

## CHAPTER VII

### I MEET A HERO

WHEN left to myself, I was wont to slide into the commonplace; and where my own dull life intrudes to clog the action I cut it down here and pare it away there until I am merely explanatory, and not too much in evidence. I rode out the Wilderness Trail, fell in with other travellers, was welcomed by certain old familiar faces at Harrodstown, and pressed on. I have a vivid recollection of a beloved, vigorous figure swooping out of a cabin door and scattering a brood of children right and left. "Polly Ann!" I said, and she halted, trembling.

"Tom," she cried, "Tom, it's Davy come back;" and Tom himself flew out of the door, ramrod in one hand and rifle in the other. Never shall I forget them as they stood there, he grinning with sheer joy as of yore, and she, with her hair flying and her blue gown snapping in the wind, in a tremor between tears and laughter. I leaped to the ground, and she hugged me in her arms as though I had been a child, calling my name again and again, and little Tom pulling at the skirts of my coat. I caught the youngster by the collar.

"Polly Ann," said I, "he's grown to what I was when you picked me up, a foundling."

"And now it's little Davy no more," she answered, swept me a courtesy, and added, with a little quiver in her voice, "ye are a gentleman now."

"My heart is still where it was," said I.

"Ay, ay," said Tom, "I'm sure o' that, Davy."

I was with them a fortnight in the familiar cabin, and then I took up my journey northward, heavy at

leaving again, but promising to see them from time to time. For Tom was often at the Falls when he went a-scouting into the Illinois country. It was, as of old, Polly Ann who ran the mill and was the real breadwinner of the family.

Louisville was even then bursting with importance, and as I rode into it, one bright November day, I remembered the wilderness I had seen here not ten years gone when I had marched hither with Captain Harrod's company to join Clark on the island. It was even then a thriving little town of log and clapboard houses and schools and churches, and wise men were saying of it—what Colonel Clark had long ago predicted—that it would become the first city of commercial importance in the district of Kentucky.

I do not mean to give you an account of my struggles that winter to obtain a foothold in the law. The time was a heyday for young barristers, and troubles in those early days grew as plentifully in Kentucky as corn. In short, I got a practice, for Colonel Clark was here to help me, and, thanks to the men who had gone to Kaskaskia and Vincennes, I had a fairly large acquaintance in Kentucky. I hired rooms behind Mr. Crede's store, which was famed for the glass windows which had been fetched all the way from Philadelphia. Mr. Crede was the embodiment of the enterprising spirit of the place, and often of an evening he called me in to see the new fashionable things his barges had brought down the Ohio. The next day certain young sparks would drop into my room to waylay the belles as they came to pick a costume to be worn at Mr. Nickle's dancing school, or at the ball at Fort Finney.

The winter slipped away, and one cool evening in May there came a negro to my room with a note from Colonel Clark, bidding me sup with him at the tavern and meet a celebrity.

I put on my best blue clothes that I had brought with me from Richmond, and repaired expectantly to the tavern about eight of the clock, pushed through the curious



crowd outside, and entered the big room where the company was fast assembling. Against the red blaze in the great chimney-place I spied the figure of Colonel Clark, more portly than of yore, and beside him stood a gentleman who could be no other than General Wilkinson.

He was a man to fill the eye, handsome of face, symmetrical of figure, easy of manner, and he wore a suit of bottle-green that became him admirably. In short, so fascinated and absorbed was I in watching him as he greeted this man and the other that I started as though something had pricked me when I heard my name called by Colonel Clark.

"Come here, Davy," he cried across the room, and I came and stood abashed before the hero. "General, allow me to present to you the drummer boy of Kaskaskia and Vincennes, Mr. David Ritchie."

"I hear that you drummed them to victory through a very hell of torture, Mr. Ritchie," said the General. "It is an honor to grasp the hand of one who did such service at such a tender age."

General Wilkinson availed himself of that honor, and encompassed me with a smile so benignant, so winning in its candor, that I could only mutter my acknowledgment, and Colonel Clark must needs apologize, laughing, for my youth and timidity.

"Mr. Ritchie is not good at speeches, General," said he, "but I make no doubt he will drink a bumper to your health before we sit down. Gentlemen," he cried, filling his glass from a bottle on the table, "a toast to General Wilkinson, emancipator and saviour of Kentucky!"

The company responded with a shout, tossed off the toast, and sat down at the long table. Chance placed me between a young dandy from Lexington — one of several the General had brought in his train — and Mr. Wharton, a prominent planter of the neighborhood with whom I had a speaking acquaintance. This was a backwoods feast, though served in something better than the old backwoods style, and we had venison and bear's meat and prairie fowl as well as pork and beef, and breads that

came stinging hot from the Dutch ovens. Toasts to this and that were flung back and forth, and jests and gibes, and the butt of many of these was that poor Federal government which (as one gentleman avowed) was like a bantam hen trying to cover a nestful of turkey's eggs, and clucking with importance all the time. This picture brought on gusts of laughter.

"And what say you of the Jay?" cried one; "what will he hatch?"

Hisses greeted the name, for Mr. Jay wished to enter into a treaty with Spain, agreeing to close the river for five and twenty years. Colonel Clark stood up, and rapped on the table.

"Gentlemen," said he, "Louisville has as her guest of honor to-night a man of whom Kentucky may well be proud [loud cheering]. Five years ago he favored Lexington by making it his home, and he came to us with the laurel of former achievements still clinging to his brow. He fought and suffered for his country, and attained the honorable rank of Major in the Continental line. He was chosen by the people of Pennsylvania to represent them in the august body of their legislature, and now he has got new honor in a new field [renewed cheering]. He has come to Kentucky to show her the way to prosperity and glory. Kentucky had a grievance [loud cries of "Yes, yes!"]. Her hogs and cattle had no market, her tobacco and agricultural products of all kinds were rotting because the Spaniards had closed the Mississippi to our traffic. Could the Federal government open the river? [shouts of "No, no!" and hisses]. Who opened it? [cries of "Wilkinson, Wilkinson!"]. He said to the Kentucky planters, 'Give your tobacco to me, and I will sell it.' He put it in barges, he floated down the river, and, as became a man of such distinction, he was met by Governor-general Miro on the levee at New Orleans. Where is that tobacco now, gentlemen?" Colonel Clark was here interrupted by such roars and stamping that he paused a moment, and during this interval Mr. Wharton leaned over and whispered quietly in my ear: —



"Ay, where is it?"

I stared at Mr. Wharton blankly. He was a man nearing the middle age, with a lacing of red in his cheeks, a pleasant gray eye, and a singularly quiet manner.

"Thanks to the genius of General Wilkinson," Colonel Clark continued, waving his hand towards the smilingly placid hero, "that tobacco has been deposited in the King's store at ten dollars per hundred, — a privilege heretofore confined to Spanish subjects. Well might Wilkinson return from New Orleans in a chariot and four to a grateful Kentucky! This year we have tripled, nay, quadrupled, our crop of tobacco, and we are here to-night to give thanks to the author of this prosperity." Alas, Colonel Clark's hand was not as steady as of yore, and he spilled the liquor on the table as he raised his glass. "Gentlemen, a health to our benefactor."

They drank it willingly, and withal so lengthily and noisily that Mr. Wilkinson stood smiling and bowing for full three minutes before he could be heard. He was a very paragon of modesty, was the General, and a man whose attitudes and expressions spoke as eloquently as his words. None looked at him now but knew before he opened his mouth that he was deprecating such an ovation.

"Gentlemen, — my friends and fellow-Kentuckians," he said, "I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your kindness, but I assure you that I have done nothing worthy of it [loud protests]. I am a simple, practical man, who loves Kentucky better than he loves himself. This is no virtue, for we all have it. We have the misfortune to be governed by a set of worthy gentlemen who know little about Kentucky and her wants, and think less [cries of "Ay, ay!"]. I am not decrying General Washington and his cabinet; it is but natural that the wants of the seaboard and the welfare and opulence of the Eastern cities should be uppermost in their minds [another interruption]. Kentucky, if she would prosper, must look to her own welfare. And if any credit is due to me, gentlemen, it is because I reserved my decision of his Excellency, Governor-general Miro, and his people

until I saw them for myself. A little calm reason, a plain statement of the case, will often remove what seems an insuperable difficulty, and I assure you that Governor-general Miro is a most reasonable and courteous gentleman, who looks with all kindness and neighborliness on the people of Kentucky. Let us drink a toast to him. To him your gratitude is due, for he sends you word that your tobacco will be received."

"In General Wilkinson's barges," said Mr. Wharton, leaning over and subsiding again at once.

The General was the first to drink the toast, and he sat down very modestly amidst a thunder of applause.

The young man on the other side of me, somewhat flushed, leaped to his feet.

"Down with the Federal government!" he cried; "what have they done for us, indeed? Before General Wilkinson went to New Orleans the Spaniards seized our flat-boats and cargoes and flung our traders into prison, ay, and sent them to the mines of Brazil. The Federal government takes sides with the Indians against us. And what has that government done for you, Colonel?" he demanded, turning to Clark, "you who have won for them half of their territory? They have cast you off like an old moccasin. The Continental officers who fought in the East have half-pay for life or five years' full pay. And what have you?"

There was a breathless hush. A swift vision came to me of a man, young, alert, commanding, stern under necessity, self-repressed at all times — a man who by the very dominance of his character had awed into submission the fierce Northern tribes of a continent, who had compelled men to follow him until the life had all but ebbed from their bodies, who had led them to victory in the end. And I remembered a boy who had stood awe-struck before this man in the commandant's house at Fort Sackville. Ay, and I heard again his words as though he had just spoken them, "Promise me that you will not forget me if I am — unfortunate." I did not understand then. And now, because of a certain blinding of my eyes, I did not see him



clearly as he got slowly to his feet. He clutched the table. He looked around him—I dare not say—vacantly. And then, suddenly, he spoke with a supreme anger and a supreme bitterness.

“Not a shilling has this government given me,” he cried. “Virginia was more grateful; from her I have some acres of wild land and—a sword.” He laughed. “A sword, gentlemen, and not new at that. Oh, a grateful government we serve, one careful of the honor of her captains. Gentlemen, I stand to-day a discredited man because the honest debts I incurred in the service of that government are repudiated, because my friends who helped it, Father Gibault, Vigo, and Gratiot, and others have never been repaid. One of them is ruined.”

A dozen men had sprung clamoring to their feet before he sat down. One, more excited than the rest, got the ear of the company.

“Do we lack leaders?” he cried. “We have them here with us to-night, in this room. Who will stop us? Not the contemptible enemies in Kentucky who call themselves Federalists. Shall we be supine forever? We have fought once for our liberties, let us fight again. Let us make a common cause with our real friends on the far side of the Mississippi.”

I rose, sick at heart, but every man was standing. And then a strange thing happened. I saw General Wilkinson at the far end of the room; his hand was raised, and there was that on his handsome face which might have been taken for a smile, and yet was not a smile. Others saw him too, I know not by what exertion of magnetism. They looked at him and they held their tongues.

“I fear that we are losing our heads, gentlemen,” he said; “and I propose to you the health of the first citizen of Kentucky, Colonel George Rogers Clark.”

I found myself out of the tavern and alone in the cool May night. And as I walked slowly down the deserted street, my head in a whirl, a hand was laid on my shoulder. I turned, startled, to face Mr. Wharton, the planter.

“I would speak a word with you, Mr. Ritchie,” he said. “May I come to your room for a moment?”

“Certainly, sir,” I answered.

After that we walked along together in silence, my own mind heavily occupied with what I had seen and heard. We came to Mr. Crede's store, went in at the picket gate beside it and down the path to my own door, which I unlocked. I felt for the candle on the table, lighted it, and turned in surprise to discover that Mr. Wharton was poking up the fire and pitching on a log of wood. He flung off his greatcoat and sat down with his feet to the blaze. I sat down beside him and waited, thinking him a sufficiently peculiar man.

“You are not famous, Mr. Ritchie,” said he, presently.

“No, sir,” I answered.

“Nor particularly handsome,” he continued, “nor conspicuous in any way.”

I agreed to this, perforce.

“You may thank God for it,” said Mr. Wharton.

“That would be a strange outpouring, sir,” said I.

He looked at me and smiled.

“What think you of this paragon, General Wilkinson?” he demanded suddenly.

“I have Federal leanings, sir,” I answered.

“Egad,” said he, “we'll add caution to your lack of negative accomplishments. I have had an eye on you this winter, though you did not know it. I have made inquiries about you, and hence I am not here to-night entirely through impulse. You have not made a fortune at the law, but you have worked hard, steered wide of sensation, kept your mouth shut. Is it not so?”

Astonished, I merely nodded in reply.

“I am not here to waste your time or steal your sleep,” he went on, giving the log a push with his foot, “and I will come to the point. When I first laid eyes on this fine gentleman, General Wilkinson, I too fell a victim to his charms. It was on the eve of this epoch-making trip of which we heard so glowing an account to-night, and I



made up my mind that no Spaniard, however wily, could resist his persuasion. He said to me, 'Wharton, give me your crop of tobacco and I promise you to sell it in spite of all the royal mandates that go out of Madrid.' He went, he saw, he conquered the obdurate Miro as he has apparently conquered the rest of the world, and he actually came back in a chariot and four as befitted him. A heavy crop of tobacco was raised in Kentucky that year. I helped to raise it," added Mr. Wharton, dryly. "I gave the General my second crop, and he sent it down. Mr. Ritchie, I have to this day never received a *piastre* for my merchandise, nor am I the only planter in this situation. Yet General Wilkinson is prosperous."

My astonishment somewhat prevented me from replying to this, too. Was it possible that Mr. Wharton meant to sue the General? I reflected while he paused. I remembered how inconspicuous he had named me, and hope died. Mr. Wharton did not look at me, but stared into the fire, for he was plainly not a man to rail and rant.

"Mr. Ritchie, you are young, but mark my words, that man Wilkinson will bring Kentucky to ruin if he is not found out. The whole district from Crab Orchard to Bear Grass is mad about him. Even Clark makes a fool of himself—"

"Colonel Clark, sir!" I cried.

He put up a hand.

"So you have some hot blood," he said. "I know you love him. So do I, or I should not have been there to-night. Do I blame his bitterness? Do I blame—anything he does? The treatment he has had would bring a blush of shame to the cheek of any nation save a republic. Republics are wasteful, sir. In George Rogers Clark they have thrown away a general who might some day have decided the fate of this country, they have left to stagnate a man fit to lead a nation to war. And now he is ready to intrigue against the government with any adventurer who may have convincing ways and a smooth tongue."

"Mr. Wharton," I said, rising, "did you come here to tell me this?"

But Mr. Wharton continued to stare into the fire.

"I like you the better for it, my dear sir," said he, "and I assure you that I mean no offence. Colonel Clark is enshrined in our hearts, Democrats and Federalists alike. Whatever he may do, we shall love him always. But this other man,—pooh!" he exclaimed, which was as near a vigorous expression as he got. "Now, sir, to the point. I, too, am a Federalist, a friend of Mr. Humphrey Marshall, and, as you know, we are sadly in the minority in Kentucky now. I came here to-night to ask you to undertake a mission in behalf of myself and certain other gentlemen, and I assure you that my motives are not wholly mercenary." He paused, smiled, and put the tips of his fingers together. "I would willingly lose every crop for the next ten years to convict this Wilkinson of treason against the Federal government."

"Treason!" I repeated involuntarily.

"Mr. Ritchie," answered the planter, "I gave you credit for some shrewdness. Do you suppose the Federal government does not realize the danger of this situation in Kentucky. They have tried in vain to open the Mississippi, and are too weak to do it. This man Wilkinson goes down to see Miro, and Miro straightway opens the river to us through him. How do you suppose Wilkinson did it? By his charming personality?"

I said something, I know not what, as the light began to dawn on me. And then I added, "I had not thought about the General."

"Ah," replied Mr. Wharton, "just so. And now you may easily imagine that General Wilkinson has come to a very pretty arrangement with Miro. For a certain stipulated sum best known to Wilkinson and Miro, General Wilkinson agrees gradually to detach Kentucky from the Union and join it to his Catholic Majesty's dominion of Louisiana. The bribe—the opening of the river. What the government could not do Wilkinson did by the lifting of his finger."

Still Mr. Wharton spoke without heat.

"Mind you," he said, "we have no proof of this, and



that is my reason for coming here to-night, Mr. Ritchie. I want you to get proof of it if you can."

"You want me —" I said, bewildered.

"I repeat that you are not handsome," — I think he emphasized this unduly, — "that you are self-effacing, inconspicuous; in short, you are not a man to draw suspicion. You might travel anywhere and scarcely be noticed, — I have observed that about you. In addition to this you are wary, you are discreet, you are painstaking. I ask you to go first to St. Louis, in Louisiana territory, and this for two reasons. First, because it will draw any chance suspicion from your real objective, New Orleans; and second, because it is necessary to get letters to New Orleans from such leading citizens of St. Louis as Colonel Chouteau and Monsieur Gratiot, and I will give you introductions to them. You are then to take passage to New Orleans in a barge of furs which Monsieur Gratiot is sending down. Mind, we do not expect that you will obtain proof that Miro is paying Wilkinson money. If you do, so much the better; but we believe that both are too sharp to leave any tracks. You will make a report, however, upon the conditions under which our tobacco is being received, and of all other matters which you may think germane to the business in hand. Will you go?"

I had made up my mind.

"Yes, I will go," I answered.

"Good," said Mr. Wharton, but with no more enthusiasm than he had previously shown; "I thought I had not misjudged you. Is your law business so onerous that you could not go to-morrow?"

I laughed.

"I think I could settle what affairs I have by noon, Mr. Wharton," I replied.

"Egad, Mr. Ritchie, I like your manner," said he; "and now for a few details, and you may go to bed."

He sat with me half an hour longer, carefully reviewing his instructions, and then he left me to a night of contemplation.

## CHAPTER VIII

### TO ST. LOUIS

By eleven o'clock the next morning I had wound up my affairs, having arranged with a young lawyer of my acquaintance to take over such cases as I had, and I was busy in my room packing my saddle-bags for the journey. The warm scents of spring were wafted through the open door and window, smells of the damp earth giving forth the green things, and tender shades greeted my eyes when I paused and raised my head to think. Purple buds littered the black ground before my door-step, and against the living green of the grass I saw the red stain of a robin's breast as he hopped spasmodically hither and thither, now pausing immovable with his head raised, now tossing triumphantly a wriggling worm from the sod. Suddenly he flew away, and I heard a voice from the street side that brought me stark upright.

"Hold there, neighbor; can you direct me to the mansion of that celebrated barrister, Mr. Ritchie?"

There was no mistaking that voice — it was Nicholas Temple's. I heard a laugh and an answer, the gate slammed, and Mr. Temple himself in a long gray riding-coat, booted and spurred, stood before me.

"Davy," he cried, "come out here and hug me. Why, you look as if I were your grandmother's ghost."

"And if you were," I answered, "you could not have surprised me more. Where have you been?"

"At Jonesboro, acting the gallant with the widow, winning and losing skins and cow-bells and land at rattle-and-snap, horse-racing with that wild Mr. Jackson. Faith, he near shot the top of my head off because I beat him at Greasy Cove."