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Winchester and Company

Continued from page 6

that puzzled us at One Hoss Mountain. He had recognized Winchester from his likeness to his mother, and had cared for him because of the great unspoken love which he cherished in his heart for her, a love which sprang from the one kind act his lonely life had known.

We both stood in the roadway watching the carriage as it lost itself in the dusk. I was the first to turn, and as I did so I started back in alarm. In the room we had left, the room in which the despatches were, I saw the wavering flame of a match. Some one was making a stealthy visit to it, and the safety of our own regiment and of another lay unguarded there.

"Good God!" I whispered, seizing Company by the arm. "Look!"

He looked in the direction in which I was pointing, and in an instant saw and understood. Like a flash the tired stoop fell from his gaunt frame and the soft light died in his eyes. Once more he was the great soldier that the world knew and loved, erect, calm, steel eyed, brave.

"A spy," he said, quietly. "Take some men and go around through the hall. I'll guard the window."

Without another word he started toward it. Calling on some men to follow me, I entered the house, passed through the hall, and opened the door of the room. Company was standing in it alone.

"We were mistaken," he said to me. "There was no one here."

But when I lit a candle, and by its light saw his face, it was all that I could do to suppress the cry that rose to my lips. It was drawn as with mortal suffering. The light revealed something even more startling. The despatch which carried our lives in its keeping was gone.

Without a word, I pointed to the table where he had dropped it. As he saw that it was missing, an exclamation escaped his lips, and I think he was about to speak. Before he could do so, however, two shots were fired just outside the window, and we heard the sound of a sharp struggle. While we still stood tense, listening, a soldier burst into the room.

"We have just caught a man trying to steal through our lines, sir," he cried out breathlessly,—"a strange man wearing our uniform!"

I was almost certain that as Company heard the words he swayed as one who has received a heavy blow; but in this I may have been mistaken, for when he spoke his voice was calm and even.

"Bring him here!" was his order.

The man saluted and retired. A moment later he reentered the room, followed by two more of our men. Between them they dragged a man in a ragged blue uniform, a man who, despite the beard and dirt upon his face, I recognized as Winchester. Then I knew why Company had been gray faced and alone when I had burst through the doorway. Even in the dark he had known the boy and had let him escape. But now as the eyes of the two men met there was no sign of recognition.

"Search him!" ordered Company abruptly.

The men did his bidding. After a moment one of them turned and handed over the missing despatch. Company examined it carefully.

"Humph!" he commented at length. "A spy, eh? Shoot him at sunrise, and take care that he does not escape before then!"

Then he turned his head and did not again look upon the prisoner. Even when they had taken him from the room, he still stood with averted face. I knew what he must be suffering, and longed to say something to comfort him; but there was that about the stooped back and bent shoulders which seemed to say that words were useless and that he had best be left to himself. So presently I stole out of the room, leaving him alone with his grief.

But, though I did not see him again that night, the thought of his sorrow haunted me and drove sleep from my pillow. Try as I would, I could not close my eyes. At last in despair I rose and went out into the air. There was a light still burning in Company's room, and I resolved to go and speak to him. But while I was still in the shadow of the veranda I saw a man ahead of me cross it quickly and leap through the window of the room. Fearing I knew not what, I crept along in the shadows and peered stealthily in the window. They were together there, Winchester and Company. The former was speaking.

"I know," he was saying, "that you contrived it so those men who were guarding me would unwittingly give me a chance to escape; but I can't take that chance,—Company."

"Why not?" asked the other, all his wonderful affection shining in his great eyes.

"Why, you see," said Winchester, "I read the despatch, and if I got away I'd have to tell its contents to Morgan. I'd be a traitor if I let him be annihilated, and I'd be worse than a traitor if I let him annihilate you. So it looks like we were in a hole," he continued almost lightly, "and that there's only one way out,—you'll have to have me shot."

He paused abruptly with a gay laugh—the laugh that I had heard so many times before. He had gambled and lost, and that was the end of it. He must pay the price, and, since this was so, he meant to pay it as cheerfully as he could. But the other could not look upon the matter so lightly. It was awful, the hopeless agony in his eyes as he heard Winchester's words and realized their truthfulness in summing up the situation. For a long time he did not speak. He just sat there in silence gazing at the boy he loved while tragedy set its ineffacable sign upon his face. At last, however, he pulled himself together and spoke.

"Yo-all are right," he said in an odd, choked voice; "I'll have to have yo' shot."

Winchester smiled at him. "I'll go back now," he said, "and they will never know that I have been away." He stretched out his hand quickly to the other, "Good by, old pal!" he whispered.

Company clutched the other's hand and held it tight in both his own for a long moment. Suddenly he dropped it. "So long!" he breathed.

Winchester turned and crossed to the window. Just as he reached it he turned back. "You've been mighty good to me always," he said, "and I've never forgotten it, though I may have seemed to. But I never could understand why. Won't you tell me?"

Company rose, and, going to him, laid his hand on his shoulder. "I loved yo' mother," he said simply.

He was shot at daybreak. Company himself gave the word. And then afterward he walked over to where Winchester lay dead with a bullet through his heart. For a time he stood there looking down upon the handsome face, so calm and tranquil—beautiful, almost, as the faint flush of the morning sun fell upon it. Then he stooped and took him up in his arms, as though he was a little child, just as I had often seen him carry the boy when he was helpless from drink. And those who stood near heard him repeat those wonderfully compassionate words, "The only son of his mother—and she a widow!" And then, still carrying his burden, he walked to where his horse was tethered, and mounting it rode off through the amber sunlight with his dead friend cold against his breast.

Long, long afterward, when at length she could bear to speak of it, she told me how he had rode up to her home that sunny summer morning, bearing the boy in his arms.

"I've kep' my promise the best I could," he told her, as he laid the body at her feet.—"an' I've brought him home—forever." And with that he turned and took a last, long look at her white face. She never saw him again.

And now I had come to tell her of his death, and the old tune she was playing had, somehow, taken me back over the sad old story. Suddenly, with a bang, she ceased, and turning saw me where I stood leaning on my walking stick. She came toward me.

"You have news?" she said.

"Yes," I answered; "he is dead."

She did not cry out; she did not even flinch. She just stood there clasping and unclasping her hands while the tears, unchecked, ran down her wrinkled face. And as I looked upon her so, I saw at last something to which I had always been blind, and asked gently:

"Then it was because of him that you have always said no to me?"

She raised her dear old eyes—they are still so beautiful—and met mine bravely. "Yes," she answered softly.

Oh, the pity of it! To love and be loved, and then to lose it all! She had loved him always, and he had never known. The boy whose life had brought them together had by his death kept them always apart. I took her hand in silence, and in silence went upon my way. Their parting could not last much longer. Soon both she and I would go there to meet him where there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage; but we are even as the angels of God. The tenderness of twilight had fallen upon the world, and as I walked on through the gathering shade I read in it a message which only the rapt and parting soul may know, and my thoughts of the afternoon seemed far off and distant. If life is sweet, so also is death. God judges for us best.

Up Salt Creek

Up Salt Creek the tide is running,
As with straining sail and chord
Goes the good ship Jolly Failure
With her passengers aboard.
And she's crammed with merry people,
All, in fact, that she can hold,
Many voy'gers of distinction
From the Land of Fame and Gold.

Up Salt Creek there lies an island
'Twixt Has Been and Never Was.
'Tis the Isle of Disenchantment,
Where the passengers shall pause,
See themselves as others see them,
Drink the Waters of Despond,
Ere their ship again shall bear them
To Obscurity beyond.

Up Salt Creek the Jolly Failure
Takes her boatload every day;
Anyone can catch the ferry—
'Tis an easy trip, they say.
But the men who take the journey
On that placid stream, alack!
Shall shed many tears and weary
Ere the boat shall bear them back.

Up Salt Creek the tide is running—
Ship ahoy there! Can you guess
How your crew must pass forever
From the Ocean of Success?
Up Salt Creek into the evening,
Where the sunset is unfurled,
Soon forgot and soon forgetting
All the Glory of the World!

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