

## Chapter Eleven

We made a bare beginning that first afternoon. The doctor watered the boys, and said that the measles cases could handle fried chicken. They were easy to locate because of the scabs.

I'll say this for Delphine. Once she turned back her sleeves, she went to work. She'd never worked that hard before, and I can witness that she never worked that hard again. But when she set her mind to something, or lapsed into French, you just as well get out of her road.

She left Noah to me, and I wondered if it was modesty. I had to get him out of the underwear he had on. That suit

of underwear could just about stand up by itself. Delphine gave Noah a wide berth and ministered to the others.

When we had to leave, I turned away to give her a moment with him, if she wanted it. He wasn't clean enough to kiss, not to mention the witnesses. But she didn't tarry, so I couldn't tell if she loved my brother or not. She drew down her veils, and we slogged out of the tent. I'd have thrown my boots away if I'd had another pair.

On our way back to the summer kitchen, I wouldn't have minded riding up beside Dr. Hutchings, for the pleasure of his company. But I made sure Delphine rode up there by him instead. He needed a little starch in his spine, and she was the one to put it there. Sure enough, she lectured him at length about the passes we'd need every day now. There was a nip in the evening air, so she spoke out about blankets for the boys. We didn't have quilts enough for all.

When the doctor said he lacked the authority to "requisition" blankets, Delphine told him to find the authority double quick and she didn't want to have to mention it again. She'd been shook by what she'd seen of an army hospital, and instead of calling for her smelling salts, she got her dander up.

I was just behind them in the trap, taking in every word. Seemed to me that when it came time to marry, Dr. Hutchings would need a wife with a lighter touch than Delphine's. He looked pretty well whipsawed when he lifted us down at the back of Mrs. Hanrahan's place.

---

We lived in her summer kitchen throughout our time in Cairo. The widow Hanrahan wanted seven dollars a week from us, and she wanted it up front. She sent her handyman down to collect our rent that first evening. Seven dollars! There were houses all over Grand Tower you could buy outright for seven dollars, and they'd throw in the fencing and dig you a well. But then, Mrs. Hanrahan was a rich woman, and the rich didn't get that way by giving you a bargain.

As we kept being told, we were lucky to have a roof over us. I for one had never lived in such luxury, as the summer kitchen had all the city conveniences. The pump was just to one side of the porch, and the privy just to the rear. The big iron stove inside heated water for our laundry and washing ourselves. It took the chill off the evenings, and I was to fry up a deal of chicken through many a night, once we got Dr. Hutchings to requisition the chickens and the stovewood.

The beds were draped with mosquito bars, and were comfortable enough if you were as tired every night as we were. And beneath them, a chamber pot apiece—china ones.

I was more dead than alive when we got back that first night. But Delphine had to unpack all her dresses, shake them out, and hang them around the room. She had brought her gold hand mirror with the violets on the back. And the portrait of her papa in its gilt frame, the yellow-haired

Monsieur Jules Duval. She hung him above her cot, for she went nowhere without him.

Mrs. Hanrahan didn't see fit to pay us a call in our early days there. She was a busy woman, according to Dr. Hutchings. Rich Cairo people in big houses took in sick officers to nurse them. So in addition to Dr. Hutchings, she had three or four ailing officers in her spare rooms. One of them was from U. S. Grant's personal staff. These invalids lolled in starched sheets, seen to by servants, while the regular soldiers slept on the cold ground in their filth. But then if there was justice in this world, you wouldn't look for it in Cairo.

And if you ask me, some of them officers were none too poorly. They sat out on the gallery of an evening, smoking their El Sol seegars and drinking from small silver cups, and I doubt if it was medicine.

Our days at Camp Defiance overlap in my mind. But each day Noah was stronger—tottering, then helping out, then growing restless. We wanted to get them all on their feet, at least well enough to carry their own slops and feed themselves.

We only lost one, a boy from up around Belleville. And he was too far gone when we got there. He starved to death because he couldn't keep anything down. Delphine spoiled two of her dresses, trying to feed him. You wouldn't have known her. When he died in her arms, she closed his eyes, folded his hands on his poor shrunken chest, and looked

away with her mouth pulled into a straight line. I can't tell you more about it. I can't bear to bring it back.

Seeing her lovely face floating over them may have pulled several through, but you couldn't call her an angel of mercy. When some of the boys lacked the spirit to eat or stir themselves, she was apt to say, "You will need all your strength when you come against the Confederates! They are a real army! They rarely sicken and never retreat!" So I suppose her greatest achievement was that she wasn't shot as a traitor.

As they improved, they wanted to know our names, especially hers. But I was popular too because I was Noah Pruitt's sister. His Company C was made up mostly of Jackson County boys, and they told us of home, of sisters and sweethearts, and the tears flowed.

We got our boys well enough and fed to where they could shovel out the tent down to dry ground. That was after we found out where the army hid its shovels. We made a bonfire of the straw they'd slept on, once we found fresh straw. I boiled their long-handled underwear over an open fire, and that underwear teemed and swarmed with living things that glistened and crawled. I itch to think of it now.

No able-bodied loafer outside our tent was safe from us. We had jobs for each and all, sending them for kindling and straw and whatever they could find. We put them to work, and anybody not skinning could hold a leg, as the saying went.

We got some loafer to find us a bunch of them big nail

kegs. You could saw them in two and caulk them. Then the boys could take baths in them. Of course they wouldn't strip nekkid until the sunset gun had seen Delphine and me off the post.

We got our boys clean and stretched out on fresh, sweet straw. We dosed them with our cures and cooked their rations for them. We made a believer out of Dr. Hutchings, and no army doctor come around to put a stop to us. We sang some too because the boys liked it.

Delphine could offer up a rendition of "My Old Kentucky Home," flavored in her French, that brought a lump to many a Yankee throat, including mine. And we sang a song the whole country was singing that fall of 1861, though I thought it must have been written expressly for me.

*Brother, tell me of the battle,  
How the soldiers fought and fell,  
Tell me of the weary marches,  
She who loves will listen well.*

*Brother, draw thee close beside me,  
Lay your head upon my breast  
While you're telling of the battle,  
Let your fevered forehead rest.*

We slept fast and deep through the brief nights, and hardly had the time to look up from our days, or to notice that we weren't girls anymore.

All around us the camp girded for war on the river. Black Jack Logan, who commanded the Thirty-first, spoke of hewing their way to the Gulf with their swords. Colonel White come to our tent to see who was fit enough to train, and took Noah away.

Back he hobbled in a pair of stiff new boots, carrying an ancient Belgian musket he said hadn't been fired since Napoleon's day. The sabers rattled around us.

The Confederate general, Leonidas Polk, held the Mississippi not twenty miles south of Cairo. His rebs were dug in on both sides of the river, at Columbus, Kentucky, and at the steamboat landing of Belmont, Missouri. U. S. Grant was expected to move downriver and "make a demonstration" against the reb positions any minute now.

Then one day they issued Noah his full uniform. It was so shoddy that Delphine said it would melt in the first rain. And it was so big on him he looked like a little ear of corn in too many husks. But he was ready to fight now, and I braced myself for the attack.

It come quicker than I thought, quicker than a striking snake when you least looked for it. And that attack come not at the camp nor on the river. It come to the summer kitchen.