

THE ARMY OF THE CALLAHAN

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I

THE dreaded message had come. The lank messenger, who had brought it from over Black Mountain, dropped into a chair by the stove and sank his teeth into a great hunk of yellow cheese. "Flitter Bill" Richmond waddled from behind his counter, and out on the little platform in front of his cross-roads store. Out there was a group of earth-stained countrymen, lounging against the rickety fence or swinging on it, their heels clear of the ground, all whittling, chewing, and talking the matter over. All looked up at Bill, and he looked down at them, running his eye

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keenly from one to another until he came to one powerful young fellow loosely bent over a wagon-tongue. Even on him, Bill's eyes stayed but a moment, and then were lifted higher in anxious thought.

The message had come at last, and the man who brought it had heard it fall from Black Tom's own lips. The "wild Jay-Hawkers of Kaintuck" were coming over into Virginia to get Flitter Bill's store, for they were mountain Unionists and Bill was a valley rebel and lawful prey. It was past belief. So long had he prospered, and so well, that Bill had come to feel that he sat safe in the hollow of God's hand. But he now must have protection—and at once—from the hand of man.

Roaring Fork sang lustily through the rhododendrons. To the north yawned "the Gap" through the Cumberland

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Mountains. "Callahan's Nose," a huge gray rock, showed plain in the clear air, high above the young foliage, and under it, and on up the rocky chasm, flashed Flitter Bill's keen mind, reaching out for help.

Now, from Virginia to Alabama the Southern mountaineer was a Yankee, because the national spirit of 1776, getting fresh impetus in 1812 and new life from the Mexican War, had never died out in the hills. Most likely it would never have died out, anyway; for, the world over, any seed of character, individual or national, that is once dropped between lofty summits brings forth its kind, with deathless tenacity, year after year. Only, in the Kentucky mountains, there were more slaveholders than elsewhere in the mountains of the South. These, naturally,

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fought for their slaves, and the division thus made the war personal and terrible between the slaveholders who dared to stay at home, and the Union "Home Guards" who organized to drive them away. In Bill's little Virginia valley, of course, most of the sturdy farmers had shouldered Confederate muskets and gone to the war. Those who had stayed at home were, like Bill, Confederate in sympathy, but they lived in safety down the valley, while Bill traded and fattened just opposite the Gap, through which a wild road ran over into the wild Kentucky hills. Therein Bill's danger lay; for, just at this time, the Harlan Home Guard under Black Tom, having cleared those hills, were making ready, like the Pict and Scot of olden days, to descend on the Virginia valley and smite the lowland rebels at

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the mouth of the Gap. Of the "stay-at-homes," and the deserters roundabout, there were many, very many, who would "stand in" with any man who would keep their bellies full, but they were well-nigh worthless even with a leader, and, without a leader, of no good at all. Flitter Bill must find a leader for them, and anywhere than in his own fat self, for a leader of men Bill was not born to be, nor could he see a leader among the men before him. And so, standing there one early morning in the spring of 1865, with uplifted gaze, it was no surprise to him—the coincidence, indeed, became at once one of the articles of perfect faith in his own star—that he should see afar off, a black slouch hat and a jogging gray horse rise above a little knoll that was in line with the mouth of the Gap. At once he

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crossed his hands over his chubby stomach with a pious sigh, and at once a plan of action began to whirl in his little round head. Before man and beast were in full view the work was done, the hands were unclasped, and Flitter Bill, with a chuckle, had slowly risen, and was waddling back to his desk in the store.

It was a pompous old buck who was bearing down on the old gray horse, and under the slouch hat with its flapping brim—one Mayhall Wells, by name. There were but few strands of gray in his thick blue-black hair, though his years were rounding half a century, and he sat the old nag with erect dignity and perfect ease. His bearded mouth showed vanity immeasurable, and suggested a strength of will that his eyes—the real seat of power—denied, for, while shrewd and

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keen, they were unsteady. In reality, he was a great coward, though strong as an ox, and whipping with ease every man who could force him into a fight. So that, in the whole man, a sensitive observer would have felt a peculiar pathos, as though nature had given him a desire to be, and no power to become, and had then sent him on his zigzag way, never to dream wherein his trouble lay.

“Mornin’, gentlemen!”

“Mornin’, Mayhall!”

All nodded and spoke except Hence Sturgill on the wagon-tongue, who stopped whittling, and merely looked at the big man with narrowing eyes.

Tallow Dick, a yellow slave, appeared at the corner of the store, and the old buck beckoned him to come and hitch his horse. Flitter Bill had reappeared on the stoop

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with a piece of white paper in his hand. The lank messenger sagged in the doorway behind him, ready to start for home.

"Mornin', *Captain Wells*," said Bill, with great respect. Every man heard the title, stopped his tongue and his knife-blade, and raised his eyes; a few smiled—Hence Sturgill grinned. Mayhall stared, and Bill's left eye closed and opened with lightning quickness in a most portentous wink. Mayhall straightened his shoulders—seeing the game, as did the crowd at once: Flitter Bill was impressing that messenger in case he had some dangerous card up his sleeve.

"*Captain Wells*," Bill repeated significantly, "I'm sorry to say yo' new uniform has not arrived yet. I am expecting it to-morrow." Mayhall toed the line with soldierly promptness.

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"Well, I'm sorry to hear that, suh—sorry to hear it, suh," he said, with slow, measured speech. "My men are comin' in fast, and you can hardly realize er—er what it means to an old soldier er—er not to have—er—" And Mayhall's answering wink was portentous.

"My friend here is from over in Kaintucky, and the Harlan Home Gyard over there, he says, is a-making some threats."

Mayhall laughed.

"So I have heerd—so I have heerd." He turned to the messenger. "We shall be ready fer 'em, suh, ready fer 'em with a thousand men—one thousand men, suh, right hyeh in the Gap—right hyeh in the Gap. Let 'em come on—let 'em come on!" Mayhall began to rub his hands together as though the conflict were close at hand, and the mountaineer slapped one

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thigh heartily. "Good for you! Give 'em hell!" He was about to slap Mayhall on the shoulder and call him "partner," when Flitter Bill coughed, and Mayhall lifted his chin.

"Captain Wells?" said Bill.

"Captain Wells," repeated Mayhall with a stiff salutation, and the messenger from over Black Mountain fell back with an apologetic laugh. A few minutes later both Mayhall and Flitter Bill saw him shaking his head, as he started homeward toward the Gap. Bill laughed silently, but Mayhall had grown grave. The fun was over and he beckoned Bill inside the store.

"Misto Richmond," he said, with hesitancy and an entire change of tone and manner, "I am afeerd I ain't goin' to be able to pay you that little amount I

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owe you, but if you can give me a little mo' time——"

"Captain Wells," interrupted Bill slowly, and again Mayhall stared hard at him, "as betwixt friends, as have been personal friends fer nigh onto twenty year, I hope you won't mention that little matter to me ag'in—until I mentions it to you."

"But, Misto Richmond, Hence Sturgill out thar says as how he heerd you say that if I didn't pay——"

"*Captain Wells*," interrupted Bill again and again Mayhall stared hard—it was strange that Bill could have formed the habit of calling him "Captain" in so short a time—"yestiddy is not to-day, is it? And to-day is not to-morrow? I axe you—have I said one word about that little matter *to-day*? Well, borrow not from

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yestiddy nor to-morrow, to make trouble fer to-day. There is other things fer to-day, Captain Wells."

Mayhall turned here.

"Misto Richmond," he said, with great earnestness, "you may not know it, but three times since thet long-legged jay-hawker's been gone you hev plainly—and if my ears do not deceive me, an' they never hev—you have plainly called me '*Captain Wells.*' I knowed yo' little trick whilst he was hyeh, fer I knowed whut the feller had come to tell ye; but since he's been gone, three times, Misto Richmond——"

"Yes," drawled Bill, with an unction that was strangely sweet to Mayhall's wondering ears, "an' I do it ag'in, *Captain Wells.*"

"An' may I axe you," said Mayhall,

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ruffling a little, "may I axe you—why you——"

"Certainly," said Bill, and he handed over the paper that he held in his hand.

Mayhall took the paper and looked it up and down helplessly—Flitter Bill slyly watching him.

Mayhall handed it back. "If you please, Misto Richmond—I left my specs at home." Without a smile, Bill began. It was an order from the commandant at Cumberland Gap, sixty miles farther down Powell's Valley, authorizing Mayhall Wells to form a company to guard the Gap and to protect the property of Confederate citizens in the valley; and a commission of captaincy in the said company for the said Mayhall Wells. Mayhall's mouth widened to the full stretch of his lean jaws, and, when Bill was through

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reading, he silently reached for the paper and looked it up and down and over and over, muttering:

"Well—well—well!" And then he pointed silently to the name that was at the bottom of the paper.

Bill spelled out the name:

"*Jefferson Davis,*" and Mayhall's big fingers trembled as he pulled them away, as though to avoid further desecration of that sacred name. Then he rose, and a magical transformation began that can be likened—I speak with reverence—to the turning of water into wine. Captain Mayhall Wells raised his head, set his chin well in, and kept it there. He straightened his shoulders, and kept them straight. He paced the floor with a tread that was martial, and once he stopped before the door with his right hand thrust under his

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breast-pocket, and with wrinkling brow studied the hills. It was a new man—with the water in his blood changed to wine—who turned suddenly on Flitter Bill Richmond:

"I can collect a vely large force in a vely few days." Flitter Bill knew that—that he could get together every loafer between the county-seat of Wise and the county-seat of Lee—but he only said encouragingly:

"Good!"

"An' we air to pertect the property—I am to pertect the property of the Confederate citizens of the valley—that means *you*, Misto Richmond, and *this store*."

Bill nodded.

Mayhall coughed slightly. "There is one thing in the way, I opine. Whar—I axe you—air we to git somethin' to eat

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fer my command?" Bill had anticipated this.

"I'll take keer o' that."

Captain Wells rubbed his hands.

"Of co'se, of co'se—you are a soldier and a patriot—you can afford to feed 'em as a slight return fer the pertection I shall give you and yourn."

"Certainly," agreed Bill dryly, and with a prophetic stir of uneasiness.

"Vehy—vehy well. I shall begin *now*, Misto Richmond." And, to Flitter Bill's wonder, the captain stalked out to the stoop, announced his purpose with the voice of an auctioneer, and called for volunteers then and there. There was dead silence for a moment. Then there was a smile here, a chuckle there, an incredulous laugh, and Hence Sturgill, "bully of the Pocket," rose from the

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wagon-tongue, closed his knife, came slowly forward, and cackled his scorn straight up into the teeth of Captain Mayhall Wells. The captain looked down and began to shed his coat.

"I take it, Hence Sturgill, that you air laughin' at me?"

"I am a-laughin' at *you*, Mayhall Wells," he said, contemptuously, but he was surprised at the look on the good-natured giant's face.

"*Captain* Mayhall Wells, ef you please."

"Plain ole Mayhall Wells," said Hence, and Captain Wells descended with no little majesty and "biffed" him.

The delighted crowd rose to its feet and gathered around. Tallow Dick came running from the barn. It was biff—biff, and biff again, but not nip and tuck for

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long. Captain Mayhall closed in. Hence Sturgill struck the earth like a Homeric pine, and the captain's mighty arm played above him and fell, resounding. In three minutes Hence, to the amazement of the crowd, roared:

"'Nough!"

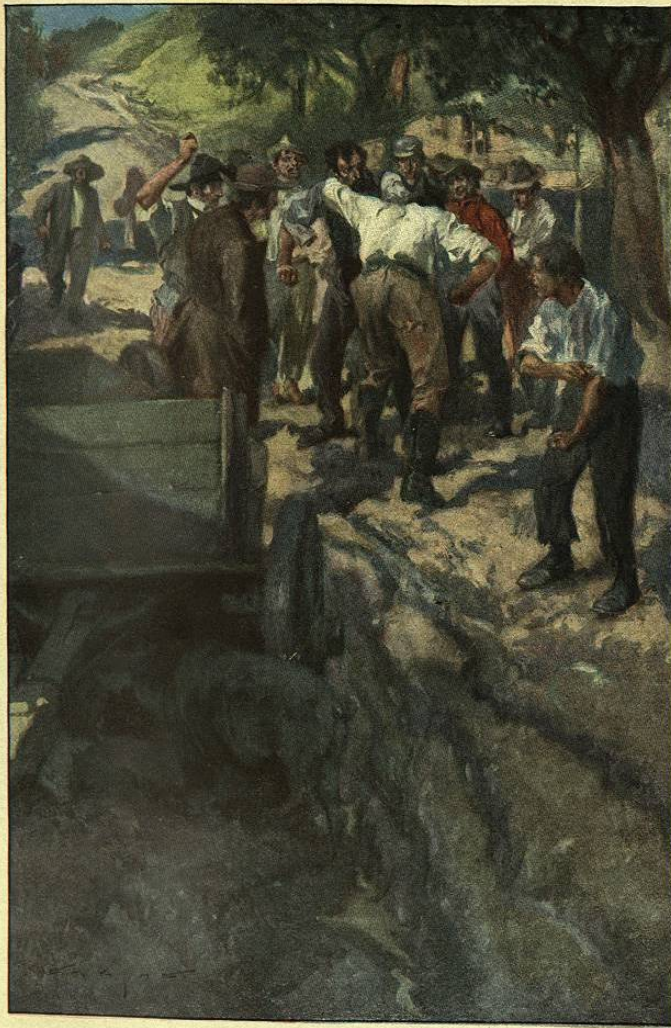
But Mayhall breathed hard and said quietly:

"*Captain Wells!*" Hence shouted.

"Plain ole—" But the captain's huge fist was poised in the air over his face.

"Capt'n Wells," he growled, and the captain rose and calmly put on his coat, while the crowd looked respectful, and Hence Sturgill staggered to one side, as though beaten in spirit, strength, and wits as well. The captain beckoned Flitter Bill inside the store. His manner had a distinct savor of patronage.

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Captain Wells descended with no little majesty and "biffed" him.

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"Misto Richmond," he said, "I make you—I appoint you, by the authority of Jefferson Davis and the Confederate States of Ameriky, as commissary-gineral of the Army of the Callahan."

"As *what?*" Bill's eyes blinked at the astounding dignity of his commission.

"Gineral Richmond, I shall not repeat them words." And he didn't, but rose and made his way toward his old gray mare. Tallow Dick held his bridle.

"Dick," he said, jocosely, "goin' to run away ag'in?" The negro almost paled, and then, with a look at a blacksnake whip that hung on the barn door, grinned.

"No, suh—no, suh—'deed I ain't, suh—no mo'."

Mounted, the captain dropped a three-cent silver piece in the negro's startled hand. Then he vouchsafed the wonder-

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ing Flitter Bill and the gaping crowd a military salute and started for the yawning mouth of the Gap—riding with shoulders squared and chin well in—riding as should ride the commander of the Army of the Callahan.

Flitter Bill dropped his blinking eyes to the paper in his hand that bore the commission of Jefferson Davis and the Confederate States of America to Mayhall Wells of Callahan, and went back into his store. He looked at it a long time and then he laughed, but without much mirth.

II

GRASS had little chance to grow for three weeks thereafter under the cowhide boots of Captain Mayhall Wells. When the twentieth morning came over the hills, the mists parted over the Stars and Bars floating from the top of a tall poplar up through the Gap and flaunting brave defiance to Black Tom, his Harlan Home Guard, and all other jay-hawking Unionists of the Kentucky hills. It parted over the Army of the Callahan asleep on its arms in the mouth of the chasm, over Flitter Bill sitting, sullen and dejected, on the stoop of his store; and over Tallow Dick stealing corn-bread from the kitchen to make ready for flight that night through