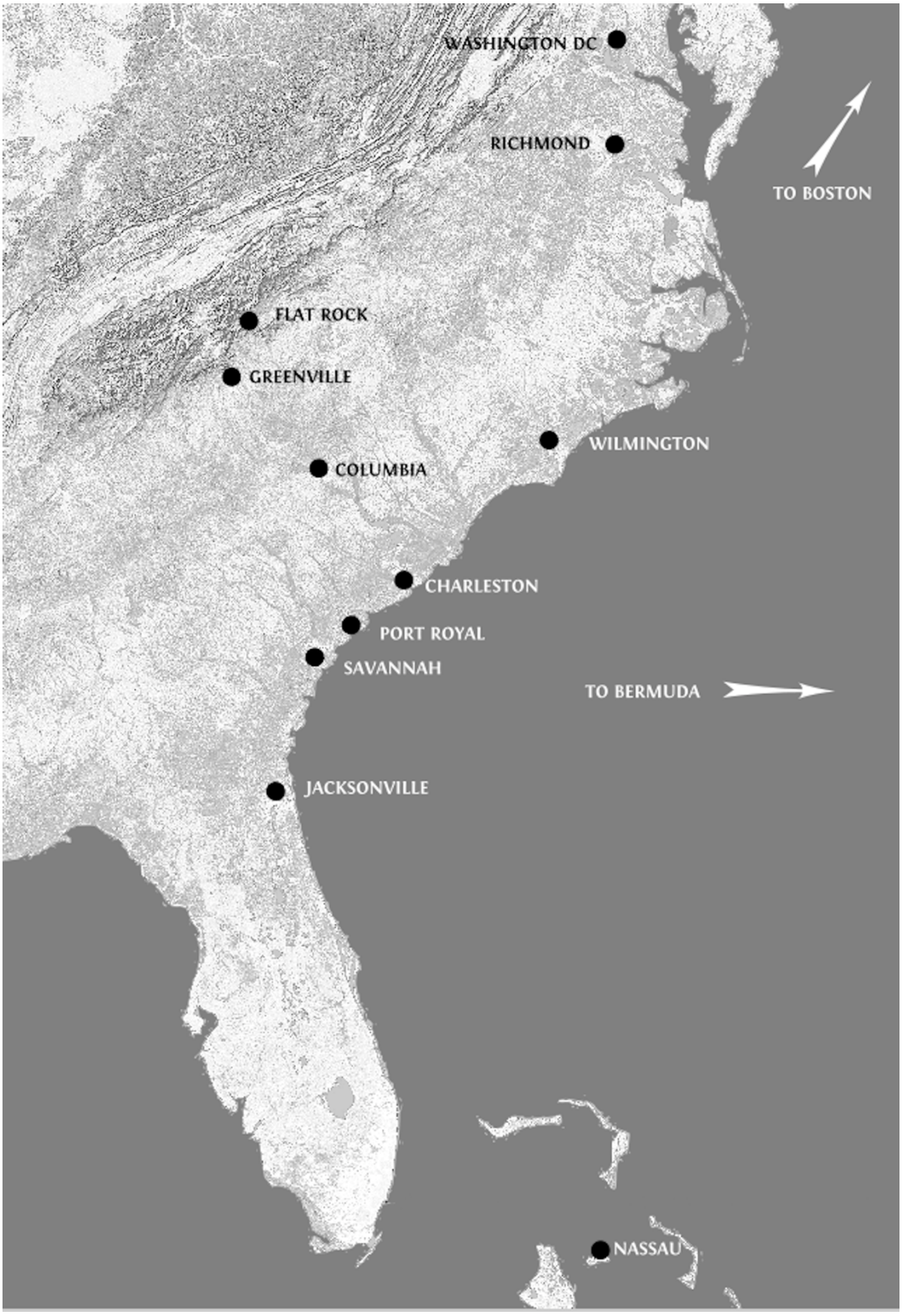
I JONATHAN

A CHARLESTON TALE
OF THE REBELLION

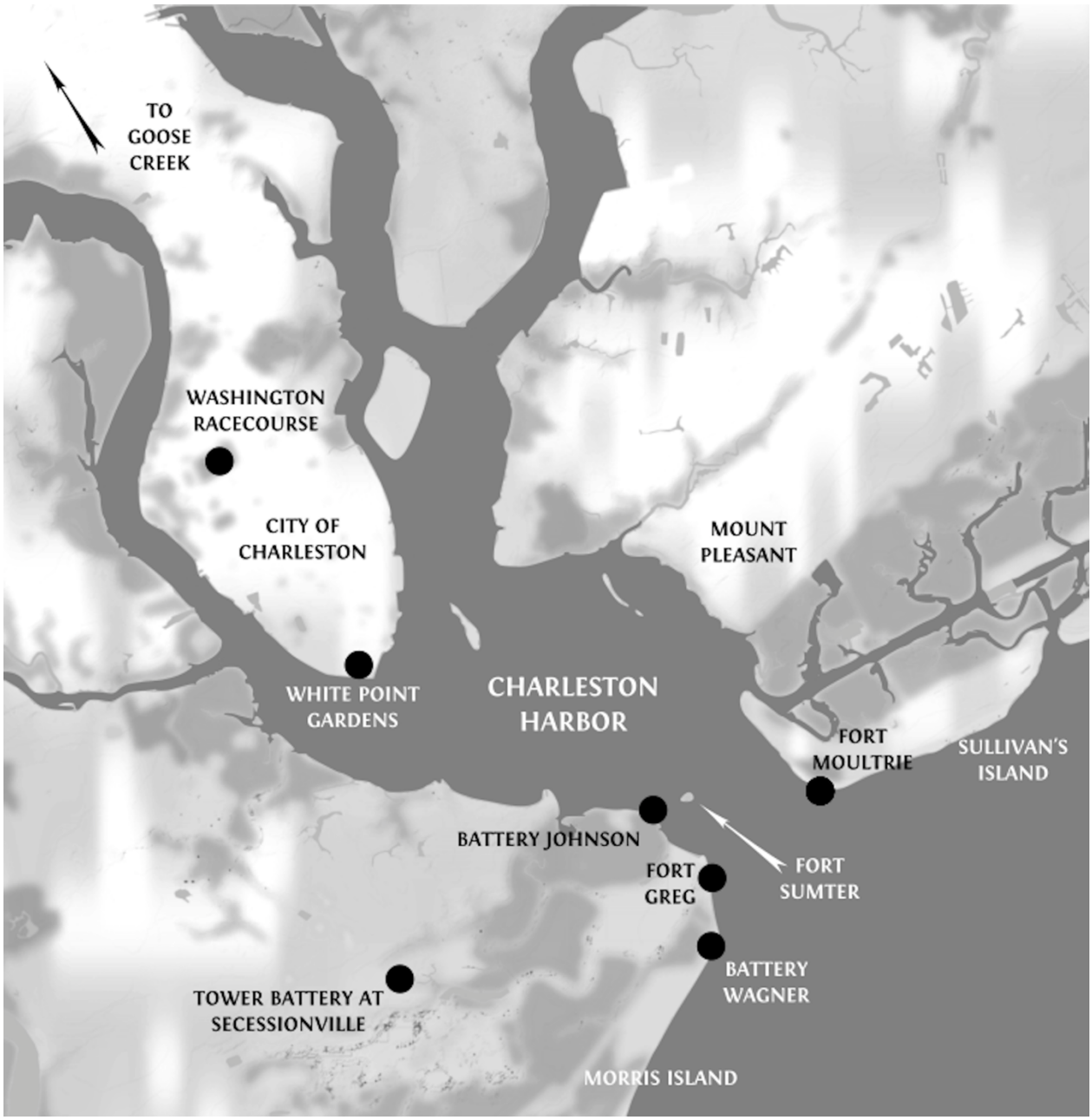
A Novel
by
George WB Scott

Archetype Imprints
an imprint of

Southern Rocket



SOUTHEAST COAST OF AMERICA



CHARLESTON HARBOR
GEOGRAPHIC FEATURES AND ELEMENTS OF ITS DEFENSE

10

Race

The city was alert with the possibilities of what might come next. But first there was a society event.

Besides guano, fabrics, and foodstuffs, Tyrone dealt in luxury items and wines – really whatever he thought he could make a profit on, often things that weren't sold by his competitors.

One day in February, Race Week, we loaded the larger of his carts with tea cookies, jams and marmalades, flaky pastry cakes wrapped in oiled paper, tins of fish paste, goose liver pate' and boxes of crunchy biscuits, twenty boxes of bottled wine, seven casks of ale, and a berry-flavored syrup to dissolve in water to make a kind of punch.

All of this and bundles of white and blue serviettes were settled in the cart and covered with an oiled canvas tarp to protect from rain, of which there was none, and from dust, of which there were clouds. The mules stood carelessly stoic awaiting the driver's command. Tyrone elected to use mules that day, as his horses would not compare favorably with some of the equine flesh showing at the track. His strong mules looked competent and did not invite comparison.

He also handed me a folded paper holding fifty dollars to place on the nose of the local favorite.

Washington Race Track was a mile oval on a broad field next to farms on the upper peninsula north of the city, the "neck," where it narrows due to swampy land to the east and west. For years it was a field of contest for horses as well as the occasional duel between men.

Traffic was brisk on the road that sunny morning, with many carriages and their liveried drivers carrying gentry in their finery, as well as with common working-class people white and black, riding and walking to the track.

This was to be a great race from what I heard, a challenge from the owner of a $20,000 purse winner against the best horse of South Carolina, quite different from the race I first had seen as a child, with both my parents. As I guided the team toward the track I reflected on my earliest experience with horse racing.

That contest was at a county fair outside of Lowell, Massachusetts. There had been rain the night before. The grass on the field was wet and there was mud all about. My mother kept me close as we strove to keep up with Father. His quick steps led us to a row of benches to view the parade. He had bought me a roasted ear of Indian on which I nibbled as the riders passed by to line up at the starting ribbon.

I remember not being very impressed as an eight-year old, not at first. The horses mostly were not as fine as the better carriage horses in our town; not all were thoroughbreds. The jockeys were mostly farmers' sons, though there were a couple of riders in colors atop beasts that stood out as superior animals – no-nonsense riders on small light saddles.

A shot was fired and the ten or so animals were spurred and whipt into wild flight. The grass was slick and two horses went down in the first stretch before the turn.

This got my attention.

Watching a half-ton and more of horse fall and struggle in this rough, casual race was pitiful to see, and one of the men did not rise. His horse had turned its leg badly, struggled to its hooves and stood wide-eyed, twitching its withers but not even trying to walk away.

The racers pounded the wet turf in the distance and were nearing the tree at the end of the pasture, where they would slow and make their turn before the run to the finish.

At the turn, taken wide by the two thoroughbreds, several animals bumped each other, and another horse went down. One animal having made the turn decided he'd had enough, and ran at right angles to the others, and despite the efforts of his rider to thrash him back into the herd, he left the field for the road home.

The remaining competitors were determined to cross the line first, and it became evident that the two thoroughbreds would be the only debate that day. The farmers' sons gamely competed among themselves to see who would show.

One of the two won, the other placed, and I was too young to care which. I had a kernel of corn stuck in my teeth that was taking my attention. The audience cheered, with some profanities expressed by some. My sweet mother did her best to cover my ears at the sound.

My father was quite pleased as he had placed a small wager on the winner's nose. We made our way to the transport as my father collected his winnings. The horse with the turned leg was slowly led staggering from the field, and I heard a shot from that direction.

I don't think these races are legal anymore, or at least not officially permitted. Too dangerous for rider and horse.

The next race I saw was when my father took me to a harness track in Franklin Park in northern Massachusetts also near Lowell, where Mother had managed the company looms. This was the year before my trip to Europe. That outing was somber, as I was already in the bad graces of my father's new wife. This was an escape for just the two of us, and both of us recalled silently with solemn glances that race of years earlier when my mother accompanied us.

That gray day my father lost every bet. We left with no glad feelings between us, nor for the future.

Charleston was sunny that day though, and people were smiling. All sorts of excitement were in the air both from the impending match race and the possible military contests with U.S. forces, somewhere to the north at some unknown date. Many, perhaps most, still held that the two countries would never come to blows. The very field of this event would prove a sad statement of the opposite in less than three years' time when it became a military prison camp.

As I drove past the Grove farm to the Washington Track, the Palmetto Rifles had assembled and were marching to and fro, creating a stellar display of Germanic military precision for the gathering crowd. These fine young men in dashing colors and bright buttons, spiked helmets and plumes struck me as the epitome of martial discipline.

At the finale of their display they marched in formation, broke into two lines, turned at twenty yards between them, and as one, shouldered their armed muskets – aimed at high angles – and fired!

The report sounded as one blast toward the sky, and a plume of blue smoke ballooned above their sparkling bayonets.

Perhaps more of a circus act than a martial demonstration. But they would show later on a field far away that their abilities were more than show.

The grounds were bustling with visitors from all strata of the Charleston area and beyond. Servants and groomsmen were scurrying to and from the grandstand bringing refreshment to the fine women and their men in the high seats. There were many Africans in the audience in their own areas, some well-to-do, most simple house servants or free tradesmen.

The grandstand faced south on the north side of the track, ensuring the warming rays of February sun would comfort the gentry ensconced on cushioned chairs, some under lap blankets. Old and young were in attendance at this highest social event of the season. I recognized the two young women sitting together, Carla and Jenny, from my first day in Charleston as I waited at the tee-totaler shop to send a telegram to Boston. They were engaged in animated conversation, the subject probably more masculine than equine, and I doubt they would have recognized me that day, dressed as I was.

Male spectators smoked and chewed and spat into cuspidors placed where they did the most good, which was not much.

Numerous “side shows” and food stands lined the track. Some were in permanent buildings rented out for the occasion; others in portable structures or even tents brought there for the quick money to be made.

Many shacks dealt in fine wines and liquors, some in "teetotalling" beverages, and not a few selling side-bets on the races themselves. I conveyed Tyrone's envelope of cash to one of these bookmakers and received his receipt.

Among the distractions for the crowd was a counting horse, a trained pig, a juggler, a man who could guess your weight, height, and age, and there were the usual dog tricks, shell deception games, and card tricks.

As always at such tracks, numerous shady characters were doing their best to swindle and cut purses and pick pockets. My ragged appearance precluded me from being a prime target for such fellows, but I kept my wits about me, and my knife.

I saw Charles in woolen waistcoat and top hat mingling with some plantation gentry. I would not have countenanced a recognizing nod if I were he, nor would I have even had I been my previous self. Yet he did afford me a brief wave.

I expect they were discussing the recent events regarding *Star of the West*, possible resupply of Fort Sumter, the impending actions the U.S. Government must take, or perhaps the political structure and foreign positioning of the new Southern Confederacy.

Further missions for supply and reinforcement to Sumter were postponed and the soldiers garrisoning that lonely outpost had grown more desperate, hungry, cold, and resolute. Their friends in Charleston had tried to send boatloads of food to the troops and to their wives, all now reduced to eating old bread and dried salt pork and finally to only mostly rice. Anderson and the garrison proudly refused gifts of food from town, even from those at whose homes they had dined in months previous.

I delivered my wares to the man in the building Tyrone had rented and led my mules to the watering area with the grooms. As Tyrone's mules drank, I scanned the competing horses now lining up for the first heat.

These were to be "flat races" as opposed to hurdles in which other horses would race later in the day.

The celebrated entrant from Virginia was named Planet, a six-year-old which had won races all over the South including at that same Charleston track, and also which had taken a $20,000 purse the year before at a track in New York.

Planet was known as a four-miler, though he was a champion in all lengths. This was to be a four-mile race. He was a tall and beautiful chestnut stallion, a sterling example of a thoroughbred, standing nearly sixteen hands, long in body, thoroughly sound. He was a heavy favorite, and betting was lively.

South Carolina presented its entry, Abilene, a fine five-year chestnut mare with a streak of white on her face. She had contested with the famous Congaree, the wonderful horse beaten just the previous year by this same Planet she now challenged.

The air was filled with the chatter of the crowd, the barking of the dealers of ale, cider, biscuits, neighing and snorting of horses. Colorful flags on poles rustled in the breeze.

The horses were led up to the line, alert but not lathered.

The crowd hushed, paused in anticipation.

A tap struck on the head of a drum – they were off!

The competitors leapt forward, and it was a joy to see the two powerful animals matching each other stride for stride. Their sinews and legs stretched and pounded the dirt, their jockeys rocking in time with the power beneath them.

Now these were two fast horses, and each jockey thought he had the faster ride. They got up to speed and rode easily, not seeming to strain around the oval for the first mile. Planet jumped to an early lead with Abilene keeping pace and biding her time a few lengths in the rear.

Alongside the track, boys on their own mounts rode along testing their horses against the speed of the race. The crowd was in rapt attention following the action.

As they neared the grandstand and the audience the crowd cheered above the thumping of hooves and the rush of the wind. This was a thrill!

The riders crouched atop the undulating horses.

In the second mile, Abilene closed the gap.

The horses increased speed.

Abilene continued to gain on the favorite, and had drawn nearly even with a mile and a half still to run.

Half a league.

Both horses were still running "within themselves," as the expression goes, quickening the pace but not straining, not yet. Each had a reservoir of strength to draw upon.

It looked like their speed increased with each stride, building the thrill, displaying beauty of this creation of God and man.

As the beasts turned the post marking the beginning of the final mile, Planet remained about a length ahead, but now Abilene with her rider made her move.

Visible for a half-minute across the oval the two horses appeared side by side, shoulder to shoulder with each step. It was a vision of dance, like orchestrated choreography of eight legs pumping and placing, matching their steps on the field, driving a quickening tempo to measure the swelling chorale of the watchers' voices.

Now the jockeys employed their crops and made the horses work.

This was what these beasts were bred for, lived for, these few minutes of speed.

The South Carolina mare pulled away, showing her fine head leading as she streaked across the straightway and came into the final turn.

When horses like these thoroughbreds race, the motivation seems to be more their own than in the nearly irrelevant rider. There is a natural desire to run with the opponent, to outrun, to compete, to challenge. The victor glories. The opponent either is heartbroken or, like men in contest with each other, wants to retry the bid on another field, until finally there are no more energies to challenge, no more forces to marshal, no more cannon, no more armies.

No more hope.

On this day there was hope! On this day the gold braid on uniforms shone in the sun. Everyone here knew the situation at Sumter could lead to one short demonstration of troops in the field. But the war, if it came, would be over before it began and heroes would return home in a parade of triumph to bands, banners, cheering women in their finery. The braid would still shine.

Or perhaps after years of deathly struggle and loss, privation and injury, the braid would fade from years in mud and rain, in blood. Maybe the faces above the gilded collar would be sallow and wizened by the witness of man's great folly.

Perhaps the sleeve would be empty.

But on this day the clothes were fine and bright, the faces well-fed, the laughter free, the air festive, and the hurtling horses on the track displayed all that is good and fine in the world.

Planet increased his speed; Abilene matched him.

Planet strove. Abilene advanced.

Noble Planet gave his last, but the mare's blood was up and would not be denied. Tyrone's wager seemed assured.

As they neared the pole Planet flagged and relinquished the race as the pride of South Carolina charged on to win!

The horses slowed to cool down, the jockeys each waving congratulations to the other, and a great sigh went up from the crowd, some in despair and some in victory. Winners and losers.

The favored was a great champion, but even the best champion when tried often enough can be beaten. Southern armies would learn this in a very few years, but those lessons were in the future.

The sun lit the field and the crowds knew joy.

This was Charleston's last best day.

17

Luminous City

Christmas was not far off. Streets that a year earlier had been packed with early shoppers and holiday revelers were now jammed with marching recruits, merchants, and suppliers carrying their wares to depots and docks. There were hundreds and hundreds of escapees from the threatened farms to the south.

Until now the greatest challenges for these people had been either harsh labor in the fields, or boredom at their plantation homes. Now all sought places to sleep, cook, to just survive in a world so different from life on a quiet farm. There were fears of invasion or worse, and very shortly worse was to come.

There were many fire crews in Charleston before the War. They held monthly or even weekly meetings where they gathered in social fraternity to toast each other's exploits, tell tales of their adventures, model their uniforms. In holiday parades the crews would burnish and paint their engines and pumps, brush their horses, shine their helmets, and display their brilliance.

Most crews were all white. They were praised for their heroic work as well as their fancy uniforms. A few crews were free blacks, who also displayed well in parades. Occasionally when needed, a black crew had a white member, or a white crew had a black member, though this had not been the norm before the war. Now in the last months of 1861 most of the young men of the white crews were serving as infantry in Virginia.

The town was alive with people early that night. The glow from the gas streetlights silhouetted the shops and houses; rays of light shot through the smoke and vapors rising from the city. A breeze was beginning to stir from the bay.

Things were looking up for me. Well, the bottom of a cesspit would perhaps look like up for the poor soul I fancied myself then.

I was awake early that day and retired early that evening. I had spent the day delivering ice, which we could still get then, and other goods to the Mills House and the Pavilion Hotel. I had slept there my first evening in the city. After delivering bills of payment to some of the ships along the wharf I was nearly in bed when I heard the bell. I ignored it and prepared to sleep, but the bells didn't stop. I went out and saw a glow in the sky.

I turned to look at the steeples of this “holy city,” with its self-satisfied airs, its churches and cathedrals, its calm, gracious gentility and sanctimonious view of itself. One of the steeples, St. Michael's, had a red lantern suspended from a pole on its northern side, a sign to fire crews that told them what section of town the fire was in.

People who visited Charleston after that war said it looked like a holocaust site because of artillery bombardment, and true, that was bad enough. But the real destruction was from that fire.

An evening cooking fire started by displaced slaves from Edisto or somewhere had started with the crisp smoky scent of ham that rapidly turned to woodsmoke as sparks escaped into an outbuilding used to store hay. The tinder flashed and flames rapidly leapt up the walls of the old building, and from there the city of wood-roofed structures was open to the fire’s appetite.

Flame swiftly climbed up the walls the rising breeze fanned the embers. The fire grew hotter. Bells rang and fire companies jumped to their wagons.

General Lee staying at the Mills House surveyed the growing inferno from the balcony. He directed his men to soak the hotel’s bedclothes in water and hang them from the balconies and windows.

This prevented flying sparks from igniting the dry wood siding of the building, and it was largely because of this action that this structure survived.

Many, many buildings were lost.

I heard people shouting in the distance, grabbed a jacket, and walked toward the disturbance.

Then I ran.

I arrived at Bay Street and saw the flames rising like brilliant glowing sheets being blown in the stiff wind. One fire crew was on the scene and another was pulling up, bell frantically clanging. The horses weren't smartly brushed like in the parades, but were alarmed, lathered, eyes wide and rolling, yet still followed the guidance of the drivers.

Fire companies and volunteers from the onlooking crowd helped residents move themselves and their property from approaching windblown flames to safer places, which often also caught fire. Despite moving their goods more than once, many citizens lost everything.

I helped move goods from a threatened townhouse, a friend of Tyrone's, and as I carried them to a cart, I was accosted by Jenny Haywood of the brandy hair, wildly calling me by name.

"Jonathan! Jonathan!"

She recognized me, even with my face and hands covered with dust, even without the mended shirt sleeve cuff. Indeed, I had inadvertently grabbed my Mexican jacket and found that it yet retained its magic powers. They were needed that night.

I was a worker in the fire, and could have been gentry or peasant, it didn't matter.

She was dressed in clothes for the theatre that had become disheveled in the frantic flight from the blazes. She pleaded with me to help move her parents out of the way of the flames, as the roadway was blocked by crowds of those seeking to put out fires, or move properties, or just to observe.

Without trying to explain anything I ran with her to the carriage of her parents. The coachman was only a boy, and Mr. Haywood and he were trying to calm their horse who was stamping and rearing, in fear of fire and the rapidly moving crowds around him.

I don't consider myself any better with horses than the next man, but I could calm one, or at least hoped I could.

I removed my enchanted coat and with some effort placed it over his head, covering his eyes. He stood more still, though lathering and still stamping and shifting his feet. I grasped the bridle and led him away, talking and then singing quietly to him. The only song to come to mind was the Foster song, "Camptown Races," though when I reached the part about "run all night," I changed the lyrics to a slow and soothing, "doo-dah, doo-dah," repeated over and over to him.

We slowly moved northward on Meeting Street to about George Street, blocks away from the growing disaster. Squads of cadets from the Citadel marched in the other direction to give what aid they could.

As I lifted the Mexican jacket, which would see other use that night, Mr. Haywood took my hand and looked into my eyes. "Son, I thank you." He then turned to calm his excitable wife who was still in the coach, and helped his coachman lead the still skittish horse farther away from harm.

Jenny was tearful in her thanks, and before she followed her father, turned her streaming face back to look at the burning city. I left her there, the yellow flames lighting her features as if she were on a theater stage.

There is something thrilling about a fire. For a while a building looks like it is bothered, irritated by the flame. As it grows, the fire envelops the house, which wears it like a brilliant, flowing cloak. Its shape is swathed in a bright, dancing, dreamy glow and the building seems to grow in size, sweeping in and out of dazzling form. Its luminance dominates the attention of all about it. Heat from the blaze is not unpleasant at first, especially in December. But the relentless radiation becomes uncomfortable and worrying, the skin of one's face and arms feels beaten, drying.

Crowds of people are held rapt, staring at a new form of nature, or rather its perversion.

Fire changes a structure built by the labor of men into dazzling heat and light, finally falling bit by bit, either leaving its skeleton ablaze, or in a sudden collapse, walls and roof failing and tumbling, blowing a billow of sparking smoke and burning dust into a spreading spiral of flying coals, like the down of a dandelion blowing across a field, its seeds seeking other places to root and grow.

Building after building fell prey to the brightness. More bells rang.

Civilians, soldiers, and members of the City Police could not contain the blaze.

The ocean tide was low at that hour and the hoses from the pumps could not reach to pull and shoot water from the harbor to the sash factory, which was lost, nor to the buildings downwind, now in full fiery array. Great waves of flame spread high into the night. The faces of the people were masks of astonished wonder – some fearful, some prayerful, all in the thrall of the mighty event.

Horses neighed, the inferno roared; bells rang, and the people gasped and cried.

As I returned to the roaring and tumultuous scene a third fire wagon appeared, pulled by mules and carrying Jacob Johnson and his sons. There were only the three of them, and I called and ran to help. Jacob handed me an axe, to what purpose I knew not.

The fire spread.

A military officer arrived and began calling out orders. Soldiers and cadets from the crowd began moving, running ahead of the striding blaze.

Mothers gathered their children as the crowd stepped back from the heat. I was sunburned that dark, cold, damp night.

I joined the running men and obeyed the orders of the officer to remove people from the houses in the path of the hot wind and sparks.

There was confusion at first, and resistance, though finally families and servants grasped that they were in danger and in a frenzy began clutching what they could to move out of their doomed homes.

Then the wind faded and a light misting rain began to fall. Many of us hoped the calamity was over. We slowed long enough for a brief prayerful rest. But immediately the rain stopped and the wind grew rising to nearly a gale, and fanned the dancing blaze.

Fire bells rang and now church bells joined them.

The fire leapt to new buildings, ravenous.

The roar of the combustion sounded like the very breath of the Devil.

We worked all night, sometimes moving families, furniture, and goods more than once, fleeing the pursuing beast.

The rolling apocalypse reached the gas works. Great green jets of even hotter fire spewed up against the dark city, illuminating everyone with an unearthly sheen that could have heralded the end of the world.

The fire marched on.

Churches fell, venerable houses of wealthy men, factories which the South relied on to pursue the war, storehouses jammed with canon, arms, goods, and food, all fell to the rampaging light.

Other homes would catch aflame from the sparks and would either have its fire extinguished by men climbing roofs with water and wet sheets, or would be engulfed and terrifically destroyed.

To my left toward Logan Street, I heard a horrific scream. A small house in the rear of a larger home was burning, but the fire was mostly inside. The structure was not a flaming mass like other houses lost in the light.

The screaming continued, and I guessed it was a child. I ran to the door – locked! – and swung the axe. I broke the door and as I opened it air rushed into the room and fed the flaming walls. A figure was writhing on the floor near a broken window. The air feeding the fire brought the low roar of the flames to a crescendo as it whistled through the doorway and swept me into the room.

I don't know how the fire made its way inside that wooden building before the outside caught. I can only guess a flaming brand blew in through an open window. That may not be the cause at all.

The wretched figure on the floor was beyond thought in painful and reflexive shuddering, shaking in the hot air about it, thrashing against a still-dark wall. Sparks of flame spat and landed on the blanket over its head, spotted with flame, and its cry was like that of a demon. In that instant I wondered what additional hellish curse was being laid on me – a fleeting thought.

My skin felt thrilling flashes of heat as I dashed toward the person and carried/dragged it from the house through the door, against the streaming wind. I stumbled onto the street and continued to crawl and drag the hopeless victim from the now collapsing house, into the dark alley.

When we were far enough away, I beat the small bits of glowing crumbs from the blanket and smothered its remaining flames with my own now-ruined jacket, completing its final charm –salvation of a life.

The figure moaned and cried, and I may have cried too.

I lifted the charred blanket and saw an elderly woman with eyes clamped shut, desperately gasping, and grasping what was left of my shirt.

A City Police officer arrived at a reckless run, and as he tried to push me away from the cowering and choking wretch, strong hands gripped me from beneath the blanket and did not let go.

"Mammy, oh, Mahir," the big policeman cried. Over and over, "Mahir, Mammy, oh, Mother."

Slowly the woman released me and transferred her grip to her son.

He drew his whistle, blew and hollered to a man carrying a water bucket and brought him over. The policeman removed his coat and tore his uniform shirt into rags which he dipped into the bucket and gently wiped the burns on his mother's face and arms.

Others gathered around, and I backed away from the pair, still on the ground and catching my breath and coughing up ash.

The policeman's face was more visible as my vision cleared, and I recognized him as Kerry, the sergeant who directed me to carry poor Ricardo out the night of his suicide nearly a year ago.

The large Irishman fretted and whimpered as he tended his dear mother, who began to whisper consoling words in Irish to her frantic son. The two simply hugged and comforted each other until Doctor Jinkins arrived. Each comforted the other, one of wounds, the other of anguish.

"Jonathan!" A call from Jacob.

I slowly came to my feet and found I was sound, though scalded by the heat. Later when near a mirror I would find that my facial hair had burnt off, and much the hair of my head was frazzled to cinders. My arms were completely naked of hair beneath my charred shirtsleeves.

And the fire marched on.

I rejoined my fire crew, now without an axe and no longer under the protection of Ricardo's enchanted jacket.

At one point we heard large explosions. A military officer had ordered several buildings blown to pieces to arrest the fire's progress, and this worked! This firebreak was made by reducing family homes to atoms, by throwing the dust and fragments of a family's possessions into the air, a sacrifice. The act isolated the area and held the devastation of the great city within boundaries. But the absolute destruction of the heart of Charleston was visible in the downtown for decades and cast a permanent pall on the city.

In fact, few people were injured due to the rapid orders of the general who took control, but the sight was disheartening, gloomy, a blow to the pride of the city. If the Romans had wrought their anger on Charleston as they had on Corinth, the desolation of these hundred or more acres could have been no more complete.

As early sunlight began to crawl into the city, I rejoined Jacob and his crew with a replacement axe and we went home to home, moving charred beams to search basements and hollows for survivors. We found a few.

We also found a few who didn't survive.

As we cleared the homes one at a time in the growing dusty dawn, our faces smeared with ash, our lungs coughing up dust and smoke of the smoldering city, the world in my view was Sodom and Gomorrah, as if God's wrath had smitten this city, this "holy city."

Some of the churches tolled the hour, and these bells, unlike the frantic ringing of the night before from fire wagons sounded like a dismal dirge for the stricken community.

We moved like spectres in those lightening gray hours as we shifted hot charcoal members of structures, seeking the unfortunates who may yet have survived. The entire wasteland crawled with those like us, searching for people or digging through the blasted remains of their homes to salvage some small item, some treasured bit of their lives.

I came to the remnants of the home of the Christmas party of a year ago, where "The Charge of the Light Brigade" had been recited.

Someone had blundered.

As we carefully worked toward the back of the house with Jacob and his sons, we lifted a blackened beam and uncovered a burnt hand, a smoking blanket, and finally the burnt face of the serving girl Isabella.

She coughed, opened her eyes, and lived.

Section Two

Transient Salvation

20

Very Like a Waltz

For Charleston, there was now an obvious need for armed craft to guard its harbors. The individual state governments had to raise money to build their own defenses, supplemented by public fundraising events.

Auctions of paintings, fine imported jewelry, cloth, glassware, furniture and other objects d'art brought in money that would build the ships.

A grand party in Hibernian Hall was announced in early May of '62 to raise funds for an ironclad. It was hoped that a good ship with iron plating, cannons, and a ram in the prow would clear blockaders from the North and re-open South Carolina's trade.

Tyrone, always competing well with the German shops, supplied much of the dainties for that fundraising party. I drove the mule cart four times to the event, each time with a king's ransom of sweetmeats, dried fruits, flour and baking materials, cups, bowls, candles and bunting.

The afternoon of the grand party was an event for all the families in Charleston including the wealthy families still in the area, and the soiree glittered with women in fashions and men in gold braid or black silk.

The city band played stirring marches, instrumental state songs, and a peculiar soft number that spoke of thoughtful longing and love, expressed by brass and woodwinds. The piano was alternately played by Abe and by Mrs. Barringer, and kept a lively tune in the hearts of the audience. People gabbed and gossiped about who was going to be married to whom before the regiments went north, or what a shame about the young men who died or were made lame in the latest battle.

But mostly the party was up-beat and happy, with the previous year's glorious victory at Manassas behind them and expectations of the swift victorious conclusion to the war ahead.

A four-foot model and large detail drawings of the ungainly craft to be bought by the event were on display, and I'll tell you it was not a pretty ship. It had a "casement" on top of the hull, rather like an enormous inverted loaf pan, oblong with slanting sides and fearsome cannon tubes protruding from it, and with a long piercing ram at the bow. The slanting walls would deflect shot; the ram would puncture the hull of the Federal ships.

My friend Charles who had witnessed Sumter's bombardment with me would stand by the model and its drawings and describe some of the attributes and reasons for the design of various elements. He loved that stuff.

Because of steam propulsion there were no graceful masts on the model, no sweeping prow or high sides. The craft was for the business of sinking ships under steam power in calm seas. It was a blunt weapon made for the harbor, unfit for blue-water sailing.

At regular intervals calls were made to the crowd for donations for the ship to be built.

As entertainment, women created "tableaux" of a scenes from the plays of Shakespeare, including Romeo and Juliet's balcony scene, one from A Midsummer Night's Dream with fabulous costumes, and another from Antony and Cleopatra. Jenny's Aunt Peggy attended with her dog Pierre, and had helped set the scenes. I noticed that there was none from Macbeth, or Othello.

Cakes were raffled, cash bids were called for tunes for the band to play.

Isabella from the burned house had recovered enough to serve at the party, and though scars had forever marred her face, her health had returned. She was actively helping her wealthy mistress pour punch and collect donations.

I returned to the event near its conclusion to load my wagon with leftovers and recovered party supplies. I saw little Timmy of the Light Brigade poem, older and now in uniform, and struggling with

emotion as he stood near the piano. Abe was playing a slow and sad tune, very simple, mournful even – a dirge.

I carried on my work and when done, I saw Abe writing on a paper and handing it to Timmy.

Both wore solemn, even tragic expressions.

Abe stood and put his hand on Timmy's shoulder, seventeen years old now, and taller. He shook with sobs, then turned away and walked out of the room. I never saw him again, though I later heard his wild story.

Abe noticed me and waved me over.

"Poor lad. He wanted me to give him something. He said, 'To remember you by.'"

I had seen Tim enough to know that he was at war within himself. He was from a prominent family, and was always compared to the standard of his big brother William Ledger, one of the three who had sworn oaths in blood beneath that live oak tree the night of my masquerade at the party.

William, with his great stature, manly beauty and adoring followers both female and male, was destined for greatness. Men like these have always fascinated me, as they do everyone, I suppose. They become leaders as a matter of course. They are often so full of love of themselves that they do not even notice it from others. It is the daily experience of their lives.

Timothy with his mild and gentle manners had long wrestled with his fate and even his desire for masculine company. He had admired Abe and his talents, as did we all for his artistic abilities, but even more so, perhaps more personally.

Abe's interest was in the fairer sex, so Timmy Ledger's hopes were not to be satisfied with him; nor probably anywhere in the manly society in which he was born. He joined the army. The fiery fields of Virginia were his destiny.

"So, I transcribed and gave him the tune I played for him." Abe played it for me, slow, simple, sad. You have probably heard it. In these latter days the army plays it on the trumpet at funerals, at the close of day. Sad, mournful even. I think Abe, the Jewish composer from Charleston, based it on a French tune, but I'm not sure.

Abe watched the doomed young soldier leave the room and turned to me. "I cannot believe there is no justice in the world." He turned and drifted into the next room where Mrs. Barringer was playing a marvelous interpretation of what I took to be a polka, but was playing it slowly with much embellishment, very like a waltz.

In days and months to come I would reflect on the music of those two musicians, one so bright with creation and the other so innovative in her interpretation. Two would-be lovers joined by their music, but forever separated by two score of years.

Should they have been?

Timmy left on the train the next morning, to camp, and was later involved in the Battle of the Seven Days.

Despite his apparent gentle nature, he put his heart into the service of his country. His ultimate commander after the general in charge was wounded, was the same Robert E. Lee who had the year before commanded in Charleston, and saved the hotel during the fire.

General Lee was an officer of less than heroic proportions, yet carried himself with grace of command that demanded obedience and service, even reverence. Many thousands of men held under his spell danced into fields of blood and fire at a word from him. Such is the willingness of men to be led.

Timothy Ledger marched into those fields.

The battle where he fought was ranging back and forth in a wooded area, and from what I was later told, little Timmy got the bit between his teeth. The anxiety that battled within his heart and brain was brought forth, and perhaps he was inspired, lifted and driven as he was that night he recited The Charge of the Light Brigade.

During one of the Federal charges with his comrades falling about him, he lifted a revolver in his left hand, raised a saber in his right and leapt to the top of the earthwork with a great roar.

Little Timmy became a berserking giant.

He charged into the ranks of the men from the North and fired and slashed, a lion amid lesser lions. His own squad, seeing him so inflamed, rallied behind him and they swept the area. They followed the blazing warrior who Tim had become. Now with a saber in each hand, he sought to destroy all on this

hateful earth. He drove all before him until he was fired on by a trio of New Yorker soldiers, and fell. He was destroyed, his breast opened by the Minié balls exposing the great broken heart that could find no satisfaction in this world.

Perhaps he will be satisfied in the next.

Later his body, pierced and shattered by many balls, was searched. The Federal soldiers found in his pocket the tune Abe had jotted down for him as a parting gift so many miles and hopes away. The New Yorkers originally from Ireland – as were many of young Timmy's comrades – thought it was some kind of code and took it to their commander. The general was named Butterfeld I think. He guessed it might be musical, and shared it with the company bugler, who interpreted it as a melody and played it. That gentle, sad tune worked its spell and was instantly reverenced.

Abe's composition was quickly adopted and replaced the military camp signal of taps on a drum head for "lights out." It has been played at military bases and funerals ever since.

Later, after the event as I was loading Tyrone's pans and wares to return to his warehouse, Isabella came up to me.

She looked at me with trepidation and spoke with hesitancy, no doubt self-aware of her brilliantly scarred forehead and cheek, yet by now resigned to her new appearance. Both eyes shone clear; her right had forever lost its eyebrow. She kept her left side to me as well as she could.

"Jonathan, they told me it was you who found me."

I listened but could not speak.

It is true I was tired, exhausted really, but I was fascinated by this mysterious woman, now marred forever, and when she spoke I felt her gentle inner light.

She did not look horrible. She was not a monster. But she could perhaps never be called beautiful.

"Uh, yes…." I expounded.

"I want to thank you."

Thank me?

I am a man without home, country, or family, hiding from those who want me to learn to kill, begging the charity of a former slave and an expatriate Irishman. I am the one who should thank my benefactors even to be permitted on a black firefighting team, not one who should receive thanks.

I gathered my wits about me. "It was my honor to be able to help you." To help anyone, really.

The world is a hard place. I had seen people die and would soon see the deaths of many more. Some I only saw suffer. A very few I recognized as happy.

This woman without blame was disfigured in a catastrophe not of her making. This woman had healed but was not made whole. This woman was now viewed by the world differently, diminished.

She nodded and turned to resume her work.

Did she still hope to find a mate, one to win her in her present state? Was she looking forward to a life of bitter spinsterhood, finally dying alone?

As I left the Hall late that night at the end of my day's labor, I sought out Isabella finishing up her day, and with a great emotional effort, I took her hand in mine.

This woman and I shared each other's comfort for the rest of that night. And later, many nights after.

Section Three

Stealth and Dash

40

Search by Smoke

Given all the other conditions, it is amazing how accurate the shot was.

I was deep in an early morning reverie, preparing my pipe on the pitching deck amidst the spray, clouds pressing down on the ocean and seas rolling at about four feet. A five-pound ball of iron flying two feet by your head can quickly draw your attention on the present. My reflection on my past few days vanished in an instant.

But I got ahead of myself.

Tyrone had called me back from the masonry job on Long Island and sent me to sea on a shopping expedition.

He competed for the best merchandise from the blockade runners but had difficulty getting it. Tyrone paid agents to bring in tinned hams but would instead get back spoiling salted bacon. He requested bolts of fine silk cloth and was brought hogsheads of black cloak buttons. Once he paid for any fashionable items women could wear and was brought bundles of white kitchen aprons. And he would have to bid for other imported smuggled goods with other shop owners, especially the ones owned by the Jewish families along King Street.

He decided to send his own agent and he knew I was eager to get out from under the eyes of recruiters.

I slipped in to see Isabella before I left. I kept to the evening shadows. She expected me and wore that dress from the magic nights in North Carolina, the cotton floral print in blue and black. She let me in and we went to her room. We quietly shed our clothes and went to bed and loved, she quieter than usual and holding me gently as if I was fragile. When I awoke that night and again early the next morning she was not asleep, just quietly cradling me against her breasts.

I rose and dressed. I kissed her goodbye before dawn.

I knew I would miss her sweet caresses. I still do.

There was lots of activity at the port in Charleston the morning before we left for the British colonial town of Nassau, far to the south. That city was making lots of money as a transshipping center between Europe and the Confederacy.

Our ship was loading on the Cooper docks. Hundreds of bales of pressed cotton and great skeins of hemp swung onboard by cranes and tackle, and the muscles of the Negroes. Workers moved methodically from long practice, slaves and freemen overseen by white foremen.

It was from this dock that the steamer *The Planter* had been stolen by Robert Smalls and Esau Johnson the previous year.

Our boat was named *Gawain.* Long and low to the water with sidewheels about midships. Its graceful structure reminded me of a racehorse, or perhaps a greyhound. In fact, I think there was a blockade runner named *Greyhound* at one time. But really with all the cotton piling up it was more like a pack mule, filled and stacked with bales and casks of turpentine. It was also loaded with coal from two different warehouses, and the water tank was topped off.

The ship was painted a dull gray to blend in with sea mists, and its retractable smoke stack could reduce its height profile.

The last time I rode a seagoing vessel I was nearly killed under a mountain of water, and on landing found myself marooned, bereft of family and sweetheart in a land preparing for war. I boarded that gray craft with trepidation.

I suppose the cruise was daring, though it was seen by millions of my countrymen as simply illegal.

Heavy, dense cotton bales from the steam press were hoisted atop one another onto the deck of the ship until the boat resembled something like an Alp.

As the light grew dim that cloudy afternoon I saw the workers perform a task I had never witnessed. The bales were being fumigated. But it wasn't to kill weevils or chase roaches out from the dense fiber bundles; this was to strangle human stowaways with rank smoke and force them out and on deck. The fumigation crew carried long poles to prod victims among the cotton bales. Metal boxes with smoldering fabric and leaves inside were carried around the ship, and while one man used a bellows to force air through the box another directed the smoke through a sort of stovepipe. It shot the choking fumes into the spaces where it turned out men could and did hide.

One man squirmed out, dusty, coughing and spitting, and was taken by a Citadel cadet detail with a rough sergeant. I wondered whether he went back to his barracks and whatever punishment was given deserters trying to get out of the country.

I wonder what punishment they would have given me.

But my papers from Tyrone were in order today. There was little interference with those on task of running the blockade.

And then voices gasped from between some more of the bales, and two haggard looking men in soldier's uniforms staggered forward. How they were able to secrete themselves between the huge blocks of cotton without being crushed to paste I cannot say, but there they were, hacking and struggling to breathe. They were held by the crew and taken ashore, joining the other. Were they all tried and imprisoned? I doubt it. Men were in short supply. I expect they were given muskets and sent north to fight alongside comrades who must have kept a wary eye upon them. Or maybe their comrades themselves later joined in an attempt to leave the hopeless war for home, or just away, maybe westward.

The search by smoke continued, and another figure roused from the cargo. He scrambled to the top of a bale and gasped. He was dressed better than the recruit, and it turned out it was Charles Gallard!

"Ahoy, Charles," I cried. He coughed, and waved. "What are you doing?"

My friend lowered himself to the deck and walked toward me. "I was just checking to see if I could evade the procedure."

Two cadets from the Citadel walked over to take him in tow. He protested, "No, I have a ticket. I'm legitimate on this ship."

Charles retrieved a ticket from his coat, and one of the cadets examined it. The captain of the ship walked over, looked at it, and confirmed, "Yes, he's a passenger." With a cautionary glance at the legal stowaway the captain returned to his duties. The cadets seemed nonplussed and decided to return to the dock.

"Charles, you continue to surprise. Why are you going to Nassau?"

"I've got to choose some ordinance." He had been experimenting with new designs of torpedoes as well as performing his regular duties with artillery shells and charges. "I'm working on a special project. Perhaps we can talk on board, later." I remembered seeing him that day at the Mills House, discussing a mystery with the professor officer last autumn.

He hustled off to shore to change from his odiferous and smoke-stained clothes.

By sunset I had eaten a good meal and used the privy in anticipation of an overnight voyage. All passengers went aboard. They were mostly business men, though there were two mothers with children and a rather striking woman, a Mrs. Trent, traveling alone, supposedly to meet her husband who was already in the Bahama Islands. I would not call her buxom exactly, yet she had a remarkable profile from any angle. She carried herself in a way that would lead one to wonder about the details of her feminine physique, and many eyes followed her as she went below.

Everyone had been directed to wear only black at night – not even a handkerchief of white; no lights and no smoking were permitted on threat of immediate death. This sounded drastic and may never have been implemented, but truth is that any sign could have betrayed the presence of the *Gawain* to the

blockading ships of war. It seemed incongruous with the rules of stealth that there was a lot of white cotton aboard.

Adventure it was, but in deadly earnest.

The captain gave the word, and the engine's fires were lit. The clean hard coal began to warm the boiler creating steam, which was directed to the piston and then to driving the wheels as the ship cast off its moorings. The sun had set hours before. It was totally dark except for the glow of lamps on the wharf and a few on nearby boats.

As we moved downstream on the river into the harbor bay I glanced back at the dock and saw Isabella standing near the warehouse near a lantern, watching our boat slowly drive to Sumter. Her face shone white in the lamplight beneath a slacked hood covering her scar.

I had told Isabella I'd be back, God willing, in less than a month. Some ships made the passage and back in less than a week. Some never returned. She had packed some food for me which I had taken aboard earlier. I watched her as she turned to stare at me with a stark capturing gaze, firm of chin, sorrow in her eyes.

I thought of her life, a pretty young woman marred with her trial by marriage, then while recovering something of a reputable station, marred again by fire and "defaced," as it were, and slipping to a state of desperate survival that led her to take even me as a companion. Me in my own low state.

Now she survived as a white serving girl with a bond of casual convenience to me, impossible to be called anything like marriage, and with no hope of anything better in life, no future beyond this. What a prospect!

And now even I was leaving her, if only perhaps for a few weeks.

I waved. She stood still and stared at us. This public yet deeply private scene struck me to the heart. I waved again and watched her standing as a statue as she shrank in my sight and finally was lost in the darking mist.

What was she seeing? What was she hoping?

How would she greet me when I returned?

From the stack came a very fine exhaust, not black and heavy as from the smaller boats running about the harbor. *Gawain* burned high quality coal imported from Wales or Canada. Some said it came from Pennsylvania. It provided little visible smoke, which helped blockade runners evade the telescopes of searching Federal ships.

Coal from the mines in Virginia, Tennessee and North Carolina is softer and smoky when burnt. Hard coal was valuable, like the guano from the Pacific islands was for the farms of South Carolina, far from such a source of concentrated fertilizer. I wonder if they use Pacific guano in Wales.

The view of a darkened city from the deck of a boat passing into danger is thrilling. Not good really, but thrilling.

We passed by Sumter, the fortified outpost in the harbor whose walls and battlements had by then been pounded to rubble by the bombardment of Federal warships. Cannons still protruded from the dark mass, perhaps more imagined than visible as we cruised past the ruining citadel. Every few weeks the Federals (my brothers!) would pour shot and shells onto that manmade shoal, reducing its brick walls ever more. Yet there was a garrison of men on Sumter, and their flag flew. Each night workers came to the island for repair. Soldiers rotated in and out to keep watch. They lived a ragged life in tunnels dug in the foundation of that artificial island made of broken bricks atop New England granite.

Perhaps each of us digs our own tunnels to hide in.

A hooded lantern blinked a signal; our ship replied, then came darkness and silence, save for splashes of water on the hull, the rhythmic throb of the engines, and the electric whispering of passengers. Our darkened *Gawain* swept into a sea of hidden warships.

No smoking was allowed. The glowing tip of a lit cigar could be the beacon that revealed us to blockading Federal vessels. It could raise a cry, "Look! A runner heading out!" to sell cotton, and to bring needed food, materiel, and weapons to continue the war. To kill loyal Americans.

All non-crew were ordered below and to remain silent until the ship had passed the cordon of blockading ships. This was a part of General Winfield Scott's "Great Snake" or "Anaconda." The plan was devised by the venerable old commander of the U. S. Army who convinced President Lincoln at the start of the war that the South's seaports could be blockaded and strangled, as if by a great constrictor

snake. Squadrons of ships, he said, would end the sea trade of the rebellious states and prevent their supply from friendly interests in Europe.

It wasn't completely effective as three out of four times the blockade runners made it out and safely returned. But it certainly added a level of danger. After all, those Federal ships were armed and the blockade runners were not.

The crews manning the runners were mostly English or Scottish or other foreigners, though I think I identified more than one adventurous New England Yankee posing as Irish or Welsh. I wonder what they might have thought of me.

Our crew was all dressed in black or dark gray. The captain had run ships to and from Nassau four times since the war had begun. And because of earlier service for the government in Washington, he had long been very familiar with shifting sandbars, tidal patterns of the inlets, tactics of the blockaders, and the quantity of money he made every voyage. All was paid in Yankee gold or British sovereigns and deposited in a British Colony bank.

The captain had been a coastal surveyor in the U. S. Navy for a decade before the war began and had offered his services to command a warship for the Federal government. He was deemed by a clerk in Washington too old at sixty two years to command, and was rejected. Perhaps his sensibilities were hurt. His vigorous nature would not let him rest, so he was hired by a firm that would pay him handsomely to employ those skills he had so completely developed.

All lights on Fort Sumter were quenched, or at least shuttered so that the silhouette of our ship would not eclipse a lantern's glow when viewed from the deck of a blockader out to sea.

We passed out of the harbor, and the ship's master directed the steersman as we wove over the changing channels through the sand bars.

We turned up Maffitt's Channel to the north, easing along Sullivan's Island past Fort Moultrie and up the coast. Our boat was not racing but making quiet swift headway in gloomy mist. After cruising carefully northward we turned to the open sea about three in the morning with no sign of a horizon, nor of a pursuer.

Federal ships were out there, but were invisible that black night.

The *Gawain* could sail in as little as eight feet of water depth. The Federal boats had much deeper drafts and coming within a quarter mile of shore was a risk. Several in past months had been grounded, leaving them open to the guns of Forts Moultrie, Johnson, or Sumter.

I wrapped myself in a dark oilskin cloak and rose to the deck.

The oilskin was warming and the sea not too rough. I felt rocked in a cradle of gray on an ocean of black, with the heartbeat of engine throbbing beneath me. I drifted to sleep on deck with sky above me and plumbless deep below. I awoke in the early fading gloom wishing the sun would hurry into the May sky so I could safely light my pipe.

The journey from port to port can take as little as thirty-two hours, but using our circuitous route of evasion we didn't expect to see Nassau for three days.

I have seen the sun rise from the ocean many times in my life. That time, as black faded to gray, I knew light would make our craft visible, this mountainous pile of cotton driving even more eastward now.

And that is when the early morning cannon ball thumped into cotton beside my head. I mentioned this earlier.

A Federal ship had fired a shot ahead of our craft earlier to order us to halt, but I never heard nor saw that one.

The marksman on the blockading ship put his missile on board the rocking, cruising platform well over a mile distant, to near where I had been resting. That seemed to me really quite a feat.

My primary reaction was to duck.

The distant crack of the cannon arrived shortly, and I looked around at my fellow passengers in the early dim light to see their reactions.

"It must be the 'crack of dawn,'" quipped Charles, who had stepped nearby.

I saw crewman and passengers in various positions of collapse, alarm, and crouch, except for the ship's master employing a telescope, the first mate steady at the wheel, and the young matron Mrs. Trent on deck in a dark blue frock. She stood quite erect and boldly followed the gaze of the captain toward the other ship. The bleary dark shape of a pursuing Federal blockader was becoming more defined.

We were all aware of the danger of the passage, though when a piece of hurtling metal came among us our emotions became something more than a simple thrill.

Some men in a chase like this would become anxious, furtive. Some would act angrily. The captain acted as if this was normal procedure and spread his cool confidence among his crew and passengers. Perhaps in his world of chase and evasion this is regular rote of action.

The sun broke from the clouds and bathed the Federal ship in a celestial glow. It seemed to glint from it. I watched its light sweep in progress across the shaded waves between the Yankee boat and our own like a drape being pulled from a window.

The ship was definitely closer.

"She'll be within easy range soon, Captain."

As the sailor spoke, I saw a flash of fire from the other ship. As I watched, a puff of smoke in the distance dashed away from its side. Then we heard the crying shriek as a ball sped past close to our bow.

"Fine shooting," stated the captain.

A passenger named Jones was having none of this praise. "Captain, we cannot countenance cannon fire! We must surrender! There are women aboard!"

Mrs. Jones was made of sterner stuff. "Hush, Willie. Let the captain do his work."

Then Mrs. Jones stood on tip-toe to view the pursuing ship. She was dressed in white that morning, and Willie stood beside her, crouching and shielding their daughter. The ten-year-old struggled to get a glimpse of the attacker.

The captain moved serenely to the very bow of the ship and trained his glass upon the sea before him. Charles and I watched the approaching craft as the sun slowly climbed toward its zenith.

More shots followed. Charles spoke, and I listened to his soliloquy of muzzle velocity, ballistic arcs, how cannon barrels are rifled to improve aim, and even of methods of gunpowder storage. How does one learn all these things? When broken into the abstract, the flying iron around our boat was not so frightening, except when another thudded into one of the large bales of pressed cotton on deck.

"More coal," commanded the captain, "more pressure."

The sun hung like a beckoning lantern higher above the eastern horizon.

The Federal bow-chaser barked again, and the ball splashed a few yards to the side.

Everyone was ordered below deck, and I complied. The well-proportioned Mrs. Trent remained above to converse with the captain and he allowed her company.

"Two points starboard," called the captain, and the wheel turned.

The *Gawain* responded and became more lively.

We had almost no exhaust coming from the boiler burning the heavy and expensive Welsh or Pennsylvania coal. Its cost depended on prices from coal smugglers plying between Northern ports and Bermuda or Halifax, then to Nassau. Lower grades of coal released plumes visible for miles, easy to spot by the blockaders who constantly searched for tell-tale smoke.

Our ship the *Gawain* was designed in Liverpool for invisibility as much as was possible. It was low to the sea and painted like fog, though its cargo of cotton bales bulked its profile. It was powered by a large steam plant that drove sidewheels, which allowed fine maneuverability in port and pretty good speed on a calm sea, about twelve knots. But it was not really a match for some of the Federal blockading fleet, loaded as it was.

The captain had no choice but to run further east for the open sea. We were given chase and the pursuing ship was gaining.

I heard the captain call for "cotton," which when soaked in turpentine can replace coal as the fuel for the boiler, and can quickly increase the temperature of the boiler. We carried an unlimited supply of cotton and about four hundred barrels of turpentine.

There is always a danger of disaster on a ship driven by fire, especially if it carries a cargo of turpentine. Breaching the first keg of the liquid added a dimension of risk, and running the steam drive at a temperature and rate of motion beyond its design heightened the thrill. I think there weren't any folks aboard who enjoyed this level of excitement. I went below, more to avoid the immediate challenge of the contest than for any other reason.

As the rhythm of the motor increased, I heard a "thump," which I guessed was another shot from the other boat, once more hitting its mark, though I hoped only absorbed again in one of the bales above.

It is amazing to me that the gunner could estimate the range, elevation, and motion of his and our ships to the degree that he could place the ball aboard us.

I heard deep splashes as the engine shafts whined at a higher pitch, and sidewheels thrashed the waves.

The steely Mrs. Trent came below with a wild grin, her eyes glowing with the rush of her blood. "The captain is lightening the ship by casting adrift some of the cotton! What a chase!"

Yes, what a chase.

She was more elated than concerned. To lighten the load the captain ordered bale after bale cast overboard; thousands of dollars bobbing in the open sea. I wonder sometimes what became of those cotton rafts, the result of hundreds of hours of planting, tilling, harvesting, ginning. I expect some that may have drifted close to shore were salvaged and sold, slightly the worse for wear. The others, thousands over the period of the war, perhaps became homes for seabirds and comfortable fiber for nests.

Our ship was less lofty now, like a snowdrift melting in spring sunlight.

As each ton of fine cotton was set adrift the speed of the straining *Gawain* increased, though the pursuers were still gaining.

I returned to the deck and witnessed the quiet efficiency of the crew as they dumped the cotton overboard A trail of white treasure bobbed in our wake. The smoke stack was hot and poured a radiant heat to the sky as wheels churned the water. A band of cloud appeared on our port beam, and the sky seemed to have grown darker. By then the day was progressing toward noon.

Another shot flew overhead missing *Gawain* by more than a hundred feet.

The Federal warship was growing larger, and I could see the bow wave, white against the dark sea.

The captain changed course again, and drove us more northerly, still eastward. The engine drove yet faster.

Another bale splashed sternward.

Like all blockade runners, *Gawain* had no arms other than the captain's revolver which could easily be dropped overboard. Any blockade runner captured with arms aboard could be charged with piracy, and the attendant penalties involving twisted hemp were not worth the slim chance of winning a battle of arms against a U.S. warship.

"Six more bales, from the bow," ordered the captain.

The heavy bales were dragged and levered into the waves, and bobbed in our wake as *Gawain* shuddered to a faster pace.

With increased speed of the engine, danger of boiler explosion also increased. A boiler explosion in the open sea could mean only doom for most all on board. But that was the challenge.

This was the cost of profit.

The lightening of the load had a dramatic effect. The disk of the sun crested to zenith. In a few more moments we finally could see the result of the captain's orders.

Our pursuer was falling behind.

"It's the Drift," said Charles. I glanced at him and saw him smiling, raising that eyebrow to a high altitude.

The captain of the Federal vessel also recognized he was failing and turned the broad side of his ship to ours. Flashes and smoke rippled along its side. Seconds later larger shot landed in the water to our rear, not well aimed. We had drawn out of range, and our lead was growing.

"He crossed the stream of the North Atlantic Drift," said Charles. He told me that a stream of warm water flowing from the Gulf of Mexico up to England travels about three knots faster than the water closer to the coast. Our captain had played the following ship and had timed our path to use this speed advantage to boost us away and out of range.

I have never been good at reading the sea.

As a youth I passed the wharfs of Boston with their tall masted ships loading at the docks, stevedores wresting the world's goods into my hometown. Loitering boys along the wharf known as harbor "chucks" would offer to work, maybe getting jobs as stevedores themselves, or maybe as seamen. Some became cutpurses. And I'm sure by now some had joined the army, at least for the enlistment bonus.

The seamen I have known and shipped with could read the sea. They would watch the birds, clouds, fish and dolphins, the angle of the waves, slight changes in the roll of the sea. They could tell how far off we were from shore, or that a blow was coming.

The men on the deck of the *Gawain* went about their duties, no longer unlashing and rolling bales overside, but trimming the tiller, looking to our pursuers, and to the sky, to the sea.

I could not see invisible signs these sailors can read.

A falling mist joined the spray from below. The sea, the sky, the air all were becoming water. I briefly wondered if since there was water in the air, was there air in the water? Not much, I think. I suppose in seltzer.

The scene was eerie. The gently falling rain dampened the deck and spitted off the stack of the engine. Fire in the boiler roared distantly, the wheels beating water. The crew stood attentive like statues, watching their work as the wind pulled at their coats. Any danger of being seen by a pursuer quickly faded in gray rain.

As the rain fell harder the captain directed the ship to turn three points to the south, more toward the Bahama chain of islands. As I made to go below deck the indomitable Mrs. Trent was alighting holding her umbrella aloft, so I stood aside. She went directly to the captain. I moved toward them as he shared that he had positioned us for running to the drifting stream that pours from the Gulf of Mexico up the coast and eventually to Europe and the land of Vikings, as Charles had deduced. This is apparently common knowledge among blockade runners. It is effective but takes the boat off course and can delay the voyage for days.

The rain was a blessed extra from heaven obscuring our flight.

On deck we were of gay spirits, and some spirits flowed freely. The sailing crew was not as free as we passengers.

Finally a blurry sun touched the sea and began to squash as it sank. Darkness came upon the deep, *Gawain* changed course to the south and reduced speed to conserve fuel.

The captain switched to the cheaper coal and insisted on all lights out and dark clothes only. And silence.

We went to our berths early, glad for the day's salvation, yet anxious to see what the new day would bring. I was sick on that voyage, queasy anyway, but from mortal danger, not from wave motion this time.

I would return to my reverie that evening and pondered my life, the choice before me. Yet another choice that would mean the world to me, to Isabella, to others. My world, and their worlds.

The night was clearing now, another black watch on the barren sea, dark but for the lively starlight, an occasional falling star, and the imagined distant, dim sense of breaking shoals.

God looked out for us that day as He had done the previous night and would the following week. But I hope I never grow to count solely on Him.

* * *

Uncle Jonathon was tired, and I let him pass into sleep. I gathered my notes and as I left his room, I noticed a small wooden box on the shelf by his bed. I could have looked inside it, but I thought his privacy should be granted. I couldn't give him much at his age, but I could give him that.

* * *