

John Temple's House

Winston Churchill

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THEY were lonely days after that for a boy used to activity, and only the damp garden paths and lawns to run on. The creek at the back of the garden was stagnant and marshy when the water fell, and overhung by leafy boughs. On each side of the garden was a high brick wall. And though I was often tempted to climb it, I felt that disobedience was disloyalty to my father. Then there was the great house, dark and lonely in its magnificence, over which I roamed until I knew every corner of it.

I was most interested of all in the pictures of men and women in quaint, old-time costumes, and I used during the great heat of the day to sit in the drawing-room and study these, and wonder who they were and when they lived. Another amusement I had was to climb into the deep windows and peer through the blinds across the front garden into the street. Sometimes men stopped and talked loudly there, and again a rattle of drums would send me running to see the soldiers. I recall that I had a poor enough notion of what the fighting was all about. And no wonder. But I remember chiefly my insatiable longing to escape from this prison, as the great house soon became for me. And I yearned with a yearning I cannot express for our cabin in the hills and the old life there.

I caught glimpses of the master on occasions only, and then I avoided him; for I knew he had no wish to see me. Sometimes he would be seated in the gallery, tapping his foot on the floor, and sometimes pacing the garden walks with his hands opening and shutting. And one night I awoke with a start, and lay for a while listening until I heard something like a splash, and the scraping of the bottom-boards of a boat. Irresistibly I jumped out of bed, and running to the gallery rail I saw two dark figures moving among the leaves below.

I lay long awake, until presently the dawn broke, and I arose and dressed and began to wander about the house. No Breed was sweeping the gallery, nor was there any sign of the master. The house was as still as a tomb, and the echoes of my footsteps rolled through the halls and chambers. At last, prompted by curiosity and fear, I sought the kitchen, where I had often sat with 25 Breed as he cooked the master's dinner. This was at the bottom and end of the house. The great fire there was cold, and the pots and pans hung neatly on their hooks, untouched that day. I was running through the wet garden, glad to be out in the light, when a sound stopped me.

It was a dull roar from the direction of the bay. Almost instantly came another, and another, and then several broke together. And I knew that the battle had begun. Forgetting for the moment my loneliness, I ran into the house and up the stairs two at a time, and up the ladder into the cupola, where I flung open the casement and leaned out.

There was the battle indeed, a sight so vivid to me that I can call it again before me after all these years when I will. The toy men—o'—war, with sails set, ranged in front of the fort. They looked at my distance to be pressed where I flung open the casement and leaned out.

There was the battle indeed, — a sight so vivid to me that I can call it again before me after all these years when I will. The toy men—o'—war, with sails set, ranged in front of the fort. They looked at my distance to be pressed against it. White puffs, like cotton balls, would dart one after another from a ship's side, melt into a cloud, float over her spars, and hide her from my view. And then presently the roar would reach me, and answering puffs along the line of the fort. And I could see the mortar shells go up and up, leaving a scorched trail behind, curve in a great circle, and fall upon the little garrison.

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As the sun got up in the heavens and the wind fell, the cupola became a bake-oven. But I scarcely felt the heat. My whole soul was out in the bay, pent up with the men in the fort. How long could they hold out? Why were they not all killed by the shot that fell like hail among them? Yet puff after puff sprang from their guns, and the sound of it was like a storm coming nearer in the heat. But at noon it seemed to me as though some of the ships were sailing. It was true. Slowly they drew away from the others, and presently I thought they had stopped again. Surely two of them were stuck together, then three were fast on a shoal. Boats, like black bugs in the water, came and went between them and the others. After a long time the two that were together got apart and away. But the third stayed there, immovable, helpless.

Throughout the afternoon the fight, kept on, the little black boats coming and going. I saw a mast totter and fall on one of the ships. I saw the flag shot away from the fort, and reappear again. But now the puffs came from her walls slowly and more slowly, so that my heart sank with the setting sun. And presently it grew too dark to see aught save the red flashes. Slowly, reluctantly, the noise died down until at last a great silence reigned, broken only now and again by voices in the streets below me. It was not until then that I realized that I had been all day without food — that I was alone in the dark of a great house.

I had never known fear in the woods at night. But now I trembled as I felt my way down the ladder, and groped and stumbled through the black attic for the stairs. Every noise I made seemed louder an hundred fold than the battle had been, and when I barked my shins, the pain was sharper than a knife. Below, on the big stairway, the echo of my footsteps sounded again from the empty rooms, so that I was taken with a panic and fled downward, sliding and falling, until I reached the hall. Frantically as I tried, I could not unfasten the bolts on the front door. And so, running into the drawing-room, I pried open the window, and sat me down in the embrasure to think, and to try to quiet the thumpings of my heart.

By degrees I succeeded. The still air of the night and the heavy, damp odors of the foliage helped me. And I tried to think what was right for me to do. I had promised the master not to leave the place, and that promise seemed in pledge to my father. Surely the master would come back — or Breed. They would not leave me here alone without food much longer.

From these thoughts I fell to thinking of my father on the frontier fighting the Cherokees. And so I dozed away to dream of him. 27 I remember that he was skinning Cameron, — I had often pictured it, — and Cameron yelling, when I was awakened with a shock by a great noise.

"Ho there, within!"

My first impulse was to answer. But fear kept me still.

"Batter down the door," some one shouted.

Then came a straining and splitting of wood, and with a crash the door gave way.