

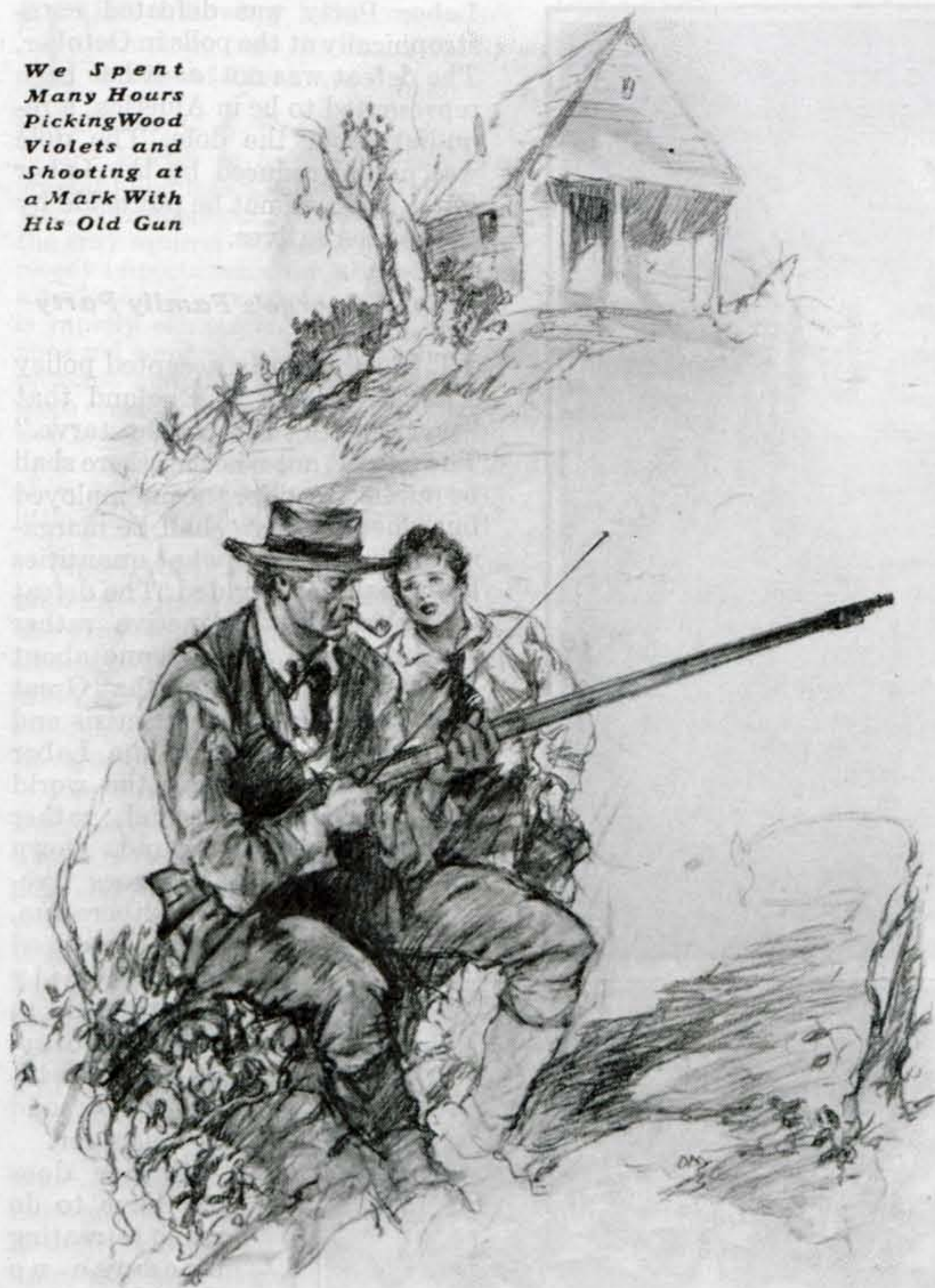
GENTLEMAN IN BLUE

A Sentimental Sketch

By LAURENCE STALLINGS

ILLUSTRATED BY ORISON MACPHERSON

*We Spent
Many Hours
Picking Wood
Violets and
Shooting at
a Mark With
His Old Gun*



were Yankees. They were men in blue—the most surprising blue. I watched them for a moment without fear. Then I understood that they were Yankees. Fear seized me, and I crept along the box bushes and ran around the house to the brick kitchen, calling for mother.

"Yankees!" I cried. "The Yankees have come to steal Spotsylvania Court House." My father had brought the pony home the year before, when he was on furlough. I don't recollect now what moved me, but the moment I saw the pony I said: "I'm going to call him Spotsylvania Court House." I did not know what it meant, or where it came from, but the name must have been in my mind, for that's what I called him. It seemed a very gallant name. "Yankees!" I yelled. "They've come to steal him!"

"Nonsense!" my mother said sharply. "Nonsense! No grown man wants to ride your pony."

In those days there were no stoves. Our cooking was done over an open fireplace, and I can remember the Negroes around the hearth that day. There must have been about twenty Negroes who lived around the house. Yard niggers. My mother often complained about so many being around, but we couldn't drive them off. They were from the carriage house, and from the loom house where mother supervised the spinning. There was a cobbler's shop and a smokehouse; but they're gone, too, all of them. They were of whitewashed logs and they made up a town square for us. The kitchen was in a turmoil when I said "Yankees."

Amos was our butler and coachman. He was putting fresh logs on the fire when I ran into the kitchen. He dropped the wood.

"You want yo' gun, Mis' Sarah?"

My mother was the calmest woman I ever saw. "Bring me my rifle, Amos," she said.

I held her skirt and started crying. It was a print of gray woolen with little, fine, red flowers and green leaves dotting it. I can remember the pattern.

"Stop crying, everybody," she said. "Stop it!"

Amos brought the gun. My mother took my hand and walked through the brick passage to the house, and went to the front door. Amos walked behind her. Amos had a hat with a cockade. He never wore it that I ever knew, unless for the Sundays when

the bishop came to Amelia to preach and then home to dinner with us. Amos wore his hat with the cockade now.

I stopped crying just to see that cockade. It was a badge of distinction, a thing that rendered us immune from ordinary things such as Yankees. I know that his hat, which he put on miraculously, dried my tears before we reached the front door. Amos opened the door for mother to pass to the front porch. We all went outside—my mother in her print dress and kitchen cap, with her long light rifle which my father had given her on their silver anniversary, and I with my storekeeper's paper cap, and Amos with the hat. My mother could bark a squirrel with her rifle. Many a time I had seen her do it.

I doubt that more than a minute had passed since I ran to the kitchen. They were still down on the road; and just as I had said, they were Yankees. My mother's hand tightened over mine when she saw them. You can't imagine how far that road seemed to me, a little child, that day.

"Be mighty careful, Mis' Sarah," I heard Amos saying. Then he began mumbling to one of the slaves,



The Yankee Was Very Grave. "We Hate to Disturb

WHEN they found those old embroidery scissors under that stump today, I went a long way back in memory. To memories of blue. I remember how blue their uniforms were.

In those days the lane from the steps here to the clay road seemed about a mile long. It is no more than two hundred feet, but it bisected a universe for me. My mother had her flower garden in a little square which was fenced off with white pickets, and it was there, after my brothers went away, that I played.

I was playing store when the Yankees rode by the house down the Appomattox road and pulled in their horses at our gate. I can remember best how blue the cloth of their uniforms was, and how it glinted in the sun.

I had heard talk of Yankees before that, but they were the first we ever saw here. My father and brothers rode away in butternut gray, with nothing blue about them. Amos held me aloft to throw kisses to Jim when his time came to ride away to Virginia's battle line. Jim was, next to me, the youngest of mother's boys. He was well turned sixteen when he left. I seem to recollect his plaguing mother for some time to go, but I paid no attention to it. I was playing store mostly. I used to pretend I had a little store under that oak there. . . . No, that's a white oak. I forget the old one's down. My mother sometimes gave me things for my store. Empty tins and bits of harness catches, and an occasional spool for an extra clerk. My chief decoration was a broken conch shell with a picture of Vesuvius set in a little mirror in its bell. My Great-Uncle Randolph had brought it home with him after squandering his fortune abroad in the 40's.

They pulled in their horses, these men in blue. There must have been a dozen of them as they sat their horses and talked down at the gate by the clay road. I watched them a moment in wonder, but without fear. I did not at first understand that they

who was whimpering inside the door. "Go lead de stallion away," he was saying sharply under his breath. "Go lead de stallion away down to de ice house, and git inside and stay wid him."

Our ice house was double-planked, with sawdust filling, and was three-quarters sunk in the earth anyway. It was soundproof. I knew Amos was placing big Logan where he wouldn't neigh and be heard.

I could hear Rupe's trembling answer, "Dey'd kill me. Dey'd kill me."

Amos was looking over my mother's shoulder at the men in blue down on the road. "Ise going to kill you as soon as dey leave, if dey don't," he said. "Go take de stallion down to de ice house."

There wasn't a Negro on our place who would have shut himself in the icehouse with Logan. Except, of course, Amos. He and the stallion understood each other. Amos gave the stallion a pint of corn whisky every Sunday morning. I know my father allowed Amos a quart of whisky every week for his rheumatism, and the yard niggers said he gave half of it to Logan as regularly as he got it.

"It keeps him proud like me," Amos said. It was generally believed that Logan, when he heard the big meeting bell ringing over at Amelia every Sunday morning, would come to the bars and neigh until Amos brought him his whisky. I know that every Sunday morning he would tear up the turf of his pasture, throwing his heels and charging even the least bit of grass or a butterfly, galloping in short circles from the gate to his stall.

Our stallion's name was Logan, I said. My father had two. But Logan killed the other one fighting in the snow, when a field hand left the gate open the winter before. I remember how my mother said she hated to write my father that the little stallion was dead. "Your father has enough worry with that regiment of no-accounts," she had said.

Two of the Yankees were detaching themselves from the main group on the road. One of them dismounted at the main gate and opened it.

"Stop trembling," my mother said to me. "Keep cool, Amos."

Amos narrowed his eyes and set the cockade hat at an angle. "Ise got de li'l one-shot pistol," he said simply.

The Yankee who spurred forward through the gate is still in my vision. The picket fence has gone and the road is infinitely nearer, and one exaggerates childhood estimates; I am sure the Yankee's horse stood seventeen and a half hands at the shoulder. The Yankee simply lifted that big gray horse over the picket-fence gate, keeping to the gravel walk between the little, old-fashioned, button-chrysanthemum bushes.

I can never get the blue of his uniform jacket from my eyes. Not the yellow stripes or the brass buttons, nor the insignia at shoulder and cap are remembered vividly now. It is that powerful, flashing blue. It seemed immensely superior to the gray of my father and brothers. My father used to say "once in a blue moon" a lot when I was a child. Somehow, the blue of that smart jacket, under which the man's muscles moved and made it glint alive, seemed to have belonged to the man in the moon. That Yankee—the first I had ever seen—was a moon man. A blue—an intensely blue—moon man.

He pulled his horse in at the steps. These very steps. My mother waited for him to speak. Amos did not move. Amos must have looked a fine figure to that Yankee. For Yankees think that some of the colored people are handsome. Amos must have been a very handsome man. He was very tall, with a peaked forehead and tightly wound hair that grew down almost to his eyebrows, and his head was as round as an acorn. His head was not unlike an acorn

from a black-oak tree, for it was of dark, polished shell with a close-fitting top of black.

I heard Amos sigh as the Yankee lifted his own hard little cap in a sweep and by some trick of leg brought the horse low at his right shoulder, as he swept his cap along its withers to the ground. Both horse and man in the gravel path managed a bow that made my face tingle.

The Yankee was very grave as he eyed the rifle and the group of us. "We hate to disturb you, madam," he said, "but we'd like to trouble you for some fire to light our pipes." That was all he said.

"Amos," said my mother gently, "take a shovel of fire down to those gentlemen by the big gate." I could not take my eyes from this blue, though I heard Amos going back through the hall. "For I am sure," my mother was saying, "that they are gentlemen."

The Yankee smiled at this, his big, strong teeth flashing above his brown beard. "A lady is never uncertain in matters of this distinction," he said, smiling. "We thank you for the fire." He wheeled his horse sharply and gathered up the bridle for a run at the fence gate, holding the gray's head high and thrusting his feet home in the stirrups. I always rode Spotsylvania with box stirrups.

"Wait," my mother called sharply. "Are your men hungry?"

The Yankee turned his horse again, the blue of his back changing to the brass and blue of his front. "We could only eat, madam," he said, "if you have plenty to spare."

"Bread and butter," I said. "That's all we have now."

"What is better?" mother asked me.

"I don't know of anything," the Yankee said seriously.

"She never asked you," I said.

"Ask the gentleman to excuse you," mother told me. In our family, if someone said something rude to another, he was always excused to go to his room until evening prayers.

"Excuse me," I said. But I couldn't let go mother's hand to leave.

"There's no offense," said the man in blue. "I've a little boy in New Hampshire just like you. I'd want him to give your father a call-down under similar circumstances."

"I had thought better of New Hampshire," my mother said, leaning against a column. . . . That column there.

Amos came by the side gate with a shovelful of smoking coals, and carrying a big twist of our bright tobacco. He had put his hat away and was wearing the cook's white cap, one freshly starched. I knew that he did not believe the men at the gate were gentlemen, whatever my mother said. But there was something about the man on the gray that made me feel Amos would have worn the cockade to offer him fire. His jacket was of a blue more brilliant than the others.

"Amos doesn't want to be free," I said, hostile.

"No one does," the Yankee said, showing his teeth again.

"Nobody is," my mother said. She turned to the doorway, still holding my hand. "Will you ask your men to come around to the kitchen?" She opened the door. "And will you please come in, sir?" she said, leaving the door open.

Mother held my hand, walking the long hall, but she set her rifle in the corner by the clock. We went into the kitchen. The people there were silent. "How much hot bread is there?" she asked old Lizzie.

Lizzie made our bread because she knew where to hide the silver coins and how many fern leaves to put into the conjure bag when it failed to rise.

"Bout six pans," she said.

Mother looked them all over. "We're going to feed some soldiers," she said. "They are just like other soldiers."

"They have on very blue coats," I said.

"That's their only difference from our men," she said. "I don't want any weeping and wailing and carrying on when they ride up. Do you all hear me?"

They all heard, because they didn't say anything. When they "yes, sir," and "I sho will" and "I declare I truly did hear you," it means that they have



You, Madam," He Said, "But We'd Like to Trouble You for Some Fire to Light Our Pipes"

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GENTLEMAN IN BLUE

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been thinking of something else and have not heard. They haven't changed much since they were sold into slavery here, and I doubt that they ever will, whether this is good or bad for us or for them.

The Yankees did not ride around to the kitchen. They left their horses, with a picket, around by the gate, and they walked in their long boots slowly to the kitchen door. How blue their coats were when they came in! Not quite so blue as the first Yankee's on the gray, but terrifyingly so. I think the people in the kitchen felt as I did at first about their being men from the moon.

I sat on Amos' knee as they were fed, and marked with satisfaction how the hot butter, when they bit into the cut squares of the hot bread, dripped down onto the blue of their jackets. One of them put his hand on my head and called me "Bub," but I twisted away from it and they let me alone. The short one with big yellow slashes on his arms said that this house sat on a hill, so they could hold it just as they were against a hundred men. They ate the bread as fast as Lizzie cut it and buttered it, and they drank gourds of water from the big bucket. Suddenly I missed mother.

I began to cry. I ran into the hall and to the porch. The man at the picket line was eating bread, just as the rest were. I don't know how he got it. I went into the dining room. The Yankee was there at the table, eating bread with a knife and fork, and drinking buttermilk from one of the tumblers mother used when the bishop came to preach.

Mother sat at the other end of the table, but her bread was hardly touched. The dining room was always in half darkness, because mother said sunlight would fade the painted paper of the ceiling and peel the varnish on the wainscot. The Yankee's buttons were reflected on the table. He seemed to give off a blue light. I went to mother's side and stood by her.

"Here," she said, giving me small mouthfuls. "Mind the rug."

"They'll be coming home, then?" she said to the Yankee.

I could feel deep down that mother wanted to cry. It was the way she did when she wouldn't cry the time they brought the news that Great-Uncle Randolph had killed Mr. Harrison's eldest son; when they had a fight with shotguns over the ownership of one of great-uncle's yard niggers. Mother didn't cry until they left her, but I know that afterward she went upstairs and sank down by her bed and held on to one of the posts and cried.

There was something about what this Yankee was saying that made her want to cry. I could tell the way she put her arm about me when she fed me the bread.

"It will be over by tomorrow or next day," the Yankee was saying. "We're Sheridan's men. All of us are back of him, and he can't possibly get out."

"Back of father?" I asked, frightened.

"Back of General Lee," mother said. "Your father's all right."

"My father's the best one of General Lee's men," I said.

"He's a wonderful man then," the Yankee said. He had finished his bread. "We must go on," he said. "We might bring something down upon this house, remaining here." He got up from the

table, and he bowed, and remained bowing until mother left the dining room holding my hand. "We are deeply grateful," he said.

As we came into the hall, Amos was standing there. I knew he had been watching. The Yankee spoke to him. "God knows I wish we were to be the last to trouble you."

"Just let mine come home to me," mother said. "It is all that I ask."

"We shall," the Yankee said. "It isn't that they'll come home. It's the thousands who will follow them that I regret."

Outside, the men were on the picket lines again, each holding his own horse. They swung into saddles when the big man came to the door with us, only one of them remaining on the ground to hold the big gray.

"May my little boy send yours a present from New Hampshire?" the Yankee asked. "Does he like maple sugar? Blocks of it?"

"We've never discovered a sugar he doesn't like," mother said.

The kitchen people were at the entrance to the brick hall. They were all peering around the door. "He's a damned Yankee," I said, "but he won't hurt you."

The big Yankee half shut his eyes then and sighed. As he straightened up and clicked his heels together sharply, I heard the people scamper back down the hall to the kitchen. He bent low and kissed mother's hand. He turned then and walked slowly down the steps and along the gravel walk of the garden, never looking back, his cap in his hand. Then he opened the little picket gate he had jumped when he first rode up, and he continued slowly, taking the gray's bridle and swinging himself into the saddle as though he was too tired to mount and ride again.

One of his soldiers, who rode up by him, had a small flag on a long staff which he carried with its butt in a saddle sling. The big Yankee took this pennon, which was red and yellow with a big "S" and a little "F" and rode over to our main gate, where he drove it with a hard thrust into the soft soil that is always there in the clay when the spring rains have swept the yard of the winter's dust. They fell in behind him, the others on their horses, and they rode away leaving the pennon on our gate. At the turn in the road where the cornfield is now—there used to be a grove of hickories there—all of them stood in the stirrups and their swords flashed in the sun as they waved back to us. Then they cantered around the trees and out of sight.

My mother stood looking after them a long time. She reached into her pocket then and brought out her small embroidery scissors with the filigree handles.

"Here," she said. "You can sell some scissors in your store today."

The scissors were forbidden property. I was never to touch them, for mother said the Lord only knew when ever she would get any more.

"But you'll need them," I said, "with your hoops and your embroidery."

"We are done embroidering," she said.

I didn't want to take them, but with mother ready to cry any minute, I had to. I resolved to hide them in the moss walls of my little store and give them back to her some day. I started into the flower garden. But there was a sound of many guns firing up the road.

When father used to let the Negroes all take muzzle-loaders out for the rabbit hunting around Christmastime guns would be popping that way, for everyone shot quickly whenever the dogs jumped a cottontail. Father would never let me go if there was more than one gun, which Amos carried. At times when Amos carried me, he always looked to see where I was before he shot at a rabbit. But the firing up the road was heavier than we would hear on Christmas Eve.

I ran to my mother and held to her skirts, and she held me closely as we stood there, the popping coming nearer all the time. Amos came out again in his cockade and led mother back into the house and up the stairs. Then he ran to the front door and locked it and drew the curtains tight.

Upstairs we could hear the uproar from the kitchen. Mother ran out upon the sewing porch upstairs, for it overlooked the road. Presently the Yankees came in sight again. They were galloping, but each man would turn occasionally and rise in his stirrups and fire his short rifle—one not half as long as mother's—at something we could not see. I could see their blue coats sometimes over the trees and then between the branches as they streamed back down the road.

The last man to ride into view was the very blue one on the big gray. Mother caught me and sobbed when she saw him round the bend of the hickories that my father had to sell for timber later when he sent me off to the military academy. As they came back along the clay they bunched together at our gate and one of them tried to open it from horseback. His horse was fretting so that he had trouble seizing the catch. I knew anyway that he couldn't open it without dismounting. My brother Jim could do it, but that was because he practiced so hard. The latch was a bar that fell into a tongue catch, and there was a little iron trip which fell over it when it shot home.

The shots were coming nearer when the man on the gray rode into the men at the gate, waving his sword and beating them with the flat of it, trying to make them go farther down the road. He flashed his sword and got them off flying again, seizing the pennon out of the ground and thrusting it to the man with the yellow sleeves. They spurred up and started toward the bend going toward Amelia. There weren't so many of them as we had fed in the kitchen.

My mother gasped, and I could see over the trees more riders coming in great bunches, galloping hard. They were in gray, and their coat tails fluttered behind them in long ribbons, but their horses weren't so fast as the Yankee horses.

The big Yankee at our gate waited until they turned the bend and then began firing from a pistol. I think it shot four times before he threw it

away. The gray riders were firing back at him now, galloping by the stable turnout. Father had said never to gallop a horse up to the stables, because that way gave the horse his will, which you should never give him if you wanted a good horse. But they weren't turning in at the stable.

"Run!" my mother screamed. "Run!"

I don't know if the big Yankee heard her. But he did just what he had done when he jumped our gate. He made a sweeping bow, horse and rider, and then turned and dashed off after his men.

There was a place up the road that father never could pack hard enough. No matter how many slaves worked on it, it was either mud or dust. It was a cloud of dust now from the stir the other Yankees made when they rode into it. The gray horse rode into it, the men in flying coat tails about a hundred yards back of him, from the stable gate to the bend there. The big Yankee fell from his horse just as the gray entered the dust.

I saw his blue jacket rolling as the other men galloped over him and into the dust after the others. Group and group of them came racing down our road and into the cloud of dust. I held to the banisters of the sewing porch, watching the clouds go past—clouds of yellow dust with figures, mostly hats and swords, rolling on the crest of them.

When it began to clear and they were all past, I discovered that Amos and mother had left me. They were down on the road, bending over the man in blue. The big gray stood there occasionally tripping over his bridle, waiting by them. Amos wanted to save his cockade from the dust, for he took it off and held it beneath his arm. Then he gave it to mother.

While she held the gray he picked up the Yankee and, folding him over the saddle, they came slowly up to the gate he had not let his men open. Mother carried the cockade and the little flat cap the Yankee had worn, and Amos led the gray. His jacket wasn't blue any more, for it was covered with dust, but just as they opened the gate I could see patches of it beneath his arms, shining as it had when he first put his gray over our picket fence and swept his cap along its withers in a bow from both man and horse. I went into mother's bedroom and cried on a post.

Amos took me over to Uncle Billy's to spend the afternoon, for he had sent word that the wood violets were out for the spring in the bowl of rocks we called the Wolf's Den. They say wolves used to live there. I stayed two days with Uncle Billy, and we spent many hours picking wood violets and shooting at a mark with his old gun. And I had a fine time playing store with two little black boys named Roy and Troy. When I came back home father and the boys were there. But they stayed in the back of the house all the time. It was so dusty on the porches, for the blue riders streamed by all day long.

When they found the embroidery scissors under that old stump today, it made me think of all this. I still remember how blue his jacket was when he lifted the gray over the picket fence and came down the gravel walk between those little button chrysanthemums.

