

SEYMOUR REIT

*Behind
Rebel Lines*

THE INCREDIBLE STORY
OF EMMA EDMONDS,
CIVIL WAR SPY

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*To my colleagues and friends
of the Bank Street College Media Group*

*I am naturally fond of adventure,
a little ambitious, and a good deal
romantic—but patriotism was the true
secret of my success.*

—FROM EMMA'S MEMOIRS

To Begin

This is the true story of a remarkable woman named Emma Edmonds (her full name was really Sarah Emma Edmonds, but she dropped the Sarah part early on in her life). Emma was a feminist long before the word became popular. In 1861, at the start of the Civil War, she joined the Union army disguised as a man and was in the thick of the battle for several years.

Emma Edmonds wasn't the only woman to attempt this. Historians estimate that over *four hundred* women, on both sides, fought in the war posing as men! Wearing men's uniforms, they proved as valiant as any of the soldiers. For pure excitement and suspense, however, Emma's wild adventures are in a class by themselves.

Some of the events described in these pages come from her own memoirs, published after the war. Other facts are from U.S. Army records and National Archives files. And some material is from the writings of such eminent historians as Bruce Catton, Sylvia Dannett, Mary E. Massey, and Philip Van Doren Stern.

Bits and pieces of this unique tale have appeared in various places, but this is the first time the whole amazing war drama has been set down. Everything that follows is true. All the dates and places are accurate. All the people were real. And all these things actually happened to young Canadian-born Emma Edmonds.

Of course, to make the past come truly alive, the people must come alive—they must be human and believable. For this reason, certain liberties have been taken: Some speeches, thoughts, and minor events have been filled in “as they could have been.” But this has been done only where necessary, with great care and respect for Emma and her work.

Emma Edmonds was a true idealist. She believed deeply in the Northern cause and reacted to those heroic years with great passion. During the war, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., who became a famous Supreme Court justice, was a young officer in the Union forces. Years later, he wrote: “Through our great good fortune, in our youth our hearts were touched with fire.”

So it was with Emma Edmonds—and here is her story.

April 25, 1861

The long line stretched from the Flint courthouse down the stone steps and across the green lawn. Moving forward slowly, the young men were in high spirits. They laughed and joked as if they were leaving on a picnic instead of going off to fight a war.

“I’ll wager we take Richmond in three weeks.”

“Southerners talk big, but they cain’t fight.”

“Been plowin’ behind horses all my life. Now I’ll get me a chance to ride one.”

“Can’t hardly wait to take a shot at a live rebel.”

“You may be too late, boy. They say one good battle, the Confederacy’ll fall apart.”

Tension and excitement crackled along the noisy line. But one dark-haired volunteer, small and silent, was lost in thought. Emma Edmonds tugged at her jacket and prayed—for the tenth time that day—that the scheme would work. It was plumb crazy, she knew, but she didn’t care. She’d made up her mind and that was that.

Would they discover her secret? She’d have her answer in a few minutes. Of course, she was comfortable enough wearing men’s clothes. She’d practically lived in rough pants and heavy shoes growing up in Canada, working with the farmhands, and keeping up with the best of them. Now at twenty-one, she was still trim and boyish. She had a strong chin, a firm mouth, and cool blue eyes, and she’d cropped her hair short like a man’s.

She also knew—she’d checked earlier—that nobody bothered with physical examinations for new recruits. The Union army was desperate for able-bodied men; they had no mind to be choosy. Still she was worried. Maybe her information was wrong. Maybe they’d see right through her masquerade.

The line inched slowly along step by step, carrying Emma past a billboard covered with recruiting posters. The words leaped out at her: VOLUNTEERS TO THE RESCUE! . . . PATRIOTISM AND LOVE OF COUNTRY! . . . RUTHLESS SOUTHERN TREACHERY! . . . DEFEND OUR NOBLE UNION! . . . VINDICATE THE HONOR OF OUR GLORIOUS FLAG!

She frowned at the fancy wording—all that fuss and bombast. Still, she had to admit that was how she really felt—she and thousands of others. Bother the fancy speeches and flag-waving politicians—the fact was that alarm bells were ringing everywhere. The country was in peril and had to be saved.

Only ten days before, Abe Lincoln had asked for seventy-five thousand volunteers. Now they were pouring in from shops and factories, mills and mines, offices, farms, and dockyards—rallying in every city, town, and village. And so were the local militias, with their fancy names and uniforms. Emma had read in the papers about Ellsworth’s Avengers, Smallwood’s Marylanders, Sprague’s Light Cavalry; she knew of the Black Rifles, the Winslow Blues, and the Hibernian Greens. She’d seen pictures of New York’s Fire Zouaves who wore baggy red pantaloons. The Putnam Phalanx of Connecticut sported white plumes on their hats. Boston’s Highland Guards had uniforms of Scotch plaid. And one group, the Mozart Regiment, had marched off to battle in elegant double-breasted frock coats. But that was changing; all these units, so nobly costumed, were now being welded into a single force wearing Federal blue.

Here in Flint, where Emma lived, men were needed for the Michigan Volunteer Infantry called the Union Grays. Emma was aching to be a nurse in a tent hospital on the battlefield, but that was dangerous work: Only male nurses were given those jobs.

The line carried Emma to the foot of the courthouse steps. She climbed them slowly, her heart hammering. With each step, her anxiety grew.

Certainly there were things she could do as a woman to help out. She could knit socks, roll bandages, or sew flags for the new regiments. She could work in a New England textile mill, making cloth for blankets and uniforms. Or fill cartridge sacks with gunpowder at a Federal arsenal. Or work in a refreshment canteen. Or write letters home for the sick and wounded. Female nurses were also needed at hospitals in big cities like Philadelphia, Boston, and New York.

It was all good work, important work—useful work that would trap her on the sidelines, far away from the realities of the war. But safety wasn't for Emma Edmonds. Something was driving her to do more, to play a bigger part. There was a kind of imp voice inside her, pushing her to take risks. It was the same voice that, years before, had dared her to climb the highest trees on the farm, to ride the most dangerous horses, to swim the river raging wild after the spring floods.

Emma couldn't put this feeling into words, but she sensed that at least part of it was her father's doing. He had always wanted a son and could never forgive her for being female. She'd tried hard to please him and to win his approval, but without success. Her father had acted as though the whole thing were *her* fault, and his hard manner never softened. After Emma's mother died, his criticism and cruel tirades got worse, and when Emma was sixteen, she ran for her life. Taking all she owned in an old burlap sack, she fled to a country where she knew words like *liberty* and *freedom* had real meaning.

That had been five years ago, and Emma had quickly fallen in love with her adopted land. She'd become its strong defender, and now that America was in peril she'd have to take action. The imp voice was calling her. Somehow she *had* to be part of this war. She *had* to be right there with the fighting men. Emma, unafraid, sharing their dangers and hardships . . .

Suddenly, she found herself in a paneled room draped with American flags. The line had carried her with it through the tall doors, and now her turn had come. With a final tug at her jacket, Emma swallowed hard and stepped to the desk. The recruiting sergeant glanced quickly at her and bent over his paper.

"Name and age?" he asked mechanically.

"Franklin Thompson," said Emma. "Twenty-one."

"Place of birth?"

"Saint John, Canada."

The sergeant looked at Emma again, but only for a moment. In this area many Canadians were crossing the border to join the Federal army. He nodded and went on.

"Any handicaps or infectious diseases?"

"No, sir."

"Civil occupation?"

"Bible salesman and medical orderly. I'm hoping I can be posted to a field hospital."

"Read and write?"

"Yes, sir."

He pushed the enlistment form over for her to sign. Taking the pen, Emma dipped it, remembering just in time to scrawl *Franklin Thompson*.

The soldier scribbled on a card, handed it to her, and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "We're short of medical help so I'm rating you as a field nurse. Report to the supply tent for your gear and get sworn in."

The huge supply tent, pitched near the courthouse, was chaotic, but somehow everything worked efficiently. Moving from line to line, Emma collected a blanket, boots, tin canteen, and army clothing. Then, with scores of others, she raised her hand and took the oath of service, administered by an elderly, tired-looking adjutant.

"You men," he said, "are now part of the Second Regiment, Michigan Volunteers. Report to the

railway depot tomorrow at 5:00 A.M. sharp. You'll go by train to Washington, where the regiment will be issued weapons and become part of the Army of the Potomac. Good luck to you all."

Emma felt a great surge of relief at passing the big test. Carrying her equipment, she slipped away from the excited crowd and hurried across the trampled lawn. The line was still growing; it seemed like every young man in the state was rushing to enlist.

Back at the rooming house she dumped everything on her bed and carefully locked the door. Forcing herself to stay calm, she began the magic change. Trousers . . . shirt . . . jacket and boots . . . peaked cap . . . wide belt with the U.S. brass buckle . . . canvas leggings . . . rolled blanket over the shoulder, just so. Then in the cracked mirror over her bureau, she sized herself up, studying her reflection from different angles. Convincing, no doubt about it. Emma Edmonds was gone, and in her place stood Private Franklin Thompson, Second Michigan Volunteers, U.S. Army!

Marching around the little room, getting used to the new uniform, Emma felt more comfortable and sure of herself. Her masquerade, starting as an impulsive, daft sort of idea, had suddenly become real. Outside her window a party of young recruits tramped by, their arms loaded with gear, their voices raised in harmony:

*We will welcome to our ranks
All the loyal, true and brave,
Shouting the battle cry of Freedom;
And altho' they may be poor,
Not a man shall be a slave,
Shouting the battle cry of Freedom!*

Emma tried to join in, but her mouth was dry. Her heart pounded and she felt light-headed. Was it joy or fear? She couldn't rightly say—odd how both these emotions had symptoms in common. But no matter—the important thing was that her scheme had worked. So far, she was safe.

Emma stared in the mirror again, tilted her cap at a jaunty, devil-may-care angle, and smiled, wondering what her father would say if he could see her now. She felt a great rush of excitement and happiness. The imp voice had pulled her from the sidelines and the adventure was beginning. Of course there would be problems—there were bound to be—but she wasn't worried. At least, not too much. Whatever trouble or dangers might be waiting, Emma knew somehow she'd manage to face them.

Standing at the window, she could still hear the volunteers singing in the distance. She drew a long, slow breath. This morning she'd taken a soldier's solemn oath; now there was no turning back. For better or worse, Miss Edmonds was going to war.

March 19, 1862

Private Thompson was dog tired. He gulped some lukewarm water from his canteen, picked up his musket, and headed wearily toward the hospital tent. His eyes burned. His shoulders ached. The sergeant's harsh voice rang in his ears.

“Dress those lines! Quick march! Try to look like soldiers!”

“When you crawl, keep your fool heads down! You want to stop a sniper's ball?”

“Thompson, that's a musket you're carrying, not a mop handle!”

Under a blazing Virginia sun, the troopers of the Michigan Second had been bullied and badgered. They marched for hours, learning military drill. They practiced priming and firing their weapons. On skirmish exercises, they crawled through acres of dirt and underbrush. It had been a rough day—only one of many.

The war had been dragging on for months, and the South still hadn't collapsed. In fact, the Confederate troops had proved tough and valiant, winning key battles. General George McClellan, commanding the Army of the Potomac, was anxious to change all that. He'd vowed to whip his militias and green recruits into a good fighting force—and no one was exempted. Along with the surgeons and other nurses, Private Franklin Thompson was classed as a noncombatant; still, everyone had to go through the same training. In war nothing was certain; there was no telling when medical and service troops might have to help fight off a sudden enemy attack.

Heading along the tent rows, Private Thompson picked his way around stacked arms and piles of equipment. Supply wagons rumbled by. Couriers on horseback galloped past him, raising clouds of dust. New men were still pouring in and tents were going up everywhere.

He entered the hospital tent and walked to the far end, where a place had been set aside for the nurses. A canvas curtain separated them from the main ward. The tent had been pitched in a shaded area with good drainage, a little apart from the rest of the camp. A row of cots ran along either side, separated by a center aisle. There were some thirty cots in all, but more could be added when necessary.

In the middle of the tent a large sawhorse table was piled with medicines, books, and hospital records. When necessary, it would also serve as an operating table. Kerosene lamps hung here and there on the tent poles, and toward the back of the tent was an open wing where all the meals were cooked.

Thompson's unit—a small one—was made up of the head surgeon, Dr. Hodes; his assistant, Lieutenant Reese; four male nurses; two cooks; a wardmaster; and an orderly who chopped wood, hauled water, and did the heavy chores. At the moment, the ward was fairly quiet, since the regiment hadn't yet seen heavy fighting. There were the usual cases of dysentery and some sniper gunshot wounds. One officer had cracked a hip when his horse stumbled and fell on him. A young soldier's foot was crushed when a cannon recoiled before he could leap clear. And a veteran of the Mexican War, who'd ridden with Winfield Scott at Cerro Gordo, was down with a case of pneumonia. Other patients who suffered from assorted burns and minor mishaps were treated and then sent back to their outfits.

The soldier peered into the ward and nodded to the men on duty. He dumped his gear and checked the time. Dr. Hodes's nurses worked in pairs—six hours on and six hours off, around the clock. He had a whole hour before his next shift—time enough for a nap and a bite to eat. Lying on the cot with its thin straw mattress, Thompson stretched luxuriously. The sounds of camp life faded away. A few fat

flies droned lazily. He closed his eyes and tried to recall all that had happened since “Franklin Thompson” had enlisted.

Of course, those first few weeks had been the roughest. Emma smiled as she thought of how nervous she'd been—how worried that someone would discover her secret. And Lord, what a peck of problems she'd had to face: how to steal a bit of privacy when she needed it, or how to behave around some of the coarser men. Emma was modest by nature but tough and determined. With faith and good humor she'd worked to solve those difficulties, and now Private Thompson was well established with nobody any the wiser.

Stretched out on the cot, Emma relived her first day in uniform—the long train ride from Flint to Washington, D.C, in a grimy coach crammed with recruits. Unsure of her disguise, she'd kept to herself, gazing out the window and answering curtly if a question came her way.

In Washington, the new men were issued arms and divided into regimental companies. Later Emma had time to explore the bustling capital. There were army uniforms everywhere. Tents and bivouacs were jammed into every inch of park and vacant lot. Space in the city was so scarce that troops were even camped in the big East Room of the White House.

Emma could almost taste the excitement in the air. Knots of civilians gathered around the bulletin boards to read war dispatches. Smart cavalry units trotted down the boulevards, their guidons snapping in the breeze. Fife-and-drum corps stepped along, piping patriotic tunes. On every wide street, troops practiced marching and drilling. Whenever a company tramped past the big house on Pennsylvania Avenue the men set up a cheer—and sometimes President Lincoln would come to the window and wave.

From her temporary camp, Emma could look straight down Constitution Avenue to the new capitol building still under construction. The huge iron dome was only half finished. Its bare ribs poked up in the air like giant fingers, a vague promise waiting to be fulfilled.

Emma stayed in Washington for months, nursing at a nearby clinic. Then, one day, thousands of troops, including her company, were jammed aboard paddle-wheel transports and carried down Chesapeake Bay. After a slow, bumpy trip, the boats anchored near Fort Monroe at the tip of the Virginia peninsula. The Army of the Potomac, numbering almost one hundred thousand men, took up positions across this neck of land, between the York River and the James River. Emma's regiment was part of the Union line. She'd been assigned to Company F, and was now settled at Dr. Hodes's tent hospital.

McClellan's plan, widely known, was to move north and attack Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy. But the Union's path was blocked by the city of Yorktown, a short way up the peninsula. This city was defended by a ten-mile line of trenches and a strong force under General Joseph Johnston. President Lincoln and War Secretary Edwin Stanton were pressuring McClellan to push ahead to Richmond, the grand prize—but the general held back. Before he could capture the rebel capital he would have to take Yorktown, lying across his path. And he wasn't sure what awaited him there.

George McClellan was a cautious campaigner—too cautious, many thought. He was also stubborn, refusing to move until his troops were well trained and he knew more about the enemy's defenses. So the Army of the Potomac stayed in place while the drilling and training went on.

None of this much mattered to Emma Edmonds. She would leave war strategy to others—she was content. Her disguise was working, the imp voice was silent, and she was having her moment in history. She'd also been lucky. Living at the hospital instead of in a crowded company tent had simplified matters. It was not only more comfortable, but more private, and she found it easier to hide her identity. Emma loved nursing. The doctors relied on her—and though she kept to herself, the other nurses treated cool, quiet Frank Thompson with friendly respect.

So Emma dozed peacefully on her cot, unaware that all this was soon to change—that two separate events would turn her tidy world completely upside down.

The first involved a Union agent who had been working in Richmond as a spy for McClellan. His mission was to get information about the rebel defenses in Yorktown. Growing careless, he'd been caught and, after a quick trial, shot by a Confederate firing squad.

The second event involved a Union patrol setting out that very night. The scout party, from Company B, consisted of four troopers and an officer named Vesey. It was a routine assignment to probe the enemy's outer defenses. With luck, the party might capture a rebel picket and bring him in for questioning. The men smeared dirt on their hands and faces to cut down their visibility and removed all loose metal that might clank or jingle. Then they slipped silently into the Virginia night.

There was nothing unique about either event. On the great, sweeping canvas of war, they were fairly minor episodes. But for Emma Edmonds, they were crucial. Taken together, these two events played major part in her future, starting her on a path filled with risk and danger.

March 20, 1862

The following morning at work, Emma heard some surprising news. A trooper from Company B came to visit a sick friend, and the men talked about a newcomer to the trooper's outfit, a certain Lieutenant Vesey. Emma's ears perked up. Asking questions, she learned that the officer's first name was James and that he was a tall man with sandy hair and a bushy mustache.

"Where's he from?" she asked.

The rifleman shrugged. "Don't rightly know, Thompson. He transferred to us from a Boston company."

Emma broke into a grin. She'd known James Vesey when they were both living in Boston some years ago. They'd been good friends before Emma had gone off to Michigan and they'd lost touch. But she often thought of the big sandy-haired man, and the memory brought color to her face.

The other girls in Boston had sometimes teased her about being sweet on James, but in her blunt, straightforward way, Emma had laughed it off. Stuff and nonsense. She had much too much to do, and certainly no time for romantic interests. Yet here they both were, in the same regiment. Emma felt her cheeks reddening. Romance—fiddlesticks. She simply wanted to see her old friend again. Where was the harm in that?

When her shift ended, Emma washed up quickly, straightened her uniform, tilted her cap, and set off for the Company B area.

Hurrying along, she was surprised at the depth of her feelings. Well, she and James had enjoyed fine times together in Boston, and she'd missed him afterward. Quite a lot. He was so hearty and good-humored. He had a lovely way with him, always cheering her up when she needed it. Imagine finding him again—what a coincidence! Of course, she'd have to play out her role and pretend to be Frank Thompson, but maybe he wouldn't see through her disguise. In those days, she'd worn her hair long, in a bun at the nape of her neck; now it was short. The army uniform would help, and her face had matured quite a bit. She'd keep her cap low and hope for the best.

Bother, it *was* confusing. She might just let him in on the secret anyway. Somehow she knew he'd understand and could be trusted. But she'd deal with all that later. Now she just yearned to see him, to talk to James and hear the booming laugh that always made her feel so warm and happy.

Outside the company headquarters tents, pennants waved in the warm breeze. Excited, planning what she would say, she hurried along the line until she reached Company B. Some distance behind the last row of tents in a cleared field, Emma noticed a familiar ritual. A cluster of soldiers, bareheaded, stood around a mound of earth while the chaplain read a psalm. His voice carried to her on the breeze:

*Commit thy way unto the Lord.
Trust also in Him and
He shall bring it to pass. . . .*

Emma stopped near a gunner who was leaning on an artillery piece, watching the service.

"Right sad 'bout Lieutenant Vesey," he muttered.

Emma froze. "Who?"

"Vesey," the gunner answered. "He took a patrol out for the first time last night. They ran into a big rebel party and there was a fight. Our lads got back safe, 'cept for the lieutenant. Took a musket ball

his neck. Dead by the time they brought 'im in.”

*The Lord knoweth
The days of the upright,
And their inheritance
Shall be forever. . . .*

Emma walked numbly toward the group of mourners. Someone picked up a rough wooden cross and pushed it into the dirt at one end of the mound. Somebody else picked up a gold-braided hat and hung it on an arm of the cross.

*For such as be blessed of Him
Shall inherit the earth. . . .*

There was a mist across Emma's eyes. Through it she stared at the crude lettering: VESEY, J.—LT., U.S.A. It couldn't be. It wasn't *possible*. Just minutes before she'd been hurrying to see him, to meet this man who'd meant so much to her—more than she'd ever realized. Emma added numbers—James must have been about thirty. Only three decades, and all that was left was a dirt mound lying at her feet like a grim joke. Time was a cheat. Now she'd never smile with him, or hear his voice, or warm his laughter.

*Wait on the Lord and keep His way,
And He shall exalt thee
To inherit the land . . .*

Emma turned away feeling sick, the chaplain's words trailing after her. Her mouth was sour with the taste of pain. Slowly it turned to anger. There would be thousands of Veseys before this was over—thousands dead before the country was whole again. When she enlisted, she'd pictured herself starting on a fine, glorious adventure. Her way had seemed so safe and secure. But all that was a myth. In war there was no safety. Dirt mounds covered dreams as well as corpses.

“Took a musket ball in his neck. Dead by the time they brought him in . . .”

Something began to stir in Emma. The imp was coming back to life, whispering, taunting her. For a while, she'd felt very pleased with her masquerade, even a little smug. Now those feelings were passing, and old fires were starting to smolder.

Fighting back tears, Emma stumbled blindly toward the hospital. Her path took her near a small cabin where the chaplain, Major Butler, lived with his wife. Emma knew Mrs. Butler, who often came to the hospital to visit patients and bring them treats from her kitchen. Emma and the older woman had become friends. Now, as she passed the cabin, some instinct drew her toward the front door. Suddenly she needed to talk, to see a kind face and hear a friendly voice. Distraught and barely aware of what she was doing, Emma stopped and knocked. Mrs. Butler opened the door, took one look at the young soldier standing there, and drew him inside.

“Sit down, Franklin. Make yourself comfortable,” she said, staring at Emma curiously. “I'll get us some hot coffee.”

Emma drank the coffee gratefully, leaned back in her chair, and closed her eyes.

“Right sad 'bout Lieutenant Vesey . . . Right sad 'bout Lieutenant Vesey . . .”

All at once the tears came. Between her sobs she told Mrs. Butler about James—their friendship, her running to meet him, the shock of seeing the sad little grave. Emma's feelings overwhelmed her.

Once started, she just couldn't stop—in next to no time, out poured the rest of her secret. She talked about her need to be in the war, about posing as a man, and confessed her true name and identity. With a rush of relief, she blurted out everything that had been bottled up inside for so long.

Mrs. Butler listened wide-eyed. "I declare," she murmured, half to herself. "I declare . . ." She came over, bent down, and put her arm around the young woman's shoulder.

"Franklin—I mean Emma—I expect you were sent to me today. Things like this aren't accidents. It's too heavy a burden for you to carry alone—time you had a friend and an ally."

Emma blinked in surprise and relief. "You're not going to turn me in?"

The chaplain's wife laughed. "My dear, I come from pioneer people. In '41 my folks drove a team and wagon from Independence clear to the Willamette Valley. We farmed the land when it was scarce more than a wilderness. That kind of thing puts iron in a woman." Mrs. Butler's eyes twinkled. "I confess, at first I was taken aback by your story. Lord, yes. But I do think you're a wonder." The gray-haired woman smiled and gazed out the little window. "If I were your age, I'm not sure I wouldn't try the same fool thing myself."

Staring at Mrs. Butler, Emma realized it wasn't finished after all; her secret was still safe. Hardly believing her good fortune, she wiped her nose, grinned at her new friend, and began talking again, filling in the details of her story.

By the time she left the cabin, Emma felt much calmer. For a long time she'd been isolated and cut off; now she could share her secret with Mrs. Butler, a partner as strong as she herself. But grief still burned inside, and the imp voice was getting bolder, stirring her discontent. Until this morning she'd been satisfied being Frank Thompson, Union field nurse. Now it all seemed so trivial. She had a fierce need to do more, to strike a real blow for the cause. She wanted to avenge James's death—she *had* to. But how?

Emma fretted, but the glimmer of an answer came a few days later. A rumor sped through camp that one of the Union's key spies had been captured in Richmond and shot. McClellan had counted on this agent. Now the army was without eyes and ears, and someone had to fill the gap. Pressure from Washington was building, but the general refused to gamble. He insisted on more information before pushing ahead.

Busy with her chores, Emma took in all the talk and gossip. The more she heard, the more her interest grew. An idea was slowly forming—a wild notion pushing its way into her awareness. When she saw what was happening, she was alarmed. The whole idea was mad. A fantasy. Downright impossible! Yet here was the nagging voice again. Coaxing. Whispering. Daring her to take new risks.

*Trust also in Him and
He shall bring it to pass. . . .*

Emma's faith was strong. Weakness wasn't in her nature. She'd faced fear many times—and was ready to face it again. Of course the whole thing might take more grit than she could muster. But how could you know the limits of your courage if you never put it to the test?

That night Emma hardly slept, tossing and turning, plagued by dreams of graves and crude crosses. At dawn she awoke with a start, and her mind was crystal clear. She had her answer: She would try the impossible.

March 23, 1862

When Emma told her friend she wanted to become a spy, Mrs. Butler almost dropped the pan of biscuits she was holding.

Quickly she sat Emma down and tried hard to discourage her. It was one thing, she pointed out, to take risks as a battlefield nurse, but plain foolhardy to go *begging* for danger. The chaplain's wife did her very best, cajoling and arguing. But she sensed that it was of no use; she knew Emma was strong-willed, daring, dedicated—and stubborn as an old razorback hog.

Emma listened politely, her jaw set, her lips in a tight smile. She couldn't understand her friend's reaction. "I 'preciate your sentiments," she said at last, "but my mind's made up, Mrs. Butler. I'll do—if they'll have me."

Faced with an irresistible force named Emma Edmonds, the chaplain's wife surrendered. "I expect you've taken leave of your senses." She sighed. "But I understand; people do what they must. If you're real set on this, at least the major and I can help."

Major Butler wasn't in on Emma's big secret. As far as he knew, she was simply young Frank Thompson, idealistic and hotheaded, and the chaplain agreed to serve as sponsor. He borrowed some army manuals from headquarters, and Emma spent her free hours learning about weapons, fortifications, makes of cannons, and types of projectiles. Then the major sent Private Thompson's name in to McClellan's chief of staff.

The next day young Thompson faced a panel of stern-faced officers. They fired a barrage of questions at him until he felt like a fort under attack. They examined his background, experience, and knowledge of armaments. They probed his beliefs, patriotism, and feelings about the Union cause. They even put him through a "phrenological test." A solemn young captain, his cuffs turned up, felt the curves and bumps on Private Thompson's head. Finally he gave the candidate high ratings for "bravery, secretiveness, and good character."

After a brief conference, the committee agreed to give the young soldier a chance. Thompson stood and took the special oath for secret agents, then met the adjutant who would be his contact and supply him with funds.

The officer came straight to the point. "You'll have a free hand, Thompson. Work behind the rebel lines any way you can. Get the facts we need and bring 'em back—plus yourself—in one piece. Be ready to start in three days."

Nervous and excited, Emma talked over her next step with Mrs. Butler. To move freely in enemy territory, she'd need a good disguise. The simplest, of course, would be to wear a Confederate uniform; she could easily piece one together from the prisoners. But that was risky. The Southern troopers would be curious. They might ask about her hometown, or what outfit she belonged to, or the names of her officers. One false answer and she'd be finished.

Thinking about it, Emma soon found a better option. Everyone knew that the Confederate armies used a great many slaves to do heavy labor. Black work gangs dug trenches, built roads, cleaned stables, hauled wood and water. There were slaves everywhere—useful, but totally ignored. To rebel eyes, all slaves were faceless beings, invisible men who were hardly ever noticed. It was the perfect disguise. Black skin would be Emma's armor.

Once decided, she hitched a wagon ride to Fort Monroe to buy what she needed at the post store. She put together her outfit quickly—except for one important item. To look convincing, she'd have to have a black woolly wig.

Parked on a bench outside the store, Emma wracked her brain, trying to remember where she had seen such a wig before. Then it came to her. While she was in Washington, she'd gone to a minstrel show. These shows, very popular in the capital, were performed by white men with their faces blackened. The "darkies" amused the crowd with songs, dances, banjo strumming, and lively humor. On stage they were dressed in fancy suits with big bow ties—and they all wore black woolly wigs.

Private Thompson jumped up and ran toward the docks where ships, cruising Chesapeake Bay, linked Fort Monroe with the Union capital. The dockside was chaotic with new troops arriving, supplies being unloaded, and men driving army mules ashore from transport barges. He was in luck: The official mail boat for Washington was about to leave. Pushing through the crowd, he found the captain, pressed money into his hand, and asked him to buy a minstrel wig in the city.

The grizzled old sailor looked surprised. He'd been bribed at times to bring back whiskey, food, or special brands of tobacco—but a minstrel wig? What in tarnation was *that* all about? Sensing his suspicion, Franklin snapped, "Secret orders from General McClellan, and not a word to anyone!" At the commander's name, the boatman nodded nervously and touched his cap. Yes, yes, of course. He'd find a darky wig, a real good one, and bring it along the following afternoon.

By the third day—the adjutant's deadline—Emma had her wig. She gave Dr. Hodes a memo from headquarters detaching her from the hospital for "special assignment." Then, carrying her gear, she hurried to the cabin where her fellow conspirator was waiting. "Franklin Thompson" had served Emma well; a new personality was about to be born.

March 29, 1862

Emma stared into Mrs. Butler's mirror and broke out laughing. Looking out at her was a total stranger—a small, gawky, brown-skinned man with a crown of woolly black hair. He had on a gray flannel shirt, patched overalls, and a pair of ancient shoes several sizes too big. Around his neck he wore an old red bandanna.

Hands on her hips, Mrs. Butler regarded her friend critically. "I declare, Em, you look more like a darky than any I've seen in these parts."

Emma studied her image anxiously. "I pray the rebels think so, Mrs. Butler." She leaned forward and examined her skin. "I tried different kinds of colorings like iodine and tobacco juice, but the best was silver nitrate. I found some in the hospital, and made a solution of it in water." She held up a worn canvas sack. "I'm taking some with me in a little bottle, case I start to fade."

The chaplain's wife came over and put an arm around Emma's waist. In the mirror, wise old eyes gazed into lively young ones. "I knew I'd never get you to change your mind," she said quietly. "Knew it all along. You're a stubborn one and you'll do what you have to do. But stubborn's different from foolhardy. Be careful, girl."

Emma nodded. "I will, I promise."

Mrs. Butler slipped a packet into Emma's canvas sack. "Some corncakes and slices of dried apple," she said. "Lord knows what you'll find to eat over *there*."

Emma smiled. Mrs. Butler made it sound as if she were going to California instead of a few miles up the peninsula. She swallowed hard and suddenly didn't trust herself to speak. Turning, she flung her arms around her gray-haired friend and supporter, holding her tight in a brief, desperate embrace. Then, with a wave, she darted out.

Leaving the cabin, Emma hurried along the row of officers' billets toward the headquarters tent at the far end. She started past the field hospital and, on a sudden impulse, popped her head in through the open tent flap. Dr. Hodes was sitting there, working at the cluttered table. He seemed weary.

Emma deepened her voice.

"'Scuse me, suh," she said.

The doctor looked up in annoyance. He stared at her for a long moment, while she held her breath. "Yes? What do *you* want?"

"Mah name Cuff, suh," Emma replied. "Lookin' fo' Mistuh Prahvit Thompson. Ah b'lieve he wuk here?"

"*Supposed* to work here," grumped Dr. Hodes, frowning at his intruder. "Don't know where the fool is. Gone off on some kind of special mission, I believe."

Emma bobbed her head and grinned. "Yassuh. He say, suh, he gon' gimme a ol' shirt."

The doctor turned back to his paperwork. "Well, I can't help you, Cuff. You'd better go along—and if you see Frank Thompson, tell him to get back here where he's needed."

"Yassuh, doctuh. Ah see 'im, ah tell 'im."

Emma ducked out of the tent and hurried on, suppressing a big grin. For weeks now she'd been with Doc Hodes, working at his side every single day. If *he* couldn't see through her disguise, maybe it would work after all.

Headquarters was the usual scene of bustle and activity, with aides and messengers hurrying to and fro. The adjutant, pacing to one side, was waiting for her. Emma stepped up and saluted, and he gaped in surprise.

“Thompson? By God, that’s quite a rig you’ve dreamed up.” He shook his head admiringly. “I’ll wager you’d fool old Jeff Davis himself.”

The officer pulled out a fat brass watch and popped open the cover. “Time to get started. My orders are to take you through our pickets. After that, you’ll be on your own.”

Together they cut east through the sprawling encampment, and Private Thompson had to step lively to keep up with the adjutant’s brisk strides. Darkness was beginning to settle over the tents and cooking fires were being lit. Overhead, the first faint stars of evening winked on.

In silence, they made their way through the Company K bivouac area, past a battery of menacing siege guns. They circled behind the cavalry stables, where she could hear the stamping of horses. Somewhere a trooper began playing a sad song on a harmonica. Emma knew the words well.

*Farewell, Mother, you may never
Press me to your heart again.
But, oh, you’ll not forget me Mother,
If I am numbered with the slain. . . .*

Ten more minutes of walking brought them to the outer edge of the Union position, with the York River on its right flank. A sentinel, hardly more than a boy, raised his rifle and barred their way.

“Stand easy,” the adjutant said. “We’re passing this man through the lines, orders of General McClellan.”

The sentinel recognized the officer, saluted, and continued on his rounds. Emma and her escort found a low ridge and scrambled to the top. The adjutant turned and patted her shoulder. “From here you’re on your own, Thompson,” he said in a whisper. “I wish you good luck.” Then he melted into the night.

Emma drew a long breath, suddenly feeling lonely and vulnerable. She bent down and shoved some scraps of paper and a stub of pencil into her shoe. She’d need them to jot down the information the general wanted. Her hands and face were beginning to itch—probably due to the nitrate solution—but there was nothing she could do about it now. Crouching on the ridge, she stared across the valley toward the enemy lines. The lush fields had all been burned to stubble, to give the Yorktown defenders a clear line of fire. But some huckleberry bushes and several stands of loblolly pine still survived. She could use them for cover.

Beyond the trees, Emma made out distant campfires—the outer pickets of the Army of Northern Virginia. Getting through this screen of rebel guards was her next challenge. She studied the pattern of the fires. They glowed and beckoned, sending a welcome and a warning.

The melancholy song crept into her thoughts again.

*Just before the battle, Mother,
I am thinking most of you.
While upon the field were waiting
With the enemy in view. . . .*

The enemy was certainly in view—waiting just across the valley—and for the first time since she’d enlisted, Emma felt a creeping fear. Up till now, she’d hardly had time to fret or even think. She’d been too busy fantasizing and playacting. Now it was different—now her survival was at stake. Mrs. Butler’s words came back to her. Lord, what was she doing here in this crazy disguise? Why had she given up her safe, comfortable spot at the hospital with Dr. Hodes to flirt with danger?

Bother—she knew perfectly well what she was doing and why. Hadn’t she ached to avenge James’

death? To support Lincoln and the cause, body and soul? To be a participant in history, not just a bystander? The imp voice was always there, prodding and urging her on. She could no more ignore it than she could stop herself from breathing.

*Mother, hear the cry of freedom,
How it swells upon the air!
Yes, we'll rally 'round the standard,
Or we'll perish bravely there. . . .*

Off to the left came a crackle of sniper fire. The sudden noise startled her, snapping her back to reality. Enough morbid thoughts—she'd act now and worry about it later.

A half-moon crept over the horizon, giving just enough dim light to help her. Narrowing his eyes, "Cuff" planned his route across the dangerous open zone. Then he whispered a quick prayer, scrambled down the ridge, and started across the valley.

March 30, 1862

It took Cuff several hours to get across the open zone. He would wait for scattered clouds to drift over the moon, then dart from bushes to trees, trees to bushes. Twice he heard the sharp crack of a musket but didn't know if he was the target, so he kept going. Drawing closer to the enemy lines, he watched and waited. The pickets plodded back and forth between the campfires, following a pattern. He timed himself carefully, then crouched and raced through a gap. A rebel sentry was only sixty feet away, but never noticed the lone black slave.

Inside the rim of defenses, Cuff could relax a bit. He trudged for a while through the woods until he reached a weedy footpath. The moon was gone now, and he decided to wait until morning before moving on.

Wearily Cuff crawled under a bush, stretched out, and soon fell asleep.

*The yams will grow, the cotton blow,
We'll have the rice 'n' corn.
Oh, never you fear, someday you'll hear
Ol' Gabriel sound his horn. . . .*

The sound of voices awakened Cuff. He peered through the bushes and saw some black men coming down the path. They were singing softly, carrying pans and buckets. Cuff was worried. Would the men accept him? He swallowed nervously—it was time to find out. He got up, brushed himself off, and stepped into view, wearing a sheepish grin. The slaves stopped in surprise at the sight of this small dark stranger who had popped out of nowhere.

Cuff nodded and scuffed his shoes. "Mawnin'," he said. "Mah name Cuff. Ah'm lost."

The men, dressed in old clothes like his own, grouped around, curious but friendly. They were taking breakfast to the sentries out on the picket lines. One of the men handed Cuff a piece of army biscuit and a tin cup of hot coffee.

"We be headin' back to camp in a little while," he said. "You want to come 'long, jus' wait here."

Thanking him, Cuff wolfed the biscuit and coffee and sat down again. Half an hour later, the slaves returned. He handed over the empty cup and fell into step with the party. There were eight of them; nobody would notice one more black face. The men shambled along silently, Cuff walking with them. They reached the outskirts of Yorktown and the rebel encampment, where they headed toward a kitchen tent and went inside. Cuff held back, unsure of himself. He stood shuffling his feet, wondering what to do next. But before he could decide, a Confederate officer on a roan horse came trotting up. He stared at Cuff suspiciously.

"Why aren't you working?" he asked. "Who do you belong to?"

Cuff bobbed his head and put on his foolish smile. "Don' b'long to nobody, mastuh. Ah's free, far as ah know. Wantin' to go to Richmond, find some wuk."

The officer frowned. "There are no free niggers here," he growled. "Not while there's a Confederate army in Virginia." He turned and shouted to a trooper: "Sergeant! Put this cheeky rascal to work, and keep him at it. If he turns lazy, give him a good lesson with the lash!"

Spurring his horse, the officer wheeled and trotted off. The sergeant beckoned and Cuff followed dutifully. Passing through camp, he shuffled along with eyes half closed. But under the drooping, lazy lids, the eyes took sharp note of everything. The vast area reminded him very much of his own

encampment, except that here the soldiers were dressed in gray instead of blue.

South of the city, the rebels were building defenses to hold off the Federal army. There was a long parapet over eight feet high, and scores of slaves were at work on it. Some were digging trenches and gun pits. Others pounded double rows of stakes into the ground. A third group filled this space with mountains of rocks and gravel. The sergeant pushed a shovel at Cuff and pointed to a large wheelbarrow. Cuff's duty was to fill the barrow with gravel, push it up an inclined plank to the top of the parapet, and dump the ballast between the stakes.

Even for a brawny man it would have been hard work. For small, slim Cuff, it soon became torture. Under a hot sun, shoulders aching, Cuff filled barrow after barrow. Then he forced each load up the tilted plank. The plank was narrow and wobbly, and sometimes the heavy barrow tipped off. When that happened he had to climb down, refill it, and start over again. The men around him worked steadily. Now and then they traded a little banter or broke into a soulful hymn. But most of the time they worked in sad silence.

Noontime brought a chance to rest and eat. Cuff picked up a tin bowl and spoon and joined the long line, glad to be free of the wheelbarrow. He soon discovered that the white troopers ate well, but slave food was poor—mostly cornbread and gruel, with a bit of dried beef now and then. Later the work gangs went back to their drudgery. The sergeants who supervised them were harsh men: They bullied and threatened, and any slave who slowed down felt the sharp pain of a leather lash. Cuff worked as hard as he could, hoping to avoid attention, and by midafternoon his hands were raw and bleeding. By the sun went down at last and work on the fortifications ended for the day.

After a skimpy supper, the slaves were allowed one hour to wander around freely. Then they had to report to an area at the far end of camp. Cuff took good advantage of his free time, roaming the fort, noting the types of artillery, memorizing the layout of the trenches. He tried to remember everything so he could jot it down later.

At curfew hour, all the blacks were herded into a compound for the night, and Cuff saw with relief that there were no white overseers here. The slaves broke up into small groups. They sprawled under scraps of canvas hung from branches, and started fires to boil water for acorn coffee. Cuff with his brown skin had been accepted completely, and during the day had become friendly with some of the others. But now he needed privacy. A kindly old man handed him a ragged blanket, which he took gratefully. Then he found an isolated tree, sat down, and tried to ignore his aches and pains.

When all was quiet and nobody was watching, Cuff drew out his slips of paper and began to write in the dark. He listed the artillery he had seen on his walk: twenty-five rifled three-inch cannons . . . eleven Dahlgren guns . . . twenty-nine thirty-two pounders . . . seven siege howitzers . . . fourteen heavy mortars . . . thirteen Columbiads . . . many light weapons. He made a rough diagram of the new earthworks, then pushed all the slips back under the lining of his shoe.

Cuff was pleased. His fears had faded. His information was just what McClellan needed. He'd spend one more day here with the enemy, then figure a way—somehow—to get back to the Union lines. Lying on his blanket, Cuff suddenly thought of his color. In the gloom, he slipped the bottle of brown solution from his sack and dabbed his face and hands. Then, munching some of Mrs. Butler's apple slices, he settled down for the night.

Twenty yards away, a group of slaves sat hunched over a campfire. As Cuff dozed they started singing in low soft voices. It was the very hymn he'd heard early that morning in the woods. Quietly he sat up and crept closer to the firelight.

*Praise and thanks! The Lord he come
To set His people free . . .
Some may call it Day of Doom,*

For us 'tis Jubilee . . .

~~*The Lord who bade the Red Sea part*~~

Is now as strong as then . . .

He say one word, and all the slaves

Will be the Lord's free men. . . .

Others joined in the chorus, their voices blending in subtle harmony.

The yams will grow, the cotton blow,

We'll have the rice 'n' corn.

Oh, never you fear, someday you'll hear

Ol' Gabriel sound his horn.

After a while Cuff slipped back to his blanket under the tree. He would need his rest for the day ahead. Lulled by the melodic voices, he fell asleep at last—his head filled with thoughts of work and sweat, of hope and faith, and the courage of black men.

March 31, 1862

Early in the morning, the slaves were roused, given a quick breakfast, and sent to their work areas. Cuff felt better, but his hands were still torn and blistered. He knew he couldn't last an hour digging gravel on the parapet and wrestling with the barrow. But if he complained to one of the guards, he'd be asking for trouble. Looking around, he saw a husky young man who was one of the kitchen squad. Cuff fell into step with him, showed him his hands, and explained the problem. The young man was sympathetic and agreed to exchange places with Cuff for the day. To seal their bargain Cuff gave him a small rusty penknife that he'd brought in his sack. Smiling with pleasure, the man headed toward the trenches while Cuff joined the slaves waiting at the cook tent.

The spy's second day behind the lines was much less painful than the first. He was assigned to a group that took meals to the crews manning the heavy artillery. Since these posts were spread out along the Confederate front, it gave him a chance to learn more about the fortifications. He eavesdropped on the conversations around him and learned that fresh reinforcements were expected. He also heard that General Robert E. Lee had visited Yorktown and didn't think the defenses would hold against a strong Union attack. All of this, he knew, would be of interest at McClellan's headquarters.

During the afternoon, while carrying pots and buckets with a slave named Jabez, Cuff saw a long row of fat logs lined up behind banks of earth. They were pointed south, and soldiers were busy painting them black.

"What's them logs fo'?" he asked his companion.

"They's Quaker guns," Jabez replied.

Cuff didn't have to playact—his puzzlement was real.

"Ah never heard o' no Quaker guns befo'."

Jabez grinned. "Quakers is ver' religious people, Cuff Peace-lovin'. They don't hold with no wars. They won't do no shootin', see? An' neither will them guns."

Studying the painted logs, Cuff realized how convincing they would look when seen through a Union telescope. He made a mental note to pinpoint the fake cannons on his secret map.

Several hours later, he and Jabez were filling canteens at a pump for one of the gun crews. Nearby, he noticed a heavysset gentleman in dark civilian clothes talking to a group of officers. Cuff recognized him as a peddler—supposedly a good friend and strong Union sympathizer. He often came to the Union camp with his wagon, staying for hours on some pretext or other. Straining his ears, Cuff caught some of the man's conversation. He was so surprised he had to fight to keep himself from spinning around and staring. The man was a clever Confederate spy who picked up data on his peddle trips, then passed it to the rebels! Bending over the pump, Cuff heard him boasting of his success in luring Union patrols into ambushes, causing the death of many.

The young woman thought of James Vesey and felt herself go hot with pain and anger. The rebel agent was talking away, unaware that he was doomed—but Emma wasted no sympathy on him. Her cause was just, she had a job to do, and fate had thrust this turncoat into her hands. She'd report the peddler to headquarters; his next visit to the Union lines would be his last visit anywhere.

Slowly the long day passed. Then the sun dipped to the horizon and Cuff began making plans. He had a lot of valuable information and had to get back as quickly as possible, but it wouldn't be easy. Slipping into the rebel camp was simpler than finding a way to break out of it. Except for his hour of liberty, he had no time alone, and at night he'd be penned with the other blacks in their compound. If

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