

Two Civil
Wars

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THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR, 1863

The Waters of England and Richmond, Virginia

THE CAPTAIN OF the Confederate States of America ship *SUMTER* sent a messenger, ordering the engineer to increase power. The rattle of the steam engine and vibration from the rocking beam was new to a captain who grew up under sail. He'd used the bell signal cord at the helm to send the same message five minutes before but sensed no increase in speed.

"I don't think I have ever seen as many sails out here as this morning," he commented to the young quartermaster at the ship's wheel.

"Tis not often, Sir, that the shipyard sends off three new ships at the same time. Them sails most likely just curious folks, come to see three steam-sail military raiders all lined up like in a parade."

Six men had managed to get the *SUMTER* out of the becalmed Southampton Harbor, using the ship's modern engine. Once freed from the harbor, the breezes steadily increased, a half-hour before the rest of the ship's company came aboard, battling large waves

as they shuttled from a merchant ship that had carried them from Mobile, Alabama. The *SUMTER* had waited hours while the two ships in front of them transferred their crews from the same vessel.

On the deck, officers were organizing the new crew into work teams. The Captain wouldn't know the quality of his green crew until they'd drilled for days. He'd ordered that the first organization was to select gun crews for the British built cannons. He smiled as he watched the other two Confederate ships begin to run up sails. Obviously, their captains had different priorities.

"Yup, those must just be gawkers," commented the young quartermaster, "they all just want to get closer where they can get a better look.

As the Captain shifted his eyes from the deck to the ships in front of him, an uneasy feeling came over him. Eight ships were maneuvering to form an L shape, some moving across the bows of the two ships now under sail, the others slowly forming a line paralleling the Confederate ships. He turned to a young ensign at the chart table. "Sound battle stations," he ordered, as cannon fire echoed over the water.

He watched his befuddled crew staring at confused officers. The deck resembled a pen outside a dairy barn as a herd of cows was gathered for milking. The Captain pointed, swinging his arm at multiple points on the horizon where the flash of cannons was erupting.

"Sir," called the quartermaster. The young man pointed to their left where two ships were bearing down on them. Two more were on a course to cut off any retreat back toward England.

The ship's second in command raced up the stairs from the deck below. "Oh my God," he whispered. "Must be a least a dozen of the bastards, and they have the wind." He extended the telescope he was carrying. "They are flying the stars and stripes." He swung the telescope to the two Confederate ships.

"Our sister ships are both turning with the wind and running," continued the officer who had only been aboard an hour.

“How long will it take to get a full set of canvas set?” asked the Captain. “On steam power alone, we can’t outrun our enemy, not in this wind.”

“Honestly, Sir, it might take a day. On the way from Mobile we drew lots for crewmen for each ship. I only ended up with three men who have any experience under sail. Most of our crew are brown-water sailors, almost all from river steamers. But we got lucky, we have four experienced artillerymen.”

The Captain stood quietly for a full minute. “Get below and get the gun crews to their stations. I’m going to sail straight into the enemy. Maybe the other two ships can get away.”

The new officer stood frozen. “I mean now,” screamed the Captain, as he tugged the bell cord ordering full speed.

Next to the ship a shell splashed harmlessly into the water, then two more. To the left of the *SUMPTER* the first Yankee ship had turned, paralleling the ship. As the Captain watched, four more of that ship’s cannons fired, throwing huge geysers of water in front of his ship. The Captain leaned over the rail trying to be heard over the bedlam on the deck below. “Pick any target and fire at will.”

The second enemy ship turned onto their course, unleashing a well-timed stream of fire from eight guns. The final shell slammed the *SUMTER* at the bow, the heavy shell scattering splinters as it crashed in one side of the metal clad wooden hull and out the other. The sound of one of their own cannons firing drowned out the screams of wounded men.

On the horizon, the other two Confederate commerce raiders had managed a turn away from the Yankee ships along their port side. The maneuver turned the ships across the broadside of the three Yankee warships that had crossed their bow. He watched as each of the Confederate ships was hit, but both were pulling away from their attackers. The combination of steam engines and sail made them faster than the pursuers.

As the Confederate ships ran, two more of their enemies gave up and turned toward the *SUMTER*. Below, a second gun fired and then a third. The Captain watched as one of his own shells shattered a mast of one of the Yankee ships to his left. The damaged Yankee fired all eight of its guns as it turned away from the fight. Two Yankee shells slammed the side of his ship, blasting two of the *SUMTER*'s guns from their mounts. Pieces of men, arms and heads scattered across the deck. Other men staggered away from the carnage clutching gaping wounds.

He was proud as another of his own guns fired, blasting away the quarterdeck of a second enemy ship. Below, a rebel yell like that heard on the battlefields of Maryland or Pennsylvania rose from those still able to fight. The yell was drowned out by the sound of two more shells slamming their hull and then an explosion as one of the shells pierced the five pressure tanks of their steam engine. Every opening to the lower decks erupted with scalding steam, the hiss mixed with the screams of men being boiled alive.

The ship rolled onto its port side, the explosion ripping a massive hole in that side of the hull opening to tons of water. The bow dove into the next wave. Thousands of pounds of water over the bow broke the back of the weakened ship. The *SUMPTER* began to fold in the center, just as another shell exploded just below the quarterdeck, turning what little was left of the captain and quartermaster into crab food.



The office of the President of the Confederate States of America was cramped, stifling; most of the men stripped their ties and unbuttoned their jackets. Only three defied common sense, President Jefferson Davis, a portly navy captain by the name of Peterson, and in the back of the room a man who looked like he should be sitting on the sidewalk, a tin cup in his hand. Davis reread the label of the folder on his desk, **STRATEGY TO DISRUPT NORTHERN**

MARINE COMMERCE, (use of commerce raiders to disrupt Yankee shipping).

“The *MOBILE STAR* brought the news of a fight, Sir,” said Peterson. “She ran the Union blockade into Beaufort three days ago. The armed ships we ordered from the British were delivered on time. All three raiders slipped out of Southampton together. They pulled down the Union Jacks and ran up our flag. Transfer of men from the *MOBILE STAR* to fill out the three crews went smoothly in spite of strong winds.”

President Davis dabbed at sweat on his lip. “So, all three of our new ships were delivered per our contract with the English?”

“They were, and all three were armed, with a full crew. But Sir, not one of them had ever drilled with their ship’s new long-range cannons. Hell, Sir, not one of the crews had ever loaded or fired a shot. When the captain of the *MOBILE STAR* heard firing at sea only miles from the rendezvous, he assumed the three battle cruisers were testing their big guns. It was only when his lookout scrambled to the deck to report muzzle flashes from a dozen different points on the horizon did the *STAR’S* captain begin to worry. The sound of heavy guns only lasted about fifteen minutes.”

“The *MOBILE STAR* waited for a half hour and then sailed out to where they had seen the flashes,” interjected an admiral, reading from a report. “They found a small boat with six men pulling hard for the English coast. Beyond them they could see two Yankee ships out where there might be more survivors. The *MOBILE STAR* picked up six survivors of the newly commissioned *SUMTER*, including one officer.”

The Confederate President dabbed at the sweat on his face with a huge blue handkerchief. The perfume of magnolias added a sickly-sweet layer to the heat. “Do we know how many survivors the Yankees picked up? Do we know what happened to the other two ships?”

“No, Mr. President,” continued Peterson. “The men picked up

by the *MOBILE STAR* said their captain sailed directly into the encirclement of Yankee frigates so that the other two ships had a chance to get away. The *SUMTER* was running on his new steam engine, so he was slower than molasses in Maine. The other two were already under sail. The last our boys saw of them, one was on a dead run, slugging it out with two Yankees. The other was leading three more on a chase before a strong north wind.”

“Why didn’t the Yankee’s go after the *MOBILE STAR*?”

“That’s what got me to thinkin’,” offered the man in a worn canvas coat in the back of the room. “That’s why we are here.”

“I wondered why the head of Naval Intelligence was sitting in my office dressed like a common dock worker,” laughed Davis.

“Jeff, those Yankees were waiting for those three ships, only those ships. They knew how many, what they would look like and when they were coming. The *MOBILE STAR* was flying the English flag when she sailed right by those ships searching for more survivors. The Yanks never even looked at her,” finished Clyde Holmes.

Holmes was the man in charge of intelligence, plotting tactics to defeat a Yankee navy many times the size of the Confederates.

“We may still have two of those new cruisers out there raising hell with Yankee commerce,” offered an admiral sitting next to Holmes. “But, Mr. President, someone gave the Yanks precise information on those ships. It wasn’t the ambassador, and it wasn’t me. That means it was either your pal the Secretary of Treasury or Mead over in the Quartermaster Corps. He was the one who put together the contracts in England, the one who set the schedule.”

“Remember Mr. President, that Colonel Mead was a Yankee officer,” snarled Holmes.

“Clyde,” laughed Jeff Davis, “you are the only man in this room who was not a Yankee officer. Still, I get your point. It couldn’t have been the treasury secretary; the only thing he did was authorize our British allies to draw on our funds in the Bahamas.

There are, however, other possibilities, are there not? There must have been people on Mead's staff who knew what was going on."

"I am just an old police investigator. I am not one of you West Point boys, but even I know that some clerk forwarding a message isn't likely credible enough to put a dozen Naval Frigates off from the harbor in Southampton on that specific day. No, whoever leaked this has some real credibility with your old comrades up in D.C."

"Probably right." The President's face reflected the painful betrayal of an old friend. "I assume you are all here to get my blessing to arrest Colonel Mead. You have it but do it quietly. We don't want to alert the press that we allowed a Yankee spy to operate right under our noses."

"Most of us feel the same, we don't need to drag the government through the morass of a spy scandal. Do you know my son, Mr. President?" asked Captain Peterson. He pointed at a young officer in the back of the room."

A young army lieutenant rose and stepped forward, extending his hand toward the President of the Confederate States of America.

"William was a junior officer at West Point the last year Mead was there. Mead made William a rifle instructor. I suggest that we allow him to take a squad of men over to Mead's home tonight when there won't be a lot of prying eyes around. I think he can convince Mead that it is in his best interest to surrender peacefully."

"Bullshit," snarled Holmes. "The man's a spy. He is headed for a firing squad. I came in disguise. I have two more men waiting outside. He'll never see us coming. We'll walk right into his office and haul his butt out."

"No. Jefferson Davis shook his head. "Captain Peterson is right; this should be done as quietly as possible."

"Lieutenant Peterson, do you know Colonel Mead well enough to convince him to go silently?"

“The Colonel is a very smart man, Sir. If he is guilty of this, he knew the risks. He is also a proud man, not the kind of man that will want to be paraded through the streets under guard. I can get him out of his house without a fight, Sir.”

Holmes shook his head, his shaggy brown hair whipping in front of his eyes. “I know when to shut up, Jeff, just like you did when I arrested you for that fight in the saloon while you were home from the academy. I understand trying to keep problems quiet just like you did when you knew that fight might get you thrown out of the Point. But I want to go on record as objecting to coddling this spy.” He rose and headed toward the street, then stopped and turned. “You need to arrest him right away before he gets any inkling that he is compromised. We may be able to catch him if he tries to go north, but if he heads toward Mexico, he’s gone.”

Jefferson Davis laughed. “Hell Clyde, if the Juaristas find him they will shoot him for working with my government and if the Monarchists get a hold of him, they will shoot him for being part of Lincoln’s support for Juarez.”

THE MEXICAN CIVIL WAR, 1864

Fresnillo, Mexico

THE MOUNTAINOUS LANDS of north-central Mexico had been a barrier to attacks by the Juarista army, what the locals called “the army of the Little Indian President.” Any army could be met by overwhelming force in a narrow battlefield defined by the steep, boulder-strewn terrain. But multiple Juarista armies attacking from different directions were turning the barriers into a trap.

The conservatives owned the land grant haciendas. They were families that worshiped in Catholic churches and supported the new Monarchy in Mexico. They owned the rich gold and silver mines. They used their wealth to crush the government of a man who they believed was not the legitimate president of Mexico, explaining that the Juarez government was inefficient and corrupt. It also was a government determined to suppress the historical power of the landed elites and their primary ally, the Catholic Church.

Benito Juarez became President when the liberal elected Presi-

dent resigned in disgrace. As Chief Justice of the Mexican Supreme Court, Juarez was selected as his successor. The conservatives seized on the moment to petition the European powers to send Mexico a pedigreed noble to become emperor. In 1862, Emperor Maximilian arrived from Austria with an army of French regulars and military units from Germany, Austria and other European powers, each nation owed millions of dollars from delinquent loans to Mexico.

In the north, after years of trying, two small armies of Juaristas had surprised and defeated units of French and Royalist troops who guarded the region. At a small village where three roads came together outside of Fresnillo, the hastily assembled Royalist militia waited behind overturned wagons and piles of earth thrown up by local miners loyal to the landowners. Behind them, the road into the city of Fresnillo, the regional capital, was unguarded.

“Major Shannon, is your artillery ready?” asked a graying man in his early fifties. He deliberately spoke English. Colonel Miguel Huerta brushed the dust of the trail from his perfectly tailored blue uniform. Huerta was a colonel in the Royalist army. Next to him, a young French lieutenant stood talking to two French sergeants.

“We have only six cannons left,” replied Shannon, an Irish mining engineer who in another life had been an officer in the British army. “The rest were lost when our roadblocks fell to the forces of the Little President. I have placed them where they can cover the approaches.”

Huerta paused, thinking about the disastrous attacks the previous days. “The peasants sent no more than twenty-five soldiers through the rocks on the hillsides to strike from the rear. That’s all it took, twenty-five men attacking from behind our fortifications to rout ten times that many of our soldiers. In spite of our warning, the French officers expected stupid Juarista commanders to march single file against their positions. Our allies seem to have little respect for Mexicans on either side of this conflict.”

Huerta turned to the French lieutenant exchanging words in

that officer's native tongue. He turned back to the Irishman and continued. "The scouts tell the Lieutenant that the commanders of the units that ran away have been captured by the Juaristas. The enemy may put those men at the front of their columns. We may have to fire on our own friends to save Fresnillo."

"Can the French bring up reinforcements from those guarding the other side of the city?" asked Shannon. "Once our enemy feels the wrath of our cannons at close range, they will retreat and figure out how to surround us. We won't hold very long with only two hundred soldiers." He turned to Huerta; his face drawn. "We need to know if we have reinforcements coming."

Huerta passed on the question in French to the allied officer at his side. It didn't take the French officer long to seize salvation. In minutes the horses of the lieutenant and the two French sergeants were fading in the distance.

Huerta turned back to the Irishman who stood waiting for orders. "Thank you, Mike, for your help. When I interviewed you for the position of mine manager, I took note of your experience as a British artillery officer, but I never dreamed that my country would ever put that experience to use. I hope you live through today. You may commence firing at the column on the western road at your discretion."

Shannon lowered his old telescope. The group of several hundred men winding their way toward the village was within range, but with only a hundred shells for the old brass cannons, Shannon held his fire. From the hillside above town, two Mexican lookouts stood in the open, signaling the approach of the second column on the northern road. That group would appear through a narrow gap any moment now. Shannon hated letting his enemy get within a quarter mile before engaging, but the twisting road they traveled hid them.

From the lower road a Juarista cannon crashed, and a shell flew harmlessly over their position. Shannon watched as the Juarista

soldiers nudged more cannons into position to fire. “They only have captured artillery,” called Shannon. “That means they only have grape shot or solid shot, no exploding ordinance.” Shannon made the sign of the cross on his chest. “Thank you, Father, for small blessings.”

Shannon’s prayer was interrupted as a hundred Juarista soldiers charged from the north road. With the French gone, Shannon switched to Spanish, no longer worried about insulting soldiers of a country that had been an enemy of Britain for centuries. He screamed out a warning as he gave the order to fire. In front of him, the rocks, nails, and lead balls from the first shot tore through the attackers. A dozen men stumbled but many more continued the charge. The second cannon maimed more men, but the charge did not falter until the third shot had reduced the enemy number by half. The remaining Juaristas scattered to either side of the road looking for cover, firing their muskets.

Shannon’s amateur gun crews fumbled through a reload. From the lower road, a half dozen cannons were now lobbing solid shot at the village, blasting holes in rock and adobe structures, but doing little damage. Shannon ordered one of his three cannons covering that road to return fire. There wasn’t much chance of causing any real damage, but it might slow the coming attack.

Colonel Huerta smiled as he directed twenty of his meager reserve of infantry to the barricades next to the cannons on the north road. One of the men reloading the cannons collapsed; blood gushed from a hole in his back, as Juarista soldiers moved from rock to rock toward their position. From behind Huerta, his youngest officer, the sixteen-year-old son of the owner of the Bank of Fresnillo grabbed Shannon’s arm and spun him around. From the road to Fresnillo, the French lieutenant and one of the sergeants galloped back toward the village. A horse with an empty saddle ran with them.

Shannon grabbed a replacement from the barricade, leading

the man through a load of the cannon. Before the reload was complete, a second group of Juaristas charged. This group got to within a hundred yards before shot from the cannons ended the attack. The enemy survivors joined their Juarista comrades firing into the barricades. They targeted those working to reload the cannons. Where the artillery had done its work, the road flowed red. More than fifty men lay, some unmoving, others crawling toward cover or just twisting and screaming.

The man next to Shannon dropped, one of the huge fifty-caliber bullets from a Juarista musket nearly decapitating him. A second man clutched his stomach, trying to contain his insides after a bullet sliced the front of his abdomen open. Bullets swarmed by Shannon, kicking up dirt as they slapped the earthen barricade and clinking from the cannons.

A whistle from Shannon's left forced him to change positions. Instead of charging across a mile of open road, the enemy infantry on the west road had begun working their way from rock to rock, the closest only three hundred yards away. Shannon waited until a dozen men were exposed. He tapped the gunner of the closest gun on the shoulder. The cannon sent a hail of steel into the rocks. The shot brought the attack to an end for a half-dozen soldiers, but a dozen more took their place. Around the cannoneers inexperienced Royalist draftee soldiers struggled to reload their muskets and return fire.

Behind him, Colonel Huerta called, starting Shannon toward the Monarchist Colonel, infuriated to see the French had returned. The French officer's horse lay dead at the side of the road. "Fuego a voluntad," screamed Shannon. He repeated the order in English: "Fire at will."

"A small group has slipped around behind us and have set up a roadblock only a mile down the road," said Huerta. "The lieutenant thinks it is no more than a dozen men. He wants enough men to take it out. I am giving them to him. It is our only escape

if we cannot stop the enemy.” In the background the crash of three of Shannon’s cannons let the men know that the enemy was paying dearly.

Before Shannon could respond, the French lieutenant stumbled and groaned, then sank to his knees, his head folding forward, the top of his head resting on the ground. Red stained his back. The French sergeant knelt to help his officer then collapsed, a bullet hole in the middle of his chest. Huerta and Shannon looked up at the hillside behind the village. Dozens of enemy soldiers were working their way from the hilltop toward them. Shannon’s two spotters stood, their hands in the air as their enemy crawled from rock to rock past them. With a pistol in one hand and a machete in the other, a huge man stood in front of Shannon’s lookouts screaming. The man swung the machete, catching one of the spotters on the right collar, opening him like a melon all the way to his waist. His partner picked up his rifle and aimed it toward the Royalists and pulled the trigger. With the machete at his back, he began to reload.

Terrified Royalist soldiers abandoned the barricades. Behind them, Juarista soldiers swarmed over the piles of earth, bayonetting the men at the cannons as they came. Huerta called to the few men in his reserve and then to the men running. He grabbed at them as they fled. He pointed at the tiny church. Some turned to follow him, but most dropped their weapons, the rocky ravine below the village offering salvation.

Shannon found himself being dragged by the boy officer toward the church, followed by Huerta and two other officers. With them were a couple of dozen soldiers who in another life had worked for Huerta either at the hacienda or at the mine. Around them, the Juarista soldiers herded the remaining royalist soldiers toward the church, shooting or bayonetting anyone who didn’t move quickly enough.

The church windows bristled with the rifle barrels of the men trapped inside. They could not shoot without killing men who they

had fought next to only minutes before. Behind what was left of their own troops, the officers watched the cannons from their own barricades being rolled toward the church. Huerta slipped a silver case from his coat, picking a cigar from the case. He then passed the case to the four other officers. He said nothing as he struck a match and lit his cigar, then passed the matches to the others. The young son of the bank president began to gag as he tried to imitate the others as they drew the smoke into their mouths; the rich smoke covering the smell terrified men had when they lost control of their insides.

In front of the church a wall of captured Royalist soldiers divided as two cannons were pushed through the crowd. Next to each was a sergeant of their own troops, a lit punk in his hands, and a gun at his head. “Por favor perdóname, Senior Huerta,” cried the man. The captured sergeants lowered the burning wands to the cannons. The rock wall of the church exploded as two heavy shells ripped into the church. Inside a dozen men lay moaning and bleeding. The young officer was ripped in half, one of the cannon balls hitting him in the chest.

“I must stop this,” uttered Huerta as he rose from the floor, sweeping rock fragments and dirt from his uniform. He smiled at Shannon as he extracted a perfectly laundered and pressed white bandana from his pocket and tied it to a shattered piece of window frame.

Outside, two Juarista officers accepted Huerta’s sword, and then forced the officers into chairs around a table carried from a nearby home. The Juarista officers produced a bottle of Tequila and four glasses, pouring each of the men at the table a drink. One at a time they were led away for a short interrogation and then returned to the table. Each man was given a piece of paper and a pen and ink to write a letter to his family.

“They’re going to shoot us, Mike,” whispered Huerta. “I am sorry that I got you into this.”

“I am no braver man than most,” replied Shannon. “But I am first a Catholic. I guess I will die for my faith. These heathens are making war on the Church.”

When the men were finished writing, their hands were bound behind their backs. They were led to the sidewall of the church. Each was offered a blindfold. Huerta refused his, but the others allowed pieces of torn uniforms to be tied around their faces. They listened as their executioners were given their orders and then as the officer counted: uno, dos, tres.

A dozen rifles exploded. The moans of men torn by bullets filled the quiet, then stopped. Shannon stood in shocked silence. He couldn't believe how little pain came with death. A moment later his blindfold was removed, and he looked down at the bodies of his comrades.

“Mr. Shannon,” said one of the Juarista officers, “this is not your war. Go home.” Shannon smiled nervously at Antonio, Colonel Huerta's younger brother.



Maria Huerta watched the small column of Juarista troops as they wound their way through the trees in front of the hacienda. Their appearance could only mean one thing.

Miguel had been a dotting, older, husband. She'd learned to deeply love him in the six years they had been married. She was not going to give the Juaristas the satisfaction of her tears.

A young officer dismounted and approached the door. Maria swung it open before he could knock. He said nothing as he handed Miguel's note then offered to leave her for a few minutes while she read.

“Está muerto mi esposo?” she asked firmly.

“Si, Señora Huerta.”

Maria looked past the young lieutenant toward the Nationalist major waiting at the gate. Somehow, she wasn't shocked to see her

brother-in-law, Antonio waiting on a horse that her late husband had given him for his twenty-first birthday.

The nationalist lieutenant handed Maria a second letter, giving her four hours to pack anything she wanted from the house. She could take her carriage and one wagon, and the horses needed to pull them. The hacienda was now the property of the government of Benito Juarez.

Antonio helped Maria into her elegant coach. "I will see to Miguel's funeral," he offered. "I tried to convince him that once the American president began aiding the nationalists that his cause was doomed. But that was months ago."

"Could you do nothing to save your own brother?" replied Maria, her face scarlet.

"His only salvation would have been for him to swear allegiance to Benito Juarez. I would have never asked it," replied Antonio and then added. "Maria, where will you go?"

"First to Agua Calientes, to your uncle's hacienda. From there, who knows," she finished, wiping tears from her eyes.

"Maria, it may take two or three years, but the Nationalists will reach Agua Calientes. Our uncle is hated by Benito Juarez. It will not be safe for you at the Hacienda de la Cruz. You will be moving from one battlefield to the next."

"Perhaps, but we are still family. Maybe cousin Denali can talk some sense into her father." She paused before continuing, "or someone will come along and help Emperor Maximillian and President Juarez realize that they both want the same thing." She tapped the side of the coach signaling her driver. Turning to Antonio, she continued, "If the Canadians could just find the same hatred that the Americans and Mexicans have found, the whole continent would be killing each other."

As she drove away, she reread the second letter. The letter granting her safe passage explained that it was only because her cousin, Denali de la Cruz, had nursed the general leading the attack on

Fresnillo back to life after he had been seriously wounded months before, that she was allowed to take anything with her. Maria wondered which side that general had been fighting for when he was wounded. For many, loyalty was a process in Mexico. For Miguel, however, everything was absolute. Now he was absolutely dead. She whispered a prayer.

Cousin Denali, I have always wondered how much trouble you could get yourself into and survive, she thought. Today I thank you for whatever you did for the General. Gracias.

THE SAME DAY THAT MARIA BEGINS HER JOURNEY TO AGUA CALIENTE

THE LIGHT IN the parlor of Mead's house disappeared and a minute later a new light appeared in an upstairs window. Peterson and his troop watched silently from the street. The simple, white two-story home looked almost empty, as the home of a confirmed bachelor should. Peterson knew that Mead even refused the servants a man of his stature would normally employ.

“Sergeant, please have your men rest easy out here on the street while you and I explain things to the Colonel and arrest him. I don't think you will need to handcuff him. He's not a combat soldier, just a glorified shopkeeper.”

Their knock on the door brought the sounds of footsteps bounding down the stairs. The window next to the door reflected the light of a candle growing brighter as it moved toward the door.

“Lieutenant, what are you doing here this late at night?” asked Colonel Mead. The man in his nightshirt stood a bit over six feet tall, with hair clipped only a quarter inch from his scalp.

His brown eyes scanned Peterson's face and then that of the older sergeant next to him. The dozen men casually leaning against the fence at the edge of the yard brought a smile to Mead's face. "Won't you two come in while I dress?"

"Wait in the entry, Sergeant," ordered Peterson. "I will follow the Colonel upstairs and explain the situation."

The two men were gone only five minutes. Peterson held a pistol at the Colonel's back as the two men descended the stairs and walked into the parlor. "Sergeant, would you please come here?" called Peterson. "The Colonel has a box of files that we will want for his trial."

The sergeant stepped into the room. Mead stood with his hands over his head near the back door. Before the sergeant could comment, he felt the barrel of a pistol slip into his left ear. "Listen very carefully and you will live to see those grandchildren of yours."

Five minutes later, the sergeant was flat on his stomach with his hands and feet tied tightly together and drawn up behind him, his mouth stuffed with a dishrag that tasted of soap. Peterson pushed on the sergeant's feet, rocking him back and forth like a children's wooden horse.

"Sergeant, the Colonel and I are going to leave you here," whispered Peterson. "There is only one United States, and we are both headed north to help make sure it stays that way. Please tell my father that was what he expected when he sent me to the Point."

Mead and Peterson slipped quietly into the alley behind the house and walked calmly two blocks to where the noise of a rowdy saloon crowd celebrating Wednesday drew them. The two men walked past the front door to the hitching posts on the side of the building. Each picked a horse, leading the stolen animal a block from the saloon before swinging into the saddle. Mead turned his mount south and kicked the horse into a trot.

Peterson caught up in seconds. "Colonel, shouldn't we be headed toward Washington?"

“Bill, in about an hour all hell is going to break loose in Richmond. Every town and every Confederate unit and checkpoint will be looking for us all the way to the front lines. We can’t outrun the telegraph. I’m betting it will take a couple of days for them to start to look west or south. I think our best chance is to get to the US picket ships in Charleston. If that route is blocked, we head for Mexico.”



Exhausted, Mead and Peterson stepped down from their saddles at a small inn where the owner stood shaking his head. “You boys sure don’t take very good care of your horses. Those mounts of yours look like they been ridden real hard. They could use some rest and more than the water in that trough out there.”

“You are right of course. We are carrying a private message from President Davis to the Governor of North Carolina. The colonel here needs to get there and back in four days. The message is about some troop movements and the President isn’t comfortable sending it by telegraph.”

“If you will take care of them, I have a couple of saddle horses I can loan you. You can swap them back for your horses on your way back through. I’ll have the boy at the stable brush your mounts down and feed ‘em.”

“That would be really helpful. How much to board our horses for four days or so?” Mead reached into a pocket.

“Jeb down at the livery won’t take a thing for helping the army, but the boy comes from a poor family, so a dollar would really help him out.”

Mead counted out five silver dollars. “Here, this is for breakfast, a tip for the boy and any trouble that the owner of the livery encounters.”

In thirty minutes, the men were back on the road. “Maybe it’s the grits. I never developed a taste for them,” laughed Peter-

son. “And my wife always liked my blue uniform better than this gray. Anyway, it will be good to go back to soldering instead of hiding in dark corners.” Mead wasn’t in the mood for small talk, he just nodded.

The roadblock was at a bridge just outside of Raleigh. By the time the men realized the traffic on the turnpike was coming to a stop, they were within a hundred yards of the simple bar over the road and the soldiers who manned it. The rebels had chosen the location well. To the left a freshly plowed field stretched for a mile. To the right was an impassible swamp. Mead studied Peterson and smiled. He quietly drew his revolver, hiding it behind the horse’s head. “Might as well work up toward that bar slowly. It will give the horses a blow before we really need them.”

They crept forward until there were only four wagons ahead of them. “Now said Mead.” The two men spurred their mounts. In seconds they were at the bar, which had just been lifted to allow a buggy through. A Confederate officer watching from under a tree down the road tugged at his pistol as the two men raced past the six soldiers manning the checkpoint. The officer raised his pistol and fired, then ran into the center of the road taking aim at the men galloping at him. The Confederate officer shot again before Mead’s pistol replied. The officer folded at the waist, a crimson splotch on his shirt. He stumbled backward two steps before collapsing onto the road. He looked up, blood bubbling from his mouth as he tried to call out. The fugitives raced past him rounding the next bend.

Coming the other direction were two companies of Confederate infantry and two mounted officers. “There is a Yankee raiding party just around the corner,” screamed Peterson as the men rode by.

A hundred yards beyond the foot soldiers, Mead and Peterson slowed their mounts to a trot. “I’m really happy that boy couldn’t shoot straight,” said Peterson. “Probably grew up on a plantation hunting quail. He must have been flock shooting. I watched his aim. He shot between us.”

“Probably right. I didn’t want to shoot, but he wasn’t going to miss with us riding straight away from him. We have to get off this road. I suggest we head toward the ocean on the first crossroad.”

Mead reached down to pat his horse on the neck. His hand came away bloody. He leaned down to examine the wound. A small bullet had cut a furrow along his horse’s neck before punching a hole just in front of his saddle.

“I don’t think the wound is too bad. Those .35 caliber pistols most of the Confederate officers carry can’t do much to heavy muscle. If I don’t have to run him hard, he should heal up just fine.”

Peterson was watching behind them where two horsemen had just stopped next to the Confederate infantry, now in skirmish lines across the road. In seconds those two horsemen and the two infantry officers kicked their horses into a gallop.

“That, Colonel, is not how this is going to play out. We have four mounted men on our tail.”

The union men spurred their horses into a run. At a fork in the twisting road, Mead turned east onto a smaller side road that followed a stream through a narrow valley. Ahead was a steep hill. At the top, the two men reined in their horses, hiding behind trees at the side of the road. Below, four crows circled, screeching at two Confederate officers who were close behind the men.

“Time to change horses,” ordered Mead.

The Confederate officers following them warily approached the top of the rise. Each pulled his carbine from its scabbard and laid it in his lap. “Drop those rifles and step down gentlemen,” ordered Mead.

Turning toward his voice, both men raised their short rifles. The first carbine fired in the general direction of the voice. Mead fired, tumbling the shooter from his horse. The other Confederate officer swung his carbine toward Mead and fired back without raising it to his shoulder. Mead’s horse collapsed behind him, the heavy bullet hitting him between the eyes. Peterson shot twice.

The Confederate officer slumped from the saddle. Neither of the Confederate officers well trained mounts moved.

“Your friend is dead,” said Mead to the wounded officer. He tugged the man’s heavy wool uniform open and examined the wound just below his shoulder. The shot had smashed the collarbone and the shoulder joint behind it. Tiny fragments of bone stuck from the wound, but there was little blood. Mead tugged a bandana from the wounded man’s neck and pressed it against the wound. “You are going to live. I’m taking you with us until I find a place to leave you and a horse well off from the road. By the time you get over the shock and crawl back in the saddle, we will be long gone.”

“Y’all are the Yankee spies they are looking for,” snarled the wounded man. He spat in Mead’s face.

Mead wiped the spit away with the sleeve of his coat. “Right now, son, I am just an officer in the American army trying to save your life.”

“Don’t do me no favors, Yankee.”

After hiding the dead soldier, Mead and Peterson left the wounded man, his feet tied, under a tree a few hundred yards from the road. Mead tied the horse that Peterson had been riding to another tree.

That evening they took turns sleeping in a haystack next to an empty cabin in the mountains. They gorged themselves on canned peaches they’d found in a root cellar next to the cabin. They were on their way again at midnight, the light of a full moon filtering through overhanging tree branches.

The two men were recognized once more on their way to Charleston. They escaped by turning off the road and leading their horses across a railroad trestle into thick woods. The smell of the saltwater below the bridge led them to a slough and a shack with no road in or out. Mead and Petersen stopped to rest only feet from a tilted cabin that had never seen paint. A door screeched across

the buckled porch and five tattered men with glaring eyes emerged. Behind the men, the slough opened into Charleston Harbor.

“We ain’t been movin’ contraband or moonshine, or whatever you think we been doin’, officer,” said the oldest man. “An’ my boys here ain’t been nowhere near the army. They ain’t deserters.” The man wore homespun cotton pants with suspenders over his naked chest. His graying hair surrounded his head like the mane of a lion, molding into his filthy beard.

“Take it easy, old timer,” replied Mead. “I’m Thomas Mead and that’s William Peterson. William and I ran into some highwaymen a few hours ago and took off through the woods. We got ourselves all turned around, being from Virginia and all; we don’t know these parts.”

The men spread out as the two fugitives dismounted. Next to the father, the smallest brother fidgeted. To his left, the second brother, slightly bigger and a bit older leaned on a long stick. The biggest brother stood smiling, all four front teeth missing. A fifth man stood behind the other four shaking his head.

“We are late to report into our new army unit. Probably be in a world of trouble if we don’t get there by tonight,” added Peterson. My daddy would skin me if I ever got crosswise with General Michael, especially after he went out on a limb to get me an officer’s posting. Even Colonel Mead here couldn’t get me out of that.”

The end of the long stick whistled at Mead’s head, as the middle brother threw everything he had into a swing. Mead sidestepped, the end of the stick slamming into the ground. Before the man could lift the stick, Mead slammed his left foot down on the shaft, breaking it. He leaned forward, grabbing the end that the man was trying to raise with his left arm. Mead pulled him forward, picking up the broken piece lying on the ground with his right. Before the man could reset, Mead slammed the stick across the side of the brother’s head. The man dropped, his scalp spraying blood. Mead swung to his left as two of the man’s brothers lunged for him.

Ducking the first fist, Mead swung the broken stick, cracking the biggest brother across the knees, folding him over just as another brother delivered a kick aimed at Mead's stomach. The heavy boot caught the folded man in the side of the head. Mead leaped over the falling man, smashing the third brother's nose with his left fist and then drove him into the ground with his shoulder. His head made the sound of someone rapping a ripe melon as it hit a rock.

Mead crawled to his feet just as Peterson cocked his pistol, aiming at the two remaining men who stood, shocked.

"I told them, Pa, that they shouldn't mess with no army officers."

The old man smiled, his rotten teeth taking any warmth from the gesture. "No need for the gun, sonny. My boys are just testing you a bit. Now what do you two want?"

Peterson stared at the three ragged men at Mead's feet. He doubted that any of them had seen the inside of a classroom or ever worn store-bought clothes. "We told you; we just need directions on how to reach Charleston by tonight."

"You ain't got a chance in hell of cutting through the woods and swamp by then."

Mead took a minute to catch his breath. "I have an idea. Down at that dock there are a couple of boats. What do you use them for?"

"We here are oystermen. That is all we do with those boats. See up on the dock we have oyster rakes and all," replied the old man, again nervous.

"William, I know you don't carry much money when you travel. If we can get to Charleston in time, could you wire for enough money to buy yourself a new mount? I know my banker would get me funds out real quick."

"Probably would work for me too, Colonel. Why do you ask?"

Mead pointed at the dock. "Our two horses are worth a lot more than that beat up old boat. I was thinking we could trade our

mounts straight across for that skiff and sail straight into Charleston City.

The smile on the old man's face made it clear that he was no poker player. "You two got a deal if you really mean that, Colonel."

Mead stepped over the three men laid out on the ground and extended his hand.

It took only a half-hour to row the old boat out to where the triangular sail caught a fresh wind. They scooted across the bay, steering south until they could see the faint line of Union blockade ships to the east of the harbor. Haze over the water made distances difficult to estimate. The first hour of their run east went smoothly. The sun was tipping toward the horizon when Peterson noticed a small steam powered scow pull out from the line of Confederate picket boats blocking access to the inner harbor. Although the boat was two miles away, it was obvious that it was trying to intercept them. Their tiny sail left their speed about half that of the powered boat.

Within an hour, the Confederate boat had closed in enough for its crew to stand waving their arms. When Mead and Peterson didn't respond, they began signaling. In the other direction the two men could clearly see American flags of the blockade ships whipping in the breeze.

"We're going to make it, Bill," chuckled Mead. "The Confederate sailors chasing us are going to be about thirty minutes too late."

From the shore to their left, a cannon boomed, then another and another. Within a minute the waters around their tiny craft began to erupt with geysers as shells from Rebel shore batteries splashed around them. From the Union ships, signals flashed from ship to ship.

Aboard the closest Union ship, the ship's commanding officer pushed his finger into the chest of a tall man with coal black hair and dark blue eyes. Chad Gritt had surprised his family, taking a commission in the Navy. At twenty-six he was the oldest lieutenant

aboard. “I’m still not sure what you are doing here, Mr. Gritt,” said the commander. “You are from a wealthy shipping family. You could have avoided serving. As it is, you only have a few months left on your enlistment.”

“Honestly, Sir, it was my duty. I thought it would be a hell of an adventure, you know the kind that you sit in a rocking chair and tell your grandchildren about.”

“Well, Mr. Gritt, you have been griping about being bored, so here is your chance for a little action before your enlistment ends. Take the ready launch and go find out why the Confederate Navy is after that boat out there. Maybe you can go home a hero.”

Chad Gritt whipped a salute to his commanding officer, and somehow landed his lanky frame in the boat at the bottom of the ladder after missing the first couple of steps in his excitement. The boat was always manned and its crew maintained steam in its tiny boiler.

“Where to, Lieutenant?”

“We are going to rescue whoever the rebs are chasing out there.”

“You mean we are going to go out there where all those shells are landing?” asked a young seaman.

“We are and we will be quick about it,” replied Chad. The glare from his blue eyes left no room for further discussion. The seaman opened the valve that drove the boat’s propeller.



A bullet fired by their pursuers kicked a splinter from the mast in the center of the oyster boat. “Someone is coming to get us,” said Peterson as Mead loaded the carbine he had taken from the dead Confederate officer. Mead carefully squeezed the trigger at a range too great to allow accuracy for either predator or prey.

Before either man knew what happened, the center of their small boat exploded upward. Mead bobbed to the surface, surrounded by debris, to find Peterson face down in the water only a

few feet away. He stroked to Peterson's side and pushed the man's upper body up onto what was left of the bow.

"Damn," he muttered as his push brought Peterson's legs to the surface. Both legs were crushed below the knee. The feet were still attached, but not by anything you could recognize, bone and muscle and skin all crushed together.

Blood from the wounds turned the water a milky pink. Mead pushed the unconscious man well up onto the broken bow. Mead striped the lace from a boot and knotted it around Peterson's left leg and then put a similar tourniquet on the other. Peterson securely in place, he chanced a glance toward the enemy.

The rebel picket boat was still coming. Mead dove under the broken bow and recovered a life ring that had come over on the *Mayflower*. He rolled Peterson onto the ring, grabbed the attached ten feet of rope and began to sidestroke away from the rebel boat, toward his own navy. He smiled as he realized that the Union ships were firing at the boat pursuing him. When he looked back, the rebel boat was retreating.

What should have been a good thing became bad as the Confederate shore cannons began firing again raising huge torrents of water. The Union launch slowed in front of them. "Grab this wounded man," called Mead.

The rescue boat stopped next to the life ring, and Union sailors pulled Peterson into the boat.

"I have the wounded man," screamed Lieutenant Gritt. "You're next." Mead began stroking toward the boat. "Let's get the hell out of here," yelled Gritt.

As he spoke, a rebel cannon shell splashed into the water almost on top of Mead turning the water scarlet. Gritt dove into the water grabbing Mead, pushing him to the side of the boat where eager hands pulled him aboard. In seconds the same hands snatched Gritt from the water and the boat turned toward the Union ships. Mead's lower arm and hand were gone.

Chad fought to control his shaking. He pulled his belt from his waist and tightened it around the stump of Mead's left arm. "Whoever you are, you will live."

"I'm Colonel Thomas Mead."

Chad looked at the man's tattered gray uniform. "Colonel, huh. Which army?"

"Both," replied Mead.