Hervey Allen

# Action at Aquila

## Hervey Allen

# Action at Aquila

Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338062956

# Table of Contents

CHAPTER I
THE CITY OF BROTHERLY LOVE
CHAPTER II
"HURRAH! BOYS, HURRAH!"
CHAPTER III
YESTERDAY AND TOMORROW
CHAPTER IV
TWILIGHT AT HARRISBURG
CHAPTER V
A BAREFOOTED RECITAL
CHAPTER VI
THE VALLEY OF DELIGHT
CHAPTER VII
A MAD DOG INTERLUDE
CHAPTER VIII
THE ESCAPE OF SERGEANT SMITH
CHAPTER IX
A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS
CHAPTER X
THE ARMING OF WILLIAM FARFAR
CHAPTER XI
MADAM O'RILEY FOLLOWS THE FLAG
CHAPTER XII
THE VALLEY OF SOLITUDE
CHAPTER XIII
COINER'S RETREAT

CHAPTER XIV
DOLLS IN THE SHADOWS
CHAPTER XV
THE LAST OF INDIAN SUMMER
CHAPTER XVI
THE GIANT'S NURSERY
CHAPTER XVII
THE ACTION AT AQUILA
CHAPTER XVIII
AN INDESTRUCTIBLE UNION
CHAPTER XIX
A CHEQUE FOR EXPENDED OATS
THE END

# CHAPTER I

# THE CITY OF BROTHERLY LOVE

Table of Contents

Southward, two mighty ranges of the Appalachians shouldered their way into the blue distance like tremendous caravans marching across eternity. Between those parallel ridges the Valley of the Shenandoah lay, apparently, as serene and beautiful as the interior of the Isle of Aves.

From a high shoulder of the Blue Ridge, where Colonel Nathaniel Franklin of the 6th Pennsylvania Cavalry had stopped for a moment to breathe his horse, he could see almost into North Carolina. "Rebel country," for the Confederates still held the upper part of the Valley and the horizons beyond.

Not that the colonel thought of it as rebel country, exactly. The sight of that magnificent landscape--despite its great beauty, perhaps because of it--brought to his eyes a mist of sorrow that threatened momentarily to overcast the countryside which rolled away southward before him. He brushed that mist indignantly away--and swore softly. He regarded all the country he was looking at as still a part of the United States, some of the inhabitants of which needed to be reconverted to the faith of their fathers--by apostolic blows and knocks if necessary. But there was nothing personal about the process to the colonel. The problem posed by the horizons rolling before him was, he liked to think, purely a military one. And in the old days he had had

too many true friends on the yon side of the Potomac to lump them all under the one indignant epithet of "rebels," even now, after several years of desperate fighting.

There were not many Americans left, however, who still felt as the colonel did. He was naturally possessed of that state of being which in the eighteenth century would have been described as an amiable soul. There was nothing weak about his amiability, but it did make hate and blind bitterness about anything hard to bear. Now, in the early autumn of 1864, he sat looking down into the peaceful, because devastated, theatre of civil war with a dull ache about his heart.

He was too far up on the mountain for much of the particular devastation in the Valley to be noticeable. Here and there a gaunt chimney rising houseless and steeple-like amid the distant fields and woods showed where a farm or manor house had been burned. But the fields had not been out of cultivation long enough to make much difference in the general view. Over the enormous checkerboard of meadow and forest below him the drifting shadows of lofty cumulonimbus clouds conferred upon the Valley a kind of dream-life of its own, as though it mirrored the visions passing in some almighty brain. Five miles down and away he could see the white tents of his own command conspicuously dotted along the border of Aquila Creek.[1]

[1] Pronounced: *Ah-wy'-la.*

Nearer yet, from a great meadow laid like a green table-cloth in the midst of tiny hills, came the flash of weapons and accoutrements, a kind of sinister blink that followed small, black lines of mounted men manœuvring in a cavalry

drill. Colson, his second in command, was putting the regiment through its paces down there. He watched the squadron flash into a charge. The sound of the mass yell, which was meant to be furious and to frighten an enemy, drifted up to him. At that height it sounded innocuous and childish, like the yells of boys playing Indians. Then the sudden voice of a bugle sounding recall died away into shivering echoes that lost themselves eventually in a thousand folds of the mountain walls.

Someone might have been sounding taps over the Valley, the colonel thought. The silence that followed was ominous.

It was accentuated rather than broken by the rushing lament of a mountain stream only a short distance down the road at the ford below. For a while the man on the black horse sat like a statue at gaze over the Valley, unable to rouse himself from a melancholy--perhaps an unsoldierly--but under the circumstances a natural enough reverie. Thought is swifter than lightning. Perhaps its fluid nature is essentially the same. In a flash, as it were, while he sat breathing his horse and looking down from that giant height at his men manœuvring below in the Valley, the scenes of the past few weeks--the faces and places, the houses, the roads, and the very sound of voices--flowed through his mind . . .

In half an hour the colonel would be back with his men again. What that implied he knew only too well; relentless vigilance, and the constant anxiety of commanding in the face of the enemy. He was just returning from a long leave of absence. This pause on the crest of the ridge was not only a breathing space for his horse. It was also his last

opportunity to let his mind range back freely over the memories of home and the immediate past. That is not to say he was being sentimental. To tell the truth he was troubled, even perplexed, by some of the happenings of the past few weeks. Home as found had not been home exactly as he had expected to find it. The sight of the camp below had brought the end of his leave forcibly to mind. It was only natural that his thoughts should flash back along the trail behind him to linger for a few moments upon what had been for him a memorable experience.

It had been his first leave since 1861. He had been looking forward to it for years, he remembered. Twice it had been revoked just on the eve of a great battle. Finally, he had given up any hope of getting home at all. War and the life of the army had at last eclipsed the memory and even the desire for another kind of existence. He had learned to live with the past and future cancelled. And in three unforgettable years he had seen a deal of active service and rapid promotion.

He had been shot off his horse at Antietam and had a horse shot under him at Gettysburg. A sharpshooter had drilled a hole through the top of his campaign hat during a skirmish at Winchester only two months before. The graves of his friends and those of his men were scattered all over eastern Virginia, clear up into Pennsylvania. Even the infantry admitted that Colonel Nat Franklin was one cavalryman who was a genuine fighting man.

For its fine service in the Valley of Virginia his regiment had lately been nicknamed "Sheridan's Eyes." It was composed largely of woodsmen and scouts and was in

almost constant touch with the enemy whenever any movement was afoot. It was during a lull in the fighting at the end of the summer of 1864, while his regiment was camping in the Valley, for once peacefully, that he had again applied for a furlough. He had hardly hoped that it would be granted. He had simply taken a chance. And then, quite unexpectedly, the furlough had come back promptly, approved by General Sheridan himself.

Three days later Colonel Franklin was back home again, not far from Philadelphia, in the old Pennsylvania village of Kennett Square.

His was the quietest home-coming possible. He could not even expect a family welcome. He was a bachelor. Most of his relatives lived elsewhere, and he had been an only child. Both father and mother had died some years before; his mother when he was still a boy, and his father while the colonel had been prospecting in the Far West and doing some unavoidable Indian fighting on the side. There had been six years of that before he had returned to take over the old place at Kennett Square and tried to drop back into the quiet ways of profitable Pennsylvania farming in a large and gentlemanly way. Then the call to arms had come when Sumter was fired on. He had been among the first to go.

So he was prepared to find the big stone farmhouse at Kennett Square lonely. It was inevitable that it should be. He still looked forward to changing that as soon as the war was over. Circumstances, he reflected, had prevented him thus far. His life had been too adventurous, too full of shifting incident to undertake the greatest adventure of all. But he was young yet. The prime of life still lay before him, he felt.

And there might be several who would be glad to share in what, at worst, could be considered a prosperous life partnership. He hated to think of it in just that way. There had been Alice Gary, for instance. He might have been happy with her. He had almost reached an understanding with her just before Sumter was fired on.

Then the war had gone on and on. Alice had finally married a well-to-do neighbour, a very respectable fellow. He couldn't blame her. After all, what the colonel hadn't been able to do was simply to make a good bargain out of life, even the best of bargains. That was why he had hesitated. And yet it might come to that yet. Here he was in the fourth year of conflict returning to his regiment, and the war still seemed interminable.

That was one reason why the old house had seemed even lonelier than he had expected. There was no longer much to look forward to there. Its future did appear doubtful. Only the past had drawn him back to it. He knew that now. And yet that was not sufficient to explain why he had actually been glad to leave home again after only a week's stay.

What he hadn't expected to find, what had caused him to leave Kennett Square so soon, was a certain covert hostility on the part of some of his neighbours. Probably it was partly political. His father had been a great Democrat, a close friend and staunch supporter of President Buchanan. He had constantly opposed and deprecated the agitation of abolition, regarding it as the cause of inevitable conflict. In the Quaker community about Kennett Square that might still be remembered against his father's son. That there was

nothing immediately personal about this "hostility," the colonel felt morally certain. People generally liked him. He had a warm heart combined with a decided strength of character. He was genially social. That made for popularity. Nevertheless, somehow, somewhere the colonel felt a gulf had opened between him and his neighbours.

Perhaps he had been out West and in the army too long to drop back into a settled way of civil life, with all of its emphasis upon property and petty local prejudices, without feeling a certain lack of air. At any rate, he soon had the sensation of being stifled. He tended to regard men now for what they were rather than for what they had. Probably some of his fellow townsmen resented it. War, battle, is a very special experience, and like a good many other soldiers back on leave, the colonel found that he was no longer quite able to explain himself even to old family friends. Above all he missed the easy tolerance of the spacious days before the war. Everybody seemed to have made up his mind now about everything--and to have closed it.

But if his Quaker acquaintances were inclined to look at his politics and even his army service somewhat askance, he was even less prepared for the virulent and white-hot hatred of the enemy made vocal by the sacred patriots and angry taxpayers of his once kindly native community. Frequent ferocious proposals for the disposal of Southern leaders, the grim personal hatred expressed for all rebels, for example, both surprised and annoyed him.

"I've only been fighting them," he would say in a half-deprecatory way when his lack of enthusiasm over a proposal "to hang the rebel cabinet in chains," or some

similar suggestion, caused a lifting of fervent eyebrows to which he did not respond. "Come help us catch them," finally became his favourite rejoinder when too hard pressed. Few of his friends seemed to relish the twinkle in his eye at such times.

"Sir," said one of them, a particularly pompous and healthy merchant of his own town, when this invitation was extended to him, "I am already represented in the army by three bounty men and I feel I have more than done my duty. I might have bought government bonds, you know, instead of just sending out the last two men."

"Why, so you might," said the colonel, "so you might! And think of the interest you're losing. Why, Carter, it's damned noble of you! Let me shake you by the hand. No, no, the other one--the one that's losing the interest. I don't suppose you let the right hand know what the left hand is doing under such circumstances. Do you, Mr. Carter?" And he had left that respectable gentleman not a little confused, with both hands sticking out--and unshaken.

Suddenly all this had become quite intolerable to the colonel.

He had intended to spend most of his leave at home, but he could no longer, under the circumstances, think of wasting the precious month of it that still remained trying to explain himself to sullen neighbours and doubtful friends. What he needed above all was change and relaxation. To tell the truth, a little conviviality. So quite suddenly he wound up his affairs at Kennett Square, rented the farm, sold some of the animals--and without saying anything or good-bye to

anybody, he had the bays hitched to the trap before sunrise one morning and set out for Philadelphia.

It was then nearly the end of September and for the first time that autumn there was the hint of frost to come in the early morning air. Also, for the first time since the colonel had been home on leave, he felt happy and carefree, almost boyish. He would even have liked to sing. But he knew too many sedate people along the Philadelphia road to permit himself to break out into a rich baritone at that hour of the morning--and just on the outskirts of Media! It might cause comment. He was in uniform and conspicuous enough already. A striking figure, in fact, in his campaign hat with its tarnished gold cord and acorns, with his large humorous mouth, sun-puckered eyes to match, and full black burnsides carefully cultivated to conceal a youthful expression that might not be quite impressive enough for a colonel of cavalry. It would never do for the colonel of the 6th Pennsylvania to look as young as he felt. Just as it would never do to break into song at that hour of the morning. Someone would certainly look out of the window and say, "There goes Nathaniel Franklin, and he's been drinking." "Drinking again," is the way they would say it. He knew them, those noses flattened against the pane, sniffing. Well, he would soon be shut of them all and fighting in the open again. Just then, however, he compromised by whistling instead of singing--and driving like the devil.

The morning road over the hills led from one cheerful vista to another. The brisk dawn air in the vicinity of Sharon Hill was exhilarating. He let the team have their heads and tore down the old Pike in the direction of Philadelphia with

the sunrise glittering on the spokes of his wheels. As the roofs and flashing windows of the city came in sight--with Kennett Square and all that miles behind him--he felt relieved, convinced he was doing wisely, at home in the once-familiar, civilian world again. In short, his own old self, as he put it.

He didn't know exactly how or where he was going to spend the rest of his leave. He was just going to let it happen. First he intended to dispose of the team of bays. They had been eating their heads off at home. Then he had some errands to do. He wanted to get himself the finest saddle horse available, for he had been riding nothing but sorry nags since his old horse had been shot under him at Gettsyburg. Also, for a quite important but purely private reason, he wanted to get a haversackful of toys.

That reason was a pleasant secret, one which caused him to smile as he watched the servant-girls flooding the sidewalks from hydrants and scrubbing the white marble steps while he rattled over the cobbles along Chestnut Street. It was still early. He ought to have plenty of time to get things done before the heat of the day began.

He soon disposed of his team and the trap for a fair price at a livery stable, and light-heartedly set out to get the toys and look up his old friends. In the City of Brotherly Love, among other things he hoped to find that the patriotic rhetoric, with which nearly everyone now seemed to address a veteran on furlough, would at least be a little less bloodthirsty than in his own formerly peaceful neighbourhood. But in this mild hope he was disappointed. For whom should he encounter at the corner of Broad and

Chestnut streets but his father's friend, old General John Fithian, a hearty veteran of the late Mexican War, and as fire-eating a commander of home-guard militia as ever ruined a white marble doorstep with broad yellow stains.

"A sight for sore eyes," roared the general, shifting his quid and bushy eyebrows in genuine and cordial excitement. "Why, what brings you back from the front, you young Hector? We've been hearing great things about you. What can I do for you? Where are you bound for?"

"I'm looking for a toy-store," said the colonel almost inadvertently, and somewhat annoyed. For the old general was a picturesque figure; the colonel was in uniform himself, and a crowd of idlers sensing the unusual had begun to surround them.

"Toy-store?" bellowed the older man, looking shocked. "Oh!" said he, suddenly grinning, "I see. Congratulations! I hadn't heard."

"No, no," replied the colonel hastily, "not that! Just for a young relative of mine--nice little girl." He felt it unnecessary to lie any further and turned rather red.

"Well, then, toy-store nothin'!" rumbled the general. "Come into the club and have a drink. The whole town will be there to give you a welcome. Why, man, you haven't seen any of your old friends for years." With that he linked his arm in the colonel's, and scattering the idlers before him with a broad fan of amber liquid, led his half-willing victim along Chestnut Street into the old Union League Club.

Now I'm in for it, reflected the colonel somewhat ruefully--and he was.

"Here's Nat Franklin back from the front," roared General Fithian, preceding him as herald and ringing a cuspidor like a gong after each glad announcement. "Here's Nat Franklin," *bong! . . .*

The devil! thought the colonel, but he was too human not to enjoy the cheery and cordial triumph they gave him. His own and his family friends surrounded him. Others joined rapidly, for the general was not to be denied--and it was by more than an average-sized crowd that he was finally swept into the bar. They drank up his news, and other things, and they continued to do so all afternoon.

Perhaps that was partly the trouble. Perhaps the afternoon and the other things had been a little too long. About four o'clock the colonel began to feel weary and to remember things which those about him could not see. He began to feel aloof from them, a bit irritable. He began to answer their innumerable questions honestly, even literally. Many of them, he could see, were shocked at this and didn't like it. Ferocious proposals no longer seemed funny even to those who made them. The room became slightly hushed. He began to tell them what he really thought of the war.

"A victory for any side is a defeat for every side now," the colonel heard himself saying. "It has all gone on so long . . ." His voice trailed away.

Above the eagles on his shoulders his face looked out not a little haggard after so many campaigns. To several there seemed to be a strange contradiction there. Again there was an awkward silence.

"Copperhead!" said someone suddenly.

A young fellow by the name of Moltan, who had just received a commission from Governor Curtin in the lately reorganized State Fencibles, put his hand to his mouth and turned a brick-red. He had not really meant to insult the colonel. He was proud of his new uniform. The epithet had slipped out because he felt and wanted to be conspicuous. But the colonel had not seen his gesture of embarrassment. He looked about him, bewildered. He mistook the embarrassment he saw in the other faces for hostility.

"No, no," he cried in indignant denial. "No, I'm a strong Union man. Why, that's all I've been fighting for! Can't you see that?"

It was now that young Moltan surpassed himself. "I can't say that I do, sir," he said.

The colonel stepped forward, his eyes blazing.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," cried Mr. Arthur Biddle, hurrying to them across the room. "This must go no further!"

"Young man, you're an ass," rumbled old General Fithian indignantly. "You've insulted a brave warrior and your superior officer in a club where you're not a member. You'll apologize to him now."

"Or get out," added Mr. Biddle.

But to do him justice, young Moltan did apologize, and quite contritely, while the colonel tried to be as decent about it as he could. Nevertheless, he was greatly shaken. That anybody--that even a tipsy young fool should have called him a Copperhead seemed incredible.

The crowd finally broke up uneasily, trying to make the best of the matter. Most of them shook hands and departed.

But some of them didn't. There would be considerable talk about the incident, the colonel was sure. Feeling distinctly miserable, he went into a corner with General Fithian and old Dr. David Craig and sat down.

"I can't understand it," he said.

"Well, it's natural enough," rumbled the general, who was always willing to precede the angels. "You see, the trouble with you, my boy, is that you haven't been home for years and you think people still feel the same as they did when you left us in 'sixty-one. Why, as a matter of fact, you talk more like the summer of 'fifty-nine!"

"Yes," agreed the doctor, "Fithian is right. The feeling now is more intense than you can imagine, after just serving in the army. If you think the men are bitter, you ought to hear the women. You're not a married man, you know, so you don't catch what's really going on. What the feeling is. Thousands of people have lost husbands, brothers, or sons. There's Andersonville and Libby. This city is full of wounded and crippled from a hundred battles. Our ships are destroyed. If anybody in Pennsylvania cherished a secret warmth for old Virginia friends, believe me, after Lee's invasion and Gettysburg they were cured of it. The feeling is more intense now in this state than it is in New England. To put it mildly, Nathaniel, you can't expect folks here to understand your sympathy for the suffering of the Southern people. They are too much preoccupied and exasperated by their own terrible losses and anxiety not to hurrah for the sternest kind of suggestions for reprisal. It's natural. It's human nature. Can't you see?"

"That's right," said the old general, nodding vigorously.

"But I still maintain we're all *one* people," replied the colonel quietly after a moment's silence. "That's the reason I'm a Union man."

"It's too fine a point to be understood now, I'm afraid," said the doctor sadly. "Cherish your idea, Nat. I rather admire you for it. But don't 'maintain' it, as you say."

"No, no," chimed in the general, "don't think of maintaining it. Just let your military record speak for you. Nobody can argue about that."

"Well, then," said the colonel, "I suppose the rest is silence, and I'll try to shift by your advice. But let me tell you both something before we leave. I want you to understand how *I* feel about this matter. You know we're not just fighting one war. We're fighting many. That is, the war is different to everyone who takes part in it. There's a general feeling, but there's a particular feeling too. Let me try to give you mine."

Unconsciously the colonel had lowered his voice as though what he was about to impart was of secret import--and in fact it was. He was going to reveal some things that haunted him. The heads of the three drew a little closer, where they sat alone in a corner of the Union League Club. The big room was deserted. It was about five o'clock of a desperately hot afternoon. Outside on Chestnut Street an occasional dray rumbled home somnolently over the cobbles. Voices passing on the sidewalk below the deep windows sounded tired and subdued.

"Let me tell you some of the things I've seen," continued the colonel even more confidentially than before. "It's all very well to speak of reprisals and punishment and military

necessity, but it's quite another thing to have to carry them out personally. You know Sheridan has been destroying the Valley--everything--and the Pennsylvania cavalry has had quite a lot of house burnings on its hands. Did you ever burn a house while the family watched? You feel brave and noble, of course. Well, near a little cross-corners called Aquila--there's nothing left there but a stone springhouse now--there was a fellow named Crittendon had a nice big house. White pillars and all that. Nothing fancy either. Just a fine, comfortable American home. Now, I got specific orders to burn it and clean out the whole plantation. Crittendon, it seems, was a major in the rebel army on Early's staff and a damned troublesome fellow to the United States government. So we started off on a swift ride one night, hoping to catch him at home. We got there an hour after dawn, thanks to a burned bridge, and he'd gone. But Mrs. Crittendon was there. She was sitting on the front porch in a long white bedgown. She's an Englishwoman. She looked like a Greek statue when she stood up to meet us, and she said, 'Good morning, gentlemen!'"

"That was sort of taking advantage of you, wasn't it?" mused the doctor almost inaudibly.

"Exactly," said the colonel. "If she had screamed or gone into hysterics like most of 'em do, you know, or cursed us out lock, stock, and barrel! But she didn't. She just trembled a little like a fine straight tree--and looked down at us squirrels."

"Well, what did *you* say?" demanded old General Fithian, shifting his cud intensely.

"What does a gentleman say when he comes to burn a lady's house down? I distinguished myself, of course. I began by saying it was very early."

"Splendid!" said the doctor. "That must have made everything all right."

"--And that I was under the unfortunate necessity of burning the house down," continued the colonel. He lit a cigar the doctor offered him, and went on.

"She didn't try to argue. 'I presume you will first permit me to remove the people within, colonel,--and our clothes?' was all she asked. I gave her half an hour. She thanked me, without being sarcastic, and went in. I heard her give a dry sob at the door.

"My, there were a lot of people in that house! Some of them started to scream and carry on, but I could hear Mrs. Crittendon put an end to that. The first person that came out was an old lady, Major Crittendon's mother. She was carried on a mattress by some of the servants. It seems she's paralysed from the waist down. But she isn't paralysed from the chin up, let me say. She simply curled my hair. The troop was lined up before the porch, just as we'd ridden in, and they all heard her."

"What'd *she* say?" demanded the irrepressible general.

"She introduced herself. She began by saying she was a great-grandniece of Madam Washington, and that even Yankee pedlars might understand that. Then she saw or heard we were Pennsylvanians and she apologized for having called us Yankees. 'But you're only one peg up from the mud sills at that,' she said, and mentioned that the Pennsylvania farmers had let General Washington and his

men starve at Valley Forge because the British gave them better prices for supplies at Philadelphia in 'seventy-eight. And that we hadn't changed any since, because she knew that when Robert Lee had gone into Pennsylvania the same farmers sold well water on hot days to his men. 'But, sir,' said she, 'they charged their own men more even on cool days. Honesty is the best policy, Colonel Franklin. You remember? Policy is all you know of honesty. How much are you going to charge us for burning the house down?' The rest was just pure, amber-coloured invective straight from the soul with a few old-fashioned oaths embedded in it like extinct flies. At last she had herself carried off to a knoll where she could watch the house burn down.

"By that time the babies were coming out crying, with their broken dolls, and toy horses, and things--which, of course, made us all feel like big, brave soldiers. Mrs. Crittendon lined them up some way back on the lawn with the blacks, who were trying to start hymns that she kept hushing. Finally they all seemed to be out. In fact, she nodded to me. So I took a couple of non-coms into the house with me and we got out our locofocos. We set fire to the curtains in the parlour. They were of some heavy English stuff. Mrs. Crittendon's wedding gifts, I imagine. Anyway, they flared up suddenly and then smouldered on with a kind of blinding smudge. It looked as though the whole house were on fire, although really nothing else had caught, when I heard Mrs. Crittendon calling frantically:

"'Margaret, Margaret, where's Margaret?'

"We ran out, of course. Mrs. Crittendon wasn't calm any longer. 'It's my daughter,' she said. 'She must have stayed

in the house. I thought we were all out.' She tried to go back herself, but just then Margaret ran out of the smoking doorway and stood on the porch. She must have delayed to put on her best things to save them, for she was dressed in the most elegant finery I ever saw: hoop-skirt, bonnet, lace dress, and ruffled pantalettes; she even had a little parasol. Another bright silk dress was thrown over one arm. She's about fifteen and one of the loveliest little girls you can well imagine. She took in everything at a glance and threw her extra dress out on the lawn for one of the blacks to pick up. Then she stamped her foot like a little empress and just yelled at us:

"'If there's one gentleman left in the Old Army he'll come in and help me put that fire out.' And with that she dived back into the smoke and started to pull down the burning curtains.

"Her mother screamed at her that she'd catch afire in her lace dress. And she certainly would have. But half the troop was out of the saddle and we were all stamping out the fire and carrying the girl out to her mother before Mrs. Crittendon could get to her. The young minx had the gall to thank us, too. Afterwards, out on the lawn.

"It's very difficult for me to tell you in so many words just how intense the excitement was on the lawn after young Margaret's rescue. The slaves burst out singing. You know how darkies can put into song what we only feel. And they were certainly doing it that morning. Mrs. Crittendon couldn't stop them. She tried at first to hush that dirgelike singing. But I think it's to her credit to say that she finally broke down herself, and coming over to me, put her hands

on my saddle and begged me as a Christian and a gentleman not to set fire to the house again. Now can you really imagine what it actually is like to have a charming and noble woman looking up into your face with tears in her eyes, asking you please not to make her and the children homeless, when you know she is helpless? Orders are orders, of course, but there was Mrs. Crittendon!" The colonel paused a moment as if the memory of that morning were overpowering.

"Oh, yes," said Dr. Craig, "I can imagine it all right!" The general cleared his throat uncomfortably. The colonel plunged on.

"It was perfectly plain the men were sick of that kind of soldiering too," he said. "They kept watching me and Mrs. Crittendon. By that time Margaret had come over to help her mother. The tension grew until even the horses got restless. The men let them have their heads, I suppose. Everyone wanted to be up and away and done with the mess. I couldn't blame them. Well, the lady begged me, and so did the young girl, and . . ."

"And so, of course, as a gallant man, you went right in and set the house afire again," suggested the doctor in a low tone.

There was a pause.

"Yes," said the colonel, looking miserable, "I did."

"What! what! Do you mean to tell me, Nat Franklin, you had the devilish crust to? The devil you did! Your father would never--no, sir," said the old general, pounding the floor with his cane, "never, sir!"

"Oh, it wasn't quite so bad as you think," continued the colonel. "No, we didn't just go in and start the fire up again. You know I couldn't! I advised Mrs. Crittendon to clear out as soon as she could with her stuff and her people, 'because,' said I, 'the next time, you know.'

"'Yes,' said she, 'I know,' and she broke down again.

"Then one of the babies with nothing on but a short night-shirt toddled up with a rag doll. He wanted to give it to 'the nice man.' That was me!

"'Come on, sergeant, we're licked,' was all I could say. 'Ride 'em off.'

"So we just rode away without looking back and went into camp a few miles higher up the Valley near a village called Aquila. We burned Aquila out. There wasn't anybody there. Everything went but a springhouse a little detached from the town. Springhouses don't catch well, you know."

"It's the dampness, I suppose," suggested the doctor dryly. "But look here, Franklin, murder will out. What happened to the Crittendons?"

"Well, we were just settled for supper, vedettes out up the Valley, and the rest of us gathered about the fires. The boys were frying their hard-tack in bacon grease, which is against medical orders, of course--when in rides General Phil Sheridan and his hard-bitten staff.

"There'd been a devil of a ruction over at Cross Keys that day. A couple of wagon trains had been cut out and looted and burned by Early, and the general was tearing mad. It meant some weeks' delay in operations in the upper Valley. He didn't say much, which is a bad sign. He's usually good enough company. But he did order the men to dump their

greasy bread on the fires and turn in on dry tack and water. There was a good deal of muffled swearing under the blankets as a consequence. And I think the general felt quite uncomfortable about that. Anyway, he borrowed some of my whisky and finished it all off himself, looking into a fire as moody as you please. Then he ordered me to turn out ten troopers and to accompany him and his staff. He was riding back to Winchester that night, he said. It looked as though he might be relieving me of command. We started. After a few miles the word was passed for me to join the general. We rode in the darkness for some time.

"'Look here, Colonel Nat,' said he suddenly, 'didn't you get orders to burn out the Crittendon people today?'

"'I did, general!' I had to say that, of course. 'I set fire to the Crittendon house at six-fifteen o'clock this morning.'

"'And put it out at six-twenty-five same date.'

"I couldn't deny it.

"'Now look here, Franklin,' he went on after a little, 'I'm an Irishman, even if I was born in old York State, and I never borrow whisky from an officer I'm goin' to court-martial. But orders are orders. I know this is a specially hard case: fine people! You've made it even harder now. But we can't go into that kind of thing. As a matter of fact, I've been easy on you. We both saw some Indian fighting in the West, so I've put you on reconnaissance almost entirely and relieved you so far of most of the dirty work. I've used your regiment for scouting and turned the harrying, and horse and house thieving over to Reinohlfennig and his bummers. Those Pennsylvania Dutch can only ride farm horses anyway. They're locusts; you're cavalry. When you get an order after

this, no flinching. Begad, man, do you think I like it any better than you do?

"'Burn the house tonight without touching anything,' he finally said. 'Without touching anything,' he repeated. 'Is that plain? That's all.'

"I saluted and fell back with my own men. To tell the truth I was pretty angry myself. He might have court-martialled me for disobedience of orders that morning, but to bring me back to burn the house and insinuate that we weren't to carry anything away! Just like saying, 'Don't carry off any cuckoo clocks or jewellery,' you know. That had me boiling, even if he is half an Irishman.

"When we got to the Crittendon house again there was a squadron of regulars bivouacked on the lawn, and the lamps in the house were lit. Sheridan gave a brief order and the squadron broke camp instantly and assembled mounted and at attention before the veranda.

"'Colonel, send your own men to the woodpiles. Have them get pine knots, light them, and fall in by the porch here.'

"Then he had the officers assemble, and all of us, with his staff, went into the house.

"I was terribly relieved to find that no one was there. Mrs. Crittendon must have taken my advice and left that morning with her people. We went into the big parlour, where there was a portrait of a Continental officer over the fireplace, and a lot of candles burning. It was some moments before I noticed that on a couch in one of the alcoves there was a body covered by a tattered Confederate battle-flag.

"'Gentlemen,' said General Sheridan, 'I am asking your assistance here in a personal matter.'

"He took a candlestick, went into the dark alcove, and pulled the flag down from the face of the form lying there. The strong, bearded countenance of a handsome man, whose hair was prematurely grey, was revealed in the yellow candlelight. He looked peculiarly waxen. His eyes were wide open and the collar of his grey uniform with tarnished gold leaves on it supported his chin.

"'This was Major Douglas Charles Crittendon of the Confederate Army,' said General Sheridan. 'He was killed in the attack at Cross Keys this afternoon. Before he died I had time for a too-brief talk with him. He was an intimate classmate of mine at West Point. For many years he was an officer in the Old Army. He once commanded the squadron of U. S. Cavalry now lined up before his door. What I'm doing here is by his own dying request made this afternoon. He was most particular, and I gave him my word "to bury him in the ashes of his home." I realize now that he must have thought this house had already been burned. If there is anything in this proceeding which offends the principles of anyone present he is at liberty to withdraw.'

"No one made a move. In fact, we all stood completely awe-struck; some of us were overcome. General Sheridan paused for a moment, then laid the flag back on his friend's face.

"'Will the new officers of the major's old regiment lend me a hand?' he said.

"The general and some of the young lieutenants from the troop outside then lifted the couch, upon which the major

lay, out into the middle of the room, under the eyes of the portrait. They piled fire-wood about it. We all helped in that.

"'I would like to have the guidon of the troop,' said the general.

"After a moment it was brought in to him.

"'This is my own idea,' he said. 'I think Douglas . . . er--Major Crittendon will approve.' His voice was a little husky. He put the silk guidon on the breast of the flag-draped man on the couch. Upon that he laid the major's sword.

"'I am sorry there is no priest here,' he said. 'Major Crittendon was the soul of honour, a true friend. A *very* gallant gentleman lies here . . .' He was unable to go on. 'God receive his stricken soul,' he managed to add finally. We said 'Amen' and trooped out of the room awkwardly enough. The empty house echoed with our heavy boots and the jingle of spurs.

"Outside the glare of the pine torches beat the darkness back for a space, wavering over the men and horses before the door.

"Sheridan stopped me for a moment on the porch and said, 'Franklin, you will be in charge in this neighbourhood for some time. Mrs. Crittendon must be in hiding hereabouts. We heard she left early this morning with her family and some wagons. Find her if you can. Do what you can for her. And give her this.' He gave me a small sealed package. 'And,' he said as he laid his hand on my arm, 'tell her that Phil Sheridan burned her house by a special order from Washington signed by the Secretary of War. If you can't find Mrs. Crittendon, see that the package is returned to me. These are bad times to live through. It's hard even for a

soldier to tell what his duty is. Don't you find it so sometimes?' He smiled sadly and extended his hand.

"'Yes, sir, I do,' I said, and we shook hands warmly. That was all.

"He mounted his horse in the glare of the torches and brought the troop to present.

"'Colonel,' he said, 'carry out your orders.' Then they moved off at a rapid trot down the drive.

"That was a great burning. For miles the whole Valley leaped with light. The house was of pitch pine a century old. It made a great column of golden fire. Behind it the gloomy wall of the Blue Ridge towered up into heaven, watching the sparks drift out among the stars."

The spell of the colonel's deep but pleasant voice seemed to his rapt listeners to have been withdrawn too abruptly. Outside the street window, by which they sat, the head and shoulders of a lamplighter appeared suddenly and with startling clearness on his ladder as he cupped the white spurt of a match in his glowing hands.

"Lord," said the colonel, "is it as late as that? I apologize profoundly. Keeping you fellows from supper! It's not to be forgiven."

"Nonsense, nobody's going to be late for supper," said Dr. Craig, jumping up and brushing the cigar ashes off his vest and long coat; "you're coming home with me. I'm a widower, and I have meals when I want them. I keep a cook from the Eastern Shore. There'll be pepper pot and reed birds in butter. A very famous patient of mine has sent me some of the port that he's famous for. Nat, I'll bet you haven't had a meal like that in months."