



CHAPTER 1

The cold passed reluctantly from the earth. The retiring fog revealed the Union's Army of the Potomac stretched out, resting, on the hills of Falmouth, Virginia. As the landscape changed from brown to green, the army awakened and began to tremble with eagerness at the distant sound of gunfire. The army looked at the roads, which were growing from long troughs of liquid mud to proper thoroughfares. Amber-tinted in the shadow of its banks, the Rappahannock River flowed at the army's feet. At night, when it had become sorrowfully black, the red gleam of Confederate campfires showed in distant hills south of the river.

Jim Conklin, a tall Union soldier, went to wash a shirt in a brook. He came flying back, waving his garment like a banner. He was bursting with a tale he had heard from a reliable friend, who had heard it from a cavalryman, who had heard it from his brother, an orderly at

division headquarters. Jim adopted a herald's important air. "We're going to move tomorrow," he said pompously to a group in his camp. "We're going to go way up the river, cut across, and come around behind them."

Jim loudly told his attentive audience about a brilliant, elaborate plan. When he finished, the blue-uniformed men scattered into small arguing groups between the camp's rows of squat brown huts. A black wagon-driver who had been dancing on a cracker box was deserted by the dozens of soldiers who had found him hilariously entertaining. He sat down mournfully. Smoke drifted lazily from many quaint chimneys.

"It's a lie," private Ned Wilson said loudly. His smooth young face was flushed. His hands were thrust sulkily into his pants pockets. He was offended. "I don't believe this damn army is ever going to move. I've gotten ready to move eight times in the last two weeks, and we haven't moved yet."

Jim felt called on to defend the truth of the rumor that he had introduced. He and Ned came close to fighting over it.

A corporal began to swear. He had just added a costly floor to his house, he said. With the arrival of spring he had refrained from making his house more comfortable because he had felt that the army might go on the march at any

moment. Lately, however, he'd gotten the impression that he was in a sort of eternal camp.

Many of the men engaged in a spirited debate. One outlined all the plans of General Joseph Hooker, the commanding general. Other men insisted there were other plans. The two sides clamored at each other. Meanwhile, Jim bustled about importantly, assailed by questions.

"What's up, Jim?"

"The army's going to move."

"What are you talking about? How do you know it is?"

"You can believe me or not. I don't give a damn."

Henry Fleming, a young private, eagerly listened to Jim and the others. After receiving his fill of discussions on marches and attacks, he went to his hut and crawled through the hole that served as a door. He lay down on a wide bunk that stretched across one end of the room. In the other end, cracker boxes served as furniture. They were grouped around the fireplace. On the walls were a picture from a weekly newspaper and three rifles arranged in parallel on pegs. Other equipment hung on projections. Some tin dishes lay on a small pile of firewood. A folded tent served as a roof. The sunlight above it made it glow light yellow. A small window allowed a square of whiter light to fall on

the cluttered floor. At times smoke from the fire wreathed into the room instead of going out the flimsy chimney of clay and sticks.

Henry was in a sort of trance. At last they were going to fight. Tomorrow, maybe, there would be a battle, and he would be in it. He had dreamed of battles all his life—vague conflicts of thrilling sweep and fire. He had imagined himself bravely protecting people and gaining glory. Several times he had burned to enlist. He had read of marches and battles and had longed to see it all. But his mother had discouraged him. With deep conviction she had dismissed his war ardor and patriotism. Sitting calmly, she had given him many reasons why he was vastly more important on the farm than on the battlefield. Finally, however, the newspaper reports of decisive victories, the village gossip, and his own imagination had aroused Henry too much to resist.

One night as he lay in bed, Henry had heard the church bell ringing to announce news of a great battle. He had shivered with excitement. He had gone down to his mother's room and said, "Ma, I'm going to enlist."

"Henry, don't be a fool," his mother had replied. She then had ended the discussion by covering her face with her quilt.

Nevertheless, the next morning Henry had gone to the nearby town of Port Jervis, New

York and enlisted. When he had returned home, his mother had been milking a cow while four other cows stood waiting. "Ma, I've enlisted," he had said shyly.

After a short silence, his mother had replied, "God's will be done, Henry." Then she had continued to milk the cow.

When Henry had stood in the doorway in his uniform, his eyes lit with excitement, he had seen two tears leave trails on his mother's cheeks. She had disappointed him by saying nothing about his returning a hero. Instead she had continued to peel potatoes and had said, "You watch out, Henry, and take good care of yourself. Don't think you can lick the whole Confederate army. You're just one little fellow among many others. Keep quiet, and do what they tell you. I've knit you eight pairs of socks and put in all of your best shirts. I want you to be as warm and comfortable as anyone in the army. Be careful about the company you keep. There are lots of bad men in the army. The army makes them wild, and they like nothing better than to teach a young fellow like you to drink and swear. Stay clear of those men. Don't ever do anything that you would be ashamed for me to know about. Think of me as watching you. Always remember your father, too. Remember that he never drank a drop of liquor and seldom

cursed. I don't know what else to tell you, Henry, except that you mustn't ever do something wrong for my sake. If a time comes when you have to either do something wrong or be killed, do what's right. Many women have to bear up after the loss of their husbands and sons. God will take care of me. Now, don't forget about the socks and shirts. And I've put a cup of blackberry jam with your bundle because I know you like that more than anything else. Goodbye, Henry. Watch out, and be a good boy."

Henry had been impatient during her speech, which had irritated him. He had left feeling relieved not to hear more. But when he had looked back from the gate, he had seen his mother kneeling among the potato parings. Her brown face, upraised, had been stained with tears, and her spare form had trembled. He had bowed his head and gone on, suddenly feeling ashamed.

Henry had gone to his school to say goodbye to his schoolmates. They had crowded around him with wonder and admiration. He had swelled with pride and strutted in his uniform.

One light-haired girl had made fun of his military spirit, but a darker girl whom he had gazed at had seemed to grow shy and sad at the sight of his uniform. As he had walked down the path between rows of oaks, he had turned his

head and detected her at a window watching his departure. She immediately had averted her glance. Since then he had thought of her often.

On the way south to Washington, DC, Henry's spirits had soared. His regiment, the 124th New York, had been fed and caressed at station after station until he had believed himself a hero. There had been a lavish expenditure of bread, cold cuts, coffee, pickles, and cheese. Basking in young women's smiles and old men's compliments, he had felt capable of mighty deeds.

After complicated travels with many pauses, there had come winter months of monotonous camp life in Falmouth, Virginia. Henry had believed that war was a series of death struggles with little time in between for sleep and meals. However, since his regiment had come to the field, the army had done little but sit and try to keep warm.

Henry had come to see himself as simply part of a vast uniformed demonstration. He was drilled and drilled. His job was to try to be comfortable.

The only Confederates he had seen were some guards along the Rappahannock's southern bank who sometimes shot at the Union guards on the river's northern side. When reproached for their shots, they usually apologized and swore that their guns had gone off

unintended. One night when he was on guard duty, Henry had conversed with one of the Confederate guards, a slightly ragged man who would spit between his shoes and whom Henry had liked.

“Yank,” the Confederate soldier had called to him, “you’re a damn good fellow.”

That statement of approval had made Henry temporarily regret the war.

Various veterans had told Henry tales. Some spoke of whiskered gray hordes who bravely advanced, chewing tobacco and cursing. Others spoke of tattered, hungry men who fired without conviction. Veterans talked much of smoke, fire, and blood, but Henry couldn’t tell how much was lies. Because he was a new recruit, they often yelled “Fresh fish!” at him.

Henry now lay in his bunk trying to convince himself that he wouldn’t run from a battle. Fear grew in his mind. As he imagined himself actually moving forward to fight, he saw hideous possibilities. Would he stand stoutly? He recalled his visions of broken-bladed glory, but those visions dissolved in the shadow of the coming battle. He sprang from his bunk and paced. “Good Lord, what’s wrong with me?” he said aloud.

After a time Jim slid through the hole. Ned followed. They were arguing.

“That’s all right,” Jim said as he entered, waving his hand dismissively. “You can believe me or not.”

Ned grunted stubbornly. For a moment he seemed to be searching for an unassailable reply. Finally he said, “Well, you don’t know everything in the world.”

“I didn’t say I know everything in the world.” Jim began to put various articles snugly into his knapsack.

Pausing in his nervous walk, Henry looked at Jim. “There’s going to be a battle, Jim?”

“Yes. Just wait until tomorrow, and you’ll see one of the biggest battles ever.”

“Huh!” Ned scoffed from a corner.

“Well,” Henry said, “this rumor probably will turn out like the others did.”

“No, it won’t,” Jim said, exasperated. “The cavalry started this morning. They’re going to Richmond while we fight the Johnnies.”

Henry remained silent for a time. At last he said, “Jim.”

“What?”

“How do you think our regiment will do?”

“We’ll fight all right, I guess, after we get into it.”

“Do you think any of the boys will run?” Henry asked.

“A few maybe, but there’s that kind in every

regiment, especially when they first go under fire. Of course, the whole regiment might turn and run if some big fighting comes right at the beginning. Then again, we might stay and fight like all hell. You can't bet on anything. We haven't been under fire before. Probably we'll fight better than some and worse than others."

"Did you ever think you might run, Jim?" Henry asked. Then he laughed as if he had intended his question to be a joke. Ned also giggled.

Jim waved his hand. "Well, I've thought it might get too hot for me in some of those battles and that if lots of boys started to run, I'd probably run too. If I did start to run, I'd run like the devil. Make no mistake. But if everybody stood and fought, I would too."

Henry was grateful for Jim's words. He had feared that all of the untried men possessed great confidence. He now was somewhat reassured.