

ASTRAY AT RAPPAHANNOCK.

We talked again of Brock Edmunds. His strange disappearance had been the theme of the mess, since his departure for Rappahannock, a week before. Brave, scrupulous and loyal, all who knew him well rejected indignantly the imputation that he had gone over to the enemy. He was a Virginian, it was said, and must forsooth be false; his affianced was the daughter of a Confederate colonel, and to be true in love, he must forswear his country. Meaner men had superseded him in the staff, and he had revenged himself by perjury and desertion. But though these paltry libels had obtained general circulation and acceptance, we—his staff companions—who had known him in camp, in perilous enterprise, and in the painful march, defended his honor as our own.

We were sitting beneath the canopy or 'fly' of the mess-tent, recreating ourselves with whisky and pipes. It was the eighth night since the departure of our comrade, and we missed his ready jest, his loud, infectious laugh, his uniform courtesy and generosity. The war had come at last to Warrenton Springs, and the encampments of an immense army whitened the surrounding hills. Federal sentries paced up and down the massive portico of the hotel; cannon were planted in all the lanes; cavalry horses trampled garden and orchard; and the Spring was become a lavatory for thousands of wanton soldiers.

We had been a fortnight at the Springs, and the monotony of our tenure had been varied by but a single incident—the loss of Brock Edmunds. The circumstances relating to his departure were mysterious and alarming. He had been called to the general's tent late in the afternoon, and intrusted with a verbal order to one of the brigade commanders, whose quarters were at Rappahannock, a railway station on a river of the same name, eighteen miles distant. He had reached his destination at nine o'clock, delivered his instructions punctually, and obtained the countersign of the day. Returning, he had passed a guard five miles from Rappahannock, and had stopped to light a pipe at a picket-fire, still further on, complaining in the latter case, that his horse was a trifle lame. He was, to all appearance, sober, and expressed himself as resolved to get back to head quarters by midnight. But subsequently, no man in the army had encountered him, and traces of neither rider nor horse had been discovered, though diligent inquiries were made far and wide. His capture by the enemy was improbable, for our picket-posts were so close and continuous that the lines were considered to be impervious. No bodies of Southern troops were contiguous; and though the Virginians within the lines were sullen and hostile, it was believed that only a few aged and infirm people remained, as the young and able-bodied had departed to join the Confederate armies. The only plausible alternative was, that Brock Edmunds, knowing the location of our pickets, had avoided them, and escaped in the darkness to his Southern friends. The Richmond newspapers, however, which our out-riders brought in daily, made no mention of Captain Edmunds, and no recent prisoners had heard anything of his desertion.

The conversation beneath the fly had turned upon the absent one. Thirteen young fellows were we, who had thrown up our several professions at the call to arms, and, unacquainted before, had met by assignment upon general B.'s staff. Five of us were Yankees, two were from New York, four were foreign adventurers who loved war for its own sake, and I was a Pennsylvanian, of Quaker descent.

'Heigh-ho!' said Wicklowe, turning off his fourth draught of spirits 'how we miss Brock's jolly laugh.'

'Camp has become so insufferably dull,' said Bigswig, 'that I shall resume the old 'biz,' and throw up my commission.'

Bigswig had been a junior partner in a dry-goods house, but took to the sword as naturally as to scissors.

'If it isn't positive conceit to repeat anything that Brock—poor old boy—has done so well before, I will sing his Chickahominy song,' said Chockmer, ever anxious to exhibit his vocal powers.

'I pray ze,' said Saint Pierre, with a supplicatory grimace, 'do not, Monsieur Chockmare.'

'Go on,' said Wicklowe, drinking again: 'any affliction is preferable to this horrible silence.'

As Chockmer's wheezy notes rang on the night, I saw the glare of camp-fires reddening the woods and sky; I heard the clatter of bayonets at the hour of guard-relief, and some of the negro servants singing sweetly

sonorous choruses. The faint, hollow roll of a distant drum blended mystically with the rustle of leaves overhead, and I saw in the dimness the cloaked and stalwart sentry striding before the general's tent. A horse stood saddled in one of the broad gravelled aisles, and I could hear the 'tick, tick, tick' of the telegraph instrument in a Sibley canopy adjoining.

A month had thus transformed one of the pleasantest of solitudes, and the hospitable grounds had been trampled by innumerable hoofs. There were great gaps in the fences, and coarse pencilings upon the walls of the fine old mansion. The furniture had been broken and used to feed Vandal cook-fires. Desolation, following in the wake of armies, had despoiled alike the fertility of nature and the improvements of man. How soon might retaliation affect our Northern homes as we had ruined these?

'Left'nant Mintlin!'

I turned toward the voice, at the repetition of my name, and recognised a tall, athletic orderly. As I faced him, he respectfully saluted, and said: 'The general nades ye, sir, immediately, at his quarters.'

The mess broke into a loud laugh, anticipating that some onerous duty would devolve upon me.

'There's twenty pages of a report to copy,' said Bigswig.

'I'll lend to you my leetle 'choval, mon ami,' said Saint Pierre; 'you take one dam journey!'

'Hadn't you as well worry down another 'smile' before you go?' said Wicklowe, copiously imbibing himself.

I replied carelessly, refilled my pipe, and following the sergeant across a grass-plot and through a broken wicket, stood in the presence of the general. He was seated at a pine table, covered with maps, diagrams, and manuscripts, and the candle threw an imperfect light upon his handsome bronzed face, and broad, prominent forehead. A trunk, marked with his initials, and a small iron bedstead, with two camp-stools, and a short wooden bench, comprised his furniture; but there was a picture of the Madonna, which never left him, suspended from a nail in the rear tent-pole. This picture had survived all mutations. He had carried it in the Mexican war, when but a lieutenant. It had hung in the halls of the Montezumas, when employed at clerk duties therein. At Fort Yuma, the Siberia of military stations, he had kept it in his quarters for five monotonous years; and when appointed a colonel, early in the civil war, he had brought this picture across four thousand miles of plain and prairie.

'Sit down, Lieutenant Mintlin!' he said curtly; and as I took one of the chairs, he resumed his writing. I looked at the richly quilted saddle that lay at his feet, at the splendidly mounted sword thrown carelessly across his bed, at the hostlers and silver-plated pistols beneath his rubber-pillow. I studied the angles and fullnesses of the fine indurated form, and the severe and wrinkled countenance before me; and from the starred shoulder bars and silvered beard of this hero of a score of battles, my eyes wandered magnetically to the pensive, melancholy picture of the Madonna—his companion in triumph, reverses, trial, and promotion. I trust that every soldier carries some such picture through his journeyings. My own Madonna was in Pennsylvania.

'Lieutenant,' said he, in his quick nervous manner, looking me directly in the eyes, 'your horse is fresh and saddled?'

I looked through the opening of the tent at the sharp beat of hoofs, and beheld my pony, led by my own servant.

'I would not trouble you till it was necessary, but gave you a part of the evening with your friends. There is your horse; here is a sealed envelope. You are to ride with all speed to Rappahannock.'

A little leap of my heart, and a slight tremor of my lips, followed the announcement of this ill-omened name.

'I may say,' continued the general, in his curt sententious way, 'since I commonly take my 'aides' into my confidence, that this paper contains the details of an order for an immediate advance. You are to ride direct to the quarters of General H., to deliver the envelope, and return to-night with his receipt and reply.'

I bowed silently, and turned to go.

'Stop!' said he again. 'It is eight o'clock; you must deliver the message by eleven. I shall not retire to-night. You will be back at three.'

'It is a long and stony way,' I said hesitatingly, 'and forty miles can scarcely be made in seven hours.'

'It must be done,' said he, shaking his

beard; the troops must be under way before midnight. Return upon a fresh horse. Good night.'

I returned his salutation, but had scarcely got a yard from his quarters, when I heard the sharp call to return. As I stood before him again he stared piercingly into my eyes, half impeachingly, half inquiringly.

'Am I to lose another aide?' he said slowly and sarcastically.

'The blood rose to my temples, and I felt my hands closing. 'Not unless you insult him twice,' I returned.

'I ask your pardon,' said he, in his old dry manner; 'you are not a Virginian!'

I bit my lips at the reflection upon my late comrade, but concluded to remain silent.

'Will you have an orderly to accompany you?'

'Not after the doubt you have expressed.'

'Forget it,' he said, with irresistible frankness, 'as the weakness of a suspicious old soldier. Give me your hand. God bless you! Be prompt. Good night.'

I repaired to the mess-tent, hastily examined my pistols, and buckled on my sword-belt and spurs. Joining my comrades in a parting health, leaped into my saddle, and at seven minutes past eight o'clock, started at a sharp canter for Rappahannock.

The ride for five or six miles of the way was enlivened by belated teams, couriers, and occasional squads of officers returning to their regiments. Campfires lit up the whole horizon, till it seemed a great belt of flame; mystic serenades flouted dreamily from invisible fields and corpses; confused voices of shouting and singing were wafted from tented hillsides, and grouped batteries ambulances, and army-cattle came dimly in view at intervals. The moon shone full and brightly; but I saw with some solitude that it was sinking slowly behind the woods; and at nine o'clock, as I heard the tattoo beat from a dozen quarters, I turned obliquely to the left, and was soon involved in complete darkness. For nine miles, I met no human being, and heard no sounds but the ring of my horse's hoofs, the rattle of his curb-chain, and the clink of my sword in its scabbard.

There was nothing of peril involved in my journey; but the times were irregular the country expansive, and thousands of reckless men were abroad with arms in their hands. How had Brock Edmunds disappeared? His route to Rappahannock had not differed from mine. The night was not less fair. As horsemen, we were well matched; and that he had been faithful, I would pledge my life. How, whence, and wherefore had the stillness and mystery of the grave fallen upon him? I could not surmise; I only know that, as I remembered his goodness, pleasantness, and usefulness, I resolved, if chance should give me a clue whereby to follow or revenge him, I would do it at all risks. My way led mainly through scrub-timber; the road was little more than a cow-path, so sinuous that I was compelled to trust entirely to the instinct of my steed, and so dark that I was not without fear of pitfalls and prostrate trees. Fortunately the route had been seldom travelled, and the clay roadway was hard, level, and unencumbered by the slush and debris that usually mark the route of an army. There was much of romance, and pleasant feverish excitement in the ride. The hoofs of my horse struck sparks from stony places, and the whistle of night-birds, the scream of owls, the whine of wild pigs, and the long shrill chirp of crickets and lizards made strange and eerie music. Weird likenesses of beings colossal, hideous eyes that shone from thickets, and glimpses of spectral sky breaking through boughs and leaves; starlight reflected in slimy pools; deserted homesteads staring black and ghostly from hill tops; clumps of negro cabins, that looked half-human through their great window eyes; clearings across which the night-winds blew dimly; and quaint old stacks and hay-barracks—these were some of the spectacles that greeted me on the way. And when, at eleven o'clock, I answered the challenge of a patrol, and found that I had almost reached my journey's end, I drew a sigh of relief, and reigning my horse into a quiet pace, soon dismounted before the quarters of General H.

He had not anticipated my message, and was about retiring to his bed. But after swearing once or twice, he resumed his garments, summoned his aides, and ordered his brigade under arms. In a few minutes, lights were twinkling here and there, great wagons laden with tents and field-utensils went lumbering across the fields, and mounted men loomed away in battalion. The multitudinous camps had folded themselves noiselessly, and were off.

I resolved to return with my own pony, for he seemed yet fresh and unwearied, and obtaining a sealed reply to my communication, accepted the offer of a drop of brandy and a cigar, and remounted my horse. The general called out to me as I moved off: 'Have you heard anything of Captain Edmunds?'

'Nothing.'

'He was a fine fellow,' said the general, turning away. 'I gave him the proper countersign just at this hour of the night, and he took some spirits, as you have done, before departing.'

'Pardon me a moment, general, I replied; 'but as a matter of curiosity, will you tell me the countersign for that evening?'

'Ticonderoga,' he answered shortly.—'Good night.' As a rule, I give no regard to coincidences. I do not believe in signs; I despise dreams and omens; but there are moments when reason, in spite of itself, gives way to superstition, and such moments were mine, as I turned my face toward Warrenton Springs, and ground my horse harshly with the spur. Not only had my journey corresponded with that of Brock Edmunds in all essentials of time, route, and object, but circumstances had tallied, not excepting the otherwise insignificant item of the countersign, for the password on this evening was 'Crown Point,' and that of the previous evening its associate battle of 'Ticonderoga.' In addition to these resemblances, I could not forget that the disappearance of my friend had pressed upon my mind for days with peculiar and intense interest; I had dreamed fitfully of his return, I had talked incessantly of his virtues, I had loved him with the fervor of a brother; nay, I had felt a conviction, too subtle to be explained, too positive to be mistaken—and on this evening oppressive beyond melancholy—that with his fate my life was in some way bound up. It was in vain that I puffed vigorously at my pipe, and strove to recall lighter topics—my mother, perhaps awake even now, and praying in the dim watches for her errant boy; my betrothed, who might be murmuring my name amid her dreams; my mess-companions roaring at their revels; the grim old general, awaiting my return, with the blue eyes of his Madonna ever upon him; the troops on the march, roused up at my unwelcome summons—but one by one these cheerful themes faded away, and the fate of Brock Edmunds resumed its place in my fancies. His face, like a spectre, glided before me in the darkness; his name, like a ghostly refrain, came up to my lips with every hoof-beat; and as I halted, obedient to challenge, by the last clustering picket, my hollo of 'Crown Point' seemed to provoke a thousand dismal echoes of 'Ticonderoga' and 'Brock Edmunds.'

'Have you the time, sentry?' I called to the patrol.

'Twelve o'clock, midnight!' said the deep voice of the horseman, vanishing in the gloom.

For nine miles to come, I should meet no living soul. The blowing of my pony, as I spurred him again, admonished me that hard travel was beginning to tell upon him; so I beat the ashes out of my pipe, buttoned on my coat close to the throat, and chirping encouragingly, pushed forward gallantly, though not at headlong speed. But the flush and exultation of my ride were over; a strange weird nervousness had succeeded.—The noise of wild swine in the brush alarmed me; twice I laid my hand agitatedly upon my sword, and once halted with drawn pistol at the shriek of a frightened night-hawk.—Ashamed of these unmanly weaknesses, I thought to compose myself by singing a cheerful starve, but my voice was so hollow and unreal, that I shuddered and ceased.—At last, with a loud, 'Woo,' and a chill, quick quiver, I stopped in the middle of the road, and felt the perspiration standing like night dew on my forehead.

I too was lost!

For more than an hour, I had failed to recognize passing objects. However my tremor and tenor had lengthened the miles, I had yet preserved some approximate estimate of time, and knew that, in the due course of travel, I should have been at Warrenton Springs. But in the rush of fears and fancies, in the gloom and shadow of the night, in the certainty that having thrice gone over the same road, I should follow it safely again, I had missed my way. In place of a scrub-maple, oak, magnolia, and gum that shut in the by-road by which I had come, I was now encompassed by dwarf pines and cedars, that revealed the open sky, but gave even more than the ordinary loneliness to the scenery. Sterile; uninhabited, interminable as I knew such soil to be, there was the additional fear that I had emerged upon a stretch of Virginia forest wherein the traveller might wander for months, in the dreary circles, finding neither outlet, nor subsistence.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)