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File 4

THE GENERAL AND THE PIRATE

by

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There was a silence in the streets of New Orleans for the first time since the oldest citizen could remember. Shops were closed and street vendors took their baskets of wares back to their homes, where they locked and barred the doors. Old men brought out guns that had long lain idle and young boys looked brave and tried to hide the ~~excitement~~ ^{excitement} they felt. It was in the winter of 1814 and everyone knew the British fleet was headed that way.

"Twelve thousand enemy troops are waiting to land on our shores."

The rumor spread far and wide. Women gathered together in parlors and waited behind closed shutters and the men of the family hurried to Fort St. Charles to train for battle.

"It will all be over soon, for General Jackson has come to defend the city," the words were spoken to comfort one another.

Andrew Jackson, riding down the quiet streets, knew that inside houses that seemed deserted, eyes were staring at him in hope and confidence. But his face was wrinkled in a worried frown.

"Now we feel safe since you're here, General," an old man called out.

Andrew Jackson saluted the man and smiled, then his thoughts turned to his troops. They had passed before him in review only that morning. What an army! Never before had such a queer group of men gathered together to defend a city against a seasoned army. Citizens of New Orleans with whatever weapons they owned, Kentucky flatboat men with their long rifles, Acadians and free negroes, and Indians. Even with the Mississippi Dragoons and his own Tennessee men in their homespun and coats, there were scarcely two thousand in all, less than half of them were trained fighters.

General Jackson rode back to his quarters and dictated letters to be dispatched at once to headquarters in Washington.

"It's not the men," he said to himself. "My Tennesseans and those Kentucky boys are the best marksmen in the world, and they all have courage. We could win easily enough if only we had the weapons to fight with. But what can we do with no ammunition, not even flint enough for the guns!

A messenger came in with news of the enemy. They had been seen not many miles away, camping on a plantation below the city. It was impossible now for the message to reach Washington in time for help and supplies to come. *The battle was lost before it was begun.*

"Here is someone to see you, sir," the General's aide spoke softly.

Andrew Jackson looked up to see a thin, pale man standing six feet tall before him. His black hair hung down his shoulders, touching the collar of his black coat, and his black eyes looked calmly at the General.

"Good day, sir," he said with a courtly bow. "I am Jean Lafitte, and I have come to offer my services to my country."

Jean Lafitte, the pirate! Men who sailed on ships were afraid of the very name. It was said that only Spanish and English ships were captured, but ~~there~~ was not a ship on the ocean that dared go near the harbor of Grande Terre.

"The Governor has offered a reward of five hundred dollars for his capture," one young soldier whispered to another.

"And not only did he defy it, but he offered a reward for the Governor of fifteen hundred dollars," the other soldier whispered in reply.

The pirate looked at them but if he heard he did not show it. He closed his left eye as he spoke.

"I have about a thousand men who will follow at my command," he went on. "And in a secret storehouse, ^{sudden} in the marshes, I have all the ammunition we need, and flint for our guns, seven thousand, five hundred of them."

The General looked at the man before him, with the dress and manners of a gentleman. He could scarcely believe his ears. A thousand men and ammunition enough for all meant the difference between winning and losing the battle.

"I will accept your offer, Jean Lafitte, with gratitude," he said. "Round up your men and bring them to Fort St. Charles. Tell them they are pardoned, to the last man, and orders for their arrest will be destroyed."

"There is one thing more, Sir," Jean Lafitte said, closing his left eye again. "My brother Pierre. He is still held in jail on the charge of piracy."

"He will be free before night," Andrew Jackson declared.

Once more the General saw his army pass before him in review. There were more than three thousand now, and a queerer assortment of men than ever, had formed themselves into one army. Merchants and lawyers marched side by side with pirates and smugglers. The old Tennessee Indian fighters and the Creoles they had once fought were comrades now. And planters marched with free negroes to defend their country together.

"I valued you much higher than you valued me, your Excellency," Jean Lafitte, the pirate said as he rode beside the Governor. "My reward for you was three times as great as your reward for me."

The Governor and the pirate laughed together at their joke.

"With men such as these, I would not hesitate to storm the gates of Hell," Andrew Jackson thought as he rode off with his men to meet the British.

The women left behind, looking down from their windows, echoed his thoughts as they shouted and waved encouragement to the marching soldiers. Silk scarfs and handkerchiefs fluttered from every house until the men were out of sight, then once more the windows and shutters were barred tight and there was silence again, and waiting. Clocks ticked and the sun went down and stars came out, and scarcely an eye was closed in the whole city that night. They heard the guns at dawn, and then, as suddenly as it had started, the firing ceased. What could it mean? Was the battle over so soon? And who would come riding into the city as victors, the enemy, or General Jackson and his queer army.

At last there was the sound of a horseman galloping down the streets.

"Victory," a hoarse voice shouted. "The city is saved!"

The British were defeated for good and for all. The army came back, tired and ragged, but in triumph, ~~with only thirteen of their number missing~~. It was a cause for rejoicing.

They had a celebration in the city such as they never had before. And in the evening there was a ball. Andrew Jackson was there with Rachel, his wife. And beside them walked Jean Lafitte, the pirate, *with his head held high.*