

The awful revelation from joy and gratitude at the sight of her lover alive and measurably unhurt to sharp anguish was too much for her, and for the second time that day she fainted. When she came back to life and its terrible realities it was night, and the kitchen beneath her hiding-place was full of armed men.

The reflection of the fire in the huge kitchen fireplace filtered through the cracks in the floor, and Madeleine saw that her little brother had fallen asleep, with his head on her arm. She crept with him to the space over the passageway, lest the light should waken him, and while she was putting him down there was a familiar step in the passage beneath, and she heard her father calling her guardedly. She answered with a little gasp of relief, putting her lips to an opening in the poles.

"We're here, and Buddy's asleep. Oh, daddy, I'm so glad you've come!"

"Sh! Don't make a noise. It's a couple o' them loose poles, and I'll he'p you down."

She obeyed, shaking like a leaf in the wind; and when she stood beside him, love made her forget the feud.

"Oh, daddy, they're going to hang Rick, and it'll sure kill me," she quavered; and the grizzled old man took her in his arms what time she was sobbing out the story of Rick's recapture and present peril.

"There now, don't take on so: mebbe 't ain't so bad as all that. Dad burn that reckless boy! I thess knowed he'd get into more troublement. You don't reckon they done strung him up already, do you?"

"I don't know; I don't know anything but just that I'm too miserable to live!"

John Vance knew then what he had to do and the manner of its doing.

"Thess you stan' right here, clost to the door, Meddy," he commanded, and at the word turned abruptly and entered the kitchen.

The hurried meal was ended, and the general and his staff were rising to mount and ride. The old mountaineer saluted awkwardly, and included the group of officers in a hospitable gesture.

"Evenin', General, and gentlemen all," he said. This here's my pore house, and you-all air right welcome. Sorry I war n't to home whenst you come, but the Johnnies 've been makin' it toler'ble skeery for me, and I had to take to the brush."

A soldierly man with a grave face and kindly eyes scrutinized him sharply.

"Are you John Vance?" he demanded.

"That air my name, General."

"It's a good one," was the curt reply. "We have heard of you: I've had my men on the lookout for you all day. You know thess mountain roads, don't you?"

"I'd ort to: been trompin' 'em since I was knee-high to nothin'."

"Good. You are a loyal man, and we need a guide. It's a perilous business, but you will be well paid."

The old man drew himself up proudly. "I been stan'in' up for what I allowed was the right for four long years, General, and I hain't never yet asked for pay. But if so be you all could do me a favor before you go—thess a little, triflin', no-account favor, General." The stern old feudalist had meant to take quite another tone, but the request made itself into a plea in spite of him.

"Name it."

"You-all done captured a boy right here in the door-yard a spell ago, General,—the young scamp 'at druv that ther ammy-mition-wagon over the bluff, and—"

The general's brow darkened, and the kindly look went out of his eyes. "Is he a friend of yours, Mr. Vance?"

"The frien'liest inimy I've got in the whole world, General. I've fit him and his kin for twenty-odd year, off and on: but—but that ther boy—dad burn it all. I caynt he'p thinkin' a heap o' that boy, General!"

"I don't blame you. The cutting out of the limber was heroic. But a'ter that, he escaped and was found in camp, disguised. There is only one construction to be put on that: he is a spy, and as such he must suffer. We are in the enemy's country, Mr. Vance."

"But if I can prove to you-all 'at he thess natchelly couldn't he'p comin' back, General?"

"State your case in a word. Time is precious."

Vance slipped to the door and called his daughter. Madeleine came in with eyes downcast and cheeks aflame.

"I ain't no lawyer, General, but I reckon this little gal's what fetched him back. He knowed she was alone—her and the

baby that's asleepin' up yonder in the loft. They hain't neither one of 'em let to me, but I reckon if the war was over my old rumpus with the boy's gran'dad 'd have to stan' aside. Ain't that the straight of it, Meddy? Speak up and tell the General."

But Madeleine, who was but a simple country maiden, only blushed the more eloquently; and a sympathetic murmur ran through the group of war-hardened listeners. The general spoke aside to one of his aides, and a fleeting smile twinkled for an instant in the grave eyes.

"You may not be a lawyer, but you've made your case, Mr. Vance. If the young man will sign a parole—"

"Oh, I reckon he'll do that; thank ye, kin'ly, General."

There was a stir at the door, and Rick was brought in under guard. Some friendly enemy had found him soap and water, and the surgeon had dressed the gash in his head. Madeleine would have gone to him, but her father restrained her, not ungently.

The general wasted no time in preliminaries.

"Captain Calvert, will you sign a parole not to take up arms until you are regularly exchanged?"

Now Rick was no feud-keeper, but when it came to the point he found it quite as hard to take his life at the hand of an adversary as ever John Vance had. Moreover, he had a soldier's loathing for spies and their calling; and he was still smarting under his accusation. So he said:

"Thank you, General, but I think you'd better go on and hang me. A spy's parole wouldn't be worth much."

"But if some loyal person will become your surety?"

Rick glanced aside at the refugee. "John Vance, you mean? He'd help you hang me."

The general's smile was grim. "You do Mr. Vance a grave injustice; but I do not mean him. Adjutant, where are those papers you found in Captain Calvert's coat?"

The papers were forthcoming, and the commander ran them over.

"Here is a marriage license for one Captain Ricker Calvert and Madeleine Vance," he said; and the vanishing smile twinkled again in the grave eyes. "You seem to have gone prepared for emergencies, Captain, as one should in time of war. Chaplain, be good enough to marry these two young people for me."

If a shell from a hidden battery had burst in the midst of them, the astoundment of the onlookers could scarcely have been greater. It was followed by a murmur of applause when the general's purpose became evident. By a single master-stroke he would tie the hands of a resolute enemy, heal an ancient feud, and free the refugee for the service of his country by providing an efficient protector for those he must leave behind.

The chaplain came forward. John Vance signed his approval, and Madeleine besought Rick with her eyes. The young man laughed and asked for a pen.

"The parole first, if you please, General. Miss Vance mustn't promise to love, honor and obey a condemned spy."

The paper was signed and witnessed; and then the chaplain bade them join hands, performing his office while the troop trumpeters were sounding "Boots and saddles." It was the briefest of ceremonies, and when it was over the kitchen cleared quickly. But the grave-faced commander, turned on the threshold and held out a hand to each of the younglings.

"God send His peace," he said, "to you two, and to this distracted land. Come, Mr. Vance: we must mount and ride."

The old mountaineer edged toward the door. Lacking speech, he would have gone without a word, but Rick would not have it so.

"Father," he said, "is the old quarrel dead and buried?"

The refugee turned and put his hands on the boy's shoulders. "Hit went up in smoke this after-noon, Rick, lad; the smoke o' the old home place down yonder in the valley. If you can make out to forget, I reckon I'd ort to."

He was gone at the word, and when the tramp and gallop of the moving host had begun again Rick put his arm about Madeleine and drew her to a seat on the settle by the fire.

"Rest me, little woman," he said, wearily. "I feel as if I'd lived a year in a day. Hear those fellows singing 'John Brown.' That's our recessional, Meddy. It wasn't quite as we had planned, was it?—a war wedding with a fanfare of cavalry bugles for music. But out of it comes peace for an old man and a young one, and for a soft-hearted little girl who stood between. Are you glad or sorry, dear?"

For answer she drew his head down upon her shoulder and kissed him.