

Who Only Stand and Wait

Continued from Page 8

destruction of the stock, he brought the flat of his blade down on John's lowered head.

"Damn these rubes," he growled, looking down at the prostrate figure; "they ain't got no sense at all. Now what'd 'e want to go an' do that for?" He looked up and saw the father staring at him with bloodless lips. "Carry him into the house," he ordered; "he ain't killed. An' fer God's sake, when ye get in the house, go into the cellar an' stay there!"

A grizzled trooper with kindly grey eyes helped the old man carry John into the house. They laid him on the floor of the kitchen and the soldier hurried out again.

Mr. Gibbs stood looking at his son in hopeless misery. His wife stood by the stove, wringing her hands and moaning. The door of the stairway opened and Mary came into the room. She gave one glance at the figure on the floor, then pressed a hand to her throat, and backed against the wall, screaming shrilly. The father dropped his face in his hands.

"Oh, my God!" he groaned, "I don't know what to do; I don't know what to do!"

The mother was the first to regain her presence of mind. She seized a dipper of water and bent over her son. Mr. Gibbs did not raise his head. Mary sank into a chair, her hand still at her throat, gasping as though she were choking. The rattle of muskets and the steady thudding of the cannon sounded from down the lane. Now and then through the din could be heard the voice of the corporal, chasing his horses through the orchard.

After a few moments, John raised his head, glared about him, and lurched to his feet. The other three looked at him stupidly. A spent bullet crashed through the window, sending the glass tinkling to the floor, and buried itself with a spurt of plaster in the opposite wall. Mary gasped, closed her eyes, and let her head fall back limply over the chair-back.

John hanging on to the table to steady himself, looked at his mother.

"You take Mary into the front room," he panted. "Get the chimney 'tween you an' the back o' the house. Pile all the chairs an' things in front of you!"

When the door had closed behind the women, John walked unsteadily to the window and looked out. The yard was tenanted only by the dead cattle and hogs, and the collie, who went sniffing from one warm body to another. The soldiers had scattered. Along the line of the hill on the other side of the marsh lay a line of men, their blue uniforms standing out sharply against the brown earth—like so many logs. Only, the motion of their guns and the thick, white smoke in the air above them spoke of life—and death. Over the woods to the right, where the guns had been hammering the smoke hung thicker. John was dimly aware that the artillery had ceased firing. Then there came a series of red, flaring explosions that showed dimly through the trees, and blue-clad men commenced pouring out into the lane. A man on horseback galloped up, threw himself from his horse, and burst through the door.

"You'll have to get this place ready for the wounded," he announced. "Any women here?"

John nodded dumbly.

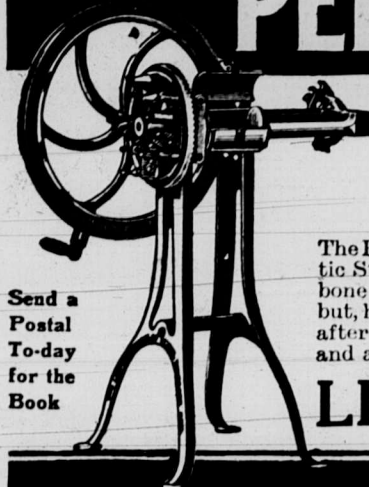
"Set 'em to tearing bandages," commanded the soldier. "And bring all the mattresses you've got down here. Spread 'em on the floor. Get plenty of water. That's about all we can do."

He walked to the door and then paused, speaking more to himself than to the two men.

"This Government," he announced, "seems to think men don't get hurt in war. They've given us everything but doctors!"

He went out and galloped down the lane. Father and son watched him with the same animal-like dullness of gaze which had settled upon them since the first rattle of firing. Then, without speech, they set about carrying mattresses and quilts and spreading them on the floor. The mother came from the other room, and listening to John's explanation, started tearing sheets into long strips without a word.

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Stumbling footsteps sounded on the porch outside. John swung open the door, and a private sprawled into the room, the blood dripping from his soaked sleeve to the floor.

"Gimme a drink," he demanded hoarsely. He brushed aside the dipper and buried his face in the water-pail, gulping the liquid like an animal. When he had finished, he dropped on to a mattress and lay breathing heavily. Mrs. Gibbs tried to ease his arm.

"Oh, let it alone," he said roughly; "it'll dry up—maybe. I don't care."

They watched him while the blood soaked into the blue-and-white mattress.

"What's goin' on down there?" John asked finally. The man relapsed over and looked at him with eyes growing bright with fever.

"Hell!" he said shortly. "Just plain hell! There's too many of 'em. We're goin' to get licked."

John peered out of the window. The artillery had left its position on the other side of the marsh and was tumbling back in haste toward the lane—the only path by which it could retreat. The familiar figure of the major, mounted on a lean bay, flitted past the house, dashed into the main road, and disappeared. The lane was filled with wounded men, staggering toward the house. A small man with a black satchel in his hand suddenly appeared in the doorway.

"I'm a surgeon," he announced curtly. Then to the man on the floor: "Get up and come out of here. This is no place for wounded. Their shells will be falling around here in half an hour."

The five guns with their limbers and ammunition wagons thundered past the house, the gunners clinging to the rocking carriages, the drivers lashing the tugging horses.

"Break through the fence and go into the fields on the other side!" a voice called above the din.

Through the fields on both sides of the lane, and up that congested channel, the blue figures came thicker. Suddenly there was a bright flash and a report directly under a single great oak, two thirds of the way down the lane. Half a dozen blue figures sagged limply to the ground, while bits of earth and branches pattered against the house. The dismounted cavalrymen, pushed back at every point of their small front, and deprived of the support of their guns, backed away from the marsh in sagging lines which broke and melted here and there. The yard filled with hurrying figures. Men shouted and swore. John, looking from the window, saw an officer driving his men into the barns and looking over his shoulder at the house. A bullet whipped through the window, another struck the chimney and sent down a shower of bricks and dust. A figure in grey showed for an instant on a hilltop across the marsh, then turned and waved a glittering sword toward whatever was behind him.

"Get under cover," shouted the officer in the yard. "We can hold 'em here a bit. Into the house with you. Use the windows. Put the bedding in front of the walls!"

John and his father were brushed aside by the swarm of grimy, bloody, panting men who burst in upon them. They

stood back against the walls, watching. Two men went to each of the rear windows facing the marsh, dragging the mattresses before them. One of them glanced out of the window as he worked.

"Golly!" he exclaimed, "they're comin' fast!"

The four men unstrapped their cartridge boxes and put them where they could reach them without moving. They smashed out the panes of the windows with the butts of their carbines, and poked the muzzles out warily. A bullet smashed the clock, which fell rattling and tinkling on to the floor. The four troopers looked around and laughed.

"That clock won't run!" one of them chuckled.

They commenced firing methodically, the reports of their rifles bellowing like thunder in the room. Empty paper cartridges littered the floor. The room grew hazy with the thick smoke, and the pungent smell of the burned powder made John and his father choke. Bullets incessantly struck the house. They could hear the guns of the men in the rooms upstairs, and the noise of their feet as they shifted their positions. One of the men, turning his head as he bit the end from a cartridge, saw the two white-faced farmers leaning nervously against the wall.

"You guys better lie down," he remarked casually, "or you'll get pinked."

A bullet struck one of the men at the windows squarely between the eyes. He fell back on to the floor, kicking out his legs stiffly. His companion, busy with his ramrod, did not turn his head.

"Are ye hit, Sam?" he asked. When the other did not answer, he looked around, frowned slightly, and went on firing. The man on the floor rolled over and fell against John's legs. John stepped over the body without looking down, and leaned against the wall closer to his father. Mr. Gibbs looked up at his son.

"They've shot a hole in the chimney," he said with stiff lips. "We'll hev t' fix that in the mornin'."

A grinding crash seemed to make the very walls of the house rock. The concussion of the explosion struck the ears of the men in the smoky room like the blow of a heavy pillow. A chorus of shrieks mingled with a patter of feet sounded outside.

"Cracky!" cried the talkative man at the window, craning his neck so that he might see better. "They put a shell right through that barn! It's on fire, too."

Mr. Gibbs suddenly started as though waking from a long sleep. He passed his hand across his forehead and looked at the man who had spoken.

"Barn on fire?" he queried sharply.

He crossed the room with quick, springy steps, peered out of the window, then reached for the water pail. A bullet had passed through the pail, and the contents had long since spouted on to the floor, but the old man did not seem to notice this.

"The new plough's in there, John," he called, as he hurried to the door; "I'm going to save that, anyhow!"

John made a futile attempt to clutch his father's shoulder. "Come back, father!" he yelled, but the old man sped past and ran out into the yard.

"They'll pot the old codger sure," said

the talkative trooper.

John hurried toward the door, but a trooper who had skulked up the lane under fire made a dash for the opening from the outside and they crashed together in the doorway. John struggled to his feet and looked out of the window. His father, bareheaded, and with the empty pail swinging in his hand, was halfway between the back steps and the shattered barn when a bullet caught him in the breast. He stopped as though he had run into a wagon-tongue in the darkness; the arm holding the pail grew limp, and he slouched down on his knees, the pail banging on to the ground beside him.

It seemed to John that the bullet had struck them both. The roar of the firing, the smell of the powder, all the rushing, red excitement of the past few hours seemed brushed aside in an instant and he only saw his father lying dead in the familiar ruts of the lane. He seemed to see at once a thousand pictures of the grey-haired man as he had seen him all his life.

"He's dead," he muttered thickly; "father's dead, and mother's in the other room where she can't see." He turned to the talkative man's back. "He wasn't seventy yet," he explained, with a strange eagerness to make himself understood. "He might 'a' lived quite a while."

He could not take his eyes from the figure outside the window. He paid no attention to the bullets which twanged through the broken windows, bored through the thin walls, and whistled past his face. He did not see the dodging, hurrying grey shapes which stole up the fences along the lane and skulked through the stubble. A shell burst under the watering-trough and he did not even wink. The tall, talkative man had dropped his gun and was trying to stop the flow of blood from a hole in his shoulder, cursing steadily. A red-faced captain stood near John, watching the fields behind the house and firing his revolver over the shoulder of the man at the window.

"We can hold 'em if they don't shell the house," he said over and over again; "if they don't shell the house, yes, sir, we can hold 'em!"

A bullet sang through the room, coming from the other direction. The red-faced captain noticed it.

"Oh, Lord," he ejaculated, "they've got round us somehow; they're comin' from the other side!"

Something in the back of John's numbed memory stirred, and he hurried to the other side of the house. He found Mary stretched out on a couch. His mother knelt on the floor, her head on Mary's breast. She did not look up as he entered, seeming to feel who it was.

"Oh, John," she wailed, "she's dead, she's dead!"

Frantically he pushed his mother to one side and began hunting for the wound. His mother watched him with wide eyes while he tore at his wife's waist.

"She's not shot," gasped the woman; "she was scared to death. We saw father—" her voice seemed simply to die out in her throat. John looked from the body of the girl to his mother, then raised his fist in the air.

"Damn this thing!" he said in even tones, "oh, damn it!"

He ran back into the kitchen. Outside he caught a glimpse of grey uniforms under the very windows. The red-faced captain was on the top of the back steps trying to keep off the bayonets of three infantrymen with his broken sabre. The grey uniforms

Concluded on Page 18

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