

Mountain Sentinel.

"WE GO WHERE DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES POINT THE WAY;—WHEN THEY CEASE TO LEAD, WE CEASE TO FOLLOW."

BY JOHN G. GIVEN.]

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SELECT TALE.

MARY ROCK.

BY PERCY B. ST. JOHN.

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 habits characteristic of this family, had driven Captain Rock from the easy neighborhood of Dickinson's Bayou, and from all others, one after another, until he found himself far nearer than was generally considered safe the 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 than when I knew her, was all the more indefatigable in the 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, drink, sleep 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 a 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 sight 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 around about Galveston. The chief things, however, which struck him on the occasion of his visit, were the wretchedness of their abode, the willful dotage of their parents, the industry of the children, and the mature 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 was also 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, should be married.

The interval was chiefly spent in hunting, fishing, boating and riding, when the various parties concerned were not engaged in necessary avocations. 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 ardor of a single-minded, honest and frank backwoodsman. Still he could not divest himself of regret at not partaking of 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 dawn of day they started.

This time, all the hunters rode horses, the very best which Snow could pick from his lot. Each had a rifle, a powder horn, 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 heaving 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, 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 dangerous one, they made a sober attack on their whiskey gourds and tobacco pouches, and after a little gossip, were glad to find rest. Mary had a little hut, 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 civilized life, with scarcely any of its virtues—are kept in the back ground, 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 quite 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 had come 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 Mustang."

"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 overlying 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.

"Ings—redskins!" observed Captain Snow. "Do you and Polly slope away to yonder clump of trees, and hide away spry, 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 his rifle, pouch, every thing, 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 recollection. 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 nearly an hour to reach a little hollow, 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 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 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 saw did not exist. With this conviction he was about to retire, when a young Indian moved aside the tree 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 and attack them. The Howling-Wind grunted his reply, and they sat down.

Captain Snow was now amply satisfied as to the nature of the Indian tribe. They were Camanches, the Arabs of the great prairie wilderness, outlying in the woods in the hope of cutting of volunteer parties going to Mexico. Using all his caution he crept from his dangerous post, 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," said Captain Snow, as he came up; "the varmints have seen us, and the sight of our camp may keep them in good humor. I conclude the 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 panikin 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. Then they piled a great quantity of wood on the fire, and then mousing 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 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 varmints are on us!"

At the same moment the war-cry of the Indians was heard in all its terror from a hundred screeching throats, and the long lances of the Camanches were seen waving in the distance. The fugitives now gave whip and spur, and the horses bounding at a rapid pace, and for a short time they succeeded in leading the Camanches; but their long lances were never out of sight. For 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 fire avalanche. To their left lay a stream of water, to their right a level sward, which had burnt some months back and was now covered with short turf 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 their 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 to be galloping of its own accord over the plains. The trick is usually adopted when flying before superior forces, to guaranty their bodies from arrows and bullets. Capt. Snow looked anxiously around him. The pursuers were about a mile behind them, the ambushed Indians about half a mile to their right, while at about an equal distance before 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 skerry 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 rides 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 then mounted again, the Indians being close upon them, and then 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 Captain 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 Camanches 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 smouldering swamp. The atmosphere which for a long time had been 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 that 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, faces as black as negroes, was all that had ensued from this 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 journey 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 him of a new danger. The savage wolves of the mountains were upon them in vast droves. The animals follow prairie fire in search of 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, & the fugitive band made for a wood about five miles off, which had been spared from the fire, the grass near the trees being top damp and too short to burn. As they rode they loosened their rifles and pistols, and took their long 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 *caibito* 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 a tree, took up the arms, 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 drank and smoked in silence for another half hour, when all were sufficiently recovered to hold a council. The wolves were howling around the tree, which was lofty 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 believed them to have perished in the flames, and who would chase a road removed from the track of the conflagration.

They spoke some time in a low tone, until the howling of the wolves became intolerable, and Captain Snow and young Rock resolved to rid themselves of the nuisance. They descended to the lower branches of the trees 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-barrelled pistols drove the jackals back in an instant. Snow was perched over a large pile of leaves driven together by the wind. On this he rapidly emptied a good handful of powder.—With the lighted tobacco from his pipe, a flame was 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 gun-powder flashed and then kept at a respectful distance. Young Rock now leaped down, flung some wood on the fire, 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 & smoking plain. Weary and tiresome was the journey through the forest, through swamps, along dreary interminable plains, with heavy rifles on their shoulders. They rarely fired a shot, eating sparingly, and at long intervals, for the crack of fire arms 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 Capt. Snow. Two or three smart reports of guns made them prick up their ears, quickly followed as they were by the duller report of the Indian fusile. The trio plunged into the thicket, loosened their rifles, and advanced. Ten minutes brought them to the skirt of the wood.

The buildings of Snowville were a 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, meanwhile making every preparation for further 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 blaze 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. I hey 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 covered down by 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 the entrance of the gully, and retreated in good order. The magic reputation of the Western rifle kept the Camanches at a respectable distance.

Two days more they were within their posts, but then the Indians gave up the siege. On the fifth day the whole party was mounted; the wagon, drawn by oxen, contained all their valuables, and on the top old Rock and his wife. The rest served as an escort. Their destination was a country two hundred miles distant where Captain Snow was to be united to Mary. They were married; and then joined by four enterprising families, the bold backwoodsmen again entered the wilderness, and returned to their old residence. A village was formed, and Captain Snow was at once chosen sheriff. The community was small, but full of perseverance; and though they have suffered a little from Indian attacks, courage and industry soon repaired the damage; and Mrs. Snow seems on a fair way of presiding over a considerable town at no distant period. Peace is now restored, and a wife and mother, the heroine of this narrative has given up the romantic habits of MARY ROCK.

Take care Girls.—"Well, Frank isn't she a perfect creature?"

"Why, I think she would do, if she—"

"If what, Frank?"

"If she didn't eat onions."

Men fear death because they know it not; as children fear the dark.

Never give your children anything because they cry for it.

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