

BRIDE OF BATTLE

A Romance of the
AMERICAN ARMY
Fighting on the Battlefields of
FRANCE



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CHAPTER I.

Lieutenant Mark Wallace of the Seventeenth New York regiment came to an abrupt standstill. He was alone in the jungle, upon the blazing hillside before Santiago, in the month of June, 1898.

"Through the branches of the trees the Mauser bullets still whizzed and whistled, and the prolonged screech of shells and distant shouting indicated that the battle, which had raged all day, had not yet reached its end. But within the short radius of Wallace's vision nothing stirred, not even the palmetto boughs that rustled with the least breeze like the sound of the sea.

Wallace had only the most confused and incoherent knowledge of what was happening on that historic day. There had been an advance in the cool of the morning, if a brief respite from the oppressive heat could be called coolness in contrast. Then came the deployment along the base of the hills as the first shells began to fall, the advance in open order, in which the nicely incultured teachings of the parade ground fell to pieces, the jumble of men, of companies, and, later, of regiments, pressing forward past the dead and stricken, the shouts, the rattle of machine guns and rifles. Batteries came galloping where they had no theoretical business to be, upsetting the junior officers' desperate attempts to preserve alignment; Red Cross men invaded the battle line to succor the wounded; commissariat mules, shaking off the lethargy which no amount of belaboring had ever overcome, ran away with supplies and strewn embalmed beef over the hillside. In the midst of it all Wallace had rallied some men of his own troop and led them forward; he plunged into the patch of scrub-covered jungle, and found that he was alone.

In front of him was a small clearing, made by some Cuban squatter in the preceding year and abandoned after the reaping. It contained the ruin of a palm shack, and the furrows scraped by a primitive plow were only just discernible amid the rank growth that had sprung up. The lieutenant stopped and shouted, expecting to see his men come running through the trees.

But none appeared, and it was at this moment that the bullet that had been stamped with his name, according to the soldier's superstition, found him. He felt a smart blow on the shoulder, which knocked him backward. He stumbled, fell down, sat up again and discovered that his elbow was shattered. The arm hung helplessly at his side.

He managed to bind up the wound with his hand and teeth. There was not much pain, but a sort of physical languor, which made him reel giddily when he arose. There was burning thirst, too. It was extraordinary that a little thing like that should take the grit out of a man. A little blood was running down his sleeve, but the wound seemed trivial.

Wallace leaned against the wall of the shack and waited for his men. He shouted once or twice more, but nobody answered him, and the battle seemed to be drifting in another direction. Wallace imagined that his troop had advanced around the patch of scrub, in which case he was not likely to establish touch with them again till nightfall. He cursed his luck and started forward, but the trees began to reel around him; he clutched at the wall of the shack, missed it, and fell.

Then he realized that he was out of the fight. Yet, in spite of his intense disappointment, he knew that worse might have befallen him. He had fought through hours of the day—that was much; he was probably spared to lead his men again—and that was more. He had found and proved himself; and at twenty-one a young man, for all his self-confidence, is composed of fears and doubts as well. In spite of his soldier ancestors, Mark Wallace had not been sure that his capacity for leadership extended beyond the parade ground, and he had suffered from the young soldier's inevitable fear of fear.

So he resigned himself to his situation. He emptied his water bottle and, gripping the end of his gauze roll with his teeth, managed to bandage his wound sufficiently to stop the bleeding. The languor, however, was increasing. Sometimes he would doze for a few moments, awaking with a start, to wonder where he was, and what had happened. The air was very still. The shouts had long since died away, the rifle firing was a distant crackling; the tremulous staccato tapping of the machine guns was like the roll of drums far away.

Wallace must have slept for a prolonged period, for when next he became conscious he started up to see, to his intense astonishment, a pretty little girl of three or four years, stand-

ing in front of him and looking at him. He rubbed his eyes, expecting her to disappear. But she was still there, and just as he was beginning to piece together a Spanish phrase she spoke to him in English.

"I want my daddy."

Wallace reached out and drew the child toward him. "Where is your daddy?" he asked. "And who are you?"

"I'm Eleanor," she answered, "and won't you please find my daddy for me?"

She pointed with a grimy little hand toward the interior of the shack, and



"I Want My Daddy."

Wallace, struggling to his feet with a great effort, made his way inside.

It was almost dark in the hut, and Wallace could only make out with difficulty the form of a man who lay, face downward, upon the ground near the wall. Presently, however, as his eyes became more accustomed to the obscurity, he saw the bullet wound in the back of the head.

He looked up at the child, who stood by, unconcerned. "Go away, Eleanor," he said gently.

The child, too young to know anything of death, went out of the hut and began to play in the shaft of sunlight that filtered through the branches of the palms. Wallace searched the dead man's pockets. He found nothing, however, except a military pass, signed by General Linares of the Spanish forces, authorizing the bearer to pass through the lines; and, after a moment's reflection, he decided to leave it on the body.

So this man had been the child's father, and, apart from her speech, his coloring showed that he had been an American. Wallace concluded that he had been a planter, trapped in Santiago. He raised the body in his arms and tried to turn it over, but let it fall when he saw the work that the bullet had made of the face. He must not let the little girl carry away anything of such memory as that!

He groped his way outside and beckoned to her. "What is your other name, Eleanor?" he asked.

The little girl only looked at him; it was evident that she did not understand the meaning of his question.

"Did your daddy live in Santiago?"

"My daddy has gone away. I want him," said the child, beginning to whimper.

Wallace tried her once more. "Where is your mamma?" he asked.

But she said nothing, and he sat down, propping himself against the shack. He drew the little girl down beside him.

"Now listen to me, Eleanor," he said. "Your daddy has gone away. He will be gone for a long time. You must be good and patient, and soon somebody will come to take care of you. Do you understand?"

The child's lip quivered, but she did not cry. She fixed her large gray eyes upon him.

"Who are you?" she asked, with the directness of childhood.

"My name is Mark."

"I like you, Mark. I will go with you till my daddy comes back."

"All right. Then sit down here beside me and play," muttered Wallace, wondering rather grimly what there was for her to play with.

But the grubby little fingers were soon busy in the sandy soil. Wallace watched the child, wondering who she was, and how it had happened that the father had been forced to take her

into the jungle, into the midst of the contending armies. Her clothing was almost in rags, and she must have been drenched by the rains of the preceding night. It had certainly been a desperate and a difficult adventure for the dead man.

The light began to fade. Wallace, half delirious now from pain and thirst, struggled to preserve his consciousness for the sake of the little girl. Sometimes he would emerge from a semi-stupor and look round for her anxiously; but he always found her, no great distance away, building sand castles out of the soft soil and chattering to herself as happily as if she had already forgotten her sorrow.

When he aroused himself finally, it was to see the flash of a torch in his eyes. Faces which he recognized were looking into his own. There was Crawford, the senior lieutenant, who had graduated from West Point the year before, and Captain Kellerman; there was his own negro servant, Johnson, with a look of alarm on his ebony face; and near by were two men from the ambulance, carrying an empty stretcher.

Wallace moaned for water and the sense of the liquid in his throat, warm though it was, brought back consciousness with a rush.

"Well, we've got you," said Crawford cheerfully. "How are you feeling, old man?"

"Fine. Have we got Santiago?"

"Well, not exactly, but nearly. We've carried all the trenches, and we're waiting to get our big guns up. Arm hurting you?"

"No," said Wallace, stifling a groan.

"Say, Crawford, I suppose I was delirious, but I thought there was a kid here."

As he spoke he caught sight of Major Howard emerging from the shack, with the little girl in his arms, fast asleep. The major came up to him.

"How are you feeling, Wallace?" he asked. "Good! I didn't know you were a family man, though, till I saw this kid sleeping in your arms."

"You've been inside?" inquired the lieutenant, looking toward the shack. The major's face grew very serious. He nodded.

"Her father," said Wallace.

"Come, get in with you!" answered Major Howard, curtly, indicating the ambulance. Mark, supported by the orderlies, who had placed the stretcher upon the ground, crawled in and lay down. He stretched out his arm toward the child. It was an unconscious action, but Major Howard noted it and, detaching the small arms from about his neck, he placed the little girl in the stretcher. The little head drooped upon the lieutenant's arm. As the ambulance men picked up their burden two soldiers came out of the hut, carrying something in a blanket. They carried it to the center of the clearing and set it down beside a hole which had already been dug.

"He carried a pass signed by Linares," said Wallace to the major.

Major Howard's eyes contracted into narrow slits. He nodded. "I have it," he answered.

"I wonder who he was?" said Wallace.

"We'll decide what to do with the kid after we get her back to camp," said the major curtly. It seemed to Wallace that he was unwilling to speculate upon the identity of the dead man. "Lie still, and don't muddle your brains with thinking, my boy," he added. "We'll have you at the base hospital in next to no time."

"How many men have we lost?"

"Can't tell you. Quite a few, I'm afraid. Sumner is gone. Crawford and Murray and I found ourselves lunched together at the top of the hill, leading a mixed company of Texas Rangers and Pennsylvania Dutch. We'll get them sorted out and sent home with labels as soon as we can. Move on, boys!"

The jolting stretcher proceeded out of the scrub and down the hill. Here, in the open, everything was almost as silent as in the bush, after the day's battle. Under the light of the rising moon could be seen parties of men moving over the hillside, stragglers seeking their regiments, or fatigue parties detailed upon the necessary night work that follows a day of death. The moon shone down on huddled forms scattered for the most part in little clusters, where shells or machine-gun fire had caught them.

It seemed an infinitely long journey, and every movement of the stretcher was almost unbearable. Wallace shut his lips tight. He looked at the child beside him. She moved in her sleep, feeling for his neck with the little grimy hands. Her cheek snuggled into the hollow of his arm. The lieutenant was curiously touched by this unconscious confidence.

He issued from his ordeal of pain at last, when the bearers halted in front of the line of tents that served for a field hospital. Stretchers by the dozen were piled about the ground, and more were arriving constantly. Wounded men, guided by the sound, came limping in on the last lap of their painful journeys. Others, who had arrived but had not yet been attended to, sat or lay in front of the tents. Orderlies were scurrying to and fro. Major Howard caught one of the regimental surgeons, who looked Mark over quickly and then picked the child out of the stretcher.

"Hello! Who's this?" he asked.

"Friend of his," said the major, indicating Mark.

"She doesn't look like a Cuban young lady," said the doctor, as he cut away the sleeve of the tunic.

"Her father's dead. Hit by a shell on his way from Santiago. I think he was an American," said Mark.

"Give her to me. I never had one,"

said the doctor, suddenly injecting a hypodermic into Mark's arm.

"Not after that," said Mark, wincing. "Besides, I'm thinking of adopting her myself."

And he wondered what had made him say that when the thought had hardly reached his own consciousness.

"See here, young man! Let me look at that arm of yours before you talk that way. Huh! You'll be running round in a couple of weeks, as well as ever."

"Thank heaven for that!" ejaculated Mark fervently. "Then I'll be in at the death."

"I doubt it. I won't pass you for duty for six months to come," said the doctor, grinning. Then, seeing Mark's dejected look, he added, more seriously:

"You may thank the modern high-power bullet that you are going to keep your arm, my boy. It's drilled a nice little pencil-hole clean through the joint, instead of shattering it, and that's got to be filled in with new growth. Even I can't grow bones in a week. I wish I could. Ten years ago your arm would have had to come off. There's nothing more I can do for you, my son," he added, as he smeared some sticky stuff over the wound and began adjusting a bandage, "except tie you up and put you in the hospital to-night, and send you down to the base in the morning."

"The devil you will! I guess I'm well enough to stay on the job as I am."

"Here, I haven't any more time to waste on you!" said the doctor. "Pounce will make you a sling and you'll go into that tent and stay there, or I'll cashier you. You won't be feeling so spry tomorrow morning. Get out!"

He strode away, leaving Mark looking into the grinning black face of Johnson.

After the sling had been adjusted he discovered that the sense of well-being, due to the hypodermic, was already beginning to leave him. His servant helped him into the tent and Major Howard brought in the little girl, who at once coiled herself up to sleep at Wallace's side.

"What are you going to do about her?" inquired the major, standing beside the camp bed and looking down at Wallace uneasily.

"Boil some canned cow and see if it will dissolve the cellulose out of an army biscuit."

"It shall be done. I guess that'll stay her till morning. But seriously, Wallace?"

"I suppose I'll have to assume the responsibility for her. I'll take her down to the base with me tomorrow and ship her home to my people in charge of one of the stewardesses on some liner."

"I've got a better scheme," said the major. "Let me have her, Wallace. My wife will go crazy over her. You know she's always talking of adopting a little girl. She's got her ideal type in mind, and that's it. I was to look round for one like that if ever the chance came along."

"Well, you'd better go on looking round, Major," said Wallace, irritably. "See here, my boy, you don't really want that kid, do you?"

"I do. I'll think over your proposition, Major, of course, but my sister would give her a home and—"

"Let me send her to my wife. You can claim her after the war, if you want to. Suppose you got killed; we'd neither of us have her. If you don't let me take her I'll make you pay for it."

"How?"

"I'll order her a bath, under the sanitary code. And you'll have to give it. And scraped beef—our beef!"

"Get out, Major, and give me a chance to yell when my wound hurts. Listen! I tell you what I'm ready to do. I'll let the regiment adopt her, with myself as godfather."

(To be continued)

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