

The MAID of the FOREST

By RANDALL PARRISH
ILLUSTRATED BY J. LAVIN

CHAPTER XXIII—Continued.

I stood before him, stunned and bewildered by his obstinacy. "Am I to understand, General St. Clair, that you question the accuracy of my report?" "No, sir!" His cheeks flushed. "My young friend, there is nothing to it. This expedition is not interested in what Hamilton is doing on the Maumee. He doesn't dare attack us with his mongrel savages. If he did we'd give him a belly full, and a fine story to send back to England. Come, gentlemen, let's get to more serious affairs. You may go, sir."

I passed out, dazed, unseeing. So this was the man in whose hands rested the fate of the northwest. This was the end of my toll and suffering; this the reward for Brady's death. He had sneered at me, turned me away with a laugh. For a moment I stood shaking from head to foot; then hot anger seized me, and brought me back to life. By heaven! he would learn yet which of us was the fool.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The Battle on the Wabash.

He had not even assigned me to service: simply turned me adrift to go where I pleased. This implied insult cut me to the quick, yet, now that I had taken the measure of the man, I cared little enough for his good opinion. Very well, I would choose my own service then—I would go back to Oldham and his Kentucky militia. He was of fighting blood, if his face spoke truth, and his command was stationed where they would feel the first shock of attack whenever it came.

Oldham received me gladly, and about the fire that night I told of my reception by St. Clair. "Well, I warned you, Hayward," the colonel commented, chuckling. "I reckon he'll know more about Indians in a day or two. Told yer he had his scouts out, did he? Why, man, there isn't one of 'em been ten miles from the column since we began this march; isn't that so, captain? The old cock doesn't know tonight what's goin' on two hundred yards ahead of his outposts." He got up, and stretched out his arms. "And so, gentlemen, we march for the Miami towns in the morning. Old Cock-a-doodle-doo says so. I'll wager a year's pay we never get there. What! no tobacco? Well, I'm going to bed."

Why should I attempt to describe that drear battle on the east fork of the Wabash? Many another has done it already, yet few tell the story as I remember it.

We were up at dawn, but for no purpose, so far as I could see, unless it was to idle through a leisurely



"The Cursed Hound; So You Were a Prisoner?"

breakfast. I had finished mine, and was smoking, cuddled close to the fire, when the storm broke. Our outposts could not have been a hundred yards in advance, or else they ran without firing a shot, for the red devils burst on us without slightest warning. I heard a hoarse shout of alarm, then whoops and yells, such as would strike terror to the bravest. I was on my feet, gripping my gun in an instant. I saw Oldham leap forward, roaring out an order—then they came, pouring out of the woods into the open, a mass of shrieking demons, half obscured in smoke, their rifles spitting fire. The man beside me went down in a heap; Oldham flung up his arms and toppled over; I saw men stare, then turn and run, peering back over their shoulders with eyes full of horror. I threw up my rifle and fired; sprang back, racing for a tree, loading as I ran. Men were everywhere, a frightened, screaming mob. I saw officers strike them with their swords, cursing them as cowards. But nothing could stop the panic; they fought to get away, they struck with clinched fists, they battered a path for themselves with clubbed muskets; they became fiends from terror, every semblance of men lost. God! may I never see such a

ugh again! My hand trembles as I write of it. I struck that terror-stricken warrior tomahawks, slashing with clubbed fists. The snow was red with blood. I know not how I got out of the tree to tree, loading as I ran. I held the painted demon back until a hundred of us, opening by the regulars and artillery, charged forward, in a drunken slaugher. They lined the woods and poured a deadly volley. There was no shouting now, no yelling—only the incessant rattle of frearms, as they crept from tree to tree, and then they fled off to either side and hemmed us in, through the clouds of smoke we caught our flitting figures, faces striped black and red, of waving feathers, and before or since fight as they did the charge, leaping through the smoke and firing with deadly aim into their faces. They shot us down with their rifles, no cessation, in which to breathe. Twice they rushed forward with a bayonet under foot. But they were in the open now, and we could see; with bayonets and clubbed rifles we charged home, driving them back to the woods. There they held us, with every tree and fallen log, their rifles at bay, and I picked up another; I was out of powder and ball and took them from a dead body. The dead lay everywhere, alone, in heaps; cries of the wounded rose above the din. We charged under foot, seeking to reach our available foes. They would not stand, would not meet us. Helpless, bleeding, dying, confused by many orders, we fell back, yet still retained line, and fronted that blinding wood. Frightened, panic-stricken men were everywhere, running and shrieking in terror, seeking vainly for some means of escape from the savage cordon. Indians crept forward under the smoke to help and mutilate the dead and dying. Horses from the artillery and staff, breaking loose, charged wildly about, trampling living and dead alike under their feet. Women, camp followers, were wedged in the mob, their shrill screams piercing the mad uproar. Only the regulars stood intact, their blue line, with here and there among them a few militiamen who kept their heads. About the guns, not a dozen powder-grimed artillerymen remained. Not an officer of the battery was left; not one of the regulars un wounded.

I heard St. Clair storming up and down behind us, swearing and shouting orders in his high, cracked voice, yet took no time to glance toward him. The smoke settled down upon us in a cloud; we fought blindly, in the dark, hardly certain but we stood alone. I was beside Butler when he was struck, and helped him aside out of the rout. Then I saw St. Clair, and, as I stopped a second, staring into his face to be sure of his identity, an officer rushed up through the smoke cloud, knocking me aside, everything forgotten but his urgent message.

"General St. Clair," he cried, "we must get out of here, sir. My men cannot stand five minutes longer. If that line breaks it will cost every life. For God's sake, let us go."

"Yes—yes, Colonel Darke, but how is it to be accomplished, sir? See those fool cowards."

Darke swept his hand out to the south in sudden gesture.

"There is only one way, sir—there by the road. I can hold the regulars steady; they'll cover the rear, and give the others a chance. One fierce charge forward with the bayonet will drive those devils back, and open the way. May I try it, sir?"

"Ay, try it! Hold! I'll lead them myself. Heavens, Simmons, Cauley, lash those skulls into the road there, while we clear a path."

I sprang forward with the others in response to swift orders. We made the woods and plunged into their shadows. There was a fierce, mad struggle face to face, bayonets and clubbed muskets, knives and tomahawks. St. Clair, on an artillery horse, led the way. We swept the front of the broad road clear, the impetuosity of our reckless charge forcing the startled savages into full retreat. Then we dropped to our knees, loading and firing to hold the advantage. Behind us, in the open road, surged the mob of panic-stricken men, fighting and crawling, beginning their long race back to the Ohio. It was a sickening sight the white, ghastly faces, the wounds dripping along, the brutal acts of fear, and over all the ceaseless cries and profanity. I caught glimpses of women among the seething mass, pushed and thrown under foot in the mad terror. The sight of them brought back to me the remem-

CHAPTER XXV.

The Retreat. I had no faith I should find her there, but I fought my way through to the tent. It had been knocked half over; the camp stove overturned, the long bench smashed into kindling wood. With stinking heart I flung back the sagging canvas, and cast one glance within. As heaven witnesses, she stood there, the blanket still wrapped about her, her hands grasping a rifle, her face turned toward me. Unconsciously her lips gave utterance to a cry of relief, and her expression changed. I sprang forward, eager, glad.

"Rene, you are here!" I cried out. "Why did you stay?"

"It was the word of monsieur," she answered simply. "Monsieur said stay till he come."

"Yes, yes, I know; but I never thought of this; never dreamed of such a defeat. But there is no time to waste in talk. There is nothing to do but run for it now. Come, lass!"

Before she realized what I was going to do, I had flung away my rifle and seized her in my arms. She was



I Staggered and Reeled From Weariness.

a light, slender thing, and I held her tight in the folds of the blanket, scarcely feeling her weight. She made no effort to resist, yet her eyes—bewildered, half-frightened—looked into my face. I gave them no heed, my whole purpose concentrated on the one effort to save her, to fight a passage through that mob of frightened men. The spirit of panic had gripped me also—not for myself, but for her! Here was my duty now; not back yonder where those regulars stood grimly in line, and died with their shoulders touching; not where I had fought all day in the powder-cloud facing those forest demons—but in the mob of fugitives, battling and cursing for their lives. The road was littered with guns thrown away, with discarded blankets and powder horns. I dared not look back, straining every muscle, staggering forward over the ruts. The roar of guns behind grew faint in the distance; the spit of rifles from the thickets ceased. Exhausted, breathless, reeling from fatigue, I put her down, and, with arm about her, stood an instant looking back.

They were coming, a dark mass bearing down upon us, but ahead of them, wild with terror, his harness flapping at his heels, his head flung from side to side, charged an artillery horse full tilt. In his mad terror he saw and knew nothing. He came straight at us, running as if crazed. I flung the girl into the side of the road and leaped recklessly for his head. My hand gripped the mane, then the leather rein; I was flung from my feet, jerked into the air, but hung; my moccasins touched ground again. I was dragged forward, rendered half unconscious by a blow, but weight told. I got fingers on his nostrils, and he stood still, panting and trembling. Clinging to him, warned by shouts to hurry, I stripped the harness and hoisted her onto the bare back. Even as this was accomplished the head of that shrieking mob was on us; one brute grabbed her by the arm seeking to pull her down, and I struck him with all the force I had. Then I ran forward, clasping the horse by the bit, crunching our way, heedless of who opposed or blocked our passage. And they made way for us; even in their blind terror, they swept aside to escape being trampled under the animal's hoofs, and left before us a clear path.

I looked eagerly for some place in which to turn aside, saw the faint trace of an Indian trail, seemingly leading down the bank of the stream, and, with instant decision, turned into it. I walked the horse now, and Rene sat up straight, and fastened her disarranged hair. The narrow trail led through dense thickets and about a slight hill; in five minutes we were out of sight of the road, alone in the wilderness. To the right through trees was the glimmer of the river. The horse panted heavily, and the way was rough. There was blood I noticed now, on his flank, and he limped slightly as he walked. I staggered and reeled from weariness, feeling reac-

tion from excitement, yet kept going on until we must have covered two miles, wandering in and out among the low hills. No sounds reached us, and as we came into a narrow ravine, promising concealment, I released my grasp on the bit and staggered back against the bank. Mademoiselle slipped from her seat and hastened to me.

"You are worn out, monsieur, wounded?"

"Worn out, yet, but nothing has touched me save a blow or two. I—I think we can rest now."

Then it occurred to me, a thought that had swept into my mind once before—we had no provisions, no chance to get away and we dare not shoot, nor build a fire.

"What is it, monsieur?"

"Why, we have nothing to eat, Rene," I admitted reluctantly. "It is a long journey to the Ohio, and how are we to keep from starving? Faith! but I am near that now."

She stood before me, slender, erect, the blanket draped about her, her eyes lowered.

"It was mine to remember, monsieur," she said simply, as if it was all the most ordinary thing in the world. "I knew not what would happen, and there was food there. When the women ran away, and I would not go, because you told me not, I knew it would be best that I take some. You do not blame me, monsieur?"

"Blame! you are a jewel; but I see nothing of it! Where—"

"This here, monsieur; I am glad if I please you."

She flung aside the blanket, dropping it to the ground, revealing a black ammunition bag strapped across her shoulder. I remembered now feeling it when I held her in my arms, vaguely wondering what it was. She unclasped and opened it.

"Monsieur must eat," she said gravely, "and sleep. Then he will be strong again."

I tried to do as she said, munching a few mouthfuls. Her actions, her words, her manner toward me, both bewildered and angered. She had assumed the part of a servant—chosen it, as if she would thus teach me my own place. In every possible way she showed me she was not there from choice, but necessity. I lay back, toying with the food, my appetite gone. The wounded horse had been down to the river and drank; now he was pawing the snow in an effort to discover feed. Over in the east, but some distance off, a rifle cracked ominously in the silence. My head fell back against the bank, and I was sound asleep.

It was two days later when we toiled up a long hill, and came out upon the summit. I no longer needed to lead the horse, and was plodding along wearily behind. Much of the snow had melted, leaving the soil soft, and the trees appeared bare, phantom-like, against the sky. Rene rode silently, wrapped in her blanket, for the air was chill and damp, her head bent, her eyes straight ahead. I have no remembrance that we had spoken for an hour. Beyond the hill summit there was an escarpment of rock, giving an open view ahead. As I gazed off, over the trees below, my heart gave a great bound—there, scarce a mile away, flowing between leagues of forest, was the broad Ohio, its waters silvery in the sun. I turned to her and pointed.

"At last, Rene," I cried, forgetting. "We are safe now; see! There is the river."

She lifted her eyes and looked.

"Yes, monsieur."

"Why do you ever speak to me in that tone? You answer me always as if you were my servant."

"Your servant!" She was looking at me now. "Am I not, monsieur?"

"Of course you are not. You are free; whatever put that in your head! I haven't known what to think, what to do since we have been together. Back on the Maumee I—I thought you loved me."

"I do love you, monsieur."

"You—you love me," I stammered. "And yet bear yourself as you do?"

"Yes, monsieur; how else could I do? You are white; I am an Indian."

"Is that all? You think that makes it different? Rene, I love you; out yonder is my home; I would take you there; I would say to those who know me—here is my wife."

"Your—your wife!" There was doubt, questioning in her eyes.

"Yes, of course; how could you think otherwise?"

"Oh, monsieur, how could I know! How could I believe? I was an Indian girl, a Wyandot. It is not so the white men come to our villages. I have seen them—the red-coats, the traders of France. They take with the strong hand, and then laugh, and go away. Then you came and grasped me, and said get into the canoe. I tried to not go, but you said yes, I must. You did not ask me, monsieur—you spoke stern, angry. I was frightened, I dare not say no, so I did as you said—I was your prisoner; you had taken me as the warriors of the Wyandots take the maidens of the Ojibwas."

"Then if that was so, why did you not leave me—that night the Indians passed us in camp?"

Her cheeks flamed.

"I—I could not, monsieur—I loved you."

"And now?—now you will go with me down there—I prisoner no longer, but my own?"

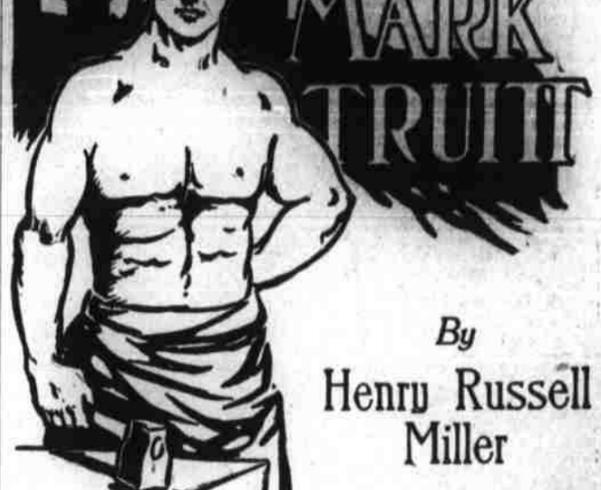
"Always and forever?"

"Always and forever," I answered gravely.

There was something new, wonderful in the depths of the dark eyes that looked into mine. I saw her hands clasp the white cross at her throat, then they were held out to me.

"I am so glad, monsieur," she said softly, "so glad!"

THE END.



By Henry Russell Miller

Author of "The Man Higher Up," "His Rise to Power," etc.

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