

NO SPOT OF GROUND

Walter Jon Williams

The dead girl came as a shock to him. He had limped into the Starker house from the firelit military camp outside, from a cacophony of wagons rattling, men driving tent pegs, provost marshals setting up the perimeter, a battalion of Ewell's Napoleon guns rolling past, their wheels lifting dust from the old farm road, dust that drifted over the camp, turning the firelight red and the scene into a pictured outpost of Hell"

And here, to his surprise, was a dead girl in the parlor. She was perhaps sixteen, with dark hair, translucent skin, and cheeks with high painted spots of phthisis red. Her slim form was dressed in white. She lay in her coffin with candles at her head and feet, and her long-faced relatives sat in a semicircle of chairs under portraits of ancestors and Jefferson Davis.

A gangly man, probably the dead girl's father, rose awkwardly to welcome the surprised stranger, who had wandered into the parlor in hopes of asking for a glass of lemonade.

The intruder straightened in surprise. He took off his soft white hat and held it over his heart. The little gold knots on the ends of the hat cord rattled on the brim like muffled mourning drums.

"I am sorry to intrude on your grief," he said.

The father halted in what he was going to say, nodded, and dropped back into his chair. His wife, a heavy woman in dark silk, reached blindly toward him, and took his hand.

The intruder stood for a long moment out of respect, his eyes fixed on the corpse, before he turned and put on his hat and limped out of the house. Once he had thought this sight the saddest of all; once he had written poems about it.

What surprised him now was that it still happened, that people still died this way.

He had forgotten, amid all this unnatural slaughter, that a natural death was possible.

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That morning he had brought his four brigades north into Richmond, marching from the Petersburg and Weldon depot south of the James break-step across the long bridge to the Virginia Central depot in the

capital. Until two days ago he'd commanded only a single brigade in the defense of Petersburg; but poor George Pickett had suffered a collapse after days of nerve-wrenching warfare in his attempt to keep the city safe from Beast Butler's Army of the James; and Pickett's senior brigadier was, perforce, promoted to command of the whole division.

The new commander was fifty-five years old, and even if he was only a division commander till Pickett came back, he was still the oldest in the army.

At school he had been an athlete. Once he swam six miles down the James River, fighting against the tide the whole way, in order to outdo Byron's swim across the Hellespont. Now he was too tired and ill to ride a horse except in an emergency, so he moved through the streets of Richmond in a two-wheel buggy driven by Sextus Pompeius, his personal darky.

He was dressed elegantly, a spotless gray uniform with the wreathed stars of a brigadier on his collar and bright gold braid on the arms, English riding boots, black doeskin gloves. His new white wide-brimmed hat, a replacement for the one shot off his head at Port Walthall Junction twenty days ago, was tilted back atop his high forehead. Even when he was young and couldn't afford anything but old and mended clothes, he had always dressed well, with the taste and style of a gentleman. Sextus had trimmed his grizzled mustache that morning, back in camp along the Petersburg and Weldon, and snipped at the long gray curls that hung over the back of his collar. A fine white-socked thoroughbred gelding, the one he was too ill to ride, followed the buggy on a lead. When he had gone south in 1861 he had come with twelve hundred dollars in gold and silver, and with that and his army pay he had managed to keep himself in modest style for the last three years.

As he rode past the neat brick houses he remembered when it was otherwise. Memories still burned in his mind: the sneers of Virginia planters' sons when they learned of his background, of his parents in the theater and stepfather in commerce; his mounting debts when his stepfather Mr. Allan had twice sent him to college, first to the University of Virginia and then to West Point, and then not given him the means to remain; the moment Allan had permitted the household slaves to insult him to his face; and those countless times he wandered the Richmond streets in black despondent reverie, when he couldn't help gazing with suspicion upon the young people he met, never knowing how many of them might be living insults to his stepmother, another of Mr. Allan's plentiful get of bastards"'

The brigadier looked up as the buggy rattled over rusting iron tracks, and there it was: Ellis & Allan, General Merchants, the new warehouse of bright red brick lying along a Virginia Central siding, its loading dock choked with barrels of army pork. The war that had so devastated the Confederate nation had been kind only to two classes: carrion crows and merchants. The prosperous Ellis & Allan was run by his stepbrothers now, he presumed, possibly in partnership with an assortment of Mr. Allan's bastards--in *that* family, who could say? The brute Allan, penny-pinching as a Jew with the morals of a nigger, might well have given part of the business to his illegitimate spawn, if for no other reason than to spite his foster son. Such was the behavior of the commercial classes that infected this city.

Richmond, he thought violently. Why in the name of heaven are we defending the place? Let the Yanks have it, and let them serve it as Rome served Carthage, burned to the foundations and the scorched plain sown with salt. There are other parts of the South better worth dying for.

Sextus Pompeius pulled the mare to a halt, and the general limped out of the buggy and leaned on his stick. The Virginia Central yards were filled with trains, the cars shabby, the engines worn. Sad as they were, they would serve to get the division to where it was going, another fifteen miles up the line to the North Anna River, and save shoe leather while doing it.

The detestable Walter Whitman, the general remembered suddenly, wrote of steam engines in his poems. Whitman surely had not been thinking of engines like these, worn and ancient, leaking steam and oil as they dragged from front to front the soldiers as worn and tattered as the engines. Not trains, but ghosts of trains, carrying a ghost division, itself raised more than once from the dead.

The lead formation, the general's old Virginia brigade, was marching up behind the buggy, their colors and band to the front. The bandsmen were playing "Bonnie Blue Flag." The general winced--brass and percussion made his taut nerves shriek, and he could really tolerate only the soft song of stringed instruments. Pain crackled through his temples.

Among the stands of brigade and regimental colors was another stand, or rather a perch, with a pair of black birds sitting quizzically atop: Hugin and Munin, named after the ravens of Wotan. The brigade called themselves the Ravens, a compliment to their commander.

The general stood on the siding and watched the brigade as it came to a halt and broke ranks. A few smiling bandsmen helped the general load his horses and buggy on a flatcar, then jumped with their instruments aboard their assigned transport. The ravens were taken from their perch and put in cages in the back of the general's carriage.

A lance of pain drove through the general's thigh as he swung himself aboard. He found himself a seat among the divisional staff. Sextus Pompeius put the general's bags in the rack over his head, then went rearward to sit in his proper place behind the car, in the open between the carriages.

A steam whistle cried like a woman in pain. The tired old train began to move.

Poe's Division, formerly Pickett's, began its journey north to fight the Yanks somewhere on the North Anna River. When, the general thought, would these young men see Richmond again?

One of the ravens croaked as it had been taught: "Nevermore!"

Men laughed. They thought it a good omen.

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General Poe stepped out of the mourning Starker house, the pale dead girl still touching his mind. When had he changed? he wondered. When had his heart stopped throbbing in sad, harmonic sympathy at the thought of dead young girls? When had he last wept?

He knew when. He knew precisely when his heart had broken for the last time, when he had ceased at last to mourn Virginia Clemm, when the last ounce of poetry had poured from him like a river of dark venous blood"

When the Ravens had gone for that cemetery, the tombstones hidden in dust and smoke.

When General Edgar A. Poe, CSA, had watched them go, that brilliant summer day, while the bands played "Bonnie Blue Flag" under the trees and the tombstones waited, like chimneys marking the factories of a billion happy worms"

Poe stood before the Starker house and watched the dark form of his fourth and last brigade, the new North Carolina outfit that had shown their mettle at Port Walthall Junction, now come rising up from the old farm road like an insubstantial battalion of mournful shades. Riding at the head came its commander, Thomas Clingman. Clingman saw Poe standing on Starker's front porch, halted his column, rode toward the house, and saluted.

"Where in hell do I put my men, General? One of your provost guards said up this way, but--"

Poe shook his head. Annoyance snapped like lightning in his mind. No one had given him any orders at all. "You're on the right of General Corse, out there." Poe waved in the general direction of Hanover Junction, the little town whose lights shone clearly just a quarter mile to the east. "You should have gone straight up the Richmond and Fredericksburg tracks from the Junction, not the Virginia Central."

Clingman's venous face reddened. "They told me wrong, then. Ain't anybody been over the ground, Edgar?"

"No one from *this* division. Ewell pulled out soon's he heard we were coming, but that was just after dark and when we came up, we had no idea what to do. There was just some staff creature with some written orders, and he galloped away before I could ask him what they meant."

No proper instruction, Poe thought. His division was part of Anderson's corps, but he hadn't heard from Anderson and didn't know where the command post was. If he was supposed to report to Lee, he didn't know where Lee was either. He was entirely in the dark.

Contempt and anger snarled in him. Poe had been ignored again. No one had thought to consult him; no one had remembered him; but if he failed, everyone would blame him. Just like the Seven Days"~.

Clingman snorted through his bushy mustache. "Confound it anyway."

Poe banged his stick into the ground in annoyance. "Turn your men around, Thomas. It's only another half mile or so. Find an empty line of entrenchments and put your people in. We'll sort everyone out come first light."

"Lord above, Edgar."

"Fitz Lee's supposed to be on your right. Don't let's have any of your people shooting at him by mistake."

Clingman spat in annoyance, then saluted and started the process of getting his brigade turned around. Poe stared after him and bit back his own anger. Orders would come. Surely his division hadn't been forgotten.

"Massa Poe?"

Poe gave a start. With all the noise of marching feet and shouted orders, he hadn't heard Sextus Pompeius creeping up toward him. He looked at his servant and grinned.

"You gave me a scare, Sextus. Strike me if you ain't invisible in the dark."

Sextus chuckled at his master's wit. "I found that cider, Massa Poe."

Poe scowled. If his soft cider hadn't got lost, he wouldn't have had to interrupt the Starkers' wake in search of lemonade. He began limping toward his headquarters tent, his cane sinking in the soft ground.

"Where'd you find it?" he demanded.

"That cider, it was packed in the green trunk, the one that came up with the divisional train."

"I instructed you to pack it in the brown trunk."

"I know that, Massa Poe. That fact must have slipped my mind, somehow."

Poe's hand clenched the ivory handle of his cane. Renewed anger poured like fire through his veins. "Worthless nigger baboon!" he snapped.

"Yes, Massa Poe," Sextus said, nodding, "I is. I *must* be, the way you keep saying I is."

Poe sighed. One really couldn't expect any more from an African. Changing his name from Sam to Sextus hadn't given the black any more brains than God had given him in the first place.

"Well, Sextus," he said. "*Fortuna favet fatuis*, you know." He laughed.

"Massa always has his jokes in Latin. He always does."

Sextus's tone was sulky. Poe laughed and tried to jolly the slave out of his mood.

"We must improve your knowledge of the classics. Your *litterae humaniores*, you understand."

The slave was annoyed. "Enough human litter around here as it is."

Poe restrained a laugh. "True enough, Sextus." He smiled indulgently. "You are excused from your lessons."

His spirits raised by the banter with his darky, Poe limped to his headquarters tent, marked by the division flags and the two ravens on their perch, and let Sextus serve him his evening meal. The ravens gobbled to each other while Poe ate sparingly, and drank two glasses of the soft cider. Poe hadn't touched spirits in fifteen years, even though whiskey was a lot easier to find in this army than water.

Not since that last sick, unholy carouse in Baltimore.

Where were his orders? he wondered. He'd just been ordered to occupy Ewell's trenches. Where was the rest of the army? Where was Lee? No one had told him anything.

After the meal, he'd send couriers to find Lee. Somebody had to know something

It was impossible they'd forgotten him.

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Eureka, he called it. His prose poem had defined the universe, explained it all, a consummate theory of matter, energy, gravity, art, mathematics, the mind of God. The universe was expanding, he wrote, had exploded from a single particle in a spray of evolving atoms that moved outward at the speed of divine thought. The universe was still expanding, the forms of its matter growing ever more complex; but the expansion would slow, reverse; matter would coalesce, return to its primordial simplicity; the Divine Soul that resided in every atom would reunite in perfect self-knowledge.

It was the duty of art, he thought, to reunite human thought with that of the Divine, particled with unparticled matter. In his poetry he had striven for an aesthetic purity of thought and sentiment, a detachment from political, moral, and temporal affairs"¹ Nothing of Earth shone in his verse, nothing contaminated by matter--he desired harmonies, essences, a striving for Platonic perfection, for the dialogue of one abstract with another. Beyond the fact that he wrote in English, nothing connected the

poems with America, the nineteenth century, its life, its movements. He disdained even standard versification--he wrote with unusual scansion, strange metrics--the harmonies of octameter catalectic, being more rarified, seemed to rise to the lofty ear of God more than could humble iambic pentameter, that endless trudge, trudge, trudge across the surface of the terrestrial globe. He wanted nothing to stand between himself and supernal beauty, nothing to prevent the connection of his own mind with that of God.

He had poured everything into *Eureka*, all his soul, his hope, his grief over Virginia, his energy. In the end there was the book, but nothing left of the man. He lectured across America, the audiences polite and appreciative, their minds perhaps touched by his own vision of the Divine--but all his own divinity had gone into the book, and in the end Earth reached up to claim him. Entire weeks were spent in delirium, reeling drunk from town to town, audience to audience, woman to woman"

Ending at last in some Baltimore street, lying across a gutter, his body a dam for a river of half-frozen October sleet.

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After the meal Poe stepped outside for a pipe of tobacco. He could see the soft glow of candlelight from the Starker parlor, and he thought of the girl in her coffin, laid out in her dress of virgin white. How much sadder it would have been had she lived, had she been compelled to grow old in this new, changing world, this sad and deformed Iron Age dedicated to steam and slaughter" better she was dead, her spirit purged of particled matter and risen to contemplation of the self-knowing eternal.

His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of a man on horseback. Poe recognized Colonel Moxley Sorrel, a handsome Georgian, still in his twenties, who was Longstreet's chief of staff. He had been promoted recently as a result of leading a flank assault in the Wilderness that had crushed an entire Union corps, though, as always, the triumph had come too late in the day for the attack to be decisive.

"General." Sorrel saluted. "I had a devil of a time finding you. Ewell had his command post at Hackett's place, over yonder." He pointed at the lights of a plantation house just north of Hanover Junction. "I reckoned you'd be there."

"I had no notion of where Ewell was. No one's told me a thing. This place seemed as likely as any." Poe looked off toward the lights of Hanover Junction. "At least there's a good view."

Sorrel frowned. He swung out of the saddle, and Sextus came to take the reins from his hand. "Staff work has gone up entirely," Sorrel said. "There's been too much chaos at the top for everything to get quite sorted out."

"Yes." Poe looked at him. "And how is General Longstreet?"

The Georgian's eyes were serious. "He will recover, praise God. But it will be many months before he can return to duty."

Poe looked up at the ravens, half expecting one of them to croak out "Nevermore." But they'd stuck their heads under their wings and gone to sleep.

He will recover, Poe thought. That's what they'd said of Stonewall; and then the crazy old Presbyterian had died suddenly.

Just like old Stonewall to do the unexpected.

The army had been hit hard the last few weeks. First Longstreet wounded in the Wilderness, then Jeb Stuart killed at Yellow Tavern, just a few days ago. They were the two best corps commanders left to Lee, in Poe's opinion. Longstreet had been replaced by Richard Anderson; but Lee had yet to appoint a new cavalry commander--both, in Poe's mind, bad decisions. Anderson was too mentally lazy to command a corps--he was barely fit to command his old division--and the cavalry needed a firm hand now, with their guiding genius gone.

"Will you come inside, Colonel?" Poe gestured toward the tent flap with his stick.

"Thank you, sir."

"Share some cider with me? That and some biscuits are all the *raffaÃ©chissements* I can manage."

"You're very kind." Sorrel looked at the uncleared table. "I've brought your orders from General Anderson."

Poe pushed aside his gold-rimmed dinner plate and moved a lantern onto the table. Sorrel pulled a folded map out of his coat and spread it on the pale blue tablecloth. Poe reached for his spectacles and put them on his nose. The map gave him, for the first time, an accurate look at his position.

This part of the Southern line stretched roughly northwest to southeast, a chord on the arc of the North Anna. The line was more or less straight, though it was cut in half by a swampy tributary of the North Anna, with steep banks on either side, and at that point Poe's entrenchments bent back a bit. The division occupied the part of the line south of the tributary. In front of him was dense hardwood forest, not very useful for maneuver or attack.

"We're going on the offensive tomorrow," Sorrel said, "thank the lord." He gave a thin smile. "Grant's got himself on the horns of a dilemma, sir, and General Lee intends to see he's gored."

Poe's temper crackled. "No one's going to get gored if division commanders don't get their instructions!" he snapped.

Sorrel gave him a wary smile. "That's why I'm here, sir."

Poe glared at him, then deliberately reined in his anger. "So you are." He took a breath. "Pardon my display."

"Staff work, as I say, sir, has been a mite precarious of late. General Lee is ill, and so is General Hill."

Poe's anxiety rose again. "Lee?" he demanded. "Ill?"

"An intestinal complaint. We would have made this attack yesterday had the general been feeling better."

Poe felt his nervousness increase. He was not a member of the Cult of Lee, but he did not trust an army without a capable hand at the top. Too many high-ranking officers were out of action or incompetent. Stuart was dead, Longstreet was wounded, Lee was sick--great heavens, he'd already had a heart attack--Ewell hadn't been the same since he lost his leg, Powell Hill was ill half the time! And the young ones, the healthy ones, were as always dying of bullets and shells.

"Your task, General," Sorrel said, "is simply to hold. Perhaps to demonstrate against the Yanks, if you feel it possible."

"How am I to know if it's possible?" He was still angry. "I don't know the ground. I don't know where the enemy is."

Sorrel cocked an eyebrow at him, said, "Ewell didn't show you anything?" But he didn't wait for an answer before beginning his exposition.

The Army of Northern Virginia, he explained, had been continually engaged with Grant's army for three weeks--first in the Wilderness, then at Spotsylvania, now on the North Anna; there hadn't been a single day without fighting. Every time one of Grant's offensives bogged down, he'd slide his whole army to his left and try again. Two days before, on May 24, Grant had gone to the offensive again, crossing the North Anna both upstream and down of Lee's position.

Grant had obviously intended to overlap Lee on both flanks and crush him between his two wings; but Lee had anticipated his enemy by drawing his army back into a V shape, with the center on the river, and entrenching heavily. When the Yanks saw the entrenchments they'd come to a stumbling halt, their offensive stopped in its tracks without more than a skirmish on either flank.

"You're facing a Hancock's Second Corps, here on our far right flank," Sorrel said. His manicured finger jabbed at the map. Hancock appeared to be entirely north of the swampy tributary. "Warren and Wright are on our left, facing Powell Hill. Burnside's Ninth Corps is in the center--he tried to get across Ox Ford

on the twenty-fourth, but General Anderson's guns overlook the ford and Old Burn called off the fight before it got properly started. Too bad--" Grinning. "Could've been another Fredericksburg."

"We can't hope for more than one Fredericksburg, alas," Poe said. "Not even from Burnside." He looked at the map. "Looks as if the Federals have broken their army into pieces for us."

"Yes, sir. We can attack either wing, and Grant can't reinforce one wing without moving his people across the North Anna twice."

General Lee had planned to take advantage of that with an offensive against half Grant's army. He intended to pull Ewell's corps off the far right, most of Anderson's out of the center, and combine them with Hill's for a strike at Warren and Wright. The attack would have been made the day before if Lee hadn't fallen ill. In the end he'd postponed the assault by one day.

The delay, Poe thought, had given the Yanks another twenty-four hours to prepare. Confederates aren't the only ones who know how to entrench.

Plans already laid, he thought. Nothing he could do about it.

Poe looked at the map. Now that Ewell and most of Anderson's people had pulled out, he was holding half the Confederate line with his single division.

"It'll probably work to the good," Sorrel said. "Your division came up to hold the right for us, and that will allow us to put more soldiers into the attack. With your division and Bushrod Johnson's, which came up a few days ago, we've managed to replace all the men we've lost in this campaign so far."

Had the Yankees? Poe wondered.

"When you hear the battle start," Sorrel said, "you might consider making a demonstration against Hancock. Keep him interested in what's happening on his front."

Poe looked up sharply. "One division," he said, "against the Yankee Second Corps? Didn't we have enough of that at Gettysburg?"

"A demonstration, General, not a battle." Politely. "General Anderson has also put under your command the two brigades that are holding the center, should you require them."

"Whose?"

"Gregg's Brigade, and Law's Alabamans."

Poe's mind worked through this. "Are Gregg and Law aware they are under my orders?"

"I presume so."

"Presume," Poe echoed. There was too much *presuming* in this war. He took off his spectacles and put them in his pocket. "Colonel Sorrel," he said, "would you do me the inestimable favor of riding to Gregg and Law tonight and telling them of this? I fear the staff work may not have caught up with General Anderson's good intent."

Sorrel paused, then gave a resigned shrug. "Very well, General. If you desire it."

"Thank you, Colonel." His small triumph made Poe genial. "I believe I have been remiss. I remember promising you cider."

"Yes. A glass would be delightful, thank you."

They sat at the folding table, and Poe called for Sextus to serve. He opened a tin box and offered it to Sorrel. "I have some of Dr. Graham's dietary biscuits, if you desire."

"Thank you, sir. If I may put some in my pockets for later"!"?"

"Make free of them, sir."

Sorrel, possessing by now an old soldier's reflexes, loaded his pockets with biscuits and then took a hearty swallow of the cider. Sextus refilled his glass.

"General Pickett's campaign south of the James," Sorrel said, "has been much appreciated here."

"The form of appreciation preferable to us would have been reinforcements from General Lee."

"We were, ah, tangled up with Grant at the time, sir."

"Still, for several days we had two brigades against two entire corps. Two *corps*, sir!" Indignation flared in Poe. His fists knotted in his lap.

"The glory of your victory was all the greater." The Georgian's tone was cautious, his eyes alert.

Condescending, Poe thought. A black anger settled on him like a shroud. These southern gentlemen were always condescending. Poe knew what Sorrel was thinking. It's just Poe, hysterical Code-breaker Poe. *Poe* always thinks he's fighting the whole Yankee army by himself. *Poe* is always sending off messages screaming for help and telling other people what to do. What? Another message from Poe? It's

just the fellow's nerves again. Ignore it.

"I've always been proved right!" Poe snapped. "I was *right* during the Seven Days when I said Porter was dug in behind Boatswain Swamp! I was *right* about the Yankee signal codes, I was right about the charge at Gettysburg, and I was right again when I said Butler had come ashore at Bermuda Hundred with two whole Yankee corps! If my superiors would have given me a little credit--"

"Your advice has always been appreciated," said Sorrel.

"My God!" Poe said. "Poor General Pickett is broken down because of this! It may be months before his nerves recover! Pickett--if he could stand what Lee did to the Division at Gettysburg, one might think he could stand anything! But *this--this* broke him! Great heavens, if Butler had committed more than a fraction of the forces available to him, he would have lost Petersburg, and with Petersburg, Richmond!"

"I do not think this is the place--" Sorrel began.

Too late. Poe's mind filled with the memory of the Yankees coming at the Ravens at Port Walthall Junction, four brigades against Pickett's two, and those four only the advance of Butler's entire army. He remembered the horror of it, the regimental flags of the Federals breaking out of the cover of the trees, brass and bayonets shining in the wind; shellfire bursting like obscene overripe blossoms; the whistling noise made by the tumbling bullet that had carried away Poe's hat; the sight of George Pickett with his face streaked by powder smoke, his long hair wild in the wind, as he realized his flanks were caving in and he was facing another military disaster";

"Screaming for reinforcements!" Poe shouted. "We were *screaming* for reinforcements! And what does Richmond send? *Harvey Hill*! Hah! Major General interfering Harvey Hill!"

Sorrel looked at him stonily. The old fight between Poe and Hill was ancient history.

"Hill is a madman, sir!" Poe knew he was talking too much, gushing like a chain pump, but he couldn't stop himself. Let at least one person know what he thought. "He is a fighter, I will grant him that, but he is quarrelsome, tempestuous--impossible to reason with. He is not a rational man, Colonel. He hasn't an ounce of rationality or system in him. No more brains than a nigger."

Sorrel finished his cider, and raised a hand to let Sextus know not to pour him more. "We may thank God that the movement was made by Butler," he said.

Poe looked at him. "The Yankees will not forever give their armies to men like Butler," he said.

Sorrel gazed resentfully at the lantern for a long moment. "Grant is no Butler, that is certain. But we will do a Chancellorsville on him nonetheless."

"We may hope so," said Poe. He had no confidence in this offensive. Lee no longer had the subordinates to carry things out properly, could no longer do anything in the attack but throw his men headlong at Federal entrenchments.

The young colonel rose. "Thank you for the cider, General. I will visit Generals Law and Gregg on my return journey."

Poe rose with him, memory still surging through his mind like the endless waves of Yankee regiments at Port Walthall Junction. He knew he had not made a good impression, that he had confirmed in Sorrel's mind, and through him the minds of the corps staff, the stories of his instability, his hysteria, and his egotism.

Harvey Hill, he thought, seething. Send Harvey Hill to tell *me* what to do.

Sextus brought Colonel Sorrel his horse and helped the young man mount. "Thank you for speaking to Gregg and Law," Poe said.

"Use their forces as you see fit," Sorrel said.

"This division has had hard fighting," Poe said. "I will be sparing in my use of them."

"We've all had hard fighting, sir," Sorrel said. A gentle reproach. "But with God's help we will save Richmond again this next day."

Poe gave a swift, reflexive glance to the ravens, anticipating another "Nevermore," but saw they were still asleep. No more omens tonight.

Sorrel saluted, Poe returned it, and the Georgian trotted off into the night.

Poe looked out at the Yankee campfires burning low off on his left. How many times, he wondered, would this army have to save Richmond? McDowell had come for Richmond, and McClellan, and Pope, Burnside, Hooker, Meade, and Butler. Now there was Grant, who had seized hold of Lee's army in the Wilderness and declined to let it go, even though he'd probably lost more men than the others put together.

Maybe Lee would turn tomorrow into another Chancellorsville.

But even if he did, Poe knew, one day this or another Yank general would come, and Richmond would not be saved. Even Lee could only fight history for so long.

The politicians were counting on the Northern elections to save them, but Poe had no more confidence

in George McClellan as a candidate than as a general--Lincoln could outmaneuver him at the polls as handily as Lee had in the Seven Days' Battle.

No, the South was doomed, its Cause lost. That was obvious to anyone with any ratiocinative faculty whatever. But there was nothing else to do but fight on, and hope the North kept giving armies to the likes of Ben Butler.

"Massa Poe?" Sextus was at his elbow. "Will we be sleeping outside tonight?"

Poe cocked an eye at the sky. There was a heavy dew on the ground, but the few clouds in sight were high and moving fast. There should be no rain.

"Yes," Poe said. "Set up the beds."

"Whatever you say, massa."

Sextus was used to it, poor fellow. Poe hadn't been able to sleep alone since Virginia died, and he had always disliked confined spaces. Sleeping out of doors, under a heavy buffalo cloak, with Sextus wrapped in another robe nearby, was the ideal solution. Poe loved to look up at the sweep of brilliant stars, each an eye of God, to feel his soul rising beyond the atmosphere, through the luminiferous ether to merge with the Eternal, the Sublime"

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How he came to the gutter in Baltimore he would never know. He had apparently given a lecture there a few nights before, but he couldn't remember it. Perhaps he would have died there, had not a passing widow recognized him, drunk and incapable, and brought him into her carriage. She had talked with him after his lecture, she told him, and found his conversation brilliant. He couldn't remember her either.

Her name was Mrs. Forster. Her late husband had been addicted to alcohol, and she had cured him; she would apply her cure as well to Mr. Poe.

Her plantation, within a half day's journey of Baltimore, was called Shepherd's Rest; she owned close to two thousand slaves and the better part of a county. She loved poetry and philosophy, read French and German, and had a passing knowledge of Latin.

She had a daughter named Evania, a green-eyed girl of fourteen. When Poe first saw her, sitting in the east parlor with the French wallpaper only a shade darker than her eyes, Evania was playing the guitar, her long fingers caressing the strings as if they were a lover's hair. Her long tresses, falling down her neck, seemed to possess the mutable spectrum of a summer sunrise.

Once before Poe, at the end of his wits and with the black hand of self-slaughter clutching at his throat,

had been rescued by a widow with a daughter. In Mrs. Forster Poe could almost see Mrs. Clemm--but Mrs. Clemm idealized, perfected, somehow rarified, her poverty replaced by abundance, her sadness by energy, inspiration, and hope. How could he help but see Virginia in her sparkling daughter? How could he help but give her his love, his troth, his ring--He was not being faithless to Virginia, he thought; his second marriage was a fulfillment of the first. Did Evania and Virginia not possess, through some miracle of transubstantiation, the same soul, the same perfection of spirit? Were they not earthly shades of the same pure, angelic lady, differing only in color, one dark, one bright?

Were they not blessings bestowed by Providence, a just compensation for poor Poe, who had been driven nearly mad by soaring, like Icarus, too near the divine spark?

* * * *

For a moment, after Poe opened his eyes, he saw her floating above him--a woman, dark-tressed, pale-featured, crowned with stars. He could hear her voice, though distantly; he could not make sense of her speech, hearing only a murmur of long vowel sounds"

And then she was gone, faded away, and Poe felt a knife of sorrow enter his heart. He realized he was weeping. He threw off his buffalo robe and rolled upright.

The Starker house loomed above him, black against the Milky Way. The candles' glow still softly illuminated the parlor window.

Poe bent over, touching his forehead to his knees until he could master himself. He had seen the woman often in his dreams, sometimes in waking moments. He remembered her vividly, the female form rising over the streets of Richmond, during some barely-sane moments after Virginia's death, the prelude to that last spree in Baltimore. Always he had felt comforted by her presence, confirmed in his dreams, his visions. When she appeared it was to confer a blessing.

He did not remember seeing her since his war service started. But then, his war service was not blessed.

Poe straightened, and looked at the soft candlelight in the Starker windows. He looked at the foot of his cot, and saw Sextus wrapped in blankets, asleep and oblivious to his master's movements. Sometimes Poe thought he would give half his worth for a single night of sleep as deep and dreamless as that of his body-servant.

He put his stockinged feet in the carpet slippers that waited where Sextus had put them, then rose and stepped out into the camp in his dressing gown. The slippers were wet with dew inside and out. Poe didn't care. A gentle, warm wind was flitting up from the south. With this heavy dew, Poe thought, the wind would raise a mist before dawn. Maybe it would postpone Lee's offensive.

He remembered hiking in New York with Virginia, spending days wandering down hilly lanes, spending

their nights in country inns or, when the weather was fine and Virginia's health permitted, wrapped in blankets beneath the open sky. His friends had thought his interest in nature morbid. Buried in the life of the city and the life of the mind, they could not understand how his soul was drawn skyward by the experience of the outdoors, how close he felt to the Creator when he and Virginia shared a soft bank of moist timothy and kissed and caressed one another beneath the infinite range of fiery stars"!

Poe realized he was weeping again. He looked about and saw he had wandered far from his tent, amid his soldiers' dying campfires.

Nothing like this had happened to him in years. The sight of that dead girl had brought back things he thought he'd forgotten.

He mastered himself once more and walked on. The rising southern wind stirred the gray ashes of campfires, brought little sparks winking across his path. He followed them, heading north.

Eventually he struck his entrenchments, a deep line of the kind of prepared works this army could now throw up in a few hours, complete with head log, communications trenches, firing step, and parapet. Soldiers huddled like potato sacks in the trenches, or on the grass just behind the line. An officer's mare dozed over its picket. Beyond, Poe could hear the footsteps of the sentries patrolling.

Once, just after the war had first started, Robert Lee had tried to get this army to dig trenches--and the soldiers had mocked him, called him "The King of Spades," and refused to do the work. Digging was not fit work for a white man, they insisted, and besides, only a coward would fight from entrenchments.

Now the army entrenched at every halt. Three years' killing had made them lose their stupid pride.

Poe stepped onto the firing step, and peered out beneath the head log as he tried to scan his front. Beyond the vague impression of gentle rolling hills, he could see little. Then he lifted his head as he heard the challenging scream of a stallion. The sound came from away north, well past the entrenchments.

The mare picketed behind the entrenchments raised its head at the sound. The stallion challenged again. Then another horse screamed, off to the right, and another. The mare flicked its ears and gave an answer.

The mare was in heat, Poe realized. And she was flirting with Yankee horses. None of his men could be out that far.

The wind had carried the mare's scent north, to the nose of one northern stallion. Other stallions that hadn't scented the mare nevertheless answered the first horse's challenge.

Poe's head moved left to right as one horse after another screamed into the night. Sorrel's map hadn't shown the Yankee line stretching that far, well south of the tributary, beyond Clingman's brigade to

where Fitz Lee's cavalry was supposed to be, out on his right flank.

He listened as the horses called to one another like bugles before a battle, and he thought: *The Yankees are moving, and they're moving along my front.*

Suddenly the warm south wind turned chill.

How many? he thought.

Sobbing in the mist like men in the extremes of agony, the crying horses offered no answer.

* * * *

He became a child again, living with Evania in her perfect kingdom, that winding blue river valley west of Baltimore. Never before had he known rest; but there he found it, a cease from the despairing, agonized wanderings that had driven him, like a leaf before a black autumn storm, from Richmond to Boston and every city between.

At last he knew what it was to be a gentleman. He had *thought* he had achieved that title before, through education and natural dignity and inclination--but now he knew that before he had only aspired to the name. Mr. Allan fancied himself a gentleman; but his money was tainted with trade, with commerce and usury. Now Poe understood that the highest type of gentleman was produced only through ease and leisure--not laziness, but rather the freedom from material cares that allowed a man to cultivate himself endlessly, to refine his thought and intellect through study and application of the highest forms of human aspiration.

He was not lazy. He occupied himself in many ways. He moved Mrs. Clemm to Baltimore, bought her a house, arranged for her an annuity. He added to the mansion, creating a new facade of Italian marble that reflected the colors of the westering sun; he employed the servants to move tons of earth in order to create a landscape garden of fully forty acres that featured, in the midst of a wide artificial lake, an arabesque castle, a lacy wedding-cake gift to his bride.

He had always thought landscape gardening fully an equal of poetry in its ability to invoke the sublime and reveal the face of the deity. In this he was a disciple of de Carbonnieres, Piranesi, and Shenstone: The garden was nature perfected, as it had been in the mind of God, a human attempt to restore the divine, Edenic sublimity. He crafted his effects carefully--the long, winding streams through which one approached Poe's demiparadise in swan-shaped boats, the low banks crowded with moss imported from Japan, natural-seeming outcroppings of uniquely colored and textured rock. At the end was a deep, black chasm through which the water rushed alarmingly, as if to Hades--but then the boat was swept into the dazzling wide lake, the sun sparkling on the white sand banks, the blue waters--and then, as the visitor's eyes adjusted from blackness to brightness, one perceived in the midst of a blue-green island the white castle with its lofty, eyelike windows, the symbol of purest Mind in the midst of Nature.

Nothing was suffered to spoil the effects that had taken a full six years to create. Not a stray leaf, not a twig, not a cattail was permitted to sully the ground or taint the water--fully thirty Africans were constantly employed to make certain that Poe's domain was swept clean.

It cost money--but money Poe had, and if not there was always more to be obtained at three and one half percent. His days of penny-counting were over, and he spent with a lavish hand.

He fulfilled another ambition: he started a literary magazine, the *Southern Gentleman*, with its offices in Baltimore. For it he wrote essays, criticism, occasional stories, once or twice a poem.

Only once or twice.

Somehow, he discovered, the poetry had fled his soul.

And he began to feel, to his growing horror, that his loss of poetry was nothing but a just punishment. True poetry, he knew, could not reside in the breast of a man as faithless as he.

* * * *

The Starker house on its small eminence stood hard-edged and black against a background of shifting mist, like an isolated tor rising above the clouds. It was a little after four. The sun had not yet risen, but already the eastern horizon was beginning to turn gray. The ravens, coming awake, crackled and muttered to one another as they shook dew from their feathers.

Poe leaned on his stick before a half-circle of his brigadiers and their mingled staffs. Hugin and Munin sat on their perch behind him. Poe was in his uniform of somber gray, a new paper collar, a black cravat, the black doeskin gloves. Over his shoulders he wore a red-lined black cloak with a high collar, an old gift from Jeb Stuart who had said it made him look like a proper raven.

Most of his life Poe had dressed all in black. The uniform was a concession to his new profession, but for sake of consistency with his earlier mode of dress he had chosen the darkest possible gray fabric, so dark it was almost blue.

There was the sound of galloping; riders rose out of the mist. Poe recognized the man in the lead; Fitzhugh Lee, Robert Lee's nephew and the commander of the cavalry division on his right. He was a short man, about Poe's height, a bandy-legged cavalryman with a huge spade-shaped beard and bright, twinkling eyes. Poe was surprised to see him--he had asked only that Lee send him a staff officer.

He and Poe exchanged salutes. "Decided to come myself, General." He dropped from his horse. "Your messenger made it seem mighty important."

"I thank you, sir." Fitz Lee, Poe realized, outranked him. He could take command here if he so desired.

He would not *dare*, Poe thought. A cold anger burned through him for a moment before he recollected that Fitz Lee had as yet done nothing to make him angry.

Still, Poe was uneasy. He could be superseded so easily.

"I think the Yankees are moving across my front," he said. He straightened his stiff leg, felt a twinge of pain. "I think Grant is moving to his left again."

The cavalryman considered this. "If he wants Richmond," he said, "he'll go to his right. The distance is shorter."

"I would like to submit, *apropos*, that Grant may not want Richmond so much as to defeat us in the field."

Fitz Lee puzzled his way through this. "He's been fighting us nonstop, that's the truth. Hasn't broken off so much as a day."

"Nevermore," said one of the ravens. Fitz Lee looked startled. Poe's men, used to it, shared grins. Poe's train of thought continued uninterrupted.

"Moreover, if Grant takes Hanover Junction, he will be astride both the Virginia Central and the Richmond and Fredericksburg. That will cut us off from the capital and our sources of supply. We'll have to either attack him there or fall back on Richmond."

"Mebbe that's so."

"All that, of course, is speculation--a mere exercise of the intuition, if you like. Nevertheless, whatever his intent, it is still an *observed* fact that Grant is moving across my front. *Quod erat demonstrandum*."

Lee's eyes twinkled. "*Quod libet*, I think, rather." Not quite convinced.

"I have heard their horses. They are well south of where they are supposed to be."

Lee smiled through his big beard and dug a heel into the turf. "If he's moving past you, he'll run into my two brigades. I'm planted right in his path."

There was a saying in the army, *Who ever saw a dead cavalryman?* Poe thought of it as he looked at Lee. "Can you hold him?" he asked.

"Nevermore," said a raven.

Lee's smile turned to steel. "With all respect to your pets, General, I held Grant at Spotsylvania."

Gravely, Poe gave the cavalryman an elaborate, complimentary bow, and Lee returned it. Poe straightened and hobbled to face his brigade commanders.

Perhaps he had Fitz Lee convinced, perhaps not. But he knew--and the knowledge grated on his bones--that Robert Lee would not be convinced. Not with Poe's reputation for hysteria, for seeing Yankees everywhere he looked. The army commander would just assume his high-strung imagination created illusory armies behind every swirl of mist. As much as Poe hated it, he had to acknowledge this.

"General Lee has made his plans for today," he said. "He will attack to the west, where he conceives General Grant to be. He may not choose to believe any message from his other wing that the Yanks are moving."

Poe waited for a moment for a reply from the cavalryman. Fitz Lee was the commanding general's nephew; perhaps he could trade on the family connection somehow. But the bearded man remained silent.

"They are going to strike us, that is obvious," Poe said. "Grant has his back to the bend of the river, and he'll have to fight his way into the clear. But his men will have to struggle through the woods, and get across that swamp and the little creek, and they're doing it at night, with a heavy mist. They will not be in position to attack at first light. I suggest, therefore, that we attack him as soon as the mist clears, if not before. It may throw him off balance and provide the evidence we need to convince the high command that Mr. Grant has stolen a march upon us."

"Nevermore," said the ravens. "Nevermore."

Poe looked at Sextus, who was standing respectfully behind the half-circle of officers. "Feed the birds," he said. "It may keep them quiet."

"Yes, massa."

"General Poe." Fitz Lee was speaking. "There are two bridges across that creek--small, but they'll take the Yankees across. The water won't hold up the Yanks as long as you might think."

Poe looked at him. "The bridges were not burned after Hancock crossed the North Anna?"

Lee was uneasy. "General Ewell may have done it without my knowledge."

"If the bridges exist, that's all the more reason to attack as soon as we can."

"General." Clingman raised a hand. "Our brigades marched up in the dark. We ain't aligned, and we'll need to sort out our men before we can go forward."

"First light, General," said Poe. "Arrange your men, then go forward. We'll be going through forest, so give each man about two feet of front. Send out one combined company per regiment to act as skirmishers--we'll want to overwhelm their pickets and get a look at what lies in there before your main body strikes them."

Another brigadier piped up. "What do we align on, sir?"

"The rightmost brigade of the division--that's Barton's?" Heads nodded. Poe continued, gesturing into the mist with his stick, sketching out alignments. "Barton will align on the creek, and everyone will guide on him. When Barton moves forward, the others will move with him." He turned to Gregg and Law, both of whom were looking dubious. "I cannot suggest to Generals Gregg and Law how to order their forces. I have not been over the ground."

Law folded his arms. "General. You're asking us to attack a Yankee corps that's had two days to entrench."

"And not just any corps," Gregg added. "This is *Hancock*."

"We'll be outnumbered eight to one," Law said. "And we don't have any woods to approach through, the way y'all do. We'll have to cross a good quarter mile of open ground before we can reach them."

Poe looked at him blackly. Frustration keened in his heart. He took a long breath and fought down his growing rage.

Winfield Scott Hancock, he thought, known to the Yanks as Hancock the Superb. The finest of the Yankee commanders. He thought about the Ravens going up that little green slope toward the cemetery, with Hancock and his corps waiting on top, and nodded.

"Do as best as you can, gentlemen," he said. "I leave it entirely to you. I wish only that you show some activity. Drive in his pickets. Let him see some regimental flags, think he is going to be attacked."

Law and Gregg looked at one another. "Very well, sir," Law said.

Anger stabbed Poe again. They'd do nothing. He knew it; and if he ordered them into a fight they'd just appeal over his head to Anderson.

Nothing he could do about it. Keep calm.

Poe turned toward Fitz Lee. "I hope I may have your support."

The small man nodded. "I'll move some people forward." He gave a smile. "My men won't like being in the woods. They're used to clear country."

"Any additional questions?"

There were none. Poe sent his generals back to their commands and thanked Fitzhugh Lee for his cooperation.

"This may be the Wilderness all over again," Lee said. "Woods so heavy no one could see a thing. Just one big ambush with a hundred thousand men flailing around in the thickets."

"Perhaps the Yankees will not see our true numbers, and take us for a greater force," Poe said.

"We may hope, sir." Lee saluted, mounted, and spurred away.

Poe found himself staring at the black Starker house, that one softly lit eye of a window. Thinking of the dead girl inside, doomed to be buried on a battlefield.

* * * *

Virginia Poe had been beautiful, so beautiful that sometimes Poe's heart would break just to look at her. Her skin was translucent as bone china, her long hair fine and black as midnight, her violet eyes unnaturally large, like those of a bird of Faerie. Her voice was delicate, as fragile and evanescent as the tunes she plucked from her harp. Virginia's aspect was unearthly, refined, ethereal, like an angel descended from some Mussulman paradise, and as soon as Poe saw his cousin he knew he could never rest unless he had that beauty for him always.

When he married her she was not quite fourteen. When she died, after five years of advancing consumption, she was not yet twenty-five. Poe was a pauper. After Virginia's death came *Eureka*, dissipation, madness. He had thought he could not live without her, had no real intention of doing so.

But now he knew he had found Virginia again, this time in Evania. With Evania, as with Virginia, he could throw off his melancholy and become playful, gentle, joyful. With her he could sit in the parlor with its French wallpaper, play duets on the guitar, and sing until he could see the glow of his happiness reflected in Evania's eyes.

But in time a shadow seemed to fall between them. When Poe looked at his young bride, he seemed to

feel an oppression on his heart, a catch in the melody of his love. Virginia had not asked for anything in life but to love her cousin. Evania was proud; she was willful; she grew in body and intellect. She developed tastes, and these tastes were not those of Poe. Virginia had been shy, otherworldly, a presence so ethereal it seemed as if the matter had been refined from her, leaving only the essence of perfected beauty and melancholy; Evania was a forthright presence, bold, a tigress in human form. She was a material presence; her delights were entirely those of Earth.

Poe found himself withdrawing before Evania's growing clarity. He moved their sleeping chamber to the topmost floor of the mansion, beneath a roof of glass skylights. The glass ceiling was swathed in heavy Oriental draperies to keep out the heat of the day; the windows were likewise covered. Persian rugs four deep covered the floor. Chinese bronzes were arranged to pour gentle incense into the room from the heads of dragons and lions.

With the draperies blocking all sources of the light, in the near-absolute, graveyard darkness, Poe found he could approach his wife. The fantastic decor, seen only by such light as slipped in under the door or through cracks in the draperies, heightened Poe's imagination to a soaring intensity. He could imagine that the hair he caressed was dark as a raven's wing; that the cheek he softly kissed was porcelain-pale; he could fancy, under the influence of the incense, that the earthy scent of Evania had been transformed to a scent far more heavenly; and he could almost perceive, as ecstasy flooded him, that the eyes that looked up into his were the large, luminous, angelic eyes of his lost love, the lady Virginia.

* * * *

Poe sat in his tent and tried to eat an omelette made of eggs scavenged from Starker chickens. Fried ham sat untouched on the plate. Around him, the reserve divisional artillery creaked and rattled as the guns were set up on the Starkers' slight eminence. The ravens gobbled and cawed.

Poe put down his fork. He was too agitated to eat.

A drink, he thought. A soothing glass of sherry. The Starkers must have some; it would be easy to obtain.

He took a gulp of boiled coffee, took his stick, and hobbled out of the tent. The sky had lightened, and the mist had receded from the Starker plantation; Poe could see parts of his own line, a flag here and there, the crowns of trees. His men were moving forward out of their trenches, forming up on the far side of the abatis beyond. Officers' shouts carried faintly to his ear. The alignment was proceeding with difficulty. The battalions had become too confused as they marched to their places in the dark.

He remembered the Ravens in the cemetery, shrouded by gray gunsmoke as they were now hidden by gray mist.

Sherry, he thought again. The thought seemed to fill his mind with a fine, clear light. He could almost feel the welcome fire burning along his veins. A drink would steady him.

A color sergeant came running up from the Ravens, saluted, and took the two birds away to march with their brigade. Limbers rattled as horses pulled them out of harm's way down the reverse slope of the hill. Artillerymen lounged by their Napoleons and Whitworths, waiting for a target.

My god, Poe thought, why am I doing this? Suddenly it seemed the most pointless thing in the world. An offensive would only make things worse.

A horse trotted toward him from the Starker driveway. Poe recognized Moses, another of Anderson's aides, an eagle-nosed miniature sheeny that Longstreet had unaccountably raised to the rank of major. One of Longstreet's little lapses in taste, Poe thought; but unfortunately, as someone with pretensions to the title himself, he was honor-bound to treat the Hebrew as if his claim to the title of gentleman were genuine.

Sextus took Major Moses's horse, and Moses and Poe exchanged salutes. There weren't many men shorter than Poe, but Moses was one of them--he was almost tiny, with hands and feet smaller than a woman's. "General Anderson's compliments, sir," Moses said. "He wants to emphasize his desire for a diversionary attack."

"Look about you, Major," Poe said. "What do you see?"

Moses looked at the grayback soldiers rolling out of their entrenchments and shuffling into line, the artillerists waiting on the hilltop for a target, officers calling up and down the ranks.

"I see that General Anderson has been anticipated, sir," Moses said. "My mission has obviously been in vain."

"I would be obliged if you'd wait for a moment, Major," Poe said. "I may have a message for General Anderson by and by."

"With permission, sir, I should withdraw. The general may need me." Moses smiled. Dew dripped from his shoulder-length hair onto his blue riding cape. "Today promises to be busy, sir."

"I need you *here*, sir!" Poe snapped. "I want you to witness something."

Moses seemed startled. He recovered, a sly look entering his eyes, then he nodded. "Very well, sir."

In a motionless instant of perfect clarity, Poe understood the conspiracy of this calculating Jew. Moses would hang back, wait for confirmation of Poe's madness, Poe's error, then ride back to Anderson to try to have Poe removed from command. Moxley Sorrel might already have filled the staff tent with tales of Poe's nerves about to crack. Perhaps, Poe thought furiously, the sheeny intended to replace Poe *himself*!

Cold triumph rolled through Poe. Conspire though Moses might, Poe would be too crafty for him.

"When will the attack begin, Major?" Poe asked.

"It has already begun, sir. The mist cleared early to the west of us. The men were moving out just as I left General Anderson's headquarters."

Poe cocked his head. "I hear no guns, Major Moses."

"Perhaps there has been a delay. Perhaps--" Moses shrugged. "Perhaps the wet ground is absorbing the sound. Or there is a trick of the wind--"

"Nevertheless," Poe said, "I hear no guns."

"Yes, sir." Moses cleared his throat. "It is not unknown, sir."

"Still, Major Moses," said Poe. "I hear no guns."

Moses fell silent at this self-evident fact. Poe whirled around, his black cape flying out behind him, and stalked toward his tent. He could hear Moses's soft footsteps following behind.

Men on horseback came, reporting one brigade after another ready to move forward. Poe told them to wait here for the word to advance, then return to their commanders. Soon he had heard from every brigade but those of Gregg and Law--a messenger even came from Fitz Lee, reporting the cavalryman's readiness to move forward at Poe's signal. After ten minutes of agitated waiting, while the sky grew ever paler and the mist retreated to lurk among the trees, Poe sent an aide to inquire.

Poe gave an irritated look at his division waiting in their ranks for the signal. If the enemy had scouts out this way, they'd see the Confederates ready for the attack and warn the enemy.

Go forward with the four brigades he had? he wondered.

Yes. No.

He decided to wait till his aide came back. He looked at his watch, then cast a glance over his shoulder at Major Moses.

"I hear no guns, Major," he said.

"You are correct, sir." Moses smiled thinly. "I take it you intend to enlighten me as to the significance of this?"

Poe nodded benignly. "In time, Major."

Moses swept off his hat in an elaborate bow. "You are known as the master of suspense, sir. I take my hat off to you, sir, I positively do."

Poe smiled. The Jew was amusing. He tipped his own hat. "Thank you, Major."

Moses put on his hat. "I am an enthusiast of your work, sir. I have a first edition of the *Complete Tales*. Had I known I would encounter you, I would have had my wife send it to me and begged you to inscribe it."

"I should be glad to sign it," Poe said, surprised. The *Complete and Corrected Tales and Poems of Edgar A. Poe* had been published at his own expense six years ago and had sold precisely two hundred and forty-nine copies throughout the United States--he knew precisely, because the rest of the ten-thousand-copy edition was sitting in a lumber room back home at Shepherd's Rest.

"Before the war," Moses said, "I used to read your work aloud to my wife. The poems were particularly lovely, I thought--so delicate. And there was nothing that would bring a blush to her lovely cheek--I *particularly* appreciate that, sir." Moses grew indignant. "There are too many passages from poets that one cannot in decency read to a lady, sir. Even in Shakespeare--" Moses shook his head.

"Fortunately," said Poe, "one has Bowdler."

"I thank that gentleman from my heart," said Moses. "As I thank Tennyson, and Mr. Dickens, and Keats."

"Keats." Poe's heart warmed at the mention of the name. "One scarcely could anticipate encountering his name here, on a battlefield."

"True, sir. He is the most rarified and sublime of poets--along, I may say, with yourself, sir."

Poe was surprised. "You flatter me, Major."

"I regret only that you are not more appreciated, sir." His tiny hands gestured whitely in the air. "Some of my correspondents have informed me, however, that you are better known in Europe."

"Yes," Poe said. A dark memory touched him. "A London publisher has brought out an edition of the *Complete Tales*. Unauthorized, of course. It has achieved some success, but I never received so much as a farthing from it."

"I am surprised that such a thing can happen, sir."

Poe gave a bitter laugh. "It isn't the money--it is the brazen provocation of it that offended me. I hired a London solicitor and had the publisher prosecuted."

"I hope he was thrown in jail, sir."

Poe gave a smile. "Not quite. But there will be no more editions of my work in London, one hopes."

"I trust there won't be."

"Or in France, either. I was being translated there by some overheated poet named Charles Baudelaire--no money from that source, either, by the way--and the fellow had the effrontery to write me that many of my subjects, indeed entire texts, were exactly the same as those he had himself composed--except mine, of course, had been written earlier."

"Curious." Moses seemed unclear as to what he should make of this.

"This *gueux* wrote that he considered himself my *alter ego*." A smile twisted across Poe's face at the thought of his triumph. "I wrote that what *he* considered miraculous, *I* considered plagiarism, and demanded that he cease any association with my works on penalty of prosecution. He persisted in writing to me, so I had a French lawyer send him a stiff letter, and have not heard from him since."

"Very proper." Moses nodded stoutly. "I have always been dismayed at the thought of so many of these disreputable people in the literary world. Their antics can only distract the public from the true artists."

Poe gazed in benevolent surprise at Major Moses. Perhaps he had misjudged the man.

A horseman was riding toward him. Poe recognized the spreading mustachios of the aide he'd sent to Gregg and Law. The young man rode up and saluted breathlessly.

"I spoke to General Law, sir," he said. "His men were still eating breakfast. He and General Gregg have done *nothing*, sir, *nothing*!"

Poe stiffened in electric fury. "You will order Generals Gregg and Law to attack *at once*!" he barked.

The aide smiled. "Sir!" he barked, saluted, and turned his horse. Dirt clods flew from the horse's hooves as he pelted back down the line.

Poe hobbled toward the four messengers his brigadiers had sent to him. Anger smoked through his veins. "General Barton will advance at once," he said. "The other brigades will advance as soon as they perceive his movement has begun. Tell your commanders that I desire any prisoners to be sent to me."

He pointed at Fitzhugh Lee's aide with his stick. "Ride to General Lee. Give him my compliments, inform him that we are advancing, and request his support."

Men scattered at his words, like shrapnel from his explosion of temper. He watched them with cold satisfaction.

"There is nothing more beautiful, sir," said Major Moses in his ear, "than the sight of this army on the attack."

Poe looked with surprise at Moses; in his burst of temper he had forgotten the man was here. He turned to gaze at the formed men a few hundred yards below him on the gentle slope. They had been in garrison for almost a year, and their uniforms and equipment were in better condition than most of this scarecrow army. They were not beautiful in any sense that Poe knew of the word, but he understood what the major meant. There was a beauty in warfare that existed in a realm entirely distinct from the killing.

"I know you served in Greece, sir," Moses said. "Did the Greek fighters for liberty compare in spirit with our own?"

Poe's heart gave a lurch, and he wondered in alarm if his ears were burning. "They were--indifferent," he said. "Variable." He cleared his throat. "Mercenary, if the truth be told."

"Ah." Moses nodded. "Byron found that also."

"I believe he did." Poe stared at the ground and wondered how to extricate himself. His Greek service was a lie he had encouraged to be published about himself. He had never fought in Greece when young, or served, as he had also claimed, in the Russian army. Instead--penniless, an outcast, thrown on his own resources by his Shylock of a stepfather--he had enlisted in the American army out of desperation, and served three years as a volunteer.

It had been his dread, these years he'd served the Confederacy, that he would encounter some old soldier who remembered serving alongside the eighteen-year-old Private Edgar A. Perry. His fears had never been realized, fortunately, but he had read everything he could on Byron and the Greek War of Independence in hopes he would not be tripped up by the curious.

"Ah," Poe said. He pointed with his stick. "The men are moving."

"A brilliant sight, sir," Moses's eyes shone.

Calls were rolling up the line, one after another, from Barton on the left to the Ravens next in line, then to Corse--all Virginia brigades--and then to Clingman's North Carolinians on the right. Poe could hear the voices distinctly.

"Attention, battalion of direction! Forward, guide centerrrr--*march!*"

The regiments moved forward, left to right, clumps of skirmishers spreading out ahead. Flags hung listlessly in the damp. Once the order to advance had been given, the soldiers moved in utter silence, in perfect parade-ground formation.

Just as they had gone for that cemetery, Poe thought. He remembered his great swell of pride at the way the whole division had done a left oblique under enemy fire that day, taking little half-steps to swing the entire line forty-five degrees and then paused to dress the line before marching onward.

Sweeping through tendrils of mist that clung to the soldiers' legs, the division crossed the few hundred yards of ground between the entrenchments and the forest, and disappeared into the darkness and mist.

Poe wondered desperately if he was doing the right thing.

"Did you know Byron, sir?" Moses again.

Poe realized he'd been holding his breath, anticipating the sound of disaster as soon as his men began their attack. He let his breath go, felt relief spreading outward, like rot, from his chest.

"Byron died," he said, "some years before I went abroad."

Byron had been feeding worms for forty years, Poe thought, but there were Byrons still, hundreds of them, in this army. Once he had been a Byron himself--an American Childe Harold dressed in dramatic black, ready with the power of his mind and talent to defeat the cosmos. Byron had intended to conquer the Mussulman; Poe would do him better, with *Eureka*, by conquering God.

Byron had died at Missolonghi, bled to death by his personal physician as endless gray rain fell outside his tent and drowned his little army in the Peloponnesian mud. And nothing had come of Byron in the end, nothing but an example that inspired thousands of other young fools to die in similar pointless ways throughout the world.

For Poe the war had come at a welcome moment. His literary career had come to a standstill, with nine thousand seven hundred fifty-one copies of the *Complete Tales* sitting in his lumber room; his mother-in-law had bestirred herself to suggest, in kind but firm fashion, that his literary and landscaping projects were running up too fantastic a debt; and his relations with Evania--on Poe's part at least--were at best tentative.

When Virginia seceded and Maryland seemed poised to follow, Poe headed south with Sextus, a pair of fine horses, equipage, a curved Wilkinson light cavalry sword, Hardee's *Tactics*, a brace of massive nine-shot Le Mat revolvers, and of course the twelve hundred in gold. He kissed Evania and his beloved Mrs. Forster farewell--within a few months he would return with an army and liberate Shepherd's Rest and

the rest of Maryland. He, as well as Byron, could be martial when the cause of liberty required it. He rode away with a singing heart.

Before him, as he woke in his bed his first night in Richmond, he saw his vision, the benevolent madonna giving him her benediction. In going south he was being, he thought, faithful to Virginia; and he hoped to find the spirit, as well as the name, of his lost love embodied in the state to which he swore allegiance.

Jefferson Davis was pleased to give a colonel's commission to a veteran of the wars of Greek liberation, not to mention a fellow West Pointer--the West Point story, at least, being true, though Poe did not remind the President that, because the horrid Allan refused to support him, Poe had got himself expelled from the academy after six months.

There was no regiment available for the new colonel, so Poe began his military career on the staff of General Joseph E. Johnston, commanding in the Shenandoah Valley. He occupied himself by creating a cypher for army communications which, so far as he knew, had survived three years unbroken.

Johnston's army moved east on the railroad to unite with Beauregard's at First Manassas, and there Poe saw war for the first time. He had expected violence and death, and steeled himself against it. It gave him no trouble, but what shocked him was the *noise*. The continual roll of musketry, buzzing bullets, shouted orders, the blast of cannon, and the shriek of shells--all were calculated to unstring the nerves of a man who couldn't abide even a loud orchestra. Fortunately he was called upon mainly to rally broken troops--it had shocked him that Southern men could run like that--but in the end, after he'd got used to the racket, he had ridden, bullets singing over his head, in the final screaming, exhilarating charge that swept the Yankee army from the field, and he could picture himself riding that way forever, the fulfillment of the Byronic ideal, sunset glowing red on the sword in his hand as he galloped north to Maryland and the liberation of his home"

Maryland never managed to secede, somehow, and Poe's Byronic liberation of his home state had to be postponed. Via blockade-runner, Poe exchanged passionate letters with his wife while remaining, in his heart, faithful to Virginia.

At the horrible, bungled battle of Seven Pines the next year, Major General Daniel Harvey Hill made a properly Byronic, if unsupported, attack against McClellan's left and lost half his men, as well as one of his brigadiers. Poe was promoted and given the shattered brigade. Joe Johnston, during the same battle, had been severely wounded, and the Army of Northern Virginia now had a new commander, one Robert E. Lee.

It did not take Poe long to discover that the ferocious, dyspeptic Harvey Hill was both an ignoramus and a lunatic. Before more than a few days had passed, neither spoke to the other: they communicated only in writing. Poe broke the Yanks' wigwag signal code, which didn't mean much at the time but was of help later, at Second Manassas.

But by then Poe was not with the army. Only a few days after taking command, Lee went on the offensive, and Poe, supported by exemplary reasoning and logic, refused point-blank Harvey Hill's order to take his brigade into Boatswain Swamp.

* * * *

Now, after three years of war, almost all the American Byrons were dying or had been shot to pieces. Jeb Stuart, Jackson, Albert Sidney Johnston, Dick Garnett, Ewell, Hood, now Longstreet--all dead or maimed.

And Edgar A. Poe, leaning on his stick, a sick ache throbbing in his thigh, knew in his heart that Byron's death had been more merciful than anyone had known.

He had written the eulogy himself, never knowing it at the time: *But he grew old-- /This knight so bold-- /And o'er his heart a shadow /Fell as he found /No spot of ground /That looked like Eldorado.*

Byron's eulogy. Poe's, too. Stuart's, everyone's.

"Forty years dead," he said. "We have other poets now."

"Yourself, of course," said Major Moses, "and Tennyson."

"Walter Whitman," said Poe. The name left a savage, evil taste in his mouth.

"Obscene." Moses shivered. "Filth."

"I agree."

"You have denounced him yourself."

"Repeatedly."

Poe stared at the dark trees that had swallowed up his entire division. How many, he wondered, would come out of those woods nevermore? Sickness welled up inside him. In another minute he might weep. He turned and shouted for Sextus to bring him a chair.

The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* had happily escaped his notice. The second edition, with the preface by Emerson, had been sent to him for review at the *Southern Gentleman*. He had denounced it. Whitman and Emerson replied; Poe printed their replies and returned fire, and the fight went on for years, a war that prefigured the more deadly one begun in 1861.

A showdown, he had thought triumphantly. He had long distrusted the New England clique and feared their grip on the *North American Review*--the fact that they regarded the pedestrian and bourgeois Longfellow as a genius was reason enough for distrust. But now the South had its own literary magazine; Poe was no longer dependent on the approval of New England literary society for employment and regard.

Whitman, he wrote, knew nothing of versification. Whitman thought prostitutes and steam engines and common laborers fit subject for verse. Whitman knew nothing of the higher truths, of the sublime. Whitman filled his verses with the commonplace, with references so mundane and contemporary that in a hundred years no one would know what he was talking about. Whitman did not even *look* like a literary man. In the ambrotype used as a frontispiece, Whitman was dressed only in his shirt, looking like a farmer just come in from the fields, not an elevated, rarified, idealized creature--a poet--who spoke the language of the gods.

And Whitman was obscene. Grossly so. Clearly he was a degenerate of the worst description. Poe preferred not to imagine what Whitman did with those young men he wrote about in such evocative terms. Emerson might have used every rhetorical trick he knew to disguise the filth, or talk around it, but he never denied it--and this from someone who affected to worship the transcendental, meaning the refined and pure. It was then that Poe knew how bankrupt the North was, how desperate, as compared with his refined, elegant southland.

"Whitman is the perfect Yankee poet," Poe said. He drove his stick into the soil as if the earth hid Walter Whitman's heart. "No sublimity, no beauty, just stacks of prose disguised as poetry--sometimes not even prose, only lists. Lists of ordinary things. Produced so much stanzas an hour, like yards of cloth in a shoddyworks." He drove the stick again. "Like Yankee soldiers. Not inspired, just numerous."

Moses gave a laugh. "I must remember that, sir. For when General Longstreet returns. It will amuse him."

Poe stared at the woods, grinding his teeth. He hadn't meant to be witty; he was trying to make a point.

There was sudden musketry from the hardwoods, a succession of popping sounds turned hollow by multiple echoes. Then there was silence. Poe listened intently for a moment.

"Pickets," Moses said.

How many Yankees? Poe wondered. He turned back in the direction of his tent. Sextus was nowhere to be seen. "Bring a chair, you blasted orangutan!" he shouted. He had no idea whether or not Sextus heard him.

More popping sounds came from the woods--individual shots this time. From a different part of the line, Poe thought.

"Byrons can only die," he said. Moses looked at him in surprise. "We real poets, we're all too in love with death. Whitman writes about life, even the obscene parts of it, and that's why he will win. Why," he took a breath, trying to make himself clearer, "why the North will win."

Moses seemed to be struggling to understand this. "Sir," he said. "Sir, I don't understand."

More crackling from the woods. Poe's head moved left and right, trying to guess where it was coming from. A savage exultation beat a long tattoo in his heart. He was right, he was right, he was right *again*. He stepped up to Moses, stared into his eyes at a few inches' range.

"Do you hear guns from the west, Major?" he demanded. "Do you hear anything at all from Lee's offensive?"

"Why--" Major Moses stopped dead, licked his lips. There was pure bewilderment in his eyes. "Why are you doing this? Why are you fighting for the Cause?"

"I *hate* Whitman!" Poe shrieked. "I hate him, and I hate steam engines, I hate ironclad ships and repeating rifles and rifled artillery!"

"Your chair, Massa Poe," said Sextus.

A cacophony of sound was coming from the woods now, regular platoon volleys, one after another. The sound battered Poe's ears.

"I fight for the South because we are *right*, Major Moses!" Poe shouted. "I believe it--I have proved it rationally--we are *superior*, sir! The South fights for the right of one man to be superior to another, because he *is* superior, because he *knows* he is superior."

"Here's your chair, Massa Poe," said Sextus.

"Superior in mind, superior in cognitive faculty, superior in erudition! Superior in knowledge, in training, in sagacity! In appreciation of beauty, of form, of moral sense!" Poe pointed his stick at the woods. "Those Yankees--they are democracy, sir! Dragging even *poetry* into the muck! Walter Whitman addresses his verses to *women of the street--that* is democracy for you! Those Yankee soldiers, they are Whitmans with bayonets! I fight them because I must, because *someone* must fight for what is noble and eternal, even if only to die, like Byron, in some pointless--pointless--"

Pain seized his heart and he doubled over, coughing. He swung toward where Sextus stood with his camp chair, the cane still outstretched, and though he didn't mean to strike the African he did anyway, a whiplike crack on the upper arm. Sextus dropped the chair and stepped back, surprise on his face. Anger crackled in Poe, fury at the African's stupidity and inability to get out of the way.

"Take that, damn you, worthless nigger!" Poe spat. He spun and fell heavily into his chair.

The battle in the woods had progressed. Now Poe heard only what Great Frederick called *bataillenfeuer*, battle fire, no longer volleys but simply a continuous din of musketry as the platoon sergeants lost tactical control of their men and the battle dissolved into hundreds of little skirmishes fought simultaneously. Poe heard no guns--no way to get artillery through those woods.

Moses was looking at Poe with wide, staring eyes. He reached into a pocket and mopped Poe's spittle from his face. Poe gave him an evil look.

"Where is Lee's offensive, sir?" he demanded. "Where is the sound of *his* fight?"

Moses seemed confused. "I should get back to General Anderson, sir," he said. "I--"

"Stay by me, Major," Poe said. His voice was calm. An absolute lucidity had descended upon him; perhaps he was the only man within fifty miles who knew precisely what was happening here. "I have not yet shown you what I wish to show you."

He listened to the fight roll on. Sometimes it nearly died away, but then there would be another outburst, a furious racket. Lines of gunsmoke rose above the trees. It would be pointless for Poe to venture into the woods himself--he could not control an entire division if he could not see twenty feet beyond his own position.

A horseman galloped up. "General Gregg's compliments, sir. He and General Law are ready to advance."

Poe felt perfectly sunny. "My compliments to General Gregg. Tell him that Poe's division is a little ahead of him. I would be obliged if he'd catch up."

The man rode away. People were leaking back out of the woods now: wounded men, some crawling; skulkers, stragglers; bandsmen carrying people on stretchers. Here and there were officers running, bearing messages, guards marching back with blue prisoners.

"Lots of Yankees, sir!" The first messenger, a staff lieutenant of perhaps nineteen, was winded and staggering with the effort it had taken him to run here. "We've hit them in flank. They were in column of march, sir. Colonel Terry wishes you to know he's driving them, but he expects they'll stiffen."

"Good job, boy." Terry was the man who commanded the Ravens in Poe's absence. "Give Colonel Terry my thanks."

"Sir!" Another messenger. "General Clingman's compliments. We've driven them in and captured a

battery of guns."

Guns, Poe thought. Useless in the woods. We can't get them away, and the Yankees'll have them back ere long.

The sound of musketry staggered higher, doubled and tripled in fury. The messengers looked at each other, breathing hard, appalled at the noise. The Yanks, Poe concluded, had rallied and were starting to fight back.

"Tell Colonel Terry and General Clingman to press them as hard as possible. Try to hold them in the woods. When the Yanks press too hard, retire to the trenches."

"Yes, sir."

"Prisoners, sir." Another voice. "General Barton sends them as requested."

Stunned-looking Yanks in dew-drenched caped overcoats, all captured in the first rush. None of them looked over twenty. Poe rose from his chair and hobbled toward them. He snatched the cap from the first prisoner and swung toward Major Moses.

"Major Moses," he said in triumph, "do you know the motto of the Yankee Second Corps?"

Moses blinked at him. "No, sir."

"'Clubs are Trumps!'" Poe told him. "Do you know why, sir?"

Moses shook his head.

"Because Hancock's Corps wears a trefoil badge on their forage caps, like a club on a playing card." He threw the prisoner's cap down before Moses's feet. "What do you see on *that* forage cap, sir?" he asked.

"A cross," said Moses.

"A *saltire*, sir!" Poe laughed.

He had to be thorough. The upper echelons were never easily convinced. Two years before, during the Seven Days, he had demonstrated, with complete and irrefutable logic, that it was suicidal for Harvey Hill's division to plunge forward into Boatswain Swamp in hopes of contacting Yankees on the other side. When the ignorant madman Hill repeated his order, Poe had stood on his logic and refused--and been removed from command and placed under arrest. He had not been comforted when he had been proven right. His cherished new brigade, along with the rest of D.H. Hill's division, had been shattered

by three lines of Union infantry dug into a hill just behind the swamp, with artillery lined hub-to-hub on the crest. And when, red-faced with anger, he had challenged Hill to a duel, the lunatic had only laughed at him to his face.

"Specifically," Poe said pedantically, pointing at the Yankee forage cap, "a *white* saltire on a blue background! That means these men come from the Second Division of the Sixth Corps--*Wright's* Corps, Major, not Hancock's! The same Sixth Corps that Lee was supposed to attack this morning, on the other end of the line! *I am facing at least two Yankee corps with one division, and Lee is marching into empty air! Grant has moved his army left again while we slept!*"

Moses's eyes widened. "My God," he said.

"Take that cap to General Anderson with my compliments! Tell him I will need his support!"

Moses picked up the cap. "Yes, sir."

Poe lunged among the prisoners, snatching off caps, throwing them to his aides. "Take *that* to General Lee! And *that* to Ewell! And *that* to A.P. Hill! Say I must have their support! Say that *Wright* is here!"

As Moses and Poe's aides galloped away, the firing died down to almost nothing. One side or another had given way.

Poe returned to his seat and waited to see which side it had been.

* * * *

It was Poe's division that had given way in the woods, but not by much. Messengers panting back from his brigades reported that they'd pushed the Yanks as far as possible, then fallen back when they could push no more. The various units were trying to reestablish contact with one another in the woods and form a line. They knew the Yankee assault was coming.

Pull them back? Poe wondered. He'd made his case to his superiors--maybe he'd better get his men back into their trenches before the Yanks got organized and smashed them.

Action, he thought, and reaction. The two fundamental principles of the operating Universe, as he had demonstrated in *Eureka*. His attack had been an action; the Yankee reaction had yet to come.

He tapped gloved fingers on the arm of his chair while he made careful calculations. The Yankees had been struck in the right flank as they were marching south along narrow forest roads. Due to surprise and their tactical disadvantage, they had been driven in, then, as the rebel attack dissipated its force, turned and fought. This reaction, then, had been instinctive--they had not fought as units, which must have been shattered, but as uncoordinated masses of individuals. The heavy forest had broken up the rebel

formation in much the same manner, contributing to their loss of momentum.

The Yankees would react, but in order to do so in any coordinated way they would have to reassemble their units, get them in line of battle, and push them forward through trees that would tend to disperse their cohesion. Wright had three divisions; normally it would take a division about an hour, maybe more, to deploy to the right front from a column of march. The woods would delay any action. The bluecoats' own confusion would worsen things even more. Say two hours, then.

Any attack made before then would be uncoordinated, just local commanders pushing people forward to the point of contact. Poe's men could handle that. But in two hours a coordinated attack would come, and Poe's division would be swamped by odds of at least three to one, probably more.

Poe looked at his watch. He would keep his men in the woods another ninety minutes, then draw them back. Their presence in the woods might serve to make the Yanks cautious, when what Grant really wanted to do was drive straight forward with everything he had.

His thoughts were interrupted by a message from Evander Law on his left flank. He and Gregg had about completed their preparations to advance, the messenger reported, when they discovered that Hancock's men across the woods were leaving their trenches and preparing to attack *them*. Gregg and Law had therefore returned to their trenches to ready themselves for the attack.

Poe bit back on his temper. It *might* be true. He would have to see in person. He told one of his aides to remain there and direct any messages to the left of the line, then told Sextus to ready his buggy.

Sextus looked at him in a sullen, provoking way. He was cradling the arm Poe had struck with his cane. "You'll have to drive yourself, massa," he said. "You broke my arm with that stick."

Annoyance warmed Poe's nerves. "Don't be ridiculous! I did not hit you with sufficient force. Any schoolboy--"

"I'm sorry, massa. It's broke. I broke an arm before, I know what it's like."

Poe was tempted to hit Sextus again and break the arm for certain; but instead he lurched for his buggy, hopped inside, and took the reins. He didn't have the time to reason with the darky now. Sextus heaved himself up into the seat beside Poe, and Poe snapped the reins. His staff, on horseback, followed.

The battle broke on the left as he drove, a searing, ripping sound bounding up from the damp, dead ground. Poe seized the whip and labored his horse; the light buggy bounded over the turf, threatened to turn over, righted itself.

The first attack was over by the time Poe's buggy rolled behind Law's entrenchments, and the wall of sound had died down to the lively crackle of sharpshooters' rifles and the continual boom of smoothbore

artillery. It took Poe a while to find Law--he was in the first line of works--and by the time Poe found him, the second Yankee attack was beginning, a constant hammering roar spreading across the field.

Law stood in the trench, gnawing his lip, his field glasses in his hand. There was a streak of powder residue across his forehead and great patches of sweat under the arms of his fine gray jacket. Law jumped up on the firing step, jostling his riflemen who were constantly popping up with newly loaded muskets, and pointed. "Gibbon's men, sir! The Black Hats! Look!"

Poe swung himself up behind the brigadier, peered out beneath the head log, and saw, through rolling walls of gunsmoke and the tangle of abatis, lines of blue figures rolling toward him. He heard the low moaning sound made by Northern men in attack, like a choir of advancing bears"! The ones coming for him were wearing black felt hats instead of their usual forage caps, which marked them as the Iron Brigade of Gibbon's division, the most hard-hitting unit of the hardest-hitting corps in the Yankee army. *We've got two brigades here*, Poe thought frantically, *and we've got an entire corps coming at us.*

A Yankee MiniÃ© whacked solidly into the head log above him. Poe jerked his head back and turned to Law. The smell of powder was sharp in his nostrils. The air filled with the whistling sound of cannon firing canister at close range.

"You must hold, sir! No going back!"

Law grinned. "Do you think the Yankees'll *let us go back?*"

"Hold to the last! I will bring up support!"

Law only looked at him as if he were mad. And then the Yankees were there, their presence at first marked by a swarm of gray soldiers surging back from the firing step, almost knocking Poe from his feet as he was carried to the muddy back of the trench, the soldiers pointing their muskets upward, groping in their belts for bayonets"!

Poe reached automatically for one of his Le Mat revolvers and then realized he'd left them in his headquarters tent--they were just too heavy to carry all the time. His only weapon was his stick. He stiffened and took a firmer grip on the ivory handle. His mind reeled at the suddenness of it all.

The sky darkened as bluecoats swarmed up on the head log, rifles trained on the packed Confederates. The Stars and Stripes, heavy with battle honors, rose above the parapet, waved by an energetic sergeant with a bushy red beard and a tattered black hat. Musketry crackled along the trench as men fired into one another's faces. "Look at 'em all!" Law screamed. "Look at 'em all!" He shoved a big Joslyn revolver toward the Yankees and pulled the trigger repeatedly. People were falling all over. Screams and roars of defiance and outrage echoed in Poe's ears.

He stood, the sound battering at his nerves. All he could do here, he thought bitterly, was get shot. He

was amazed at his own perfect objectivity and calm.

And then the Union standard-bearer was alone, and grayback infantry were pointing their rifles at him. "Come to the side of the Lord!" Evander Law shouted; and the red beard looked around him in some surprise, then shrugged, jumped into the ditch, and handed over the flag of the Twenty-fourth Michigan.

The soldiers declined to shoot him, Poe thought, as a compliment to his bravery. *Never let it be said we are not gallant.*

Poe jumped for the firing step, and saw the blue lines in retreat. Dead men were sprawled over the abatis, their black hats tumbled on the ground. The ground was carpeted with wounded Yanks trying to find little defilades where they would be sheltered from the bullets that whimpered above their heads. They looked like blue maggots fallen from the torn belly of something dead, Poe thought, and then shuddered. Where was the poetry in this? Here even death was unhallowed.

Soldiers jostled Poe off the firing step and chased off the bluecoats with Mini-Ã© balls. Confederate officers were using swords and knives to cut up the Yankee flag for souvenirs. Poe stepped up to Law.

"They'll be back," Law said, mumbling around a silver powder flask in his teeth. He was working the lever of his Joslyn revolver, tamping a bullet down on top of the black powder charge.

"I will bring men to your relief."

"Bring them soon, sir."

"I will find them somewhere."

Law rotated the cylinder and poured another measured round of fine black powder. "Soon, sir. I beg you."

Poe turned to one of his aides. "Find General Gregg on the left. Give him my compliments, and tell him what I have told General Law. He must hold till relieved. After that, ride to General Anderson and persuade him to release the rest of Field's division to come to the aid of their comrades."

Wounded men groaned in the trenches and on the firing step, cursing, trying to stop their bleeding. Yankee blood dripped down the clay trench wall. Cannon still thundered, flailing at the bluecoats. Southern sharpshooters banged away with Armstrong rifles equipped with telescopic sights almost as long as the gun, aiming at any officers. Poe found himself astounded that he could have an intelligible conversation in this raucous, unending hell.

He limped away down a communications trench and found Sextus in the rear, holding his buggy amid a group of waiting artillery limbers. Poe got into the buggy without a word and whipped up the horses.

Behind him, as he rode, the thunder of war rose in volume as Hancock pitched into another attack. This time the sound didn't die down.

On the way back to his tent Poe encountered a courier from Fitz Lee. His men had moved forward dismounted, run into some startled bluecoats from Burnside's Ninth Corps, and after a short scrap had pulled back into their entrenchments.

Burnside. That meant three Yankee corps were facing two southern divisions, one of them cavalry.

Burnside was supposed to be slow, and everyone knew he was not the most intelligent of Yankees-- anyone who conducted a battle like Fredericksburg had to be criminally stupid. Poe could only hope he would be stupid today.

Back at his tent, he discovered Walter Taylor, one of Robert Lee's aides, a young, arrogant man Poe had never liked. Poe found himself growing angry just looking at him.

"Burnside, sir!" he snapped, pulling the buggy to a halt. "Burnside, Wright, *and* Hancock, and they're all on my front!"

Taylor knit his brows. "Are you certain about Burnside, sir?" he asked.

"Fitzhugh Lee confirms it! That's three-fourths of Grant's army!"

Taylor managed to absorb this with perfect composure. "General Lee would like to know if you have any indication of the location of Warren's Fifth Corps."

Poe's vitals burned with anger. "I don't!" he roared. "But I have no doubt they'll soon be heading this way!"

Poe lurched out of his buggy and headed for his tent and the Le Mat revolvers waiting in his trunk. Judging by the sound, Gregg and Law were putting up a furious fight behind him. There was more fighting going on, though much less intense, on his own front.

Poe flung open the green trunk, found the revolvers, and buckled on the holsters. He hesitated for a moment when he saw the saber, then decided against it and dropped the trunk lid. Chances were he'd just trip on the thing. Lord knew the revolvers were heavy enough.

Taylor waited outside the tent, bent over to brush road dirt from his fine gray trousers. He straightened as Poe hobbled out. "I will inform General Lee you are engaged," he said.

Poe opened his mouth to scream at the imbecile, but took a breath instead, tried to calm his rage. With the high command, he thought, always patience. "My left needs help," Poe said. "Hancock's attacking two brigades with his entire corps. I'm facing Wright on my front with four brigades, and Fitz Lee's facing Burnside with two on the right."

"I will inform General Lee."

"Tell him we are in direst extremity. Tell him that we cannot hold onto Hanover Junction unless substantially reinforced. Tell him my exact words."

"I will, sir." Taylor nodded, saluted, mounted his horse, rode away. Poe stared after him and wondered if the message was going to get through it all, or if the legend of Poe's alarmism and hysteria were going to filter it--alter it--make it as nothing.

More fighting burst out to his front. Poe cupped his ears and swiveled his head, trying to discover direction. The war on his left seemed to have died away. Poe returned to his chair and sat heavily. His pistols were already weighing him down.

Through messengers he discovered what had happened. On his third attack, Hancock had succeeded in getting a lodgment in the Confederate trenches between Gregg and Law. They had been ejected only by the hardest, by an attack at bayonet point. Evander Law had been killed in the fighting; his place had been taken by Colonel Bowles of the 4th Alabama. Bowles requested orders. Poe had no hope to give him.

"Tell Colonel Bowles he must hold until relieved."

There was still firing to his front. His brigadiers in the woods were being pressed, but the Yankees as yet had made no concerted assault. Poe told them to hold on for the present. It would be another forty-five minutes, he calculated, before the Yanks could launch a coordinated assault.

Comparative silence fell on the battlefield. Poe felt his nerves gnawing at him, the suspense spreading through him like poison. After forty-five minutes, he gave his brigades in the woods permission to fall back to their entrenchments.

As he saw clumps of men in scarecrow gray emerging from the woods, he knew he could not tell them what he feared, that Robert Lee was going to destroy their division. Again.

* * * *

After the Seven Days' Battles, Lee had chosen to lose the paperwork of Poe's impending court-martial. Poe, his brigade lost, his duel unfought, was assigned to help construct the military defenses of Wilmington.

Later, Poe would be proven right about Harvey Hill. Lee eventually shuffled him west to Bragg's army, but Bragg couldn't get along with him either and soon Hill found himself unemployed.

Poe took small comfort in Hill's peregrinations as he languished on the Carolina coast while Lee's army thrashed one Yankee commander after another. He wrote long letters to any officials likely to get him meaningful employment, and short, petulant articles for Confederate newspapers: Why wasn't the South building submarine rams? Why did they not take advantage, like the North, of observation from balloons? Why not unite the forces of Bragg and Johnston, make a dash for the Ohio, and reclaim Kentucky?

There were also, in Wilmington, women. Widows, many of them, or wives whose men were at war. Their very existence unstrung his nerves, made him frantic; he wrote them tempestuous letters and demanded their love in terms alternately peremptory and desperate. Sometimes, possibly because it seemed to mean so much to him, they surrendered. None of them seemed to mind that he snuffed all the candles, drew all the drapes. He told them he was concerned for their reputation, but he wanted darkness for his own purposes.

He was remaining faithful to Virginia.

Perhaps the letter-writing campaign did some good; perhaps it was just the constant attrition of experienced officers that mandated his reemployment. His hopes, at any rate, were justified. A brigade was free under George Pickett, and furthermore it was a lucky brigade, one that all three Confederate corps commanders had led at one time or another. Perhaps, Poe thought, that was an omen.

Poe was exultant. Lee was going north after whipping Hooker at Chancellorsville. Poe thought again of liberating Maryland, of riding on his thoroughbred charger to Shepherd's Rest, galloping to the heart of the place, to the white arabesque castle that gazed in perfect isolate splendor over the fabulous creation of his soul, his own water paradise. Once he fought for it, Shepherd's Rest would be *his*; he could dispossess the restless spirits that had made him so uneasy the last few years.

Determination entered his soul. He would be the perfect soldier. He would never complain, he would moderate his temper, he would offer his advice with diffidence. He had a reputation to disprove. The army, to his relief, welcomed him with open arms. Hugin and Munin appeared, delivered by grinning staff men who wore black feathers in their hats and chanted "Nevermore." His immediate superior, the perfumed cavalier George Pickett, was not a genius; but unlike many such he knew it, and happily accepted counsel from wiser heads. Longstreet, Poe's corps commander, was absolutely solid, completely reliable, the most un-Byronic officer imaginable but one that excited Poe's admiration. Poe enjoyed the society of his fellow brigadiers, white-haired Lo Armistead and melancholy Dick Garnett. The Southern officer corps was young, bright, and very well educated--riding north they traded Latin epigrams, quotations from *Lady of the Lake* or *The Corsair*, and made new rhymes based on those of their own literary celebrity, whose works had been read to many in childhood. *Of the rapture that runs,*

quoth Lo Armistead, *To the banging and the clanging of the guns, guns, guns. Of the guns, guns, guns, guns, guns, guns, guns, guns--To the roaring and the soaring of the guns!*

It was perfect. During the long summer marches into the heart of the North, Poe daydreamed of battle, of the wise gray father Lee hurling his stalwarts against the Yankees, breaking them forever, routing them from Washington, Baltimore, Shepherd's Rest. Lee was inspired, and so was his army. Invincible.

Poe could feel History looking over his shoulder. The world was holding its breath. This could be the last fight of the war. If he could participate in this, he thought, all the frustrating months in North Carolina, all the battles missed, would be as nothing.

Pickett's division, the army's rear guard, missed the first two days of the battle centered around the small crossroads town in Pennsylvania. Arriving that night, they made camp behind a sheltering ridge and were told that they would attack the next day in the assault that would shatter the Yankees for good and all. Pickett, who had been assigned elsewhere during Lee's last two victories, was delighted. At last he would have his opportunity for glory.

The next morning the officers of Pickett's division and the other two divisions that would make the attack were taken forward over the sheltering ridge to see the enemy positions. The attack would go *there*, said Lee, pointing with a gloved hand. Aiming for those umbrella-shaped trees on the enemy-held ridge, beneath which there was said to be a cemetery.

Standing in the stirrups of his white-socked thoroughbred, craning at the enemy ridge, Poe felt a darkness touching his heart. Across a half-mile of open ground, he thought, in plain sight of the enemy, an enemy who has had two days in which to dig in!"

Was Lee serious? he thought. Was Lee mad?

No. It was not to be thought of. Lee hadn't lost a major battle in his entire career, Sharpsburg, of course, being a draw. There was method in this, he thought, and he could discern it through ratiocination. Perhaps the Yanks were weary, perhaps they were ready to give way. In any case, he had resolved not to complain.

Pickett left the ridge whistling, riding toward the Yanks to scout out the ground. Poe and the other brigadiers followed.

Longstreet remained behind. Poe discovered later that he had seen the same things that Poe had seen, and wanted a last chance to change Lee's mind. When time came to order the advance, Longstreet could not give the order. He just nodded, and then turned his head away.

Later that day Poe brought his men forward, marching with drawn sword at the head of the Ravens, Hugin and Munin crackling and fluffing their feathers on their perch just behind. He remembered with

vivid intensity the wildflowers in the long grass, the hum of bees, the chaff rising from the marching feet, the absolute, uncharacteristic silence of the soldiers, seeing for the first time what was expected of them.

And then came the guns. There were two hundred cannon in the Northern lines, or so the Yankee papers boasted afterward, and there was not a one of them without an unobstructed target. In the last year Poe had forgotten what shell-fire was like, the nerve-shattering shriek like the fabric of the universe being torn apart, the way the shells seemed to hover in air forever, as if deliberately picking their targets, before plunging into the Confederate ranks to blossom yellow and black amid the sounds of buzzing steel and crying men.

The sound was staggering, the banging and the clanging of the guns, guns, guns, but fortunately Poe had nothing to do but keep his feet moving forward, one after another. The officers had been ordered to stay dismounted, and all had obeyed but one: Dick Garnett, commanding the brigade on Poe's left, was too ill to walk all that way, and had received special permission to ride.

Garnett, Poe knew, would die. The only mounted man in a group of twelve thousand, he was doomed and knew it.

Somehow there was an air of beauty about Garnett's sacrifice, something fragile and lovely. Like something in a poem.

The cemetery, their target, was way off on the division's left, and Pickett ordered a left oblique, the entire line of five thousand swinging like a gate toward the target. As the Ravens performed the operation, Poe felt a slowly mounting horror. To his amazement he saw that his brigade was on the absolute right of the army, nothing beyond him, and he realized that the oblique exposed his flank entirely to the Union batteries planted on a little rocky hill on the Yankee left.

Plans floated through his mind. Take the endmost regiment and face it toward Yankees? But that would take it out of the attack. Probably it was impossible anyway. But who could guard his flank?

In the meantime Pickett wanted everyone to hit at once, in a compact mass, and so he had the entire division dress its ranks. Five thousand men marked time in the long grass, each with his hand on the shoulder of the man next to him, a maneuver that normally took only a few seconds but that now seemed to take forever. The guns on the rocky hill were plowing their shot right along the length of the rebel line, each shell knocking down men like tenpins. Poe watched, his nerves wailing, as his men dropped by the score. The men couldn't finish dressing their ranks, Poe thought, because they were taking so many casualties they could never close the ranks fast enough, all from the roaring and the soaring of the guns, guns, guns"! He wanted to scream in protest: *Forward! Guide center!* but the evolution went on, men groping to their left and closing up as the shells knocked them down faster than they could close ranks.

Finally Pickett had enough and ordered the division onward. Poe nearly shrieked in relief. At least now the Yankees had a moving target.

But now they were closer, and the men on the Yankee ridge opened on Poe's flank with muskets. Poe felt his nerves cry at every volley. Men seemed to drop by the platoon. How many had already gone? Did he even have half the brigade left?

The target was directly ahead, the little stand of trees on the gentle ridge, and between them was a little white Pennsylvania farmhouse, picture-book pretty. Somewhere around the house Poe and his men seemed to lose their sense of direction. They were still heading for the cemetery, but somehow Garnett had gotten in front of them. Poe could see Garnett's lonely figure, erect and defiant on his horse, still riding, floating really, like a poem above the battle.

The cemetery was closer, though, and he could see men crouched behind a stone wall, men in black hats. The Iron Brigade of Hancock's Corps, their muskets leveled on the stone wall, waiting for Garnett to approach"

And then suddenly the battle went silent, absolutely silent, and Poe was sitting upright on the ground and wondering how he got there. Some of his aides were mouthing at him, but he snatched off his hat and waved it, peremptory, pointing at the cemetery, ordering everyone forward. As he looked up he saw in that instant the Federal front blossom with smoke, and Dick Garnett pitch off his horse with perhaps a dozen bullets in him; and it struck Poe like a blow to the heart that there was no poetry in this, none whatever"

His men were plowing on, following Garnett's. Poe tried to stand, but a bolt of pain flashed through him, and all he could do was follow the silent combat from his seated position. A shell had burst just over his head, deafening him and shattering his right thigh with a piece of shrapnel that hadn't even broken his skin.

Another line of men rushed past Poe, Armistead's, bayonets leveled. Poe could see Armistead in the lead, his black hat raised on saber-tip as a guide for his men, his mouth open in a silent cheer, his white mane flying" And then the last of Pickett's division was past, into the smoke and dust that covered the ridge, charging for the enemy trees and the cemetery that claimed them, leaving Poe nothing to do but sit in the soft blossoming clover and watch the bees travel in silence from one flower to another.

The first sound he heard, even over the tear of battle, was a voice saying "Nevermore." Hugin and Munin were croaking from the clover behind him, their standard-bearer having been killed by the same shell that had dropped Poe.

The sounds of battle gradually worked their way back into his head. Some of his men came back, and a few of them picked him up and carried him rearward, carried him along with the ravens back to the shelter of the ridge that marked the Confederate line. Poe insisted on facing the Yanks the entire way, so

that if he died his wounds would be in the front. A pointless gesture, but it took away some of the pain. The agony from the shattered bone was only a foretaste of the soul-sickness that was to come during the long, bouncing, agonizing ambulance ride to the South as the army deserted Pennsylvania and the North and the hope of victory that had died forever there with Armistead. He had died on Cemetery Ridge, shot dead carrying his plumed hat aloft on the tip of his sword, his other hand placed triumphantly on the barrel of a Yankee gun.

* * * *

"Law is dead, General Gregg is wounded," Poe reported. "Their men have given way entirely. Colonel Bowles reports he's lost half his men, half at least, and the remainder will not fight. They have also lost some guns, perhaps a dozen."

Robert Lee looked a hundred years dead. His intestinal complaint having struck him again, Lee was seated in the back of a closed ambulance that had been parked by the Starker house. He wore only a dressing gown, and his white hair fell over his forehead. Pain had drawn claws down his face, gouging deep tracks in his flesh.

"I have recalled the army," Lee said. "Rodes's division will soon be up." He gave a look to the man who had drawn his horse up beside the wagon. "Is that not correct, General Ewell?"

"I have told them to come quickly, General." Ewell was a bald man with pop eyes. He was strapped in the saddle, having lost a leg at Second Manassas during a fight with those damned Black Hats. Now that Poe thought about it, perhaps the Black Hats were becoming a *Leitmotiv* in all this shambles. Ewell's horse was enormous, a huge shambling creature, and the sight of it loping along with Ewell bobbing atop was considered by the soldiers to be a sight of pure high comedy.

Poe thought it pathetic. All that stands between Grant and Richmond, he thought, is a bunch of sick old men who cannot properly sit a horse. The thought made him angry.

"We must assemble," Lee said. His voice was faint. "We must assemble and strike those people."

Perhaps, Poe thought, Lee was a great man. Poe could not bring himself, any longer, to believe it. The others here had memories of Lee's greatness. Poe could only remember George Pickett, tears streaming down his face, screaming at Lee when the old man asked him to rally his command: "*General Lee, I have no division!*"

Poe looked from Ewell to Lee. "Gentlemen," he said, "I would suggest that Rodes be sent north to contain Hancock."

Lee nodded.

"The next division needs to be sent to Hanover Junction. If we lose the railroad, we will have to fall back to Richmond or attack Grant where he stands."

Lee nodded again. "Let it be so." A spasm passed across his face. His hands clutched at his abdomen and he bent over.

We may lose the war, Poe thought, because our commander has lost control of his bowels. And a case of the sniffles killed Byron, because his physician was a cretin.

The world will always destroy you, he thought. And the world will make you ridiculous while it does so.

General Lee's spasms passed. He looked up, his face hollow. Beads of sweat dotted his nose. "I will send an urgent message to General W.H.F. Lee," he said. "His cavalry division can reinforce that of General Fitzhugh Lee."

Bitter amusement passed through Poe at Lee's careful correctness. He would not call his son "Rooney," the way everyone else did; he referred to him formally, so there would be no hint of favoritism. Flattened by dysentery the man might be, and the Yankees might have stolen a day's march on him; but he would not drop his Southern courtesy.

Another spasm struck Lee. He bent over double. "Pardon me, gentlemen," he gasped. "I must retire for a moment."

His aides carefully drew the little rear doors of the ambulance to allow the commander-in-chief a little privacy. Ewell turned his head and spat.

Poe hobbled a few paces away and looked down at his own lines. Gregg and Law's brigades had given way an hour ago, on the fourth assault, but of the Yanks in the woods there had been no sign except for a few scouts peering at the Confederate trenches from the cover of the trees. Poe knew that the longer the Yankees took to prepare their attack, the harder it would be.

A four-wheel open carriage came up, drawn by a limping plow horse, probably the only horse the armies had spared the soberly dressed civilians who rode inside.

They were going to the funeral of the Starker girl. Battle or no, the funeral would go on. There was humor in this, somewhere; Poe wondered if the funeral was mocking the battle or the other way around.

He tipped his new hat to the ladies dismounting from the carriage and turned to study the woods with his field glasses.

Hancock had broken through to the north of the swampy stream, but hadn't moved much since then--victory had disorganized his formations as much as defeat had disorganized the losers. Hancock, when

he moved, could either plunge straight ahead into the rear of Anderson's corps or pivot his whole command, like a barn door, to his left and into Poe's rear. In the latter case Poe would worry about him, but not till then. If Hancock chose to make that lumbering turn, a path which would take him through dense woods that would make the turn difficult to execute in any case, Poe would have plenty of warning from the remnants of Gregg and Law's wrecked brigades.

The immediate danger was to his front. What were Burnside and Wright waiting for? Perhaps they had got so badly confused by Poe's attack that they were taking forever to sort themselves out.

Perhaps they were just being thorough.

Poe limped to where his camp chair waited and was surprised that the short walk had taken his breath away. The Le Mats were just too heavy. He unbuckled his holsters, sat, and waited.

To the west, Rodes's division was a long cloud of dust. To the south, Rooney Lee's cavalry division was another.

Another long hour went by. A train moved tiredly east on the Virginia Central. Rooney Lee's men arrived and went into position on the right. Amid the clatter of reserve artillery battalions galloping up were more people arriving for the funeral: old men, women, children. The young men were either in the army or hiding from conscription. Soon Poe heard the singing of hymns.

Then the Yankees were there, quite suddenly and without preamble, the trees full of blue and silver, coming on to the old Presbyterian melody rising from the Starker house. The bluecoats made no more noise on the approach than Pickett's men had on the march to Cemetery Ridge. Poe blinked in amazement. Where had they all come from?

Then suddenly the world was battle, filled with the tearing noise of musketry from the trenches, the boom of Napoleon guns, the eerie banshee wail of the hexagonal-shaped shells from the Whitworth rifled artillery fired over the heads of Poe's men into the enemy struggling through the abatis, then finally the scream and moan and animal sounds of men fighting hand to hand"

Poe watched through his field glasses, mouth dry, nerves leaping with every cannon shot. There was nothing he could do, no reserves he could lead into the fight like a Walter Scott cavalier on horseback, no orders he could give that his own people in the trenches wouldn't know to give on their own. He was useless.

He watched flags stagger forward and back, the bluecoats breaking into his trenches at several points, being flung again into the abatis. He felt a presence over his shoulder and turned to see Lee, hobbling forward in his dressing gown and slippers, an expression of helplessness on his face. Even army commanders were useless in these situations.

The fighting died down after Wright's first assault failed, and for the first time Poe could hear another fight off on his right, where the Lee cousins were holding off Burnside. The battle sounded sharp over there. Poe received reports from his commanders. Three of his colonels were wounded, one was dead, and Clingman had been trampled by both sides during a squabble over a trench but rose from the mud full of fight.

The Yankees came on again, still with that grim do-or-die silence, and this time they gained a lodgement between the Ravens and Corse, and the Confederates tried to fling them out but failed. "Tell them they must try again," Poe told his messengers. He had to shout over the sound of Whitworths firing point-blank into the Yankee salient. He looked at the sad figure of Lee standing there, motionless in his carpet slippers, his soft brown eyes gazing over the battlefield. "Tell the men," Poe said, "the eyes of General Lee are upon them."

Maybe it was Lee's name that did it. Poe could no longer believe in great men but the men of this army believed at least in Lee. The second counterattack drove the shattered Yankees from the works.

The Yankees paused again, but there was no lack of sound. The Confederate artillery kept firing blind into the trees, hoping to smash as many of the reassembling formations as they could.

What did a man mean in all this? Poe wondered. Goethe and Schiller and Shelley and Byron thought a man was all, that inspiration was everything, that divine intuition should overthrow dull reason--but what was inspiration against a Whitworth shell? The Whitworth shell would blow to shreds any inspiration it came up against.

Poe looked at Lee again.

A messenger came from Fitz Lee to tell the commanding general that the cavalry, being hard-pressed, had been obliged by the enemy to retire. A fancy way, Poe assumed, for saying they were riding like hell for the rear. Now both Poe's flanks were gone.

Lee gave a series of quiet orders to his aides. Poe couldn't hear them. And then Lee bent over as another spasm took him, and his young men carried him away to his ambulance.

There was no more fighting for another hour. Eventually the rebel artillery fell silent as they ran short of ammunition. Reserve ammunition was brought up. Messages came to Poe: Hancock was moving, and Burnside was beginning a turning movement, rolling up onto Poe's right flank. Poe ordered his right flank bent back, Clingman's men moving into Hanover Junction itself, making a fort of every house. His division now held a U-shaped front.

What did a man mean in all this? Poe wondered again. Nothing. Byron and Shelley were ego-struck madmen. All a man could do in this was die, die along with everything that gave his life meaning. And it was high time he did.

Poe rose from the chair, strapped on his pistols, and began to walk the quarter mile to his trenches. He'd give Walter Whitman a run for his money.

The fight exploded before Poe could quite walk half the distance. Wright's men poured out of the woods; Burnside, moving fast for once in his life, struck at Hanover Junction on the right; and unknown to anyone Hancock had hidden a few brigades in the swampy tributary of the North Anna, and these came screaming up out of the defile onto Poe's undermanned left flank.

The battle exploded. Poe began limping faster.

The battle ended before Poe could reach it. His men gave way everywhere, the Yankees firing massed volley into their backs, then going after them with bayonets. Poe wanted to scream in rage. The world would not let him make even a futile gesture.

The shattered graybacks carried him back almost bodily, back to the Starker house where civilians were solemnly loading a coffin into a wagon, and there Poe collapsed on the lovely green lawn while the batteries opened up, trying to slow down the advance of Wright's triumphant men. Limbers were coming up, ready to drag the guns away. Lee's ambulance was already gone.

Poe found himself looking at the coffin. A dead girl was a poem, he thought as his head rang with gunfire, but no one had asked the girl if she wanted to be a poem. She would probably have chosen to live and become prose, healthy bouncing American prose, like his Evania. That was why he couldn't love her, he thought sadly; he couldn't love prose. And the world was becoming prose, and he couldn't love that either.

The artillery began pulling out. Poe could hear Yankee cheers. Poe's staff had vanished, lost in the whirlwind of the retreat, but there was Sextus, standing by the buggy, looking at the advancing Yankee line with a strange, intent expression. Poe dragged himself upright and walked toward the buggy.

"Come along, Sextus," he said. "We must go."

Sextus gave him a look. There was wildness in it.

Poe scowled. This was no time for the African to take fright. Bullets fluttered overhead. "Take the reins, Sextus. I'm too tired. We must leave this *champ du Mars*."

At the sound of the French, Poe saw a strange comprehension in Sextus eyes. Then Sextus was running, clutching his supposedly injured arm, running down the gentle hill as fast as his legs could carry him, toward the advancing Northern army. Poe looked after him in amusement.

"Sextus!" he called. "You fool! That's the wrong way!" The fighting had obviously turned the darky's

wits.

Sextus gave no indication he had heard. "The wrong way! We're running *away* from the Yankees, not *toward* them!" Poe limped after him. "*Madman!*" he shrieked. "*Baboon! Animal!*" His nerves turned to blazing fire, and he clawed for one of his Le Mat revolvers. Holding the heavy thing two-handed, Poe drew the hammer back and sighted carefully. A few Yankee bullets whistled over his head.

Sextus kept running. The dark masses of Union men were just beyond him. The pistol's front sight wavered in Poe's vision.

Stupid, Poe thought.

He cocked his arm back and threw the revolver spinning after Sextus. There was a bang as the Le Mat went off on impact, but Poe didn't bother to look. He turned to the buggy and stepped into it; he whipped up the mare and followed the guns and the funeral procession through a cornfield toward the Confederate rear. Behind him he heard Yankee cheers as they swarmed up onto the deserted Starker lawn.

The corn was just sprouting. The buggy bounded over furrows. The field was covered with wounded Confederates staggering out of the way of the retreating guns. There was a cloud of dust on the border of the field.

Oh, no, Poe thought.

Men moved out of the dust, became two divisions of A.P. Hill's corps, moving in perfect battle formation. Marching to the rescue, like something out of Walter Scott.

Poe halted, examined the advancing Confederates through his field glasses, and then whipped up again once he found the man he wanted to see.

Little Powell Hill was riding in another buggy--another officer too sick to ride--but he was wearing the red flannel he called his "battle shirt," and his heavy beard, a contrasting shade of red, was veritably bristled with eagerness for battle.

Poe passed through Hill's lines, turned his buggy in a wide circle, and brought it on a parallel course to Hill. He and Hill exchanged salutes.

"I hope you've left some Yankees for us, General." Hill's voice was cheerful.

Poe looked at him. "Plenty of Yankees, sir," he said. "None of *my* men left, but plenty of Yankees."

Powell Hill grinned. "I'll reduce 'em for you."

"I hope you will."

"You should rally your men. I need your support."

Where were you when I needed your support! Poe wanted to say it, but he couldn't. Instead he just saluted, and brought the buggy to a halt.

His broken men gathered around him. Hill's marched on, into the swelling battle.

* * * *

The battle died down at sunset. The blows and counterblows weren't clear to Poe, but Hanover Junction, after having changed hands several times, ended up back with the Confederacy, and Grant's army was safely penned in the bend of the North Anna. The burning Starker house was a bright glow on the horizon, a pillar of fire. Someone's shellfire had set it alight.

Among all the other dead was Hugin, shot by a Yankee bullet. The raven lay wrapped in a handkerchief at the foot of his tall perch. Munin moved from side to side on the perch, his head bobbing, mourning the loss of his mate.

Poe stood under the perch in the light of a campfire, listening to reports from his subordinates. Torn and dying men were lying around him in neat rows. The living, some distance off, were cooking meat; Poe could smell salt pork in the air. From the reports he gathered that he had lost about sixty percent of his men, killed, wounded, or missing. He had lost eighty percent of his officers the rank of captain or above. The figures were almost as bad as the attack at Gettysburg, last July.

A buggy moved carefully through the darkness and came to a halt. Walter Taylor helped Robert Lee out. Lee had apparently recovered somewhat; he was dressed carefully in a well-brushed uniform. Poe hobbled to him and saluted.

"General Lee."

Lee nodded. "This army owes you its thanks," he said. "You have saved Richmond."

"I have lost my division."

Lee was silent a moment. "That is hard," he said. "But you must tell your men how well they fought, how they have saved the capital. Perhaps it will make their sorrows easier to bear."

Poe nodded. "I will tell them." He looked at Lee. "What will I tell George Pickett? They were his men, not mine."

"You will tell him what you must."

Is this, Poe wondered, how Lee had got such a reputation for wisdom? Repeating these simple things with such utter sincerity?

Lee stepped forward, took Poe's arm. "Come. I would like to speak with you apart."

Poe allowed himself to be led off into the darkness. "Grant will move again," Lee said, "as soon as he gets his wounded to the rear and his cavalry comes back from the Yellow Tavern raid. There will be another battle, perhaps more than one. But sooner or later there will be a pause."

"Yes, sir."

"I would take advantage of that pause, General Poe. I would like to send a division to the Valley on this railroad you have saved us, to defeat the invaders there and strike at Washington. I would like to say, sir, that I am considering you for the command."

An independent Shenandoah Valley command, thought Poe. A chance for glory. The same command had been the making of Stonewall.

"My division is destroyed," Poe said. "I can't commit them to battle."

"Your division," gently, "is General Pickett's. When he recovers his health, he will return to command it. I refer to a new division, assembled with an eye to the Valley adventure."

"I see." Poe walked in silence for a moment, and stopped suddenly as his boots thudded against a wooden surface. He looked at it and realized it was the Starker girl's coffin, lying alone in the rutted cornfield. Apparently it had been bounced out of the wagon during the retreat.

Glory, he thought.

The Cause was lost. He couldn't believe in it anymore. That afternoon he'd told Moses one should fight for something noble, even if its time was gone. Now he no longer believed it. None of this was worth it.

He should have died, he thought savagely. He should have died on that last spree in Baltimore. It would have spared him all this. And perhaps spared his men, too.

If he hadn't anticipated Grant's maneuver, all this savagery might have been avoided. And the war would

be over all that much sooner. The one chance he had to change things, to become the great man, and all he'd done was prolong the nation's agony. Put more good men in their graves.

He thought of the lines of wounded and dying men, lying in the cornfield waiting for the morning, and he felt his heart crack. One fought for them, or nothing.

He straightened, took a breath. "I must decline the command, sir," he said. "My health and spirits are too poor."

Lee looked at him somberly. "You may wish to reconsider, General. It's been a hard day."

"I want to stay with my men, sir," Poe said.

Lee was silent for a long time. "I will speak to you again on this matter, General Poe," he said. He began walking back toward the raven standard. Poe followed.

"Your men shall be spared further fighting," Lee said. "Your men will be assigned to bury the dead."

For some reason this made Poe want to laugh. "Yes, sir," he said.

"I thank you for your part today."

Poe saluted. "Sir."

Walter Taylor snapped the reins, and Lee's buggy trotted away into the darkness.

He has left me in command of the dead, Poe thought. Sexton-general in charge of dead hopes, dead causes, dead ravens, dead verse, dead girls.

He looked at his officers, gathered under the standard for his instructions. Poe stepped to the perch and picked up Hugin's body.

"About fifty yards out there," he said, pointing, "there's a dead girl in a coffin. Find some men, find a wagon, and deliver her to the graveyard in New Market." He held out the dead raven. "Bury this poor bird with her," he said.

"Yes, sir."

He pulled his black cloak around him. He could hear the moans and muttering of the wounded. They were his responsibility when alive; now they were his, too, when they were in the grave.

In a quiet voice, he gave his instructions.

Above him the raven mourned, and said nothing.