

The Enlistment

Frances “Frankie” Blaine didn’t know exactly when she had fallen in love with Patrick McCoy. They had been friends for a long time. He had come to live at her mother’s boarding house after taking a job as the undertaker’s apprentice. That was in the summer of 1859. Later a shocking series of events in 1860-61 shook the Blaine household and the little town of Blaineton, New Jersey. It was Patrick’s interest in medicine and science that helped answer a crucial question, making a favorable impression on Frankie.

As the town and the boarding house recovered, a feeling began to grow between the two young people. And then one day he took her hand. It was in April of 1861. Patrick was eighteen years old, but Frankie would not be fifteen until June. It didn’t matter. They both knew something was happening.

Slowly Frankie came to the realization that she was in love with Patrick. Everything was full of hope, until that evening in early August of 1862 when Patrick told her something that made her gasp.

“What? Oh, Patrick! Why?”

He had just told her that he was going to enlist in the Army.

Patrick took a deep breath and thought: *Here we go.* This girl could be a handful – and yet that was one of the reasons he loved her. Frankie brimmed with life and she had a mind of her own.

The two were sitting on the porch steps. The sun had just begun to set and it was the time of day that Mr. Borden, the town’s Lamplighter, went down the street. Frankie and Patrick watched as he paused by the gas lamp in front of the Second Street Boarding House, lifted the pole, and lit the lamp.

When Mr. Borden smiled in their direction, the two waved at him. Once he had moved on, Frankie said, “I don’t want you to go, Pat.”

“Yeah, well,” he muttered, averting his eyes, “we have to win this war. I have a duty, you know.”

She bristled. “A duty? To do what? Die?”

The war had been going on between the states for a year and four months, and during that time Frankie had eagerly read her stepfather’s newspaper, *The Gazette*. She had learned all about battles in far-flung places like Fort Sumter, Boonville, Lexington, Bull Run, Leesburg, Hampton Roads, Shiloh, Williamsburg, and Chattanooga.

So many names. So many places. So many battles. So many deaths.

Frankie had been worried when Patrick went off with his employer, Mr. Meany, to help him set up a business to embalm soldiers’ bodies and send them home to grieving families. That had been in July of 1861.

The young couple had written to each other regularly and then, abruptly, in February of 1862, Patrick walked up the steps to the boarding house saying he had seen enough.

Ever since that time, he had taken over as the town's undertaker, a job that consisted mainly of building caskets and some other furniture, making arrangements for burial, and helping families lay loved ones out in the parlor for viewing prior to the funeral service. He seldom embalmed anyone. The process was expensive and wasn't needed since bodies normally were laid out on a cooling board.¹

But now Patrick, the boy she loved with all her heart and who had come home disgusted at the destruction and loss of life he had seen, was saying he wanted to join the army.

On one hand, Frankie was afraid for him. He could get wounded or, worse yet, killed. On the other, she felt oddly jealous. It was as if he was abandoning her again to go on an adventure, an adventure in which she could not participate. Patrick would be serving his country in a way that was denied to her.

Frankie never could understand why boys and men were afforded a wide range of opportunities while those available to women and girls were greatly limited. She knew all about the "sphere of men" – the rough but exciting world of politics, business, and war – and the "sphere of women" – the softer realm of religion, home, and family. And yet Frankie was well aware that women were every bit as resourceful, tough, and intelligent as men. It was no wonder that the spirited young woman chafed at her role in society.

And now her beau was going to war and she was supposed to sit back and meekly accept it.

Unlike her pacifist stepfather, who as a former Quaker rejected violence and aggression, Frankie had mixed feelings about this war. She understood that it had become a vast killing machine, but she hated slavery as well as the fact that the Union had been broken in two. She also understood that there seemed to be no way for the United States of America and the Confederate States of America to come to terms. Although she did not like the idea that a conclusion would involve one nation's loss and the other one's triumph, it seemed necessary for both sides had given up completely on talk.

As the elfin redhead brooded on Patrick's announcement, her young man was watching her. Every time his girl got cross, he could swear her eyes turned emerald green, and they were brilliant now, so she had to be furious. He finally said, "Look, Frankie, Edgar and I have been talking this over and –"

"Oh, I know you've been talking it over," she interrupted. "I've heard it at the supper table every night for months now." Frankie's eyes pooled with tears, making them all the brighter. "I thought you were back to stay. You said you'd had enough."

"I wasn't in the army then. You know that." Patrick was a fair-looking young man of nineteen, with a shock of hair the color of mahogany and eyes as blue as a deep sea. His long fingers laced together and then unlaced again. "But I have seen the worst that can happen to soldiers. I saw the bodies. I saw what a minié ball* and shrapnel can do to a man." He heaved a sigh. "Frankie, I was so disgusted with Mr. Meany. Embalming doesn't cost nearly as much as what

¹ The star indicates that the word can be found in the Glossary at the end of the book.

he charged. He was cheating soldiers' families, taking advantage of their grief and their need to see loved ones one last time. He wasn't helping anyone but himself." He glanced at her. "That's why I decided to leave. I went with him because I thought I could do something, to make a difference, to help in some way. But once I saw what was going on I realized Mr. Meany was making money from people's pain."

Frankie brushed unruly strands of red hair back from her face. Her hair always managed to escape both braid and bun, which annoyed her to no end but for which she could find no cure. "Look, Pat, if you join the army, you'll have a gun in your hands. You'll be shooting at the Johnnies* and they'll be shooting at you. What difference could *you* possibly make besides losing your life and making us all sad, too?"

"I don't know. I *do* know this, though, we all thought this thing was going to be over in a few months, but now there's no end in sight. Frankie, I can't sit back anymore and let someone else do the fighting." It was impossible to look at her when she was this distressed, so Patrick focused on the square across the street as he spoke. The parklike environs were filled now with dense summer greenery. Tree branches created a canopy of heavy leaves that during the day left dappled shade on the bushes and flower beds. Once upon a time, back in the town's early history, sheep used to graze on that patch of green.

As he gazed at the square Patrick suddenly realized that Frankie had no idea what things were like elsewhere. He had seen the devastation left by the war while working with Mr. Meany in Virginia and he still had nightmares about it. But Frankie, living in the safe little enclave of Blaineton, had no idea what was out there, other than what she read in the *Gazette*.

Across the square, as the sun set, the yellow glow of oil lamps began appearing in windows.

Patrick said, "You've got to understand, Frankie. I don't want to go. I want to stay here with you. But this is something I need to do. Edgar and I will be going down to Flemington to enlist at Camp Fair Oaks. If all goes well, they'll accept us and we'll join the Fifteenth New Jersey Volunteers. I'm sorry, but that's the way it's got to be."

Frankie's lower lip trembled.

Patrick braced himself. She was about to cry. He hated it when she cried.

"Will you be back after you enlist?" she asked in a quavering little voice, which nearly broke his heart.

Steeling himself, he said, "No. I hear they'll send us right into training."

At this, she leaped to her feet. "Oh, Patrick! How could you?" And, gathering up her skirts, she bolted off the porch and into the boarding house, slamming the door behind her.

Patrick threw his head back and emitted a frustrated groan.

"The course of true love never did run smooth," a voice behind him said.

Patrick looked over his shoulder at Eli Smith, Frankie's stepfather. "That from the Bible?"

"Shakespeare. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*." Using his cane, the portly man thumped over and eased himself down to sit on the step beside Patrick.

"I guess it doesn't matter if it's Shakespeare or the Bible. It's the truth," Patrick muttered. "Boy, is it ever true..."

"Yep." Eli's dark eyes peered out at the young man from behind wire rim eyeglasses. "So tell me. What happened?"

"Told her I was going to Flemington tomorrow to enlist and that I wouldn't be coming back home. That made her angry."

"Ah."

Confused, Patrick turned to the middle-aged man. "What should I do, Eli?"

"Well, you're dealing with a woman, albeit a young one. Reactions vary from one to the next, but I'd say give her some time, and then go and tell her how much you care about her and how sorry you are that your news upset her."

Patrick frowned. "But -"

"And," Eli continued, "tell her that you have a patriotic duty to perform and will try your level best to get home in one piece."

"Aw, she'll never accept that!"

"Fine. How about picking a nice bouquet of flowers and giving them to her?"

"That won't work, either, Eli. This is Frankie we're talking about, not her mother."

The older man laughed. "True. Mrs. Smith isn't quite that stubborn and she does love flowers." He paused a moment. "However, allow me to say that my lovely bride is not at all happy that Carson and I plan to cover the war for the *Gazette* by following your Regiment. Once we get permission from the government, that is. When she heard my news, Mrs. Smith said one word, 'Fine.' And then she walked away. Very quickly."

Patrick heaved a long sigh. "Edgar tells me Liddy is being stoic."

"Yep," Eli replied. "Lydia got the stoicism. Frankie got the excitability. They're sisters who are opposites in most ways."

"Why do you suppose women get so upset over us leaving?"

Eli glanced at the young man and smiled faintly. "Because they love us."

"Must be hard being a woman."

"Without a doubt."

Patrick stared out at Blaineton's darkening square. "Guess there aren't any easy decisions for any of us these days, huh?"

"With all due respect, my young friend, *most* decisions are not easy."

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After running all the way to her bedroom on the second floor of the boarding house's "new wing," a weeping Frankie threw herself upon the bed.

Chloe Strong could hear the other girl's heart-rending sobs all the way down the hall. When Frankie had run through the kitchen, the concerned ten-year-old got up from the table where she had been reading a book and followed her friend.

Chloe and her mother, Matilda, arrived at the boarding house in early 1861. They had escaped from a plantation in Virginia, stumbled upon an

Underground Railroad line*, and were smuggled north night after night by people of all kinds until they reached Blaineton.

As Chloe drew closer to Frankie's piteous sobs, she couldn't help but wonder what had happened. Sometimes the things her sixteen-year-old friend got upset over were confusing.

She stepped into the bedroom. "What's wrong?"

Frankie lifted her head and, eyes red-rimmed, stared at the girl with the black braids. "Patrick's going to join the army. He's enlisting tomorrow and won't be coming back."

Chloe walked to the bed and sat down beside her friend.

Frankie used the palm of her hand to wipe tears from her cheeks. "He could get killed. Oh, Chloe, what would I do if that happened?"

"I don't know. But we all lose people at one time or another and it's hard." After a couple seconds of silence, she murmured, "When they sold off my father and my brothers, I wanted to lay down and die."

The other girl sniffed and fumbled in her bodice* for a handkerchief.

Chloe looked earnestly into Frankie's watery eyes. "If I were you, I'd be proud Patrick's joining the army. If the rest of my family is still in Virginia and if the Union wins, we could be together again. That is," she added quietly, "if they're all still alive."

Touched, Frankie reached over and laid a hand on Chloe's arm. "I believe they are."

The younger girl offered up a brave smile.

Frankie took the moment of silence to blow her nose and then said, "You ever wish you could do something to help?"

Chloe nodded.

"Me too." After giving her nose one last swipe with the hankie, Frankie sighed. "I wish *I* could enlist."

"Girls can't be soldiers."

"No, I suppose not." Frankie sat up and brushed her hair back from her face. "But being a girl is so... inconvenient! I mean, why do we have to wear skirts? And those awful hoops and corsets!" She shuddered.

"Are they bad? I haven't worn hoops or a corset yet."

"They're both dreadful. With hoops, you have to be careful how you sit down or your skirts'll just fly up over your head and everyone'll be able to see your drawers.*"

Chloe laughed.

"And corsets!" Frankie rolled her eyes heavenward. "You get tied into them so tight you scarce can breathe. They're torture!" Getting control of herself, she sighed softly. "Oh, Chloe, there are so many things girls can't do. Have you ever thought about that?"

Chloe nodded. "Sure. And there're even more *colored* girls can't do."

Frankie frowned. "That's so unfair. Just because your skin is dark doesn't mean you're not clever. And just because we're both girls doesn't mean we're not strong and that we can't fight."

"We fight every day just to get our voices heard."

“That’s right! It’s like trying to join the conversation at dinner time. I have to work hard just to get a word in edgewise.” The redheaded young woman leaned toward her young friend. “You know, when I was your age, I used to play with a group of three boys – and I could best every one of them! Whatever they did, I did, too, and I did it better! I even got into fist fights, but I won those, too.” She rested back against the bed’s headboard. “They say women are the weaker sex, but I respectfully disagree.”

“Me, too,” Chloe opined. “My mommy is the strongest woman in the world and she knows it. That’s why she took the name ‘Strong,’ instead of the plantation master’s name.”

“And they say only men should fight,” Frankie muttered. “Ha! I bet I could shoot a gun if I had to.”

“I bet I could, too!” Chloe grinned. “Say, if we got hold of a gun we could go off to the woods and shoot at rocks and trees and things.” She blew out a wistful breath. “I wish colored girls could enlist...”

“Wouldn’t that be something,” Frankie mused. “Both of us in the army...”

“We probably could win the war single-handed!”

“Bet we could! And you and I would be the heroines of the war.”

The two collapsed into giggles. But once their laughter subsided, they fell into a reflective silence.

“Know what?” Chloe whispered.

“What?”

“I wish there wasn’t a war.”

Frankie nodded. “Me, too.”