

Charlestown

Winston Churchill

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DOWN and down we went, crossing great rivers by ford and ferry, until the hills flattened themselves and the country became a long stretch of level, broken by the forests only; and I saw many things I had not thought were on the earth. Once in a while I caught glimpses of great red houses, with stately pillars, among the trees. They put me in mind of the palaces in Bunyan, their windows all golden in the morning sun; and as we jogged ahead, I pondered on the delights within them. I saw gangs of negroes plodding to work along the road, an overseer riding behind them with his gun on his back; and there were whole cotton fields in these domains blazing in primrose flower, — a new plant here, so my father said. He was willing to talk on such subjects. But on others, and especially our errand to Charlestown, he would say nothing. And I knew better than to press him.

One day, as we were crossing a dike between rice swamps spread with delicate green, I saw the white tops of wagons flashing in the sun at the far end of it. We caught up with them, the wagoners cracking their whips and swearing at the straining horses. And lo! in front of the wagons was an army, — at least my boyish mind magnified it to such. Men clad in homespun, perspiring and spattered with mud, were straggling along the road by fours, laughing and joking together. The officers rode, and many of these had blue coats and buff waistcoats, — some the worse for wear. My father was pushing the white mare into the ditch to ride by, when one hailed him.

"Hullo, my man," said he, "are you a friend to Congress?"

"I'm off to Charlestown to leave the lad," said my father, "and then to fight the Cherokees."

"Good," said the other. And then, "Where are you from?"

"Upper Yadkin," answered my father. "And you?"

The officer, who was a young man, looked surprised. But then he laughed pleasantly.

"We're North Carolina troops, going to join Lee in Charlestown," said he. "The British are sending a fleet and regiments against it."

"Oh, aye," said my father, and would have passed on. But he was made to go before the Colonel, who plied him with many questions. Then he gave us a paper and dismissed us.

We pursued our journey through the heat that shimmered up from the road, pausing now and again in the shade of a wayside tree. At times I thought I could bear the sun no longer. But towards four o'clock of that day a great bank of yellow cloud rolled up, darkening the earth save for a queer saffron light that stained everything, and made our very faces yellow. And then a wind burst out of the east with a high mournful note, as from a great flute afar, filling the air with leaves and branches of trees. But it bore, too, a savor that was new to me, — a salt savor, deep and fresh, that I drew down into my lungs. And I knew that we were near the ocean. Then came the rain, in great billows, as though the ocean itself were upon us.

The next day we crossed a ferry on the Ashley River, and rode down the sand of Charlestown neck. And my most vivid remembrance is of the great trunks towering half a hundred feet in the air, with a tassel of leaves at the top, which my father said were palmettos. Something lay heavy on his mind. For I had grown to know his moods by a sort of silent understanding. And when the roofs and spires of the town shone over the foliage in the afternoon sun, I felt him give a sigh.

And how shall I describe the splendor of that city? The sandy streets, and the gardens of flower and shade, heavy with the plant odors; and the great houses with their galleries and porticos set in the midst of the gardens, that I remember staring at wistfully. But before long we came to a barricade fixed across the street, and then to another. And presently, in an open space near a large building, was a company of soldiers at drill.

It did not strike me as strange then that my father asked his way of no man, but went to a little ordinary in a humbler part of the town. After a modest meal in a corner of the public room, we went out for a stroll. Then, from the wharves, I saw the bay dotted with islands, their white sand sparkling in the evening light, and fringed with

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strange trees, and beyond, of a deepening blue, the ocean. And nearer, — greatest of all delights to me, — riding on the swell was a fleet of ships. My father gazed at them long and silently, his palm over his eyes.

"Men-o'-war from the old country, lad," he said after a while. "They're a brave sight."

"And why are they here?" I asked.

"They've come to fight," said he, "and take the town again for the King."

It was twilight when we turned to go, and then I saw that many of the warehouses along the wharves were heaps of ruins. My father said this was that the town might be the better defended.

We bent our way towards one of the sandy streets where the great houses were. And to my surprise we turned in at a gate, and up a path leading to the high steps of one of these. Under the high portico the door was open, but the house within was dark. My father paused, and the hand he held to mine trembled. Then he stepped across the threshold, and raising the big polished knocker that hung on the panel, let it drop.