



CHAPTER II. CONTINUED.

"You are a spy," Miss Clay's voice rang out clear and defiant. "He is a confederate soldier, and in uniform. He is a prisoner of war."

"And are you also?" The young general rose gracefully as he addressed the speaker with curiosity that had some admiration mixed with it, but he answered, calmly:

"I am not, sir. I am a non-combatant, a Virginia lady on her way to her aunt's home, arrested and dragged here without cause or excuse for the outrage. You doubtless could hang us both to-morrow—or now, if it suits your government's theories of war; but its articles protect this youth and release me."

"The general's eyes again inventoried the speaker with curiosity that had some admiration mixed with it, but he answered, calmly:

"Uml you seem familiar with the articles of war. Did you study them at your aunt's, or—in camp. What is your name?"

"Carrie Fauntleroy—my first cousin, sir," Evan broke in, quickly, his eye catching the papers on the table, before the girl could reply.

"Is that true?" The federal general questioned the man, but his gaze never left the face of the woman turned defiantly upon him, now suffused with a glow of anger that never deepened under his scrutiny.

"My cousin is a Virginian, sir," she answered for him, as he had done for her. "We are never ashamed of our names."

A quick glance sent her Evan's thanks that she had caught his meaning—that her own name was too well known along the border to be faked in this perilous hour. Whether the general caught that glance or not, she seemed impressed by its reflection in her eyes, from which his own had never swerved; for, after a brief pause, he asked, suddenly:

"At what point, miss, did you hope to reach the river?"

If he expected a start or flush for an answer, it was in vain. Carolyn Clay had been in close places before, if not so perilous as this; and she answered, as calmly and naturally as though declining an ice:

"My aunt lives inland, sir; not on the river."

A half smile he could not repress flashed on his instant about the cavalry leader's lips, quickly replaced by their habitual sternness, as he retorted:

"It is a strange hour and strange company for you to be found in, miss. No, I am not doubting your statement—stopping her intent to speak by a gesture—but shall ask proof for it."

Major, question the general who brought them in point of capture and all details. Send the guide to me, sir."

"As the major bustled out of the tent, Miss Clay said, rather anxiously:

"I can give you all the details now, sir. The troopers will prove my statement."

"Uml doubtless," the general answered, slowly. "Will they also disclose to me what was in"—he turned on Evan like a flash—"that paper you swallowed?"

"Fine out, sir," the boy answered, quickly but meekly; and even the gravity of his peril could not restrain the twinkle in his eyes as he grimaced with affected nausea.

A challenge without a low reply, and the orderly stood in the entrance, saluting.

"The guide, sir," he said, at length, turning to Miss Clay.

"Send him in at once." A tall figure, wrapped in a long cloak, that showed beneath it only muddy riding boots, entered the tent. The plain felt hat he removed showed fine black hair on his broad white forehead.

"MY COUSIN IS A VIRGINIAN, SIR." But the slim hand that smoothed it carefully betrayed its roots stained by the red track of a recent bullet. The features below were clear cut and high bred, though deeply tanned from exposure.

The newcomer saluted, as the general asked, quickly:

"Do you know any Fauntleroy hereabouts, sir?" The guide raised his eyes, meeting full the mingled surprise, contempt and hatred shot into them by the blazing glance of Carolyn Clay. And even her best-trained tact lost itself in the cry: "Peyton Fitzhugh!"

The man's tanned face grew almost purple in its flush, and his eyes fell before hers; but, equally surprised as herself, he exclaimed:

"Carolyn Clay," she spoke plain words, that of Evan Fauntleroy cried to the silence now filling that tent:

"Oh, Lord! it's all out!" But his cousin's face was dark with wrath that swept before it thought, prudence—all save the deep contempt quivering in each word of her retort:

"To her own people, yes! Miss Clay to the branded traitor Peyton Fitzhugh!"

Replied the general's glance moved from man to woman, resting sternly on the guide's face as he said:

"What does all this mean? Explain, sir."

For a space in which one might have told ten, no answer came. The thin, sensitive lips twitched as if meditating, but the narrow hand slid beneath the cloak, as though to grasp a weapon; but all the while the guide's flushed face was raised full to his chief's, his eyes never winking, though his breast labored heavily once or twice.

"Answer, sir, what is this woman's name?"

The guide was himself again. Calmly, respectfully, he answered, with least possible emphasis upon the title:

venture—the most dangerous, so far, that all her risky essays as a blockade-breaker had forced upon her.

"In all her previous tramps along the Potomac trail—as in her 'hair-breadth 'scapes' from patrol gunboats in crossing the well-watched river—Miss Clay had escaped capture. Indeed, had the opera been written then, she had certainly gained the sobriquet of 'The Mascotte,' from her good fortune."

But now, added to the danger of suspicion for a spy was the trial of a darling brother, loved beyond expression of words, whose chances in his struggle for life or death would be lessened by her delay.

In the rapidly-forming coils rose pictures of a narrow cut in a hospital ward, a fever-buried boy tossing restlessly upon it, and a stately form, worn by washing and anxiety to semblance of itself, leaning tenderly over him, smoothing the hot pillow, while the age-veined hand put the cooling draught to his lips. And the girl's sense could actually hear the words of fervent prayer he uttered, above the boy's fair hair, as soon changed to cheering talk of sister soon to come and bring relief.

Quickly, unconsciously, memory's camera had changed its slide, and in the coils before her the picture was of a gay ball-room of the previous year. It was New Year night, the road frost, and Richmond's best and fairest were there—her bravest and her tenderest. To a dim nook, a stairway half hidden from the throng, came subdued hum of distant voices, softened music of a waltz. She heard the very notes—low, sweet and tremulous—and her breathing kept time to the strain, Lanner's "Romantic."

And to that rhythm there had kept time eager, earnest, pleading of a strong, brave voice, tempered by deepest feeling and resistless truth, as it told anew "the old, old story."

A shiver ran through her lithe form, the shining coils of ruddy hair bent lower on her breast, as Carolyn Clay saw the woman in the coils hesitate, and then—her bravest and her tenderest. To a dim nook, a stairway half hidden from the throng, came subdued hum of distant voices, softened music of a waltz.

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A shadow of agony unspeakable swept the man's face, and his lips opened as if to speak. But a mighty effort closed them again; and he answered only with pleading gesture to the door.

"Leave me!" the woman said, low but imperiously. "Go or I call the guard!" "Bitter, hard as you are," the man answered, calmly, but with laboring breast, "your pride will ruin all. Miss Clay, by every memory of the past—by the grave of my dead mother—I swear I speak the truth. In the cope render stands my horse. The sentry is—powerless. An hour's ride brings you to roads you know; sunrise sees you safe with confederate cavalry. By my soul, I swear I speak only truth."

"And did I trust you?" "Yes, I know," he interrupted, eagerly, almost happily. "If you do, it is not that you hate—despite me less, but that you must use such vile means for the cause! Will you come?"

Again he extended his hand, entreating. Again the woman drew back with a shudder.

"Oh, God! Dare I trust this man?" burst from her lips in half sob. "You can!" he whispered, eagerly. "You can trust me as you could Evan, for your own sake—for your cause—for little Fairfax!"

"You know?" She stared at him. "Yes, I know," he hesitated in a instant, adding, almost fiercely: "It is my business—the traitor's—to know all. Poor little Fairfax"—again his voice softened to infinite tenderness—"he will die—you will murder him—unless you use these means to save. An hour's ride, and you are free, safe among friends."

With something like a sob he finished, raising his hand to push the damp hair back from his forehead. The embers flickered into blaze again, throwing full light upon his face, and the woman,—hesitant till then—again drew back, shuddering.

"An omen!" she cried. "That scar—Cain's brand upon your forehead—warns me not to trust the traitor!"

He stared at her wondering. Then the name passed his lips, low, vengeful as a curse. His breast rose and fell, as he dashed his hat to his head, striding one step towards her.

"Obstinate, relentless!" he said, rapidly, in hollow voice. "Will you prove selfish as well? Carolyn Clay, I have said what man dare say. Did I say one word more,—did I criticize you,—then I should despise myself as you despise me! I have solemnly sworn to save you, at risk of all that is left to me,—at risk of losing what a girl like you could never dream! A moment more, the relief comes, and all is lost; for I swear I will leave this but alone! No, do not answer; there is no time. If your own honor is risked,—if your mother's heart is broken,—if little Fairfax dies for want of remedies his piteous sister might have won him,—then I call God to witness that the sin is on your head!"

The woman's bosom rose and fell; words rushing to her lips died upon them; she heard her own heart beating thunderous in her throat.

"Come! For the sake of all dear to you,—cause, mother, brother,—come!" the man pleaded. "Vile, despicable as I am in your eyes, let me alone in part, by saving you—and Fairfax."

The sob so close to Carolyn Clay's lips burst through them. A great joy gleamed in the deep eyes of the traitor Virginian; and again—with observation piteous in its meekness—he held out his hand.

With bowed head, but quick gesture of dissent, the woman withdrew her own hand, half extended to take it; but she pointed to the door, without a word.

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brush flashed into flame before the draught. "How dare you—coward?" Low, clear, but almost in a hiss, came the words from the man's throat. "Hush!" the man answered, in a voice

so hollow she scarce recalled it. "Betray yourself by any noise, and we both are lost. I come."

"Peyton Fitzhugh! Leave me this instant, or I call the guard!" She drew up to her full height, pointing to the door with arm-sweep of a queen. "Your very presence would be insult to any Virginian woman; to me it is disgrace!"

"Listen!" the man answered, in a hoarse whisper. "Think what you will, but, for God's sake, hear me. I have just left the general. He is angered, vengeful. He knows all—your real name, your attachment to Stuart, your mission to the river—"

"And you told him?" The scorn in her voice was infinite. "You?" "I come to save you," he answered, rapidly, the great effort to be calm only betrayed by heaving chest, and nails that dug into his clenched hands. "Vilify, despise me as you must in thought, forget no more than men like me. Then I swear to serve you to the death. Stop! I know what you would say; the grief between us—the shame—the horror! Oh, God! Carolyn, do not stop for that! You life—your honor—my worthless life not counted—all rest on one single instant now! Come; you are free!"

"Something in the strong, low-spoken words, a will hers could not combat, forced the girl to listen, even while she shuddered and shook her head. Then, as the man eagerly, pleadingly, held out his hand, she drew back, her old self came more."

"Keep back!" she cried, with flashing eyes. "You are lying to me—lying for your revenge! He who would betray his country would not scruple to betray a helpless woman."

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