

SOLDIER'S HEART



CHAPTER ONE

JUNE 1861

He heard it all, Charley did; heard the drums and songs and slogans and knew what everybody and his rooster was crowing.

There was going to be a shooting war. They were having town meetings and nailing up posters all over Minnesota and the excitement was so high Charley had seen girls faint at the meetings, just faint from the noise and hullabaloo. It was better than a circus. Or what he thought a circus must be like. He'd never seen one. He'd never seen anything but Winona,

Minnesota, and the river five miles each way from town.

There would be a shooting war. There were rebels who had violated the law and fired on Fort Sumter and the only thing they'd respect was steel, it was said, and he knew they were right, and the Union was right, and one other thing they said as well—if a man didn't hurry he'd miss it. The only shooting war to come in a man's life and if a man didn't step right along he'd miss the whole thing.

Charley didn't figure to miss it. The only problem was that Charley wasn't rightly a man yet, at least not to the army. He was fifteen and while he worked as a man worked, in the fields all of a day and into night, and looked like a man standing tall and just a bit thin with hands so big they covered a stove lid, he didn't make a beard yet and his voice had only just dropped enough so he could talk with men.

If they knew, he thought, if they knew he was but fifteen they wouldn't take him at all.

But Charley watched and Charley listened and Charley learned.

Minnesota was forming a volunteer regiment to go off and fight. It would have near on a thousand men when it was full, men from Winona and Taylor's Falls and Mankato and as far north as Deerwood and from the capital, St. Paul, as well.

A thousand men. And Charley had learned one thing about an army: One part of an army didn't always know the business of another part. The thousand men in the regiment would be in companies of eighty to a hundred men from each section and it would be hard for a man to know men who weren't from the same area.

Charley couldn't join where they knew him. Somebody would spill the beans and he'd get sent back or used as a runner or drummer boy. He wasn't any boy. He was going to sign to fight as a man and he knew a way to do it.

They would gather at Fort Snelling, up along

the Mississippi. All the companies from all the towns would assemble there before they went off to fight.

He'd just take him a walk, Charley would, take a walk by himself until he was at Fort Snelling and there he would lie about his age and sign up as a man and get him a musket and a uniform and go to see what a war was like.

"I won't get into any trouble, Ma," he said, wrapping some bread and cold potatoes and half a roast chicken in some tow cotton. "Plus they'll be paying me. I hear they give eleven dollars a month. I'll send most of it on home to you and Orren." Orren was his younger brother. "You can use the money and I won't be under your feet all the time. . . ."

"You aren't under my feet." She hated it when he talked fast. He always got his way when he talked fast. He'd smile and that cow-lick would stand up in the back and he'd talk fast and she couldn't keep him from what he

wanted. He was a good boy, as good as they came, but ever since his father, Paul, had been kicked to death by a horse gone mad when a swarm of bees landed on it, Charley only had to smile and talk fast and he got his way. "You haven't ever been under my feet."

"Same as," he said, shaking his head. "I'm always in the way. Best I go off and see what the big fuss is all about."

"You ain't but a boy."

"And I've got to be a man sometime. You've said it more than once yourself. Charley, you said, you've got to be a man. Well, here it is—my chance to be a man. A boy wouldn't go off to earn eleven dollars a month and wear a uniform. Only a man. So I'm going to be a man and do what a man can do."

And he won. She knew he would and he did and he took his bread and cold potatoes and chicken and left home walking down the road for Fort Snelling, and if she had known what

was to come of it, if she had known and could tell him what would come of it, she would have fought to drag him back and let the federal government keep their eleven dollars a month.

But she also had heard the songs and the slogans and seen the parades, had been to the meetings, and though it was her son Charley leaving she did not think it would be so bad. Nobody thought it would be so bad. Nobody thought it *could* be so bad. And all the officers and politicians and newspapers said it would be a month or two, no longer.

It would all be over by fall.

FORT SNELLING

They didn't have uniforms for him. There was a pair of black pants that were so short his calves showed, a pair of gray socks and a black felt hat. That was the uniform he received to go for a soldier. The socks and pants were stout but the hat was cheap and with the first little sprinkle it sagged around his head and drooped over his face.

They took his name. The colonel of the regiment read a list of things he couldn't do—desert his post, traffic with the enemy, steal from his fellow soldiers, act immoral or without de-

gency—and then he signed his name, told them he was eighteen and they didn't challenge it, and he was a soldier. He could read and write, Charley could, though he hadn't had much schooling. His ma had made him stick to reading and writing and he wrote her letters telling her of how it was to be a soldier.

"The food is bad," he wrote. "Beef so gamey dogs won't eat it, and hard beans. We bile the beans and use them for a meal, then use the leftover beans for soup the next day and on the third day take any cooked beans that are left, dry them and crush them and boil them for coffee. The men don't like them much and there's talk of hanging the commissary officer. It ain't but just talk, but some don't smile when they say it."

There wasn't much of a war, Charley decided early on, but there was a lot of playacting and once he got inside it he found it mostly boring.

They did something they called "drills" and

the "manual of arms," working in the hot sun in the compound area of Fort Snelling until they were soaked with sweat and Charley felt he could snap his rifle from left shoulder heft to right shoulder heft as good as any man in any army had ever done it.

They fired some but there wasn't much ammunition and when the sergeants tried to make them hit targets a quarter mile off, Charley nearly laughed. He'd hunted his whole life and knew about shooting, but the rifles they were issued were .58-caliber rifled muskets that fired a hollow-base bullet called a minié ball, named after the Frenchman who had invented it. The rifles thundered but lacked the flat crack of his smaller-bore hunting rifle, and he found that nearly a third of the time the bullet seemed to fly end over end and it was all he could do to hit a target fifty yards off. A quarter mile—over four hundred yards—seemed silly.

But they practiced anyway and stood and fired and dropped to one knee, and then the

next rank stood and fired and dropped. They reloaded by biting the end off the paper cartridge, pouring the powder down the bore and setting the bullet on the powder with the ramrod. Then a cap on the nipple, the hammer back and fire again—they said a man could do it three times a minute but Charley somehow never managed more than twice.

When they couldn't afford to expend any more live ammunition they practiced with empty rifles, again and again, until Charley was sick to death of the drilling and wheeling and marching and fake loading.

It would be different, he thought, if the leaders knew what they were doing. But the officers and sergeants had been civilians like the rest of the men and mostly had been elected by the men themselves and had to learn as they went along, using an army manual for close-order drill.

It seemed all they did was drill and sweat and listen to sergeants and corporals bellow at

them and as the weeks passed Charley grew more and more bored and was beginning to pay attention to his mother's letters. She had taken to thinking of the bad side of the war and was in fear that Charley would get killed and wrote three times a week.

"I know it ain't right," she wrote in one letter, "but you must think on coming home now. Just leave the army and walk home before they get you in a battle and shoot you apart. . . ."

Like most of the men, Charley doubted there ever would be a battle. Minnesota was mostly wild then, with Sioux and Chippewa Indians to the north and west, and there were some frontier forts on the edge of the wilderness to deal with any difficulties. These posts were manned by regular army troops, which Lincoln needed now to fight in the war, and there was talk in the ranks that the Minnesota volunteers would be used to replace the army troops at the frontier forts so the regular army could go east to fight.

"It'll be all mosquitoes and muck," a corporal named Massey said during a break in drilling one afternoon. "They don't let me go fight the rebels and I might pull foot and leave. . . ."

It was all rumor, of course, but what with his mother's letters (she wrote more often all the time of deserting), the boredom of constant drilling in the hot sun, and now the talk of being sent to relieve the frontier forts so that the regular army troops could go fight the Rebels (one company had already been started on the march north to the forts), Charley was nearly on the edge of leaving when on June 22 they were called into formation, ordered to get all their gear and marched to the river, where steamboats were waiting to take them to St. Paul.

There they marched through town with great fanfare. They still didn't have proper uniforms but they had all been issued red flannel

shirts, and though those shirts were as hot as original sin—as Charley heard them described—at least the men looked like a unit, marching with shouldered rifles and hats cocked forward. Girls waved flags and people yelled, "Go it, boys, get the Rebels!" and "Don't stop till you hit Richmond!"

In a short time they boarded other steamboats that took them south and east to La Crosse, Wisconsin, where trains were waiting for them.

It was all new to him. Charley had never ridden on a steamboat, never marched in a parade or had pretty girls wave flags for him and hand him sweets. Now, as he boarded the train and saw the plush seats and fancy inside of the car, he thought: I never, I just never imagined such a thing existed.

It was, all in all, a simply grand way to go off to fight a war.