

CHAPTER 1

The cold passed slowly from the earth, and the lifting dawn revealed an army stretched across the hills, resting. As the hillsides changed from brown to green, the army awakened and began to tremble with eagerness at the talk of battle. A river, yellow-colored, flowed at the army's feet. At night, when the stream had become a sorrowful blackness, one could see across it the red, eye-like glow of enemy campfires in the distant hills.

Once a certain tall soldier went to wash a shirt. He came rushing back from a brook waving his shirt like a flag. He was breathless with a tale he had heard from a good friend.

“We’re going to move tomorrow—sure,” he said importantly.

“We’re going up along the river, across, and come around behind them.”

To his listeners he told a loud and careful story of a very smooth battle plan. When he had finished, the blue-clothed men scattered into small arguing groups.

“It’s a lie! That’s all it is—a thundering lie!” said another soldier loudly. His smooth face was red and his hands were pushed angrily into his pockets. He considered the matter as a wrong against him. “I don’t believe the old army’s ever going to move. I’ve been ready to go eight times in the last two weeks, and we haven’t moved yet.”

The tall soldier felt required to defend the truth of the story he himself had introduced. He and the loud one almost started fighting about it.

There was a youthful soldier who listened with eager ears to the words of the tall one and to the varied remarks of his friends. After listening to discussions concerning marches and attacks, he went to his tent. He wished to be alone with some new thoughts that had lately come to him.

The youth was in a condition of shock. So they were at last going to fight! Tomorrow, perhaps, there would be a battle, and he would be in it. For a time he had to labor to make himself believe. He could not accept with certainty a sign that he was about to take part in one of those great affairs of the world.

He had, of course, dreamed of battles all his life—of uncertain and bloody fights that had excited him with their vastness and fire. In dreams, he had seen himself in many struggles. He had

imagined people secure in the protection of his fierce bravery. But, awake, he had regarded battles as bloody marks on the pages of the past. He had put them as things of the past with his thought-images of heavy crowns and high castles. There was a portion of the world's history which he regarded as "the time of the wars." But it, he thought, had disappeared forever.

He had wanted several times to join the army. Tales of great movements shook the land. There seemed to be much glory in them. He had read of marches, advances, battles, and he had wanted to see it all. His busy mind had drawn for him large pictures filled with breathless deeds.

But his mother had prevented him from going. She looked with little favor upon the quality of his war spirit. She could calmly seat herself and give him many hundreds of reasons why he was more important on the farm than on the field of battle. She had had certain ways of expression that told him that her statements on the subject came from a deep belief.

At last, however, he had taken a firm position. The newspapers, the talk of the village, his own imaginings, had excited him to an uncontrollable degree. They were in truth fighting finely down there. Almost every day the newspapers talked of victory.

One night, as he lay in bed, the winds had carried to him the ringing of the church bell. Someone was pulling the bell rope wildly to tell the news of a great battle. This voice of the people, joyful in the night, had made him tremble in excitement. Later, he had gone down to his mother's room and had told her, "Ma, I'm going to join the army."

"Henry, don't you be a fool," his mother had replied. She had then covered her face with the blanket. There was an end to the matter for that night.

Nevertheless, the next morning he had gone to a town that was near his mother's farm and had joined a regiment that was forming there. When he had returned home, his mother was milking a cow. Four others stood waiting. "Ma, I've joined," he said to her hesitatingly. There was a short silence. "The Lord's will be done, Henry," she had finally replied, and had then continued to milk the cow.

When he had stood in the doorway with his blue soldier's clothes on his back, and with the light of excitement and expectancy in his eyes, he had seen two tears leaving their trails on his mother's tired face.

Still, she had surprised him by saying nothing about his returning. He had privately been ready

for a beautiful scene. He had prepared certain sentences which he thought could be used to produce great emotion. But her words destroyed his plans. She had steadily cut potatoes and spoken as follows: "Be careful, Henry, and take good care of yourself. Don't think you can beat the whole rebel army at the start, because you can't. You're just one little fellow among a lot of others, and you have to keep quiet and do what they tell you. I know how you feel, Henry.

"And always be careful when you choose your friends. There are lots of bad men in the army, Henry. The army makes them wild. They like nothing better than taking a young fellow like you, who has never been away from home much and has always had a mother, and teaching him to drink liquor and curse. Stay away from them, Henry. I don't want you ever to do anything, Henry, that you would be ashamed to tell me about. Just act as if I were watching you. If you keep that in your mind always, I guess you'll come out all right.

"You must always remember your father, too, child. And remember he never drank a drop of liquor in his life, and seldom cursed, either.

"I don't know what else to tell you, Henry, except that you must never avoid your duty, child. If a time comes when you have to be killed or

do a bad thing, Henry, don't think of anything except what's right.

"Don't forget your shirts and socks, child, and try to keep warm and dry. Good-bye, Henry. Be careful, and be a good boy."

He had, of course, not been patient during the speech. It had not been quite what he expected. He departed, feeling a kind of relief.

Still, when he had looked back from the gate, he had seen his mother kneeling among the potatoes. Her brown face, upraised, was marked with tears, and her body was shaking. He lowered his head and went on, feeling suddenly ashamed of his purpose.

From his home he had gone to the school to say good-bye to many friends. They had gathered about him with wonder and admiration. He had felt the difference now between himself and them, and had been filled with calm pride.

There was a dark-haired girl at whom he had gazed steadily, and he thought she grew sad at the sight of his blue uniform. As he had walked down the path between the rows of oaks, he had turned his head and seen her at a window watching his departure. He often thought of it.

On the way to Washington, his spirits had risen. The regiment was fed and praised at station after station, until the youth had believed that he

must be a hero. As he enjoyed the smiles of the girls and was given attention by the old men, he had felt growing within him the strength to do splendid deeds.

After long journeyings with many pauses, there had come months of boring life in a camp. He had had the belief that real war was a series of death struggles with little time for sleep and meals. But since his regiment had come to the field, the army had done little but sit still and try to keep warm.

He was brought then gradually back to his old ideas. Struggles as in ancient times were ended. Men were either better or more timid.

He had grown to regard himself merely as part of a vast blue demonstration. His main job was to take care of his personal comfort as well as he could.

Now there was a more serious problem. He lay in his tent thinking about it. He tried to prove to himself that he would not run from a battle.

Before now, he had never felt obliged to consider too seriously this question. In his life he had accepted certain things, never doubting his belief in final success, and thinking little about methods. But here he was faced with an immediate situation. He had suddenly wondered if, perhaps, in a battle he might run. He was forced

to admit that—in the matter of war—he knew nothing about himself.

He jumped from his bed and began to pace nervously back and forth. “Good Lord, what’s the matter with me?” he said aloud.

After a time the tall soldier came into the tent. He began to put some articles in his bag.

The youth, pausing in his nervous walk, looked at the busy figure. “Going to be a battle, sure, is there, Jim?” he asked.

“Of course there is,” replied the tall soldier, whose name was Jim Conklin. “Of course there is. You just wait until tomorrow, and you’ll see one of the biggest battles that ever was. You just wait.”

“Do you really think so?” asked the youth.

“Oh, you’ll see fighting this time, my boy—real fighting,” added the tall soldier, with the manner of a man who is about to enact a battle for the benefit of his friends.

“Well,” remarked the youth, “this story will probably have the same result the others did.”

“No, it won’t,” replied the tall soldier. “No, it won’t.”

The youth remained silent for a time. At last he spoke to the tall soldier. “Jim!”

“What?”

“How do you think the regiment will do?”

“Oh, they’ll fight all right, I guess, after they once get into it,” said the other with cold judgment. “They’re new, of course, but they’ll fight all right, I guess.”

“Do you think any of the boys will run?” continued the youth.

“Oh, maybe a few of them will run, but there’s that kind in every regiment, especially when they first go under fire,” said the other in a kindly way.

“Of course it might happen that the whole regiment might start to run, if they met some big fighting at the beginning. Or they might stay and fight. But you can’t bet on nothing. Of course they haven’t ever been under fire yet, and it’s not likely they’ll beat the whole rebel army in one battle. But I think they’ll fight better than some, and maybe worse than others. That’s the way I see it. Most of the boys will fight all right after they start shooting.” He placed great weight on the last four words.

“Did you ever think you might run yourself, Jim?” the youth asked. On completing the sentence he laughed as if he had meant it as a joke.

The tall soldier waved his hand. “Well,” he said seriously, “I’ve thought it might get too uncomfortable for Jim Conklin sometimes. If a lot of boys started to run, I suppose I’d start to

run, too. And if I once started, I'd run like the devil. But if everybody were standing and fighting, well, I'd stand and fight, I would. I know I would!"

The youth felt grateful for these words of his companion. He had feared that all of the other men possessed a great confidence. He was now a little reassured.