

MY LADY OF THE NORTH

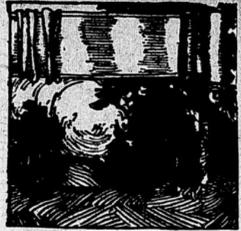
The Love Story of a Gray Jacket

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SYNOPSIS.

The story opens in a Confederate tent at a critical stage of the Civil War. Gen. Lee imparts to Capt. Wayne an important message to Longstreet. Accompanied by Sergeant Craig, an old army scout, Wayne starts on his mission. The two, after a wild ride, get within the lines of the enemy in the darkness. Wayne is taken for a Federal officer who came to keep an appointment, and a young lady on horseback is given the charge. She is a northern girl and attempts to escape but fails.

CHAPTER V.—Continued.

On one side of us the bank fell away with such precipitousity that we were once succeeded in dragging our load to the edge, we experienced no difficulty in sending it crashing downward. The body plunged through the thick underbrush at the bottom of the gorge, where I knew it would be completely hidden, even in the glare of daylight, from any eyes of any troops riding hard upon our track. As we rapidly worked on this disagreeable task, I thought and planned; two horses and three riders—one of these a woman in need of protection—a dispatch to be delivered by day, light, at all hazards. It was indeed a difficult proposition, and I saw only a single possible solution. One of our number must press on; two of us must remain behind. Which one? What two? If I rode with the dispatch (and how eagerly I longed to do so) and succeeded in bringing Lee's message safe to Longstreet, it meant much to me—promotion, distinction, honor. On the other hand, if I remained behind, and Craig successfully carried out the duty which had been especially intrusted to me, I should be fortunate indeed to escape with a reprimand instead of more serious consequences. If failure resulted, it meant certain and deserved disgrace. Yet I could absolutely trust him with the dispatch; he was a soldier, and would faithfully perform a soldier's duty. More, he would carry the message with even greater certainty than I, for he knew the roads much better, and I write the words hesitatingly—I could not trust him there alone with the woman.

"But unfortunately, I have one with me tonight who is neither. I would that he were for my own sake. However, madam, let that pass. The fact is here, and we have no time to argue or quarrel. I have already told you that we ride with dispatches for Longstreet. These must go forward at all hazards, for thousands of human lives depend upon them; yet I dare not leave you here alone and unprotected to the mercies of the wolves who haunt these hills, or on a horse and in a 'gray jacket' kind."

"The tone in which she spoke was most sarcastic. 'I thank you for your approbation,' and I bowed again; 'but I venture to tell you this merely because I have already fully determined to dispatch the sergeant forward with the message, and remain behind myself to render you every protection possible.' 'Very well, sir; I simply yield to what I am powerless to avoid, and will obey your orders however disagreeable they may be. What is your first command?'"

"That you dismount. The sergeant must ride your horse, as he is the more fit to do so. 'Greatly to my surprise and relief she placed her gauntleted hand in mine, and, without so much as a word of protest, permitted me to swing her lightly from the saddle to the ground. 'Craig,' I called, 'come here. 'You know your work,' I said to him briefly. 'And now the sooner we get away the better. He dismounted and led our own. As soon as you deliver Lee's message at headquarters, hunt up the cavalry brigade commander and report to him my position. Get a detail, insist upon one, and be back here by to-morrow without fail. That is all.'"

He saluted, wheeled about, swung lightly into saddle and rode off on a rapid trot, grasping, as he passed down the hill, the rein of his own mount, and leading it, lagging behind him, until the night swallowed the figures, and even the sound of the hoof-beats could be no longer heard. We were alone.

CHAPTER VI.

A Struggle in the Dark. I have seldom been more deeply embarrassed than at that moment. I knew not what to say or how best to approach this young woman, yet so strangely to my protection. The very fact, which now realized, that she was both young and fair, added some indefinite burden and complicated the delicate situation. I saw no safety for us but in careful hiding until Craig could return, a squad of hard-riding troopers at his back. To permit the girl to venture forward alone through the desolate country we were in, even as I knew it to be by irregular hands whose sole purpose was plunder, and whose treatment of women had made my blood run cold as I listened to its recital, was not to be so much as thought of.

"There was no help for it, and but one way out, disagreeable as that might seem to me. I knew it to be there before me, motionless and silent as a statue, exactly where she had alighted when the sergeant took her horse, and it seemed to me I could plainly read righteous indignation in the indistinct outline of her figure and the haughty pose of her head. To her at that moment I was as a man, disagreeable and even hated companion, a 'Rebel,' the being of all others she had been taught to despise, the enemy of all she held sacred. 'Could any good thing come out of Nazareth?'"

"The time has come when it becomes my duty to look after your comfort and safety," I said, striving to disguise all self-consciousness. "Every moment we delay now merely increases the danger of our remaining here. 'I imagine I might very easily dispense with any further care on your part, and I am sure you are capable of Her reply nettled me, and I answered with an earnestness which she could neither ignore nor check: 'Possibly you may think so, but if you do it is merely because of your utter ignorance of the disorganized conditions which prevail in these mountains. Your pride is almost ridiculous under all the circumstances. You have no just cause to feel that I am forcing myself unnecessarily upon you. Our being compelled to take you in charge has proven as disastrous to us as to you. Personally I can say that nothing will relieve me more than to be able to place you uninjured into the care of your own people. I would willingly assume great risks to that end. But while you remain here and in my care, I shall perform my full duty toward you as though you were my own sister. Now please listen to me, and I assure you I shall speak nothing for the mere purpose of alarming you, but simply that you may better comprehend the facts which must influence our present relationship. I have sent forward Sergeant Craig with the message especially intrusted to me for delivery, and thus, if it falls to reach its destination, I have laid myself open to the charge of a grave military crime. In doing this I have not only periled my own future, but the lives of my comrades and the faith of my commander. Yet I have deliberately chosen to do so because I feel the impossibility of leaving you here unprotected, and because I was unwilling to trust you alone with my companion. I dare not permit you to traverse these roads alone. The mountains appear, as I said, to be all filled with desperate and hunted men whose tenderest mercy is death. Any rock may be the hiding place of an outlaw, any dark ravine the rendezvous of a wild gang as ever murdered for plunder.'"

"Let Me Go With You." "It might be as well for you to draw the cape closer about your face at present. There are rough men in all armies who would consider your beauty a lawless prize. The life we lead is not conducive to gentleness; virtue is not born in camps, and it would be better not to provoke a danger which may be so easily avoided. 'You claimed, I believe, to be an officer and a gentleman,' she said coldly. I smiled, even as I felt the full chill of her words, and my purpose stiffened within me. 'Even as I yet claim, and trust to be able to prove to your satisfaction, my eyes looked unflinchingly into

"But the Sergeant said there was a Federal picket post at the crossing of the White Briar." Her voice trembled as she spoke. "He merely supposed there would be; but even if it were true, we have no positive means of knowing that the men stationed there would be of the regular service. Doubtless those thieving, murdering bands—such as that headed by Red Lowe, of whom you may have heard—are sufficiently organized to keep patrols posted, and may, indeed, be utilized at times by both armies for that purpose. Were you to go to them you might be simply walking into a den of wolves. 'But could you not go with me?'"

I smiled at the naive innocence of her query. "I wish you to feel that I have never thought so much about my own danger as about yours," I returned quietly. "But would it be a pleasure even to you to behold me swinging from the limb of a tree, hung as a spy without trial, merely because I ventured to walk with you into a Federal camp?'"

"I could see her eyes now resting full upon me, and much of the hardness and doubt seemed to have gone out of them as she scanned my unobtrusive features in the dim light. I scarcely think I was ever considered a handsome man even by my friends, but I was about them, frank of face, with that about me which easily inspired confidence, and it did me good to note how her eyes softened, and to mark the perceptible tremor in her voice as she cried impulsively: 'Your words yield me new heart.' I replied fervently, determined, now that I was partially forming, to permit no excuse for its again forming.



There Burst a Vivid Flash of Flame Within a Foot of My Face.

"For if you but once fully realize our situation you will certainly feel that I am merely endeavoring to perform my plain duty. 'I will, of course, bow to the inevitable, sir,' she said, 'and shall endeavor to adapt myself to the requirements of my unfortunate situation. May I venture to inquire what you now propose to do?'"

"To the right of where we stood the ground sloped rapidly downward until the dense darkness at the foot of the steep defile shrouded everything from view. The descent appeared rocky and impracticable, and I could distinguish the sound of rapid water falling just below us, and possibly a dense wood, the outer fringe of trees overhanging the road, and through the waving leaves the moonlight checked the ground with silver, while the dense mass beyond seemed to flow back up the steep side of the mountain, thick with underbrush. Just below us, and possibly fifty feet from the highway, I could perceive a small one-story log cabin, as silent, gloomy, and deserted to all outward appearance as were the somber woods of which it formed a part. 'There seems small choice,' I said, speaking as cheerfully as possible. 'But I propose to investigate the log hut yonder, and learn if it may not afford some degree of shelter. If you will rest here, in the shadow of these trees, I will soon discover whether it has inmates or not.'"

"She followed me in silence across the road to the spot designated, but as I turned to leave her seated upon the grass, and well protected from prying eyes, she hurried quickly after me, and in her agitation so far forgot herself as to touch my sleeve with her hand. 'Oh, please do not leave me here alone. I am not naturally timid, yet everything is so gloomy I cannot stand it. Let me go with you, if you must go.' 'Most assuredly you shall if you desire,' I returned cheerfully. 'There appeared before us a dim, little-used path leading in among the trees, and following its erratic curves we were soon before the cabin, which

grew seem more uninviting as we drew near. As I paused a moment before the closed door, in order that I might listen for any possible sound within, I could hear her quick breathing, as though the terror of the moment had driven all else from her mind. The wooden latch yielded readily enough to my pressure, and pushing wide open the door, which creaked slightly upon its rusty hinges, I stepped across the porch on three-hold onto the hard earthen floor. There was no window visible, and the slight reflection of moonlight which crept in through the doorway scarcely revealed the nature of that dark interior. I could dimly perceive what I believed to be a table directly in front of me, while certain other indistinct and ill defined shadows might be chairs pushed back against the wall. At least this room was without occupants; yet it was with every sense alert that I entered, pressing slowly past the table toward where I felt the fireplace would naturally be, knowing that my companion was yet with me, her hand clutching my arm. 'Oh!' she cried sharply in terror, 'what was that?'"

It was something certainly—a dead-end, muffled, shuffling sound directly in our front, followed by a strange noise of scraping, as if with a dull knife on wood. 'Wait here,' I said sternly. 'Probably it is nothing more dangerous than a rat.' I felt my way carefully around the table, a revolver ready in my hand. There was nothing to be found there—nothing, indeed, in the room; for from my new position I could look backward and distinguish in the moonlight the details of that simple, squalid interior. I ran my hands

along the rough logs of the further wall. A door! here was a break, doubtless a door; and groping along the crack I found the latch. There was no longer any noise audible, and I drew the door inward, never dreaming of danger. Suddenly, with a fierce, wild spring out of the dark, a huge body hurled itself directly at my throat, striking with such headlong impetus that I went backward as if shot, crashing against the table, then to the floor, dropping my weapon as I fell. There was no noise, no sound, while for an instant, with strength of sheer desperation, I held back the snapping jaws that breathed hot fire into my very face. With a bound backward of its great body the beast jerked free from my grip, and the next instant had sunk its dripping fangs, deep and hard, into the flesh of my shoulder. As the intense pain shot through me, my right hand, driven with all the force I could muster, caught the monster over the eye, full in the throat, but tighter and tighter those clinched jaws locked, until it seemed as if every bone between them must be ground to powder. Even as I grasped the lower jaw, seeking vainly to wrench it loose, I heard the girl scream in sudden fright. 'Quick!' I gasped desperately. 'Get my revolver; there on the floor, and use it—but for God's sake keep down; don't let the brute see you.' She must have heard, but there was no response, although her crying ceased. Yet my own struggle to rid myself of that crushing weight and those iron jaws drowned all other thoughts. Every muscle of my body began to weaken from the strain, my eyes blurred, faintness swept over me, I felt my brain reeling, when there burst a vivid flash of flame within a foot of my face, singeing my forehead; then followed a deafening report, and the huge brute sprang backward with a snarl of pain, his teeth clinking together like cogs of steel. Then he stiffened and fell prone across me, a dead, inert weight, pinning me breathless to the floor. For the moment I could do no more

than lie there helpless, gasping for breath, scarce conscious even of my deliverance. Then, as sufficient strength returned for action, I rolled the body of the dead brute off me, and lifting myself by aid of the wall against which my head rested, looked about. Two broken chairs overturned upon the floor, and the shapeless, huddled body of my late assailant, alone spoke of the violence of that deadly struggle; but the cabin was yet full of smoke, and I could perceive the figure of the girl leaning against the frame of the open door, the revolver still grasped in her hand. Her posture was that of a frightened deer, as her terror-filled eyes sought the dark interior. 'It is safely over,' I said weakly, for my breath yet came to me in gasps. 'The brute is dead.' I could scarcely mark her coming across the narrow streak of moonlight, moving toward me as a frightened bird might, startled at everything, and passing as far from the lifeless mass on the floor as the small space would permit. She was anxiously over me her face was so in shadow that I could distinguish nothing of its features. 'What is it? Are you indeed severely hurt?' 'Not seriously, I think, yet I have lost some blood, and am in great pain. There is brandy in the inner pocket of my jacket, but I am unable to move my arm in order to reach it. Would you endeavor to draw the flask out?'"

I felt her bend over me, her soft breath coming almost in sobs upon my face, as with trembling fingers she undid the buttons of my trooper's jacket and extracted the small flat flask I had been thoughtful enough to store away there. The fiery liquid seemed to put new blood into my veins, and with it there came all my old-time audacity, with that intense hopefulness in which I had been trained by years of war and self-reliance. 'I trust you realize,' I said, 'that I am neither thoughtless nor ungrateful. Years of war service make one careless of life, but I know it you a brave girl.' Her overtaxed nerves gave way at my words, and I knew she was crying softly. The sobbing was in her voice as she strove to speak. 'Oh, no, I am not; you do not guess how great a coward I am. I scarcely knew what I was doing when I fired. That horrid thing—what was it?'"

"A huge mastiff, I imagine; one of the largest of his breed. But whatever it may have been, the beast is dead, and we have nothing more to fear from him." 'Yet I tremble so,' she confessed, almost hysterically. 'Every shadow frightens me.' I realized that no amount of conversation would quiet her nerves so effectively as some positive action; besides, I felt the hot blood constantly trickling down my arm, and realized that something needed to be done at once to staunch its flow, before weakness should render me equally useless. 'Do you think you could build a fire on the hearth yonder?' I asked. 'I am afraid I am hardly capable of the largest of his breed. But whatever it may have been, the beast is dead, and we have nothing more to fear from him.' 'Yet I tremble so,' she confessed, almost hysterically. 'Every shadow frightens me.' 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