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MOLLY TYNES: REBEL RIDER

by Louis Wolfe

Like a thunderbolt, the War between the States had finally struck the quiet Confederate mountain village of Jeffersonville, Virginia.

A mile or so away, mounted troops from the North had stopped for a short rest before resuming their march southward. Terror

gripped the village as the warning spread from plantation to house to cabin: "The Yankees are here! One thousand strong! They're on their way to surprise and capture Wytheville!"

In a large house just outside Jeffersonville, eighteen-year-old Molly Tynes sat alone in her bedroom and worried. She knew that if Wytheville fell into the hands of the Union troops, it would give them command of the railroad running into Tennessee and control of the lead mines that the South needed so desperately.

Wytheville had to be warned, but already the Northerners were taking steps to prevent any Confederate messenger from getting through by the main routes. There was only one hope—the backbreaking shortcut over the mountains. It was a rugged climb up steep, twisting trails, across thickets infested with prowling beasts. The trip would test the courage and endurance of a hardy man—and there were none of those, for all the able-bodied men of Jeffersonville were away fighting with the Confederate army.

Suddenly Molly decided—she herself would warn Wytheville. She had ridden a horse ever since she was a child, and she knew the mountain paths as well as her own backyard. Quickly she changed to her riding clothes and, making as little noise as possible, darted to the barn and swiftly saddled her horse.

Shadows were rapidly blacking out the trail as she rode through the foothills. Ever steeper and wilder, the rugged path snaked upward, growing still narrower and rockier as it left the forest and rimmed the high cliffs.

The strain of their hours on the hazardous trail began to show on both horse and rider—and the toughest part of the journey still lay ahead.

Higher and higher the lone rider climbed, through forests so thick that the trees seemed to close in on all sides like a huge trap. Swinging branches whipped against her legs and face, slashing her skin and tearing her clothes. Several times the mare's hoofs got tangled in the thick mesh of vines, and Molly was forced to dismount and free the struggling animal.

Soon the path rimmed a high cliff and Molly could see only a short distance ahead. To her left rose a sheer wall of rock, while to her right she could distinguish nothing but a yawning pit of blackness. Barely breathing, she firmly guided the mare ahead.

Finally, as the first rays of the rising sun pierced the sky, Molly peered down the mountainside and caught her first glimpse of Wytheville. Without wasting a minute, she patted her valiant horse and started downward. After almost two hours of struggle they reached the village—peacefully asleep, unaware of the approaching danger.

Weak from exhaustion, barely able to stay in the saddle, Molly rode from house to house, crying out, "To arms! The Yankees are coming!"

The townspeople could hardly believe their eyes when they saw that the haggard rider with the flyaway hair and the tattered clothes was a young girl. They fired question after question at her, until they saw that she was slumping in the saddle. At once they lifted her and carried her to the nearest house,

where she was tenderly cared for.

By now the village of Wytheville seethed with action and excitement. There were no Confederate troops on hand, but the Home Guard of old men and boys immediately swung into action. Villagers rushed to their cellars and dug up the guns and ammunition that had been hidden for just such an emergency. Then they all took their positions, peering out of cellars and attic windows, lying on rooftops, crouched behind barns and ditches, and hiding up in trees. Within an hour Wytheville was changed from a sleepy, peaceful village into a small fortress.

About ten o'clock a cloud of dust was seen rising just above a ridge that rimmed the foothills outside town. The villagers on the rooftops could make out a column of mounted men in blue coats riding toward Wytheville. The Yankees loped nonchalantly ahead, as if they were sure Wytheville was unprepared and would fall easy victim to their surprise attack.

Soon afterward, like a thundering avalanche the thousand troops charged down Main Street, yelling as they opened fire at the barns and houses. They had advanced only fifty yards when the Confederate villagers let loose with a blistering fire. Soldiers toppled from their mounts and rolled in the dusty

street. Wounded horses stumbled to the ground, trampling each other and squealing.

Though the first charge had been stopped, the Yankees charged repeatedly, until the heavily outnumbered villagers were finally forced to surrender.

Then, just as the Yankees were ready to capture the railroad terminal, they heard a train whistle wailing in the distance. Confederate reinforcements were rushing to Wytheville. The Yankee commander knew his troops were exhausted, wounded, and demoralized. They were in no condition to fight. There was only one thing to do to avoid complete disaster—retreat. Disheartened, the Yankee troops slipped out of Wytheville and began their long march back to West Virginia.

On the retreat one question rankled in their minds: Why had they failed? The attack had been well planned. Yet it was not the villagers, but the Yankee troops who had been surprised. Had someone got through and warned the town? But there was only one possible way—over the mountains—and no one could do that, the retreating troops reasoned. Not across those high rugged mountains in such a short time, especially in the dark of night. And so they trudged on, wondering . . . wondering . . .

CHECK YOUR READING

1. Molly lived in
 - A Michigan
 - B Virginia
 - C New York

2. If the South lost Wytheville, it would lose
 - A an important railroad
 - B valuable mines
 - C Both A and B

3. The mountain trail that Molly took between Jeffersonville and Wytheville was
 - A a shortcut
 - B the usual route
 - C Neither A nor B

4. Molly's trip took about
 - A two hours
 - B one whole night
 - C a day and a half

5. During the battle Wytheville was protected by
 - A the Home Guard
 - B Confederate troops
 - C Both A and B

6. The Yankee troops numbered
 - A one hundred
 - B five hundred
 - C one thousand

7. They rode into town feeling
 - A demoralized
 - B confident
 - C exhausted

8. The Yankees failed to take the railroad terminal because
 - A Confederate reinforcements arrived
 - B the townspeople rallied and won
 - C Neither A nor B

9. The villagers were at an advantage because they
 - A outnumbered the Yankees
 - B took the Yankees by surprise
 - C Both A and B

10. The Yankee troops had to retreat to
 - A Pennsylvania
 - B Maryland
 - C West Virginia