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Erskine Dale — Pioneer

By John Fox, Jr.

Copyright by Charles Scribner's Sons CHAPTER XII—Continued.

"Barbara would not accept your sacrifice nor would any of us, and it is only fair that I should warn you that some day, if you should change your mind, and I were no longer living, you might be too late."



"I'd Like to Go—to Learn to fence."

I expect to be most of the time, I need nothing at all. Colonel Dale rose.

"I wish you would go to college at Williamsburg for a year or two to better fit yourself—in case—"

"I'd like to go—to learn to fence," smiled the boy, and the colonel smiled too.

"You'll certainly need to know that, if you are going to be as reckless as you were today," Erskine's eyes darkened.

"Uncle Harry, you may think me foolish, but I don't like or trust Grey. What was he doing with those British traders out in the Northwest—he was not buying furs. It's absurd. Why was he hand in glove with Lord Dunmore?"

"Lord Dunmore had a daughter," was the dry reply, and Erskine hung out a gesture that made words unnecessary.

"Erskine," he said, "don't worry—and—don't give up hope. Be patient, wait, come back to us. Go to William and Mary. Fit yourself to be one of us in all ways. Then everything may yet come out in the only way that would be fitting and right."

"I can think of nothing in the world that would make me quite so happy."

"It's no use," the boy said tremblingly, "but I'll never forget what you have just said as long as I live, and, no matter what becomes of me, I'll love Barbara as long as I live. But, even if things were otherwise, I'd never risk making her unhappy even by trying. I'm not fit for her nor for this life. I can't get over my life in the woods and among the Indians. I can't explain, but I get choked and I can't breathe—such a longing for the woods comes over me and I can't help me. I must go—and nothing can hold me."

"Your father was that way," said Colonel Dale sadly. "You may get over it, but he never did. And it must be harder for you because of your early associations. Good night, and God bless you." And the kindly gentleman was gone.

Erskine sat where he was. The house was still and there were no noises from the horses and cattle in the barn—noise from roosting peacock, turkey, and hen.

From the far-away quarters came faintly the merry melow notes of a fiddle, and farther still the song of some courting negro returning home. A drowsy bird twittered in an ancient elm at the corner of the house.

The flowers drooped in the moonlight which bathed the great path, streamed across the great river, and on up to its source in the great yellow disk floating in majestic serenity high in the cloudless sky.

And that path, those flowers, that house, the barn, the cattle, sheep, and hogs, those grain-fields and grassy acres, even those singing black folk, were all—all his if he but said the words. The thought was no temptation—it was a mighty wonder that such a thing could be.

And that was all it was—a wonder—to him, but to them it was the world. Without it all, what would they do? Perhaps Mr. Jefferson might soon solve the problem for him.

Perhaps he might not return from that wild campaign against the British and the Indians—he might get killed. And then a thought gripped him and held him fast—he need not come back. That mighty wilderness beyond the moun-

tains was his real home—out there was his real life. He need not come back, and they would never know. Then came a thought that almost made him groan. There was a light step in the hall, and Barbara came swiftly out and dropped on the top-most step with her chin in both hands.

"Erskine!" As quickly he rose, embarrassed beyond speech.

"Come here! Why, you look guilty—what have you been thinking?" He was startled by her intuition, but he recovered himself swiftly.

"I suppose I will always feel guilty if I have made you unhappy."

"You haven't made me unhappy. I don't know what you have made me. You saw how I felt if you had killed him, but you don't know how I would have felt if he had killed you. I don't myself."

"She began patting her hands gently and helplessly together, and again she dropped her chin into them with her eyes lifted to the moon.

"I shall be very unhappy when you are gone. I wish you were not going, but I know that you are—you can't help it." Auntie he was startled.

"Whenever you look at that moon over in that dark wilderness, I wish you would please think of your little cousin—will you?" She turned eagerly and he was too moved to speak—he only bowed his head as for a prayer or a benediction.

"You don't know how often our thoughts will cross, and that will be a great comfort to me. Sometimes I am afraid. There is a wild strain on my mother's side, and it is in me. Papa knows it and he is wise—so wise—I am afraid I may sometimes do something very foolish, and it won't be me at all. It will be somebody that died long ago." She put both her hands over both his and held them tight.

"I want you to make me a promise." "Anything," said the boy huskily.

"I want you to promise me that, no matter when, no matter where you are, if I need you and send for you you will come." And Indian-like he put his forehead on both her little hands.

"Thank you. I must go now," Bewildered and dazed, the boy rose and awkwardly put out his hand.

"Kiss me good-by." She put her arms about his neck, and for the first time in his life the boy's lips met a woman's. For a moment she put her face against his and at his ear was a whisper.

"Good-by, Erskine!" And she was gone—swiftly—leaving the boy in a dizzy world of falling stars through which a white light leaped to heights his soul had never dreamed.

CHAPTER XIII

With the head of that column of stalwart backwoodsmen went Dave Vandell and Erskine Dale. A hunting party of four Shawnees heard their coming through the woods, and, lying like snakes in the undergrowth, peered out and saw them pass.

Then they rose, and Crooked Lightning looked at Black Wolf and, with a grunt of angry satisfaction, led the way homeward. And to the village they bore the news that White Arrow had made good his word and, side by side with the big chief of the Long Knives, was leading a war party against his tribe and kinsmen.

And Early Morn carried the news to her mother, who lay sick in a wigwam.

The miracle went swiftly, and Kaskaska fell. Stealthily a cordon of hunters surrounded the little town. The rest stole to the walls of the fort. Lights flickered from within, the sounds of violins and dancing feet came through crevice and window.

Clark's tall figure stole noiselessly into the great hall, where the Creoles were making merry and leaned silently with folded arms against the doorpost, looking on at the revels with a grave smile. The light from the torches flickered across his face, and an Indian lying on the floor sprang to his feet with a curdling war-whoop. Women screamed and men rushed toward the door. The stranger stood motionless and his grim smile was unchanged.

"Dance on!" he commanded courteously, "but remember," he added sternly, "you dance under Virginia and not Great Britain!"

There was a great noise behind him. Men dashed into the fort, and Rocheblave and his officers were prisoners. By daylight Clark had the town disarmed. The French, Clark said next day, could take the oath of allegiance to the republic, or depart with their families in peace.

As for their church, he had nothing to do with any church save to protect it from insult. So that the people who had heard terrible stories of the wild woodsmen and who expected to be killed or made slaves, joyfully became Americans. They even gave Clark a volunteer company to march with him upon Cahokia, and that village, too, soon became American.

Father O'hault volunteered to go to Vincennes. Vincennes gathered in the church to hear him, and then hung the Stars and Stripes to the winds of freedom above the fort. Clark sent one captain there to take command. With a handful of hardy men who could have been controlled only by him, the dauntless one had conquered a land as big as any European kingdom. Now he had to govern and protect it. He had to keep loyal an alien race and hold his own against the British and numerous tribes of Indians, bloodthirsty, treacherous and deeply embittered against all Ameri-

cans. He was hundreds of miles from any American troops; farther still from the seat of government, and could get no advice or help for perhaps a year.

And those Indians poured into Cahokia—a horde of them from every tribe between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi—chiefs and warriors of every importance; but not before Clark had formed and drilled four companies of volunteer Creoles.

"Watch him!" said Dave, and Erskine did, marveling at the man's knowledge of the Indian. He did not live in the fort, but always on guard, always seemingly confident, stayed openly in town while the savages, sulky and grotesque, strutted in full war plumage through the straggling streets, inquisitive and insolent, their eyes burning with the lust of plunder and murder. For days he sat in the midst of the ringed warriors and listened. On the second day Erskine saw Kah-too in the throng and Crooked Lightning and Black Wolf. After dusk that day he felt the fringe of his hunting-shirt plucked, and an Indian, with face hidden in a blanket, whispered as he passed:

"Tell the big chief," he said in Shawnee, "to be on guard tomorrow night." He knew it was some kindly tribesman, and he wheeled and went to Clark, who smiled. Already the big chief had guards concealed in his little house, who seized the attacking Indian, while two minutes later the townspeople were under arms. The captives were put in irons, and Erskine saw among them the crestfallen faces of Black Wolf and Crooked Lightning. The Indians pleaded that they were trying to test the friendship of the French for Clark, but Clark, refusing all requests for their release, remained silent, haughty, indifferent, fearless. He still refused to take refuge in the fort, and called in a number of ladies and gentlemen to his house, where they danced all night amid the council-fires of the bewildered savages. Next morning he stood in the center of their ringed warriors with the tasseled shirts of his riflemen massed behind him, released the captive chiefs and banded them the bloody war belt of wampum.

"I scorn your hostility and treachery. You deserve death, but you shall leave in safety. In three days I shall begin war on you. If you Indians do not want your women and children killed—stop killing ours. We shall see who can make that war belt the most bloody. While you have been in my camp you have had food and fire-water, but now that I have finished, you must depart speedily."

The captive chief spoke and so did old Kah-too, with his eyes fixed sadly but proudly on his adopted son. They had listened to bad birds and been led astray by the British—henceforth they would be friendly with the Americans. But Clark was not satisfied.

"I come as a warrior," he said haughtily; "I shall be a friend to the friendly. If you choose war I shall send so many warriors from the Thirteen Council-Fires that your land shall be darkened and you shall hear no sounds but that of the birds who live on blood." And then he handed forth two belts of peace and war, and they eagerly took the belt of peace. The treaty followed next day and

Clark insisted that two of the prisoners should be put to death; and as the two selected came forward Erskine saw Black Wolf was one. He whispered with Clark and Kah-too, and Crooked Lightning saw the big chief with his hand on Erskine's shoulder and heard him forgive the two and tell them to depart. And thus peace was won.

Straightway old Kah-too pushed through the warriors and, plucking the big chief by the sleeve, pointed to Erskine.

"That is my son," he said, "and I want him to go home with me."

"He shall go," said Clark quickly, "but he shall return, whenever it pleases him, to me."

And so Erskine went forth one morning at dawn, and his coming into the Shawnee camp was like the coming of a king. Early Morn greeted him with glowing eyes, his foster-mother brought him food, looking proudly upon him, and old Kah-too arranged his braves around the council-pole, while the prophet and Crooked Lightning walked in their tents.

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