



SWEET REVENGE

By Captain F. A. MITCHEL
Author of "Hattanooga," "Chickamauga," Etc.

CHAPTER X.
A DANCE FOR A LIFE.

THE proposition was received with shouts of approval. "You don't mean you're dancing?"

"Reckon." "Good gait! 'Tis the way to a dance!"

"You nigger, tune that banjo! 'Tis lucky for you 't' strung an all, er we'd 'a' had strings over yer hide."

The camp was on a beautiful piece of land ground so cut off from the sun by surrounding trees and bushes that no grass grew. The few scattered sprouts were soon cleared away. Ginger sat down on the log which lay near by, twined his hands, fighting or loosening a string, and then gave a preliminary flourish.

Jaqueline took off her sunbonnet, threw it a few feet away and stepped on to the clearing. There were mingled fear and defiance in her face that set my heart to fluttering. Though I did not know she was carrying out a pre-conceived plan, somehow it got into my head that she was about to dance for my liberty—in other words, for my life. The thought naddened me. An impulse seized me to throw off the mask and defy the whole band. Helen, seeing the desperate resolve expressed in my face, gave me a look, partly imploring, partly commanding, that recalled me to a sense of my helplessness.

Jaqueline began sailing about, keeping time to Ginger's music, moving lither and thither with uncertain steps, as a bird will flit back and forth before darting away in its flight, or as a musician will sweep his fingers over a harp before beginning his melody. Gradually the music grew quicker, and Jack, gathering confidence, forgot everything but the dance.

Since the entry of the two girls into the camp, I had not had one terror after another in quick succession, and now it struck me that in case Jack succeeded in fascinating this lawless group some of them, fired with a desire of possession, would break through all restraint. I had been wondering how two defenseless girls should dare to come among them, and now I was stupefied that Jack should dance before them and that Helen should permit her to do so. But who shall measure the strength of woman's weakness? Mother Nature had taught Jack and Helen their power, and they went about their work with not a tittle of the fright that possessed me.

Meanwhile Jaqueline had drifted into the dance and was whirling, bounding, floating, every muscle alive with its especial motion. At times she would lull, pose herself for a moment, then, like a fitful wind, start again with renewed fervor. At no time, however, did she discover any lack of refinement in her movements, and now it was her purpose to attract without exciting her spectators. Stimulated by frequent bursts of applause and by the rapt attention of the men surrounding her, she found her main incentive in a far deeper, nobler motive, feeling, as she did, the critical situation, the dread responsibility, for a human life resting upon her.

What a singular scene! The ring of ugly faces momentarily softened by the sight of grace and beauty; the captain, his sharp face turning with the dancer and following her wherever she goes; Pete Halliday, standing with folded arms, lowering from under the broad brim of his sombrero, grinding his quid; Ginger's bow legs gleaming with pride at furnishing the music for his young mistress, inspiring her with his own inspired melody; little Buck, standing before two lank guerrillas in "bitterness" staring at his cousin and forgetful of her danger in his interest in her work; Helen Stanforth, standing apart, her strong face wearing the expression of a general who watches a cavalry charge intended to turn a position on which hangs the fate of the day.

The guerrillas, not one of whom would hesitate to slit a throat at the slightest prospect of gain, were watching the little soubrette not only with admiration, but with respect. Once during her performance one of them applauded with a ribald remark. He was standing by the captain, who stretched his arm, brought it down with a backward stroke and sent the man sprawling. Instantly the act and the approving looks of the outlaws, who were in no mood to have their sport interrupted. The color left her cheeks, but she kept right on, and the episode passed without further consequences.

At a moment when the attention of the men had become riveted upon the dancing Helen, who had been gradually working her way from the group toward me, came and sat down on the log behind Ginger, where she was partially screened by him. Watching her opportunity, she deftly took a revolver from her pocket and concealed it in the folds of her dress. With her eyes fixed upon the group about Jack, she waited for a favorable moment when it came, reaching back, she dropped the weapon behind the log at my feet; then, rising, rejoined the circle. I pushed the revolver under the log with the toe of my boot, then kicked dust and leaves over it. This accomplished, I breathed the most comfortable sigh of relief I have ever drawn in my life. The whole situation seemed changed by that little dust covered combination of bits of metal. Stopping, I slipped it into the ing of my boot and felt that half the battle was won.

At that moment the setting sun came out from behind a cloud and shot lanes of light through the trees, covering the group with a beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad, the refined and the vulgar—with gilded splendor. I saw but Jaqueline. The usual stiffness of her disposition, her natural expression of careless indifference, had given place to a serious intensity denoting a great purpose. Posing herself between two movements, the gliding rays shone on her forehead. Then darting on her toes to another part of the ring, a quick succession of lights and shades passed over her brow, a glittering diadem of sun flashes. Truly God is a wonderful artist, since he can touch even a dance with celestial purity.

Helen Stanforth turned to me. Pulling her sunbonnet forward so as to conceal her face from the others, though they were too intent on Jaqueline to notice her, she moved her lips,

and though no sound came I knew she intended the word:

"Go!"

Near me was a tree, not far from that another, underbrush, bushes—just the cover through which to make a retreat. I could easily get down behind the log, crawl into the thicket and away. Now for the first time the purpose of dear Jaqueline was fully apparent.

But how could I leave these friends who had risked so much, accomplished so much, for me? I stood still and shook my head.

Again Helen looked an order for me to go.

"Not without the others," I whispered, sitting down on the log so as to be nearer to me, she replied in a low voice:

"We will leave here when you are safely away. She will dance on to keep them from knowing you have gone. We have planned it."

"They will know you committed at my escape and murder you."

"Why should they? Go at once, or I shall consider you an ingrate."

She looked so anxious, they had all made such a noble effort in my behalf, that I could not find it in my heart to disappoint them.

I slipped behind the tree, dropped to the ground and wriggled like a snake through the underbrush; then, rising, I darted away.

A dozen yards—fifty—a hundred. The music of Ginger's banjo dies as suddenly as the clang of a bell on a passing engine. Will one minute or five pass before I am missed? A distant burst of applause—God bless the dear little dancer! Before me is an open space, then a dense clump of trees. If I can reach that thicket I can make a quick digression, and this may throw my pursuers off my track.

A confusion of yells, a bullet whistling by my ear. I reach the wood and push on through it, not daring to lose distance by digression with an enemy close behind me. My feet becoming entangled in a vine, I stumble and fall. A weight comes down on me, crushing the breath out of me. It is all over. Panting, bleeding, white as a ghost, I am led back to the guerrilla camp.

"Shoot him!"

"Give me a rope once that pack mule!"

"The him on a critter an send him down the mountain!"

A babel of brutal suggestions came from the different members of the band, sounding in my ear, stunned as I was, like a rain of arrows. A distant burst of applause—a "forlorn hope." Amid the clamor I saw but one sight—Helen and Jack locked in each other's arms, paralyzed with terror.

"Stand back, men!" cried the captain, pushing his way toward me. "Have you forgot the money?"

"Stand back!" roared Halliday. "He belongs to me an Tom Jaycox! We tuk him!"

The captain's authority, thus supported, saved me from immediate death.

of there was nothing to precipitate trouble, but the entertainment could not go on all night, and I began to dread the moment when the girls should attempt to take their departure. Presently Helen in a firm voice said:

"Come, it's time for us to go." Shouts of "No!" "A dance!" "A song!" greeted the proposition, and the guerrillas began to form in groups to resist an exit. Helen, selecting the noisiest knot of men, drew a revolver from her pocket and, cocking it, moved toward them with her eyes fixed upon them, calm and steady. Whether it was that they were covered by the weapon or admired this evidence of woman's pluck, they opened a way. The captain, seizing the opportunity, quickly took Jack by the hand and led her after her cousin. Once beyond the ring, he assisted the girls to mount, then, mounting himself, the three rode away, followed by a cheer. As for me, I broke off one long sigh of relief.

"Well, Ginger," said Buck, "reckon we uns air goin to get to Sparty to-morrow we'll have to travel all night." "Is the nigger takin you to Sparty or air yo' takin the nigger?" asked one of the men.

"That ain't gwine to mak' no differ," said Ginger. "Mars Buck an I don't never had no trouble. Mars Buck, he's my mars' till I gits to de new one."

Buck led his horse to the log and mounted, giving me a significant look, as much as to say, "I won't be with you," then rode away, followed by Ginger, with the remark:

"Goodby, yo' fellers. Much 'bliged to 'de good time."

The restraint of the girls' presence being no longer felt, the men's behavior changed in a twinkling. The captain's absence left Pete Halliday, the worst man in the gang, free to foment trouble, and he began to do so by sneering at the chief for being drunk, as he expressed it, under petticoat government. There appeared to be two factions in the band—the one headed by Halliday or Jaycox and the other by Captain Ringgold. Halliday set about instigating the guerrillas, or rather his adherents, to go after Helen and Jack and bring them back for another dance. To make matters worse, one of the men found some applejack, and it was not long before the gang were half drunk. Meanwhile the captain returned and received the hearty cursing from Halliday and his adherents. Several of them started to bring back the girls, but Ringgold drew upon them and threatened to shoot unless they returned. They staggered back, grumbling, and the captain adroitly proposed another pull at the applejack. This diverted them, and after finishing the liquor one after another sank into a drunken slumber.

It was midnight. Every member of the band was asleep save the man who was deputed to guard me. He was sitting on a piece of firewood, so placed that he could watch me across the flames. I lay on my back looking up at the stars and feathered clouds that now and again floated across the great blue dome, the only motion apparent save the tree tops bending under an occasional breeze. The fire flickered, the guard nodded, and an arrow in the distance gave an occasional hoot.

I heard something stir in the underbrush. Glancing aside, I saw a small light disk over a bush. It was the face of little Buck.

"Now, in the name of all the gods, will those devoted friends never give over risking their lives in these useless attempts? What is to happen now? I scowled an order to the boy to go and he paid no attention to it. Something came along, then, and he ground and lodged against me. The guard heard it, started, cast a quick glance at me, then about him, but seeing nothing, relaxed into his former quietude. I felt for what I had struck me and clasped a jackknife.

Meanwhile Buck disappeared, but soon appearing again in his place, held up a carbine. He had doubtless stolen it from one of the men who slept on the edge of the circle about the fire. Again he disappeared, and I watched eagerly for his return. The guard was still awake, though nodding, but had been more watchful he would not likely have discovered Buck, for the underbrush, both where the man appeared to me and where it skirted the sleeping guerrillas, was so thick that in passing around the camp he was comparatively safe from observation. Besides for most of the distance Buck traveled in his gun foray the guard's back was toward him.

I watch the point where Buck's head appeared, expecting to see it again, but in its stead presently see two white dots. Straining my eyes, I discern the whites of two eyes, then a black face.

It is Ginger. A white line appears directly below the eyes, and he is showing his teeth in a smile. He raises his arm, and behold, another gun! Again a white line of teeth, and he puts the weapon down. He is far better fitted for such delicate work than a stiff old negro.

The little pantomime begins to take shape in my mind and bring anticipations of more than a fight for my own life. If I can escape and Buck and Ginger secure sufficient arms, it may be possible for all our party to get together and make a defense. I must tell Ginger to get some ammunition. But with a guard looking straight at me it is no easy task to convey an order by signs, and that to a stupid negro. Catching sight of a small figure beside me, I put out my hand, yawning to conceal my intention, let it fall on the stone and soon had it between the knuckle of my thumb and the point of my forefinger, as a boy holds a marble. Watching till the guard's head is turned, looking meaningly at Ginger, I fire the stone a short distance, hoping he will understand the word "ammunition." His face is a blank; it is evident that he does not know what I mean, and there is no prospect of his getting it through his thick skull.

Ginger turned away, and I knew that he was speaking to his young master; then Buck's white face showed itself inquiringly behind the negro's black one. I looked meaningly at Buck and repeated the motion of firing. He caught my meaning and, taking up a gun, made a motion as if ramming a cartridge, looking at me inquiringly. I indicated that he was right. He went away and after a long absence came back and held up four cartridges, two in each hand. Then, putting down the boxes, he held up three fingers, and I knew that he had secured three guns. He next held up four fingers of the other hand, pointing to the sleeping guerrillas, and I knew he proposed to get one more gun.

Buck was a long while capturing the fourth gun. One of the men awoke, yawning, sat up and looked into the fire, yawning again, lay down and was soon snoring. Then the guard got up from where he was sitting. There was a slight sound in the bushes, and he

listened attentively. Then he put some wood on the fire and sat down again. He had scarcely seated himself before Ginger held up the fourth gun. I moved slightly, showing my friends by my manner that I was about to try to get away. They appeared to understand.

The guard opened his eyes and looked straight at me.

stand and gathered up the guns, Buck taking one and Ginger three, doing all so silently that the camp seemed motionless. I waited, watching the guard intently till he should nod. I had no expectation of his going to sleep. I only hoped to free myself from my thoughts before he should discover my movement. The restraint of the girls' presence being no longer felt, the men's behavior changed in a twinkling. The captain's absence left Pete Halliday, the worst man in the gang, free to foment trouble, and he began to do so by sneering at the chief for being drunk, as he expressed it, under petticoat government. There appeared to be two factions in the band—the one headed by Halliday or Jaycox and the other by Captain Ringgold. Halliday set about instigating the guerrillas, or rather his adherents, to go after Helen and Jack and bring them back for another dance. To make matters worse, one of the men found some applejack, and it was not long before the gang were half drunk. Meanwhile the captain returned and received the hearty cursing from Halliday and his adherents. Several of them started to bring back the girls, but Ringgold drew upon them and threatened to shoot unless they returned. They staggered back, grumbling, and the captain adroitly proposed another pull at the applejack. This diverted them, and after finishing the liquor one after another sank into a drunken slumber.

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