

CAPTAIN LUCIAN OF THE BEAR FLAG



Lucian, With Captain Merritt, Rode at the Head of His Troops

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CHAPTER II

Mrs. Elliott at the sound of Rose's voice gave a cry of terror which she tried to smother.

"My poor children, what will become of us now?" she exclaimed, and hurried from her place at the window to the little girl's trundle bed.

"Be still, be still, my darling," whispered the distracted mother. "They are bad men—they are what—they have heard you—we are—"

From the corral, where the party of horsemen were watering their mounts, came the swelling chorus of a song—very much out of tune, but still definable:

And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there;
Oh, say, does that star spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?"

That was not the way that Lieutenant Arce and his men, had they come back to Sonoma on a bloody errand, would have sung. They might have had better voices, but not a better song.

Tears welled into the mother's eyes and she hugged her children even before she threw open the heavy wooden shutters.

"Americans, Americans!" she cried. Lucian leaped through the window. He had quickly dressed himself in his few garments when he first discovered the horsemen in the yard. In a moment he was among them.

"You are not Mexicans," he shouted in glee and turned handsprings about the heels of the horses. "We thought you were Lieutenant Arce. He passed through here a few days ago and said he was coming back to lick us Yankees."

"That young feller Arce," drawled one of the men of the party. "That must have been the feller we caught up at Murphy's ranch on the Cosumnes a couple of days ago." Then every one laughed.

Lucian surveyed the group before him. He saw 30 men, almost all of whom were dressed in leather hunting shirts and leather breeches. It was very dark, but several of the men held torches made of grasses, which lit up the scene weirdly. All the men were armed and carried ugly knives. A long bearded fellow, wearing a coonskin cap, from the crown of which a ringed tail dangled, seemed to be the leader.

"What is up?" asked the boy.

"Well, young feller, I am Captain Ezekiel Merritt, and we-uns are going to capture this town of Sonoma or know why not, by Lucifer. Ain't we, men?"

"We are," replied several of the voices in the darkness.

"But we don't know the way. Maybe you do, young feller?" said Merritt.

"Sure I do. I'll take you there in a half hour." Lucian saw real adventure, probably war, a war for his country, before his eyes. Without waiting for another word from Captain Merritt he rushed back into the house and told his mother in sputtering sentences the purpose of the horsemen.

"They are going to capture California for us Americans and hold it—they are going to make a government of Yankees."

"God bless them on their way," said the woman.

"And it will be I who shows them the way," shouted Lucian.

In 10 minutes Lucian was mounted on his little pony and with Captain Merritt rode off at the head of his troops. Never was a great commander waging a just war more proud than was this 14 year old Yankee boy, riding at the head of 30 men toward the defenseless California mission town of Sonoma, guiding a party of Americans on what has since been characterized by history writers as a filibustering expedition.

Lucian did not go into the merits of the cause. He only knew that he was to guide an armed force of his fellow countrymen, his fellow Yankees, to the capture of a city.

In the cool morning air the men rode, Merritt, on a heavy horse at Lucian's side, talked to him occasionally. Merritt was a great hunter of bears and Indians. As their horses cantered shoulder to shoulder the gray bearded old frontiersman had the boy feel the handle of his tomahawk. "Feel those notches, young feller. They represent Injuns I have shot, and if there is any trouble out here this morning there will be more notches, by Lucifer," exclaimed the old hunter.

Such a brave hunter, with so many notches in his tomahawk—each notch meaning a dead Indian—was not the man to show any fear to a 14 year old boy. But there was one question he put so often that Lucian guessed that the old man was cautious.

"Where is Juan Padilla? Where is that varmint—he's worse'n Injuns," Merritt would say.

And then Lucian, bold lad that he was, would tremble a little in his saddle.

"He hasn't been around here for weeks," replied Lucian.

"He's varmint," whispered the old hunter.

It was faint morning light when the party of 30 men headed by our young friend Lucian rode into Sonoma and up to the home of General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, comandante of the town and the country—a commander without a single trooper.

"Is this a masquerade?" asked Senora Vallejo, the bright wife of the general, looking through a shutter and seeing the Yankees trot into the plaza.

Just as the sun rose on the morning of June 14, 1846, Merritt and two other men entered the Vallejo house to demand the surrender of the town. They looked like a party of masqueraders. Each man was in a fringed hunting shirt and in the lead swaggered the bold Captain Merritt, his long white beard stained with tobacco juice and on his head a furry coonskin cap. The ringed tail of the coon hung down over his forehead to his matted

eyebrows and it took good eyes to tell where coon tail left off and whiskers began. His buckskin breeches were fringed like an Indian's. He was a remarkable looking warrior.

Lucian had heard much about the glory of war. He knew how the little French army of Joan of Arc had conquered Orleans and raised the siege. He had seen pictures of his great hero, George Washington, receiving the surrender of Cornwallis' army. Those were nothing like this—and this affair was the capture of a fine California town.

There wasn't even a drum beat to give an air of martial splendor to the scene.

Lucian's part in the capture had not been played yet. He was a spectator with nothing to do. So he sat on his horse while his friend, Captain Merritt, and two other men went into the Vallejo house to receive the surrender of the town.

The Yankees were in the house a tremendously long time. The other horsemen, who had been riding all night, grew tired. Some fell asleep in their saddles.

Finally one of the men called to him, "Boy, slip up to the window and see what's keeping old Merritt."

Lucian peeped in the window of the house and quickly came back to the command.

"They are having a party in there," he reported. "Captain Merritt looks like he's asleep. But they've had a lot of bottles—I can see them on the table."

"I'll be hamstrung," yelled the Yankee, and he dropped from his horse like a flash and ran into the Vallejo house.

Later General Vallejo came out. "Gentlemen," said he with every courtesy that a fine Spaniard can command. "Gentlemen, I am your prisoner."

"That means that the fight is all over, the war is ended," thought Lucian to himself. Then he took another very important and far more accurate thought. He had not had breakfast.

The boy knew Sonoma and his little friend Pedro, with whom he had played a Boston tea party, lived in the town. He would find Pedro and have a breakfast of beans. There were not many houses around the plaza and the Yankee lad started briskly for the low roofed cabin where his friend lived. He had left his pony with the men in the party, for the horses were then being fed by the generous General Vallejo.

Pedro was not at home, but his grandmother was. It was a bad day for Americans in Sonoma, for the Mexicans and Spanish were highly wrought up over the capture of their town by the Yankees, the gringos. But hospitality is hospitality. Lucian, though his skin be white and hair fair, could not be turned away from the house. There was a plate of beans for him. And when he nodded over them, for he had slept but little the night before, the old grandmother led him into Pedro's cot by the window. "Just take a slesta there," she said in Spanish.

It was twilight when Lucian awoke. A whole historic day he had spent in sleeping. He bit his tongue in his rage over his luck. He was a baby, not a man. How could he tell his father this experience? What would

his mother think of her son now? A baby—Rose would have been more resolute and wide awake. In his first doings those thoughts came to him as he lay hot and angry with himself.

He was just about to throw himself from his cot when he heard a soft footstep cross the room and a few whispered Spanish words. A man had come in. Pedro's grandmother was greeting him, but her voice was not cordial.

"What do you want, Juan Padilla?" she exclaimed.

Juan Padilla! The name that the brave Merritt had feared—the name of the most cruel outlaw in northern California. Juan Padilla, the man of terror, who robbed and pillaged the Yankees and the rich—whose knife was always wet with the blood of a victim. And he was in the same room with Lucian, whispering words of hate for the Yankees.

Lucian was terror stricken. If he was discovered even the goodly hospitality of the native Californians would not save him from the hands of the outlaw.

Padilla told a frightful story of his deeds on that day. He and his men had captured two "gringos." They had died. Lucian almost screamed, so terrible was the tale of their death. Now Padilla was going to rescue General Vallejo. Did the old senora not know that already the Yankees had split, that already there was a bitter feud among them, and the old Indian hunter, Merritt, had started for General Fremont's camp with General Vallejo and one of his men as prisoners. The other Yankees were holding the town, filled with anger at Merritt for taking the prisoner away. Padilla had a plan, he told the Spanish woman. He and his men would overtake Merritt and his prisoners, would kill the Yankees and set the general free. No one would stop them, and the other Yankees would not care, so deep was their hatred now for Merritt.

Lucian heard the plot, his body rigid, but damp. Padilla wanted something to eat. The old woman went out of the house to the yard where the pot of beans hung over glowing coals. Lucian saw his opportunity.

In a single leap he was out of the house. It was now deep twilight and he clung to the shadows of the trees as he ran toward where his horse was picketed.

All boys do foolish things. Lucian showed his boyishness at this moment. He believed the terrible Padilla when the outlaw had said that the Yankees left in Sonoma hated Merritt so much that they would do nothing to aid him if they knew that he was in danger from the Californians. Lucian himself must ride on into the night, overtake Merritt and his men, though they had had several hours' start, and warn them of the impending peril.

Lucian knew that there was a road or trail leading over toward the Vaca ranch, miles and miles away. That was the road Lieutenant Arce had taken. That was the road Merritt and his men had come by. Saddling his horse Lucian sprang to the saddle and turned the willing steed's head down the road from Sonoma.

(To Be Concluded Next Week.)