
CONFRONTATION

Jacob Gibson

There's so much work to catch up on after you've been sick in bed. The weeds have taken over the garden. Before the bluecoats invaded, vegetables were starting

to sprout, but now it's hard to find them among the tangle. I attack the weeds with hoe, spade and garden fork. The pile of debris grows higher. I like this kind of work. You can do it alone, with no one to interrupt your thoughts. From somewhere behind me comes the slow clop of horse hooves. The sound stops.

"Jake?"

I spin around.

"What are you doing here?"

"Corn, I've been riding forever." Eli eases himself gingerly to the ground. "Got a bit of sleep at Twelve Mile Creek, but I'm bone tired, I tell ya."

"I said, what are you doing here?"

"Had to report to the colonel first thing. This here's Buttercup. She needs a place to stay."

"She can stay. You can't."

"Jake?"

"You've got some nerve coming back."

"Jake, what's wrong?"

"What's *wrong*? I ought to thrash you!"

"Hey, you got no call to be so vexed."

"No call! You betrayed us, Eli. You arrested Mr. Willcocks and turned him in. Now get out. I don't want to see you again."

"Jake . . ."

"I stood by you, Eli. I risked everything for you. And the minute my back was turned, you betrayed us all."

“Jake, listen.”

“All this time I thought we were blood brothers. We swore an *oath*. And all along you were just a snake ready to strike.”

“Jake, that ain’t fair!”

“Who else are you going to turn in? Me, because I met with Captain Norton? Abby, because she meets with Henry? You going to arrest him too? Why not just send us all to jail and take the house over?”

“What?”

“I should have let them try you for treason. I should have let them tear you apart at General Brock’s funeral. And now you’ve had them *arrest* Mr. Willcocks.”

“What did you say back there? About Miss Abby?”

“Don’t change the topic. All along, William and Henry have been telling me I should stay away from you. They said you weren’t to be trusted. Said you were a bad seed. A weed. And now Mr. Willcocks pays for my bad judgment.”

“What’s he got to do with Miss Abby?”

“Keep Abby out of it, Eli,” I snap. “This is about Mr. Willcocks.”

“What about him?”

“*What about him!* You *arrested* him.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Eli, I *saw* you. From upstairs.”

“Well, all right, I did.”

“There! Now get out and — ”

“But he *asked* me to, Jake.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“It’s the truth. I swear on my sweet ma.”

“I don’t trust a thing you say.”

“Jake, Mr. Willcocks *told* me to arrest him. He gave me his pistols and told me to march him to see Colonel Scott.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Jake, he’s come over to our side.”

“How dare you!”

“It’s the truth. He’s fighting in our army. He’s got some pull with our generals, I tell you. Leastwise, he did before the generals got captured. Reckon he’s still got pull with Colonel Scott — the colonel seemed right impressed with the letter I delivered.”

“I don’t believe it. Where’s Mr. Willcocks now?”

“Well, hopefully he’s convinced Colonel Burn to attack.”

“He’s giving advice to the *enemy*?”

“Corn, Slim, if he’d been in charge, we would’ve won the battle. Him or that Major Smith feller.”

“No . . . ” I sit down on the pile of weeds. “He wouldn’t. He . . . ” But Mr. Willcocks was certainly acting strange that day. And I *did* see him riding off with their staff. I thought they had him under *arrest*.

“You aright, Jake? You still sick?”

I shake my head. But my hand is shaking too.

It feels like my whole insides are shaking.

“But what about Miss Abby?” he says. “Is she in trouble? Jake?”

I look up at him. What’s he talking about?

“You said something,” he continues. “A few minutes ago. About her getting arrested. And about Lug.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Yes, you did.”

“I didn’t mean anything.”

“Jake, I heard it. You said I was going to arrest Lug.”

“Must have been about someone else.”

“Jake . . .”

“Just forget about it. Please?”

“Jake, is she sweet on Lug?”

I swallow hard, but I can’t get rid of that lump in my throat. “Yes,” I whisper.

“Corn, Jake. Why would she like a feller like . . . like . . . ?”

“At least Henry’s *loyal*.”

“Jake Gibson, what are you saying? You just come right out and tell me straight. You think I *ain’t* loyal?”

“You’re one of *them* now.”

“When it comes to you and Miss Abby, I ain’t nothing *but* loyal, Jacob Gibson. I’d slay dragons for her. I’d do it for you too.”

“You take your orders from Colonel Scott!”

“That don’t matter.”

“How can you say that?”

“This war is gonna be over soon. You and your family’s gonna need friends like me.”

“Well, what’s going to happen if Abby marries Henry? You going to be loyal to him too?”

“Him? Never! He don’t deserve her!”

“That’s not for you to decide. It’s her choice.”

“He was there, Jake — on the battlefield. And he was gonna kill me. If I ever come across him again, it’s gonna be my duty as a soldier to take *him*. I’ll take him any way I have to. I’ll do anything that needs to be done. And maybe Miss Abby won’t forgive me — ever. And maybe you won’t either. But I know him, Jacob Gibson. He’s the one that can’t be trusted! And you know I’m right.”

We stand there for a moment, glaring at each other.

“Maybe you’d better billet with a different family,” I say.

“Maybe I should, Jake. But that ain’t my choice. There’s a war on, and I got my orders. From Colonel Scott himself. But just so’s you know, I ain’t gonna bother your family no more. I’ll stay in the barn. With Buttercup.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

Part IV

THE CHALLENGE

June 7–22, 1813

RIDING WITH THE DOCTOR

Eli McCabe

There's spiders up there in the rafters. Do they come down into the straw at night? You keep up there, spiders. We'll stay down here. Right, Buttercup?

She don't hear me — she's asleep. She can sleep standing up. If those Connecticut fellers could've slept standing up, imagine the surprise we would've given them lobsterbacks.

Except for the spiders, I don't mind the barn. I ain't goin' back in that house again, not ever. No more lessons from Mrs. Gibson on how to hold a knife and fork. No more twisting myself into knots trying not to stare at Miss Abby. No sir, I'm staying out here.

There's lantern light coming toward me across the yard. Hope it's not you, Jake. I ain't in the mood to argue. Or maybe you're coming to apologize, but I ain't in the mood for that either.

"Eli?"

"Miss Abby?"

"What are you doing out here? Come into the house."

"Sorry, Miss, but it's probably better I stay out here."

"What on earth for?"

I can't meet her eyes. She's slipped a coat over her nightdress, but she's showing a lot more leg than I've seen on anyone but my sister.

"Jacob said you were upset," she tries again.

"He sent you out here?"

"He says we should leave you alone."

"Reckon he knows what he's talking about." That came out mean. "Sorry, Miss Abby. I just don't want to be a burden. You've been kind and all, but I don't belong."

"Of course you belong."

"I'm with the other side."

"You're a friend and our guest, and I wish you would come back to the house." She hangs the lantern from a nail and sits down in the straw. "I hear there was a battle."

I don't want to talk about that battle – not with her, that's for sure. Lug nearly shot me.

"Miss Abby . . . "

"You can call me Abby. I'd like that."

"So, Abby – "

"That sounds better, doesn't it?"

"Is it true? You got a sweetheart?"

She sucks in her breath. "Did Jacob tell you that?"

"He didn't mean to. It just sorta came out. Miss Abby – Abby – I know women's a civilating influence and all, but I have to tell you, I think you'd be far

better off civilating someone kinder. Someone who'd care for you more."

"So Jacob told you his name?"

"He didn't mean to. Miss Abby, Henry's got fine clothes and la-de-da manners. He probably knows how to hold his knife and fork right. But he ain't a good man."

"Eli, I think you must trust me to rely on my own judgment on that matter."

"He ain't good enough for you." We let that hang there awhile.

"Will you come back into the house?" she says at last, but her voice ain't as warm as it was before.

I drop my eyes and shake my head. The lantern light casts shadows as she leaves the barn. Inside the house, the light goes from window to window, up to her room, and then it goes dark like the others.

* * *

Before anyone stirs in the house, I saddle up Buttercup and report to Colonel Scott. He stands before his mirror with his face lathered.

"You *want* to go back to your regiment?"

"Yessir. I reckon you won't need me to report now that you have Mr. Willcocks."

He glowers at the mirror while he wipes the rest of the soap off his face. "I know someone who can use you more. You'll see Dr. Chapin."

A doctor? My saddle sores ain't *that* bad. But some horseman named Anderson fetches me. I expect we're going to go to the hospital at the English church, but we ride off in the other direction, through the camp, and report to a group of men on horseback.

A tall man in a major's uniform studies me. He's got a peculiar face: keen blue eyes that seem to cut and probe, bushy black eyebrows and a nose like a hawk's beak.

"You're McCabe?" He has a raspy voice. "I was expecting someone more . . . mature." He wheels his horse around, and we follow him at a trot.

"Where we going?" I ask Anderson.

"We're foraging," he says. "An army's gotta eat."

* * *

An army needs horses too, I reckon. Our job is to gather all the livestock we can find from the farms hidden away in the back roads. But since when did an army need silver candlesticks and trays?

We come to a place where there's cows, horses and pigs. The old man who owns the place takes a shot at us, but he's easily disarmed. The fellers want to string him up to an oak tree, but the doctor tells them to wait. The old man calls us "Yankee scum," and they think that's a fine joke. Then he sees me and he points. He's missing three fingers.

"*You!* You're the McCabe traitor. They should have hanged you last winter!"

This raises my measure in the minds of these fellers, but they still give me the job of digging up the spot where it looks like something's been buried. Dr. Chapin and the others help themselves to the man's moonshine still.

When I uncover a treasure, the fellers help themselves to the silverware and smash the china. Before we leave, they burn the old man's barn and his haystack. This ain't why I returned to the Canadas. This ain't what this war is supposed to be about.

With the sun getting low, we start herding the livestock back toward town. But there's one more farm. A young woman with a baby in her arms screams at us. The baby screams too. The woman says we wouldn't dare come around here if her husband were home. The fellers just laugh.

"We come from Pennsylvania," she shouts. "You got no cause to harm us."

The doctor turns to me. "That right, McCabe?"

"Yes, Doctor," I lie — because for the life of me, I don't know who she is. But I do feel mighty sorry for her. "In the election, her husband was with Mr. Willcocks. A big supporter."

The doctor tells us to ride on, and the fellers seem right disappointed. I reckon if we do any more of this foraging tomorrow, I'm going to recognize a lot more supporters of Mr. Willcocks.

We're driving the livestock toward the main road

when the doctor lifts his hand. We stop to listen: a distant rattling and clanking, as if the whole earth was shaking its pots and pans. I know that sound. It's the noise an army makes on the move. Dr. Chapin leaves some of the experienced drovers with the herd, and the rest of us set off at a canter and catch up with the army wagons.

"You see Injuns out there?" asks a driver. "They're right behind us."

"That's *us* behind you," says Dr. Chapin.

"You gotta hurry!" says the man. "They'll getcha for sure."

"We've seen no Indians."

"They're out there. I know it. Been chasing us all day. Don't leave me here, boys. You won't leave me back here to be picked off, will ya?"

Dr. Chapin sends some riders back to help guard the livestock. The rest of us stay with the army wagons. I listen for war whoops and gunfire, but hear only the twilight birds. When we reach Fort George, the gates are locked behind us. Corn, the whole army's in here!

"Eli McCabe!" calls a familiar voice. Mr. Willcocks pushes his way through.

"What's happened?" I ask him. "Was there another battle?"

"Panic, my boy," says Mr. Willcocks. "You see before you an army in panic."

"But we had them beat. You said so yourself."

He shakes his head in disgust. "Come. Let's go report to that colonel of yours."