

The Indian Stratagem
by J. G. H.

During the Revolutionary War a fort was erected near the Monongahela River, in which the surrounding settlers took refuge in times of particular danger. Among others who fled for refuge to the fort was one David Morgan, a man considerably advanced in life, and the father of a family of several children. Mary Morgan was the oldest—a lovely girl of sixteen summers—whose beauty had won the admiration of all the young men of that section, and whose good sense had also secured their respect.

Before proceeding any further with our tale, in order to illustrate the danger and daring of the times, we will relate an incident which occurred while Morgan was at the fort. This individual had a plantation about a mile from the fort. The Indians had not annoyed them for some days, and having occasion to send to the plantation, he rather thoughtlessly and imprudently allowed two of his children to go there. They were gone some considerable time.

“David,” said his wife, “I feel uneasy about the children.”

“To tell the truth, I don’t feel exactly right myself,” said David. “I think I will take my rifle and go after them. I haven’t felt right since they left the house, and it’s about time for the red-skins to be at their old tricks again.”

With these words David Morgan shouldered his trusty rifle, and walked hastily towards the plantation. He had nearly reached it, when to his horror he saw his little ones pursuing their homeward way, unconscious of danger, while two painted savages were approaching them with cautious steps. The heart of the father sank within him. The pitiless enemies of the white man were about to seize his dearest treasures. David Morgan would not have been the man he was, had he been mindful of his own safety at such a crisis.

“Run! Children! *Run!* The Indians are after you!” he cried out in a stentorian voice.

With a shriek of terror the horrified little ones obeyed the warning of their father, and ran as fast as their little feet could well carry them. Immediately the savages ceased pursuing the children, and with a fearful war-whoop, started after what they considered nobler game—Morgan himself. The latter now sought his own safety in flight, but being about sixty years of age, he was but poorly prepared to run with the swift-footed sons of the forest. The Indians gained on him fast. To run longer was hopeless.

“I am quite old,” said Morgan to himself. “I cannot, according to the common course of nature, live much longer. I don’t wish it to be said that David Morgan was wounded in the back; therefore I will turn upon my pursuers, and die fighting like a man. My rifle is well loaded—I am a good shot, and it will be strange indeed, if I cannot bring down one of my foes.”

The brave old man made a full stop, and confronted his enemies. Seeing a tree, which he had passed, which would afford him protection, he made a rapid, retrograde movement towards his enemies which surprised them not a little, and they stopped running to see what Morgan was going to do. They did not have to wait long to find out. The body of the old man was soon protected by the tree, his rifle was brought to bear upon the foremost and most conspicuous of the Indians, who fell dead before his unerring aim. He then turned and fled as fast as possible, for his rifle was empty, he had no time to load, and cared not, on account of his age, to match himself with the athletic savage, providing his fire should not prove fatal; for the Indian's gun was loaded.

At the distance of a few paces, while Morgan was straining every nerve to make the distance greater, the Indian discharged his gun; but on account of his extreme eagerness and haste, he missed his mark, and Morgan was not scathed. His adversary was now near him, and he was obliged to turn and fight. Before closing, however, he dealt his more agile enemy a blow with his clubbed rifle, which broke off at the breech, and received in return a blow from the Indian's tomahawk, which severed the little finger of his left hand. They then closed, and thereupon a most remarkable struggle took place.

But the weight of sixty winters pressed heavily upon the once strong limbs of Morgan. He was no match for the savage. Both fell, and the latter was uppermost. Considering the victory already won, the red-skin uttered a terrific shout of triumph, and attempted to draw forth his knife to dispatch his victim. But in this the savage was unexpectedly baffled; the handle had become entangled in some article of wearing apparel which he had that day stolen and thrust into his pocket. While the athletic Indian was vainly trying to extricate his knife, Morgan seized the fingers of the other hand with his teeth, and commenced chewing them without mercy. This cruel attempt at cannibalism on the part of Morgan proved dreadfully embarrassing to the savage; for Morgan's teeth, fortunately, were in a good state of preservation, dentists being scarce in those days. The Indian finding himself in danger of being eaten alive, made desperate efforts to extricate his hunting-knife, and succeeded; but instead of grasping it by the handle firmly, he got hold of it down upon the blade so far that Morgan was able to seize the part projecting through his hand. Exerting all his strength, and driven almost to desperation by the hopelessness of his situation, he gave the fingers of his adversary an extra twist with his incisors, and drew the knife-blade through the other hand, nearly severing the fingers therefrom.

Morgan was now master of the fatal knife. The savage now strove desperately to disengage himself, and both got upon their feet; but Morgan still maintained his hold upon the fingers and chewed them in a shocking manner, while the Indian danced the polka, in a fantastic manner for a few minutes, in order to free himself and avoid the knife. But it was in vain—the deadly thrust was given—the weapon passed into the Indian's body to the hilt—he sank down at the conqueror's feet, gasped, and died. Terribly exhausted, David Morgan picked up his broken rifle, and with the reeking knife in his hand, returned to the fort.

After the bloody incident above related (which the indulgent reader will remember is a matter of fact and history), there was a season of comparative quietness and safety. The

men began to venture out as usual to work upon their farms, and the women and children began to breathe easier as the phrase goes.

But suddenly a new cause of alarm appeared. Men went out and never returned. The sentinel was not found upon his post in the morning, and no traces of him could be discovered afterwards. These mysterious events filled the hearts of the settlers with consternation. Some said their comrades had been carried off by a catamount, others shook their heads, and said something about Indians.

The night following the strange disappearance of the sentinel, several of the settlers stood guard, but nothing was seen, and nothing unusual took place. This plan was pursued for several consecutive nights without gaining any clue to the mystery. At length the sudden fear wore off. Some concluded that the sentinel had perhaps gone away of his own accord, and did not mean to return; and those who had gone out to work, or hunt, and had not returned, had either been slain by the Indians or devoured by panthers. So two persons only stood on guard afterwards, as though nothing had happened extraordinary; but the dismay of all may in some degree be imagined, when one morning they discovered that another of their number had disappeared. A careful search was made, but the body of the missing man could not be found.

“Very singular,” said one.

“Wonderful,” exclaimed another.

“A terrible mystery,” observed a third.

“It’s hard to lose any of our numbers in these troublous times,” added a fourth.

“We must try and get at the bottom of the mystery,” suggested a fifth.

“And avenge the death of our comrades!” exclaimed another.

“I’d give the best half of my plantation to know how it’s done,” said David Morgan; and so said they all; and each had some plan to propose.

“My old dog, Lion, would be useful now,” added Morgan; “but he’s been missing a month.”

The dog alluded to was a mastiff of extraordinary size, and had been a universal favorite among the settlers, on the account of his sagacity and good nature; but as Morgan had remarked, he had been gone a month, and no one could give any account of him, anymore than they could of the missing men. After the gloomy subject of their losses had been discussed a long time, the interesting question arose, “Who will watch to-night?” But to this important interrogatory there was no immediate response. At length a young man stepped forth and said firmly, “I will.”

It was observed that the face of Mary Morgan, who was present, turned pale when the young man volunteered his services.

“Who will mount guard with the Tom Watson?” asked Morgan, anxiously; but there was no reply.

“I will stand alone,” said Watson. “I am not afraid. I will solve the mystery, or die. Things can’t go on in this way long; for we shall all be picked off one by one, without knowing the fate of our companions, until we share it.”

One or two young men now offered to share the danger with Watson; but he steadily refused their offers.

“If several of us mount guard at the same time,” said Watson, “all will go on as usual, and we shall be no wiser than before. We know this will be the case, because we have tried it to our satisfaction; but if no one dares the unknown danger alone, he will stand some chance of learning something about it.”

“Too good a chance!” remarked some one, in a low tone; but not so low but Mary Morgan heard it.

“What Watson says is true,” said an old settler; “though it’s a pity to have such a brave young fellow run such a risk.”

“Somebody must run the risk,” replied Watson, “and if anybody is to fall, why it might as well be Tom Watson as any other person. I should at least die with the proud consciousness that I was doing my duty.”

“Nobly said,” replied David Morgan: “but I’m an old man, and my loss wouldn’t be of so much consequence to the general safety; and after all, perhaps it would be better for me to make trial of it, and if I fail, why there’ll be time enough for you to try your skill, afterward, Tom Watson.”

“I will never consent to it!” exclaimed Watson, looking furtively at Mary. “If you should prove unsuccessful, there would be many left to deplore your loss; and I could never forgive myself for it; so let us say no more about it.”

“If you really insist upon it, why I suppose we must consider the matter settled,” replied Morgan, with a sigh; “but be sure and give the alarm if anything unusual takes place, and we will be ready to rush to your aid, for I’ll warrant some of us won’t sleep a minute to-night.”

In the course of the day Thomas Watson and Mary Morgan had a long talk; for the lover had mustered courage enough to tell Mary how much he loved her, although he might have spared himself the trouble; for his actions had been telling her the same thing for the last six months; but he managed to make a verbal declaration, and received as a reward

for his courage, a certain secret to keep, which concerned the state of Mary Morgan's affections—a tender secret, more interesting to Watson than the reader.

Before the dreaded night came, it seemed to be tacitly understood by all parties, that Tom Watson and Mary Morgan were engaged, to the great disappointment of some of the young backwoodsmen who had been smitten by the beauty and grace of the latter. Some of the backwoodsmen slyly hinted, that if the recent events had affected nothing else, they had at least advanced Watson's courtship six months in a single day.

"Be very careful," said Mary, in a low tone, when they were alone together (and they were often alone during the day), "for you know if anything unfortunate should happen, I should be very—"

"Unhappy," suggested Watson.

Mary blushed until her handsome face was quite crimson, for she was not intending at first to confess so much.

"And if I live through the night, I—I—"

"Yes, Tom," said Mary, softly.

"And shall the day be soon, Mary?"

"Don't ask so many questions, Tom. You must talk with father."

"Shifting the responsibility, are you!" said David Morgan himself, who had approached the parties unobserved. "Well, it's natural for young girls to do so, and I don't mind it much." And then he added in a more serious voice, "But don't set your hearts too much on it, for it's hard to tell what a day will bring forth in times like these."

Mary concealed her face in the folds of her pocket handkerchief, in order that its anxious expression might escape her father's observation. With a gentle pressure of hands, and a stolen kiss, Watson left the side of his Mary; for the shadow of night was already upon the earth. When it was quite dark he shook hands with his comrades, and with his rifle in his hand went forth to do his duty.

In front of the fort was quite a forest of low pine and birch, and in the edge of the forest he took his station. The night was unusually dark, and gradually his eyes became accustomed to it, and he went his rounds without difficulty, and in fact discharged the duty often assigned to two. Hour after hour passed without the occurrence of anything remarkable. Midnight came and went, and Watson began to entertain a hope that he should not be disturbed. A few stars were now visible in the skies, but their faint and shadowy light scarcely reached the rounds of the brave sentinel. Suddenly it occurred to him that he would remain perfectly motionless for a time, employing his eyes, meanwhile, to the best advantage. Accordingly he placed his back to a tree growing upon

the borders of the forest, and stood still. It was weary work remaining so motionless, but Tom was resolved to solve the mystery, if possible, and persisted in maintaining the attitude which he had assumed, occasionally, no doubt, thinking of Mary Morgan, by way of diverting his thoughts from the unknown danger which might menace him. If his eyes grew heavy, or his limbs ached, he recalled to mind the fate of his comrades, which was involved in so much terrible mystery, and the remembrance gave him strength and resolution.

All at once a slight rustling sound reached the ears of the dauntless Tom Watson. He looked steadily in the direction whence it proceeded, and to his surprise and joy a well-known object met his vision. It was David Morgan's great dog Lion—the favorite of the settlers for miles around. Watson could scarcely repress a cry of joy; but true to his purpose and the memory of his lost comrades, he remained perfectly motionless, and made no sign. The dog paused, and with his great shaggy head erect, looked steadily towards the fort.

“I have half a mind to call him,” said Watson, to himself, “he would be so much company for me; but I must not forget my duty. I did not expect to have company when I volunteered to mount guard, and it shall never be said that Tom Watson was a coward.”

With his nose still up, the dog advanced slowly. Suddenly the eyes of Watson flashed with intelligence, a fierce and forbidding expression appeared upon his hitherto tranquil features, he raised his rifle quickly to his shoulder, glanced rapidly along the fatal barrel, fired, and the dog, leaping high in the air, fell down with a groan of mortal agony. Instantly there was a simultaneous rush from the fort.

“Tom Watson!” cried David Morgan, who was the first one on the spot, “what has happened? What did you fire at?”

“At your dog, I believe,” said Tom, calmly.

“Why, I'd almost as soon had you shot one of the children. What possessed you, Tom?” replied Morgan.

“There he is; go and see,” returned Watson.

Morgan ran to the spot in hopes some life still remained in his faithful dog. He laid his hand upon his head and started back with a cry of astonishment.

“It's Lion's *skin*, but not his *body!*” exclaimed Morgan. “Thank God! The mystery is solved.”

Reader, the skin of the dog contained the body of an Indian.

“It was easy enough for the red-skin, in the disguise of our old friend, to creep up and surprise our comrades at their post, or to kill our neighbors at their common employment

in the fields or in the woods. This was a most ingenious and dangerous device, truly; for who could fear any danger when old Lion was near? Tom, how in the name of wonder, did you detect the trick?" continued Morgan.

"He was too cautious," replied Watson. "Old Lion never approached us with caution, but upon a brisk and good-natured trot. No, Lion didn't sulk! He came to us at once, with his eyes beaming with friendship, ready to lick our faces, and clap his paws on our shoulders. But the movements of this animal were not natural. He didn't put his feet down right, and the hinder legs were too large and awkward. All at once the true state of the case flashed into my brain, and I settled his business in scarcely no time. If I had whistled or called him, that would have been the last of Tom Watson."

Watson did not watch any more that night *outside* the fort; but it has been slanderously hinted since, that he watched a great many long evenings afterwards with Mary Morgan; and some said it was "good enough for him!"

After the death of the Indian dog, there were no mysterious disappearances, and all the settlers felt relieved of a fearful weight of anxiety. The writer has heard that there was a good deal of merry making at the wedding of Tom Watson and Mary Morgan.

Flag of Our Union, June 15, 1861