

Kathleen Ernst
WRITING AT THE INTERSECTION OF PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THE PAST

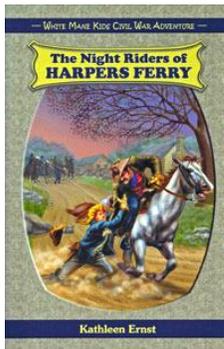


Preview of *The Night Riders of Harpers Ferry*

An American Civil War Novel

Written by Kathleen Ernst

Published by White Mane Kids 1996



A memorable tale of loyalty and adventure, based on a true story.

In the weeks preceding the Battle of Antietam Creek, 1862, Solomon Hargreave, along with the rest of the newly-formed 8th New York Cavalry Regiment, has to adjust to life in the army. The appointment of a Southern-born colonel to their unit, and rumors of a Confederate advance, did not ease their adjustment.

While riding in Maryland, Solomon rescues a lockkeeper's daughter, Mahalia, from drowning in the Potomac River. As Solomon comes to know Mahalia and her family, he quickly learns how tangled politics and family relationships can be in that troubled border state. Mahalia's brother is the notorious leader of a band of Rebel partisans, and Solomon's colonel wants him to learn more about the family.

While Solomon pursues that mission, with results that threaten his friendship with Mahalia, the Confederate noose tightens around Harpers Ferry. Only a daring plan can save the regiment. Can Solomon trust his colonel? Can he trust his own military ability? And can he trust Mahalia with his heart?

This book contains a period map, photos, and illustrations, and an author's note about the actual events that inspired the story.

I never saw Mahalia cry. I met her the day she came plum close to drowning, which would have set most women to tears. But not Mahalia.

I am used to weeping women, having been surrounded by too many for all my seventeen years. I have six sisters back home, in New York. They cried like the heavens opened the day I left with the cavalry regiment I'd up and joined. Ma was crying too, saying "My boy," over and over, which made me want to get on with it even quicker.



Betsy Lee Thornton cried a lot too. She was pretty as a field of violets in May. She wept pretty too, the afternoon she told me she didn't want to marry me after all, like she was the one getting her heart torn out and not the other way around.

But Mahalia never cried. And she had more reason than most.

The first time I saw Mahalia Sutter she was standing on a rock in the Potomac River. I was riding on the Maryland side, toward the army pontoon bridge that would get me across the rapids to Harpers Ferry where my regiment was bivouacked. It was a wild, beautiful place, that riverside coming down to the junction of the Shenandoah River. The cliffs of Maryland Heights rose a thousand feet straight above, with room for just one slope-hugging dirt road, and the strip of land along the C&O Canal, in between. Across the Potomac, Harpers Ferry clung to its point of land. Beyond the river junction, Loudon Heights rolled along. Those two rivers cut right through the mountains. I'd never seen anything like it.

The Potomac races over rocky ledges along that stretch where I was riding, as if it can't wait to meet the Shenandoah. Fishermen pull shad and bluebacks from the eddies along the bank. Sometimes boys jump out to boulders farther from shore with their poles, daring each other, looking for excitement as much as supper.

That afternoon, Mahalia was standing on a rock about a hundred feet from shore, so far from the next closest rock I reckoned it was quite a jump for her. She was barefoot, and had on a mustard-colored dress—plain, hemmed up above the ankles for easy walking, not hooped and silken like the dresses Betsy Lee wore. Mahalia was looking downstream.

I nudged my mare Cinder along, so I could see the girl's face. She didn't notice. She was very still, staring at the water.



A better man probably would have called out to her. But she wouldn't have heard over the rushing water, I reckon. I slid my sketchpad from the saddlebag—my personal one, not the one I used for making maps for Colonel Davis. I flipped past all the drawings I'd made of Betsy Lee, and found my pencil stub.

She was some younger than me, I figured. My pencil drew a slim girl, with a long braid the color of cornsilk and a sharp nose. I made another mark or two, trying to capture her expression, so strange and empty.

When I looked back up—she was gone. Shocked punched me in the gut. Then I saw a bit of that ugly yellow dress in the water.

What happened next came so fast it's hard to put down right. I slid off Cinder and scrambled to the shore. I got another glimpse of her dress. She was upstream from me a few yards, but tumbling fast, hitting against rocks all the time. I knew better than to jump in after her. I'm a good swimmer, but the current in those rapids is powerful strong.

There was a rock just out from shore, close in line to her path, and a sycamore tree on the bank spread its branches down close to the water. I jumped out to that rock and flattened down. I'm lanky, and I stretched my arm as far as I could. But I'd heard how drowning people can drag their rescuers down, so I kept a good hold of one of those branches too.

For an instant I thought she'd gone under for good. Then I caught sight of her hair. Her body slammed against the rock I was on and I grabbed mightily. I caught hold of her arm, but it got wrenched out of my hand. That's when I gave up all figuring and just plunged in after her.

The cold hit hard, and the current caught me like I was a twig. But I got a good hold on her skirt, and I didn't aim to let go. The two of us tumbled over another rock. It caught me in the shin so hard I yelped and got a mouthful



of water. On the next slam I managed to brace myself against the rock and hold us there long enough to get my arm around her.

There weren't many choices left. I launched out for shore, dragging the girl along and fighting the current with one arm. My wool uniform weighed about a bale. Fortunately we got bounced closer toward the bank, and I was mighty thankful for that.

Halfway there the girl came to life and started thrashing around. "Be still!" I croaked. My lungs were about to burst when I felt gravel. I stumbled into a calm backwater where the water shallowed out. I dragged the girl 'til her head and shoulders were up on the bank before my strength gave out. We were both coughing and spitting like two beached catfish.

"You're safe now," I panted.

"Damnation!" It was gasped out so ragged I could hardly be sure I'd heard right. But I had.

Well, I don't mind saying I was shocked. It had been a terrorizing experience, but I'd never heard a girl say such a thing. She crawled up on the muddy bank, and I just stared after her.

Before I could gather my wits I heard a shout. An old man hobbled toward us. "Sweet Jesus," he quavered. "Sweet Jesus, I saw it all. Thought you were goners."

I stood, which was a chore with my high boots and uniform soaking wet. "I thought so myself," I managed, and then looked down at the girl I'd almost drowned myself to rescue, and gotten cursed at for my trouble. She was still gasping, but pushed herself up on her knees, which I took for a good sign. Her dress was plastered to her and I couldn't help noticing she wasn't quite as young as I had taken her for, maybe even seventeen like me. Her hair



was plastered down too, that braid undone. Tendrils draped around her head like eelgrass.

I was almost afraid to speak to her, but my mama raised a gentleman. It wasn't proper to pull someone from a river and then walk away. "Miss, are you well?"

She coughed once more, then heaved her shoulders. "Yes," she said, in a different tone from the brazen one I'd heard before. She sounded disappointed. Defeated.

The old man didn't give me much time to ponder. "Mahalia Sutter, what come over you?" he scolded. And to me, "She's been jumping rocks on this river all her life. Swims like a fish, besides. I can't figure what happened."

"I just slipped, Mr. Timmerman," she said quietly. I offered her my arm. She took it and heaved to her feet. "I was careless."

"The name's Francis Timmerman," the old man said to me, holding out his hand. "You're quite a hero, young man."

I have to say "hero" wasn't a word that had ever been thrown my way. It sounded pretty good, even coming from a barefoot old man with a pocket full of worms. Besides, some folks thereabouts didn't use the word in connection with any soldier wearing Yankee blue, even if Maryland was still officially in the Union.

"Solomon Hargreave," I introduced myself. "Eighth New York Cavalry. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir. Right now, I better be seeing Miss Sutter home."

"Fine thing, fine thing," Mr. Timmerman nodded.

"I can walk." Mahalia drew herself up straight, although she didn't let her eyes meet mine. "I thank you kindly for pulling me out of the river, Mr. Hargreave." With that she turned and started walking away.



Well, like I said, my mama raised me to be a gentleman, and I wasn't about to have a young lady walking home alone after near to drowning in the Potomac River. Even though it was only the first of September, the breeze was a bit chill against our wet clothes. And there were hazards this close to the Virginia border, bands of hard-riding Rebel bushwackers who splashed across the Potomac after dark. Besides, I admit I was pretty baffled by Mahalia. I'd go plum crazy trying to figure her out if I let her walk away.

"I won't hear of it," I said, real firm. "I'll fetch my horse and take you home."

I thought she was going to refuse. Then she glanced at Mr. Timmerman, who was eagerly watching the exchange, and seemed to think better of it. She nodded.

Cinder was browsing where I'd left her. I picked up my hat, and slid the sketchpad back in the saddlebag, before mounting and trotting back. I gave Mahalia a hand and she reluctantly swung up behind the saddle.

Mr. Timmerman was grinning as I turned the mare's head around. "He'll have the story all over Sandy Hook by tomorrow, I don't doubt," I said. Sandy Hook was the tiny village just downstream of the Potomac and Shenandoah junction.

"I'm sure that'd please you right fine," Mahalia snapped. The submissive girl was gone again.

"That's not what I meant," I began, but decided against explaining further. "Where do you live, anyway?"

"Lock Thirty-Six."

It took me a full minute to figure out that address. But I wasn't about to ask her to explain.

Kathleen Ernst
WRITING AT THE INTERSECTION OF PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THE PAST



"Set on the border of North and South during the Civil War, this novel conveys the strain of divided families, misguided loyalties, and the hardscrabble existence of that period."

— **American Library Association *Booklist***

"...the book is entertaining and instructive at the same time and, despite a cover and title that don't do it much justice, is a surefire hit for historical fiction fans."

— ***School Library Journal***

"What a stunning novel! What a fine, fresh voice! Kathleen Ernst writes with sensitivity and power and with a sure grasp of the historical material that provides the background for her story."

— **Marion Dane Bauer**, Newberry Award-winning Children's Author

The Night Riders of Harpers Ferry is available from the book's publisher, White Mane Kids. Signed and personalized copies can be acquired directly from the author, Kathleen Ernst. For more information, click on http://www.kathleernerst.com/book_night_riders.php