

# CLARENCE

By  
BRET HARTE.

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## CHAPTER V.

In another instant bugles were ringing through the camp, with the hurrying mass of mounted officers and the tramping of forming men. The house itself was almost deserted. Although that single cannon shot had been created to prove that it was not mere skirmishing of pickets, Brant still did not believe in any serious attack of the enemy. His position, as in the previous engagement, had no strategic importance to them. They were no doubt only making a feint against his position to conceal some advance upon the center of the army a mile or two away. Satisfied that he was in easy supporting distance of the division commander, he extended his lines along the ridge ready to fall back in that direction while retarding the advance and masking the movements of his chief. He gave a few orders necessary to the probable abandonment of the house, and then returned to it. Shot and shell were already dropping in the field below. A thin ridge of blue haze sheathed the line of skirmish fire. A small conical white cloud, like a bursting cotton pod, revealed an opened battery in the willow-fringed meadow. Yet the pastoral peacefulness of the house was unchanged. The afternoon sun lay softly on its deep verandas; the pot-pourri incense of fallen rose leaves haunted it still.

He entered his room through the French window in the veranda, when



Miss Faulkner swept quickly inside and closed the door behind her.

the door leading from the passage was suddenly flung open, and Miss Faulkner swept quickly inside, closed the door behind her and leaned back heavily against it— panting and breathless.

Clarence was startled, and for a moment shamed. He suddenly realized that in the excitement he had entirely forgotten her and the dangers to which she might be exposed. She had probably heard the firing, her womanly fears had been awakened; she had come to him for protection. But as he turned toward her with a reassuring smile, he was shocked to see that her agitation and pallor were far beyond any physical fear. She motioned him desperately to shut the window by which he had entered, and said with white lips:

"I must speak with you alone!"

"Certainly. But there is no immediate danger to you even here—and I can soon put you beyond the reach of any possible harm."

"Harm me! God! if it were only that!"

He stared at her uneasily.

"Listen," she said, gasping, "listen to me! Then hate, despise me—kill me if you will. For you are betrayed and ruined—cut off and surrounded! It has been helped on by me, but I swear to you the blow did not come from my hand! I would have saved you. God knows how it happened—it was fate!"

In an instant Brant saw its truth instinctively and clearly. But with the revelation came that wonderful calmness and perfect self-possession which never yet had failed him in any emergency. With the sound of the increasing cannonade and its shifting position made clearer to his ears, the view of his whole threatened position spread out like a map before his eyes, the swift calculation of the time of his men could hold the ridge, in his mind—even the hurried estimate of the precious moments he could give to the wretched woman before him—all this he was keenly alive to as he gravely, even gently, led her to a chair, and said in a critical and level voice:

"This is not enough! Speak slowly, plainly, I must know everything. How and in what way have you betrayed me?"

She looked at him imploringly—reassured, yet awed by his gentleness. "You won't believe me! You cannot believe me! But I do not even know: I have taken and exchanged letters whose contents I never saw—between the confederates and a spy who comes to this house—but who is far away by this time. I did it because I thought you hated and despised me, because I thought it was my duty to help my cause, because you said it was 'war' with us, but I have spied on you. I never it!"

"Then how do you know of this attack?" he said, calmly.

She brightened, half timidly, half hopefully. "There is a window in the wing of this house that overlooks the slope near the confederate lines. There was a signal placed in it—not by me—but I knew it meant that as long as it

He extended his hand and left a slight pressure on her cold fingers. But they slipped quickly from his grasp, and she turned away with a heightened color.

He stepped to the door. One or two aids-de-camp, withheld by his order against intrusion, were waiting eagerly with reports. The horse of a mounted field officer was pawing the garden turf. The officers stared at the young girl.

"Take Miss Faulkner with a flag to some safe point of the enemy's line. She is a non-combatant of their own, and will receive their protection."

He had scarcely exchanged a dozen words with the aids-de-camp before the field officer hurriedly entered. Taking Brant aside he said quickly: "Pardon me, general, but there is a strong feeling among the men that this attack is the result of some information obtained by the enemy. The woman you have just given a safeguard to is suspected, and the men are indignant."

"The more reason why she should be conveyed beyond any consequences of their folly, major," said Brant, frigidly, "and I look to you for her safe convoy. There is nothing in this attack to show that the enemy has received any information regarding us. But I would suggest that it would be better to see that my orders are carried out regarding the slaves and men combatants who are passing our lines from division headquarters, where valuable information may be obtained, than in the surveillance of a tony and outspoken girl."

An angry flush covered the major's cheek as he saluted and fell back, and Brant turned to the aid-de-camp. The news was grave. A column of the enemy had moved against the ridge; it was no longer possible to hold it; and the brigade was cut off from its communication with the division headquarters, although as yet no combined movement was made against it. Brant's secret fears that it was an intended impact against the center were confirmed. Would his communications to the division commander pass through the attacking column in time?

One thing puzzled him. As yet the enemy, after facing his line, had shown no disposition, even with their overwhelming force, to turn aside to cover him. He could easily have fallen back when it was possible to hold the ridge no longer, without pursuit. His flank and rear were not threatened, as they might have been by a division of so large an attacking column, and his retreat was still secure! It was this fact that seemed to show failure or imperfection in the enemy's plan. It was possible that his precipitation of the attack by the changed signal had been the cause of it. Doubtless some provision had been made to attack him in flank and rear, but in the unexpected hurry of the outset it had to be abandoned. He could still save himself, as his officers knew, but his conviction, that he might yet be able to support his division commander by holding his position doggedly, but coolly awaiting his opportunity, was strong. More than that, it was his temperament and instinct.

Harrowing them in flank and rear, contesting the ground inch by inch, and holding his own against the artillery sent to dislodge him, or the cavalry that curled around to ride through his open ranks, he saw his files melt away before this steady current without flinching.

## CHAPTER VI.

Yet all along that fateful ridge, now obscured and confused with thin crossing smoke drifts from file firing, like partly rubbed out slate pencil marks, or else, when cleared of those drifts, penetrating only an indistinguishable map of zig-zag lines of straggling wagons and horses, unintelligible to any eye but his, the singular magnetism of the chief was felt everywhere. Whether it was shown in the quick closing in of resistance to some sharper onset of the enemy or the more dogged stand of inaction under fire, his power was always dominant. A word or two of comprehensive direction, sent through an aid-de-camp, or the sudden relief of his dark, watchful, composed face, uplifted above a line of bayonets, never failed in their magic. Like all born leaders, he seemed, in these emergencies, to hold a charmed life, infecting his followers with a like disbelief in death. Men dropped to right and left of him with serene assurance in their ghastly faces or a cry of life and confidence in their last gasp. Stragglers fell in and closed up under his passing glance; a hopeless inextricable wrangle around an overturned caisson, at a turn of the road, resolved itself into an orderly, quiet, deliberate clearing away of the impediment, before the significant waiting of that dark, silent horseman.

And you have courage—you have devotion," he said, gravely. "I believe you regret the step you have taken. If you could undo what you have done, even at peril to yourself, dare you do it?"

"Yes," she said, breathlessly.

"You are known to the enemy. If I am surrounded you could pass through the confederate lines unquestioned."

"Yes," she said, eagerly.

"A note from me would pass you again through the pickets of our headquarters. But you would bear a note to the general that no eyes but his must see. It would not implicate you or yours—it would be only a word of warning."

"And you," she said, quickly, "would be saved! They would come to your assistance! You would not then be taken?"

He smiled gently. "Perhaps—who knows?"

He sat down and wrote hurriedly.

"This," he said, handing her a slip of paper, "is a pass. You will use it beyond your own lines. This note," he continued, handing her a sealed envelope, "is for the general. No one else must see it, or know of it—not even your lover—should you meet him!"

"My lover!" she said, indignantly, with a flash of her old savagery, "what do you mean? I have no lover!"

Brant glanced at her flushed face.

"I thought," he said, quietly, "that there was some one you cared for in yonder lines—some one you wrote to;

it would have been an excuse—"

He stopped as her face paled again, and her hands dropped heavily at her side. "Good God! you thought that, too. You thought that I would sacrifice you for another man?"

"Pardon me," said Brant, quickly.

"I was foolish. But whether your lover is a man or a cause, you have shown a woman's devotion. And in repairing your fault you are showing more than a woman's courage now."

To his surprise the color had again

mounted to her pretty cheeks, and even a flush of mischief shone in her blue eyes.

"It would have been an excuse—yes—to save a man, surely. Well, I will go. I am ready."

"One moment," he said, gravely.

"Although this pass and an escort insure your safe conduct, there is an engagement and some danger. Are you still ready to face it?"

"I am," she said, proudly, turning back a braid of her fallen hair. Yet

moment she hesitated. Then she said, in a lower voice: "Are you as ready to forgive?"

"In either case," he said, touched by her manner, "and God speed you!"

sponsibility of the field on his shoulders, even at that desperate moment, found himself recalling a vivid picture of the actor Hooker personating the character of "Red Dick" in "Rosalie the Prairie Flower," as he had seen him in a California theater five years before!

He wanted still an hour of the darkness that would probably close the day.

Could he hold out, keeping his offensive position so long? A hasty council with his officers showed him that the weakness of their position had already infected them. They reminded him that his line of retreat was still open—that in the course of the night the enemy, although still pressing towards the division center, might yet turn and outflank him—or that the strangely delayed supports might come up before morning. Brant's glass however, remained fixed on the main column still pursuing its way along the ridge. It struck him suddenly, however, that the steady current had stopped, spread out along the crest of both sides and was now at right angles with its previous course. There had been a check! The next moment the thunder of guns along the whole horizon and the rising cloud of smoke revealed a line of battle. The division center was engaged. The opportunity he had longed for had come—the decisive chance to throw himself in their rear and cut his way through the division—but it had come too late. He looked at his shattered ranks. Scarce a regiment remained. Even a demonstration—the attack would be against the enemy's superior numbers. Nothing clearly was left to him but to remain where he was—with supporting distance, and await the issue of the fight beyond. He was putting up his glass when the dull roar of cannon in the extreme western end of the horizon attracted his attention. By the still gleaming sky he could see a long gray line stretching up from a valley from the distant rear of the headquarters to join the main column. There were the missing supports! He leaped! He held the key of the ridge now. The one imperfect detail of the enemy's plan was before him. The reports coming later from the west had shown only the second signal from the window—when Miss Faulkner had placed the vase—and had avoided his position. It was impossible to limit the effect of this blunder! If the young girl who had thus saved him had reached the division commander with his message in time, he might be forewarned, and even profit by it. His own position would be less precarious, as the enemy already engaged in front would be unable to recover their position in the rear, and correct the blunder. The bulk of their column had already streamed past him. If defeated there was always the danger that it might be rolled back upon him—but he conjectured that the division commander would attempt to prevent the junction of the supports with the main column by breaking between them, crowding them from the ridge and joining him. As the last stragglers of the rear guard swept by Brant's bugles were already recalling the skirmishers. He redoubled his efforts, and resolved to watch and wait.

(To be continued.)

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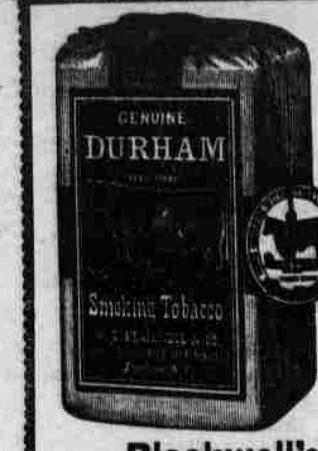
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