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IN THE DEBATABLE LAND.

BY EDWARD S. ELLIS.

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CHAPTER XII. HOT QUARTERS.

Lieutenant Oakman followed Mrs. Benware into the spacious but scantily furnished sitting room, where she placed the candle on the circular stand in the middle of the apartment. A hickory wood fire was burning on the broad hearth and diffused its cheerful warmth to the farthest corner of the room. One of the evidences of the poverty brought by war-times was that in many such families candles took the place of the lamps to which they had been accustomed.

A second lady followed the officer stepping so lightly that he did not suspect her presence until Mrs. Benware introduced her sister, Miss Davis. The ladies were of nearly the same age and showed a striking similarity of features. The lieutenant remained standing until they were seated, and the hostess motioned him to the rocking chair at the side of the table supporting the candle.

"Mary has it," added the elder. The unmarried lady drew a folded paper from the bosom of her dress, and without a word handed it to the officer, who, knowing its character, flushed and accepted it with a slightly tremulous grasp.

"With your permission," he said, bowing to each in turn. They nodded, and without further ceremony he unfolded the single sheet of paper and proceeded to examine it with an intensity of interest that could not have been intensified, the women meanwhile watching his countenance with an interest almost as great. They saw his eyes expand with wonder, while a low admiring whistle came from between his lips.

"What a prize!" he muttered. "General Sherman would pay \$10,000 to lay his hands on that."

The extravagant assertion was warranted, for that sheet of paper contained a list of all the forces gathering to dispute the advance of Sherman, with the names of the officers and the exact strength of every regiment. Included in the statement was equally valuable information as to the cavalry and artillery, not to mention a number of minor matters. Finally on the back of the



"What a prize!" he muttered. The document was written in a hand as fine and legible as copperplate minute directions for Lieutenant Oakman himself, directions which if followed would carry him into the Union lines before Sherman reached Savannah.

"So the old man is going to Savannah!" muttered the delighted officer. "He wouldn't let us know, and we guessed all sorts of places. I take some pride to myself that I stuck to Savannah."

As softly as the moving figure over the screen the door leading from the hall was shoved inward and two men in the ragged uniform of Confederate cavalrymen stepped into the room. Each held a revolver, and the foremost, with a deftness born of long practice, leveled his weapon at the astounded Union officer.

"Up with your hands, Yank! We hain't time for any fooling!"

Never was the lieutenant caught so completely at fault. These horsemen, turning back on their own trail, had followed him to the house, tied their animals and entered the building without attracting notice. By what possible means could they have gained their information?

Oakman did a daredevil thing. Dearer to him than his life was the safety of that document in his hand, for its capture meant death to others besides himself.

He would have flung it into the flames had he not known that his captors would snatch it forth before it was more than scathed. He attempted a piece of strategy whose audacity could not have been surpassed.

"I surrender under protest," he said, rising from his chair but instead of elevating his hands he coolly folded the paper and shoved it into his inner pocket.

"What are you doing?" thundered the man with leveled weapon.

"Merely putting away a letter. That being done, up go my hands!"

With which he laughed and reached toward the ceiling.

"What is in that letter?"

"Would you like to see it?"

"Trot it out."

The lieutenant shoved his hand under his shoulder and brought forth the letter written by Captain Wager Trenholm.

"At your service. It will interest you."

Had the other document been the only one in his possession, thus robbing him of this trick, he would have whipped out his revolver and fought the battle then and there to the end.

The cavalryman gingerly unfolded the letter.

"Here, Bill," he said gruffly to his companion. "I never could read writing. Out with it while I keep the Yank covered."

Oakman wondered that they did not disarm him, but when three more grizzled troopers tramped through the hall and entered the apartment he saw the little need of doing so.

The one who held the letter leaned sideways to the candle for a minute or two and then picked up the light blue letter and began to read. His companions looked on attentively while waiting for him to speak. Finally he emitted an oath after glancing at the signature.

"I'm blowed!" he exclaimed. "Do you know who wrote that, boys?"

"How should we know?" was the appropriate question that followed.

"Why, Captain Wager Trenholm."

"Read it out."

The man complied, while the others stood gaping and wondering. The letter, it will be recalled, was a declaration that Lieutenant Ledyard Oakman was a Union officer for whom Captain Trenholm had been exchanged and that he was entitled to courteous treatment and a safe conduct to the Union lines.

When the group had somewhat recovered from their shock, the one who still held the document in his hand looked at it again.

"I wonder if the captain did write that, Miss Harriman, you know his writing."

"Very well indeed."

Lo, directly behind Lieutenant Oakman stood Miss Marian Harriman, whose detestation of the Union officer a fortnight before brought so scathing a rebuke from Mrs. Eldridge and her daughter.

"Heavens, you here!" he exclaimed, facing her.

"Yes," she said, with a sneering smile. "I am here, and I rather suspect you wish you were somewhere else."

"I always do when in your presence."

She had on her hat and held a riding whip in her hand, as if she had just ridden up with the party. Could it be that it was she who had conducted them to this house that she might betray him to his death?

She ignored the slur and, taking the letter from the hand of the soldier, who held the candle for her, examined it with the utmost care from the beginning to the signature at the bottom.

"You know," she said in conclusion, "that the captain never loses the opportunity to visit the home of General Eldridge. I am familiar with his handwriting, and therefore, much as I regret it, I am compelled to say that this letter was written by him."

"No doubt about it, Miss Harriman?" asked one of the disappointed group.

"Not a particle. I suppose it will hardly be safe to disregard what he says, or rather what he has written. This prisoner is in uniform, and therefore cannot be regarded as a spy, unless—"

"Unless what?" asked two of the guerrillas in the same breath.

"There are papers on him to show that he is acting as a spy. Why not search him so as to make sure?"

"Good idea! You've got more wit than all of us! Go through the Yank, boys!"

CHAPTER XIII. A BREAK FOR LIBERTY.

A deep sigh and partly suppressed moan broke the sudden silence that fell upon the group. They were from Mrs. Benware, who moved backward a step, as if to recoil from the impending tragedy.

"You seem interested in the prisoner," was the cutting comment of Miss Harriman, but the woman addressed gave no answer. She and her sister, who seemed equally affected, but in better control of her nerves, moved toward the door leading into the hall.

Their action suggested to the other woman the propriety of all withdrawing for a brief while, and they passed out of the room into the wide hall.

Lieutenant Oakman, without any evidence of emotion except a slight paling of his countenance, said to the leader of the party.

"Search me if you choose. I shall offer no resistance."

"It makes little difference whether you do or not," grimly replied the Confederate, who without ceremony began the work, which was simple in its nature.

From the inner pocket of the prisoner's coat he drew forth several letters and folded documents. They included two missives from his mother, another from an army friend with General Grant in Virginia, and that was all. Every other part of his clothing was searched, including his cap and cavalry boots, which he was compelled to draw off. There was nothing contraband in them, and the heels of his boots, which were tapped and examined, gave evidence of being solid and devoid of any secret receptacles. Of course his revolver was confiscated.

It would have gone ill with the lieutenant had that document which he received from the hands of Mrs. Benware been found, but, strange as it may seem, it had vanished, the thorough search of his captors making it impossible for it to remain hidden about his person.

It would appear that, the search of the prisoner having resulted as stated, his peril had disappeared. Such would have been the fact had he been in the custody of a company of regular Confederates, but, unfortunately, these men were irregulars, known as Wilkins' cavalry, who did not consider themselves bound by the usages of civilized warfare.

"Well, Yank," coolly remarked the leader, "you seem to be what you claim, and Miss Harriman says that this letter (handing it back to him) was written by Captain Trenholm, but it happens that the captain doesn't command our company."

"I do not see what that has to do with my case," replied the lieutenant, who, nevertheless, was quite certain of the drift of the words.

"You'll be likely to see pretty soon," was the significant remark of the leader. "These are not the times to show much consideration to the like of you. I'll own that the question isn't clear in my mind. I'll have to talk it over with the boys. While we're doing so, you can withdraw. Stay with the women. No doubt they'll find your company agreeable. Bill, go along and keep an eye on him all the time, remembering that, if he hasn't any weapons except his sword, the fact won't hinder him from running, if he gets the chance."

The soldier addressed as "Bill" motioned to Oakman to follow him into the hall. The prisoner did so, the two joining the three women, who were seated near the stand or table upon which was the candle, with their arms folded, grim, silent and waiting. They turned their eyes toward the couple, but not a word was spoken by any one.

All the chairs were occupied, and the men kept their feet. Bill wished to follow the debate that was going on in the next room and placed himself near the door that he might catch the words spoken, an easy thing to do, since there was little or no attempt at secrecy by the others.

While posted thus the soldier motioned for Oakman to take his place in front, that he might observe his every movement, the guard men, while keeping his hand on the revolver at his hip.

Less than five minutes later a scream rang out from Miss Harriman, and the startled company in the adjoining room dashed into the hall to learn its cause.

She was in her chair, gasping and struggling with a frightful attack of hysterics; Mrs. Benware and her sister, as white as death, sat silent, upright and evidently on the point of swooning; Bill, the cavalryman, was stretched on his back, to all appearances as dead as dead could be. The open front door left no doubt whether the prisoner had gone, and with fierce imprecations the raiders streamed outside and made for his horse.

Not a minute was to be lost, for in the vivid moonlight he was seen in the act of swinging himself into the saddle of one of the animals that had been tied at the side of the lane, fully alive to the fact that his life depended upon using every second at his command.

Not doubting what the verdict of the men would be, Lieutenant Oakman, while in the hall with his jailer, determined to discount it. The fact that his guard did not suspect any such wild purpose increased the chances of the officer. Without his motive being distrusted by the man whose attention was centered upon the discussion in the adjoining room the lieutenant stepped up near him. The next instant he was throttled with such lightninglike quickness that he sank to the floor and collapsed without being able to make an outcry.

Lieutenant Oakman would have strangled the life out of him without any compunction had he dared to linger for that purpose, but the door at his side was likely to open any moment, when it would be all over with him. As it was he came near shutting off the wind of the fellow for good, but, seeing him senseless, he snatched away his revolver, rose from his feet and tiptoed hurriedly out of the door.

The whole thing was begun and ended so quickly that the daring fellow seemed to be gone ere the women understood what it all meant. Then a moment passed before they did anything, and the form on the floor had begun to show signs of returning animation, when Miss Harriman uttered her penetrating scream, the party crowded into the hall, and without pausing to ask questions, made for the fleeing prisoner.

Lieutenant Oakman was as cool as he was active. There was no time in which to select the best horse, and he untied the one nearest at hand. They were partly in moonlight and partly in shadow, but he saw the old building disgorge his terrible contents, as he turned the head of his animal down the lane toward the highway, and he knew the battle for life was on. There would be no surrender or quarter shown in this business.

The instant the animal broke into his gallop in the middle of the lane Oak-

nipping of two of them as they grazed his clothing.

With his head still on the horse's neck he peered from under his cap and jammed the spur on his boot into the flanks of the beast, which must have been mystified by the curious turn of events.

The situation was too hot for the lieutenant to seek to guide the horse, and, knowing so little of the country, he let the reins lie loose, while he devoted his own energies to getting all the speed he could out of the animal, which, being uncontrolled, upon debouching into the highway, turned to the left. This, it will be remembered, took him in the direction of the home of General Eldridge, which the fugitive had left earlier in the evening. It seemed to his rider that this was a mistake on his part, but it was too late to correct it.

After the first scattering volley, the cavalrymen ceased firing, and ran with all speed for their horses. Accustomed to such stirring work, they were in the saddles in a twinkling and tearing down the lane like a whirlwind. Of necessity one of the men had to stay at the rear, since there was no animal for him, and it was a singular coincidence that the steed thus taken was the personal property of the dazed Bill, trying to rouse himself to a sense of things in the hall of the house left behind.

Another coincidence was disquieting. Bill's horse was the poorest of the whole group.

CHAPTER XIV. A FRIEND IN NEED.

Lieutenant Oakman was too skilled a horseman to remain long in ignorance of the woeful mistake he had made. He had taken the worst horse of the whole lot, and one of the inevitable certainties of the immediate future was that he would be beaten in his flight for freedom.

Glancing over his shoulder at the party dashing down the highway after him and noting that they were surely gaining, the fugitive perforce did some hard thinking.

"This can't go on much longer. I don't think they will need a court martial next time to decide what to do with me."

The pursuers were close enough to tumble Oakman from the saddle, but he knew they would not do that, since by waiting awhile he must fall into their hands, while there was danger that in firing they might wound the horse. Even though he was the least valuable of the lot, the party were not willing to lose him.

Oakman glanced keenly to the right and left, in the hope of discovering something that might be turned to account in his flight. The open character of the country was discouraging, but he recalled indistinctly a small stretch of woods through which he passed when he fled to his defense.

The officer had suspected something was amiss, and, issuing from the dwelling just as Miss Eldridge was returning, he demanded to know what was afoot. She told him, without reserve, knowing of Wilkins' cavalry in the neighborhood, the chivalric nature of the Confederate was aroused, and he comprehended for the first time the imminent peril of Oakman which had caused him to resort to secret flight.

The return of Pete with word that the fugitive refused to use Miss Eldridge's horse appealed still more strongly to the chivalry of the captain, who saw, without understanding the true, underlying motive of the refusal, that it was because of his objection that the fugitive had thus been deprived of the probable means of securing his safety.

While still debating what he could do if indeed he could do anything, the sound of the pistol firing brought the captain into the road.

"Out of that saddle quicker than lightning!" he commanded, as Oakman came face to face with him.

The Union officer was on the ground in a twinkling at the side of his friend.

"You are a brave man, captain! I'll stand by you to the death!"

"No, you won't! Into the house with you!"

"And desert you? Never!"

"You infernal fool! I don't want your help! I'm in no danger. It is you they're after, and, if you stay here, you'll be a dead man inside of three minutes!"

"But what of you, captain?" asked the bewildered fugitive.

This time the captain swore, and, seizing his companion by the shoulder, he swung him about and precipitated him so violently forward that he came near falling.

"Off with you! Into the house! I'll hold these people back till you're safe. Then I'll join you, and we'll stand them off together! What in thunder are you waiting for?"

brain, as would have been the fact but for the restlessness of both animals.

Before his foe could fire a second time the lieutenant let fly. The other reeled and slipped out of his saddle to the ground, dead when he struck the earth.

Whatever purpose Oakman had of seizing the horse of his enemy was spoiled by the brute, which wheeled and dashed back at headlong speed toward the company at the rear, whinnying in his terror as he dragged the form of his late master for a few rods, when his boot, disengaging itself from the stirrup, left him lying in the middle of the highway.

It was flight again, with all the chances against him, but, since there was nothing else for him, Lieutenant Oakman jerked his animal's head around, and, with the merciless speed of his spur into his bleeding flank, drove him to his utmost.

No use now of looking to the rear. He knew the whole party, after a moment's pause, would be after him, hotter than ever.

Something desperate must be done, and the fugitive was on the alert for the first opening, no matter how slight. While there's life there's hope, and he was casting about for the last chance, when on a slight rise of ground in advance the form of a man on foot and bareheaded loomed to view in the moonlight. And then it was that Oakman discovered he was close to the house of General Eldridge and recognized the man as Captain Wager Trenholm, his "exchange."

That officer was running, when as he came up the swell of ground he saw

all, but pass into the woods at the rear. The opportunity to do so was his while Captain Trenholm was holding his vigorous debate with the raiders in the highway. If the captain could not keep off the angered guerrillas, the latter in their desperation were likely to force an entrance into the dwelling, in order to take vengeance on the man that had shot their leader. They would offer no violence to the captain himself while the debate was under way, since all were fighting under the same flag, and the officer was therefore strictly truthful when he declared himself to be in no danger. But, with Oakman in sight, neither the rage nor the threats nor the resistance of the captain would be sufficient to prevent the fierce troopers from shooting the Union officer.

"He may hold them in check for a brief time," thought Oakman, "but they will not allow me to escape. There will be more fighting if I stay and some of these people will be hurt. The right course is for me to take to the woods."

He was passing the farther end of the mansion, with the intention of reaching the forest, from which he had taken his first survey of the place, when some one called to him in a guarded undertone:

"One moment, lieutenant!"

He stopped short and looked around.

"Good heavens, Miss Eldridge! What brings you here at this time?"

She paused a couple of paces away, where she could be seen only indistinctly in the gloom. That her voice was tremulous and that she betrayed much excitement was no reflection on her bravery.

Ignoring his question, she said reprovingly:

"The captain told you to come into the house."

"He did, and he is a brave, honorable soldier!" replied Oakman, eager to render this tribute to the gallant officer.

"But I shall be safer in not obeying him."

"Do you not believe we can hold them at bay?"

There was something thrilling in her reference to the defenders as "we."

"If bravery alone were sufficient, I should be safe in the hands of you and the captain. But this house was never intended for a fort, and, if they persevere, they may burn it about our heads."

"They would not dare do that."

"Ordinarily they would not, but I shot their leader, and they are determined to get at me. It will be easy to reach the woods at the rear of your plantation, and I am sure they cannot find me there."

"Your plan is a good one, but there is a better."

"What is that?"

"Take my pony, Jack, and ride away. There isn't an animal in Georgia nor in the whole south," she proudly added, "that can overtake you."

"Where is he?"

"When Pete brought me word that you refused to use him, I told him to return him to his hiding place in the woods. Hunt up Pete. You know where to find him. Let him conduct you round to the road, and then don't spare Jack."

The seconds were of measureless value. In the stillness of the night the angry voices were plainly audible in the highway. Captain Trenholm's above all the others, and it must be admitted that his profanity was impressive in its way. Evidently the arguments and protests were at a crisis.

Despite all this, Lieutenant Oakman could not help saying:

"I will accept your offer. I thank you from the bottom of my heart and pledge myself that, if it is possible, Jack shall be returned at the earliest hour."

"I shall be grateful to receive him, but I beg you to give the matter no thought, and not to delay your departure another moment."

She was growing nervous over his dallying.

"Well, goodby, Miss Eldridge. I hope we shall meet under happier circumstances, but if we are never to see each other, God bless you! I shall never, never, forget the noblest daughter of the south."

He extended his hand, and she met it. In the excess of his feelings he was pardonable if his pressure was fervent and was prolonged a few seconds longer than was necessary; but, offering no objection, neither did she respond. Her dainty hand lay limp in his warm palm, and she did not speak. He let it gently fall and slipped away like a shadow among the trees.

Miss Eldridge stood for a full minute, listening after the sound of his guarded footsteps had become inaudible. If she had any misgiving that he would return, it quickly vanished. Then she gave a faint sigh and walked in the opposite direction.

That which attracted her was the sound of the angry voices in the highway. Captain Trenholm was never noted for his angelic temper, and all the signs indicated that an explosion was impending. Her fear lest this should curb hastened the steps of the young woman.

"The first one that crosses that threshold without invitation is a dead man!" shouted the captain as he resolutely placed himself in front of the horsemen, revolver in hand. "And, to be sure I don't make any mistake, I'll shoot him on his attempt to pass through the gate!"

"No one questions your bravery, captain, but your bluff won't work. We're bound to string up the Yank who shot Captain Dick."

"He shot him in fair fight, as he had a right to do, but—"

At this juncture Miss Eldridge, who had passed down the short lane in front of her home leading to the highway, was recognized as she ran forward. Her appearance hushed the turmoil for the moment, though it was apparent that it could not placate the wrath of the raiders.

As the horsemen saluted she said:

"If you will excuse me for a minute, I will say something privately to the captain."

CHAPTER XV.
A SECOND FRIEND IN NEED.

Lieutenant Oakman had let his tired horse go free, and, leaving the fence, he ran swiftly toward the grove of trees that inclosed the mansion of General Eldridge. At the moment of darting among the shadows he glanced toward the highway, where he saw Captain Trenholm surrounded by the enraged raiders.

The fugitive felt some qualms at deserting the man who had given such proof of his chivalry, but the captain's own words left no doubt that the apparent desertion would in reality contribute to the safety of his gallant foe and friend. But for that, Oakman would have stood at his side to the last extremity.

There are crises in men's lives when the brain works with marvelous swiftness. It was while Lieutenant Oakman was running with his utmost speed for the shelter of the house that it flashed upon him there was a way by which he could not only increase his own prospect of escape, but at the same time save that good family an infinite amount of annoyance. He would not enter the dwelling at

all, but pass into the woods at the rear. The opportunity to do so was his while Captain Trenholm was holding his vigorous debate with the raiders in the highway. If the captain could not keep off the angered guerrillas, the latter in their desperation were likely to force an entrance into the dwelling, in order to take vengeance on the man that had shot their leader. They would offer no violence to the captain himself while the debate was under way, since all were fighting under the same flag, and the officer was therefore strictly truthful when he declared himself to be in no danger. But, with Oakman in sight, neither the rage nor the threats nor the resistance of the captain would be sufficient to prevent the fierce troopers from shooting the Union officer.

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