

Harper's Donelson Excerpt

Harper set his hat on the snow next to him and crouched lower, closer to the holly bush, until the points of its leaves pricked at his face. He watched the road through its branches while he breathed into his overcoat so condensation would not expose his position. While he watched, he slowed his breathing though his heart still beat furiously.

The horses in the column carried a wide variety of saddles and tack, ranging from full bridles to simple ropes tied around the horse's muzzle or head. The riders allowed the horses to walk in the cold night but they covered ground swiftly. Some horses dripped water from their shaggy winter coats. Some carried two riders. A number of the ghostly riders rode mules. Harper could smell the wet, rangy animals.

He could not identify the riders' uniforms with certainty. Like the tack on their horses, they wore a mix of military and civilian coats, cloaks, or slickers, some of it from the Federal army. The riders carried carbines, shotguns, rifles, muskets, or pistols in holsters attached to their saddles. A few carried swords or sabers. Taken all together, these signs told Harper this was a sizable force of Rebel cavalry.

The riders moved along in near-total silence. They would have appeared to be a column of specters in the moonlight, except for the occasional jangle from a bridle or a squish from a horse's hoof in the mud. One rider wore the gold-braided "swallow's nest" on his sleeve, the mark of a Confederate officer. Harper had his confirmation. These were Confederate cavalry moving south—out of the fortress, into the rear of the Federal lines. Harper allowed himself a brief moment of satisfaction at being right. Now, he needed to bring the information back to the battalion.

Pistol still in his right hand and his hat in the left, Harper inched back from the holly bush, watching to remain in the shadow of the oak tree beside it. Staying low to the ground, he edged around until the tree blocked the view from the road. He searched for the next bit of cover, saw a nearby tree which suited him, and crawled to it, using understory bushes for cover. Soft snow and mud oozed through the knees of his trousers.

He enjoyed this hide-and-seek. Like an Indian brave using a *coup*-stick, he touched the enemy by observing them and now would escape unscathed.

After ten yards or so, he came to a crouch while trying to determine if he was visible from the road. Too close. He crawled farther along the understory, deeper into the wood. If they saw him from the road, perhaps they would think they saw an animal. When he could not see the road anymore, Harper felt safe to stand in the shadow of the next tree. He looked around for any sign of a Rebel flank guard but saw nothing, so he walked to the next tree, using the slow caution he learned as a marshal.

Now, the night air carried the odor of unwashed humans. He turned to look deeper in the woods, his pistol ready. He sensed, more than saw, multiple dark shapes moving at him before stars exploded in his eyes. The blow to the back of his head drove him to the ground. Two bodies fell on top of him, pinning him in the snow. He jerked the trigger of his pistol, trying to send a warning shot. It fired into the ground, sending up a mound of muddy snow which covered the muzzle flash and smothered the discharge to a muffled *thump*. Another man yanked the weapon from his hand, leaving him helpless as the wetness of the snow began to seep into his overcoat.

“Lookee heah, boys. We got us a Yankee off-i-sah.”

The pain was gone. Her lower body did not burn. Her nausea was gone. Katie watched down through the bed’s canopy while Major Evilface strangled an inert red-headed girl on the bed. The spot of light hovered above her where her mother stood. Katie-in-the-Air tried to move into the warmth and safety of the light, but Katie-on-the-Bed grasped her ankle in both hands with desperate strength. Katie-in-the-Air could not escape. She was stuck between the bed and the light. She looked to her mother, hoping for help. Her mother whispered something that she couldn’t understand. Katie-in-the-Air stretched, trying to come closer. At last, she could hear her mother’s words.

“Go back.”

Magnusson’s stomach burned. It churned and twisted inside his gut. It growled at him. The Rebels hadn’t given them any of the food from what the local people offered. He hadn’t eaten since...when? Saturday morning, before the battle. What day was it now? The Rebs captured them on Saturday night before supper. They spent that night and the next sleeping in the saddle. Tonight was the third night, so that made it Tuesday night. Three days, nine meals missed — eleven, if he counted the missed meals from the day of the battle.

He had no idea how long could a man go without food. Three days? Four days? Bailey and Cooke might last longer, because they were smaller, but how long could men as big as him or Davis last?

They had to get away. Harper was right about that. The Rebel captain looked like a right mean bastard. He'd already said he would've killed them, except he had orders. Maybe now he wanted to starve them to death? No chance of escaping from the jailhouse tonight. Walls were made from cement, and it looked like there was a second cement wall around the two cells. No tools, either; only a single bucket for all four of soldiers to do their business. No wonder this jailhouse smelled so bad.

Would Harper be any use if we tried to escape?

If Harper hadn't taken the guard's musket, they might still be in the corn crib next to the farmer's field and close to the woods. It would've been easier to break down the corn crib than to get out of this jail. Harper didn't seem very interested when they talked on the first day.

Might have to leave him behind. It'd serve him right, after wanting to leave poor Billy Monroe behind.

Magnusson stood up from the cot. He spread the only other blanket, the one which his men had offered to him, over the three sleepers on the floor. He leaned his elbows on a horizontal stiffener for the cell bars and looked through the door into the front room of the jail. The two guards sat taking turns sleeping at the desk. Past them, he could see the town of Kingston through the large windows at the front of the building. Even now, they might escape; no one was moving in the town at this time of night. The Rebs had only two guards and one of them was asleep; if they could only get out of this cell.

Magnusson shook at the bars but they remained indifferent to his strength. He turned to look at the moon through a small window at the back of the cell. Was his mother looking at the same moon? His sisters? What did the army tell them about him disappearing? Did they even know? Tears filled his eyes.

Damn Harper. I joined the army to fight, not to get locked up.