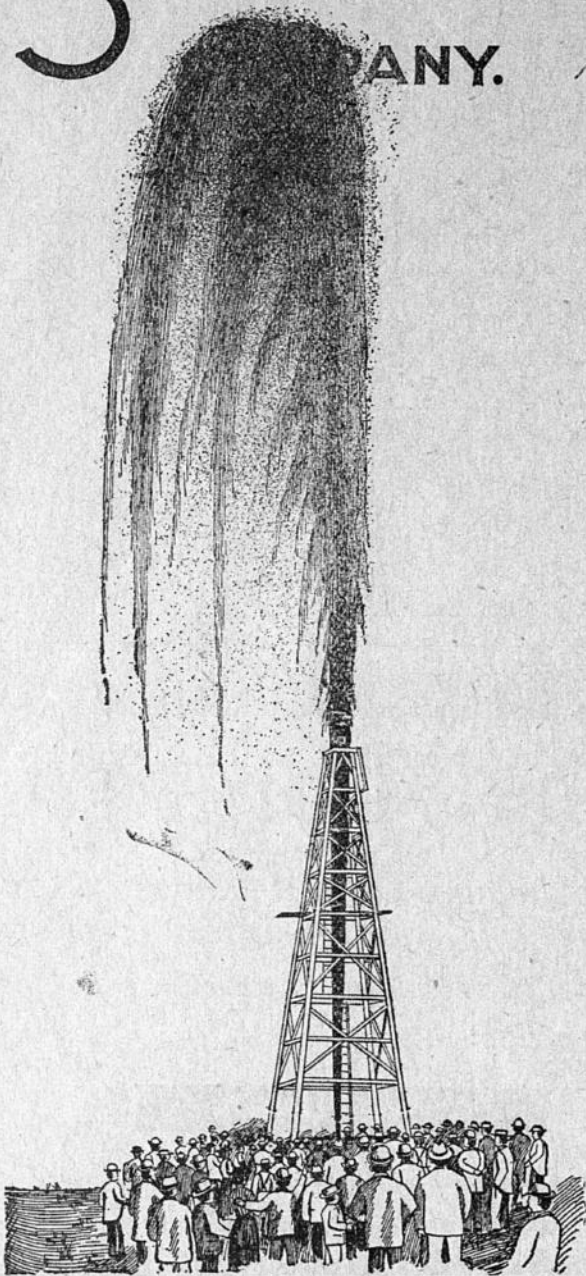


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MY CAPTIVE.

By JOSEPH A. ALTSHELER,
Author of "A Soldier of Manhattan,"
"The Sun of Saratoga," Etc.

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[CONTINUED.]

The girl rose and walked over to me. Reaching down, she seized the end of my silk handkerchief, which was projecting from my pocket, and jerked it forth. She threw it into the fire and watched it burn, the red heat gripping the delicate silk and converting it in a moment to ashes. Then she turned upon me a face of flame.

"You dared to bind me," she said—"you a rebel and I an English woman, the daughter of a loyal English officer! You dared to insult me so!"

"And I presume that is the reason you burn the handkerchief with which I bound you," I said.

"Yes."

"Now that you have begun the job of burning I suppose you would like to burn me, too, as I am the man who tied the handkerchief, and I did so because you deserved it."

She was silent, but her cheeks were as red as ever.

"I congratulate you upon your rescue, your rescuers, your company," I said.

"They are loyal British soldiers."

"They wear the British uniform. Any ruffian and robber may do that."

"I have seen Captain Crowder himself in the army of Cornwallis. My father knows him, and I do too."

"You know his face, and that is all. He may be a good enough British soldier when he is with Cornwallis, but elsewhere he is anything that suits his purpose. Look at him and his comrades now."

Every man had produced a bottle and was drinking deeply from it. The odor rose and was too strong to be swept away by the wind.

"Look at them," I repeated. "I congratulate you on your company."

They drank deeply and replaced their bottles in their pockets, where I was sure they were not destined to remain long. The red died from the girl's face, but she said nothing, and giving me the same curious look of mingled triumph and defiance went back to her old place on the log. There she sat, staring straight into the fire, as if she were wholly oblivious of me and the other men around her.

The partisans were in great glee. They laughed and cracked rough jokes, and presently, as I had expected, pulled out the bottles again and took a long, deep draft, once, twice, thrice. Their faces flushed from the effect of the strong spirits, and the loudness and roughness of their talk increased. Crowder, the leader, was the loudest and roughest of them all.

"That was a fine song you sang to that fellow there when you set him a-napping for us to catch, Miss Howard," he said presently, "and we like music, too, don't we boys?"

"Yes, yes!" they roared, all together. "And won't you kindly sing that song or another as good for us, Miss Howard?" he continued.

She made no answer, staring straight at the red embers, her cheeks pale.

"I say, Miss Howard, don't you hear?" exclaimed Crowder roughly.

"Yes, I hear," she replied, "but I'm sorry I can't oblige you. I can't sing any more."

"If you can sing for that—a rebel there," continued Crowder, "I should think you could sing for us, who are good and loyal English like yourself."

She was silent again.

"Didn't we rescue you?" he continued. "Aren't we your saviors? Don't you owe us gratitude?"

Still unanswered, he swore an oath and said to his comrades:

"Here's gratitude for you, lads. Well, if she won't sing for us, we can sing for her. How do you like this, my lady? It's called 'I'll Owe the Muir to Maggy,' and it goes very well with the song that you sang."

Then he sang the old song, which, like the girl's, was Scotch:

"And I'll owe the muir to Maggy—
Her wit and sweetness call me—
There to my fair I'll show my mind,
Whatever may befall me.
If she loves mirth, I'll learn to sing,
Or, like the Nine to follow,
I'll lay my lugs in Pindus' spring
And invoke Apollo."

"If she admire a martial mind,
I'll sheath my limbs in armor;
If to the softer dance inclined,
With gayest airs I'll charm her;
If she love grandeur day and night,
I'll plot my nation's glory,
Find favor in my prince's sight
And shine in future story."

"Beauty can work wonders with ease
Where wit is corresponding,
And bravest men know best to please
With complaisance abounding.
My bonnie Maggy love can turn
Me to what shape she pleases.
If in her breast that flame shall burn
Which in my bosom blazes."

His voice was not unmusical, and he had some idea of rhythm and measure. His comrades joined him, and they roared out a chorus which must have penetrated to the farthest edge of the wood.

"I'll not only sing for you, Miss Howard," said Crowder, "but I'll dance for you too."

It was plain enough that the man was drunk and was relapsing into his natural condition of savagery. I hoped that he would fall into the fire, but he did not. His drunken head swayed from side to side, but he kept step to the beat of the song.

One of the men drew his empty bottle and beat upon its side with his knife blade. It made a lively tinkle that sounded like music, and the others, seeing his success, imitated him. Crowder had not only a vocal but an instrumental chorus as well. His zeal increased, and he danced like an Indian at a scalp dance, while the men roared on the song and beat their bottles with enthusiasm.

"Again I congratulate you on your company, your glorious band of rescuers, Miss Howard," I called out to her.

I know she heard me, but she did not reply. Her lips were set firmly, but her cheeks were growing paler and paler, and she seemed to be white to the hair. I tugged at my bonds, but I could not move them.

The song stopped for a moment, and Crowder, looking around for further amusement, spied me.

"A good song, boys, and good fun," he cried, "but here's better fun. Let's hang the prisoner and see him squirm."

The others, as drunk as their leader, shouted their approval, but the girl sprang up.

"You shall not do that!" she cried.

"And why not, miss?" asked Crowder. "He is our prisoner."

"Because I will not permit it!" she cried.

They roared with laughter.

"If you do," she said, "I will report your act to Colonel Tarleton. This man

is an important prisoner. He can guide Tarleton to Morgan, and he will do it to save his life. He must be taken safely to the British camp. Tarleton will reward you well."

"All right, if you say so, Miss Howard," he said. "Anything to oblige, especially one as handsome as you are. And we won't hang him tonight. Maybe we will do it in the morning anyhow, but that's no reason why we should stop the fun now. A soldier's life is hard, and he ought to make merry while he can."

He took a large flask from his haversack and shared it with his men. They began to sing and dance again, all of them wild with drink.

It was an orgy of savages. The fire had died down and ceased to blaze; only the red embers glowed in the darkness. I could feel the blackness of the night which rolled up and encircled us more closely. The girl was as immovable as a statue. Her tawny hair shone in the dim light, and I could see that her face was still white, but that was all.

One of the men fell down presently from sheer exhaustion.

"Let him lie," said Crowder. "He'll sleep as well there as anywhere."

The man never moved, but began to snore, and a second one yielded to exertion and whisky and, stretching himself out on the ground, went to instant sleep. Crowder himself was the third and was followed speedily by the others, including the sentinel, who had joined without objection in the orgy. The six men were sound asleep in a slumber heavy with weariness and liquor.

A last brand fell over in the coals and blazed up. The girl rose from the log, and by its light I could see that her face had turned from white to red. She walked quickly over to me and said in a voice shaking with excitement and alarm:

"Take me away from here, Mr. Marcel! Take me away at once! I would rather be with you than these men, these savages, these brutes! Nor is your life safe here!"

"They wear the British uniform. They must be loyal British soldiers," I could not keep from saying.

"I do not know what they are," she replied, with alarmed insistence, "but let's go. Pray take me at once."

She pulled at my shoulders as if she would have me rise and go on the instant.

"Untie my wrists," I said.

She tugged at the cords, but could do nothing. They were tied too tight.

"Take a knife from that drunken fool's belt," I said, indicating one of the men. "Don't be afraid. He won't wake."

She took the knife from the man's belt and cut my bonds. I rubbed my wrists together for a few minutes to take out the stiffness and to restore the circulation. Again she urged me to start without delay.

"Wait a minute," I said. "We must provide ourselves."

They had taken my arms from me when they bound me, and I recovered them, adding to my supply Crowder's pistol and some ammunition. Then I turned to the horses.

Old Put's great dark eyes flamed with approval and gladness. He had stood at his halter's length, watching the orgy and my rescue with attention and understanding.

"We'll bid farewell to these beasts now, old comrade," I said in a whisper, patting his nose.

He was too cautious to whinny a reply. The brown hack was near him, but I saw another among those belonging to the guerrillas which I fancied much more than he. I hastily changed Miss Howard's saddle to his back, assisted her to mount and sprang upon Old Put.

I turned the heads of our horses toward the northwest, but as the woods before us were dense and interlaced with wiry bushes and creeping vines we dared not attempt more than a walk. The horses stamped and neighed as we left them. The girl's mount stepped on a large, dry branch, which broke with a crack like a pistol shot. Nor did ill luck stop at that. The abandoned horses, frightened by the report, neighed and stamped again, creating a great uproar.

The sentinel, who was the least drunk of the party, sprang to his feet. He was yet half dazed with sleep and liquor, but he saw the dim figures of a man and a woman riding away from the little encampment, and he knew that, according to the plans of Captain Crowder, it was not what should be. He fired a hasty pistol shot in our direction, the bullet clipping the dry twigs above our heads, and then shouted to his comrades to awake, giving emphasis to his cries with many sturdy kicks.

"Look out for your head!" I shouted to Miss Howard. "An untoward bough might prove fatal. And be sure you stay with me."

"I'll not leave you," she said. "Now, Old Put," I said, "lead us out of this."

He curved his long neck in the darkness and looked ahead with sharp brown eyes. I let the reins fall loose, and he wound about among the trees with a judgment that was never at fault. The other horse kept close at his side. Behind us we could hear the cries of the awakened men as they leaped upon their horses and rode after us, shouting to us to stop. Two or three more pistol shots were fired, but the air received them.

If the men could see at all, it was but dimly, though they could follow us by the hoof beats of our horses and the tearing of the vines and slapping of the bushes as we passed. They made such a prodigious cursing and swearing that we were never in any doubt as to where they were. I had a mind for a moment to send toward them a pistol ball which would stop their fuss, but I concluded that the more noise they made the better it would be for us, as it gave us exact warning of their approach. They did not seem to be gaining upon us, which was a satisfaction for the present. Out on the plain they would see us more distinctly, but I believed that our horses could leave them there.

I saw a beam of light shining through the latticework of the boughs and then another and another and knew that we would soon be in the open. The girl's horse stumbled, and she uttered a little cry of dismay, but in a moment the horse was steady on his feet again, and we went on. The beams grew more numerous and fused into a broad shield of moonlight. Two minutes more and we would be out of the wood and into the cleared ground, with the fields racing behind us.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

PARAFFINE

Judge—Pat, to save time I suppose you will admit that you were drunk?
Pat—Dhrunk, sor? Oi wor so sober, sor, that me naybors tort Oi wor dead and wor 'bout to hould a wake over me, sor.—Up to Date.

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