



IT WAS a cold afternoon in 1778. The ground was hard frozen, and the red light of the late sun but intensified the darkness of evergreen woods and icy river.

In the American encampment there was suffering from illness, slow starvation and intense cold—suffering such as cannot now be comprehended by those who enjoy a national liberty which was so dearly purchased.

The torture of uncertainty, the dread of dawning hopelessness, the present and utter discouragement of the army, made doubly hard the strain upon the Commander-in-Chief, whose task it was to arouse ardor and rekindle hope in the soul-sick army around him.

The British, then quartered in and about the city of Philadelphia, sent out foraging parties until the country people, despondent to the last degree, grew desperate under the hopeless outlook.

About two miles south of the American outposts stood the farmhouse of Leban Williams. On that desolate winter afternoon Priscilla Williams walked to and fro with a sick child in her arms, while her little daughter Nell stood looking out of the window at the chill, bare landscape.

Suddenly there was a rush of color from beyond. A party of dragoons galloped out of the woods and up the lane and in the gate of Leban Williams's place, and a sword struck the door.

With a white face Priscilla Williams opened the door. She well knew what this meant. The soldiers wore the red coats of the British, and already their foragers had swept away well-nigh all she had. An officer sprang down, and, followed by a soldier, entered the house. Little Nell slipped from the window and stood with her frightened brown eyes fixed upon the intruders.

"Baking day, mistress?" said the officer.

"I have scarce anything left to bake," quietly answered Priscilla.

The man raised his eyebrows and pointed with his sword to the buttery beyond.

"Go, look!" he said. The soldier beside him obeyed, and Priscilla's eyes flashed as she suddenly faced the officer and pointed to the whimpering child in her arms.

"Harken to the child," she said; "it's hungry!"

"So am I, madam," replied the officer, twisting his mustache; "in truth we're all hungry. I remember the flavor of your ducks. They were excellent."

"Ay! The remainder of my poultry I gave to the suffering Americans, lest you should return," said Priscilla.

The second soldier emerged from the buttery with a can of cornmeal and a little salt meat, and a rueful countenance.

"Ah! Then you owe us somewhat now!" retorted the officer with a shrug. "Live-stock is our need at present. A pig would go well; or, have you a cow, mistress?"

"You forget, sir, that you also stole my cow two months past," said Priscilla Williams.

"Tut, tut, mistress! The cow should not have strayed in sight whilst we were on a hunting expedition. Odds take it! What's that?"

Loud and unmistakable came the bellow of a calf near by. The officer laughed triumphantly, and motioned contemptuously to the articles in the hands of the soldier.

"Put down those paltry things! There's live-stock about. Mistress," he added with a hand in his pocket, "I'll pay for what I find in the stable."

"Sir!" said Priscilla Williams, suddenly standing erect with fiery eyes; "the price of my few possessions is all too high, methinks, for the British Army!"

"And that, madam?" he said, enjoying the scene.

"The freedom of my husband, who even now is detained at the outpost—a prisoner."

The officer leaned against the dresser and laughed aloud while shaking the coins in his hand.

"So! You would purchase your husband with the price of one calf? In truth, you rate him low, mistress. Methinks, however, that I'll pay for the calf, and, at your service, keep the husband also."

He made a mocking bow as he opened the door, and laid the coins upon the table. But with a sudden sweep of Priscilla Williams's hand they were struck from the table and went flying after him, striking the ground and rolling into the midst of the astonished soldiers.

The officer laughed as the man who followed him picked up the money. And the door closed.

But all this had passed well-nigh unnoticed by little Nell Williams; for at the officer's words about the calf a look of horror dawned upon her face. Dolly, her one pet and playmate, was to be killed and eaten by these men.

Without a sound the child turned, as the door closed, and fled out the back way and down to the barn, unperceived by the officer, who was remounting at the front of the house.

She slipped into the dark barn and ran to where Dolly stood. Throwing her arms around the calf's neck, and clinging to and caressing her soft head and face, Nell burst into tears. For well she knew there was no hope.

Suddenly loud voices sounded without, and Nell tore her arms from Dolly's neck and hastily climbed a short ladder near by leading to the loft above. There she lay crouched in the darkness with her fingers tightly clasping her eyes, and silent sobs shaking her.

Half a dozen soldiers entered the barn and passed in and out of the stalls—and then they found Dolly.

One was provided with a rope; and Nell, huddled on the floor above, peered through a crack, trembling and distressed, while they drew it around Dolly's tender neck.

"We shall overtake the wagon beyond the woods, and, mayhap, can tie the calf within," said one of the men.

"Ay, for if we lead the calf 'twill take well-nigh all night to return. As 'tis, the wagon goes slowly," said another.

"The way through the woods cuts off a good bit, and is safer, too. 'Twere a risky thing to have come around this near the outposts," said another.

"Bah! We've an hundred horse," said the first; "besides, up yonder"—with a gesture in the direction of the American camp—"they're all down with fever. We're safe enough on the lower river road; it has been reconnoitred. Ho, there! Come on! You shall make a fine veal pie!"

The man addressed the calf as he led her out, for she was unwilling to go. As the sound of their footsteps died away Nell sprang downward in a tremor of distress and flew back to the house. Her heart beat tumultuously. She could not face the terrible thing which had befallen her.

Her mother met her at the door. Priscilla's lips were sternly set. She had hoped to save Dolly for the little girl's sake, so stripped and desolate had the child's life been of late. More than once had the mother forced aside the unwilling thought that, if the worst came, the calf must ultimately be sacrificed for their own use.

"Daughter," she said, "they have taken Dolly away."

Little Nell nodded, and clasped her hands upon her heart. She could not speak.

"I had gladly sent her first to the American camp, where they are suffering so sorely," said Priscilla, laying her hand upon the child's head. "Methinks I must yet go thither and claim protection."

Nell Williams looked at her mother with distressed brown eyes. Then forcing back the tears she said:

"Would he—would General Washington have sent some one to take care of Dolly, mother?" For to her the American Army meant General Washington.

"He is, himself, well acquainted with suffering," replied her mother simply, "and a great man is ever most careful of the weak."

She passed into the next room, and Nell stood with a new thought illuminating her mind and thrilling her. Through the window she could see the British dragoons disappearing up the lane, and it meant to Nell but one thing: they were taking Dolly to be killed.

Instantly the child caught her cloak from a peg, and, drawing the hood over her head, slipped out and closed the door.

Down the lane, her red cloak flying like a fall leaf blown by the wind, went little Nell Williams. Far in advance the British horses were galloping up the road to the right, and Nell's flying footsteps turned to the left—the road which led to the American camp. Two miles! How could her small feet ever travel fast enough? They sped over the frozen ground, stumbling against stones and tripping heedlessly as the little girl pressed forward. Now and then she stopped to rest, but a single thought of Dolly's fate would speed her along with redoubled effort. A mile is a long way for small feet to travel. Although Nell Williams was a sturdy little maid, and accustomed to rough country roads, it seemed an unending time before she reached the first gray milestone, which she knew stood midway. She rested upon this for a few moments; then on she went, off the highway and up the narrow road whither she had come once before, riding with her father upon his horse when he brought her to view the American camp. Now the thought of her father made the tears rise to Nell's eyes. Her father a prisoner, and Dolly to be killed! A sob broke from her lips, and as she turned a curve of the road tears blinded her, and she stopped to brush them away.

And there above her, upon the very hillock from which her father had shown her the camp, was a horseman. He sat motionless, erect, sharply outlined against the winter sky. One hand was upon the bridle at his horse's neck; the other hung downward at his side. His firm profile was turned toward the camp, which lay in a slope of land below. And although Nell Williams did not then realize the significant dejection of this solitary figure against the desolate landscape, she remembered it long afterward as typical of a moment of profound sorrow and relaxation.

The horseman was dressed in the uniform of an American officer; so Nell was not afraid. At the sound of her footsteps he turned sharply, and, drawing his horse back into the road, looked down upon a little girl with a red hood falling from her tumbled curls, and with brown eyes which were still wet with tears.

"Child! Why are you here alone?"

It was a wonderfully kind voice, and Nell looked eagerly up into his face.

"I am going to see General Washington, sir, to tell him about Dolly. Oh, do you think I might find him soon?"

"What might you want with him, little maid?" asked the soldier.

"They have taken Dolly, my calf, to kill her, sir," said Nell, with the tears trembling upward again. "The British soldiers—they have taken well-nigh all we have; and mother said that if General Washington knew it he would not let them. Oh, please tell me where to find him now, sir, so he can send and bring Dolly back!"

Instantly the officer was all attention.

"British, and near?" he said. "Tell me, child, about how many men were there?"

"'Twould seem a great many, sir, for the yard was full of horses. The man who took Dolly said 'An hundred horse.' And that the wagon was beyond the woods."

"So!" uttered the soldier. "An hundred horse, and a wagon, no doubt, of provisions. Think, child, did they mention a road?"

"They said 'The lower river road,'" replied little Nell.

"Oh, sir, may I please go find General Washington?"

The officer quietly dismounted, and, lifting Nell upon his horse, leaped up behind her and rode rapidly in the direction of the American camp. "I, myself, will see that he attends to it at once, little one," he said.

It was so kind and grave a voice, above Nell's little red hood, that she sighed contentedly and said: "Oh, then he will do it! General Washington is so good, sir, and we love him so! Mother says that he hath much trouble now with his poor, sick soldiers. We have but little left to eat, but mother would not sell our things to the British to-day while he hath such need of them. I had rather given General Washington Dolly!"

Did the strong arm holding the child draw her closer? Nell did not notice it then; her thoughts were all of Dolly. But had she looked up into the face above her she might have been surprised by a swift flash of those grave eyes: as though a ray of sunlight had suddenly played upon dark and troubled waters.

Nell rested her head against her soldier, for she was very tired, and they rode in silence, for he seemed to be musing again. Once only did murmured words escape him; strange words, the child thought, and afterward she remembered them:

"If God be for us, who can be against?"

Presently they drew rein before a tent from which emerged an officer. Nell heard her soldier give rapid, low-toned directions. The officer was to take a company of two hundred, and hasten at once by way of the fields to the lower river road to head off a party of British horse, who traveled with a wagon. The officer was to be most careful of a calf which would be found tied in the wagon, and to report at headquarters.

Then Nell's soldier rode on until they reached a log house.

"What is your name, my child?" he said as they stopped.

"Major Williams's daughter Nell," said the little girl.

"Ah! A brave man's brave daughter!" He beckoned to a soldier, who came forward. Whereupon Nell's friend lifted her carefully down and instructed the man to take her back immediately to her mother. Then he leaned from his horse, and held out his hand.

"God bless you, child," he said; "you have served far better than you know!"

Nell put her hand in his and smiled up at him.

"Thank you, sir, and will you please tell General Washington to take care of Dolly?" she said.

Nell was lifted to another horse, in front of the man in charge of her, and as she rode away she looked back and smiled at her soldier, who stood before the log house looking after her. And it seemed to Nell that his grave face was not so sad as when she saw it first upon the hillock.

At early candlelight, when Nell Williams ran in with her face glowing and her eyes shining in eagerness, she found her mother much troubled by her daughter's absence. But when Priscilla learned that the child had actually been to the American camp, carried thither by an officer who would see General Washington in their behalf, she was indeed amazed.

"And, mother, I did hear him tell the soldier to be most careful of Dolly!" said Nell triumphantly.

The next morning several American soldiers stopped at Major Williams's place. One bore a basket of provisions, and another led a small calf.

The soldiers stated to Priscilla that the entire company of British dragoons, who were on their way to Philadelphia with a load of supplies to enrich the British table, were overtaken and captured the night before on the lower river road. They were completely surprised by the Americans, who lay in wait for them.

The provisions were a godsend to the American camp, and a basketful was thereby delivered to Mistress Williams by order of General Washington, who wished also to express his thanks for the information brought by her little daughter.

But to all of this Nell Williams was oblivious, for her arms were around Dolly's neck.

Some time afterward Major Leban Williams escaped from the British outpost and made his way back to the American camp. After the first happy meeting with his wife and children he was told of Nell's adventure, and of the many and repeated kindnesses which had come to them since.

"My soldier must needs have been good, father," said Nell, standing at his knee, "for he bade them be most careful of Dolly."

"Daughter," said her father, "your soldier was none other than the General himself!"

Then, suddenly, Major Williams arose and went to the window and stood gazing down toward the American camp. When he turned again his eyes were misty, and he laid a hand upon his little girl's head.

"Harken, Nell," he said gravely; "in time to come, when I am no longer here to testify; when ours is a free and happy country, and when Valley Forge is forgotten, remember, in spite of what any may say, that a great man never lived if Washington be not great!"

And years afterward, when Nell was a woman fighting her own battle of life, she remembered her soldier's face as she had seen it that one desolate winter day upon the hillock, and then she understood.