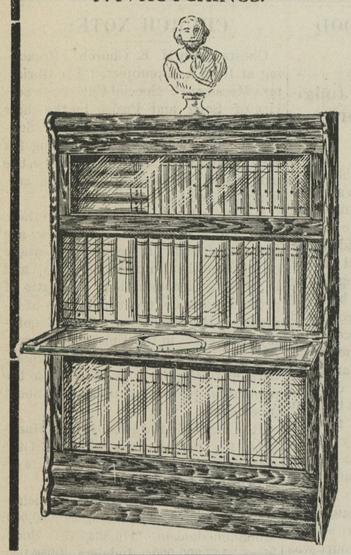
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America's Christmas of Peril

By P. J. TANSEY

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CHAPTER I.

CHRISTMAS morning of 1776, beaming bright and frosty on sparkling snow and glistening icicles all over the northern American colonies, might seem to mock with its splendor the patriots' trust in God's approval of their cause, for never did glorious winter day so strikingly suggest a smiling heaven, and never looked heaven on a patriot cause in such sore need as that championed by General Washington and his men.

The principal theater of the war had shifted to the banks of the Delaware. On Dec 8 Washington, hotly pursued by Cornwallis and Knyphausen, had crossed that river in boats. He had barely 3,000 men. Cornwallis and his Hessians and British and colonial loyalists, having no boats, for Washington had seized all in sight, were obliged to remain on the New Jersey side until the river should be sufficiently frozen to allow them to cross on the ice. Congress, doubting that Washington could save Philadelphia when that should be done, had fled from that city to Baltimore. But the great commander had not lost heart. He calmly awaited the coming of General Lee with 3,000 more men from Morristown, firmly trusting that they would arrive at the river and outwit the enemy in effecting a crossing before the ice should get strong enough to hold up large bodies of marching troops. He had his boats ready for their transportation.

On that bright and frosty Christmas morning a stout built, blue eyed and rosy cheeked young man of about twenty-five and of middle height, in the uniform of a British colonel, walked briskly down the main street of the village of Trenton, whose few taverns and their vicinity were crowded with Hessian troops, just arrived. Near the Church of England house of worship at the end of the street stood the comfortable two story cottage of the pastor, the Rev. Dr. Wilson, where also dwelt the boasted beauty of the New Jersey colony, his lovely daughter Ann, whose tall and graceful form, dark eyes and hair of gold were toasted often and again even in faroff England, to which land her father often took her when visiting his old friends of Oxford, where he got his doctor degree. The young officer entered the pastor's door.

Soon there sounded a light step in the hall, and sweet Ann Wilson, lovelier than ever, burst upon his vision.

"Thank God for your safety first and next for your renown, report of which has reached us and the reward of which I proudly see!" she said.

And now shuffled in the bent and gray old doctor, carrying blessing, welcome and congratulation on his withered, outstretched hands.

"Made a captain at Long Island and a colonel at Harlem Heights!" cried the old man, weeping with pure delight. "Thrice welcome, and God bless you!"

"And behold," cried the young man exultingly, turning to him, "I bring you tidings of greater joy!" He reluctantly released the hands of fair Ann for those of her parent. "I am selected," turning to her again, "for the glorious trust of effecting the capture of the arch traitor."

"George Washington!" exclaimed both his listeners.

"Yes, this very Christmas night! I know that I am as safe in telling that here as I was in suggesting the plan to General Cornwallis himself."

He walked to the mantel and took up a withered rose branch.

"You have cherished this," he said tenderly, advancing to her with it. "May I hope that its condition is not a sign of withered regard?" He smiled confidently.

"Indeed, dear Edward, were it to symbolize my continued friendship for you fitly it should blossom now out of its barrenness even as did the rod of Aaron." Her eyes shone with repressed tears.

"Friendship!" he repeatedly testily, plucking moodily at the withered leaves and throwing them on the floor. "I had your friendship, Ann. Was it merely to maintain it that I diced with death a hundred times since this gay branch was in full flower that I might shine before you as a hero more worthy of your love than one whose daring exploits were winning infamy"—

"Edward, no, not infamy," spiritedly interrupted Ann, her fine eyes flashing. "Censure his judgment if you will, but be just for the sake of the days when we three were friends."

"Hear me out, Ann," he said hotly, planting himself in her way. "I repeat the declaration I made when I last saw you. No"—she was about to speak—"before you answer now hear me out." He took her arm and led her to the window again.

"See those Hessians in the street," he went on. "Well, their presence is part of my plan. They are marching in here in plain view of Washington himself, whose headquarters you see across there where the flag is flying. They are only 2,000 strong, and no more will come. The rebels have been joined by about 2,500 of their kind from Morristown under a General Sullivan. We caught 500 more last night and General Lee himself. These included a company that was to have spied on our strength and gone over the river in advance of the rest to tell Washington the situation. Read this letter."

The letter he showed simply read:

To Whom It May Concern: The bearer may be absolutely trusted. LEE.

"The bearer of that," he proceeded, "was a Captain John Stafford, now safe in our custody down in Bordentown. But tonight I will be that trusty captain and induce the arch rebel to cross at a certain point with just enough of men to join Lee on this side and take Trenton from the 2,000 Hessians he is now counting. He will fall into the trap and be one of the first men ashore. The rest will be simple. I will myself seize him. A knighthood and the governorship of a colony will be two of my rewards. The third, if you consent— But you seem preoccupied, dear." He took her hand again.

"Is—is he—among your prisoners?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"Warren Stryker? No, and truly for your sake and the memory of the school days of us three in New York I am glad that he is not. I bear him no malice, though he took the rebel side and for a time at least had stolen your affections."

"Edward, I love him now and will be true to him while yon holly is evergreen," replied the fair girl, flushing rosy red and drawing herself up to her full height. A holly bush outside the window had suggested her last words. "He is a rebel soldier, as you are a brave loyalist. For the success of our side I pray daily, hourly pray, and for his safety."

"When did you see him last, may I ask?" he inquired coolly.

"Three weeks ago," she moaned.

"What, here?" he blurted out in alarm.

"Yes," she sighed, still swaying from side to side in her wretchedness, "when his regiment crossed the river."

"Then he's in the camp over yonder?"

"I suppose so."

"Great heavens! Our information was that Captain Stryker, Washington's most useful scout and spy, came in from Morristown with Lee and was one of the few who escaped last night, but who must soon be taken, as they cannot cross the river owing to the strict watch of our horsemen. Whew, here's a pleasant prospect for me now, the chance of meeting him in yonder camp! 'Tis well indeed that I go at night and that the headquarters are so near the river. When the war ends in rebel defeat his days will be numbered."

"Oh, Edward, "will you save him?" She stood white and shaking before him, her hands clasped in supplication.

"The captor of George Washington would surely be granted the pardon of a rebel captain."

"You will, then?"

He caught both her hands passionately.

"If you marry me," he answered, with slow, grim decisiveness.

She wrenched her hands free, burst into tears and swept from the room.

CHAPTER II.

HE rushed from the house, hot with rage and shame. He felt that he should have waited until Stryker was a prisoner. He had made a false move, and now even her esteem was lost to him.

A party of four Hessian officers, half drunk and noisy, were coming up the street. Among them was one, the soberest of the lot, a burly, brawny, curly bearded man of forty, who wore the mercenaries' insignia of the rank of a colonel. "Probably Rahl," thought our colonel. He was right. Colonel Rahl made no guess as to who the other was. He did not care, but he had the courtesy to salute an officer outranking him, for colonials as well as regulars of the British did outrank the hired foreigners.

The courtesy was in the act of being returned when Rahl exclaimed, looking straight ahead:

"Mein Gott, dere was mein schatz! Schtop! Hey, mein peauty!"

As he raised his voice to carry these last words to some person ahead whom he was addressing Colonel Williams turned around and saw Ann Wilson, who had just left her home to attend church, running in fright to the door of the sacred edifice. The Hessians broke into a roar of laughter, and their leader swore in his broken English that he had noted the house she had come out of and would make it his headquarters during his stay in Trenton.

In an instant the enraged colonial was at the side of Rahl.

White with anger, he managed to say, with some show of calmness: "Pardon me, colonel, but I am here by special order of Lord Cornwallis. That house belongs to friends of mine, and I have made it my headquarters during our stay in Trenton."

"Colonel," responded the now angry foreigner (we will forego his mangled English), "I am in this service for pay, and, as I may suppose you know, that service ends in a few days, so I do not care a button now what I do."

"You shall not intrude in that house, I tell you!"

"We shall see!"

They had been walking together in the direction of the church, and now they arrived opposite its door. The Hessians sauntered along laughing. Williams, without another word, turned into the church just as the venerable clergyman was beginning his discourse. Ann Wilson was in her accustomed pew, near the pulpit.

Crack, crack, crack!

The sound of musket firing close by was the sudden and startling rejoinder which interrupted the reverend man. His congregation arose in panic and rushed out of the church door.

A fine and fiery roan steed came up the highway like a tornado. On his neck was a tall figure in homespun.

"My horse!" ejaculated Colonel Williams, and, rushing a few yards up the road, stood ready to seize the bridle.

The horseman faced to the front. For a moment the carbine was at his shoulder; then it was lowered, and while a woman's scream arose from the church door the clattering hoofs dashed by.

Red coated dragoons emerged at a gallop from a lane into the road before him and formed across it to bar his way, while at full speed rode in from the other direction a larger party, in the same uniforms, probably the men who had fired on him. Colonel Williams advanced on foot, calling out to the pursued one to surrender.

"The river! The river!" shrieked Ann Wilson, and for an instant every brain but one thought of a rebel attack, and every eye was turned to the sunlit Delaware and its floating icy isles. It was but twenty yards away. A little churchyard stretched down to its banks, from where the lone horseman waited and watched, finger on trigger, for the best chance to make one opening in the red ranks through which he might make another dash to freedom.

But suddenly he was over the churchyard wall, and from the high river bank he and his horse plunged into the icy flood below.

Half a dozen dragoons with whom the Hessian officers now mingled dismounted and clambered over the wall. They saw the noble steed struggling helplessly in a whirling ice filled eddy that touched the shore.

"Don't shoot!" cried Colonel Williams, running after the party. "The horse and man must be swept ashore there!" The soldiers were taking aim.

The redcoats lowered their carbines, for they were Captain Hardy's company of Williams' own command, but Colonel Rahl, who, with his merry friends, had gained the bank, took a pistol out of his pocket and fired at the daring rider, now within a dozen yards and coming inshore. Horse and rider sank, and when they next appeared the man was out of the stirrups, the horse was bleeding and dying, and both were close to the bank. With the assistance of bridle reins thrown to him the fugitive climbed out and up the icy bank, still holding his trusty carbine, now, alas, useless.

"Surrender to me, you dog of a rebel!" shouted Rahl. The prisoner looked at him with a glance of contempt. "Take this man to the first house, there, the parsonage!" cried Colonel Williams, and the dragoons proceeded to obey. The Hessians glared impotently.

"Very well," cried Rahl, with a forced laugh, "that will do; that's my headquarters. Captain Hermann, you and Steyn and Brandt go and bring up your companies. We will soon see who is in command here!"

Ann Wilson, her face white as that of the aged man on whose arm she leaned, had eyes for no one or nothing but the oncoming, dripping prisoner.

They looked sadly into each other's eyes, but made no sign of recognition as his captors halted him at the door.

Colonel Williams, coming up, asked the preacher to admit the half drowned man and to provide him with change of clothing at once. "He is my prisoner," he added, with a glance at woe stricken Ann. Was it a look of triumph or of assurance? Alas, she could not tell.

"And look you, old one, that he does not escape, else I'll hang you for it. I'm in command in Trenton, and this house is my headquarters. I will be ready for dinner in an hour, and so will three of my captains. You hear?" So spoke Rahl and sauntered off to await the coming up of his re-enforcements, muttering to himself, "And the beauty shall be one of the party." Ann and her father followed Williams and the prisoner into the house, and the dragoons surrounded it.

CHAPTER III.

THE prisoner wheeled about and with a smile held out a hand to wan and tottering Ann.

"Fear not for me, dear," he said. "Christmas tells us there is a Saviour."

She placed her hand in his, shuddered and looked appealingly at Williams. No word did she speak, but her father, to whom Stryker offered his disengaged hand, sobbed as his quavering voice uttered the words:

"Oh, Warren Stryker, you utter blasphemy! Son of my neighbor, may God forgive you for your treason and for the woe you have brought to us!"

The young man's smile died away. He turned from father and daughter to Williams, who sullenly looked on, and held out his right hand to him.

"Under this roof there is truce, I suppose," said he, again smiling. The other took the hand for the fraction of a second and then said hastily, "Warren, you must have dry clothing at once."

"A suit will be found in my room," sobbed the old clergyman.

The two young men went up the stairs, and the colonel entered the room with Stryker, explaining that he must keep guard over him.

"Everybody knows of your dashing exploits and your keeping the rebel headquarters informed of all our movements as Washington's most trusted scout, and I'll wager that you know why it is especially important not to lose you now," he added. "But how and why did you take my horse? And—ah, me—but you were warmly clad with a suit of Hessian uniform under your homespun."

The other was rapidly donning the garments of the doctor.

"Under the circumstances 'tis no use denying, Edward," he replied, "that I know who 'Captain Stafford' is. There are many tongues in the big camp that stretch from here to headquarters in Bordentown that can be made to wag with a farmer lad's applejack!"

"So you were the sutler I saw as I rode out of camp?"

"Yes, and I followed on foot to reach my boat and cross ahead of you with warning. I went so briskly that I excited some interest, I reckon. Infantry chased me, but I distanced them. I knew the dragoons would be after me next and that I must pull off my countryman's garb. The road was full of Hessians as I came near the village, and so I decided to go to your folks' barn to make the change. As I opened the door of it I saw the redcoats come riding over the hill. They saw me too. You know the rest."

"You have no chance of mercy!" said Williams coldly, his hands behind him.

At that moment a tumult was heard in the street. Both men, looking out, saw a frightened woman pursued by two Hessian soldiers run into a house. A brawny civilian immediately appeared at the door and knocked down one of the ruffians after another. Others of the townsmen rushed up, and other Hessians, but Captain Hardy sent half a dozen of his dragoons in among the gathering rioters and dispersed them.

"Behold the work of your glorious King George!" cried Stryker bitterly. "You speak of mercy. I would beg no mercy for myself, even if you had the power to grant it. But, Ned, think of her who is dear to both of us, think of her peril in the hands of these foreigners; then, and at risk of all and everything—plot, prize, honor and even life—place her out of danger. That I implore you!"

He caught Williams' hand between both of his.

"True, it should be done," said the other, and just then came the sound of another uproar farther up the street. "But how—that's the question?"

"Send her and her father up to the camp under escort of your dragoons," decided Stryker, rising.

"Good! And I can send you up with them and so save your life, but on condition"—

"What is it?"

"That you pledge yourself never to see Ann Wilson again after I secure your release."

"How can you save me?" The questioner's cheeks flushed, and he bit his lip.

"I will tell Lord Cornwallis when I ask for your liberty that you turned loyalist for sake of old friendship with me and gave me your boat in this enterprise."

"And I will tell him that you lie!"

The loyalist recoiled from the thunder of the retort. The other folded his arms as if to restrain them from violence, and, quivering with passion, he uttered these words in accents of deepest scorn:

"Give up my love and my good patriot repute for the skulking remnant of the life of a self scorning wretch? Ned Williams, you must have forgotten me strangely!"

While this was passing upstairs the doctor was pacing his study in deep misery, and his stricken daughter was swaying with clasped hands once more in her chair in the little parlor.

She went out to old Betty in the kitchen. "Tell Colonel Williams I want to see him," said she.

The colonel came running down the stairs. She advanced to him with a face like death.

"Save him," she moaned, lifting her clasped hands.

"And then?"

"The holly leaves are no longer green!"

With a cry of joy he clasped her to his breast. "I promise!" said he in gleeful tones. "And now there is no time to be lost, darling. I will send him and you and your father and Betty to the British camp, out of the power of this Hessian colonel, and then I will prepare for"—And he pointed across the river.

"No, no!" she cried, springing away from him. "That was not your former offer. My eyes have been opened. Horror is reigning here. Take Warren across the river with you and bid the generous Washington come will all his forces before these devils expect him, promising that even the women of Trenton will fight in the streets to aid him. Do this, and I am yours as soon as the town is saved!"

Colonel Williams, chin on breast, slowly paced the floor. Compressing his lips firmly, he paused before her and said rapidly:

"You add conditions now that would make my saving him impossible. Your nerves are overwrought. Should I do as you ask Washington would still be captured—so should I—and who would then be left to intercede for him upstairs, in that case again a captive?"

"Oh, my god, too true!" she cried, for, like all the Tories, she had been taught to believe the king's troops ultimately invincible.

"What I can and will do," he added, "is to send him to the camp a prisoner, with the request that nothing be done on his case until I return. Then I will make intercession for him as one having the right to do so."

"God bless you!" she murmured. Oh, she did not see the sly wicked gleam in his eye nor guess that he might insist upon having the wedding before risking his intercession. Poor, harassed child!

"Call Captain Hardy!" called out the young man to old Betty, trudging past the door.

The old woman did so and the Captain entered. His colonel had but begun to give his order when the street door was thrown open again, and in it stood Rahl and his tipsy captains, grinning triumphiantly, while outside "the thin red line" of dragoons the street was packed with Hessians.

"Colonel," said Rahl, advancing insolently, "here is an order from Lord Cornwallis that you turn over the spy to me for instant execution and proceed on your errand." He showed a

(Continued on Third Page,)



WILLIAMS SANK SPEECHLESS INTO A CHAIR.

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