

THE ROAD TO VIDALIA

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"Told Kirk you could n't march yet awhile! You got an awful blow. Only, we can't stay with you — that's involved! Captain's bent on making Vidalia. Orders are to bring you on if you can march, and if you can't to double-quick it ourselves and catch up! Says Grant's going to invest Vicksburg and he can't spare even Kirk and me. You're to come on as quick as you can, and rejoin wherever we are. Says nobody ever had a better headpiece than you, and that you'll walk in somewhere that is n't at the end of the procession!"

The night descended. Edward lay half asleep upon the pallet, in the light of the pine knots with which the negro fed the fire. The rushing in his head was going, the nausea passing, the warmth was sweet, bed was sweet, rest, rest, rest was sweet! The old negro went to and fro, or sat upon a bench beside the glowing hearth.

After his kind he communed with himself half aloud, a slow stream of comment and interrogation. Before long he took from some mysterious press a little corn meal and a small piece of bacon. The meal he stirred with water and made into thin pones, which he baked upon a rusty piece of tin laid on a bed of coals. Then he found a broken knife and cut a few rashers of bacon and fried them in an ancient skillet. The cabin filled with a savoury odor! Edward turned on the pallet. "Uncle, are you cooking for two?"

The meal, his first that day, restored him to himself. By now it took much to kill or permanently disable a Confederate soldier. Life forever out of doors, the sky for roof, the earth for bed, spare and simple diet, body trained and exercised, senses cleared and nerves braced by danger grown the element in which he moved and had his being, hope rising clear from much reason for despair, ideality intact in the midst of grimmest realities, a mind made up, cognizant of great issues and the need of men — the Confederate soldier had no intention of dying before his time. Nowadays it took a bullet through heart or head to give a man his quietus. The toppling caisson and the bayou had failed to give Edward Cary his.

The young white man and the old negro shared scrupulously between them the not over-great amount of corn bread and bacon. The negro placed Edward's portion before him on a wooden stool and took his own to the bench beside the hearth. The wind blew, the rain dashed against the hut, the flames leaped from resinous pine knot to pine knot.