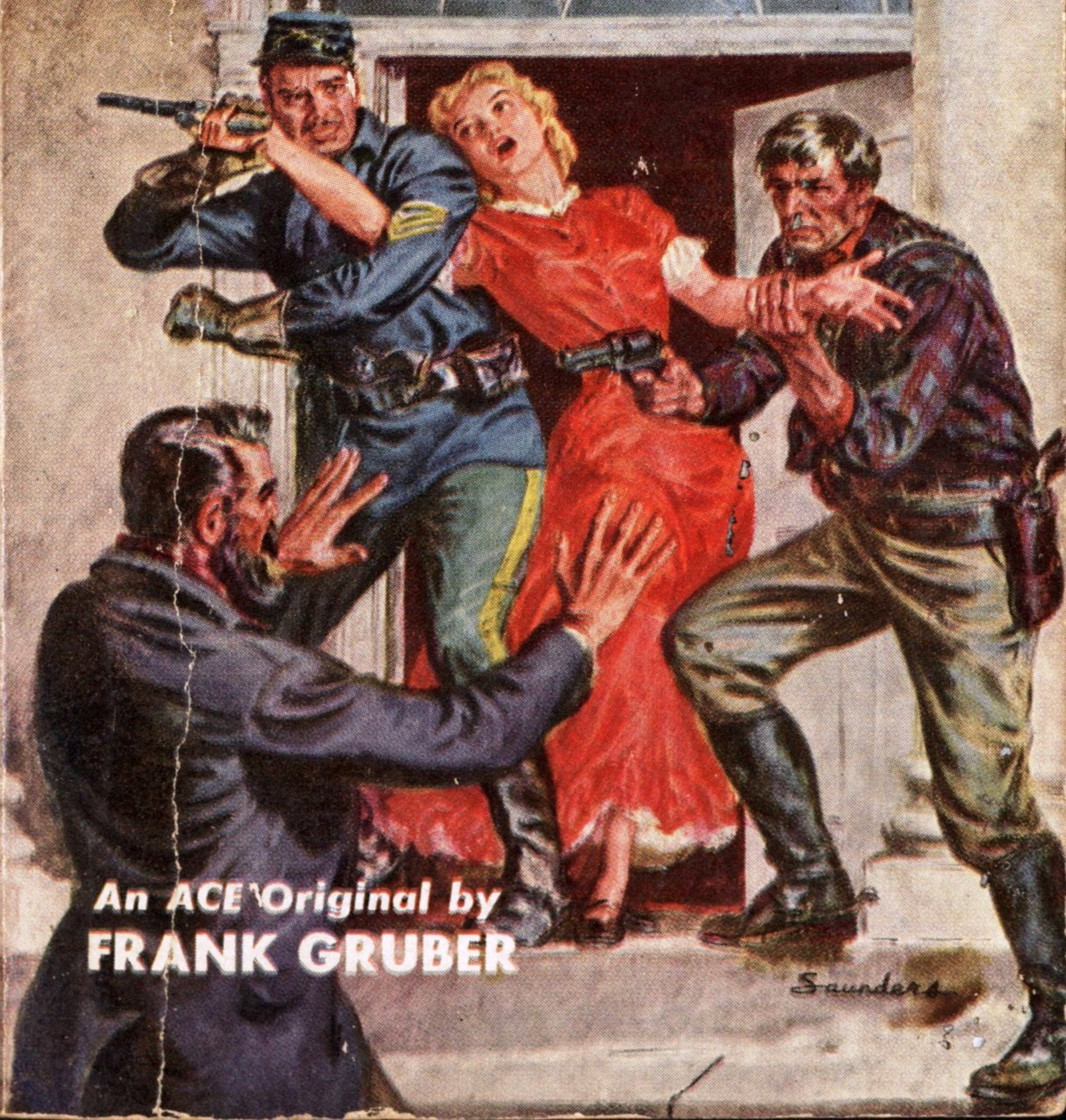


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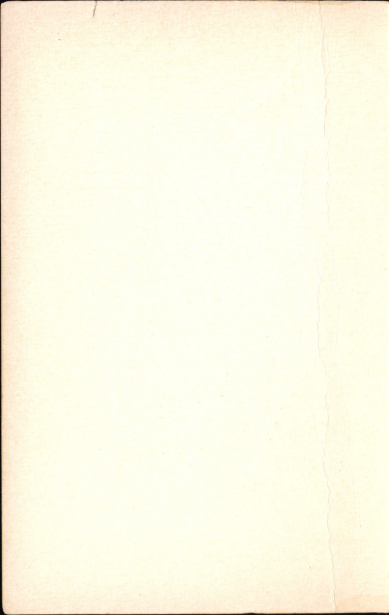
# QUANTRELL'S RAIDERS



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FRANK GRUBER**

*Saunders*







***He was forced to ride with a killer's  
cavalry:***

By defending his girl from the drunken attack of bushwhackers in Union blue, West Pointer Donny Fletcher was marked as a rebel by the Federal Army. The threat of a firing squad made him flee from both North and South alike to become a hunted fugitive in the woods of his native Missouri.

But then the "border ruffians" banded together and the name of their leader, Quantrell, became feared throughout the land. Despite his true loyalties, Donny rose to a position of command among Quantrell's raiders. Then came the culmination of their bloody campaign, the hideous massacre at Lawrence, Kansas, and Donny Fletcher knew that the moment of his most dangerous decision had come. . .

In this sweeping new novel of men and women in war, the full impact of war between the states can be felt. Here is an ACE Original, based upon authentic history, written by a skilled writer, which will hold every reader from start to finish.

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second Frank Gruber novel.***

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*A note from the author on the sources of  
this book:*

"History is biased. It depends on whose version you prefer to believe. In writing *Quantrell's Raiders*, the author has had access to an extensive library of Civil War material. He studied more than 250 books on the subject, those written by Southerners as well as Northerners. In addition, he consulted the military records of the time—and in the end was compelled to draw his own conclusions.

"The story of Donny Fletcher is fiction, yet all the incidents in the story are based on fact. Some readers may doubt the possibility of a West Pointer ever having been a guerrilla. Major General George A. Custer, while at West Point, had a roommate named Parker. As late as June, 1862, the name mentioned oftenest in Federal dispatches referring to guerrilla activities was that of this same Parker.

"Some of the incidents in my book are necessarily controversial, as are the delineations of the characters of some of the men mentioned in the work. I may have erred in some instances; if so, it is not intentional. A former resident of Missouri, I have conducted an extensive research, over a period of years, into the history of the Civil War in that state. I have personally covered the ground of every engagement described in the story."

—FRANK GRUBER



# QUANTRELL'S RAIDERS

*by* FRANK GRUBER

**ACE BOOKS, INC.**

**23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N. Y.**



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REBEL ROAD (*Outlaw*)

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## CHAPTER I

PRIDE stiffened the spine of Second Lieutenant Doniphan Fletcher as he stood on the grassy knoll and watched wave after wave of his country's finest young men swirl down upon the muddy stream that was called Bull Run.

They were militiamen, these soldiers, and they looked brave and magnificent in their brilliantly colored uniforms; the New York Zouaves, in red Oriental trousers, the Pennsylvania Volunteers in bright blue and the regiments from Ohio and Michigan, New Jersey and Illinois, each in their own distinctive uniforms.

They were militiamen, yet to them had been given the honor of crushing the rebel horde that dared to call itself an army. And Doniphan Fletcher, a commissioned officer in the regular army, had to stand back here on this knoll as a spectator.

It wouldn't be much of a fight, of course. Probably just a thrust here and there, then a swift charge along the entire front and it would be all over. Except the surrender and march back to Washington, amid the cheers of the thousands upon thousands of spectators that lined the ridge on which Donny Fletcher himself stood.

There were almost as many noncombatants here on this ridge as there were soldiers down there. There were Congressmen, politicians and their ladies, civilians who had come to see history in the making. For this was The Day. The day when McDowell's army would crush the rebel host and break the backbone of the revolution. It was all going to be settled today — secession, sovereignty of state, slavery.

This war between the states, the conflict that had been inevitable for so many years, was going to be fought today. And Donny Fletcher, who had spent four long years at West Point, who had been graduated three weeks ago on the eve of this event, was not taking a part in it.

It was the fault of those stuffed shirts in Washington. They were all tied up in their red tape. While he and his classmates, men who had been trained for this, were standing on



this hilltop as spectators, the battle was going to be fought by militia.

A cannon roared and another and another. The thunder was almost drowned by the roar that went up among the multitude upon the ridge.

"The battle's started!" screamed a thousand throats.

Dignified men and staid women suddenly seemed to lose their reason. They rushed about, leaped up and down in their excitement. A Senator from a border state threw his stove-pipe hat in the air and failed to catch it as it came down. A young girl in crinoline and silk kicked the hat gleefully in Donny Fletcher's direction and yelled at him:

"Why aren't you down there with them?"

Donny grinned wryly, shook his head and paid no more attention to the young lady. The crackle of rifle fire broke out along the line below and his attention was riveted upon the meandering little stream that divided the two armies.

In a few minutes — Yes, there they were! The first wave was advancing upon the creek.

The canonading became terrific, as thirty thousand rifles on both sides belched out clouds of smoke that soon rolled about the troops and enveloped them into anonymity. Under cover, the militiamen from the North forded Bull Run at a dozen points.

They were next seen advancing upon the higher ground on the other side — and the Southern rabble was in flight!

The North had won! They had driven the rebels from their positions with almost ridiculous ease.

The civilian spectators upon the ridge saw the victory before the troops that had won it. They surged down from their vantage point toward Bull Run to see at closer range the final rout and surrender. The din they made, the screaming and yelling, rose above the sound of the cannons, now firing all up and down the line.

But . . . a puff of wind blows away the smoke on the left, far bank of Bull Run. A brigade of Confederates has refused to retreat; it is standing like a stone wall. The Union advance breaks upon it, falters and gives way.



No! They cannot be retreating, those splendid New York Zouaves, with their red Oriental breeches, the Pennsylvania Blues. They're the flower of the North. They cannot be retreating.

But they are. And on the right, a battery of artillery has become strangely silent. A horde of Confederates, a ragged, irregular horde, without the least semblance of rank or order, appears and moves forward. Before it, the Union army goes back. It crosses the river again — in full retreat.

The thousands of spectators in the rear have become silent. Almost, as if by command, they move back upon the heights. Here and there a party gets into its carriage and drives northward.

The Union army is lost again in the clouds of smoke; it reappears a considerable distance from the stream that is known as Bull Run. The men of the militia are going back — slowly, for a division of the regular army has been hurriedly thrust between them and the foe and they are pouring a merciless fire into the masses of gray.

But the militiamen are still retreating. The civilians have given way, and soon the ridge is occupied by soldiers. Brigades and regiments are deployed, batteries of artillery set up their guns.

The Confederates have been too strong, but a slow, steady retreat is not a defeat. The ranks can yet be formed, new regiments and brigades thrown in. Another advance can be started if the division of regulars can hold the enemy in check for an hour or two.

But they cannot. The fiery Southerners have had a taste of victory; they are advancing now, crossing the narrow stream of water that has been reddened by Northern blood. The Union regulars are fighting stubbornly, but give way under the sheer weight of numbers.

If the artillery upon the hill can only shatter those waves of gray, hold them back for just a little while. But those guns down there, across the river, are throwing a more rapid fire, more thundering. Shells are bursting upon the ridge so lately vacated by the civilians.

The artillerymen of the North cannot stand by their cannon.



They are retreating, and the last hope of the Northern army is gone. Its defense has been broken. The infantry, unsupported, retreats faster. The withdrawal becomes a rout.

The troops overtake the civilians at the Rapidan. The latter become hysterical and panic-stricken. They whip up their horses and regardless of fords, dash them into the water. Horses flounder, carriages are overturned and men and women thrown into the water.

Silk hats bob here and there; bright colored parasols float and swirl upon the muddied stream. Soldiers enter the water, mingle with the civilians.

"They're coming!" the soldiers yell. "The rebels are coming! Hurry — get out of the way!"

Donny Fletcher is down there. He wades the Rapidan in his brand-new blue uniform that he bought only four days ago. He walks through the night, glad that it is dark and he cannot see the shame upon the faces of the soldiers and civilians that are all about him.

In the morning Donny Fletcher reached Washington City. In his still damp, wrinkled uniform, he made his way to the Levitt Hotel. Here, one by one, four of his classmates appeared.

There was a lean, lank, yellow-haired stripling named Custer, who came from Michigan. There was also Bailey of Massachusetts, Wheeler of Ohio, Johnson from Wisconsin. They had not all been at Bull Run, but they all knew what had happened.

"Why don't they assign us to commands!" fumed Bailey of Massachusetts. "Those Washington vote-grabbers know no more about commanding troops than we do of stuffing a ballot box."

The tall Custer sneered. "Red tape! Washington's all tied up with it — so tight even a Congressman can't cut it."

"The trouble," said Wheeler of Ohio, "is that there are too damned many Congressmen. Each has his bills and recommendations and his patronage. They've bogged down the administration."



"I'm going," said Donny Fletcher. "It may be weeks and weeks yet and I've got to go home."

"To Missouri, Donny?" asked sober Lieutenant Johnson.

Donny Fletcher nodded. "They're going to fight there. Lyon is moving on Price. Missouri wanted to be neutral, but they won't let her be. They're going to have such a war there that even Bull Run will seem like a skirmish."

Yellow-haired Custer sniffed. "In those Ozark brush patches? Hell, Fletcher, there isn't enough cleared land in Missouri to make a decent cavalry charge."

"You're wrong, George," said Donny Fletcher. "The war is new here, but it's been going on in Missouri since '56. Our border ruffians have been going into Kansas. Their Redlegs and Jayhawkers have been coming to Missouri. Missourians voted at the Kansas polls, sacked the town of Lawrence. And Kansas Redlegs and Jayhawkers have raided Missouri and robbed and burned and killed."

Young Lieutenant Bailey of Massachusetts flushed. "I know. A lot of our Massachusetts Abolitionists have gone out there. Some have made fine Redlegs and Jayhawkers."

"But you, Fletcher," cut in Custer, "isn't your father a slave-holder?"

Donny replied evenly: "Yes. We moved to Jackson County, Missouri, from Kentucky, in '39. All our people have owned slaves for generations. But no Fletcher has ever raided into Kansas. We're not border ruffians."

## CHAPTER II

THE NORTH was rousing itself for the great struggle. Wheeling Island was a huge army camp. Cincinnati was recruiting and St. Louis was in a fever of mobilization. In St. Louis, the Confederate flags had come down only a few weeks before, but the Secesh sympathizers were still here, even though they no longer shouted their political creed from the street corners.

It seemed to Donny Fletcher that almost every other man in St. Louis wore a uniform. At almost every street corner



leather-lunged recruiting sergeants exhorted passing men to join up with Abe Lincoln and the Union.

The big crowds, though, were down at the levee. As far as Donny Fletcher could see in each direction, river steamers and packets were moored. Stevedores unloaded corn from Iowa, wheat from Minnesota and Wisconsin, barley from Illinois, and, surprisingly, bale after bale of cotton from Mississippi and Tennessee. St. Louis was the metropolis of the West, the port of the inland waters.

Donny Fletcher searched for the *Polar Star*, the flat-bottomed packet on which he was to travel the last leg of his journey up the Missouri River.

A carpetbag in each hand, he strolled northward along the waterfront, a lean, dark young man wearing a cutaway coat, gray trousers and a silk hat. A ruffled shirt and silk waistcoat completed his ensemble. People looked at him as he passed, for most men of his age were wearing uniforms these days.

After a while he found the *Polar Star* and was pleasantly surprised. It was a luxurious, commodious packet, twice the size of the one on which he had come down-river four years ago.

An officer stood at the gangplank. Donny put down his carpetbags and took a ticket from his pocket.

"Kansas City," he said.

The officer pursed his lips. "That's as far as you're going?"

"On the boat, yes. My home is a few miles south of Kansas City. Near Lees Summit."

"Oh," said the officer, "in Jackson County. That's fine." He handed the ticket back to Donny.

His tone arrested Donny. "Why did you ask where I lived? You don't usually do that, do you?"

The man shook his head. "It's none of our business, really. Only now — well, times are unsettled. We were boarded our last trip, at Lexington, by a band of — irregular soldiers. They took off several passengers whose destination was Kansas. So we are cautioning passengers."

"What do you mean by irregular soldiers? Southerners?"

The packet officer looked down at his hands. "Sort of . . ." And that was as much as he would say. A steward came down



the gangplank then and picked up Donny's bags. He led him to a small cabin.

The room contained a cot, a washstand with pitcher and water and a small chest of drawers. There was a tiny window opening on the deck. It was insufferably hot in the room.

"Be cooler when we get going," the steward told Donny as he left.

Donny took off his coat and washed his face and hands. Perspiration filmed his face before he had dried himself with the towel. He put on his coat again and walked out on deck. Other passengers lined the rail and Donny, looking overside, saw that there was considerable activity on shore. The boat was evidently due to start in a little while.

He discovered the saloon and found it crowded with both men and women. There was a bar just off it and he stepped inside to get a glass of beer, a refreshment that had been denied him these last four years.

He'd almost forgotten what it tasted like and as he quaffed the cool St. Louis brew, a little wave of nostalgia swept over him. It would be good to be home: his cool room, with the cross ventilation and the big oak tree shading the south window, a soft bed and clean, cool sheets. . . . Tall, moisture-beaded glasses of fragrant mint julep . . . hot biscuits with honey . . . fresh ham . . . fried chicken the way Mammy Lou made it. . . .

A harsh voice swept it all away. "That's Dutchman's stuff you're drinkin', mister!"

Donny Fletcher half turned. A man even taller than himself stood beside him, a glass of whiskey in a massive fist. An insolent sneer twisted sensuous lips and gave a satanic cast to a rather handsome face.

The man wore a fine black Prince Albert with a velvet collar, broadcloth trousers, brocaded vest and starched linen. A slouch hat was set rakishly on his head, not quite concealing abnormally long hair. He was in his middle twenties.

Donny Fletcher looked into the man's greenish eyes, then shot a glance at his half-filled glass of beer.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "did you say something to me?"

"I did," the other replied. "I invited you to have a drink with me."

"Thank you," said Donny, "but I've got a drink. A good Dutchman's drink!"

The greenish eyes dropped to Donny's gray Prince Albert, came up to his eyes. "You don't look it."

"Look what?" Donny challenged.

"Like a Dutchman."

"My family's from Kentucky. We live in Missouri, now. Jackson County. But what's wrong with Dutchmen?"

"Since you're from Jackson County — nothing!"

"I don't get it."

The tall man grinned suddenly and looked five years younger.

"My name's Anderson," he said. "I live near Westport."

The name had a familiar ring, but not a pleasant one. There was a family of Andersons in Jackson, a large one — no, this couldn't be a member of that Anderson family.

Donny said, "My name's Doniphan Fletcher. Perhaps you know my father, Louis Fletcher."

Anderson nodded slowly. "Louis Fletcher. Had a son went to West Point?"

"That's right. I'm the one. My brother is four years younger. He's at home."

"More likely he's joined up with Pap Price," said Anderson. "Ain't many fellas that age at home in Jackson, now."

Donny looked steadily into Anderson's green eyes, then dropped his gaze to his glass of beer.

"Funny," Anderson went on, "there are Kentucky folks in Jackson that ain't on our side. Some you'd never thought. Man named Wilcoxon at The Landing, owns slaves and up and joined the Yankee army. . . ."

"I think —" Donny began, coldly.

"Woo-woo-eel!" tooted the whistle of the steamboat. Then, again "woo-woo-woo-eel!"

Donny Fletcher winced from the blast, then put down his



half-emptied glass of beer and joined in the general rush of the passengers to the deck.

Hands had loosened the fastenings of the gangplank and were about to haul it in, when two belated passengers sprang upon it. Donny Fletcher watched them with interest. One was a middle-aged man with a black full beard that came to his chest. He struggled with two carpetbags and herded his companion before him.

This was a girl, a young lady. She wore a green velvet traveling suit that must have been stifling in the ninety-five degree heat. She carried a round leather hat box that she dropped on the gangplank as she hastened up.

Three men from the deck sprang down to retrieve the hat box; they got themselves all tangled and the girl scooped up the box herself and continued up the plank, her face flushed a deep crimson. She had to wait for the chivalrous gentlemen to clear her passage.

Donny lost the girl as she and the man with the beard were swallowed up in the deck crowd. He didn't see her again until in the evening, after the *Polar Star* had passed Alton and turned into the broad Missouri, headed westward for St. Charles, Boonville, Lexington, Kansas City.

She was sitting in the saloon then, wearing a crinoline evening gown with a tight bodice and a Spanish lace shawl over her shoulders. She was alone, but there was nothing unusual about that. Most of the travelers had forsaken their stifling cabins. The decks, of course, were preferred, but there was too much light on them.

He saw the saturnine Anderson, too. He was sitting at a little table a few feet away, watching the girl in the evening dress.

Seeing a little table on the far side of the room, Donny sat down by it, turning his chair so that he did not face Anderson. But by turning his head a little he could still see him and the girl beyond. He signaled to a waiter and ordered a mint julep, then frowned and changed the order to a glass of beer.

The waiter brought the beer, and as Donny took a sip of it, he saw the black-bearded man come into the saloon and

look around. The man located the girl after a moment and walked to her table and sat down.

Anderson rose then. A sardonic smile twisted his face and he walked to the other table. Donny could hear his deep voice:

"Major Benton! Well, well! Been on a trip?"

The bearded man turned up his face and Donny saw there was no welcome in it. He said something, but Donny could not hear the words. He saw their result, however. Anderson's smile left his lips and his head jerked forward an inch. Then the smile came back, more crooked than before.

He said: "Your daughter, Susan, I believe?"

Donny heard the bearded man's reply, then. It was sharp. "Good evening, sir!"

Donny pushed back his chair. He strode deliberately toward Anderson and when he came up, said: "Mr. Anderson, I'll join you in that drink now!"

The tall Anderson jerked around. He recognized Donny and sneered: "Dutchman's beer? No, thanks!"

Donny reached out and took Anderson's arm, surprised a little at the hardness of it. He said: "Not beer, whiskey!"

Anderson's nostrils flared and his eyes seemed greener than ever. Then the muscles in his arm, under Donny's grip, softened. "All right, I don't mind if I do."

But they did not have their drink together. In the corner nearest the bar, a lively little party was going on. There were two men and four women in the party. The women were not Susan Benton's type.

There were glasses on the table before them and they were laughing and giggling.

One of them saw Anderson and cried out: "Bill Anderson!"

Anderson chuckled. "Hello, Della!" he called jovially. He turned to Donny. "Sorry, Mr. Fletcher, but I won't drink with you after all. Unless you want to join the party."

"Thank you, no," said Donny. "I think I'll turn in."

Anderson took a step away, then stopped and turned. "I'll see you again, Fletcher!" There was an unpleasant promise in his tone, although his mouth was smiling again.



Donny changed his direction and moved toward the door leading to the deck. Major Benton headed him off.

"I want to thank you for taking that man away," he said.

Donny bowed slightly. "I could see he was annoying you and your daughter."

Major Benton bobbed his head. "You're the Fletcher boy, aren't you? The one who just graduated from West Point?"

Donny was surprised. "Yes, but —"

"I live in Lees Summit. Moved there after you went East. Know your father well. Come over and meet my daughter."

He took Donny's arm.

As they walked back to Major Benton's table, Donny shot a glance across the saloon and saw Bill Anderson watching him. He bit his lip.

And then he was looking into Susan Benton's blue eyes. Her hair was a soft, golden blonde, her complexion the smoothest Donny had ever seen, her features finer than those of any of the girls who had come to the infrequent West Point dances.

"My daughter, Susan, Mr. Fletcher," Major Benton was saying.

Donny bowed and murmured a politeness, then saw Susan Benton's hand. He took it.

She said: "I've heard so much about you, I feel I know you. Your mother expected you home last summer and then you went to Virginia instead."

"George Rosser insisted I visit with him. But say — you know my mother?"

"Of course. We're neighbors. Didn't you know?"

Yes, of course he'd known. His mother and his brother, Stephen Kearney, had both mentioned her in their letters. Stephen's had been particularly enthusiastic in his description of "the girl next door," but then Stephen had been writing about girls to Donny since his plebe year. His interest in the opposite sex had started young.

"Sit down, Mr. Fletcher, won't you?" rumbled Major Benton. "We've only been away from home two weeks. We'll give you the latest news of your family. I'm glad to say that all

this hasn't made any difference between your family and mine."

Donny pulled out a chair. Then he said: "All what?"

Major Benton's eyes drew together a little. He cleared his throat. "Sorry. I shouldn't have got on that subject. Can't seem to help it."

Donny looked from the major to Susan Benton. Her face was tight and her mouth slightly open. She saw his eyes on her and laughed shortly.

"What father's trying to say," she said, "is that we can be friends even though we're on opposite sides politically."

"But we aren't!" Donny exclaimed. "You're Union and I'm a second lieutenant in the United States Army."

"Eh?" said Major Benton. "Oh, yes, you've graduated from West Point. But you're going home now, aren't you?"

"That doesn't change the facts any. At present, I'm still unassigned, but my orders may come any day. You see — " He stopped. Susan Benton's blue eyes were wide. She said, softly: "Don't you know? Haven't you heard — "

Major Benton inhaled deeply. "Your brother, Stephen, he enlisted in the state guard. I thought — well, your father — "

Donny Fletcher stared for a moment. He moistened his lips. "I hadn't heard," he said, slowly. "Steve's with Sterling Price?"

Susan Benton nodded. "His regiment left just before we went to St. Louis."

Donny shook his head soberly. "I'm sorry. He should have waited. I guess that's why they wrote me to come home. I couldn't, though. We weren't graduated until three weeks ago and we expected any day to get our assignments."

Major Benton stroked his glossy beard. "Never talk politics with your father. Naturally, I considered him a Southern man."

"He's from Kentucky," Donny said. "They've always owned slaves — "

"He sold all of them," cut in Major Benton. "He sent them down to New Orleans six months ago, when those border ruffians started jumping across the line."

There was more, much more, but Donny couldn't take it



all in. Some of it was too unbelievable. Oh, there'd been talk of those things even at The Point, but the work had been hard there, the hours long. There wasn't much time to read the infrequent newspapers that came into the quarters.

Border ruffian. The phrase was an old one by now, of course. It hadn't been new in '57. In '56 three thousand of them had looted Lawrence, Kansas, the stronghold of the Abolitionist crowd in Kansas. Missourians had hopped across the line to vote in Kansas in '55. They won, by fraud, every seat in the Kansas territorial legislature. But Redlegs and Jayhawkers had slunk across the line into Missouri; they rang the golden bell of the underground railway, spread the velvet cloak of religion and let the simple slaves hear the rustle of black wings.

But these things were vague, distant. In West Point you drilled and studied and when you thought of graduation you visualized a blue uniform. No, not always. Boling of South Carolina had gone home in December. Temple, who had roomed with Donny Fletcher, had gone to Mississippi in January. And then the others — from Georgia and Tennessee, Virginia and Texas. They were wearing the gray, now.

Some day they might be facing each other over guns. A cold shudder ran through him. Steve was wearing a gray uniform!

### CHAPTER III

IT WAS cooler the next day, with a threat of rain. The Bentons did not make their appearance. After breakfast Donny Fletcher found a deck chair up forward, under the pilot house, and slumped into it. He watched the muddy river water ahead.

After a while a couple of men clumped along the deck and stopped in front of Donny. He looked up into the blood-shot green eyes of Bill Anderson. The tall Jackson County man had put aside his broadcloth today and was wearing ordinary black trousers, tucked into high leather boots. He

still wore a white shirt, but was coatless. A slouch hat was tilted over one side of his head. He had a long black cigar clamped in his jaws.

The man with him was dressed similarly, but was shorter, heavier-set. A clay pipe was stuck in his mouth.

"Saw you with the Bentons last night. They tell you they were Yankees?"

Hot blood throbbed in Donny Fletcher's temples, but he made a tremendous effort to control himself. He said: "The Bentons are my father's neighbors and my friends. I don't care to discuss them."

The heavy-set man took the pipe from his mouth. "This the fella you were tellin' about, Bill? The West Point fella?"

Bill Anderson grinned wickedly. "Uh-huh. Mr. Doniphan Fletcher, of the Jackson County Fletchers."

The other man started to hold out his hand, then looked at it and dropped it at his side. "My name's Polk Webster. I'm from Lees Summit m'self. Know your fam'ly. B'longed to the same militia company with your brother."

"Then why aren't you with — " Donny said, before he caught himself.

Polk Webster nodded, without rancor. "Why ain't I with Price now, huh?" He smacked his lips noisily. "Can't. Gave my word. I was captured in that scrimmage at Boonville and had to take the oath." He turned his eyes upwards, in angelic manner.

Bill Anderson snickered. "He can't never take up arms against the United States on account of he swore an oath."

Donny Fletcher got up from the canvas deck chair. "I've got a book in my carpetbag. Think I'll read 'awhile."

He brushed past the two men. He heard one of them laugh when he was a half-dozen steps away, but he did not turn around.

In his tiny cabin he lifted one of his carpetbags to the bed and opened it. From under a pile of shirts he took a Navy Colt revolver. He removed the nipples from the cylinder and inserted fresh ones. Then he loaded the gun and tucked it into his belt over his right hip. His long Prince Albert concealed it from casual view.



He went on deck without a book. He circled the deck once without seeing either Bill Anderson or Polk Webster and concluded that they had retired to the bar. He deliberated having it out with them, now, but finally decided against it.

The shallow draft *Polar Star* churned its way up the muddy Missouri, making frequent stops at the river towns.

Donny Fletcher was having lunch in the dining room when the Bentons finally made their appearance. The major was dressed as he had been the evening before, but Susan was wearing a high-necked dress of black muslin that, by contrast, heightened her fair complexion and hair.

Donny rose and invited them to join him at lunch. After they had ordered, Donny said casually, to Mr. Benton: "I had another little brush with Mr. Anderson this morning. I wish you would tell me about him. Is he one of the Andersons I think —"

"The border ruffians? Yes. In fact, he's the leader of them. There are three or four of them and I believe three girls. This Bill sometimes wears the clothes of a gentleman." Major Benton shook his head. "The stories about the Andersons are probably exaggerated, but they're too persistent to be ignored altogether."

Donny nodded thoughtfully. "The Andersons had an unsavory reputation four years ago, but I thought those things had died down."

"On the contrary, they've increased. Men of the same stripe on the Kansas side, I'm sorry to say, have construed the national condition as an order for the suspension of all law and order. Bands of bushwhackers have sprung up everywhere. A dozen farmhouses in the more remote sections of Jackson County have been burned during the last two months. A man named Montgomery and another called Jennison, reputed to be sponsored by Senator Lane, have crossed the line several times —"

Susan Benton interrupted: "What about that ruffian they call Kroger? And that Younger boy from our own vicinity, the son of Thomas Younger —"

"He's gone," Major Benton said, "with the state guard."

"The state guard is what puzzles me," Donny said. "Sterling Price, although a Southern man, was supposed to be a Unionist. Why, he was a brigadier in the Mexican War. And when he was governor of Missouri —"

"That was several years ago. He didn't commit himself until after the Camp Jackson affair in St. Louis." Major Benton said, tugging at his beard.

Donny lifted his eyebrows. "But there must be many Union men in the state guard."

"Hundreds, but they wouldn't dare reveal their true political leanings now."

Wearily, Donny shook his head. "I wonder if Steve —"

Susan Benton said: "I'm afraid not. Steve was very outspoken about his convictions. He's Confederate."

"But he's only eighteen!" protested Donny.

"I'm eighteen," said Susan, a trace of a smile on her lips. "You think I'm too young to know my own mind?"

"No, of course not. Still —"

Major Benton coughed loudly. "We'll be at Boonville in an hour. We leave you there, to continue by stagecoach. It's no faster than the steamboat, but we always travel by coach to and from Boonville. We'll no doubt see more of you in Lees Summit."

The trip, as far as Donny Fletcher was concerned, was uneventful after the Bentons left the steamer. At Lexington a troop of blue-uniformed soldiers came aboard and caused a bit of flurry among the passengers. From then on Bill Anderson and his friend Polk Webster remained in their cabins.

It was a tedious trip, taking forty-eight hours for the less than three hundred miles. It was afternoon of the second day when the *Polar Star* finally chugged up to the landing at Kansas City.

To Donny's surprise, Blue uniforms were in evidence everywhere. Kansas City had been the stronghold of the pro-slavery faction in the old days. But there were still plenty of men of military age in civilian clothes, indicating that President Lincoln's call for volunteers was not receiving too much response out here.

When Donny went to a livery stable, he received the disconcerting information that there wasn't a carriage or horse to be had.

"The army's been buying up horses," the liveryman told him, "them that the state guard and the Kansas men ain't requisitioned." He looked thoughtfully at Donny. "You're from Lees Summit, huh? There's a wagon here going to Westport in a few minutes. Why don't you ride on it to the Landing? Your chances of getting a mount in Westport will be better than here."

So Donny rode to Westport Landing on top of a load of door and window sashes. The driver of the wagon was a tobacco-chewing, whiskered man wearing homespun jeans and cotton shirt. His name, he told Donny, was Dal Maine.

"But I ain't from there," he added emphatically. "Tennessee's my home state. An' I don't mind sayin', if you wasn't a Southern man yourself, you'd never be ridin' on this here wagon."

"How do you know I'm not a Union soldier?" Donny asked, curtly.

"'Cause I know your pap. Good a Kentucky man as there is in Jackson."

Donny lapsed into silence. His replies to the garrulous Dal Maine were in monosyllables and after a while the teamster shrugged and gave his full attention to his chewing tobacco and team.

When they reached Westport, Donny climbed down from the wagon. He extended a fifty-cent piece to Dal Maine. The latter looked at it and wiped a trickle of brown liquid from his chin. "What's that for?"

"For driving me here. I happen to be a Union soldier."

Dal Maine scowled. "In that case, I'll take the money." He took the coin from Donny's fingers and called: "Hi, boy!" and when a big buck, who was putting a sack of feed into a buggy, turned, tossed the half dollar to him.

His lips taut, Donny turned away.

"Massa Donny!" cried a voice. "Massa Donny, fo' de Lawd's sake!"

The big Negro tossed his sack of feed into the buggy,



ducked under the heads of Dal Maine's team and came toward Donny.

Donny exclaimed. "Mose!"

He gripped the strapping Negro by an arm and the slave grinned hugely. "Massa Donny, why yo' don't write yo' pappy yo' comin' home?"

"Is that our buggy, Mose?"

"It sho' is. Yo' mammy send Mose all de way to Westport to get some sewin' things, and —"

"Let's go!" cried Donny. "I'm in a hurry to get home."

There was a fine team of geldings hitched to the little buggy and under Donny's driving they trotted swiftly out of Westport.

When they had left the town behind, Donny asked eagerly: "How is everyone?"

"Jes' fine, Massa Donny," replied the slave. "Jes' fine. Yo' pappy was ailin' a while back, but he gonna be all right now. Yo' mammy, she ain't never been better. Not a day older, hardly, dan when yo' went off to dat soljer school."

"And Stephen — does he write?"

"He sho' do. On'y yesterday he write sayin' dey goin' have big battle wid them Yanks and beat tar out dem."

"How do you know what he wrote?" chuckled Donny. "You can't read."

"Ah got ears, Massa Donny. I c'n hear powerful well."

After a while Mose spoke again. "It sho' good to see you home ag'n, Massa Donny. Yo'-all got a shootin' gun wid you?"

"Why, yes, Mose. In my bag. I bought one of those fine Navy Colts in New York. Why?"

Mose showed his big white teeth, but there was no longer a smile on his face. "'Cause we comin' into de Sni Hills now and maybe best to show some shootin' irons. Man try to stop me when I come to Westport, and I drive like de debil to beat him."

"Just a minute, Mose," said Donny. He reached under the seat and opened his carpetbag. A moment later he brought out the Navy Colt he had loaded on the *Polar Star* the day before.

He put the gun on the seat between himself and Mose.

"Why would this man try to stop you? Was he from across the line?"

"No, suh. Just one of dese yere white trash from de hills. Dey powerful uppity lately. Call dey-self 'bushwhacker.' Dese yere hills are full ob dem."

"Why don't soldiers come down and clear them out?"

Mose stared surprised at the question. "Massa Donny, yo'-all hunted here. You know dese yere brush so thick a crow can't even fly t'rough it. Bushwhacker knows every tree. Soldier kain't find dem in twenty years." He caught his breath suddenly and said in a hoarse whisper: "Man dere now, jes' come out. Same fella chase me 'fore."

"Fine," Donny said harshly. "Perhaps there'll be one bushwhacker less in a minute." He pulled the horses to a walk and he had ample time to study the ruffian by the roadside.

He was an evil-looking specimen: black, unkempt beard, butternut shirt and pants that would have been a discredit to a scarecrow. His hair came halfway to his shoulders, untrammelled by any hat. Yet he carried a surprisingly good carbine, and a Navy Colt the equal of Donny's was stuck in the waistband of his trousers. He slouched at the edge of the narrow road, one shoulder lightly touching a stunted oak tree.

When the horses were almost even with him, the ruffian straightened from his slouch.

"Howdy, mister!" he said.

Donny nodded curtly and would have continued, but somehow the ragged man reached out a hand and the horses stopped. "That black boy of your'n, mister. He needs a good hidin' and I'm the man to do it ef you don't."

"You lay a finger on him and I'll kill you," Donny said savagely.

The ruffian took a step back, but his face showed no alarm. "Name's Fletcher, ain't it? I got a good memory for faces. 'Member you when you was knee-high to a 'coon. I'm Dick Kroger."

"Is that so? There was a Dick Kroger around these parts who was a first-rate cutthroat and scoundrel. You wouldn't be him, though."

Dick Kroger's eyes glittered. "Them's hard words, Mister Fletcher."

"I meant them to be," reported Donny, grimly. "Mose told me that you tried to steal these horses on his way to Westport. I'm warning you, Dick Kroger, don't ever try to take anything belonging to a Fletcher."

Dick Kroger snorted, took another step back and froze. Donny's Navy pistol had leaped into his hand and was covering him.

"Climb down and take his guns away, Mose!" he ordered.

Mose gasped, but jumped to the dusty road. As he went around the team, Dick Kroger said: "Fletcher, if that boy touches me I'll kill him before the week's out."

"Take his guns, Mose," Donny said relentlessly. "Break the carbine across the wheel."

Kroger surrendered his weapons without a struggle, but he winced as the wood of the stock splintered. "Throw the revolver into the woods," Donny went on, "as far as you can!"

Mose glanced apprehensively at Dick Kroger as his powerful arm drew back to hurl the revolver. The ruffian watched the weapon fly into the thicket and began cursing with liquid fluency.

"I ain't forgettin' this, Fletcher. I ain't never goin' to forget it!"

Mose went around the buggy and climbed in. Donny put down his Navy Colt and picked up the lines. He clucked to the horses and they trotted off.

Dick Kroger's curses followed them.

Beside Donny, Mose shivered. "Massa Donny, I hear 'bout dat Kroger man. He bad!"

Donny snorted shortly. "Next time you have to pass here you'll carry a gun."

Mose didn't seem calmed.

## CHAPTER IV

DONNY lapsed into a depressing silence. The encounter with Dick Kroger had taken the edge off his homecoming. Times



had certainly changed in the Sni hills. White trash there had always been, but they'd kept their depredations for their sporadic trips into Kansas. When they'd fought at home, it had been with others of their kind. They had never dared to affront the planters.

The team of bays kept up a steady jog and ate up the miles. Ordinarily, Donny would have held them in, but today he was anxious to get home and he let them keep their steady pace, mile after mile.

The sun was still over the trees when he finally turned the team off the road, into the rutted trail in the middle of the large clearing. The fields on both sides of the road were unploughed.

"How come, Mose?" he said, nodding toward the right field.

"Field hand all gone," Mose explained. "Yo' pappy send dem to N'Awleans two-t'ree months ago."

"And we're not raising any crops at all?"

"Naw suh, jes' little patch cawn and li'l truck garden fo' yo' mammy."

The team, knowing it was nearing home, broke into a gallop. The buggy crested a little knoll and there it was: the two-story brick house, with the wide veranda in front supported by tall white pillars — Donny Fletcher's home.

"Giddyap!" cried Mose to the horses and they swept around the circular drive to the front of the house.

A tall, slightly stooped man with a gray mustache and goatee looked up idly from his seat on the veranda. Then he came suddenly to his feet.

"Doniphan!"

"Father!" Donny tossed the lines to the grinning Mose and leaped to the ground. He took several quick strides and gripped his father's hand. A woman who had heard the exchange of greetings came running out of the house.

"Donny!"

"Mother!"

Ellen Fletcher was forty-five and looked thirty-five. She was a little above medium height, slender in her maturity, yet with a superb figure. Her hair was straight and dark, parted in the

center and coiled in a long knot upon the back of her head.

She trembled in Donny's tight embrace and cried a little: "It's been so long, Donny!"

Fat, waddling, aging Mammy Lou came out of the house. She had practically raised Ellen Fletcher, who had been Ellen Stuart. She had been Donny's mammy and he was not ashamed to hug her now.

They made much of him, firing excited questions which he answered just as excitedly. But inevitably came the moment when the other things had to come. By that time, they'd had supper and the Fletchers were alone on the veranda, Donny's mother in a wicker chair and the men nearby on a bench.

Louis Fletcher, with an uneasy glance at his wife, fired the opening shot. "We had a letter from Stephen yesterday. He's been made a sergeant."

Donny looked at his father, then at his mother and finally back at his father. He took a deep breath.

"I guess there's no use beating about the bush, father. I saw the Battle of Bull Run. The South has an army and it's not going to be a quick thing. It'll last two years, perhaps more. I can't stay out of it."

"Your father and I have talked about it, naturally," Ellen Fletcher said calmly. "You've been at the military academy. You're a trained soldier."

"Yes," said Donny. "And my orders may come tomorrow."

"Orders," said Louis Fletcher. "Didn't you come straight from Washington?"

Donny's eyes dropped to the flagstones of the veranda. "I did. And my orders are coming — from Washington."

He heard his mother inhale sharply, but he did not look up. His father, so close to him, did not seem to breathe.

Donny lifted his gaze to his father's. "You obtained the congressional appointment for me, father. The United States gave me a university education and paid me."

"But, Donny —"

"Yes, father?"

"We're from Kentucky. We've been slaveholders since before the Revolution."

Donny risked a glance at his mother, saw her face white and

still. The evening seemed suddenly cool to Donny. He said, a little desperately: "It wasn't just West Point, father. I — I think I felt this way even before."

Louis Fletcher nodded slowly. "I think I knew. Certainly I sensed it these last few months. Your letters — there was a note to them — "

Donny lifted his head miserably. "What shall I do?"

His father cleared his throat. "Why, you'll do what *you* believe is right."

"Would it be easier if I didn't stay?"

"Donny!" exclaimed his mother.

Louis Fletcher said, "This is your home, the same as it is Stephen's. Naturally, you'll stay here. Although — "

"Yes, father?"

"Nothing."

"I think I know what you were about to say — that I shouldn't express myself hereabouts. Jackson County's Southern, I know."

Louis Fletcher shook his head slowly. "The border's in a state of unrest. It isn't wise for any man to express himself openly these days. Some pretty terrible things have been happening around here. Bushwhackers — "

"I had an encounter with one this afternoon. Dick Kroger, he said his name was."

His mother's eyes widened.

Donny said quickly: "It didn't amount to anything, really. But, look, father, I encountered neighbors of ours on the *Polar Star*, coming up from St. Louis. The Bentons."

Ellen Fletcher's eyes lit up. "Susan? What did you think of her? Isn't she a charming girl?"

"Very!" Donny said, then flushed a little because of the enthusiasm in his tone. He added, quickly, "I had quite a long visit with Major Benton. He didn't exactly tell me what his business was, but I gathered that he's rather a substantial person."

"That's putting it mildly," smiled Louis Fletcher. "Major Benton is our richest man. He owns the bank in Lees Summit, a stage line running clear to Boonville — "

"So that's why they left the boat there!"



"... And he owns considerable farm land hereabouts," continued Louis Fletcher. "Some of it is close by ours."

"Susan has been such a comfort to me," put in Ellen Fletcher. "I declare she's visited me almost every day. Stephen thought so much of her."

"She made some mention of him," Donny said. "They're just about the same age, aren't they?"

"I believe Susan is a couple of months younger. She's grown up in the three years they've been here. I declare, she was just a half-grown child when they first came, all legs —"

Mose came around the edge of the house.

"Massa Fletcher," he said, "dem two mares we done had in the south pasture — dey's gone."

Louis Fletcher rose quickly. "Gone? You mean they've broken the fence?"

"Fence broken, all right," said Mose, "but busted wid de ax. Mares gone, dat's sho'."

"Those miserable Barretts!" exclaimed Louis Fletcher. "I'll run them off the place tomorrow."

"Who are the Barretts, father?"

"Trash. But they're the best I could get. Since I sold the hands I've had to employ local white labor. I paid these Barrett boys a dollar a day. They've stolen at least that much more. And now — they'll answer for those horses, though!"

Donny slept that night in the cool room with the cross ventilation. He heard again the crickets, felt the smooth sheets and soft mattress under him. But it was long before he went to sleep.

The next morning he looked through his clothes. It wouldn't be advisable to wear the gray suit, today. Yet he had no other. But in the closet was a pair of blue denim trousers. He held them up before him and whistled. "The kid's grown. Must be my height." He put on the trousers. They fitted. He found a shirt then, but was compelled to put on the new officer's riding boots he had bought in New York, while on his way to Washington.

Then he went downstairs — and almost collided with Susan Benton, who was just coming into the house from the veranda.

"Welcome home!" she exclaimed.

"Miss Benton! This is a pleasure. I missed you on the boat."

"And I came over early to apologize. It was father's fault. He never thought to tell you our reason for leaving the *Polar Star* at Boonville. It was just to save a dollar by finishing the journey on his own stage. Father's very economical!"

"But you should have told me. I would have been glad to — to patronize home industry."

She made a funny little curtsey. "Thank you, sir, but it wouldn't have been proper for a young lady to invite you to travel with her."

Donny grinned. "Mother said: 'why, three years ago she was a half-grown girl, all legs' —"

"Limbs, Mr. Fletcher! And you're not so much older yourself, even if you are an officer."

Ellen Fletcher came out of the kitchen. "Susan! You're just in time for breakfast."

"I had breakfast almost an hour ago. We eat early at our place. But —" She glanced teasingly at Donny — "since I'm a growing girl a second breakfast wouldn't hurt me at all."

Donny's father was not at breakfast. His mother explained that he'd had to ride to Lees Summit on a business matter. Donny guessed that it had to do with the missing mares; but made no comment.

Breakfast was an enjoyable affair, with Susan Benton and Donny carrying on an animated give-and-take conversation in which Ellen Fletcher joined frequently. Donny detected a warm look in his mother's eyes before the meal was half finished.

After breakfast, Susan took her leave. Mose brought around a black filly with a side saddle and Donny helped her up. Looking down at him, she said: "You're dressed as if you intend to work. But if the heat should get too much for you in the middle of the afternoon and you could use a cold drink . . ."

"I'll come riding to your place, where it'll be in a tall glass, with crushed ice surrounding it and a spray of mint inside."

Later, Donny took a turn about the farm. The little white-

washed slave cabins stood open, but grass was already growing high about the doors. The stables and the barns showed neglect, and the little corn patch behind the slave cabins had a meager, scrawny growth. The farm certainly needed work, he thought, and a feeling of sadness came over him. He remembered the place as it had been four years ago.

He caught himself.

"We'll get by," he said, half aloud.

But he was glad a little later when he saw his father ride up to the mansion on a huge sorrel. He dismounted heavily and Donny saw that his face was grim.

"I guess our mares are gone for good," he said. "Bushwhackers burned the house of Jacob Shickel last night. Ran off his livestock, too. It's apparent that those good-for-nothing Barretts have turned bushwhackers. We'll see no more of the mares."

"If they're the same Barretts I'm thinking of, father, they're mere boys. Why, I remember them as about eight or ten."

"Oh, they're probably fifteen and sixteen now. They're old enough. Most of these bushwhackers are mere boys. There've been rumors about those Younger boys for a year or two, and the oldest can't be more than sixteen or seventeen now."

"You mean Cole Younger?" exclaimed Donny. "Why they're not —"

Louis Fletcher grunted. "Family's one of the best in the state. I know their father well. Union man, by the way, even though he owns slaves. Oh, I almost forgot, there's a letter from Stephen."

Ellen Fletcher heard the last as she opened the door. She came out, flying. "Let me see it!"

Louis Fletcher brought an envelope from his pocket. Donny took it and gave it to his mother. She opened it eagerly and read, aloud:

"Dear Parents:

I take my pen in hand to write a few lines. I am well and have gained five pounds. We have plenty to eat, because our foragers have been very good.

General McCulloch has joined us with 7,000 Texas and Arkansas troops . . . "



Ellen Fletcher broke off suddenly. Her eyes went to Donny. Donny winced: "I know — military information. But Steve's my brother. What he tells me in a personal letter . . ."

"Of course, Donny, I'm sorry. That was stupid of me." She continued with the letter. Steve said the combined forces of Price and McCulloch numbered over twenty thousand and they were sure that the Yankee army in Springfield wasn't any stronger than that. They were expecting to meet them, and after they had dispersed them, the army would march north. He expected to see his family within two or three weeks.

There was not a word about Donny, no questions as to whether he had returned from his four years in the East. The omission was significant. When his mother finished reading the letter, Donny turned to take another walk in the fields. Before he reached the edge of the mansion, however, he stopped.

A sharp report had come to his ears. Then he heard another, a duller, deeper boom. He turned quickly and saw his father already spring toward the door.

"Wait, father!" Donny cried.

He rushed to the house, pulled open the door and ran up the stairs to his room, three at a time. His carpetbag was open and he tore out the Navy Colt.

He went down the stairs faster than he had ascended them, but when he got out of the house, his father was already astride the sorrel, galloping toward the fields. Donny ran after him, his heavy cavalry boots not hindering his speed. When he was still two hundred yards from the edge of the woods, his father had halted his horse and was on his knees beside a huddled body.

It was Mose. Donny saw that before he came pounding up. And by that time Louis Fletcher was straightening, a terrible look on his face.

"He's dead!" he said, dully.

"There were two," Donny said. "The first shot was from a revolver, the second a carbine. Let me have your horse, father."

"No," said Louis Fletcher. "They have the advantage. There are two and they know the woods."

"You've forgotten — I know every tree within five miles."

"They may have friends nearby. At any rate, you can't trail them through those hills without dogs. If you wish, ride over to Justin Tate's, up the road. He has some hounds. And I imagine he'll want to come along with his sons. In the meantime, I'll get the Sagers and the Wattersons. Phil Watterson is a deputy sheriff."

Precious time could be lost arguing. Donny turned and ran back to the slave cabins. Adjoining was a little pole corral in which a couple of sleek horses grazed. Donny caught up a bridle from the top pole of the corral, dropped the pole to the ground and vaulted into the pen.

He caught one of the horses, slipped the bridle into its mouth and swung easily onto the animal's back. Bareback, he took the animal over the hurdle where the pole was down. A moment later he was galloping past the brick mansion toward the main road, a quarter mile away.

He passed the Benton house on his way to the Tate farm and had a fleeting glimpse of an imposing house, larger even than the Fletcher mansion. Justin Tate lived two miles beyond and Donny did not spare his mount.

Fortunately, Justin Tate, a lean man six feet, five inches tall, was feeding his hounds in the back yard when Donny pounded up.

"Why, Donny Fletcher —" he began, but Donny cut him off.

"Mr. Tate, some bushwhackers have killed Mose and father wants to borrow your hounds."

"Bushwhackers!" Justin Tate put two fingers to his mouth and blew a piercing blast. Two younger Tates, not much shorter than their father, came running from different directions.

"Lester! Henry! Saddle horses. And fetch the best guns. We're goin' huntin' for big game!"

He moved swiftly himself then, gathering leashes for the dogs, dappled, long-eared beasts.

They were at the Fletcher farm in ten minutes, but Louis Fletcher had already returned from his own errand, with three heavily armed men.

"Phil Watterson wasn't home. But there's enough of us

without him. Here's an old shirt one of the Barretts wore."

"You think it was them?"

"I'm thinkin' we'll find them at the end of this trail."

Justin Tate thrust the shirt under the muzzles of the half dozen hounds, then took off their leashes. Instantly the dogs began baying and dashed about. In less than a minute, their voices were raised in unison and they tore off for the woods.

The men clambered into saddles and took after them.

It was a wild ride. The forest was almost impenetrable for horsemen, although the dogs could dart readily through the underbrush. Their baying grew fainter and fainter and if it hadn't been that they were delayed at a small stream a couple of miles from the start, they might have lost the riders.

By the time the posse reached the water, the dogs just managed to pick up the trail on the far side, a hundred yards downstream. The horses splashed across the water and for a time the underbrush was fairly thin and they made better time.

Justin Tate, because he owned the dogs, rode in the lead. One of his sons, the older one, named Lester, rode behind him and after him, Donny Fletcher. Donny's father was next and the others strung out behind.

It wasn't until after they had crossed the water that Donny's cold anger left him and he began to think more clearly of what was impending. These men were all Southerners. They did not often appeal to the law for aid. Most of them had been in this country before there had been any law.

There was one thing you couldn't do to these men — coerce their slaves to run away or kidnap them. Their wealth was counted in slaves. A Negro like Mose, in the full prime of his life, was worth fifteen hundred dollars. Yet it wasn't the money. During the hectic years of embittered clashing with the free-state North, certain laws had come into being. Kidnapping a white person might be punishable with six months in prison. Kidnapping a slave meant death — by legal execution — if the offender lived that long, which was unlikely.

But Donny Fletcher was an officer in the United States Army.

A gun thundered in the thicket ahead and a dog yipped in

pain. The rapid fire of a revolver burst out then and there was more yelping on the part of the hounds.

"We've got them!" cried Louis Fletcher. "Spread out, men!"

Justin Tate and his son Lester gave way surprisingly quick and Donny suddenly found himself in the lead. Behind him, the possemen were spreading out.

A wild figure appeared fifty feet away, carbine raised. The Navy Colt bucked against Donny's palm and the carbine fell from the man's grasp.

A cry of awful rage and hate tore from a throat and another man sprang from behind a tree. There was a revolver in each hand.

The right hand gun belched a puff of smoke and a bullet tugged at Donny's shirt sleeve. Another struck his horse and the animal screamed and plunged up on its hind legs. Somewhere behind Donny a gun thundered, but the bushwhacker ahead was still blazing away.

Donny slipped back off the horse's rump, hit the ground and plunged to one side on his knees. As he landed his Navy Colt straightened automatically before him; without even knowing he fired, the gun bucked again in his palm. The bushwhacker pitched to the ground.

Louis Fletcher, leaning down from his horse, helped Donny to his feet.

"Straight shooting, son," he said.

They were both dead. But they weren't the Barretts. The first one, the man who had carried the carbine, was Dick Kroger. Justin Tate identified the second.

"Yancey Caseldine. Now maybe we can raise shotes again."

"I had a brush with Kroger yesterday," Donny said. "It was over Mose. He threatened to kill him —" He stopped and plunged suddenly into the brush at one side. He was violently sick.

These were the first men he had ever killed.



## CHAPTER V

THEY buried Mose that afternoon. Donny and his father dug the grave, draped the black form in a quilt and deposited it gently into the cold ground. They shoveled earth over the body and Donny could scarcely see it because of the mist in his eyes.

Louis Fletcher was silent through it all, but when they put away their tools he said to Donny: "If I'd sent him to New Orleans with the others, he'd still be alive."

"I think he'd have preferred it this way," Donny said. "He'd have brooded the rest of his life if he'd once stood on an auction block."

Louis Fletcher looked oddly at Donny. Then he nodded. "Perhaps you're right!"

Donny took off his brother's trousers and shirt in the afternoon and donned again his suit of gray.

When he came outside, his father was on the veranda with a stout, black-bearded man.

"Donny, you remember Mr. Watterson?" his father said.

"Of course. It's good to see you again, sir."

Phil Watterson extended a moist hand. "Howdy, Donny. We've just been talking about you."

Donny caught the frown on his father's forehead before it was erased. "You mean — about this morning?"

"I'm sorry, Donny," Louis Fletcher said, "but the story's already around Lees Summit. Someone talked more'n he should."

"It was that Dutchman, Cretzmeyer," exclaimed Phil Watterson angrily. "You shouldn't a let him go along knowing his party lines."

"He was visiting Jim Sagar," Louis Fletcher frowned.

"Does it matter?" Donny asked. "Mose was murdered and we tracked down the killers. They opened fire on us."

"Sure, sure," said Watterson, "I'm not sayin' anything. I'd done the same m'self. Only, I thought I'd stop over and tell you what's buzzin' around town. You see, this Caseldine — well, he only yesterday enlisted in the Yankee army. Of course you know how *we* feel about that —"

"What Mr. Watterson means, Donny," Louis Fletcher cut in, "is that although Southerners hereabouts are in the majority, there are Union troops stationed at Lees Summit."

"What I mean," said Phil Watterson, "is that the sheriff's got a warrant for your arrest. He's holdin' it up until tomorrow morning."

"Why didn't you bring it out with you? You're the sheriff's deputy aren't you?"

Phil Watterson's forehead creased. He looked at Louis Fletcher. The latter said: "That's it, Donny. Phil doesn't want to serve that warrant. And neither does the sheriff. But they'll have to."

"I understand that. But I don't think it'll be so serious. In view of the circumstances, I'm sure the court will —"

"No," said Donny's father curtly. "It won't be a civil court. Caseldine was a *soldier*."

Donny caught his breath. "I see. And I think I know what you mean."

Phil Watterson said quickly: "Your dad told me about you. I brought out a letter for you, too. Came into the post office just as I was leavin'. Abe Colton gave it to me — said it looked important."

Louis Fletcher took a long envelope from his pocket. "It's from the War Department, Donny."

"My orders!"

He broke the seal and took out an official-looking letter. His pulses pounded and his breath came heavily. He looked up and Phil Watterson said hastily, "I'll be goin' now. Good-by, Donny, and good luck."

"Thank you, Mr. Watterson. I want you to know that I appreciate what you're doing."

"That goes for me, too, Phil," Louis Fletcher said.

Phil Watterson walked to his horse, mounted and put the spurs to the animal's flank. Louis Fletcher said to Donny: "He's a good friend. He didn't want to know what your orders were, in view of the fact that his sympathies are Confederate —"

"I know, father," Donny said. He extended the document

from Washington. "In view of my record at the academy, I've been made a captain. It's almost unheard of."

"There's a dearth of officers," Louis Fletcher said. He looked at the order Donny had given him and his mouth became tight. "It says here that you're to report at once to General Lyon, at Rolla."

Donny caught the significance of his father's tone. "In the meantime, General Lyon has moved to Springfield. And Steve's down there."

Louis Fletcher gripped Donny's arm. He smiled wanly, but he said nothing until they had turned to enter the house. He said softly: "Perhaps, it would be best not to tell your mother where you're going."

Donny nodded, his face a little drawn.

Ellen Fletcher received the news of Donny's departure without any outward perturbation. Yet Donny knew how she felt.

She said: "How long have you got?"

Thinking of Phil Watterson, Donny replied, "No time at all. I've got to leave now."

This time Ellen Fletcher could not prevent her eyes from misting. "So soon, Donny?" Then, "You'll have time to ride over to the Bentons?"

He nodded.

A little later he mounted a gelding and rode the half mile to Major Benton's mansion. Susan Benton, in a cool, white dress, got up from a chair on the veranda. She looked at his face and said:

"Something's happened?"

"I've got my orders."

Her blue eyes were sober. Donny would remember them that way for a long time. He said: "I wish I could have had more time, just a little more."

Her gaze remained steady. "I wish so, too."

"Good-by, Susan."

"Good-by . . . Donny!"

In his room, at home, Donny's mother had laid out his blue uniform on the bed. Donny would not have put it on until later, but the intimation was clear. He was the son of Ellen

and Louis Fletcher. If he chose to wear a blue uniform instead of gray, he was still their son, and this was his home.

He put it on. He put his Navy Colt in its holster and descended the stairs.

His departure was strained but quiet. He had known it would be.

"Take the gelding, Donny," his father said. "He's a good horse.

And then, in a few minutes, he turned in his saddle on the crest between the house and the road. He looked back at the brick mansion and a shiver ran through him. Perhaps . . .

Rolla was one hundred and fifty miles from Kansas City, yet the easiest way to reach it was to go three hundred miles by steamboat to St. Louis, then one hundred miles by train to Rolla, the southwest terminal of the railroad. Such a trip consumed the better part of a week, but it could be traveled in comfort and ease.

Donny Fletcher chose the shorter, more rigorous journey, which took only two and a half days. He traveled by steamer to Jefferson City, then cut across country to Rolla.

It was hostile territory through which he passed, but the Union Army was in control, and Donny's blue uniform earned him no more than occasional sullen glances. From Jefferson City to Rolla, the Federal patrols were numerous.

Rolla had been established by General Lyon as a base early in his campaign against Sterling Price. Then Fremont had superseded Lyon in command of the Western department, with headquarters in St. Louis.

Lyon remained in the field, in imminent danger from the vastly superior enemy near Springfield, a hundred miles southwest of Rolla. He sent frantic requests to Fremont for reinforcements, ammunition, supplies. But none came.

Faced by a united foe who outnumbered him four to one, the fiery Nathaniel Lyon was faced by two alternatives — one, to retreat to Rolla, the other to strike a quick surprise blow at the enemy, who seemed apathetic despite its superior strength.

Retreat was repugnant to Lyon. He sent frantic messages



to Fremont in St. Louis, and when the response did not come and the big bear to the south of him began to rumble, he suddenly marched his army south of Springfield and on August 10, at Wilson's Creek, made a vicious attack with the main body of his men — thirty-five hundred against twenty thousand. In the meantime a brigade of Germans, under Colonel Sigel, who had begged to try an independent flanking movement, marched around the enemy and struck from the rear.

The odds were then six to one, yet Lyon hurled his regiments repeatedly against the disloyal state guards of Sterling Price and the Southern army of Ben McCulloch.

At last the sheer weight of numbers told against Lyon's force. After six hours of battle the dour Lyon, already wounded, said sadly to his unit commanders: "I fear my day is lost."

A few minutes later a Rebel bullet struck him dead.

Donny Fletcher reached Rolla from the north as the vanguard of the defeated Union army approached Rolla from the south. He found the headquarters of the army in a two-story brick building on a hill overlooking the town. He introduced himself to an orderly, then cooled his heels on a bench for fifteen minutes before being shown into a room.

An officer wearing the insignia of a captain of ordnance scowled at Donny.

"I'm Captain Lutz," he said. "You're Captain Fletcher?"

"Yes, sir," Donny replied.

"And you just graduated from West Point?"

Donny was puzzled by the hostility in the officer's tone. He nodded curtly.

"That's fine," the ordnance officer continued. "Often wished I had friends in politics myself."

Donny stiffened. "I'm sorry, but I don't happen to have any political friends. I won the appointment to West Point in a competitive test."

"I can imagine," Captain Lutz said, his lips twisted into a sneer. "I was a second lieutenant for four years and a first for seven. And you're out of the Point six weeks and have already reached my rank."

A retort leaped to Donny's lips, but he forced it back and remained silent. Captain Lutz looked sharply at Donny and seemed disappointed when he did not take up the challenge. He grunted.

"All right, you're too late to save Lyon, so find yourself quarters somewhere. You'll hear from us in due course of time. Advise the clerk outside of your residence."

Seething inwardly, Donny saluted and left. If this was a sample of his pettiness and inefficiency it was no wonder that Captain Lutz had remained a lieutenant for so many years. Being an ordnance officer he was a noncombatant, and it was quite probable that his promotion would be slow even in these times, when combat second lieutenants became captains and captains colonels.

He set out to find lodgings and after an hour's search obtained a room, no larger than a closet, in a claptrap hotel that had been raised hastily at the south end of town. He returned to headquarters and left his new address with the orderly clerk.

Mud was ankle deep on the streets of Rolla. Cavalrymen galloped their horses through the stuff and splattered foot soldiers, who cursed the cavalrymen with uninhibited fluency.

Infantrymen clumped up and down the wooden sidewalks and greeted other infantrymen with cheerful taunts: "Hello, Ohio! Thought you'd be back in Cleveland by this time."

"Hi, Wisconsin. Your shoes are worn out from running!"

Donny Fletcher pushed open the door of a large saloon and found the place packed with soldiers of all ranks and branches of service.

A mixed quartet composed of two infantrymen, an artilleryman and a cavalryman were howling the mournful words of "John Brown's Body." At the bar an infantry corporal was buying a youthful lieutenant a drink, and a captain of artillery had his arm about the shoulders of a sergeant and with tears in his eyes was telling him of his wife and children in Minnesota.

Imbued with the military caste system, Donny was appalled by the fraternizing of officers and enlisted men, but after he examined the insignia of several soldiers and saw that they were militia he made grudging allowance.

Yet, he was somewhat disconcerted when a militia major

looked him over and introduced himself in a Teutonic accent. "I'm Major Weisbecker. Would you do me the honor of having a glass of lager with me?"

At West Point Donny had learned that a captain does not "honor" a major. But he said:

"Of course, sir, and I'd be grateful if you'd give me the news. I've only arrived in Rolla from the north."

"The north? Then you were not at Springfield? *Ach*, you have missed something." The major shuddered. "It was frightful. We make charge after charge; we drive them back and back and always they return and there are more of them. It was terrible. Our losses — I do not know, but twenty-five per cent, at least —"

"Twenty-five per cent!" gasped Donny. "Why, ten per cent is high for the average battle."

"*Ja*, so I have always been told, but in this battle, *brrr!*"

Raw troops, twenty-five per cent losses. Donny sipped at the glass of beer the major had bought for him and pondered this hate that made men fight so fiercely, men who were of the same general stock, neighbors. And for what were they fighting? Their lives, homes? No, they had not been threatened.

A corporal wearing sidearms came into the saloon. With him were two privates, carrying rifles. The corporal looked around the saloon, frowned, then saluted an officer and spoke to him in a low tone. The officer's face showed astonishment; then he turned and called out, loudly:

"Gentlemen, is there a Captain Doniphan Fletcher in the room?"

Donny straightened. "That's me!"

The corporal spoke to his escort and the trio came across the saloon. They stopped and came to attention before Donny. The corporal said:

"You're wanted at headquarters, sir!"

Donny's eyes narrowed. "Very well, but why the escort?"

"Orders, sir!"

Some of the officers were looking on, puzzled. Donny reddened.

"Let's go," he snapped, curtly.

He strode out of the saloon ahead of the escort. The detail fell in behind him, walking smartly. Donny refused to look back at them until he reached the headquarters building. Then, finally, he whirled and snapped: "Who wants to see me?"

"Captain Lutz, sir, the provost marshal!"

Donny stormed into the building and the escort still followed. A moment later he slammed open the door of Captain Lutz's office.

"What is this, Captain?" he demanded, sharply.

Captain Lutz bared his teeth. "Right after you left I looked through some papers that had come in and which I'd not had time to examine previously. They came from Lees Summit, Missouri, which I understand is your home."

"That's right. What of it?"

"Nothing of it," Captain Lutz retorted. "Except that Colonel Teeple of the 47th Kansas Infantry has preferred charges against you. Serious charges. Murdering a United States soldier."

A dum-dum bullet seemed to explode in Donny Fletcher's vitals. A gasp was torn from his throat. "I did kill a man near Lees Summit. He was a contemptible ruffian who had just stolen some of my father's horses and climaxed that by shooting down my father's servant in cold blood."

Captain Lutz picked up some papers from his desk and tapped them. "It says here that your father is a slaveholder, that you have a brother even now in the Confederate army. Is that right?"

"It is, but that has nothing to do with me. I am a graduate of West Point."

"So is Robert E. Lee. Also Jefferson Davis and Beauregard . . ."

Donny's eyes slitted. "What are you driving at, Captain Lutz?"

Captain Lutz suddenly slammed back his chair and rose to his feet. "Just this — you're under arrest. The charge is treason and murder and you will face a court-martial. Corporal, take his sidearms and escort him to the guardhouse!"

Donny was suddenly as cool as crushed ice. He said:



"You're making a mistake, Captain Lutz. There were half a dozen men with me when that affair took place. They'll swear —"

"Swear, hell!" snarled Captain Lutz. "I've got the names of every one of them, and their records. They're all Rebels and their testimony won't even be allowed in the court-martial! Take him away, Corporal!"

## CHAPTER VI

THE guardhouse was a one-room log cabin, ten by fourteen feet. It contained one window which was secured against escape by criss-crossed straps of iron. There was no furniture of any kind in the place. A prisoner was allowed one blanket, which he spread out on the hard-packed earthen floor.

About twenty men were in the guardhouse. They were the rag-tag of the army, deserters, looters, incorrigibles. They played cards incessantly, bickered continuously among themselves and occasionally united to harass Donny Fletcher, the only officer present.

According to regulations Donny should not have been confined with enlisted men, but these were exceptional times. The other prisoners persisted in calling Donny a Confederate and their malicious thrusts were based on that premise.

"Price just shot three Union prisoners at Osceola," one of them would say. "I hear Fremont's issued an order to shoot six Confederates in return. Reckon you'll be one of the six, Fletcher?"

The jibe was not without justification. Reports of Price's activities came into the guardhouse every day. Sentries spoke to the prisoners through the barred window, sold them newspapers at ridiculously high prices.

As Price's army moved northward it increased in strength. Southerners who had held off before, enlisted now. Some, whose sympathies had been on the borderline, toppled to the Southern side by the sight of a victorious army. And there were others — many of them — who merely tagged along with the army. Border ruffians, scavengers, looking for loot;

bushwhackers, who had never owned a slave in their entire lives, but who found this opportunity too good to pass up. Overnight, they became "Confederates."

Donny Fletcher remained in the guardhouse at Rolla nine long days and nights, during which he was ignored entirely by those outside. Several times he tried sending messages to the provost marshal, to the commanding officer of the camp, but the sentries took the messages — and Donny's bribes — and nothing happened.

And then, on the tenth morning, a stern-eyed captain of infantry came into the guardhouse.

"I'm Captain Vance," he told Donny crisply. "I've been assigned to act as your personal counsel. You go before the court-martial in a half hour."

"But my witnesses!" Donny cried. "I haven't been permitted to get in touch with them."

"Jackson County is in the hands of the enemy," Captain Vance replied. "And as your counsel I advise you not even to mention them. Captain Lutz has informed me that your witnesses are definitely pro-Southern."

"But how can I make a defense without witnesses?"

"Don't make a defense. Admit your guilt and make a plea for mercy. It's your only chance. At least two of the officers on the court-martial board are from the western counties. One comes from Kansas."

Donny Fletcher stared in amazement at Captain Vance. "And *they're* going to try me?"

Captain Vance nodded grimly.

"You're young and you make a good appearance. Your record at The Point is good. We'll bear down on that. We'll plead extenuating circumstances — self-defense. We may get away with it."

Later, when Donny entered the court-martial room and looked at the grim faces of the five officers composing the general court-martial, his courage seemed to ooze out from his fingertips.

Captain Lutz read the charges and Donny saw a scowl come to the face of Major Parrish, the judge advocate.

"How do you plead, guilty or not guilty?" the major snapped.

The bite in the major's tone acted as a stimulant to Donny. The resentment that had smoldered in him during the long days and nights in the guardhouse burst into flame.

"Not guilty!" he cried. "The charges have been preferred by a prejudiced absentee, a Kansan, who —"

Major Parrish's fist banged on the table before him. "Answer yes or no, that's all. Your counsel will make your defense."

"Not guilty, then!" Donny said heatedly. "And I prefer to make my own defense. According to regulations —"

"I know the regulations," cut in Major Parrish. "And I'm warning you right now that this court will tolerate no insubordination. Serious charges have been preferred against you, and your attitude convinces me that they are not unfounded. Captain Vance, proceed with the defense!"

A cold chill settled upon Donny Fletcher and seeped through his entire body. He knew, then, that he was doomed. The ensuing two hours were a mockery. There could be but one sentence proclaimed by men whose homes were even now being ravaged by the enemy. To them, Donny was the enemy.

The sentence was proclaimed two hours later: death by the firing squad, at sunrise of the third day.

"I'm sorry," Captain Vance told Donny. "I'll make immediate appeal to General Fremont."

Donny looked at the captain and shook his head. "You expect an answer in three days? Fremont had more time than that to send reinforcements to Lyon, and yet he couldn't make up his mind."

That afternoon, Donny was removed from the guardhouse to a small room on the second floor of the headquarters building. The room had one window, which looked out upon the rear and was barred. A sentry was posted outside his door.

The only furniture in the room was an iron bedstead, which contained a mattress and one blanket. Donny dropped down on it. He heard the key turn in the lock; then the steady tread of heavy boots outside the door began a ceaseless marching . . . back and forth . . . pause . . . back and forth.

He lay on the bed in his guarded room and stared at the warped wooden ceiling overhead.

Well, he was out of it. They might fight and kill until there were left no more to kill. But he wouldn't know about that. He would be dead then — as dead as those poor deluded men who had died at Wilson's Creek.

There was no difference between them. They had died from bullets, just as Donny would die. He had a small advantage over them; the bullets that would smash into him would be well aimed. There was no danger of his being merely wounded and suffering horribly before death came. It would be short and merciful.

Yet think all he wanted, he couldn't down it: he would have changed places with any one of those men who had died at Wilson's Creek. They had perished in the heat of battle, they had been instilled with something — call it just a principle — but they'd had it. They'd been volunteers, every one of them. They faced the enemy and fought him, and went down into death victorious. They gave their lives for a Cause.

But Donny Fletcher had no Cause. He was dying a criminal's death, a traitor's death that he had not earned. There had been no treason in his heart, no thought of murder. He'd killed a man — yes, two. But why? Because they had committed murder and in the end had tried to kill him.

A second's delay and they would have succeeded. That one of them had enlistment papers in his pocket — well, that had been the barest of accidents. Certainly, the man would have been no asset to any army. A thief and a cold-blooded murderer. For killing such, Donny Fletcher, commissioned a captain in the army of the United States, was now facing execution — in three short days.

It rained outside and Donny heard the patter of the rain-drops on the roof. After a while a cold drop of rain splashed on his face and roused him from his bitter reverie. It had more effect on him than a bucket of ice water would have had under other circumstances.

His eyes jerked open and fastened on a dark wet spot in the warped, wooden ceiling. Another drop of water fell from the spot and landed on his chin.

Then suddenly he was up from the bed, standing on it. The ceiling was low and he could place his palms flat against it. He tapped it with his knuckles and it gave off a hollow sound.

He stepped to the edge of the bed, climbed cautiously upon the high headboard; raising himself suddenly, he gripped the ceiling with the flat of both hands. It was tricky balancing for a moment, but he made it. He had to stand crouched, for being at such a height his head touched the ceiling. He twisted sideways until he got an eye up to a crack.

What he saw sent a glimmer of hope coursing through him. There was a shallow attic over his ceiling and above it a roof — a plain, ordinary board roof on the other side of which was probably tar paper. That was all there was between Donny Fletcher and the open sky — two thicknesses of one-inch planking, badly warped, and a thin layer of tar paper. With an ax he could chop it through in five minutes.

He didn't have an ax. But was it necessary? The sentry outside the door had a rifle. He had to be disposed of before Donny could hope to chop through the ceiling and roof, so why not utilize his bayonet?

It would be dark in a little while and he needed the darkness to make good his escape from Rolla. He dropped to the bed and with his hands folded under his head regarded the ceiling thoughtfully. He considered, too, the consequences of his act and came to the conclusion that he had no other choice.

In three days he would be executed. The camp was too confused for anyone with sufficient authority to intercede for him and take the subject up with the higher authorities in St. Louis. For that matter, it was doubtful if Fremont would intercede. He had published an order only recently to the effect that anyone taking up arms against the forces of the United States would suffer the penalty of death.

Donny was innocent of the charges against him. Although he could not disprove them, he was young and had a natural desire to live. Yes, if he made his escape, he would be proscribed a traitor. But alive, there was a chance that some day he could prove his innocence. Better a live traitor than a dead martyr.



There was a scuffling of boots outside his door and the sentry opened it and set down a canteen of water and a mess kit containing meat, beans and a chunk of corn bread. He set a lighted candle on the floor.

"Hurry up and eat," he said. "I want to get the things and the candle in fifteen minutes." He slammed the door behind him.

Donny got up and ate swiftly. It might be a long time before he obtained substantial food again. He drank deeply of the canteen, too; then, moving the candle to one side, he dropped to the floor, doubled up and pressed his stomach with both hands.

He cried out in a tone of forced anguish: "Poison! I've been poisoned. Help — get a doctor. I'm dying!"

He punctuated his words with alternate wails and groans, making them loud enough to be heard outside the door.

The act brought quick results. The sentry's voice called roughly from outside the door: "What the hell's the matter in there?"

Donny ignored the direct question. He groaned and sobbed. "Poisoned! Somebody poisoned the food. I'm dying —"

The door was slammed open and Donny clawed at his stomach. Without seeming to look at the sentry, he wailed: "I've been poisoned —"

Holding his rifle at the trail, the sentry stooped forward. Both of Donny's feet, shod in heavy cavalry boots, catapulted out and landed heavily on the sentry's chin. The guard cried out and fell back. At the same time his lax fingers released the rifle, which fell forward, toward Donny.

He caught it in mid-air and sprang to his feet, as the sentry's body hit the floor. Swiftly, he dragged the man farther into the room, then poked his head out into the corridor. The hall was dimly lit by a candle at one end, and Donny could see brighter light coming up from the staircase. He knew he could never get out that way. It had to be the roof.

Swiftly he moved the candle to the center of the room. Then he reached toward the ceiling with the bayoneted rifle, aimed at a crack between the warped boards and stabbed upwards. The bayonet went between the boards to half its length.

Savagely, Donny pushed sideways on it. Nails pulled out of timbers with a protesting rasp. One end of a board came loose. Donny stabbed the bayonet into the loose end, pulled it down to the reach of his hands and wrenched it off.

A second board came loose just as easily. Donny moved the bed directly under the opening. Then with the added height, he stabbed the bayonet up through the opening into the roof.

The blade went through rotten wood and rain splashed on Donny's face. A gleam in his eyes, he mounted to the raised headboard of the bed, and thrust his head and shoulders into the attic. It was an easy task to pull himself up and inside of three minutes he had cut a hole in the roof large enough to climb through.

It was a black, soggy night. The rain came down in sheets. The tar paper of the roof was slippery. Catching at the ragged edge of the opening he had chopped through, he let himself slowly to the edge of the roof. He peered down, but could only see blackness. He knew that it was thirty feet or more to the ground and that he stood an excellent chance of breaking a leg or ankle in the drop.

Well, there was no alternative. If he were recaptured he would never get another opportunity to escape. It had to be now, or not at all.

He let go of the bayoneted rifle and heard it strike the earth with a sodden splash. Then he let go. The fall seemed much more than thirty feet, but he kept himself relaxed and when he landed violently on both feet, threw himself forward to the ground. His face went into muck, but triumph coursed through him. He wasn't hurt and he was on the ground. He groped for a moment in the mud for the rifle he had dropped and found it.

Then he was off. He had gone no more than fifty feet when guns banged in the darkness behind him and he knew that his escape had been discovered — far too soon!

## CHAPTER VII

DONNY traveled through the night without encountering a single person. Now and then he saw lights in the distance, but always gave them a wide berth. He kept to the fields and avoided roads. Near dawn the rain stopped falling, but the ground remained wet and soggy.

When it became light he found a thick clump of brush, into which he crawled. He guessed that he was by now fifteen to twenty miles from Rolla, unless he had traveled in a circle.

The sun came out, but Donny did not risk venturing out to get dry. He was hungry and thirsty, but that did not matter. He remained in the brush all that day and did not venture out until it was dark.

The heat of his body had dried his uniform by that time, but Donny knew that he would have to get rid of it soon. He could not travel long distances without sooner or later encountering someone. And then his mud-stained uniform would lead to questions he could not answer satisfactorily, for the report of his escape had undoubtedly been circulated through the area controlled by the Union army.

He forced the solution to that problem within a couple of hours. Coming out of a thick patch of woods, he saw a tiny log cabin in a little clearing. A dim light showed through a curtained window. He crept up to the cabin and made a complete circuit of it before he slipped to the little window and peered through a hole in the piece of burlap that served as a curtain.

He saw a bearded, unkempt-looking man sprawled on a bearskin on the floor, his hands under his head. Near him, on a three-legged stool, a slatternly woman sat smoking a clay pipe. A candle stood in its own grease on a puncheon table.

Nodding grimly, Donny moved to the door of the cabin. It stood partly open, for it was warm outside. He shoved the door open swiftly and thrust his rifle into the room.

"Hold everything!" he snapped. "And keep your hands clear."

The bearded man on the floor came up to a sitting position.

The woman on the stool took her pipe from her mouth and said, "A Yank!"

"What ye want?" growled the man on the floor. "Ain't your gang cleaned us out already?"

"So you're Secesh, eh?" Donny said.

The man glowered. "We ain't neither. I'm jes' a pore farmer and I'm mindin' my own business."

Donny looked around the one-room cabin. Aside from the bed and ragged blankets the cabin contained little but a few pieces of homemade furniture and cooking utensils stacked up beside the stone fireplace. An ancient rifle hung from pegs over the fireplace, but there seemed no other weapons about.

"I'm an escaped prisoner," he said. "I don't mind telling you because I know that your sympathies are with the South, but —"

"Say," said the man on the floor, "ye wouldn't be that Captain Fletcher that was supposed to be shot!"

Donny nodded grimly. "I am, but don't go getting ideas about it."

"Sarah!" exclaimed the bearded man scrambling to his feet, "git some food out for the capt'n. Set down here by the table, son!"

A bit dubiously, Donny pulled a stool to the table, while the woman got up and rummaged in a tiny cupboard beside the fireplace. She brought out a tin plate, some cold pork and corn pone.

Leaning his rifle against the table beside him, Donny wolfed the food. He was ravenously hungry. As he ate, the whiskered man rambled on: "They're a thievin' lot, them Yanks. They robbed all the livestock for fifty miles around here, took all the meal and flour that we didn't hide. It's a dern good thing they're pullin' out."

With his mouth full of food, Donny grunted: "What do you mean, pullin' out?"

"You ain't heard? Nah, guess you couldn't, hidin' in the bresh all day. Price took Lexington. Captured the town and took ev'ry dam' Yankee soldier prisoner. Some say there was as many as ten thousand there!"

Donny stiffened. With all the Union forces scattered through Missouri, with weeks of advance knowledge that Price was moving northward, why hadn't Fremont concentrated his troops to defeat Price?

Donny finished the food before him and looked broodingly at his host. "How many men has Price got?"

"Why, I dunno," the other replied. "There's talk he's got nigh a hundred thousand."

"That's ridiculous! He had no more than ten thousand at Wilson Creek. McCulloch wouldn't join him in the northern expedition, and —"

"Wal, I dunno about that," said the other, "but I know they's a lot of folks jined him. I figger I'll — I mean, there's fellas around talkin' about jinin'."

Donny shook his head. "Price can't hold Missouri. Fremont's got fifty thousand troops in the state and he can raise another fifty thousand inside of a month. He'll drive Price back into Arkansas."

The whiskered man scowled. "Say, what kinda talk is that? Fella'd think ye was still a Yank."

Donny bit his lip. The man was right. He'd forgotten for a moment that he was an escaped Union prisoner. If he was recaptured, he would be summarily executed. His only hope was that Price would retain Missouri. His only refuge, for that matter, was the Confederate army.

He pushed back the stool. "I've got to move along. Thanks for the food."

"Don't menshun it. Say — that there uniform —"

Donny looked down at it. "Yes, where I'm goin' it'll be a target. I wonder — I don't s'pose you have any clothing —"

"None that ye'd wear."

"Why not?"

The whiskered man shrugged and took down a bundle of rags from a peg over the bed. "Ye c'n try these, if ye like."

Donny took the clothing and tried not to grimace. Then he stepped to the door. "I'll put them on outside."

He kept to the road that night and next day. Now and then he passed a farmhouse and saw people, but they did not wave



at him and he made no greeting. Toward noon he struck a little village and found a troop of Confederate cavalry quartered there. The men saw him, but showed no interest. Donny thought that strange until he reasoned that the fear of the bushwhacker who would fight North as readily as South restrained isolated detachments of soldiers from molesting ragged, unkempt men.

In the middle of the afternoon he encountered a foraging party of Confederates. They were driving a half-dozen cows before them. Several of the soldiers yelled insulting remarks. He pretended not to hear them and quickened his pace.

And then, soon, he began to see landmarks that had been familiar to him years ago and he knew that he was nearing Lees Summit. He skirted it, cutting across fields in the twilight. The rest of the journey he made by the light of stars and a half moon.

Finally, he stood near his father's house and stared at two squares of light on the first floor of the shadowy building. He looked at the lights a long time, while bitter memories welled up in him.

Then he walked down the hill to the house. He circled it once completely and was struck by the silence. He wondered about that for a moment before realizing that the stillness resulted from the absence of animal life. There were no horses anywhere around the house.

He tried to peer through a window, but the shades were drawn too close. Finally he stepped on to the flagged veranda and knocked on the door.

There was silence for a moment; then his father's voice called: "Who's there?"

"It's Donny, father!"

The door was jerked open and Louis Fletcher stood in the light, amazement upon his features.

"Good Lord! We'd heard —"

"I know, father. Is it all right to come in?"

Louis Fletcher reached out and gripped his arm. He pulled him into the house and closed the door behind Donny. Then he stood back and surveyed his son. He shook his head in bewilderment. "There was a rumor a few days ago that —"

"It was true," Donny said grimly. "But I escaped. These clothes — I didn't dare . . ."

Ellen Fletcher's voice called from the landing on the second floor. "Who is it, Louis?"

"Mother!"

Donny, on the floor below, heard his mother gasp. Then her shoes clicked as she came down the stairs. Running forward to meet her, Donny caught her in his arms. He felt the trembling of her body.

"Oh, Donny!" she sobbed, "I'm so glad —"

A voice at the top of the stairs, called: "The Yank himself!"

Donny released his mother suddenly and retreated one step. He stared up into the half gloom above, his body tense. A slender man in gray breeches and white shirt, his left arm in a sling, started down the stairs. As his face came into the light, Donny saw his features twisted into a sneer.

He said: "Steve!"

Stephen Kearney Fletcher continued his descent until he stood a couple of steps above his mother. "Captain Fletcher of the United States Army, I believe."

"Boys!" exclaimed Ellen Fletcher, sharply.

So strong was the memory of the years when their mother had come between their youthful quarrels that the sneer disappeared from Stephen Kearney's face. But he still glowered.

"You don't look so good, Brother Doniphan."

Donny's glance dropped for an instant to his ragged costume, then returned to his brother's bandaged shoulder. "Is it bad, Steve?"

"This? Nah, I just stopped a chunk of lead at Wilson's Creek. Maybe it was yours, eh?"

Ellen Fletcher half turned on the stairs. "That'll be enough of that, Stephen. This is Donny's home as well as your own. I — I can't control what either of you do away from here, but as long as you're in this house —"

"Your mother's right," Louis Fletcher said from the bottom of the stairs.

Stephen grinned suddenly; he seemed more boyish than ever. He came down and put his well arm about his mother.

"Well, shall we go down and kill the calf? No, I forgot. We haven't got a calf. Our foragers got the last one."

Donny preceded his mother and brother down the stairs. Louis Fletcher, in the meantime, turned to the door and shot the bolt, then led the way into the living room. He went around to the windows and made sure the shades and curtains covered them completely.

Ellen Fletcher looked at her two sons for a moment and with a soft light in her eyes, turned toward the kitchen, in the rear. "You haven't eaten, Donny. I'll see that Mammy Lou gets you something."

His brother was as tall as he; Donny observed, as the lad stood in front of the fireplace, feet spread wide apart. He lacked Donny's weight, but he was a fine-looking youngster. His gray trousers were part of a uniform.

"Well, Donny?" Louis Fletcher said, pointedly.

Donny's lips twisted. "There's not much to tell, I guess. It seems that a report of my — our little episode here, reached Rolla about as soon as I did."

"But surely, the authorities wouldn't try an officer for a thing like that! That man was no more than a ruffian, even if he was enlisted in the Union Army."

"I know, but some of the men were pretty bitter at the moment. Our army had just been defeated —"

"Our army, Donny?" cut in Steve.

Donny bit his lip. Then he made a correction. "The Union Army, then. Well, as I was saying, the officers of the court-martial didn't like my antecedents. Southern —"

Steve's eyes blazed suddenly. "You mean because I was in the state guard?"

Donny made an impatient gesture. "Forget it, Steve. I'd prefer not to discuss it just now."

"But don't you think it should be discussed, Donny?" Louis Fletcher asked quietly. "You see —"

Donny's forehead creased. "I see. My present status must be defined. Yes. The Confederates are in control here, now. If I'm still loyal to the Union . . ."

"You catch on fast, kid!" grinned Steve. "Won't do, you know, for a Yank and a Reb to be living in the same house."

"Well," said Donny slowly, "I guess you can't call me a Yank any more. I'm an escaped prisoner. If I'm captured by Union soldiers, I face a firing squad."

"Then you're going to enlist in the Confederate Army? I didn't think you had it in you."

"No, Steve. I — I'll never do that."

"Then what are your plans? The Yanks want to shoot you — you won't be a Confederate."

"Why must I be either?"

"Because you can't be neutral, not in these parts."

"I'm afraid that's true, Donny," their father said quietly. "The country's gone crazy. Why, after you left here, a detachment of Yanks came and searched the place. When they couldn't find you, they made all sorts of threats —"

"That's putting it mild, Dad," cut in Steve. "Why don't you tell him what they really did?"

A cloud swept over Louis Fletcher's face. "The last of our horses disappeared with them. And they — well, they ransacked the house . . ."

"And took everything they could carry with them!" cried Steve. "They wanted to burn down the house, too, but Major Benton stopped them."

"Major Benton?" Donny inhaled softly. "How is he — and Susan?"

"Susan? You've met her? Yes, of course. She's mentioned you." Steve scowled.

"Go ahead, Steve," Louis Fletcher urged. "Tell Donny what your men did to Major Benton."

"It wasn't our men," Steve said, rather sulkily. "It was that bunch of bushwhackers that was tagging along with Pike's Indian brigade."

"What'd they do?" Donny asked quickly.

"About the same thing the Union soldiers did here," Louis Fletcher said. "They ran off all the livestock and insulted the major and his daughter." He sighed. "These bushwhackers are getting —"

Donny exclaimed, "For Pete's sake, how many of these bushwhackers are there? Everywhere, people are talking about

them. Surely a large army like Price's can keep them in control."

"I don't know about that. I sometimes think there are almost as many bushwhackers as there are men enlisted in either army. There are literally hundreds of these ruffians, some working independently and others with small bands of two and three up to a dozen —"

"I don't get it! If they want to fight so badly, why don't they enlist in the army?"

"Because regular army service doesn't suit them. They're the trash of this section of the country. They'd rather plunder than fight. I'm afraid we're going to have a lot of that, too. If Price should retreat from Lexington —"

"Don't worry, he won't!" cried Steve.

"I think he will, Steve," his father disagreed. "With the number of men he's got he can't hold it. I understand Fremont is massing a tremendous army in the central part of the state. Price has got to retreat soon or be cut off."

Steve snorted. "Fremont's rabble wouldn't have a chance against our boys."

"I wouldn't be too sure, Steve," Donny said. "The Union troops are becoming better trained. Fremont's gathered a large staff of professional soldiers, exiles from European armies."

"Renegades!" scoffed Steve.

"Perhaps. But they're military men and they learned their craft in a hard school. Officers like that are martinets. They insist upon drill and discipline above everything else."

## CHAPTER VIII

FOR the first time in many nights Donny was able to relax. He was too tired even to contemplate the irony of a sergeant in the Confederate army sleeping in the same bed with a captain of the Union forces, albeit a disgraced captain.

He knew only that he was at home and that for a while, at least, he was safe from the storms of the world without.



The morning was cool and crisp, a perfect September day. When Donny opened his eyes he stared for a moment about the room and then, when he realized his whereabouts, sighed. Steve was already up and out, but he had draped some of his clothes over a chair for Donny, evidently to replace the tattered rags in which he had arrived the evening before.

Donny poured out cold water from the pitcher on the dresser and washed. Then he dressed and went downstairs. There was no one in the living room so he slipped out to the veranda. He stood there for a moment looking to the east, toward the plantation of Major Benton.

After a moment he left the veranda and started walking across the field. There was a spring in his step and an odd feeling of excitement swept over him.

He met Susan Benton on a little knoll and was not surprised. It was almost as if he'd made a prearranged tryst with her. She saw him and came steadily forward, until she was within a few feet of him. She stopped then and said:

"I knew you were safe. In danger, but safe —"

Somehow, without knowing quite how it happened, she was in his arms and he was holding her tight, as if she were a captive struggling to escape his embrace. Yet she did not move. He felt the pounding of her heart and knew that his own was beating like the roll of a drum.

After a long while, when she drew away from him, she said: "And now, Donny?"

His face became bleak again.

"What now? What is there now for anyone? The world's gone mad. No one knows what's going to happen. No one quite knows which way to look except ahead, and only black clouds are there."

"You think, Donny," she said, steadily, "that this will last long?"

"I think it will go on forever. Beyond our time. At first I thought it wouldn't amount to much. This country's had storms before. I didn't know then how deep were the hatreds, how pent up the wrath. It's been too long in coming — for it had to come, even if John Brown had never lived, even if there had never been a Kansas."

"But where'll it all end?" Susan exclaimed. "For us? You're out of it, but —"

"I'm not out of it, Susan."

"I thought —"

"You heard what happened to me at Rolla? Well, I escaped. But only from a firing squad. I can't escape Missouri. It won't let me. My sympathies are with the Union." He winced a little. "I mean they should be. But the Union Army wants to destroy me. I don't want to fight for the Confederacy, because I cannot sincerely believe in it. Yet will they let me be neutral?"

"You can go away, to California, or the Northwest. The war hasn't touched there."

"But don't you see? I can't run away. No more than Dad can, or your father."

A cloud crossed her face. "Father may have to go. Price has confiscated — I guess he calls it confiscated — just about everything we have. The bank, the stage line —"

Hoofs pounded the earth and Steve Fletcher called to them: "Hello there, you two. Breakfast is waiting."

Donny looked at his slender young brother, astride a big black gelding. There was a youthful grin on Steve's lips, but the rest of his features were not smiling.

"Where'd you get the horse, Steve?" Donny asked.

"In the woods. We keep them there now, so the Jay-hawkers can't steal them."

"Or the Confederate foragers?"

Steve chuckled. "We're at it again. Susan, you're on his side, I suppose?"

Susan slipped her hand under Donny's arm. She said: "Without the political division, Steve."

Steve's nostrils seemed to flare. "I see. It's — congratulations to you both?"

Steve dismounted from the gelding. With his arm through the bridle reins, he walked beside Susan and his brother, toward the Fletcher mansion. As they neared it, Ellen Fletcher came out. She looked at the approaching trio, then came

forward and said: "Good morning, Susan!" Without a word she put her arms about Susan and kissed her.

Then she stepped away. "Breakfast is getting cold, children!"

Louis Fletcher was not at breakfast, but just as they finished, he rode up to the house.

"I've been to Lees Summit," he announced. "Price left Lexington yesterday. He'll pass here today."

"Then I'll have to go!" cried Steve.

"Your arm, Stephen?"

"Oh, it's as good as new. I was going to take the sling off today. Besides, I don't need two hands to ride."

An invisible cloud seemed to settle over the group, and after an awkward moment Steve turned away and clumped up the stairs to put on his uniform and get his sidearms.

Louis Fletcher squinted at Donny. "The Union advance will be crossing the Missouri today. They'll take over the minute Price falls back. I—I didn't want to bring it up, Donny, but —"

"I know. I've got to make up my mind."

"Donny," said Susan Benton. "Whatever your choice is — it won't make any difference."

"I know. But —" Donny looked at his father. He said, bitterly: "What can I choose?"

"I think," said his father, "you've got just about a minute to make up your mind."

Donny heard it, then, the galloping of many horses' hoofs. He sprang to the veranda just as a squad of horsemen pounded around the corner of the house and pulled up in a cloud of dust.

There were eight or ten men in the group. Most of them were bearded and unkempt. Two or three wore gray uniforms of a sort. All were bristling with weapons.

The leader, a squat, bearded man who wore homespun breeches and a gray uniform blouse, snapped: "The Confederate Army is takin' these here horses, mister!" He jerked his head toward Steve and Louis Fletcher's mounts, which were grazing nearby, still saddled.

"I suppose," Louis Fletcher said, "I must let you take my

own mount, if you have the proper authority. But the black doesn't belong to me."

"That's all right," cut in the bearded man. "We'll take him along, too. I'm Captain Gregg of —"

Steve slammed out of the door behind the group on the veranda. He wore his complete uniform now, with the broad stripes of a sergeant on his sleeve.

There was a Navy Colt in his fist which wasn't aimed at any one in particular, but could be tilted to cover Captain Gregg with a slight upward flip.

"What regiment did you say, Captain Gregg?" he asked harshly.

The bearded man scowled. "General Pike's brigade, but what the —"

Steve's Colt was suddenly raised. "The black is my own mount; my father has generously donated the brown one to the cause of the Confederacy. I've accepted it on behalf of my immediate commanding officer, Captain Jo Shelby."

One or two of the men behind Captain Gregg grumbled, but after biting his lip a moment, the leader of the squad made a gesture to his men and they wheeled and rode off at a canter.

"That," said Donny Fletcher, "is the first time I saw a mere sergeant talk down a captain."

Steve's eyes were still glinting.

"A captain without a commission," he said. "That was Bill Gregg, one of our finest bushwhackers."

Donny whistled. "I'd hate to meet that gang on a dark night. You did a good job on him, but watch yourself if he's around your outfit."

"I don't think Price will stand for his kind much longer. The entire Indian brigade, with which these bushwhackers fought at Wilson's Creek, wasn't worth a damn. You should have seen them skedaddle every time a shell came within a half mile of them. The noble redskin can't stand artillery, and neither can a bushwhacker."

Steve, as well as the others, turned to Donny. Louis Fletcher asked the question, however. "You're not going?"

Donny shook his head. "I've just made up my mind. There's

no reason I can't appeal direct to Fremont, or the War Department, if Fremont won't act. After all, I have some rather good references. I'm going to write to some of the boys."

"But while you're waiting, Donny —" Louis Fletcher looked anxiously at his son.

Donny laughed and nodded his head toward the wall of timber beyond the cleared field. "I used to know every tree in there. I don't think any man living will find me there, unless I want him to!"

## CHAPTER IX

DEEP in the woods, a mile from the Fletcher mansion, Donny found a tiny cave he had used as a boy. It was a shallow hole in a sandy bluff, six feet deep and four high. Its entrance was concealed by a thick bush. Here he wrote his letters to General Fremont, to classmates from the Point, to the superintendent of the academy, and to the Secretary of War.

Then came the long wait. Finally, a letter came from the superintendent of the Academy. He'd gone to Washington in person to see the commander-in-chief, Winfield Scott, and found the aged hero of the Mexican War harassed by politicians and favor-seekers; he'd made a note to send for the records of the court-martial in Rolla.

"Don't worry, Fletcher," the superintendent wrote. "You're too good a man to be lost to the army!"

It was good to have influential friends. After all, what were friends for, if they couldn't help you over some of the rough spots? Donny showed the letters to his father and the latter nodded. "That's fine, boy, that's fine."

His father was losing weight and there were lines in his face. His gray hair was definitely turning white. There was a pained, worried look in his eyes.

"What is it?" Donny asked. "Bad news?"

"It's nothing, Donny, nothing at all," Louis Fletcher said, but after a moment he reached into his pocket and brought out a folded sheet of paper. A reward poster.



Donny looked at it and a cold feather slithered up his spine. "Reward . . . Doniphan Fletcher . . . Wanted for Treason and Murder. . . ."

"I got it in Lees Summit," Louis Fletcher said. "It was up since yesterday. There's a company of Montgomery's troops stationed there."

"They won't find me here," Donny said. "Not a soul's come within five hundred yards. I guess nobody but a Fletcher knows about this cave. I can hide here for a year, if necessary. Which it won't be, of course."

His father went away and Donny, sitting on the ground with his back against the little sand bluff, stared moodily at the concealing foliage ahead of him. He heard vaguely the murmur of the little stream, only ten yards away, but out of sight.

After a while he got up and moved to a bush. He parted it carefully; getting down on his knees, he crawled into his cave. There were a couple of blankets on the ground, as well as an excellent Sharp's rifle. There was food, too, enough to last for a week in the event of emergency. There was water in the creek below.

In five weeks, Donny had not ventured more than two hundred yards from his cave. Like a prairie dog, he wanted to be near his hole and pop into it at the first sound or sight of danger.

It was a full moon that night, a cold moon that promised a cold winter. Donny sat outside his cave and looked at the yellow disk. It was the same moon that was shining down on West Point, on the armies of the Potomac and Virginia. A reddish moon.

Reddish?

No, that color wasn't in the moon. It was in the sky.

Donny sprang to his feet, a cry of horror torn from his throat. It was fire — a tremendous fire in the general direction of the Fletcher mansion!

He scuttled into the cave, caught up his Sharp's rifle and some ammunition and scurried out again. He ran in the darkness, branches of trees whipping his face.

He knew he would be too late, even as he tore through the

woods. When he burst into the clearing near his home he saw that the roof of the mansion had already fallen in.

By the light of the leaping flames he saw several figures, more than he knew should be here, but he went forward heedlessly, his Sharp's rifle gripped in both hands.

It was his mother who saw him first. She said, in a toneless voice: "Donny!"

They crowded around him then, his father, Susan and Major Benton, Justin Tate and one of his sons.

"What happened?" he asked, harshly.

"Yanks," Justin Tate replied laconically.

Donny's father amplified the remark. "They said they were Kansas troops. One of them mentioned a name. Jennison, I think it was."

"How many were there?" Donny demanded.

"Six or seven. They — " Louis Fletcher paused.

Donny shook his head. "But why did they burn the house? Was it because of me?"

Louis Fletcher did not answer. He didn't have to. Hot anger swept through Donny. "The cowards. Why didn't they — "

"Look!" cried Justin Tate. "My house!"

Everyone whirled and saw the red fire shooting skyward a mile to the west.

"Let's go!" cried the younger Tate. "Maybe we can get them." He started for the road and his father followed.

Major Benton cried out: "Wait a minute, Tate. If you go, you'll get into a fight and that'll hurt everyone around here."

The Tates stopped and Justin said, bitterly: "You're Union, Major. They won't bother you. But they've burned my house, and if that means a fight, then fight it'll be."

Donny exclaimed. "Hold on, Justin. Maybe you won't have to go home to fight. Listen!"

All heard it, then, the pounding of horses' hoofs. Donny caught hold of Susan Benton's arm. "Susan, take mother to your place. Please!"

"But — you can't fight them!" cried Susan Benton. "You mustn't. It's bad enough now. Don't — "

A hundred yards away, a gun roared.

Donny shoved Susan violently toward his mother. "Run!"

In front of the group, the two Tates dropped to the ground. Donny reached out and pushed his father to his knees. "Down, Father. There's only a half dozen of them. We can drive them off."

The horsemen topped the crest between the burning house and the road and were silhouetted as they charged forward. The guns of the Tates roared and a horse screamed in pain.

Donny threw up the Sharp's rifle and fired without aiming at the riders. But at the moment of pressing the trigger, he jerked up the muzzle of his rifle, so the bullet would go high. He winced at the realization of his instinctive act. Even now he couldn't fire at a Union soldier.

The unexpected resistance had its effect. The horsemen were thrown into wild confusion. The Tates fired in the plunging mass. A soldier plummeted to the ground, yelled hoarsely and rushed forward several feet before falling to his face.

And then the soldiers were galloping away, routed completely. They left behind one wounded horse and a dead man.

The younger Tate exulted gleefully, "I got him. I got me a damn Yankee, Dad!"

"Neighbors," said Major Benton soberly, "I'm afraid something has started here that's going to be hard to stop."

Justin Tate glowered at the major. "Your house wasn't burned."

Major Benton turned away stiffly. "Susan! Come."

Susan Benton was talking in a low tone to Ellen Fletcher. Donny moved closer to them and heard his mother's reply. "No, Susan. I must remain with them. It's my place."

"You can't, mother," Donny said. "As soon as those men reach Lees Summit they'll get reinforcements and come back. I can take Dad to the woods, but —"

"I've slept in the woods before, son," Ellen Fletcher said. "One night more won't hurt me. Tomorrow we'll go to Independence."

"Donny's right," Susan cut in. "The soldiers will come back. You'll be safer at our house. Father —"

"Susan!" Major Benton said, from a distance.

"I'm coming, Father. Mrs. Fletcher — please!"

Donny pushed his mother gently toward Susan and Ellen Fletcher gave in. But not before she went to her husband's side and whispered in his ear.

The two women followed Major Benton toward the house on the adjoining plantation. Before they were out of sight, the Tates and the two remaining Fletchers got together to discuss their problem.

Justin Tate said, "Well, Louis, looks like we've been turned into bushwhackers, whether we want to or not."

"No," Louis Fletcher said. "Those soldiers most assuredly were acting without orders. When their commander learns what they've done, they'll be disciplined."

"I don't believe it," Tate said. "I figure the officers know what's going on. Houses have been burned all over the country. Kansans have been running off slaves —"

"Slaves?" said Donny.

Louis Fletcher cleared his throat. "Haven't you been aware that Mammy Lou isn't here?"

Donny whistled. "I hadn't noticed. What happened to her?"

"She's gone. Some soldiers came yesterday and took her away. They claimed Fremont had issued an emancipation proclamation."

"They made her go? Against her will?"

"Yes."

"But where? She's always been with us."

"Maybe Jennison will feed her," Justin Tate said sardonically. "They ran my boys off, too, you know. And today they came back to finish the job."

"Horses!" said the younger Tate, excitedly. "A flock of 'em comin' back!"

"Then it's the woods for us!" Donny caught his father by the arm. "I don't think they'll venture after us tonight. Tomorrow they won't find us, even if they beat the woods with a thousand men."

"Lead on, Donny!" exclaimed Justin Tate.

The four men ran to the protection of the trees and paused there to observe the return of the soldiers. The force contained more than a score of men now. The detachment spread out to

beat the clearing and Donny suggested to his companions that they retreat to his hiding place.

Even though it was pitch dark in the thickest sections of the forest, Donny led the small group unerringly to his cave.

"We'd better keep watch, even though I don't think they'll venture this deep tonight. I'll keep watch. I don't think I could sleep, anyway."

"Neither could I," said Louis Fletcher.

The Tates both crawled into the shallow cave. Donny and his father seated themselves side by side, with their backs up against the little bluff. For a while they were silent; then Louis Fletcher said quietly:

"Well, Donny, where's it all going to lead?"

Donny had been trying to answer that question in his own mind for weeks.

"I don't know," he said bitterly. "I don't know at all. But I do think you and mother should leave here. Even if you rebuilt the house, they'd burn it again."

"Where can we go?"

"To Kentucky. You have relatives there."

"Yes," said Louis Fletcher. "But Kentucky, like Missouri, is a border state. Probably the same things are happening there."

"Then go to a city. At least mother will be safe there. I'm afraid things are only starting around here."

"Starting? Can conditions get any worse than they are now?"

"I wonder," Donny said softly.

For a moment both were silent, then: "What are you going to do, Donny?" asked Louis Fletcher.

Donny looked sidewise at his father. "You're afraid my appeal will be turned down? That the War Department will uphold the court-martial?"

"You've got to consider such a possibility."

"I have. And the answer is — I don't know what I'll do in that event."

The decision was forced upon Donny Fletcher sooner than he expected. He and his father sat for an hour before the

little cave in which the Tates slept, conversing in low tones.

Then Donny heard the distant baying of a hound. Alarm shot through him, but he fought against it. The baying of a hound had more than ordinary meaning to him. Every farmer had dogs, of course. They sometimes got loose at night and roamed the forest.

The baying came closer. Louis Fletcher stirred uneasily. "Do you suppose —"

"I think we'd better wake the Tates." Donny turned and scuttled into the cave. He encountered a boot and tugged on it. "Justin — Henry — Wake up."

There was a scuffle of movement and Donny retreated to the outside. The Tates poked out their heads.

"What's up?" the elder asked, sleepily.

"Listen!"

A hound bayed, not more than three or four hundred yards distant. Justin Tate exclaimed. "That's my dog!"

"Are you sure?" Donny demanded fiercely.

"Course. I'd know that bark anywhere. They're on leash, too."

"Then we've got to run for it. Those Kansas men are using your own dogs to run us down."

"No use runnin'," said Justin Tate. "The dogs'll follow our trail twenty miles. They're good dogs."

"Then we've got to kill them!"

Justin Tate began a protest, but cut it off. "Guess you're right. Let's go."

He sprang to his feet and plunged for the stream a short distance away. A Sharp's rifle roared somewhere near and Justin Tate broke in his stride and fell forward on his face.

The younger Tate screamed. "Dad's killed!"

A half-dozen rifles and revolvers cut loose, and twigs and branches fell about the group at the cave's mouth. Donny heard bullets thud into the earthen bluff.

He caught his father by an arm. "The cave! It's too late to run."

Henry Tate was on his knees by his father's side, sobbing hysterically. But suddenly he uttered a scream of pain and



scurried back to the cave's mouth, into which Donny and Louis Fletcher were just scrambling.

The shooting outside continued, interspersed with the yells of the Kansas soldiers. A dog yelped eagerly just outside the cave, and Henry Tate thrust out his rifle barrel and pulled the trigger. The dog howled in pain and rushed away.

"All right," Donny said grimly. "We've got to fight. There's no surrender."

Boots were scuffing the earth outside the cave, proof that the soldiers had not yet located the exact hiding place of the fugitives.

Then suddenly the dim light which seeped through the bush in front of the entrance was blotted out. Almost immediately several yells indicated that the hiding place had been discovered.

Guns banged and earth was kicked into Donny's face. He drew his Navy Colt and fired blindly. Beside him, his father and Henry Tate opened up a rapid fire.

The explosions of the guns outside became less sharp.

"They're runnin'!" shouted Henry Tate, exultantly. "We've licked them."

"No, we haven't," Donny said. "They'll come back." He reached out in the darkness to touch his father.

His father did not move.

"Dad!" Donny cried in a frenzy.

On the other side of Donny, Henry Tate breathed hoarsely. "Him, too!"

A ball of fire exploded in Donny's brain.

On his hands and knees he scrambled through the entrance of the cave. Henry Tate tried to pull him back, but Donny struck away his hands. He shoved through the protecting bush outside the cave, came to his feet and yelled reckless defiance at the hidden Federals.

"Come on and fight, you —"

Guns blazed from a half-dozen spots and a red hot iron seared the skin under Donny's left armpit. It served only as a stimulus to Donny. He plunged forward in the darkness, firing wildly at darker shadows on the ground. Behind him he heard the pounding of Henry Tate's feet.

Perhaps because their charge was so furious, the Kansas soldiers estimated the number of their antagonists to be far greater than it actually was; at any rate, the soldiers fell back, and before they knew it Donny and Henry were in sole possession of the battleground.

## CHAPTER X

IT WAS almost noon the next day when Donny Fletcher left the woods and stalked toward the Benton mansion. He was still a dozen feet from the kitchen, when the door was thrown open by Susan Benton.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" she exclaimed. "We heard shooting last night, and —"

Donny pushed past Susan into the kitchen and found his mother looking at him anxiously. "Donny, where's your —"

Donny said dully. "He's dead. The dirty butchers killed him."

Instinctively he reached forward to catch his mother. But she did not faint.

"Where is he?" she asked tonelessly.

"I buried him," Donny said harshly.

Susan Benton came up from behind and took hold of Donny's cold hand. She pressed it, but he did not return the pressure. He said: "They'll pay for it, mother. I promise you that!"

Ellen Fletcher blinked suddenly as if she'd just been awakened from a daydream. Her hand went to her apron and brought out a folded envelope.

"This, Donny — Abe Colton brought it only a half hour ago."

Donny Fletcher stared at the red sealing wax on the envelope.

"It's from the War Department," Susan Benton said. "Open it, Donny."

He ripped it open, unfolded a sheet of thick paper and scanned it briefly. A harsh laugh came from his lips.

"What is it, Donny?" Susan asked.

"It's from the War Department. They — they've reviewed my case, and —"

His lips twisted into snarl and he ripped the letter across and across.

"Oh, Donny!" exclaimed Susan Benton. "I'm so sorry. I hoped —"

"You'd hoped?" said Donny. "That they'd reinstate me? Well, they did, the slow-witted, blundering fools!"

Susan caught her breath. "Then, why —"

"Because it's too late. Too late by twelve hours and one murder." Donny's voice rose. "Damn the Union!"

Major Benton burst into the kitchen. He said stiffly, "Some soldiers have just turned in from the road."

Without a word, Donny Fletcher brushed Susan to one side and went out of the house. Bent low, he ran for the shelter of the woods.

In the thickest part of the forest, Henry Tate and Phil Watterson found Donny Fletcher. Watterson announced he was no longer deputy sheriff at Lees Summit.

"How come, Phil?" Donny asked.

"They said I favored some Southern folk." Watterson shrugged. "I turned in my badge, but that wasn't enough for the Kansas soldiers. They figured to stretch my neck. Me, I like my neck."

"Why don't you join the Confederate army, Phil?"

"Mebbe I should've done that three months ago. But not now. The Confederates are down in Arkansas. There's fifty thousand Feds between us and them."

Henry Tate hunkered down on his heels. "Tell him the rest, Phil."

Donny looked sharply at the former deputy sheriff.

Watterson cleared his throat. "Since last night, you're a guerrilla leader, Donny. The Kansans reported to their commanding officer that a force of a hundred guerrillas under Captain Fletcher had dispersed them."

A savage gleam came into Donny's eyes. "So I'm a guerrilla leader now, eh? Well, perhaps that report is only slightly premature."

Watterson exclaimed. "You mean you're turning Reb, Donny?"

"No," said Donny bluntly. "I'm not going to fight the United States Government. But I *am* going to fight those men who killed my father."

"My father was killed, too," Henry Tate cut in.

Donny nodded. "I'm counting on you, Henry and Phil. And any other Missourians around here who've had their houses burned by Kansans, or who've been robbed and mistreated by them."

In such manner Donny Fletcher became a guerrilla. Phil Watterson went off that afternoon and returned in the evening with two recruits, young Bill Beecham, no more than nineteen and Tom Colton, the son of the Lees Summit postmaster. Henry Tate brought in Luke Monks, and the information that Kansas soldiers had burned the Monks home that morning.

Donny pounced on that bit of news. "It looks like they're going to persecute whatever Southern families have members in the Confederate army. Luke, isn't your cousin Harold with Price?"

"Yeah, sure," replied Luke Monks. "Say — you think they'll try burnin' Uncle Bob's house?"

Donny said grimly, "What do you say we hurry over to Bob Monks place? We may be in time to give the Kansas firebugs a warm welcome."

A half hour later, after cautious reconnoitering, they advanced upon the house of Bob Monks. Luke's uncle remained inside the house, but Donny could see the muzzle of a gun close to his reach.

Luke Monks approached the window. "It's all right. Captain Fletcher thinks the Jayhawkers are coming to burn your house and we figured to give them a welcome."

Bob Monks left the window and appeared at the door a moment later. A brace of revolvers were stuck in the waistband of his trousers and he gripped a double-barreled shotgun.

"I been waitin' for 'em myself," he said. "If this house gets burned it's over my dead body."

Phil Watterson, who had been watching the road, trotted

over. "I think they're coming, Donny. Least, I hear hoofs on the road."

"Get in the house!" Donny ordered quickly. "But don't scatter. Stay in the kitchen in a body. Bob, you willin' to talk to them out in back, here?"

"What can I lose? If the Kansas men are comin' here, it ain't because they want to wish me good luck."

Donny's small force hurried into the kitchen, dropping to the floor so they would not be seen by anyone looking in from the outside. Bob Monks took a position at a window.

It was no more than three minutes before he said in a tense voice: "They're comin' in!"

"How many?" Donny asked.

"Only two. They're wearing uniforms."

"I'm going to get one of them," Henry Tate said savagely.

Donny shook his head. "I don't like it. Only two men. There've never been less than a half dozen."

"Maybe they're gettin' braver," Phil Watterson said.

"I don't believe it. By this time the Southern folks around here are pretty well stirred up. The Jayhawkers ought to know they can't get away with their stuff much longer. I wish we'd deployed in the woods, instead —"

"Shh!" cautioned Bob Monks. "They're here. I'm goin' out."

As he opened the door a voice outside yelled: "Hello, the house!"

Monks stepped out, leaving the door slightly ajar.

"What do you want?" Monks demanded truculently.

A harsh voice laughed. "We're foraging for the Union Army, Mister. Where's your livestock?"

"Your bunch of thieves got it weeks ago," Monks retorted bitterly.

Donny winced. Monks was giving the show away by his belligerence. One of the soldiers outside immediately became suspicious.

"Say, you home alone?" he asked.

Donny leaped to his feet and the others followed his example. They crowded out of the kitchen door.

The Kansas soldiers saw them and swiftly raised their carbines. Donny fired at the legs of one soldier; beside him, Phil

Watterson fired at the other. The man went down and the other members of Donny's command swarmed around them.

A ripple of apprehension shot through Donny. "Watch out!" he cautioned. "There may be —"

His words were drowned out by gunfire from the woods a hundred yards away. Simultaneously, a wave of blue uniformed men poured out into the clearing.

Donny gasped. "Into the house, men!"

The disconcerted guerrillas rushed so furiously for the kitchen door that they became entangled and for a moment none could gain the shelter of the house. Another volley from the charging Kansas troops took heavy toll of them. Phil Watterson cried out and fell to the ground, a bullet through his head. Young Bill Beecham got into the house, but pitched to the floor and lay there, moaning piteously.

Donny could not give him any attention. "To the front, Henry — Tom. We may be surrounded. Luke — Bob, to the windows. Let them have it as they come!"

Donny set the example by poking his Navy Colt through the window glass and blazing away at the soldiers, now less than fifty yards from the house.

The Kansas troops broke in their charge, amid wild yells, but an officer re-formed them at the edge of the woods. Looking out cautiously, Donny estimated the force at about two dozen. He was thankful that he heard no firing from the front of the house.

"Load up, men!" he ordered. "They're going to come again. Tom! Come back here. We need you. Henry can keep an eye out front by himself. Yell if anyone comes from that side."

Tom Colton ran into the kitchen and dropped to his knees at the window beside Donny. He thrust out a Sharp's rifle.

"They're coming again, Captain," he said.

Donny saw them. "Hold your fire," he said, grimly, "until they get within revolver range. Then shoot — fast!"

The Union soldiers were spread out in a thinner line this time, eight or ten feet separating one man from the next. They came forward at a trot, carbines at the ready.

"This is it," Donny said. "They're not going to break. We're in for it."



Forward they came. Forty yards — thirty —

"Fire!" Donny cried.

The kitchen of Bob Monks' home exploded to the roar of gunfire. Out in the clearing, men pitched to the ground. Some dropped merely to their knees and fired from that position. Others fell prone. But the majority broke into a terrific rush for the house.

At Donny's elbow, Tom Colton sobbed and suddenly fell away. Bob Monks rushed to the kitchen door to meet the advancing soldiers. He thrust out his rifle, cried out in anguish and fell back into the kitchen.

And then, for the first time in his life, Donny Fletcher heard a sound that was to become famous in later years, a sound that would strike terror to the hearts of thousands of men, women and children.

It was the wild rebel yell, adapted and made even more ferocious by the Missouri guerrilla.

It rose over the din of the gunfire, the screaming of enraged, wounded and dying men.

"Yip-yip-yee-ow-eee!"

Horses' hoofs thundered and revolvers roared like the roll of a gigantic drum. A dozen horsemen, closely packed, galloped into view of the small band of defenders of Bob Monks' home and struck the charging Kansas soldiers.

The fight, if a slaughter could be called a fight, lasted less than thirty seconds. At the end of that time the survivors of the Union force had fled to the woods and ten or twelve blue-uniformed bodies were strewn in the clearing. Individual guerrillas rode around and sent bullets crashing into still bodies.

Donny, pale of face, stepped out of the house, his Navy Colt raised for any contingency. Behind him came the last survivors of his command, Henry Tate and Luke Monks.

A rider saw the trio and swung down from his mount. Donny saw then that he was a tall slender man, with strangely blond hair, almost white.

"My name's Charley Hart," the man said. "I guess I don't have to tell you we're Southern men."

Donny nodded. "We came here to prevent their burning this house. But it doesn't make any difference now, I guess. Bob Monks got killed."

The tow-haired man shrugged. "He took some damn Yanks with him, though." The guerrillas looked sharply at Donny. "Say, isn't your name Fletcher?"

"Why?"

"I've heard a lot about you. Like to talk to you."

"Go ahead."

Charley frowned. "Well, it's about this business. I'm figuring on raising a company of men. I got a nice start here — " he gestured toward the scattered horsemen. "But I figure on raising two-three hundred. Good material round Jackson County, but the boys are mostly farmers. They need military training and I thought — well, I've heard you're a West Point man and I thought perhaps you'd throw in with me and sort of train the boys."

Donny looked toward a guerrilla who was in the act of leaning down from his saddle and sending a bullet into a blue-uniformed corpse.

He shook his head. "After just saving my life, it may sound ungrateful, but I think I'd rather fight this thing out by myself."

"You won't have a chance, Fletcher!" Charley Hart declared. "No Southern man alone will have a chance. I can offer you a lieutenancy."

"No. Thank you."

For an instant Charley's eyes seemed green as they stared without winking at Donny Fletcher. Then Hart relaxed. "All right, Fletcher, if that's the way you feel. Hope to see you around again. Come on, boys — let's go!"

As quickly as they had come Charley Hart and his band swept away.

Henry Tate said to Donny, "Why didn't you throw in with them, Donny? Been better to be with a big bunch, wouldn't it?"

Donny gestured significantly at the dead Kansas soldiers.

"I don't like the way they shoot dead men," he said.

Henry Tate did not remind Donny that he was a bush-whacker himself. But after a moment Donny thought of it. "All right, we're guerrillas, too. We're fighting Kansas soldiers, but we'll fight like soldiers — not cutthroats!"

## CHAPTER XI

THE sky had been overcast when Susan Benton and her father left their home in the morning. Snow began to fall as they neared Independence.

"If this keeps up, we may have to stay in Independence overnight," the major said.

"Do you think so?"

Major Benton looked sidewise at his daughter, a little puzzled by the enthusiasm of her tone. He drove in silence for a moment, then said: "Perhaps I've been wrong in persisting in remaining on the farm. Maybe we ought to move to a town."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Susan. "We — we can't do that!"

"Why not? You seemed eager at the prospect of remaining overnight in Independence."

"Yes, but that was because — well, it was for just tonight."

"I see. You want to remain on the farm because of the Fletcher boy. You've been seeing him?"

Susan shook her head. But her denial was too emphatic. Her father glanced at her suspiciously. "But he's around somewhere and you know he couldn't get to you in town. That's it. Susan, I don't like it. Not just this Fletcher affair, either. Everything. This war — I'm afraid of it. I've been thinking seriously of closing out everything I've got here and moving to St. Louis."

Susan turned and stared at her father. "But, father —"

"Yes, Susan?"

"I love Donny Fletcher. Don't you see?"

Major Benton's shoulders seemed to droop. "I was afraid of that."

"Afraid? But I thought you liked him."

"I do — as a man. And if these were normal times, I'd say marry Doniphan Fletcher. But — well, times are not normal."

"You mean you want me to give him up just because he's in trouble?"

"I'm afraid I do mean that, Susan. Doniphan Fletcher has been convicted of treason by a military court. His life is instantly forfeit to any Federal soldier or official. And now there are rumors that he's turned guerrilla."

Susan Benton bit her lip. "I don't believe that. They were spreading those rumors even before his father was killed."

Major Benton sighed wearily. "Just the same, the Kansas soldiers will include him in the guerrilla category. While I don't approve of some of the methods of the Kansas troops, you must admit that they have a difficult task here. So they're fighting the bushwhacker and guerrilla with his own methods — and it isn't going to be pleasant for the bystander."

"Donny?"

"Us. I'm a known Unionist. So far we haven't been molested much, but if Kansas troops do much more of what they have been doing — and they probably will — retaliation by the bushwhackers is going to be severe. It won't exclude us. At the present stage I can't afford to antagonize the Union forces, ruthless though they may be."

Susan Benton's color was high. "I understand, father."

"Then you won't see him? Or give him aid?"

"I didn't say that."

"What then?"

"I don't know. I only know that I'm being torn all to pieces inside of me. And I don't know how much more I can stand, father."

In Independence, Major Benton stopped the carriage before a two-story brick building, housing a bank on the first floor. "I've some business in here that'll take me an hour or so, Susan. Will you be shopping in any of the stores?"

"Perhaps. But don't worry about me. I'll meet you at The Terrill House."

The snow had stopped by morning, but there was a white blanket on the roads when Major Benton and Susan started homeward. It was a rather long trip. Fortunately there had been no wind and the snow had not piled up into drifts.

It was approaching noon when Major Benton turned his team into the lane leading toward the house.

"It seems we've visitors," he announced.

A sudden feeling of premonition settled over Susan. "Do you suppose —"

"I don't know, but it's too late to retreat. They've seen us."

A half-dozen men had come out of the house and were already heading toward the carriage. One of them caught the bridle of the right horse and stopped it.

"Major Benton?" he asked. "I'm Captain Plummer of the Kansas Militia."

"How do you do, sir," the major replied gruffly. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Uh-uh," replied Captain Plummer. "We've been foraging and we've already helped ourselves."

Major Benton climbed down from the carriage.

"I can't prevent you from taking whatever catches your fancy," he said, crisply, "but it's customary to issue warrants. May I have them?"

"Wal, now, Major," said Captain Plummer, showing tobacco-stained teeth, "we're plumb out of warrants. The reg'lar paper warrants, that is. We got some others, however. Yancey!" he called to one of the men by the house, "fetch out that warrant — the one we was talkin' about."

The soldier turned to the porch and picked up a coil of rope. "Here she is, Plummer!"

Susan Benton sprang to her feet in the carriage, a cry of horror torn from her throat.

"What do you intend to do with that?"

Captain Plummer grinned wickedly. "Wal, now, mebbe nothin'. That depends on the major here."

The man with the rope advanced. He swung an end of it carelessly. "The fact is, Major Benton, some of yore friends killed some of our friends. Natcherly we want to pay them back. That's where you come in. We want you to tell us where to find this blackguard friend of your'n, Donny Fletcher."

"I don't know where he is."

"No?" said Plummer. "We've heard different. He's put some of our boys out of circulation and we heard that you been

feedin' him and givin' him information. So we figure to let you tell us where he is so we can take care of him."

"I don't know where he is," the major repeated, his face becoming tight.

"Yancey!" said Captain Plummer.

Yancey shook out about six feet of the inch-thick rope. He swung it, then leaped forward and lashed Major Benton savagely.

Susan screamed.

"Miss," said Captain Plummer, "if you was smart you'd go in the house and not bother us. We might forget you're a lady, if you don't. In fact, we might forget that anyway, seeing's how you and this Fletcher fella is sweethearts."

"Susan," said Major Benton, "go into the house. I can handle this."

"Oh, can you?" snapped Yancey. Again the rope end whistled through the air and coiled about Major Benton like the crack of a whip.

Major Benton winced from the pain. Susan took a couple of backward steps, then wheeled and rushed into the house. The men by the door let her in, but when she popped out a moment later, a gun in her hands, two men pounced on her from either side. One ripped the gun from her hands and the other struck her in the face with an open palm. She recoiled, trembling with terror.

A few feet from the house, Captain Plummer said: "All right, Benton — talk!"

A grim, defiant look settled upon the major's face. Yancey lashed down with the rope end and Major Benton's mouth was blood-flecked. Yancey struck again — again and again.

When Yancey finally stopped, Major Benton was down on the snow, moaning and half conscious. Captain Plummer stepped forward and twisted his fist into the major's collar. He yanked him upright and kept him from falling.

"So you won't talk," he snarled. "You're going to be a martyr, huh? Well, we'll see about that. Yancey, that tree there."

A couple of the men joined Yancey, who threw the free end of the rope over a limb, some seven feet from the ground.



They wrapped the end about their wrists. Yancey then proceeded to tie a hangman's noose in the other end. Another man joined Captain Plummer and they dragged Major Benton to the trees.

Susan Benton could stand it no longer. Screaming, she rushed from the porch to her father's side. A couple of the soldiers raced after her and caught her before she could cover the entire distance. One of them struck her again, savagely.

"Maybe *you'll* tell where he is!" he snarled.

Captain Plummer turned. "If you don't, your father's going to have a stretched neck."

"But we can't tell you!" Susan cried. "We haven't seen him in weeks."

Major Benton turned dazed eyes upon Susan. His face, bleeding and bruised, was a horrible sight.

"Susan," he said dully, "it's all right —"

"Is it?" thundered Plummer. "Then pull, boys!"

The noose was already about the major's neck. The two men who had the other end backed away and pulled on the rope. The major was jerked to his toes. His hands clawed up instinctively and tore at the rope about his throat.

Susan sobbed, hysterically. "I'll tell . . . I'll tell!"

A carbine cracked nearby and one of the men pulling on the rope pitched to the ground. The other let the rope run through slack fingers and Major Benton fell in a heap to the snow.

The blue-uniformed men whirled, panic-stricken, toward the woods. Their hands streaked for their guns.

Donny Fletcher stepped out from the trees, a carbine in his hands. He threw it to the snow and came on, his hands held partly up and before him.

"Here I am!" he said.

Susan Fletcher moaned and fainted.

Captain Plummer whipped a Navy Colt from his belt and pointed it at Donny Fletcher. "Throw up your hands or I'll let you have it!"

"If you shoot," said Donny, "you'll die. There's no power on earth can kill me before I draw my own gun and shoot you." As he spoke he moved relentlessly forward.

"Stop!" cried Plummer. "Stop, I tell you!"

"Throw down your guns," Donny ordered. "The whole damn bunch of you!"

There were six Kansas men in the group, scattered over an area of thirty feet. All were armed with revolvers, two or three with them in their hands. But they seemed spellbound by the dramatic appearance of Donny Fletcher and by his steady, remorseless advance. He had thrown away his carbine, but there was a Navy Colt in the waistband of his trousers.

He was coming on — fifty feet, forty, then thirty. Captain Plummer's mouth fell open; he cried out hoarsely, and then he quit. The revolver fell from his hands. Instantly, Donny Fletcher's eyes whipped to the others.

At the same time, he whipped out the Navy Colt.

One of the Kansas men cried out: "Don't shoot!" and threw up his hands. It was the signal for the others. Those who held guns dropped them; the others threw up their hands.

Donny went from one to the other, jerking their guns from holsters and tossed them away. In a moment, the six Kansas men stood in a frightened little group.

"I should shoot you down in cold blood — every murdering son of you." His voice was deadly.

One of the Jayhawkers whimpered.

The sound angered Donny oddly. "Why, you sniveling yellowbellies. You roared like lions a few minutes ago!"

Captain Plummer said, "We — we weren't going to kill him." His face was gray with fear.

Major Benton moaned and stirred. Donny stabbed the muzzle of his Navy Colt at Plummer. "You — step out!"

Plummer tried to back away. "No — don't! I'll do anything you want me to do, but don't —"

"Step out!"

His own companions shoved Plummer forward, thinking by that act to obtain immunity for themselves. Plummer babbled incoherently.

Contemptuously, Donny Fletcher took a step forward. He swung up the muzzle of his Colt and brought it down savagely. The weapon hit Plummer's jaw with a crunching sound. Plummer screamed and fell to the snow.

"Pick him up," Donny ordered, "and get him out of here. Quick!"

The men moved forward cautiously. They pounced upon the body of their leader, swooped him up and backed away.

"Run!" Donny commanded and fired a shot over their heads.

They went like frightened rabbits, half carrying, half dragging the unconscious Plummer with them.

Donny returned to the two lying upon the snow. Major Benton was trying to sit up, but Susan still lay still and motionless. Donny dropped to his knees.

"Oh, my dear!" he whispered.

## CHAPTER XII

THIS Christmas Day of 1861, Doniphan Fletcher, erstwhile captain of the United States Army, hovered over a tiny fire of green wood. He was wet from the snow, chilled to the bone; it was so long since he had eaten a square meal that the thought was enough to bring out a cold sweat on his forehead.

He wore cracked boots, mud-stained, tattered homespun breeches, torn shirt and battered hat, an overcoat a slave would have scorned to wear.

He was hunkered on his heels, trying to roast a rabbit impaled on a stick. There were tears in his eyes, which were the result of the smoky little fire, but which might have been inspired by memories of Christmas dinners of other years. There had been roast turkey, goose and fowl, an entire suckling pig roasted a crisp brown, yams and Irish potatoes, green peas, fresh butter and honey.

Donny Fletcher was a guerrilla, a chieftain without a command. A month ago he had had five men with him. Three had been killed in their first engagement with Kansas troops. Another, Henry Tate, had strangely deserted him a few days later. The last, Luke Monks, had tried to kill two Kansans by himself and had been only partially successful. He had killed one, but the other had promptly avenged his companion.

So here was Donny Fletcher, now, alone and on the dodge, cooking his Christmas dinner over a pitiful fire. A little gust of wind blew smoke into his eyes. He rose suddenly; half sobbing, he hurled the stick on which the half-cooked rabbit was impaled as far as he could throw it. He kicked at the miserable fire with his battered boots and scattered embers in every direction.

He thrust both his hands into the pockets of his overcoat and his right closed over the cold butt of a Navy Colt. Then he hunched up his shoulders and plunged into the woods.

Ten minutes later he stood at the edge of a clearing and regarded a weatherbeaten stone house. Nearby was a number of slave cabins, with smoke coming from the little chimneys. There was also a big barn, and Donny could hear the clamping of horses's hoofs inside.

The door was opened suddenly from the inside and a squat, bearded man appeared in the doorway. He was about forty. He snapped: "Who're you?"

"I'm looking for Charley Hart. Is he here?"

"Never heard of him. What's your name?"

"That doesn't matter. If Hart isn't here —"

"No you don't. Just stand where you are. Deke, Art — come here!"

The stocky man took a step aside and a couple of men leaped into the doorway. There were guns in their fists.

"He's asking for Charley Hart," the first man sneered. "What do you think?"

"Come in, mister," one of the others invited.

"All right," said Donny. "I'll come in. But don't try touching me."

The stocky man snorted, but stood to one side. The others drew back opposite him. Donny stepped quickly past them, into a living room in which there was a half-dozen men as disreputable looking as the first three. There were guns in the hands of most of them. At the far end of the room, a couple of women slipped out through another door.

The stocky man came up behind Donny. "All right, mister. Take your hands out of your pockets — empty!"

Donny obeyed and a rough hand reached into his right coat pocket and drew out his Navy Colt.

"Donny Fletcher!" suddenly cried one of the men in the room.

"Hello, Henry," Donny said to Henry Tate.

The stocky man stepped around in front of Donny. "That right? You Donny Fletcher?"

Donny nodded grimly. "I thought I might find Charley Hart here. Any of you men know him?"

"I guess we do. Seein's we're in the same business, you might say. I'm Captain George Todd and these are some of my boys. Where's your outfit?"

"There isn't any."

"What do you mean, there isn't any? What about that story goin' the rounds about you and your men capturing those Jayhawkers at Benton's place — and turnin' 'em loose again?"

"I was the outfit. They were about to hang Major Benton and I stopped them. That's all there was to it."

"But you cracked Captain Plummer's jaw. Well, that's caused at least a dozen good Southern homes to go up in smoke."

"I know," said Donny, "but what else could I do?"

"Nothin'. Chances are them Redlegs and Jayhawkers would've burned the houses, anyway. They're doing it all over, in Jackson and Clay and Cass Counties. And look what Lane did down at Osceola."

Donny nodded. Then he looked around the room. "Isn't it rather reckless to gather here so openly? Suppose a Federal troop came along?"

"Then we'd give them hell. But don't worry — we ain't goin' to be surprised. We got a picket down the road."

"But what about the woods? I came that way, and no picket stopped me."

"That's right. Never thought of that." George Todd scowled. "Deke, put on your coat and go out there."

"Aw, what the hell," protested Deke, but George Todd cut him off savagely.

"I said — go!"

Deke jumped.

After he had gone out, Todd said to Fletcher, "You had your dinner yet?"

"No," said Donny, "or my breakfast either. That's why I'm here."

"We'll fix that right away. Nannie!"

A blowzy-looking girl stuck her head into the room. Todd said to her, "Put out some grub for Cap'n Fletcher. Plenty of it. He's hungry!"

Doniphan Fletcher, graduate of West Point, commissioned captain in the United States Army, was now a full-fledged guerrilla.

Food, shelter and sleep were all that mattered. Donny Fletcher had all three that day. He ate until he was bloated; then he curled up on the floor near the fireplace. With the drunken merry-making going on around him, he slept.

Candles lighted up the room when he awakened. The revelry that had been around him when he had closed his eyes had abated. The guerrillas, however, were still present, but they were gathered around a newcomer, a tall man who had apparently just come in from outside.

Donny looked listlessly at the tall man. He seemed familiar, but at the moment he could not place him. Then the newcomer, seeing Donny awake, came over. He looked down at Donny and smiled thinly.

"Hello, Fletcher," he said.

Donny recognized the man then. "Charley Hart."

The tow-headed man shook his head. "The name's Quantrell. Charley Quantrell."

Donny sat up. "Didn't you use the name Hart awhile ago?"

"Oh, sure," the other replied easily. "But the time's come to use my real name. And it's Charles W. Quantrell. We were just talking about you. You finally decided to throw in with us?"

Donny climbed to his feet and leaned against the fireplace. He was as tall as Quantrell and within a few pounds of his weight, but there the resemblance ended. Quantrell's character was in his face: a border ruffian, renegade, murderer.

"We're holding an election," Quantrell went on. "The boys



have just elected me captain and now we're going to vote for lieutenants." He turned to the men around him. "Boys, we're going to need a good drill-master and a feller who can show us some West Point discipline."

"We don't want any discipline," one of the men shouted.

Quantrell searched out the man and fixed him with a deadly stare. "If you don't think so, you'd better just step out right now, because it's the last time you're going to be able to do that. After this meetin', every order any elected officer of our outfit gives is going to be obeyed — to the last letter. Do all of you understand that?"

Grunts and shouts assured Quantrell that all understood. He nodded.

Quantrell called for order and the balloting began. It resulted in the election of William Hallar, first lieutenant; George Todd, second lieutenant; and William Gregg, third lieutenant.

And so was formed the nucleus of the organization that was to go down in history as the bloodiest, fiercest company of men of the entire Civil War. In a few short weeks, the very word *guerrilla* was to assume a new and horrible meaning.

When the election of officers was concluded, Charley Quantrell made a little speech. "There aren't many of us, right now, but there's going to be a lot more soon. There must be a couple thousand bushwhackers — I mean Southerners — in western Missouri who can't join the regular army, but who'll ride with us. It's my idea to bring together the independent commands. With a thousand men we'll drive the Yanks out of Missouri. We'll drive them out of the state; then we'll turn over into Kansas and burn every damned town, every house and make whatever Abolitionist we don't kill ki-yi back to Massachusetts . . ."

There was more to Quantrell's speech, but Fletcher heard only the droning of words. During the election he had sunk back to the floor.

The next time he awoke it was morning and the guerrillas, who had slept on the floor around him, were getting up to the accompaniment of groans, yawns and curses. They were a choice lot.

Donny looked around. He had cast his lot with these men, almost all of them already murderers.

From a corner of the room, Charley Quantrell spoke. "All right, rise up and shine. We've got work to do today."

Outside the house, it developed that only about half of the newly organized band of guerrillas had horses. Quantrell commented on this. "We've got to get mounts for everyone first of all, and here's the way to do it. A man named Searcy has been going around here stealing a lot of horses and cattle. I got word last night that he's driving them over into Kansas. My idea is to stop him."

"How we going to find him?" asked Bill Hallar.

Quantrell grinned sardonically. "That's what took me so long yesterday. Come on — I'll take you right to this Mr. Searcy."

Quantrell was true to his promise, for before the little band had traveled three miles they came upon a broad trail in the snow.

They came on Searcy inside of two miles and discovered that he was not alone. There were two riders with him. All three of the ruffians were armed with Sharp's rifles and revolvers.

"Where you think you're going with this livestock, Searcy?" Quantrell demanded coolly.

Searcy, a villainous-looking man if ever there was one, scowled. "I'm foragin' for Colonel Shanks."

"You're going in the wrong direction, then."

"No. I'm cuttin' across the border to get out of the way of some Feds. I figure on takin' the Scott road across the line, then cuttin' south to Vernon County."

"You lie like hell, Searcy," Quantrell snapped. "You're a Confederate deserter. You've stolen this stock and you're taking it to the Kansas Abolitionists."

Searcy sneered. "Mebbe you think you'd like to be in my place? Yah, you think I don't know you, Charley Hart. You're sore because I beat you to it."

Quantrell bared his teeth. Then suddenly he grinned and whipped out a revolver and covered Searcy.

"Throw down your gun, Searcy!" he ordered.

Searcy's reaction was prompt. He threw up the Sharp's rifle and pressed the trigger. The bullet whistled past Quantrell's ear. Quantrell fired at Searcy and the stock thief fell to the snow. Instantly, several guerrillas fired upon Searcy's companions.

They went down without firing a return shot.

Quantrell leaped from his horse and advanced upon the fallen Searcy.

"I only pinked him," he cried. "Now we'll show folks what'll happen to horse thieves!"

Quantrell forgot that he had been a notorious horse thief in Kansas only a year before. He signaled to George Todd, who came forward with a rope.

Bill Gregg, seeing Quantrell's purpose, protested. "Wait a minute, Charley. You can't hang him, no matter what he's done."

"Why can't I?" snapped Quantrell.

Gregg frowned. "Because we're not commissioned troops. Hanging a man makes us outlaws."

Donny Fletcher had known what to expect when he had thrown in with Quantrell. His mouth tightened and he turned away.

News of the hanging of Searcy, the horse and cattle thief, had a surprising effect on the fortunes of Quantrell's newly organized band of guerrillas. Here was a man after the bushwhacker's own heart.

Bushwhackers had been plundering on their own, descending upon isolated farmhouses, looting and burning and occasionally killing from ambush. They now got the idea that it might be more profitable to run with a pack. As Quantrell moved through the Sni Hills, furtive creatures came out of the brush and attached themselves to his command.

Quantrell encouraged his men to spread the word that recruits were welcome. All he asked of a man was that he have guns and be willing to use them. Of past history he cared naught. He wanted desperate men and no questions were asked. Inside of a month, Quantrell had forty men riding with him.

Stages and supply trains were attacked if the escorts were not too strong. In these there was rich plunder and the guerrillas went after them in high glee. The escort usually fought, and these little skirmishes, in which the guerrillas usually outnumbered their opponents, were greatly relished.

There was always prompt pursuit by Federal cavalry, for every town in Jackson County these days had a garrison, even though it sometimes consisted of only a squad or two of men.

The pursuit always stopped when Quantrell's men reached the Sni Hills. The Federals were strangers to the vicinity, but the guerrillas knew every nook and cranny of the country. The brush was so thick it was hard for a detachment of more than a dozen men to remain together. Quantrell's men didn't have to stay as a unit. They could — and did — disperse with every pursuit.

Donny Fletcher rode with Quantrell. As the weeks wore on, it was impressed upon him more and more that, even had he not made that decision on Christmas Day, it would have been forced upon him soon. The brush was seething with bushwhackers and guerrillas. And more and more Federal troops were being stationed in the towns throughout the county. They rode relentlessly up and down the highways; they beat the brush and pounced upon farmhouses, hoping to find individual fugitives therein.

They did find bushwhackers and ended their careers promptly. For the Federal troops were as ruthless as the guerrillas.

Although the guerrillas saw almost daily action, the war in general seemed at stalemate. Finally, the change came: The crushing defeat of the Confederates at Pea Ridge. Pea Ridge crushed the Confederacy west of the Mississippi. Price's army, with twenty-five per cent casualties at Pea Ridge, was reorganized. Enlisted as state guards, the men had no wish to fight outside Missouri. They were discharged, therefore. Some enlisted in the Confederate service, but the majority made their way north to their homes, and were ripe candidates for Quantrell.

Hearing of the defeat of the South at Pea Ridge, Quantrell

decided to strike a blow of his own in retaliation. He led his small band across into Kansas, to the village of Aubrey. He left it a smoking heap of ruins and returned with twelve wagon loads of plunder.

And now the recruits came — to see wagon-trains of plunder, brought with the slaughter of Redlegs and Jayhawkers. It was a siren song for the returning men of Price's army. More than a hundred enlisted with Quantrell in three weeks.

Quantrell's star was in the ascendancy!

## CHAPTER XIII

ELLEN FLETCHER faced each day with a calm face and inscrutable eyes. But the tranquil face was a mask; the soul within Ellen Fletcher writhed and screamed. She suffered far more than the woman who could release her grief with tears.

The battle of Pea Ridge was fought and Federal casualty lists published. And then, a little later, there circulated surreptitiously the lists of the Confederate casualties. Among the "dead and missing" was the name: Fletcher, Stephen K.

Ellen Fletcher did not weep. She had been prepared for this blow. There remained only one more tragedy that could happen to her.

That day, Susan Benton called. "Father's gone. He's received a commission."

"But where'll you stay, child?" Ellen Fletcher asked. "Why don't you come here with Florence and myself?"

Susan smiled wanly. "I'll stay with Mrs. Auer. She's going to continue with the hotel, you know. I think Father has a mortgage on it. At any rate, she's very kind and I can help her with the work. Father suggested it."

They talked for a few minutes of casual things; then Susan could restrain herself no longer. She blurted out: "Haven't you heard anything . . . of Donny?"

"Not a word. I'm afraid —"

"No!" exclaimed Susan. "He isn't dead. I would know it. He's in danger, perhaps, but I know he isn't dead. But I can't understand why we haven't heard a single word."

"I did hear something," Ellen Fletcher said. "Just a rumor."

"What is it?"

"It's not very pleasant. It's — well, that he's with Quantrell."

"No!" declared Susan emphatically. "Donny couldn't be with him."

"Of course not."

Although Ellen Fletcher changed the subject quickly, the worried look did not leave Susan's face and Mrs. Fletcher berated herself for expressing aloud the fear that had been in her own breast.

The days wore on. Jennison was withdrawn from Jackson County, but Kansas troops still remained. The stories circulated by the Southern people in Independence — and four-fifths of the residents were Southern — were too fantastic to believe. Yet the refugees came into Independence. Houses were at a premium; families doubled up.

The town was strongly garrisoned; at least five hundred soldiers were quartered there under command of Colonel Buel. The fraction of the citizenry who were Union rode high. There were no organized Confederates in the state. There never would be again. The Confederacy was as good as crushed right now.

Even Lee in the East was afraid to fight. And on the upper Mississippi, Grant was driving the Confederates before him.

And then came reports of the second battle of Bull Run, in Virginia.

Colonel Buel had practically taken over the dining room of the hotel. That wasn't a hardship on Mrs. Auer, because civilians would not have come there to dine in any case.

Mrs. Auer was a German woman, who had lived with her husband in West Missouri for twenty years. Mr. Auer was gone, now; in the Union Army, of course. Very few transients came to Independence these days, and it wasn't hard to keep the hotel going with the assistance of Susan Fletcher.

They were in the hotel on Sunday night when a soldier brought a farm woman into the dining room. Susan, about to leave the room, remained to listen.

"The Confederates are going to attack Independence to-



morrow!" the woman blurted out, the moment she saw the several officers.

A buzz of comment ran instantly through the room, but Colonel Buel silenced it. "Nonsense. There are no Confederates within a hundred miles — no force large enough to attack us. Hughes hasn't been able to enlist more than a handful of men."

"But I heard them," protested the woman. "I live near Blue Springs. Colonel Upton Hays is there with his partisan rangers. He's marched to Lees Summit to join General Hughes."

"With how many men?" asked a junior officer.

"I don't know. A big band — a thousand at least."

Colonel Buel laughed raucously.

"Hays never had more than a hundred men at one time. And Hughes hasn't got fifty."

The woman persisted. "Quantrell's coming with them."

"Quantrell!"

The name created more impression than had the announcement of Hays' and Hughes' forces.

"He wouldn't dare. Not against our garrison," Buel said sharply.

"Of course not," some of the officers assured him.

Seeing that she was making no impression, the woman departed. The officers of Buel's staff left their quarters soon afterwards.

However, at dawn the rattle of gunfire awakened Susan Benton. For a moment she lay in bed, paralyzed, then forced herself to leap up and begin dressing. Before she was finished, Mrs. Auer was pounding on her door.

"Susan! The Confed'rates. They're attacking the town!"

The gunfire swelled to deafening proportions, interspersed now and then with fierce yells.

Hurriedly, Mrs. Auer and Susan made their way to the lobby of the hotel. They reached it just as the door was smashed down by rifle butts and a trio of wild-looking men burst in.

Mrs. Auer screamed and Susan put her arm around the frightened German woman.

"We're alone here," Susan announced as calmly as she could. "There are no guests in the hotel."

"We'll see about that," one of the ruffians retorted.

Another pair of guerrillas charged into the lobby. They dispersed quickly in the directions of the rooms.

The guerrillas were still ransacking the hotel when another detachment of five or six burst into the place and were chagrined to learn that some of their comrades were already ahead of them.

Some of the first ruffians began returning with blankets and other loot they had found in the rooms. They were heaping it up on the lobby floor when a tall, tow-haired man, wearing four revolvers in his belt, came into the hotel.

"What's going on here?" he snapped.

"Nothin' much," one of the guerrillas replied. "Just pickin' up a few things."

"I warned you about that," snarled the tow-headed man. "You weren't to touch anything belonging to Southern people. Who owns this place?"

"Her!" A guerrilla pointed at Mrs. Auer.

The leader of the guerrillas stepped around and faced Mrs. Auer and Susan. His eyes stopped for a moment on Susan and he bowed. Then he addressed Mrs. Auer.

"Madam, what are your political leanings?"

"*Ach, Gott!*" sobbed Mrs. Auer.

The Teutonic words brought a scowl to Quantrell's face. "Dutch! I should have known it."

Susan Fletcher said suddenly: "Do you rob only Germans, Captain Quantrell?"

The greenish eyes of the guerrilla chief lit up. "Ah, you know my name!"

"I've heard it. But not favorably."

Quantrell fixed her with a cold stare. "Whom have I the honor of addressing, Miss — It is Miss, isn't it?"

"It is and I'll tell you who I am. I'm a Unionist. My father is Major Benton, an officer in the Union Army."

"Benton?" exclaimed Quantrell. "Say — you're not from Lees Summit?"

But Susan Benton did not answer. Her face had turned

suddenly white and she swayed and seemed on the point of fainting. Quantrell jerked his head around and saw Donny Fletcher, a Navy Colt in his hand, coming into the lobby.

Quantrell's face twitched. "Ah, Fletcher! A friend?"

Donny Fletcher came forward and stopped before Susan Benton.

"Susan," he said, hoarsely.

She looked at him with strangely dead eyes.

"It's true, then," she said tonelessly. "I heard it but I wouldn't believe . . . that you'd become a guerrilla. . . . You, a thief, mur —" Her words trailed off.

Susan Benton turned slowly and walked deliberately out of the hotel lobby. She went to her room and sat down on her bed and stared, sightlessly, at the faded rug on the floor.

INDEPENDENCE surrendered. General Hughes was killed and Colonel Thompson restrained the guerrillas from murdering prisoners, but the toll of death was heavy. And the loot — well, there wasn't as much to take as there had been when Jennison had first purged the town.

The Confederates left. Reinforced, they fought a terrific battle at Lone Jack and routed a strong Federal command. The guerrillas took no actual part in the fighting here, but came to the field after the battle and acted as scavengers.

The border was in chaos.

Union troops dashed here and there, but the hordes of guerrillas, stimulated by success, were invincible. They fought pitched battles with Federal cavalry, defeated them. They retreated now and then before superior numbers, but always took severe toll before melting into the brush.

Guerrillas died, but for every man who was killed, two seemed to spring in his place.

The name of Quantrell was a blight upon the land. He raided Kansas and Olathe fell to him. Paola was put to the torch; Shawneetown was plundered and burned. Corpses were strewn indiscriminately. Quantrell received no quarter and he asked none. He took no prisoners.

The Sni Hills were swarming with guerrillas and yet the Federals seemed unaware of any unusual activity. Quantrell

had sent word to the chieftains of the various bands of bushwhackers and they were reporting to him now, bringing their men with them. Poole brought a dozen, Cole Younger a few more. Jarette came down from Clay County with a handful of men and from the south slunk the fanatical "Reverend" Skaggs.

Gregg beat the river bottoms for recruits and from Clay County, George Todd, the dour one, brought fifty men. And at last came Bill Anderson, Bloody Bill Anderson, with more than eighty men.

Donny Fletcher saw the company ride in. Quantrell had under him youths of seventeen and eighteen, some only sixteen, but fully half of Bloody Bill's "men" were under seventeen, some indeed no more than thirteen or fourteen. Yet though they were young in years, they were old in wickedness. Not a boy of them had less than two Navy Colts; some had five and six stuck in their belts.

Quantrell assembled the colonels, captains and lieutenants.

"What is it, Charlie?" Bloody Bill demanded. "A raid on Kansas City? You know I'm for it, if it's the last damned thing I do. I haven't forgotten my sisters —"

Quantrell, always dramatic, let his eyes wander about the faces of the scoundrels about him. He remained silent while they asked questions and expressed their opinions. Then, at last, he stepped back upon a little mound, so his head was above all the others.

He said one word: "Lawrence!"

There was a stunned silence and then a clamor of debating broke out.

"You can't!" one of them cried. "It's too strong."

Another said: "They'll have a regiment there. It's Jim Lane's home, and he'd never live there without plenty of men around."

"It's too far. We couldn't get back . . ."

Quantrell let them chatter awhile; then suddenly a shudder seemed to run through him and his head jerked up.

"It's Lawrence!" he said harshly. "I've had spies there for weeks. Fletch Taylor just came back. He says they've got only a bunch of recruits and a couple of squads of militia —"

fifty men, maybe. We can take Lawrence, and I for one am going there."

"I'll go!" snarled Bloody Bill Anderson. "I like the sound of it. It's Lawrence and every house burned. And —"

Quantrell whipped a sheet of paper from inside his blouse. "We've made a list of Jayhawkers who must die in Lawrence. I'm going to give the list to you. Make any additions you want — but no subtractions!"

He stepped down from the mound, turned and walked away.

Donny Fletcher sat on a log, staring sightlessly at the seared leaves on the ground. Lawrence to him did not mean Jim Lane or loot. It meant more murder. And Donny was sick of murder.

A harsh voice broke into Donny's thoughts: "Hi, Fletcher! You don't look so chipper."

Donny looked up into the bearded face of Bloody Bill Anderson, and without conscious thought he compared him to the way he had looked the first time they met on the Missouri River steamer. Anderson had been clean shaven then, dressed in the clothes of a gentleman. With an effort, he'd been able to control himself.

But this Anderson: black, untrimmed beard, slouch hat, the brim pinned back so all could see his blood-flecked eyes. He still wore a long coat of material that had once been good, but was now mud-spattered and torn. It was encircled by a broad leather belt in which were stuck six Navy Colts.

Anderson seemed to read Donny's thoughts, for he said suddenly: "We don't look much like we did the first time we met, do we? Hmm! You had a fancy gray Prince Albert then and you looked like a fine young Southern gentleman. And all the while you were carrying around a commission in the damned Yank army!"

Donny laughed, but there was no humor in it. "Yes, Bill, I remember when it was. I remember, I thought I'd kill you then."

Bloody Bill said, "Any time you feel like that, Fletcher, just go ahead, and I'll give you the first shot. No man can

kill me, not until I get thirty scalps in payment for what they did to my sisters."

A long time ago, Donny Fletcher would have taken up the challenge. He would have rid the earth of a black-hearted murderer and felt that it was his duty. But now he shrugged.

The guerrillas moved west in the morning. Skirmishers were thrown out and when the main body was not traveling through wooded country, they rode in columns of fours. Quantrell had stressed the importance of formation and discipline on this most important of all guerrilla undertakings, and his lieutenants had promised that their men would obey orders.

They started more than three hundred strong and were joined after a while by Colonel Holt, who bore a commission from Sterling Price. There were one hundred and fifty men with Holt.

"Come with us," said Quantrell. "You'll get all the fighting you want and maybe a bit of pay. We're going to take Lawrence!"

Four hundred and fifty men, they were mounted upon the finest horses in western Missouri and unencumbered by sabers and carbines. They were armed with the deadliest of all cavalry weapons, Navy Colts, in the use of which they were unexcelled.

They rode across the Kansas line in somber silence, and then Quantrell called Donny Fletcher to him. "From here on, it's going to be dangerous. You go and take command of the advance, Fletcher. Put the skirmishers far enough out and — " He held up his left hand and suddenly clenched it into a fist — "keep them like that! Understand, Fletcher? It's up to you to see we don't ride into any trap!"

Donny nodded and rode forward. Ten minutes later they saw a company of Federals to the left. There were easily a hundred of them.

"Do we charge them?" drawled Fletch Taylor.

"No," said Donny. "We'd beat them, but the fight would lick us in the end. We'd never get to Lawrence." He'd answered Taylor's question instinctively. From a soldier's viewpoint it was folly to fight the company of Federals. They could



not exterminate them. Some would get away and spread the alarm.

Quantrell galloped up to Donny Fletcher when he saw the line of blue uniformed cavalrymen.

"We can lick them, but is it good tactics?" he asked.

"No. It isn't. Let's keep on riding."

They continued. Late in the evening they stopped and ate cold suppers, their arms looped through bridle reins so no horse could stray. They rested awhile and looked to their equipment. Before any man was quite ready, Quantrell gave the order to mount again.

They couldn't stop now. Federals might be massing behind them, to their right or left. They had passed farmhouses, small bodies of troops. Certainly, the alarm had been sent to Kansas City before this. They had to ride forward.

They rode through the night. Some tied themselves to saddles so they would not fall off if they fell asleep.

The night was long and fearful. Quantrell pressed his command, permitting them not more than ten minutes every two hours for rest. Shortly before dawn they came upon a well-traveled crossroad and halted. Quantrell addressed his leaders again. "We can't be far now, but damned if I know just where we are. We've got to get to Lawrence by daybreak."

"Couple houses ahead, Colonel," Fletch Taylor said.

"Get someone to guide us, then," Quantrell ordered. "But remember — no shooting! We're too close."

A moment later a light winked ahead. Then George Todd's voice cried out exultantly: "Joseph Stone. By God! For two years I've hoped I'd run into you. Now, you dirty stool-pigeon —"

"No shooting!" cried a voice.

"Mind your own business, Younger!" Todd exclaimed. "This is the man who had me arrested in Kansas City at the beginning of the war. I made myself a promise if I ever set eyes on him again, I'd bash in his brains."

A guerrilla moved forward and thrust an ancient musket into Todd's hands. "Here you are, cap'n!"

Donny Fletcher gasped and dug his heels into his horse's

flanks. "Todd — " he began, then heard the sickening thud of solid wood against flesh and bone.

Quantrell's voice rang out. "This is the Eudora road. I know where we are now. We don't need a guide. But we've got to hurry. In your saddles, men!"

Mounted, the detachment pressed forward at an increased pace. It was a race with the dawn, but when they reached Franklin, four miles from Lawrence, the huge ball of fire that was the sun had already shot up over the horizon.

"Column of fours!" the command rang down the line. "And gallop!"

Not a breath of air was stirring; the day was clear without the least bit of haze. Here and there, on the prairie, straight columns of smoke from chimneys indicated the morning cooking fires. And straight ahead was the smoke of Lawrence.

Lawrence, the metropolis of the plains, a village of two thousand souls, the seat of the Free-state government of Kansas, the home of the Free-soil men who had struggled so valiantly for their cause.

Quantrell raised himself in his saddle and held up a hand. Behind him the column of fours clattered to a halt, amid a swirling cloud of dust.

"There it is, men!" Quantrell cried. "It's ours for the taking."

Lieutenant Bill Gregg was the first dissenter. "This is madness, Colonel — "

Instantly several other officers voiced their disapproval. "We can't get away with it. Every man of us'll be killed."

Quantrell's studied calmness gave way to seething rage. "Every damn one of you can do as you please. I'm going in!"

He spurred his horse.

Without command, every guerrilla advanced behind the chosen leader of the band. Fletch Taylor spurred his horse up beside Quantrell's. He pointed with a shaking hand. "There's the camp."

Quantrell had already seen it. He half turned in his saddle and grinned when he saw Lieutenant Gregg on his other side.

"Get them, Lieutenant!" he ordered.

Lieutenant Gregg gestured toward the several rows of tents.

A half-dozen columns of fours broke instantly from the main body and charged the tents.

Donny Fletcher, remaining with Quantrell, was aghast at the fury of the guerrilla charge. The men rode their horses directly upon the tents, trampling them to earth and under them their still sleeping occupants. They fired at every squirming lump under the canvas.

Here and there a recruit got out from under the canvas, screaming in awful terror. He was immediately riddled with bullets.

Quantrell turned his eyes away from the slaughter.

"On to the Eldridge House!" he cried.

The column thundered up Massachusetts Street.

Donny Fletcher rode a few feet behind Quantrell. Every moment he expected death to flame out from the houses.

But none came: no concentrated fire, no organized resistance, not even single snipers shooting at them. As no resistance developed in their advance down Massachusetts Street the confidence of the guerrillas returned.

They began yelling and shooting. They still retained a reasonably close column, but the individual guerrillas' attention was given to the houses they passed. They riddled them with bullets. Here and there a frightened citizen scurried out of a house and was shot down.

A man stood in front of a house, his arms thrown over his head, paralyzed with fear. Dave Poole charged from the column and shot him through the head.

The Eldridge house was just ahead, now. A huge, four-story building of stone, it was said to be the finest hotel west of St. Louis. The advance upon it was a little more cautious than the charge down Massachusetts Street, for the building was a veritable fortress. If any resistance was to be made in Lawrence, it would be made here. A cordon of guerrillas was thrown about the building. The men began to fire their revolvers at the windows. Almost immediately a bed sheet was waved from a window and a mighty cheer went up from the guerrillas. Lawrence was theirs.

A blue-uniformed man appeared in the window and called for Quantrell by name.

Mounted upon a magnificent brown gelding, Quantrell rode forward. Lean and saturnine, this was the high tide of his infamous career. Lawrence, which had treated him so shabbily years ago, was at his feet. If he said the word every living creature in it would die today.

He spoke to the Federal officer in the window of the hotel. "I take it the white flag means the surrender of the hotel?"

The Federal officer: "It does, if you will guarantee the safety of the inmates."

"The lives of all prisoners will be spared," Quantrell said curtly.

Quantrell turned in his saddle and called out: "Captain Anderson, spread your men over the town. You have the list. See that none escape. Lawrence should be thoroughly cleaned. And the only way to do it is to kill! Kill!"

## CHAPTER XIV

ANDERSON and his command had been waiting for just that order. Numbering among them the youngest of the guerrillas, they were the fiercest, most blood-thirsty of the entire pack.

Reins in their teeth, Navy Colts in each hand, shooting them with reckless abandon, they went from house to house. They killed men in their beds, ran them down in attics and cellars. Here and there a man surrendered and asked for mercy and was killed. Wives and mothers pleaded for the lives of husbands, sons. Occasionally a life was spared, only to be taken by the next guerrilla to come along.

Donny Fletcher, swept along in the tide of Anderson's ruffians, was dazed by the awful carnage. For eighteen months he had ridden and fought with the guerrillas. He had shared in their hardships, ridden stirrup to stirrup against the belching muzzles of Federal carbines. It was war. Not such a war for which he had been trained but the kind of war that had been forced upon him.

But this — this was not warfare. This was murder, a slaughter of innocents.

A gray-bearded man burst out of the front door of a house, screaming piteously. Behind him charged a stripling, no more than fifteen, but with a deadly Colt in each hand. "Stand still, you damn Abolitionist!" the boy cursed, and punctuated his curse with a bullet.

Donny Fletcher heard the thud as the bullet hit the gray-bearded man in the back. A middle-aged woman came running out of the house behind the young guerrilla and caught hold of his arm. "For God's sake, don't kill him. He's old. He never hurt anyone in his life."

With a half-animal growl the boy shoved the woman away from him. She fell to her knees and scrambled forward to throw her body upon that of the old man, who lay in the dust of the street.

The guerrilla, his face distorted, caught the woman roughly by the shoulder and tried to pull her off the old man. Her scream wrung Donny Fletcher's heart. In a single bound he leaped from his horse and lunged for the guerrilla. But he was too late. The boy thrust a Navy pistol under the woman and pressed the trigger.

Abysmal rage exploded in Donny. He caught the youthful murderer by his left shoulder and with a single swirl threw him eight feet away. The guerrilla hit the street on his shoulders and bounded up, his eyes blazing death. But Donny was upon him then, his own Navy Colt two feet from the boy's face.

"You young devil!" he gritted. "I ought to kill you!"

The boy guerrilla showed no fear, only defiance.

"They murdered plenty of *our* folks. They hung my dad and whipped my ma. They beat me with a rope."

Donny cut him off. "I'll beat you with a pistol if I catch you doing anything like this again."

Guns were still banging. The screams of men and women were making the streets of Lawrence hideous. Donny tried to deafen his ears, but could not. He walked back toward the Eldridge Hotel, but before he reached it smoke was already issuing from the windows.

A detachment returned from burning Senator Jim Lane's mansion, enraged that the senator himself had not been home. They did not know that he had sprung out of the house at the first shot, clad only in his nightgown, and had dashed for the nearby cornfields.

After the removal of the prisoners from the Eldridge House to the Stone Hotel, Quantrell and some of his captains had breakfast cooked for them. Nathan Stone, the proprietor of the hotel, sat with Quantrell while he ate. Stone was an old friend, one of the few Lawrence citizens who had befriended Quantrell in his earlier residence. His house, accordingly, was to be spared.

After breakfast, Quantrell ordered a carriage brought to the door. He drove to the low summit of Mt. Oread, just outside the town, and climbed from the carriage. He looked down somberly upon the ruins of Lawrence.

"They ran me out once!" he muttered. "They wanted to hang me. Well, look at them now!"

After a while he got into the carriage and rode back to the ruined city. He frowned as he rode through the business section. Many of his men were drunk; they had broken open the liquor stores, the clothing stores, had outfitted themselves with clothes from head to foot, then butchered the clerks and burned the shops.

Cole Younger saw Quantrell and dashed up. "Colonel, don't you think we ought to leave? The men are getting drunk and in a little while the Federals will be here."

"Assemble the officers," Quantrell ordered. "Report to me at Stone's. We've got to work out our retreat, because it'll be hell!"

In a little while his officers — most of them — gathered at the Stone Hotel. George Todd and Bloody Bill Anderson were almost too drunk to stand. Quantrell regarded them scornfully.

"Do you fellows want to stay here? Right now a thousand Federals are galloping down on Lawrence. How can you get your men together if you're drunk yourselves?"

"Quantrell," said Bloody Bill Anderson, "you go to hell!" Quantrell's mouth tightened.



"Anderson," he said, "if you're looking for a fight . . ."

George Todd cut in. "I'm backin' Bill's play. We only came to Lawrence because we figured on gettin' plenty of plunder. We're gettin' it, an' —"

A mounted guerrilla galloped up to the veranda of the hotel and leaped to the ground.

"Colonel Quantrell," he yelled, "the Federals are comin'. A whole slew of 'em!"

"And there'll be more right along," Quantrell snapped grimly. "Fortunately, they're on the other side of the river and we took the trouble to cut the ferry cable. They'll take a little time getting across. But we haven't a minute to lose. Anderson — and you, Todd — you can do as you like with your men, but as for me —"

The guerrilla captains spoke hastily. "Oh, we're stickin' with you, Charley!"

"Then assemble your men. We ride out in five minutes."

Quantrell stepped down from the veranda of the hotel and walked to the middle of Massachusetts Street. He searched the horizon a moment, then pointed to a white house on the Wakarusa. "We'll wait there an hour. But not a minute longer. The men you can't get there will just have to take their chances."

He ran to the hitch-rail before the hotel, untied a magnificent black horse — not the one he had ridden to Lawrence. He vaulted into the saddle and waved to Donny.

"You, Fletcher. You'll cover the rear with thirty men!"

The report that the Federals were coming spread like fire through Lawrence. The guerrillas — those not too drunk to comprehend — swarmed down Massachusetts Street. Some fired a few houses that had been overlooked and most of them discharged their Navy pistols, to give themselves new courage.

Quantrell did not wait five minutes. He rode up Massachusetts Street with a bodyguard of a dozen men. Colonel Holt, with the majority of his men, followed close behind, and behind them came the rabble that was Bloody Bill Anderson's command. Todd remained a little longer, but galloped his

detachment and caught up with the main body at the town limits.

There, Donny Fletcher cut off thirty men and formed them in a double rank, with skirmishers thrown out on each end.

The great retreat was on, the retreat that was second in amazing performance only to the sack of Lawrence. Before the guerrillas had left the town they saw the Federal cavalry on the opposite side of the river and in the distance to the left, another force, undoubtedly hostile.

At the white house on the Wakarusa the guerrillas halted to await the arrival of Lieutenant Gregg and the stragglers. They came, strung out over the entire distance to Lawrence, galloping their horses as if a war party of Indians were behind them.

Lieutenant Gregg came up inside of a half hour. He reported to Quantrell, "I think I got them all."

"Then let's ride, because there come the Lawrence crowd — with guns."

The retreat was in a southerly direction. They had entered Kansas just below Aubry, and gone to Lawrence by an almost direct route. But that way was now too dangerous, for above Aubry was Westport and Kansas City, with its heavy concentration of troops.

Cavalry, no doubt, was trying to cut them off in the east, so Quantrell headed his force due south from Lawrence. By the time they reached the little village of Brooklyn, the rag-tag of pursuing Lawrence citizens caught up with them.

There were no more than forty or fifty of them, and Quantrell's detachment could easily have dispersed them, but to the north and east was the threat of the large Federal command and the guerrillas were in no mood to tarry.

Quantrell left the rear guard under Donny Fletcher to break up the disorganized pursuit. This Donny's command did with a single charge, but before they had gone a half mile the Lawrence men were after them again.

It was ride and fight from then on. The Lawrence men were under the personal command of Jim Lane, who had emerged from his cornfield hiding place the moment Lawrence was

cleared of the guerrillas. The guerrillas did not know this. Had they, the threat of a thousand men on his rear would not have kept Quantrell from turning and exterminating Lane.

Ten minutes after passing through Brooklyn, Lane's little command spied the detachment of Federal cavalry under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Plumb. A hurried consultation between Lane and Plumb resulted in a determined assault on the guerrillas.

It was a futile charge, however. Plumb's men and horses were fatigued to the point of exhaustion. Some responded, most did not, so that when the Federals came up to the guerrillas it was in a scattered, miserable formation.

Donny Fletcher lined up his thirty men, a half-dozen feet apart. The Federals were met with a withering revolver fire, and they broke almost as fast as they got in range.

Lieutenant Gregg came galloping up now with thirty additional men, sent by Quantrell to protect the retreat of the main band. Donny and Gregg immediately formed a plan of retreat. Each officer was to retain command of his thirty men. They would spread out in a thin line, each man forty to fifty feet from the next. The two commands would be four hundred feet apart.

One would face to the rear and pour a devastating fire at the Federals. When the Federals came too close for further safety, the guerrillas would gallop their horses to the rear, passing through the second command, who would in turn face the Federals until the first troop was behind them.

It was a brilliant piece of strategy and succeeded beyond expectations, despite the fact that the Federals were shortly joined by a strong force of militia which brought their entire strength up to twice the number of Quantrell's command.

The fighting abilities of the guerrillas were so feared by the Federals that their charges were timid, awkward. They broke with almost every volley from the guerrillas. Only the threats and commands of their officers kept them to their tasks, and sometimes the orders were given in quavering voices.

Quantrell cut to Paola and ran into a Federal force. Caught between two fires, he turned his men and charged the pursuing

Federals, and for ten minutes an intense battle raged. It ended with the rout of the Federals.

And that was the last organized resistance the guerrillas met. Incredible as it seemed, they marched fifty miles into Kansas without opposition, destroyed a town of 2,000 population and left more than one hundred and fifty of its citizens dead. They inflicted a monetary loss of more than a million dollars, made eighty widows and two hundred fifty orphans — and then began a retreat of almost a hundred miles, during which they burned almost every farmhouse they passed, killed dozens more, and outbluffed and outfought an aggregate of 1200 to 1500 troops and militia. And in the end the guerrillas dispersed completely. Only a few were ever captured.

## CHAPTER XV

EVEN the Missouri Southerners cringed when the reports of the Lawrence Massacre spread through the border counties. There would be retaliation for that black deed. It came even sooner than expected. The citizens of Independence saw the battalion of bluecoats entering the town from the west and knew that unpleasant events were about to transpire.

A group of officers gathered before the town hall and one of them tacked a sheet of paper on a bulletin board. Then the officers returned to their commands. A few of the citizens ventured up to the bulletin board and began reading the notice.

For a moment there was silence, then a gray-bearded man exclaimed in awe. "My Gawd!"

Susan Benton watched the entry of the troops from the veranda of the hotel. When the order was posted on the bulletin board she hurried across the street. She read:

Kansas City, Mo.  
August 23, 1863

Order #11

All persons living in Jackson, Bates and Cass Counties, Missouri and that part of Vernon County included in this

district, except those living within one mile of the limits of Independence, Hickman's Mills, Pleasant Hill and Harrisonville, and except those in Kaw Township, Jackson County, north of this creek and west of the Big Blue, embracing Kansas City and Westport, are hereby ordered to remove from their places of residence within fifteen days from the date hereof.

Those who within that time prove their loyalty to the satisfaction of the commanding officer of the military station nearest their present places of residence, will receive from him certificates stating the fact of their loyalty, and the names of the witnesses by whom it can be sworn. All who receive such certificates will be permitted to remove to any military station in this district, or to any part of Kansas except the counties on the eastern border of the state. All others shall remove out of this district. Officers commanding companies and detachments serving in companies will see that this paragraph is promptly obeyed.

All hay or grain in the field or under shelter in the district from which the inhabitants are required to remove, within reach of the military stations after the 9th of September next, will be taken to such stations and turned over to the proper officers there and a report of the amount so turned over made to the district headquarters, specifying the names of all loyal owners and the amount of such produce taken from them. All grain and hay found in such districts after the 9th of September next, not convenient to such stations, will be destroyed.

Thomas E. Ewing, Brigadier General  
Commanding, Military Department.

Susan Benton was stunned.

"They can't!" she whispered.

But she knew they could. For three days Independence had rung to the knell of Lawrence. Federal soldiers cursed the civilians on the streets, until the latter scarcely dared leave their homes. Rumors were rife that a Kansas invasion, in retaliation for the Lawrence massacre, would spare no man, woman or child not a proved Unionist.

And now it came, Order #11, with Kansas Troops to enforce it.

For months, Susan Benton had not talked to Ellen Fletcher. She had seen her numerous times on the street, but had passed

her with an aloof nod. It was unfair to cut Mrs. Fletcher because of her son, yet Susan could not face the older woman.

Now, however, she found her feet carrying her hurriedly to the residence of the Gages, where Ellen Fletcher was living. But as fast as she went, the news of Order Number Eleven went faster. Florence Gage preceded her into the house by sixty seconds.

Ellen Fletcher showed visible agitation.

"That applies to me!" she said "Stephen . . . Donny . . ."

"But you're already living in Independence," said Florence Gage. "Surely they won't bother you."

Her lips quivering, Susan Benton said: "Mrs. Fletcher, do you suppose — do you suppose Donny was at Lawrence that day?"

Ellen Fletcher crossed over to Susan and took both her hands in her own. "My dear, I don't know. But if he was, he is still my son."

A shudder ran through Susan. "I've been horrid to you these last months. I — you've probably wondered — it was because I met Donny last summer, when Quantrell raided here. He came into the hotel. I didn't know, I hadn't dreamed . . ." Her voice caught and she fell into Mrs. Fletcher's arms.

Florence Gage exclaimed in a frightened voice: "Ellen — Susan! They're here!"

Without the preliminary of knocking, the door was kicked open and four Federal soldiers swarmed into the house. A man with the chevrons of a sergeant on his sleeves said harshly: "Which one of you's Ellen Fletcher?"

Suddenly calm, Ellen Fletcher said: "I am."

The sergeant placed two big fists on his hips and scowled. "So, you're the woman who whelped a guerrilla! Why, you —"

Susan Benton screamed. "Stop it, or I'll have you reported to the provost marshal! You can't talk like that to —"

One of the privates stepped around the sergeant and caught Susan roughly by an arm. "Who the hell are you to talk, you stuck-up snob? You're Fletcher's sweetheart. Yah, you go around Independence with your nose in the air, too good for private soldiers! And you think we don't know what happened last year, when the Rebs were here!"



The sergeant showed his teeth in a wicked grin. "So we get two of the birds at one time. The mother and the sweetheart of a guerrilla. That's just fine. Now listen to this: you've got two weeks to leave this country, and if I were you, I wouldn't wait those two weeks!"

"You can't drive Susan away!" exclaimed Ellen Fletcher. "Her father is an officer in the Union Army."

"And her sweetheart's one of the Lawrence butchers. Father or no father, she goes with you!"

The soldiers trooped out of the house and the three women looked at one another.

"They can't!" whispered Florence Gage. "They can't enforce such a terrible order. Why, it means driving thousands of women and children from their homes. Where'll they go? What can they do?"

Everywhere in Clay, Jackson, Cass and Vernon Counties people were asking that question. There were very few able-bodied men in these homes, only boys too young to enlist in the army, or men too old; also those who were sick, wounded or crippled. But there were thousands upon thousands of women and children.

The order, said the Kansas troops, was to give Missourians a taste of what Kansans had experienced — as if Missourians didn't already know! Southern sympathizers had sheltered, fed and given information to guerrillas in the border counties. Henceforth, the Federals intended to make it impossible for a guerrilla to live in this country.

And so the exodus began. All day and night the roads were crowded with moving wagons, carrying household goods. Women and children walked, carrying clothing and what little food was allowed them.

The guerrillas who had been to Lawrence reached the border counties of Missouri on the twenty-second of September. By the twenty-third no single force of more than a dozen men could have been found anywhere. Guerrillas who had friends or relatives had gone to them for succor and shelter. Haymows were alive with men. Cellars and attics contained larger prey than mice and rats.

Furtive creatures slunk through the woods and hills and burrowed into holes in the ground. In the dense thickets near Lees Summit — less than a mile, in fact, from Donny Fletcher's cave — a dozen men lay under the bushes, almost suffocating from the stifling heat.

Quantrell was here; so, too, were Anderson and Todd, Bill Gregg, Cole Younger and Frank James. Here came Donny Fletcher, who had no friends, no relatives to hide him.

Donny lay in the woods like a wild animal, listening to the quarreling of the others around him, yet not hearing. He was thinking. Yesterday and the day before had been too hectic for clear thinking. Under the stress of fighting and running, the sight of blood and death, his brain had been too chaotic to see anything clearly.

But now he saw things with a clarity that had never been granted him before. These men around him had started as guerrillas and bushwhackers. A cause had bound them together, given them a semblance of righteousness. But when had that cause disappeared? When had they ceased being soldiers and become beasts and murderers?

As he lay on the ground, pondering that question, a man beside him sprang suddenly to his knees.

"Someone's coming!" he said in a frightened voice.

Guns leaped into hands and a dozen pairs of eyes tried to pierce the thicket around them. The hammer of a revolver clicked in the sudden stillness and a man jumped at the slight sound.

Then Bill Gregg exclaimed in a tone of profound relief: "It's Hank Tate!"

Charley Quantrell cursed fluidly. "Damn you, Tate, make more noise when you're going through these woods."

Henry Tate, who looked now as wild as any of Anderson's hellions, dropped to his knees and scuttled under the bush where Quantrell was crouching.

"I got something, Colonel," he said. "It was posted in Lees Summit only a couple hours ago. Thought you'd like to see it." He fumbled in his jacket and brought out a soiled, folded sheet of paper.

Quantrell ripped it from his hands and opened it. He read

silently for a moment, then gasped: "Boys, listen to this order Ewing's just issued!"

In a tone that had a whine in it, he read aloud the text of Order #11. When he concluded, Bloody Bill Anderson began cursing as Donny Fletcher had never heard that master of the art curse before.

"Why, the dirty — They can't do that. No order like that's ever been issued!"

There was a frightened look in Quantrell's greenish eyes. "I've never heard the like of it. Why, if this order is obeyed to the letter, it'll make the border counties a howling wilderness like they were a hundred years ago. We — we won't be able to live around here."

"Perhaps that's the idea," Donny said soberly. "They haven't been able to wipe us out by force of arms. Lawrence was the last straw."

Bloody Bill Anderson glared at Donny. "Sometimes, Fletcher, I wonder about you — if you're with us, or still in the Union Army."

"I wonder about you, sometimes," Donny replied calmly. "About whether I'm going to have to kill you."

Bloody Bill began mouthing obscenities and in the midst of them reached for his guns, but Quantrell struck at his hands. "Cut it out, Bill. We've got something serious to face. We've got to leave these hills."

"Why?" demanded George Todd. "We ain't never had to leave before."

"I just got through telling you that this order changes the picture," Quantrell replied testily.

"They'll never enforce it," Todd retorted. "Yeah, sure, they'll burn some houses, but they can't burn them all. And there's plenty logs to build more. Anyway, we ain't going to be loafing while things are popping."

Quantrell shook his head. "You're underestimating Jim Lane. I've told you time after time that he's got more influence with Lincoln than anyone in Washington. He'll flood these counties with Federal troops."

"Just the same," said Bloody Bill, glowering, "I don't figure

on leaving. I stand with George. We're wasting time right now. Let's get busy."

"It's suicide!" cried Quantrell.

"So what? How about you, Bill?"

Bill Gregg tugged at his beard. "Well, these folks around here have been pretty good to us. I'm thinkin' maybe they need some help from our side, now."

The others agreed vociferously with Gregg, and Quantrell found himself alone. He gave in, although ungraciously. "All right, we'll fight. Tate, Shepard, get going and send the word around. Tell the boys to gather here."

All through the night guerrillas came into the camp in answer to Quantrell's summons; by dawn almost a hundred had assembled. Meager breakfasts were eaten and then the guerrillas broke up into a half-dozen commands, with the announced plan of uniting southwest of Independence in the late afternoon.

Donny noted that Quantrell's personal command was one of the smallest and attached himself to it. They left the forest and almost immediately came upon a troop of Union cavalry, plodding along the dusty road. They were sighted, but fled to the protection of the trees and the troop did not follow. Thereafter, the guerrillas kept off the roads.

Toward noon, attracted by a fire that seemed larger than most they had seen they ventured into a clearing and found a scant half-dozen Federals. They charged them furiously and Federals seemed to spring out of the very ground. The guerrillas ran, leaving two dead.

Quantrell complained bitterly as they slunk through the woods. "I tell you, they've got us licked. There are twenty thousand bluecoats in Jackson County alone. And they'll be pouring in every day. They'll wipe us out if we don't leave."

Donny Fletcher looked up contemptuously at Quantrell. The lion who had ridden down upon Lawrence was a whining jackal now. Did he know he had passed his zenith, that his star was fading?

As they moved cautiously northward, the pillars of smoke in the sky became more numerous. Gunfire was almost continuous, but whether this was because of the resistance of

individual Southerners who objected to their property being destroyed, or brushes between other guerrillas and Federals, Quantrell and his command could not determine.

They kept away from the vicinity of the gunfire. In fact, had Quantrell not promised to meet Anderson and Todd near Independence, he would most certainly have turned back from this march.

They were about four miles from Independence when it became necessary to cross a road. Quantrell approached it hesitantly and would not permit any man to go ahead of him. When he finally looked out upon the road, he dropped to the ground with an exclamation of awe.

Donny moved up and looked out. He gasped. There were people upon the road: people, wagons and horses. As far as he could see were women and children, wagons piled high with household goods. Here and there an aged man — no young men at all. It was The Exodus!

He fell down beside Quantrell. "I think you were right," he said. "The troops are carrying out Order #11 to the last letter — and beyond!"

"Where'll they go?" Quantrell whispered wonderingly. "These people haven't had any money for years." He did not add that he had sown the wind and these people were reaping the whirlwind.

"They can't go to Kansas," Donny said, "and they can't stay in Missouri. Kentucky — it's too far." His eyes widened suddenly.

His mother. She was in Independence, which was one of the military towns exempt from Order Number Eleven. But it was known that one of her sons was a guerrilla. Would they let her remain? These people out here were coming from Independence!

"Let's go out and talk to them," he suggested.

Quantrell caught his arm. "Hell, no. Didn't you see the soldiers?"

Donny rose and looked again upon the road. Yes, there were soldiers riding up and down the long line. Not many, but there might be more concealed in the wagons.

His mouth became a thin, straight line. "All right, Quantrell, let's go and meet the others — if they got this far!"

The appointed rendezvous was at the Gedlow farm. The guerrillas were there, but they were skulking behind the farm. And the numbers were considerably depleted since that morning.

Bloody Bill Anderson had a bloody rag about his head. He was raging like a wounded tiger. "It was fight, fight, all the way. I never saw so many Yanks in all my life."

"I warned you," Quantrell said. "How many men did you lose?"

"What the hell's the difference? We got some Feds, more than they got of us."

"But they've got more men to begin with. They can lose five to every one of us and never miss them."

George Todd crept up, scowling. "All right, we've been run out of Jackson. How about Clay County?"

"There'll be more in Clay than here," Quantrell said, "thanks to your own work up there in the past."

"Then Cass County," snapped Todd. "Plenty good Southern folk there."

Quantrell shrugged. "We'll try it, but my idea is — Texas."

They retreated to Cass County. They found even more Union troops than they had left behind them in Jackson County. And they found more burned houses, saw more refugees along the road.

Order Number Eleven was being enforced, to the accompaniment of gunfire, the screams of bereaved widows and the cries of dying men.

On September 15, Bates, Jackson, Cass and half of Vernon County, with the exception of the sheltered oases, was a barren land. In the words of an officer who aided in the execution of the infamous order: "A crow couldn't fly through those counties without carrying his own rations."

Order Number Eleven was a blot upon Union history.



## CHAPTER XVI

RETREAT, for the guerrillas, was defeat. For two years they had ravaged the border counties. They had fought the Federals a hundred times and had dispersed almost as often. That had been part of the game. The Southern population, decidedly in the majority, had fed, sheltered and succored them.

But now there were no more Southern people. There were no places to hide, no food to be had, no secret information to be whispered in their ears. Without those things the guerrillas could not exist in Missouri.

So they retreated —unwillingly, savagely. They had brought it upon themselves and they knew it, but it did not make things easier.

Bill Anderson expressed the sentiments of most of the men. "Why the hell don't they send Price up here, or Shelby? His brigade'd be enough, with our crowd to help him."

"No, it wouldn't," Donny Fletcher said. "The eyes of the North are on Missouri now and they're going to protect it with everything they've got. We've ourselves to thank for that."

Anderson looked at Donny with hot eyes. "Why the hell you ever threw in with us, Fletcher, I don't know."

"I often wonder myself, Anderson," Donny said evenly. "And I guess quite a few of the boys do too. That Lawrence business wasn't our idea of war. All that's happening to our own people here is our fault."

Anderson began cursing. "Damn you, Fletcher. I'll —"

Big Cole Younger rode up on the other side of Anderson.

"Bill," he said, "some day one of us is going to get fed up with you."

Anderson's bloodshot eyes turned to the left, to Younger, then to the right, to Fletcher. He licked his lips. "You takin' Fletcher's side, Younger?"

"I'm taking my own side," Cole Younger replied. "And I may have more to say about that after a while. Or maybe you want to make an issue of it now?"

Anderson snarled and spurred his horse from between

Younger and Donny. Near the head of the column he pulled up beside George Todd.

"Two of a kind," said Donny.

Cole Younger shook his head. "What do you say, Fletcher — shall we quit it?"

Donny blinked. "Quit? How can we quit?"

Younger shrugged. "I saw you at Lawrence. You were pretty disgusted. So was I. You were right a minute ago; we brought all this on our own people. We're sorry — and what good does that do?"

"None at all, Cole. But quit — we can't do that. They won't let us."

"Who? Quantrell? Bill? The hell with them. I've been thinking about it for a long time. When we reach Texas, I'm going to enlist in the regular Confederate Army. So are some of my boys. Why don't you come along with us?"

Donny shook his head. "I can't, Cole. It's hard to explain. I guess I've never really got it straight in my own mind. You see, I'm a graduate of West Point."

"The Union didn't treat you very well. You fought them in Missouri —"

"I know. I've gone over that. And I joined Quantrell. I had to. It didn't seem just like fighting the Union. Kansas, yes, but Kansas was fighting me. It seemed like self-defense at first, but these last few months . . ." Bleakness spread across Donny's face.

The head of the column had stopped. Tom Maupin galloped down the line.

"Federal camp just ahead!" he yelled. "Watch yourself. We may have a fight."

Both Younger and Donny rode to the front, where the several commanders were having a heated discussion.

"They haven't got a regular fort," Fletch Taylor was saying. "Just some earthworks thrown up. Not more'n a hundred men."

Quantrell glowered. "It's not that. We can lick them all right. But we're going to lose a lot of men. Is it worth it, for what we can gain? We're going to enter the Indian country

tomorrow and we're going to need every man to get through alive."

"And we're going to need food, too!" snapped George Todd. "They've got it at the camp. And wagons and horses. It's five hundred miles to Texas, through bad country."

"If you're afraid, Quantrell —" sneered Bill Anderson.

"Have you ever seen me run?" Quantrell demanded angrily. "Who was it suggested Lawrence?"

A guerrilla galloped up on a jaded horse.

"Blunt's out there!" he shouted.

"General Blunt?" Quantrell cried. "He's at the fort?"

"He's five miles away, headin' for it with an escort. There ain't more'n forty men in the fort."

"The hell with the fort!" exclaimed Anderson. "Let's get Blunt. A general! Let's capture us a general, boys. What do you say?" He turned and shouted to the guerrillas at large.

Their yells and the sudden spurring forward of horses was his answer. It was a general forward movement that swept Donny Fletcher along with the crest.

They burst through the timber out upon the open stretch of prairie and came upon an amazing scene. To the south was the camp of the Federals, as Taylor had reported, a mere rectangle with breastworks on three sides. A small detachment of soldiers was lined up outside of it, facing to the north.

In the north, a half mile away, was a double rank of Federal cavalry, with a string of wagons behind it. But it was the vanguard that caught the attention of the guerrillas: two wagonloads of musicians, their instruments gleaming in the bright sun.

General Blunt was about to approach his camp, in true parade-ground fashion, the band playing, his escort riding behind in formation.

The strange sight brought the guerrillas to a halt, but only for an instant. Quantrell sized up the situation and with his usual brilliance about such things, grasped the strategic thing to do.

"We can't let them get into the fort!" he cried. "We've got to drive a wedge between them. Gregg — Younger — Poole, attack the fort!"

Commands rang out and fifty of the guerrillas rushed to the left. Quantrell and the remaining leaders galloped straight forward, the rest of the men following them.

By this time Blunt had seen the guerrillas and issued quick orders. His men fronted into a single column, facing the camp and the oncoming guerrillas. It was a foolish thing for Blunt to do. His force was outnumbered by the guerrillas. If he had made a rush for the earthworks he might have lost a few men, but the majority of them would have gained the shelter, and with the two forces united the Federals could have withstood an indefinite siege.

But Blunt was contemptuous of the guerrillas. His men were veterans. They were splendidly mounted and well equipped. Certainly they should be able to disperse the rabble that was descending upon them.

The smaller detachment of guerrillas were upon the camp now, yelling and firing. Quantrell knew that they could not storm the earthworks, but he knew, too, that they would prevent the smaller force of Federals from coming to the aid of General Blunt and his escort.

He gave an order and the guerrillas brought their horses to a halt and faced General Blunt's command, two hundred yards away. Between them, although somewhat to the west, were the wagons containing the band.

As yet, General Blunt's escort had not fired a shot. They had evidently been ordered to hold their fire until the guerrillas charged. But if their commander held the guerrillas in contempt, the soldiers did not. One or two of the men backed their horses away, wheeled and tried to gallop away. An officer forced them back into the line at the point of a pistol.

Quantrell saw the episode and a gleam came to his eyes.

"They're scared stiff!" he said. "Let them have it, men!"

The fierce guerrilla yell went up and the guerrillas charged in a mass. The Federals promptly scattered before them. It was the worst thing they could have done. At that sort of work the guerrillas were unexcelled. The guerrillas, as always, were mounted on the best horses that could be bought or stolen. Their main arm was the Navy Colt and not a man of them had less than two.

Reins in their teeth, a revolver in each hand, the guerrillas rode down the scattered Federals.

Donny Fletcher was in the front of the charge, but when the Federals broke, he brought up his horse. His talk with Cole Younger, his thoughts of the past several days were heavy upon him. A fight against an equal, a Federal command that met them on even terms, he could have faced — but not a rout and subsequent slaughter. He had seen too much of that.

Yet purely by chance he was forced to witness the worst atrocity of all. To the west, the wagons containing the band and several civilians had taken flight. Some of Gregg's men, who had attacked the camp, cut them off and the wagons turned and came back.

Several of Quantrell's command stopped chasing soldiers and swooped down upon the band. Donny rushed his horse forward. The musicians were unarmed; several had already thrown their instruments from the wagons, apparently thinking to lighten the loads the horses must pull.

Then disaster overtook the lead wagon. A wheel came loose and the wagon overturned, spilling musicians and instruments upon the prairie.

A man in civilian's clothing was the first to leap to his feet. Donny Fletcher bore down upon him, yelling: "Drop to the ground!"

Bill Gregg, galloping up from the south, almost collided with Donny.

"What the hell, Fletcher?" he cried.

"They'll surrender!" Donny exclaimed. "They're unarmed."

The second band wagon had been halted beside the overturned first. Men were piling out, their arms raised in surrender.

A howling guerrilla rushed his horse into the thick of the musicians, firing his revolvers with both hands. Donny threw up his own revolver and snapped a quick shot at the guerrilla. The horse the ruffian was riding broke and plunged among the bandmen. But the guerrilla bounced out and fell upon a short, slight figure in civilian clothes.

He thrust both revolvers forward and fired. A dozen guerrillas galloped between Donny and the musicians and Donny

wheeled his horse and rode away. He was suddenly very sick.

It was slaughter again, shooting down unarmed noncombatants, civilians, fleeing soldiers—the specialty of the guerrilla!

At the edge of the timber he dismounted from his horse and looked back upon the scene of the carnage. The prairie was dotted with slain soldiers. Here and there a guerrilla was still galloping around, and near the earthworks a group of them were firing desultorily. But the main band of the guerrillas were gathered about the captured supply train. Looting. Ah, they were good at that!

A loathing filled Donny Fletcher. A loathing for Charley Quantrell, Bloody Bill Anderson, George Todd—every guerrilla, most of all, himself.

THE war reeled on. The battles became more frequent, more bloody. The screams of the dying drowned out the sobs of the living.

The guerrillas were gone. They had left Missouri. The slaughter of a hundred men at Baxter Springs was their parting outrage. Reports of their progress through the Indian Territory drifted back to Missouri. The ferocity of the guerrillas had frightened even the Indians.

Order Number Eleven was repealed in November and families who had been exiled by it began to come back to western Missouri. They found their homes burned, their livestock gone. Some built rude shacks; others lived outdoors, in the woods, even though the snow fell heavily that winter and the cold was more intense than even the old residents remembered it.

Federal patrols rode upon the main highways, but avoided the back roads and trails. The country was desolated; there was no need to beat the forest. The few returned citizens could do no damage. Their spirit had been broken during The Exodus.

Yet, as the winter wore on, shadows flitted through the wildest sections of the Sni Hills. Guerrillas? No, Quantrell was in Texas. There were rumors that his men had deposed him,



that they had enlisted as Confederate soldiers in Kirby Smith's army division.

At any rate, there were no raids upon Federal outposts. Stages and supply trains traveled the border counties with small escorts and were not attacked. So the guerrillas must still be in Texas.

They were — most of them. But the rumors had a small element of truth in them. The retreat to Texas, the inactivity of the winter, accomplished what 20,000 Federals in Missouri had not been able to do: the disintegration of the guerrillas.

Donny Fletcher did not see it happen, for he had not gone to Texas. The slaughter at Baxter Springs had been the last straw. When the guerrillas rode southwest, he rode southeast. With him went Cole Younger and a dozen others. Donny left them in Arkansas and they continued south. He traveled eastward by slow degrees, hiding by day and traveling by night. When he found a sheltered spot, he remained for days at a time. He set snares for rabbits, fished in the icy streams and now and then, when he was in an isolated section, he shot game.

November found him in eastern Arkansas. There he learned of the repeal of Order Number Eleven. He resisted temptation for several weeks, but shortly after Christmas he began moving north and west.

When spring came he was once more in the Sni Hills. There was life in the hills again, but he did not become a part of it. Not until he returned to his cave one day and was shocked to find an old friend and companion-in-arms sleeping on his single blanket. It was Henry Tate, who had been present that day, so long ago, when Donny had turned guerrilla.

He shook Henry awake. "When did you get back from Texas, Henry?"

Tate, who wore a fierce-looking black beard these days, grinned. "Been back a long time. I came back with the chief."

"Quantrell? He's back?"

"Oh, sure. He's here with his wife."

"Wife?"

Henry Tate grimaced. "Well, he calls her that. He's changed a lot. Never got over Todd runnin' him out."

"Todd, eh? I wondered if it would be he or Anderson."

"Well, it was really both of them. They ganged up on Charley; got the men lined up, but it was George who pulled a gun on Quantrell and told him to beat it, or else."

"And Quantrell wouldn't fight?"

"Wouldn't be any use. He'd just got hisself killed. A few of us stuck with him. I didn't like Texas, anyhow."

"But you're still with Quantrell?"

"No, I been tellin' you, Quantrell's in the brush with his wife. Ain't no one with him. Say, Donny —"

"Yes?"

Henry Tate wet his lips. "I saw a friend of yours yesterday. Fact, that's why I came here today. She sent me."

"She?"

Emotions long dormant in Donny Fletcher suddenly stirred. His pulse seemed suddenly faster and there was a faint drumming in his temples.

He looked at Henry Tate.

Henry said: "Miss Benton. She's livin' on the old place again."

"Their house was burned," Donny said harshly.

"She had a log shack built. Been livin' there some time. I happened to be goin' by and stopped. She asked about you, wants to see you."

It was two years. Two years since Quantrell had captured Independence and Donny had seen Susan Benton the last time, had seen her look of contempt and heard her scornful words. It was two years since he had tried to forget her — and remembered every feature of her.

Yes, there was a log cabin near the ruins of the old Benton mansion. There was also a small field of corn and a tiny vegetable garden. Susan Benton, in a faded, patched gingham dress was working in the garden.

When she saw Donny Fletcher her hands tightened on the hoe until her knuckles showed white.

There was a roaring in Donny's ears as he said: "I got your message. You wanted to see me?"

Her lips moved soundlessly for a moment; then words came

from them. "I — I heard you were back . . . Living in the woods."

She seemed no older than she had been back in '61. A faint line or two, perhaps, around her mouth, tiny spider webs at the corners of the eyes. Her features were the same, still finely chiseled. Her mouth was firm. Was it quivering?

Words — words! They rushed to his throat, beat at his brain and his tongue would not say them.

The tip of her tongue moistened her lips. And then suddenly she burst out, "Can't you say something? How long are you going to keep it up?"

Inanely, he asked: "Keep what up?"

She swept a hand toward the forest. "That! Living in the woods, like a beast."

Bewildered, he gasped, "What else can I do?"

"Surrender to the government."

"But I can't. I can't surrender. I'm not a soldier. They'd kill me."

Sudden contempt twisted her mouth. "Is life so dear, then? I thought it was cheap at Lawrence!"

"Susan!" he gasped.

She gripped her hoe fiercely. "You were at Lawrence, weren't you? You killed your share there."

"I didn't. I never fired my gun once in the time we were there. I couldn't stand the thought of —"

"But you *were* there. And because of what you and your companions did, twenty thousand innocent people suffered. Do you know what happened to your mother? She was driven from her home, exiled like a criminal —"

Each word was a stab in his heart. His hands came up before him. "Where is she?"

Stonily, Susan Benton looked at him. "She's all right — now. But, Donny, I mean it, why don't you surrender? Take your medicine. The war isn't going to last forever. You said a moment ago you did not kill anyone at Lawrence. It bears out a report I heard last winter: that you'd quit the guerrillas, because you couldn't go on."

His forehead creased. "It's true, Susan. I quit them months

ago. But what can I do? I've been outlawed. If I surrender, it's — "

Behind him, Donny heard the snap of a twig. He started to turn and a voice called:

"All right, Fletcher! Hold it!"

Half-turned, Donny froze. His eyes went to Susan Benton's face, saw it white and drawn, but not shocked. She had known.

Soldiers converged upon Donny from three sides. Seven or eight of them, carbines held at the ready. A sergeant came around and plucked Donny's two Navy Colts from his belt.

Susan Benton had betrayed him. She had sent Henry Tate to draw him out here; she had held him in conversation by alternately taunting and pleading with him. She had broken down his vigilance. And then the soldiers had come out of their hiding places.

They rode into Independence, the Federal cavalymen with the captured guerrilla. They dismounted before a two-story brick building and the sergeant in command of the detail walked with Donny to the door.

"Inside, Fletcher," the sergeant said. "The provost marshal will talk to you."

Donny pushed open the door and entered a small, sparsely furnished room. An officer wearing the oak leaves of a major sat behind a desk. He looked casually at Donny, gasped and pushed back his chair.

"Donny Fletcher!"

Donny inhaled softly. "Bill Wheeler!"

Major Wheeler came around his desk and gripped Donny's hand. "Donny, I'm glad to see you."

It wasn't until then that Donny backed away. "You — you're the provost marshal?"

Wheeler grimaced. "It's three years since we graduated from West Point. I'm only a major. I wasn't as lucky as George Custer." He laughed shortly. "Remember him, Donny? He graduated last in the class and he's gotten ahead of all of us. He's a brigadier general now, and he'll have two stars before this is over. I never thought it — "

He broke off abruptly. "I'm sorry, Donny." He stepped past

Donny and closed the door behind him; then he came back and gripped Donny's arm. "Sit down, Donny. We've got to have a talk."

Donny shook his head. He looked down at his clothing. "Can't you see? Can't you guess what I am?"

Major Wheeler nodded. "Of course. I'd heard of you even before I was assigned to this post. It's that I want to talk about."

"I'm your prisoner, Bill. It looks like you're the one's got to do the dirty job."

Wheeler walked around his desk and sat down in his chair. He leaned back and looked at Donny with suddenly narrowed lids. "All right, you're my prisoner. Now what?"

"What else is there? I'm a guerrilla. I know what your orders are."

"The firing squad, Donny?"

"Yes."

Major Wheeler drew a deep breath. "Three years ago —"

"Don't, Bill. Please!"

Major Wheeler seemed not to hear. He went on remorselessly. "Three years ago you were the best man in our class. You were the most brilliant graduate of the lot. If anyone had made any predictions as to which man had the best chance of succeeding, I think you would have been selected. Custer —"

"Bill!"

Wheeler laughed hollowly. "All right, Donny, I won't say any more. You're my prisoner. As provost marshal of this district, I have a duty to perform. It's not without precedent. Guerrillas have been declared outlaws and, according to orders, must be executed when captured. That the guerrilla happens to be the former classmate of the provost marshal does not enter into the matter."

Donny whispered: "Bill, this isn't easy."

Wheeler kicked back his chair and sprang to his feet. "Do you think it's easy for me? I can issue an order condemning a guerrilla to death and think no more of it, for I know that the world is better off without him. But when that guerrilla happens to be Donny Fletcher, my best friend for four years, a man I regarded as a brother . . . Do you think it's easy to

shoot him down like a dog? My God, what do you think my feelings have been ever since I sent for you?"

"You sent for me?"

"Of course, you idiot. Do you think Susan Benton sent for you of her own accord? Do you think she betrayed the man she loved so he would face a firing squad?"

Donny Fletcher dropped into a chair. "I don't understand."

Wheeler straightened and looked down at Donny. "I've been in Missouri since '62. I know your complete record, what they did to you in Rolla and here in Jackson County. I know what the others have done and I'm not going to condemn or defend anyone, certainly not you. Perhaps, in your place I'd have done the same thing. But, Donny, it can't go on. It's gone much too far already. You've seen this country desolated. Yes, I know some of it is the result of our own enforcement of Order Number Eleven. But just the same, that cannot be repeated, on either side."

"It won't be," said Donny. "The guerrillas are scattered."

"Are they? Then they'll assemble again. I happen to have information that Price is massing an army in Arkansas, that he is coming up into Missouri again. Quantrell will be ahead of him, or with him."

"Quantrell's through. He hasn't been in command since shortly after Lawrence."

"Then Todd and Anderson. They're as bad as Quantrell, if not worse. Anderson is less than fifty miles from here right now, and Todd is not much further away. As soon as Price sets foot in Missouri, they'll be out. It will be as bad as last year — worse, because they know now they're fighting for a lost cause. The Confederacy is on its last legs. It's just a matter of time until Lee surrenders in the East. But there's no Lee out here, just a dozen independent murderers, who carried on a war before Bull Run and who will keep it up after Lee surrenders."

"Missouri," said Donny, bitterly.

Wheeler nodded soberly. "Missouri has seen too much blood. Missourians are sick of it. I think they want no more. That's why the guerrillas must be exterminated. And that's the reason I sent for you, Donny."

Donny blinked. "You can take mine. I know my life's forfeit."

"Oh, damn your life!" exclaimed Wheeler impatiently. "I've been trying to tell you. What would Missouri or this country gain by taking the life of one guerrilla, a reformed guerrilla, at that? You're nothing, Donny, nothing at all. Neither am I, for that matter. There are thousands of majors in the United States Army, but there is only one Quantrell, one George Todd and one Anderson. Three fabulous men who've gripped the imaginations of a half-million Missourians, struck terror to their hearts. That unholy trio, Quantrell, Todd and Anderson are more important than a thousand like you and me. Dead, I mean."

"Kill George Todd and you can withdraw a brigade from Missouri. Kill Quantrell, Todd and Anderson and you can protect Missouri with a corporal's guard. You can withdraw twenty thousand troops and send them to Virginia, where they're needed. Do you get what I'm driving at, Donny? I want Quantrell, Todd and Anderson, if I can get them, but Quantrell most of all. That's why I sent for you."

Donny got up from his chair. "I think I understand now. You want me to betray Quantrell, tell you where he is."

"Tell, hell. You could tell me exactly where he is and before I could get within ten miles of him, the grapevine telegraph would have told him I'm coming. You know that as well as I. It's Missourians who have protected Quantrell, sheltered and protected him as well as his men. They've done it for three years, and they'll continue to do it, because he's their Messiah."

"Well, in what other way can you get Quantrell?"

Major Wheeler's eyes glinted. Hard knots of muscle stood out on his jaws. "The way *another* Messiah was put out of the way. By a Judas."

Danny recoiled. "You want me to betray him?"

"War," said Major Wheeler, "can be like that."

"Bill, I agree with everything you've said. And I don't like Quantrell. I never did like him, but I rode with him as a comrade. You can't expect me —"

"I can," Wheeler snarled. "I can ask you to do anything



that is right. You've conceded that your life is forfeit, that you have no right to call yourself a human being. You're dead. A dead man has no brain, no emotion; so I can ask you to do anything, even be a Judas."

Donny's face became gray. Wheeler looked at it; wincing, he dropped the harshness from his voice. "Oh, can't you see, this is war. A general can send a thousand men to certain death if it means a victory. He can send his own son charging against a cannon.

"Anybody can die. Why, it's really easy to have a gun in your hand and charge another man with a gun. It isn't much harder to stand up before a firing squad. But for some men, a man like you, Donny, whom I know as well as I know myself, it's much harder to do what I'm asking you to do. And yet I know you will do it."

"All right, Bill," Donny said in a low tone. "I'll do it."

His victory won, Wheeler said in a tone he tried to make casual, "It's got to be just between you and me. No one else must know."

"But Susan —"

"I haven't told her. She doesn't know why I wanted you. I merely convinced her that it was absolutely essential that I have a talk with you."

## CHAPTER XVII

DONIPHAN FLETCHER skulked through the Missouri River bottoms as only a guerrilla of three years' standing could travel. Ragged, unshaven, uncouth, he slept under an overhanging ledge of the river one night, in a soggy marsh the next, and a third crawled into a clump of almost impenetrable brush. By day he moved furtively. When he came to a clearing, he scouted it for an hour before daring to show himself. His appearance alone told the farmer his status. And by his reaction, Donny would know whether there would be immediate pursuit, or whispered information.

He heard persistent reports that Quantrell had taken to the brush with his mistress, Kate Clarke, and that he had sworn

to have nothing to do with Price's campaign. But no one seemed to know exactly where he was hiding. Of Anderson and Todd, reports were more definite. Anderson was in the eastern part of the state, north of Missouri, laying waste the countryside.

Todd was nearer at hand, raiding along the river. Near Richmond, Donny ventured to approach a miserable log cabin and as he engaged a bearded farmer in conversation, a pair of wild-looking boys sprang from the cabin behind the farmer and covered Donny with gleaming Navy pistols.

"Throw up your hands!" one of them cried.

Donny started to obey, instinctively. Then with his hands even with his shoulders, he exclaimed: "Wait a minute, boys. You know me; at least you should." He nodded to the older boy, who might have been seventeen.

The young ruffian looked coolly at Donny for a moment; then recognition came to his eyes and his guns went down. "Why sure, you're Captain Fletcher. You was at Lawrence."

Donny nodded. "I remember your face." He remembered more too. This was one of Bill Anderson's whelps who had run amok that gory day.

"Yeah, sure," said the guerrilla. "I'm Jim Cummings. This is my pard, Donny Pence."

"Donny — that wouldn't be Doniphan, would it?"

The youngest guerrilla nodded. "Uh-uh. My pap named me after Colonel Doniphan."

"What are you boys doing around here?"

Jim Cummings jerked the muzzle of a Navy pistol at the farmer. "Visitin' my uncle. We was at home near Kearney; now we're going back to join Captain Todd."

"That's fine," exclaimed Donny. "I'll go with you."

Donny Pence suddenly nudged Jim Cummings. Then he leaned over and whispered something in the latter's ear. Cummings' close-set eyes narrowed even more.

"Say, I ain't seen you in almost a year. You left us in Texas last winter. Where've you been since?"

Donny waved vaguely toward the south. "At home, Jackson County."

"Yeah?" said Cummings. "Donny just reminded me. Seems

Captain Todd said something about you awhile ago. It wasn't so good."

Donny shrugged. "Oh, I was a little sore after Lawrence. I didn't see where all this was getting me. You know, I didn't get a dollar out of Lawrence and I didn't quite like the way Quantrell let Gregg and me and some of the boys stand off the whole Union army while he made his getaway."

"Todd didn't like that, either," said Cummings. "It was one of the things he held against Quantrell. He never did like the way Quantrell always watched out for his own hide."

Donny Pence said: "I'm the best revolver shot in Clay County."

Jim Cummings brightened. "He ain't just talkin', Captain. He's only sixteen, but there ain't a man in the outfit could beat him shootin'."

"I'll show you," said the beardless guerrilla.

Donny Fletcher made an impatient gesture. "Show me the next time we meet a Federal."

George Todd had changed. His jaw was slack, now, and when he talked saliva bubbled on his lips. Always a fierce fighter, he was now absolutely without restraint. He stared at Donny Fletcher and his jaws worked.

"You!" he spat. "Why aren't you with Quantrell, hiding out in the brush like a yellow dog?"

Donny shrugged vaguely. "I heard you'd been seeing some action."

"Action!" A fanatical gleam lit up Todd's blood-shot eyes. "Did you hear what we did at Centralia? The Yanks chased us out of town and when they caught up with us, they dismounted to give us a volley." He laughed, without humor. "The fools dismounted to fight us! Can you imagine that?"

"I can't," said Donny. "How many were there?"

"As many as us. Maybe two hundred and fifty. We wiped them out; not more than a dozen got away and we lost only one man."

Donny gasped: "You killed two hundred and forty Federals?"

Todd waved in the general direction of his command. "See

the nice blue uniforms the boys are wearing? They got them at Centralia."

Donny shook his head. Bill Wheeler had been right. The guerrillas were out again, and they were stronger than ever. They were emboldened by success and drunk with blood. They were no longer human beings, but savage beasts of the forest. These last two or three weeks Donny had seen evidence of the terror they had draped over the countryside.

If Price was successful in Missouri, the guerrillas would make a shambles of the state.

Donny said casually, "Where's Price now?"

Todd showed yellow teeth: "He's marching to Boonville."

"He took Jefferson City?"

"Naw. The Feds dug trenches and Price figured he didn't want to waste no time, takin' such a small town. He went around it. Shelby took Boonville last week. He's up around Glasgow now. In a couple of days he and Fagan and Marmaduke are going to join up with Price and then it's Kansas City. We'll have it next week."

A fine film of perspiration appeared on Donny's forehead. "You're going with Price?"

"You bet!" Todd smacked his lips. "We're meetin' him tomorrow or the day after. And it's action from then on."

Donny nodded grimly. "That will suit me. That is, if it's all right with you."

Todd frowned. "Well, to tell you the truth, you and me never got on too well, but I guess I can use you. The boys have been a little hard to handle lately, and if you want to stick around, you can take charge of the pickets and skirmishers. But I'm warning you, it's a tough job. The boys don't think we need regular army stuff any more."

"I'll take over. How many men can I have?"

"Well, there are only about one hundred and fifty here now. But Thrailkill ought to show up with about fifty more. Take about thirty men."

Donny went among the guerrillas. Most of their faces were new. Only here and there were there familiar ones. Cole Younger had enlisted in the regular army and was in Louisi-

ana. Dave Poole, Fletch Taylor and Arch Clements were with Anderson.

Big George Sheppard was still here, though. He and Donny had never got along. Sheppard saw Donny and chuckled wickedly. "Hello, West Point. What's the matter? The Federals run you out of Lees Summit?"

"Hello, George," Donny replied calmly. "You look like you'd make a nice picket. Get your things together."

Sheppard's face twisted into a scowl. "Listen, you — " he began.

"Captain Todd's orders," Donny snapped.

"Be damned to Todd," Sheppard swore. "And you too. I'll take no orders from any white-fingered snob."

Donny hit him in the face. It was a savage blow that sent Sheppard reeling back against a tree. He clawed instinctively for a gun, but Donny stepped forward and rammed the muzzle of a Navy pistol into the big guerrilla's stomach.

"That will be all from you, Sheppard. You'll take orders like every man around here from now on."

Sheppard wiped a trickle of blood from his mouth with a large dirty hand.

"All right," he conceded with a whisper that was belied by the venomous gleam in his eye.

Donny selected the rest of his men. There was some grumbling but no open remonstrance, for most of the guerrillas had seen the encounter between him and Sheppard.

The older guerrillas had always treated Donny with more respect than they had shown for other members of the organization. It wasn't just because Donny came from a substantial family, because there were many guerrillas whose family were the equal. A man was judged by the guerrillas for his fighting prowess and Donny had proved himself in that respect many, many times. His knowledge of military tactics, even though the men too often rebelled against it, was conceded grudging admiration by all.

Those who had been at Lawrence knew that Donny's masterful covering of the retreat had done more to save them from annihilation than anything else.

Thraikill, true to Todd's conviction, showed up shortly

after noon, but there were only thirty-three men with him.

"We met a company of Wisconsin militiamen," Thrailkill told Todd. "I lost twelve men, but we took care of more than twice that number."

Todd frowned. "Where's Price?"

"He left Boonville this morning. His skirmishers are right behind us."

Todd exclaimed exultantly. "Then let's get busy. We'll keep just a little ahead of him to the Little Blue. There ain't no fun being in back of Price's robbers. A jack rabbit couldn't live behind them. Get the men together. Fletcher! Throw out your skirmishers. We're moving, straight to the Little Blue. We'll wait for Price there, because I've got an idea that's the place he'll have a little resistance."

Price did meet resistance at the Little Blue, resistance that would have stunned a less seasoned or less ferocious army than his ten thousand veterans. But Price's star was still in the ascendancy. His miraculous charm still held. As always he was near the fighting, sitting calmly on his horse with his staff about him, studying the theatre of the battle and making his decisions with quick vigor.

Price crossed the Little Blue. It cost him dearly, but he drove a demoralized Union Army before him. He took Lexington and then it was a straight march to Independence. There the Union must make its stand. The fate of Missouri would be decided — the fate, perhaps, of the entire Cause. For if Price destroyed the Union Army, the West was his. Kansas would be laid waste and Price could turn leisurely, gathering recruits by the thousand, and march back through Missouri into Illinois.

The fighting between Lexington and Independence satisfied even the ardor of Todd's guerrillas. It was charge and counter-charge all the way. The last human traits left the guerrillas, when Price in a weak moment let Todd have six prisoners the guerrillas claimed to have taken at Lexington. The men were hanged, and when the bodies were cut down they were promptly scalped.

Donny, haggard from the savage pace, knew nothing of this

affair until one of his own skirmishers told him about it on the morning after. He knew then that he could delay no longer. He had to remove Todd. The time was not propitious, but it couldn't be helped any more. Todd had gone too far. In a day or two a decisive battle would be fought. If the South won, Todd would gain five hundred recruits and with that many guerrillas — Donny shuddered at the very thought of it.

He rode back to the main body of the guerrillas. "I think you had better call in the skirmishers, Captain. We've lost five or six during the last hour. Best not to keep the men so scattered from now on."

In a way it was the truth, for resistance was so continuous now that the thin skirmish line was in constant peril. Yet if it was drawn in, the main body would have to increase its vigilance, in order not to walk into a trap.

Yet a trap was what Donny wanted. It might catch Todd in its jaws; if it didn't, Donny had to get him away from the main command.

"The Federals are going to make a stand at Independence," he told Todd. "It's going to be artillery against artillery and probably the bayonet. Do you want to be in on that?"

Todd scowled. He knew the strange apathy of the guerrilla for artillery. Carbines and pistols they relished; they thrived on the cavalry charge, but artillery — as far back as Pea Ridge, the guerrillas had ignominiously left the field when shells fell around them. In that respect, they were similar to the Indians. None of the Confederate Indian allies had ever been able to stand artillery.

"Maybe we'd better do a little reconnoitering," Todd said, "and see if we can't do better work on the flanks."

"That's what I had in mind," Donny offered. "But it had better be a good survey. Some of the boys may not like the looks of things."

"I'll go myself," Todd offered.

Donny could scarcely conceal his exultance; he had counted on that, for he knew Todd of old. A reckless fighter when the odds were in his favor, he was usually shy of taking too great risks.

Todd prepared his horse for the scout, looked over his six



Navy pistols and changed the nipples. Then, mounted, he suddenly changed his mind.

"No, Fletcher, I can't go. It's too near the time for action. You go. Take a couple of men with you."

Donny swore under his breath, but knew that he could not refuse a scout he had himself suggested. He selected a couple of men at random: Jud Wills, a whiskered ruffian, six and a half feet tall, and Mahoney, a shambling old-timer.

They had scarcely left the guerrilla camp when the rumble of heavy artillery came to them from the south and west.

"Think we better go back?" Mahoney asked.

"No," Donny said savagely. "Todd told us to make a scout and a scout we'll make, if it's right up to the cannon."

Jud Wills wiped tobacco juice from his mouth into his ragged whiskers.

"Not me," he said laconically. "When grape starts whistlin' around me, I got business somewhere else."

Donny dropped back, so he was between the two guerrillas and a couple of feet behind them. His hands dropped carelessly upon the butts of the Navy Colts on either hip.

"Boys — " he began, and at that instant Jud Wills jerked his horse back.

"Federals!" he cried in a hoarse whisper.

Donny saw them too: a half-dozen cavalrymen just coming out from a clump of trees. But he saw something that Wills hadn't seen, or did not care to see. A white flag, on the end of a six foot pole.

Wills jerked out pistols and fired at the flagbearer. The next moment he toppled from the saddle under the blow of a Colt laid against the base of his brain by Donny.

"Mahoney!" Donny cried. "Don't shoot!"

Mahoney whirled and looked with startled eyes at Donny's gun.

"They've got a white flag," Donny said.

"But we used the white flag at Pea Ridge," Mahoney gasped.

"Theirs is on the level. Sit still."

The Federals approached warily, but they had seen Donny's reaction to Will's fire upon them and they were willing to take

a chance. When they were about twenty feet away, they stopped.

A soldier with sergeant's chevrons said, "We've got a letter for General Price. It's important for you fellows."

"You mean our army?"

The sergeant shook his head. "No— just you fellows."

Donny rode forward. "Let me have the letter." He pointed his revolver carelessly at the sergeant and held out his left hand.

"It's got to go to Price."

"It'll get there."

The Union sergeant surrendered the letter and backed his horse away. Donny watched somberly while the others followed their sergeant's example. A half-dozen Union soldiers didn't care to turn their backs upon even a single pair of guerrillas. When they finally backed into the trees, Donny looked at the letter. He saw that it was open, even though addressed to Major General Sterling Price, commanding Confederate forces.

Donny took out the single sheet of paper, opened it and read the message. His mouth tightened.

"What is it, lieutenant?" Mahoney asked.

"They've hanged six Confederate prisoners in retaliation of what Todd did yesterday."

Mahoney swore luridly. "Why, they can't do that! It ain't right."

"It wasn't right for us to do it," snapped Donny. "This letter also says that if our outfit doesn't withdraw they'll shoot every prisoner they've got. This letter has to go to General Price immediately. And you're going to deliver it, Mahoney."

"Sure," said Mahoney, taking the letter. "I'll go right away." He turned his horse.

Donny said savagely, "And get a receipt for it! If you haven't got it when you get back to camp, so help me, I'll kill you."

Mahoney rode due south, where the cannon fire was now a continuous rear. Donny dismounted from his horse and discovered that Wills was regaining consciousness. He waited until the guerrilla opened his eyes. Then he said, "Wills, get

on your horse and ride back to camp. Tell Todd why I sent you back and if you don't I'll settle with you when I get in."

With that, Donny turned his horse and galloped it across the clearing, toward the woods, into which the Federal cavalymen had disappeared.

Reaching the shelter of the trees, he halted his horse and took a piece of soiled paper from his pocket. With a stub of a pencil, and using his saddle pommel for a writing surface, he wrote:

"Major William Wheeler, Provost Marshal, Independence, Mo. Older party will be eliminated today."

He did not sign the note, but after it was written he broke a branch from a tree and tied his handkerchief on the end of it. Then he pressed forward into the forest, making as much noise as he could.

A couple of dismounted cavalymen, with carbines pointed at him, stepped out from behind trees, inside of five minutes. They were from the party which had itself been the bearers of a flag of truce a little while ago.

Donny said: "I've got a message that must get to Major Wheeler, the provost marshal of Independence."

One of the soldiers took the note and glanced at it. "There's no name signed to this and the message don't make sense."

"It will to Major Wheeler. And he'll know from whom it is."

"All right, he'll have it inside of a half hour."

"Thank you."

Twenty minutes later, Donny rode into the guerrilla camp and found it in an uproar. Mahoney had delivered the Federal message to General Price and Price had replied to it — quickly and decisively, as always.

Todd had the reply. He stormed up to Donny and roared: "Damn you, Fletcher, why'd you send that message for Price?"

"It was brought under a flag of truce, and I didn't think I could hold out a message of the general's."

"But you read it. Why the hell didn't you bring it to me first?"

Donny snarled, "There's more important things right now. Come with me out here and I'll show you."

Todd's eyes widened uneasily. "What's up. You made your scout?"

"Yes. And I want you to come out here a ways. I'll show you something."

Todd vaulted into the saddle of his horse, which he always kept handy these days. "I'll get some of the boys."

"No, it's better they don't see this. It'll only take five minutes."

Todd's curiosity got the best of his cautiousness. He rode beside Donny into the woods.

"Price's given an order that we're to quit the Army. Says he can't have us around any more. The white-whiskered, sanctimonious hypocrite! Didn't he himself ask Bill Anderson and me to join him this last time?"

Donny pointed to a little glade just ahead. "There, Todd!"

"What? I don't see anything."

"You're sure? None of your men around?"

"No. Say — " A startled look came into the guerrilla captain's eyes. "Fletcher, don't — "

"George Todd," Donny Fletcher said evenly. "This is the end of the trail. You've earned what's coming to you a hundred times. You've burned your last house and killed your last man."

"Fletcher!" Todd cried, hoarsely. "For God's sake — "

"Don't talk about God. I've heard men beg for mercy and you didn't give them any. There was that man near Lawrence, whose head you bashed in. Draw, Todd!"

But Todd was suddenly gripped by hysteria. "Don't, Fletcher. Don't. I ain't ready to die. I'll let you take over in my place. I'll go away — "

"Draw, Todd," Donny whispered. "Don't make me shoot you down in cold blood."

Todd wouldn't draw. The murderer of fifty men was suddenly afraid of death — certain death. In a cavalry charge

there was always a chance, but now — he seemed to know that this was fate.

Donny knew it too. And he knew that he had to kill George Todd, by fair means or foul. His death was too long overdue. Alive, he could take too many other lives.

He whipped out a Navy pistol. And still Todd bleated in sheer terror. But he would not draw his own gun.

Donny shot him through the throat.

As Todd's body toppled from his horse, Donny rode past it, back to the guerrilla camp.

Thrailkill was the first man he met.

"Todd's dead," Donny said shortly.

Thrailkill's mouth fell open. "Dead! Why, he just rode off with you a few minutes ago."

"I know. I'd made a scout and located an ambush. He wanted to see it. He wouldn't believe there were Federals hiding in the brush. I tried to hold him back, but he rode out into a clearing. A sniper got him through the throat."

Thrailkill stared, bewildered. "After all these years, a sniper — "

"His number was up, and so's ours. Todd told you about Price's order?"

"Yes. But — "

"But what?"

"Todd wasn't going."

"Shelby's moving over," Donny said harshly. "He'll wipe us out if we don't leave the field."

"But where'll we go?"

Donny shook his head. "The war'll be over tomorrow. The Union army will beat us. Can't you hear those cannon? They're making their last stand and they're holding us. Their guns haven't retreated in an hour. And Pleasanton's at Lexington, coming up with ten thousand cavalry. Pleasanton's the best cavalry general in the Union army outside of Phil Sheridan."

Thrailkill was too confused to realize, at the moment, that Donny Fletcher couldn't possibly know Pleasanton's whereabouts.

He pulled abstractedly at his ear, then came to a sudden

conclusion. "Well, I don't know what the rest of the boys are going to do, but me, I'm going north — and I'm going now!"

He ran back to the main body of the guerrillas, and inside of thirty seconds the tragedy of Captain Todd's death was known to every man.

## CHAPTER XVIII

TODD was dead, and in his passing Bill Anderson saw his own end. The sun was setting on the long day of the guerrilla, but before it went down altogether Bloody Bill Anderson intended to exact the maximum toll.

All through the twenty-second and twenty-third days of October he dashed through the Missouri bottomlands like a starved timber wolf. The faint, almost continuous rumble of guns, fifteen and twenty miles away, seemed to madden him. He wanted to be in the thick of it, for unlike Todd, Anderson had never been cautious. The man did not know the meaning of fear.

But Price's ultimatum had been brought to him by Donny Fletcher and the remnants of Todd's command. Even though Anderson would defy it, his men would not. They knew, too well, the type of men and officers that had earned for Joe Shelby's men the term, "The Iron Brigade."

Anderson had two hundred men. With them he was safe against any hostile force three times the size of his own. Right now, there was no force that large not engaged at Independence and Westport. But there were plenty of small detachments, wagon trains, plunder.

Yes, there was plenty upon which Anderson could vent his rage. Donny had ridden with Anderson in '62; he had been with Quantrell at Baxter Springs, but never had he seen such ruthlessness as he saw those two days in late October.

They were in the saddle from dawn to midnight. They burned a hundred homes, fought a dozen pitched battles with Federals. What the toll in dead and wounded was on the other side, Donny could not even begin to guess; but it was severe.

The guerrillas themselves lost twenty men and almost a hundred had wounds of some description.

Donny was in the thick of it all. He rode constantly beside Anderson, hoping for a moment of laxity on the part of the guerrilla leader, an opportunity when others would not be watching. But Anderson kept his band too closely about.

The cannon became fainter on the 23rd and Donny realized with a sinking heart that they had moved farther west. That meant Westport and Kansas City, a Union defeat.

Defeat it was. Price's divisions, under Shelby, Fagan and Marmaduke, were fighting their last campaign. It was win or give up forever. The men fought like demons. The Federals had the advantage of position and numbers at Independence, but Price rolled them back.

Price fought from Independence to Westport, victory giving his army the last bit of strength they needed. Just one more battle, one more day, and it would be all over. Missouri and Kansas would be in their hands. Victory and honor. And revenge!

It was hand to hand fighting at Westport, with Price storming the earthworks. Only men who were fighting for their homes could hold back the hungry tide now. But they couldn't hold it for long.

Merciful darkness saved them. The opposing armies rested on their arms. In Price's camp, the generals got together and planned the final assault for the morning.

And in Kansas City, the defeated Union generals decided that flesh and blood could only stand so much. They would have to fall back tomorrow, give Westport and Kansas City to Price and hope that he would be content with that and permit them to retreat to Leavenworth, where the Union Army might in time gather new strength.

And where was Pleasanton?

The telegraph wires had been down these three days. But surely they must know there in the east that Price was at the door of Kansas!

Why didn't Pleasanton come? Ten thousand cavalymen would help to hold Westport another day, although another



day wasn't enough. It would take a week for enough help to come.

Major-General Alfred Pleasanton was at Lexington, forty miles away. He was coming, riding through the night, with not ten, but four thousand cavalymen — seasoned campaigners, yes, but far too few to hurl against the iron brigade of Shelby, the divisions of Price and Marmaduke and Fagan.

Forty miles, through the night, on horses that had already traveled a hundred miles in two days. But he was coming. Through the river bottoms, through ravished Independence, where he routed Price's rear guard. On to Westport, and the dawn already breaking.

The guns began to roar. With a sinking heart General Curtis threw the last of the Kansas militia into the front lines. They had to hold Price's charge, so the retreat would not become a rout.

They came, Shelby's and Fagan's cavalry, and behind them, the infantry. The iron brigade struck the Union line and hurled it back. Revolvers and sabers, now, and the long Union bayonet.

The blue line is holding — no, it is going back. It is breaking. Price is the victor!

But what is that dull rumble in the east, that long roll of thunder? Cannon? No, too dull. Horses' hoofs!

Yes, yes! And there they come! Pleasanton's four thousand cavalymen, spread out in battle array, a solid mass of flesh and bone and steel.

Fighting Joe Shelby sees the blue wave. Oh, they're trying a charge! Against the Iron Brigade!

"Right wheel! This is old stuff to us. We've taken a hundred charges and we've never been licked yet. Give them hell, boys!"

The blue juggernaut comes on; it meets the gray and butternut. The very earth seems to tremble from the fury of the collision.

And then — then the gray and butternut is hurled back! Shelby's Iron Brigade is defeated. It is retreating. A rout!

Incredible, unbelievable! But it is true. Pleasanton's cavalry has come on the field, at the eleventh hour, in one of the most

magnificent cavalry charges in all history. It has struck and routed one of the finest bodies of fighting men ever assembled under a banner: Fighting Joe Shelby's Iron Brigade.

The embattled Union Army has seen Pleasanton's charge. And now, their retreat halted, they are charging forward with the bayonet. Price's division is hurled back, Fagan is crushed and Marmaduke in retreat. The entire Confederate army is demoralized.

Shelby rallies his men. They cannot attack Pleasanton, but the horses of Pleasanton's men are utterly exhausted. They can't make another charge. And so Shelby can cover the rear of Price's army and save it from utter annihilation.

Anderson did not learn of Price's defeat at Westport until the 25th of October, when Price was already crossing the Osage. The guerrillas were in camp when the news came. Anderson was sitting on his saddle, staring into a tiny camp fire. Donny Fletcher lay on the ground a dozen feet away, watching Bloody Bill, as he had the last few days.

A ragged guerrilla brought the news to Anderson. The guerrilla chieftain listened as the man talked excitedly, then nodded casually and continued to stare into the fire.

After two or three long minutes he suddenly got to his feet and swiveled his head about, so he could see the entire encampment. Donny was close enough to see his face and a little shiver ran through him.

Anderson was mad, no question of it. The streak of insanity had always been in him. Even Quantrell had commented on it one time in Donny's hearing, but now the virus had spread through Anderson's entire brain.

These years had been hard on Anderson, no doubt. Donny compared him today with the man of almost four years ago, the Anderson Donny had met on the *Polar Star*, going from St. Louis to Kansas City. Anderson had worn the veneer of a gentleman then. There had been a rather wild cast to his eye, but he'd had complete control of himself. Now —

Bloody Bill Anderson roared: "Saddle your horses, men. We're riding!"

There were protests. The men had been in the saddle for days. They couldn't stand much more.

Bloody Bill raged through the camp. "You yellow-livered, sniveling bunch of cowards! You're with Bill Anderson, not with Quantrell. When you're with me, you obey orders. When I tell you to kill, you kill. And any lousy son who doesn't want to, can get the hell out of here. The rest of you — into your saddles!"

A few men may have sneaked off in the darkness, but most of them saddled and mounted. Donny Fletcher was among them.

They galloped through the river bottoms that night, using the torch and the revolver continuously. In the morning, they neared Richmond and Anderson was all for storming and burning the town. But here his men balked.

"There's a regiment of Federal cavalry in town!"

"We'll lick the hell out of them!" Anderson snarled.

Arch Clements, a young hellion of about twenty, rode his horse up beside Anderson. "I'm with you, Bill. I never did like Richmond."

Donny dug his heels into his horse's flanks and sent the animal rearing on its hind legs. "And I'm with you, Bill! Let's go!"

He fought the plunging animal and with one hand whipped out a revolver. He emptied it wildly at the town. Anderson rode up to him, a baleful gleam in his eye.

"What the hell'd you do that for?"

"You said you wanted to attack the town. Well, come on, what's holding you back?"

Donny rushed his horse forward fifty feet, then whirled it.

"Come on!" he yelled. "Are you afraid?"

"Federals!" howled a half-dozen guerrillas. "They're coming!"

And coming they were, a thundering mass of blue, outnumbering the guerrillas five to one. Anderson tried to rally his men, but they had no stomach for this fight out in the open. They turned and plunged for the shelter of the forest.

Anderson, Clements and Donny galloped after them.

"I'll kill you for that, Fletcher!" Anderson raged as he rode beside Donny. "Your shooting warned them."

"Any time, Bill!" Donny cried. "Any time."

In the shelter of the trees the guerrillas rallied and poured a withering fire at the Federal cavalry. The latter promptly retired to a safe distance, to plan a flanking maneuver. Even when outnumbering Bloody Bill Anderson five to one, Federals never charged him in the woods.

Bloody Bill seized the opportunity to form a retreat.

"We'll make them follow us," he exclaimed. "Fightin' our way, we'll cut them to pieces. Come on, boys."

They retreated noisily into the brush. The Federals followed cautiously, throwing out skirmishers. When they were a half mile in the woods, Bloody Bill sent the main body of his men to the right. With a score of men, he took shelter.

"We'll hold them like this for about five minutes," he said. "They'll know there aren't many of us by then and figure the rest of you've beat it. They'll try rushing us. Then you boys hit them from the rear. We'll give them Centralia all over again."

The Federal skirmishers came in sight a few minutes later and Anderson ordered his small detachment to open fire. The skirmishers fell back and returned after a minute or two, reinforced. The guerrillas fired spasmodically, giving the impression of a small force.

"All right," Anderson said in a low tone. "They're going to charge. We'll get them. Ready . . ."

The guerrillas lined up in a thin line. To the right, out of sight of the Federals, was the main force of the guerrillas. They would strike the flank of the Federal charge, smash it to pieces.

The Federals were coming now. Anderson stood up in his saddle and said: "Let's go!"

Reins in their teeth, a Navy Colt in each hand, the guerrillas charged. The Federals saw the small number of them, roared and came forward.

And then, as the two bodies, the small and the large, moved together, the woods to the rear belched a solid sheet of flame.

Above the thunder of pistol fire rose the wild guerrilla yell.

"Anderson!" screamed Donny Fletcher, riding stirrup to stirrup beside the guerrilla chieftain.

Anderson turned in his saddle. Two tufts of human hair — scalps — on his bridle, were flattened back by the force of the wind. Donny saw them and knew that this was the moment.

"I'm going to kill you, Anderson!" he cried.

Bloody Bill Anderson saw the death in Donny's face.

"Fletcher!" he gasped. "You —"

Even then Donny let him fire the first shot. The bullet raked across Donny's chest. Then he fired his own gun. Bloody Bill Anderson gurgled horribly and toppled from his saddle.

The Federals were less than fifty feet away, now, milling in utter confusion from the charge of the main body of guerrillas.

Donny rose in his stirrups and with all the air in his lungs screamed at the top of his voice. "Bloody Bill's dead! We're lost. It's every man for himself!"

Donny led the rout himself.

Guerrilla warfare in Missouri was over.

Bill Wheeler was still provost marshal, at Independence, but he was Lieutenant Colonel Wheeler now. A lieutenant came into his office and said: "I beg your pardon, sir, but we've a prisoner who insists on seeing you. Says you know him."

"A Confederate officer?" Colonel Wheeler asked mechanically.

"No, sir," replied the lieutenant. "He looks like a guerrilla, although he came in himself."

Colonel Wheeler kicked back his chair. "Bring him in!"

Donny Fletcher was brought into the room. Colonel Wheeler nodded to the lieutenant. "It's all right. You can leave him here."

As the lieutenant walked out, Wheeler stared at Donny. He had seen him several weeks ago, had been touched by the gaunt, ragged appearance of his former classmate. But Donny looked much worse now.

"Donny!" he said, holding out his hand.

Donny looked dully at the hand, but made no movement forward. "You've heard about Anderson?" he asked.

"Major Cox brought in his wallet. He made a report of how he killed him."

"Two bullets," Donny said. "One in the right hip, another in his right temple. . . ."

Colonel Wheeler gasped softly. "*You —*"

"I killed him in cold blood," Donny said. "I murdered George Todd, too."

Wheeler's lips parted, closed, then parted again. "And Quantrell?"

Donny shook his head. "I don't know where he is. He's been inactive for six months. He didn't take any part in the fighting around here."

A cloud flitted across Wheeler's face. "But there's activity in the Sni Hills. I had a report yesterday that Quantrell's sent out word —"

"But he can't!" Donny said in consternation. "He was discredited months ago. Todd drove him out of camp at the point of a gun. Bloody Bill laughed in his face. The guerrillas won't follow a man like that."

"They've got to. They're gone ducks. The war's over west of the Mississippi. They know that and they know, too, that they can't surrender like the regular Confederates. There's nothing they can do but keep on, and with Anderson and Todd out of the way, there's no one they can turn to but their old leader."

Donny groaned and Colonel Wheeler winced. But he went on doggedly: "I'm sorry, Donny. Your work isn't finished."

How could Donny Fletcher tell Wheeler that he saw the faces of Bill Anderson and George Todd every night? Killers, murderers, yes — but Donny had killed them in cold blood. He was as bad as they.

Blood — he was sick of it. And death. What he wanted more than anything in the world was to lie down and sleep for a week, forever.

A door at the rear of the room opened and a man came in. "Colonel Wheeler —" he began, and then, seeing that Wheeler was not alone: "Oh, I beg your pardon. I didn't know . . ." He started to back out of the room.

And then Donny turned.

The man in the doorway stopped. He was a tall, lean man. He had only one arm.

Donny reeled. "Steve!"

Steve Fletcher stood as rigid as a flagpole. His clean-shaven face became gray. "Donny," he whispered.

"Steve, I thought you were dead!"

"I was in prison," Steve Fletcher replied, dully. "They turned me loose last week. No reason to feed a — a one-armed prisoner."

Donny stared, fascinated, at the empty right coat sleeve. Steve saw his gaze and suddenly a shiver ran through him. He said, crisply: "Sorry to have disturbed you, Colonel. We — I was going to ask you to have dinner with us, but evidently you'll be engaged!"

With that, Steve clicked his heels together, made an about face and disappeared the way he had come, without another glance at his brother.

Colonel Wheeler said softly: "They're living next door. I meant to tell you."

"It's all right," Donny said, hoarsely. "I don't blame them. I'm a guerrilla. All right, I'll go again."

"Quantrell?"

"Yes. I'll let you know when it's over. If you don't hear from me — good-by, Colonel Wheeler!"

Donny Fletcher went out and Lieutenant-Colonel Wheeler stared bitterly at the door through which he had gone. "*Colonel Wheeler . . . Brigadier-General Holbrook . . . Major General Custer* — and Donny Fletcher is a better man than any of us! Donny Fletcher, Guerrilla!"

## CHAPTER XIX

SHERMAN marched from Atlanta to the sea, leaving death and desolation in his wake. He split the Confederacy in two, cut its lifeline of food and supplies. In the Shenandoah valley of Virginia, Sheridan stripped the granary of the South.

Lee was slowly starved into submission. And at last it was



over. At Appomattox Court House, on April 9, 1865, Lee surrendered his army.

In the West, victory had come earlier, at Bloody Westport. After that it was merely a matter of mopping up. The guerrillas disappeared with the death of Bloody Bill Anderson. Where they went, no one knew.

There were rumors that Quantrell had united them once more, but after a time the rumors died and Quantrell was seen no more. The bleak winter passed in war-torn Missouri and with spring, life began to throb once more. Farmhouses were rebuilt. Smoke came from the chimneys of new cabins and here and there, patches of soil were turned once more by the plough.

Bleeding Missouri was licking its wounds. All Missouri needed now was time: time to forget and dull the memory.

This man here had tried to kill that man there at Pea Ridge, at Lexington, at Westport. This widow had lost her husband at Wilson's Creek; the father of those children had been killed at Lone Jack. And the brother of this tall somber man with an empty sleeve was a guerrilla whose name had once been whispered in awe and dread and was now forgotten.

They were gone, the guerrillas. Buried in unmarked graves, exiles on foreign soil, or — perhaps that silent man hoeing his little patch of corn had once ridden under the black flag. If so, he never talked about it and it was too soon to ask him. Too soon.

Where once had stood an imposing mansion of brick and tall white pillars was now a rubble of weed-grown ruins. But facing the ruins was a new building, a two-room affair of logs. In front of the open door, on a three-legged wooden stool, sat the man with the empty sleeve. His eyes were somber, his face lean and drawn. He looked thirty and was only twenty-two. Inside the cabin, Ellen Fletcher was cooking a meager supper.

Stephen Fletcher heard her moving about inside and knew that in a few minutes he would have to eat again, even though he had no appetite for food. And after a while he would go to bed, to lie in the darkness and see the shadowy faces. Faces of men long dead.

He wondered if *the* face would come again. It came often, a gray, drawn face with dead eyes. The face of his brother as he had last seen it, that day when he had turned away from it.

"Stephen!" said the voice of his mother, inside the cabin.

"Yes, mother," he replied mechanically, "I'm coming."

His mother came to the door. She was quite gray now, but her features were still smooth and fine. She had aged, but she had not been broken, like so many others.

She said: "Supper's not ready. 'It's — that wagon, coming there!'"

Stephen had not even heard the creaking of the wheels. He looked up now, startled, and saw the Conestoga wagon already less than fifty feet from the house. It was driven by a bearded man and another sat in the body of the wagon, his head on a lower level than the driver's.

Stephen got to his feet and walked stiffly toward the approaching wagon.

"Good evening," he said quietly.

The driver pulled up the team of horses. He said: "You Steve Fletcher?"

Stephen Fletcher nodded. "Won't you stop and have supper with us? I believe it'll be ready in a few minutes."

The driver shook his head and looked past Stephen at Ellen Fletcher. Stephen moved forward a couple of steps. "Is there something I can do for you?"

The man looked again at Ellen Fletcher, then shortened his vision to Stephen's face and said, in a low tone, "We've got a man here. He's been hurt."

Stephen could still see only the straw in the body of the wagon, but he knew, then. He knew the identity of the wounded man lying in the straw.

He said, softly: "Bad?"

The driver nodded. "Pretty bad. We didn't know — well, we couldn't leave him die out there in the woods, so we thought we'd bring him here."

"Of course! Will you bring him into the house?" He glanced quickly down at his empty sleeve and bit his lip. Then he turned and walked toward Ellen Fletcher.

"Mother — "

She knew, too. "It's Donny."

"He's been wounded. These men —" But his mother had already darted into the cabin to get things ready for Donny's . . . home-coming.

The driver of the wagon brought it up to the door; then he and the other man climbed down and carefully lifted the pitifully thin body of Donny Fletcher from the straw. Donny was unconscious and Stephen Fletcher, looking at his pallid face, knew that his grasp on life was feeble.

The men carried Donny into the cabin and laid him on Ellen Fletcher's bed. She had already put a kettle of water on the fire and was ripping clean, white cloth into strips.

"Ride to Lees Summit, Stephen," she ordered. "Bring Doctor Sanford back with you. I can manage until he gets here."

Stephen went outside with the men.

"Would you mind?" he asked. "We have no horses and it'll take too long to walk."

The man who had been the driver said: "My name's Arch Clements. I don't think —" He shot a quick glance at his comrade, then inhaled sharply. "Of course, we'll drive you to town. Climb in."

Stephen got into the wagon and the driver turned his horses.

"You can drop me near town," Stephen said. "I understand why you don't want to drive in."

"No," said Arch Clements. "We'll drive right in. It's probably best that way, anyway. Don't you think so, Les?"

The man called Les grunted. "Why not get it over?"

"We rode in to Independence," Arch Clements explained. "Les, Donny and myself. To talk to Colonel Wheeler, the provost marshal, about a surrender for the boys. The colonel was willing; said he'd parole us and we started back to tell the boys it was all right to come in. And then —" A cloud passed over Arch Clements' face — "we ran into a half dozen drunken militiamen. They fired on us."

Stephen exclaimed. "Oh, the fools! The war's been over here for six months."

Arch Clements said harshly: "We even had a white flag. But it didn't make any difference to those drunks. Well, we

got away, but Donny got that bullet through the lung. That was yesterday. We hid him in the brush, but we saw today that he wouldn't last overnight without a doctor, so . . ."

"Thanks, Clements. You — " He stiffened. "I'm sorry. But here come some soldiers."

Arch Clements and Les had already seen the approaching horsemen. Clements said: "It's all right. We're not going to put up a fight. That's Colonel Wheeler!"

Wheeler it was — Wheeler, three cavalymen and a civilian carrying a bag. They reined up in the road when they came to the wagon.

"Steve!" Colonel Wheeler said. "They brought Donny home?"

"Yes. We were just going to Lees Summit for the doctor."

"That won't be necessary, now, Stephen," the civilian with the bag said. "I'll ride on ahead."

"Thank you, Dr. Sanford."

The doctor galloped his horse past the wagon. Colonel Wheeler said, then, to Arch Clements: "I heard what happened and I've placed those men under arrest. Your paroles — they still stand, Clements."

"Thank you, Colonel. It's all right, then, if Les and myself go to bring in the boys?"

"Yes. Steve, get up behind me. I want to see your brother."

Ellen Fletcher met them at the door of the cabin.

"Dr. Sanford's with Donny," she said. "Good evening, Colonel Wheeler."

"Good evening, Mrs. Fletcher. I want to tell you how sorry I am about this thing. Your son surrendered at my office yesterday. This unfortunate thing happened afterward. I've placed the men responsible for it under arrest."

Dr. Sanford appeared in the door. "Colonel Wheeler, he's conscious and he wants to talk to you. Come in — but only for a minute. He's pretty weak."

Colonel Wheeler stepped hurriedly into the cabin. At the door of the bedroom, he turned. "Would you mind — give me a minute with him, alone."

Colonel Wheeler closed the bedroom door and stepped to the bed. He looked down into Donny's feverish eyes.

"Donny!" he said, softly.

"Colonel Wheeler," Donny whispered. "I want to report. Quantrell — "

Colonel Wheeler cut him off. "It's all right, Donny. Never mind that now."

Donny's face twitched in pain. "In Kentucky — he's . . . dead!"

Colonel Wheeler gasped. "You followed him there? No wonder we never heard of him again, around here."

"Dead," reported Donny. "Dead, like — " His eyes opened wide suddenly and a short, harsh laugh was forced from his lips. "Like me, Colonel Wheeler!"

Colonel Wheeler reached down and grasped Donny's hand. It was feverish to his touch. "No, Donny. You're going to be all right. But you've got to rest, now. I'll send Doctor Sanford in."

He went out quickly.

In front of the cabin, Colonel Wheeler gestured to Stephen Fletcher. The latter followed him to one side out of earshot of the soldiers and Mrs. Fletcher.

"Stephen Fletcher," Colonel Wheeler said. "I want to ask you a question — a personal question."

"Yes?"

"It's just this. Are you in love with Susan Benton?"

The tightening of Stephen Fletcher's mouth was sufficient answer for Colonel Wheeler. His forehead creased. "I was afraid of that."

"Why?" Stephen demanded harshly. "What difference should it make to you? You don't think I'd ask her to marry a man with one arm?"

"An arm wouldn't make any difference to Susan Benton," Colonel Wheeler said bluntly. "That wasn't what I had in mind. It was Donny."

"Donny," Stephen said, bitterly. "Donny, Donny. All right, Colonel Wheeler, I'll tell you. Susan Benton's in love with my brother. She always has been, right from the start. But when Donny . . ."

He made a hopeless gesture.

Colonel Wheeler's eyes lit up. "I'm going to fetch her here. She's in Lees Summit right now, eating out her heart for him. He needs her. She'll bring him back to life."

Stephen Fletcher followed the colonel to his horse. As the officer mounted, he said desperately: "Colonel Wheeler, there's something I've been wanting to ask you for six months. Ever since that day, in your office. I thought, then — well, I thought naturally that Donny had been captured and when we didn't hear any more of him, afterwards —"

Colonel Wheeler looked down at the tall ex-Confederate.

"Lieutenant Fletcher," he said crisply, "when Susan Benton gets out here, she'll tell you something. Something she doesn't know herself right now. It's about Donny, and it's the truth. I've got to go now. Donny needs her!"

The chill of death was in the room that night. Donny Fletcher slept, but his breath came so softly that at times those who were watching thought there was no breath at all. In the still hours, with the candles flickering and making ghostly the corners of the room, they thought more than once that they heard the rustle of dark wings.

The women sat on either side of the bed, Ellen Fletcher and Susan Benton. The men, Dr. Sanford and Stephen Fletcher, spent the night outside the door, but each came frequently into the still room.

And then, as the gray dawn crept into the room, Dr. Sanford said in a tone that quavered: "He's breathing better now. The fever's broken. He's waking!"

"Thank God!" breathed Ellen Fletcher. And suddenly she wiped a tear from her eye, this woman who had not wept when her house had been burned to the ground, when her son had been posted as a traitor, as dead.

Donny's eyes opened. They were clear and bright. He rolled his head to the right, said: "Mother!" then rolled the head to the left.

His eyes met Susan Benton's and held.

Susan Benton's lips parted.

"Hello, Donny," she said.

At the foot of the bed, Stephen Fletcher said dryly: "Fella, I'll give you two weeks. No more. Because if you're not out then, the weeds will be taller than the corn and there won't be any use to hoe it!"

Ellen Fletcher got up suddenly. "I'll need some kindling for breakfast, Stephen. Come!"

Donny exclaimed weakly: "Mother . . . wait!"

But Ellen Fletcher pretended not to hear.

She hurried out of the room, taking Stephen with her. She closed the bedroom door behind them.

Then they were alone, Donny Fletcher and Susan Benton. But he could not look at her now.

He stared at the ceiling, unconscious of pain.

Susan Benton, her face suddenly crimson, said: "Donny, Colonel Wheeler told me. He said — "

Donny exclaimed sharply: "He shouldn't have said anything. He promised — "

Susan Benton went on, firmly: "Colonel Wheeler said — and listen, carefully, Donny — he said, 'Donny Fletcher is the bravest man I've ever known. And the best soldier. Even if he isn't a general.' Colonel Wheeler said that, Donny, and he wanted me to repeat it to you."

She leaned forward and her head went down on his breast. He gasped, as if in pain and for an instant was rigid. But then he relaxed and his left arm — the only one he could raise — came up and encircled Susan Benton. He murmured:

"I guess . . . the war is over for me, too!"