

LITERATURE, &c.

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MARY ROCK.

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THE Rock family had emigrated to the very verge of wild Indian life, when the recent war between the United States and Mexico burst out, an event which, while awakening prospects of fierce struggles between the rival Republics, aroused also the hopes and passions of the swarthy Indian tribes that people the frontiers of the contending powers. Certain predatory and wandering habits already alluded to as characteristic of this family, had driven Captain Rock from the easy neighborhood of Dickenson's Bayou, and from all others, one after another, until he at last found himself far nearer than was generally considered safe to Spanish Peak and its troublesome tribes of redskins.

This time, the old man, his wife, son and daughter—the other having remained with her husband—had to build a house, instead of taking possession of one abandoned by former proprietors. They chose the mouth of a deep gully, and the verge of a dense forest. Their hut was, as usual, blocks of wood rudely put together; and their energies had this time gone so far as to induce the cultivation of a small field of maize. This exception, their whole existence depended on hunting and fishing. Mary, who, it seems, had become more slim than when I knew her, was all the more indefatigable in pursuit of the game afforded by the fertile and happy plains of Upper Texas. She and her brother were ceaseless in their endeavors to track deer, wild turkey, and partridges; and supported their family entirely. The old couple did absolutely nothing but eat, sleep, drink and smoke, utterly forgetful of their former position in society.

A little while before the outbreak of the late war, the Rocks became aware of the presence of a neighbor. A tall young Kentuckian, passionately fond of wild life, suddenly located himself within a mile of their abode, with a sturdy assistant from his own land, four negro slaves, a dozen horses, a herd of cattle, and a wagon. He erected a solid frame house, and called his place Snowville—his name being given out as captain Snow. With peace and tranquility his farm would probably soon have been the centre of a neighborhood, and ultimately the site of a town. But a great pestilence, more destructive than cholera or plague, was coming: Texas was the cause of a terrible war.

As soon as captain Snow had settled himself, built his house, and set his fields going, he thought it but right to pay a visit to the Rocks, despite the piratical character which he had heard of them round about Galveston. The chief things, however, which struck him on the occasion of his visit were the wretchedness of their abode, the wilful dotage of the parents, the industry of the children, and the matured beauty of Mary. Of a frank and sociable disposition, he made friends with young Rock; and very soon became the invariable companion of the brother and sister in their huntings and wanderings. The consequence was natural. Had she not been the only female within a hundred miles, Mary would have won the heart of any youth not already enchained by her simplicity, truth and sincerity. Captain Snow, in a month, was over head and ears in love, and in two was the accepted lover of Miss Rock. It was agreed on all sides that immediately after the maize harvest, they should freight a boat with their various goods, and going down to the settlements, be married.

The interval was chiefly spent in hunting, fishing, boating, and riding, when the various parties concerned were not engaged in necessary occupations. Captain Snow heard with a bounding heart of the war, but his murderous propensities were wholly quelled by the sight of Mary, whom he loved with all the ardour of a single-minded, honest, and frank backwoodsman. Still, he could not divest himself of the regret at not partaking the dangers of the expedition, and to divert his mind, proposed to the brother and sister, a week's hunting in the buffalo regions higher up the country. Both frankly acquiesced, and one morning at the dawn of day they started.

This time the hunters rode horses, the very best which Snow could pick from his lot. Each had a rifle, a powder horn and a bundle of corn cakes, a flask of native whiskey and a hunting knife. Mary on this occasion was dressed in almost as masculine a costume as her companions, and never was happier, more sprightly, or filled with more of the enthusiasm of prairie life. Their journey was up deep gullies, along heavy plains, by cool streams, and beneath the shadow of thick woods. They rode along in the morning until they found a place fit for sport, and then halting, lit a fire, shackled their horses, and started on foot in search of game, sometimes together and sometimes separate. When success crowned their efforts, or when night approached, they returned to their camp and supped. After this operation, which in the prairies is a very serious one, they made a sober attack on their whisky gourds and tobacco pouches, and after a little gossip were glad to find rest. Mary had a little hut always formed of boughs and their three cloaks, the brother and affianced husband keeping guard on each side.

Thus they wandered for more than a week and none thought of turning back. When the wild passions of rapine, and slaughter, and

murder, almost inseparable from savage life—which has generally all the faults of civilised life, with scarcely any of its virtues—are kept in the background, a wandering existence in the virgin woods and fields of America has an inexpressible charm. They all felt it. To camp at night beneath trees hundreds of miles from houses and men is a thing which excites romantic feelings in the rudest, and none of the trio belonged to the rough cast. Captain Snow had received some education, and Mary Rock had learned to read before I left the country. They had thus some common topic of conversation, and their excursion gained redoubled charms.

One evening a little after dusk, having failed during the day to find a suitable encampment in an arid plain, they had turned back towards that which they left in the morning. They had ridden pretty hard, and when they came to the dry bed of a torrent which they had to cross their horses were very tired.

'I reckon,' said Captain Snow, 'we'll not circumvent Dick's Ferry this night. My horse is getting cranky like, and trails his legs like an old mutang.'

'Hush!' said young Rock in a low tone.

'What's up?' whispered the other in an equally cautious manner.

Young Rock pointed down the bed of the torrent, which was thick with bushes, and overhung by trees, and at some considerable distance the blaze of a fire seemed reflected faintly on the silvery branches of a larch. The fire itself was completely hidden, and would have been admirably concealed but for an accidental opening in the trees.

'Engines—Redskins!' observed Captain Snow. 'Do you and polly slope away to yonder clump of trees, and hide away spony, while I creep down to the reptiles, and look at their paint.'

With these words the Kentuckian descended from his horse took off his cloak or poncho; and divesting himself of rifle, pouch, everything, in fact, but his tough pantaloons, flannel shirt, moccasins, and hunting knife, began to descend the stony bed of the river.—Mary and her brother rode away with every precaution, leading the third horse between them.

Snow moved with all the stealth and caution of an Indian warrior. He had lived three years with the Cherokees, and seen their arts and contrivances in the profession of man-slaying. He now roused all his recollections. The neighborhood of Indians might be harmless, but it likewise might be dangerous; and the safety of his affianced wife quickened the young man's blood, but took nothing from the admirable coolness of his head, which was as fertile in expedients as that of a backwood lawyer is in abuse. It took him full an hour to reach a little hillock behind which lay the camp. Snow now scarcely breathed. The spot he occupied was rough, and filled by thorny bushes. It was about twenty yards from the dangerous vicinity of the fire.—Slowly and gravely he raised his head, and then his eyes fell upon a party of nearly a hundred Indians in their hideous war-paint. Some were sleeping, some were smoking, while two or three were on the watch. One of these stood within three yards of him leaning against a tree. His side was towards the Kentuckian, and his eyes were fixed on vacancy. Once he turned quickly in the direction of Snow; but the darkness, and the scout's motionless position made him see nothing, and the white man could continue his survey in peace. The long lances of the Indians leaning against the trees showed him that the warriors were cavalry, and this circumstance made his heart beat. He had hoped that the horses of his party would have given him a certain superiority over the Indians, which he now saw did not exist. With this conviction he was about to retire, when a young Indian moved aside the trees near the fire, and advanced into the centre of the opening, until he stood before the chief, who was smoking his red clay pipe with becoming gravity.

'Pale-faces,' said the young man, after the usual pause.

'Ugh!' replied the chief.

'Three,' continued the young man: 'one squaw—two warriors. Squaw dressed like warrior: her voice soft and sweet like a Pale face girl.'

'Ugh!' said the chief.

Another pause ensued, after which the young man having explained that the white party was tired and weary, and could not go far, the chief of the war party ordered him to take a dozen warriors about dawn and attack them. The Howling-Wind grunted his reply and sat down.

Captain Snow was now amply satisfied as to the nature of the Indian tribe; they were Comanches, the Arabs of the great prairie wilderness, outlying in the woods in the hope of cutting off volunteer parties going to Mexico. Using all his caution, he crept away from his dangerous spot, nor departed from his noiseless walk until half a mile distant.—He then made boldly for the clump where he had advised his friends to retire. He found them camped in its very centre, well concealed, their horses grazing with shackled feet and a small fire.

'Heap on more wood-bog,' said Captain Snow as he came up; 'the varmint have seen us, and the sight of our camp may keep them in good humour. I conclude their scouts are spying us out this very minute.' And he explained all he had heard.

A hasty meal, but an ample one, was taken at once, and then some portion of rest was snatched. Indeed the Rocks, with all the careless security of their Irish blood, slept soundly until two hours before daylight, when

Snow roused them up. The horses were saddled in silence, a mouthful of corn cake eaten. Snow then doled out to each, a small panekin full of brandy, half of which they drank, while with the other half, mixed with water, they washed the joints of their horses, their mouths, and ears. They then piled a great quantity of wood on the fire, and mounting their horses rode off.

Not a word was spoken, while Snow, who headed the party, forbore to press the horses, reserving their strength for sudden emergencies. They soon entered a beaten trail in the forest, which they followed until dawn. The night had been dark, without moon or stars; and when the gray morning broke, they found that their imperfect knowledge of the country had deceived them, and that they were getting away from home. They retraced their steps, guided by the lofty smoke of their own fire, not with the intention of getting so far back, but of gaining another trail which led across a vast open prairie in the direction of their home. Presently the skirt of the wood was reached, and they were on the huge plain.—It was of the rolling character, covered with lofty high grass, and extended far out of sight. A heavy cloud in the distance, hanging over the edge of the horizon, showed that in that direction the prairie was on fire. Towards this the trio rode slowly in a line which promised to leave the vast conflagration which was being formed to their left hand.

'Whip handsomely,' suddenly exclaimed Snow: 'the varmint are on us.'

At the same time the war cry of the Indians was heard in all its horrors from a hundred screeching throats, and the long lances of the Comanches were seen waving in the distance. The fugitives now gave whip and spur, and the horses bounded along at a rapid pace, and for a short time they succeeded in heading the Comanches; but their long lances were never out of sight. For four hours they rode hard over the plain, until they were not more than two miles distant from the crackling, smoking, blazing high grass, which bore down towards them like a fiery avalanche. To their left lay a stream of water, to their right a level sward, which had been burnt some months back, and was now covered with short turfy grass. Near its edge grazed a number of wild horses, which presently raised their heads as they approached; for this mode of escape they had preferred to trying for a ford.

'The reptiles,' suddenly exclaimed Snow, reining in his horse. 'Do you see them, horses? Well every one of them has an Indian devil hanging by his side, ready to catch us! I know that trick a mile off.'

The Mexican Indians, by means of a thong round the saddle, and a peculiar stirrup, will hang for hours beside a horse, which will thus appear of its own accord to be galloping furiously over the plains. The trick is usually adopted when flying before superior forces, to guarantee their bodies from arrows and bullets.

Captain Snow looked anxiously around him. The pursuers were about half a mile behind them, the ambushed Indians about a mile to their right, while at about an equal distance between them was the fire.

'We have little choice,' said he calmly. 'My friends, we must do a dreadful bold thing! The horses will be a little skeary like, but a quick eye and a cool head will do it—we must shoot the prairie fire!'

The Rocks had heard of such a thing, but they stood amazed at the very thought. But Snow left them no time for reflection. The concealed Indians finding themselves discovered, leaped into their saddles and bore down upon them. But they remained unnoticed. The three fugitives were busily engaged. They had placed their powder-flasks out of the reach of fire: they had wrapped their rifles in strips of their torn up cloaks; and then, having carefully and tightly bound their own clothes, they tied bandages over the eyes and nostrils of the horses. They mounted again, the Indians being close upon them, and made for the rampart of smoke and flame that lay between them and life.

The line of fire was about three miles long. The prairie composed of reeds and grass, damp with recent rains, did not burn with that lightning like rapidity which leaves no chance of escape. It burned quickly but steadily, and Snow remarked that in some places smoke predominated over flame. Just before them a lofty clump of bushes burnt high and brightly, but to the left of this a thick black smoke seemed to indicate a swampy expanse where the fire had less purchase. They were moving rapidly, the Indians not two hundred yards behind them, along the line of flame, and the Comanches were yelling with delight. They gained ground every minute on the fugitives, and saw no chance of escape for them.

'Close your eyes and follow,' suddenly cried Captain Snow, seizing the bridle of Mary's horse, and plunging headlong into the thick smoke of the mouldering swamp.

The atmosphere, which had been for a long time oppressive, now became absolutely suffocating. The noise was infernal. Crackling reeds, hissing damp bushes, flaming grass, a black vapor that choked and blackened, was all they could distinguish, with a sense of intense heat, and then a black plain covered with charred wood, with smouldering heaps of charcoal lay before them. They had passed with the least possible amount of injury. A few burns, a scorching sense of thirst, their faces as black as negroes, were all that had ensued from their desperate and daring act. Snow pressed the hand of Mary in silence, and then examined the horses. They were irreparably lost. Their legs had suffered burns, which would render much further jour-

neying impossible; but they were compelled despite their frightful state, to urge them on again at their fullest speed.

A howl that Snow knew too well warned them of a new danger. The savage wolves of the mountains were upon them in vast droves. These animals follow prairie fires in search of the carcasses of deer, turkeys, rabbits, hares, &c., that perish in the flames; and collected in such force, become formidable. The wretched horses instinctively darted away, and the fugitive band made for a wood about five miles off, which had been spared by the fire, the grass near the trees being too damp and too short to burn. As they rode they loosened rifles and pistols, and took their huge powder horns from the many swaths which had protected them. Several times they halted and fired at the furious beasts, which to the number of about four hundred, came on behind them. Their shots told, and a general halt showed that *cañote* were engaged in devouring their unlucky companions.

At length the wood was reached; and while by a general discharge they for an instant checked the advance of the hungry brutes, Mary climbed up a tree, took up the arms and provisions, and other traps, and was then followed by the weary men. The horses galloped away, and became instantly a prey to the savage white wolves.

It required an hour of absolute repose to enable the fugitives to talk over their position. They then ate, and smoked, and drank in silence for another half hour, when all were sufficiently recovered to hold a council. The wolves were howling round the tree, which was lofty and thick, and seemed determined not to abandon their prey. But the backwood trio laughed at them. Their chief concern was the loss of their poor horses, and the prospect of a tramp home. They were now pretty secure from the Indians, who must believe them to have perished in the flames, and who would chose a road removed from the track of the conflagration.

They spoke some time in a low tone, until the howling of the wolves below became intolerable, and Captain Snow and young Rock resolved to rid themselves of the nuisance. They descended to the lowest branches of the tree and looked down. A fearful yell from a hundred throats greeted them; and the aspect of the long hanging tongues, fierce eyes, and savage teeth of so many animals would have terrified any but men inured to dangers and hardships. A quick volley from their revolving five barrel pistols drove the jackals back an instant. Snow was perched over a large pile of leaves which had been driven together by the wind. On this he rapidly emptied a good handful of powder. With a handful of Spanish moss from the tree, and the lighted tobacco from his pipe, a flame was soon produced, and the burning moss dropped as the wolves returned to the charge. The animals retreated with terrific yells, as the leaves took fire and the gunpowder flashed, and then kept a respectful distance. Young Rock now leaped down, flung some wood on the fire, and joined by his party, soon had a fiery rampart round the tree. Within this they rested, and dressed their wounds, or rather burns.

The next day, after sixteen hours of repose, the whole party started on foot. The wolves, which only collect in dangerous numbers on rare occasions, had dispersed over the black and smoking plain.

Weary and tiresome was the journey through forest, through swamp, along dreary and interminable plains, with a heavy rifle on the shoulders. They rarely fired a shot, eating sparingly, and at long intervals, for the creek of firearms had now become dangerous. Ten days they tramped along, and on the morning of the eleventh, they were within a mile of the dwelling of Captain Snow. Two or three smart reports of guns made them prick up their ears, quickly followed as they were by the duller report of Indian fusils. The trio plunged into a thicket, loosened their rifles, and advanced. Ten minutes brought them to the skirt of the wood. The buildings of Snowville were little more than a hundred yards distant. The Indians lay about fifty yards to their left, behind the wagon and corn-stack frame. Quick as thought Snow and his companions fired, and then, with a loud yell, rushed across. Taken in flank, the savages sought the cover of the wood, and made no effort to prevent the junction of the whites. Snow found that his house had been blockaded two days by the Indians, but that his assistant and four negro slaves had made a very spirited defence. Mary was alarmed about her parents; but during the day any movement was impossible. They accordingly rested until night, making meanwhile every preparation for farther resistance; and darkness once set in, Snowville was abandoned to two negro slaves. Snow had always been kind to his blacks, and they acted accordingly. The party of six crept on hands and knees through a maize field, and thus gained a trail that led to the house of the Rocks. A huge blast soon informed them that the place was burning. Mary felt sick at heart, and darted forward. She was only restrained within the bounds of prudence by the exertions of her lover. They soon stood at the mouth of the gully, and the scene, illuminated by the blazing hut, was revealed in all its gravity.

Old Rock and his wife cowered down between two posts; the Indians were preparing for the torture: they were at least twenty in number. But the whites hesitated not. A quick volley revealed their presence, and then on they rushed. But before they had gone half the distance the old couple were among them, with Indian guns in their hands. A retreat was beat at once; and before the astonished savages rallied, the pale-faces commanded