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THE LAND IS BRIGHT

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HAUNT FOX
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SWAMP CAT

THE LAND IS BRIGHT

by

JIM KJELGAARD

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To Lucille and Robert Albers, who do unto others

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The characters, places, incidents and situations in this book are imaginary and have no relation to any person, place or actual happening

THE LAND IS BRIGHT

CHAPTER I

The Judge

Ling Stewart went into the predawn blackness to harness the horse while his wife, Ann, remained at the breakfast table. The steadily burning candle softly illumined part of the long table and cast a little circle of light on either side, but the far corners of the room remained in shadow. As she sat there, Ann read in those dim shadows a portent of things to be.

Several days ago, William Bodine, a Wetherly merchant, had tried to cheat Ling out of part of a bale of furs that Ling had offered for sale. Doubtless, after following his usual practice of asking hunters to help themselves at the whiskey barrel, Bodine had carried the bale of furs into a rear room, stolen five deer skins and three fox pelts and claimed they had never been present. Ling had reacted characteristically and knocked Bodine down. Day before yesterday, the sheriff from the next county, whose court served the area, had ridden up to inform Ling that Bodine had preferred charges of felonious assault and that he, Ling Stewart, would have to answer those charges in Denbury Court. Ann had expected a felonious assault on the sheriff himself, and she had been enormously relieved when Ling merely listened amiably. When he told her that he intended to obey the summons, she was dizzy with astonishment.

Now they were readying themselves for the trip into Denbury, some fifteen miles distant, and Ling's day in court.

Ann rose, and with efficient economy of movement brought about by long practice, gathered up the dishes and put them in a pan. She stooped to swing the hook that held a kettle of warm water over the fire, laid a folded cloth on her hand and poured the water over the dishes. Then she opened a door that led into an adjoining room, bent over the nearest of two small beds and whispered, "Jeffrey!"

The child in the far bed awakened first and called out, "Mama?"

Ann sighed inwardly. Her husband was the most skillful hunter in Hobbs Creek, a community of hunters. Just past three years of age, baby Ling was wide awake at a sound that had failed even to disturb his older brother; he was his father reborn. Ann said softly, "Go back to sleep, Lingo."

"Yes, Mama."

He lay down but not to sleep, for the candle's light showed his bright eyes fixed steadily on her. Ann whispered a second time, "Jeffrey!"

Now he, too, was suddenly awake and alert, with no pause between sleep and wakefulness. Raiding Cherokees and renegade white men might occasionally prowl here, and even small children learned early that the difference between drowsy and instant wakening could mean the difference between dying and living. Far more gentle than his brother, resembling Ann as much as the younger boy resembled Ling, he spoke softly, "Yes, Mama?"

"Papa and I will be gone all day. It's much too early for you to get up, but when the time comes tell Gramp to fix breakfast eggs for you, Lingo and himself. Tell him to serve milk, cornbread and butter with it. After breakfast he is to wash the dishes. Then he is to feed and milk the cows . . ." She recited, very precisely, the chores to be done, concluding with, "Then he is to go to bed and you must tuck Lingo in."

"I put myself to bed," baby Ling declared.

"Hush!" Ann breathed. "After Lingo is in bed, you are to tuck yourself in. Do you understand, darling?"

"I must tell Gramps to cook breakfast eggs for me, Ling and himself, and to have . . ." He repeated exactly what she'd said and Ann listened patiently. When he finished, she said fondly, "That's my darling! Go back to sleep now."

She stooped to kiss him and crossed to the other bed to kiss her younger son, urging him back to sleep. Then she tiptoed from the room and softly closed the door behind her. A throbbing excitement stole some of her nervous fear. Lighting her way with the candle, she went into the bedroom she shared with Ling. She opened a trunk and took from it a gown, a beribboned bonnet and a coat that had been very smart ten years ago.

Slipping out of her gingham house dress, Ann put on the gown and while she reveled in the luxury of silk and velvet, she gave silent thanks for a stubborn little whim that she had insisted on pursuing. She had gone nowhere in ten years and there had seemed no faint possibility that she would go anywhere, but it had given her soul a necessary balm to keep the

best of the adolescent Ann's clothing for the woman she had become. Ruthlessly destroying one garment to piece out another, over the years she had watched the extensive wardrobe that Enos had provided shrink to two gowns, the coat, five bonnets and a scattered heap of remnants. She smoothed the gown, slipped into the coat, tilted the bonnet on her blue-black curls and suddenly and mightily wished for a full-length mirror.

There was none, but Ann's imagination created one. She stepped lightly in front of it, turned, pirouetted. Then the front door opened and Ling came in.

Hastily she caught up the candle, returned to the other room and stifled a giggle. Ling was tall, dark, lean and graceful, and Ann had always thought his eyes wonderfully gentle until she had discovered how swiftly storms could arise within them. But now he was wide-eyed and clumsily gawking as he stared at her.

"My gosh!" he blurted. "My gosh, Ann! You're pretty's a yearlin' doe on new spring grass!"

"Do you like it?" she asked, smiling.

His engaging grin flashed. "Cept for one thing."

"And what is that?"

"I'd best tote along a club to beat off them young Denbury bucks."

"Of course!" she teased. "You'll need one in each hand."

"Ready?"

"All ready."

She hoped he couldn't hear her sigh of relief when he came to her side without even glancing at the firearms rack. He seldom went anywhere without a gun, even out to split wood in the barn, and she dreaded the possible consequences if he entered Denbury armed. The fact that he obviously intended to go unarmed made more complex a situation that was already bewildering. Ann sought the reason and presently found it.

Ling was condescendingly tolerant at best, and scathingly contemptuous at worst, of anyone who submitted to restriction in any form. He considered the residents of Denbury and all other towns to be some rather low form of life which happened to look human. This life couldn't possibly be human because, in Ling's opinion, no man would ever relinquish a fraction of the freedom to be found in the wilderness for any security that could be had in town. Town-dwellers were his enemies and as such they might turn on him, but they were such puny creatures that he need not bother to go armed among them.

Given reason, Ling would attack anyone, including the judge of Denbury Court, with his fists. But at least he wasn't likely to kill anyone, and with that comforting thought Ann walked outside toward the carriage.

Having been in a stall all night, the horse felt rambunctious and showed his feelings by vigorously pawing the earth. The black carriage was only dimly seen in the dark, but when Ling turned a blanket aside, a lantern glowed from beneath it. "All right, honey. Get in," he said.

She climbed into the seat, turning her face from the raw wind as she did so, but when Ling got in on the other side and drew the blanket over them, the lantern's heat warmed her legs and feet. She looked wonderingly at her husband. He would never have thought of the lantern if he had been going alone, but he had considered her comfort.

Ling caught up the reins, the horse trotted forward and Ann meditated on her own part in this curious adventure. She had assented readily when he asked her to come with him, but she had wondered then, and wondered still, why he wanted her along.

In the twenty-one years since his father brought him to Hobbs Creek, Ling had visited no settlement larger than Wetherly. With four hundred-odd residents, it was the largest settlement in the county. In the woods he was master. But for all his braggadocio and superiority to townsmen, and for all the bulldog courage that bade him face his enemies wherever they might be, he quailed because he must venture into a town he had never visited. She'd wondered why he wanted her along! Why, he'd rather face ten angry bears than face the judge of Denbury Court alone. She could not hide a chuckle.

"What's funny?" he asked.

"You going meekly in to answer a sheriff's summons."

"Bodine ain't goin' to face me down!"

"More to the point, and more important, you're going to defend a point of justice where it should be defended—in court."

He said uncomprehendingly, "Uh huh."

They left the valley, climbed a forested hill and broke into the Pollard clearing. Ann saw her father's house, the scholarly retreat Enos had planned and caused to be built, softly beautiful among shadows. Sometimes the house was a place of horror from which she shrank. Sometimes the sight of it brought back happy memories of another and very different life, long, long ago. This was such a time, and Ann's serene and happy mood held until they left the clearing.

Presently the warmth of the lantern and the monotonous motion of the carriage made her drowsy. She nodded, awakened and nodded again. At last she slept with her head on Ling's shoulder.

When the sun had fully risen, they had left the mountains behind them, crossed the broad and sluggish Connicon River and entered the wide plateau of Denbury County. Here the land was green and fertile, plantation country. Their road paralleled the Connicon and now and then they passed a stately mansion across the river which faced the willow trees lining the riverbank. On their side of the river the houses were less grand and the fields more indifferently kept.

"I thought there were no poor planters," Ann said, by now wide awake and looking about eagerly.

Ling grinned. This plantation was poor only in comparison with the lavish establishments on the other side of the river. "Didn't you take to mind how all the rest front right on the river and got their own wharfs? They can tote their corn an' wheat an' tobacco on river boats and have an easy haul to that agent's warehouse we passed a ways back."

"Tom Dare," Ann quoted from the sign she had seen on the warehouse.

"Well, this fella here has got to tote all his crops on wagons because he's too far from the river, and that costs. He jest can't handle as much."

Ann marveled at Ling. Probably these were the first plantations he had ever seen; he could neither read nor write; but he had acute powers of observation, and he could analyze what he had observed. She wondered suddenly what heights he might have achieved if he had had an education. And then at the sight of the loveliest plantation they had yet passed, she gasped with pleasure and lost herself in looking. The house, surrounded by spacious lawns and huge trees, was set well back from the river, its rosy brick overgrown with ivy and its windows sparkling in the morning sun.

"Look, Ling! Look!"

"Sure is mighty nice."

"Quail Wings it's called," Ann said reading from the sign on the wharf.

"Mighty nice name, too," Ling said. "But none suits me like the house your Dad built up in the mountains. That is the prettiest house I ever did see."

"It was once," Ann answered quietly.

Soon they approached the town of Denbury itself, and the wonders to be seen came one on top of another. It seemed no time at all before they were in Denbury and Ann gasped, "Oh, Ling—look!"

"Right sweet," Ling acknowledged. "But they walked as if they'd been hobbled."

Ann did not answer. She was hungrily watching two young ladies of fashion walking side by side down a wooden sidewalk. They were slim, sparkling, vibrant as young people should be. Above and beyond that, and infinitely more

important, they were town-dwellers. As she watched, they entered a shop beneath a gilt-lettered sign that read "Ladies' Clothing." Smaller letters under the sign announced that Mlle. Helen Fouché of Paris, France, was the proprietress. Ann glimpsed feathered bonnets and gleaming silks. She turned to gaze back wistfully until they were well past Mlle. Fouché's.

Ling's "I'll be jugged!" roused her.

They both stared wide-eyed at the splendid coach approaching them, drawn by four perfectly matched grays and manned by a liveried Negro footman and two coachmen. The windows were curtained, so they were unable to see the personage who commanded such magnificence.

"I'll be jugged!" Ling said again.

Ann breathed, "It's even more wonderful than I remembered," and then, "Look, Ling!"

Ann had discovered a hardware store, a commonplace to any townsman but a fairyland to her. Just across the street was a small shop with "Genris Darson, Carpenter" painted in black letters over the window. A Negro coming up the sidewalk stepped aside to let a white man pass.

Ann continued to gasp, to exclaim, and only by exercising rigid self-control could she keep from pointing. Ling's brief answers were entirely satisfactory; she wouldn't have heard him if he'd said anything more. But she did notice when the horse swung, turned and halted. She glanced at Ling and then followed his steady gaze.

A brick building, by far the largest and most imposing she had seen in the town of Denbury, stood well back on a lawn still green, though the surrounding maples and poplars were bare. Above its verandah, supported by white marble pillars, was a facade bearing a sculpture of blindfolded Justice eternally weighing human fate in the balance. The words "Denbury Courthouse" were chiseled into stone beneath the figure.

Ann knew instantly why they were here. Ling was following his deepest instincts. If he were going into Cherokee country, he would reconnoiter. In Denbury, he saw no reason to do otherwise.

"The paper said we're due in court at half past one?" Ling asked.

"Yes."

He glanced at the sky and said, "Must be quarter-past eleven now. Let's go."

Soon they were entering a livery stable that Ling had seen, but she had missed, on the way down. A white-haired Negro came forward.

Ling greeted him amiably. "Howdy, Cap'n."

"How do, suh."

"You care for horses here?"

"Yes, suh."

"How much?"

"Twenty fi' cents."

"Heap o' money for jest takin' care of a horse," Ling objected.

The old man rolled worried eyes. "Hit's what we gits."

"Come on, Ling," Ann pleaded. "Pay him and let's go."

He paid, but when he took her arm to escort her across the street she knew he had suffered a shock. In Hobbs Creek, if a man decided to go away, any neighbor would gladly care for his stock and ask nothing except permission to feed from the owner's stores. If he had none, they'd care for his creatures anyway and let him return the fodder when he could.

Ann stepped back into the sheer delight of just looking about her. By some magical process her body seemed able to defy the law of gravity as they entered the Denbury House, Rooms at Moderate Rates. It was she who saw the sign that indicated the dining room.

"This way."

"I'm with you."

Her conscience smote her. "You should have let me pack a lunch."

"Huh!" Three drummers sitting idly in the lobby look startled and glanced up. "We come to town, we eat at a eatin' house."

"It's very thoughtful of you."

Ling grinned. "First meal you ain't had to rustle in . . . how many years, Ann?"

They entered the dining room, the tables dazzling beneath white linen and polished dinner ware. A colored waiter with a blue jacket, a grey shirt, a small head, and incredibly long legs sheathed in yellow hose, looked so remarkably like a great blue heron waiting for an incautious frog to venture near that Ann wanted to laugh. As though he had long been immune to what might be said or done, the waiter escorted them to a table, gave each a menu and shuffled away so silently that his shoes might have had no contact with the floor. Ling pretended to study his menu, but as soon as the waiter left, he looked over it at Ann.

"What the jughead's this?" he asked, waving the menu.

"A list of the food they offer."

"They must expect a mort of company."

"Now let me see," Ann read for him. "They're serving fish, mackerel."

"Don't trust them outland fish. What else?"

"Pork pie, beef stew, choice steak . . ."

"Honest to John beefsteak?"

"Of course."

"I'll have me some," Ling declared, and almost as an afterthought he added, "How much?"

"Thirty-five cents."

"Dunno why everybody 'round here ain't rich," Ling growled, then smiled his apology. He had brought his wife to town. Let the sky be the limit.

Ann chose a chicken pie. She also ordered coffee, not because she was fond of that beverage but because coffee was a symbol of luxury. Ling looked with interest at her cup.

"What's that?"

"Coffee."

"Good?"

"Try some," she invited.

He picked up her cup, gulped a mouth full of the steaming black brew, grimaced and replaced the cup.

"Great gobs of mud! You can have it!"

Ann sipped her coffee, and tried hard to look as though she were enjoying it because Ling watched her every move. They

finished with chocolate layer cake. Ling ate quickly and heartily but Ann lingered over every forkful; this memory must endure for a very long while. A third of her cake remained uneaten when he said, "Gittin' on that time."

She said reluctantly, "Then we'd better go."

She hesitated, hoping against hope that he would help her with her coat, but she stifled the sigh that threatened when he did not. She knew it had simply never occurred to Ling that a young, healthy woman needed any help in a matter as fundamental as putting on her coat. Ling paid the bill and they went back onto the street.

A cold wind blew now, and the sun had grown sickly, bathing Denbury in a mournful light. As two men passed by, Ann heard a snatch of their excited conversation.

"Lincoln's election means war! There'll be no stopping it now."

"You're dead right!" his companion agreed.

"Did you hear that, Ling?" Ann asked, when the men were some distance from them. "Those men said that Lincoln's election means war. I read about Lincoln in that newspaper you brought back from Wetherly. He wants to free the slaves and the South will fight to the last man, the paper said."

"Freein' the slaves is one thing—he can have all of mine," Ling grinned. "That sounds like planter talk to me, honey. Don't pay it no mind. Those fellers think they own all creation along with their slaves."

Side by side, they strode up the walk to the courthouse, but when Ann started to climb the marble steps she was suddenly aware that Ling was no longer at her side. When she turned she saw him standing two paces back and his eyes told her why he had halted. He was not afraid, but he neither trusted nor understood this place he was supposed to enter. Ann thought of a captured bear about to be forced into a cage, and she knew she must take command now.

She said calmly, "Coming, Ling?"

"Yeah, sure."

He joined her and remained at her side as they ascended the steps and opened the massive doors that stood between the world and Denbury Court. They looked into the spacious but austere chamber adorned only with two rather grim portraits, hung side by side, of judges who had presided here in the past. Benches filled the rear of the hall, but the only spectator was a thin, sallow man who sat five benches down and hung with breathless interest on the trial in progress. On the other side of the aisle, William Bodine and his clerk, Hendry Dexter, sat together.

Ann saw them, looked away and glanced at Ling. He had seen, too, for the fires leaped in his eyes, but he said nothing. Two benches ahead of the sallow spectator, Ann found a seat and Ling dropped beside her. She looked towards the front of the court and, after briefly noting the bailiff and the aging court clerk, fixed her eyes on the man behind the judge's bench.

She had somehow expected to find a venerable figure, an old man with a long white beard. This judge was a young man, she was surprised to see. Even sitting down, he seemed big, and it was not only his physical proportions that made him seem so. His robe of office concealed his upper body, but his head dominated as a rocky crag dominates tree-covered slopes. It was the head of a Viking, she thought, and then rejected the thought. No—it was a head of a man who stood alone. A wealth of fair hair surmounted his face—a face that compensated with strength for a lack of symmetry. Even at this distance, the judge's keen blue eyes seemed to probe Ann's innermost mind and read her thoughts. She had a sudden, powerful notion that she met this man before, so many times that they were old friends, and immediately she knew that she had not.

An older man and a spindly youth stood before him. The judge addressed the youth in a gentle voice. "Willie Matson, do you waive a trial by jury?"

"Yes—yes, sir," the young man shifted uncomfortably and turned frightened eyes to the floor.

The judge turned to the older man. "Ned Hale, what charge do you prefer?"

Hale flicked a stubby thumb at his adversary. "This'n tol' me he was a journeyman blacksmith. I hired him to shoe m'

mules and he stole m' blacksmith tools."

"Is that true?" the judge asked Willie Matson.

"Yes, sir."

"Why did you steal?"

"He would not pay for the work I did."

The judge turned to Ned Hale. "Why did you refuse to pay him?"

"This'n," Ned Hale flicked his thumb again, "didn' work good."

"Were the mules improperly shod?"

"They was shod proper enough. But this'n—"

"Stop flicking your thumb!" the judge said irritably.

"Sorry y'r Honor. This'n, he took two days for a job what Lightnin' Joe'd a done in a day an' a half."

"Was a time limit stipulated?"

"Stipu—what?"

"Did Willie Matson understand, before he started working, that he was to finish in a day and a half?"

"No, y'r Honor. But Lightnin' Joe—"

"That will do," the judge said shortly. "How much did you promise to pay?"

"Two dollars a day an' found."

"And you might have hired Lightnin' Joe for a dollar a day with no found?"

"Yes, y'r Honor."

"Why didn't you hire him?"

"He's took with a misery."

The judge addressed Willie Matson. "Where are your own tools?"

"Sold in Richmon'," Willie said miserably. "I needed money for my boat fare an' to keep me 'til I got work."

"It is the order of this court," the judge pronounced, "that you, Ned Hale, pay Willie Matson the full sum you promised."

"I like that jedge!" Ling whooped, and Ann sensed that his tension had given way to admiration. He turned to the sallow spectator and bellowed, "What's the jedge's name?"

The sallow man squirmed and looked embarrassed. Ling repeated in a louder voice, "What's the jedge's name?"

The bailiff had come up the aisle so silently that he was beside Ling and had touched his shoulder before Ling even suspected he was near. Ling turned to face him.

"You must be quiet in the courtroom," the bailiff warned.

"I jest want to know the jedge's name!"

"Be quiet or I'll have you ejected from court."

"Good!" Ling chuckled. "The jedge himself wants to see me next. What's his name?"

"Judge Colin Campbell. Now be quiet."

"If you'd told me his name, I'd of been quiet long ago," Ling said amiably.

Judge Colin Campbell said caustically, "I trust the court will interrupt no one else if it proceeds with the business at hand." He turned again to Ned Hale. "Did you understand?"

"But—" the farmer protested.

"At once!" the judge ordered sternly.

Ned Hale said suddenly, "Yes, y'r Honor."

He took out his purse, pressed the required sum into the blacksmith's hand, and stamped loudly up the aisle. The judge swung to Willie Matson.

"You are to return Ned Hale's tools at once. You are *not* again to appear before me on any charge."

"I will, sir! I won't, sir!" Willie's formerly dejected countenance now sparkled. He tripped happily up the aisle.

The clerk removed the brief that had been on the judge's bench, gave him a second brief, and the judge bent to read. After a few minutes he straightened, nodded, and the bailiff called decorously, "*William Bodine vs. Lingo Stewart.*"

"That's me!" Ling said happily.

He rose, and Ann gasped with disbelief at the transformation he had undergone. Ling had expected the judge to be a weakling, or, at best, another slick townsman. Instead, he had met a man who commanded his respect. He slouched easily down the aisle, halted before the bench, and said amiably, "Howdy, Jedge."

"Howdy," Colin Campbell returned pleasantly. "You're Mr.—?"

"Ling Stewart."

"I see, and is Mr. Bodine here?"

William Bodine and Hendry Dexter had followed Ling up to the bench and now they sidled unobtrusively in beside him. The merchant said, "I'm Mr. Bodine, your Honor."

"Who is this third man?"

"Hendry Dexter, my clerk and witness, your Honor. He saw everything."

"Very well. What charges do you prefer, Mr. Bodine?"

"On November 1, 1860, in the main room of my store at Wetherly, Buckshot County, with no provocation and for no reason, Lingo Stewart feloniously assaulted my person."

"It's a dirty lie!" Ling gritted.

Ann gasped, but the judge was unabashed. "You deny he charges, Mr. Stewart?"

"Not all of 'em. I basted him once and I'd o' done it five six more times 'cept he run in another room an' locked the door. But I didn't do it 'thout reason!"

"Go on. What was your reason?"

"I toted a bail of twenty-six deer skins and eleven fox pelts to sell at his store. He took the bale in back, swiped five deer skins and three fox pelts, then said they was never there."

"Is that true, Mr. Bodine?" Judge Campbell asked.

Bodine smiled tolerantly. "These mountain dwellers can neither read nor write, your Honor. Therefore they're incapable of keeping a tally except in their own minds. Almost always they think they bring me more furs than they do. I needn't remind your Honor that memory is a weak crutch."

"Did you have a tally?" the judge asked Ling.

"Bet your neck!" Ling snorted. "I kind of figgered this skunk cheated me before an' this time I wanted to make sure."

He took from his pocket an aspen stick that Ann hadn't even suspected he brought and held it up. The judge leaned forward and appeared to be interested. Ling explained his private accounting system.

"See them eleven little notches, Jedge, an' them twenty-six big 'uns? The little ones mean eleven fox pelts and the big 'uns twenty-six deer skins."

Judge Campbell took the stick, methodically counted the notches in each category, and returned the stick to Ling. He addressed Bodine.

"Do you object to testifying under oath, Mr. Bodine?"

"Why—no."

"Then I shall ask you to do so. If, after the oath has been administered, you remain willing to testify that the bale of furs was short to the numbers you stated, I shall find in your favor."

"But—"

"A mere formality," the judge's voice remained gentle, almost soothing. "But perhaps I should advise you that, if you testify falsely while under oath, you incur a mandatory prison sentence for the crime of perjury."

"I don't see—"

"Why should you hesitate, Mr. Bodine?" Campbell frowned. "Mr. Bodine, if you refuse to take the oath and testify, I can conclude only that the bale of furs and skins conformed to Mr. Stewart's count rather than yours."

"He cheated me plenty of other times!" Bodine snarled.

Ling's voice was an angry bear's growl. "It's another dirty lie!"

The judge rapped for order, waited, and addressed William Bodine. "I admire neither your methods nor your morals, Mr. Bodine, but since this is your initial appearance before this court, I am inclined to be lenient. I fine you twenty-five dollars for your sheer effrontery in attempting to prosecute a fraudulent case and for thinking you would succeed. Pay the clerk."

Bodine produced his purse, paid, and turned to go. Colin halted him.

"You are also to pay Mr. Stewart ten dollars as partial compensation for the inconvenience you have visited upon him."

Ling tucked Bodine's ten dollars into a pocket and turned his shining face to the judge. "By gosh, Jedge, never did figger to meet a 'town man' I could take a shine to!"

Judge Campbell murmured politely, "I'm flattered that you've finally met one in me."

"Sure have! Ever git up Hobbs Crick way?"

"I've missed that pleasure."

"Come!" Ling urged. "First person you meet after you git five miles past Wetherly'll tell you where I live! I'll show you the best huntin' you ever did see!"

"Hunting?" Interest leaped up in the judge's eyes and Ann thought he would have liked to talk at greater length. But he said, "I must ask you to excuse me, Mr. Stewart. I have some papers to attend to."

"Sure!" Ling boomed. "You goin' out the front way when you're through?"

"Yes."

"We'll bide a mite," Ling declared.

Ann rose to join Ling and together they went back out into the November afternoon. Presently Ann's eyes darted to a coach waiting in front of the courthouse. It was the same magnificent coach they had seen when they first came into town. But now the curtains were drawn back and she could see its occupant—a young girl.

Only her face, framed by silvery fair curls, her dainty neck and shoulders and the hand that parted the window curtain were visible. But Ann needed nothing more to tell her that this was a girl of breath-taking beauty. Even the impatience that was so evident on her face did not mar her loveliness, and the slim white hand complimented it. She was as exquisite as a china doll.

Ling, who had been regarding the girl with more than ordinary interest, exclaimed, "Pretty as a flyin' hawk, ain't she?" The girl evidently heard these words—there was nothing subdued about Ling's voice—and hastily redrew the curtain. "Ah! Here comes the jedge."

Colin was hatless and the wind tousled his fair hair. He was past twenty-five but probably had not yet reached his thirtieth birthday, and he walked tall and straight as a young man should.

Again Ann had a strong feeling that she had met this man not once but many times.

"Howdy, Jedge," Ling boomed.

"Oh, hello there, Mr. Stewart," Colin smiled as he came to them and shook the hand Ling extended.

"Want you should meet my wife, Jedge. Ann, this is Jedge Colin Campbell."

Colin bowed, and Ann blushed because she could not remember when a man had extended such a courtesy. Fortunately, Ling distracted Colin's attention.

"I'd as soon split this ten with you, Jedge."

"No, thank you, Mr. Stewart," Colin declined, laughing.

"Name's Lingo—Ling fer short. I just wanted to see if you was as fair and honest as I thought you were. You are," Ling explained.

Colin grinned. "I'm glad I passed the test," he said. "And I hope the citizens of Denbury and Buckshot counties will agree with you at the next election."

Ling was anxious to get onto a really interesting subject. "Speaking of Buckshot County," he said, "do you like to hunt? An' if you like to hunt have you ever been to Hobbs Creek?"

"I love to hunt, though I've done very little of it since I was a boy. And I've never been to Hobbs Creek."

"Then come! Stay on the trace after you leave Wetherly and you can't miss. We got bucks in our woods as'll make the biggest one on these river flats look piddlin' as a yearlin' fawn."

"What else do you have, Mr.—Ling?"

"Bears, catamounts, foxes, turkeys. Name it and we got it."

They were off on the enraptured conversation of two men who share a common enthusiasm. Ann waited patiently, watching the judge as he talked, looking for some clue that would tell her why she felt she had seen him before. Suddenly they were all startled by the sound of a very annoyed girlish voice calling, "Colin! Really!" They turned in the direction from which the voice came and saw the beautiful young lady staring out of the window of the coach, her blue eyes flashing.

The judge looked contrite. "Oh, Jeannie! I'm sorry. I got to talking with Ling Stewart here about bears and such, and I'm afraid I forgot that you were going to be waiting for me."

"I noticed that."

"I'll be right with you, Jeannie." To Ling he said, extending his hand, "I'll come to Hobbs Creek early next week for sure." Ushering the Stewarts towards the coach, he called to Jeannie, "I want you to meet some friends of mine."

"Another time if you don't mind." Jeannie's smile was pure ice as she slammed the door of the coach and signaled to the coachmen. As the magnificent equipage disappeared around a corner, Ann glanced at the judge's distressed face and decided that Jeannie's heart was pure china.

CHAPTER II

Colin

By mid-afternoon the next day, Colin disposed of his final case which involved a two-hundred-and-twenty-pound sailor who had allegedly stolen, of all things, a set of crochet hooks and a half-finished antimacassar to which they were attached. With an inward sigh of relief he went into his chambers, took off his judicial robe and sat down at his desk. Going through his mail, he found a note in his father's precise script.

Colin, I have news of the greatest importance and must see you some time today. Ralph Campbell II

Colin tucked the note into his pocket. His father was not in the habit of making mountains out of molehills. He would stop off to visit with him at Quail Wings this afternoon on his way to the Dare's.

Before leaving the courthouse, he checked to make sure that the tiny pasteboard box was in the pocket of his topcoat. The box contained a garnet brooch, a peace offering, by no means the first he had tendered in the last three months, to atone for his responsibility for yesterday's quarrel. It *was* his fault. He had admitted that last night. He had known Jeannie was to be there waiting for him. But when anything interested him, and the Stewarts did, he devoted himself to it so wholeheartedly that he forgot everything else. Jeannie knew that. Of course he had apologized. She had answered snappishly that he had no right to keep her waiting while he exchanged pleasantries with his hill-billy friends. Then she had made a remark which he interpreted to mean that it was Ann Stewart, rather than an interest in hunting, that had kept him so long in conversation. When he made an angry retort, she had promptly denied that she had ever even thought such a thing. The quarrel might have been shrugged off if there hadn't been so many disagreements lately.

Once more, Colin tried to reason it away. He had been working very hard lately; he had been very much preoccupied with the growing tension between North and South—doubtless he hadn't been the pleasantest of companions. His imagination often ran away with him and probably he had been too quick to give a double meaning to an innocuous remark. At any rate, he must try a little harder to please his fiancée.

He left the courthouse and strode towards the rig that awaited him, grinning suddenly at the sight of the middle-aged bay gelding standing patiently between the shafts of the trap. The sedate Dusty was not his notion of a proper horse. Still, he furnished a wholly proper means of transportation for the judge of Denbury Court.

As soon as they were out of Denbury on the River Road, Colin wrapped the reins around the whipstock and let Dusty set his own pace. Every morning that court was in session Dusty took him there and every night returned him to Quail Wings. He knew both his duty and the road and he could be trusted. Submerged in his own thoughts, Colin sat up straight and looked about him only when they came to Hilliard Thorne's Thornhill and the first view of the Alleghenies.

The sight calmed him, as it had calmed and comforted him for as long as he could remember. Plantations such as Thornhill and Quail Wings represented man's genius for accomplishment. But the power of God dwarfed human effort just as the most majestic temples raised to Him were puny compared with these cathedrals He had created. No man could look at them and lack faith.

Quail Wings, now visible in the foreground, was perfectly set off by a low ridge that prevented any view of the mountains. That was as it should be. The plantation and all it connoted had no kinship with the mountains and what they represented. Built well back from the river, with shining glazed windows and huge stone chimneys at either end, the house had an appearance of great age. Yet it was far from ancient. Colin's paternal grandfather, forced to leave the Tidewater because wasteful agriculture had ruined his plantation, had copied the house he left behind and modified it only as the more rugged western climate demanded. The house at Tidewater had, in turn, been a copy of the ancestral home in England. Nearing it, Colin felt the warmth that always flooded him at the sight of this beloved home.

Of his own accord, Dusty swung into the drive lined with poplars and broke into a phlegmatic trot as Colin leaped from the trap. Dusty would go on to the stables where one of the boys would take care of him. Admitted into the house by William, the doorman, Colin made his way down the hall to the study which in recent years had become a refuge for his father.

In his mid-seventies, Ralph Campbell looked with haughty disdain upon the effete younger generation. He could, he declared loudly and often, ride better, shoot straighter, dance longer and more gracefully, and drink more whiskey than

either of his sons or, for that matter, anyone else's. There was no foundation whatever for the first three statements; the old man was short of breath, red of face, and almost apoplectic when excited. In addition, he was subject to fainting spells that were causing both Dr. McDermott and his family much concern. But there was no question whatever about the latter boast. These days, the elder Campbell was seldom without a glass in his hand and a bottle at his side. However, no amount of drinking ever left a noticeable effect. Colin knocked on the closed door and heard his father say, "Who is it?"

"Colin."

"Come in, boy."

Colin entered softly, partly out of respect for his father and partly because the room always impressed him. On three walls were book shelves filled with titles ranging from *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* in Latin to the latest treatises on crop and animal husbandry. The fourth wall was given solely to the portrait of Edith Campbell, and as always happened when he entered the study, Colin's eyes sought his dead mother's image.

That she had been lovely was obvious; no artist could have put such beauty down on canvas if it had not been present for him to capture. Her blond hair was piled high on her head with a stray ringlet, probably the artist's touch, curled demurely about her right ear. Her features were delicate, almost fragile, but with a marked inner strength. Her eyes were gentle, but they held depth and perception. This portrait and his father's rare references were all that Colin knew of his mother. She had died when he was a few months old from the after-effects of his birth.

Colin turned to face his father who, as usual, sat behind the desk. Ralph Campbell's face, though flushed and aged now, mirrored what he had been when young. His hair was iron-grey, but it had been very dark. He was bushy-browed, firm of jaw, proud, intelligent and stubborn. Colin noted the half-empty bottle and the partially filled glass on the desk, but, though he was sure that excess in both food and drink had a direct connection with his father's ill health, he said nothing. Nobody had ever made this proud old man do anything he didn't feel like doing and nobody was going to start now.

"I'm glad you're here, Colin." Ralph Campbell tapped a folded paper on the desk. "I've just had a letter from Macklyn. He has resigned his commission and is coming home with Betsie and the children before Christmas."

Colin was stunned. Macklyn, his senior by a dozen years, held a colonel's rank in the United States Army and had devoted himself to a military career as wholeheartedly as Colin had embraced the law. "Resigned! Why?" he said.

"As a loyal Southerner, he will not serve under the command of Abraham Lincoln," his father answered. Colin thought that Julius Caesar might have referred to some barbaric Gallic chieftain in the same contemptuous tone. "Why else?"

"I think he's being very foolish," Colin said firmly.

"Foolish?" the elder Campbell bristled. "Foolish, when these, these, scallywag Yankees are plotting in every evil way to humble the South and reduce her to servitude? Do you believe a Campbell should continue to serve an army that will be hurled against the South when those money-mad schemers think the time is ripe?"

"Be reasonable, Father. The South is not without its money-mad schemers, some of whom see secession as the perfect way to wiggle out of their debts up north."

Ralph Campbell ignored this remark. "The South has conceded all she can and retain honor. These blasted Yankees need to be taught their places."

Colin sighed. They had been over this same ground many times before, and Ralph Campbell had not yielded an inch. He would not yield now, and further argument would solve nothing. But Colin decided grimly that he wouldn't yield either. Despite the secession fever that was rampant in South Carolina and rising fast in other states, a few cool heads and a few decisions based on common sense might yet keep the Union together.

His father looked at him searchingly. "Well?"

"What do you expect me to say?"

"Where do you stand?"

"You know very well—not with secession and certainly not with war."

"But if war comes?"

"If war comes—I don't know," Colin said slowly. "I don't know."

Ralph Campbell sat in silence. Colin had never before admitted the possibility that his devotion to the Union, his belief that slavery should be abolished, his conviction that the South must eventually build its economy on free labor were stronger than his love for his family, his region, his state. The time for argument had ended.

"You think I am unreasonable," Ralph Campbell said quietly. "I think you are without feeling. If events continue as they have been going, there won't be room for both of us at Quail Wings."

Father and son gazed at each other across the desk. "You are asking me to take a stand on a situation that may never arise," Colin said finally. "I hope to God it doesn't."

The father gave way. "I hope not," he muttered, lowering his eyes.

Colin turned and left the room.

Colin was in no mood to patch up a lover's quarrel as he rode his favorite stallion, Robin, through the autumn twilight to Jeannie Dare's. His thoughts were on his father's words, "There won't be room for both of us at Quail Wings."

Whenever he had thought of his future with Jeannie—and he had thought of it less and less frequently in the three months since her return from school in Baltimore, he admitted—he had envisioned a life at Quail Wings. Now with Macklyn and his family coming home to stay, with two like-minded adversaries in the house, perhaps he needed a roof of his own.

But where? Quail Wings was his home and he loved it, but he had no particular love for Denbury and its society. He loved his work; he would not want to leave that, even though he realized that the problems it dealt with were only the petty differences of insignificant people. They did not touch on the affairs of the high and mighty—gentlemen did not take their differences to court. The lowly dared not approach it. No Negro had ever brought his troubles to Denbury Courthouse. The freeman did not expect justice in the South. The slave was not legally entitled to it. Although it reached only some of the people and then only their superficial problems, justice was worthy of any man's service.

The two things that bound him to Denbury were his work and Jeannie. Jeannie! As her image rose before his eyes, he realized that he was sure of nothing. Jeannie, too, had envisioned life with him at Quail Wings as mistress of the finest plantation for miles around. Colin felt suddenly and strongly that much of her feeling for him was bound up in this vision.

As Robin turned in at the driveway to Dare's Landing, Colin felt again for the little pasteboard box. He had thought of it as a peace offering, but in his present state of mind it seemed more a parting gift.

After giving Robin over to a stableboy, he hesitated a moment before climbing the front steps and lifting the brass knocker on the massive door.

"Is Miss Jeannie at home?" he asked the colored houseboy who answered to his knock.

"No, suh. Miss Jeannie gone callin'."

"Is Mr. Tom at home?"

"Scuse me, suh."

He disappeared and returned a moment later. "Come in, suh." He escorted Colin down the hall to the study. Tom Dare, who had been working at his desk, rose with his hand extended when Colin came in. He was a man who would command a second glance in any crowd. His face was ugly and yet not unattractive. It was a misshapen face—misshapen in the manner of a bulldog's. His features were set, like a bulldog's, into a pugnacious expression. His eyes were ordinarily expressionless and seldom offered the slightest hint about his thoughts.

Almost forty years ago, with two hundred pounds in his money belt bequeathed by a thrifty merchant father, Tom Dare had sailed from England to make his fortune in America. He had landed in Richmond, but found little there to consume that restless, driving energy that was to dominate his whole life.

Scouting opportunity in the back lands, Tom discovered as soon as he arrived that his nose had not led him astray. These planters, whose fields produced more lavishly than the lands at Tidewater, had to transport their crops to Richmond before they could even hope to ship them. The cost was always high and sometimes prohibitive. Tom walked every inch of the Connicon, discovered the two reefs that prevented the more shallow-draft ocean going ships from ascending to a point well west of Denbury, and with the help of two slaves, he literally ripped them out with brute force. That was a bare beginning.

He bypassed Denbury—from the border it was still five hundred yards to the river—and chose a quiet harbor on the Connicon itself. He used every farthing of his own capital, and when that was exhausted he begged, borrowed, cajoled, and intimidated. He drove his slaves hard enough to rouse talk among the planters, but he drove himself harder. When his first small wharf and warehouse were finally finished, he persuaded the skipper of the *Jeannie*, a small and decrepit ship that seldom had a full load, to come up the Connicon. Then he announced to all his neighbors that he was ready to accept whatever they might bring him and that he would pay them at Tidewater prices after the cargo was sold.

His first clients were small and struggling planters who had always felt the strain of paying for transportation to port and then across the Atlantic. By sheer coincidence, both tobacco and cotton were in short supply that year and Tom's clients earned such fabulous profits than others flocked in. Because Tom's business acumen was outstanding, his clients continued to prosper and when he was financially able to do so, he expanded. Now, it was rumored, his wealth exceeded that of even the most affluent planters.

He said, "Jeannie's gone to see Laura Talmadge. She should return soon."

She had known he was coming, Colin thought, and he tried to mask his irritation. Tom saw through the mask.

"During my life, Colin, I've found the answer to a few riddles but woman is one riddle I've never understood."

Colin grinned. "I'll wait if I may."

"You are very welcome. Have you read the newspapers since the election? War seems nearer with every passing hour."

"You believe that, too, do you?" Colin asked.

"You mean you think there is some hope?"

"That depends on the new president."

"You don't expect anything but trouble from that gorilla," Tom Dare growled. "Have you read any of his speeches?"

"All that I have seen printed. He seems like an eminently sensible and reasonable fellow for a Republican."

"Sensible? Why, he talks like a raving lunatic with all this business of a nation not being able to exist half slave and half free. It's existed perfectly well up to now. Not, mind you, that I don't believe all this talk of secession isn't lunacy, too. But the states that are seething with propaganda will leave the Union sooner or later, I'm sure of that. There are too many fools in responsible positions, North and South. Some idiot will bring about an outright act of war and—" Tom Dare shrugged and moodily continued, "that will be a black day for the South. She may fight to the last man, but she cannot possibly win."

"Why?" Colin could not help feeling a little angry, although he held the same opinion.

Tom Dare laughed. "Don't take me wrong. Man for man, the Southerner is more than equal to the Northerner, though I question local opinion that he's five times as good. Even if he were, this will not be a war of men alone. It will take factories, money, railways, ships—and in these the North is way ahead of us. The South may fight for as long as two years with the resources at her command and those that ingenuity may create. But what will happen when everything's exhausted?"

"Much as I dislike to admit it, I agree with you," Colin sighed.

"What will you do when war comes?" Tom Dare asked suddenly.

Colin gave a harsh laugh. "That's the second time I've been asked that question today. I have no answer for it."

"I trust I'm interrupting nothing too momentous." Jeannie had come in so silently that neither man had heard. She stood in the open doorway, her cheeks rosy from the autumn wind. Colin felt a sudden return of the old warm feeling and he knew again, as he had known in the beginning, that she was one of the most completely beautiful women he had ever seen or ever would see. Her lips were parted in a half-smile, but her eyes were teasing. "I'm sorry to be late, Colin."

He said gallantly, "You are forgiven."

"My dashing knight! I'll be down as soon as I've tidied up a bit. Don't be completely tiresome, Father."

"I'll try not to, darling."

As Tom Dare droned on about a shipment sent to England, Colin's mind harked back to the day he had really become aware of Jeannie Dare.

Riding quietly a trail bordered by trees which led to a clearing beside the Connicon, Colin had heard the discord of an altercation. He halted his mount at the edge of the clearing and looked out upon thirteen white boys, all sons of tradesmen or artisans in Denbury, yelling at and dancing around a small and frightened colored boy whom Colin recognized as the son of Magador, Ellis Xavier's top field hand.

No harm was done and none would have been done. The white boys had merely found someone they could terrify and were taking fullest advantage of their sport. At Colin's sharp reprimand they stopped yelling, exchanged sheepish glances and departed towards Denbury. Then, "Bravo, St. George! The dragon is vanquished!"

Colin looked toward the edge of the clearing and saw a most beautiful girl. Whenever Betsie, Macklyn's wife, came home for a visit, she'd indulged in a great deal of matchmaking on Colin's behalf. Her taste was excellent and many of the girls were lovely, but not even the exquisite Jane Carleton, yearned after and dreamed of by every eligible young man for miles around, could compare with the girl who had somehow materialized in this lonely place. Tall, slender and delicately made, her hair was almost silver in its fairness. She looked somehow like a moonbeam who had ventured into broad daylight.

Then he realized who she was and gasped, "Jeannie Dare!"

She teased him, "I had no wish to frighten you, Colin."

"You—you've grown up!"

"I'm almost eighteen."

"I haven't seen you for—for—"

"For at least a year," she supplied. "Father decided to hide me away at Miss Darnley's in Baltimore."

"I must say hiding agrees with you," Colin said recklessly. "May I escort you home?"

All that summer he saw her often, as often as he possibly could. Until that time, so intent had he been on his work, so eager in those first years out of law school to learn all there was to know about the practical ways in which the law could solve the tangles people wove for themselves, that he had allowed no woman to disturb him seriously. That summer, for the first time he was powerless, helplessly drawn to this slim, silver-fair girl. He, who had hoarded his leisure for reading or riding, found himself present at every ball. At first he had pretended to himself that his attendance was mere sociability. But the pounding of his blood at the sight of Jeannie's face in a crowded room made a sham of his pretense. Jeannie, more experienced than he for all her youth, saw through it before he did. It was no surprise to her when one evening as they walked in the garden at Dare's Landing he took her in his arms and between feverish kisses murmured brokenly, "I love you, Jeannie darling—marry me—"

Before she returned to Baltimore for her final year at Miss Darnley's, they were engaged.

He hadn't expected to live through the time while she was gone, so impatient was he for her return. Now she had been home for three months. Her nearness was enchanting, but his helplessness in her presence was gone; and question lingered where none had ever been.

Had she changed? He didn't think so. She was as beautiful as ever, as charming—when she had her own way completely. He had been so busy, he thought ruefully, straightening out other people's problems, that he had neglected self-knowledge. He had been as blindly infatuated as any schoolboy. She was young; life still had much to teach her. Marriage would give depth and understanding to their relationship. And yet—

"And do you agree that when war comes, cotton will be a major factor?" Tom Dare concluded a lengthy discourse on the Southern economy.

Colin started. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I didn't hear your question."

Tom grinned fleetingly. "It isn't important. Ah, here's Jeannie!"

She entered, radiant in a simple white gown. As both men rose, Tom said, "I've work in the store. You young people remain here if you wish."

When he had gone, Jeannie turned expectantly to Colin. In an instant, she was in his arms and he was lost, his lips on hers. He was in love, he told himself as Jeannie gently drew away, and nothing else mattered.

"Colin," she said, "Colin darling, let's stop quarreling. I know I've been silly, and you haven't been very nice either. Let's stop, both of us."

Colin smiled into her eyes and then bent to kiss her cheek. "I have something here," he said, drawing the little pasteboard box out of his pocket, "which I intended to convey the same message."

Jeannie opened the box as eagerly as a child. "Ooh, what a beauty! And how sweet of you!" She threw her arms around his neck to bestow a childish kiss of gratitude. But there was nothing childish or playful in Colin's response. Closer and closer he held her against himself, driven by a sudden agonizing longing. Neither could tell how long they had been locked in silent transport when Jeannie came to her senses and struggled free.

Breathless and disheveled, she faced him from a safe distance. "I would like you to kiss me like that every day, every hour of every day. But not until we are married."

"If we were—" Just now, at this moment, it seemed the answer to everything. "Jeannie, we've waited long enough."

Her eyes sparkled as they met his. "Do you really mean it?"

"I really mean it. It's just that—"

"Just what, darling?"

He was about to explain his differences with his father, the tension at Quail Wings, but he was afraid to break the spell. He heard himself say instead, "Macklyn and Betsie are coming home to stay. There won't be room for all of us at Quail Wings. I must find a house for you and me."

"Then do!" she exclaimed. "Any old house anywhere! It doesn't matter just so both of us are in it!"

When Colin left and stepped into the outside darkness, he carried with him the longing that had possessed him earlier. But as he made his way home on Robin it slowly ebbed away into the black night. The wave of ecstasy on which he had floated seemed of another age and time, with another person. He saw in imagination, as he had seen so many times in reality, a pouting and petulant Jeannie who was displeased with him. And the words, "Any old house anywhere! It doesn't matter just so both of us are in it!" seemed completely incompatible with that vision.

CHAPTER III

Hobbs Creek

As he walked briskly up the lonesome little valley Robin's shod hooves left clear-cut tracks in two inches of new snow, and the cold wind that knifed down the valley honed his always high spirits to a razor edge. He wanted to run, and because Colin held him in he danced skittishly from side to side.

Few trees grew in the valley, but the upper slopes on both sides were heavily forested, largely with hardwoods that had shed their leaves and stood gaunt and bare in the wind. Some tall oaks with shriveled leaves still clinging stubbornly to parent boughs rattled dismally when the wind shook them. Towards the valley's head, the vivid foliage of a single great pine contrasted almost shockingly with the late autumn bleakness all about.

Colin halted to make sure that his rifle, the exquisite 58 Worthington carbine that had been custom-made for him by Justin Worthington himself, rode properly in its saddle scabbard. The three lean hounds that followed him halted with Colin and fixed steady eyes on their master. They wanted to hunt and knew they had come to the mountains to hunt, but as yet they had been given no permission to seek game.

Colin slackened the reins and went on, keeping to the trace of which Ling Stewart had told him. Follow it, Ling had said, and he couldn't miss Hobbs Creek. Then he need only ask the first person he saw where the Stewarts lived and Ling—Colin grinned as he remembered—would show him the jo-darndest best hunting he had ever seen. With his court calender empty for the next five days and Jeannie on a shopping trip to Richmond, Colin was on his way to enjoy some of that hunting.

He had some hard thinking to do, too, he told himself. But he couldn't do it yet; he couldn't force his decisions. They would come of themselves, as natural and obvious as the sunrise.

Now, as they neared the head of the valley, it dwindled to a mere shallow ditch on the mountain's slope. Then they left it entirely and broke out on the summit, a broad plateau that, except for occasional dips and rises, was as level as the fields at Quail Wings. It was heavily forested, the massive tree trunks giving mute evidence that the woodsman's axe was all but unknown in this place. The only trees felled were those that would have blocked the trace.

Deer tracks were everywhere, and in places deer had so beaten and trampled the snow that it was as though a herd of cattle had passed. Crossing and criss-crossing were the plainly marked trails of bears, wolves, bob cats, foxes, turkeys, wild pigs that were doubtless the feral offspring of tame animals, and small game so numerous that there were few stretches of snow in which some wild animal had not left the story of its passing.

Colin's interest heightened. He had avoided hunting in this section because, according to rumor in Denbury, the settlers were a hostile lot and had, in any case, already killed most of the wild game. But nowhere had Colin seen more evidence of wild creatures. He was so intent on tracks in the snow that they entered the clearing before he was aware of it. Colin raised his head and his eyes widened in surprise.

Originally the clearing had been natural, one of the open meadows, or parks, that are found in all forests. But some human with the perception of an artist, and a prodigious will to work, had shaped it to his own desires. Retaining the natural symmetry of the surrounding forest, he had removed all dead and dying trees, all stumps, and all decaying matter so that the impression remaining, even in winter, was one of abundant and enduring life with no hint of death. A graceful weeping willow rose from the only knoll in the entire clearing where such a tree would not have been out of character. An orchard had been planted on a little slope opposite the house, doubtless so that the people who had once lived here might see the trees when they were in bloom. There was a stable with six boarded windows—stalls for six cattle or horses—and connected with it a barn for hay and grain storage. Attached to the stable was a small paddock for the bull or stallion and a larger one for cows or mares. There were two smaller buildings that might have been chicken houses or pig pens. Six stately silver maples, probably imported from the lowlands, provided shade for the larger paddock.

The house was built on the far side of the clearing, near the forest's edge, and designed so artfully that, like the trees, it seemed to belong exactly where it was. Perhaps half the size of the mansion at Quail Wings, it was built of a rosy brick with a grey shingled roof and shutters that had probably been imported from the sawmill at Wetherly. The once-white paint on the shutters was fading, but even the dinginess of fading paint could not detract to any marked extent from an over-all beauty and harmony. Even the stone chimneys at either end which began at ground level and thrust above the

ridge pole had no harsh angles. The house faced the east, to receive the first of the morning sun. All the windows were boarded.

For a full three minutes, Colin sat entranced. Never had he seen a house that captured his heart more completely. It must be his. And Jeannie's, he amended. He could so easily visualize his own life in this house that somehow the house gave color and shape to life with Jeannie. Surrounded by so much calm and beauty, surely she would drop the airs of the spoiled beauty and become the Jeannie of his imaginings.

He considered the practical problems. The house was some fifteen miles from Denbury, about twelve miles from Quail Wings. With either Robin or Pegasus, his other stallion, he could reach Quail Wings in a little more than an hour and pick up Dusty there. If he had a very strenuous load of work or the weather were especially bad, he could spend the night in Denbury. As he rode slowly up the drive, Colin felt that at last he had come home.

He dismounted, tied Robin to a tree, and with the three hounds trailing him, walked slowly around the house. Coming to the west side, his eyes lighted with pleasure. At the second story level, supported by a three-sided stone wall whose interior probably served as a root cellar, was a many-windowed room which, due to the slope that lay beneath it, rose above the level of the surrounding trees. Whoever built the house had contrived to greet the sun as it rose and bid it farewell as it set. The least Colin knew about him now was that he was an artist who had faith in time and the fulfillment of time. Whoever he was, Colin warmed to him.

Returning to the front of the house, Colin mounted the steps and tried the great white door. When it yielded, he brushed the snow from his boots, entered a hall and strode down in to a spacious drawingroom occupied at the present time only by the ghosts of draped furniture. In the dim light he could see little save the massive fireplace. But he could feel the love and affection that had been expended here, as though the house were a living thing.

Because he suddenly felt like an intruder, Colin stole out of the house, shut the door and mounted Robin. His heart sang as he continued down the trace. He had fallen in love with a house! This house represented so much that he valued, and he was convinced that life here with Jeannie would take on these values. A sudden chill crossed his heart as it occurred to him that the place might not be for sale. But he banished the thought. It *had* to be.

Within a few minutes he had reached another clearing. It was in a shallow valley, or rather the shallow upper reaches of what doubtless became a deep valley. The clearing was divided by an unfrozen creek that looked oddly black in contrast to the snow on either bank. A sturdy wooden bridge spanned the creek, and on the other side stood a cabin that was part old and part new. Three wings had been added to a one-room central structure, one so new that the peeled logs from which it was built still looked raw. Rows of split and stacked wood stood within easy reach of the door. The front windows were glazed, but the window Colin saw on the side seemed to be covered with scraped deer skin. A curl of blue smoke rising from the stone chimney was snatched away by the wind.

Some distance back from the cabin stood a log barn, adjoined by an enclosed pasture. A few sheep pawed diffidently in the snow and nibbled the frozen grasses they uncovered. Chickens scurried about another small outbuilding. Pigs grunted in a sty and a red cow munched indifferently at a hay stack.

As he gazed about him, Colin heard a woman's voice call out, "Judge Campbell!"

He looked toward the cabin door and recognized standing there the girl whom he had first met in Denbury Court, Ling Stewart's wife. He had paid little attention to her then in his other preoccupations, but as he approached her now he saw that she was beautiful. The shawl that she had thrown over her simple homespun dress did not conceal the lithe fullness of her tall figure. Her face, tanned and glowing from the sun and keen mountain air, was both strong and delicate. "Why, she's a thoroughbred!" Colin thought in surprise.

As he extended his hand to her, he said, "Do you remember that your husband invited me to hunt with him? This is the first chance I've had to accept. I hope I don't come at the wrong time."

"You're most welcome, Judge Campbell," she answered, smiling. Colin's wonder mounted. Most hill people mispronounced their words in such a way that it was often difficult to understand them. Mrs. Stewart's enunciation was perfect and she was as gracious as any hostess in a manor on the Connicon.

Two little boys, one about six and the other perhaps three, crowded around their mother and then ran towards Colin's

hounds. Mrs. Stewart called them back to her side. They halted, the older boy looking frankly at Colin while the younger kept his eyes on the hounds.

"Jeffrey, this is Judge Campbell."

"I'm delighted to know you, sir."

"And I to make your acquaintance, young man."

Colin shook hands with Jeffrey, and Ann turned to her younger son, saying, "Lingo, this is Judge Campbell."

"Please 't'meetcha," and there was more defiance than shyness in the child's voice and manner. Ann's face grew stern.

"Lingo!"

"Please!" Colin laughed. "I thought he acquitted himself very well."

Ann sighed. "I often believe that cleaning the Augean stables was simplicity itself compared with teaching manners to healthy boys."

Colin glanced sharply at her. Who had taught her of Hercules and the tasks assigned to that mythological hero?

Unnoticing, she asked Colin, "May they play with your hounds? For the moment we have no dog, and the youngsters love them."

"I'm sure my hounds will love them, too."

The children raced happily forward, and the hounds waited with welcoming tails for the frolic to come. Colin watched them for a moment before he turned to speak to Ann again. He was surprised to find that next to her now stood a white-bearded and gaunt old man, motionless, with his face cast down. He had evidently come up silently from around the corner of the cabin.

"This is my father, Enos Pollard," Ann said.

Colin was about to extend his hand in greeting when he noticed that the old man had not even looked at him, had not, in fact, taken his eyes off the ground.

"Father, will you please put Judge Campbell's horse in the box stall and feed him?" Ann asked.

Only then did the old man raise his visage briefly. Colin caught a glimpse of his eyes. They were mindless as stones. What horror, Colin wondered, had destroyed the intelligence that must have once lit his face?

"Please come in," Ann invited Colin. "Ling will be delighted to see you."

She stood aside and Colin entered a large room that was obviously the center of the house. One outer wall was given entirely to a huge stone fireplace, with an oven at one side and various pot and kettle hooks arranged to swing in and out. Cooking utensils depended from wooden pegs that must have been inserted with pliable mortar, and there was a homemade cabinet for table wear. A long table flanked by wooden chairs dominated the center of the room, and against the far wall stood a spacious couch covered with tanned deerskins. At one end of the couch Colin was amazed to see shelves crammed from floor to ceiling with books. On the opposite end was a gun rack holding four rifles, with an empty space for a fifth. Two pistols and two powder horns dangled from a set of deer antlers. The gun rack, elaborately carved and with horseshoes bent to fit the rifles, had cost someone a great deal of knife and metal work. The skin of a black bear served as a rug in front of the couch.

Colin lingered in front of the bookshelves. Plato's *Republic* was wedged between Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and Macaulay's *History of England*. He tried to keep surprise from his voice as he said, "You have a fine library here."

"It is my father's library," Ann answered. "But I am the only one to read it now."

Colin was filled with curiosity. What were this beautiful young woman and her father doing here? What had happened to

the mind that once studied Gibbon and Macaulay? How did she come to be married to an amiable woodsman who could neither read nor write? He would like to know the answers to all these, but her tone of voice precluded questions.

"I'm sorry Ling isn't here, Judge Campbell."

"Please call me Colin."

"All right, Colin." She spoke without a trace of self-consciousness. "I'm Ann."

"A proud and lovely name and most befitting."

"Thank you!" she laughed. "Ling's gone hunting, as usual. But he should be here soon."

As though her words possessed some magic which was able to reach out to her wandering husband and bring him to her side, a moment later Ling entered the house.

"Why, hello, Jedge! Mighty glad to see you here!"

"Hello, Ling!" Colin's greeting was equally warm. "I thought I'd accept your invitation to do a little hunting at Hobbs Creek."

"Sure 'nough tickled you did! Them your hounds my kids is playin' with?"

"Yes, they are."

"Any good?"

"As good as any deer hounds I know."

"We'll try 'em," Ling promised.

In one hand he carried the rifle that was missing from the rack and down his back dangled a turkey with its head shot off. Blood still oozed from the mangled neck. When Ling laid his turkey on the table, Colin was watching Ann. He saw on her face revulsion and disgust, but he also saw resignation. Probably she had long since ceased trying to explain that turkeys with bloody heads had no place in the house, least of all on the dining table. But just then her father and little Lingo came in and all she said was, "Take the turkey outside and dress it, Dad, will you?"

Enos caught up the turkey and Lingo remained at his side as they left. Ling replaced the rifle in the rack and turned to Colin. "Tell you what, Jedge. It's a bit late in the day to go out huntin' now. Spend the night here and we'll go out at dawn in the mornin'. Meantime, you and I can go visit some of the folks on Hobbs Creek before dinner. I told 'em about you and the way you put down that low livin' Bodine. They've all been hornswoggled by him and they'd be mighty proud to meet the man that showed him a trick or two."

"That sounds fine, Ling, but I don't want to put you people to all that trouble. I brought my camping gear with me, and a night out under the stars would be a real pleasure to me."

But Ling wouldn't hear of it, and his invitation was cordially seconded by Ann. Soon the two men had started up the valley and into the woods on their way to the neighbors', the free-striding Ling shortening his step to suit Colin's. At half a mile's distance, they emerged into another clearing.

"Darnley Hamlin's place," Ling explained as they walked toward the log house. "Bedloe an' Tracey, his brothers, lives with him and his passel of young 'uns."

As they approached the house a young man of about twenty came out to meet them. He was as tall as Ling but more heavily built. His hair was red and, like Ling, he was cleanshaven. He moved with the same easy woodsman's grace, and his grin was contagious.

"Hi!" Ling called, and when they were near enough he said proudly, "Tracey Hamlin, meet Jedge Campbell."

"Right glad to know you, Jedge." Tracey's handshake was warm and his eyes spoke their own welcome. "Come say howdy to the rest."

Colin met Darnley and Bedloe, Tracey's older brothers. He was introduced to Charity, Darnley's competent wife. He warmed to the six children who stared at him, ran into another room, peered around the door jamb and giggled. He accepted with pleasure a mug of hard cider.

To his surprise, the talk soon turned to politics. He would have thought these men as isolated in their thinking as they were in their domain, but they were aware of all but the very latest developments in the increasingly bitter struggle between the North and the South. About most recent events, they questioned him keenly, phrasing their questions so as to elicit from him an idea of his own opinions. Once they felt sure that he did not share the views of the planter aristocracy, they declared their own views outspokenly.

"Do you keep slaves?" Darnley Hamlin had asked him.

"My father has over a hundred at Quail Wings, our plantation. On my twenty-first birthday he gave me two as my personal slaves, two of the best he had. The next day I gave them their freedom and asked them if they would care to work for me. They gladly agreed and they are with me still."

"What did your father say to that?" Bedloe had put in bluntly.

"He thought I'd lost my mind, and we've been arguing about it ever since."

They were not only against the idea of slavery, believing a man should "do fer hisself," Colin discovered; they also had a regional pride which had been affronted by the slave-owning lowlanders. "Nobody goin' to ketch us fightin' so them easterners can live like kings with all their slaves waitin' on 'em," Darnley said. "Them easterners has been bossin' the whole state of Virginny long enough, grabbin' all the money there is fer schools and roads and," slyly, "courthouses. We got to go clear to Wetherly to find a school and clear to the next county when one of us gits into a little ruckus with the law." He winked at Ling.

Later Colin asked them, "Putting aside all your differences with the east, what would you do if worst came to worst and federal troops entered the state?"

"I reckon we'd fight right enough," Darnley answered, "or first thing you know they'd be takin' over Hobbs Creek."

As he left with Ling to call on Watt Sackett, it seemed to Colin that the opinions of the brothers Hamlin were more reasonable than those of his own father and brother.

That night after a dinner of venison steaks, baked potatoes and blueberry pie, Ann's father and the children went to bed. Ann and Colin settled themselves before the fire while Ling went outside to bed down the cattle.

Colin turned thoughtfully to Ann. "I passed an empty house in a clearing on my way in," he said. "It's on top of a knoll, perhaps half- or three-quarters of a mile from Hobbs Creek. It's one of the loveliest houses I've ever seen. Do you know who owns it?"

"My father, Enos Pollard," she said quietly.

"Your father!" Ling could not hide his astonishment.

"That's right. He designed it and had it built according to his design." Then she added softly, "He was not always as he is."

"Forgive me if I have offended you."

"You haven't," she answered serenely. "May I ask why you are interested in my father's place?"

"I'm going to be married as soon as my fiancée and I can find a house of our own. I love that house. Is it for sale?"

"It's a long way to Denbury."

"I've considered that. I'll leave Dusty, the horse that takes me to and from court, at my father's house. Robin or Pegasus,

my other stallion, will get me there in an hour or so and I'll pick up Dusty at Quail Wings. If I'm very busy, I'll spend the night in Denbury, and Jeannie can always visit her father if she wants to see her Denbury friends."

"Jeannie is your fiancée?"

"Yes, the girl who was waiting for me outside the court the day you were there."

"She is lovely."

"I know that you and she will be the dearest of friends if we move to—to Campbell Hill."

Ann smiled. "Your new estate already has a name?"

"I hope it will be mine."

"It is for sale, Colin, but might it not be wise to let your Jeannie see the place before you talk of buying?"

"Of course! But I know she'll love it as I do."

"Then I shall be happy for the two of you."

The sun was up when Ling and Colin left the house next morning. Holding the long rifle that went wherever he did, Ling turned to pull the door softly shut and drop the latch.

"We'll come back for the hounds later," Ling said softly.

Colin nodded his agreement.

Leading the way down the worn path, Ling walked as gracefully and precisely as a puma. His stride seemed slow because it was effortless, and in that domestic setting he was, as any wild animal would have been, more than a little out of his element. The farm was his, an inheritance from his father, he had told Colin, but it was evident that Enos Pollard did most of the work.

They crossed Hobbs Creek on the wooden footbridge and climbed the hill. Here Ling stopped to look back at the house before he entered the woods. Reassured that all was well, his relief at turning away was visible. As soon as the woods closed about him there was no suggestion that he was out of place. He fitted in as naturally as the wind, Colin thought. The farm was a convenient home for his family and provided part of his livelihood, but the forest gave him life.

As they walked along, Colin watched Ling with growing respect. Though a hunter by profession, he had a philosophy of sorts—a feeling for the natural order of things which served as his code of ethics. Colin had seen enough amorality, immorality and just plain meanness in Denbury Court to appreciate a good man when he met one.

Presently, Ling turned and whispered tensely, "This is it, Jedge."

So fresh and clear in the snow that they couldn't possibly be more than one-half hour old, the paw marks of a huge bob cat led over the rim of the knoll. Ling pointed and whispered again, "See that patch of brush, right 'longside the dead chestnut and mebbe ten feet up the other slope?"

"I see."

"He's bedded there. Sit tight and I'll show you how to get him."

Silent as a ghost, Ling disappeared. Colin watched the patch of brush until his eyes ached. Then he saw Ling in the valley, approaching a snow-covered fallen log on knees and one hand; the other hand carried his rifle. When he reached the log, he crouched beside it and lifted the back of his hand to his lips several times in rapid succession.

While Colin watched in puzzlement, the bob cat emerged from the brush, slowly, cautiously, on the prowl. As it approached the fallen log, Ling's rifle spoke. The huge cat fell in its tracks.

Colin voiced a shout of admiration. It had taken superb woodsmanship even to approach the cat without frightening it, but to coax it from its hiding place—! Recklessly, he plunged down the slope towards the fallen log.

"That was the finest bit of hunting I have ever seen," he said breathlessly when he stood at Ling's side.

"T'wasn't that good," Ling grinned. "You take a big old cat like this'n and he'll lay somethin' aside for rainy day even if his belly's full. I fooled him. Listen!" Ling put the back of his hand to his lips as he had done when he crouched by the log. The sound that emerged from behind his hand was the squeak of a rabbit in distress. "That old bob cat took me for a bunny rabbit."

Colin threw back his head and laughed uproariously. Later, looking back on that day, it occurred to him that he hadn't laughed like that for months.

CHAPTER IV

Christmas

From the judge's bench, Colin was all but unaware of his own question, "What happened then?", and he heard only vaguely Marvin Manley's statement, "She thrun a rock at my head. Hit me, too."

Colin forced himself out of Hobbs Creek and back into Denbury Court.

"He chased my pig!" Mrs. Vinch shrieked.

Marvin Manley muttered, "T'was rootin' 'neath my chicken coop an' the hens mighta got out."

"That bitsy thing a chicken coop!" Mrs. Vinch sneered.

"Madam, kindly remain silent until you are addressed by the court," Colin said firmly. Then he turned to Marvin Manley and asked, "What did you do after she hit you with the rock?"

"Caught her up and paddled her hinder."

Colin managed to keep a straight face. "Where was your husband all this time?" he asked Mrs. Vinch.

"He was in the house—tuk with the toothache."

Marvin Manley gave a sharp laugh. "He was peekin' out the window an' when he saw me paddlin' away he yelled out, 'By jiminy, Marv, you're a better man than I am.'"

Colin said curtly, "I asked Mrs. Vinch. Now Mrs. Vinch, do you have a pen for your pig?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hereafter, you are to keep the animal confined." He turned to Marvin Manley, "And you are to restrain any further impulses towards violence."

"Ha!" Mrs. Vinch glared at her enemy.

"Unless," Colin amended, "that pig should get out again and you should have to chase it again and she should hit you with a rock again."

"Ha!" Marvin Manley gloated.

Colin retired to his chambers and took off his robe. Disputes such as the one just settled were typical of the cases he was called on to adjudicate. He had never underestimated the importance of these plain people with their petty problems, for he had always understood that no problem is insignificant to those involved. But compared to a recent event, any case that might appear in Denbury Court was as inconsequential as the buzzing of a fly.

Overriding a majority of the state's people, who were opposed to secession, and ignoring the legislature, the more fiery of South Carolina's secessionists had convened at Charleston. Four days ago, on December 20, 1860, the convention had nullified that provision by which South Carolina had ratified the United States Constitution just seventy-two years before and declared that she was once more a free and independent state.

The thought of secession had dripped glibly from many tongues and occupied many minds, but it had never seemed more than a dream or a threat, depending on the viewpoint. It was a satisfying prospect to some, a dread prospect to others, but always a vague possibility, never an act to be carried out. However, no thunderbolts had ripped South Carolina, no plague had stricken her, and no troops had been sent to suppress what at best was outright rebellion. Long a fantasy, secession was a reality that was spreading with epidemic speed throughout the entire South. And most of its supporters managed to delude themselves in thinking that war would not follow.

Colin put on his topcoat, went into the cold afternoon, trying and failing to capture the spirit of the season. It was Christmas Eve, but the only humans who appeared even remotely affected with Christmas spirit were children.

Riding along on Dusty, Colin considered the evening that was most likely in store for him. His brother, Macklyn, had

arrived today. The subjects that occupied all adult minds had been scrupulously avoided by Colin and his father ever since they had come so close to breaking a few weeks ago. With Macklyn's return, their tacit agreement to keep silent would be shattered. And judging by his letters, Colin knew that Macklyn was, if possible, an even more ardent Southerner than his father. He did not look forward to the evening, delighted as he had always been to see Macklyn and his wife, Betsie.

Lately when he was depressed, his thoughts turned to Hobbs Creek and, more particularly, to the lovely house Enos Pollard had built and abandoned. "Campbell Hill" he had called it when he confidently told Ann Stewart that he was sure Jeannie would love it as he did. The house had become for him a symbol of all that his own his seemed to lack these days—calm, dignity, serenity.

He recalled bitterly the day he had taken Jeannie to see the house. He had been tense with excitement and eagerness as they approached the clearing surrounding the house. Now, in retrospect, he knew that Jeannie had humored him by coming at all. She had burst into giggles when he had first told her about it. "Colin, you can't be serious about living way up there with only a few hill-billies and wild animals for company!" But when she had seen that he was serious, in her womanly wisdom she had decided to go through the motions of considering it.

She had been impressed in spite of herself. "It is lovely," she said in surprise as they entered the Pollard clearing. And then, evidently remembering the woods and the long climb in back of them, she fell silent. She did not want to encourage Colin in his crazy idea.

"We'll have to go to the Stewarts' first and tell Ann we'd like to go into the house. Perhaps she'll want to show us around," Colin had said.

"Why doesn't she live in it herself?" Jeannie asked this question with more petulance than curiosity, for if Ann lived in the house Colin would not be taking her on this wild goose chase.

"She didn't volunteer the information and I didn't like to ask her. Certainly there's a strange story there. Ann is obviously an educated person and her father must have been a man of both taste and means. I think I told you that he has lost his mind—that may have something to do with their abandoning the house."

Jeannie shivered. "Spooky!"

"There's nothing at all spooky about Ann. If she had been born and raised along the Connicon you'd have had to look to your laurels. You'll see."

"Wasn't she one of the mountaineers you wanted to introduce me to outside the courthouse one day?" Jeannie asked. "I'm afraid I only noticed her rather peculiar costume."

The whole morning had been like that. First, there was Jeannie's amusement at the Stewart's log cabin. "How very quaint!" she had exclaimed when they first came upon it. "Colin, I'm surprised you don't want us to build our own little cabin just like this one." Then there was Jeannie's ill-concealed condescension to Ann. She had not seen the fine features and graceful gestures. She had not heard the precision of speech. She had not noticed the books. She had seen only the homespun dress and the work-roughened hands.

Later as Ann had ushered them into the drawingroom of the Pollard house Jeannie glanced at the crystal chandeliers and the marble fireplace and asked Ann, "How can you bear to live in that—uh—hut when you could live here?"

"Bear it? It is not hardship for me to live in my husband's house." Ann's cheeks were flushed and she held herself very straight. "In any case, I couldn't live here," she added quietly.

"Oh! Why not?"

Ann turned away as if she had not heard.

Colin quickly drew Jeannie away into another room. "How can you behave so?" he asked angrily.

"Sorry," Jeannie answered. "I guess I was trespassing on forbidden ground. What a sensitive creature for a little mountain goat!"

"Mountain goat! Where are your eyes?"

"Do let up, Colin. I've said I was sorry." And then in an attempt to placate him she added, "You were right about the house. It's charming. Let's look at the rest of it."

Colin's eagerness had returned. "Do you like it?" he asked.

"I like it, but really, Colin, do you seriously think we could live here, so far from everything?"

"It's only a short trip to Wetherly. And Robin can make it to Quail Wings in a little over an hour."

"Wetherly! That overgrown trading post! And Robin is all right for you, but what about me? I rode here today to please you, but in a carriage it would take hours to get to Denbury."

"What is so interesting in Denbury? Silly gossip and teaparties—would you miss those so much? You could visit your father or stay at Quail Wings whenever you hankered for that life."

Jeannie reverted to the argument that had never failed her. She threw her arms around his neck and drew his head down to hers. "Darling, please! Let's forget the house and think just of us. We can live with father if there isn't room at Quail Wings—just until we find something that really suits us."

Colin had been wooden in her arms. He had felt nothing but dull disappointment and disgust with himself—for having imagined that Jeannie would share his vision of life together in this house, for having imagined that she was more than an exceptionally beautiful butterfly. Life in Denbury was tolerable to him now because he had his work, his books and his horses. The thought of the idle social round to which Jeannie would condemn him was suddenly sickening. It was clear to him that his desire to live in this place had roots he himself had been unaware of; it grew out of his uneasy position in a planter society with convictions he did not share and with a leisurely, graceful way of life which only reminded him of the misery that supported it. He wanted to live free among other free men.

All this, he knew then, was utterly foreign to Jeannie. Not only wouldn't she agree with him; she would not even know what he was talking about if he explained his feelings. And with this knowledge, the love—belated puppy love it now seemed—he once felt for her died forever. He felt only relief that he knew his own feelings at last. And now that he saw her for what she was—a frivolous and self-centered person, no better or worse than most of her contemporaries, only more beautiful and therefore further prey to men's dreams—he could feel sympathy for her.

Colin knew perfectly well that the wealth he had inherited from his grandfather, the Campbell name and his position as judge of Denbury Court made him a "catch." As such, Jeannie had been delighted with him. But she was becoming uncomfortably aware that there was more to her prize than she had counted on—prickly opinions and ideas which might alter the course of the agreeable life she envisioned.

The mistake had been his more than Jeannie's.

Gently, quietly, he had said to her that day at Enos Pollard's, "I should have known the house wouldn't appeal to you. We'll explain to Ann Stewart and take our leave."

But Ann was nowhere to be found that day. Colin had gone back to Hobb's Creek a few days later to tell her that Jeannie felt the house was too far from friends and family.

"It was kind of you to come and tell me, Colin, but I knew, of course. She would be very unhappy here in the mountains." Her tone of voice quiet and polite as it was, told Colin that she and Jeannie would never have been friends as he had once imagined.

"Yes, I understand her point of view," Colin had forced himself to say. "But my heart is set on that place. I can't help feeling disappointed."

He could not tell Ann what he now knew; that he would never marry Jeannie. Their quarrels had grown so constant since that day that he knew it would not be long before Jeannie would release him. Vanity alone had made her hold on this long. A week or two after their visit to the mountains, they had, in fact, had such a serious disagreement that Jeannie, by way of punishing him, had gone to visit a schoolmate in Washington. She had just come home for Christmas and Ralph Campbell had invited Tom Dare and his daughter to Quail Wings for Christmas dinner tomorrow. If she did not see for

herself that her "punishment" had failed, Colin planned to ask her to break their engagement. He was thoroughly tired of living a fiction.

Lost in thought, he had ignored the familiar landscape. Now Dusty's eager gait told him they were almost home. As the carriage pulled up before the house, the front door was flung open.

"Colin! You old darling!"

"Betsie—you're here!"

The woman who threw her arms around his neck was tall, and made to seem taller by a trim and well-proportioned body that she carried as one born to grace. Her lustrous dark hair was done in ringlets which nodded down her slim back. Her full, rich lips framed a smile of welcome, and both laughter and mischief danced in her deep brown eyes. Betsie, Macklyn's wife, was thirty-five, but it was still apparent why the former Miss Ballinger had long held sway as a reigning beauty. She still commanded a second and more than lingering glance from all males between the ages of sixteen and seventy-six. Colin embraced her joyously. Here was one person at Quail Wings with whom he could never quarrel.

"Betsie! When did you get in?"

"This afternoon and a good thing! One more day in Washington and Macklyn would have started fighting those Yankees all by himself. Stand back and let me look at you."

Grinning, he underwent her inspection. Betsie laid a forefinger along her chin and shook her head in mock dismay.

"It's a mortal sin."

"What is, Betsie?"

"That a man as handsome as you has stayed single so long. But I hear it won't be much longer."

"Are we alone?"

"For the moment, yes."

"Can you keep a deep secret?"

"Cross my heart!"

"I'm afraid the wedding is off. The lady changed her mind. She'll be here tomorrow for Christmas dinner and she'll keep up appearances, you know, but she'll be announcing it soon."

Betsie studied him shrewdly. "You sound almost as heartbroken as if you'd said it was going to rain tomorrow."

"Can you keep another secret?"

"I'm sure I can," Betsie smiled.

"I'm delighted. It would have been a disaster."

"Then I'm delighted, too," Betsie said. "But you won't escape forever, you know."

"I hope not." Then, dismissing the subject he asked, "Where are the children?"

"Linda and Lorena," Betsie grimaced, "are out pestering Zack to give them the wildest mounts he can find for them. Ralph's still at West Point, but he'll be here soon."

"He's resigning his commission, too?"

"You didn't know?" Betsie's voice was hollowly dramatic. "A Campbell who served in Mr. Lincoln's army! Why, he'd just as soon forget to help a lady, if she was pretty enough, into her carriage!"

"Macklyn is with Father, I suppose?"

"Yes, they're celebrating South Carolina's secession."

"Celebrating! Are they insane?"

"Evidently," said Betsie, as she left him at the door of his father's study.

They had, indeed, been celebrating—to such an extent that they had managed to swallow the common delusion, along with a good deal of Bourbon, that secession would rule out any possibility of war.

"Don't you see," Macklyn asked Colin after they had greeted each other warmly, "that if there is a separate nation composed of the Southern states, the present reasons for conflict will vanish overnight? This whole quarrel over the new states being admitted to the union—the question of whether they should be free or slave states—has been responsible for more bitterness than any other point. By setting up their own country, with their own laws, their own government and all that goes with it, the Southern states will wipe out this problem altogether and, with it, the danger of war." He smiled happily.

"Secession might wipe out that particular problem," Colin answered, "but it raises dozens of others. What happens, for example, to federal property within this separate nation? Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor belongs to the United States government. What would you do with it?"

"The fort belongs to South Carolina—it lies within her boundaries," Macklyn answered firmly. "You lawyers are always splitting hairs."

"Perhaps. But don't forget that the Congress in Washington is made up largely of lawyers. It won't be any different in the capitol of your new nation."

Nothing could shake Macklyn's happy conviction. He and Ralph Campbell were too elated for argument that night. The stormy evening Colin had foreseen was spent instead in swapping stories and reminiscences.

The next morning, Christmas day, Macklyn told Colin that he planned to run as a delegate to the Richmond convention that had been called to determine whether or not Virginia would secede. He would, of course, stand in favor of secession.

"You won't have my vote," Colin said, smiling. "In fact, I'll do my darndest to persuade whoever I can to vote for your opposition."

Macklyn was less elated today. He did not answer Colin's smile.

By the time Jeannie and Tom Dare arrived for Christmas dinner only Betsie and her daughters were in a festive and hospitable frame of mind. Colin had double reason to dread this gathering; Macklyn and his father were preoccupied with matters of state.

Jeannie was all smiles and charm to everyone but Colin. By little signs that only he would understand, she let him know that he was still being punished, that apologies should be forthcoming—or else.

Macklyn had never met Jeannie before. "However much we disagree in other matters," he said in compliment to Jeannie, "I can see that we share the Campbell eye for beauty, Colin."

Ralph Campbell beamed at the lovely girl who would, he thought, soon be his daughter-in-law. "If I were twenty years younger, I'd try to beat Colin out myself." Colin wished himself a hundred miles away.

Hard as the men tried, however, they could not avoid the subject that preoccupied them.

"I'm afraid I don't agree with you that secession eliminates the possibility of war," Tom Dare told Macklyn.

"I don't think it eliminates the possibility, but it seems to me that it lessens it."

"The Yankees will find some way of meddling," Ralph Campbell put in. "I'm afraid we have been too optimistic. We've forgotten how pigheaded and greedy they are. The South is too valuable for them to give it up without a fight. Well, then, we'll fight, every man-jack of us."

"Yes, they'll have to be taught their lesson sooner or later," Tom Dare said, with a pugnacious expression on his face.

At this, Colin could keep silent no longer. "Do I hear you right, sir?" he asked Tom Dare. "I remember a conversation we had not so long ago in which you said it would be a black day for the South if war ever came because the South couldn't possibly win. How do you reconcile that with 'teaching the North a lesson'?"

Tom Dare stared at Colin as if he had lost his senses. "I said such things? I'm afraid you have me confused with one of your mountain friends," he said with a cold sneer.

Jeannie laughed merrily at this jibe. "Father is always saying the Southerner is five times the man the Northerner is," she said earnestly, turning to Macklyn. "Do you agree with that, Colonel?"

Macklyn smiled at this bit of feminine naiveté. "I believe he is five times as determined and enthusiastic, at any rate. There are exceptions, of course, like Colin here."

Colin felt a deadly rage growing within him. Quickly, before he could give it expression, Betsie said, "I believe Colin is saving his determination and enthusiasm for the person," she glanced coolly at Jeannie, "or the cause that merits it. Colin is not the only Southerner who is opposed to secession, who dreads the prospect of war. You will find, I think," she addressed her husband, "that if you are chosen to go to Richmond you will be in the minority."

Colin had regained some of his composure. "Mr. Dare made reference to my mountain friends. They happen to be Virginians as much as we, and they are fine people, proud, independent. They have a lot of common sense, even though few of them can read or write. They don't give a crooked cent for the 'Southern way of life.' Forgive my saying so, but you gentlemen have spent so much time agreeing with each other that you don't realize there are great groups of Southerners who don't see things your way at all."

"I think in important matters they will follow the lead of those of us who can read and write, my boy," Ralph Campbell said smugly. "They always have."

When at last the final bit of plum pudding had been consumed, Macklyn, Ralph Campbell and Tom Dare retired to the study with a bottle of brandy. The young lovers, it was assumed, would want the drawingroom to themselves. But, after a separation of three weeks, they did not rush into each other's arms.

Jeannie eyed Colin coldly. "Why did you contradict Father during dinner? You were very rude."

"He contradicted himself. I merely pointed it out as politely as I could."

"It seems to me that, if anything, you've changed even more since I was away. Colin, we can't go on like this." Here she gave him a chance to apologize for his strange behavior.

"No, we can't. And, Jeannie, I'm convinced that, each of us being what we are, we'll never be able to go on any other way."

Jeannie stared at him openmouthed. "What do you mean?"

"I am not your kind of person, and you are not my kind. We should never have become engaged—we could never be happy together."

Jeannie stood silent and motionless for a moment, her eyes blazing. Then she drew his ring from her finger and flung it on the carpet. Tossing her head, she ran from the room.

Colin did not move. He heard Jeannie asked William the doorman to get her cloak and summon the Dare carriage. "Tell my father I had a headache and will send the carriage back for him." He heard the carriage pull up and heard it leave, taking Jeannie out of his life forever. He did not move, afraid to disturb the sensation that pervaded him. It was happiness.

CHAPTER V

Campbell Hill

Astride the powerful stallion, Robin, and balancing across his saddle bow a wriggling hound puppy, a Christmas gift for the Stewart boys, Colin neared the head of the valley that led to Hobbs Creek. Ten inches of soft snow troubled Robin not at all, but the puppy whimpered and snuggled close to Colin for warmth. Colin stroked it gently. Her sons loved dogs, Ann had said, and they had none. Well, they would have one now. Colin grinned suddenly at the thought that Ling might try to wheedle the puppy away from his sons so that he could train it to hunt. With two boys and Ann opposed to him, he hadn't a chance.

As they entered the Pollard clearing, Colin's heart quickened, and he drew Robin to a halt. He sat in the saddle, taking in the beauty and the peace of the scene before him, and knew suddenly what he was going to do. He was going to buy the Pollard place and live here alone. Life would become more and more difficult at Quail Wings, he was sure of that. Here was the answer to his problem.

As he sat thinking, the puppy wriggled free from his grasp and slid down to the ground. The pleasure of running free in the snow was too much for it. It began racing in circles, yipping as it went. Colin dismounted hastily. "Here, boy—come on boy!" But the puppy refused to give up his sport. There was nothing to do but wait for the little devil to get tired.

"Colin!" There was pleasure and surprise in the woman's voice that called his name from the direction of the house.

"Why, Ann!" he was about to ask, "What are you doing here?" but checked himself. As she walked toward him, he explained, "I was on my way to your house with this puppy, a Christmas present for the boys, when he wriggled away and started this nonsense."

"What a wonderful present! They'll be delighted. Merry Christmas, by the way."

"Merry Christmas! My day hasn't been the least bit merry up to now, but just being in the mountains has already improved it. There's something—"

Ann interrupted him, "Come inside and warm up. I've just built a fire—it only needs to be lit."

"I mustn't leave Robin standing long in the cold, but there's something I've got to talk to you about."

She stood aside to let him enter and closed the door against the cold wind. As he walked into the house, followed by the suddenly docile puppy, it struck Colin forcibly that, somehow and at last, he was truly in tune with Christmas and all it meant. At the same time, he felt curiously that he was an intruder. Ann had a reason for coming here today which excluded him and, evidently, her own family.

When the fire was blazing and they were seated before it, Colin said, "Ann, I want to buy this house and move into it as soon as it can be made ready."

"But Jeannie—"

"Jeannie and I are not going to be married. I would live here alone. Zack and Nell, whom I employ, will take wonderful care of me."

"I'm terribly sorry, Colin."

"Sorry!" For one very bad moment he thought she was terribly sorry that she couldn't sell him the house. Then he realized she was referring to his broken engagement. He smiled. "I should pull a long face, I know. But you can't imagine how wonderful it feels *not* to be engaged to a girl you don't love."

"I think I can." Ann looked into the fire for a moment and then said, "You can buy the house, Colin. We'll arrange the details later but, before we do, I would like to tell you why I am here today and every Christmas day. No, I guess I'll have to go further back. Can you bear to hear the story of my life?"

"I have been anxious to hear it since I first came to Hobbs Creek."

"My father built this house when my brother and I were small children. He was tired of the family business in Baltimore

and wanted to lead a more quiet life, with time to study and write. He and my mother loved the mountains—anyway, we came here. My father had engaged an architect in Baltimore to build the house just as he wanted it, down to the smallest detail."

"What about your education—yours and your brother's?"

"My mother taught us to read and write, to do arithmetic and so on. The house was crammed with books; we devoured them. And when we were fourteen—my brother was two years older than I—we were each, in turn, sent to school in Baltimore."

Ann stared thoughtfully into the fire for a moment, collecting her thoughts, while Colin pondered the significance of the phrase "my brother *was* two years older than I."

"We were wonderfully happy here. We hated going away to school and longed for the Christmas holiday even before the school year began. It was during my second year at school, when I was fifteen—" Ann's voice quavered and broke off. She paused, not to collect her thoughts this time, but to get her emotions under control. "On Christmas day, when I was fifteen and my brother seventeen, some half-drunk Cherokees came raiding while we were still asleep in bed. Our old servant Samson roused us and took one of Father's rifles to frighten them and send them on their way. They killed him before he fired a single shot. By that time my brother and father were fully alerted and armed. My brother was inexperienced and reckless. He made an easy target from behind a window and soon he was wounded in the chest. He died within a few minutes but not before my mother, in tending him, had been killed outright. My father held them off singlehanded for thirty minutes before one of the servants sneaked away from the quarters out back and brought help from Hobbs Creek."

"Why didn't the servants come to help you themselves?" His own voice sounded muffled to him. His tongue was thick with rage and horror.

"They were unarmed. It would have been suicide for them to try to approach the house."

"Did you see the whole thing?"

"Blessedly, no. Liza, Samson's wife, was beside herself with grief. At the start, to keep her out of the way, my father ordered her to keep me out of rifle range. I fought her like a wild cat—I wanted to take up a gun myself. But she weighed close to three hundred pounds. Finally she just sat on me, both of us sobbing all the while."

She spoke eagerly, without reserve, as though there had long been a need to share the hell of that day with an understanding heart. Colin knew, and gave thanks for his perception, that she was freely giving a part of herself that she had tried desperately, and always unsuccessfully, to give to anyone who would accept it.

"Sometimes when I pass this house," she resumed, "I hear the Cherokees yelling and see my mother and brother lying dead in their bloody nightclothes, and again I live everything I lived that Christmas day. Other times it's as though that day had never happened, as though they're still here. Can you understand that?"

"Yes, I can, Ann."

"Yes, I can read it in your eyes. Why does no one else ever know?"

"Because few love as deeply as you."

"That isn't the answer," she said. "Mary Murdock Stewart loved her baby. Ling was very young when his mother died, but he loved his father greatly. His father died a year after the raid, of a wound he got that day chasing the Cherokees."

"Then your mother and brother were avenged?"

"Only two of the Cherokees escaped. My father shot three—the men from Hobbs Creek killed the rest. But I can't believe that one death atones for another. I thought God would punish the raiders. It shook my faith when men did."

"Do you want to tell me what happened after that, Ann?"

"Yes," she answered calmly. "It was a black time, a lost time. Overnight, it seemed, my father's mind deserted him. He

turned from a vigorous, youthful and highly intelligent person into a wordless, helpless old man. He had loved his books, his family and his home. He cared little for anything else. He had always received a generous income from the family business and left the management of it in my uncle's hands. I sent a letter to Uncle Nat, telling him of the raid. He came at once and—"

"Go on," Colin urged. Unnoticing, he had put his hand on hers in an unconscious gesture of sustenance.

"Father did not even recognize him. He wanted me to leave with him at once, but I wouldn't leave Father. He promised to send for both of us—but he never did. No more money came from Baltimore. We had to let the servants go; we couldn't feed them, let alone pay them. Liza wouldn't go, poor old thing, but she died that Spring. Father and I would have starved if it hadn't been for Ling. He watched over us, brought us food and clothing, did everything for us that we couldn't do for ourselves. He was wonderful."

"I know," and now Colin knew also why Ann had married Ling.

"When I was eighteen, Ling and I were married. Of course, I had told him I could never leave Father. He knew that. Father had been growing worse staying in this house—too many memories for him—and Ling wouldn't have stayed here, anyway. So for seven years now this house has been empty. I am glad it will be lived in again." She smiled at him. "It was made for happiness. One crazy freak of fate does not change that. I hope you will be happy here if you still want to buy the house after what I have told you today."

"From the moment I saw this house, I've wanted to live here. I felt I knew the man who had built it—I knew what kind of life he wanted to lead here. The house is haunted for me only by the happy family that once lived here, and they will be pleasant company."

Ann smiled. "Thank you, Colin. We were pleasant company, I think."

"Ann, before we talk about the house further, I want to appoint myself your lawyer. Now that you've attained your majority and might press a case in court, have you given any thought to collecting your father's share of the family business?"

"Yes, but Ling doesn't believe in courts. His going to Denbury Court was a gesture of defiance, not compliance. If he thought we needed any of Uncle Nat's money, and we don't, he'd go find him in Baltimore and take it by force."

"Direct and to the point," Colin murmured, "but hardly practical. If you would like to start legal proceedings, I'd be glad to do it for you."

"I'd rather you didn't, Colin. I shouldn't care to do anything unless Ling approved."

"I understand. Now will you grant me a favor?"

"Of course."

"Come to this house and visit with your mother and brother whenever you want."

"Thank you very much, Colin." It was an evasion, and he wondered why.

"Your favor, Ann?"

"Yes—yes—I will come whenever I want," she said in some confusion. "Shall we go now to Ling and the children? Ling will be so excited to hear you are buying the house and the children will be wild about the puppy. Ling will talk to you about the sale. I know nothing about it, not that he knows very much more."

"Let me retain a lawyer for you in Wetherly. That would be best."

"If Ling agrees, fine. You're the first townsman he ever took to, you know. I'm sure he'll accept any suggestion you make."

They put out the fire and while Colin roused the puppy, who had fallen asleep in a sheeted armchair, Ann took a last look around the room in the light of the lantern she held. This was a farewell, in a way. The house would be Colin's from now on. She watched him as he bent over the puppy. And suddenly she knew why she had felt she knew him from the first. A

stab of pain went through her at the knowledge, so sharp she almost cried out. She loved him. Her earlier recognition had been, not of an old acquaintance, but of her heart's secret desire.

"Are you perfectly serious, Colin?"

"Perfectly, Father. I've already arranged to buy the house. It needs a good deal of repair work. It hasn't been lived in for seven years, you see. But I should be able to move in by the end of March."

"But why do you want to leave Quail Wings? I know I have said things in haste that may have offended you. Pay them no mind. I am an old man, set in my ways and opinions. I don't always understand you, but I respect your right to think as you do."

"Thank you, sir." The two men looked deeply into each other's eyes. "I will always remember that."

"Now that you are not marrying Jeannie Dare (And, by the by, I'm not too sorry about that. I don't quite like that father of hers; he would make trouble for you.), why should you want to move?"

"I've always loved the mountains. They mean something special to me—I can't explain it myself. And this house is a jewel. I hope you'll ride up there with me and see it soon. The whole setting, the way of life it promises, is what I want. Remember I'll be at Quail Wings every day that court is in session. You'll see a good deal of me."

"One other thing, Colin. Isn't this a bad time to start a new venture? In my soberer moments, I know well enough that as more and more states secede, the chances of war increase."

"All the more reason, to my mind, to do as much as you can of what you want beforehand. I know well enough that if war comes—much as I believe it needn't, much as I'm convinced it would solve nothing—I will be drawn into it. Well, then, I'd like to have as much from life as I can now."

"Won't it be rather lonely there for you?"

"Lonely! Why, no. I've always been bored to death with most Denbury social affairs. You know that. I much prefer the company of the mountain people. And some day, I hope, I'll marry." Why did the vision of Ann Stewart sitting before the fireplace on Christmas day come into his mind? She was Ling's wife.

"Have you spoken to Zack and Nell? Are they ready to go there?"

"They'd love it, they say. I am moving them up there next week so they can help put the house in order. They're sorry to leave Dab, of course. But they can come here to see him from time to time." Dab was their only son.

"They won't be enough for you. Tell you what; I'll make you a present of Dab and that little girl he married last summer. What's her name?"

"Elva. That's wonderfully kind of you, Father. Zack and Nell will be overjoyed. And, of course, you're right. Two in help wouldn't have been enough."

"Dab is an excellent gardener, and William tells me that Elva is an excellent housemaid. With Nell in the kitchen and Zack in charge of the horses and dogs, you'll be very comfortable. I'll have to visit you now and then; Nell's cooking will be a powerful lure."

"I hope you will come often," Colin said eagerly. He rose. "I have an appointment in Wetherly with Mrs. Stewart and her lawyer. I must be off. Thank you again, Father, for your understanding and your generosity."

A prosperous little village, Wetherly was the funnel through which the timber, crops and wild game of the mountains poured down to the coast. To a lesser extent, it was also a distribution center where mountaineers might find

merchandise from the coast. The residents of Hobbs Creek came to Wetherly, usually on foot, when they needed sugar, salt, spices or any other article they were unable to make or produce. They usually traded by barter.

Wetherly had a Baptist church and an Anglican church and a school. There were some farmers, Germans or Scots who treasured and improved their land and who, when their time came, would hand it down to their sons. Of the three merchants, two made a decent living and one, William Bodine, was accumulating some wealth. No matter what anyone wanted to buy, he had it to sell. He combined shrewdness, often carried to the point of trickery, with a deceptively affable personality. He, Alec Gerould, the schoolteacher and lawyer, and Jackson Cartwright, the banker, were Wetherly's three leading citizens. There were three blacksmith shops, all busy because of the great horse traffic in Wetherly and the surrounding lumber camps; a tinker's shop; various craftsmen; a doctor. Citizens of Wetherly who were not self-employed could always find work in one of the logging camps or in Jackson Cartwright's sawmill. And Wetherly also had the usual complement of town loafers.

When Colin, the deed to the Pollard place in his pocket, and Ann emerged from Alec Gerould's office, the idlers were lounging on the verandah of Con Magloon's Wetherly Inn guffawing at some activity in a vacant lot across the way.

Colin turned to see what caused so much amusement. A middle-aged man, who walked with a decided limp, was instructing eight gawky youths in the art of drilling. All carried green sticks over their shoulders in lieu of bayonets.

"Fix bayonets," the middle-aged man commanded.

"Why that's Jason Maxwell, the carpenter," Ann said.

"Why on earth is he trying to drill those boys?" Colin asked.

"From what I hear," Ann said, "Jason has always wanted to be a soldier. He's read every book he could get his hands on about war and soldiering. Now he's sure that war is coming and he's convinced those boys they'd better be ready for it."

They stopped to watch for a moment. Jason Maxwell waved his hand toward a patch of weeds and shouted to his company, "The Yankees are there! Charge!"

The boys started across the field at a shambling run. Only three remembered to lower their "bayonets" into proper position. Suddenly one of the three tripped over his stick and lurched into the man ahead of him. Both sprawled to the ground. Jason Maxwell screamed and pulled at his hair. The men watching laughed hysterically.

Colin took Ann's elbow and they walked on. Suddenly he said to her, "This was play—what we saw. But if war comes, how many awkward boys exactly like these will be slaughtered like cattle because they don't know what they're doing? It makes me sick to think of it."

"Do you think war will come, Colin?"

"Yes, I'm afraid it will."

"What will you do if it does?"

"I don't think I'll have much choice. Now we argue pro and con. But when the time comes we'll all be swept into it as helplessly as leaves in a storm."

Ann was silent a moment. Then she said, "You sound so hopeless; yet moving into Campbell Hill, as you call it, to start a new life in a new place is a hopeful act."

Colin turned to look at her. Her lovely brown eyes were fixed on him in inquiry. "That's the human condition, Ann. We seem to go on hoping even when there's no hope."

Ann paled and lowered her eyes. "Yes, we do."

"Hey, Ann, Jedge!" Ling called them. He had brought Ann into town and gone off on his business while they transacted theirs. "Everything settled?" he asked.

"You now address the proud squire of Campbell Hill," Colin said. "Hatch, the contractor, has told me it won't take more than two months to make all the necessary repairs, down to the last dab of fresh paint. I won't be able to stay away from

the place for more than a few days at a time. Can we go hunting from time to time?"

"Sure thing. And any time you want to stay the night or drop in for a meal, just come by."

"Thanks, Ling. That's very kind of you, but Nell and Zack will be there after next week and they'll be able to fix me up. I'll come by, though, you can be sure of that."

He saw them to their trap, tied to a hitching post down the street, and waved to them as they rode off. He had felt happy, even joyous, all afternoon, all through the driest, dustiest financial and legal details. Now he felt alone, empty. And he knew why.

Ann was no longer here. She had gone—gone home with her husband to their two children, he reminded himself fiercely. Slowly, so slowly he hardly noticed, she had crept into his dreams, then his waking thoughts, now his daydreams. He had fallen into the bad habit of contrasting her with Jeannie, originally; then, Jeannie dismissed entirely from his dreams and plans, he had thought of her in an almost abstract way as a gracious, warm and loving woman, the ideal wife and mother. Then she had appeared in his dreams, not as the ideal wife of Ling Stewart and mother of his sons, but as his own beloved Ann.

After their talk on Christmas day, he found himself thinking of her constantly, of her courage, sweetness and beauty. Now thinking of her was not enough. He wanted to be with her. And what would he do when her mere presence did not suffice?

CHAPTER VI

The Housewarming

Zack himself dug his barbecue pit and, while Colin took over stable and kennel chores, went to search for exactly the wood he wanted. He must have pine to give his fire life, oak for endurance, hickory for glowing coals, and mulberry to impart a final magic touch found in no other wood. But he could not simply cut the first trees he ran across; if the wood was too green it merely smoldered and if too dry it scorched the outside of the meat without penetrating to the bone and tender marrow.

As Zack found the trees he wanted, he felled them and returned to Campbell Hill for a mule team and wagon to haul them in. He used a bucksaw to cut proper lengths for the barbecue pit, then split each of the larger lengths into quarters or eighths and the smaller lengths into halves.

Zack had never been able to explain the secret of his barbecue, partly because he himself did not understand it fully. And he didn't know that it harked back to religious ritual handed down by African forebears who lived in villages. But anyone who had ever tasted Zack's finished product could happily testify that it was incomparably delicious.

At the exact hour of sunset—an imperative part of the ritual—Zack started his fire. Using pine as a base, he waited until it blazed and then added hickory and oak. Nothing was done haphazardly. The hickory and oak must be laid alternately, and at precisely the proper angles. Then he laid nine carefully selected boulders on top of the blaze. When his roaring fire subsided to red-hot coals, Zack banked the coals with ashes. Finally he made his grill from the tough trunks of young and green oak trees and went to bed.

Zack was up with the dawn, and in the woods to gather herbs; mint for tang, the bitter root of jack-in-the-pulpit to be used sparingly, for strength, and wintergreen for flavor. According to the use for which it was intended, each had to be young and tender or old and woody.

He laid the herbs on a slab of bark, and, being careful not to crush them, covered them with another slab and tested the temperature over the banked coals with the palm of his hand. It was as it should be. Zack laid his grill over the pit and arranged upon it four shoats and three lambs. Then he squatted beside the pile of mulberry chunks. He laid a chunk on the fire, watched it flare and die into ashes, and laid on another. When the pile of mulberry chunks was exactly half gone, he garnished each of the carcasses with wintergreen leaves.

Nell came from the big house with containers of salt and pepper and parcels of assorted spices. She sniffed hungrily.

"Sho' smells good!"

"It bettah be good. Wheah's Mistah Colin?"

"Gone roussle out eve'y man, woman, an' chile what lives he' abouts an' ask 'em all to come. Guess I ought to go back. That Cloe an' Emma," borrowed from Quail Wings for the occasion, "they do' know what side of the stove's the hot 'un."

"He ridin' Nancy?"

"Yeah."

As he approached the Stewart clearing, Colin drew the roan, rough-gaited Nancy to a slow walk while his imagination created for him what his heart would have to encounter. He would be greeted by Enos, his old scholarly self. Ann would be waiting just for him, and her eyes would be telling tales that only he could read. Colin tried to drive the fantasy from his mind and could not. He loved Ann as he never had and never would love another woman. If she were married to a complete stranger, the situation would have been difficult enough. That Ann was the wife of Ling, who lavished on Colin all the blind faith and sublime confidence of the most devoted hound in his kennels, created an obstacle that nothing could possibly overcome.

When he entered the Stewart clearing, six-year-old Jeffrey, accompanied by the hound puppy, came running. "Uncle Colin! Uncle Colin!"

Colin halted Nancy, waited for the boy to draw alongside, gave him a hand up, and steadied him in the saddle. Jeffrey turned a happy face, Ann's face, to Colin's.

"Some day I'll have a horse just like this."

"I'm very sure of it."

With the hound puppy frolicking beside them, Colin hugged the youngster tightly. He had, he thought wonderingly, lived most of his life in a shell. He thought he had known the common people, but he had known from the height of the judge's bench only those who appeared in Denbury court. Not until he came to live in the mountains had there been any genuine understanding. Without knowing it, he had shared the snobbishness of the planter class. Without ever thinking about what the element might be, he had assumed there was some mysterious trait which set most of humanity apart from himself. Now he knew that, given equal opportunities, Ling's sons and all the other children on Hobbs Creek would in every way be the equal of all children everywhere.

They reached the house and Jeffrey slid to the ground.

"Good morning, Colin," Ann called from the door.

"Good morning, Ann. I've come with an invitation. Will you all—the whole family—come to a housewarming tonight? The last curtain has been hung and Zack, Nell, Dab, Elva and I are all bursting with pride. We want all the neighbors to join in our pleasure."

"Of course, we'd love to come. Do you want Father, too?"

"If you don't think it would bring him pain."

"I have a feeling that seeing the house lived in, cared for and full of people, might help to erase the memory of it that he carries with him."

"Oh, I hope so. Bring him, by all means."

"I'm bursting with curiosity. I've kept away so that when it was all finished it would all be a complete surprise. I haven't even let Ling describe any of it to me—not that describing carpets and sofas is his strong point."

"Is that why you've kept away?" Colin asked. "I've wondered."

Their eyes met with sudden intensity. "Yes, that's why," Ann said falteringly.

Colin knew that if he did not leave this minute, he would blurt out everything to her—that he loved her, that he longed for the sight of her and that somehow he knew she loved him, too.

He turned abruptly, saying, "I must go to invite the Hamlins. See you tonight! Six o'clock!"

After inviting the Hamlins, Garrisons, Tylers, Doyles and Murdocks, Colin rode home. He stopped to chat a moment with Zack and to sniff the aroma from the barbecue rack. "Master and Miz Betsie done come," Zack told him. Though it was several years now since Zack had been Ralph Campbell's slave, he still referred to him as "Master."

"Good!" Colin said and bounded into the house.

He found Betsie looking about her admiringly in the diningroom. The long table was set for forty guests with the finest silver and the most delicate china. On either side were smaller tables as elegantly appointed. He took Betsie by surprise as she was in the act of picking up a spoon and giving it close scrutiny.

"After my silver, eh?" Colin teased.

Betsie turned to face him, laughing. "Caught in the act! Oh, Colin, this place is heavenly. The setting, the view, the house, the way you've arranged it—everything! Even your father is terribly impressed."

"Where is he?"

"He's upstairs lying down. Lately he tires very easily, you know. The trip on horseback was too much for him, though of course he wouldn't hear of ordering the carriage."

"I want to take you on a real tour of inspection, but first tell me what news you have from Macklyn."

"The convention goes on and on, waiting for some kind of assurances from Washington. Most of the delegates are against secession but they don't want to take a stand without obtaining some guarantees for the Confederacy."

"The state is trying to mediate then, to prevent the possibility of war?"

"Yes, but I'm far from sure that the conditions they ask will be met by the federal government. Macklyn is confident they will. Now, show me your house."

"With pleasure!"

As they strolled from room to room, amid Betsie's "Oohs" and "Ahs" Colin gave her something of the history of the house. He ended by explaining Enos Pollard's condition. "Do me a favor—keep an eye on him and be especially kind to him. It's going to be something of a shock to him."

"What is the husband like?" Betsie asked.

"Husband? You mean Ling?"

"Yes."

"He is goodheartedness itself and the best woodsman I ever saw in my life. But he is something of an overgrown boy."

"Is she happy with him?"

"Is she—who—Betsie, what is the reason for these questions?"

Betsie looked at him soberly. "You don't fool your Aunt Betsie for one minute, Colin. You are in love with this girl, Ann. Heaven help you!" And she went upstairs to get dressed.

The first to arrive that evening were the Watt Sacketts, with Hannah tenderly cradling their blanketed baby boy on her lap and the diminutive Watt driving a team of mules hitched to a farm wagon. He halted in front of the door, helped his wife down from the wagon and escorted her up the steps.

"Hello, hello, hello!" Watt effusively greeted his host. "Here we be, Colin."

"And very welcome you are."

Colin was busy from that moment on greeting his guests, introducing them to Betsie and his father and offering drinks. The women declined his offers with thanks; the men accepted but sipped sparingly. Only Ralph Campbell, who stood beaming before the fireplace with a tall glass in his hand, drank with gusto. Colin smiled to himself as he recalled the popular view that the mountain men devoted half their time to hunting and the other half to drunken debauchery.

The last to arrive were the Stewarts, Ann radiant and lovely in a periwinkle blue dress she had resurrected from her boarding school trunk. At the sight of her, Colin sharply drew in his breath and his spirits spiraled upward.

The women busily marveled at the house, the like of which they had never seen. The men were teasing Tracy Hamlin, just turned eighteen, who had been seen kissing Anita Murdock as he escorted her to the housewarming. Anita Murdock hung her head, scarlet overspreading her cheeks. Enos Pollard sat with his grandsons, staring about in a bewildered but happy way. Only Ann sat alone, looking thoughtful.

"How do you like it, Ann?" Colin asked.

"Colin, it's lovely. And you've succeeded perfectly in restoring the atmosphere it once had. Father feels it, too. Look at him. He is wakening a bit from his nightmare. And I've just been sitting here feeling twelve years old."

"I can't tell you how happy that makes me," he answered. Betsie joined them. "I don't think you have met my brother's wife, Betsie. This is Ann Stewart."

Smiling and exchanging greetings, the two women appraised each other and liked what they saw. Then Betsie said, "Excuse me for interrupting you, Colin, but your father wants to see you a moment. He's in the study."

Entering the study, Colin was amazed to find Macklyn's son Ralph standing solemnly beside his grandfather, who was

sprawled dejectedly in an armchair. As far as Colin had known, Ralph was in Richmond with his father. His presence here meant news from Macklyn—bad news, Colin thought.

"Ralph," he said. "What is it?"

Ralph drew himself up stiffly as befitted a West Point man and a future officer of the Confederate Army, conscious of the importance of this moment.

"The Yankees tried to reinforce Fort Sumter on the 12th, against a warning from General Beauregard that he would fire if they did. His men fired. Fort Sumter has surrendered. Lincoln," Ralph spat out the name, "has asked for volunteers to put down the 'rebellion.' The delegates in Richmond have probably already voted for secession by now."

"It's war—it's come," Colin said confusedly.

"Father and I are leaving in the next day or so for Montgomery to offer our services to the Confederate Army." There was a lilt in Ralph's voice. The fool was actually elated, Colin realized bitterly. "Father will send for you as soon as he returns, to let you know what you may do."

"How can the South win a war against twice—" Colin began.

The old man in the armchair had roused himself. "Colin," he said with spirit, "I think it's not as bad as you imagine. The South need not win in a military sense. Macklyn explained that to me. She need only defend herself with enough vigor to show the Yankees that it's useless to try to conquer her. If I know the Southerner, it won't take us long to prove that."

"I hope you're right," Colin answered.

"Uncle Colin, may I have a fresh mount?" Ralph asked. "I have to get back to Quail Wings tonight and on to Richmond tomorrow."

"Won't you have dinner and stay the night? I have guests—"

"There's no time for that," Ralph interrupted impatiently.

"Then, of course, I can give you a fresh mount. I'll see to it now."

Somehow he got through the dinner, smiled and joked and did all that was required of a genial host. He decided not to tell the people of Hobbs Creek the news until he had had time to think it over. He knew that what he said and how he said it would have a profound influence on them.

After dinner, his guests happily occupied with each other, he sought solitude outdoors. By the light of the rising moon the mountains loomed dimly before him. The sight of them calmed him; it always did.

All over the South, he thought, and doubtless all over the North, fiery patriots were springing to the sacred call. Editors were filling columns. Orators of high and low position were thundering from anything they could stand on about the righteousness and justice of the cause they favored. Depending on the sentiments and personal prejudices of the preacher, beyond all doubt God was firmly behind both North and South.

Colin stared at the starry sky, trying to imagine war's effect on Hobbs Creek. The mountain people could not avoid being swept into it, even if they wanted to resist. They would be used to stem the tide of battle as lavishly and dispassionately as stones and logs were used to stem the flow of a creek. They would require sympathy and understanding in their senseless ordeal. Suddenly in his mind's eye Colin saw Ling in uniform, marching under the command of a spit-and-polish officer like young Ralph. Ling would no longer be an individual but a mere unit, expected to perform like a perfect mechanism. Instant, unquestioning obedience would not only be expected but also demanded, and Ling was as incapable of such performance as he was of climbing a rainbow. No amount of training or punishment was going to make him any more amenable, Colin knew. He would always be a rebel, a trouble maker from the army's point of view. And so would the other men on Hobbs Creek.

Colin knew then what his role was to be. He would be the buffer between these men and the army. The only way he could do that, he realized, was to be their commanding officer. He would see Macklyn about it as soon as he returned. Perhaps it could be managed.

"Colin!"

He turned to find Ann Stewart beside him.

"What has happened, Colin?" she asked anxiously. "I saw your face during dinner. You did your best, but I could see that you were terribly upset by something."

He answered gravely, "Bad news, Ann. War has broken out between the North and the South."

"Oh no!" Then she said dully, "You will go. Ling will go."

"I'm afraid every able-bodied man will be called on."

"Can men think of nothing but hunting and fighting? Is the life with which God endowed you so loathsome that you must forever seek to court death?" Her voice was anguished.

Before he knew what he was doing, Ann was in his arms and he was saying, "Life could never be loathsome to me, Ann, as long as you are in it somewhere. Just to know that you are there, to see you now and then—"

He felt her heart beating wildly beneath his own. His lips eagerly sought hers; his lean hard body pressed tightly against her yielding one. For a moment, he knew only ecstasy and then he became aware that her hands were pushing him gently away. In the dim light he saw her upturned face and her eyes looking steadily into his. "Colin," she said softly, "I've wanted that as much as you did. I'll say it now, for you to know forever: I love you. You are my first and only love."

"Ann," he moved toward her, "my darling!"

"No, Colin, we mustn't. Please!"

"Yes, you're right," he mumbled helplessly.

"Colin, listen to me, please." She took his hand. "I love my children. I love Ling, too, as a friend, a brother, a comrade. He has been good to me. I wouldn't hurt him for an instant."

"Nor would I, Ann. This won't happen again." He added bitterly, "The war comes at an opportune moment."

"Don't!" Ann half-sobbed and then checked herself. "It is time to take the children home. I must go in."

"Goodbye, my darling. Remember that I love you always."

CHAPTER VII

Recruits

Macklyn, now General Macklyn Campbell of the Confederate Army, was back at Quail Wings after three weeks at Montgomery, conferring with Confederate leaders. Only this morning Toby, overseer of the stables at Quail Wings since Zack left, had brought Colin a message scribbled in haste: "Must see you at once. Macklyn." And Colin, mounted on Robin, was on his way to Quail Wings.

During the three weeks since war had broken out he had fretted constantly. The more he thought of it, the more he was convinced that his idea of leading the mountain men was the only service he could perform in this war with any degree of satisfaction to anyone. And events on Hobbs Creek had confirmed his original feeling that the army and the mountain people were like oil and water.

Young Lieutenant Hazard, a V.M.I. cadet as full of military starch as young Ralph Campbell, had come to Hobbs Creek looking for volunteers. Tracey Hamlin had rounded up every male between fifteen and fifty for a community meeting at the Hamlins'. The men had been as excited as small boys, emitting war whoops as they came, squabbling among themselves about who should go and who should stay; all their grievances against the East and all their hard common sense had departed. When they had all assembled in the Hamlins' yard they were so busy laughing and whooping it up that Lieutenant Hazard could not get their attention.

"Quiet!" he had barked in best parade ground style from the height of a tree stump. "Quiet!" He had made no impression at all. They had not told him what to do in such situations at V.M.I. Colin had seen that Hazard's private inclination was to stamp his foot and burst into tears. Before anything as disastrous as that happened, Colin had intervened.

"May I borrow your rifle, Ling? I'll only need it a moment."

Ling had interrupted a gleeful conversation with Watt Sackett long enough to say, "Why, sure, Jedge!"

Approaching the stump where Lieutenant Hazard stood helpless, Colin had asked, "May I quiet them for you, Lieutenant?"

"Oh, please!" the boy had answered with a most unmilitary quaver in his voice.

Mounting the stump, Colin had aimed the rifle at a height a foot or more above the tallest man there. As the bullet whizzed above their heads the men broke off their gabbing and looked toward the stump.

"If you banty roosters will stop your crowing," Colin had said quietly, "Lieutenant Hazard has a few words he'd like to say to you."

The lieutenant had not been able to forgive himself his own failings. He had drawn himself up—he was still a growing boy and had yet to shave of necessity—and in his starchiest voice had begun, "Gentlemen, I assume you know that Forts Sumter and Moultrie have fallen, that Virginia has seceded and that the president of the North has called for volunteers to invade our beloved Southland." He had droned on and on, appealing to their honor, their chivalry, their love of the South.

Colin had watched the men's faces. First there had been amusement at this pup in his fancy uniform giving himself a general's airs. Then there had been boredom—this milk-toothed whelp made war sound like a ladies' quilting bee. Then there had been a hard-faced indifference; they wouldn't be talked into anything by some fancy-pants lieutenant. When the lieutenant called on all volunteers to raise their hands, Colin had not been at all surprised that not a single arm was lifted. Lieutenant Hazard reported back to his commanding officer that the mountain men were a wild and unpatriotic lot and would only be militarized by conscription.

Now Colin was on his way to persuade Macklyn that this was not so. As he rode through Wetherly he looked for any changes the war might have made in the life of the town. A farmer was driving a yoke of oxen up the road. Saddled horses twitched their tails or stamped their feet at various hitching posts. Children played. Jason Maxwell, the middle-aged clubfoot who had devoted his spare time to studying military campaigns, was again drilling awkward country youths in an empty lot. (Colin noted that their number had grown.) Dogs lounged and scratched their fleas. The saw in the mill screamed as it ground through another log. Men and women went about their small but all-important tasks precisely

as they went about them every day of their lives.

In a democracy, according to theory, the people made every decision; the people would decide in favor of or against war. Colin thought bitterly that with few exceptions nobody in Wetherly had any clear ideas about why North and South differed or why war should be. But the people he saw about him would not respond to the voice of reason. They would be lured by a rattling drum, an inflammatory poster, an impassioned speaker. They would hate, but they would never really know why they hated. If reason prevailed, however, there would be no war.

As he left Wetherly behind him, he reprimanded himself. Who really understood war? He recalled an incident described by Macklyn, who had fought in the war with Mexico. Once, Macklyn said, he was ordered to capture a small but well-garrisoned town and to do so with as little bloodshed as possible. He sent a Mexican, a man of great ingenuity and daring, into the town to inform his countrymen that the Americans had fled. In the surprise attack that followed, not a single American soldier was lost. Describing another incident, Macklyn had referred to a cowardly, contemptible American turncoat who had helped Mexicans ambush American soldiers. Macklyn had seen nothing paradoxical in his evaluation of the two men. It had never even occurred to him that the Mexican was at least as traitorous as the American, or that both must have had courage and perhaps even conviction.

Passing Tom Dare's place later, Colin was astonished to see a horde of soldiers, some with and some without uniform and all obviously among the first recruits of the Confederate Army, engaged in various tasks. Had Tom offered his services to the Confederacy? It looked that way. He must ask Macklyn about it. Colin had not seen either Tom or Jeannie since Christmas day and had, in fact, scarcely thought about the Dares. Betsie had told him that Jeannie was seen about a good deal with Bob Talmadge, her friend Laura's brother, and he had felt only pleasure that she had been so quickly diverted. Then he smiled ruefully to himself as he thought of his own love for Ann; it predated, he was sure, any interest Jeannie might have for young Talmadge.

For the first time in his life Colin went directly to the study at Quail Wings and entered without knocking. His father, as usual, sat behind the desk and as he looked at him, Colin hoped he successfully concealed the shock he felt. He had known, of course, that his father was old, but for the first time he *seemed* old. His cheeks were sunken, his face haggard, his eyes haunted.

"Are you ill, Father?" Colin blurted.

"Not exactly," Macklyn answered for the old man. "He is upset because the army refused to accept him."

"You—you don't mean he tried to join the army?"

"And why not?" A little of his father's old spirit flared. "Why shouldn't I serve the army in some capacity? I've forgotten more about a thousand different things than some of these snippy young officers will ever know."

Macklyn's fine dark eyes were gentle as they warned Colin to humor the old man.

"I know just what you mean," Colin assured his father. "Why, we had a recruiting officer visit Hobbs Creek the other day who knew as much about handling men as a six-week-old kitten."

His father looked grateful.

Colin glanced at the star on Macklyn's shoulder. "Congratulations, General Campbell," he said. "What will your assignment be?"

Macklyn smiled proudly. "I'm to be in charge of the army of upper Connicon." Then, looking stern, he added, "Now that war has come, you've forgotten all that nonsense about the futility of war and so on, I hope?"

"I haven't changed my views and I don't consider them nonsense, but once the die is cast I know it is useless to discuss them further. Tell me, there'll be conscription, I suppose?"

His father gasped. "Colin! You would wait to be conscripted?"

"Not for myself, Father. I was thinking of the men of Hobbs Creek and what their future will be."

"I had in mind stationing you at Dare's Landing," Macklyn said. "Tom Dare has been made colonel in charge of supplies

for this area and he'll need someone who knows the law and can cut through a mass of rules and regulations and legal details. It may seem odd to you to be put under his command in view of your old relationship with Jeannie, but we must all forget personal considerations in this emergency."

The idea of doing Tom Dare's paper work filled Colin with horror. "No, no!" he said. "Some older lawyer can do that better than I. I have an idea of my own. But tell me first whether there will be conscription."

"If the war lasts more than three or four months," Macklyn answered, "there will certainly be conscription. But we are hoping by a strong show of volunteer strength to demonstrate to the Northern leaders that it is useless to try to take the South by force of arms. Virginia will naturally be the crucial state."

"I see," Colin said. "In other words, either a man volunteers now and, by swelling the Confederate Army, serves to warn the North by his mere presence in uniform, or there will be real hard fighting and the need for conscription."

"Yes, that's about it," Macklyn answered.

"Here's my idea, then," Colin said. "My neighbors on Hobbs Creek were bursting to join up when they heard that war had broken out. But the Confederate Army sent that young pup I mentioned earlier up to recruit them and in fifteen minutes they'd lost every ounce of enthusiasm they ever had. They're good men and they'd make the best fighters you ever saw, but they're used to a lot of leeway and they'd never take orders from a conventional army officer."

"You mean they're undisciplined," Macklyn said. "The army would knock that out of them soon enough."

"They have their own kind of discipline," Colin answered. "But they require someone who understands what it is to be their leader. I've been among them a good deal. I like them and respect them, and I think they feel the same way about me. I would like to recruit them and serve as their commanding officer. Put them under the wrong officer and they'll desert within two hours."

"Then they're too unreliable."

"They're steady as a rock under the right circumstances. If they're under my command, I'll answer for them."

"Are you sure you can handle this?" Macklyn asked, concern on his handsome, dark face.

"I'm sure."

"If you'll take the word of a useless old man," Ralph Campbell put in, "I think Colin has a splendid idea there."

"All right, Colin. You have a free hand and may expect a captain's commission. Are you prepared to start right away?"

"Yes."

"Come into Denbury tomorrow. Your commission will be ready and you will be sworn in. You'll buy your own uniform, of course."

"Where is the army headquarters in Denbury?"

"We've taken over the inn. You know, by the way, that you'll have to resign your judicature."

"Yes, I'll do it tomorrow."

"Do you have a training center in mind for your troops?"

"Wetherly's a central point and I should be able to recruit more men there. My men will be issued arms, uniforms, supplies and pay according to the standards of the Confederate Army, of course?"

"Of course. I'll arrange everything, don't worry. And I'll have a barracks ready and waiting for you in Wetherly."

"That's all I need to know for the time being. I'll get my horse and go home to start recruiting."

"You aren't even going to stay overnight?" Macklyn asked. "I know Betsie is eager to see you."

"Give her my love and tell her I mustn't waste a minute while a war's on," Colin teased.

Colin sent Zack to tell all the Hobbs Creek families that there would be an important meeting at Campbell Hill and ask the men, women and children to come. For himself he reserved the task of telling Ann and Ling. Ling, he knew, would greet the idea of serving under Colin with enthusiasm, but he wanted to be sure that Ann understood his motives.

As he approached the Stewart cabin the two boys, followed by their invariable companion, the hound pup Colin had given them, rushed out to greet him. "Are your mother and father at home?" he asked them.

"Mother is but Dad has gone into Wetherly," Jeffrey answered.

At the sound of their voices, Ann appeared at the cabin door.

"Hello, Colin," she said. "It's such a beautiful day I was about to go for a walk with the boys."

"May I join you? I have something important I want to tell you about."

Ann was flustered. "The boys—" she began.

Colin smiled at her. "It's entirely suitable for their ears."

"Let's go, then."

They set out toward Frenchman's Peak, the boys racing on ahead.

"I wanted to tell you, Ann, before I tell the whole community this evening, about a plan I have been nursing since the news of war came to Hobbs Creek the night of my housewarming." At the reference to that evening, they both fell silent for a moment, remembering. "When you came out to me that night I had been thinking about the Hobbs Creek men and what the war would mean for them. They have been accustomed to as much freedom as a human being can possibly attain. Army life is the very opposite of all that they have been used to. If they entered the Army in the usual way, they'd be in serious trouble in no time at all."

Ann murmured her agreement.

"I cannot escape being made an officer; I am a so-called prominent citizen and the brother of General Macklyn Campbell. I know these men and have a high regard for them. My idea, then, was to be made their officer so that, knowing their good and useful qualities, I could protect them from what the Army would consider their bad features."

Ann stopped and thought seriously for a moment, her brow puckered with intensity. Looking down at her, Colin was filled with such tenderness and longing that he moved away and pretended to scrutinize a perfectly ordinary dogwood tree.

"What do you think?" he asked finally.

"I think it is the best that can be made of a terrible situation. Have you been empowered to do this?"

"Yes. I am already Captain Campbell. My uniform is in the making and my brother has arranged that there shall be a Wetherly unit. I'll be in complete charge."

Ann smiled. "I think, then, your only difficulty will be in trying to keep Grandpa Teague and all the other unsuitables from joining up. As for Ling, I can hear his whoop of joy right now."

They walked on, talking lightly, easily, grateful to be alive and together on a beautiful spring day. Only on their return, as they approached the cabin, did Ann take Colin's hand and press it against her cheek. "Bless you and keep you," she murmured and ran into the house.

That evening Colin rose before the assembled company and explained to them his reasons for seeking a commission and his reasons for believing that the men would be better off under his command. "Now I've been made a captain," he concluded. "I have promised to recruit a company. Some of you, I'm sure, will want to serve in it."

"S'pose we don't want to serve?" Darnley Hamlin demanded truculently.

"Then you won't."

"You won't try to haul us off to jail or nothin'?"

"I will not. I want no man in my company who isn't there of his own free will and who doesn't understand the situation before he volunteers."

"You'll be the big boss?"

"That's right."

"I ain't soldierin' with none of them fancy-pants officers like was here the other day."

"You won't have to, Darnley."

"Then I'll go," Darnley declared. "What with that mis'ry in his back when it rains, Bedloe wouldn't do so good soldierin'. But he will take care of Georgia and my young 'uns."

"I'll count on you then, Darnley."

"Whar's the war?" Wilton Doyle demanded.

"So far there isn't anything except a declaration; neither side is strong enough to launch any worthwhile attack. But there will be war and we must be ready for it."

"Will it come to Hobbs Crick?"

"I doubt if there'll be fighting in Hobbs Creek; there's no worthwhile military objective here. But if the North wins, Hobbs Creek will be under northern influence."

"Wouldn't like that," Wilton said. "How long will it take to whip the pants off these damyankees?"

"I don't know," Colin admitted. "Some say two months, others that the war will drag on for at least two years."

"What do you think?"

"I believe it will be a long war."

"But we will womp these Yankees?"

Colin said reluctantly, "I don't know that either."

Wilton conferred with his wife and turned back to Colin. "Count me in."

Bill Garrison shouted, "I'll go!"

"Me, too!" Tracey Hamlin roared. "Got no wife an' kids to leave behind!"

"I'll soldier with you, Jedge," Ling Stewart said. "Enos can handle the farm."

"I'll sojer," Tom Tyler offered.

Colin shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Tom."

"Why?" Tom bristled. "You think I'm scairt to fight?"

"It isn't that. You have no one to leave with Hope and the youngsters." He had an idea. "Unless you'd like to let them live here at Campbell Hill?" Colin addressed Hope. "Would you care to do that?"

The timid Hope said, "If Tom goes I would."

"I'm goin' sojerin'!" Tom said happily.

"So am I!" Douglas Murdock said fiercely.

"Ye are not!" his brother proclaimed with equal ferocity. "I go!"

They rose, preparatory to starting around the table towards each other. Colin halted them. "Hold it, you two!"

Half-standing, they stopped glaring at each other to look inquiringly at Colin. He took a coin from his pocket.

"We'll settle it. All right, Douglas?"

"Heads."

Colin flipped the coin, and Ling and Ann Stewart and Darnley and Georgia Hamlin leaned eagerly forward as it landed on the table cloth.

Darnley exclaimed, "Tails!"

Douglas Murdock looked enviously at his brother. "Ye'r the lucky 'un."

Jonas Garrison spoke up. "Tom an' me been talkin' it over, Jedge, not jest 'twixt ourselves but with Mary an' Joanna, too. Wilbert, he ain't wu'th a hooty owl's hoot anyplace else but he does aw right on Hobbs Crick. He'll make out with that big young'un of his an' some of our young'uns to help. We'll go."

After the last of his guests had departed, Colin sat alone in his study and scanned the list of volunteers. There were eleven; without them Hobbs Creek would be drained to the danger point. Some men were staying behind, however, and there was no alternative. He wrote:

Dear Macklyn,

I have recruited all the able-bodied men in this vicinity: 11. I suggest moving to Wetherly and vigorously continuing the recruiting program.

As ever,

Colin

The next morning Colin handed the note to Zack and asked him to deliver it to Macklyn at Quail Wings. He learned swiftly that, though the mills of God may grind slowly, they grind with super speed compared to the mills of the army. More than four weeks elapsed before Private Willie Matson came up the road from Wetherly on a horse so gaunt that it seemed certain to collapse at the next step. Willie Matson leaned from the saddle to hand Colin a formal order, and Colin read:

To Captain Colin Campbell

Upon receipt of this order, you will escort all recruits under your command to Wetherly. You will contact and be assigned to barracks by Mr. William Bodine.

When it is feasible, Sergeant Arnold Bell will be detached from his present assignment to instruct your recruits in rudimentary warfare. Pending the arrival of Sergeant Bell, you will interest yourself in securing as many additional recruits as possible.

Macklyn Scott Campbell

Brig. Gen in command, Upper Connicon Milt. Dist.

CHAPTER VIII

Wetherly

Colin rode Robin into Wetherly at half-past nine on a Tuesday morning. He wore a new and expensively tailored captain's uniform; he was determined to do everything properly. But everything seemed wrong. A captain, he thought uneasily, should be preceded by drummers and accompanied by smart troops. The only articles on Hobbs Creek which even resembled drums were a couple of tom-toms that Bedloe Hamlin had supposedly captured in Indian fights. As for Colin's troops, not one of them had seen any sense in taking the road to Wetherly when he might hunt his way down. Colin had wisely granted them permission to go on their own; had he not done so, his men would have hunted anyway.

As Colin tied Robin to a hitching post in front of William Bodine's store, he heard snickering among the loafers who spent their days chawing and gossiping on the broad steps of the store.

"Is something bothering you gentlemen?" Colin demanded sharply.

"No, Cap'n," one said, "we jes' wondered if—if—"

"If what?"

"If you was aimin' to fight this here war all by yourself?"

Colin stalked proudly into the store, hoping by hauteur to cover his self-consciousness. A captain without troops did look silly, and Colin was sure that he felt even sillier. He squared his shoulders and waited for William Bodine to come to meet him.

"Ah! Captain Campbell! It's a pleasure to meet you again!"

Evidently Bodine chose to ignore the circumstances of their last meeting in court. "Thank you," Colin shook the proffered hand. "I've been advised that you will provide barracks for my troops."

"Ah, yes," Bodine shook his head and clucked his tongue. "And a melancholy task it is preparing for this tragic war. But we must do what we can to make sure the South will win! Then, after we have subjugated the North's physical resources by force of arms, we must conquer its mind by force of our intellectual powers. Only by so doing may we insure that this catastrophe will never recur."

Colin remained silent. In addition to being a successful merchant and a proved liar, he decided, William Bodine was also extremely pompous.

Bodine said, "I'd volunteer myself if I were younger. How many troops do you have, Captain?"

"Twelve at the present time." His original eleven had been unexpectedly augmented by the woods-runner, Johnny Moss moss, who joined as soon as he was assured there would be fighting.

"There'll be more!" Bodine said fervently. "The young men of Wetherly will show themselves to be true in this crisis! Jason Maxwell has at least twelve more who are pledged to join. By the way, Captain, you will accept Jason?"

"Isn't he clubfooted?"

"Yes, but he has made a thorough study of the military and has done splendid work in training the boys. Surely you could use him in some capacity?"

Colin answered dubiously, "We should have none except able-bodied men."

"Oh, Captain Campbell! Surely you'll need a clerk or an orderly or could use Jason in some other way where his disability won't hinder and his abilities will help?"

"We'll see." Colin looked sharply at Bodine but refrained from telling him that Darnley Hamlin and Tom Garrison were both older than he and that there was certainly a place for William Bodine, too, if his views were so patriotic. "Now, the barracks?"

"Ah, yes. Your personal quarters will be in my home, Captain. Are your men outside?"

"They haven't arrived yet. I—I had them deploy on both sides of the road to scout their way down. It's part of their training."

Bodine nodded. "Commendable. Commendable, indeed." He called, "Lena!" and a middle-aged woman appeared from the back room. "Take over the store, will you, Lena? I must escort Captain Campbell to the barracks I have procured."

As they left the store, a breathless pink-cheeked youth rushed up to Colin. "Cap'n, sir! Kin I j'ine up?"

Colin looked at him kindly. "How old are you, son?"

"Six—nineteen, sir."

"Sixteen, aren't you?"

"I'm most nineteen," the boy mumbled. "Paw, he wouldn't let me j'ine up till a sure enough sojer come. He says Jase Maxwell might know what he's doin' but he ain't the real army."

Colin sighed. The whirlwind, in full force, was sweeping children and cripples alike before it. "What's your name, son?"

"Clem Faraday, sir."

"And your father will give his permission?"

"Oh, yes! He wants to j'ine up hisself."

"Then bring your father to—" Colin glanced questioningly at William Bodine.

"Clayton's barn will be barracks for the Wetherly unit."

"I'll come!"

Clem Faraday whirled and dashed off. Colin untied Robin and walked beside William Bodine, leading his horse. The merchant said happily, "I told you there'd be more."

"He's too young to go to war," Colin said angrily.

"He can shoot," Bodine answered, and Colin found himself heartily disliking this man whom he had previously and impersonally known as a trickster.

Soon they arrived at Clayton's barn, a massive unpainted structure that had been used as a stable for the many horses of the Clayton Lumber Company. When the best of the timber close to Wetherly had been cut, the company had moved farther away from the town and had abandoned this barn.

"There it is," Bodine said proudly, "and a hard time I had buying it from Clayton at a reasonable price."

Colin looked hard at the wide gaps between the buckled siding on the barn, at the holes in the roof where shingles had blown off, at the hay protruding from the hayloft. He sniffed and knew the stabling had not been cleaned. "This!" he exploded. "A place for human beings!"

"You'll have private quarters in my house."

"No, thanks, Mr. Bodine! I'll stay with my men."

"Well! You needn't be so huffy about it!"

"I don't need your further attentions, Mr. Bodine. Go home and count the fat profit you must have made when you sold this wreck to the Confederate Army."

"Don't boss me around!" Bodine flared. "I'm not one of your recruits and this is not Denbury Court!" And he stalked off indignantly.

Blast Bodine! Colin glared after him. He knew, however, that no war had ever been fought or ever would be fought without great numbers of profiteers. Bodine was not the only profiteer in the South and doubtless his counterpart existed in the North. Meanwhile, the barn must serve as the Wetherly barracks.

He put Robin in a box stall, removed the saddle and the bridle and carefully stood his 58 Worthington in a corner. He turned grimly to examine further the Wetherly barracks. Soon he felt better. The shingles that had blown off could be nailed back on, and it was a warm spring. The hay would be useful as bedding, as well as food for Robin and any other horses or mules they might acquire. But they needed blankets, cooking utensils, food and many other things. Above all, the place needed cleaning.

"Captain Campbell!"

Colin turned to see Jason Maxwell standing in the door. He was in his mid-forties and of medium height and stocky physique. His sandy hair was streaked with grey. His full lips were rich and sensitive, almost esthetic. His eyes glowed with joy. All his life he had dreamed of being a soldier, and now his dream was close to realization.

Saluting smartly, he said "I'm Jason Maxwell, sir, and I have recruited twelve men who wish to join your unit." The names he read from a sheet of paper included his own.

"Thank you, Mr. Maxwell," Colin said gravely. He hesitated a moment, wondering how to tell this man that his own services would not be needed.

"You can use all of us, sir?" asked Maxwell. His eyes pleaded desperately.

Colin looked searchingly into his face and quickly changed his mind. "Why, certainly," he said, smiling. "Of course I can. Have your men report at once and have each bring either a wheelbarrow or a shovel."

"Yes, sir! Will you swear them in, sir?"

"Oh—oh, yes, of course."

"We'll report as soon as possible, sir!"

Jason Maxwell hobbled away and Colin sighed with relief. Jason should not be in the army, but Colin remembered the gawky youths drilling on the vacant lot while the loafers in front of Con Magloon's snickered. He had seen the glow in Jason's eyes. Colin thought the war was a nightmare, but to Jason Maxwell it was a dream. The thought of Maxwell's happiness lifted Colin's spirits.

Searching the barn for something with which to begin cleaning up, Colin considered all that needed to be acquired—food, cooking utensils, blankets, shoes, arms, uniforms. He hadn't the least idea how he was to obtain these things. Obviously the supply center at Dare's Landing was not yet functioning at full capacity.

He was scraping away at the mess on the barn floor with a broken shovel he had found in the granary when Jason Maxwell reappeared with his men. In spite of the fact that each man carried a shovel or pushed a wheelbarrow, there was a distinct air of military precision about them. Colin blessed providence for sending Jason Maxwell his way.

Now Jason lined up his men and called their names: "Adams, Barkman, Dodge—"

When he had finished, Colin said, "Very good, Sergeant."

"Sergeant!" Jason flushed in happy astonishment but recovered instantly.

"Correct, Sergeant Maxwell." Colin hoped he was maintaining the military formality that Jason expected and wanted. "You will instruct the men in their present duties and report to me."

"Very good, sir." Jason Maxwell's voice possessed a tone indispensable to all good sergeants. "Police it up!" he told his men and then joined Colin. "Next, sir?"

"We need rations, arms and uniforms. How do we go about getting them?"

"We'll have to requisition them from Dare's Landing."

"I see— Ah, there's one of our men now."

It was Johnny Mossmoss with a rifle in his hand and a turkey over his back. Colin gave silent thanks that his men had hunted down from Hobbs Creek. Jason Maxwell looked horrified as Johnny leered at his commanding officer. "This our camp, Jedge?"

"This is it, Jo—Private Mossmoss."

Johnny looked curiously at him. "What's got into you? Name's Johnny like it always was."

"You are in the army, Private Mossmoss. Now pick that turkey clean and start cooking it."

"Sure, Jedge," Johnny said amiably.

Next came Marvin Teague with another turkey, followed by Ling Stewart, Watt Sackett and Tracey Hamlin. All three dragged bucks behind them. Colin sighed in relief. The Wetherly unit would never be one of the army's best-disciplined, but it was likely to be one of the best-fed.

When they had eaten roast venison and turkey and were sitting around the fire, the recruits from Wetherly were somber, silent, uncertain. This was a novel way of life for them. The Hobbs Creek men, who were accustomed to camps and campfires and who did not consider this one particularly impressive, were silent for their own reasons. Then one of the men from town addressed Ling. "Why ya takin' yer joolry to war, sojer?"

Ling did not answer.

Irrked, the soldier tried again, "What'sa matter? Can'cha talk? Why ya takin' yer joolry to war?"

Ling's eyes smouldered, warning the Wetherlyite not to pursue the matter further. But the warning was ignored.

"Weddin' ring, too. Wifey don't wan'cha to forget her while you're away bein' a hero. Now ain't that sweet?"

Colin sat next to Ling, but he had to act swiftly in order to leap over, grab the muzzle of Ling's rifle and force it upward. "Ling, don't be a fool!"

"I'll kill the—"

"Lower your rifle! He didn't mean anything."

"Course I didn't," came the frightened voice of Private Barkman. "I didn' mean nothin'."

Colin felt the tension ebb out of his friend. But the anger remained and for a long time would remain. Private Barkman would not be safe close to Private Stewart for the rest of the night. Colin thought fast. "Ling, will you leave at once with a requisition for Colonel Dare at Dare's Landing?"

"A what?"

"An order for supplies. We have nothing here."

"All right."

"Leave me go, too, Jedge," Tracey Hamlin said.

"An' me!" from Watt Sackett.

Colin nodded agreement and turned to Jason Maxwell. "Will you draw up the requisition, Sergeant?"

"I have already done so, sir. I've ordered supplies for forty men, but I don't think the complete order will be filled."

"I'm sure you're right," Colin agreed, "but let's get what we can." He read aloud by the fire's light, "Cots, 40; blankets,

80; rifles, 40—"

"Don't need no rifle," Tracey Hamlin asserted. "Got one.

"Me, too," Wilton Doyle said.

"Sho don't need no rifle 'sides the one I got," Johnny Mossmoss put in.

"Quiet!" Colin snapped. He finished reading, signed the requisition and handed it to Ling. "Do you understand?"

"Yep."

As the three disappeared in the darkness, Colin turned away from the fire so that the others could not see his face. He thought about the gold ring on Ling's left hand. It was a wedding ring, and because he loved her, too, Colin understood why Ling had not wanted to leave her without this much of Ann. He looked at his own left hand. It seemed gaunt, ugly and naked. He quickly thrust it behind his back.

Zack brought Colin's desk and swivel chair from Campbell Hill, and the Hobbs Creek men had cheerfully walled off a corner of the barn to serve as their captain's quarters and office. Zack had brought Colin's bed, too, but that was in the barn's refurbished granary serving as a hospital bed for Private Louis Cantrell. Dare's Landing had sent twenty-three cots for thirty-eight men now in Colin's command, but that number was sufficient, for there were seldom twenty-three men present.

Outside Sergeant Maxwell said, "Right face!"

Colin paused to listen sympathetically. Jason had done his best to bring about orthodox military discipline in the Wetherly unit. From the very first, his task was hopeless; the Hobbs Creek men could see no sense whatever in performing maneuvers with a rifle when there was nothing to be shot. Jason accepted things as they were, however, and any disappointment he might have felt was more than compensated for—at last, he was a soldier.

Turning back to his desk, Colin scanned an army directive. When he had finished reading it, he yelled, "Sergeant Maxwell!"

Jason hobbled in. "Yes, sir?"

"Where are Thomas, Jonas, and William Garrison, Tracey and Darnley Hamlin, and Privates Doyle, Sackett, Stewart, Teague, Tyler, Murdock and Mossmoss?"

"They haven't been here for the past week."

"Are any others absent?"

"Spencer, Jackson and Mullins."

"Listen to this notice."

To Captain Colin Campbell:

First Sergeant Arnold G. Bell will report to you July 11 and will be assigned by you as drill master.

Col. James W. Williams

As Jason heard the order, his face fell. But he said quietly, "I'll order Spencer, Jackson and Mullins in."

"All of the men must be in tonight. You will assume command until I return this evening."

"Yes, sir."

"Sergeant Maxwell, when I appointed you as non-commissioned officer, did I or did I not specify that you were to be First Sergeant?"

"You did not, sir."

"An unforgivable omission," Colin said coolly. "I should have been more specific. But you are First Sergeant and, regardless of when Sergeant Bell joined the army, you have been longer with the Wetherly unit. Therefore, you are to continue as ranking sergeant."

"Yes, sir! Thank you, sir."

Until he gave this order, Colin hadn't been sure that he really commanded the Wetherly unit. Let his superiors send as many sergeants as they wished to send; he would still give the orders in his own unit.

He saddled and bridled Robin, who hadn't been getting enough exercise, and headed up the road to Hobbs Creek for the first time since the Wetherly unit had assembled. Robin broke into a canter, had to be restrained to a trot and was still fresh when they arrived at Campbell Hill. Zack came back from the stables while Colin looked about approvingly. The stable was clean, the horses in the pasture were well cared for. Pegasus looked over his paddock and snorted defiantly at Robin. The hounds, scenting their master, sent up a furious outcry.

Zack's welcome was both in his words and in his eyes. "It's almighty good to see you!"

"And you, Zack! How are things?"

"Nothin' wrong."

"Have you seen the recruits from Hobbs Creek?"

"Yes, they's all home now."

"Will you saddle Pegasus and ride to the Hamlins, Garrisons and Murdocks? Tell the men that they must return to Wetherly at once. Tell them I said so." He reserved an excuse to go to the Stewarts and catch a glimpse of Ann, he realized ruefully.

Entering the house he was happily greeted by Watt's wife, Hannah Sackett, who had elected to stay here with Hope Tyler. "It's so good to see you again," she said.

"It's wonderful to be here and to see you, Hannah, but I can't stay. I've come to ask all the men to go back to Wetherly."

She nodded. "They said they'd go back when they were needed. Watt and Tom are both working their farms. Hope and the children have gone down with Tom for the day. I'll tell them as soon as they come in this evening."

"That won't be soon enough. They must return tonight. We're getting another sergeant, and absence might be considered desertion. The penalty can be severe."

"Shall I get them right away?"

"Can you?"

"Of course."

"I would appreciate it."

"Lan' sakes, Jedge!" Nell came running and threw both arms about him. "You sho' what these eyes need to look at!"

"Hello, Nell. I swear you're getting prettier every day."

"You!" she chuckled. "Come on in the kitchen. I fix you somethin' to fatten you up. You looks thin to me."

"I haven't time, Nell."

"I'll hustle it."

Hurriedly he ate the wedge of strawberry pie and drank the coffee she insisted on giving him, planted a farewell kiss on her cheek and left. Between them, Zack and Hannah were carrying the message to everyone except Wilton Doyle, Marvin Teague, Ling Stewart and Johnny Moss moss. Colin stopped briefly at the Doyles and Teagues. As Robin trotted towards the Stewart clearing, Colin realized he didn't know where to find Johnny Moss moss. Johnny made his home wherever he

happened to be. Ling would know where he was.

He felt a rising eagerness as he saw the Stewart cabin. Enos Pollard, working in the fields, did something that would have attracted Colin's instant attention under ordinary circumstances—he stopped working and looked up without anyone telling him to do so.

The cabin door opened and Ann stood framed in it. She was so lovely it seemed to Colin that his heart stopped for a moment.

"Colin!" Her eyes sparkled with pleasure and surprise.

He looked at her hungrily, glanced aside and felt his lips go dry. It was nearly six weeks since he'd seen her. Now that he was with her again, the only words he wanted to say to her were words he must suppress. Finally he managed, "How have you been, Ann? You look wonderful."

"We're managing pretty well. And you? You look a little thin and tired."

"It's been rather tedious so far. I miss the good mountain air." He could not help adding, "I miss a lot of things."

"Yes, I know," Ann said softly. Then in her normal bright voice, "Won't you come in?"

"I've come for Ling, Ann. He has to go back to Wetherly. Is he here?"

"He's hunting. He'll be along soon. Come in and wait for him."

"No, thank you—I must get back." He dared not be alone with her. "Will you tell Ling to report back by sundown and to bring Johnny Moss moss if he can find him?"

"Johnny's with Ling. I'll tell him, of course."

"Ann—"

"Yes?"

"Thanks," he said clumsily. "Thanks a lot."

He forced himself to turn away and mount Robin, get Robin into a canter and keep his eyes straight ahead. If he did not hurry, if he looked back, he would be unable to leave at all.

CHAPTER IX

March to Manassas

It seemed to Colin that the rain had started falling when the world began and would fall until the end. Yesterday afternoon, trudging through the mud along with all his men, Colin had abandoned the attempt to keep any part of himself dry. Half the men walked—they could not be said to be marching—with empty rifles that would not fire because the priming pans were wet. None had cared to complain as long as Jason Maxwell, a clubfoot, not only kept pace but offered to help any who could not. In fact, save for two or three chronic malcontents, they had walked with spirit. They had been happier than they had been since joining the army.

After the long monotonous weeks at Wetherly, they were going to war.

There had been constant trouble at Wetherly, largely because the supplies that trickled in were deficient in quality and quantity. But the Hobbs Creek men had seen to it that there was always enough to eat. If they couldn't hunt, they had helped themselves to produce from local farms. Colin could never discover the culprits and when the farmers inevitably came raging to the barracks, they were never able to prove anything.

Wetherly had been beset with rumors that the Yankees had been routed at Bull Run, Washington had been invaded, New York was besieged, England had entered the war on the Confederate side, and Illinois and Indiana had cast their lot with the Confederacy. No one had known what actually was happening. Life had gone on much as before, except that even Jason's original group had wearied of his drilling. The men had spent more time at home than they had spent at the barracks, but all had rallied with whoops of joy when Colin had received orders to start his platoon marching. Colin was to place himself under the command of Colonel Harvey. Every man had received a twenty-four hour furlough and Colin had gone to Campbell Hill.

There, near Ann, whom he would always adore but never possess, he had found a measure of peace and some ease for his aching heart. He had seen her only for a moment as they were leaving to go back to Wetherly but the look on her face would give substance to his dreams for weeks to come.

Colin inadvertently walked through a knee-deep puddle and Ling Stewart, walking beside him, grinned. "Keerful, Jedge! You'll get wet."

"I might," Colin said amiably. "It does look like rain."

"Feels like it, too," Ling observed. Both men laughed. "How long afore we tangle with them Yankees, Jedge?" asked Ling.

"It's about thirty-five miles to Tonston. Perhaps another two days."

Ling said hopefully, "If you send the best walkers on ahead, we might be there and have some fightin' done afore mornin'."

"Nothing doing!" Colin declared. "We stay together."

Ling said soberly, "An army sure slows a man up." There was a moment's thoughtful silence and Ling said, "Jedge—"

"Yes?"

"Looks to me," Ling said, "like we're fightin' for a mudhole."

Colin glanced sharply at his companion. He knew Ling's moods, was sure that Ling wanted to confide in him, and for some reason had changed his mind. But whatever he wanted to say would come out in time. The walking men began enthusiastically to sing a marching song by a "composer" among them.

Shinner up a live oak,
Shinner up a tree.
If you can't ketch a wild cat,
You can't ketch me.

Colin raised his voice to make himself heard above the clamor. "Smell out a good camp site for tonight will you, Ling?"

"I'll keep my smeller workin'."

"We'll have to get something to eat."

Ling said indifferently, "We will."

"That's what I like about you!" Colin scoffed. "You worry so!"

Ling, who still seemed absorbed in his own thoughts, grinned. Presently, almost as though he had known it would be there, he swerved to a dead stump in an oak grove, kicked the stump apart, caught up a hand full of dry wood, and in less than a minute had a fire started. Some of the rain-soaked men brought more wood to build up the fire, while others used brands from the first to start their own fires. Clem Faraday swung his mule team into the grove, clambered painfully down from the seat, and he and his son unharnessed and picketed the mules. The Hobbs Creek men and some of the men from Wetherly reloaded and primed their rifles.

Tracey swung half around, looked intently at a pine tree about a hundred yards off, raised his rifle, shot, and with a mighty buffeting of wings, a wild gobbler tumbled out of the pine. Tracey smiled happily and said, "Figgered an old gobbler'd be makin' hisself to home in that pine whilst all this rain was sloshin' down."

Colin marvelled. In a cold rain, soaked to the skin, under the dreariest conditions imaginable, these men needed only minutes to set up a comfortable camp and start providing food. They were resourceful and excellent marksmen. They were able to think for themselves and fiercely resented anyone who tried to think for them. When and if they caught up with any Yankees, Colin thought grimly, the Wetherly unit would be very effective.

Tracey, Watt and Ling, a natural trio, went off together while the rest of the hunters scattered in different directions. Louis Cantrell and young Clem Faraday started plucking Tracey's turkey. Carl Arthur, Jason Maxwell and George Barkman prepared biscuits for the dutch oven. Old Clem Faraday sat on a boulder near the fire and unlaced his boots. Sweat broke out on his forehead as he pulled them off. Colin looked on with concern.

"Bad, Clem?"

"I'll make out, Cap'n."

Clem winced when he peeled off his socks and revealed feet that were swollen and blue. Colin knelt to examine them, but aside from bathing the feet in hot salt water, he didn't know what to do. Clem needed a doctor's attention, and he would have it if they were able to find a doctor. Meanwhile he had to ride on the wagon because he could not walk. Colin cut up one of the spare blankets and as gently as possible bound the strips around Clem's feet.

"Don't try to put your shoes back on."

"Thanks, Captain."

"Hadn't you better let someone else handle the team tomorrow?"

"I can handle 'em, Captain."

Colin knew a sudden fury. If Clem were home, working at his job in the Wetherly sawmill, he would be all right. Because a conflict of remote interests had resulted in war, Clem had gone off with a group of men who called themselves soldiers and whose mission was to kill other men. Admiration presently stole Colin's anger. It was painful for Clem to move, and agony when he walked, but he walked when necessary. His brain, or his heart, or his spirit—whatever mysterious force controlled his life and made him human—was stronger than pain. He, and the others, had courage.

From the west, the route taken by Ling, Watt, and Tracey, came three shots so closely together that they sounded almost like one. Presently the hunters appeared with the skinned carcasses of three young razorback hogs that probably belonged to some settler but that had been running wild in the hills and growing fat on acorns. The other hunters returned with two turkeys and a deer, and as night fell, the fires leaped high and the good smell of roasting meat was in the air. His back against a tree, Colin ate his fill of roast pork and biscuits and found himself strangely contented. The rain still fell, but

roaring fires kept the little group of men dry and comfortable. It was thus, Colin thought, that ancient man had lived. It must have been a good life when a full belly and a warm fire could insure happiness. Modern, complex man was usually in trouble and made most of his own troubles—Colin interrupted that train of thought. Tomorrow life might again be dreary, but tonight it was very good. He lost himself in a dream of Ann.

Twice during the night he awakened when someone threw more wood on the fire, and it occurred to him that there really should be a sentry posted. Then he dismissed this thought. One of the Hobbs Creek men might be taken by surprise, but it was impossible to take all of them unawares. They would know if someone came, and they were not yet in enemy country. Sometimes it was difficult not to feel as though they were little boys playing soldier.

In the middle of the next morning, that illusion was shockingly and permanently dispelled.

The rain had subsided to a monotonous drizzle. Every tree and bush continued to drip water. The road they followed was not the one that led down the Connicon, but a rough trace that offered a more direct route over the hills. It was slimey with mud, and twice during the morning they had to stop and lay corduroy—tree trunks side by side—so Clem Faraday could drive his wagon through. The only signs of civilization were occasional settlers' clearings. A bearded man with a rifle in his hands glared from the open doorway of one. Behind him, a woman with three small children huddled near her skirts did her best to see while remaining unseen.

Colin called reassuringly, "You needn't fear us."

The man said nothing and continued to glare until the column passed. Colin glanced uneasily over his shoulder, as though there were something here that should not be. He sensed nervously that the men were anxious too. There was no singing and little talking. Something to be dreaded was here now or had been here. Every man stopped long enough to reload his rifle.

Colin turned to Ling, "What do you make of it?"

"Nothin' yet, Jedge. But I don't like the feel of things."

"There's a kind of smell in the air," Watt Sackett observed. "Puts me in mind of the time the Cherokees got Grant Severance an' his fam'ly. I don't like it either."

"Been shootin' here'bouts," Johnny Moss moss remarked quietly.

"How do you know?"

"Look."

Colin's eyes followed Johnny's pointing finger to a group of smooth-barked aspens, two of which had unmistakably been nicked by bullets. The bullets might have been fired by hunters at game, but, if so, there had certainly been two hunters, for the nicks were twenty feet apart, and the game had been running. The rain had hopelessly filled in any tracks that might have offered a clue. Colin stopped, the men halted, and Clem Faraday drew his lurching wagon up behind them.

Colin pondered. Imagination could play weird tricks, but if some real danger lurked on this lonely, muddy trace it was far better to find out than to lead his men into a possible ambush. Colin addressed the group.

"Ling, Watt, and Tracey, you come with me. The rest of you give us a two-hundred-yard start and follow. Stay grouped and alert."

"Listen!" Ling commanded.

The sound, the far-off, mournful bawling of a cow, was repeated. Colin shivered. He had expected to be afraid of blasting cannon and rattling rifles, but now he thought that he would never again fear anything as he feared the forlorn cry of this lone cow. There was something threatening, ominous and dire about it.

"That cow ain't been milked," Watt Sackett said decisively.

"Which means," Johnny Moss moss remarked, "that there ain't nobody about to milk her."

Colin shivered again and knew that, if he followed his natural instincts, he would run back along this lonely road until he

was safe at Campbell Hill. But these men looked to him for leadership. When he spoke again he hoped he sounded very cool and confident, as a commander should sound.

"We'll follow my plan. Johnny, you come with us, too. The rest of you take cover if there's shooting and we'll fall back."

They drew ahead of the rest, the four Hobbs Creek men seemingly unchanged but Colin taut as stretched buckskin. He was afraid, knew it, and wished mightily that he had never undertaken the vast responsibility of leading men into battle. There was an armed enemy, not a man but a monster, behind every tree and in every copse. At any second he would hear the cracking rifles that would cut him and his four companions down, and just as he fell there would sound the thunderous volley that would wipe out all the rest. But much as he wanted to go back, to run as far as possible from the evil thing that had spread its dark shadow over all of them, he must go ahead.

As they advanced, the cow's bawling became louder, clearer, more urgent. Colin knew a rising irritation. War was cannon and rifle fire, bayonet sparring, hand-to-hand combat, and in no way whatsoever related to a tense sortie against a bawling cow.

Ling spoke casually, "Take it easy, Jedge. Ain't nobody here'bouts."

"How do you know?"

"If there was," Ling remained almost maddeningly indifferent, "that cow wouldn't be bawlin'. She'd be milked."

Presently they came to a clearing in which there was a weather-beaten cabin, a garden, and a lean-to barn. Near the barn stood a red and white cow with curved horns and swollen udders. Wanting desperately to be relieved of the load of milk that pained her, she took a few uncertain steps towards the men.

Colin asked, "What now?"

"Milk her," Watt Sackett said practically. He walked slowly up to the cow, stroked her with a practiced hand, and soothed her, saying, "So-o, bossie."

Colin felt a mighty relief and an overpowering embarrassment. He had stalked up the muddy road expecting to find an armed enemy, and he had found an unmilked cow. The five men looked at each other and laughed. When the rest came up, Watt Sackett took a pail from the wagon and began expertly to milk the troubled cow. Ling, Tracey and Johnny Moss Moss prowled into the woods. A few minutes later they returned.

Ling said quietly, "Somethin' you should see, Jedge."

Colin followed wonderingly to a saddled and bridled brown horse that lay on its side and seemed to be resting. But the blackened blood, which had run down its shoulder and gathered in a puddle between its stiff front legs, proved that it was dead. Near the horse lay the rider—a man in a blue uniform. His cap had fallen off, his rusting rifle lay beside him. He was perhaps nineteen years old.

Colin could imagine what had happened. A raiding party of Yankee cavalry had penetrated behind the Confederate lines. There had been a fight here, and both the boy and his horse had fallen in a place where nobody except a woodsman from Hobbs Creek would have found them.

"We'd better bury him," Colin said abruptly.

"Yeah," Ling agreed. "Want me to get some spades?"

"Will you?"

Ling went to the wagon for spades, and when the news spread, the rest of the Wetherly unit came to view the dead soldier. The grave was dug and the soldier laid as gently as possible in it. Watt Sackett contributed a wood cross fastened together with buckskin. They hung the soldier's cap on it, and, while the wondering men stood with bared heads, Colin read from Jason Maxwell's Bible the passage that begins,

Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble.

Then they stripped the saddle and bridle from the dead horse, threw them into the wagon, tied the cow on back, and

continued. The ease was gone, and so was the happiness. Accompanied by the four men from Hobbs Creek, Colin resumed scouting three hundred yards ahead of the unit.

They stopped for lunch and a brief rest and went on. Suddenly Ling flung himself sidewise against Colin and pushed Tracey Hamlin to the ground. Johnny Moss moss and Watt Sackett dropped. A second later, rifles spoke and bullets whined like angry bees overhead.

Ling whispered, "Come on!"

He motioned Colin behind the trunk of a huge oak and crouched beside him. With a mighty effort, Colin resumed the leadership.

"We'll fall back to the rest," he whispered.

"All right," Ling agreed.

"Come on out, Yanks!" a nearby voice snarled. "Come on out an' we'll let ye be prisoners!"

"Blasted idjits!" Watt Sackett screamed. "Blasted idjits! We ain't Yanks! We're goin' to help fight 'em!"

"You—" there was astonishment in the voice. "You are?"

"Yes, we are! Yes, we are! Blastid idjits! Blastid idjits!"

"We—" the voice was apologetic now, "we're sorry."

"You oughta be!"

"We'll come out if ye won't shoot."

"Won't shoot!" Watt snarled. "When I see one of you—"

"Watt!" Colin said sharply, and to the hidden spokesman, "Come on out. We won't shoot."

They emerged from the brush, fourteen lean and sheepish settlers who knew how to handle their firearms even though they were presently fumbling with them. A bearded giant who, in lieu of a shirt, wore a tattered and buttonless jacket said, "The Yanks was here."

Colin said crisply, "They aren't now."

"'Tain't our fault," the big man said truculently.

"And it isn't your fault that some of us aren't dead, either. Where's the fighting?"

"S'all over. The Yanks are runnin' home to Mama. If they get a few more lickin's like that one the war'll be over. You shoulda seen 'em at Ball's Bluff yestiddy—a bunch of girls they was. Tha's Bide Dirksen's cow ya got there."

"Where's Bide Dirksen?"

"Kil't by the Yanks. I'll take the cow."

"The cow," Colin said smoothly, "has just been requisitioned by the Confederate Army."

CHAPTER X

Williamsburg, '62

Colin and his platoon arrived at the city of tents outside Williamsburg just before noon. One of a group of artillerymen loafing beside his field piece called, "Some more purty sojers! They'll make purty corpses, too!"

Johnny Mossmoss stepped forward. The rest of the Hobbs Creek men swung naturally to follow and the men from Wetherly also made ready for battle. It had been an uninteresting winter and they were ready for some excitement.

"Come back here!" Colin ordered.

"Aw, Jedge!" Watt Sackett said plaintively.

"There'll be no brawls. Save your ginger for the Yankees." Then he addressed the artilleryman. "Attention!"

"My!" The artilleryman was less defiant than frightened now. "They got a purty officer, too."

Colin turned to Jason Maxwell. "Sergeant, have a detail arrest that man."

The artilleryman came to clumsy attention, "I was only foolin'."

"Your fooling will get you in trouble one day," Colin snapped. "Where are Colonel Harvey's headquarters?"

"Bender's store."

"Sir!"

"Sir! Bender's store, sir." The artilleryman pointed. "Thar it be."

His men grinned openly at Colin's conquest of the insubordinate artilleryman, but Colin was suddenly weary and depressed. The army outside of Williamsburg was not trained. The men were lounging, sloppy, indifferent and this artilleryman was typical of the group.

He halted in front of Bender's store and turned to his men. "Find a place and set up camp. I'll join you later."

"Sure, Jedge," Ling said easily.

When Colin entered the store the soldiers of various ranks who were busily at work did not even look up at his entrance. Obviously Harvey had chosen a diligent staff.

"Captain Campbell reporting with the Wetherly platoon," he told the soldier on guard.

"One moment, sir." The soldier disappeared. When he returned, he said, "The colonel will see you now, sir."

Colonel Harvey was perhaps thirty years old, but he seemed a tired old man. His face was haggard, his eyes sunken and dark with fatigue. Obviously he was a professional soldier, perhaps a West Point graduate, but he was also a harassed human being who had too much to do and too little with which to do it. He looked up, unsmiling, as Colin said, "Captain Campbell reporting with the Wetherly platoon."

"Ah, yes, Captain, we have been expecting you." Harvey indicated a chair. "Won't you sit down?"

Colin seated himself. Harvey asked, "Do you have any knowledge of the situation here?"

"No, sir."

Harvey sighed and spread a map on top of some scattered papers. He pointed with a piece of paper to a section of the map.

"General McClellan has landed some eighty thousand troops here on the James and, according to our intelligence, more are on the way. Their ultimate objective, of course, is Richmond. If they succeed in taking it, it's obvious that they'll be endangering the whole Confederate cause."

"I understand."

"McClellan is waiting for reinforcements before he tries to take Yorktown. He doesn't know, of course, that it has already been evacuated. We hope to draw him on into the swamp area here between the Chickahominy and the Pamunkey rivers and take a stand somewhere in this area." He pointed with his pencil. "General Powell is coming to reinforce us. Johnston has been severely wounded."

"I understand."

"What do you understand?" Harvey asked sharply.

"That we stop McClellan before Richmond."

"You *do* understand." Harvey permitted himself a fleeting smile. "Do you have any questions?"

"How much fighting has there been?"

"A lot—and all to our advantage so far. There will be much more before the fate of Richmond is decided."

"Where do I report now?"

"Your platoon will be directly under Major Andrews. Report to him."

"Today, sir?"

"Tomorrow will be all right. I'll send a scout to guide you. He has taken up a position on Dynamite Hill. Meanwhile draw rations from Major Scott over there."

"Are there any doctors in camp?"

"Surely you have no wounded? I understood your platoon has been sitting tight all winter and spring."

"No wounded. Only sore feet."

Harvey shook his head sadly. "The doctors are all with the wounded near Richmond. The best I can offer is simple first aid."

Colin, who did not want Clem Faraday in the hands of an ignorant corpsman, said hastily, "We'll get along."

"Good luck, Captain."

"Thank you, sir."

Colin left the store and Ling Stewart eased from the shadows to accost him. "How'd you make out, Jedge?"

"We're moving into the front lines tomorrow."

"Good!" Ling said feelingly. "Don't care much for this place. I came to show you where we're at."

The Wetherly platoon had encamped in a vacant lot. The wagon was drawn up, the mules were tied to it and a fire blazed. Darnley Hamlin brought Colin a plate heaped high with scrambled eggs and fluffy biscuits and handed him a cup of hot coffee. Colin stared in astonishment. In a place where there should be little flour, no eggs, and certainly no coffee, the Wetherly platoon had produced an abundance of all.

At daybreak the next morning a weary-looking scout who carried his rifle as though it were an extension of his arm, shuffled into camp and saluted sloppily.

Obviously no waster of words, he said, "C'mon."

Colin asked, "Are you taking us to Major Andrews?"

"Yep."

Past the staring soldiers, they started south from Williamsburg. Colin shuddered. The stares were neither apathetic nor meaningless. Rather, it was as though men watching others depart for the battle lines were silently congratulating themselves because they did not have to go. They passed clearings where farmers who still had horses were using them to work their farms, and those who had none were working by hand. Women and children toiled beside their men, and nobody bothered to look up. Passing soldiers were too familiar a sight to command attention.

Three hours later they reached a farmhouse with a dozen wagons standing outside. There was a picket line of horses and of mules, and soldiers bustled about.

The scout said, "Here y'are."

Colin met Major Andrews, a black-haired man who fulfilled his army duties with the same grim persistence that he had formerly devoted to civilian affairs.

He nodded briefly. "Leave your wagon here and relieve Lieutenant Trevor on Dynamite Hill, Captain."

"Where's Dynamite Hill?"

Andrews pointed. "Right over there."

Colin stared wonderingly at Dynamite Hill, a wooded knoll exactly like a dozen he had known at Hobbs Creek. Again he had to force his mind to grasp the realities of war. One rode horses on such hills and ran hound packs on them. One definitely did not climb them for the purpose of killing other men; there was nothing whatsoever on such a hill worth even a fist fight.

Andrews asked impatiently, "Do you understand, Captain?"

"I understand." Colin turned to Jason Maxwell. "Sergeant, you and Clem Faraday stay here to guard the mules and wagon."

"Captain!" There was anguish in Jason Maxwell's eyes.

"It's an order," Colin said firmly.

"Yes, Captain."

Colin and the rest of his men filed up Dynamite Hill. They met Lieutenant Trevor and his bored platoon and learned that none of the enemy had been sighted. Then they took up positions. They stole sheepish glances at each other and were embarrassed. It made no more sense to wait on Dynamite Hill than it did to drill at Wetherly barracks, and the first hour was a fretful one.

Then Ling said, "Look, Jedge."

At first Colin did not see, and then he did. There were men on the hill facing theirs, men who carried rifles and wore blue uniforms, and they were slowly but purposefully advancing. Colin's tongue went dry in his mouth and his eyes burned. Surely the Yankees did not intend to come on, to kill and be killed. They would turn back.

"Get down, Jedge!" Ling whispered.

Colin crouched behind a tree, and he noted that all his men had taken cover. He heard rifle and musket fire break out in adjoining positions, but kept his entranced eyes on the attacking enemy. They reached the foot of the hill ahead of Colin's unit and they started up Dynamite Hill. Colin was aware of his men shooting and knew that he himself fired his 58 Worthington, but he did not know if he hit anyone. He watched a blue-clad Yankee, shot through the neck, spin around and around and finally crumple in a heap. He heard bullets singing near.

Then the Yankees were gone, running back up their hill and disappearing among the trees. Colin was brought out of shock by Ling's furious, "Jedge!"

Colin turned to see Tom Tyler lying on his back. There was a hole in his forehead, a tiny hole that surely could not harm a man grown, and a drop of blood formed near it. Without uttering a sound, Colin felt that he was screaming. There was something he must do about this, something he had to do. Then he knew what it was, and his speech to Hope Tyler

formed in his mind even as he became aware that Tom was dead.

They held Dynamite Hill for three days. For the sake of that small hill, Tom Tyler and McDonald Murdock were dead, Marvin Teague had lost his left arm at the elbow and Johnny Moss was crippled for life. They had defended this insignificant hill, and now they were abandoning it to the Yankees. A new line would be formed nearer Williamsburg.

Back in camp, which now seemed a model of order and luxury, Colin was told Colonel Harvey wanted to see him at once. Without stopping even to wash, Colin rushed to Bender's store.

There was sympathy in the colonel's haggard face as Colin reported in. "It was rough, eh?" he asked. "And yet, you know, when the history of this war is written, the skirmishes around Dynamite Hill will be considered one of the many infinitesimal victories that made up a victorious battle."

"Victory?" Colin asked dazedly.

"There is usually nothing grand and glorious about victory. It simply means that a few more men were killed on one side than on another, a slightly better position gained. But I did not summon you here to tell you this." He looked directly into Colin's eyes. "I've had a telegram from your brother Macklyn, under whom I've had the honor of serving. Your father has had a stroke and is not expected to live."

Colin gasped.

Colonel Harvey murmured his sympathy. "Your brother asks that you be allowed to go home on a short leave. I can grant you a leave now. We are re-grouping now and so are the Yanks, and the trains are running from Richmond to Denbury."

Colin could not take it all in. "How—" he began.

Colonel Harvey rose and shook his hand. "You'd better leave right away for Richmond. Please extend my sympathy to your brother and his wife. Here is your pass."

Colin wired from Richmond that he would be in Denbury the next day and Betsie was at the station to meet him. For a moment he hardly knew her, she was so changed. Her face was drawn with lines of anxiety and sorrow. Her hair was streaked with gray. But her carriage was proud as she walked quickly toward Colin and her welcoming hug was as affectionate as ever. When they pulled back from their embrace to scrutinize each other, Colin saw that there were tears running down her cheeks.

"Oh, Colin," she said, "I'm so glad you're here. But you are too late to see your father. He died yesterday. Your telegram arrived an hour or so before he died, and it made him happy to know that you were all right and that you were coming. He fell asleep with a smile on his lips and never woke up. He had been fearful—you see, we are doubly stricken."

"Doubly stricken?" Colin mumbled, his tongue thick and his throat choked with sorrow.

"Your father's stroke was brought on by the news that Ralph had been killed in action."

Betsie and Macklyn's only son! He had no words to express his compassion as he pressed her to him and cried. Death in old age brought with it a grief softened by inevitability, but the death of a boy killed in battle was only harsh. Colin raged against fate, against the cruelty and stupidity of men. No wonder Betsie wept. She would weep whenever she thought of the baby boy she had held in her arms, the child she had raised to manhood, the proud young cadet she had sent to war.

"Betsie," he said finally, "if I had known—why didn't you let me know sooner? Is Macklyn here? Were you alone through all this?"

"Macklyn came two days ago and sent for you as soon as he arrived. He has been in the West, in Tennessee where the war has been going badly, and he couldn't get away sooner. He is waiting at Quail Wings for us—we should go."

They climbed into the carriage. Toby, with a sympathetic smile on his face held the door for them. At a glance, Colin saw that the carriage needed paint and that Toby's livery was frayed. The horses looked bony and overworked.

Settling into the cushions, he took Betsie's hand and asked, "When did you get the news of Ralph?"

"Two weeks ago. He had been put in charge of a company of marines and they were chasing Tom Dare who had commandeered a frigate—"

"Tom Dare! What has he got to do with it?" Colin asked.

"Well, you know he had been in charge of the supply center at Dare's Landing and naturally a good deal of money went through his hands. He evidently decided that he had backed the losing side and if he wanted to keep his fortune intact he had better get away quickly. Jeannie went with him."

Colin remembered a conversation with Tom Dare before the war, nearly two years ago, in which Tom had said, "The South cannot possibly win." "Do you remember that Christmas dinner at Quail Wings when Tom was so full of Southern patriotism?" he asked Betsie. "I reminded him then that he was contradicting his previous views. But why should he go to all that trouble? He could have gone north at any time before the war started and even afterward. He could have acquired safe conduct."

"He not only deserted, Colin. He took Confederate gold with him. Before the war he must have thought out his pose as a rabid rebel. Anyway, that's why they sent a ship after him. The ship was sunk with all hands lost." In a muffled voice she added, "And Ralph was on the ship."

"Anything for a dollar, honest or dishonest," Colin said bitterly. "And that Ralph should die because of that sneaking—"

"Don't!" Betsie interrupted. "Please, now that you know the whole story, let's not talk of it any more. I can learn to face the fact that Ralph is dead but I can't bear to think about the episode itself."

"I understand, Betsie." She was right. To dwell on the injustice of fate was to go mad. "How had things been at Quail Wings before this happened?" he asked in an attempt to find more solid ground.

"It's been lonely, of course," Betsie answered, "but your father and I were too busy to mope. Several of the slaves ran away and went north. Most of them your father loaned to the government for factory work in Norfolk. There are only five left at Quail Wings now—and only one for the house. So, of course, there was plenty of work for both of us."

"That house is so huge," Colin said.

"We closed off all but five rooms last fall when it got cold. But even so—"

Colin glanced at her hands. The nails were broken; the skin was roughened. He took them and raised them to his lips. "You are a wonder, Betsie," he said.

Knowing how brief their time together would be, Colin left Betsie and Macklyn to themselves as much as he could until after the funeral. After crowded army life, with its absolute lack of privacy, he was glad to be by himself. Riding through the fields, most of them now gone to weeds, on the elderly mare which was the best mount Quail Wings stables now provided, he silently nursed his grief.

Macklyn had to get back to his command in Tennessee immediately after the funeral. But before he left the two brothers went into their father's study together. Colin had an idea he wanted to propose to Macklyn before he left.

"I'm worried about Betsie," he told Macklyn. "With Linda out West and Lorena working in the hospital at Richmond, she'll be so alone now that Father's gone. I'd like to suggest that she stay at Campbell Hill. It's safer up in the mountains and Zack and Nell would love to have her there. She'd have an easier time of it."

"It's very kind of you to suggest it, Colin," Macklyn answered. He looked so worn by care and sorrow that Colin wondered he could make the effort to speak, but his fine dark eyes still shone with pride and intelligence. "By all means suggest it to her. It would relieve me a good deal if she would do it, but I'm quite sure she won't. She'll feel it's her duty to stay here as custodian of Quail Wings."

"I'll try to persuade her, anyway," Colin answered. "Before you leave, could you give me a rough picture of how the war is going? I only know what's happening in front of my own nose and that seems on the whole successful."

"Yes, the fighting goes well for us in Virginia," Macklyn answered. "But we are losing on other fronts. Soon we will be completely blockaded unless by some miracle we manage to maintain our hold on the Mississippi. It takes a while to

feel the effects, but when the blockade is complete we will be slowly squeezed into submission. It is clear now that England will not help us. It isn't hopeless yet, but I'm afraid it soon will be."

Colin groaned. This was what he had feared before the war ever began.

Macklyn stood up, his back held straight and proud. "I'll say goodbye to Betsie and then I must go. It has been wonderful to see you for this little time, even if we were brought together by father's death. In a way, I am glad he died now—that he did not live to see what I fear is in store for us." Macklyn had not once referred to his son's death in the two days Colin had been at Quail Wings.

"Yes, he was too old and too stubborn to adjust easily—and too proud to accept defeat."

Macklyn grasped Colin's hand. "Goodbye, Colin. Good luck!"

"God bless you, Macklyn. Goodbye!"

Colin himself would have to take the train back to Richmond the following night. He wanted to visit Campbell Hill before he left, and he must have a glimpse of Ann to carry back with him. He proposed to Betsie that she should come with him—it would be a change for her and their last chance to be together. And, once there, he hoped to persuade her to stay.

Betsie came with him gladly. Their progress was slow on the old horses at their disposal—they had, in fact, to change horses at Wetherly—and they talked of many things. A little color crept into Betsie's cheeks and a smile played on her lips as they recalled happier times. And, finally, something of the old teasing Betsie came back as she asked Colin, "How is Ann Stewart?"

"That is my most important reason for coming."

"I thought so. You haven't changed then?"

"No. I think I never will."

"I can't blame you. She is a rare person and a lovely one."

Colin had only a few hours to spend at Campbell Hill, and he had much to do. First, he sent Zack for McDonald Murdock's wife, a stolid woman whose silent sorrow might be a comfort to Hope Tyler. Then he took the two women into his study and told them gently that their husbands had been killed and that they had died bravely in helping to secure a Confederate victory. As he had thought, the two widows, one young and timid, the other middle-aged and phlegmatic, each gained comfort from companionship.

Then he took time to visit a little with Zack and Nell and Dab and Elva, to pat Robin on the nose and offer him a carrot and to examine Dab's vegetable garden and Nell's rose bushes. Campbell Hill, at least, was thriving.

At last he went to Ann. To his surprise, he met her halfway to the Stewart clearing. She sat beneath a huge pine as if she were waiting.

"Ann!" he called in astonishment.

She smiled at him as he hastily dismounted and came to her side. "I knew you were coming, Colin. Those hounds of yours don't bark like that for anyone but you."

He could only look and look at her, her cheeks flushed with pleasure and her eyes sparkling with excitement. As she gazed back at him, the smile slowly faded from her lips and she said, "Colin, what is it? You look almost ill. What has happened?"

"It's not Ling," he assured her quickly, sitting down beside her. "He was fine four days ago when I last saw him." He went on to tell her about Dynamite Hill, and about Ralph and his father. She watched him anxiously.

"Oh, how terrible!" she said softly when he had finished. "I'm so sorry for you, Colin, and for Betsie and your brother. And for Hope and—" She fought to keep back her tears, closing her eyes in the effort.

Colin's arms were around her and they clung to one another in tenderness and sorrow, wordless at first and then murmuring all the endearments they had held back for so long.

At the sound of a twig cracking, they drew apart hastily. Why must he conceal, Colin thought bitterly, a feeling that was as natural to him as breathing? In a moment, Enos Pollard came into view, a rifle slung over his shoulder. To Colin's amazement, he called out a greeting and waved to them before disappearing into the woods. Colin turned to Ann. "Your father is a different person," he said. "What has happened to him?"

Ann smiled. "Yes," she said, "that is the only good result of the war that I can think of. Evidently the responsibility that was put on him when Ling went away has slowly strengthened his mind. Soon after Ling left he began to do things—little things at first—on his own. Now he's so much recovered that he often tells *me* what to do. I'm glad now that I had the money you paid for the house put in his name. I've always believed this would happen some day."

"I've worried about how lonely it was for you," Colin said. "Can you talk things over with him?"

"Oh, yes. He still has long, silent spells now and then but most often we chatter away like anyone else. We have many years of silence to make up for."

"That's the best possible news I could take back to Ling. How are the boys? He'll want to know all about them. I wish I had time to see them myself but I have to leave Denbury for Richmond tonight."

"Tell him the boys are fine. I've taught Jeffrey to read and Lingo is growing like a weed. We've acquired a wife for their dog and the puppies are due now. The boys are terribly excited about that. But they miss Ling and talk of him all the time."

"I'll tell him, Ann." He took her hand. "I must start back now. Will you walk with me to Campbell Hill? Betsie is there and I know she would like to see you. I'm hoping to persuade her to stay there now that she's alone at Quail Wings."

"Oh, I wish she would. Yes, I'll walk with you."

"How does your father feel about my having bought the house? Was he upset?"

"He's very pleased that it's in good hands."

Just before they reached the clearing at Campbell Hill, they turned to one another to make their real farewell. It was wordless—they dared not speak what their wildly beating hearts would have them say. They clung together in one brief, desperate embrace. The past was dead; the future might not exist. Because of the terrible yesterdays and the threatening tomorrows, they would be forgiven this moment.

CHAPTER XI

Interlude

Ling worried when he went into a fight. He did not worry for himself, or that he might be killed, because every creature that did not die naturally was sure to be killed. But, without him, what would happen to Ann and his two sons? That was the question tormenting him. Although Ann's father had recovered, he was not a young man; he couldn't be depended on.

A dozen times he had tried to talk to Colin about Ann, but he could not. One man did not tell another man, "I know you're in love with my wife. I saw it in your eyes before you knew it yourself. I can't blame you because I'm in love with her, too, though I never knew how much till I had to go away from her. If I knew you would take care of Ann and our sons, I would rest easy in my mind, no matter how many fights I got into."

A man did not say such things, and, unsaid, they weighed on Ling.

Not even his deep anxiety for his family drove Ling to the brink of insanity like the deadly routine of camping during the long waits between battles. To escape that maddening inactivity, he and his two companions, Watt Sackett and Tracey Hamlin, were now twenty miles behind Union lines, flirting openly with death. If they were caught, they instantly would be shot. The rules of war did not apply to raiders who gave up the protection of a uniform for the obscurity of ordinary dark clothing. Colin had forbidden these raids, but he had yet to find a way to prevent them.

The night was dimly lit by a thin slice of moon which shone through occasional openings in fleecy white clouds. They were not storm clouds but they presaged a storm. A thin, cold wind plucked ghoulishly at the few leaves left on the artillery-battered trees. A fire winked in the distance. Did men huddle around it for cheer and warmth? Or was it a trap, a decoy to lure night-raiding Rebs into the rifle fire of alert Yankees?

Ling's hand stole to the sheathed knife at his belt. A knife was the best weapon for this sort of work; shooting attracted attention and any action was certain to be at close quarters. At the same time, Ling wondered uneasily what had come over him. Running the forest at home, he had never bothered to feel his knife or look to his rifle, for he had always known whether the knife was there, whether the rifle was loaded, and if it needed fresh priming. They were merely minor details that had never worried him. The change went far deeper.

On Hobbs Creek, he had helped to repel an occasional party of pillaging Cherokees or white renegades. He had fought with savage enthusiasm, and he had shot any raider with the feeling that it was the right thing to do. Although he had thought he would do the same in war and kill Yankees just as happily, there was a vast difference.

He had discovered this discrepancy on Dynamite Hill, where he had killed one of the advancing Yankees with his first shot, reloaded, killed a second, reloaded again, and wounded a third while the Yankees were retreating. Even while he was reloading for his second victim, and despite the fact that his aim did not falter as he shot, he knew that this was and always would be a distasteful task.

It had taken Ling, who still shot with deadly precision in battle, a long while to understand why he shuddered every time he killed a Yankee. Now he knew that the Cherokees and renegades who came to Hobbs Creek threatened not only him but also his family. He could kill them with as little compunction as he crushed the heads of the rattlesnakes that occasionally ventured into his yard.

The Yankees posed no direct threat to Ling and his family. They were not like rattlesnakes. They were just men like himself. Though Ling could not understand the reasons for war, he finally understood why Colin considered it senseless.

Suddenly he heard Watt Sackett whisper, "What do you think, Tracey?"

"Can't see 'nough to know. We'll have to get closer."

"How 'bout you, Ling?"

"Let's move up."

The cold wind, making hollow and ghostly noises in the shell-shredded trees, sighed in their faces, plucked at their cheeks and moaned away in search of something else to play with. In the darkness, they almost stumbled over a cannon tipped on its side and their feet sank into the soft earth of the graves that had been recently dug for the cannon's dead

crew. Ling's hand slipped again to his knife and, even though he found it comforting, a cold dread gripped his heart. He could not avoid what he was doing any more than Watt and Tracey could avoid their actions, but he did not want to use that knife on a fellow human.

As they neared the fire, Ling fought a great desire to turn back. He did not fear what was ahead, but if Colin were with him now, he knew he would be able to speak the words that had for so long been in his heart. But Colin was not with him and there was no turning back. There never was. They could now see the fire plainly, built from trunks and branches of the shelled trees. On the ground rested ten shadowy lumps that were ten men sleeping and, far enough from the fire so that only their outlines showed, a dozen horses stood on a picket line. Counting one man for each horse, there were twelve men. Ten slept while two stood guard.

Tracey whispered, "They must be rec-roots."

"It don't follow," Ling contradicted. "We jest happen to be a smart hop behin't their lines. They don't expect no prowlin' here'bouts."

"That's it. That's it," Watt Sackett agreed.

The wind, passing by, continued to feel at their faces as though seeking something it might snatch away before going on. One of the sleeping men rose, took a pipe from his pocket, filled it, lighted it with a brand from the fire, and sat down to puff contentedly.

The conviction strengthened in Ling's mind that Tracey was at least partly right. These men, a Union cavalry patrol, might not be raw recruits but they lacked experience, for they had picketed their horses on the downwind side of the fire. The wind itself would help muffle any noises arising from the picket line.

"Le's try for the picket line," Watt whispered.

Tracey said caustically, "Now ain't you the smarty-pants? What'd we come for?"

Ling whispered, "You got to beller, go find 'nother bull."

No further conversation was necessary. This was an old story, one that each of the three knew by heart. All knew their parts so well that there was no need for rehearsal. Because he was short, Watt Sackett might aim at the throat and seize the shoulders instead. Ling and Tracey alternated in knocking the guards out—it must always be done silently—before they raided. If there were two guards, each took one. Watt, a farmer with both a genius and familiarity in handling animals, quieted the aroused horses or mules until the three were able to get under way. If there were more than two guards, they gave up and sought another Yankee camp that offered better chances for success. They walked now towards the picket line, hidden by darkness.

One of the two sentries joined the man who was smoking beside the fire. The other sat disconsolately on a pile of saddles with his back turned to the cold wind. Ling became more certain that these soldiers lacked battle experience. It was a long way back to the Rebel lines but, even so, the horses should have been saddled and ready. Frequently, in a single flying attack, the Rebels had swept farther than this and seasoned veterans were always ready for anything.

It was Ling's turn to quiet the sentry, and Tracey and Watt waited expectantly as he slithered forward on his belly. Silent as a crawling snake in soft earth, he never averted his eyes from the sentry, who still kept his back to the wind. Then another great and troubling worry began to torture him. He hoped he would not have to kill the sentry. It was far better simply to steal the horses without killing anyone. If those thefts alarmed the Yankees, and forced them to alert more watches and station more men behind the front lines, they might even serve a military purpose.

Ling cared little about this matter. He was unable—few men possess such an ability—to see the war in its entirety. He was just one individual in the southern army pitted against his counterpart in the northern corps.

Now he could plainly see the men around the fire, and he heard them talking. Partly because they were still some distance away, and partly because he was concentrating on the sentry, their voices came to him only in low-pitched murmurs. Ling drew the knife with a heavy hilt from its sheath and made ready to throw it.

Accidentally he put his hand on a dead stick that cracked sharply beneath his weight. He halted breathlessly, wondering

what the noise might provoke, and raised himself so that he would be able to spring erect and throw his knife better.

The sentry, little more than a boy, leaped from his pile of saddles and called sharply, "Who's there?"

"See somethin', Buster?" one of the men near the fire called, and the other turned to stare toward the picket line.

"Heard something," Buster replied.

"Want we should have a look-see?"

"Wait."

Sixty seconds dragged by like sixty hours, and presently Buster turned toward the fire.

"Reckon it was nothing."

Ling crawled hurriedly forward. The young sentry had been alerted and assured himself that it was just a false alarm. For the next few seconds he would not be quite as keen as he had been. Now was the time. Flipping the knife so the blade was in his hand, Ling was almost upon him before he turned. Using the hilt of his knife as a club, Ling smashed it down on the boy's head. Instantly Ling dropped the knife to encircle his throat with his muscular hands. Already dazed, presently the sentry went limp as a fresh-killed deer and Ling eased the gasping boy down to the ground.

As though they had sprung from the earth itself, Watt and Tracey were beside him. They had already taken three bridles from the pile near the saddles and Tracey pressed one into Ling's hand. Then, even while he soothed the nervous horses with soft words, Watt chose a mount and began to bridle it; there was no time for saddles.

Ling selected a bay, one with only a small white star on its forehead. Marked in this way, it would be an obscure target. Leading his horse, he walked softly along the picket line and helped cut the tie ropes of the others.

"Ready?" he asked softly.

"Ready," Watt whispered.

"Set," Tracey said.

Ling vaulted to the back of his startled mount and kicked him in the ribs. He whirled behind the freed horses and yelled, "Eee-eee!"

One of the soldiers sitting beside the fire jumped up and fired his rifle. The bullet sang past Ling's ear, and had he known nothing about bullets, he might have supposed that he had narrowly escaped death. But the bullet missed by at least six inches, a comfortable margin. Sleeping men scrambled up and someone shouted inanely. Ling dropped far enough behind the running horses to see how Watt and Tracey were faring, and when he saw them hurrying but not frantic, he kicked his horse into a gallop.

Six rifles cracked. Five more fired at sporadic intervals, but the surprised and probably frightened soldiers were aiming at shadows. Ling could see by the muzzle flashes that at least four of the rifles were aimed at right angles to the fleeing men.

One of the driven horses stumbled and went down. His high-pitched whistle of fear was startlingly loud in the night. The other horses pounded around their fallen comrade. Ling neither paused nor thought of going back. If they did not get out of here quickly they would lose their stolen mounts, and their lives. If they maintained a gallop, it was unlikely that more horses would go down because horses have an instinct rather than an eye for obstacles. Even in darkness, when driven full speed, what they cannot go through or over, they go around.

Descending a low ridge that effectively screened the fire, Ling drew to a walk. The horse that had fallen, obviously not seriously hurt, caught up and trotted past to join his companions. No longer driven, the others fell to a trot and then a walk. Ling swerved his mount to where Watt and Tracey had already joined forces.

"Horse thieves!" he scoffed. "You two have really sunk lowdown! I mistrust a rattlesnake won't talk to you when we get back to Hobbs Crick!"

"Sure!" Watt agreed. "Sure, sure, sure! An' who helped us steal hosses?"

"An' who ever heard of a rattlesnake talkin'?" Tracey demanded.

"Halt!"

The ringing challenge came out of the darkness, and Ling reined his horse to a slower walk as his hand dipped again to the hilt of his knife. Tracey and Watt swung away, so that a volley would not cut all three of them down. Ling strained his eyes into the gloom.

Presently he saw their challenger, a shadow in the darkness, and when the thin slice of moon shone briefly through an opening in the clouds, moonlight glinted on bayonets. There were a considerable number of men, almost certainly Union soldiers, and they were directly across the line of march that the horses must take.

Ling put a quaver in his voice, "If you be Rebs, leave us come in and give up."

"We ain't Rebs."

"Neither be we. We're bringin' horses from Bromley Haddonfield and Gener'l Martin says we should bring these on to Cunnel Eustace. He wants 'em real bad."

"Why'nt ya say so in the fust place?" the man snapped.

"Would if we'd knowed who ya was."

"Ya know now! Eustace is 'bout a quarter mile ahead an' a quarter east. Watch out ya don't blunder into the Reb lines."

"We'll be careful."

Making no attempt to hide, the three drove their pillaged horses past. Ling grinned to himself. The simulated call of a lonesome hen turkey would usually deceive a gobbler in quest of a mate, but turkeys were not the only creatures that could be deceived. Men could, too, if one used the right words, and Colonel Eustace commanded the regiment in this sector facing the Wetherly platoon. It was very sociable of the Yankee, Ling reflected, to tell them exactly where Eustace might be found. One half hour before dawn, they were back in their own camp.

The camp was pitched on a wooded hill. For the most part it was a tent city, but some men, including all those from Hobbs Creek, preferred bark-thatched huts that were warmer in cool weather than tents, cooler in the heat, and in which stone chimneys and fireplaces were easier to build. The camp fronted a grassy meadow where bored sentries stood at intervals.

Darnley Hamlin, sentry for the Wetherly platoon, hooted at them and yelled, "Ain't ya got 'nough trouble 'thout stirrin' more up? The Jedge's mad as a banty rooster."

"Where is he?"

"In his shanty. Git up there 'fore he comes down here."

They rode to Colin's cabin. Jason Maxwell, who had finally been permitted to fight and had come through twelve battles without a mishap, looked sidewise at them and continued to mend his shoes. The hard-driven horses were eager to wander into the meadow and crop grass. Colin stormed out of his hut.

"Where have you three been?"

Ling reddened, looking at the ground, and shuffled his feet. "Jest 'round," he said.

"Have you been raiding again?"

"'Twan't a raid!" Tracey protested. "We was jest jauntin' up to camp when we see these hosses runnin' loose an' we thought—"

"Yes," Colin said caustically, "you thought, 'here are some horses whose owners must be dead. Being patriotic citizens and soldiers of the Confederacy, we'll take them to someone who can use them.' Is that it?"

Watt Sackett said happily, "That's it! That's it!"

"And I suppose you weren't behind Yankee lines?"

"A mite," Ling admitted.

"Next time this happens all three of you will be ordered to the guard house and kept in solitary. I mean it!" He stalked off furiously.

They knew that he meant what he said. And they also knew that the threat of the guard house wouldn't stop them from raiding again.

CHAPTER XII

Disaster

In the column filing past, men had their feet wrapped in blankets, rags, cow hides, or anything else they had been able to find. Of those who had shoes, some carried them and some wore them. One of the latter was jeering at a gaunt and bearded soldier who carried his shoes in his left hand and his rifle in his right as he trudged along the dusty road.

"Right nice of ya to save 'em, Sammy. When ya get yerself kil't, kin I have 'em? Huh? Kin I?"

The gaunt soldier made no reply. The years of war were not anything that might be counted on the fingers of one hand but something to be reckoned in ages, and the bearded soldier had been marching throughout all of them. He had heard a million cannons roar, a million rifles crack, a million bits of advice, and all he really wanted was some place where he might sit down, rest his aching feet, and fill his empty stomach.

Carrying his shoes was a mechanical action, something he did without thinking, for the routine of war had been so relentlessly hammered into his brain that he no longer found it necessary to think. The pattern was invariably the same; fight, rest, march, and fight again. It was logical that shoes wore out on the feet and did not wear if carried in the hand. A man should not wear them if he could be barefoot. Eventually he would find himself in a position where the unshod could not run and were, therefore, killed or captured.

Save for an occasional new uniform that stood out like a mirror sparkling in the sun—the mark of a newly arrived recruit—the soldiers' clothing was faded and patched with strips of canvas, blankets or cloth. The column's artillery, mud-spattered and weather-worn, was pulled, not by the big sleek horses that had so briskly wheeled the cannons into position when the war started, but by spiritless nags. The supply wagons were battered; on those with tops, the canvas was sagging and patched. The horses and mules assigned to transport would have been scorned by the poorest farmer before the war. The officers, scarcely distinguishable from the men, were also walking.

Colin's eyes were bitter as the column filed past. This was what he had envisioned when the first war clouds appeared. Men had been killed or injured permanently; wives and children, mothers and fathers, were bereft and heartbroken; goods had been wasted and much property had been ruined. The war had exacted a price that nobody could ever pay.

Colin no longer retained even a faint doubt that the Confederacy must suffer defeat; the South had little left except a steadily weakening will to fight. The best they could hope for were lenient terms; even the brilliant General Lee was fighting battles of desperation. Colin glanced at the ground and smiled sardonically.

It was he who had undertaken to lead the Wetherly platoon into battle on the assumption that they would fare well under his leadership. Of the men who had gathered at the Wetherly barracks only himself, Ling, Tracey, Watt, and Jason Maxwell remained. The rest—only two days ago they had laid young Clem Faraday in an unmarked grave on the unnamed hill where he had fallen—were either dead or at home, wounded.

Colin hailed a passing soldier so young that his beard was hardly visible. "Tommy, will you tell Sergeant Maxwell that I want to see him?"

"Right away, Captain."

The young soldier scooted off, and a few minutes later Jason Maxwell presented himself to Colin. Of the men from the original platoon, only Jason remained unchanged by war. Deadly in battle, but compassionate to friend and enemy alike when battle was over, and always devout, Jason was the one man Colin knew who had found himself in war. "Yes, Captain?" he now asked.

"Any word from Ling, Tracey and Watt?"

"No, sir."

"This is the sixth day they have been missing. They never go for more than two or three days," Colin said anxiously.

"I know, Captain. I still don't see how they managed to get away. I wish I had locked 'em up."

"It isn't your fault."

"Shall I send a scout to find them?"

"No. Even if we were able to spare one, it's pointless to risk a scout, too. But they're under arrest when they return."

"Yes, Captain."

"How is the platoon?"

"No worse than you'd expect, sir."

"Is anyone ill?"

"Private Haplan is subject to fevers. Of course, he's sixty-eight years old. He should be sent home, for his own sake and our's too. He slows all of us up."

"We have several who find it hard going, don't we?"

"Yes, but none as bad as Haplan." Jason Maxwell, who remembered the Wetherly platoon when no other unit in the army could march farther or faster, smiled sadly.

"I'll see Colonel Andrews and have Private Haplan sent home," Colin promised.

He wondered why Andrews, the same tenacious man the Wetherly platoon had first met on Dynamite Hill, should have come unscathed through bitter fighting when so many other good men had been killed. He never spared himself, was always to be found where the fighting was hottest and always led by example. Colin shrugged. Just as inexplicably, neither he nor Jason Maxwell had suffered even a minor wound. He did not have the answer. Probably the soldier's assumption that you died when the bullet or shell had your name on it was as good an explanation as any.

Colin glanced toward the road up which Ling and Tracey and Watt would come if they returned. His worry mounted. He had warned them that they would be thrown in the guardhouse if they made any more of their raids, and within their hearing he had told Jason Maxwell to arrest them if they tried to leave camp. But they had gone. Sick at heart, he rose and made his way to Colonel Andrews' tent.

He found Andrews bent over a map spread out upon a makeshift table. The years and his promotion from Major to Colonel had changed him little. But shared hardships and perils had taught both Colin and Andrews deep mutual respect and had done away with the formality that originally both had observed with care.

Andrews said companionably, "Hello, Colin."

"Good morning, Len. How goes it?"

"Couldn't be better." If Andrews were the last man in the Confederate Army, he would still fight. "What's on your mind?"

"I have a man, Private Haplan, who should be sent home."

"Can he get up to the front?"

"Probably, but he'll never get away if we have to skip."

"We have quite a few who aren't exactly agile."

"A sick man cannot shoot accurately."

"That's true," Andrews agreed, "and we have no ammunition to waste. Send Haplan home. Anything else new?"

"Ling Stewart, Watt Sackett and Tracey Hamlin aren't back yet."

Andrews nodded. "One of these days those raiding boys of yours are going to walk into a hornet's nest and get stung. Why didn't you stop them?"

"I ordered their arrest if they tried to leave, but they slipped out."

"Well, I don't see what you can do about that. Are you going to arrest them when they come back?"

"I am."

"Good. We can't have every man in this army fighting the war his own way. Also, we have undertaken some strategic retreats of late. I believe Lee's luring the Yankees into a trap."

"I hope so."

"Why don't you get some Major's stripes for your uniform, Colin? You could."

Colin grinned. "I'm too weak to hold them up."

"You and your blasted platoon." Andrews matched Colin's grin. "Is there some reason why you must stick with it?"

"Yes."

"You don't care to advance, to cover yourself with glory, to emerge as one of the distinguished heroes of this war?"

"That's right."

"Well, go ahead and send Haplan home."

"How about a replacement?"

Andrews said dubiously, "We're not exactly overburdened with replacements. All I will promise is the best I can do."

"Thanks. Thanks a lot."

"You're welcome, Colin."

Colin returned to his quarters, sent for Jason Maxwell, and asked, "Will you send Private Haplan in?"

Haplan shuffled in, a tall, gaunt man whose thinning hair and straggly beard seemed always to have been brown streaked with gray. His eyes were watery, his chin small, his leathery face wrinkled, and he gave the impression that, when noses were allotted, there had been a very small one left for Private Haplan. A farmer by trade, he was ill at ease even in this tattered splendor, which was the best Colin could present. "Ya sent fer me, Cap'n?"

"What's your first name, Private?" he asked gently.

"Ira, Cap'n."

"Well, Ira, you're going home."

"T'see my missus?" Haplan inquired eagerly.

"To stay."

"But—" He was bewildered. "But I come to shoot the Yanks that kil't m'two boys an' Arno. He's m'daughter's man."

"I know." Colin remained gentle. He did not want to hurt this man if he could avoid doing so. "But war is war and an army must travel."

"I think so," Haplan said miserably. "Knowed I was slowin' 'em down even when I wa'nt ailin'." Then he brightened. "All right, Cap'n. I can't fight, but I'll go plant crops fer them as can."

He extended a gnarled hand. Colin shook it. Ira Haplan said feelingly, "Bye, Cap'n, an' may the Lord bless ya'."

"And you."

"I'll ask Parson Skelts to say a word fer ya' ever' day."

"Thank you, Private Haplan."

When he left, Colin sat down and stared at the tent wall. Was there a time before the war began, he wondered? There must have been, for there had once been many healthy young men. Now the world around him was made up largely of the

old, the unfit and the very young. But even the very young were not young any more. Human age was measured in experience, and even though they might still be in their teens, the very young men who faced each other across the battle lines were older than their grandfathers.

The next morning, the Wetherly platoon went back into battle. Colin's heart was heavy as he led his men forward. Watt, Tracey and Ling were still missing. Except for Jason Maxwell and himself, his command consisted of old men and young boys. The slaughter of the innocents, he thought. They were not veterans, though about half had been involved in one or more minor skirmishes.

Andrews dropped back to walk beside him. Colin warmed to this man who could not conceive of letting go. Andrews peered from beneath his jutting black brows.

"Maybe we'll get 'em this time," he said.

"And maybe we won't."

"Don't be a pessimist, Colin. War's done a lot to us. But it has not left them unscarred."

Colin inclined his head backwards. "Take another look at our army."

"Bullets fired by fourteen- and sixty-year-olds are just as deadly," Andrews pointed out. "Besides, this has become an orphan outfit. We still have some crack troops."

"We'd better have. Where are we going?"

Andrews shrugged. "We report at Berry Knob to General Drummond, who should be in some old men's home, and put ourselves at his disposal. I suppose it is a holding or diversionary action. Drummond wouldn't be trusted with anything else."

For a moment Colin did not reply. He thought curiously that ordinarily Andrews would be saying that the enemy was weak, Drummond a military genius, and victory certain. But Colin knew better and Andrews knew that he knew. Andrews would never say such a thing unless he trusted Colin completely because remarks like that could get officers in trouble.

Colin said moodily, "I'd almost trade my chance at Heaven if Ling, Watt, and Tracey were with us."

"I'd be happier too," Andrews agreed. "They know what they are doing. Why haven't you given all three sergeant's stripes?"

"They wouldn't take them."

"Some men are like that."

"Yes, some are."

The march was slow, due in part to the age and infirmities of some of the soldiers, but it was not hard. Mid-afternoon of the second day they came to Berry Knob and Colin bivouaced his troops to await further developments. Then he looked about the camp.

It was a good camp; these men knew how to set up a camp. Except for a few battle-tested veterans, all of whom looked bored and went about their tasks with a skill born of long experience, there was an air of tense expectancy. The boys, some of whom were no more than fourteen, had flushed cheeks, and the older men prowled restlessly, as though expecting to find a Yankee somewhere. Jason Maxwell approached Colin.

"Hadn't I better put them to work, sir?"

"I think you'd better, Sergeant."

Jason set them to building a stone wall, which he said would serve as breastworks when the Yankees came. The veterans grumbled; if there were any Yankees here they would have fired before. But the rest went eagerly to work, as though any forthcoming skirmish and the fate of the world rested upon their building the wall as perfectly as possible.

One youngster laid a stone on the wall, stepped back to view his handiwork, then forward to rearrange the stone.

Colin said nothing. The wall was unnecessary, it would of course be abandoned when they moved up, but it did take the men's minds from themselves. Just before dusk a scout came to lead them to their positions in the front line.

They stopped on a hill. It was not exactly like Dynamite Hill and fifty other hills from which Colin had commanded his platoon, but it was still just an unimportant little hill. But men would shed their blood for it. Lieutenant Jackson, who had been holding the position, reported no action save a brief skirmish yesterday and retired with his men. Colin and Jason Maxwell deployed the more inexperienced troops, trying to arrange them between the few veterans in the platoon. They advised the greenhorns to stay down, shoot straight, and look to the man on either side.

Colin took up his own position, watched the Yankee emplacements and hoped fervently that there would be no attack. If he lived to return to Campbell Hill, he would never hunt again. He watched the night pale into dawn and become day until he was aroused by Jason Maxwell, crawling towards him.

Jason whispered, "Look down the hill."

Colin peered in the direction indicated. Perhaps a hundred yards away, attached to a slender, crooked stick, a dirty white flag protruded from behind a massive oak and waved frantically up and down. Colin frowned. This could be the flag of surrender or a ruse.

He called, "What do you want?"

"L—Leave us come in," and as soon as he heard, Colin knew it was no ruse. There was more than ordinary fear in the voice—there was stark terror.

Colin called, "Just a minute."

He passed the word to hold fire if the men came unarmed and shouted to the unseen flagman, "Come in with your hands up. You'll be shot if you're carrying arms."

They came up the hill, two pale, fearful Union soldiers whose hands and arms jerked spasmodically even as they advanced. When they were near enough for Colin to see their eyes clearly, he knew that these men had not merely thought they had seen demons. They *had* seen demons.

Colin said sympathetically, "You're all right now."

"Omigosh!" one prisoner breathed.

"They come las' night!" the other gasped. "They was six of us. Afore we knowed it, four was dead!"

There was no fighting on that hill, though on others Colin saw old men and young boys fall around him as the tide of blue swept inexorably onward. But some unknown terror had entered this particular sector. Periodically, terrified prisoners, always with a tale of comrades who had died before anyone even suspected there was an enemy about, surrendered. Colin did not understand it until he heard Andrews question a soldier captured in the fighting. This Yankee breathed defiance through his nostrils. He carried a captured Confederate rifle which he had used as a club when his ammunition had been exhausted and he had been surrounded. He seemed unafraid.

"What is your home state?" Andrews asked.

"Find out, Secesh!" the prisoner jeered.

"To what company are you attached?"

"Go climb a tree!"

"You'll fare better if you cooperate," Colin told him.

"I ain't goin' to, so go ahead and toss me into your stinkin' prison. I won't be there long. You Rebs are 'bout done. Even them two hellions you got behind our lines can't last much longer!" His tone changed to grudging admiration. "I kind of like them two, anyway they got sand! But they'll be shot when we ketch 'em again jest like we shot their pal, that third

feller who was with 'em."

Colin was suddenly alert. "What was he like, this third man?" he asked tensely. "Did you hear his name?"

"You'll get nothin' from me," the prisoner taunted.

Colin leaped toward the Yankee, his hands clenched, his eyes blazing. "That was one of my men," he said furiously. "Tell me what you know or I'll choke the daylights out of you. If he's dead, what harm can it do to tell?" He stood over the prisoner, glowering.

The Yank knew a madman when he saw one. "Yeah, no harm done, I reckon. He's dead all right. Saw him lined up and kilt with m'own eyes. He was a tall, lean feller, dark hair and eyes. 'Bout thirty-two or thirty-three, I'd say."

It was Ling, Colin knew now beyond a doubt. Tracey Hamlin was ten years younger and had blue eyes; Watt Sackett was short and square. Restraining his impulse to run somewhere, anywhere where he could be alone to weep for his lost friend, Colin said in a low, quiet voice, "He was a particular friend of mine from home. I know his wife and two boys. He had no business raiding behind your lines. He knew he would be shot if he got caught and I warned him not to go. So I don't hold against you any part you had in his death. You were doing your job and doing it properly. But if you'll tell me how he was captured I would like to be able to tell his family. It would mean a lot to them."

The prisoner looked into Colin's face and saw not an enemy officer but an unhappy fellow creature. "These three fellers came round our camp one night and 'fore we knowed what was happenin' they made off with some hosses. We found out quick enough and took some other hosses and chased 'em. The tall feller—the one that's dead now—he'd broke his ankle and they'd stopped to help him. That slowed 'em down and we caught 'em and brought 'em back to the prisoner's compound. The other two escaped a couple of days later but the third feller couldn't make it 'counta his ankle. He was shot the next day."

"Is that all?" Colin asked bitterly.

"No," the prisoner said. "His pals came back for him day after he was shot, kilt our guards and let out the whole mess of prisoners. An' they been raisin' Cain ever since they learnt their frien' was dead. Still is, unless they got caught again."

"Thanks, soldier, thanks for telling me," Colin managed to say. He turned and left the tent.

Somehow he found his own tent and the pallet that served as his bed. He flung himself down on it and lay there without moving or uttering a sound. He did not know later how long he lay there. His mind was numb—it could repeat endlessly the words "He's dead, he's dead, he's dead" but it could not accept the words as true. Jason Maxwell poked his head in at the opening of the tent and quickly retreated. Colin did not hear.

Finally he struggled into a sitting position. His mind was a little clearer now and he knew what he must do. He must get a letter to Ann through Sam Potts who was at the hospital station five miles behind the front waiting for some kind of transport back to Wetherly. His left foot had been amputated. Len Andrews had told him earlier that transport had been arranged for tomorrow.

He rifled through his knapsack and found two pieces of smudged and crumpled paper and a stubby pencil.

"Dear Ann," he began. "Ling has been killed—" He buried his head in his hands. What else should he say? "His death was quick and merciful." This was true. "He died fighting." This was true only if you stretched the truth, but the whole truth might be too strong for Ann as yet. "He will be missed and loved by those who knew him." This was certainly true. "I think you know how much my thoughts are with you. The war cannot last much longer. God willing, I will be home soon. Colin."

CHAPTER XIII

Suicide Stand

Beneath a clouded night sky, Colin sat on a boulder crusted with lichen and waited for the dawn, which could bring nothing except a tidal wave of Yankees to drown him and every one of his men. But he had waited a dozen other times for what reason told him was certain death, and he was still alive. He had no doubt, however, about one thing; this was the end of the war.

There had been no formal cessation of hostilities and Lee still fought savagely for the best terms he could get. This was the end that had been foreordained when this senseless struggle began. Atlanta, Savannah, Charleston and Wilmington had fallen before Sherman's advance, and, despite Lee's brilliance, Richmond could not last long. The fall of Richmond would bring the fall of the Confederacy.

General Drummond, in command of Colonel Andrews' regiment, was not a doddering old fool. Nor was he a military genius. He was as able as most generals. He had been given an unusual assignment. Certain papers, possibly revealing the Confederacy's major weaknesses and potentially damaging to Lee's bargaining power with the North, had been smuggled out of Richmond to Drummond. Drummond's orders were to leave enough men to delay the enemy twenty-four hours while he and the rest of his army fled west with the papers.

Colonel Andrews himself had explained the situation to Colin. He had held nothing back. He did not know the nature of the documents Drummond carried, but whatever they were, they must not fall into enemy hands. Andrews and Colin had picked the seasoned men from Andrews' regiment who would remain to delay the enemy. They had automatically eliminated everyone under nineteen and everyone over forty-five. From the remainder they had selected thirty-seven veterans, the very cream of Andrews' regiment. With Jason Maxwell as First Sergeant and Colin in command, there were thirty-nine, but this particular emplacement had unexpectedly gained another recruit.

After seeing the retiring troops on their way west, Andrews had turned his command over to Major Dorsey and returned to help stop the Yankees. His back against a tree, he sat calmly beside Colin and, like the younger man, awaited whatever the morning might bring.

Suddenly he chuckled. "Did you ever feel like an utter ass, Colin?"

"Frequently."

"Well, I did when I started out with Drummond. Two-thirds of an army running away so something or other would not fall into Yankee hands. Why? If Drummond carried gold or silver, it's better thrown away. Since he carries documents, burning them would release a lot of men for fighting. That's why I came back."

Colin, who knew very well that Andrews had returned because he thought he belonged wherever the fight might occur, said nothing. Nor did he bother to state his own views that, while two-thirds of an army had no right to run away with gold and silver, papers were another matter. The South would lose this war, but she had fought one of the mightiest and most incredible conflicts in history. Evidence of this would be priceless to the generations who followed. Whoever had ordered the documents saved at all costs was taking the long view, but Colin did not try to explain that to his companion.

"Our chance would have come," Andrews continued. "Sooner or later we would have lured the Yankees into a perfect trap and scored a major victory."

Colin murmured, "It's possible," and refrained from reminding Andrews that a chance to trap and annihilate the enemy had not presented itself in months of steady retreat.

Andrews said, "I believe this may very well be the turning point, Colin. We have a formidable group of picked men. Even though we may be numerically inferior, there is every chance that we'll win the battle and capture the supplies which will enable us to launch an offensive. Who flanks our position?"

"Lieutenants Henry and Jackson."

"Good men," Andrews commented. "Good men both, but we should have an over-all command."

"We all have the same orders."

"To hold for twenty-four hours?" Andrews asked scornfully. "Pah! Trust old Wishy-Washy Drummond to think that one up! Do you realize that, if an opportunity presents, we shall be unable to launch an effective counterattack?"

"That's right."

Andrews said sadly, "More official mismanagement. With the exception of Lee, our high officers are bungling asses."

"What about Stuart, Jackson, Hood, and the rest?"

"Grandstand players!" Andrews said contemptuously. "Very picturesque and good headlines for the press, but they accomplish nothing. How many lives have been sacrificed because those who should have exercised wisdom chose to play the fool?"

"All of them."

"Eh?"

"All of them."

There was a short silence while Andrews pondered. Then, "You're right. Of course you're right. When do you think the war should have ended?"

"It should never have started."

There was another silence that Andrews broke, "You're right again. Have you always held such views?"

"Always."

"Yet, you're in uniform?"

Colin countered with, "Did you want to fight a war?"

"No," Andrews said without hesitation. "I much preferred my importing business. Colin, you're a pernicious influence."

"Why?"

"You make me think. Why are we here?"

"Soldiers should never think," Colin advised. "They should merely accept, and we are here."

"So we are," Andrews laughed. "I should like very much to continue our friendship after the war."

"So should I."

They stopped talking, and, save for a rustling in the leaves as some tiny animal dug out a concealed tidbit, silence reigned. Colin slid from the boulder, pillowed his head on it and looked up at the cloudy sky. He thought of Ann and immediately wished he had not, for he could not think of Ann without thinking of Ling. And he could not think of Ling without going over and over in his mind what he might have done to stop the raiding and save Ling's life. Always, he came to the conclusion that, short of putting him in irons, there was nothing he could have done. His sense of responsibility for Ling's death grew out of his love for Ann, out of the guilty knowledge that it freed her for him if she would have him now.

He tried to force all thoughts of past and future from his mind. The past was unreal and the future uncertain. Only the present, this very minute, had any significance.

Andrews fell into a sound sleep and his gentle snoring broke the silence. Shielding the match with his hand, a man down the line lighted his pipe and the aroma of burning tobacco perfumed the air.

Somebody said plaintively, "Gimme a puff, Jess."

"We-ell, jest one."

"Tha's all I ask."

Colin, who had slumbered peacefully on a half-thousand rude couches, found sleep eluding him. He stared at the sky. Soon, by the time the sun rose, only twelve hours of their vigil would remain. When the sun set, all who remained alive would be free to leave. Colin shook his head in irritation. The Yankees had not come all night and there was no certainty that they would come with the morning. Everyone might survive the day.

Towards morning, the clouds scurried away. The wan, sad dawn broke. A heavy mist that had lingered all night over the creek wandered into the woods. It hung there like a great thick blanket of white fleece. The sun burned through it and the mist drifted away. Colin glanced at Andrews, still sleeping, and then at his men.

Some of the men still slept, some merely waited, and some gnawed at the cold hardtack and pickled beef that had been issued. Every man was now a veteran, and all knew that their orders were to hold this position at any cost for twenty-four hours. Yet, perhaps because attack was not certain and perhaps because no one believed he would die, the men seemed bored rather than tense or excited.

Andrews stirred, wakened, and yawned prodigiously just as Jason Maxwell hobbled down to Colin.

"Any orders, sir?"

"The orders stand as issued, Sergeant."

"Very well, Captain."

Jason left and Andrews gazed curiously after him. "There's a queer duck."

"Why?"

"I've never seen his feathers ruffled."

"They're never ruffled."

"You'd almost think he likes this."

"He does."

"What is there to like about it?" Andrews looked inquiringly at Colin. "Is he bloodthirsty?"

Colin said emphatically, "Definitely not! Jason's one of the kindest, gentlest and most considerate people I've ever known! But he's a special case. As some are born to be musicians, artists or engineers, Jason was born to be a soldier. It is soldiery and not war, that he likes."

Andrews said dubiously, "A soldier who doesn't care to kill anyone?"

"Have you known many soldiers who do like to kill?"

"Come to think of it, no," Andrews conceded. "All this is too profound for my feeble mind."

Gustily and with obvious enjoyment he began to eat his own pickled beef and hardtack. Colin sat quietly; he appreciated the company of this man who was compounded of such earthy ingredients. Then the warm sun, slanting through the trees, made him drowsy and he slept.

He awakened suddenly, but no sound had disturbed him and he saw nothing new. Some inner sense whetted by years of constant danger had alerted him. He sat up and saw that Andrews was now keenly watchful. All along the line, men had ceased whatever they were doing to face the direction from which the enemy they could neither see nor hear, but only sense, was approaching.

Ten rifles spoke from an adjoining position and were answered by the oncoming Yankees. Colin clearly heard ten more rifles, then ten more, and nodded approvingly. He had instructed his men to fire in groups of ten so that, by the time the last rifles were empty, the first would be reloaded and ready to shoot again. Then he saw the Union troops.

Men with bayoneted rifles were walking the ridge across the creek. They made no attempt to conceal themselves because they knew they were out of range. They wanted to draw fire in order to exhaust the enemy's supply of

ammunition.

They descended to the creek bottom, and when they reappeared they were more cautious. Colin realized that the Union troops outnumbered his men and also that the third of an army in his command must sound like the entire army. It was advantageous that the Yankees did not know that Drummond had gone with two-thirds of the army. Again the first ten rifles spoke, then the second, and Colin aimed and fired with the third. He was not unduly alarmed because, doubtless, this first attack was a probe to assess the Rebels' strength and determine their positions. The Yankees returned fire and retreated.

There would be a brief lull before the next attack, and Colin took full advantage of the quiet and relaxed. Andrews also rested. Both men looked steadily in the enemy's direction, and Colin was startled to hear someone close beside him say, "Captain Campbell!"

It was Sergeant Deshmire from Captain Taylor's company. Ordinarily nothing ruffled his placid exterior. Once a shell that had failed to explode landed at Deshmire's feet, but he had merely finished his lunch. At present he was agitated.

"Captain Campbell, Sergeant Maxwell's bad hit!"

Colin said almost stupidly, "What?"

"Sergeant Maxwell—"

Colin was on his feet and running beside Deshmire, but even as he ran his mind rejected the absurdity of this news. Jason Maxwell had come through four years of war without a minor wound. He was indestructible. Then Colin was kneeling beside him.

His head pillowed on Deshmire's jacket, Jason lay behind the tree where Deshmire had placed him out of the path of the bullets. Sweat covered his forehead and dampened his hair. Frothy blood, indicating a lung shot, bubbled from his mouth. He was too deep in shock to feel much pain. Colin took Jason's limp, cold hand in his and knew that nothing could be done. He hoped his smile was reassuring.

"So you finally stopped one, Sergeant?"

"I stopped one, Captain," Jason smiled wanly.

Wonder rose and mounted in Colin's mind. Throughout the years he had seen many men die. Some had been silent, some moaned or screamed with pain, some hysterically blurted out a confession of their sins and all feared dying. But when the final moment came, Colin could not remember even one who feared death itself. He had long ago determined that on the threshold between life and whatever succeeds life, some shining, splendid vision was revealed to those about to die. In the final moment they had no fear.

Jason was going to die and he surely knew it, but he seemed filled with a serenity that verged on ecstasy. Colin knew that any possible pain could not steal or dim that mood. Pain was physical.

"They're comin'!" Deshmire hissed.

Deshmire stood behind a tree about five yards to one side, and Colin looked down the slope to see the Yankees advancing again. The attack was more purposeful this time. The Yankees knew the Rebel positions and they were coming to destroy them. Colin noted that the Union forces did not seem weakened. He waited for the first rifles, the second, and shot with the third.

At once he reloaded, a mechanical action drilled into him by combat. After a soldier fires his weapon, he should reload instantly and be ready to fire again. He realized that his men were in trouble. He was neither afraid nor panicked, for if fear and panic ruled he would cease to be a soldier and would become a fugitive.

In turn he fired again. When the Yankees went back down the hill, the pattern of their attack was evident. This was a battle of attrition. After they wore down the Rebels, they would overwhelm those remaining with a bayonet charge.

Colin turned to Jason Maxwell. The first numbing shock had passed, and he was in pain. His face muscles were tense, and the little bubble of blood at his mouth became larger. Jason ground his teeth in agony, and Colin's wonder mounted.

Even this pain could not overcome the serene aura, the ecstatic glow, that enveloped Jason.

Colin wiped his friend's face with a handkerchief and said, "We'll get you out, Sergeant."

It was an inane thing to say and he knew it, for they were not going to get Jason out. Colin needed inspired words, but he could not provide them.

Andrews appeared. "Dorsey, Kintner, Mason and Williams are dead. Zenos has a broken left arm and Disbrow is carrying a bullet in his shoulder. Kelleem and Hewitt have light wounds."

Colin said, "They hit us pretty hard."

It was a stock comment applied to a routine situation. Had Andrews behaved in his customary fashion, he would have said that casualties were not disastrous and a smashing victory was certain. He said nothing, and Colin glanced up to find him staring at Jason Maxwell.

Understanding, admiration and sorrow were in Andrews' eyes. No sentimentality existed in his expression or in his voice when he spoke. "He's a happy man, Colin."

Colin said dully, "Happy?"

"He knows all he ever wanted to know."

With a sudden rush of warm gratitude for this observation, Colin now understood what Andrews had seen at first glance. Destiny had decreed that Jason Maxwell be born a clubfoot; at the same time fate had endowed him with dreams of a soldier's life. Granted his dream, he had been granted its fulfillment. He had lived a soldier's life and now he was dying a soldier's death. Colin bent his head. Andrews said gently, "You're fortunate, too; for while you lingered on this earth one man was truly your brother."

Suddenly the pain faded from Jason's face and only the ecstasy remained. In a sudden resurgence of strength he stretched forth his hand. Then he spoke in a faint whisper, "Captain."

"Yes, Sergeant?"

Colin took the outstretched hand and leaned forward to hear the next whisper. Jason's hand tightened and his smile became joyful.

"Bless you, Captain."

Jason died like a man settling into a peaceful and welcome sleep. Very gently Colin covered his friend's face with his own jacket.

Andrews said, "They'll come again, Colin, but I'm sure we can hold them. If we seize the propitious moment to launch a bayonet charge—"

A rifle cracked on the opposite slope. Andrews stopped talking abruptly. He wrinkled his brow as though in deep thought, took a halting forward step, and then like a weed in the path of a hot flame, he wilted to the ground. He sighed once and lay still. Colin dropped to his knees, slipped his bare hand inside Andrews' shirt to feel for a heartbeat, and brought it away wet with blood. Some sniper, a superb shot and blessed with a lot of luck, had seen Andrews, taken a chance, and hit his target squarely in the heart.

Deshmire hissed, "Here they come!"

There were still two hours until sunset. A woodpecker, searching for grubs on a nearby tree, beat a rattling cadence with its bill. A robin chirped. Colin crouched behind a tree and awaited another attack.

The Yankees had indeed come again, and again, until he was no longer sure how many times they had left one hill to attack another. Each time they had been hurled back and each time they had suffered, but each time they had also inflicted

more damage. Of the forty men who had faced them from this emplacement at dawn, eleven were dead. Thirteen walking wounded, carrying two unable to walk, had departed to the rear. Sergeant Deshmire, a bullet through his head and another in his belly, had died behind a tree.

From the diminishing rifle fire on either side, Colin knew that other emplacements had suffered heavily. Colin tried not to think of the remaining fourteen men. They had killed as many men as they had lost, but the Yankees had originally outnumbered the Rebels and they still did.

Colin shifted his position to obtain a slightly better field of vision. He looked at the bayonet on his rifle. It was fixed and ready.

Two minutes before he saw any Yankees, he knew the attack was coming. When he saw them, he did not bring his rifle into firing position because the range was too great. His shot must kill or disable a Yankee in order to eliminate as many as possible from bayonet combat.

Again they descended the hill, were lost for a moment in the creek bottom, and came into view. Colin sighted. He shot coolly, and without looking to see whether he had hit his target, reloaded and shot again.

The men in blue were very near, and the setting sun glanced from their bayonets. Colin tried to guess how many there were and could make no exact tally, but the defenders were outnumbered at least five to one. He kept his intent gaze on a big tree because it shielded a Yankee, and he made ready to spring up and engage that man with his bayonet. There was almost no shooting. The Rebels had emptied their arms and had no time to reload. This was the last charge.

Suddenly rifles sputtered from the enemy's rear and Yankees fell. The great menacing serpent of enemy soldiers halted. Somebody yelled, "They're behind us!"

"Run!" another screamed. "They got behin't us!"

Panic spread from one end of the line to the other. The Yankees, who had been so close to victory, turned in hasty flight.

Over the ridge so recently in enemy hands sprang a row of men with unkempt hair and beards and tattered uniforms. But those uniforms were grey. As the men drew nearer, Colin recognized Tracey Hamlin, then Watt Sackett. And when they gained the crest of the ridge, Colin saw among them his brother, Macklyn.

CHAPTER XIV

Return to Quail Wings

"Hi, Jedge!" Tracey was not the nineteen-year-old who had so enthusiastically volunteered to fight. Now he was an older man who had passed through fire and had been hardened as steel is tempered. "We been followin' ya' quite a spell. We knowed ya' was with Drummond an' we aimed to ketch up."

"Where did you find the friends you brought with you?"

"Back thar," Tracey waved his hand in the general direction of the Union lines.

"They were prisoners?"

"They was in a kind of footy little wire pen."

"You got them out?" Colin knew he should be upbraiding these two for insubordination but it was too late for that now. He didn't have the heart.

"Stampeded the hosses through the guards an'—" Watt shrugged.

"You didn't come any too soon," Colin grinned at them.

"We heerd the fightin' an' we been watchin' the Yanks half a day. Couldn't do much about it 'cause we didn' have much to do with. But we knowed they was wearin' ya' down on account of the shootin'. We figgered that sooner or later they'd toss most ever'body in to wipe you out. When they did—" Watt shrugged again.

Colin understood. Confident of victory, certainly the Yanks who remained to mop up had not been expecting an attack from the rear. Once they launched their final attack and threw in all their reserves, the Rebs had little trouble overwhelming the Union guard and capturing arms for themselves. Attacked from the rear by a foe in front of them, the Yanks had panicked.

"We'd of been back sooner," Tracey explained, "'cept they kilt Ling. We done our best to fetch him along, but he couldn't make it. It provoked us."

Remembering the terrified prisoners, Colin said dryly, "Yes, it must have. I heard about what happened from a captured Yank—about Ling, I mean, and how he was already dead when you went back for him." He looked at the ground and bitterness filled his heart. "Do you know where he was buried?" he asked.

"We buried him," Tracey said shortly. "Whar we goin' from here?"

"I don't know."

For the first time, it occurred to Colin that he didn't know. Their only orders had been to hold on long enough to give Drummond a twenty-four-hour start, and they had obeyed those orders. They had no more orders, perhaps because they had not been expected to survive the delaying action, but more probably because Drummond, too, knew this was the end. There was little point in rallying troops to fight when the fighting was over. Colin made a sudden decision. "I'm going home," he said.

"Us, too?" Tracey asked.

"You, too."

The eyes of both men revealed their excitement. "Sounds good, Jedge. Watt, shouldn't we ought to give a hand 'round here 'fore we go?"

"Guess so, guess so."

Colin saw Macklyn ahead and left the men to walk slowly forward to join him. Macklyn was as lean as a greyhound. His hair and beard were grey, and even his bushy brows were flecked with grey. His tattered uniform was patched with bits of blanket and tent cloth, and his trousers showed a wide streak of Yankee blue that must have been given to him in a

prisoner's camp. But on this bloody hill, with only the remnants of a once-mighty army around him, he remained the general.

"Macklyn!"

Macklyn turned and stared with a trace of the old haughtiness, unrecognizing.

"It's been a long war Macklyn. It's brought me all the way from Hobbs Creek to—I don't even know the name of this hill."

"Colin!"

Heedless of the soldiers who stopped to gape, Macklyn stepped forward to embrace his brother. Then he backed two steps and there was only delight in his eyes.

"Colin! They told me you'd been killed!"

"I'm one of the lucky ones."

"I too. Tell me, what have you been doing?"

"When you came on the scene, I was doing my best to command the detachment defending this hill."

One of the men who had arrived with Macklyn approached and Macklyn introduced him. "Colonel Bascomb, my brother Colin."

Bascomb, in tatters like all the rest, shook hands, exchanged small talk, and went on to superintend some men who were digging graves. Colin followed with his eyes.

"You're all officers?"

"Yes. We were confined in an officers' compound, and nobody could have stampeded it more effectively or led us out more surely than the two men who rescued us. They knew what they were doing."

"Two of my Hobbs Creek recruits," Colin said proudly. "I told you long ago that they would be among our best fighters, but would never be good soldiers."

"I made my mistakes, Colin."

"And so did I. Befriending the Dares, for example."

"That had nothing to do with Tom's conduct," Macklyn said.

"I wonder what happened to him?"

"A captured Yankee officer told me he was getting richer every day supplying the Union army."

"Did he know of Tom's daughter?"

Macklyn said hesitantly, "She—she was the officer's wife."

Colin said without feeling, "The fortunes of war, and I wish him the joy of her. What follows this?"

"You have no orders?"

"Only to hold this position twenty-four hours. We did that."

"What do you think?"

"That we may as well go home."

Macklyn said quietly, "I agree."

"I expect you're ranking officer here," Colin pointed out. "Such a decision on your part may lead to unpleasantness."

Macklyn shrugged. "Why pretend? The war's over and we have lost. Lee may hold for days or, at the most, weeks. All of us can send him word. Should he care to have us report for active duty, which I question, he can notify us. At any rate, I assume complete responsibility."

"All right, Macklyn," Colin said quietly.

The graves had been dug, and the mounds of fresh earth on either side looked oddly clean and fresh. Macklyn read from a Bible belonging to another officer, and all stood with bared heads as their dead were lowered to rest. Helping their wounded and carrying those who were incapacitated, the men who had been left to make a suicide stand and their rescuers walked away from the war.

Their wounded were left in a hospital at Darleystown, and as the men came upon the roads leading to their homes, they took leave. Only Colin, Macklyn, Watt, and Tracey remained to strike out on the long path leading up the Connicon. The route they chose took them across part of the battlefield, or what had been a battlefield. The fury that had raged there was dead. Union and Confederate soldiers were still at their stations, but they knew that the war had run its course and they did not risk death because in a very short time Lee had to surrender. Now and again a cannon roared and occasionally a rifle snapped. But they represented little except fist shaking, to serve as a reminder that the fight could be resumed if anyone was foolish enough to provoke it.

Colin thought of his wealth, as measured in money and goods. Packed carefully in his knapsack were a neatly tied bundle of letters from Ann that he had purloined from Ling's belongings when he knew Ling was dead; a broken doll that some child had pressed into his hand when the Confederate Army had taken a town; a dried flower that had once given a touch of beauty to an otherwise drab camp; and a bit of verse written by some soldier on a sheet of foolscap that Colin had found blowing across a battle field. The first two lines ran repeatedly through his mind.

We who are about to die salute no Caesar
As we go forth to battle, we salute everlasting life.

Macklyn said, "I'm sorry that I have never seen your home in the mountains. Betsie tells me it's beautiful. What's it like?"

Colin described Campbell Hill and added, "There are no slave quarters."

Macklyn smiled thinly. "A foresighted omission; you won't need them."

"Why don't you—" Colin began and then hesitated. War had raged along the Connicon and Quail Wings must have felt its fury. He had been on the point of asking Macklyn why he and Betsie did not come to live at Campbell Hill, but instantly he knew better. Betsie had refused to leave Quail Wings during the war. It was Macklyn's home, the only home he would want.

"Why don't I what?" Macklyn asked.

"Come with Betsie and the girls and see for yourself," Colin amended.

"I'll be delighted, Colin, and, of course, Betsie will, too. The girls—Linda married Wilfred Gentle and went with him when he was sent to the western theatre. I only hope Betsie knows where they are. Lorena married Wilson Thorne and has a fine baby boy—"

"How wonderful!" Colin interrupted.

"Wilson was killed at Gettysburg, just three days before the baby was born," Macklyn continued quietly.

"So many of the best are dead," Colin said sadly.

"The baby isn't!" Macklyn answered with spirit. "The Thornes—Hilliard was invalided home in '62—are taking care of him while Francesca stays on duty at Cahecechaca Military Hospital—" He interrupted himself to call sharply, "Watch it!" At the same instant Watt Sackett and Tracey Hamlin leaped in front of them. A lean soldier carrying a rifle and

wearing the usual tattered uniform had been walking ahead of them. He suddenly whirled and leveled his rifle.

"Stay whar ye be!" he commanded.

Macklyn said, "You needn't fear us."

"I ain't goin' back! We'uns got licked!"

"We've no intention of taking you back. We're going home too."

"Ye be?"

The lean soldier lowered his rifle but remained alert. When the group came near, he slung his rifle in the crook of his arm and said companionably,

"Reckon ye mean what ye say. Who be ye?"

"Macklyn Campbell."

The soldier extended his hand. "Use'ta be a gener'l o' that name. I be Decker Bindley."

Macklyn introduced his companions and they trudged in silence for twenty minutes. Then Decker Bindley said, as though it were a matter he had been considering for a long while, "We fit 'em. We fit 'em fer a spell o' time. An' we got licked."

"That's right."

"Is they still fightin'?"

"I think so."

"Oughtn't be," Decker Bindley commented. "No sense in no more killin'. Soon's I knowed that I says to me, 'Deck, you fit Yanks for a long spell. Git home to yer woman an' kids while ye kin!'"

"Sensible," Macklyn said.

Decker Bindley said, "I ain't runnin' away. If they was a chanst I'd stay, but they ain't no more chanst."

"We know it."

They walked without speaking for another mile, and when they came to a place where the road forked, Decker Bindley took one branch while those going up the Connicon continued together. Three days later they were in Denbury.

At first glance the town seemed unchanged—the same buildings, the same trees, and even the same weary dogs in the same shady spots. But it was changed, Colin noted dismally. He saw Grubb Rowely, whom he had once jailed for beating his wife, hobbling about on a peg leg. There was a sign over a building "W. Matson, Blacksmith." But the blacksmith who stood in the doorway, the same Willie Matson who had once faced Colin in court, was hunched far over to the right because the bullet that had ripped him would not let him stand straight. There were other men without arms or legs, but Colin was most disheartened over the courthouse. He tried to remember when it had been such a grand edifice. Now it looked grubby and small, and there was about it an air of distinct decay. He was glad when they had passed through Denbury and started up the road beside the Connicon.

Unruffled by men and their wars, the river pursued its unhurried course towards the sea. Except for a few willows that had been broken by shells, the trees, bearing new leaves, were as they had always been. As they neared Thornhill, and the view of the mountains, Colin quickened his step. It was here that he had always made Dusty walk when going home from Denbury court so that he might lift his eyes to the mountains. But when they reached it, he had eyes only for the plantation.

The forest that grew on all sides had sent adventurous saplings and creepers a quarter of the way across Thornhill's fields. What had been neatly cultivated fields of tobacco and corn had become a tangle of brush and briars. The big house was dingy, with paint flaking from wood. The slave quarters had been either razed or burned, and the stables were tumbledown. Much of the glass was missing from the windows of the house, and many windows were closed with raw

lumber. Three work mules shuffled in the paddock where Hilliard Thorne's brood mares had raced their long-legged colts. But blue smoke curled from one of the great chimneys.

Colin said nothing, and sensing his mood, neither Watt nor Tracey spoke. Macklyn was intent and eager, and in spite of himself, Colin felt a rising excitement too. Ahead lay Quail Wings, beloved home of his boyhood and young manhood. War could not completely shatter Colin's memory of his home.

They reached the clearing, started up the drive, and met a man and a boy driving a team of mules. With a start, Colin recognized the same blocky, beefy Ned Hale who had once appeared before him in Denbury court. Now Hale affected an easy familiarity which he wouldn't have dared assume before the war. "Howdy, Macklyn. You home to stay?"

"Yes. How are things going?"

"We'll make a crop," Ned said expansively. "We'll make a crop an' there'll be somethin' in it for both of us." He nodded at Colin. "Howdy, Y'r Honor."

"Hello, Ned."

Watt Sackett said hotly, "Your mules got harness sores! Oughtn't be drivin' 'em, you oughtn't!"

"Now, little man, th' mules are mine."

"Don't call me little man!" Watt bristled.

They went on towards the house which, like Thornhill, was sadly in need of paint and had rough lumber nailed over open windows. Colin asked his brother, "What's Ned Hale doing here?"

"He and his son have been working the place on shares while I was away."

Macklyn spoke as though this were the most natural and the only natural explanation. The war had indeed wrought changes; there had been a time when Macklyn wouldn't even have spoken to Ned Hale. Then they were at the door and Colin held Watt and Tracey back so Macklyn could enter alone. There was a tense silence and then "Macklyn!"

It was a cry wrenched from the heart, and they heard a woman's sobbing and then the quiet voices of Macklyn and Betsie. Presently Macklyn returned to the door and said happily, "Welcome to Quail Wings!"

CHAPTER XV

Homecoming

Colin, Watt and Tracey were admitted to the drawingroom. It now held a seven-foot wooden partition that lacked more than a dozen feet of reaching the ceiling. Within the enclosure were a small cooking range, a wooden table and a few chairs that formerly had been used by the slaves, and a wooden cabinet for dishes. Nailed to the wall was a board with hooks spaced at intervals and from the hooks hung skillets and kettles. Through the doorless aperture at one side was revealed the lower half of a neatly-made bed. By glancing over the partition, Colin saw that the exquisite chandeliers and candelabra were missing. Probably they had been carried off by the Yankees.

Although there had been a drastic change in Quail Wings, the only difference in Betsie was that wrought by passing years. There were more lines in her face than Colin remembered, and the hands that had always been so carefully kept were hard and calloused. She wore a simple dark dress that covered her from neck to ankles, and her greying hair was bound at the nape of her neck. But the smile on her lips and the happiness in her eyes more than atoned for coarse clothing and lines etched by work and worry.

"Colin!" she rushed forward and kissed him.

Colin hugged her warmly. "Oh, Betsie, you can't imagine how wonderful it is to see you!"

"I am starved for the sight of you, too, you know," she said, laughing.

It was as though he had gone back to the source of things and found all that ever had been, or ever would be, worthwhile.

Colin recalled her to Watt and Tracey, whom she had met at the housewarming at Campbell Hill four years ago.

"Messrs. Sackett and Hamlin, do you remember my brother's wife, Mrs. Macklyn Campbell?"

Watt and Tracey murmured subdued acknowledgement. Then Betsie thawed them and won their hearts by going forward and taking each by the hand. "You're most welcome here, Mr. Sackett and Mr. Hamlin."

"Thankee, ma'am," Tracey murmured. "Name's Tracey."

"And call me Watt," Watt Sackett said.

Colin was charmed, but he could not rid himself of a feeling that the scene before him was not taking place at all. Betsie was offering a masquerade, and all the guests were to come as soldiers who had just finished fighting a desperate war. The drawingroom was altered to conform to the *motif* of the party and was not really a place where Betsie worked in a makeshift kitchen and slept in a bed just outside it. She turned to Colin and laughed.

"We'll accommodate you most elegantly. In the drawingroom and three of the bedrooms are the only ceilings that don't leak when it rains."

Colin grinned. "At least there is a roof."

"The Yankees took so much," she explained, and there was little trace of rancor or bitterness in her voice. "They even found the silver we buried and took that. They would have taken the house itself if there had been a way to do it."

Colin said, "If the Yankees haven't raided Hobbs Creek, I'll have silver to spare for you."

"You angel!"

Macklyn said, "These valiant warriors are hungry, my dear. Does Quail Wings still have a larder?"

"Oh mercy me! I'm a thoughtless hostess!"

Betsie lifted a stove lid, poked the grey ashes, built the fire up, and began to mix a johnnycake. Colin watched. Betsie would hardly have known how to boil an egg four years ago, and Watt Sackett and Tracey Hamlin would not have been guests at Quail Wings in those days. But now that the blindfold was gone from Colin's eyes, he saw very clearly.

These people, the planters, had built their wealth on a foundation of hard work, applied intelligence and vision. Now, in

extreme adversity, they remained exactly as they had been. They would build again, and though one of the Willie Matsons, Ned Hales, or even Grubb Rowelys, might equal or even surpass some, the best of them would again be leaders. Colin thought suddenly of old Gerald Varnum, who had bequeathed Varnum Acres to his young son Henry. A fool, Henry had squandered his inheritance and two years after his father's death, only a saddle and a horse remained. He promptly mounted and rode west with the announced intention of recouping his fortunes there. No vested interest could expect to maintain its position without intelligence, strength, and mercy. Even kings fell when they became too weak or too tyrannical.

Watt and Tracey tilted their chairs against the wall and sniffed hungrily as Betsie began to brown pork chops in a skillet. Colin stirred uneasily; Quail Wings still had a larder but it couldn't possibly be an extensive one. Macklyn, who had been on a tour of the house, ducked back through the aperture and said calmly, "They were rather thorough."

"Did they take everything?" Colin asked.

"Everything they could carry."

Colin made no comment. When he had moved to Campbell Hill, one coveted treasure, his mother's portrait, had remained at Quail Wings. He had never mentioned his desire to have it because he had known his father would never part with it. Now it was gone. Betsie said, "Dinner is ready."

The table was set with coarse dishes and cutlery, the best at Quail Wings. Colin still had the curious feeling that this was a masquerade. Then he knew. The table and tableware were rude and the food common, but wherever Macklyn and Betsie might be, there would also be warm hospitality. If they lived in a barn, their guests would still be graciously received.

Colin ate sparingly; he knew there couldn't possibly be a great reserve of food, but it seemed to him that he relished this simple fare far more than any of the banquets which he had eaten in this house. Watt and Tracey were hungry and ate rapidly. Colin saw in Betsie's eyes the delight that any good cook feels when her efforts are appreciated. Tracey grabbed the last bit of johnnycake to mop up his plate. Colin finished and said happily, "That's the finest meal I've eaten in a long while, Betsie."

"You didn't eat much."

"Plenty, I assure you."

"You will stay the night?" Macklyn asked.

"I'd like to get up to Hobbs Creek tonight," Colin said. But now that seeing Ann was possible, not a remote dream-like hope, he felt hesitant. Ling, dead, came between them as he had not when he was alive. And Ann might blame him, as he often blamed himself, for Ling's death. If he could simply go and take her in his arms—but that moment might never come now.

"Oh, stay," Macklyn said. "You don't know when you'll get here again, or when we'll get away. There's so much to be done."

"What are you going to do, Macklyn?"

"First tackle the brush with a brush hook. Then perhaps I'll be able to borrow a team of mules from Ned Hale and help with the plowing. Any spare time I have I can very profitably spend on the house and outbuildings."

Betsie said, "Those are our mules Ned's using, dear. When I knew the Yankees were coming, I hid them in a swamp. There is a second team in the paddock."

"My lovely Rebel!" Macklyn's eyes glowed with warmth. "That's one less bridge to cross."

"Would you like me to send Zack to help?" Colin asked.

"You'll need him yourself," Macklyn pointed out.

"I can spare him at least part time and I know he'll be glad to come," replied Colin. "He always loved this place."

"If you can do without him sometime it would be a wonderful help, Colin. Wait and see. It will take time, but we'll rebuild Quail Wings."

"I know you will," Colin said fervently. Four years ago, the thought of Macklyn's doing menial labor would have been beyond the farthest reach of the imagination. But Colin knew now that the ingenuity, perseverance and vision that had built Quail Wings originally would rebuild it. "Zack and Dab and I will be down next week to help you. Zack's a first-rate carpenter when he puts his mind to it, and Dab can make anything grow anywhere."

"And you?" Macklyn teased smilingly.

"I guess I can cut brush as well as the next lawyer," Colin answered.

The young trees had grown more rapidly than he thought it possible for them to grow. Some shrubs and early flowers were in bloom. Gardens showed the tender sprigs of very young vegetables. Most of the horses had been requisitioned for the army, but Robin snorted in his paddock and a long-legged colt ran beside Sue. Zack had managed to get or keep a team of mules and was cultivating with them.

Watt tried to sound casual and succeeded only in emphasizing the excitement bubbling within him. "I'll ja'nt down an' see Hannah, Jedge."

"I'll be goin' along, too," Tracey said. "But first I got somethin' for ya', Jedge."

"For me?" Colin looked puzzled.

"Yeah." For a moment Tracey did not speak, and when he did his words were slow and measured. "You knowed we spent a day or so in that Yank prison camp with Ling 'fore we got away. He knowed we was goin' and he knowed he couldn' make it hisself."

"What are you driving at, Tracey?"

"He knowed he'd mos' likely be shot, but he fooled us into thinking he'd be all right till we come back fer him." Tracey stopped and Colin waited for him to continue. "He tol' me, 'When they's no more chanst of the Jedge gettin' kilt,' Ling says, 'give him this, Tracey. I tried my bounden best to tell him an' couldn't. But I know how things was, tell him. When the Jedge gits this, he'll know what I tried to tell him. He'll know, too, what I mean fer him to do.'"

Tracey dropped a small parcel wrapped in cloth into Colin's hand and turned to stride swiftly away. Colin removed the wrapping and stared in wonder. Inside was Ling Stewart's wedding ring. He raised his head and blinked away tears that he could not keep from his eyes. Suddenly he knew what Ling had wanted to tell him and had not been able to say. "I know how things was," he had told Tracey. Colin felt a rising wonder. What he had considered his closely guarded secret was no secret at all. Ling had known Colin was in love with Ann. Colin almost heard him say, "If I get kil't in this here war, Jedge, it wouldn't be mortal bad a'tall if I knowed you'd take her. She needs somebody."

With this ring, Ling had given Ann into Colin's keeping, as though she were a horse or mule to be offered away! But how very like Ling! Colin slipped the ring into his pocket and was only vaguely aware, as he neared the house, that Campbell Hill had not entirely escaped the effect of war. The house and outbuildings needed paint; Zack had fashioned wooden hinges to replace metal ones that were no longer available; the harrow that awaited use in a fresh-plowed field had wooden teeth. But no Yankees had visited here. Campbell Hill was blessed beyond measure compared with the houses along the Connicon. Then Zack turned and saw him.

"Jedge Colin!"

He left his mules and came running, a tall man who flew like a running deer. Reaching Colin, he embraced him.

"Jedge Colin! Youah back!"

"I'm back."

"T'stay?"

"To stay. The war's over."

"Glory be! C'mon in!"

He escorted Colin into the kitchen, where Nell hugged him ecstatically and assured him, "Jest si' down! You'll have vittles in a hustle!"

"But I'm really not hungry, Nell."

"You got to be hungry—you looks half-starved—an' vittles is one thing we got in plenty."

"Tha's right," Zack asserted. "The crops been good, the pigs been good, we got some beef crittuhs an' they been good. No so'jers come this way. We been lucky."

"Zack, do you know if Sam Potts got home all right?" Colin asked.

"Yeah, he home now a couple of weeks."

"The food will have to wait. There's something I must do right away, Nell," Colin said, rising. He knew that he must go to Ann at once. If he delayed, he might not have the courage to go at all. "Will you saddle Robin, please Zack?"

"So soon—" Zack began to protest.

"Saddle Robin, Zack," Nell interrupted quietly. "The Jedge, he know what he haf to do."

A few minutes later when he reined to a halt before the Stewart cabin, Ann appeared in the doorway. "Colin!" she said, quietly. Her hand flew to her throat.

"Ann!" He searched her face closely. Like Betsie, she had changed with the years. Some of the sparkle was gone, but its absence somehow emphasized the delicate strength of her beauty. Gentleness, intelligence, warmth, all the qualities that made her so dear, were deepened and mellowed.

"You know?" he asked finally. "You got my letter?"

"Yes. And I was prepared for it. I've known, I believe, for a long time that it was going to happen. I think Ling knew, too."

"What makes you say that?" Colin asked quickly.

"Once in a while he would get someone to write me a letter for him. He couldn't express himself well—but in little ways he was trying to tell me, to prepare me for it."

Colin thought a moment. "That fits in with something that Tracey Hamlin told me just a while ago when we got home. And with something Ling gave him to give me." He took the cloth from his pocket and walked toward Ann. When he stood beside her, he opened the wrapping. Ann stared at the ring. "He told Tracey to tell me that he knew I loved you, Ann, and that he had been trying to tell me for a long while but wasn't able to. When I got this ring, he told Tracey, I'd know what he meant me to do."

Ann stood staring at the ring, wrinkling her brow in bewilderment. Then, very slowly, she began to smile. "If that isn't just like him!" she said affectionately. "Such a practical, no-nonsense fellow."

"Ann, there's something more I have to tell you." He went on to describe the raids, the way he had tried to prevent them and the final raid that had ended in Ling's death. "I keep feeling that there was something more I should have done to keep him from going. Because I love you, perhaps, unconsciously I wanted Ling to go. I can't judge myself. But I could understand if you held me responsible and hated me for it."

Ann looked intently into his eyes. "Hate you!" she said. "Colin, how needlessly you've tortured yourself! Nothing could have stopped Ling—I know him. What can I do to get rid of this insane idea you have?"

Colin felt as if an enormous weight had been lifted from him. His arms went around her and his lips met hers. Finally, he

drew back and said, smiling down at her, "You asked me a question. Rude of me not to answer! If you want to keep me from insane ideas you only have to marry me and come with the boys and your father to live at Campbell Hill." He was suddenly dead serious as he asked, "Will you, Ann?"

Her eyes met his and a happy smile played on her lips. As she formed the word "yes" he took her in his arms again and held her close. The South was defeated, he thought. But Macklyn and Betsie were not defeated. Timid Hope Tyler had conquered her fears and had gone home; she was not defeated. Watt and Tracey were not defeated. And with Ann at his side, life for him was just beginning.

Ravaged, neglected, impoverished—still the land was bright.

Transcriber's Notes:

hyphenation, spelling and grammar have been preserved as in the original

Page 38, asked suddenly ==> asked suddenly.

Page 83, her like wild cat ==> her like a wild cat

Page 110, Colin had intereved ==> Colin had intervened

Page 137, Have you see the recruits ==> Have you seen the recruits

Page 177, and sieze the shoulders ==> and seize the shoulders

Page 181, a rattle snake talkin' ==> a rattlesnake talkin'

[The end of *The Land is Bright* by Jim Kjelgaard]