

Adversity finally arrived and in a swarm. For hours Gemmer had hidden in the brush; his horse now dead from a single shot. Having learned over the past months to move with great stealth, he had been able to slither here and there until he came to a dense spot in the woods where he could hide for a time--perhaps deep into the night. But that was past. The enemy troops were onto him. Somehow they had produced a hound, and as it neared--with senses keen beyond ever missing a human being--Gemmer had found it necessary to move, then move with increasing rapidity, until he reached the point where reckless abandon became logical and his only chance.

His worst fears were soon realized as shots roared past his head and crashed hard into foliage, rock, and ground. His only hope lay in his speed afoot. It was inconceivable that they would give up on him for he represented a forward scout, someone who'd have to be squelched if their great movement of army to their foe's vulnerable flank were to remain a surprise.

Gemmer dashed frantically. He understood the paramount importance of making it back to command, for thousands of his comrades' lives were at stake. But Gemmer's life was on the line too, and he realized more than ever just how much he loved living. *Oh, God, please let me live beyond this day. Things will never be as bad as this, and I'll not bother you again.*

Thoughts whirred before him as swiftly as the landscape. He had attended the great university in Lexington and had been considered a gifted student able to grasp mathematics as well as any scholar. At nineteen he hadn't rushed to join either side; so

many of his friends had come from Ohio and Indiana, yet even more from his own Kentucky. Excruciatingly, he'd made his decision--and not looked back.

Heavy footfalls pounded behind him along with cries of, "*Save him for Colonel McCord's noose!*" Then: "*No! He's getting away! Shoot him!*"

Gemmer's all out burst for life was taking its toll. He'd not eaten well for weeks, and his health was far from peak. Designated a scout because of his intellect and riding ability; he was not above average strength. He thought for only a moment of Sarah Hoffman; he suddenly knew he'd choose her over Carin Farmer, for whom he had a maddening crush. Sarah would make a wonderful wife indeed, and at that moment, though he'd only danced with her, he knew she was perfect for him. *Oh God be with me now...*

The enemy troops closed. Then, abruptly, Gemmer skid to an edge. Unbelievably, he stood at the brink of a great chasm perhaps one-hundred-fifty feet deep. It was a tiny valley of sorts, not so unusual in the hills of Virginia. He had nowhere to go; death lurked ahead and behind him. Daunted by the great height, Gemmer glanced back at his pursuers. Despair ruled the moment. *I have reached my end.*

Except, there stood a wondrous tree both tall and broad and as dense as any he'd seen whose top was perhaps thirty feet below him. Could he, somehow, jump? He recalled his uncle explaining that sometimes a person's fall could be broken, maybe by a snow drift or a tree, and on rare occasions the person might then survive. *Oh God--*

A sudden bolt, like a hard punch in the back, rocked Gemmer and he jumped. In no time his speed was many times greater than he'd anticipated and he could hear himself scream. The tree flew to him and his terror had no precedent.

The first thing Gemmer felt was chest-splitting shock from a branch that proceeded to break, slowing but also flipping him so he then plummeted head first. Hands flailing, he encountered another branch but could not react. It ripped through his palms only for his head to take its brunt. Cartwheeling, Gemmer grabbed and grabbed but never seemed to latch onto anything to rescue himself. Then just as suddenly, he was stopped: his crotch seemingly wedged in a huge fork, but Gemmer had no control at that point and try as he did he simply could not restrain himself from slinking, then toppling from the fork. He did, just for an instant, catch a glimpse of men firing down from the ridge. His fall resumed.

The journey then took a peculiar twist. Gemmer had somehow slowed his hands on the rough bark as he faced downward. He felt that he might actually have some control, and he looked back up but saw only the startling beauty of the immense green speckled by wondrous diamonds of sunlight. Oh my, what--

His velocity continued to wane and he felt minute upon minute pass, until he wasn't sure that perhaps a whole hour might have gone by. Gemmer inched downward headfirst and felt no strain. He seemed one with the great trunk, and the further down he traveled the cooler and more exquisite his journey became. The tree's foliage was so dense that it now made sense to him that he could descend so slowly. He felt much as a character from a fairy tale--his adventure became surprisingly enjoyable. The enemy soldiers seemed not even to exist.

Gemmer's blissful passage finally reached the base of the lovely tree. He had managed to crawl out on a limb plump with emerald leaves only feet from the ground when he came upon a bare spot, and what lay just below almost knocked him from his

perch. There sat a girl with waist-long hair in a floral patterned dress. She lounged on an apricot quilt next to a basket of fruit. Barefoot, she seemed entranced by a nearby brook that shimmered in the sunlight and seemed perfectly clear in the shade. A daisy nestled in the fold of an open book.

Gemmer, taken aback by the wondrous scene of softness and tranquility, feared that he might startle the young lady. But just that quickly she noticed him, and if she had seemed beautiful before, she now radiated splendor which Gemmer had never fathomed.

“Hello,” she said. “I thought I heard you coming.”

“Ah, hello. I’m sorry to…” Gemmer managed.

She laughed. “It’s quite all right. I’m delighted you’re here. It’s a splendid day and I’m so glad for you. Won’t you come join me? I have pears and cakes and some cool water from the stream.”

Her eyes were alight and her skin glowed with creamy perfection. She appeared happy beyond words and her demeanor bestowed a gentle confidence that seemed peculiar to Gemmer. Entranced, he simply gawked, somehow setting Sarah and Carin aside as they no longer felt quite right for him. This woman had the face of a child but her presence indicated otherwise. He experienced an immediate love, and nothing seemed foolhardy or fatuous about it. His longing to join her was intense.

“You look so tired.” She said. “What’s your name?”

“Carlton. Corporal Carlton Gemmer,” he managed, suddenly wheezing.

“The third?” She laughed.

“Yes. How could you know?”

“Come to me, Carton. Everything will be fine. You have nothing to fear, ever again.”

He strained, then realized he could not move. A sudden tear ran down his cheek and, in shame, he tried to bury his face on the limb. “I don't believe I can...”

“Look at me,” she said. Suddenly the ground which had seemed seven or eight feet away now was only three or four. She extended her hand. “Come to me, Carlton.”

“I don't think...” he murmured.

“Take my hand Carlton, you must.” she said.

“I ...” He stretched his hand as far as he could and felt, suddenly, on some sort of an edge.

There came just a brief point in time when Gemmer had no clue. Then, ever so lightly, she caressed his hand. Her touch transcended his comprehension, giving the feeling of silken snow, yet the sensation seemed greatly more pronounced than Gemmer had imagined, bringing joy and wonder both sensual and ethereal. There seemed a strength about her, about her fingers, that had no limit, and though the feeling of his hand in hers brought him great peace, he couldn't help but attempt to assign a correlation to such power. Maybe, he speculated one hundred thousand men or ten thousand horses. He squeezed back, only slightly, still with as much strength as he could muster. Then, ever so quietly they departed.

Two figures covered with dust converged at the tree's base. One reached up and yanked the lifeless body by the wrist, and in a second Gemmer crumpled at the boots of the soldier. “Well you can tell McCord to save his rope. We got him.”

“Yeah.” The other muttered sadly, eyeing the bullet holes and the badly misshapen body. “What a horrible way to go.”