

Otis James

Sarah Dillard's Ride: A Story of the Carolinas in 1780



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NOTE

"They were men admirably fitted by their daily pursuits for the privations they were called upon to endure. They had neither tents, baggage, bread, nor salt, and no commissary department to furnish regular supplies. Potatoes, pumpkins, roasted corn, and occasionally a bit of venison supplied by their own rifles, composed their daily food. Such were the men who were gathering among the mountains and valleys of the Upper Carolinas to beat back the invaders." —*Lossing's "Field-Book of the Revolution."*

CHAPTER I. A BRITISHER'S THREAT

In the year 1780 there was in North Carolina, west of Broad River, and near the site of what is now known as Rutherfordton, a settlement called Gilbert Town.

Within five or six miles of this village on a certain September day in the year above mentioned, two lads, equipped for a hunting trip, had halted in the woods.

One was Nathan Shelby, a boy sixteen years of age, and nephew of that Isaac Shelby whose name is so prominent in the early history of North Carolina; the other, Evan McDowells, son of Colonel Charles McDowells, was one year younger than Nathan.

But for the fact that these two lads were sorely needed at their homes, both would have been enrolled either among the American forces, or with those hardy pioneers who were then known as Mountain Men, for the time was come when the struggling colonists required every arm that could raise a musket.

On the previous month the American forces under General Gates had been defeated by Cornwallis at Camden. Tarleton had dispersed Sumter's forces at Rocky Mount, and the southern colonists appeared to have been entirely subdued by the royal troops.

General Cornwallis, now at Camden, was bending his efforts to establish the king's government in South Carolina, and in punishing those "rebels" who, despite their many reverses, were yet among the mountains awaiting a favorable opportunity to strike another blow in behalf of freedom.

It was at this time, and especially in the Carolinas, as if the attempt to free the colonists from the oppressive yoke of the British had utterly failed, and even the most sanguine despaired of being able to accomplish anything in that section until General Washington should lend them some assistance.

Nathan and Evan, lads though they were, understood full well the situation of affairs, and as they sat upon the trunk of a fallen tree, resting from the labor of seeking food – for this hunting trip had been made for serious purposes, rather than in pursuit of sport – the two spoke concerning the reverses which had been visited upon the patriots.

"It is as if we were already whipped into submission," Evan said sadly, "for how is it possible our people shall gather in such force as to be able to offer successful resistance?"

"That seems indeed true," Nathan replied, "and yet will Colonel William Campbell of Virginia remain idle? Do you believe my uncle, Colonel Shelby, or Lieutenant-Colonel John Sevier, have laid down their arms? Or even if those three are subdued, is it likely, think you, that your father will rest content while the king's forces overrun the country at their pleasure?"

"There are matters which cannot be mended, however brave men may be, and it seems to me that now has come the time when we must say that the struggle for liberty can no longer be continued."

"If all who have for four years opposed the king's will were as faint-hearted as you, Evan, then indeed had the rebellion been crushed before it was well begun."

"But tell me, Nathan, how may the Americans, with but few men, scanty equipments, and little or no money, even attempt to hold their own against the royal forces, which outnumber us mayhap ten to one?"

"That I cannot do, and perchance even your father might find it difficult to make reply to such question, but this much I believe to be a certainty. The desire for freedom has not been crushed out from the hearts of the American people, and while it remains strong as at present, some way will be found whereby we shall have at least the semblance of an army again."

"I would I could believe you."

"Is your mother thus despondent?"

"I cannot say, Nathan. It is now near two weeks, as you know, since I have seen her."

"But think you she has lost all hope? She, who has dared to burn charcoal in the fireplace of her own home, while the Britishers were about, in order to carry it to your father, who was making gunpowder in a cave among the mountains."

"My mother is brave, which is more, mayhap, than can be said for her son."

"Ay; had she not been, when your father's cattle were driven off by the British skirmishers, she had hardly called the neighbors together, and by such show of strength recovered the property. With women like your mother, and men such as your father and my Uncle Isaac, I tell you, Evan, the cause of liberty is not lost."

"But it would seem as if we were further from our purpose now than four years ago, when a declaration of our independence was read throughout the colonies. Then we had more money, and it was not as difficult to find recruits. Now ten dollars in paper is hardly worth two cents – in fact, I am told that even the troops consider it too cumbersome for its value to repay them for carrying it around."

"That is the case only with the paper money."

"Ay, Nathan; and as for gold and silver, we still trust to that on which is stamped the king's image. But it is not for you and I to talk of political matters, when both are really in the same way of thinking; the only difference between us is that I, who was never so courageous as you, have grown faint-hearted."

Evan ceased speaking very suddenly, for at that instant both the lads heard the hoof-beats of horses in the distance, and started up in what was very like alarm as they listened, while exchanging inquiring glances.

"It must be that the British are coming this way," Evan said, turning as if to flee; but his companion clutched him by the arm, saying with a laugh:

"You are grown timorous indeed, Evan, if you can imagine that noise to be caused by the redcoats. Surely there are none nearabout here, and even though there were, it is not likely they would attempt to make their way through this wood."

Evan ceased his efforts to flee, but turned as if unwilling, with a forced smile upon his face.

"Of course it must be as you say, Nathan, for the Britishers would have no business here; yet it is even true they may be nearabout, for we have heard that General Cornwallis was bent on sending a force into this section, and he is not wise who refuses to take heed of any warning in these times."

"You need not set me down as one who makes light of the information which has been brought by those whom we could trust; but I refuse to be alarmed without cause, and the idea that the Britishers would ride into this thicket is – They *are* redcoats! It is *I* who am playing the fool by setting myself up as an authority on those matters of which I know nothing!"

The foremost of a mounted band had come into view, causing this sudden change in Nathan's speech, and the two boys gazed in alarm at the rapidly advancing horsemen, for now was it too late to make any attempt at flight. Both knew, from reports which had been spread through the country, of outrages committed among even those who were not in arms, what it might mean to fall into the hands of the enemy, who were bent on subjugating the country by any means, however harsh, and they had good reason to expect brutal treatment once they were caught in the clutches of the king's troops.

Involuntarily the lads clasped hands. Although armed, there was no thought in the mind of either that resistance might be offered, and indeed it would have been in the highest degree foolhardy to have done other than they did at this moment – quietly await that foe from which escape was impossible.

Where they stood the forest was open and free from underbrush, therefore while the troopers were yet a quarter of a mile away they were in full view, their red coats showing in vivid contrast among the green leaves, and before the advance squad were yet arrived at where the boys were standing, the entire company could be seen.

Fully two hundred men, a goodly portion of whom were Tories, clad in the ordinary garb of the country, and the remainder wearing the king's uniform, made up the party.

Among the foremost of the riders was one clad in the habiliments of a major, and from what had been told by those who brought the information of General Cornwallis' movements, the boys knew at once that this must be Patrick Ferguson of the Seventy-first Royal Regiment.

It was this officer who accosted the frightened lads, by asking in a loud voice which had in it much of menace:

"What are you two doing here armed? Rebel spawn no doubt, who lie in wait to do mischief when it may be accomplished without danger to yourselves."

"We are out hunting, and if it please you, sir, in order to get meat for the family," Nathan replied, speaking stoutly, although he was inwardly quaking with fear.

"Tell me no lies or it shall go the worse with you. How long has it been that you of the Carolinas must search for food in the forests?"

"Since his majesty's troops overrode the colony, quartering themselves upon those whose store of provisions was already scanty."

"Be careful how you speak! I am not in a mood to hear insolence from those who rebel against their lawful king," and the major made a threatening gesture, bending from his horse as if he would strike the boys.

Evan stepped back a pace in fear; but Nathan boldly held his ground as he asked bravely:

"Think you, sir, that two lads like us may do the king harm?"

Major Ferguson's face reddened with rage, and motioning for one of the troopers to advance, he said:

"Disarm and bind these insolent cubs who dare bandy words with their betters. They shall talk in a different strain before I am done with them."

"Would you make prisoners of us who are not soldiers?" Nathan asked even as the man seized him by the arm. "Would you carry away from their homes two boys upon whom a family is depending for food?"

"Where are your fathers?" Major Ferguson asked sharply.

"I have none," Nathan replied. "My mother is a widow."

"And yours?" he continued, turning toward Evan.

"Colonel Charles McDowells."

"As rank a rebel as lives in the Carolinas. See that you bind them well, my man, for I doubt not these two, innocent as they would appear, have already had their fingers in the rebel broth."

"Since you are bent on making us prisoners, sir, it is useless to deny that we have done aught against the king, save it be a crime to perform our share in feeding those dependent upon us."

"If those who make up the ragamuffin following of *Mister* Washington could not depend on such as you to provide for the women and children, they might be forced to remain at home where they belong, instead of hatching treason, and I could then, perhaps, clear this portion of the colonies of every male inhabitant who is old enough to be of service in any capacity. Before I have performed my mission you of the Carolinas shall understand what rebellion means, for it is my purpose to teach you a lesson."

Having said this the valiant major turned his horse that he might speak with some of his followers, and the trooper who was bidden to disarm and bind the lads had well-nigh finished with the task.

Nathan and Evan were rudely searched, and with such effect that even their spare flints were taken from them. Their hands were bound behind their backs securely with leathern straps; the fowling pieces and the scanty store of ammunition were taken charge of by one of the troopers, and he who had been detailed to seize them stood as if awaiting orders of his commander.

"Keep up a brave heart, Evan," Nathan whispered courageously. "Do not give yonder redcoated brute the satisfaction of seeing that we are afraid."

"We are likely to be carried very far from home, Nathan, and it may be that much suffering is in store for us."

"Of that there can be little doubt; but no good will come to us by showing the white feather, for of how much weight, think you, tears and prayers be upon such as our captor. It would please him were we to give free rein to our sorrow, and I am not minded he shall have such gratification from me."

"But surely there is no reason why you should anger him by bold speaking – that will not avail us."

"No more than it would if we pleaded for mercy, and there is much satisfaction to be gained by depriving him of the pleasure that would come with the sight of our tears. Hold firm, Evan McDowells, as your father and your mother would do were they in like situation, and mayhap the time will come when this Major Ferguson's grasp will be so far lessened that we shall see a chance of slipping through his fingers."

"I have little hope of any such good fortune," Evan replied, with a long-drawn sigh, and then both the boys fell silent.

The horsemen had dismounted, and it was evident that a prolonged halt would be made.

The major gave no further orders concerning his prisoners, and the trooper stood guard over them four or five paces away, giving no apparent heed to the conversation in which they had been indulging.

During half an hour the situation remained unchanged, and then came into view two hundred or more men on foot, the greater number wearing scarlet uniforms, the remainder being evidently Tories.

At first glance the boys believed this last body of Britishers had come by accident upon the halting-place; but as the men exchanged salutations with the members of the advance party, it could be seen that they all formed one company under the leadership of Major Ferguson, and had been temporarily separated because of the more rapid traveling of the horsemen.

When another half-hour had been spent here the order was given to resume the march, and an officer in the uniform of a captain brought word from the major to the man who was guarding the boys, that he would be relieved from duty, one of the foot-soldiers taking his place.

When the change of guards had been effected, Nathan and Evan were ordered into line midway of the column, and thus hemmed in on every side they were forced to advance, traveling with difficulty, and even pain, because their arms were fettered.

As a rule, the men gave very little attention to these young prisoners, save when one or the other of the boys fell slightly in the rear, and then a blow from the butt of a musket would warn him that he must keep pace with the remainder of the troop or suffer because of inability to do so.

Now that the lads were completely surrounded by foes, no conversation of a private nature was possible, and in silence they marched on, with ample food for unpleasant thoughts.

The only question in the minds of both was as to the destination of this body of Britishers, for there seemed little reason why so many men should penetrate this mountainous portion of the Carolinas, where there was no important stronghold to be captured.

Until five o'clock in the afternoon the troop advanced steadily, and then the foot-soldiers were arrived at a small valley where the horsemen had already apparently halted for the night.

Fires were kindled here and there; some of the soldiers were engaged in cooking, others in caring for the horses, and all so intent upon making themselves comfortable that it was as if the prisoners had been forgotten by everyone save him who was charged with their custody.

When an hour had passed the lads were still standing where they had been halted, and Nathan said with a mirthless laugh:

"It looks as though we might be forced to keep our feet until morning, for so nearly as I can make out food has been served to all save ourselves and our guard."

"I am counting on being relieved before many more moments pass," the soldier said petulantly, for Nathan had spoken so loudly that he could not fail to hear the remark.

"And are we to be starved because we neither wear red coats nor are willing to march shoulder to shoulder with them?"

"It matters not to me what disposition may be made of you, so that I am given an opportunity of getting my rations," the soldier said, and a moment later one of his comrades came up, musket in hand, to relieve him.

To this last guard Nathan repeated his question as to the probability of their being provided with supper, and the soldier replied carelessly:

"I am not the quartermaster of this detachment, and if I was I question whether much time would be spent over such as you."

Then he fell to pacing to and fro, watching his comrades as they lounged around the campfire; but all the while keeping close guard over the two lads, who were so weary from the hunting of the forenoon and the march of the afternoon that it is questionable whether they could have fled even if the opportunity presented itself.

"I had expected to be ill-treated," Nathan said with an assumption of carelessness to his comrade; "but did not count on being starved. It is a pity, since we were to be made prisoners, that this gallant Major Ferguson could not have come up after we had partaken of dinner, for it seems as if many hours had passed since we ate breakfast."

Evan was on the point of making some reply to this mournful remark when from the distance he observed a lad, who, coming directly across the valley, was halted by the sentinels stationed around the encampment.

"Look there!" he said, in a low tone of excitement. "If I mistake not, it is Ephraim Sowers, and what may he be doing here among the redcoats?"

"It is as I have always believed," Nathan cried, forgetting that the man who acted as their guard could hear every word he spoke. "Ephraim is neither more nor less than a Tory, and I venture to say he comes now to give information concerning our friends."

"It is not the first time he has met this detachment of men," Evan added, "See! He speaks now with one of the soldiers as to an old acquaintance."

"Who may say for how long he has acted the spy? When it was told on the day before yesterday that he had gold in his possession, I would not believe it; but now it is plain to be seen that there was truth in the statement, and we can say how he earned it."

This Ephraim Sowers was the son of one who claimed to be "a man of peace;" one who by many a loud word had declared that he believed it a sin to resort to arms, whatever the provocation, and, living a near neighbor to the McDowells, was in a position, if it so pleased him, to give much of valuable information to the enemy. Until this moment, however, there had been no suspicion that he might be tempted to play the part of spy, and his son's arrival at this encampment told the boys as plainly as words could have done how it was General Cornwallis had reliable knowledge concerning that portion of the colony, for he had given good proof that he knew who among the inhabitants favored the king or the "rebels."

Ephraim advanced leisurely, and with the air of one who believes he is expected, until his eyes rested upon the prisoners; then he started suddenly, a flush as of shame came over his face for the instant, and straightening himself defiantly, he walked up with a vindictive smile until he was within half a dozen paces of the two lads.

"I had thought that the sight of a redcoat was so displeasing that it went against your stomachs," he said tauntingly, "and yet I find you hobnobbing with Major Ferguson's men."

"It seems that you know who commands this detachment," Evan said sternly, forgetting all his fears now in the anger he felt that this lad whom he had once trusted should have been all the while a Tory.

"I'll warrant you two know as much."

"Ay; but we are here as prisoners, and you have come as a visitor – one who has seen these men before, to judge from the manner in which you accosted them."

"Well, what does that prove?" Ephraim asked, an evil look coming into his eyes.

"It proves you to be a spy, and when we shall make known what has been seen this night, I am thinking neither you nor your peace-loving father will find the Carolinas a pleasant abiding place."

"And I am thinking that when such rebels as you have the chance to tell what has been seen, the rebellion will have been crushed out, for now that you are here, if my words go for anything, you will not soon be set at liberty."

CHAPTER II. THE TORY'S PURPOSE

Until the moment when Ephraim Sowers had revealed his true self by coming into the British camp as a spy, neither Nathan nor Evan had felt any grave anxiety regarding the future.

They knew full well that the redcoats were not given to being friendly in their intercourse with the so-called rebels, and that such persons as they took were treated with roughness, if not absolute harshness.

Such treatment as had previously been dealt out to captured Americans the boys could endure without a murmur, therefore there was no painful anxiety regarding the outcome of the matter; but when Ephraim Sowers appeared, the situation of affairs seemed to be decidedly changed.

Now that he had been recognized by these two, the news that he was a Tory and in league with the Britishers would be carried to all that country roundabout where he lived, whenever Nathan and Evan were set free.

It was only reasonable to suppose he had some slight degree of influence in the camp, having served Major Ferguson as a spy, and these two lads might safely count on his doing whatsoever was in his power to have them held prisoners, even if worse did not follow, and it was evident Nathan feared this last possibility, for he said in a low tone to his comrade, when the young Tory had walked away with a swagger in the direction of Major Ferguson's tent:

"No good will come to us through having seen that villain."

"On such a point there need be little discussion, for I am of the same mind, and it will be exceedingly fortunate if he leaves this encampment without having worked us some harm, although I cannot say in what way it might be done."

"For his own safety, should he ever count on returning home, we must be silenced, Evan, and I am thinking Ephraim Sowers knows in this encampment enough of his own kidney who would aid him in thus doing."

"Do you mean that he would dare to kill us?" and now Evan looked up in alarm.

"He would dare do anything when there was no danger of his receiving bodily injury. But don't let me play upon your fears, for there is no reason why we should look abroad for trouble when we have sufficient of it close around us. We will trust to the chances that that young Tory is powerless, or too much occupied just at present, to give evil heed to us."

"The last is what we should not take into consideration, for however actively engaged he may be it is necessary for his own safety, should he ever return among his neighbors, to prevent us from telling what we have just learned."

"If you refuse such comfort as I try to give, then we will put it that he will be content so long as we are held prisoners here, and who shall say that we may not soon find an opportunity for escape? Captives while on the march are not like to be kept under overly strict guard."

"Where did the Tory go? I was so bewildered both by seeing him here and realizing what his coming might mean, as to be almost in a daze while he was making his threats."

"I fancied I saw some one nearabout Major Ferguson's tent beckoning for the scoundrel, and he hurried away as if bent on visiting the commander. I venture to predict we shall see him again before he leaves this locality."

Then the lads fell to speculating as to how long young Sowers had been engaged as a British spy; what might be the result of Major Ferguson's march through the mountains, and in other ways discussing the situation as if they were to be spectators rather than participants in whatever might occur.

When half an hour had passed, much to their surprise, for the boys had come to believe they would not be given food that night, rations were served out to them, and they were partaking of the limited meal with such keenness of appetite and eagerness as to be unaware of Ephraim Sowers' return until he stood close beside them.

"Well, have you finished giving Major Ferguson all the information he desired?" Nathan asked curtly, only glancing toward the newcomer sufficiently to discover his identity.

"I may have told him some things that wouldn't be pleasant for you to hear," the Tory replied surlily.

"Of that I have no question, for it is easy to guess that you have done all the injury to your neighbors of which your tongue was capable."

"I have given the major such a good account of you two that he won't be likely to part company with you for some time to come."

"We are not surprised, because it was only what might have been expected after we found you were playing the part of spy," Evan said, determined to so far hide his fears that this vicious enemy should not suspect what was in his heart.

"I am ready to do whatsoever I can against the enemies of the king," Evan replied, assuming what he intended should be a dignified attitude.

"His majesty must rest content now, if he knows that you stand ready to aid his officers by playing the spy upon those who have befriended you when you were in need."

Nathan spoke distinctly and deliberately, in a tone so loud that all might hear, and Ephraim's face crimsoned with mingled rage and shame, for he knew full well that but for the aid afforded him by Nathan's uncle during the previous winter his sufferings might have been great indeed.

"I shall do all in my power to overthrow the wicked plans of the rebels, and more particularly will I exert myself against the Mountain Men," he cried, in a fury of passion, whereat Evan added quietly:

"We can well fancy that, for Master Isaac Shelby is a Mountain Man, and but for him you would have starved. Let me see: vipers have been supposed to be the only living things that would sting the hand which feeds them."

"I shall sting you even worse than I have already done!" Ephraim cried, shaking his clinched hand in impotent rage, and so threatening was his attitude that the soldier on guard seized him, as if fearing the boy would strike the helpless prisoners.

"Take your hands off!" Ephraim cried, literally trembling with passion. "I am not to be treated as a prisoner in this camp after all I have done."

"Very true," the soldier replied quietly. "You shall not be deprived of your liberty save when it becomes necessary to prevent you from striking helpless captives, and that I would not allow my own comrade to do."

"I had no idea of touching them."

"Your actions told a different story, and even though these two lads be rebels, they shall be treated decently while I am on guard over them."

"I will see them hanged, and that before long!" Ephraim screamed.

The soldier released his hold of the infuriated Tory, but took the precaution of stepping directly in front of Nathan and Evan, as if to afford protection; while Ephraim, standing a few paces away, poured out a flood of invective, during the course of which much information was gained by those whom he menaced.

"I didn't come to this place empty-handed!" he cried, "nor will my visit be of little concern to the rebels! I brought Major Ferguson information that Clarke and his men are in camp at Greene's Spring, and to kill and capture them all will be a simple matter for this troop."

"You have dared bring the enemy down upon your mother's own cousin," Evan cried in astonishment.

"He is no cousin of mine once he raises his hand against the king."

"I'll venture to say there will be little desire on his part to claim relationship after he knows the part you have been playing," Nathan replied with a laugh, which yet further increased the Tory's wrath. "But have a care, Ephraim Sowers. The men in this colony are not easily whipped into submission, nor do they readily forget an enemy, and if it should so chance, as it has many times since '76, that the king's forces were driven out of the Carolinas, your life would not be an enviable one."

"If anything of that kind should happen, and I am ready to wager all I possess it never will, you won't be here to know what comes to me, for before then I will take good care you are put where all rebels should be – under the sod."

"If the king's officers will commit, or permit, murder at your request, then must they give up all claim to the name of soldiers," and now Evan was rapidly becoming as excited as the Tory. "It may be you can succeed in having us killed; but the reckoning will come, Ephraim Sowers, and the longer it is deferred the more must you pay."

"I will settle with you first after my own fashion, and when that has been done we will see what your ragamuffin friends are able to do about it."

Ephraim would doubtless have indulged in further threats, but just at that instant a soldier came up from the direction of Major Ferguson's tent, and the vindictive lad was summoned to the commander's quarters.

"It seems that his footing here is not so secure that he can give his tongue free rein many minutes at a time," Nathan said in a tone of relief as the spy walked reluctantly away, literally forced so to do by the messenger who had come in search of him.

"It is not his words which trouble me," Evan said mournfully. "Just now he is in a position to work us great injury, and by yet further provoking his wrath we have made of him even a more bitter enemy than he naturally was."

"I question if that could be possible."

"Yet you cannot dispute his power to work us harm."

"Neither do I. If he be willing, as it appears he has shown himself, to betray the whereabouts of Colonel Clarke's forces, knowing full well that this troop can readily cut them down, it is certain we stand a good show of learning how great is his power for mischief."

"For myself I have little concern at this moment, because of the knowledge that our friends are in such peril."

"And yet there is nothing we can do to aid them."

"Unless it might be we could escape." Evan said suddenly, lowering his voice to a whisper lest the sentinel should overhear his words.

"It is only needed that you look about in order to see how much hope there is of such a possibility," Nathan said despondently. "Even though we were fresh, instead of so weary that I question if we could travel a single mile further, and if we might so far elude the sentinel as to gain the cover of the thicket, it would be impossible to continue the flight two miles, for the Tories in this troop know the country as well, if not better, than we."

"I was not so foolish as to believe that escape might be possible, but only spoke because my thoughts were with those who are threatened, and my desire is to aid them."

"I wish it might be done," Nathan replied with a long-drawn sigh, and then the two fell silent, each occupied with his own gloomy thoughts.

An hour passed, and nothing more had been seen or heard of the Tory spy.

Even though they were in such desperate straits, the boys began unconsciously to yield themselves up to slumber, and after a time, bound as they were, both were reclining upon the green turf in at least partial repose.

When morning came they ached in every limb, with arms so benumbed that it was as if those useful members had been paralyzed. They had slept fitfully, and were hardly more refreshed than when the halt was called after the day's march.

Scanty rations were served out to them, and to the intense relief of both the lads a captain, more humane than his commander, ordered that the bonds be taken from their arms.

They were to be tied together in such manner that any attempt at flight would be useless, and yet the labor of marching would be much lightened.

The prisoners had expected another visit from the Tory before the troop started; but in this they were happily disappointed, and when the march was begun they almost believed Ephraim Sowers had been left behind, until shortly before noon they saw him riding with the mounted detachment.

"He is most likely guiding the force to Greene's Spring," Nathan said bitterly. "He counts on seeing those who have played the part of friends to him shot down, and even though their blood will be upon his head, he is well pleased."

To the relief of both the boys, their enemy did not come near where they were, and it was reasonable to suppose Major Ferguson, although not prone to be overcareful of the feelings of his "rebel" prisoners, had given Sowers orders to put a check upon his tongue.

When noon came the detachment of foot soldiers arrived at Martin Drake's plantation, where the cavalry had already halted and were actively engaged in wantonly destroying property.

Outbuildings were torn down, lambs, chickens, and geese were being slaughtered although they were not needed for food, and the household furniture which, rude though it was, represented all that went to make up the interior of the home, was thrown about the grounds, or chopped into kindlings, from sheer desire to work destruction.

The horsemen could not have been at this place more than an hour when the foot soldiers came up, and yet in that short time they had completely wrecked the dwelling portion of the plantation, and caused such a scene of devastation as would lead one almost to believe that a desperate conflict had raged at that point.

"All this must be pleasing to Ephraim Sowers," Evan said bitterly, "for it was Martin Drake's wife who tended him when he was ill with the fever, and this may be a satisfactory way of requiting her."

"Have you seen him since we halted?"

"No, and I am hoping he has gone ahead with the advanced detachment, for it seems certain all of the horsemen are not here."

Although Master Blake's live stock had been slaughtered in such quantities that there was treble the amount of food the troop could consume, the boys were given nothing more than cornbread for dinner, and hardly so much of that as would suffice to satisfy their hunger.

Not until everything portable had been destroyed, the doors torn from the house, and the windows shattered, was the march resumed, and then the prisoners heard the Tory who was acting as guide say that at nightfall they would camp on Captain Dillard's plantation.

There was in this information a ray of hope, so far as warning Colonel Clarke's men of what threatened, for Captain Dillard was in his command, and if information could be conveyed to the mistress of the house it was possible she might send a message ahead.

This much in substance Nathan had suggested to his comrade; but Evan failed to see any possibility that good might be effected so far as the friends of the cause were concerned.

"Even though Mrs. Sarah Dillard can be told all that we know, it is not likely she will have an opportunity of sending a messenger from the plantation. Ephraim Sowers knows full well where the captain may be found, and will warn Major Ferguson against permitting any person to leave the place."

"If Dicey Langston, a girl only sixteen years old, could baffle Cunningham's band, who gave themselves the name of the Bloody Scouts, as she did on that night when alone she crossed the

Ennoree, swollen though the waters were, what may Sarah Dillard do when she knows her husband's life hangs in the balance?"

"It is not a question of what she would do, but of what she can," Evan replied gloomily. "Thanks to Ephraim Sowers, the commander of this force will know only too well how eager she must be to send news ahead of his whereabouts, and will take precautions accordingly."

"That is as may be. We can at least hope for the best," Nathan replied bravely, and then word was given for the troop to resume the march.

During the afternoon the British soldiery came upon two plantations, the buildings of which they utterly wrecked, shooting from sheer wantonness the live stock that could not be run down without too much labor, and seeming eager in every way to mark their trail by destruction.

It was an hour before sunset when the boys saw in the distance the buildings of the Dillard plantation, and knew that the time was near at hand when, if ever, they must get word to that little band whose lives were in such deadly peril.

Ephraim Sowers was nowhere to be seen; but slight comfort could be derived from this fact, for it seemed reasonable to suppose he was making himself obnoxious in the dwelling of those people whom he had once claimed as his friends, but was now visiting as their bitterest enemy.

"Keep your wits about you for the first opportunity to gain speech with Sarah Dillard," Nathan whispered to his comrade, and Evan sighed as he nodded in reply, for it seemed to him there was little chance they would be permitted to hold a conversation with any acquaintance, because of the probable fact that Ephraim Sowers would guard against such a proceeding.

The prisoners were marched directly up to the dwelling, and there, with the windows and doors flung wide open, they had a full view of the entire interior, but their enemy was nowhere to be seen.

This, to Evan, unaccountable absence, troubled him not a little, for he believed it betokened yet more mischief on the part of the vindictive Tory, but Nathan was not so ready to take alarm.

"It may be that he is keeping out of sight, hoping Sarah Dillard will still look upon him as a friend, and, in case the captain should succeed in escaping, confide the secret of his whereabouts to him."

The mistress of the house was doing all in her power to satisfy the exacting demands of the officers who had quartered themselves upon her, as the boys could see while they remained halted near the doorway.

It appeared that such servants as she had were not sufficient in numbers to please these fastidious red-coated gentlemen, and they had insisted that Mrs. Dillard should perform her share of waiting upon them. Now one would call out some peremptory order, and then follow it with a demand that the mistress of the house give it her especial attention, while, despite such insolence, Sarah Dillard moved with dignity here or there, as if it were pleasure rather than necessity which caused her to so demean herself.

On the outside roundabout the soldiers were engaged in their customary diversion of killing every animal which came within range of their guns, and a huge bonfire had been built of the corncribs, near which a score or more of men were preparing the evening meal.

A spectator would have said that the dwelling itself was spared only because in it the officers had taken up their quarters, and once they were ready to depart it would be demolished as the other structures surrounding it had been.

During half an hour or more the boys stood close by the door under close guard, and then one of the officers appeared to have suddenly become conscious of their existence, for he called in a loud tone to Mrs. Dillard:

"We desire of you, madam, some apartment which will serve as a prison for two rebel cubs that we have lately taken. Can the cellar be securely fastened?"

"There is only a light lattice-work at the windows, which might readily be broken out if your prisoners made an effort at escape," Mrs. Dillard replied.

"But surely you have some apartment which will answer our purpose? If not, the men can speedily nail bars on the outside of one of the chamber windows."

"There is a room above, the window of which is already barred, that may serve your purpose," Mrs. Dillard said, as she glanced toward the boys with a certain uplifting of the eyes, as if to say that they should not recognize her as an acquaintance.

"Show it to me and we will soon decide if that be what is required, or whether we shall call upon our troopers to turn carpenters," the officer said with a laugh, as if believing he had given words to some witticism, and in silence Mrs. Dillard motioned one of the servants to lead the way to the floor above.

The brief survey which he made appeared to satisfy the Britisher, for on his return he said to Major Ferguson, who was seated at the head of the table, giving his undivided attention to the generous supply of food which the mistress of the house had been forced to bring out:

"There is but one window in the room of which our fair hostess spoke, and that overlooks the stable-yard; it is barred on the outside with oaken rails stout enough to resist the efforts of any three of our troopers, I should say. The door can be not only bolted, but locked on the outside, and in my opinion there should be no need of a sentinel stationed inside the building."

"If such is the case, why spend so much breath in describing the dungeon," Major Ferguson said with a laugh. "It is enough for our purpose if the lads cannot break out, and the sooner they are lodged within the sooner you will be ready to hold your peace, thus giving me an opportunity of enjoying this admirable game pie. Put the rebels away and sit down here, for it may be many days before another such chance presents itself."

Word was passed to the soldier who had the prisoners in charge for him to take them to the upper floor, and this trifling matter having been arranged, the gallant British officers turned their attention once more to converting their hostess into a servant.

CHAPTER III. A DESPERATE VENTURE

The meaning look which Mrs. Dillard had bestowed upon the prisoners, brief though it was, sufficed to revive their spirits wonderfully. Not that there was any promise in it; but it showed they were recognized by the hostess and, knowing her as they did, the boys knew that if there was a loophole of escape for them she would point it out.

While preceding the soldier up the stairs it was much as though they were guests in Sarah Dillard's home, and there came with the fancy a certain sense of relief and security such as had not been theirs for many hours.

The apartment selected to serve as prison was by no means dismal; it was cleanly, like unto every other portion of Sarah Dillard's home, and sufficiently large to permit of moderate exercise, with a barred window overlooking the stable-yard which allowed all that took place in the rear of the dwelling to be seen.

"I shouldn't mind being a rebel myself for a few hours in order to get such quarters as these," the soldier said as he followed the boys into the chamber. "Not a bad place in which to spend the night."

"With a couple of blankets a body might be very comfortable," Nathan replied in a cheery tone, for despite the dangers which threatened that little band at Greene's Spring, despite Ephraim Sowers' avowed enmity and probable ability to do harm, despite the fact that he was a prisoner, this enforced visit to Captain Dillard's house was so much like a home-coming that his spirits were raised at once.

"And you have the effrontery to ask for blankets after getting such a prison as makes a soldier's mouth water," the Britisher said with a certain rough good-nature in his tone. "You rebels have a precious queer idea of this sort of business, if you can complain because of lack of blankets."

"I am not complaining," Nathan replied with a laugh. "Of course there is no situation which cannot be bettered in some way, and I was simply speaking of how this might be improved. We are satisfied with it, however, as it is."

"And so you had better be, for I am thinking there are not two rebel prisoners as comfortably bottled up, and by this time to-morrow night you will be wishing yourselves back," replied the guard.

Then the soldier locked and barred the door on the outside, trying it again and again to make certain it could not readily be forced open, and a few seconds later the sound of his footsteps told that the boys were comparatively alone for the time being.

Now was come the moment when they should make known the danger which threatened the friends of freedom through Ephraim Sowers' perfidy, for every second might be precious if a warning message could be sent, and involuntarily both the lads ran to the window, looking eagerly out through the bars in the hope of seeing some member of the household whose attention might be attracted.

Major Ferguson's subordinates were not so careless as to allow their prisoners many opportunities of such a nature. All the servants, and in fact every person on the plantation, was kept busily engaged waiting upon the redcoats, a goodly number of whom could be seen in the stable-yards, which knowledge caused Evan to say mournfully:

"We are not like to get speech with any one who could carry word to Greene's Spring. It stands to reason Ephraim Sowers has warned the Britishers that such an attempt might be made, and you may be certain, Nathan, no one can leave the plantation without Major Ferguson's permission."

"It is possible he can prevent a message being carried; but I shall not give up hope yet awhile."

"Before many hours have passed the troop, or at least a portion of it, will set out to slaughter our friends. I would I knew where that Tory spy was at this moment!"

"Most likely he has gone ahead to make sure his victims do not escape. We shall hear of him again 'twixt now and daybreak."

"I am afraid so," Evan replied with a long-drawn sigh, and then, leaning his forehead against the wooden bars, he gazed out longingly in the direction his feet would have taken had he been at liberty.

With two hours' start he might save the lives, perhaps of a hundred men, all of whom could be accounted his friends, and yet because of one lad's wickedness that little band of patriots was in imminent danger of being massacred.

From the apartments below the coarse laugh and coarser jest of a Britisher could be heard, telling that the enemy were still bent on making themselves as obnoxious to the inmates of the household as was possible, while now and then from the outside came sounds of the splintering of wood or the cackling of poultry as the soldiery continued their work of wanton destruction.

Both officers and men grew more nearly quiet as the shadows of night began to lengthen. The Britishers were weary with asserting their pretended right as victors, and the stable-yard was well-nigh deserted of its redcoated occupants.

The young prisoners were standing near the window in silence, when a slight noise as of some animal scratching at the door attracted their attention, and instantly the same thought came into the mind of each.

Sarah Dillard, freed for the time being from the exacting demands of the unwelcome visitors, had come, perchance, to point out some way of escape.

Now was arrived the moment when they might reveal to this brave woman the dangers which threatened, and yet for the instant Nathan hesitated so to do, because it appeared to him that he would be distressing her needlessly, since it was hardly probable she could find means of conveying the warning to those in peril. By making her acquainted with all that threatened he would be doing no more than to increase her distress of mind.

Evan, however, was not looking so far into the future. He only realized that perhaps now was the moment when he would make known Ephraim Sowers' perfidy, and crept noiselessly toward the door, whispering eagerly:

"Is that you, Mistress Dillard?"

"Yes, boys, and I have come in the almost vain hope that it may be possible to serve you, although I know not how. When did you fall into the hands of the enemy?"

"Have you seen Ephraim Sowers here?" Evan asked, heeding not the question.

"No. Has he also been made prisoner?"

"It is far worse than that. He is a spy in the service of the redcoats, and has revealed to them the whereabouts of Colonel Clarke's band."

"That is impossible, for the entire company were here not more than eight hours ago, and with them was my husband."

"Then the miserable spy is mistaken, and these Britishers will have their journey for their pains," Nathan whispered in a tone of intense relief. "Ephraim has told Major Ferguson that they were encamped at Greene's Spring, and there –"

"And it is to Greene's Spring they are going!" Mrs. Dillard cried unconsciously loud. "How could any spy have learned of their intended movements?"

"You must remember that Ephraim Sowers has not been looked upon as a spy. Perchance no one except the Britishers knew it until we two saw him coming into the camp where we were prisoners," and Nathan spoke hurriedly. "It is not for us to speculate how our friends have been betrayed; but to give the warning to them without loss of time."

Mrs. Dillard did not reply immediately, and the prisoners could well fancy that she was trying to decide how the danger might best be warded off.

"Is it not possible for you to release us?" Nathan asked after a brief pause. "If either Evan or I were at liberty we might be able, by rapid running, to cover the distance between here and Greene's Springs before the redcoats could arrive there, for it is not likely they will start very early in the night."

"To escape from the window while the soldiers are in the stable-yard is impossible," Mrs. Dillard replied, much as though speaking to herself, "and as for getting you out by this way I am powerless. One of the officers has a key to the door, and even if it was in our possession, there is little chance you could make your way through the house secretly."

"But something must be done, and at once," Nathan whispered in an agony of apprehension, and at that moment the sound of footsteps on the floor below caused Mrs. Dillard to beat a retreat.

The boys could hear the swish of her garments as she ran through the hallway, and it was as if the good woman had no more than hidden herself from view before the heavy footsteps of a man on the stairs told that some one of the Britishers was coming to make certain the prisoners were securely confined.

Creeping noiselessly away from the door lest the redcoat should enter and find them in a position which betokened that they had been holding converse with some one on the outside, the lads remained silent and motionless until the noise of footsteps told that this cautious Britisher, having satisfied himself all was as it should be, had returned to the floor below.

Then the lads stole softly back near the door where they awaited the coming of the woman whom they hoped might show them the way to freedom, even though at the time it seemed impossible she could do so.

The moments passed like hours while she remained absent, and then once more they heard a faint scratching at the door which told of her return.

"Tell me all you know regarding this boy Sowers being a spy," Mrs. Dillard whispered when she was once more where private conversation could be carried on, and Nathan said nervously:

"Why speak of him at a time when every moment is precious? Instead of giving such as that villain a place in our thoughts we should be trying to form some plan whereby the lives of our friends may be saved."

"It is yet too early in the night for us to make any move," the brave woman replied as if her mind was already made up to a course of action. "Until the men have quieted down somewhat we cannot so much as cross the yard without being challenged, and I would know all that may be told before setting out for Greene's Spring."

"Do you count on making such a venture?" Evan asked in surprise.

"Some one must do it, and since I cannot set you free, I must act as messenger."

"But there is hardly one chance in a hundred you will succeed."

"Yet I shall try to take advantage of that hundredth chance."

"But how may you get there? It is twenty miles over a rough mountain road."

"Even though it were ten times as far, and the peril greater an hundredfold, do you not think I would brave it in the hope of saving the lives of those brave men?"

Evan ceased to find objections to her plan; but asked how she might be able to make the journey.

"There is in the stable a colt which the Britishers will hardly attempt to drive away because he has not yet been broken. I shall do my best at riding him, and trust in the good God for protection."

Nathan was not a cowardly lad; his acquaintances spoke of him as one having much courage, and yet he trembled at the thought of this woman attempting to bridle an unbroken colt, and then ride him twenty miles over the rough mountain roads where only the steadiest of horses might safely be used.

He would have said something in the hope of dissuading her from her purpose; but it was as if his tongue refused its office, for Sarah Dillard would ride that night not only to save a hundred or more friends of freedom, but to save the life of her husband.

"Tell me all you know of the spy, so that I may warn our people against him with fair proof."

Neither Evan nor Nathan made any attempt at giving advice; the woman's courage so far eclipsed theirs that it was as if she should command and they obey – as if they had no right even to

offer a suggestion. Obedient to her wishes they repeated all they had heard the vindictive Tory say, and described in detail his reception at Major Ferguson's camp.

"If you could only take us with you, or what would be better, so manage it that we might go in your stead," Nathan said when his account of Ephraim Sowers was brought to an end.

"I would willingly do so if it might be possible; but I can see no way to accomplish such a purpose."

"Yet there are many chances against your being able to ride the colt, however willing you may be," Evan said, as if hoping such suggestion might cause her to devise another means of forwarding the warning.

"I know full well how many chances there are against success, and yet because it is the only hope, I shall venture."

But little conversation was indulged in after this assertion, which seemed prompted by despair.

Nathan told the brave woman all he knew regarding the most direct path through the thicket to the American encampment, and Evan warned her to be on the alert for Sowers nearabout the spring, where both he and his comrade believed the spy had gone to make certain his intended victims did not escape.

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