

The Rock of Chickamauga

A Story of the Western Crisis

Book 6

by Joseph A. Altsheler


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Principal Characters in *The Rock of Chickamauga*

Dick Mason, Cousin of Harry Kenton, Who Fights on the Northern Side.

Colonel George Kenton, Father of Harry Kenton.

Mrs. Mason, Mother of Dick Mason.

Colonel Arthur Winchester, Dick Mason's Regimental Commander.

Alan Hertford, A Northern Cavalry Leader.

Daniel Whitley, A Northern Sergeant and Veteran of the Plains.

George Warner, A Vermont Youth Who Loves Mathematics.

Frank Pennington, A Nebraska Youth, Friend of Dick Mason.

Tom Slade, A Guerrilla Chief.

Victor Woodville, A Young Mississippi Officer.

John Woodville, Father of Victor Woodville.

Charles Woodville, Uncle of Victor Woodville.

Historical Characters in *The Rock of Chickamauga*

U. S. Grant, Northern Commander.

George H. Thomas, "The Rock of Chickamauga."

William S. Rosecrans, Northern General.

Nathan Bedford Forrest, Southern Cavalry Leader.

W. T. Sherman, Northern General.

James Longstreet, Southern General.

Simon Bolivar Buckner, Southern General.

Leonidas Polk, Southern General and Bishop.

Braxton Bragg, Southern General.

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Chapter 1

At Bellevue

“You have the keenest eyes in the troop. Can you see anything ahead?” asked Colonel Winchester.

“Nothing living, sir,” replied Dick Mason, as he swept his powerful glasses in a half-curve. “There are hills on the right and in the center, covered with thick, green forest, and on the left, where the land lies low, the forest is thick and green too, although I think I catch a flash of water in it.”

“That should be the little river of which our map tells. And you, Warner, what do your eyes tell you?”

“The same tale they tell to Dick, sir. It looks to me like a wilderness.”

“And so it is. It’s a low-lying region of vast forests and thickets, of slow deep rivers and creeks, and of lagoons¹ and bayous². If Northern troops want to be ambushed, they couldn’t come to a finer place for it. Forrest and five thousand of his wild riders might hide within rifle shot of us in this endless mass of vegetation. And so, my lads, it behooves³ us to be cautious with a very great caution. You will recall how we got cut up by Forrest in the Shiloh time.”

“I do, sir,” said Dick, and he shuddered as he recalled those terrible moments. “This is Mississippi, isn’t it?”

Colonel Winchester took a small map from his pocket and,

1 A small pond-like body of water

2 A sluggish, stagnant arm of a river or lake

3 Benefits

unfolding it, examined it with minute⁴ care.

“If this is right, and I’m sure it is,” he replied, “we’re far down in Mississippi in the sunken regions that border the sluggish⁵ tributaries of the Father of Waters. The vegetation is magnificent, but for a home, give me higher ground, Dick.”

“Me too, sir,” said Warner. “The finest state in this Union is Vermont. I like to live on firm soil, even if it isn’t so fertile, and I like to see the clear, pure water running everywhere, brooks and rivers.”

“I’ll admit that Vermont is a good state for two months in the year,” said Dick.

“Why not the other ten?”

“Because then it’s frozen up, solid and hard, or so I’ve heard.”

The other boys laughed and kept up their chaff⁶, but Colonel Winchester rode soberly ahead. Behind him trailed the Winchester regiment, now reorganized and mounted. Fresh troops had come from Kentucky, and fragments of old regiments practically destroyed at Perryville and Stone River had been joined to it.

It was a splendid body of men, but of those who had gone to Shiloh, only about two hundred remained. The great conflicts of the West and the minor battles had accounted for the others. But it was perhaps one of the reliefs of the Civil War that it gave the lads who fought it little time to think of those who fell. Four years crowded with battles, great and small, sieges, and marches absorbed their whole attention.

Now two men, the dreaded Forrest and fierce little Joe Wheeler, occupied the minds of Winchester and his officers. It was impossible to keep track of these wild horsemen here in their own section. They had a habit of appearing two or three

4 Concerned with the smallest details

5 Slow-moving

6 Good-natured teasing

hundred miles from the place at which they were expected.

But the young lieutenants, while they watched too for their redoubtable foes, had an eye also for the country. It was a new kind of region for all of them. The feet of their horses sank deep in the soft, black soil, and there was often a sound of many splashing as the regiment rode across a wide, muddy brook.

Dick noted with interest the magnolias, and the live oaks, and the great stalks of the sunflower. Here in this Southern state, which bathed its feet in the warm waters of the Gulf, spring was already far along, although snows still lingered in the North.

The vegetation was extravagant⁷ in its luxuriance⁸ and splendor. The enormous forest was broken by openings like prairies, and in every one of them the grass grew thick and tall, interspersed⁹ with sunflowers and blossoming wild plants. Through the woods ran vast networks of vines, and birds of brilliant plumage¹⁰ chattered in the trees. Twice, deer sprang up before them and raced away in the forest. It was the wilderness almost as De Soto had traversed it nearly four centuries before, and it had a majesty which in its wildness was not without its sinister¹¹ note.

They approached a creek, deeper and wider than usual, flowing in slow, yellow coils, and as they descended into the marsh that enclosed its waters, there was a sharp, crackling sound, followed quickly by another and then by many others. The reports did not cease, and, although blood was shed freely, no man fell from his horse nor was any wounded mortally. But the assault was vicious, and it was pushed home with the utmost courage and tenacity¹², although many of the assailants fell

7 Exceeding the limits of reason

8 Lush growth

9 Scattered at intervals

10 Feathers

11 Threatening

12 Persistence

never to rise again. Cries of pain and anger, and imprecations¹³ arose from the stricken¹⁴ regiment.

“Slap! Slap!”

“Bang! Bang!”

“Ouch! He’s got his bayonet in my cheek!”

“Heavens, that struck me like a minie ball¹⁵! And it came whistling and shrieking, too, just like one!”

“Phew, how they sting! And my neck is bleeding in three places!”

“By thunder, Bill, I hit that fellow fair and square! He’ll never trouble an honest Yankee soldier again!”

The fierce buzzing increased all around them, and Colonel Winchester shouted to his trumpeter:

“Blow the charge at once!”

The man, full willing, put the trumpet to his lips and blew loud and long. The whole regiment went across the creek at a gallop—the water flying in yellow showers—and did not stop until, emerging from the marsh, they reached the crest of a low hill a mile beyond. Here, stung, bleeding, and completely defeated by the enemy, they stopped for repairs. An occasional angry buzz showed that they were not yet safe from the skirmishers, but their attack seemed a light matter after the full assault of the determined foe.

“I suppose we’re all wounded,” said Dick as he wiped a bleeding cheek. “At least as far as I can see, they’re hurt. The last fellow who got his bayonet in my face turned his weapon around and around and sang merrily at every revolution.”

“We were afraid of being ambushed by Forrest,” said Warner, speaking from a swollen countenance. “Instead we struck something worse. We rode straight into an ambush of

13 Curses

14 Wounded

15 Type of bullet

ten billion, high-powered mosquitoes, every one tipped with fire. Have we got enemies like these to fight all the way down here?”

“They sting the rebels, too,” said Pennington.

“Yes, but they like newcomers best, the unacclimated¹⁶. When we rode down into that swamp, I could hear them shouting, to one another: ‘That fat fellow is mine, I saw him first! I’ve marked the rosy-cheeked boy for mine. Keep away the rest of you fellows!’ I feel as if I’d been through a battle. No more marshes for me.”

Some of the provident¹⁷ produced bottles of oil of pennyroyal¹⁸. Sergeant Daniel Whitley, who rode a giant bay horse, was one of the most foreseeing in this respect, and, after the boys had used his soothing liniment¹⁹ freely, the fiery torment left by the mosquito’s sting passed away.

The sergeant seemed to have grown bigger and broader than ever. His shoulders were about to swell through his faded blue coat, and the hand resting easily on the rein had the grip and power of a bear’s paw. His rugged face had been tanned by the sun of the far south to the color of an Indian’s. He was formidable to a foe, and yet no gentler heart beat than that under his old, blue uniform. Secretly he regarded the young lieutenants, his superiors in military rank and education, as brave children, and often he cared for them where his knowledge and skill were greater than theirs or even than that of colonels and generals.

“God bless you, Sergeant,” said Dick, “you don’t look like an angel, but you are one—that is, of the double-fisted, fighting type.”

The sergeant merely smiled and replaced the bottle carefully

16 Unaccustomed

17 Having foresight

18 Plant of the mint family used for medicine

19 A soothing liquid rubbed on sprains or bruises

in his pocket, knowing that they would have good use for it again.

The regiment, after salving²⁰ its wounds, resumed its watchful march.

“Do you know where we’re going?” Pennington asked Dick.

“I think we’re likely, if we live long enough, to land in the end before Vicksburg, the great Southern fortress, but as I gather it, we mean to curve, and curl, and twist about a lot before then. Grant, they say, intends to close in on Vicksburg, while Rosecrans farther north is watching Bragg at Chattanooga. We’re a flying column, gathering up information, and ready for anything.”

“It’s funny,” said Warner thoughtfully, “that we’ve already got so far south in the western field. We can’t be more than two or three hundred miles from the Gulf. Besides, we’ve already taken New Orleans, the biggest city of the South, and our fleet is coming up the river to meet us. Yet in the East, we don’t seem to make any progress at all. We lose great battles there, and Fredericksburg they say was just a slaughter of our men. How do you make it out, Dick?”

“I’ve thought of several reasons for it. Our generals in the West are better than our generals in the East, or their generals in the East are better than their generals in the West. And then there are the rivers. In the East, they mostly run eastward between the two armies, and they are no help to us but a hindrance rather. Here in the West, the rivers, and they are many and great, mostly run southward, the way we want to go, and they bring our gunboats on their bosoms. Excuse my poetry, but it’s what I mean.”

“You must be right. I think that all the reasons you give apply together. But our command of the water has surely been a tremendous help. And then we’ve got to remember, Dick, that

20 Soothing

there was never a navy like ours. It goes everywhere, and it does everything. Why, if Admiral Farragut should tell one of those gunboats to steam across the Mississippi bottoms, it would turn its saucy nose, steer right out of the water into the mud, and blow up, with all hands aboard before it quit trying.”

“You two fellows talk too much,” said Pennington. “You won’t let President Lincoln, and Grant, and Halleck manage the war, but you want to run it yourselves.”

“I don’t want to run anything just now, Frank,” rejoined Dick. “What I’m thinking about most is rest and something to eat. I’d like to get rid, too, of about ten pounds of Mississippi mud that I’m carrying.”

“Well, I can catch a glint of white pillars through those trees. It means the ‘big house’ of a plantation, and you’ll probably find somewhere back of it the long rows of cabins, inhabited by the dark people whom we’ve come to raise to the level of their masters, if not above them. I can see right now the joyous welcome we’ll receive from the owners of the big house. They’ll be standing on the great piazza, waving Union flags, and shouting to us that they have ready cooling drinks and luxurious food for us all.”

“It’s hardly a joke to me. Whatever the cause of the war, it’s the bitterness of death for these people to be overrun. Besides, I remember the words of that old fellow in the blacksmith shop before we fought the battle of Stone River. He said that even if they were beaten, they’d still be there holding the land and running things.”

“That’s true,” said Warner. “I’ve been wondering how this war would end, and now I’m wondering what will happen after it does end. But here we are at the gate. What big grounds! These great planters certainly had space!”

“And what silence!” said Dick. “It’s uncanny²¹, George. A

21 Beyond the ordinary or normal; mysterious

place like this must have had a thousand slaves, and I don't see any of them rushing forward to welcome their liberators."

"Probably contraband²², gone long ago to Ben Butler at New Orleans. I don't believe there's a soul here."

"Remember that lone house in Tennessee, where a slip of a girl brought Forrest down on us and had us cut pretty nearly to pieces."

"I couldn't forget it."

Nor could Colonel Winchester. The house, large and low, stood in grounds covering an area of several acres, enclosed by a paling fence now sagging in many places. Great stone posts stood on either side of the gateway, but the gate was opened, and it, too, sagged.

The grounds had evidently been magnificent, both with flowers and forest trees. Already many of the flowers were blooming in great luxuriance and brilliancy, but the walks and borders were untrimmed. The house was of wood, painted white with green shutters, and as they drew nearer, they appreciated its great size, although it was only two stories in height. A hundred persons could have slept there, and twice as many could have found shade in the wide piazzas²³ which stretched the full length of the four sides.

But all the doors and shutters were closed, and no smoke rose from any chimney. They caught a glimpse of the cabins for the slaves, on lower ground some distance behind the great house. The whole regiment reined up as they approached the carriage entrance, and, although they were eight hundred strong, there was plenty of room without putting a single hoof upon a flower.

It was a great place. That leaped to the eye, but it was not marked upon Colonel Winchester's map, nor had he heard of it.

"It's a grand house," he said to his aides, "and it's a pity that

22 A black slave who escaped to the Union lines

23 Porches

it should go to ruin after the slaves are freed, as they certainly will be.”

“But it was built upon slave labor,” said Warner.

“So it was, and so were many of the most famous buildings in the world. But here, I’m not going to get into an argument about such questions with young men under my command. Besides, I’m fighting to destroy slavery, not to study its history. Sergeant Whitley, you’re an experienced trailer. Do you see any signs that troops have passed here?”

“None at all, sir. Down near the gate where the drive is out of repair, I noticed wheel tracks, but they were several days old. The freshest of them were light, as if made by buggies. I judge, sir, that it was the family, the last to leave.”

“And the wagons containing their valuables had gone on ahead?”

“It would seem so, sir.”

Colonel Winchester sighed.

“An invader is always feared and hated,” he said.

“But we do come as enemies,” said Dick, “and this feeling toward us can’t be helped.”

“That’s true. No matter what we do, we’ll never make any friends here in one of the Gulf states, the very core of Southern feeling. Dick, take a squad of men and enter the house. Pennington, you and Warner go with him.”

Dick sprang down instantly, chose Sergeant Whitley first, and, with the others, entered the great portico. The front door was locked, but it was easy enough to force it with a gun butt, and they went in, but not before Dick had noticed over the door in large letters the name “Bellevue.” So this was Bellevue, one of the great cotton plantations of Mississippi. He now vaguely remembered that he had once heard his uncle, Colonel Kenton, speak of having stopped a week here. But he could not recall the name of the owner. Strong for the Union as he was, Dick was

glad that the family had gone before the Northern cavalry came.

The house was on a splendid scale inside also, but all the rugs and curtains were gone. As they entered the great parlor, Dick saw a large piece of paper, and he flushed as he read written upon it in tall letters:

TO THE YANKEE RAIDERS:
YOU NEED NOT LOOK FOR THE SILVER.
IT HAS BEEN TAKEN TO VICKSBURG.

“Look at that!” he said indignantly²⁴ to Warner. “See how they taunt²⁵ us!”

But Warner laughed.

“Maybe some of our men at New Orleans have laid us open to such a stab,” he said. Then he added whimsically²⁶:

“We’ll go to Vicksburg with Grant, Dick, and get that silver yet.”

“The writing’s fresh,” said Sergeant Whitley, who also looked at the notification. “The paper hasn’t begun to twist and curl yet. It’s not been posted up there many hours.”

Colonel Winchester entered at that moment, and the notice was handed to him. He, too, flushed a little when he read it, but the next instant he laughed. Dick then called his attention to the apparent fact that it had been put there recently.

“May I speak a word, Colonel,” said Warner, who had been thinking so hard that there was a line the full length of his forehead.

“Yes, George, a dozen if you like. Go ahead. What is it?”

“The sergeant, who has had much experience as a trailer, told us that the tracks made by the buggy wheels were several days old. The slaves probably had been sent southward before that time. Now someone who saw our advance has come back,

24 Expressing strong displeasure at an insult

25 Mock

26 Playfully

and, whoever it was, he was thoroughly familiar with the house. He couldn't have been a servant. Servants don't leave taunts of that kind. It must have been somebody who felt our coming deeply, and if it had been an elderly man, he would have waited for action. He wouldn't have used saucy words. So, sir, I think it must have been a boy, just like Pennington there, for instance."

"Good, George, go on with your reasonings."

"As surely, sir, as z plus y equals the total of the two, the one who put up the placard²⁷ was a son of the owner. He alone would feel deeply enough to take so great a risk. The conditions absolutely demand that the owner has such a son and that he has done it."

"Very good, George. I think you're right, and this youth, in giving way to a natural burst of anger, although he did not mean to do so, has posted up for us a warning. A lad of his spirit would go in search of Forrest, and we cannot forget our experience with that general in Tennessee. Now, boys, we'll make ready for the night, which is not far away."

The house was built for a Southern climate, although Dick had learned that it could be cold enough in Central Mississippi in midwinter. But it was spring now, and they opened all the doors and windows, letting the pleasant air rush through the musty house.

"It may rain," said Colonel Winchester, "and the officers will sleep inside. The men will spread their blankets on the piazzas, and the horses will be tethered in the grounds. I hate to see the flowers and grass trodden down, but nature will restore them."

Some of the soldiers gathered wood from heaps nearby, and fires were kindled in the kitchen and also on the hearths in the slave quarters. Colonel Winchester had been truly called the father of his regiment. He was invariably particular about his health and comfort, and as he always led it in person in battle,

27 A paperboard sign or notice

there was no finer body of men in the Union service.

Now he meant for his men to have coffee and warm food after this long and trying ride, and soon savory odors arose, although the cooking was not begun until after dark, lest the smoke carry a signal to a lurking²⁸ enemy. The cavalymen cut the thick grass, which grew everywhere, and fed it to their horses, eight hundred massive jaws munching in content. The beasts stirred but little after their long ride, and now and then one uttered a satisfied groan.

The officers drank their coffee and ate their food on the eastern piazza, which overlooked a sharp dip toward a creek three or four hundred yards away. The night had rushed down suddenly, after the fashion of the far South, and from the creek they heard faintly the hoarse frogs calling. Beyond the grounds, a close ring of sentinels watched, because Colonel Winchester had no mind to be surprised again by Forrest, or by Fighting Joe Wheeler, or anybody else.

The night was thick, and dark, and moist with clouds. Dick, despite the peace that seemed to hang over everything, was oppressed. The desolate house, even more than the sight of the field after the battle was over, brought home to him the meaning of war. It was not alone the death of men but the uprooting of a country for their children and their children's children as well. Then his mind traveled back to his uncle, Colonel Kenton, and suddenly he smote his knee.

"What is it, Dick," asked Colonel Winchester, who sat only two or three yards away.

"Now I remember, sir. When I was only seven or eight years old I heard my uncle tell of stopping, as I told you, at a great plantation in Mississippi called Bellevue, but I couldn't recall the name of its owner. I know him now."

"What is the name, Dick?"

28 To lie in wait

“Woodville, John Woodville. He was a member of the Mississippi Senate, and he was probably the richest man in the State.”

“I think I have heard the name. He is a Confederate colonel now, with Pemberton’s army. No doubt we’ll have to fight him later on.”

“Meanwhile, we’re using his house.”

“Fortune of war. But all war is in a sense unfair, because it’s usually a question of the greater force. At any rate, Dick, we won’t harm Colonel Woodville’s home.”

“Yet in the end, sir, a lot of these great old country places will go, and what will take their place? You and I, coming from a border state, know that the colored race is not made up of Uncle Toms.”

“Well, Dick, we haven’t won yet, and until we do, we won’t bother ourselves about the aftermath of war. I’m glad we found so large a place as this. At the last moment I sent part of the men to the cabins, but at least three or four hundred must lie here on the piazzas. And most of them are already asleep. It’s lucky they have roofs. Look how the clouds are gathering!”

As much more room had been made upon the piazzas by the assignment of men to the cabins, Colonel Winchester and some of his officers also rested there. Dick, lying between the two blankets which he always carried in a roll tied to his saddle, was very comfortable now, with his head on his knapsack. The night had turned cooler, and, save when faint and far lightning quivered, it was heavy and dark with clouds. But the young lieutenants, hardened by two years of war and life in the open, felt snug and cosy on the broad, sheltered piazza. It was not often they found such good quarters, and Dick, like Colonel Winchester, was truly thankful that they had reached Bellevue before the coming storm.

It was evident now that the night was going to be wild.

The lightning grew brighter and came nearer, cutting fiercely across the southern sky. The ominous rumble of thunder, which reminded Dick so much of the mutter of distant battle, came from the horizon on which the lightning was flashing.

Colonel Winchester, Pennington, and Warner had gone to sleep, but Dick was wakeful. He had again that feeling of pity for the people who had been compelled to flee from such a house and who might lose it forever. It seemed to him that all the men, save himself and the sentinels, were asleep, sleeping with the soundness and indifference to surroundings shown by men who took their sleep when they could.

The horses stamped and moved uneasily beneath the threat of the advancing storm, but the men slept heavily on.

Dick knew that the sentinels were awake and watchful. They had a wholesome dread of Forrest and Wheeler, those wild riders of the South. Some of them had been present at that terrible surprise in Tennessee, and they were not likely to be careless when they were sure that Forrest might be near, but he remained uneasy nevertheless, and, although he closed his eyes and sought a soft place for his head on the saddle, sleep did not come.

He was sure that his apprehension did not come from any fear of an attack by Forrest or Wheeler. It was deeper-seated. The inherited sense that belonged to his great grandfather, who had lived his life in the wilderness, was warning him. It was not superstition. It seemed to Dick merely the palpable²⁹ result of an inheritance that had gone into the blood. His famous great-grandfather, Paul Cotter, and his famous friend, Henry Ware, had lived so much and so long among dangers that the very air indicated to them when they were at hand.

Dick looked down the long piazza, so long that the men at either end of it were hidden by darkness. The tall trees in

29 Obvious

the grounds were nodding before the wind, and the lightning flashed incessantly³⁰ in the southwest. The thunder was not loud, but it kept up a continuous muttering and rumbling. The rain was coming in fitful gusts, but he knew that it would soon drive hard and for a long time.

Everybody within Dick's area of vision was sound asleep, except himself. Colonel Winchester lay with his head on his arm, and his slumber was so deep that he was like one dead. Warner had not stirred a particle in the last half-hour. Dick was angry at himself, because he could not sleep. Let the storm burst! It might drive on the wide roof of the piazza, and the steady beating sound would make his sleep all the sounder and sweeter. He recalled, as millions of American lads have done, the days when he lay in his bed just under the roof and heard hail and sleet drive against it, merely to make him feel all the snugger in the bed with his covers drawn around him.

The fitful gusts of rain ceased, and then it came with a steady pour and roar, driving directly down, thus leaving the men on the outer edges of the piazzas untouched and dry. Still, Dick did not sleep, and at last he arose and walked softly into the house. Here the sense of danger grew stronger. He was reminded again of his early boyhood, when someone blindfolded was told to find a given object, and the others called "hot" when he was near or "cold" when he was away. He was feeling hot now. That inherited sense, the magnetic feeling out of the past, was warning him.

Dick felt sure that someone not of their regiment was in the building. He neither saw nor heard the least sign of a presence, but he was absolutely certain that he was not alone within Bellevue. Since the lightning had ceased, it was pitchy dark inside. There was a wide hall running through the building, with windows above the exits, but he saw nothing through them save

30 Without interruption

the driving rain and the dim outline of the threshing trees.

He turned into one of the side rooms, and then he paused and pushed himself against the wall. He was sure now that he heard a soft footstep. The darkness was so intense that it could be felt like a mist. He waited, but he did not hear it again, and then he began to make his way around the wall, stepping as lightly as he could.

He had gone through most of the rooms at their arrival, and he still retained a clear idea of the interior of the house. He knew that there was another door on the far side of the chamber in which he stood, and he meant to follow the wall until he reached it. Someone had been in the room with him, and Dick believed that he was leaving by the far door.

While he heard no further footsteps, he felt a sudden light draught³¹ on his face, and he knew that the door had been opened and shut. He might go to Colonel Winchester and tell him that a lurking spy or somebody of that character was in the house, but what good would it do? A spy at such a time and in such a place could not harm them, and the whole regiment would be disturbed for nothing. He would follow the chase alone.

He found the door and passed into the next room. Its windows opened upon the southern piazza, and two or three shutters were thrown back. A faint light entered, and Dick saw that no one was there but himself. He could discern the dim figures of the soldiers sleeping on the piazza and beyond a cluster of the small pines grown on lawns.

Dick felt that he had lost the trail for the time, but he did not intend to give it up. Doubtless the intruder was someone who knew the house and who was also aware of his presence inside. He also felt that he would not be fired upon, because the stranger himself would not wish to bring the soldiers down

31 Draft of air

upon him. So, with a hand upon his pistol butt, he opened the side door and followed once more into the darkness.

The ghostly chase went on for a full half-hour, Dick having nothing to serve him save an occasional light footfall. There was one period of more than half an hour when he lost the fugitive entirely. He wandered up to the second floor and then back again. There, in a room that had been the library, he caught a glimpse of the man. But the figure was so shadowy that he could tell nothing about him.

“Halt!” cried Dick, snatching out his pistol. But when he leveled it, there was nothing to aim at. The figure had melted away, or rather it had flitted through another door. Dick followed, chagrined³². The stranger seemed to be playing with him. Obviously, it was someone thoroughly acquainted with the house, and that brought to Dick’s mind the thought that he himself, instead of the other man, was the stranger there.

He came at last to a passage which led to the kitchen, a great room, because many people were often guests at Bellevue, and here he stopped short, while his heart suddenly beat hard. A distinct odor coming from different points suddenly assailed³³ his nostrils. He had smelled it too often in the last two years to be mistaken. It was smoke, and Bellevue had been set on fire in several places.

He inhaled it once or twice and then he saw again the shadowy figure flitting down to the passage and to a small door that, unnoticed by the soldiers, opened on the kitchen garden in the rear of the house.

Dick never acted more promptly. Instantly he fired his pistol into the ceiling, the report roaring in the confined spaces of the house, and then, shouting with all his might; “Fire! Fire! Fire!” as he dashed down the passage, he ran through the little

32 A feeling of disappointment or humiliation

33 Made an impact on

door, which the intruder had left open, and pursued him in the darkness and rain into the garden. There was a flash ahead of him, and a bullet whistled past his ear, but he merely increased his speed and raced in the direction of the flash. As he ran, he heard behind him a tremendous uproar, the voices and tread of hundreds of soldiers awakened suddenly, and he knew that they would rush through Bellevue in search of the fires.

But it was Dick's impulse to capture the daring intruder who would destroy the house over their heads. Built of wood, it would burn so fast, once the torches were set, that the rain would have little effect upon the leaping flames, unless measures were taken at once, which he knew that the regiment would do, under such a capable man as Colonel Winchester. Meanwhile he was hot in pursuit.

The trail, which was not that of footsteps but of a shadowy figure, ran between tall and close rows of grapevines so high on wooden framework that they hid anyone who passed. The suspicion that Dick had held at first was confirmed. This was no stranger, no intruder. He knew every inch of both house and grounds, and, after having set the house on fire, he had selected the only line of retreat but a safe one, through the thick and lofty vegetation of the garden, which ran down to the edge of the ravine in the rear, where he could slip quietly under the fence, drop through the thick grass into the ravine unseen by the pickets, and escape at his leisure in the darkness.

Dick was so sure of his theory that he strained every effort to overtake the figure which was flitting before him like a ghost. In his eagerness, he had forgotten to shout any alarm about the pickets, but it would have been of no avail, as most of them, under the impulse of alarm, had rushed forward to help extinguish the fires.

He saw the fugitive reach the end of the garden, drop almost flat, and then slip under a broken place in the palings.

At an ordinary time, he would have stopped there, but all the instincts of the hunter were aroused. It was still raining, and he was already soaked. Wet branches and leaves struck him in the face as he passed, but his energy and eagerness were undimmed.

He, too, dropped at the hole under the broken palings and slid forward face foremost. The wet grass was as slippery as ice, and after he passed through the hole, Dick kept going. Moreover, his speed increased. He had not realized that the garden went to the very edge of the ravine, and he was shooting down a steep slope to the depth of thirty feet. He grasped instinctively at weeds and grass as he made his downward plunge and fetched up easily at the bottom.

He sprang to his feet and saw the shadowy fugitive running down the ravine. In an instant, he followed headlong, tripped once or twice on the wet grass, but was up every time like lightning and was once more in swift pursuit. The fugitive turned once, raised his pistol, and pulled the trigger again, evidently forgetful that it was empty. When the hammer snapped on the trigger, he uttered a low cry of anger and hurled the useless weapon into the grass. Then he whirled around and faced Dick, who was coming on, eager and panting.

Dick's own pistol was empty, and he did not carry his small sword. He stopped abruptly when the other turned, and, in the dim light and rain, he saw that his opponent was a young man or rather youth of about his own size and age. When he saw the lad cast the pistol aside, Dick, moved by some chivalrous³⁴ impulse, dropped his own in the grass.

Then the two stared at each other. They were far beyond the line of the pickets, and as they stood in the deep ravine, there was no chance that anyone would either see or hear them. As Dick gazed intently, the face and figure of his antagonist³⁵ shaped

34 Gracious

35 Adversary or opponent

themselves more distinctly in the dim light. He beheld before him a tall youth, extremely well built, fair of face, his brown hair slightly long. He wore rain-soaked civilian's garb.

He saw that the youth was panting like himself, but it was not wholly the result of flight. His face expressed savage anger and indignation.

"You dirty Yankee!" he said.

Dick started. No one had ever before addressed him with such venom.

"If by Yankee you mean loyalty to the Union, then I'm one," he said, "and I'm proud of it. What's more, I'm willing to tell who I am. My name is Richard Mason. I'm from Kentucky, and I'm a lieutenant in the regiment of Colonel Arthur Winchester, which occupies the building behind us."

"From Kentucky and consorting with Yankees! A lot of you are doing it, and you ought to be on our side! We hate you for it more than we do the real Yankees!"

"It's our right to choose, and we've chosen. And now, since you're talking so much about right and wrong, who may you be, Mr. Firebug?"

Even in the dark, Dick saw his opponent's face flush and his eyes flash with deadly hostility.

"My name is Victor Woodville," he replied, "and my father is Colonel John Woodville, C.S.A. He is the owner of the house in which your infamous Yankee regiment is encamped."

"And which you have tried to burn?"

"I'd rather see it burn than shelter Yankees. You'd burn it anyway later on. Grant's troops have already begun to use the torch."

"At any rate, you'll go before our colonel. He'll want to ask you a lot of questions."

"I'm not going before your colonel."

"Oh, yes, you are."

“Who’s going to take me?”

“I am.”

“Then come on and do it.”

Dick advanced warily³⁶. Both had regained their breath and strength now. Dick with two years of active service in the army had the size and muscles of a man. But so had his opponent. Each measured the other, and they were formidable antagonists, well matched.

Dick had learned boxing at the Pendleton Academy, and, as he approached slowly, looking straight into the eyes of his enemy, he suddenly shot his right straight for Woodville’s chin. The Mississippian, as light on his feet as a leopard, leaped away and countered with his left, a blow so quick and hard that Dick, although he threw his head to one side, caught a part of its force just above his ear. But, guarding himself, he sprang back, while Woodville faced him, laughing lightly.

Dick shook his head a little, and the singing departed. Just above his ear he felt a great soreness, but he was cool now. Moreover, he was losing his anger.

“First blow for you,” he said. “I see that you know how to use your fists.”

“I hope to prove it.”

Woodville, stepping lightly on his toes and feinting³⁷ with his left, caught Dick on his cheek bone with his right. Then he sought to spring away, but Dick, although staggered, swung heavily and struck Woodville on the forehead. The Mississippian went down full length on the slippery grass but jumped to his feet in an instant. Blood was flowing from his forehead, whence it ran down his nose and fell to the earth, drop by drop. Dick himself was bleeding from the cut on his cheek bone.

The two faced each other, cool, smiling, but resolute

36 With caution

37 A movement made to deceive

enemies.

“First knockdown for you,” said Woodville, “but I mean that the second shall be mine.”

“Go in and try.”

But Woodville drew back a little, and as Dick followed, looking for an opening, he was caught again, a heavy clip on the side of the head. He saw stars and was not able to return the blow, but he sprang back and protected himself once more with his full guard, while he regained his balance and strength.

“Am I a firebug?” asked Woodville tauntingly.

Dick considered. This youth interested him. There was no denying that Woodville had great cause for anger, when he found his father’s house occupied by a regiment of the enemy. He considered it defilement. The right or wrong of the war had nothing to do with it. It was to him a matter of emotion.

“I’ll take back the epithet³⁸ ‘firebug,’” he said, “but I must stick to my purpose of carrying you to Colonel Winchester.”

“Always provided you can. Look out for yourself.”

The Mississippian, who was wonderfully agile, suddenly danced in—on his toes it seemed to Dick—and landed savagely on his opponent’s left ear. Then he was away so quickly and lightly that Dick’s return merely cut the air.

The Kentuckian felt the blood dripping from another point. His ear, moreover, was very sore and began to swell rapidly. One less enduring would have given up, but he had a splendid frame, toughened by incessant hardship. And, above all, enclosed within that frame was a lion heart. He shook his head slightly, because a buzzing was going on there, but in a moment or two it stopped.

“Are you satisfied?” asked young Woodville.

“You remember what John Paul Jones said, ‘I’ve just begun to fight.’”

38 A word used to describe a person

“Was it John Paul Jones? Well, I suppose it was. Anyhow, if you feel that way about it, so do I. Then come on again, Mr. Richard Mason.”

Dick’s blood was up. The half-minute or so of talk had enabled him to regain his breath. Although he felt that incessant pain and swelling in his left ear, his resolution to win was unshaken. Pride was now added to his other motives.

He took a step forward, feinted, parried skillfully, and then stepped back. Woodville, always agile as a panther, followed him and swung for the chin, but Dick, swerving slightly to one side, landed with great force on Woodville’s jaw. The young Mississippian fell, but, while Dick stood looking at him, he sprang to his feet and faced his foe defiantly. The blood was running down his cheek and dyeing the whole side of his face. But Dick saw the spirit in his eye and knew that he was far from conquered.

Woodville smiled and threw back his long hair from his face.

“A good one for you. You shook me up,” he admitted, “but I don’t see any sign of your ability to carry me to that Yankee colonel, as you boasted you would do.”

“But I’m going to do it.”

The rain increased and washed the blood from both their faces. It was dark within the ravine, but they had been face to face so long that they could read the eyes of each other. The eyes of Woodville, like those of Dick, ceased to express great anger. In the mind of each was growing a respect for his antagonist. The will to conquer remained but not the desire to hate.

“If you’re going to do it, then why don’t you?” said Woodville.

Dick moved slowly forward, still watching the eyes of the Mississippian. He believed now that Woodville, agile and alert though he might be, had not fully recovered his strength. There was terrific steam in that last punch, and the head of the man who had received it might well be buzzing yet.

Dick then moved in with confidence, but a lightning blow crashed through his guard, caught him on the chin, and sent him to earth. He rose, though still half-stunned, and saw that the confident, taunting look had returned to Woodville's face. It was fortunate now for Dick that the pure blood of great woods rangers flowed in his veins and that he had inherited from them too an iron frame. His chin was cut, and he had seen a thousand stars. But his eyes cleared, and steadily he faced his foe.

"Do I go with you to your colonel?" asked Woodville, ironically³⁹.

"You do," replied Dick firmly.

He looked his enemy steadily in the eye again, and he felt a great sense of triumph. After such severe punishment, he was stronger than ever, and he knew it.

Therefore he must win. He struck heavily, straight for the angle of Woodville's chin. The Mississippian evaded the blow and flashed in with his left. But Dick, who was learning to be very wary, dodged it and came back so swiftly that Woodville was caught and beaten to his knees.

But the son of the house of Bellevue was still so agile that he was able to recover his feet and spring away. Dick saw, however, that he was panting heavily. The blow had taken a considerable part of his remaining strength. He also saw that his antagonist was regarding him with a curious eye.

"You fight well, Yank," said Woodville, "although I ought not to call you Yank but rather a traitor, as you're a Kentuckian. Still, I've put my marks on you. You're bleeding a lot, and you'd be a sight if it weren't for this cleansing rain."

"I've been putting the map of Kentucky on your own face. You don't look as much like Mississippi as you did. You'll take notice too that you didn't burn the house. If you'll glance up the side of this ravine, you'll see just a little dying smoke. Eight

39 With mockery

hundred soldiers put it out in short order.”

Woodville’s face flushed, and his eyes for the first time since the beginning of the encounter shone with an angry gleam. But the wrathful fire quickly died.

“On the whole, I’m not sorry,” he said. “It was an impulse that made me do it. Our army will come and drive you away, and our house will be our own again.”

“That’s putting it fairly. What’s the use of burning such a fine place as Bellevue? Still, we want you. Our colonel has many questions to ask you.”

“You can’t take me.”

Dick judged that the crucial moment had now come. Woodville was breathing much more heavily than he was and seemed to be near exhaustion. Dick darted boldly in, received a swinging right and left on either jaw that cut his cheeks and made the blood flow. But he sent his right to Woodville’s chin, and the young Mississippian, without a sound, dropped to the ground, lying relaxed and flat upon his back, his white face, streaked with red, upturned to the rain.

He was so still that Dick was seized with fear lest he had killed him. He liked this boy who had fought him so well, and, grasping him by both shoulders, he shook him hard. But when he loosed him, Woodville fell back flat and inert.

Dick heard the waters of a brook trickling down the ravine, and, snatching off his cap, he ran to it. He filled the cap and returned just in time to see Woodville leap lightly to his feet and disappear with the speed of a deer among the bushes.