



***NELSON
LLOYD***

***THE SOLDIER
OF THE VALLEY***

Nelson Lloyd

The Soldier of the Valley

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They called to me as a boy.....

Frontispiece

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"Welcome home—thrice welcome!"

Tim and I had stopped our ploughs to draw lots and he had lost

"Well, old chap!"

Josiah Nummler

He did not stop to hear my answer

Swearing terrible oaths that he will never return

No answer came from the floor above

The tiger story

He had a last look at Black Log

"He pumped me dry"

"Nanny is likely to get one of her religious spells and quit work"

I was back in my prison

"'At my sover-sover-yne's will'"

Perry Thomas stands confronting the English warrior

"You'll begin to think you ain't there at all"

I saw a girl on the store porch

Aaron Kallaberger

Leander

"Her name was Pinky Binn, a dotter of the house of Binn, the Binns of Turkey Walley"

William had felt the hand of "Doogulus"

"Aren't you coming?" young Colonel seemed to say

Sat little Colonel, wailing

The main thing was proper nursing

Well, ain't he tasty
"But there are no ghosts," I argued
"Of course it hurts me a bit here"
"An seein' a light in the room, I looked in"
Tip Pulsifer leaned on my gate
The horse went down
"And I'm his widder"
Then Tim came
Old Captain
When we three sit by the fire

THE SOLDIER OF THE VALLEY

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I

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I was a soldier. I was a hero. You notice my tenses are past. I am a simple school-teacher now, a prisoner in Black Log. There are no bars to my keep, only the wall of mountains that make the valley; and look at them on a clear day, when sunshine and shadow play over their green slopes, when the clouds all white and gold swing lazily in the blue above them, and they speak of freedom and of life immeasurable. There are no chains to my prison, no steel cuffs to gall the limbs, no guards to threaten and cow me.

Yet here I stay year after year. Here I was born and here I shall die.

I am a traveller. In my mind I have gone the world over, and those wanderings have been unhampered by the limitations of mere time, for I know my India of the First Century as well as that of the Twentieth, and the China of Confucius is as real to me as that of Kwang Su. Without stirring from my little porch down here in the valley I have pierced the African jungles and surveyed the Arctic ice-floes. Often the mountains call me to come again, to climb them, to see the real world beyond, to live in it, to be of it, but I am a prisoner. They called to me as a boy, when wandering over the hills, I looked away to them, and over them, into the mysterious blue, picturing my India and my China, my England and my Russia in a geographical jumble that began just beyond the horizon.

Then I was a prisoner in the dungeons of Youth and my mother was my jailer. The day came when I was free, and forth I went full of hope, twenty-three years old by the family Bible, with a strong, agile body and a homely face. I went as a soldier. For months I saw what is called the world; I had glimpses of cities; I slept beneath the palms; I crossed a sea and touched the tropics. Marching beneath a blazing sun, huddling from the storm in the scant shelter of the tent, my spirits were always keyed to the highest by the thought that I was seeing life and that these adventures were but a fore-taste of those to come. But one day when we marched beneath the blazing sun, we met a storm and found no shelter. We charged through a hail of steel. They took me to the sea on a stretcher, and by and by they shipped me

home. Then it was that I was a hero—when I came again to Black Log—what was left of me.

My people were very kind. They sent Henry Holmes's double phaeton to the county town to meet my train, and as I stumbled from the car, being new to my crutches, I fell into the arms of a reception committee. Tim was there. And my little brother fought the others off and picked me up and carried me, as I had carried him in the old days when he was a toddling youngster and I a sturdy boy. But he was six feet two now and I had wasted to a shadow. Perry Thomas had a speech prepared. He is our orator, our prize debater, our township statesman, and his frock-coat tightly buttoned across his chest, his unusually high and stiffly starched collar, his repeated coughing as he hovered on the outskirts of the crowd, told me plainly that he had an address to make. Henry Holmes, indeed, asked me to stand still just one minute, and I divined instantly that he was working in the interest of oratory; but Tim spoiled it all by running off with me and tossing me into the phaeton.

So in the state-coach of Black Log, drawn by Isaac Bolum's lemon-colored mules, with the committee rattling along behind in a spring wagon, politely taking our dust, I came home once more, over the mountains, into the valley.

Sometimes I wonder if I shall ever make another journey as long as that one. Sometimes I have ventured as far as the gap, and peeped into the broad open country, and caught the rumble of the trains down by the river. There is one of the world's highways, but the toll is great, and a crippled soldier with a scanty pension and a pittance from his school is wiser to keep to the ways he knows.

And how I know the ways of the valley! That day when we rode into it every tree seemed to be waving its green arms in salute. As we swung through the gap, around the bend at the saw-mill and into the open country, checkered brown and yellow by fields new-ploughed and fields of stubble, a flock of killdeer arose on the air and screamed a welcome. In their greeting there seemed a taunting note as though they knew they had no more to fear from me and could be generous. I saw every crook in the fence, every rut in the road, every bush and tree long before we came to it. But six months had I been away, yet in that time I had lived half my life, and now I was so changed that it seemed strange to find the valley as fat and full as ever, stretched out there in the sunshine in a quiet, smiling slumber.

"Things are just the same, Mark, you'll notice," said Tim, pointing to a hole in the flooring of the bridge over which we were passing.

The valley had been driving around that same danger spot these ten years. There was a world of meaning to the returning wanderer in that broken plank, and it was not hard to catch the glance of my brother's eye and to know his mind.

Henry Holmes on the front seat, driving, caught the inflection of Tim's voice and cried testily: "You are allus runnin' the walley down. Why don't you tell him about the improvements instead of pintin' out the bad spots in the road?"

"Improvements?" said I, in a tone of inquiry.

"Theop Jones has bought him a new side-bar buggy," replied the old man. "Then the Kallabergers has moved in

from the country and is fixin' up the Harmon house at the end of the town."

"And a be-yutiful place they're makin' of it," cried Isaac Bolum; "be-yutiful!"

"They've added a fancy porch," Henry explained, "and are gittin' blue glass panes for the front door."

"We've three spring-beds in town now," put in Isaac in his slow, dreamy way. "If I mind right the Spikers bought theirs before war was declared, so you've seen that one. Well, Piney Martin he has got him one—let me see—when did he git it, Henery?"

Old Holmes furrowed his brow and closed one eye, seeking with the other the inspiration of the sky.

"July sixth," he answered. "Don't you mind, Ike, it come the same day and on the wery same stage as the news of the sinkin' of the Spaynish fleet?"

"Nonsense," retorted Isaac. "You're allus mixin' dates, Henery. You're thinkin' of Tip Pulsifer's last baby. He come July six, for don't you mind how they called him Cevery out of pity and generosity for the Spayniards? Piney's spring-bed arrived the same day and on the same stage as brung us the news of Mark here havin' his left leg shot off."

"Mebbe—mebbe—mebbe," muttered Henry, shaking his head dubiously. "It certainly do beat all how things happens all at once in this world. Come to think of it, the wery next day six of my sheep was killed by dogs."

"It's good you're gittin' your dates cleared," snapped old Bolum. "On history, Henery Holmes, you are the worst."

Henry retorted with an angry protest against the indictment, declaring that he was studying history when

Bolum was being nourished on "soft food." That was true. Isaac admitted it frankly. He wasn't his mother's keeper, that he could regulate his own birthday. Had that been in his power he would certainly have set it a half century earlier or later to avoid being constantly annoyed by the "onreasonablest argeyments" Six Stars had ever heard. This made old Holmes smile softly, and he turned and winked at me. The one thing he had ever been thankful for, he said, was that his life had fallen with that of Isaac Bolum. Whenever he done wrong; whenever the consciousness of sin was upon him and he needed the chastisin' rod, he just went to the store and set and listened to Ike. To this Isaac retorted that it was a wonder the rod had not worn out long ago; it was pleasing to know, at least, that he was made of tough old hickory. Henry admitted this to be a "good 'un" on him—an unusual one, considering the source—but that did not settle the exact date of the arrival of Piney Martin's spring-bed.

It was time for me to protest that it mattered little whether the event occurred on July sixth or a week later, since what really interested me was the question as to who was the owner of the third of these luxuries. Isaac's serious, self-conscious look answered me, but I pressed the inquiry to give him an opportunity to sing the praises of this newest of his household gods. Mr. Bolum's pleasure was evident. Once launched into an account of the comfort of springs as compared to a straw-tick on ropes, he would have monopolized our attention to the end of the journey, but the sagacious Henry blocked him rudely by a tug at the reins

which almost threw the lemon-colored mules on their haunches.

We were at the foot of the slope where the road to Buzzards Glory branches from the pike. The Arkers had spied us coming, and ran down from the tannery to greet us. Arnold, after he had a dozen times expressed his delight at my return, asked if I had seen any shooting. His son Sam's wife nudged him and whispered in his ear, upon which he apologized abruptly, explaining that he had dropped his spectacles in the tanning vat. Sam sought to extricate his father from these imaginary difficulties by demanding that I go coon-hunting with him on the next night. This set Sam's wife's elbow going again very vigorously, and the further embarrassment of the whole family was saved by Henry Holmes swinging the whip across the backs of the mules.

On went the state-coach of Black Log. We clattered quickly over the last level stretch. We dragged up the last long hill, and from its brow I looked on the roofs of Six Stars rising here and there from the green bed of trees. I heard the sonorous rumble of the mill, and above it a shrill and solitary crow. On the state-coach went, down the steep, driving the mules madly before it. Their hoofs made music on the bridge, and my journey was ended.

Home again! Even Tip Pulsifer was dear to me then. He was between the wheels when we stopped, and I planted a crutch on one of his bare feet and embraced him.

He grinned and cried, "Mighty souls!"

That embrace, that grin and that heart-born exclamation marked the entrance of the Pulsifer family into my life.

Therefore I had regarded them with a suspicion born of a pile of feathers at the door of their shanty on the ridge, for they kept no chickens. Now the six little Pulsifers, all with the lower halves of their faces washed and their hair soaped down, were climbing around me, and the latest comer, that same Cevery who arrived with Piney Martin's spring-bed, was hoisted into kissing distance by his mother, who was thinner and more wan than ever, but still smiling. But this was home and these were home people. My heart was open then and warm, and I took the seven little Pulsifers to it. I took old Mrs. Bolum to it, too, for she tumbled the clamoring infants aside and in her joy forgot the ruffles in the sleeves of her wonderful purple silk. At her elbow hovered the tall, spare figure of Aaron Kallaberger. Mindful of the military nature of the occasion he appeared in his old army overcoat, in spite of the heat. Rare honor, this! And better still, he hailed me as "Comrade," and enfolding my hand in his long horny fingers, cried "All's well, Mark!"

The mill ceased its rumbling. Already the valley was rocking itself to sleep. Out of the darkening sky rang the twanging call of a night-hawk, and the cluck of a dozing hen sounded from the foliage overhead. A flock of weary sheep pattered along the road, barnward bound, heavy eyed and bleating softly. The blue gate was opened wide. My hand was on Tim's shoulder and Tim's arm was my support.

"All's well!" I cried. For I was hobbling home.



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Perry Thomas still had his speech to deliver. He hovered around the rocking-chair in which they had enthroned me, and with one hand he kept clutching violently at his throat as though he were suppressing his eloquence by muscular effort. His repeated coughing seemed a constant warning that at any moment he might be vanquished in the struggle for becoming silence. There was a longing light in his eyes and a look of appeal whenever our glances met. My position was embarrassing. He knew that I realized his predicament, but how could I interrupt the kindly demonstrations of the old friends who pressed about me, to announce that the local orator had a formal address of welcome that was as yet unspoken? And an opportunity like this might never again occur in Perry's life! Here were gathered not only the people of the village, but of the valley. His words would fall not alone on the ears of a few choice spirits of the store forum, or the scoffing pedants of the literary society, for crowded into that little room were old men whose years would give weight to the declaration that it was the greatest talking they had ever heard; were young children, who in after years, when a neglected gravestone was toppling over all that was left of the orator, would still speak of the wonders of his eloquence; were comely women to whom the household was the world and the household task the life's work, but who could now for the moment lift their bent forms and have their dulled eyes turned to higher and better things. Moreover, there were in that room a score of deep eyes that could not but quicken at the sight of a

slender, manly figure, clad in scholastic black, of a thin, earnest face, with beetled brows and a classic forehead from which swept waves of black hair. Little wonder Perry was restless under restraint! Little wonder he grew more melancholy and coughed louder and louder, as the light without faded away, and the faces within were dimmed in the shadow!

From the kitchen came the clatter of dishes and pans and a babel of women's voices, the shrill commands of old Mrs. Bolum rising above them. The feast was preparing. Its hour was at hand. Apollo never was a match for Bacchus, and Perry Thomas could not command attention once Mrs. Bolum appeared on the scene. He realized this. Her cries came as an inspiration to action. In the twilight I lost him, but the lamp-light disclosed him standing over Henry Holmes, who had been driven into a corner and was held prisoner there by a threatening finger. There was a whispered parley that ended only when the old man surrendered and, stepping to the centre of the room, rapped long and loud on the floor with his cane.

Henry is always blunt. He has a way of getting right at the heart of things with everyone except Bolum. For Isaac, he regards circumlocution as necessary, taking the ground that with him the quantity and not the quality of the words counts. So when he had silenced the company, and with a sweep of his cane had driven them into close order about the walls, he said: "Mr. Thomas is anxious to make an address."

At this moment Mr. Thomas was about to step into the zone of fire of a hundred eyes. There was a very audible

titter in the corner where three thoughtless young girls had squeezed themselves into one rocking-chair. The orator heard it and brought his heels together with a click.

"Mind what I told you, Henery," he whispered very loud, glaring at Mr. Holmes.

"Oh, yes," Henry returned in a casual tone.

He thumped the floor again, and when the tittering had subsided, and only the snuffling of Cevery Pulsifer broke the silence, he said: "In jestice to Mr. Thomas, I am requested to explain that the address was originally intended to be got off at the railroad. It was forgot by accident, and him not havin' time to change it, he asks us to make believe we are standin' alongside of the track at Pleasantville just as the train comes in."

Isaac Bolum had fixed himself comfortably on two legs of his chair, with the projecting soles of his boots caught behind the rung. Feet and chair-legs came to the floor with a crash, and half rising from the seat, one hand extended in appeal, the other at his right ear, forming a trumpet, he shouted: "Mr. Chairman! Mr. Chairman!"

"This ain't a liter'ry meetin', Mr. Bolum. The floor is Mr. Thomas's, I believe," said Henry with dignity.

"But I didn't catch the name of the station you said we was to imagine."

"I said Pleasantville," cried Henry angrily.

"I apologize," returned Isaac. "I thought you said Meadowville, and never havin' been there, I didn't see how I could imagine the station."

"It seems to me, Isaac Bolum," retorted Henry with dignified asperity, "that with your imagination you could

conjure up a whole railroad system, includin' the freight-yard. But Mr. Thomas has the floor."

"See here, Henery Holmes," cried Isaac, "it's all right for us old folks, but there's the children. How can they imagine Pleasantville station when some of 'em ain't yet seen a train?"

This routed even Henry Holmes. At the store he would never have given in, but he was not accustomed to hearing so loud a murmur of approval greet the opposition. He realized that he had been placed in a false position by the importunities of Mr. Thomas, and to him he now left the brunt of the trouble by stepping out of the illumined circle and losing himself in the company.

The fire-swept zone had no terrors for Perry. With one hand thrust between the first and second buttons of his coat, and the other raised in that gesture with which the orator stills the sea of discontent, he stepped forward, and turning slowly about, brought his eyes to bear on the contumacious Bolum. He indicated the target. Every optic gun in the room was levelled at it. The upraised hand, the potent silence, the solemn gaze of a hundred eyes was too much for the old man to bear. Slowly he swung back on two legs of his chair, caught the rungs again with the projecting soles, turned his eyes to the ceiling, closed them, and set himself to imagining the station at Pleasantville. The rout was complete.

Perry wheeled and faced me. The hand was lowered slowly; four fingers disappeared and one long one, one quivering one, remained, a whip with which to chastise the prisoner at the bar.

"Mark Hope," he began, in a deep, rich, resonant voice, "we welcome you home. We have come down from the valley, fourteen mile through the blazin' noonday sun, fourteen mile over wind-swept roads, that you, when agin you step on the soil of our beloved county, may step into lovin' hands, outstretched to meet you and bid you welcome. Welcome home—thrice welcome—agin I say, welcome!"



[Illustration: "Welcome home—thrice welcome!"]

Both of the orator's hands swung upward and outward, and he looked intently at the ceiling. He seemed prepared to catch me as I leaped from a second-story window. The pause as he stood there braced to receive the body of the returning soldier as it hurtled at him, gave Isaac Bolum an opportunity to be magnanimous. He clapped his hands and cheered. In an instant his shrill cry was drowned in a burst of applause full of spirit and heart, closing with a flourish of

wails from Cevery Pulsifer and the latest of the Kallabergers. Perry's arms fell gracefully to his side and he inclined his head and half closed his eyes in acknowledgment. Then turning to Isaac, measuring every word, in a voice clear and cutting, his long forefinger shaking, he cried: "From the bloody battlefields of Cuby, from her tropic camps where you suffered and bled, you come home to us to-day. You have fought in the cause of liberty. To your country you have give a limb—you——"

Poor Bolum! Awakened from the gentle doze into which he had fallen the instant Cevery Pulsifer relieved him of the duty of leading the applause, he brought his chair down on all four legs, and slapped both knees violently. Satisfied that they were still there, he looked up at the orator.

"You have give a limb," repeated Perry, emphasizing the announcement by shaking his finger at the old man.

Isaac's mouth was half open for a protest, when he remembered, and leaning over seized the toe of each boot in a hand and wriggled his feet. When we saw his face again he was smiling gently, and swinging back, he nestled his head against the wall and closed his eyes once more.

"You would have give your life," cried Perry.

But the only sign old Bolum made was to twirl the thumbs of his clasped hands.

"Six months ago, six short, stirrin' months ago you left us, just a plain man, at your country's call." Perry was thundering his rolling periods at us. "To-day, a moment since, standin' here by the track, we heard the rumblin' of the train and the engyne's whistle, and we says a he-ro comes—a he-ro in blue!"

Had Perry looked my way, he might have noticed that I was clad in khaki, but he was addressing Henry Holmes, whose worthy head was nodding in continual acquiescence. The old man stood, with eyes downcast and hands clasped before him, a picture of humility. The orator, carried away by his own eloquence, seemed to forget its real purpose, and in a moment, sitting unnoticed in my chair with Tim at my side, I became a minor figure, while half a hundred were gathered there to do honor to Henry Holmes. Once I even forgot and started to applaud when Perry raised his hand over the gray head as though in blessing and said solemnly: "He-ro in blue—agin we bid you welcome!"

A little laugh behind me recalled me to my real place, and with a burning face I turned.

I have in my mind a thousand pictures of one woman. But of them all the one I love most, the one on which I dwell most as I sit of an evening with my pipe and my unopened book, is that which I first saw when I sought the chit who noticed my ill-timed applause and laughed at me. I found her. I saw that she laughed with me and for me, and I laughed too. We laughed together. An instant, and her face became grave.

The orator, now swelling into his peroration, was forgotten. The people of the valley—Tim—even Tim—all of them were forgotten. I had found the woman of my firelight, the woman of my cloudland, the woman of my sunset country down in the mountains to the west. She, had always been a vague, undefined creature to me—just a woman, and so elusive as never to get within the grasp of my mind's eye; just a woman whom I had endowed with every grace;

whose kindly spirit shone through eyes, now brown, now blue, now black, according to my latest whim; who ofttimes worn, or perhaps feigning weariness, rested on my shoulder a little head, crowned with a glory of hair sometimes black, and sometimes golden or auburn, and not infrequently red, a dashing, daring red. Sometimes she was slender and elf-like, a chic and clinging creature. Again she was tall and stately, like the women of the romances. Again she was buxom and blooming, one whose hand you would take instead of offering an arm. She had been an elusive, ever-changing creature, but now that I had looked into those grave, gray eyes, I fixed the form of my picture, and fixed its colors and fired them in to last for all my time.

Now she is just the woman that every woman ought to be. Her hair is soft brown and sweeps back from a low white forehead. She has tried to make it straight and simple, as every woman should, but the angels seem to have curled it here and mussed it there, so that all her care cannot hide its wanton waves. Her face is full of life and health, so open, so candid, that there you read her heart, and you know that it is as good as she is fair.

She stood before me in a sombre gown, almost ugly in its gray color and severe lines, but to me she was a quaint figure such as might have stepped out of the old world and the old time when men lived with a vengeance, and godliness and ugliness went arm in arm, for Satan had preempted the beautiful. Against her a homely garb failed. She was beautiful in spite of her clothes and not because of them. But this is generally true with women. This one,

instead of sharing our admiration with her gown, claimed it all for herself. Her face had no rival.

I did not turn away. I could not. The gray eyes, once flashing with the light of kindly humor, now softened with sympathy, now glowed with pity. Pity! The thought of it stirred me with anger. The justice of it made me rage. She saw in the chair a thin, broken figure, a drawn brown face, a wreck of a man. Yesterday—a soldier. To-day—a hero. Tomorrow—a crippled veteran, and after that a pensioner drifting fast into a garrulous dotage. She, too, was looking into the future. She knew what I had lost. She saw what I dreaded. Her eyes told me that. She did not know what I had gained, for she came of a silly people whose blood quickened only to the swing of a German hymn and who were stirred more by the groans of a penitent sinner than the martial call of the bugle.

So it came that I struggled to my crutches and broke rudely in on Perry Thomas's peroration. I had gathered all my strength for a protest against the future. The people of the valley were to know that their kindness had cheered me, but of their pity I wanted none. I had played a small part in a great game and in the playing was the reward. I had come forth a bit bruised and battered, but there were other battles to be fought in this world, where one could have the same fierce joy of the conflict; and he was a poor soldier who lived only to be toted out on Decoration days. I was glad to be home, but gladder still that I had gone. That was what I told them. I looked right at the girl when I said it, and she lifted her head and smiled. They heard how in the early spring in the meadow by the mill-dam Tim and I had