

The Reprieve

By Solomon Williamson, '11.

It was ten o'clock, and the night was already dark. All the afternoon, great banks of clouds driven by a strong wind, had rolled from the northeast, and piled up their massive forms ominously on the horizon. The atmosphere, close and hot, weighed heavily on man and beast. The little fretful rumbles of thunder interspersed with savage spasmodic flashes of lightning unmistakably betokened a violent storm. The September breeze was chilly along the banks of the Ohio. Gerald drew his great cloak closer around him, and trod his beat with a brisker step as the fitful gusts of wind shrieked through the branches ahead, casting upon the lonely sentinel a shower of dried leaves.

About three miles north of the little town of Holmar in Southern Ohio, there is a spot where two roads cross; and very near this crossing there stands today a hoary, majestic oak tree. The side toward the road is fair and sound, but the other side is hollowed out almost to the centre, thus affording complete shelter to a single person.

McLellan's vanguard comprising the 21st and 22nd New Hampshire and several other northern regiments under General Vincent, was encamped that night in and around the vicinity of Holmar. As it was rumored that a detachment of southern troops were some distance to the south, especial vigilance was necessary lest Holmar be surprised. For this purpose Vincent had posted his most tried men as sentinels at the chief strategic positions; and thus it happened that Lieutenant Gerald Conyers of the 21st was appointed to that cross-road with the oak-tree as his sentry-box.

The rain began to fall in torrents and the storm broke in its might. The night-birds flew around uttering the weird ghostly cries, which could be heard only through the intervals of the thunder's roar. Soon, however, Gerald heard very close to him another cry, which was certainly not the cry of a bird, it sounded

so human. No, it was the stifled moan of a person in pain, and that person apparently a child. The sentinel peered into the darkness but failed to recognize anything. Again he heard that cry, nearer and more distinct than before. Just then, by a lurid flash of lightning, he could see on the arm of the road nearest him the form of a girl holding tightly to her breast what seemed a basket, and limping painfully, yet struggling bravely to make her way through the storm. His heart was touched by the sight and he hastened toward the child, which even as he drew near, fell down in the muddy road, uttering the piteous cry, "I can go no further. Poor mother, what will become of mother!"

The sentinel picked up the slight form now drenched with the rain. It was that of an undersized girl of about ten years, whose ruddy face, though now pinched with pain, nevertheless showed great determination. A few questions elicited the fact that she was Elsie, daughter of poor Widow Colman, who lived about a half mile from the cross-road. This woman's two sons were in the navy, her elder daughter far away in the east, and herself ill here with no one to nurse her but the little Elsie. Thus Elsie had to go that afternoon to Holmar for food and medicine. If she did not reach home soon, doubtless the mother would die. But in the darkness she had sprained her ankle in a rut of the road, and could go no farther. The little maid wrung her hand so piteously while she told her simple tale, that the stoniest heart, seeing and hearing her, must have melted.

Gerald wavered long between his sense of military duty and his humanity. He knew that to be found away from his post meant death and eternal disgrace. But suppose the widow should die and, perhaps, the child herself perish in that storm. The enemy was known to be, at least, twenty miles away; and only an hour ago the picket-guard had passed his

box and, therefore, would not be returning until midnight, when Gerald's watch would cease. The widow's house was only a half mile away to the north. Surely he could carry the child home and return in time. He hesitated no longer. Inwardly breathing a prayer to the God of mercy that all might be well, he lifted the timid yet grateful maiden in his strong arms, bore her bravely through the blasts, and did not stop until he had placed her at the bedside of her sick mother. Then he hurried quickly back to his post realizing the awful risk he incurred; but, even as he thought thus, the mite of the maiden and the look of that mother seemed to him recompense enough for even disgrace and death.

He arrived at the cross-road and looked around. All seemed well, but as he approached within ten feet of the oak tree, two forms, with lifted pistols, stepped from behind it and a sharp voice rang out: "Halt, who goes there!"

There was no mistaking that voice. It was the pitiless, steely tone of General Vincent. Gerald stammered out:—"Lieutenant Conyers of the 21st New Hampshire."

"Lieutenant Conyers," came the voice of the General, "You will deliver your arms to Sergeant Blair and consider yourself under arrest for neglect of duty!"

To hear was to obey; and the officer and his prisoner trudged moodily back to the camp.

So this was the end of it. Arrested for deserting his post! Tomorrow the court-martial, degradation before his fellow-officers, and then to be lined up before six privates and shot down like a dog! This was the end of all his bright hopes, the fruit of all his mother's prayers and fond dreams for her son! Was it for this that other—a slender blue-eyed, fairhaired form—had kissed him as they stood at the old stile on that night before his departure and promised to pray for him—an ignominious death, a nameless, dishonored grave?

The next morning broke fair and beautiful. The sun shone with unusual splendor, gilding the autumn tinted trees of Holmar. The birds sang blithely, and all nature seemed endeavoring to forget

the wild fury of last night. Gerald looked out from the window of his cell upon the beautiful world; but his heart sank within him. No more for him those birds would sing; no more the rivulets murmur their soft music!

The court-martial was hurried through. Gerald told the reason of his absence from his beat; but to no avail. He knew military law and its penalties. No excuse was possible to exculpate him. Death was the penalty. He took the sentence calmly. "After all," thought he, "cannot I give my life that two might be saved? Conscience, surely, must be greater than law!" With this thought he could die bravely. However, according to a time-honored custom of the 21st, no execution of an offender could take place until six days after the court martial; and thus Gerald was remanded to his cell to pass those six days in the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

That very morning, Mary, the elder daughter of Widow Colman, arrived in Holmar. On the street she met, by the merest accident, an old friend who was now serving on the staff of General Vincent, and learning from him the story of the prisoner's fate, and knowing that he it was who saved her mother's life, she determined to do her utmost to save the brave fellow. Accordingly she went first to General Vincent, but no tears, no entreaties, could prevail with him.

"Military law," said he, "must be obeyed. The precedent would be dangerous. Examples are necessary. To the depth of his soul, he regretted the incident, for Lieutenant Conyers seemed a worthy young man, nevertheless, he must pay the penalty of the law."

What would she do! Surely Heaven would not allow that gallant soul to perish for such a noble deed! Then an idea burst upon her mind; mighty resolve filled her soul. She would go to Washington at any cost and see the President. Mr. Lincoln would sympathize with the noble lad; he would pardon that heroic misdemeanor. But the time was so short and the obstacles so great! Yet she did not flinch from her resolve. The nearest railroad station was fifteen miles from Holmar. No horses were available as all were in requisition by the army. She must go on foot. And she went. Filled with a mighty resolu-

tion, what can daunt the breast of woman?

Forty hours after she had decided, she was standing before the White House hungry, wearied, almost exhausted by her unusual effort. Her whole nature cried out for rest and food. But no! She must not think of herself now. She must see the President tonight. Only three days more and the brave youth must die. But how could she see Mr. Lincoln? She had no friends in Washington, but she knew that God was her friend and would provide a way for her. It was already five o'clock in the evening when she presented herself before the attendants begging them to allow her to see the President.

"You cannot see him tonight," was the response, "the President is away and will not be back until Friday."

"Oh but I must see him tonight," she wailed. "Friday will be too late, too late. I must see Mr. Lincoln tonight!"

And some of the heartless attendants even dared to laugh at the wild grief of the maiden; for they knew how futile it was to wish to see the President in Washington that night.

Poor Mary with a heavy heart, turned away from the great building; and crushed and broken in spirit, walked down the long avenue towards the gate. As she approached the gate, silently admiring the lovely flowers, a carriage drove rapidly up the street, stopped at the gate and a tall gentleman dressed in black stepped out, dismissed the carriage and started up the avenue. As he neared her, something in that tall, ungainly figure, the regnant pose of that head, told her that must be he—the President, and with the quick intuition so characteristic of woman, and with the boldness of desperation she quickened her pace and came directly towards him.

She looked up in his face. It was he. That kindly smiling, sympathetic yet intensely sorrowful countenance could belong to no other man than the great Lincoln. Had she not seen his picture in the papers? In a moment she was at his feet and told him her story. He listened patiently until the end, then in a very grave voice said kindly, "My dear child, you know that the young man can hardly be saved. A soldier's duty is to obey.

The penalty of deserting his post in such a time is death"

"Oh sir, do not call it desertion! Think how it was done! why it was done!" she interrupted in her grief.

"Yet if these acts are allowed to go unpunished, how can we have discipline in our army?" the great man continued. "Such precedents are perilous to the nation's welfare."

"True sir, true. But must he die because he did what Jesus Christ would have done? Die because he obeyed the voice of mercy? Should not the merciful be shown mercy?"

"My daughter," came in a low voice, "he saved others, he might not save himself."

Then a deep sigh broke from that strong man's breast as if he gave utterance to a thousand sorrows. For several moments he stood there in the silver moonlight and spoke no word. Then lifting the still kneeling form of the sobbing girl, he inquired:—

"Have you any friends in Washington?"

"No sir," she sobbed, "I know not where I shall remain tonight. My money is gone, and—and—"

"Then follow me," he interrupted, and taking her hand, together they walked up the avenue to the White House.

It is Saturday morning at Holmar. The sun is gilding the chimneys of the town and lighting with a magic glow the yellow and crimson foliage of the orchards. The birds are singing their gay melodies, and the last straggling butterflies still sip the honey from the few late autumn flowers in the fields. What means that processions of soldiers moving so silently, swiftly, sternly, with arms reversed toward the cross roads? No fife sounds its merry note, no drum beats its martial tattoo. Not one brow reflects the loneliness of the scenery around them. Each is sad and lowered, while the stern regular beat of their steps is like the tread of destiny.

There are fourteen persons in that sombre procession. Twelve soldiers, privates—are marching in double file and in their midst a youth in civilian costume. His hands are tied, yet his head is erect and his step firm and elastic. Be-

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hind them marches an aged sergeant. They proceed directly toward the old oak tree under which they halt. The sergeant gives a command and the men, leaving the youth alone under the tree, retire about twenty paces and stand with levelled guns awaiting the order to fire.

But hark! a clear bugle note rings out on the air. The men wheel around instinctively. Two horsemen riding at full speed are seen coming towards them from the direction of Holmar. On they come; and as they draw near can be seen the stern features of General Vincent and beside him an orderly from headquarters.

"Halt!" rings out the voice of the General, "Ground arms!" The twelve rifles instantly fall to the earth. The orderly quickly springing from his horse draws a packet from his breast and hands it to the sergeant. It is a reprieve from Washington and Conyers is saved.

DEATH OF ROBERT ROCKWELL.

On March 21, Robert Thomson Rockwell, our fellow student and friend, passed into the great beyond. His connection with Kalamazoo College was one of short duration, since he was enrolled for only one term as a member of the class of 1912. At the end of his first term he was forced to leave school on account of sickness which caused his death. He was not known to all of the students, but to those who did know him, he was a loving and congenial friend. His joyful spirit and endearing manner made him popular with all his associates and his death comes as a severe blow to all. Mr. Rockwell was nineteen years old, and entered Kalamazoo College in September, 1908.