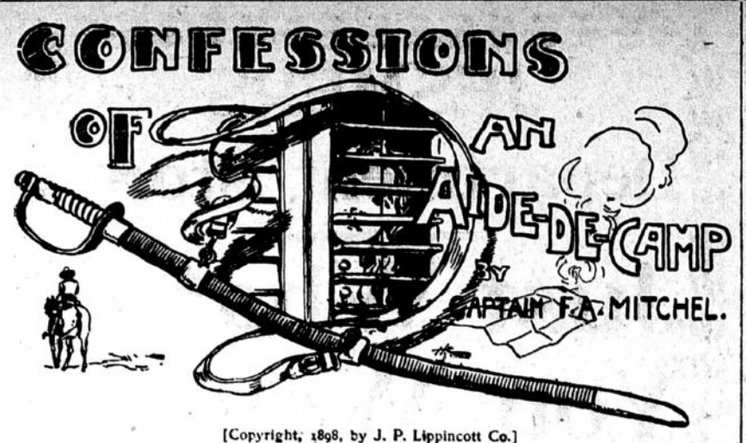
CONFESSIONS OF AN AIDE-DE-CAMP



BY CAPTAIN F. A. MITCHEL.

I.

UNDER A CLOUD.

The silent soldier sat smoking at Chattanooga. I can see him now as I saw him then, his sword and sash laid aside, his uniform coat thrown open negligently, his whole appearance denoting rather one of the drudgery officers of the staff, whose soldierly bearing had given way under the continued performance of clerical duties, than the commander of an army. Before him on a table was a bundle of papers, one of which he had taken up and was fingering absently. Directly opposite stood "the general"—my general; we of the staff always spoke of him as "the general," though there were a hundred generals in the army—with a dogged look on his face that boded no good to himself or anyone else.

I had attended the general on a summons to headquarters, and should have waited in the hall, but curiosity to see the new commander of the Army of the Cumberland, who had achieved renown at Donelson and Vicksburg, had overcome whatever of modesty I possessed—it was not a gem of the first water—and, stalking confidently past staff officers and orderlies, I entered the room with my chief. Once there, I stood back in a corner where I would attract as little attention as possible, fearing that I would be ordered to betake myself to parts more fitted for a second lieutenant than the apartment of the commanding general.

"Gen. Heath," said the commander, "I have sent for you to communicate to you the contents of this paper which I received this morning from the secretary of war."

The general started. "The secretary of war?"

"Yes. He directs your arrest and trial by court-martial."

"What new persecution is this?" exclaimed the general, impatiently.

"The secretary seems to hold you responsible for the disaster at Chickamauga."

"Chickamauga? In what way does he connect me with that blunder?"

"You are accused of purposely leaving the gap in our lines through which the confederates poured, thus effecting the rout of the Army of the Cumberland."

Gen. Heath made no reply, standing with his hand resting on his sword-hilt, his brows knit, his lips compressed.

"I regret this new complication," said the general in chief, presently. "I have especial use for you, and at once."

"Use for me, general? But just released on one charge of treachery, and rearrested on another. Who would follow such a leader? I would much rather you would procure the acceptance of my resignation. Why should I serve a government that distrusts me? My friends, my family in Virginia, begged me to stay with them, to fight for them. I remained true to the union. What has been the result? At the very outset, in the spring of '61, I was accused of conniving to surrender my command in Texas. Then there were those rumors of treachery at Shiloh—that I had withdrawn the picket in my front in order to leave the way open to attack—and my arrest and confinement by the secretary of war. What use to beg for a copy of the charge? What use to demand a trial? No accuser, no accusation. Then, after months behind bars, the public gaze being attracted elsewhere by another battle, the secretary, finding it inexpedient to hold me longer, turns me out of prison and orders me to report to you, expecting you to utilize a disgraced man. And now, before you can assign me to duty, a scapegoat being needed for the disaster at Chickamauga, an order comes for my rearrest. The blunderer who left the gap through which Bragg hurled Hood has succeeded in covering up his identity, while I, who commanded cavalry and had nothing to do with the main line of battle, must be sacrificed to appease the public, who are looking for victories and get nothing but defeats."

I should not have been present at such an interview—I, a beardless boy in my teens—but I had been Gen. Heath's aide from the start, and had served him through all his troubles, often carrying his messages to those high in authority in his efforts to gain a hearing. I could have withdrawn, but nothing short of an order would have driven me from an interview which interested me intensely. Gen. Heath, naturally restless and sensitive, had been maddened by his confinement and disgrace. This new trial that loomed up before him rendered him ready to turn like a hunted beast and rend his persecutors. It was plain to me that the general in chief was giving his subordinate time to cool. I remembered how he had himself been deprived of his command after Shiloh and shelved as a mere assistant to the commander in chief, and could understand his patience with one who had suffered so much more keenly in a similar manner. When his subordinate had finished, the superior gave a few deliberate puffs at his cigar, then asked:

"Have you no suspicion as to the origin of these rumors?"

"None whatever."

The general in chief sat thinking. "The wrongs of this war," he said, presently, "will be righted only as opportunity is given the wronged to right them."

"Will you explain, general?"

The commander smoked on, unruffled, pensive. Gen. Heath stood mute, while I wondered what solution would be given for so knotty a problem.

"I cannot refuse to obey the secretary's orders," said the general in chief at last, "but I can postpone its execution. Meanwhile I can give you an opportunity to perform a signal service, which, if successful, will bear witness to your loyalty."

Gen. Heath stood restlessly attentive, while his chief proceeded: "You possess the faculties requisite for a cavalry leader to a marked degree—daring, ingenuity, rapidity; features especially needed in an expedition I have in view."

"Why do you propose, general, to trust me with a command, handicapped as I am, when there are so many others who have never been smirched?"

"Because they have not the ability to do a work for which you are conspicuously fitted."

There was a brief silence, which was broken by the general in chief.

"It has been reported to me this morning that Longstreet's corps is about to be detached from Bragg's army on Missionary Ridge, and moved by the East Tennessee & Georgia railroad to Knoxville, with a view to crushing Burnside. It is extremely important that I should know definitely if this move be made. Burnside must be warned and supported, while Bragg, weakened by the loss of one of his most efficient corps, may be attacked and defeated."

Gen. Heath's eye lighted.

"The means by which you propose to gain this information?"

"A corps of observation posted near the railroad to watch the passage of trains."

"Cavalry?"

"Yes."

"How large a force?"

"What is the effective strength of your brigade?"

"Five hundred men—a mere remnant of the force I led at Chickamauga."

"Just the number I would designate."

"Bragg will carefully protect the line from our observation."

"You are right; he will keep bodies of cavalry moving along the railroad, in order not only to protect his bridges and telegraph wires, but to preserve his secret. My plan is for you to take your brigade to some point midway between here and Loudon, from which to make forays, in the hope of encountering the trains on which his troops are transported. You may be able to slip between patrolling forces, or cut your way through them by hard fighting."

There was a long silence, during which the commander smoked on, while his subordinate pondered.

"Supposing the move be not made?" said Gen. Heath, presently.

"I believe it will be made."

"Then why not act accordingly?"

"First, it is not a certainty; secondly, I do not care to weaken my army by sending troops to support Burnside. I wish the government to do that, and the government would pay no attention to a mere rumor."

"H'm! You would be lucky if you could move the war department on perfect evidence."

To this the commander made no reply.

"Why not send a spy, instead of the force you propose?" asked the subordinate.

"First, because I could not trust a spy who works for pay; secondly, because the government would not be likely to pay attention to a spy's report; thirdly, a spy might be detected by the enemy and never heard from; fourthly, in case you discover a large force moving by train, you may possibly, by burning a bridge, delay it, or cut it in two. However, when near the railroad you can exercise your own discretion as to sending a spy, though I should recommend you rather to use a small reconnoitering party, so that, from among a number, one may get back to you with the information. Lastly, you are to use all diligence in communicating what you may learn to Gen. Burnside at Knoxville."

There was another silence, at the end of which Gen. Heath, in a more softened tone than he had yet used, said: "I will perform the service, general." He waited for his commander to speak again, but there were only silent puffs of tobacco smoke, while an occasional gun boomed on Lookout mountain, where the confederates had posted artillery and were sending shells into the town. Presently Gen. Heath asked: "Shall I forage on the country?"

"Certainly. We need all the rations we can haul, here."

"Have you any further orders?"

"No."

II.

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW.

We left Chattanooga at midday, crossed the Tennessee, and moved northward by the pike along the base of Waldron's Ridge. On our left towered the ridge; on our right, among innumerable hills, wound the Tennessee. The general rode at the head of the column, his hat pulled down over his eyes, doubtless to conceal the turbulent thoughts within him. We of the staff knew that he was in no mood to be trifled with, and took pains to execute promptly and satisfactorily such orders as he gave us, that he might have no cause to lash us with his sharp-edged tongue, which he could use with such effect when irritated.

The afternoon was spent. I was riding with the general, the head of column a short distance to the rear. Coming to a sharp rise in the road, just before reaching the summit, there appeared suddenly the face of a woman; then her form, then the horse she rode, came successively into view. At first she seemed about to turn and flee, but instead she sat blankly staring at us. The sun, which was near the setting, shot a sheaf of rays flashing in her eyes, lighting up her face; her lips were compressed in an effort to appear calm.

"Margaret!" exclaimed the general.

Whether the girl was too startled to control her tongue or did not recognize an old friend, she continued to stare mutely.

"What are you doing here?"

"I live near here."

"Live near here?"

"Yes. When the federal troops entered Nashville we came to our plantation."

"I did not know of any plantation belonging to your family in this region. Where is it?"

"Two miles back, at Morganton's Cross-Roads."

"Where are you going?"

"To visit a friend."

"We shall stop at the Cross-Roads."

"Mamma will receive you."

The general looked perplexed. He saw mischief in the girl's going on, now that she knew of our presence. At that moment he especially desired to keep his movements from the enemy.

"It will not be safe for you to go to Chattanooga alone; better go back with us to the plantation."

She gave him a look of mingled surprise and reproach. "Do you mean that you will use force?"

I had never seen the general so embarrassed. None of us who were looking on knew of his past relations with this girl, except that it was apparent they had been acquainted. The sharp interest with which we regarded both added to the general's perplexity.

"This is war," he said. "Inclination must be subservient to duty."

"If you detain me you will regret it," said the girl, with a rising color in her cheek and an angry light in her eye.

"Your very anxiety to go forward necessitates my preventing you."

It was a strange picture, one that after long years of peace I often recall as typical of the many incongruities of war; the men in the ranks sitting in their saddles in the various positions by which horsemen contrive to relieve their strained muscles, the horses, some lowering their tired heads, others restlessly biting their bits, or nibbling at the grass growing beside the road; the young general—I thought him an old man then—his eyes fixed on the delicate face of the woman, in such marked contrast with his own. Yet of all these details, one I recall far more vividly than the rest—a tear on the girl's cheek, which the rays of the setting sun caused to sparkle like a diamond.

But there was only this tear to mark her woman's weakness, for she sat defiant in our path. In a twinkling the general broke her down with a kindly tone that had been natural to him before his troubles, but which was rarely heard now:

"Come, Margaret, go with us, won't you?"

Turning her horse's head, she rode back as peacefully as a child. But

At first she seemed about to turn and flee.

there was an evident constraint between her and the general, for, beyond an inquiry from him as to her mother's health, and a reply that she was still an invalid, no word passed. We trotted on, wondering at the strange meeting and what would come of it, a continued beating of hoofs and clanking of sabers behind us, until we reached a plantation in the center of which stood a square house, in its front one of those porticos with Ionic columns in vogue during the "fifties." The yard included something like a dozen acres, and was surrounded by a high picket fence. The general, the girl and I entered the gateway and rode up to the house.

And now happened something which, had I not looked up at the very moment I did, would have turned the whole current of this story, perhaps rendered it not worth the telling. What put it into my head I know not. I might as well have cast my eye on the well-house, or on a rock jutting out between the trees, or an old darky back in the road scraping the dirt off a hoe, or a couple of mules feeding. I saw all these, and there was nothing strange in it, for they were on a level with my eye; but what was strange was that I should have looked up at a certain window in the top story of the house in the very nick of time to see the slats in the shutter turn, and an ashen face with startled eyes quickly sweep our party and rest an instant on our prisoner. Then the slats were turned again. It was all done so quickly that I could not tell whether I had seen a man or a woman. Quick as thought I flung a glance at the girl beside me. She was white as death.

I spurred to where the general was about to dismount.

"Something wrong, general," pointing to the house.

"What do you mean?"

"Some one concealed up there. I saw a face at a window, and a look between it and the girl."

At the moment my brother aide-de-camp, Walter Bland, came riding into the place, and the general ordered him to bring a sergeant and half a dozen men and surround the house.

"Go upstairs," the general said to me, "and find out who is lurking there."

I knit my brows. Was I to hunt unarmed citizens?

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

An angry word was on my tongue, but I had seen my chief cut a man down with his sword for a mutinous reply. I repressed my choler and started doggedly into the house. He called me back, I supposed to give me a reprimand, but I was surprised when in a quiet voice he said to me: "I have selected this plantation as a rallying point from which to make forays on the railroad. The disloyal citizens are all spies, and will report our every move to the enemy. Likely there is one of them at this moment in this very house. Now go upstairs and find who is lurking there."

This was the general's way. One moment he would strike, the next caress. One moment I hated, the next loved him. I went into the house to carry out his order. Taking an old darky with me as guide, I mounted the stairs, reached a door which I judged would let me into the room I sought, and threw it open. No one there.

"Now, uncle," I said to the negro, "I want you to take me into every nook and corner of this house, from garret to cellar."

"Yes, mars'."

Never have I seen a negro more deliberate, more profuse with excuses, than the one who piloted me on my search. It was "Yes, mars', jes' wait a minute till I find de key," or "Dis do' done stuck wid de wedder," or "Don't hurry de ole man; de misery's powerful bad; nobody can't git away while de sojers is outside."

I drew my saber and poked here and there, beat it against doors, thrust it up chimneys, pretending that I was doing a duty which I was shirking all the while. On the floor where I had seen the face we found all the rooms empty. Above was a trap-door with steps leading up to it. I climbed the steps, lifted the trap and stepped in under the roof. It was a singular construction, sloping downward to a gutter in the center instead of rising to a peak. Finding nothing, I pulled myself through an opening and stood on the roof, looked behind all the chimneys, and heaved a sigh of relief that I had found no one. Then, going below, I resumed my searching in the lower stories. Knocking at the door of a room on the second floor, the summons was answered by an old lady. As I gained an insight into the apartment, a bedchamber, I thought I saw a woman's skirt whisk out of a rear door.

"I must search the room, madam," I said, imperatively.

"Certainly. Come in."

She spoke in so soft a voice and looked at me in such a motherly way out of her patient eyes that I could have bitten off my tongue for my demand.

"Never mind," I said, coloring. "I see there is no one here."

"Better satisfy yourself."

With that she opened the closet door, pulled out a lounge and turned up the valance of the bed. I stood hanging my head like a boy caught stealing jam, then suddenly squared my back to what she would show me.

"Look," she said, with a sweet voice.

"Look?" I repeated, turning and facing her. "Look through the chamber of a lady! Have I come down here to do work a detective would shrink from? I came to fight men, not to force myself on the privacy of women. I ask your pardon, madam, for trespassing."

I left the room, my cheeks burning, and, going downstairs, passed out to the gallery where the general was waiting for me, and reported no one found. He drew down the corners of his mouth in a way I never liked.

"Sergeant," he said, turning to the man who commanded the guard, "take a couple of men and search the house."

The sergeant saluted, and, ordering the men he selected to follow him, went upstairs. Meanwhile Col. Wilton, the next officer in rank to the general, rode up and claimed his commander's attention, while the girl stood waiting in the doorway.

Leaning my elbows on the rail, I looked out on the scene before me. The sun had set, and the surrounding hills stood out in silhouette against a pearl sky, though their sides were dimly aglow with variegated autumnal colors—for it was at the end of October—and a chill breeze was coming up from the south. Directly below, in the yard, the men were going into camp, some unsaddling the horses, some getting out cooking utensils, some cutting boughs on which to sleep. From a snake fence on the other side of the road troopers were carrying rails with which to make camp fires, some of which were already sending out the odor of burning wood and boiling coffee. Some 20 miles away, across the valley of the Tennessee, were the hills at whose base ran the railroad we were charged with watching. I was wondering how the general, with a few hundred men, could maintain himself against the cavalry of the enemy, let alone getting near enough to the railroad, at the exact time the expected trains would pass, to discover them, when the sergeant and his men came downstairs and reported another failure.

"Lieut. Hall," said the general sharply to me.

"Yes, general."

"I expect you to keep this young lady under your especial watch. Question her, take down her replies in writing, and bring them to me. Treat her and every one about the place with every consideration possible under the circumstances, but instruct the guard to see that no one leaves the house during the night." With that he left me and trotted briskly down to the gate. I turned to the girl. She had sunk into a seat in a dead faint.

III.

RED-HANDED.

I was about to sing out lustily for some of the negroes below to come to the assistance of their mistress, when she regained consciousness and her will-power at the same time.

I grasped her hand; it was like ice.

"Are you better?"

"Has anything happened?"

"You have been overstrained."

"Not that. What has occurred since—since I haven't known anything?"

"Nothing. You were unconscious only for a moment."

She seemed relieved. I steadied her while she rose, and supported her into the house, where I placed her in charge of a negro woman, who took her to her room.

The general's order to question her and report to him was a load upon my mind. To pry into the secrets of a girl about my own age, to cross-question her, to extort from her what she did not care to tell, seemed to me no proper duty for a gentleman and a soldier. Several times during the evening I nerved myself for the work, and as often put it off. At last, fearing that the girl would go to bed, I sent word by one of the negroes to know if she felt well enough to see me. I was bidden to the living-room, where I found her seated on a lounge, anxiety depicted on every feature of her face. Taking possession of a table in the center of the room, I produced my paper and sharpened my lead-pencil.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I am going to ask you a few questions."

"Who ordered you to do that?"

"The general."

"The replies are for him?"

"Yes."

"Well, go on."

I began my work with all the embarrassment of a young lawyer making his first examination of a witness.

"How long have you known the general?"

"Do you ask that for his or for your own information?"

Realizing my mistake, I bent my head down to the paper to hide my confusion.

"Never mind that question," I said, "I'll ask you another."

"Well?"

"Who is the lady upstairs—that pleasant woman with a sweet voice?"

"My mother." She looked pleased at the compliment paid to one she loved. I fancied I had made a mistake in showing interest, and scowled, in order that she might, after all, consider me unsympathetic.

"Is your mother union?"

"Confederate."

"H'm! Now I want you to tell me whose was the face at the window upstairs."

She made no reply.

"I'm waiting."

I glanced up at her from the paper. From her expression I judged that I might wait for an answer till the crack of doom.

I took out my knife and sharpened my pencil, though I had sharpened it a few minutes before. I wanted time to think.

"Are you union or confederate?"

I asked the question because I could think of no other: I did not doubt she was confederate.

"Union."

"Union?" I smiled. What a barefaced falsehood! "Why, if you are union, what is the use of all this searching, your concealment of facts, and all that?"

"You have done the searching, not I."

I glanced my eye over the paper on which I was taking notes. I had certainly not distinguished myself by the value of my questions or the information I had elicited. How could I show such a document to the general? Like most people who are unfitted for what they undertake, I put off till to-morrow what I could not do to-day.

"I will not show this to the general till morning," I said. "By that time, I trust, you will have made up your mind to make a full confession."

"What am I to confess?"

I made no reply to this, keeping up as unbending a mien as possible, though somehow I could not but feel that the girl saw through the gauzy mantle of severity I had donned, and knew full well that I was an inquisitor of clay. But what was I to do with her over night? I pondered awhile, and then said:

"Give me your parole not to leave this house, and you may sleep where you like without a guard."

"What is a parole?"

"Word of honor. Do you promise?"

"Certainly."

"Very well. Now you may go where you like inside the house; only remember you have given your promise not to leave it."

With that she left me, and I heard her go upstairs and enter her mother's room.

I determined to sleep in the house, occupying the room where I had questioned her, using the sofa for a bed. Having stationed a man in the hall, shortly before midnight I threw my blanket on a chair to have it ready for the chill of the early morning, unbuckled my saber and pistol-belt, pulled off my boots, tossed my forage-cap on the table—in short, made the preparations for bed of a soldier in the field. Then, having blown out the candle that lighted my room, I lay down.

But slumber would not come. Either the sentry in the hall must strike a match to light his pipe, or a dog in the yard must be moaning, while the hall clock ticked loud enough to awaken the Seven Sleepers—disturbances that would not have troubled me had it not been that my head was full of Margaret Beach and her singular surroundings. However, at last I fell asleep.

Suddenly I awoke. The light in the hall had gone out, and I could hear the sentry snoring. There was a creaking on the stairway. Some one was coming down, pausing at every step. Straining my eyes, I saw dimly a human figure standing on the lowest step, which was directly opposite my door. Then it disappeared.

Rising quickly, I stepped softly to the door just in time to catch sight of someone moving toward the rear of the house. I followed. A door opened, and the figure passed through. Catching the door before it closed, I looked into a kitchen. A stove door opened, and the fire-light plainly revealed Margaret

I sprang forward and pinioned her in my arms.

Beach about to burn a paper. I sprang forward and pinioned her in my arms.

"Sentry!" I yelled at the top of my voice.

The sentry came stumbling along in the dark.

"Bring a light."

Running back to the hall, he returned with a candle. Holding it up, it showed a face of marble.

Leading my prisoner to the living-room, I told the sentry to watch her every moment till my return, then made for the general's tent.

"General!" I called.

"Well?"

"Miss Beach—I caught her stealing through the hall. She went to the kitchen and was evidently about to burn a paper, when I stopped her."

"Where is she now?"

"At the house under guard."

He got up and went with me to the house. We found Miss Beach seated in a chair, her head resting on her arms on a table, the sentry watching her. I noticed for the first time that she kept her right hand tightly closed. She looked up at the general with a wild, hunted look. In his own face there was an unexplained dread.

"Have you searched her, lieutenant?"

"No, general."

"Open your hand, Margaret," he said to her.

By this time she had risen and stood before us at bay.

"Open your hand," the general repeated.

She opened her left hand and tossed a paper ball on the floor. The general picked it up and began to open it—no easy task, since the paper was very thin and tightly compressed.

"Hold the light here."

I took the candle from the sentry and held it over the general's shoulder. His face suddenly became white as a cloth.

"Burnside's defenses, with every division, brigade, battery, laid down in red ink on tissue paper!"

I looked at Miss Beach to note the effect of the discovery, expecting her to drop in a faint. What was my surprise to see instead a relieved expression, as though she had escaped a great danger!

The general was standing with the paper in his hands, I holding the light, the sentry back, the girl facing us all. For a few moments there was complete silence. I shall never forget its breaking. The general spoke. His tone was one in which he might have pronounced his own death-sentence.

"You have committed the gravest offense known in war."

He turned and left the room, motioning me to follow him. Leaving Miss Beach in charge of the sentry, I went with him to his tent. It was some time before he could gather his faculties to speak.

"The commanding general is right," he said, at last; "they are going to crush Burnside."

"Why so, general?"

"Straws show which way the wind blows. Why should they wish plans of the works at Knoxville, if they are not intending to attack them?"

"But Miss Beach?" I said, more interested in her than in the military situation.

"Had we not caught her in the act she would have been in Bragg's camp before to-morrow morning."

"What shall I do with her?"

"Confine her in one of the rooms on the top floor, and let her have no communication with anyone."

When I went back to the house I found the girl walking to and fro in the hall, while tears were silently flowing. I conducted her upstairs, feeling that I had fallen from the high degree of an officer of the army to the menial position of a common jailer. Opening the door, I stood beside it, and, taking off my cap, waited for her to pass in. As she did so she extended her hand to me,