

## At the Cannon's Mouth-

They said it was a forced march. First, some soldiers on horseback went tearing by with a terrible clatter leaving a cloud of dust behind them, then it was all quiet for an hour. I heard a tramping, and looking up to the crest of rising ground to the north saw the road packed with soldiers on foot. They came quickly up, and I scarcely had time to see what they looked like before those in front had passed. They didn't march like soldiers I had seen in the city on a gala-day, when I was a little girl; they hurried along, each man walking as he liked. I wondered how they could go so fast, they were loaded down so. They carried great heavy knapsacks and blankets, and tin pans and canteens, besides their muskets. They looked more as if they were gone to set up house-keeping than to war.

While I was leaning on the window-sill, looking out and watching them, I saw a young officer ride into the yard, just as if he belonged to the place—or, rather, as if the place belonged to him—and back toward the barn. Two soldiers rode close behind him, and they got down off their horses and went into the barn. I thought at once they were after our horses. My pony was there, and I made up my mind they shouldn't take him without walking over my dead body. I ran down stairs and out to the barn. If I had been making a forced march myself I couldn't have gone faster. Before I got there they had two horses out, and were harnessing them to the farm wagon. I marched straight up to the officer and asked him what he was doing.

He was a trifle startled at seeing a girl standing before him, looking as if she intended to make a resistance. "We're 'pressing' all the horses and wagons we find, along the road," he said.

"What do you mean by 'pressing' them?"

"We're 'pressing' them into the service."

"What for?"

"To carry the men's knapsacks. They can march faster."

"Do you think it makes it any more respectable to call it 'pressing'?"

The officer's face was flushed. I thought it was because he was ashamed of his work; but I soon noticed that he was in a burning fever.

"You shan't take my pony, anyway," I cried, going to the man who was leading him out of the barn, and seizing the halter.

"Never mind that horse," said the officer; "it's only a pony. Take it back into the stable."

The man obeyed at once. They harnessed two horses to the wagon and led the team into the road. As the soldiers marched past they threw their knapsacks upon the wagon and it was soon loaded, and one of the negroes drove it away.

Just then an officer came along with a number of other officers and a train of horsemen followed him. I noticed that he had stars on his shoulders and wore a straight sword instead of a crooked one like the rest.

"Captain!" he said, looking at the officer who had taken our horses and wagon, "you'd better not try to go any farther."

"I can go on, general. It's only intermittent."

The general cut him short with, "Stop where you are." He spoke so sharp that I thought he was going to bite the captain's head off. I wished the captain had the courage to answer him, but he hadn't.

The general and those who were with him rode on leaving the sick man sitting on his horse looking after them, to take care of himself as best he could. I noticed he wore the same ornaments on his cap as those about the general—a wreath—and I concluded he was one of them.

There was an interval in the passing regiments, and no one was near but the captain and me.

With that, he gave my hand a press, sure, and looked long and steadily in to my eyes. Then he mounted his horse and rode away without once looking back.

As soon as he had gone I commenced to think what he could mean about leaving his hostage. I was sure he wouldn't offer anything very valuable. He must know that I wouldn't like that; but I thought he might leave some little trinket for me to remember him by.

I ransacked the room he had occupied, looked into bureau drawers, into closets, any place the ingenuity of man could find to hide anything. I even looked behind the pictures hanging on the wall. Then I went all over the house from attic to cellar. Not a thing could I find. Then I recalled his words, if you are shrewd enough to guess what it is, and went all over my search again. At last I gave it up. A pretty way to treat me, I grumbled, after taking care of him so long! I vowed that if ever I should see him again he should tell me whether he had really left anything and what it was.

News came of terrible fighting at the front. Stragglers, broken-down horses, mules, wagons, ambulances from which now and then a ghastly face would look out kept going by day after day for several days. The yard, barn, and the kitchen were full

of men. The first day they drank up all the water in the well. Then the regiments marched by almost fast as when they were making their forced march south. They passed on by the house, but stopped on the crest of the hill up the road. There they began to dig with spades and shovels, and the next morning when I looked out there was a long line of forts, and the Yankee flag flying above them; and, great heavens, the black mouths of cannon frowning down at us.

While I was looking I heard something rattle far down the road. It sounded like emptying a barrel of stones into another barrel. Then another rattle, mingled with a constant dull booming.—All the morning the sounds kept coming nearer till at last I could distinctly hear the loud reports of cannon and of muskets all fired at once. I noticed a great stir in the forts above. Horsemen were galloping back and forth; new guns were every moment thrusting out their ugly mouths, and men were marching and countermarching. I could hear their officers shouting gibberish at them which they must have been Indian or Chinese to understand. Then more soldiers passed the house from the south tired, dusty, grimed some of them running, some wounded and tottering along slowly. All passed in a steady stream behind the forts.

Suddenly a horseman dashed up to the house—he was all dust and dirt, and his horse covered with foam. He threw himself from the saddle and came up on the veranda.

Good gracious! the captain, come away from here at once, he said: our men are retreating; we are going to make a stand behind the works. You are directly in range be quick! the fire is liable to open at any moment.

Then there was a scramble to snatch a few things. One took a lamp, another a pitcher, another photograph album. It seemed as if everybody took the most useless thing to be found. All except me were hurrying down the walk to the gate; I staid behind. The captain was trying to make me hurry. He was stamping up and down the veranda and through the hall, almost crazy at my delay.

Come, be quick! he said, as sharp as if he were the general himself. Captain—I said hesitating.

What is it? he asked impatiently. The hostage.

What hostage?

That you left when you went away; I couldn't find it. Must we leave it?

He looked at me a moment as if he thought I had lost my sense; then he burst into a laugh.

I never could stand to be laughed at, and just then it was particularly obnoxious. I made up my mind that he should tell me what I had hunted for, and tell me then and there.

Never mind that, he said, seeing that I was irritated. Save yourself and it will be in no special danger. I'll not leave it, whatever it is, I said resolutely.

Come, come! this will be a battle field in a few moments.

I won't stir a step till you tell me what I want to know.

Nonsense he said severely. The more severe his tongue the more resolute I became. I stood stock-still.

For Heaven's sake! he urged, becoming really frightened; the gunners are standing ready to fire.

Let them fire. I folded my arms.

A volley sounded a short distance down the line of the forts to the west. The captain tried to seize my wrist.

Do come, he pleaded.

Tell me what was the hostage, I said stubbornly.

What are you going to do? I asked him.

I was sitting on the fence, with my feet dangling. It wasn't a very graceful position, but I was only a country girl then, and didn't know any better.

I don't know, he said wearily. I suppose I must ride back to N—. There's a hospital there.

If he hadn't been a Yankee and a robber, or a 'presser, which is the same thing, I'd have asked him to come into the house at once, he looked so sick.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, I said, to take horses that don't belong to you?"

He looked ashamed. It isn't a pleasant business, he said. "You'd better get that pony of yours out of the way; there'll be more troops along here by-and-by."

When he said this his voice sounded so pleasant, and he looked so sick, that I made up my mind to ask him in. But I couldn't bring myself to speak kindly to him. I couldn't forget that he was a Yankee soldier.

Come into the house, I said sharply. He looked at me out of his melancholy, feverish eyes.

No, I thank you. I'll ride back to N—; and he turned his horse's head to ride away.

I called to him to stop. He obeyed me, and I went out into the road and took hold of the bridle.

What do you mean by that? he asked, surprised.

I'm going to 'press your horse.

What for?

To keep for the service of those you've taken.

He looked at me sort o' dazed. He put his hand to his head, and didn't seem to know what to do. I led his horse up to the veranda. He dismounted and walked feebly up the steps and sat down on a bench, while I took his horse round to the barn.

Well, the captain was put to bed. He had typhoid fever. Occasionally when troops would come into the neighborhood, I would mount my pony, and ride over to their camp and ask to have a surgeon come and see him. Between the surgeons and my nursing we got him through the crisis. I nursed him for six weeks. Then he became convalescent, and it was very nice to have him sitting up in an arm-chair on the veranda looking so pale and handsome. I used to sit by him and work, and he seemed so gentle and so patient—not at all like he appeared to me when I first saw him riding back to the barn to 'press the horses—that I began to feel sorry he wasn't one of our own men instead of being nothing but a detestable Yankee.

One day while I was sitting on the veranda beside him, sewing, he said: Miss Mollie, are you still holding my horse as a hostage?

Yes. Ours haven't come back yet. Don't you think you could let me take him when I get well, if I should promise to go and find your horses and have them returned?

I'll see about that when you get well. He'd been talking already about going to join the army, but I didn't mean to let him go. He couldn't very well go without his horse, so I wouldn't let him have it.

What hostage do you require in token of my appreciation of your kindness since I've been sick? he asked.

You haven't anything to leave. Besides, I've done very little, I'm sure.

He thought a moment. Then he said, somewhat sadly: Yes; there's one thing I can leave—only one. I'll leave that with you.

I couldn't think of anything he had except his revolver, and I was sure he wouldn't leave that. It was not appropriate. I waited for him to tell me, but he said nothing about it then.

At last he was well enough to go. At least he thought so; I didn't. He was as weak as a kitten, but I saw how anxious he was, and I didn't oppose him any longer. So one pleasant morning, when the air was soft and the roads were dry, I told one of the colored boys to bring the captain's horse round from the barn.

The captain stood on the veranda ready to mount and ride away. His blanket and rubber poncho were strapped behind the saddle just as he had left them, and his horse was so anxious to be off that the boy could hardly hold him. The captain took my hand in his to say good bye, and looked straight into my eyes. I lowered them to his spurs.

You're a good girl, he said, I'll not forget your kindness.

Oh, I would have done the same for any one.

Any one?

Any one.

Then I asked myself: What did I want to say that for.

I leave you the hostage I spoke of, he said, but it is a very poor return for so much kindness—a mere bagatelle.

I could have bitten my tongue off. He was going to make a return—to pay for what I had done for him.

You'll find it, he added, if you have the shrewdness to guess where it is.

Here?

No, no, this is not a fit place to tell you that. For the love of Heaven do come away! I vowed to conquer him or die on the field.

"You shall either tell me or I shall stay here till the battle is over."

He looked at the frowning forts anxiously then back at me.

Yes, must know.

"Yes."

"Now?"

"Now."

well, then; Molly dear I left you my heart." I stood as one whose eyes an enemy coming straight down on him whose limbs are paralyzed from the suddenness of the discovery. Merciful Heavens! what had I done? What stupidity! The blood rushed in a torrent to my cheeks; I covered my face with my hands.

"And now, sweetheart"—taking one of my hands from my burning cheek and leading me away—"if you are satisfied with the hostage, we won't stay here any longer."

As he spoke there was an explosion in the forts, and it seemed as if a dozen shrieking cats were whirling over our heads. I almost wished one of them would strike me dead. The captain led me like a child towards the forts through smoke and noise and confusion. I didn't think of the battle that was opening; I thought only how immodest he must think me, and that he never would believe I could be so stupid as not to know what he meant by leaving his hostage.

I have had to suffer all my life for that one mistake, I never can have my own way about anything for when my husband finds all other expedients for governing to be failures, he invariably taunts me with having forced his secret at the cannon's mouth.

F. A. MITCHEL.

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