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Fears of Battle

A cloud of fog rose slowly from the cold earth. The rising sun revealed a camp of Union army soldiers stretched out on the hills. Last night the Yankees had seen the red gleam of enemy campfires on a distant hillside. Today, they were hoping for some action.

A tall soldier had gone down to the river to wash a shirt. When he came back he was waving the shirt like a flag.

“I just heard that we’re moving out tomorrow, for sure,” he said to a group of his comrades. “We’re going up the river. Then we’ll cut across and catch the Rebels from behind.”

“It’s a lie! That’s all it is—another big lie!” said one private loudly. “I don’t believe the darned old army’s *ever* going to move.

I've got ready to move eight times in the last two weeks. And we ain't moved yet."

"Believe what you like, Wilson."

The tall soldier, Jim Conklin, was so sure of himself that the men started to believe him. One of them, a young private named Henry Fleming, listened silently while the others talked. Then he went to his tent, crawled inside, and lay on his bunk. He wanted to go over some new thoughts that had come to him lately.

Henry had dreamed of battle glory all his life. The great and bloody wars of his imagination had thrilled him with their sweep and fire. In his daydreams, he had always been a great hero. But Henry was not so sure anymore. Perhaps such battles belonged in the distant past, along with heavy crowns and high castles.

This war seemed different. The soldiers around him seemed more timid. Perhaps religion and education had erased the killer instinct in men.

For months Henry had been burning to enlist in the great war between the North and

the South. Tales of great marches, sieges, and conflicts filled the newspaper. He had longed to see it all. But his mother had discouraged him. She gave him hundreds of reasons why he was needed more on the farm than on the field of battle. Then one night the church bell rang to celebrate a great victory over the Confederate army. This news made him shiver with excitement. Later, he had gone down to his mother's room. "Ma," he said, "I'm going to enlist."

"Henry, don't you be a fool!" his mother had replied. Then she had covered her face with the quilt and turned away.

But the next morning he had walked into town and enlisted. When he returned home, his mother was milking a cow. "Ma, I've enlisted," he said to her shyly. There was a short silence. "The Lord's will be done, Henry," she said with a sigh. Then she turned back to the cow.

Weeks later, when he had stepped through the doorway in his new blue uniform, Henry had seen two tears run down his mother's cheeks. As she peeled potatoes, she said,

“You watch out, Henry. Take good care of yourself in this fighting business. Don’t go thinking you can lick the whole Rebel army at the start—because you can’t! You’re just one little fellow among a whole lot of others.

“I’ve knit you eight pair of socks, and I’ve put in all your best shirts. I want my boy to be just as warm and comfortable as anybody in the army. When they get holes in them, I want you to send them back to me so I can darn them.

“And always be careful of the company you keep. There’s lots of bad men in the army, Henry. The army makes them wild. They like nothing better than to teach a young fellow like you to drink and swear. Keep clear of them, Henry. I don’t want you to ever do anything that you would be ashamed to let me know about.

“I don’t know what else to tell you, Henry—except that you must never do any shirking on my account. If a time comes when you have to be killed or do a mean thing—why, Henry, don’t think of anything except doing what’s right.