

The RED MIST

A TALE OF CIVIL STRIFE

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SYNOPSIS.

Confederate Sergeant Wyatt of the Staunton artillery is sent as a spy to his native county on the Green Briar by General Jackson. Wyatt meets a mountaineer named Jim Taylor.

CHAPTER II—Continued.

"Things has changed sum since then. Nobody lives ter hum any more. It's sure hell in Green Briar these days—somebody is gettin' kilt every day er two. The cusses travel in gangs, murderin' an' burnin' from one end o' the county to the other." He spoke in an even, drawing voice, with not the slightest show of emotion, as though telling an ordinary bit of news: "D—d if I know which outfit is the wus—the Yanks or the Rebs."

"Which are you with?"
"Who, me?" He paused in his bolting of food, and gave vent to an unpleasant laugh. "I rather reckon it would puzzle the Lord Almighty ter find that out. I don't give a whoop fer neither of 'em. I'm fer ol' Jim Taylor, an' it keeps me toler'ble busy tendin' ter his affairs, without botherin' 'bout no government."

"Then your name is Taylor?"
"I reckon it has been for 'bout sixty years. Thar's a slew o' Taylors over along Buffalo creek, an' som' of 'em are Yanks, an' a parcel of 'em are Rebs, but they don't git ol' Jim ter take nary side. At that, I'm gittin' all the fightin' I hanker arter. Naturally, I'm a peaceful critter, if th' cusses let me alone."

"Quieted down some over there lately, hasn't it?"

"Huh! Thar's a regiment o' blue-coats at Lewisburg, an' a few cavalrymen ridin' ther pikes. Don't amount ter a hill o' beans as fer as ther boys are concerned. All they got ter do is go further back in the hills, an' be a bit more keener. I reckon, young man, ye'll find plenty o' deviltry going on in Green Briar, if ye ever git out that away. Wal, the's all thar is fer us ter eat, an' I'm goin' ter take a snooze."

He closed the door, fastening it securely with a wooden bar, and stretched himself out on the floor. The room was dark, as the only window was tightly boarded up, and using my bundle for a pillow, I lay down also. In a short time his heavy breathing was evidence enough that Taylor slept. Slowly my heavy eyes closed, and I lost consciousness.

The sun was below the mountain ridge, when the heavy hand of the old mountaineer shook me into sudden wakefulness. With nothing left to eat we were not long in preparing for departure, I endeavoring vainly to get my silent companion to converse, being rewarded merely by grumbled and evasive answers. Finally I desisted in the attempt, content to follow his lead. Taylor, astride his sorrel, with gun resting grimly across his knees, rode straight through the brush, away from the pike, down the valley of a small stream. In crossing, the horses drank their fill.

"How about the valley road?" I asked as we climbed the opposite bank.

The leader glanced back at me. "This yere way is nigher, an' a darn sight mor' quiet," he answered gruffly. "Soldiers been marchin' over the pike all day. Mout be all right fer yer, if yer've got a pass—but I ain't got none. We'll hev' good 'nough ridin' in 'bout a mile mor'."

"You are aiming for the cut-off?"
"I be—yer do kno' sumthin' of this yere kinty, I reckon, but yer've got more eddication than any Cowan I ever hooked up with afore. Yer don't talk none like moutin' folks."

I drew a quick breath, sensing the return of suspicion.

"That's true," I admitted readily. "You see I went to school at Covington; they were going to make a preacher out of me."

Taylor stared into my face, his vague suspicion seemingly gone.

"Well, I'll be d—d—a preacher."

He rode on into the dusk, chuckling, and I followed, smiling to myself, glad that the man's good humor had been so easily restored.

We were fed at a hut back in the foothills, where an old couple, the man lame, were glad enough to exchange their poor food for the late news from the army, in which they had a son. Then we rode steadily to the south. When dawn came we were to the west of Waynesboro, in broken country, and all through those long night hours scarcely a word had been exchanged

between us. We camped finally in the bend of a small stream, where high banks concealed us from observation. There was little to eat in our haversacks, but we munched what we had, and Taylor, his eyes on the horses, broke the silence.

"I reckon the critters don't need more'n a couple hours' rest," he said. "They ain't been rid no ways hard, an' I'm fer gittin' through the gap durin' daylight—the road ain't overly good just now."

"Across the mountains? Is there a gap here?"

"Ther road ter Hot Springs is 'bout two miles below yer. I cum over it ten days ago an' I reckon I kin find my way back. It's 'bout forty miles frum thar ter Lewisburg, mostly hills, but a good trail. I know folks at Hot Springs who will take good keer o' us, onct we git thar."

We rested, dozing, but neither sound asleep, for nearly three hours. Whatever might be in Taylor's mind, the lonely night had brought to me a new thought relative to my companion. The fellow was evasive, and once he had frankly lied in seeking to explain his presence in the valley, and the reason for his secrecy of movement. By now we were decidedly at cross-purposes, each vigilantly watching the other—Taylor in doubt as to what the bundle contained, which I never permitted out of my grasp, and myself as deeply interested in gaining possession of a packet of papers, a glimpse of which I had caught in an inside pocket of the mountaineer's coat. His mission, whatever it might be, was secret and dangerous. Of this his ceaseless vigilance was proof.

The light of a dying day still clung to the western sky when our wearied horses bore us into the village of Hot Springs. It was like a deserted hamlet, few houses appearing inhabited, and the shop windows boarded up. Taylor, glancing neither to right or



I Followed the Mountaineer Up the Steps and Into the Hall.

left, rode straight down the main street, and turned onto a pike road, leading to the left. A mile beyond, a frame house, painted white, barely visible through the deepening dusk, stood in a grove of oaks. The mountaineer turned up the broad driveway, and dismounted before the closed door. Almost at the same moment the portal opened slightly and a black face peered out.

CHAPTER III.

The Body on the Floor.

Taylor stood at the foot of the steps, pausing in uncertainty.

"Is that you, Sam? Is Mister Harwood yere?"

I insensibly straightened in my saddle. Harwood? What Harwood, I wondered—surely not Major Harwood of Lewisburg, my father's old friend! What was it I had heard about him a few months ago? Wasn't it a rumor that he was on General Ramsay's staff? And the daughter—Noreen—whatever had become of her? There was an instant's vision before me of laughing eyes, and wind-blown hair, a galloping horse, and the wave of a challenging hand. She had thus swept by me on the road as I took my mother southward.

"I don't 'peer fer to recollect no such name, sah," replied the negro, scratch-

ing his wool thoughtfully. "I done reckon as how you got the wrong house."

"No, I reckon not," said the other drily. "Git 'long in, an' tell him Jim Taylor is yere."

The door opened wider.

"Suah, I know you now, sah. Just step right 'long in, the both of yer. I'll look after them horses. You'll fin' Massa Harwood in the dinin' room, sah."

I followed the mountaineer up the steps, and into the hall, utterly indifferent as to whether my company was desired or not. It was not yet dark, but a lamp burned on a nearby table, and a cheerful fire glowed at the farther end. But a brighter glow of light streamed from a room beyond, and, determined to miss nothing, I was so close behind Taylor that my quick eyes caught what I believed to be a swift signal of warning to the man within. This, however, was an impression born from my own suspicion, rather than any real movement, for Taylor took but a single step across the threshold, and stopped, leaning on his gun. The single occupant sat upright, before him the remnants of a light repast, his hand toying with a spoon, and his eyes shifting from Taylor's face to my own. He was heavily built and broad of shoulder. The face would have been hard, but for a gleam of good humor in the eyes, and the softening effect of gray hair, and a gray mustache. The man had aged greatly, yet I recognized him instantly, my heart throbbing with the possibility that I also might be remembered. Yet surely there was no gleam of recollection in the eyes that surveyed me—and why should there be? I had been an uninteresting lad of fifteen when we last met. This knowledge gave me courage to meet that searching glance, and to lift my hand in the salute due to an officer of rank.

"Ah!" said Harwood in deep voice, "a soldier from the valley?"

"Yes, sir," respectfully, "the Sixty-fifth Virginia."

"How does it happen you wear artillery uniform?"
Expecting the question I answered unhesitatingly.

"They'd lost so many gunners, some of us were detailed to help. Recruits are coming in now."

"What was your battery?"

"Staunton Horse artillery, sir."

"Stationed?"

"At Front Royal—that was our winter camp."

He nodded, tapping his spoon against the table, favorably impressed by my prompt replies. His keen eyes sought the face of the silent mountaineer.

"You know this man, Taylor?"

"Wal, I can't exactly say that I dew, major," he said drawlingly, shifting his feet uneasily. "He says he's a Cowan, frum over on Buffalo creek."

"A Cowan!—you mean—"

"No, he don't claim ter be none o' ol' Ned's brood—his mar's a widdler woman. They ain't no kin, I reckon."

Whatever thoughts might have been in Major Harwood's mind were concealed by an impassive face, as he sat there for a moment in silence, gazing at the two of us.

"No doubt you did what you believed to be best, Taylor," he said at last quietly. "We will talk it over later. You are both hungry enough to eat, I suppose? Draw up some chairs and Sam will find something. No objection to remaining here over night, Cowan?"

"I'd be glad to get on, sir, but my horse is about used up. The roads have been hard and we have traveled rapidly."

"Well, there is plenty of room, and you are welcome. This house," he explained, "belongs to a friend of mine, who had to leave the country—too Yankee for his neighbors. I find it rather convenient at times. Ah, Sam, that rasher of bacon looks prime—I'll try some myself."

The three of us talked upon many subjects, although Taylor said little, except when directly addressed, and I noted that few references were made to the war. That Harwood was in the Federal service I had no doubt, although he was not in uniform, and, if this was true, then it must be also a fact that Taylor was a Union spy. The meeting here had not been by chance, although a mystery involved the hidden reason why I, a known Confederate soldier, had been encouraged to accompany the mountaineer to this secret rendezvous. At last the meal ended and the major pushed back his chair and motioned Sam to clear the table.

"You two men are tired out," he said genially, "and you had better turn in and get a good night's sleep. We'll all of us ride on into Green Briar tomorrow. I'll talk with you a minute, Taylor, in the parlor, before you go; but Cowan does not need to wait. Help yourselves to the tobacco. Oh, Sam! show this soldier up to the back bedroom and see he has everything he needs."

It was clearly apparent that Harwood desired a private word with Taylor and so, after deliberately filling

my pipe, I rose to my feet, stretching sleepily. The black returned with a small lamp in his hand and led the way up the broad stairs. A moment later I was left alone in a small room at the end of the upper hall with one window, so heavily curtained as probably to render the light invisible from without. The door was securely latched, but there was no lock. Then I was not being held a prisoner.

After some minutes I extinguished the light, and looked out of the window. It was quite a drop, though not necessarily a dangerous one, to the ground. Those dim outlines of buildings were probably the stables, where I would find my horse. With no guards the trick of getting away unobserved would be easy enough, and I knew the road sufficiently well to follow it safely. But I desired to learn first what these two men were actually up to.



I Picked It Up Wonderingly. It Was My Own.

Such information might prove more important than my investigations in Green Briar. I stole across to the door and opened it noiselessly. There was no one visible in the upper hall, and I leaned over the stair rail gazing down, and listening. A light still burned within the dining room, but there was no sound of voices, or of movement.

The silence continued, and I began to cautiously steal passage down the carpeted stairs, crouching well back against the side wall. Little by little I was able to peer in through the open door—the chairs were vacant; there was no one there. The gleam of the lamp revealed a deserted room, the table still littered with dishes. What had become then of Harwood and Taylor? Were they sitting beyond in the darkened parlor? I crept to the half-closed door. The room was black and silent, although I could perceive dimly the outlines of furniture.

Something—some vague sense of mystery, of danger, gripped me. I felt a strange choking in the throat, and reached for the revolver at my belt. It was not there; the leather holder was empty. My first sensation was fear, a belief I was the victim of treachery. Then it occurred to my mind that the weapon might have fallen from the open holster as I rested on the bed—a mere accident. At least I would learn the truth of that dark room. I stepped within, circled the overturned chair, and a groping foot encountered something lying on the floor. I bent down and touched it with my hand; it was the body of a man. The whole truth came to me in a flash—there had been a quarrel, a murder, unpremeditated probably, and the assassin had escaped. But which of the two was the victim? An instant I stood there, staring about in the dark, bewildered and uncertain.

Then I grasped the lamp from the table in the other room, and returned holding the light in my hands. The form of Major Harwood lay extended on the floor, lifeless, his skull crushed by an ugly blow. Beside him lay a revolver, its butt blood-stained. Beyond doubt this was the weapon which had killed. I picked it up wonderingly—it was my own.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Mistake Somewhere.

"Yaas," said Uncle Elias, "my son Bill hez got back from a special course he's been a-takin' at college, with a piece o' paper signed by th' 'thorities sayin' as how he's an A. M. I dunno what an A. M. is, but I'm afeard they're some mistake about it, for judgin' from the time he gets down to breakfast he behaves more like a P. M. ter me."

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