

The Night Of Chancellorsville, F. Scott Fitzgerald

I tell you I didn't have any notion what I was getting into or I wouldn't of gone down there. They can have their army—it seems to me they were all a bunch of yella-bellies. But my friend Nell said to me: "Nora, Philly, is as dead as Baltimore and we've got to eat this summer." She just got a letter from a girl that said they were living fine down there in "Ole Virginia." The soldiers were getting big pay-offs and figuring maybe they'd stay there all summer, at least till the Johnny Rebs gave up. They got their pay regular too, and a good clean-looking girl could ask—well, I forget now, because, after what happened to us, I guess you can't expect me to remember anything.

I've always been used to decent treatment—somehow when I meet a man, no matter how fresh he is in the beginning, he comes to respect me in the end, and I've never had things done to me like some girls—getting left in a strange town or had my purse stolen.

Well, I started to tell you how I went down to the army in "Ole Virginia." Never again! Wait'll you hear.

I was used to traveling nice—once when I was a little girl my daddy took me on the cars to Baltimore—we lived in York, Pa. And we couldn't have been more comfortable; we had pillows and the men came through with baskets of oranges and apples. You know, singing out: "Want to buy some oranges or apples—or beer?"

You know what they sell—but I never took any beer because—

Oh I know, I'll go on— You only want to talk about the war, like all you men. But if this is your idea what a war is—

Well, they stuck us all in one car and a fresh fella took our tickets, and winked and said:

"Oh you're going down to Hooker's army."

The lights were terrible in the car, smoky and full of bugs, so everything looked sort of yella. And say, that car was so old it was falling to pieces.

There must of been forty gay girls in it, a lot of them from Baltimore and Philly. Only there were three or four that weren't gay—I mean they were more, oh, you know, rich people, and sat up front. Every once an awhile an officer would pop in from the next car and ask them if they wanted anything. I was in the seat behind with Nell and we heard him whisper: "You're in terrible company, but we'll be there in a few hours. And we'll go right to headquarters, and I guarantee you some solid comfort."

I never will forget that night. None of us had any food except some girls behind us had some sausages and bread, and they gave us what they had left. There was a spigot you turned but no water came out. After about two hours—stopping every two minutes it seemed to me—a couple of lieutenants, drunk as monkeys, came in from the next car and offered Nell and me some whiskey out of a bottle. Nell took some and I pretended to, and they set on the side of our seats. One of them started to make up to Nell, but just then the officer that had spoken to the women, pretty high up I guess, a major or a general, came back again and asked:

"You all right? Anything I can do?"

One of the ladies kind of whispered to him, and he turned to the one that was talking to Nell and made him go back in the other car. After that there was only one officer with us; he wasn't really so drunk, just feeling sick.

"This certainly is a happy looking gang," he said. "It's good you can hardly see them in this light. They look as if their best friend just died."

"What if they do," Nell answered back quick. "How would you look yourself if you come all the way from Philly and then got in a buggy like this?"

"I come all the way from The Seven Days, sister," he answered. "Maybe I'd be more pretty for you if I hadn't lost an eye at Games' Mill."

Then we noticed he had lost an eye. He kept it sort of closed so we hadn't remarked it before. Pretty soon he left and said he'd try and get us some water or coffee, that was what we wanted most.

The car kept rocking and it made us both feel funny. Some of the girls was sick and some was asleep on each other's shoulders.

"Hey, where is this army?" Nell said. "Down in Mexico?"

I was kind of half asleep myself by that time and didn't answer.

The next thing I knew I was woke up by a storm, the car was stopped again, and I said, "It's raining."

"Raining!" said Nell. "That's cannons—they're having a battle."

"Oh!" I got awake. "Well, after this ride I don't care who wins."

It seemed to get louder all the time, but out the windows you couldn't see anything on account of the mist.

In about half an hour another officer came in the car—he looked pretty messy as if he'd just crawled out of bed: his coat was still unbuttoned and he kept hitching up his trousers as if he didn't have any suspenders on.

"All you ladies outside," he said. "We need this car for wounded."

"Hey!"

"We paid for our tickets, didn't we?"

"We need all the cars for the wounded and the other cars are filled up."

"Hey! We didn't come down to fight in any battle!"

"It doesn't matter what you came down for—you're in a hell of a battle."

I was scared, I can tell you. I thought maybe the Rebs would capture us and send us down to one of those prisons you hear about, where they starve you to death unless you sing Dixie all the time and kiss niggers.

"Hurry up!"

But another officer had come in who looked more nice.

"Stay where you are, ladies," he said. And then he said to the officer, "What do you want to do? leave them standing on the siding! If Sedgewick's Corps is broken, like they say, the Rebs may come up in this direction!"

Some of the girls began crying out loud.

"These are northern women after all," he said.

"These are—"

"Shut up and go back to your command! I'm detailed to this transportation job—I'm taking these girls back to Washington with us."

I thought they were going to hit each other, but they both walked off together. And we girls sat wondering what we were going to do.

What happened next I don't remember exact. The cannons were sometimes very loud and then sometimes more far away, but there was firing of shots right near us—and a girl down the car had her window smashed like a hole in the center, sort of, all smashed you know, not like when you break a glass, more like ice in cold weather, just a hole and streaks around— you know. I heard a whole bunch of horses gallop by our windows, but I still couldn't see anything.

That went on half an hour—galloping and more shots. We couldn't tell how far away but they sounded like up by the engine.

Then it got quiet—and two men came into our car—we all knew right away they were Rebels, not officers, just plain Private ones, with muskets. One had on a old brown blouse sort of thing and one had on a blue thing— all spotted—I know I could never of let that man make love to me. It had spots—it was too short—anyway, it was out of style. Oh it was disgusting. I was surprised because I thought they always wore grey. They were disgusting looking and very dirty; one had a big pot of jam smeared all over his face and the other one had a big box of crackers.

"Hi ladies."

"What you gals doin' down here?"

"Kain't you see, Steve, this is old Joe Hooker's staff."

"Reckin we ought to take em back to the General?"

They talked outlandish like that—I could hardly understand, they talked so funny.

One of the girls got historical she was so scared, and that made them kind of shy. They were just kids under those beards, and one of them tipped his hat or cap or whatever the old thing was.

"We're not fixin' to hurt you."

At that moment there was a whole bunch more shooting down by the engine and the Rebs turned and ran.

We were glad, I can tell you.

Then, about fifteen minutes later, in came one of our officers. This was another new one.

"You better duck down!" he shouted to us. "They may fire on this train. We're starting you off as soon as we unload two more ambulances."

Half of us was on the floor already. The rich women sitting ahead of Nell and me had gone up into the car ahead where the wounded were—to see if they could do anything. Nell thought she'd look in too, but she came back holding her nose. She said it smelled awful in there.

It was lucky she didn't go in, because two of the girls did from our car. People that is sick can never seem to get much consideration for other people who happen to be well. The nurses sent them right back—as if they was dirt under their feet.

After I don't know how long the train began to move. A soldier come in and poured oil out of all our lights except one, and took it into the wounded car. So now we could hardly see at all.

If the trip down was slow the trip back was slower— The wounded began making so much noise, grunting and all, that we could hear it and couldn't get a decent sleep.

We stopped everywhere.

When we got in Washington at last there was a lot of people in the station and they were all anxious about what had happened to the army, but I said You can search me. All I wanted was my little old room and my little old bed. I never been treated like that in my life.

One of the girls said she was going to write to President Lincoln about it.

And in the papers next day they never said anything about how our train got attacked, or about us girls at all! Can you beat it?

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