

MY LADY OF DOUBT

By Randall Parrish

"Do not use General Lee," I broke in. "He has ever been a reckless fighter. Has the man lost his wits?"

Maxwell leaned over, so his words should not carry beyond my ear.

"The envy of Washington, to my mind," he said soberly. "He has opposed every plan in council, imagining no doubt, a failure of campaign may make him the commander-in-chief. There comes a courier now."

The fellow was so streaked with dust as to be scarcely recognizable, and he wiped the perspiration from his eyes to stare into our faces.

"General Maxwell?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Compliments of General Lee, sir, and you will retire your troops toward the Freehold Meeting House, forming connection there with General Scott."

"Retreat! Good God, man! we haven't fired a shot."

"These were the orders, sir. It that Scott, over yonder?"

Maxwell nodded, too angered for words. Then, as the courier galloped away, he turned in his saddle.

came into the sandy plain below and skirted the morass. I recognized Lee in advance, mounted on a black horse flecked with foam. Twice he paused, gazing across the hills through leveled field glasses, and then rode up the steep ascent to our rear. Maxwell met him not twenty feet from where I lay.

"What does this mean, sir?" Lee thundered hoarsely. "Why are your men lying strewn about in this unseemly manner, General Maxwell?"

Are you unaware, sir, that we are in the presence of the enemy?"

Maxwell's face fairly blazed, as he straightened in the saddle, but before his lips could form an answer, a sudden cheer burst down from the crest of the hill, and I saw men leaping to their feet, and waving their hats. The next instant across the summit came Washington, a dozen officers clattering behind, his face stern-set and white, as he rode straight toward Lee.

"What is the meaning of this retreat, General Lee? My God, sir, how do you account for such disorder and confusion?" he exclaimed, his voice ringing above the uproar, his angry eyes blazing into Lee's face. "Answer me."

"The cavalry! The cavalry!" They were coming around the end of the morass, charging full tilt upon the right of our line. I saw that end crumble up, and a moment later, scarcely realizing what had occurred, we were racing backward, firing as we ran, and stumbling over dead bodies.

Maxwell rallied us beyond the causeway, swearing manfully as he drove us into position behind a low stone wall. Again and again they charged us, the artillery fire shattering the wall into fragments. Twice we came to bayonets and clubbed guns, battling hand to hand, and Wayne was forced so far back upon the left, that we were driven into the edge of the wood for protection. But there we held, out front a blaze of fire. It seemed to me the horror of that struggle would never end. Such heat, such thirst, the black powder smoke in our nostrils, the dead under foot, the cries of the wounded, the incessant roar of the guns. Again and again it was hand to hand; I could scarcely tell who faced us, so fierce the melee, so suffocating the smoke; I caught glimpses of British Grenadiers, of Hessians, of Queen's Rangers. Once I thought I heard Grant's nasal voice amid the infernal uproar. Stewart and Ramsey came to our support; Oswald got his guns upon an eminence, opening a deadly fire; Livingston's regiment charged, and, with a cheer, we leaped forward also, mad with the battle fever, and flung them back, back down that deadly slope. It was not in flesh and blood to stand; we cut the center like a wedge, and drove them pell-mell to where Lee had been in the morning. Here they rallied, flanked by thick woods and morasses. Too exhausted to follow, our men sank breathless to the ground.

It was already sunset, and our work done. The artillery still already, and I could see long lines of troops—Poor's and the Carolina brigade—moving to the right. Night came on, however, without more fighting, and, as soon as we had recovered sufficiently, we devoted ourselves to the care of the wounded.

"Very well, colonel! I am ready to serve wherever needed."

"Of course you are, man. There should not be much danger connected with this trip, although there will be stragglers in plenty. I'm told that Clinton lost more than three hundred deserters crossing Camden."

Headquarters were in a single-roomed cabin at the edge of a ravine. A squad of cavalymen were in front, their horses tied to a rail fence, but within Washington was alone, except for a single aide, writing at a rude table in the light of a half-dozen



"Pardon Me, Sirs, but There Are Horsemen Ahead."

candles. He glanced up, greeting us with a slight inclination of the head.

"A moment, gentlemen."

He wrote slowly, as though framing his sentences with care, occasionally questioning the aide. Once he paused, and glanced across at Hamilton.

"Colonel, do you know a dragon named Mortimer?"

"I have no recollection of ever having met the man, sir. I have written him orders, however; he is a scout attached to General Lee's headquarters."

"Yes; I recall the name. He is the one who brought us our first definite information this morning of Clinton's position. I remember now, you were not with me when he rode up—young, slender lad, with the face of a girl. I could but notice his eyes; they were as soft and blue as violets! Well, an hour ago he came here for a favor; it seems the boy is a son of Colonel Mortimer, of the queen's rangers."

"Indeed; Wayne reported the colonel killed in front of his lines."

"Not killed, but seriously wounded. The son asked permission to take him home to a place called Elmhurst near Laurel Hill."

"I know the plantation, sir," I said, my interest causing me to interrupt. "It is on the Medford road."

"Ah, you have met the lad, possibly."

major," and he turned his face toward me. "The boy interested me greatly."

"No, sir; I endeavored to find him at Lee's headquarters, but failed. I have met his father and sister."

"A lovely girl, no doubt?"

"To my mind, yes, sir."

His grave face lighted with a sudden smile.

"I sometimes imagine, Colonel Hamilton," he said quietly, "that this unhappy war might be very pleasantly concluded if we could only turn our young officers over to the ladies of the enemy. Would such a plan meet with your approval, major?"

"I should prefer it to the present method."

"No doubt, and Mistress Mortimer?—But let that pass, until we hold council of war upon the subject. Just now we shall have to be content with the more ordinary plans of campaign. I gave the boy permission to remove his father, and they are upon the road ere this. I would that all the British wounded had homes close at hand. You have informed the major of his mission. I presume, Hamilton, and there is nothing I need add."

"He understands clearly, sir."

"Then I will complete the letter. Be seated, gentlemen."

He wrote for several minutes steadily, once pausing to consult a map, signed the paper, and enclosed it in another sheet, across which he scratched a line of address.

"You will deliver this to General Arnold in person, major; do not spare horse-flesh. You were in the action today?"

"With Maxwell's brigade."

"That was a hard fight along the stone wall; you came out unhurt?"

"A slight bayonet wound, sir; nothing to incapacitate me from duty."

"Very well; take ten dragons as escort. Hamilton will write you an order. I have told Arnold our victory is practically complete. Clinton may slip away in the night, for he is a wily old fox, but he has lost his power to injure us in the Jerseys. I hope to bottle him up before morning, so that any retreat will be impossible, but even if he succeeds in getting his army to the transports at Sandy Hook, he has lost prestige, and the victory is ours. Good-bye, major, and the Lord guard you on your journey."

Ten minutes later, mounted on a rangy sorrel, my dragoon escort trotting behind, I rode south on the Plainsboro road, as swiftly as its terrible condition would warrant.

The evidences of war, the wreckage of battle, were everywhere. Several times we were compelled to leap the stone walls to permit the passage of marching troops being hurried to some new position; several batteries passed us, rumbling grimly through the night, and a squadron of horse

galloped by, the troopers greeting us with shouts of inquiry.

We took to the fields, but, as there seemed no end to the procession, I turned my horse's head eastward, confident we were already beyond the British rear-guard, and struck out across country for another north and south road. We advanced now at a swift trot, the sound of our horses' hoofs on the soft turf almost the only noise, and, within an hour, came again to parallel fences, and a well travelled road.

This was the road running a mile, or so, to the west of Elmhurst. It led as straight as any, toward Philadelphia, but whatever stragglers the British army had left behind would be found along here. However, they would probably be scattered fugitives, unwilling to interfere with as strong an armed party as this of mine. If I was alone it would be safer to turn aside. Then, it was a strong temptation to me to pass thus close to Elmhurst. It would be after daylight when we reached there; I might even get a glimpse across the apple orchard of the great white house. Would Claire be there? It seemed to me quite probable, as Eric was taking the wounded colonel home for nursing. The girl's face rose before me against the black night, and my heart beat fast. When I came back, I would ride to Elmhurst—surely she would be there then.

The sergeant touched my arm.

"Pardon me, sir, but there are horsemen ahead."

"Indeed? I was lost in thought, Conroy. Coming this way?"

"No, sir, they seem to be traveling south slowly. I noticed them first as we turned the corner back there; I could see outlines against the sky."

"How large a party? They form merely a lumping shadow to my eyes."

"Not more than three or four, sir, with a covered rig of some kind. They're halted, now; heard us coming. I reckon."

I could perceive the little group, but merely as a black smudge. Then a mounted figure seemed to detach itself from the darkness, and advance toward us.

"Halt your men, sergeant," I said quietly. "I'll ride forward and learn what the fellow wants."

CHAPTER XXVII.

The Escort.

The figure of the man approaching was hardly distinguishable, as he appeared to be leaning well forward over the saddle pommel, yet my eyes caught the glimmer of a star above a pistol barrel, and I drew up cautiously, loosening my own weapon.

"Who comes?" he questioned shortly, the low voice vibrant. "Speak quick!"

To Be Continued.

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We Were but a Handful—a Single Thin Line.

"By Heaven! I suppose we must do Lawrence. But what folly! What insanity! We've got the Redcoats hemmed in, and did you ever see a better sight! 'Pray God I may hear Washington when he comes up. I'd rather be dead then, than Charles Lee!"

We give the orders, and the men fell back sullenly, swearing fiercely as they caught the rebellious spirit of their officers. Scarcely able to breathe in the hot, stagnant air, caked with mud to the waist, we attained the higher ground, and dropped helpless. Even from here the enemy were invisible, although we could see the muzzles of their guns, and hear distant rattle of musketry. I sat up, staring through the heat waves toward the eminence on the left where Wayne's men remained, showing dimly against the trees. A group of horsemen were riding down the slope, leading toward our line. As they

The other muttered some reply I failed to catch.

"That's not true," returned Washington, every word stinging like a whip. "It was merely a covering party which attacked you. Why did you accept command, sir, unless you intended to fight?"

"I did not deem it prudent, General Washington, to bring on a general engagement."

"You were to obey my orders, sir, and you know what they were. See! They are coming now!"

He wheeled his horse about, pointing with one hand across the valley.

"Major Cain, have Oswald bring up his guns at once; Lieutenant McNeil, ride to Ramsey and Stewart; have their troops on the ridge within ten minutes—General Maxwell, these are your men!"

"They are, sir."

"Hold this line at any cost, the reserves will be up presently."

As he drew his horse about he again came face to face with Lee, who sat his saddle sullenly, his gaze on the ground. Washington looked at him a moment, evidently not knowing what to say. Then he asked quietly:

"Will you retain command on this height, or, not, sir?"

"It is equal to me where I command."

"Then I expect you will take proper means for checking the enemy."

"I shall not be the first to leave the ground; your orders shall be obeyed."

What followed was but a medley of sight and sound. I saw Washington ride to the left; heard Lee give a hurried order, or two; then I was at the rear of our own line strengthening it for assault. There was little enough time left.

Under the smoke of several batteries, whose shells were ripping open the side of the hill, the British were advancing in double line, the sun gleaming on their bayonets, and revealing the uniforms of different corps.

"Steady, men! Steady!" voice after voice caught up the command. "Hold your fire!"

"Wait until they reach that fallen tree!" I added.

Every man of us had a gun, officers, all. Coatsless as though we came from the haying field, the perspiration streaming down our faces, we waited. The rifle barrels glowed brown in the sun, as the keen eyes took careful sight. We were but a handful, a single thin line; if the reserves failed we would be driven back by mere force of numbers, yet before we went that slope should be strewn with dead. Crashing up from the rear came Oswald with two guns, wheeling into position, the depressed muzzles spitting destruction. Yet those red and blue lines came on; great openings were ploughed through them, but the living mass closed up. They were at the fallen tree, beyond, when we poured our volleys into their very faces. We saw them waver as that storm of lead struck; the center seemed to give way, leaving behind a ridge of motionless bodies; then it surged forward again, led by a waving flag, urged on by gesticulating of

CHAPTER XXVI.

The Road to Philadelphia.

It must have been 10 o'clock, and if I had slept at all, I was scarcely conscious of it. All about me the men lay outstretched upon the ground, still in their shirt-sleeves, as they had fought, their guns beside them. The night was clear and hot, scarcely a breath of air moving. Here and there against the sky-line passed the dark silhouette of a sentinel. There was no sound of firing only an occasional footfall to break the silence of the night. The wounded had been taken to the field hospitals at the rear; down in our front lay the bodies of the dead, and among these shone the dim lights of lanterns where the last searching parties were yet busy at their gruesome task. I was weary enough to sleep, every muscle of my body aching with fatigue, but the excitement of the day, the possibility of the morrow, left me restless. I had received no wound, other than a slight thrust with a bayonet, yet felt as though pummeled from head to foot. The victory was ours—the army realized this truth clearly enough; we had repulsed the red-coats, driven them back with terrible losses; we had seen their lines shrivel up under our fire, officers and men falling, and the remnant fleeing in disorder. It meant nothing now that a force outnumbering us yet remained intact, and in strong position. Flushed with victory, knowing now we could meet the best of them, we longed for the morrow to dawn so we might complete the task.

I reviewed the vivid incidents of the day, looking up at the stars, and wondered who among those I knew were yet living, who were dead. I thought of others in those lines of the enemy, whom I had known, speculating on their fate. Then along our rear came a horseman or two, riding slowly. A sentry halted them, and I arose on one elbow to listen.

"Lawrence? Yes, sir, Major Lawrence is lying over there by the scrub oak."

I got to my feet, as the first rider approached.

"This you, Lawrence?" asked a voice I instantly recognized as Hamilton's. "You fellows all look alike tonight. Where is your horse, major?"

"I have been on foot all day, sir," I answered saluting.

"Ah, indeed; well, you will have need for a horse tonight. Wainwright," turning to the man with him, "is your mount fresh?"

"Appears to be, sir; belonged to a British dragoon this morning."

"Let Major Lawrence have him. Major, ride with me."

We passed back slowly enough toward the rear of the troops, through the field hospitals, and along the edge of a wood, where a battery of artillery was encamped. We rode boot to boot, and Hamilton spoke earnestly.

"The battle is practically won, Lawrence, in spite of Charles Lee," he said soberly. "Of course there will be fighting tomorrow, but we shall have the red-coats well penned in before daybreak, and have already captured ammunition enough to make us easy on that score. Poor, and the Carolina men, are over yonder, while Woodford is moving his command to the left. At dawn we'll crush Clinton into fragments. Washington wants to send a despatch through to Arnold in Philadelphia, and I recommended you, as you know the road. He remembered your service before, and was kind enough to say you were the very man. You'll go gladly?"

"I should prefer to lead my own men tomorrow, sir."

"Pshaw! I doubt if we have more than a skirmish. Sir Henry will see his predicament fast enough. Then there will be nothing left to do, but guard prisoners."

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