when she arrived at the ship on the previous evening. The ladies of the Sanitary Commission, in whose care she had been placed, provided supper and hustled her off to bed without offering her the opportunity of inspecting the Yazoo River landing.

The broad, low flats beneath Haines Bluff had been converted into a vast park filled with military supplies. Mountains of boxes, extending as far as the eye could see, were stacked and ricked along the provisional wharf. Berthed next to the hospital ship were strings of barges filled with every conceivable military object. The city of boxes was divided by long, dusty streets laid out in spoke-like fashion to form a vast half-wheel-shaped metropolis. Canvas-covered stacks of warehouse supplies, oak casks of gunpowder, boxes, barrels, shops, huts, blacksmith, ordnance and cargo wagons, plus corrals crammed with the much abused army mule, filled the spaces in between the streets of this Yankee city. Quartermaster, commissary, ordnance officers, clerks, wagon masters, teamsters, and shirtless sunburned soldiers, brown as Indians beside the pale-skinned raw recruits trooping off the transports, jammed the streets.

Malvina smiled to herself as the scenes of the past twenty-four hours passed in panorama before her mind's eye. The nervous young mortar-boat captain, the pompous old admiral. The admiral was an old dear, even though he undoubtedly harbored a few lecherous thoughts. He had made every effort to expedite her trip to Haines Bluff as though she were a military dispatch carrier direct from Washington. He personally had brought her up river in his own steam launch, secured permission for her to spend the night on the hospital ship, and had sent an aide off immediately to make further arrangements for the following day.

Lieutenant Newhouse, the corps headquarters aide, arrived promptly at seven o'clock. Malvina was eating breakfast when the word that he was waiting reached her.

"General Sherman came back last night," he said grinning after introducing himself. "I don't know when he'll have time to see you, if he will, but you should be at headquarters just in case."

"He'll see me," Malvina assured him as she made her way down the gangplank to a gaily topped buggy which stood waiting on the docks below.

The trip through the Haines Bluff depot was astonishing. It seemed as if all the barrels, boxes, wagons, and mules in the world had been assembled here at this one spot.

"It must be large, ma'am," Licutenant Newhouse explained eagerly, and proudly proceeded to show off his knowledge of the army commissary. "Just to feed our army here for one day takes sixty thousand pounds of flour, six thousand pounds of coffee, plus comparable amounts of beef, tea, sugar, fish, potatoes, salt, pepper, and rice."

"With all that food," Malvina said laughingly, "they'll be too fat to fight."

The trip to the fortification headquarters was an exciting experience and by the time they arrived, Malvina was in an optimistic frame of mind.

Sherman's headquarters, unlike those of most field commanders, who impressed local houses into use, was a tent city. Lieutenant Newhouse led Malvina to the adjutant's tent, mumbled some instructions to the duty officer, and instructed Malvina to wait.

And wait she did. It was over two hours before the adjutant led her down a long row of umbrella tents to the last canvas shelter. The tent faced up the street commanding a view of the entire headquarters area.

"Go right on in, miss. The general will see you next," the adjutant instructed Malvina in a low voice.

Malvina glanced around the general's tent. It was a sight. It was littered with maps, books, papers, and baggage. A sword was lying on the floor, a pair of spurs glistened on the bed. General Sherman sat behind a packing-case desk talking to one of his officers.

So this is the demon Sherman, Malvina thought as she inspected the object of her circuitous trip. He was rather small in stature and not at all what one would expect.

"The way I see it . . ." the colonel was saying.

"Draw rations for ten days," Sherman interrupted, ending the conversation without permitting the poor officer the chance to finish his last remark. He rose, took the colonel by the arm and pushed him off, following him to the door of the tent, still talking, "I'll send you some artillery. Be sharp now, good-by, and don't bother to report unless you run into trouble."

The frustrated colonel was literally shoved out into the street and moved off mumbling to himself.

Sherman turned to Malvina, continuing to talk without a break or pause in his flow of words: "I detest people who talk forever without ever coming to the point of what they are trying to say. Now what can I do for you? You're from Vicksburg? I like Vicksburg, although you'd never know it from my actions. Well? Who are you? What do you want? Speak up!"

Malvina was stunned and left speechless by the general's rapidity of speech, the mingling of his sentences, all accompanied by strange, quick, ungraceful, and mysterious gestures. This first cessation in the flow of words had been caused when Sherman, now back at his desk, paused to light the cigar which poked out through his beard.

"Hope you don't mind if I smoke? Well? What do you want? I'm sure you've come for some reason other than admiring my great beauty." His impatient questions, like commands, were quick, sharp and pointed, yet not harsh.

"My name," Malvina began, "is Malvina McClellan."

"You're not related to. . . ?"

Malvina had the pleasure of making a spirited interruption. "No. We certainly are not!"

Sherman chuckled to himself.

"I have come, sir," Malvina smiled demurely, "to inquire about one of your soldiers."

"I have over twenty thousand soldiers. Please be more specific." Sherman was again in the interrupting mood, his never quiet fingers nervously twitching in his red whiskers, "Who specifically stole your pet rooster and ran away with it?"

"Not my rooster, sir," Malvina said smiling. "My heart—and he did run away with it."

"I'll court-martial the man," the general roared. "Any man who could steal your heart and then run away should be court-martialed

not for theft but for sheer stupidity. What is his name? This idiot?"

"Captain Miller, sir. Captain Alan Miller."

Sherman ceased the finger tattoo he had been playing on his chair, ran his twitching fingers through his hair, rose from his chair and started to pace. He was silent for all of thirty seconds, then jumped to a conclusion with one tremendous spring. "Did he get you in . . . trouble!"

"Horrible trouble," Malvina said, deciding this man would understand a joke, permit a bit of teasing.

"That scoundrel!" Sherman exploded. "I will have him court-martialed now, even though he is my best scout. Is that what you want?"

"When a Yankee steals the heart of a true daughter of the Confederacy, isn't that punishable by death?" Malvina asked.

"Is this all he did?"

"Isn't that enough?" Malvina teased.

"Hummm. Miller, huh? I didn't think he paid any attention to the ladies. I thought his interests were on horses, Indians and riding the great Wild West."

"And spying," Malvina sliced this in between a pause in his monologue.

"Oh?" Sherman frowned. "Where is he?"

"I don't know," Malvina answered. "This is why I am here, to find him. He asked me to marry him, I refused and sent him away. I haven't seen him since."

"And then you changed your mind?"

"I understand," she said, "that this is my right."

For the first time during the entire interview Sherman smiled, returned to his desk, sat down, crossed his legs, and not liking that, uncrossed them. "He hasn't reported in as yet, but when he does I'll see that he gets your message."

"Thank you, sir."

"How is the situation within Vicksburg?" Sherman asked suddenly.

"Are you asking me for military information?" Malvina's eyes narrowed.

"No, I am asking about my friends. I have many old friends and former pupils in Vicksburg," Sherman replied quietly.

"I didn't know," Malvina said then added, "The situation among

the citizens of Vicksburg is very serious. There is much hardship."

Sherman was quiet for a long time.

"Must they be made to suffer?" Malvina asked at last. "The innocent?"

"How are we to judge in war just who is innocent, who is guilty? Surely few of the men in the trenches out front share any of the guilt or responsibility." Sherman spoke slowly. "I only know we must have peace in America. To secure this we must stop the war that now desecrates our once happy and favored country. To stop this war we must defeat and destroy the Rebel armies. There is no other way. War is cruelty. You cannot refine it."

There was little, she realized, that could be said to refute the simple intuitive reasoning of this man.

Malvina arose.

"You're going?" Sherman asked.

"Yes," she said, holding out her hand. "I have imposed enough upon your kindness. If you will please tell Alan that he can find me either in Jackson or in Vicksburg, I shall be forever indebted to you."

"You cannot return to either Jackson or Vicksburg," Sherman said. "You must remain within our lines. Should you attempt to return, once having been here, we would consider you to be a spy."

"Then Alan and I would be ideally suited for one another," Malvina replied with spirit. "In which case please tell Alan that in the event he fails to find me inside your lines or in your prison camp, he should look for me inside Vicksburg."

A smile twinkled deep within the general's eye as he watched Malvina walk out of the tent, her prideful head held high.

5

A bird, a mockingbird, sang overhead in the roadside tree. Belle McClellan, sitting astride one of Justin's mounts, watched him gallop on ahead over the next hill to inspect the village before allowing her to proceed on into Edwards Depot. They were nearing the critical part of her volunteer mission, the time when she would receive the cartridge caps, the moment when Justin would expect her to perform her sworn and sacred duty to carry them into Vicksburg alone.

Army ordnance in Jackson had issued Belle a huge petticoat, quilted in diamond-patterned pockets, empty now, designed to be individually filled with the flat, round caps, then sewn up. The caps were hidden in the home of a patriot outside the Federal lines at Edwards Depot.

Justin returned with the news that the village was clear of Yankees. Time and distance were closing in uncomfortably tight, Belle complained to herself as they made their way over the hill and through the empty village to the designated rendezvous point, a house on the edge of town. The kitchen of this innocent-appearing, unpainted farmhouse looked like an arsenal. It was stacked to the ceiling with boxes and barrels of caps and powder.

Belle's requisition called for caps, but the dispersing officer, disguised in a farmer's rude clothing, had something else in mind. "We have received an urgent call from Vicksburg for quinine. Mind if we load your petticoat with quinine? It'll be a lot lighter and easier for a woman to tote."

Belle had not the "slightest mind," for the answer was immaterial. She had no intentions of returning to Vicksburg with either quinine or caps.

Once the petticoat was prepared, Belle carried it to one of the back bedrooms of the house, where she slipped off her dress, her own petticoat, and donned the quinine-laden garment.

It was amazing how much the white powdery drug weighed. The petticoat, hung by special straps, dragged down upon her shoulders as though it were filled with lead. After a struggle she tugged her dress back over the ballooning garment and returned to the kitchen where Justin was signing the requisition form.

Belle wandered out onto the side porch to wait. As she succeeded in lowering herself and her billowing skirts onto the top porch step, she saw a patrol appear in an opening of the tree-screened roadway in front of the house. She watched as one of the men handed his rifle to another, gather up a load of canteens, turn and start up the lane toward the house. It was not until the man was nearing the tumbled-down fence of the farmyard that Belle, her mind filled with Justin, understood. There, fumbling with the gate latch, no more than twenty feet away, was a uniformed man in blue. Blue, coated with gray dust. The patrol was Yankee and the farmhouse was about to be overrun!

It seemed to Sammy Neofes as he plodded along behind his ragged little detachment as it entered Edwards Depot, that one of his farmer's son charges had put it right when he said, "This hyer army's a piss-pore place ter be, if'n ya wanna live long enuf ter sleep with yer youngest son's bride." Every assignment, and they were coming at horribly regular intervals, was growing tougher and tougher. This one—to set up a roadblock on the Jackson road, east of Edwards Depot—was downright dangerous.

"Sarge," one of the men yelled, "how 'bout me goin' over to that there house yonder and fillin' up my canteen?"

For the hundredth time since the march began, Sammy shook his head. Captain Wilks had been explicit about foraging. "Under no circumstance will you or any of your men enter a building along the road."

Sammy had little taste for his assigned mission, lagging behind his patrol as far as he dared, "just in case." If the expected sniper's gun roared, Sammy wanted to be on the "free running end" of the column.

"Hey, Sarge. Can I go fill the canteens now?" the soldier asked for the hundred and first time. "You don't have ter wait. I'll run and catch up."

"All right," Sammy nodded, "but you hurry and don't do nothin' but get water."

The eager soldier handed his musket to a buddy, gathered up the proffered canteens and went trotting up the lane toward the nearest house.

Belle, running pell-mell into the farmhouse kitchen shouting, "Yankees! Yankees in the lane!" set off a panic. The three attendants of the distributing point plunged out the back door, all but upsetting the frantic girl. Justin displayed more common sense.

"Wait here in the house," he cried softly to Belle. "Wait here while I go get the horses. Here. Take this pistol."

Belle, with the pistol dangling in her hand like a dead fish, moved to the kitchen window as Justin dashed out the back door. The Yankee, one hand filled with canteens, the other on the yard gate, was standing open-mouthed, watching the farmers running from the house and out through the yard toward the woods.

Belle never knew what prompted her to raise the pistol, point it out the open window in the general direction of the gaping soldier, and pull the trigger. The noise of the explosion frightened Belle as much as it did the poor victim of her atrocious aim. The three Rebel ordnance men plunged into the woods; Sammy and his detail dived into the ditch alongside the road. Justin stopped, spun around in his tracks, whipped out a second pistol and with one well-aimed shot sent a bullet through the heart of the thirsty Yank.

Sammy Neofes, positive that his luck had expired, would have faced west and started crawling toward California except for the fact he did not have a compass and was uncertain of his directions. After nearly one year in the army and after innumerable close calls, this was the first time Sammy had been confronted by bullets fired in anger. One of the men in the patrol, a veteran of Shiloh, poked his head above the weeds along the road long enough to see what was going on.

"Hey, Sarge," he yelled, "them bastard farmers shot Ed and now they're all runnin' off inta the woods. Come on! Let's go get Ed!"

The men in the patrol, assuming the sergeant's command would be an automatic thing, cocked their pieces and moved out. Sammy ventured his head above the weeds only after the men had darted half the distance to the house.

Three of the ten Yankees rushed up to the house with lowered bayonets, five fanned out around the yard, one took possession of the well, and the tenth, Ed, bled out his last moments beside the gate. Sammy directed the attack from behind a tree. Justin, trapped in the barn, watched the operation through the stable window.

The Yankees who came charging into the kitchen were the most fiendish-looking demons Belle had ever seen. Black with dirt, blue uniforms soaked and green with sweat, they made Aunt Della's vivid description seem pale.

"Well, look it what we got here," one of the Yankees leered when he saw Belle. "Now ain't she a purty one?"

"Anybody else here in the house?" the second asked, jerking the still smoking pistol from Belle's hand.

Belle, trembling with fright, gazed at her empty hand and shook her head.

"Go call the sarge."

Sammy, as he came up to the yard, avoided looking at the dead soldier at the gate.

"Look what we got here, Sarge," the Yankee with Belle's pistol greeted Sammy when he entered the house. "A real Yankee-killin' female Rebel. Look. I just got me a souvenir. This is what she used to shoot Ed."

Sammy took the pistol from the soldier's outstretched hand, inspected it judiciously, noted the engraved silver butt, and stuck the gun into his own belt.

"Look over here, Sammy," one of the other men called, "look at all these boxes here. There's 'nuff powder 'n caps to blow up the whole army. There must be a million caps."

"What's all this stuff doing here?" Sammy asked Belle.

Belle, still unable to find her voice, shook her head.

The other men of the patrol trooped into the kitchen to learn what was going on.

"Anybody around outside?" Sammy asked.

"Naw, they all took off to the woods."

"Anybody in the barn?" Sammy continued his questioning.

"Naw, they ain't nobody in the barn," the trooper lied. "Clean as a whistle."

Belle's heart sank at this news. Where was Justin? Had he run away with the others?

"Look in hyer, Sarge," one of the snooping men called. "This hyer cupboard's fulla stuff. Looks like powder."

Another man wet his grimy finger, dabbed it in the powder for a taste.

"Quininc," he spat.

"Must be a place fer spies 'er smugglers 'er somethin'," someone suggested.

"Yeh," said Sammy, "an' we caught ourselves a female spy and a house fulla gunpowder and chased off the rest. Yeh. We done all right." The sergeant smiled, turning to Belle. "You a spy?"

Belle shook her head again.

"Whatsa matter, can't you talk?" Sammy asked, stepping up to the quaking girl. "Whatcha got? A mouthful a gold or diamonds? Open up. Let's see."

Belle's teeth snapped closed on Sammy's exploratory finger.

"God damn it!" Sammy swore, jerking his finger free.

"Bet she's got 'em hid someplace else," a Yank laughingly suggested.

"Yeh," the angry Sammy agreed, holding his finger. "Yeh, I think we better search her. Take off yer clothes."

Belle clutched her elbows to her sides and gasped at the suggestion.

"Take 'em off or else we will," Sammy growled.

Belle turned to make her way into the bedroom.

"Here! Right here," Sammy barked.

Sobs bubbled up onto Belle's lips as she slowly started to unbutton her dress.

"Hurry up. We ain't got all day."

Her trembling fingers wouldn't hurry. The dress finally fell to the floor, followed by the heavy quilted petticoat. Head bowed, tears streaking down her face, Belle, in her white camisole and pantalettes, stood like a shaft of sunlight amid the dark circle of men, her trembling lips whispering, "Please, Justin. Please, please come."

"The rest of it," Sammy said hoarsely.

As Belle tried to guide her groping hands down the long row of pearl buttons, the room was still as death. Only the heavy breathing of the encircled men could be heard when she opened the chemise, revealing snowy, brown-tipped breasts: a scuffling as someone moved to gain a better vantage point; a murmur and a muffled curse as a jostled man moved to make room for the intruder; then, the silence of waiting as the hands moved to the top of her pantalettes.

"Naw," Sammy broke the spell. "Dat's all right. You don't need to."

"Aw, Sammy!" a disgusted voice protested. "Come on, let's have the show."

"Fold up yer tongue!" Sammy growled.

"Yeh. She's probably got it stuffed fulla diamonds. I'm for doin' a little . . ."

Sammy spun on the speaker. "Get out! All ya, get out!"

"Gonna keep her fer yerself, Sammy?"

Sammy pushed the last man out of the house and followed him to the porch, closing the door on the half-nude, weeping girl.

"When she gets dressed, we'll take her with us over to the other side of town," Sammy called. "Somebody—you, Joe! You stay here and watch this stuff!"

From his barn-window observation post, Justin was preparing to rush the house where Belle was being held, when the Yankees filed out of the building. They loitered around the porch a few minutes until Belle, her face half buried in her hands, appeared, then moved back out to the road with Belle as their prisoner.

Justin, leaving his two mounts in the barn, skirted through the edge of the woods, running, following the Yankees to the other side of town where they placed Belle in a vacant house. One man was left as a guard while the sergeant directed the other men of his command in the setting up of a roadblock.

The house was a tiny two-room affair, set in the center of a clearing. Justin, realizing the futility of any rescue attempt during the daylight hours, settled down in the bushes to watch and wait for nightfall.

Unexpected help came around midnight. In the distance, to the rear and on the road, Justin heard the sound of hoofbeats. Moving silently back through the woods to a point near the road, he took up an ambush position at the far end of a small wooden bridge. His vigilance was soon rewarded by the appearance of a lone horseman, a Yankee from the shape of his silhouette. Here was his chance to create a diversion and liberate Belle. A carefully aimed pistol shot toppled the unsuspecting Yankee captain, on the way up to inspect the outpost, out of his saddle and onto the ground dead.

As Justin quickly made his way back through the woods he could see the members of the patrol scrambling for their weapons and into the darkness away from the bonfire's light. He moved swiftly around to the rear of the house, placed his shoulder against the flimsy half-rotten door, and with one shove entered the room.

"Justin?" Belle cried from the corner of the room.

"Yes." He held her momentarily when she rushed into his arms. "Quick. Take my hand."

In silence they darted out of the back door, across the pool of firelight and into the shadows of the trees.

"Wait," Belle whispered. "I'm caught on a bush."

Her full-skirted dress and billowing quinine-laden petticoat were too large for movement in the brush-choked woods. "Here. Let me help you," Justin said.

"The sergeant made me take off all my clothes," she whispered as she tried to free herself in the dark.

"He what?" Justin's shocked voice rose above a whisper. "All of them?"

"Yes," Belle whispered.

"Are you all right? Did they . . . ?"

"There," Belle said. "Now I'm ready."

"The sergeant made you take off everything?" Justin asked again.

"In front of all the men," Belle answered.

"You're sure you're all right?"

"I guess so," she replied hesitantly.

"You stay here until I get back," and he was gone.

Sammy and his men were circled around the campfire, inspecting the body of the dead captain, when the shot rang out. A spurt of flame from the nearby bushes marked the position of the assailant.

Justin's bullet entered Sammy's back, smashed all the way through to come out of his chest directly over the heart.

Crashing branches, pounding feet told the men of Sammy's patrol the sniper was escaping. They were in no mood to pursue. Like wolves they dove and fought for possession of the sergeant's money belt, known to contain several thousand dollars.

6

"If we're going to go, then we'll go in style," Big Beulah insisted when she ordered the eight caves dug in a ravine behind one of the better residential sections in Vicksburg. "I'll have my cave, and each of you loyal and faithful girls is going to have your own hole."

Aunt Della and 'Lijah were "beside themselves," bursting with curiosity, when a crew of Negro workmen under the direction of an old barge captain began digging one large and seven small caves down the gully "a piece" from the McClellan cave. Della summoned up enough courage to ask the captain who the new neighbors would be, but his answer seemed vague.

"They're for the seven sisters of the Pleiades," the old river rat informed her.

'Lijah was out in the front of the cave sweeping the dirty dust from off the top of the clean dust when Beulah and her procession hove into sight. "Lan's sakes o' Goshen," the black mammy exclaimed, "Commere, Miz Della, and look what am comin' up de hill!"

"Well, what is it?" Della, who was in the rear of the cave, called.

"I dunno," the perplexed 'Lijah shook her head. "It am like nothin' afore I eva did see."

Beulah and the girls had left downtown Vicksburg in relatively good order. Beulah was in the lead with her seven sisters-in-sin following in tandem. The madam and the girls carried their personal possessions; parrots, dolls, Chinese prayer rugs, bootjacks, and other articles of a personal or sentimental nature. The beds, bedding, liquor, and other pertinences for a prolonged siege had been sent on ahead in a wagon Beulah had been able to procure, a vehicle marked C.S.A. ORD., pulled by four mules and driven by a uniformed corporal.

"This is worse than climbin' in an outa bed a dozen times on Saturday night!"one of the winded, puffing girls complained as she reached the top of the hill.

The girls, upon their arrival at the diggings, went running in and out of the caves, inspecting each of the new abodes, like an excited pack of prairie dogs.

Della, watching all this from the entrance to the McClellan cave, finally concluded, "It must be a mother and her seven daughters. Odd though that none of the girls look the least bit alike." She giggled, "From appearances it looks as if each one of them had a different father."

7

Robert's first indication of the seriousness of the siege came when he was stopped on the way out to the fortifications where he had been assigned for duty, asked to dismount and give up his horse.

"We're collectin' all horses," the sergeant in charge of the collec-

tion point explained. "You don't need 'em in the lines and there ain't no forage for 'em in Vicksburg."

"What are you going to do with them?" Robert asked.

"Drive 'em through the lines at night," the man answered. "Let the Yankees worry about feeding them."

The plan was not as successful as had been hoped. Yankee snipers, with tons of ammunition to burn, used the horses for target practice, killing the animals as soon as they appeared in front of the Confederate lines. Four days later the hot sun had turned the dead animals into bloated balloons of odious gas, sickening to those on the windward side.

Robert, who had not been up to the defenses since the investment began, marveled at the intricately designed works, as a regimental guide, assigned to lead him to his new command, guided him through the defensive labyrinth. His pride in the defenses was further bolstered when he was led into the bombproof which was to be his new command post. The first sergeant, expecting the arrival of a new commanding officer, had assembled the command personnel, three line sergeants, the last of whom had been a member of his first command, Sergeant Piney Pucket.

"Sergeant Pucket!" Robert greeted, stepping forward to take Piney's limp hand.

Piney shuffled his feet in embarrassment at the singular honor bestowed by the new captain in front of his fellow sergeants, and raised his eyes from the ground long enough to mumble, "Thanks." Sick of heart, he was overwhelmed with joy, at the sight of Captain McClellan. Malvina, the end of his life's ambitions, suddenly came back into the realm of obtainability.

8

Loulie Schmidt Chaffin sat in the middle of her unmade bed counting her fingers and wishing they were hundred-dollar bills.

The knock on the bedroom door came as a complete surprise, causing her to lose finger count somewhere between the numbers six and seven, the number of days since she had written her husband asking for money.

Loulie's mind plodded through the list of possibilities as the un-

known visitor pounded a second and more insistent demand for an audience.

Tod is outside with money.

The landlady is outside wanting money.

The shock of finding Piney Pucket standing in the hallway when she opened the door almost made her lose a grip on the wrapper she was clutching loosely over her bare body.

"What cha doin' here?" Loulie gasped.

"Come to see you," Piney replied.

"'Bout what?"

"I'll tell you," Piney said, stepping into the room and closing the door.

"You ain't come from Tod, have ya?" Loulie queried.

"Naw, I ain't seem 'im."

"Oh."

Piney's visit to Loulie was in line with his usual round-about-the-bush method of doing things. Piney's approach, in wrangling a meeting with Malvina, had been first to engage Robert in casual conversation about girls. Robert's eager boyish interest in the fairer sex determined the nature of the bribe. A suggestion by Piney that they secure passes and go in town for a nocturnal visit with a young widow met with Robert's instant approval.

"Let's do that some night," Robert grinned, dismissing the sergeant with a man-to-man slap on the back.

"Whatcha want?" Loulie asked sullenly.

"I thought ya might like to go out with a captain," Piney baited.

"What for?" Loulie asked the rat-faced altruist.

"A little bit of fun."

"How much ya goin' give me if I do?"

"Ten dollars."

"That won't be enuf to buy me a bag of gingersnaps," Loulie sneered.

"Fifty?"

"Uh, uh. A hundred."

"He knows yer husband, Tod, so you be a widder," Piney instructed as he loosened his pants and dug into his money belt. "You be Loulie Schmidt, a widder."

"Who knows? I probably am anyway. I ain't heard from Tod.

He's probably kilt or somethin'." Loulie assumed the look of a bereaved widow.

"Yeh. Here's fifty. If ya give him a good time, I'll give you another fifty." Piney started for the door. "We'll be 'round tomorrow night."

"A girl's gotta look after herself," Loulie continued, talking to herself. "Times like these a woman's got to be a little bit prackle, 'specially a widder. Who knows?"

9

Alan Miller, after the usual half-day wait in the adjutant's tent, was at last allowed an audience with the general.

Sherman, his usual bundle of nerves, was restlessly pacing the inside perimeter of his tent, deep in thought, heedless of all going on around him. His black eyes darted up to stab Alan as he entered and, without voicing a greeting, continued his pacing, deep in thought, leaving a long black trail of cigar smoke in his wake like a river gunboat heading upstream under a full head of steam.

The beggar is trying to impress me, pretending he is endeavoring to solve all of the problems of the war, Alan smiled to himself. When actually he's trying to figure out how to draw the smoke through that cigar.

Sherman, the invetcrate smoker, smoked as he did everything else, with an energy which it would be supposed would deprive him of all the pleasures of smoking. He reached into his vest pocket, pulling out a fresh stogie and growled, "Cigar?"

"Thank you, sir," Alan said.

"I understand cigars are in order," Sherman stopped pacing and spun to face Alan. "And that you're going to quit us."

Alan met the general's eyes, locked them in a steady stare as he slowly found a match and applied it to the cigar.

"Mine's gone out," the general said after Alan had extinguished the match, "give me a light."

Alan took a puff or two to improve the glowing coal, handed his cigar to the general. Sherman carefully lighted his weed, took a pull

or two to assure himself, and having again lapsed into his train of thought, abstractedly threw away Alan's cigar.

"Well come on!" he finally said. "Answer me! What is this claptrap I've been hearing? I've held off on the court-martial proceedings until I heard your side of this affair."

Alan chuckled over the sudden demise of his gift cigar. "How," he asked, "did you happen to hear the other side?"

"There was a young lady through here yesterday, asking for you," Sherman replied.

"Malvina? Here?" Alan could hardly believe that she had managed to get through the lines.

"That's what I said," Sherman gruffed with all the manners of a Pawnee Indian. "She was here with a preposterous story about undying love, resigning commission, and other poppycock."

"Where is she now, sir?" Alan demanded.

"She said something about going to Jackson. I told her she would be arrested as a spy if she tried crossing our lines. I would assume she is now in Jackson."

Alan smiled.

"A most personable girl," the general persisted. "So much so, I'm afraid, that our outpost guards would melt under her smile." Suddenly he became serious. "What is this about resigning your commission?"

"Here it is, sir," Alan said, handing Sherman his letter of resignation. "I felt that I can no longer serve the army honorably."

The general tossed the document on his desk without looking at it. "I would reject this request if I were empowered to do otherwise. You're needed here."

"I'm afraid my services are of little use to you now, sir. I was arrested and imprisoned during my last visit to Vicksburg," Alan explained.

"If you had been attending to your duties," Sherman scowled, "observing the enemy's activities instead of its fairer sex, this would not have happened."

"Yes, sir," Alan smiled.

"It's unfortunate for the service that this has occurred," Sherman barked. "Get out of here before I disgrace myself by losing my temper."

"Yes, sir." Alan saluted and turned to leave.

"Where are you going? When you desert us here?" Sherman called. "Back out West to those savages?"

"Yes, sir," Alan stopped only long enough to reply, "back to civilization."

10

Young Lieutenant Newhouse, assigned as Malvina's escort, was disappointed when he learned of her wish to continue east to Jackson.

"I can't take you to Jackson," he grinned. "Not unless General Sherman's Corps clears your General Johnston out of the way, but I can drive you to the Big Black. We have patrols back that far."

"It isn't necessary," Malvina protested. "I can manage quite well."

"Leave you and return to fighting a war?" the lieutenant exclaimed. "Nonsense. I'm continuing with this assignment until we reach the point where I'm ducking Rebel shot and shell."

"Very well, my true and faithful lamb," Malvina laughed. "Come with me and I shall lead you to slaughter."

The ride from Haines Bluff to the Big Black River crossing near Edwards Depot was both exhilarating and depressing. It was good to be searching for Alan once again, but the countryside was a land of desolation. Pickets lounged on the porches of each abandoned plantation house. Beautiful women stood patiently outside the army encampments, waiting to beg soldier's rations for their children. Here and there, dotting the landscape like festering bedsores on the body of a dying man, black, saw-toothed, jagged-edged ruins, surrounded by open, unplanted fields, marked the sight of once proud planters' homes.

Jackson had never been a pretty town. A visiting Englishman had once described it as a "hydrocephalic order of architecture." The long strings of wooden houses, fronted with white porticoes and pillars too wide for their shrunken rooms, were a bit ridiculous. There were, Malvina admitted, grounds for the Englishman's watery-brain architectural theory.

"Perhaps," she thought, as she walked down the main street, sprinkled with a few lifeless, sullen loafers, "they will rebuild Jackson after the war into something beautiful."

Malvina's search for Belle would not have been difficult even if it had included searching every building in Jackson. The number of structures left standing after Sherman's departure were few. The search began at the hotel. Malvina, knowing Justin was in Jackson and thinking he might have seen Belle, had decided to begin her search by seeking his help.

"Mr. Justin Phelan?" the hotel clerk answered Malvina's inquiry. "Yes, ma'am. Mr. and Mrs. Phelan are here. They come back last night. I don't know whether they're in right now, but you can try if you want. Two-seventeen."

Malvina did not try to conceal the surprise which flooded her face. When had Justin married? Whom had he married?

Belle was the last person Malvina expected to find in Justin's room. "What are you . . . ?" Malvina could not finish the inquiry.

"Come in, Malvina," Belle said. Her face was controlled but her eyes could not find the strength to meet her sister's.

"Where is Justin?" Malvina demanded.

"I . . . I don't know," Belle stammered. Her eyes darted to the pile of gear in the center of the room which belonged to Justin; she abandoned her frantic plan for pretense. "He's out someplace. He ought to be back any minute."

"You've been staying here . . . with Justin?" Malvina demanded.

"Yes. It's none of your business," Belle answered, her eyes flashing defiance.

"Are you married?"

"No. Not yet." Belle hesitated, then added eagerly, "We're going to be."

"How long has this been going on?"

"It's none of your business!"

"I'm making it my business!" Malvina flared, then, tempering her anger with compassion, pleaded, "Belle, baby, you can't do this. You can't be here in a hotel, with a man. You're just a baby. Justin is twice your age. Papa would die if he knew."

"We're going to be married!" Belle shouted. "We're in love. He's going to marry me!"

"Yes, Belle," Malvina added firmly, "he certainly is."

"And I don't need your help to get a husband!" Belle stormed. She flounced across the room, threw herself on the bed.

"When did this begin?" said Malvina, quietly.

"A long time ago. While you were over here in Jackson." Belle turned to face Malvina, her face growing animated, her eyes sparkling as she taunted, "Does it surprise you, Malvina, that I, little sister Belle, could win a man away from the beautiful Malvina?"

"No, Belle," Malvina replied slowly. "You're very beautiful and Justin has always admired pretty girls."

"He likes me for many other reasons, too," Belle replied defiantly.

"Obviously," Malvina said. "Here in this hotel room he doubtless has discovered several other things."

"You're jealous, aren't you, Malvina?" Belle taunted. "Jealous because he never asked you to come to a hotel with him."

Malvina walked slowly to the cracked window, disdaining to reply.

"Answer me," Belle shouted. "It's true, isn't it? He never asked you!"

"No. He didn't ask me," she said. Would it have made a difference if he had? she asked herself. Would I have come? Would I have shared the bed Mary Anderson had at Hillcrest? Malvina thanked God that Justin had spared her the necessity of making this decision.

Suddenly Justin was in the room.

"Malvina!" he gasped, seeing her standing at the window.

"Good afternoon, Justin," she turned to face her former fiancé. "I came to visit you, and you can imagine my surprise when I discovered my baby sister here."

"Oh, yes. Yes. Belle." Justin's composure was shattered, "I . . . I found Belle and let her have my room," Justin blurted.

"That was very thoughtful of you, Justin," Malvina's smile was disarming.

"Oh, but . . ."

"Belle had told me everything, Justin," Malvina interrupted his protest. "When are you two getting married?"

"I don't know," Justin said, looking at Belle. "We had not decided."

"May I suggest," Malvina's voice was low and calm, "that you have a choice. I'll go with you either this afternoon, or this evening."

12

DELLA STOOD in the cooking arbor, a covered area in front of the cave entrance, shouting instructions, warnings and more instructions for as long as Chris was in sight. It was a morning ritual with Chris, the walk down to the city, a trip which included a visit and inspection of the foundry ruins, an attempt to purchase supplies at the street market, and exchange of gossip, news, and rumors with the newsmongers at the courthouse. As the walk was an established routine, so was Della's parting advice, usually spawned from some dream of dire foreboding.

"Look out for the shells! Keep looking in the air all the time!" she would shout. "If you see any pins, get me some. Oh, ask 'round 'bout for news from N'Orleans. I had a dream last night that Cousin Grace died. I just know somethin' happened to Grace. Ask about Grace!"

She's right, Chris thought, as he made his way slowly down the hill toward town, with these warnings. Each day the siege continues,

more and more people are exposing themselves carelessly, taking needless chances.

In the first few days of the siege the streets were deserted, now, after two weeks of being ringed by an ever-increasing number of mortars, parrots, rifles being fired around the clock; after living in the heart, the bull's-eye of a vast target, a gradual contempt for death was beginning to be the prevailing mood. Children were now playing on the streets, ducking into the caves at the sound of an approaching shell, dashing back out again after the explosion to pick up and salvage the jagged bits and pieces of casings.

Chris was midway down into town when the first shell of the new day was fired. The distant "H'rumph" came from the north, in the direction of the Yazoo. Seven rounds and then it was over, for the moment, as though each of the guns were sighting in, registering the range, making ready. The real fireworks were yet to come.

Chris wondered about his stubborn insistence which included the mournful visit to the foundry ruins in his daily routine. Habit, I suppose. A devilish habit, instinctive and uncontrollable.

Beyond the foundry, the army quartermaster was slaughtering draft oxen, preparing a four-ounce meat ration for the men in the forts. A long line of Negroes and whites were waiting patiently for the discarded tails, heads, entrails and feet. The quartermaster officers were the only fat men in Vicksburg.

Shopping, or rather trying to buy, at the market was a distasteful task to Chris. The shelves and counters of the few stores remaining open were dust-covered and empty. The proprietors usually sat in the front door turning away all servicemen, the wives, mothers, and children who were strangers, the refugees, the Negroes, even local residents who were not old customers, important or wealthy citizens. Money was not the medium of exchange; it was only a part of a complicated barter system. A merchant would exchange two barrels of secretly hoarded flour for a year's lease on a desirable house; the house would then be rented to a shelled-out planter, who would in turn sign over assets worth two thousand dollars held by a bank in England. The system disgusted Chris.

Bernbrook's, where the family had been accustomed to shop for many years, offered Chris a pound of coffee for seventy dollars, a pound of butter for twelve, a pound of snap beans for two. "Meat? No meat." Chris bought the snap beans and wondered what was

concealed beneath the counter, what was hidden behind the doors of the locked back room.

The crowd at the courthouse was the same. The rumors, the lies, the vague stories they told had not changed since the day before.

"Did you hear about how they're planning to replenish the ammunition at the forts?" a friend asked Chris enthusiastically.

"No, I don't think so," Chris replied.

"They're collecting all the Yankee duds and are going to recap them," the friend said proudly.

"Relief will be rolling inside of a few days. Johnston will be here," an authority told Chris.

"Captain Sanders came in last night. Took him two weeks to make the trip in from General Johnston," another authority told him a moment later. "He brought word ordering Pemberton to fight his way out. Vicksburg can't be saved."

"Not a stone, not a pebble will remain to mark the spot where our proud city stands. Yes, this will be so rather than bow before those Yankee despots!"

In disgust Chris vowed to cease his morning visits to the courthouse.

The contest of wills between Della, determined to live in the cave, and 'Lijah, stubbornly refusing to "set foot in dat gopher hole," was solved by Jefferson's cooking arbor at the entrance. It provided a common meeting ground for the two strong-willed women, a place where Della could stand and direct the meager household, yet still be ready and close enough to duck back into the damp safety of the sheltering cave at the slightest noise.

When Chris returned from his walk he found Della and 'Lijah preparing to bake. Saturday was bake day and no good Methodist would break the Sabbath by baking bread on Sunday.

Jefferson had been working since mid-morning preparing the fire, nursing and tending it until the glowing coals were "just right for baking." The two cooks, 'Lijah in the kitchen and Della at the cave, kept a watchful eye on Jefferson's activities as they worked the johnnycake and ash-cake doughs.

The ash cakes, barely palatable, but healthful, were 'Lijah's specialty and were the first to go on the fire. The cakes were made by burying soft corn-meal dough under the hot ashes of the baking

fire. The ashes, small coals, dirt, and trash which adhered and baked into the cakes gave them a special property beneficial to health . . . according to 'Lijah.

Della's specialty was the johnnycakes. Her soft corn-meal dough, spread to the proper thickness, and patted down on a johnnycake board, was a gourmet's delight. The cake, mounted on the board, was placed standing before the fire, supported by a chair at an angle of forty-five degrees, until the heat of the fire baked it thoroughly done and crusty brown.

Chris from the shelter of the cave recalled, as he watched the women work, 'Lijah's favorite explanation of the origin of johnnycakes to David, Robert, and the girls when they were all children.

"Not johnnycakes, journey cakes. De Injuns made 'em up. Whole parcels when dey get ready for a long journey across de plains an' mountains."

Dusk was beginning to descend over the city when 'Lijah, at the cave entrance, called in a voice vibrating with excitement.

"Miz Della. Yo' come hyer, ma'am?"

"What is it, 'Lijah?"

"Next doah dehr. Dey is somethin' goin' on next doah," 'Lijah exclaimed.

Della lumbered to the cave entrance to inquire, "Where next door?"

"In dat cave," 'Lijah pointed out the newly excavated cave down the hill. "Look at dem men all lined up in a line like. S'pose dey is somebody daid ova dehr? S'pose dey is pallbearers?"

Della inspected the line of twelve men waiting outside the neighboring cave entrance, pondered the phenomenon. "I don't know. There's twelve men sure 'nuff."

"Dehr's been men a comin' an' a goin' dehr all day, but dey ain't been no line befo'."

"They don't seem to be particularly sad," Della mused as she observed the laughing, joking, flask-drinking line-up of soldiers.

"Mus' be goin' ter be a militerry funeral. Dey is all sojers," 'Lijah observed sadly. "Some po' sojer soul is laid out in dehr awaitin' ter be transported by ministerin' angels ter de promised lan'."

A pore sojer soul was indeed laid out in the cave next door. Seven "ministering angels" in seven hillside heavenly caves had

pulled aside their blanket-draped portals for the weary heart and body. Big Beulah had opened up her Pearly Gates for business.

2

"You've just got to understand, Belle," Justin was saying, and Malvina, seated beside her sister on the hotel-room bed, nodded in agreement. "Jackson is no place for a woman now. The patrols have been streaming back through town all day. Sherman's entire corps seems to be heading back to Jackson, destroying the railroad as they come."

While God, Lincoln and General Halleck worried about the security of the troops at Vicksburg, Grant and Sherman had decided to eliminate the threat of a rescue attack by Johnston for all time. Sherman was knifing to the rear in the direction of Jackson with orders to tear up every foot of railroad track from Vicksburg to Jackson; poison every well with dead animals; ruin every spring with kerosene and quinine; find and destroy any enemy army.

Johnston and his army could not be found. The sulking general and his men were at Canton, twenty-five miles north of Jackson and would never be a threat to the Army of the Mississippi.

"Belle," Justin pleaded patiently, "you're not listening! I'm forming my Ranger company. Once under arms we must leave the city immediately. We will attempt to forestall Sherman's re-entry into Jackson. I'm going to ride south as far as Raymond with you and Malvina on Thursday afternoon. I will leave you and Malvina there. I am certain Malvina's pass will assure you safe-conduct back through the lines into Vicksburg."

The tone of finality in Justin's voice told Belle that further argument was useless. Tonight and tomorrow night in Justin's arms, then it would be over. Forever? In wartime anything was probable.

"I'm going to my room," Malvina said as she rose from the edge of the bed. "I will see you two happy married folk at dinnertime."

Malvina was glad to get away from Belle and Justin. She was sure that Justin too was counting the hours until he would be free of his bride of two days. Justin was not the type of man who could

enjoy the sustained company of any woman, and Belle with her juvenile whims, moods, and tantrums would test the patience of the most ardent male.

"I wonder how wise it was of me to force this marriage?" Malvina pondered. "Would Papa have insisted as I did?"

Malvina dismissed her concern by assuming that Justin, whom she knew to be an honorable man, would have married Belle anyhow.

If Justin had any feeling as he took his position at the head, facing his newly assembled Partisan Ranger Company, it was not one of pride. The company, comprised of sixty men and their mounts, was a miserable-looking assemblage. There were two or three young men, sons of planters, who like Justin had so far avoided service and now that their property was gone or endangered were impelled to heed his call. The larger portion of the new company was composed of that part of the Southern community known as "poor whites." These illiterate, half-starved men owned one horse apiece and had chosen the Rangers because of the promise of abundant food, rich treasure, and the excitement of cavalry raiding, in preference to the tediousness of the trenches. It was a motley crew which gathered on the State House lawn. Some wore dark homespun, some wore jackets, some long coats, some frock coats, some dress coats, some no coats at all. Side by side with the "clay-eaters" rode the few handsomely uniformed and finely mounted lads of the plantations.

Most of the horses were half-starved-looking beasts, only to be endured until, as one man put it, "Ah can head out to'ard Vicksburg and git me one of them thar corn-fed Yankee critters."

"Look how tall he is in the saddle," Belle exclaimed proudly to Malvina as they stood beside the hotel window watching the mustering-in and review. "Isn't he grand?"

"Justin looks very brave and noble," Malvina agreed. "Are we leaving Raymond in the morning as planned?"

"Why do you always have to spoil everything by mentioning something unpleasant?" Belle flared as she flounced away from the window and returned to her own room. Malvina watched the rest of the review alone.

It was next to impossible to purchase horses in Jackson. Malvina thought they were fortunate when Justin found a pair of bony mules and intimidated and bargained their Negro owner into a sale which included a two-wheel cart. The price was five hundred dollars, Confederate.

"Do you think I'm going to ride in that awful old dirty cart behind those funny-looking old mules? I'll be the laughingstock of Vicksburg if we come riding in from Jackson in that thing," Belle railed when she saw the rig.

As usual it was Malvina who smoothed out the tantrum. "Belle, baby," she explained, "no one will see us in this cart except the Yankees. If they laugh, who cares? We'll leave the cart outside of Vicksburg. We cannot drive anyway, we must walk in."

Reins in hand, perched on a rough board seat, Malvina waited impatiently as Belle played her parting scene.

Thirty minutes later the poor mules were shocked out of standing-sleep by the angry snap of a rein's end on their rumps. The cart lurched forward, Malvina driving in angry, determined silence. Belle, whose tears had vanished the moment Justin swung onto his horse and rode back toward Jackson, stared straight ahead, dreading the two days' trip with the woman who was responsible for all her troubles.

Della shouted from her position at the mouth of the McClellan cave, "Belle!" Turning, she rushed back into the dungeon to fetch Chris. The hugging and kissing was cut short when Belle announced, "I've got a new name."

"What do you mean, child?" Chris asked. He was overjoyed at this unexpected safe return of his daughters.

"I am Mrs. Justin Phelan!" Belle said smugly.

"What?" Chris gasped.

"That's right," Malvina said quickly. "Belle and Justin were married in Jackson last Sunday, I attended the wedding. Wasn't I lucky? The lovebirds were getting married the day I arrived."

Della, for the first time since her arrival in Vicksburg, was speechless. Chris recovered from his surprise enough to take Belle in his arms and weep silently, his head buried in her hair. "Baby, baby, baby. This is what you wanted. I'm so happy for you."

'Lijah, who had been aroused from a sound sleep, came out of

the house at this moment to break up the weeping family circle. "Bless de Lord and de lobely Jesus. Mah babies. Dis chile tinks yo' is daid fo' suah."

"They couldn't kill us off, 'Lijah," Malvina laughed as she embraced her mammy. "We're too onery."

"Dat Ah believe. Dat Ah do believe fo' shore."

"Isn't it wonderful?" Malvina said. "Belle is married."

"Dat baby? Mah baby?" 'Lijah shouted, turning to Belle. "Now what yo' go do dat fo'?"

Malvina, fearing her presence might be embarrassing to Belle, left her sister to invent her own story of intrigue, love, and marriage, bask as the center of attention, so under the pretense of helping 'Lijah prepare the wedding breakfast, she withdrew from the group.

At the fire helping 'Lijah, Malvina heard the joyous news. "Dat man ob yo's, dat cap'n. He war hyer."

"When, 'Lijah?" Malvina whispered excitedly. "When was he here?"

"Da day yo' lef' if Ah remembers rightly. He come hyer an' spend de whole day with Mista Chris." 'Lijah puckered her brow trying to recall the exact time of his visit.

Mad with impatience and curiosity, Malvina refrained from interrupting Belle's monologue, biding her time until she could get her father alone. "'Lijah, I'm so hungry," she said, diverting her own attention away from the subject uppermost in her mind. "Could I have some bacon for breakfast?"

"Lordy, baby, dat ain't possible a-tall," 'Lijah said, shaking her head sadly. "We ain't had no bacon fo' weeks now. Mista Chris say dey's asking sixteen dollahs a pound fo' de moldy stuff."

"Oh, dear," Malvina frowned, not at the price, but at the implications behind these prices. "Things are critical. I didn't realize."

"Ah doan know 'bout critical, but dey sure is bad. Mista Chris buy a piece ob beef dis mornin' dat's so stringy an' tough, Ah tole him dat it been dried right on de hoof."

Chris came by the cook fire at this moment, having broken away from the table group, and bent down to whisper in Malvina's ear, "I'm expecting Captain Miller to come by here any day now. He's been away for a week looking for a woman to marry. If he doesn't find anyone, perhaps he'll be back by here to marry you."

Malvina threw her arms around her father, weeping joyously on his shoulder.

3

Justin Phelan stood on a brush-crowned knoll, peering through a leafy curtain inspecting the encampment along the road a quarter of a mile below. A full moon illuminated the peaceful little scene with the brightness of day. A few shelter halves, a headquarters officer's Sibley tent, and two sleepy sentinels plodding up and down the road in front of the tent was all that was visible of the ammunition and ordnance supply depot located in the woods to the rear of the tents. Justin supposed there would be other guards on duty in the dark woods, probably two on each side of the dump. Turning to an aide, he whispered, "Go down and get the boys. I'll wait here."

Taking a company of untrained men out on a raid is sheer idiocy, Justin argued before the expedition got under way, but his seconds-in-command thought differently.

"This crowd of cotton-pickers didn't join up to ride up and down the streets of Jackson practicing cavalry formations. They're hungry and they're poor and they're itchin' to get their hands on some Yankee loot. They're gettin' rebellious and unless we start doin' something in the next day or two, the whole pack 'll desert," Justin's chief lieutenant had explained.

Fearfully, he had selected a simple task; one which, if successful, would supply the troop with badly needed arms and ammunition. The target for the raid was one of the ammunition dumps which Sherman had established behind his corps.

Reaching the site of the dumps had meant a long circuitous ride to the south, circling down and around Sherman's railroad-wrecking army, coming up on the flank and to the rear. So far, they had managed to avoid the cavalry units which rode and combed the flanks of the Federal army, slipping through the screen, and had moved up the dumps without having to fire a single precious shot.

"We're all set, Just'," the returning aide said in a low voice.

"Good." Justin turned and followed the messenger back to the

rear slope of the hill where the troop was assembled. The rangers, lounging on their mounts beneath the trees, looked dangerous and powerful in the leaf-filtered moonlight. The half-light helped to fatten the bony-ribbed horses.

"The dump is down below the edge of the hill a half-mile." Justin spoke to his men in a low, but distinct voice. "We'll go over the crest in a line and continue down the hill at a walk. No man will open fire. We will not charge until we are fired upon or until I give the command. Our success depends upon surprise. We will ride through the camp below on the dead run, killing every Yank in sight, and will rendezvous at the supply dump immediately to the rear of the camp. I don't want anyone stopping to loot the tents or the bodies of the Yankees. We need horses, guns, cartridges, and caps. Money, watches, and uniforms will come later. Is this understood?" The men, anxious and excited, murmured their agreement.

The Yankees came spilling out of their tents at the sound of the bloodcurdling Rebel yells. They groped in confusion for their weapons, dying at the hands of the pistol-shooting, saber-slashing Rebel guerrillas milling about in their midst. The Yankee officer in charge was shot in the doorway of his tent before the eyes of the frightened mulatto girl who crouched at the rear on a cot.

Justin reined in at the dump, hoping that his name and prestige would provide the discipline necessary to bring the exultant troopers through the tempting deserted tent village. Silently he murmured a prayer of thanks when his whooping, laughing, shouting command appeared at the agreed assembly point, scrambling among the boxes of arsenal-fresh rifles, searching for better weapons, stuffing saddlebags with cartridges and caps.

The entire raid took less than five minutes. While his second-in-command was taking roll call, Justin took one man and two canteens of kerosene to prepare the dump for firing. After spilling powder around the entire perimeter of the depot and splashing kerosene on the powder kegs, Justin mounted, tossed a match into the oil-soaked powder, and signaled for the withdrawal. As his mount raced down the road on the dead run, Justin turned in his saddle to look back. His troopers were strung out behind him in a long line, and in back of them an inferno of powder and exploding cartridges lighted the sky, leaping into the neighboring pine trees, lighting them into a towering beacon of fire. Every Yankee

cavalry detachment for miles around had now been informed of another successful guerrilla raid.

Five miles from the conflagration, Justin led his men into the woods, pausing to rest winded horses and to instruct the men on the route of their proposed return trip to Jackson.

"We're heading straight south, men, along the Raymond road, until we cross the Baker Creek bridge. We'll burn the bridge and hope this will delay any pursuing cavalry. After we fire the bridge we'll head cross-country," Justin explained. "We'll stick to the woods, follow lumber trails, and not cross any main road until it has first been scouted to the right and left. Men, this was a most successful raid. We have been lucky to escape without the loss of a single man. The most difficult task now lies ahead of us. The ultimate success of our venture depends upon our ability to bring every man back to Jackson alive."

Again, luck rode with the raiders. The Edwards Depot-Raymond road was deserted all the way back to the creek. The bridge was quickly smeared with kerosene, a little tar, a keg of powder. The wooden structure was speedily enveloped in rushing billows of flame. It vanished into smoke and smoldering ashes only minutes before the first group of pursuing Yankee cavalrymen reached the creek.

4

Piney Pucket walked up the main street of Vicksburg with Loulie Schmidt Chaffin at his side. On his way to deliver "the widder" to Captain McClellan, he hopefully planned for an evening of soldierly companionship in which Robert would invite his trusted sergeant to accompany him and "the widder" up to Twin Chimneys where the jovial group would enjoy a quiet drink. Robert would then bring out his sister and say, "Sergeant, you remember Malvina? She was with us on the trip from Jackson, remember? Maybe we can talk her into joining us and making this party a foursome."

"Whatcha lookin' so glum about?" Loulie whined as they approached the hotel.

Piney shook his head. "Remember now," he warned, "you're a widder an' if ya want that other fifty, give him a good time."

"Whatcha want me to do?" Loulie complained. "Take 'im onna trip around the world?" Loulie had picked up this expression from the actors and didn't really know what the phrase implied.

Piney gave Loulie a look which summarized the contempt he felt for all women. He did not bother to give her an answer.

As the gallant Robert, recalling the inviting picture Loulie had presented at the military-ball rape affair, took her hand in introduction and bowed low, murmuring compliments about the brave women whose sacrifices had been made at the altar of their country, Piney's desperate hopes for an evening with Malvina faded. The captain tucked Loulie's arm beneath his own and moved toward the door.

Loulie was so impressed by the captain's gallantry that she almost wished she *were* a widow. She felt angry at Tod, cheated that he would deny her this honor.

"We'll see you here at the hotel at eleven o'clock, Sergeant," Robert said gaily and turned to lead his lady out onto the street.

Piney turned to the dust-covered gilt-edged mirror hanging on the hotel wall, inspected the dejected figure he saw reflected in the glass, and snarled, "Whatcha expect—pimp!"

Vicksburg in siege time was a desolate place, all eating places and bars having closed for want of food and liquor. Robert was uncertain as to what was expected of him and assuming Piney had made all of the arrangements for the evening, walked the length of Main Street with Loulie on his arm, then turned around and walked all of the way back to the hotel as he waited for the lady to reveal them. He told a few amusing incidents, drawn from his collection of army stories, ending the recital with the one which he thought was most hilarious.

"The boys in my company have lots of fun shouting across the lines to the Yankees," Robert began. "They yell, 'How are you, Abe Lincoln?' and then the Yankees yell back, 'How are you, Jeff Davis?' Usually my men will call back, 'How are you, Bull Run?' and the Yankees, they have a tough time trying to find a battle they've won, but sometimes they come back with, 'How are you, Antietam?' " Robert chuckled and waited for Loulie.

Loulie turned her calf eyes on the convulsed captain and slowly inquired, "Why? Why do they shout at each other?"

"What's he tryin' to do? Wear out the only pair of shoes I got?" Loulie murmured to herself when she and the captain reached the hotel, turned around and started back down the length of Main Street again.

One of the underlying reasons behind Loulie's acceptance of this date was that she had assumed they would go out to dinner first. In Loulie's circle of friends, the men that didn't want to feed the girls went straight to Beulah's place. Under the influence of this assumption, Loulie, as she had bathed and dressed during the afternoon, had conjured up a vision of the dinner she would order at some fine restaurant—roast duck stuffed with nuts.

"I've got a flask of brandy," Robert said with a forced, nervous, sickly grin as they reached the end of Main Street for the second time. "If we had someplace to go we could drink it."

Loulie had a place for him to go, but she refrained from expressing this vulgarity aloud. She did not want brandy. She wanted champagne with roast duck.

Had Loulie been able to summarize her feelings, she would have admitted the hunger pains were actually nervous pains. She would have felt much better had she known what to do next, how to proceed, what was expected of her. Her previous associations with men had been solved by circumstance or the men themselves. With Tod she had been drunk; Clyde had been the aggressor, dragging her off to bed right in front of her father; but with Captain Robert McClellan she felt like a complete idiot. He just kept walking, talking, grinning, and waiting.

"We could go up to my room," she said at last, in answer to his question concerning a place to drink the brandy.

When she and the captain, minus his jacket, were finally seated uncomfortably upon the edge of her bed, each holding a dirty water glass partially filled with brandy, Loulie sighed and nervously began her task of earning the extra fifty dollars.

Employing the tricks she had seen on the stage of the opera house, she assumed an attitude of mock modesty—keeping her eyes lowered, thus avoiding a chance revelation of her true emotions—and volunteered, "It was shore hot today."

"Yes. Over a hundred," Robert eagerly replied. "Out at the forts, most of the men took off their shirts, it was so hot," he added, eager to pursue this new subject.

"That's a good idea," Loulie said. "I don't have a shirt, but would you think I was awful if I took off my dress?"

"Why, no. No, of course not," Robert stammered, "I took off my coat and I didn't even ask your permission."

"Here. You help me with my buttons," Loulie said, rising and turning her back, confronting the captain with a neck-to-waist row of pearl fasteners.

Robert's hand shook when he began the task, but by the time he reached the last button he was anxiously calm.

"I'll jis take it off, see . . . I got onna underskirt," Loulie demonstrated as she stepped out of the gown, leaving it in a heap at the foot of the bed. "I feel like I can breathe now. Did ya eva feel like that? That ya had somethin' on an' if ya didn't take it off ya couldn't breathe? That's the way I felt." Loulie was feeling more relaxed now. The brandy on an empty stomach helped; then too, she was in familiar surroundings and they were talking about things Loulie knew and understood.

"I'll betcha pants are hot, ain't they? I don't see how men can stan' it in hot weather, goin' 'round wearin' pants alla time."

If Robert caught the implication behind Loulie's speech, he muffed the cue. Robert sat, sipping his drink and grinning.

"I never wear pantalettes when it gits hot weather," Loulie continued, refusing to give up the subject, offering the captain a second chance. "Do ya think that's awful? A lady not wearin' pantalettes?"

Loulie was never to learn Robert's opinion on the subject. A knock at the door silenced the conversation. Before Loulie could rise from the bed, the knob turned and the door opened.

"My God! Tod!"

Tod's first reaction, upon seeing Captain McClellan sitting on Loulie's bed, was to salute. He checked the impulse in time to keep himself from looking like a complete fool. Still uncertain as to what he should do or say; as to what the military protocol decree was under such informal circumstances, he stood in the doorway nervously trying to button his coat which he had loosened as he came up the stairs. At last, properly buttoned, he stepped forward, extending a hand of welcome to his superior officer and scion of the august Vicksburg McClellan family.

"Lieutenant, I . . ." Robert turned to the sullen-eyed Loulie, "I understood you were dead!"

"Yah. They tole me ya was," Loulie lied, addressing her gaze to the floor.

"No. No, I'm very much alive," Tod said with a nervous laugh, relieved that the situation he found could be excused with a valid reason. He hastened to ask, almost as an apology, "Where did you hear this, Loulie?"

"I don't know," Loulie glanced at Robert, saw he was watching her and quickly allowed her eyes to return to the floor. "Somebody tole me."

"When?" Tod persisted, more anxious to please the captain than to track down the source of the misinformation.

"Day 'fore yesterday." Loulie's voice was shaded with defiance. "Somebody come and tole me day 'fore yesterday."

"That's odd," Tod mused. "I was at the fort."

"If you'll excuse me," Robert, who had risen and slipped on his coat, said with an apologetic smile, "I think I'd better be on my way. Good night, Mrs. Chaffin. Good night, Lieutenant. It has been a pleasure seeing you again."

Again Tod had to restrain his impulse. Again his first thoughts were to beg the captain to stay awhile longer.

"What was he doing here?" Tod demanded, after he had conducted the captain to the door and begged him to return soon.

Loulie, who was sitting on the bed peeling off her stockings, did not answer.

"Loulie," Tod said in the patient tones of a father addressing a stubborn child, "what was Captain McClellan doing here?"

"What did it look like he was doin'?" Loulie shouted as she pulled off her petticoat. Loulie had neglected to tell the captain that she was not only pantaletteless but shiftless. Loulie stood by the bed, wearing no more clothes than a frog.

"Look," Loulie said, turning completely around to display her charms and calling forth some opera-house French. "I'm in dishybilly."

Tod could not find the words to say what he thought.

"I suppose your dirty old mind is thinkin' all sorts of things," Loulie said, throwing herself down on the bed, then rolling over on her back. "It ain't so. He come to see me 'cause I was a widder. They allus send officers out to see soldiers' widders an' offer congratulations."

Tod did not bother to correct his wife; he could only look.

"He had all his clothes on, didn't he? I wasn't layin' here for him like I am for you, was I?"

"No, Loulie," Tod managed to say. "You weren't layin' here for him like you are now."

"Fer you," Loulie corrected. "Take off yer clothes. Ya must be awful hot. It's cool here layin' on the bed in front of the window with nuthin' on."

As Tod undressed, Loulie picked up the captain's half-empty brandy glass and finished the contents. "Ya didn't bring anythin' to eat, did ya?" she asked. "I'm hungry. Ya know what I'm hungry for? Roast duck."

"Have a good time?" Piney asked, when Robert appeared at the hotel.

"Her dead husband came home," Robert replied dryly, turning and walking out of the hotel lobby. Piney trailed the long-legged Robert all the way back to the forts, silently cursing the day God purloined the rib.

The lightning which illuminated the western skies with the brilliance of the noonday sun, the thunder rumbling and rolling in from across the river, failed to awaken Tod from his deep dreamless sleep. A fatigued man with ears attuned to the mortar's roar could slumber undisturbed through the thundering, booming nightly cannonade but would snap to wakefulness at the slightest deviation from this normal bedlam. The steady and relentless patter of the rain which followed the early pre-dawn electrical storm was the sound which awakened Tod.

This is a real gully-washer, Tod thought as he listened to the persistent drumming of the rainfall on the roof. The poor men at the forts will be soaked by dawn and the trenches will be running knee-deep with water.

Tod turned to the bland-faced Loulie sleeping at his side, and wondered at the fates which continually conspired to throw him back into the arms of this girl.

Tod hated himself more than he did the dull-witted Loulie. He was disgusted at the weakness he had demonstrated upon finding his wife alone and partly disrobed in the company of another

man. What am I? Who am I that I would bow and scrape and practically apologize for my intrusion and then climb into bed and into the arms of the woman like a returning hero?

Rising, Tod tiptoed over to the chair containing his heaped uniform and was trying to pull on his trousers when Loulie said, "Whatcha doin'?"

"Dressing," Tod said. "I'm going back to the fort."

"Why?"

"I think I'd better go. I'm needed," he replied hesitantly.

"I thought ya had two days off? Ya said so last night."

"I know, but I've got to go." He succeeded in getting one leg into his trousers before he felt Loulie's warm body pushing up against his bare back. Her arms came creeping around his waist, fondling.

"Whatcha wanna go for? It's rainin' pitchforks and nigger babies. Come get back in bed. I'm cold standin' out here wrapped in this old sheet."

As Loulie enveloped his body in her muslin wrapper, Tod returned to the animal level of human existence, too weak to think; the bed smelled of dampness, of woman. . . .

5

The fort was a madhouse of activity. At intervals along the main traverse men with shovels were busily engaged in digging pits in the floor of the trench.

"Countershafting," the first sergeant explained to Robert. "Listen."

Joining the sergeant in a kneeling, ear-to-the-ground position, Robert listened. Deep in the earth he could hear the dull thud of numerous picks as they chipped away in some subterranean passage.

"What is it?" Robert whispered.

"Mine. The Yankees are digging a mine under the fort," the sergeant explained.

"But it must be a hundred and seventy-five yards over to the Federal lines," Robert protested.

"Don't make no difference. That's what they're doin'. They've

dug a shaft all the way over here. Right now they're probably diggin' powder branches on both sides."

"Why?" Robert still could not believe his ears.

"They're gonna blow us right up among the angels." The sergeant grinned. "They'll put about five thousand pounds of powder under us and Whoom!—away we go."

"What had we best do?" Robert asked the veteran non-com.

"I would suggest, sir," the sergeant replied, "that we notify regiment, keep the counterminers digging and move the rest of the company back to the reserve trenches where we'll be in a position to counterattack when the big blow comes."

"But, if they're still digging, how can they explode a mine?" Robert queried.

"I think, now this is just a guess, but I think the pick noises are just horn tootin'," the sergeant explained. "I've a notion the diggers are pounding around, to make us think they're still working on the mine, while actually they're carryin' in, loading and fusing the mine right now. Unless I miss my guess, they'll blow her tonight."

"I wouldn't want to rouse the colonel unless it's necessary," Robert hedged.

"I've been watching the Yankee parapets out front. It grows about a foot every night. They've been trying to cover it over with brush and weeds, but that parapet has been growin' and not by itself."

The colonel, the regimental commander, listened to Robert's explanation, congratulated him on his alertness, and implemented counterattack plans immediately. All men, except the sappers, were moved out of the outer-works to the inner-works.

Robert had not inspected the inner-works and was surprised to find they had been constructed for the specific purpose of such a counterattack. Crude chevaux-de-frise, formed by studding a tree trunk with five-foot sharpened stakes capable of impaling a man, were brought to the front and poised atop the inner-works, ready to be rolled like huge meat choppers down on top and into any salient which might be blown in the fort. Stacked behind the chevaux-de-frise were piles of shot, fuses cut short, ready to be lighted and rolled or tossed onto the heads of the attacking Yanks. In addition to these offensive-defensive measures, the works themselves were impressive. Eighteen-inch logs had been railed, staked,

and then bunked up with earth, with the topmost log laid in as a header, blocked up a few inches above the dirt in order that the concealed rifleman could peer through the slot under the log and enjoy complete safety.

"One company could withstand an army here," Robert commented to the colonel. The colonel nodded and instructed the sergeants to form the men into groups of four and place them in the works four deep. "If the Yankees blow a salient in the outerworks they will attempt to carry the inner fort by rushing an entire company through at one time. The action will be fast and furious. The best shot in each group will be designated as the rifleman. The other three men will attend to keeping this man supplied with four loaded and cocked muskets at all times."

The first sergeant missed his prediction concerning the explosion time of the Yankee mine by six hours. From out of the bowels of the earth came a deep, dull, rumbling sound, like a half-suppressed earthquake, followed by a heavy cloud of mushrooming earth bellowing up, showering the surrounding trenches with dirt, clods, and shattered logs. The heavy dirt cloud began to settle revealing a mingling of timbers, muskets, and men, half buried amid the boulders of the explosion.

A huge gap of perhaps fifty feet had been gouged out of the Confederate outer-works behind which was a ragged ten-foot-deep gully marking the site of the mine tunnel.

"Load your guns!" The Yankee voice carried all the way to the waiting Confederate lines. Ramrods could be heard ringing in Enfields as cartridges were pressed home.

"Skirmishers to the front!" A thin line of blue-jacketed sharpshooters appeared over the edge of the Federal works. They came trotting down the debris jumbled crater, guns at half port.

"Forward!" A long double column of Yankee assault troops spilled over into the hole and began moving up toward the Confederate salient.

Robert's regimental commander gave the command to fire and the earth began to tremble under the explosion of artillery and small arms from the intact inner works. From Robert's peek-hole position, vision was soon obliterated by the heavy cloud of blue smoke which filled the chasm with a lethal fog. To Robert it did

not seem possible than any man could walk headlong into this deadly storm of Confederate shells and live. He was amazed when several scattered bluecoats came stumbling through the tornado of fire. These living few seemed dazed, at a loss as to where they were.

Robert was swept with feelings of horror and exhilaration as the Confederate snipers, having a clean target for the first time, began the systematic slaughter of the surviving bluecoats.

"We are not men. We are animals; beasts of prey."

"Back, men!" a young Federal officer finally cried. "Back for your lives!" And the living handful of men turned tail and ran back into the smoke-filled valley of the dead as the Rebels in the works redoubled their fire.

"Would you believe it," someone shouted to Robert, "them damn Yankees didn't fire nary a shot?"

6

Alan Miller's planned route back to Vicksburg, after his meeting with General Sherman, consisted of a circling movement which would take him south of the city, across the Mississippi River and up the Louisiana shore to a point where he could reswim the river and enter the town above the south battery defenses. He selected this particular course, the route followed by the few Confederate smugglers who managed to traffic in and out of the city, knowing it to be comparatively free of Confederate troops. His only danger would be the Confederate guerrillas who infested the Louisiana shore.

At the river, after depositing his equipment and horse with the Quartermaster at General Herron's headquarters, he had shucked off his jacket, shirt, and boots. Clad only in his buckskin breeches, armed with a bowie knife, he slipped into the silt-laden waters of the Mississippi and with steady, powerful strokes made the half-mile swim to the Louisiana shore. Silently he had pulled himself up onto the western levee, moved quietly out and crossed a cornfield to a narrow wagon road leading north. He estimated himself to be five miles south and west of the Vicksburg docks.

Silence can be deceptive. Swinging around a sharp bend in the road, Alan came face to face with a horseman standing like a statue

in the middle of the road. The guerrilla had seen him crossing the fields and was waiting at the shadowy bend of the road. A flash of fire sent a bullet whistling by his ear. To flee, to attempt an escape, was impossible. Ducking low, Alan plunged forward, bowie knife in hand, slashing into the horse's chest. It reared, poised, and fell, pinning the frantic rider beneath. Before the guerrilla could attempt a recovery, Alan was on him, stabbing down in blind fury. The wicked, bloody blade nearly severed the man's head from his body. Gathering up the dead man's pistol, Alan sprinted on up the road on a dead run, hoping to gain the river bank opposite Vicksburg before the guerrilla's body was discovered by his companions.

The iron-gray dawn of the twenty-eighth day of the siege of Vicksburg flushed the eastern skies and daylight was coming in with the rush of a moccasined savage when Alan grasped the piling along the north end of the cannon-blasted Vicksburg wharves and slowly pulled himself up out of the dark waters of the river. Pausing, he shook himself like a giant retriever dog, freed his long hair of water, and darted into the shadows of a shelled-out building.

'Lijah was fussing with the fire in the arbor outside the McClellan cave, uncovering the "ashed-in" coals, adding stick kindling and making ready to heat coffee water, when Alan appeared. The old mammy was startled into dropping an entire apronful of kindling on the feeble coals when he whispered, "Hist! 'Lijah!"

"Is dat yo'?" 'Lijah's eyes looked like two balls of white in the cave's shadows as she looked up at the towering scout.

"Captain Miller," he assured her.

"What yo' doin' hyer at dis ouah?"

"Sh," Alan warned. "We don't want to wake anyone."

"Doan wanna wake nobody?" 'Lijah's voice rose as she spoke. "Now what kinda talk am dat? Miz Malvina, she shoot me daid if she sleep and not know yo' hyer."

"Who is it, 'Lijah?" It was Belle's voice calling from the interior of the cave.

"Miz Malvina's Cap'n Miller," 'Lijah sang out.

Malvina, on her cot beside Belle, was vaguely aware of the voices calling in the night. She was awake enough to recognize 'Lijah's voice, to hear the words "Cap'n Miller," but the meaning was slow

in coming. The wing of the cave which she occupied with Belle was pitch black; she had no idea whether it was day or night. She would have turned over and gone back to sleep, thinking she had been dreaming, had Belle not mumbled something under her breath and flounced around on the hard bed.

"What is it?" Malvina managed to ask.

"It's 'Lijah. Your captain is outside."

"Alan!" Malvina was out of the bed, stumbling through the darkness toward the cave entrance.

Alan lifted her from the damp ground cradling her like a baby.

"Oh, my darling," she whispered in ecstasy.

'Lijah turned away to cover the embarrassment. She fussed with the fire, turned back again, and still they were kissing. "Now yo' look hyer," she said, outraged. "Yo' leave mah girl alone. She ain't fitten to be receivin' no gentleman. Miz Malvina, yo' git back in dar an make yo'self decent. Shame on yo', traipsin' round hyer barefoot in yo' nightgown. Yo' gits." It was then she noticed Alan's lack of clothing for the first time. "Yo'! Look at yo'! Naked as a jaybird! Wheah is yo' clothes?"

Frantically she rushed to turn Malvina around, facing her away from the bootless, shirtless captain. "Yo' stan' there now and doan yo' peek none while I go fetch somethin' ter cover up dis po' man's nakedness. Lan' o' goodness Ah doan know what dis worl's acomin' too. Eberbody carryin' on like de day dey wuz born."

"Alan," Malvina whispered after the fussing 'Lijah had vanished into the cave looking for a quilt, " 'Lijah won't let me look, but I can feel. Come put your arms around me."

"I love you, Malvina," he whispered into her hair as he held her shoulders tightly to his bare chest.

"Oh, darling, I've missed you so," Malvina whispered as she twisted around in his arms. Their lips were locked in a kiss when 'Lijah returned.

"Stop dat!" 'Lijah shouted as she waddled toward the lovers. "Ain't yo' got no shame? Yo' doan listen to a thing Ah say."

"I do! I do! See? My eyes were closed. I didn't peek."

Unable to cope with Malvina's logic, 'Lijah changed the subject. "Yo' git now, while Ah cover up dis man."

"My man!" Malvina corrected.

"Not yet, he ain't! Not till yo' is married good an proper. Den

an only den is yo' 'titled to do all de monkey-shinin' yo' wants," 'Lijah lectured as she wrapped the shivering Alan in the bed quilt. "Ah thought Ah taught yo' better dan dis."

Alan's protestations and assurances that he was not tired subsided when 'Lijah and Malvina had led him into the house and into one of the upstairs bedrooms. It had been a long time since he had slept in a bed and almost forty-eight hours since he had slept anywhere.

The light was fading in the western skies when Malvina shook him into wakefulness. "Come on, sleepyhead. 'Lijah is holding supper for you," and it was dark when Alan bade good night to the thoughtful Chris, and took Malvina by the arm and led her off into the darkness.

"Where are we going?" she whispered as they walked out into the road and turned up toward the heights above the city.

"Back to Sky Parlor Hill," Alan replied. "I'm going to try to find our rock."

In the darkness Malvina blushed at the thought of that first evening with Alan. Wondered at the impulsiveness which had brought this wonderful stranger into her life. Alan after a few minutes' walk found their rock. In the moonlight it looked even more inviting than it had those many months before.

"It's been such a long time," Malvina whispered when at last she was in Alan's arms. "When I was looking for you in Yazoo City, in Jackson, I was in despair. I was afraid I had lost you forever." The arm which tightened around her shoulders atoned for every agonizing hour of her search. "Say something to me."

"I love you, Malvina."

Malvina sighed. With four words he had said everything.

A rocket arced into the northern sky, bursting forth with three red stars.

"My heart did that this morning," Malvina purred. "When 'Lijah called that you were here, my heart, like that rocket, burst with a million stars."

"When did you know?" he asked.

"That morning in the kitchen, when you walked out of my life. Love me forever, Alan. Please?"

"Forever and ever," he murmured as his hand imprisoned her breast.

Malvina abandoned herself to his caress.

A fiery red shell, darting out from below the horizon, broke the lovers' spell. Higher and higher up into the heavens it darted on its eccentric flight, followed by another and then another and then another, until they began their dip back down to earth. Whizzing and screaming, their paths ablaze, faster and faster, until, with a hollow thud, they buried themselves deep in the earth of the city below and exploding with a terrible upheaval, showered blue and amber stars back into the air. A third shell exploded in the air high above their hilltop observation post, streaming out thousands of scintillating lines of fire, which darted and streaked through the air. Below, far below on the river, a Rebel gun answered, hurling a red-hot fiery ball of iron back.

"When will it ever cease?" Malvina whispered sadly. As she spoke, two of the monster shells crashed against each other in their flight sending myriads of bright streaming lines, like tiny meteors, darting in every direction.

Alan arose, lifting Malvina to her feet. "This is exciting, but it is very dangerous."

"Where are we going?" Malvina asked.

"You are going back to the cave where you will be safe," he drew her into his arms feeling the languorous softness of her yielding body.

"But I want to stay here with you," she pleaded.

"And I want a wife with two arms and two legs to take West with me."

"And lips?" Malvina asked, taking his face in her hands, bringing his lips to hers.

"And eyes and ears," his whispering kiss traced the message across her eyelids and to her ear as he picked her up as he would a child and strode off down the hill toward Twin Chimneys.

13

THE QUARREL had arisen from what Loulie considered to be a perfectly innocent remark.

"That sure was funny last night . . . you know, when you come walkin' in here an' the captain tried to salute, put on his coat, get up off the bed an' hold onta his brandy glass all at the same time," she had giggled from the bed on the morning after he had found her half-dressed with Robert McClellan. "He was dancin' around like a hound dog with a cocklebur under its tail."

The remark had sent Tod hobbling back to the forts in silent fury and, as far as Loulie knew, had completely severed the sacred bonds between her and her husband. After contemplating his departure for a few minutes and after counting the meager contents of her purse, she had dressed in her best bib and tucker and headed for the forts herself, looking for Sergeant Piney Pucket and Captain Robert McClellan.

Loulie was amazed and dismayed at the tremendous number of soldiers who were lounging around in the rear areas of the forts.

From the number who were sitting about mending shoes, playing poker, watching cockfights, having their hair cut, or patiently picking fleas out of one another's hair, it did not seem possible that there could be any men on the other side of the forts watching the enemy. She would probably have bolted were it not for the casual air of unconcern with which these sunburned fellows went about their tasks and diversions. They acted as though they were at home, in their own back yard, engaged at some thoroughly commonplace task.

It was in the vicinity of the Old Vicksburg-Jackson road that Loulie picked up her first worth-while clue.

"Pucket? Yes, he's hyer in this regiment," a grizzly veteran said, "but I ain't sure what company. Tell ya what. Go down ter thet first traverse an' ask the corporal in the first bombproof. He'll know if anybody does."

Loulie found the corporal engaged in cleaning his rifle with a corncob, an old rag, and some powdered dirt. "Pucket? Sure I know Piney. Got business with Piney?"

Loulie nodded.

The corporal led Loulie to Piney's dug-out, a two-story-deep hole. The top half was covered with a shelter half and floored with boards. Under the boards was a second cave angling off into the black earth like a mole hole.

"Loulie?" Piney called up from out of the darkness when the corporal informed him he had a visitor, "Loulie Schmidt?"

"Yah. It's me, Piney," Loulie answered.

"Whatcha want?"

"Ta talk ta ya," Loulie replied.

"Talk." Piney was not coming out of the protective darkness of his hole for anyone.

"I wanna see Captain McClellan." Loulie felt embarrassed standing out there in the open, calling down into the hole. She felt as though she was shouting down a rain barrel.

"What for?" Piney asked.

"Tod left and I thought I oughta maybe make up to the captain for that night," Loulie explained.

Piney, in the hole, was silent for some time as he thought this over. "Yeh. That's a good idear," he finally said. "Yeh. You stay there. I'll come up."

Piney came out of the dugout blinking and squinting at the hot, bright afternoon sunlight like a hoot owl confronted by a coal-oil lantern.

"Hi, Piney," Loulie greeted.

"Tod's gone?" Piney searched Loulie's evasive eyes, trying to pin her down to the truth.

"Yah. I throw'd him out. Fer good," Loulie assured Piney.

Piney thought over this bit of news. "Awright. You go back to town and I'll be in tonight er tomorrow night fer sure."

"You got some money, Piney?" Loulie asked.

Again Piney studied the round-faced girl, while deep inside a plan was taking shape. Grunting, he dug into a pants pocket and came out with a roll of bills. Counting out forty dollars, he handed the money to Loulie and said, "Yer gonna fix me up with McClellan's sister. I tell ya how later."

It was Loulie's turn to study Piney now. Sensing something of great importance, she nodded solemnly and turned to head back toward Vicksburg.

2

"Good morning, Sergeant," Robert greeted Piney, who came sidling into the headquarters dugout.

Piney, who had avoided the subject of Loulie since the unfortunate night in town, approached the subject of a return engagement with the "little widow" with a circuitous parade of subjects. The sight of the skinny non-com's Adam's apple, which bounced around beneath his too-loose collar like a cat fighting its way out of a bag, was so diverting that Robert was caught speechless when Piney suddenly asked if "he'd had any lately."

Robert hemmed and hawed, laughed nervously and remarked, in an effort to dismiss the subject, "No, Sergeant, I've given up widows for awhile." This lead was all that Piney needed.

"Captain, sir," Piney whispered, leading Robert to one side, "Loulie, Mrs. Chaffin, come out to see me the other day. She was awful sorry about what happened that night. She an' her husband have separated for good. Not only that but she was tellin' me that she

wisht you would come in and see her again. She thinks you're purty great."

Robert, anxious to end the embarrassing conversation, hedged, "Maybe I'll go in some night and see her," he remarked casually.

"Yah? When? What night?" Piney pressed for an answer.

"Oh, I don't know," Robert hesitated.

"Tuesday night? She tole me she wasn't doin' anything Tuesday night," Piney said, picking a day out of the air.

"I . . . I guess Tuesday would be all right," Robert replied.

"I'll see that it's all fixed up fer you," Piney said, rising to leave.

"Good. I appreciate that."

"I'll guarantee nothin'll happen this time," Piney said. "I'll take care of it myself. Personal."

"You do that," Robert said. He had promised his father that he would come in to town on Tuesday, an excellent excuse for avoiding another embarrassing interlude with Loulie.

Loulie, at work on her face in front of the old, cracked dresser mirror, prepared for her evening with Captain McClellan and debated her choice of two gastronomical delicacies, horehound drops or peppermint lozenges. Settling on the horehound drops, her dreams went to an emerald necklace, to furs, to an evening on the town in some foreign city, London, St. Petersburg or—Loulie ran out of cities.

Steps sounded in the hallway outside her door while she was still working on her spit curls. The fear of being caught unprepared gave way to panic when the doorknob rattled and the door opened. Piney stepped into the room and Loulie's panic turned into ire.

"Dont'cha ever knock? Was ya born inna barn?" she greeted.

"Yah. A barn fulla cows," Piney snarled, inspecting the pantaletted, chemised girl in front of the mirror.

"Ya ain't ready?"

"Course I ain't ready," Loulie rejoined. "He ain't here yet, is he?"

"He was gettin' ready to leave, so I come on ahead to check," Piney explained.

"So ya checked. Now ya go," Loulie spat.

"You're gonna give him a real good time?" Piney questioned.

"If you're so worried, why don't ya go get one of yer maw's sweet girls?" Loulie turned back to the mirror.

"I think maybe I shoulda," Piney said as he turned to leave. "I just think maybe I shoulda."

Robert McClellan, on his trip into town, went directly from the forts to Twin Chimneys. 'Lijah, who was fussing around the cooking fire at the cave, greeted her boy.

"Where's Belle? Papa?" Robert asked.

"Dey all in de house," 'Lijah smiled at the sight of her boy. "How is yo', Mista Robert?"

"Fine, 'Lijah."

"Dey ain' been no shellin' er bombin' er boomin' in alla three days now," 'Lijah explained.

"I know."

"Dat's why dey all inside. Eatin' in dere away from de flies and de skeeters."

Belle sat at the table teasing the piece of meat on her plate with her fork, much in the way a cat toys with a mouse. Hungry though she was, she could not bring herself to eat the fried squirrel 'Lijah had prepared for the evening meal.

"What's wrong, Belle?" Malvina had asked. "I thought you loved squirrel."

Belle continued stirring the piece of meat on her plate, studying the tip of her fork in order to avoid looking at Malvina and the hateful Yankee who was sitting by her side.

I do dearly love squirrel, Belle thought to herself, wishing she could say the words aloud. I would love to eat it had it not been killed with a traitorous bullet, aimed and fired by a Yankee spy!

"Hello, everybody," Robert called as he walked into the dining room.

Belle despised Malvina when she rose beside Alan, took him by the arm and led him forward to meet Robert.

"Robert," Malvina said, "I believe you've met Captain Miller?"

"Good evening, Captain," Alan smiled.

"Alan was formerly a captain in the Army of the United States," Malvina continued before Robert could return the greeting.

"Formerly?" Robert frowned.

"Yes. He resigned his commission last week."

"Malvina refused to allow me to love her and my country," Alan smiled, slipping his arm around Malvina's waist.

"That is not so, Robert," Malvina interposed. "Alan resigned his commission, then came to ask for my hand in marriage."

"Well . . . congratulations," Robert stammered.

"Thank you, sir," Alan said. "I deserve to be congratulated. To have won your sister's heart is a sacred honor."

By ten o'clock, Loulie, having decided to take matters into her own hands, was making her way slowly across the front lawn of Twin Chimneys. Her determination to seek out the missing major was rapidly waning and she would probably have resigned herself to hiding and watching the brightly lighted dining room from the shadowy and protective bushes around the edge of the yard, had Robert not walked out onto the porch for a breath of air.

"Cap'n McClellan!" Loulie called.

Robert, partially blinded by the match he was holding in front of the cigar in his mouth, lowered the lucifer and peered into the darkness. "Who is it?"

"Me. Loulie."

"Well," Robert said with an embarrassed laugh, "what are you doing here?"

"I come to find out if somepun was wrong," Loulie said, as Robert, in order to avoid being overheard by his family in the dining room, walked down on the lawn beside her. "You was comin' over tonight, remember?"

"I didn't remember," Robert lied. "I'm sorry but I forgot all about it. My sister wanted me to come up here tonight and meet her fiancé. They're announcing their engagement and we're having a little dinner party."

"Oh." The high-sounding talk about fiancés, engagements, and dinner parties seemed like a plausible excuse to Loulie. "You can come down to the room after while then?"

"No, not tonight, Loulie," Robert replied.

"Maybe some other night?" Loulie was not going to allow this one to get away.

"Let's do that. Some other night." Robert smiled, anxious to get rid of the girl.

"Awright. I'll look for ya then." Loulie was about to leave when she saw Captain Miller, the man she had had thrown into jail, standing beside some woman in the dining room. "That man up there," she said, pointing, "who's that?"

"Alan Miller," Robert said, turning in the direction of Loulie's pointed finger. "My sister Malvina's fiancé."

"Yah," Loulie said, trying to figure out how he had managed to get out of the hoosegow.

"Do you know him?" Robert asked.

"Naw. Oh, naw," Loulie stammered and turned to leave. The captain evidently was "somebody." Loulie had no desire to meet face to face the man she had betrayed. "I'll run along now and I'll see ya later."

With a sigh, Robert returned to the pleasant company in the dining room. He was anxious to hear more of Alan Miller's tales of Indians and scouting for the army in the far West.

"What chu doin' here?" Piney, who had come up the hill to visit his mother, flared when Loulie poked her head through the blanket which curtained the mouth of Beulah's candle-smoke-filled cave.

"I come up to see you-know-who, next door, and then I cum over here to see you," Loulie explained carefully.

"You was next door?" Piney was horrified at the thought of Loulie visiting the McClellan home.

"He didn't come 'round, so I went to find out why." Before Piney, who had risen from the bench where he had been sitting beside Beulah, could find the right words to express his anger, Loulie continued, "He couldn't come 'cause they wuz havin' a party for his sister's fee-ancy."

"Which sister?" Piney barked.

"Malvina, I think he called her," Loulie had been rushing her explanation, hoping to pacify Piney before he slapped her, but she did not expect the reaction which gripped him. He turned green, the sweat popping out on his upper lip and forehead.

"You're lying," Piney's hands were around her throat.

Beulah brought a round, fat arm smashing down on his straining wrists, breaking his hold. "Behave yerself, Piney!"

"Who to? Who to is she a fee-ancy to?" Beulah demanded.

Piney seemed to have lost his voice. His lips were making motions but nothing came out.

"That's the funny part," Loulie began, as she tried to rub away the hurt left by Piney's frantic fingers on her throat. "I saw him settin' in the house there and it was the same feller that rented my room awhile back, Captain Miller."

"What about him?" Buelah demanded.

"Well," Loulie didn't know exactly where to begin. "I wuz broke an' he wanted to rent my room, so I let him have it. Then after I left I decided I didn't want to let the room go, so I went back to see him. I thought maybe I could make a deal er somethin' but . . . well he wouldn't."

"Hmmmm." Beulah never trusted a man who would turn his back on a woman. "So?"

"Well, that made me mad so I turned him in to the provost," Loulie explained.

"How did you do that?" Beulah asked.

"I tole 'em he wuz a deserter . . . hidin' out. They musta believed me 'cause they went right down and arrested him," Loulie explained proudly.

"They put him in jail?"

"Yah. I don't know how he got back out again."

"You don't know nothin' about him, then?" Beulah questioned.

"Only what I said."

Silently Beulah digested these meager facts as Loulie eyed a box of gingersnaps sitting on the table beside the madam's bed.

Beulah reached into her dress pocket, pulled out a roll of bills and handed two twenties to Loulie saying, "Thanks, Loulie. Thanks fer tellin' me."

"Can I have a gingersnap?' Loulie asked as she took the money.

"Sure. Sure, take the whole box," Beulah said as she turned her attention to Piney who sat on the bed, his head buried in his hands.

As Loulie, munching gingersnaps, left the cave, Beulah sadly placed a motherly hand on the shoulders of her son. The mystery concerning his peculiar behavior was solved now. Piney was in love with a "swell."

3

"We are fortunate, we who live up here on the hill," Chris remarked to Alan, as the shells began coming in on the city below, bringing an end to the three-day reprieve they had been enjoying.

Alan nodded. "I would guess that only about one shell in forty falls on the hills."

"Why is this?" Chris asked.

"Well . . . two reasons, I think. The business section of the town provides a more lucrative target, a greater concentration of men and materials; and few of the guns are large enough to reach the greater distances, up here on the hill."

Chris and Alan, sitting in the library when the shelling commenced, had risen in silent agreement to walk out onto the piazza where they could observe the mortar shells tumbling and hissing through the air, the parrots screaming as they roared into the city.

Alan heard the shell as it approached. His ears, trained to battle, sensed the path, the range, the destination. "Duck, Chris!" he yelled as the missile roared over the house, missing the roof by inches, and crashed, exploding in the area of the cave to the rear of the house.

"Is Malvina upstairs?" Alan shouted.

"Yes, I think so," Chris answered.

"Run for the cave," Alan called as he vanished through the front door and went bounding up the stairs four steps at a stride. He met Malvina on the landing coming down. "Quick. The cave," he gasped, taking Malvina's hand. In silence they raced through the house and on across the yard to arrive panting and breathless at the cave.

"Whatever is wrong?" Malvina asked after she had time to regain her breath. "I've never seen you so upset by a shell before."

A stranger to the siege overhearing this question would have suspected Malvina had lost her mind. An artillery shell missing a house by a few yards would seem ample reason for showing concern. But Alan understood the reason, for after forty-five days of constant bombardment, the townsfolk were growing, as do hardened veterans in the lines, indifferent to the shelling.

Alan said, "There is a good chance of the house being hit if that gun fires again."

"Why? What makes you so sure?" Belle asked. From the cave she had witnessed Malvina and Alan's mad scramble to safety. It seemed right that she should point out his cowardice.

"If another shot is fired from the gun," Alan started to explain, "even though the aim has not been altered, the second shell will fall short of the first. The rifling will wear just enough to allow a bit more of the gas to escape and naturally the shell will travel a shorter distance."

Everyone in the cave heard the shell before it arrived, whining and screaming along the path of the first. Della, who had been fighting the stifling hot and humid air in the cave with a lace-trimmed fan, held it up before her face for protection. The shell struck with a deafening roar in the upper front section of the house, showering deadly fragments through Malvina's room, ripping large gaping holes in the back wall of the building. Smoke began curling out of the shattered windows.

"Quick," Alan called to Chris. "Grab an ax! There's a fire started up there."

The frayed and splintered wood around the edges of the opening smoldered, ready to burst into flame.

"Alan! Papa!" Malvina, who had followed Alan and her father back into the house, called as the two men, axes in hand, chopped away the smoking wood. "Come back to the cave, please! Let the house go."

"We're all right," Alan paused, turned and smiled. "There's no longer any danger from that gun."

As he spoke, another thud announced that the third and last shell was on its way, roaring along the path of its predecessors. It fell short, across the street and down the hill from the house.

When the smoldering timbers had at last been cleared away, Alan and Chris slumped down upon Malvina's bed to rest, while Malvina sat down on the floor between the feet of her men. In silence they watched the pillars of smoke which marked unchecked and freshly kindled fires across the length and breadth of the city.

"When will it ever end?" Malvina whispered.

"It was rumored downtown this morning that Johnston has ordered Pemberton to evacuate the city, cross the river and join

General Taylor," Chris said, then added with a sigh, "He has been ordered to cross the river in the face of the Federal fleet, without boats. The Saviour Himself would be needed to lead this maneuver, walking the troops across on the water."

Sadly Malvina said, "The Saviour seems to have deserted Vicksburg."

4

Justin Phelan sat on the rickety porch of the abandoned house he had selected as a command post, contemplating a blank sheet of paper, his pen, and a glass filled with homemade pokeberry-juice ink. The fulfillment of his husbandly duties, the writing of a note of reassurance to his new wife, was a task he would have loved to shirk.

My Dear and Beloved wife, Belle:

This letter is to be posted, dispatched and, I hope, delivered by a Private Vaughn, who will make himself known to you and will explain in detail what we are about.

We returned to the vicinity of Jackson yesterday after our first, and very successful, foray against the Yankees near Edwards Depot. I am proud to state we secured a generous supply of arms and ammunition, fifteen head of horses, destroyed the Yankee ordnance depot and one bridge. All without the loss of a single man. I am now in bivouac, resting men and mounts preparatory to our next raid. It is necessary that I keep our present rendezvous area a secret. Spies are everywhere and "bushwackers," as we are called, are their special target. Tomorrow we will leave for Lexington where we will swing west to a railroad the Yankees are using to haul supplies and ammunition south from Memphis. Our intentions are to rob a train, destroy a section of the line and disrupt their communications system. You can see I have my work cut out for me, particularly commanding a unit such as mine. Discipline is a difficult thing to maintain. At this very moment, the men, having had a taste of victory, are champing at the bit, anxious to participate in more lucrative raids.

At dawn tomorrow we will hit the saddle and be off to the north. I am not looking forward to the prospect of spending a hot and dusty

four days in the saddle, but this is the nature of the duty I have selected for myself.

My thoughts are for your continued safety and comfort in Vicksburg. Looking forward to the day in the very near future when we have driven the Yankees from our midst and you will again be at my side, I remain,

Your devoted husband,
Justin Phelan

P. S. Give my love to your father and to Malvina.

With his hat pulled low to cut out the glare of the mid-afternoon sun, Justin knelt in the weeds alongside a ramshackle hilltop barn. A quarter of a mile below and to the front, the rusty Mississippi Central Railroad tracks stretched north to the broken bridge, then resumed their path on into the woods beyond. Justin, as motionless as a basking lizard on a tombstone, searched the woods for the telltale pillar of smoke which would mark the long-awaited arrival of the southbound Yankee supply train.

The hot sun beat down on his back, helping to quiet the cold hand of dread which was slowly settling on him. Something had gone amiss. The guerrilla sources in Jackson had assured him that a munitions train had left Memphis twenty-four hours ago and was making its way south on the newly repaired rail line. The train was hours overdue and the prospects for his first big raid grew dimmer by the minute.

Everything was in order and the plan seemed perfect. The tracks on the bridge below, a Yankee-army engineer-built affair, constructed out of the rough-hewn timbers cut and strung across the old rock abutments of the former bridge, had been carefully removed and destroyed. The approaches from the north ran through a dense pine forest and the engineer of any southbound train would not be able to see the rail-less bridge until it was too late to brake to a stop. A train bursting out of the forest would surely skitter out onto that unprotected trestle and topple into the creek. The guerrillas hidden in the woods above the bridge could sweep down, kill off the guards, loot and burn the train at leisure.

Nothing, it seemed, had gone right since the beginning of this operation. The trip north from Jackson to Lexington had been long and tiresome, delayed unnecessarily by the poorly fed mounts.

Grass-fed horses must eat often and the countryside over which they had passed was desolate, cleaned of grain and hay, leaving only a few fenceless pastures to provide grass. It seemed to Justin they had spent half their time seeking forage and grazing the animals. Morale had sunk to a low point when the men in the troop, expecting to live off the countryside, found it had been stripped bare. Once-white fences had been consumed in Yankee cooking fires, yards spaded from end to end for hidden treasure, houses and barns burned or left standing vacant. And now, the hoped-for train robbery appeared to be an exceedingly remote possibility.

Spelled by one of his scouts, Justin made his way back to the untenanted gray clapboard house which served as the company headquarters. As he reached the edge of the yard which was strewn with discarded clothing, utensils, and broken dishes, his relief came riding up, reined to a halt, and pointing excitedly to the rear, shouted, "Look. Look comin' up from the south!" Turning, Justin saw, to his dismay, a column of smoke puffing up through a break in the trees. A train was coming, but from the wrong direction! A train whose engineer, once the engine had cleared the forest to the south, would have plenty of time to pull to a halt short of the bridge!

The men in the command, attracted by the shout, came spilling out of the house and barn where they had been resting, to crowd around Justin.

"What are we gonna do?" someone asked.

"It ain't the right one, but let's take it anyway," another suggested.

All eyes turned from the approaching train and rested on Justin, awaiting a decision.

Instinct told Justin to forget the project. The anxious men, the thought of the grueling ride up from Jackson, the problem of morale, overruled reason. Reckless indifference took command. "Saddle up. Take your positions in line over at the top of the ridge by the barn." The men back-slapped and laughed their way across the barnyard to their horses. This was what they had been waiting for.

Justin tightened the saddle girth on his own mount, swung into the saddle and rode to the crest of the hill taking his place in the center of the forming line of men and mounts. His horse seemed

to anticipate the dash down the hillside, standing motionless and quivering, waiting for the spurs in the ribs which would signal the attack.

The northbound train took what seemed forever to creep through the forest and nose out onto the flat below. True to his prediction, the engine pulled into the pasture and slowly rolled to a halt with most of the train cars still concealed in the woods.

Justin roweled his horse and the long string of horsemen swept down the hillside without command. The mounted Rebel thunderbolt, bloody with spurring, fiery red with haste, raced for the engine and the kill.

The sharp rattle of musketry fire, zinging overhead like angry bees, was the first indication that all was not right.

"Them rascals are shootin' at us!" a horseman beside him yelled and Justin glancing back along the stalled train could see the rascals very clearly. The boxcar doors were popping open to spill out riflemen by the score, and a line of infantrymen was developing along the right of way. When he was almost upon the engine Justin glanced over his shoulder. There he beheld the sickening sight of an entire Yankee cavalry troop breaking out of the woods, preparing to charge down into the valley.

Blue rings of smoke curled up along the entire length of the train; troopers all around Justin were spilling out of their saddles, laid low by the well-aimed musketry. The train was a trap; somehow the Yankees had learned of the proposed ambush and delayed the train from the north, sending up a cavalry-protected decoy from the south.

The body of a dead Rebel courier lay bloating somewhere south of Vicksburg, in the swamps along the Big Black. A letter addressed to Mrs. Belle McClellan Phelan lay in the bottom of a Yankee colonel's saddlebag. The Yankee cavalry colonel turned in his saddle to make sure his troopers were in line, on the slope to his rear. The late afternoon sun flashed off his silver saber as it slashed down to signal "forward," and the two hundred-odd Yankee horse-critters swept down upon the handful of Rebels, penned in and pinned down by riflemen firing from alongside the train.

To the passengers the train, coming to a head-jerking halt again, was an occurrence unworthy of notice. The crackling of musketry

outside the coach window, and particularly the intensity and volume of the fire, caused John Hughes, journeying home on convalesence leave, to snap awake, lean over and forward out of the window to investigate the cause of the commotion.

Beside the train a grappling of guns was taking place in a tiny rock-fenced pasture. A handful of gray, brown, and butternut uniformed horsemen tried to steady their frantic horses enough to wield their smoking pistols. One of them leveled the sights of his pistol at a kneeling rifleman beside the train and fired just as the horse, struck by a stray bullet, reared in death agony. The ball flew high over the head of the intended victim, sailed through the window of the coach to the rear, and smashed into the temple of John Hughes.

A sheet of flame burned life from the shocked brain; a hand made a rapid gesture in the direction of the bullet-punctured skull and fell lifeless upon the red plush cushion.

The groans of the sobbing and blubbering boy hunched in the straw pile at his side had prevented Justin from hearing the sound of the approaching hooves until they were reined to a stop. The snorting of the horses as they cleared their nostrils on the road outside the barn was his first indication that danger was at hand.

"Sh!" Justin warned the boy.

"What? What is it?" the lad cried.

"There's someone outside. Sh!" Justin whispered. "Yankee cavalry!" The clanking of the sabers was unmistakable.

Is this all going to end with capture? Justin thought. Error in war begins with haste and ends in ignominy.

The error of the previous afternoon was recognizable by the time he had led his little troop halfway down the hill during the ill-fated charge on the train. Seconds later, when he reined in beside the smoking engine, he could count only five men alive and mounted. The encircling Yankee cavalry were sweeping down the hill. There was nothing left to do but run for it, and no direction left in which to flee except straight ahead. Bending low over the pommel, he set his spurs into his mount's flanks, skirted around the end of the engine to protect his back against the riflemen along the train and raced for the woods a hundred yards away. The popping muskets gave way to the yells of cavalrymen and the sharper ac-

celerated crack of the cavalrymen's Spencers as they finished off the wounded men on the hillside and swept around the train in pursuit of Justin and the remaining four guerrillas. When Justin's horse plunged through the thicket surrounding the woods, one man remained by his side. A boy, a planter's son from south of Raymond. The lad rode clinging to the saddle with one hand; the other arm, covered with blood, hung useless along his side.

A wounded horse, screaming somewhere to the rear, told of the fate which had befallen the balance of the troop. Veering left onto a lumber road, Justin yelled, "Follow!" and spurred his mount on to a steady lope down through the moss-draped forest. In the growing dusk the shadows of the parasite-draped trees looked like tresses of a witch's hair, hanging over invisible faces. Reaching an intersecting road, Justin turned west and continued at a steady lope, reckoning to put distance between himself and the inevitable pursuers as quickly as possible. The wounded boy, glued to his saddle, followed Justin automatically.

Justin's mind was dazed and blank. He knew he should be making plans for a course of action; still he could not bring himself to think of anything. The shock and horror of the past half-hour seemed to have burned all reason from his mind.

He tried to recall the events of the past few days; he tried to discover where and why the raid had gone awry. How had the Yankees' intelligence learned of the attempted train robbery? Had there been an informer in his own midst? Where had he failed? Question piled upon question; remorse upon guilt. There were no answers. The responsibility for what had happened was his to bear alone.

The boy's mount, his silent ghostly companion, was the first to go. The horse pitched forward to the ground without warning, throwing the wounded boy over his head into a heap on the black roadway. The horse was dead. An unnoticed wound had sapped away the animal's life, but the brave mount had carried its rider through to the last breath. The wounded boy lay on his shattered shoulder crying like a baby.

After a great struggle, Justin managed to get the lad onto his own horse but the double load finished off the exhausted beast within another ten minutes. Rather than kill the animal, Justin decided to take their chances by hiding out in an abandoned barn along the forest road.

Justin, by holding the dying boy in his arms, had managed to still the lad's moans. His hopes for escaping the notice of the cavalrymen, outside on the road, were beginning to rise when his own horse, sensing the smells and hearing the sounds of the other animals outside the barn, neighed.

"Search the barn," a command voice barked somewhere out in the darkness. "Be sharp about it!"

Justin knew he could have succeeded in darting out through the rear of the barn, escaping detection. It would have been one more chance for life, since neither side—the guerrillas nor the searching cavalry bands—took prisoners. But he could not bring himself to abandon the boy. A bull's-eye lantern swept the interior of the dark barn and came to rest on Justin.

"Well, well, well," the voice behind the lamp gloated, "I declare if we ain't got ourselves a pair of Rebels to hang. On yer feet! Be quick about it!"

14

"DON'T LET ME DIE. Please don't let me die," the boy sobbed continuously during the first twenty-four hours of his captivity. The anguished cry was quiet now. The guard, posted outside the barn, growing tired of this constant wail, had stuffed dirty rags in the boy's mouth. Justin, bound hand and foot, lying face down on the manure-strewn floor, could not be sure whether or not the boy was still alive.

Justin's concern for the boy was now dulled by his own misery. The numbed and tortured legs and arms, his agonizing thirst, the manure-dust laden floor beneath his mouth and lips tested the limits of his endurance. It took all the discipline and courage he could summon to keep from crying out himself. His cry, if he had permitted himself that indulgence, would have been, "Kill me! Let me die!"

Justin could not account for the strange imprisonment which had followed his capture. Rebel guerrillas and Yankee cavalrymen had

the habit of making short shrift of their prisoners. This two-day reprieve did not make sense. His captors, a detachment of four cavalrymen, had bound him and the lad securely and departed, leaving one man as a guard outside the door.

The answer to Justin's questions came shortly before dark, on the afternoon of the second day. The tramping of horses and the jingling of spurs announced the return of the three Yankees. Seconds later a flabby, white-fleshed Yank, wearing corporal's chevrons on his sleeve, came into the barn carrying a lantern which he hung on a peg near the spot where Justin lay. A rib-crushing boot kick in the ribs rolled Justin over onto his back. The corporal was the same snuff-chewing, grossly filthy leader who had stripped him of his money belt on the eve of the capture.

"The Federal money I found in your money belt—where did you get it?" the corporal whined through a dirty nose. "From the paper with it, we know you got a lot more of it. Where is it hid?"

Justin silently cursed the day he had decided to entrust McPherson's cotton-payment money and the records of the sale to his money belt, rather than the bank in Vicksburg. The man obviously thought he had collected the two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars and hidden it in some secret cache.

"Jim," the corporal called, "commere."

The man who answered the summons bore the appearance of the very quintessence of rascality. He was huge, blubber-fat; his flesh looked as if it were set in dough. Long, yellow hair hung down from beneath his campaign cap. "Whatsa matter, corporal? Is the Rebel givin' ya some trouble?"

"He don't wanna talk," the corporal said, reaching down, lifting Justin by the throat until he was upright. The man's breath was fetid, smelling of decayed teeth and tobacco. "Where did you bury it?" he snarled.

Justin maintained his silence.

"You talk to him, Jim," the corporal grinned, shoving Justin, causing him to topple and crash onto the stable floor.

The fat man called Jim dropped slowly to his knees beside Justin. He spoke in a hoarse whisper. "We're gonna hurt cha real bad if'n ya don't tell us where ya got that money." The man's breath bloomed out over his fat, livid lips and into Justin's face freighted heavily with the fumes of whisky.

"He's deef, Jim," the corporal said. "He's just plumb deef and can't hear nothin'. Maybe ya better fix him so's he hears better, huh?"

"I think so," Jim whispered.

Justin could not see, from his position on the ground, what the man was about. He could hear him fumbling in his cartridge box, heard the sound of paper ripping as he tore the top off a paper cartridge with his teeth. Justin was not aware of what was taking place until he felt the powder from the cartridge trickling into his ear. A match flared and the man called Jim whispered once more, "Where is it?"

"There isn't any money, you stupid fool. That was a bank draft in my belt," Justin said, finding his voice.

"Why ya lying to me?" Jim whispered, touching the match to the powder-primed ear.

The agony of his fire-filled ear seared deep into his brain, closing the door on consciousness.

"Now look whatcha done," the corporal growled.

"The son-of-a-bitch is fakin'," Jim snarled, turning Justin's limp body over and reaching for another paper cartridge.

"Whatcha gonna do?"

"Give him a shot in the other side," Jim replied, emptying the contents of the paper into Justin's left ear and striking a match.

The shadows in the barn ran into the corners for a second, as the powder flared up, then crept back again as the flame died down, as if anxious to hide with darkness the shame of infamy.

"Now what?" Jim asked as he slapped the unconscious Justin on the side of the head, trying to revive him.

"We ain't got time to wait around," the corporal spat in disgust. "The woods is full of guerrillas. We better get goin' back to the outfit. Go get a shovel."

Silently the corporal and his fat henchman scooped out a shallow trench in the floor of the barn deep enough to hold Justin and the boy. As Jim kicked the unconscious pair into the pit he broke the silence to whisper, "They ain't neither one of them dead."

"They will be 'fore long," the corporal grinned as he began to shovel the freshly dug soil onto the bodies.

"Look," the man called Jim said, as the first layer of dirt covered the two Rebels. "Look at the dirt. It's breathin'."

The dirt did indeed move up and down slightly, disturbed by the laboring lungs beneath.

"I'll fix that," the corporal said, pulling his cavalry saber from its scabbard and starting for the half-filled hole. "I'll let the air outa them there balloons."

2

It was a hot, sultry Sunday morning in Vicksburg. The moisture on Loulie's face glistened like the morning dew as the sunlight streamed in through the tiny window of her room. Her nude, white body, accented by the dingy gray sheeting on her bed, looked pure and virginal in the morning light. A large green fly broke the Sunday morning tranquillity when it landed on her sweat-glistening belly.

"Son-of-a. . . ." The bells on the neighboring churches began to toll out their calls to the wayward, drowning out Loulie's profanation of the Sabbath.

Loulie would have preferred to sleep through the entire day. She was broke, behind in her rent, without a man, and bored. It was the boredom of the besieged city, populated with nothing but women and children, which oppressed her the most.

"I gotta do somethin'," she murmured as she began searching through one of several clothes puddles, looking for the freshest of her soiled underwear. "Can't just lay here an' do nothin'."

By the time Loulie walked the three miles out to the forts she looked as if she had been through a bomb explosion in a hog wallow. The fine, ankle-deep dust, kept in a constant state of agitation by the wagons and marching men, had settled over and coated her perspiring face and arms with sticky ooze.

The rapid shifting and moving of the troops hither and yon to danger points and areas of possible attack left Loulie a stranger in a strange land. Piney and Captain Robert McClellan, the objects of her search, were no longer in their old haunts. Her plan to enlist Robert's attentions (and his money) once again had gone astray. Dirty and hungry, Loulie found herself, with darkness approaching, facing a long trek back into the besieged city.

As she started her walk back through the rear areas a voice caused her to pause. Loulie had been hearing voices all afternoon as she

wandered in and out of the approaches to the forts, but this voice was different. It was round, it was full, it had the deep resonant bass tones of an actor.

The words which the voice called were no different from the words the other voices had called throughout the day. It said, "How about it?"

Loulie paused, turned, and walked slowly over to the three men who were lounging around the rear end of the bombed wagon they had converted into a shelter. "How about what?" she countered.

"A little cheer and comfort for a brave defender of Vicksburg," the voice said. It belonged to a homely, bearded, and ragged soldier. His companions were equally homely, bearded, and ragged.

"But he does have a nice voice," Loulie said to herself. "It's kinda hard fer a girl to be cheerful and comfortable when she ain't had nothin' to eat," she said aloud.

"I can find something for you to eat," the man said eagerly.

"What?"

"Some canned peaches. I know where I can buy them. From a man that traded for them from the Yankees."

"I'd like some canned peaches," Loulie smiled as she sat down. "Right now."

As the man with the deep voice departed, one of his companions spoke up. "I got a solid gold locket here. See? It belonged to my wife's mother. She brought it over from England. It's solid gold."

Loulie took the outstretched trinket, inspected it carefully. "I'll keep it," she said. "Ya gotta wait till after I get my peaches."

Encouraged, the third man decided to vie for Loulie's favors. "How much money ya want?" he asked bluntly.

"What kind?" was Loulie's practical reply.

"Either kind," the man said. "I got Yankee money I took off a dead colonel."

"I'll take a hundred Confederate and ten Yankee," Loulie said, shrewdly hedging against any eventuality.

"It's a deal," said the man of means, grinning eagerly.

"After I eat my peaches."

As the sun rose on another dust-choked day, the three shamefaced lovers, avoiding each other's glances, attended to fixing Loulie some breakfast. Anxiously they scanned the road in front of their wagon,

hoping their visitor would be on her way before an officer came along.

At first they smelled kinda bad, but after ya got used to it, it wasn't any worse than Cyril's grease paint. It didn't last long, an' if ya think of somethin' else, like what chur gonna do with the money, then it was over 'fore ya hardly noticed, Loulie told herself as she adjusted her bonnet, preparing to leave.

"Good-by, boys," she said, inspecting the toes of her dust-encrusted shoes, "I'll be seein' ya."

"Sure," they replied with a sigh as they watched her depart down the road. They were curious when they saw her turn east toward the forts, instead of west toward Vicksburg. They guessed she was going to work another day before returning to the city.

"Lieutenant, sir," an orderly in the company bombproof doorway announced, "there's a woman out here to see you, sir."

It took all of the strength and will power he could muster to propel his legs back through the traverses leading to the rear of the fort. The runner had said "woman," and Loulie was the last person in the world Tod Chaffin wanted to see.

"Hello, Loulie," he greeted his dust-begrimed wife. Loulie, legs spread in a most unladylike manner, was sitting on a log in a shelter at the rear of the fort.

"I had trouble findin' ya," Loulie said without rising. "I been lookin' fer two days."

"I'm sorry." Tod could not think of any other reply. He felt embarrassed standing here in broad daylight talking to Loulie. He imagined he saw a nudge and a knowing wink pass between two soldiers who were walking past. "Put your legs together, Loulie," Tod said in a low voice after he had walked to Loulie's side. "That isn't a very nice way to sit."

"What's wrong with the way I'm settin'?" Loulie bristled. Her voice was loud. Loud enough to be heard by anyone in the surrounding area. "I'm hot. I'm so hot the sweat's pourin' right down the inside my legs, that's how hot I am."

"What do you want, Loulie?" Tod asked, trying to change the subject.

"I come to see ya. Whatta ya think I want?"

"I was just wondering . . . I . . ." Tod did not know what to say. He wanted to say that he had assumed their marriage was over

—that she had thrown him out declaring she was through with him, but the main entrance to the fort was not the proper place to talk about personal problems. Particularly not with Loulie.

"I miss you, Tod," Loulie said suddenly.

"You do?"

"Yah. You come in an' see me as soon as you can?" she invited with a sly smile.

"Well . . . I don't know." Tod hesitated, trying desperately to hold onto the advantage he had gained when she threw him out.

"Don't ya want to?" Loulie asked.

"Well . . . I . . ." Tod kept glancing around, hoping he and Loulie were not attracting too much attention.

"Ya don't want to. That's it, ain't it?" Loulie flared, her voice rising, her mind racing desperately, searching for a handle she could use to renew her hold on Tod. Her thoughts, on the way up to the forts, had concerned themselves with the probabilities and complications that might attend impregnation by three men at the same time. Inevitably Loulie's last thought was her first thought in recall. "Well, ya better, that's all I gotta say. Ya just better. An' ya better give me some money too. So's I can go see the doctor."

"The doctor?" Tod frowned.

"Yah. The doctor?" Loulie mimicked Tod's surprised question. "If I'm gonna have a brat of yourn I'm gonna take care of myself."

"Loulie! Are you. . . ." Tod could not believe his ears.

"Yes, I am," Loulie snapped back, still aping Tod's tone of voice. "Ya fixed me good, time 'fore last."

"I . . . I can't believe it."

"Ya better!" Loulie stuck her stomach out. "Wanna feel?"

Tod declined the opportunity.

3

The reckless courage which had carried Cyril Clyde Herring to the pinnacle of theatrical success in Vicksburg ran out in the middle of the Mississippi River. When a launch sent out by a Federal gunboat intercepted the skiff he and Gerald were using in their escape it was the effeminate Gerald who put up the protests, demanding and receiving, as a free artist, his freedom. Meekly Clyde had submitted

to arrest as a deserter. It was not until the darkening shadows of the gallows threatened his hopes, that he was frightened into summoning up enough strength to plead his case before the Courts-Martial Board.

Clyde's vivid imagination provided him with a circumlocutory series of alibis—spying, captivity, a hair-raising story of escape —which, coupled with a lack of any witnesses plus the persuasive power of his hammy oratory, won him an acquittal, restoration of commission, and a new assignment. He was assigned, the adjutant having taken into account his former civilian occupation, as paymaster with the field pay office.

Seventy-one thousand officers and men were depending upon the paymaster for the disbursement of over one quarter of a million dollars each month. Clyde was proud of this new assignment.

The size and strength of the massive Federal army was an awe-inspiring thing. A feeling of pride and importance at being a part of this vast machine quickly took possession of the impressionable Clyde. No degrading company duty to perfrom here. His was a job vital and important to the war effort.

It was hard for Clyde to believe that this was the same army he had deserted. The floundering, swamp-bound mob had been transformed into a huge, well-organized army skilled in the art of besiegement.

The materials used by the western farm-hand soldiers for their defense were ingenious and original. Wild grapevines were impressed into service as cables; cane was used for fascines; bales of cotton, rolled to the front and covered with a coating of earth, made parapets with the impenetrability of armor. Skins of oxen, killed by the army for food, covered the outside of the parapets. Provision containers, barrels, kegs, and boxes were put into service and the enfiladed ravines to the rear of the works had been converted into safe passageways by the ingenious use of blinds made up of felled trees.

Further to the rear, out of the range of the Confederate guns, huge cities had been constructed as off-duty quarters for the soldiers. The ravines and gullies were filled with miniature log cabins.

Clyde was proud of his army and when one of the brigade commanders, learning of Clyde's interest in drama, suggested that the captain organize a rear-area entertainment program, Captain Her-

ing was beside himself with delight, resolving to abandon the theater and make the army his permanent career.

4

From a comparatively safe spot, a cannon slot in the forward section of a triangular-shaped redan, Robert McClellan viewed the battlefield to his front. There was no life to be seen anywhere except far to the rear, behind the Yankee lines, where the tall signal towers raised their multiflagged heads above the surrounding trees to wigwag signals from nowhere to nobody. At a greater distance, puffs of blue smoke marked the Yankee cannon sites as they hurled cannon balls into the Confederate works. The balls would strike the forward positions, bounce, leap, and bound onto the rear in much the manner of an India rubber ball.

Robert's regiment, along with several other units, after being pulled out of their positions in the northern part of the fortifications, were now in a new reserve defensive area directly behind a mined redan on the Jackson road. Federal mining operations had been under way for several days at this point and the intensified artillery activity indicated that an attack could be expected momentarily.

Below and directly to the front Robert could see the above-the-earth entrenching efforts of the Yankees—freshly dug parapets and approaches zigzagged forward behind sap rollers (rolled hoop baskets filled with sticks, pushed ahead of the diggers to protect them against enfilading fire.) In the forward Confederate works, Robert could see a few riflemen waiting on the fire-steps.

The Federal shelling stopped suddenly and an unearthly silence settled over the battlefield.

" 'Pears like the fun's about to start," a fellow officer in the redan with Robert observed.

"I've got this in my favor," another officer stationed at another slot on the other side of the fortress drawled. "It takes a man's weight in lead to kill him. That's a statistical fact. I've figured out that it takes seven hundred one-ounce shots to hurt a man, and forty-two hundred to send him shuffling off this mortal coil."

Robert, weighing one hundred and seventy pounds, started making a few arithmetical calculations.

The Yankee mine was exploded at three o'clock.

The air in front of Robert's position was filled with dirt, cotton bales, lumber, splintered timbers. A deep crater was left in place of the carefully constructed works. The Confederate soldiers who had been on the fire-steps vanished.

"Now's your time!" someone yelled.

"Here comes me a new pair of pants," cried a ragged Confederate corporal.

"Here they come . . . right toward us!"

Out of the flame and smoke and blood, scrambling up over the smoking debris, came fragments and scattered groups of infantry. The Yankee General Logan's assault troops.

The massed Yankees presented the kind of target gunners dream of—the kind where one shot kills three men. Double-shotted canister, fired at one hundred yards, cut wide swaths through the lines of the attacking Yankees. Heads, arms, legs, muskets could be seen flying high in the air at every discharge of the defending cannon.

The incessant din of musketry ringing in the ears, the odor and the smoke of gunpowder, the defiant cheers, the madness of the helter-skelter attack was awful and it was grand. The Sixth Missouri stormed out of the Confederate second line of defense and came down upon the handful of determined Yankees who had gained access to the shattered redan, driving the bewildered attackers back to the other side of the crater.

A hand on Robert's shoulder, a shouted set of instructions, gave the battle a whole new meaning for him. "The colonel orders you to go down and take command of the counter-attacking forces!" In a single sentence, Robert the observer became Captain Robert McClellan, a commander, charged with the task of leading men into the mouth of hell, into a fifty-foot smoke-filled hole in the ground.

The bullet-lacerated piece of timber resting at a crazy angle on top of the dirt did not provide any of the usual command-post luxuries, but Robert was not quarreling with the spot fate had selected for him. Any shelter, even a broken twig, was a welcome port in this storm of shot and shell.

"What time is it?" he whispered to a sergeant, who lay stretched out on his stomach at his side.

"About midnight, I think," the man replied.

Is it possible, Robert thought, that I have been in this slaughter pit for eight hours and am still alive?

All around the bomb crater where Robert and his handful of men lay, the ground was strewn with men literally torn to pieces. Arms, legs, torn from bodies, lay scattered over the ground as though some petulant monstrous child, growing tired of a game of toy soldiers, had ripped and torn his playthings into bits and tossed them away in a fit of temper. Some men were in the last throes of death; others, with pain-distorted faces, moaned in agony; others lay face down, drowned in a depression-filled pool of their own blood.

Robert shook his head in wonderment. Can this be happening to me! Can this be me, Robert McClellan?

It had been four o'clock when, in answer to the frightening summons, he had found the regimental commander at an observation post, a rifle pit, notched into the forward wall of a freshly dug parapet.

"McClellan," the colonel called without turning, "come here. See that hole down below?" He was pointing out the mine crater, filled with debris and wounded men; the spot where the Confederate redan formerly stood.

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to take a company, double quick. Get down there and occupy that position. Hold it at all costs."

"Yes, sir."

"Bob," the colonel turned to Robert for the first time, placing one hand on his shoulder, "I'm sending you, rather than the regular company commander, because of the excellent work you did during the last mine explosion. You understand this sort of thing. Good luck, man."

Robert felt the eyes of the nation upon his back as he moved out to find the area where the company was assembled—the eyes of all —Belle, Malvina and Papa and David. David! It was not such a terrible thing to die in defense of the flag of the Great Confederacy.

A lieutenant with the assault company came up with a fine suggestion which Robert put into practice. The company, after lining

up in position in the shelter of the reserve defense parapet, went up, over, and down into the embattled area with a "whoop and a holler." Robert, pistol in hand and at the head of the company, joined in the "Hey-yeh-yeh. Hey-yeh-yeh" at the top of his voice.

The appearance of a fresh line of Confederates brought on a deafening crash of musketry and the earth trembled from the concussion and shock of cannonry. Stumbling and sliding, the men scrambled down the outside edge of the defense works amid a storm of leaden hail. The musketry, from out of the smoke, sounded like a great pouring of dried peas in a tin pan; the minie balls whistled and shrieked as they searched and found new flesh.

All formation was lost in the headlong rush when the company met the wounded pouring back out of the blue smoke, dragging themselves, hobbling to the rear. Each man was a bleeding messenger come to tell the men of the attack the fate that awaited them.

Feeling the need for something more lethal than a pistol, Robert grabbed a bayoneted musket from the hands of a returning wounded man, waved it in the air bravely, and plunged forward into the smoky pandemonium. He ran forward alone, eyes flashing, unaware how his bold display of courage was affecting the men in the company. Rifles lowered, bayonets gleaming, the company took the involuntary form of a line, following to a man, close upon Robert's heels.

In the depths of the smoke-enshrouded pit the enemy was met, bayonet crossing bayonet, and all was chaos—a wild dance of death.

Robert came foot to foot, face to face, with a fiercely bearded Yankee. Eyes filled with fury, in a frenzy that seemed supernatural, the Confederate captain and the Yankee private stood panting in one another's face, rifles crossed, one against another in frozen tableau. The countenance of the devil-eyed Yankee was to be painted upon Robert's mind forever. The death stance lasted for what seemed hours, each man afraid to move lest he give the enemy the advantage in this awful struggle. Unable to endure this moment of death, Robert screamed with fury, thrust, and parried. The stroke. The crash of muskets. Thrust again. A spout of blood, a cry of death, and it was over.

A wild cheer went up. Robert turned to find five or six of his

men circled to his rear, spectators in this moment supreme. Turning, he found the blue line halted, trembling and vanishing beyond the far edge of the mine crater. Throwing themselves into positions along the near rim, the Confederates knelt, fired, whirled over on their backs to reload, to whirl and fire again. Faces, hands begrimed with smoke, dust and heat, they shot, killed, clubbed, wrestled for the right to occupy the Vicksburg side of a blown and totally worthless redan.

Day faded into night with the battered Yankees clinging to one slope of the former works, the bloody defending Rebels on the other side.

Robert glanced up from behind the timber which had been his home since late afternoon and grimaced at the hated flag of stars and stripes which flapped sullenly in the grimy atmosphere a scant five feet away. Robert could almost reach it and tear it down were it not for a man in a ragged blue uniform on the opposite side of the log. And so they lay, all up and down the line, each log, each piece of cover offering shelter to a man in gray on one side, another in blue on the other. Guns were of no use here. Packages of useless cartridges were lighted and tossed over on the other side. No one died. A few fingers were burned tossing the flaming package back again. A few tempers were lost over the taunts growled in hoarse whispers at the enemy on the other side of the bank.

"Nigger lover!"

"Gonna take yer nigger wife back home with ya?"

"Howja like bein' a prisoner?"

"How'd yawl like to come take one?"

Robert sent a detail back for picks and shovels and by dawn the shallow holes had grown into rifle pits; the rifle pits were connected by traverses and the redan began to take on shape and form again. The Yankees stayed—it was important ground, this five long yards they had gained.

5

"Alan. Alan Miller! Darling—wake up!"

Alan had been awake for some time, listening to the guns rumbling in the east and north. He had heard Malvina when she came

tiptoeing down the hallway outside his room, the careful opening and closing of the bedroom door. Eyes closed, arms wrapped around a pillow in a bear hug, he played 'possum and waited until she had lowered herself to a sitting position on the edge of the bed.

"Alan. Come on. Wake up. It's daylight," she whispered.

Clinging to the pillow, mumbling to himself as though he were lost in dreams, Alan whispered, in tones loud enough for Malvina to hear, "Darling, hold me closer. No, closer still. There. Now kiss me."

"Alan," Malvina debated with herself whether to succumb to the temptation to listen or to pursue her original mission—to awaken Alan.

"Your body is so soft and thrilling against mine," Alan whispered, his eyes shut. "I love you so . . . Susan."

Two clenched fists fell like triphammers upon the top of his skull. "You! You!" Malvina choked with indignation. "You've been leading me down the garden path!"

The protesting girl became voiceless from his kisses as strong arms pulled her down onto the bed.

"What will 'Lijah say, if she comes?" Malvina whispered without removing her lips from Alan's.

"That you must marry me at once so I can make you an honorable woman," Alan grinned, raising himself and rolling Malvina across and to the far side of the bed. He propped himself up on one elbow, in a position where he could look down upon her face and asked, "When will I be able to find you here by my side every morning?"

"If you continue being such a lazybones, never," Malvina said. "I have been awake since four, waiting for a proper time to awaken you."

"I too have been awake since four."

"Waiting for me?"

"Yes," laughed Alan. "Let's always awaken at four and arise at five."

"What will we do. . . ." Malvina caught herself, and put her hand over his mouth. "Shame on you! Suggesting such things to an unmarried lady."

"What things?" Alan's protest rang with mockery. "From four until five we will discuss the problems of yesterday, the plans for to-

day. There will be many things to decide about the children."

"What will we do before we have any children?" Malvina asked with mock innocence.

"Make them."

'Lijah, as usual, found them locked in embrace. "Now yo' stop dat. Stop dat right now!"

" 'Lijah," Alan turned to face the black, shiny-faced mammy, " 'Lijah, when I first met you I liked you very much. I said to Malvina . . . 'Malvina, when we are married and go West, let's take 'Lijah with us to care for our children.' "

"At da rate yo' two is cuttin' up," 'Lijah interrupted, "yo' is goin' ter have a whole kit and kaboodle ob babies fo' yo' is married *or* fo' yo' goes West."

"I've changed my mind now," Alan continued. "With you in the household Malvina and I will never be alone long enough to even get acquainted, to learn one another's names."

"Nebber fear 'bout dat. Yo' am de friendliest man Ah ebber did see," 'Lijah snapped back, as she made her way across the room to close the only window left unbroken in the entire house.

"Now I remember," Malvina said, sitting up and adjusting her dress.

"You remember what?"

"Why I came up here. I had something to tell you. You made me forget," she said as she joined 'Lijah at the window.

"So?"

"I want to be married next Saturday. I spoke to Papa last night and he agreed," Malvina said, looking at 'Lijah, afraid to look at Alan.

Alan leaped out of bed. "And the groom is always the last to know," he cried as he clutched a sheet around his middle and raced across the room to take Malvina in his arms. The sheet held in position between their two embrace-locked bodies, dipped dangerously low behind.

"Lan' sakes o' Goshen," 'Lijah exclaimed as she ran to give support to the sagging garment. "Now yo' hang on ter dis hyer sheet and cova yoself up. I declare, I'm powerful happy to hear dis hyer news, but Ah doan know whetha Ah'm goin' ter have the strength ter keep yo' fit ter be a bride, ifn yo' keeps carryin' on dis hyer way all next week. Ah declare Ah shorely doant."

6

Dejected and alone, Piney Pucket sat on a fire-step in the fort's outer works. He seemed unaware of the mortar fire which fell constantly around the area, acting as though he would welcome being blown to bits.

"Fishing for a furlough," sleeping with one foot stuck up over the top of a parapet and hoping a Yankee sniper would "pink" it, was common practice, but asking for a whole mortar shell in the lap was another matter.

The men in the company sadly shook their heads and went about the alternate business of sweating out their allotted hours on the line and seeking safe places to spend their "off-periods," leaving Piney pretty much alone. They agreed that Piney, since his return from leave in Vicksburg, had not been "acting right."

Mothered and trapped in a house full of whores, dragged into a life-and-death struggle for which he had no stomach, Piney desperately needed a golden dream to strengthen his feeble will to live. The radiantly beautiful Malvina had fulfilled this golden dream. In Malvina, Piney found a symbol of purity whose shadowy side would cover over and hide all of the women who controlled and shaped his life. Here was the life-giving mother for which he had always longed. A mother who could never be attained. Beulah had never been a part of Piney's dream world. Her love was the sloppy, sentimental kind which men hate and refuse to accept. The intelligent, serenely beautiful Malvina was, in Piney's eyes, the very symbol of perfection.

The news of Malvina's betrothal had been a sickening shock destroying his will to defend his homeland . . . his will to live.

Beulah was counting up the nights receipts and preparing to retire when the canvas cover over the cave entrance was pulled aside. Squinting, peering against the bright light of the new day which streamed in around the shadowy figure silhouetted in the opening, she growled, "We're all closed up fer the night."

"It's me, Maw."

"Piney! Whatta ya doin' in town?" Beulah exclaimed. "Why ain't you out there killin' Yankees?"

"I quit," Piney mumbled, throwing himself down on the bed.

"Fer good?"

"I ain't ever goin' back," Piney snarled.

"Now, son, we all got our duties to perform," Beulah intoned with a weary sigh.

"I'm gonna skip," Piney declared flatly.

"That's desertin', son!" Beulah exclaimed. "You can't desert. No Pucket ever deserted his country."

"One deserted you!" he said bitterly.

"It's that McClellan girl, ain't it?" she guessed wisely. "If that Loulie hada just kept her mouth shut. . . . Whatta you want her for? Them McClellans 'er nuthin' but a highfalutin bunch of big bugs. I didn't know you wanted a girl, but if ya do, I'll help you find one. How about Wilma? Or maybe Andulusia? Andulusia's real good," Beulah suggested hopefully.

Piney rose in disgust.

"Don't git mad. We can find somebody," Beulah soothed.

"You find out about Malvina," Piney ordered.

"All right. If that's what cha want," Beulah sighed. "If I do, will ya go back out to the fort?"

Piney nodded, picking up his jacket to leave.

Smiling bravely, outlandishly garbed in her "conservative" red dress and wearing a demure white ostrich-plumed hat, Beulah left her cave and walked over to the McClellan cave.

Della, eagerly anxious to meet her unusual neighbor, met the puffing, wheezing Beulah at the arbor entrance. "You must be our neighbor," she greeted, "I'm Della McClellan."

"Pucket's my name, Beulah Pucket," Beulah nodded and bowed.

"Oh. Are you related to the Pucket boy that helped us move?" Della asked. "What was his name? Oh, yes, Piney! Are you related to him?"

"Yes, ma'am," Beulah nodded enthusiastically. "He's my boy."

The sound of someone approaching from the rear caused Beulah to turn. All of the questions she intended to ask of Della, all of the answers she needed to resolve Piney's problems were answered in a single glance. Slowly strolling down the path, which led from the McClellan house to the cave, came a black-haired, porcelain-skinned girl. She was walking hand-in-hand with a very tall and handsome

man. The man was dark with long hair which reached to his shoulders. Even though the man wore one of Robert McClellan's old suits, Beulah instantly recognized him as the spy who had passed over the Vicksburg defense maps to the courier in her river-front place. The solution to Piney's problem was solved!

Lifting her skirts, Beulah crossed the yard in a waddling lope, bursting through the hedge into the street, leaving a shred of red cloth dangling on the bushes.

"Now what could have got into her?" Della asked, shaking her head in bewilderment.

"Who was it?" Malvina asked.

"Our next-door neighbor," Della replied. "I wonder what happened?"

"I probably frightened her," Alan laughed.

By the time Beulah had waddled all of the way down the terraced street to the town her breath was coming in short painful gasps. She was forced to sit down on the steps of the provost's office before entering the bustling establishment.

"What do you want, madam?" A sergeant at the front desk asked.

"I wanna see somebody high up," Beulah panted.

"What is your trouble?" The sergeant questioned.

"I know where the dirty Yankee spy is that stole all the Vicksburg maps," she announced triumphantly.

15

PINEY PUCKET walked the Vicksburg-Jackson road hating every plodding footstep which carried him toward the fortifications. Sick at heart, exhausted by the hundred-degree heat burning down upon the beleagured city, he slumped down along the edge of the road to rest. He was there, sitting with his head buried in his hands when four mounted officer couriers galloped by carrying letters to General Pemberton's four division commanders:

Unless the siege of Vicksburg is raised . . . it will become necessary very shortly to evacuate the place. I see no prospect of the former, and there are many great, if not insuperable obstacles in the way of the latter. You are, therefore, requested to inform me as to the condition of troops and their ability to make the marches and undergo the fatigues necessary to accomplish a successful evacuation.

The author of the letter, oppressed and heavy of heart, sat alone in his headquarters pondering the problem which weighed upon his

shoulders, waiting for some word from his superior as to what he should do.

A scant three miles away in another headquarters tent, another general—Grant—sat studying a letter he had intercepted from General Johnston, addressed to General Pemberton. Johnston had moved an army of twenty-six thousand men up into a position between Brownsville and the Big Black River and was contemplating a diversionary attack on July 7. Pemberton was to co-ordinate an evacuation attempt at this same time. The commander of the Vicksburg defenses was never to receive the message.

As the sweat-soaked Piney was groaning to his feet to resume his hike to the forts, Beulah in the provost's office shook a pudgy finger under the nose of the harassed sergeant and panted an anger-choked protest. "But this hyer spy's livin' right here in town, big as life."

"Lady. . . ." the sergeant began.

"Don't lady me!" Beulah shouted in anger. "I ain't no lady. You know who I am? I'm the woman that turned in the spy they hung here a couple of months ago. That's who I am. You jis' ask your officer. That's who I wanna see, anyway. I wanna see your commanding officer."

"I'm sorry, ma'am," the sergeant said in a low voice, "but our commanding officer isn't seeing anyone."

"But don't cha want this man?" Beulah pleaded.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. We'll do the best we can. I've noted down all of the information you've given me."

Beulah got midway up the hill toward the cave before she fainted.

Piney received word about his mother around midnight. It was dawn before he could wangle another pass and get into town. He found Beulah stretched out on the cot of her cave.

"You got here in time. I'm so glad," Beulah whispered.

"Sure, Maw. Sure I got here," Piney declared, kneeling beside his mother's bed. "Whatsa matter?"

"I don't know. I just feel all frazzled out. I'm not long for this world."

Piney sat with his ailing mother, cursing the day he was born. Desperately he longed to ask her whether she had succeeded in

learning anything about Malvina, but her weakened and delicate condition prevented any inquiries of this nature.

Beulah, from her self-styled deathbed, read the unspoken question in Piney's hurt-filled eyes and regretted deeply this deception she was forcing herself to play. Maybe I ought'n fainted, she told herself as she watched her silent, suffering son. "I did feel kinda peeked out," she said, excusing her weakness.

Piney roused from his lethargy, "I don't feel good, either."

Beulah's first impulse was to jump out of bed and start tending to Piney's needs. She was forced to hold onto both sides of the bed in order to keep from rising when he turned and slowly walked out of the cave.

Piney continued walking slowly down the hill, his mind made up as to what he should do. There was no point in lingering now that he was no longer needed. Beulah was dying. Malvina would never be his. It was time to extricate himself from the mess which enveloped him and all of Vicksburg.

General Pemberton, looking through the paneless window of the little two-room house he was using as a headquarters, reviewed the situation before him. The big picture looked as dismal as did the gray dawn breaking over the city. On the desk to his rear rested the reports from his four field commanders. Two urged immediate surrender, two reported their men as being incapable of a forced evacuation. Forty-five days without exercise in the cramped confines of the forts had destroyed their effectiveness as offensive fighters. Completing the estimate of the situation was the quartermaster report. "There is enough pea meal to bake two biscuits per man. The rations for the next two days."

Intelligence reported: "The enemy is making vast preparations for an immediate assault upon our works."

Engineers reported: "The construction of enough rafts and boats to ferry the entire garrison across the river is completely impracticable."

The command decision: "I must start negotiating a surrender before the last particle of food is gone."

The early morning fog which came billowing up from the river,

pushing into the draw in front of the Confederate works, caused Piney to hesitate about going through with his plans. But there was safety from Yankee snipers in the pea-soup mist, and he came to a decision quickly, slipping up and over the parapet and out into the shell-scarred battlefield to the front.

Rumors of the army's plan for an evacuation attempt, the prospects of more fighting to come, Beulah's approaching death, and the hopelessness of his love for Malvina had fused into a final plan for action. Surrender and imprisonment in a Yankee prison until the war was over was the only solution he could find for his problems.

2

"Lieutenant Colonel McClellan." Robert savored the title, tried it out loud, and decided he liked the sound of "Colonel McClellan" very much. The colonelcy was not official as yet, but the regimental commander had sent in the recommendation for promotion through channels.

Robert, deeply engrossed, scarcely noticed the stifling blast of breathless and steaming hot air which greeted him as he stepped out of the headquarters gallery. The two white flags, fluttering on the forward edge of the parapet in General A. J. Smith's divisions sector brought his attention to a cluster of officers and men who were standing exposed atop the entrenchments watching something at the front. Now for the first time, he also noticed the complete silence which enveloped the area. Not a single gun or musket or cannon could be heard.

"What's the matter?" Robert asked a private as he climbed to the top of the parapet. The man pointed to a group of four officers standing in the center of the battlefield. Two of the men were being blindfolded with handkerchiefs.

"General Bowen and Colonel Montgomery," the man said. "They've gone over with a communique for General Grant."

Robert turned back to the entrenchments and hurried off in the direction of headquarters.

General Pemberton's aides, duly blindfolded, were taken to General Burbridge's tent where they presented a letter and a request to

see General Grant. The request was denied. The letter got to Grant.

I have the honor to propose an armistice for—hours, with the view of arranging terms for the capitulation of Vicksburg. To this end, if agreeable to you, I will appoint three commissioners, to meet a like number to be named by yourself, at such place and hour today as you may find convenient. I make this proposition to save the further effusion of blood, which must otherwise be shed to a frightful extent, feeling myself fully able to maintain my position for a yet indefinite period. This communication will be handed you under a flag of truce, by Major-General John S. Bowen.

Grant dashed off a note in reply which was given to Bowen with instructions to the effect that if Pemberton wanted to discuss surrender, Grant would meet him at three o'clock in front of McPherson's Corps.

The note read:

Your note of this date is just received, proposing an armistice for several hours, for the purpose of arranging terms of capitulation through commissioners, to be appointed, etc. The useless effusion of blood you propose stopping by this course can be ended at any time you may choose, by the unconditional surrender of the city and garrison. Men who have shown so much endurance and courage as those now in Vicksburg, will always challenge the respect of an adversary, and I can assure you, will be treated with all the respect due to prisoners of war. I do not favor the proposition of appointing commissioners to arrange the terms of capitulation, because I have no terms other than those indicated above.

Signed
U. S. Grant

"But we can't surrender," Robert protested at the top of his voice.

"Nevertheless, the general staff is in the process of exploring the idea," the colonel at headquarters explained.

"But they can never capture these forts!"

"Nevertheless. . . ."

Promptly at three o'clock Grant, Ord, McPherson, Logan, and A. J. Smith, with several other staff officers, rode through the Federal lines and out to a scrubby oak tree midway to the Confederate works. The Yankee commander in chief, slouchy, round-shouldered, looking as though he and his horse were made of the same piece, sat in moody silence until twenty minutes past three, when Pemberton, Bowen, and Montgomery finally appeared at the top of the forts.

Pemberton and Grant dismounted and approached one another, stopping at a distance of thirty feet away, and there they stood, each determined that the other would weaken and speak first. The friendship of the Mexican war was gone. The two adversaries stood like wooden Indians trying to stare one another down. Montgomery relieved the embarrassment by introducing the generals one to the other as though they were complete strangers.

"What terms of surrender do you propose to grant my army?" Pemberton asked in what seemed to the Yankee staff to be an insolent and overbearing tone.

"None. My terms are unconditional surrender," Grant reiterated.

"The conference might as well end," Pemberton snapped, turning his back abruptly upon Grant.

"Very well," Grant replied and was preparing to return to his lines when Bowen intervened, proposing that he and one other Federal general continue the conference.

While Generals Smith and Bowen conferred, Grant retired to sit in the shade of a stunted oak tree with Pemberton, where he smoked, pulled up every tuft of grass in the area where he sat, and talked—a bit. Bowen proposed that the Confederate army should be allowed to march out of Vicksburg with the honors of war, carrying their small arms and field artillery.

Grant promptly and unceremoniously rejected the idea and the conference was over. Hostilities, however, would not be resumed until Grant had had time to write up the final terms of surrender.

The news of the proposed capitulation reached the Vicksburg courthouse square faster than one of Admiral Porter's mortar shells. The din and hum of protesting voices replaced the flying Yankee shells. Supposition was heaped upon a hearsay to construct another

bridge of dreams. The surrender talks were a ruse to stall the Yankees until Johnston could arrive.

Grant sent his letter to Pemberton around ten o'clock.

In conformity with agreement of this afternoon, I will submit the following proposition for the surrender of the City of Vicksburg, public stores, etc. On your accepting the terms proposed, I will march in one division as a guard, and take possession at eight A.M. *tomorrow. As soon as rolls can be made out, any paroles signed by officers and men, you will be allowed to march out of our lines, the officers taking with them their side-arms and clothing and the field, staff and cavalry officers one horse each. The rank and file will be allowed all their clothing, but no other property. If these conditions are accepted, any amount of rations you may deem necessary can be taken from the stores you now have, and also the necessary cooking utensils for preparing them. Thirty wagons also, counting two two-horse or mule teams as one, will be allowed to transport such articles as cannot be carried along. The same conditions will be allowed to all sick and wounded officers and soldiers as fast as they become able to travel. The paroles for these latter must be signed, however, whilst officers present are authorized to sign the roll of prisoners.*

After midnight Grant received a reply:

. . . in the main your terms are accepted . . . at ten o'clock A.M. *tomorrow, I propose to evacuate the works in and around Vicksburg, and to surrender the city and garrison under my command by marching out with my colors and arms, stacking them in front of my present lines. After which you will take possession.*

The surrender was accepted.

3

Piney Pucket scrambled along the path near Haines Bluff leading down into the flat lands, with several hundred other Confederate

prisoners. The detail was on its way to a boat which would take them North to prison camp.

"Did ya hear the news?" someone asked Piney as the guards were reforming the group at the bottom of the hill.

"What news?" Piney asked.

"Pemberton's gonna surrender Vicksburg," the man said.

"Whatta's that mean?" Piney asked.

"I suppose it means they'll parole everybody . . . let 'em go home if they want," the man explained.

"Ya mean they won't hafta fight again?" Piney asked slowly, his mind making a quick exploration of what this meant to him.

"That's right."

"How come they ain't turnin' us loose?" Piney protested.

"We're different kind of prisoners, I guess, since we got caught while the fightin' was still goin' on," the man said.

"But I don't want to fight! I wanna stay here," Piney wailed. "Hey! You! Guard! You can't send us up the river now. They're gonna surrender."

The point of the guard's gleaming bayonet dropped to belly-button height and zeroed in on Piney's target. "Git in line, soldier! You're gonna take a boat ride."

4

The fatal word reached regiment at eight:

The city and the army has been surrendered. Your regiment will be in position behind your section of the fortifications, prepared to march by companies, forming on a regimental front upon the declivity outside your fort where the troops will stack arms, deposit colors, knapsacks, belts, cartridge boxes and cap-pouches. Immediately following the above maneuver you will march your men back toward Vicksburg along the Jackson road. Division guides will direct you to temporary bivouac areas. All regimental and company officers will report to division at three P.M. *with a complete duty roll, where instructions will be issued concerning the procedure to be used in the preparation and issuance of paroles.*

At nine, Robert took his position with the staff at the head of the regiment.

"Forward." The colonel's preparatory command was muted and soft.

"Forward" repeated itself down the line of unit officers in tones used by commanders at military funerals. Voiced whispers, felt as much as heard.

"March!"

The conquered moved bravely out of the entrenchments, coming to a halt upon the grassy forward slope. The weathered and bronzed cheeks of many of the men were wet with tears as they silently stacked their arms. They passed in a line before a dump designated as the final resting place for their knapsacks, cartridge boxes, and other accouterments of the warrior.

The tops of the Yankee entrenchments were lined solid with blue-uniformed men, watching the spectacle to their front. No cheers went up; there was not one shout of derision. The Yankees, when they did speak to one another, spoke in whispers. "They look like they ain't wearin' nothin' but rags."

"Yah. Half of 'em ain't got no shoes," replied his partner.

"They shore as hell fight better'n they dress."

In silence the Confederate troops appeared, in silence they departed, regiment after regiment, moving back into the city.

General Grant waited near Shirley's white house until word was brought that Pemberton's men had stacked arms and had moved out toward Vicksburg. Then he mounted and rode to take his place at the head of General John Logan's Brigade. Logan's Illinois men having worked their way nearest the Rebel works, were given the honor of marching into the city first.

The Yankee command group rode into the city stopping at Forney's headquarters, a large plantation house located on the extreme outskirts of town. There on the veranda, on a damask-cushioned rocking chair, looking stern and discontented, sat General Pemberton, surrounded by his staff. When the short, squat Grant, dressed in a blue, plain flannel suit adorned with two stars, approached the Confederate general, Pemberton refused to rise, nor did any of his staff get up to offer the conqueror a chair. Grant, pretending not to notice, started the conversation by asking how many rations would

be needed to feed the captive army. He was shocked to learn the number of captives. Thirty-two thousand. Grant had been under the delusion that he was fighting about fifteen thousand Confederates!

Grant, impassive, inspected his opponent with cold gray eyes. After trying to converse with Pemberton for a few minutes and tiring of the one-way conversation, he turned abruptly and went into the house. On the edge of the veranda Pemberton remained alone in his pride and grief.

5

Malvina, standing beside Alan on the shell-shattered tree-lined street leading down to the Vicksburg courthouse, watched the columns of silent Confederate soldiers as they marched back into the city. A dust cloud, hanging like an evil thing over the seemingly endless line of soldiers, marked the road from the city back to the defenses. The men, without exception, looked like scarecrows, their clothes saturated with dust and perspiration.

Overcome by the sight of the half-starved, lame, and foot-sore defenders, Malvina turned to hide her face on Alan's shoulder as she wept.

"Look!" someone in the crowd shouted. "Here they come! Here come the Yankees!"

Holding Malvina close to his side, Alan pushed through the excited crowd to the edge of the street. Coming around the corner at the far end of the block, rode a contingent of mounted Union officers followed by a long column of blue-coated infantrymen. McPherson and Logan, followed by Logan's troops, were converging upon the courthouse square.

Alan could see that the mood of the crowd was a curious blend of exultation and sadness. The personal joy and relief of having escaped the caves, of having lived through the seemingly endless days and nights of bombing, the freedom of walking through the streets without having to dodge half-spent cannon balls was an undeniable pleasure which brought forth hesitant laughter, an attempt at joking, an air of sad cordiality.

"What are they going to do with us now that we have surrendered?" The voice was belligerent.

"What are they going to do with the Negroes now that they will free them?" The voice was thoughtful.

Here and there could be heard bitter remarks aimed at Pemberton the betrayer, Grant the destroyer, about "nigger lovers comin' into town to steal the darkies," but the crowd was mostly curious and relieved that it was at last all over.

The ceremony at the courthouse was a brief humiliation. Logan's regiment, a slouchy, dirty aggregation, unmilitary in their unbuttoned coats, formed into a double line in front of the courthouse steps. At eleven-thirty Old Glory was slowly hoisted to the top of the flagpole over the courthouse, and the troops sang a tuneless version of "Rally Round the Flag."

"There's Robert!" Malvina cried, as another regiment of the defeated hove into sight at the far end of the street. Breaking away from Alan's side, she ran to embrace the saddened young officer. At the same time, Alan discovered that Chris had just arrived. Thus one Confederate family's reunion took place in the shade of a bomb-shattered tree on the courthouse yard.

Big Beulah did not think it would be advisable to visit the surrender, even though she was filled with curiosity. Piney would be marching back into town and it would not be right for him to see her walking around in perfect health. Instead she sent April, one of the girls, down as her special emissary.

"You go find Piney and bring him home," she instructed.

April was still in the crowd looking for Piney when Logan dismissed his troops. April was a timid girl, and it was only through love and loyalty to Beulah that she had accepted this hazardous assignment. The harrowing tales and stories of Yankee atrocities had left a mark upon her impressionable mind and she fully expected, as she watched the flag-raising ceremony, to be raped by some Yankee before she ever again reached the safety of the cave.

Bafflement replaced fear when, after Logan dismissed his troops, the Yankees made straight for the Confederate soldiers. The Yankees and Rebels were soon seen walking arm in arm, swapping knives, sharing rations, discussing the campaign. April felt a bit disappointed when one strapping big Yankee pushed right by her to greet a Confederate sergeant whose acquaintance he had made during one of the truces.

She waited and waited but there was no sign of Piney. She was almost ready to return to the cave when a tall, good-looking Yankee stopped in front of her and grinned a boyish smile.

"Looking for somebody, ma'am?" he asked politely.

April's voice, by some freak of nature or breeding, was pitched a good full octave higher than ordinary girls', with the resultant sound resembling the high nervous peepings of a peanut vendor's whistle. The girls at the house called her a nightingale and her customers referred to her as a little pip-squeak.

"Me?" April queried.

The soldier was a bit taken aback by this phenomenon he had discovered, but he had been away from women too long to be discouraged. "I saw you lookin' and thought maybe you was lookin' for somebody in particular."

"Oh," April summed up her thoughts on the subject.

"You from here?" he asked, discouraged but game.

This remark convulsed April, sending her into gales of laughter.

"I got some chocolate an' a canteen full of whisky," he offered tentatively.

The seriousness of this offer sobered April for a second; the thought of munching chocolates once again was so appealing that she grabbed the bluecoat by the arm and with a shrill giggle started leading him up the hill toward Big Beulah's.

Andalusia Smith, the only girl in Beulah's establishment who could speak Yankee fluently, made the investigation and brought back the true Piney story. Beulah, once in possession of the facts—"Piney went over to the other side"—had the answer to her problem. "We're switchin'," she announced to her assemblage of the faithful seven.

"Ta what?" April asked, somewhat apprehensively.

"Ta Yankees," Beulah announced and a shocked hush fell over the girls.

"Do you mean to say we are going to start carryin' on like those disgusting Yankees?" April asked. "Drinkin'? Carousin'? Gamblin'? Whorin'?"

"No, indeed!" Beulah assured her emphatically. "I will not put up with any drinking or carousing or gambling! We're going to be good, upright United States law-abiding Yankees."

April nodded in prim approval, having failed to follow carefully Beulah's rundown of prohibited vices.

"Here's what I'm going to do," Beulah began. "I'll need all you girls' help to make this thing work. Piney is a prisoner up North someplace and we're all goin' up to find him. Now, Schmidt, you know—Loulie's Paw—knows where I can buy us a river boat. It's a stem-winder with a steam engine, ten cabins, a barroom and a ballroom; I'm goin' to fix it up and turn it into a floatin' palace of pleasure."

"Are we goin' someplace on this boat?" Andalusia asked.

"We're going to work our way up the river, maybe to Chicago or New York City. Wherever they send Piney. It may take us a year or so to get there, but we'll get there."

"Tell us more," said one of the girls.

"Well, I'm goin' to fix the boat up real fancy like and I'm goin' to put out handbills where eva we stop. There's gonna be a barroom, an' a show. I'll get us some show people, an' music an' dancin' in the ballroom. All you girls gotta lcarn how to dance native dances."

"Native dances?"

"Yah. I'm gonna advertise my new place by callin' it a boat trip around the world. Each of you girls is gonna be a different kinda girl. Maude, you're gonna be an Indian; Edna, you'll be Spanish; April 'ill be a Chinawoman; Andalusia will be French. . . . Let's see," Beulah paused to think, "what other kinds is there?"

One of the more literate girls said brightly, "There's English and German and Italian and Yankee and Confederate."

"Yah. I'll get costumes from old Fishback down at the opera house; I'll fix you all up purty," Beulah smiled, carried away with the idea.

"Whatta ya gonna call the boat, Beulah?"

"The U. S. S. *Piney Pucket!*" Beulah announced proudly.

6

The preparation and signing of thirty-two thousand paroles was a monumental task. Robert, assigned as regimental parole officer, sat in the temporary headquarters of Major Watts, Confederate Commissioner for the Exchange of Prisoners, sweating over his assigned

stack of preparing four handwritten copies for each of the twelve hundred men in his regiment.

Robert, at first irritated and chagrined by the capitulation, was now beginning to feel more kindly disposed toward the Yankees. The rations which they were distributing to the Confederate troops were of the finest quality, and abundant. He was beginning to see Pemberton's wisdom in surrendering. If the general's request for arms to equip one battalion to act as guards in keeping the men together while they were being marched to a camp of instruction were granted, the general undoubtedly could march out of Vicksburg with an army of at least twenty-eight thousand. This, combined with Johnston's twenty-six thousand, would constitute a fighting force large enough to re-engage Grant. Perhaps whip him next time with Johnston in command. Robert felt much better about the surrender.

His only concern now was prompted by Malvina's rash action. Her determination to marry a Yankee, even though he was apparently a decent chap, was something he would prefer keeping in the dark. The Confederate command group might not look too kindly upon confirming and signing a promotion for an officer who had a Yankee for a brother-in-law.

7

"What are they doing? Why doesn't Belle start playing?" Malvina fretted as she paused at the wall mirror in the library to adjust the ribbon on the single strand of pearls about her neck. "Does it look all right? My wedding dress?" she worried.

" 'Course it looks all right," 'Lijah sighed. "An if yo' doan stop fussin' with dat bead bow yo' is gwan ter hab th' whole batch of 'em rollin' roun' dis hyer floah lak peas in a pan."

"I'm going to find out what's delaying things," Malvina declared as she started for the living-room door.

"Oh, no yo' ain'," 'Lijah shouted as she rushed to block Malvina's path. "Dat's bad luck, alookin' on yo' husban' fo' he is one. Ah'll do th' lookin' round tyer."

"What do you see?" Malvina asked as she tried to peer over 'Li-

jah's shoulder when the old mammy cautiously peeked into the adjoining room. "Is he there?"

"Is who dere?" 'Lijah asked, moving to block Malvina's view. "Ah see Mista Chris and Mista Robert. Dat's all the hes Ah sees."

"You're sure?" Malvina cried.

"Miz Della's dere and Miz Belle she's a settin' down at the piano now." 'Lijah continued her painfully slow count of the occupants in the windowless, shell-pocked parlor.

"He's changed his mind. Alan is not coming! Alan has run away and left me!" Malvina cried in a half-whisper.

"Hush now!" said 'Lijah sternly as the piano sounded out Bell's first few labored chords.

"Yo' straighten up, 'cause yo' time has drawn nigh."

"Now?" Malvina swallowed, lifted her chin high, inhaled, and held her breath.

"Now," 'Lijah said as she stepped back from the door and turned to give her bride a final inspection. Huge tears welled up in her eyes and her lips began to tremble. "God bless yo', Miz 'Vina. Yo' be happy now. Yo' hear me? Yo' be happy."

The long-anticipated moment had arrived and he was there, waiting, standing head-high above everyone in the room.

The somber words . . . "I, Alan Miller, take thee, Malvina. . . ."

The solemn pronouncements . . . "To have and to hold. . . ."

The murmured responses . . . "I do. I do."

"You may kiss the bride."

The last of her doubts, the agonizing hours of waiting, the sorrow she felt over leaving home and family vanished when his lips, touching hers, echoed, "I do," when Chris whispered to her a moment later, with tears in his eyes, "My baby, this is truly a joyous occasion."

Everyone left the house almost immediately after the ceremony, after the one bottle of champagne Chris had been able to produce from a far corner of the cellar had been consumed. Robert had to return to supervise the paroling, Belle began packing while Chris went to buy a mule to pull the buggy they would use on their trip to Jackson to find David's grave, to try to locate Justin. Alan reluctantly left to find his division quartermaster and to regain his possessions.

"I'll be all alone," Malvina pleaded, hugging Alan. "On my wedding night, I'm going to be all alone."

"If we're going to leave tomorrow, I must find my horse and get my things," Alan said regretfully. "I must also find a horse for you, my darling."

"I know. I'm selfish, but this is our wedding night."

He bent and kissed her tenderly. "I shall be back before the night is over," Alan promised.

"If you don't return, I shall go to my good friend, General Sherman and ask him to hang you from the highest tree," Malvina warned.

"Because of this," Alan laughed, "and only because of this, I'll hurry home to my bride."

The night settled over Vicksburg and over Twin Chimneys. The severed portion of the bisected Southern Confederacy rested and slept, gathering strength to begin a new life.

Malvina, alone in her marriage bed, tried desperately to remain awake until her husband returned. Exhausted from the excitement of the day she dropped off to sleep shortly before dawn. When she awakened, Alan was kneeling beside the bed. It was broad daylight and the sun was shining in the window, bright and hot.

"You were away all night long," she gasped, sitting bolt upright, taking Alan's face between her hands and kissing him.

"I had trouble getting to headquarters," Alan explained.

"Promise you'll never, ever be away from me."

"I promise. I just arrived about a half-hour ago."

"And you didn't wake me? What have you been doing?"

"Sitting here by your side," he smiled, "marveling at the beauty of you."

"Once a spy, always a spy," said Malvina.

"Once in love, always in love," laughed Alan. "Come," he said, leading her to the window. "See?"

Below, tied to the hitching rack, stood Alan's pony and a lovely white Arabian.

"Where did you find her? She's beautiful," Malvina exclaimed.

"At the army quartermaster corral. I have friends."

"And a wife who spent her wedding night alone," Malvina pouted.

Alan stepped back into the room, leaving Malvina in front of the window.

The strong morning light slashed through the open frame cutting through Malvina's diaphanous nightgown, revealing in dark outlines the shape and delicacy of her body. "What are you doing, standing there?" she asked.

"Enjoying a husband's privilege," his voice was strained. "Drinking in the beauty of you."

Malvina glanced down; she did not pretend to be shocked, or coy, or shy, she slowly moved across the bedroom, the light still at her back. "I'm yours, Alan . . . love me always."

"I'm beginning to wonder whether I'll ever have that opportunity," he said bitterly.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Your father and Belle are in the kitchen," Alan sighed as he gathered her into his arms. "They're waiting to say good-by to you before leaving for Jackson."

"Alan?"

"Yes?"

"Do you love me?"

"With all my heart."

"If you love me, you will make this day vanish in just one hour. I cannot wait longer to start my life with you."

8

Beset with despondency, Tod sat on the one chair in the room, as Loulie, trying to overcome the breathless humidity and scorching heat which gripped the city, sprawled across the bed.

"You're sure you're pregnant?" he asked.

"For the trillyunth time I tole you I was," Loulie flared. "You think I'm lyin' er somethin'?"

Loulie climbed off the bed, out of her gown. Nude, she minced her way through the debris-strewn floor to rummage around in her unpacked hatbox looking for something to wear. Finding two stockings which almost matched, she returned to the bed. As she sat working the hose up over her moist legs, Loulie considered another

visitor she had had about noon. Andalusia from Beulah's place. Beulah had sent the girl to inquire about Fishback. It seemed she was outfitting a pleasure boat to go north on the river and was looking for entertainers. Loulie pondered the information, wondering how she could turn it to her advantage.

It was nearly six o'clock when they reached the street and it was still stifling hot.

"Where we goin'?" Loulie asked.

"I don't know, Loulie," Tod said patiently. "I haven't any money, I gave it all to you. I thought I would walk over to the army rationing building and see if I could get my ration for today . . . for you."

"Thanks," Loulie sneered. "That's just what I was wantin' fer supper tonight. Yankee hardtack an' salt pork."

The last person in the world Loulie ever expected to see when she trailed Tod into the food-rationing depot, was Cyril Clyde, but there he was, big as life, sitting behind a makeshift desk sorting and signing papers.

Loulie quietly ducked back out of the depot while Tod was at the far end of the ration line; and while Cyril busied himself with some papers on the desk before him.

Loulie was in the alley outside the warehouse when Tod arrived with his hands full of raw, uncooked food.

"Look," he said proudly, hoping to please Loulie, "look what I drew. A piece of dried beef, some bread, candles, a jar of peaches."

"Tod," Loulie said sweetly, "you take the things and go on to the room. I just remembered that I gotta run down to the river and find Paw. Somethin' I wanna talk to him about. You go on an' maybe you can start fixin' supper an' I'll hurry right back. Huh?"

Tod had no desire to visit Herr Schmidt and accepted the explanation without question.

"You hurry, I'll see if I can get an onion some place and maybe we can fix a stew. Would you like that, Loulie?" he asked eagerly. He was pleased to be the provider.

"Yah. Yah, I like stew," she said, anxious for Tod to be on his way.

Clyde Herring had been apprehensive when, because of a shortage of administrative personnel, he had been put on temporary duty

with the quartermaster and ordered to assist in administering the Confederate food-rationing depot in Vicksburg.

Realizing that he might encounter some of his former acquaintances in the city, Clyde had been careful to keep in the background during the day at the depot and had loitered at his desk until dusk in order to avoid walking the streets of Vicksburg during daylight. Slipping out of a side door at the warehouse, he started down the alley on his way to camp. Loulie was waiting for him around the corner of the rationing building.

"Loulie!" he gasped. His face drained of color.

"Surprised to see me, huh?" Loulie grinned, enjoying the position in which she found herself.

"Yes . . . I . . . I didn't expect to see you," Clyde stammered.

Any plans for revenge; any bitterness she may have felt toward Clyde melted in Loulie's heart when she again heard his warm, liquid voice—she felt "goose-pimply" like the first night in Beulah's barroom.

"Since I seen you in there I been thinkin'," said Loulie smiling. "I was sorta mean to you . . . turnin' you in that way. I been thinkin' I maybe oughta do somethin' to make it up to you."

Clyde felt giddy with relief as the old boldness slowly began to return. "How do you want to make it up to me?" His voice rumbled in a most suggestive manner.

Loulie swallowed. She felt weak "all inside." Her sigh became a groan of relief when he put his arm around her waist.

"Would you like to go someplace?" he whispered.

Loulie nodded, but did not budge from the shadows of the building. "Cyril," she whispered, "how would you like to be an actor again?"

"I don't know," he replied, slightly taken back. "I'm doing well now."

"There's a boat goin' to be leavin' here next week. A showboat, an' it's goin' up the river alla way to New York City. If you wanna be an actor on that boat, I can fix it. Fishback and me is goin' to get the actors for the show."

Loulie's whisperings became vanity's hot breath, blowing upon the flame of Cyril Clyde's memory of the footlights, the applause, the adoration, the women.

"You're sure about this?" Clyde asked eagerly.

"My Paw's gonna run the boat. You get the job if I say so an' Paw can hide you out on the boat till they start."

"And we'd go to New York?" Clyde's eyes began to glow.

"You and me," Loulie wanted to pin down this part of the bargain.

"Oh, sure, sure," Clyde hastened to reassure his benefactor.

"An' you could act alla way up there," Loulie added, sweetening the deal. "It'd be good 'spearance."

"Golly, I don't know. . . ." Clyde hesitated.

"You can put on the plays too," Loulie urged. "Pick 'em out yourself."

"There *are* several things I'd like to do. . . ." Clyde argued with himself. "You're certain about this?"

"Sure. Paw's runnin' the boat.

"It's all right? I mean . . . you and me . . . being together again?" Clyde asked.

"Let's go down to the boat. We'll stay down there 'till it's ready to leave," she whispered, taking his hand, leading the way.

Tod Chaffin sat in the dismal room and waited. It was midnight and he knew Loulie would never return. He sat and waited and the stew which he had prepared for himself and Loulie grew cold.

A breeze which sprang up around eleven cleared the room of cooking odors, bringing with it a sense of peace—a sense of direction. It blew in from the east, in the direction of home. Tod knew that he would never return to the army. He knew his place now. Loulie had taught him that. She had put him where he belonged.

9

The team of horses pulling the *New York Tribune* wagon came down Broadway at a gallop, swerving in toward the curb as it approached the corner newsstand. A skinny, ragged newsboy, proprietor of the curbstone news-vending agency, warned his customers back out of danger.

The fifty-pound roll of newspapers, tossed from the racing wagon, struck the edge of the curb, bounded across the sidewalk, coming to

rest against the side of the building to the rear with a resounding thud as the distributing wagon careened off down the street.

"Must be an extra, huh, Johnny?" the customer asked as the newsboy slashed the twine binding the bundle.

"Yeh," the youngster grunted, handing the man a paper still damp from the presses.

"VICKSBURG SURRENDERS!"

"Whatta you know!" the customer exclaimed. "Say, whatever happened to your brother? Sammy. He's in the army, ain't he?"

"Yeh."

"Ever hear from him?"

"Naw. We don't hear nothin'."

"Where'bouts is he?"

"Well, he ain't inna army now," the boy, Johnny Neofes, replied, his eyes glowing with the pride youth has in an older and more successful brother. "I think he's in California now. Diggin' gold."

"Yeh?" the man was impressed.

"Yeh. Soon's I get enough money, soon's I hear from him, I'm goin' out there too," Johnny proudly explained. "Extra! Extra! Read all about it! *Vicksburg surrenders!*"

A shining carriage, driven by a liveried coachman and bearing a handsomely dressed man and a beautiful lady, pulled to the curbing. "Paper boy!" the man called.

Johnny received a fifty-cent piece with instructions to keep the change. More profits for the trip to California!

"What do it say?" the beautiful lady asked as the carriage pulled away.

"What *does* it say," the man corrected.

The woman sighed and parroted. "What does it say?"

"Vicksburg has surrendered."

The lady was silent. The name Vicksburg brought to her mind three other names—Piney, Knute, and Justin Phelan.

The man had turned to an inner page. "Listen to this," he said and read, "James McPherson, son of Andrew McPherson, of Bridgeport, arrived in New York City yesterday from Havana, Cuba. Mr. McPherson is on his way to Bridgeport with his lovely wife and bride. Mrs. McPherson, the former Maria Gonzalez de Cala, is the daughter of a prominent Cuban planter."

"Dat's us," the woman commented.

"No, Maria. That . . . is us," McPherson corrected.

"That is us," Cleo repeated slowly and then added, "what moah do it say in dere 'bout Vicksburg?"

10

Outside, from the road, the darkened house and barn seemed intact, as though the tramping armies had, for some reason, by-passed Knute's farm. The approaching night concealed the awkward holes in the roof, the gaping windows, the cannon-crumbled walls.

The chickens and ducks were all gone. There was no livestock in the barn. The house was empty. It was littered, strewn with bits of clothing and crockery . . . empty. The parlor was bare; even the organ was gone. A muslin curtain hung by one nail at the north window.

Tod was hungry after his long walk out from Vicksburg. Remembering the summer apple tree and the delicious yellow fruit his mother had used to make pies and apple butter, he drifted out to the orchard. It was here he found the grave. The spot some kindly neighbor had selected as Knute's final resting place. A weathered broken board shoved into the ground formed a crude headmarker. Upon the board the benefactor had scratched "Knute" in straggling letters with a lead pencil.

I will start afresh and at the beginning where I belong, he thought. If the seed I plant grows, so be it. If it withers and dies . . . I will accept it.

11

"Husband," Malvina called as she nudged her mount forward and reined to a walking gait beside Alan. "Where are we going to spend the night?"

Alan grinned and shook his head.

"Oh, you! You know what I mean," she blushed.

"No. Tell me what you mean," Alan teased.

"I'm not going to. It's a perfectly good question. A wife must be

concerned about such things; I am supposed to prepare our first meal tonight, on a campfire."

"And, what are we going to eat?"

"Not much," Malvina sighed, "I'm afraid. I looked at the food in your pack that you brought back from quartermaster. What a dismal selection, hardtack, bacon, flour and salt."

"A banquet!" Alan laughed. "I'll let you in on a secret. I hope to spend tonight at the house of a woman friend who has a farm down by the river near Bruinsburg. She put me up once."

"A woman? You spent the night on the farm of a woman? Alone?" Malvina's voice was cold with suspicion.

"No. I wasn't alone. She was there," Alan said with a straight face.

Malvina looked ahead and did not comment.

"Don't worry," Alan laughed. "She's a very sweet lady and you'll like her."

"But I wanted to camp out, in the woods, alone with you," said Malvina.

"You'll like this place and we'll have plenty of opportunities to camp out before we arrive at our new home."

"Where is that? Exactly?" Malvina asked. "I married you without knowing where we were going . . . except out West!"

"Not very far. I hope we can catch an army boat at Bruinsburg and ride as far as Natchez, or even better, to Baton Rouge. We'll get things organized there, send for your things. I plan to start west in September."

"Will we go on horseback?"

"Only part way," Alan explained. "We'll go up the Red River by boat as far as Wichita Falls, where we'll get our oxen and a wagon. Then we'll head overland to Santa Fe. It's a pleasant spot. We'll stay there until spring—then on to California!"

"Is that all?" Malvina asked.

"All?"

"Yes, I want to travel with you for years and years."

The sun was still high in the western sky when Alan turned his mount off the main road onto a rutted path following a tiny creek, into the dense woods.

"Where are we going now?" Malvina asked.

"You wait and see," he called, nudging his horse to a trot. Malvina kicked her mount into pursuit, galloping alongside of Alan.

"I love you," she cried.

"I love you," he smiled in reassurance. "We'll soon be there, my darling."

They cantered along in silence into the black woods. The forest was dark with mystery. A few grasshoppers scattered out of their path as they moved along the rutted path, otherwise there were no signs of life. Overhead, long strands of moss draped the half-arches of the tree aisle, swinging in slow dignity like stately old dancers.

Everything was as Alan remembered it. First the fence, then a turn to the right, following the railing up and over the hill, and there, in the valley below, stood the lean-to stable, the tiny two-room house.

"This is where *that* woman lives?" Malvina asked.

Alan nodded and together they rode down the sloping fence row to the farmyard.

With the exception of the time of day, it was dusk, everything looked as it had before. As before, the house looked deserted. Only a tiny wisp of smoke which sneaked up over the lip of the mud chimney, like a chipmunk sliding out of its hole, betrayed an occupant.

The woman, as before, had undoubtedly observed their approach and was waiting behind the thong-latched door with a shotgun set on half-cock.

"Hello," Alan called as he pounded on the door. "Anybody home?" Silence greeted his inquiry except for a double click. The hammers on the double-barrel shotgun had been moved from half-cock to cock.

"Put down your shotgun, ma'am," Alan called, his voice laced with laughter. "You remember me. The scout you fed and put up a few months ago? I've come back with my bride."

The hammers squeaked as they eased off, the gun butt sounded on the loosely timbered floor, footsteps, and the door swung slowly open.

Nor had the woman changed. She was still gaunt, tall, hollow-cheeked. If there was a change it was in her stringy black hair which seemed a little more tidy.

Alan waited as she peered out into the half-light. Her face remained impassive; only her eyes reflected thought. In a moment they sparkled a welcome, "What'd you come back here for?"

"I'm on my way, rather we are on our way to the river at Bruinsburg. We need a place to stay overnight. I thought perhaps I could buy a meal from you, too." Alan smiled and then asked, "A wilderness is not the proper place for a bride to spend her first night away from home."

A half-smile crept on the woman's lips. A smile which said she understood the real purpose of Alan's visit.

"I reckon I can fix you up. I ain't sellin' no vittles, no matter fer all that talk about payin'. You'll take what I got fixin' on the fire and like it, but they're for free. This the missus?"

"Malvina, I want you to meet our benefactor, Mrs. . . ." Alan paused. He had not learned the woman's name during his first visit.

"Sims. Emily Ann Sims," the woman offered.

Malvina smiled her relief. "What a pretty name—Emily Ann."

"I don't look much like an Emily Ann, do I?"

"You are so kind to take us in," Malvina said.

While Emily Ann set the table, Malvina walked to the nearby springhouse to wash the dust away from her face in the icy waters of a captive underground stream.

The food was simple, but it was hot. Fried ham, fried potatoes, soda biscuits and milk. For dessert there were more biscuits and fresh, unstrained comb honey.

After the supper, Emily Ann accepted one of Alan's cigars and suggested they all "go set out front under the apple tree where it's a mite cooler."

They were seated beneath the tree and Alan was engaged in peeling Malvina an apple he had pulled from one of the low branches when Emily Ann made her announcement. "I got myself a man."

"Congratulations," Alan smiled.

"He ain't much, but he's a man," Emily Ann said and then added, "Men are hard to find."

"Indeed they are and I feel the same way about my man," Malvina said kindly.

Emily paused to inspect Alan again before she made any comments. "You done right smart. Mine's kinda puny, peaked and sickly like but he's right smart with a plow. I put him plowin' my

corn patch one afternoon last week. I got busy myself and forgot about him, and I'll be dog bite me, if he didn't plow that ar' patch three times 'fore I could stop 'im." Emily chuckled fondly to herself as she thought about her man's prowess with a plow.

"Where is he, Emily Ann?" Malvina asked. "In town?"

"No," Emily hesitated. "He's a mite shy. Right now he's out in the smokehouse, out back. I fed him some supper and he et out there."

"I'd like to meet him," Malvina said, trying to be polite.

"No, ma'am. I just don't rightly think you should. It wouldn't be of much good. He don't talk none."

"Oh?"

"Got somethin' wrong with his talkin' apparatus, but that suits me fine," Emily hastened to add in defense of her man. "I don't dote much on gabby men, nohow."

"I agree with you on that point, too," Malvina said, looking at Alan. "I dislike gabby men."

"And how about grabby men," Alan murmured as he slid his arm around Malvina's waist.

"You go right ahead an' lollygag," Emily Ann said, nodding in approval. "I got no objections to a man that's fulla juice. My first man was that a-way. A real hell-snorter. When he made love he made you feel like rarin' up and suckin' a cloud dry."

Malvina laughed to cover her embarrassment. Alan changed the subject. "When did you," he hesitated to say marry, "find your man?"

"I did just that," Emily Ann nodded in approval of Alan's choice of words. "It was a real peculiar thing, but I did find him, a little over a month ago. I was out early one mornin'; up on the hill in the woods north of the house, lookin' ter see if one of my sows had littered yet. I was goin' 'round easy like, tryin' not to scare her if I found her, and I peeked through a bush an' there he was, no more'n three grasshopper jumps away—by the crick, a bendin' over drinkin' water. Lappin' it up like a dog would. Well now, when he got up and turned around I was shocked near to death. He war as naked as a jaybird from the waist down. First off I thought he was a sly one—thought mayhap that he was tryin' to lure me or somethin'. You know there are men like that. Well now. I was gettin' ready to head back fer old double-barreled Betsy at the house

when he went lopin' off up the hill, jist like a deer. Fer some reason, I guess it was just natural female curiosity, I follered him, alla time keepin' hid. I diskivered him asettin' in front of a cave on the other side of the hill, crackin' and eatin' acorns. That wuz what he was doin'. That's what he wuz livin' on—acorns."

"This is unbelievable," Malvina gasped.

"It shore don't sound true. But it is the gospil. When I first walked up to him he was scared—crawled way back in the cave and wouldn't come out. Jist set back in there an whimpered like a kicked dog. You know how I got him out?" Emily Ann asked.

"How?" Malvina and Alan asked at the same time.

"I went alla way back down to the house. Cut some ham slices and put 'em between some fresh-made bread and then went back up. I coaxed him out like you coax a scared kitten down out of a tree with a bowl of cream."

"Where did he come from?" Malvina asked. "What was wrong with him?"

"Don't rightly know. You see he don't talk none. At first he waren't good fer nothin'. He jist set in the corner an et an slept. I put an old pair of pants on him . . . some that belonged to my first man . . . I had to cover up his nakedness. Lately, durin' the last week er so, he's been actin' right good. Like I say, I took him out and put him between the plow handles and he seemed to know right away what I wanted. He grinned and went right to it. He ain't so much to look at. He sorta slobbers and his tongue keeps hangin' out, but . . . well, he's better'n nothing. I think he's gonna be a good worker," Emily Ann concluded.

"That is the most amazing thing I've ever heard," Malvina said, shaking her head. "You don't know where he came from?"

"No. . . ." again Emily Ann hesitated, as if she was not sure whether or not to reveal everything she knew. "Truthful, now this is just between us, I think he's a Yankee. I bet you think I'm awful, don't you? Keepin' a Yankee fer a man?"

"Well," Malvina was very serious, as though she was thinking out this problem for the first time, "I would think there are circumstances under which a woman, a Southern woman, can take a Yankee for a man and be justified about what she has done."

Emily Ann turned to Alan. "You know, mister, you got a real smart woman here."

"Too smart," Alan said.

Malvina chuckled.

Emily Ann smiled and nodded in approval. "What's he sayin', dear? Is he wantin' to go to bed?"

Alan burst into laughter, rose and lifted Malvina up into his arms. "How did you guess?" he laughed.

"I know quite a bit about men, and how they think," Emily grinned. "Remember? I tole you my first man was a hell-snorter."

"Where are you taking me?" Malvina whispered as Alan carried her around the corner of the house.

"Out back to a special place. Here," he said as he kicked open the door to the lean-to which had been tacked onto the rear of the log cabin.

"What is it?" Malvina asked.

"Our bridal house," Alan said. "A place for brides and grooms to live when the parents sleep in the only bedroom of the main house."

Malvina gasped. "You! You saw this when you were here before! You saw this and you plotted to bring me here all the time. All the way from Vicksburg!"

"Are you unhappy?" Alan asked as he sank down upon the corn-shuck bed.

"Oh, no darling, no. You're the most wonderful husband in all of the world and I love our bridal house. Tell me more. What else did you plan?"

Alan said nothing. Slowly he began to unfasten the long row of buttons which ran down the front of her dress. "Malvina, my darling, I love you. I love you. I love you."

It was later, much later when Malvina softly whispered, "Alan?"

"Yes, my darling?"

"I feel like rarin' up and suckin' a cloud dry."

The shuck tick rustled with his chuckle.

"Alan?"

"Yes, Malvina."

"May I say a naughty word?"

"If you wish."

"You're a hellish hell-snorter."

Alan was awakened around midnight. The bumping noise which had awakened him came from the stable. He slipped into his boots and trousers, and was buckling on his pistol when Malvina awakened.

"What is it? Alan! Where are you going?" Malvina was sitting up in the bed, enough for the moonlight which streamed in through the room's one window to catch the line of her shoulders and breasts.

"Here I am," Alan whispered.

"What's the matter?" she gasped.

"There's something wrong with the horses. I'll be right back." He turned and opened the door. Outside, the moonlit farmyard was as bright as day, as he moved silently and swiftly across the yard to the lean-to barn. Stepping quickly around the corner of the structure he beheld the figure of a man dressed in a Federal jacket and cap, naked from the waist down, standing between the horses, one hand on each animal's withers, caressing them as though he were rubbing them down after a stiff run. The animals, unused to the stranger, were shying away, one to either side of the stall.

"What are you doing?" Alan barked.

The man, he was not a man, but rather a boy, skinny-legged, with yellow, seedy-looking hair, turned his frightened eyes in the direction of Alan's voice and whimpering like a baby, dropped his hands to the hairy region between his legs.

As Alan stepped forward into the shed, the half-dressed boy spun and sprinted out of the shed like a frightened rabbit, running for the woods. By the time Alan could cross to the other side the phantom soldier had vanished from sight.

Malvina met Alan in the courtyard by the sorghum mill as he was returning to the bridal house. She had opened the saddlebags, secured and donned a gown and was coming to meet him. "What was the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing," Alan said. "Apparently a 'possum or a coon was in the barn looking for grain."

Malvina took a deep breath and grasped his arm. He could feel the softness of her breast as she nestled against his side. "Smell the air," she said. "It is cool . . . it's ravishing."

"You're ravishing," Alan whispered. "What are you doing out of bed?"

"You were away too long. I couldn't bear to be without you," she

whispered. "Look," she said, pointing through the woods to the great river flowing ceaselessly toward the sea. "Look at the moonbeams on the water. Aren't they lovely?"

The moon cut a yellow band across the black, turbulent waters of the Mississippi.

"That's a moon bridge. It is the kind of bridge which we'll use to cross when we die and go up to heaven."

"You are wrong," Alan said softly. "The moon bridge is your secret pathway from heaven."

"*My* secret pathway?"

"Yes. You're not Malvina McClellan . . ."

"Malvina Miller," she corrected.

". . . Malvina Miller at all. You are one of God's angels and you came down from heaven by the way of the moon bridge."

"I came from the other direction. I am one of the devil's own elves and I have come to this earth, straight from hell, to find myself a hell-snorter."

Alan chuckled as he stepped behind Malvina, wrapping his arms around her waist. Quickly she lifted his hands to cover her breasts. "I'm cold," she whispered.

As Alan scooped his bride up into his arms and started walking once more in the direction of the bridal house, the low silhouette of a gunboat broke the ribbon of moonlight which streaked the river beyond the farmyard. It was followed by another gunboat and then another.

Executive Mansion
Washington
August 26, 1863

Hon. James C. Conkling
Springfield, Illinois
My Dear Sir:

. . . . *The signs look better. The Father of Waters again goes unvexed to the sea* . . .

A. Lincoln.