

# AN HUMBLE HERO

BY THOMAS P. MONTFORT

## CHAPTER I.

**THE APPEARANCE OF A STRANGER.**  
The little village of Beckett's Mill had never been in such a state of excitement in all its history.

Women, bareheaded and with rolled up sleeves, rushed wildly to and fro across the town's single street or leaped from their open windows and called excitedly back and forth, asking a hundred questions that no one pretended to answer. The children, huddled about the mothers, clinging to their skirts, their faces white and their eyes wide with wonder and fear. The men, awestricken, collected on the street corner in front of the postoffice and talked together in low, hushed tones.

The cause of all this excitement was the very booming of cannon away off to the south and the barely distinguishable rattle of musketry which told only too plainly that a battle was being fought and that men were being killed and mangled by their fellow men.

It was in the spring of 1861, at the beginning of the long and bloody war between the south and the north. The people at Beckett's Mill and all over that part of Missouri known as Possum Ridge had heard rumors of a coming war, but they had gone on in their "yet uneventful way, giving little thought to what they heard and feeling confident that even if war came it would not affect them.

And now, right at the beginning, a battle was being fought almost at their very doors. Just a few miles away General Sterling Price and his army of men in gray were laying siege to Lexington and its garrison of men in blue.

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men admired him for his coolness, and the women admired him for that and also for his handsome features and his magnificent and manly form.

One woman, young and beautiful and strangely unlike the people about her, looked first on the stranger, then on the horseman. The first she regarded with unmistakable admiration, but unconsciously that look changed to one of shame as she turned her eyes on the other.

"He's no such a man as that man there," she said to herself. "Oh, my Lord, if he only was, if he only was!"

The people, crowding about him, would have made a hero of him, and he allowed them to fawn on him and make over him, though he felt that he had done nothing to merit it.

It was all very pleasant, and he enjoyed it, especially when he was surprised to look of admiration in the eyes of the young woman who had contrasted him with the horseman, and they had both blushed and cast their eyes down.

At that meeting of eyes there was recognition—yes, more than recognition. Yes, it was all very pleasant to the stranger until suddenly his past life flashed before him; then his face paled, and his heart grew sick, and a painful, furtive expression came to his eyes.

There was something there that nothing could blot out—noting but death.

"Wonder what that chap's been up to now," some one said after a pause, "he's had to take to him out of a way."

"I reckon, Pap Sampson, you all think you're powerful smart. My land, didn't none of you never start now, an' get lost on the way? Humph! Like as if Ebenezer couldn't 'f'ell into that cellar or got sort of rattled an' run into it by mistake! Look an' see how he's got on now! He's tryin' to make out that Ebenezer an' a coward."

"Lord, Miss Sparks, we don't need to do nary such a thing as that," Pap Sampson replied promptly. "Ebenezer the old man done made that all out as plain as the nose on your face himself. Yes, s'ree—"

"What's happened to him?"  
"Why, he's all buried up under you boys' taters. They's most a thousand bushels on top of him."

Without another word Hicks led the way to the cellar, and there, sure enough, they found Ebenezer, the brave and the bold, buried under a mass of potatoes which had rolled down over him when he had attempted to secrete himself by burrowing into them.

He looked sheepish and cheap when he was hauled out, and when the men laughed at him he was in half a mind to get angry, but he thought better of it and grinned instead.

"Your woman loved you war swine to a battle to whip?"  
"With a smile," but you know you war'n't his so bad as all that to whup no 'tates, an' it looks like you was war right."

"I did start to jine the war," Ebenezer stammered, "but how could I get to go any fadder when I done got kiltched under them derned taters."

"Did you 'low the war had done ratched clean to Hicks' cellar," Pap Sampson asked, "an' war you down that lookin' round 'mong them taters for a battle to whip?"

Ebenezer grinned, but made no reply. His wife, however, who had come up just in time to hear Pap's question, said:

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"Guess Ebenezer an' Sim Banks has done showed just how brave they are," Jason Roberts observed, with a laugh. "One o' em a-burnin' the other, while the other t'eped an' down the road lippy-catty an' on all account of a drove of old cows. Say, I bet the war'd soon be fit if they uns had a whack at it."

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