

## **The Rider of the Black Horse**

by George Lippard

It was the 7th of October, 1777. Horatio Gates stood before his tent, gazing steadfastly upon the two armies now arrayed in order of battle. It was a clear, bracing day, mellow with the richness of autumn. The sky was cloudless, the foliage of the wood scarce tinged with purple and gold, the buckwheat in yonder fields frosted into snowy ripeness. But the tread of legions shook the ground, from every bush shot the glimmer of the rifle barrel, on every hillside blazed the sharpened bayonet. Gates was sad and thoughtful, as he watched the evolutions of the two armies. But all at once a smoke arose, a thunder shook the ground and a chorus of shouts and groans yelled along the darkened air. The play of death had begun. The two flags, this of the stars, that of the red cross, tossed amid the smoke of battle, while the sky was clouded with leaden folds, and the earth throbbed with the pulsations of a mighty heart.

Suddenly, Gates and his officers were startled. Along the height on which they stood came a rider on a black horse, rushing towards the distant battle. There was something in the appearance of this horse and his rider that struck them with surprise. Look! he draws his sword, the sharp blade quivers through the air, he points to the distant battle and lo! he is gone; gone through those clouds, while his shout echoes over the plains. Wherever the fight is thickest, there through intervals of cannon-smoke you may see riding madly forward that strange soldier, mounted on his steed black as death. Look at him, as with face red with British blood he waves his sword and shouts to his legions. Now you may see him fighting in that cannon's glare, and the next moment he is away off yonder, leading the forlorn hope up that steep cliff. Is it not a magnificent sight, to see that strange soldier and that noble black horse dashing, like a meteor, down the long columns of battle?

Let us look for a moment into those dense war-clouds. Over this thick hedge bursts a band of American militiamen, their rude farmer-coats stained with blood, while scattering their arms by the way, they flee before that company of red-coat hirelings, who come rushing forward, their solid front of bayonets gleaming in the battle light. At this moment of their flight, a horse comes crashing over the plains. The unknown rider reins his steed back on his haunches, right in the path of a broad-shouldered militiaman. "Now, cowards! advance another step and I'll strike you to the heart!" shouts the unknown, extending a pistol in either hand. "What! are you Americans, men, and fly before British soldiers? Back again, and face them once more, or I myself will ride you down!"

This appeal was not without its effect. The militiaman turns; his comrades, as if by one impulse, follow his example. In one line, but thirty men in all, they confront thirty sharp bayonets. The British advance. "Now upon the rebels, charge!" shouts the red-coat officer. They spring forward at the same bound. Look! their bayonets almost touch the muzzles of their rifles. At this moment the voice of the unknown rider was heard: "Now let them have it! Fire!" A sound is heard, a smoke is seen, twenty Britons are down, some writhing in death, some crawling along the soil, and some speechless as stone. The remaining ten start back. "Club your rifles and charge them home!" shouts the unknown. That black horse springs forward, followed by the militiamen. Then a confused conflict, a cry for quarter, and a vision of twenty farmers grouped around the rider of the black horse, greeting him with cheers.

Thus it was all the day long. Wherever that black horse and his rider went, there followed victory. At last, towards the setting of the sun, the crisis of the conflict came. That fortress yonder, on Bemus Heights, must be won, or the American cause is lost! That cliff is too steep—that death is too

certain. The officers cannot persuade the men to advance. The Americans have lost the field. Even Morgan, that iron man among iron men, leans on his rifle and despairs of the field. But look yonder! In this moment when all is dismay and horror, here, crashing on, comes the black horse and his rider. That rider bends upon his steed, his frenzied face covered with sweat and dust and blood; he lays his hand upon that bold rifleman's shoulder, and as though living fire had been poured into his veins, he seizes his rifle and starts toward the rock. And now look! now hold your breath, as that black steed crashes up that steep cliff. That steed quivers! he totters! he falls! No! No! Still on, still up the cliff, still on towards the fortress. The rider turns his face and shouts, "Come on, men of Quebec! come on!" That call is needless. Already the bold riflemen are on the rock. Now, British cannon, pour your fires, and lay your dead in tens and twenties on the rock. Now, red-coat hirelings, shout your battle-cry if you can! For look! there, in the gate of the fortress, as the smoke clears away, stands the black horse and his rider. That steed falls dead, pierced by an hundred balls; but his rider, as the British cry for quarter, lifts up his voice and shouts afar to Horatio Gates waiting yonder in his tent, "Saratoga is won!" As that cry goes up to heaven, he falls with his leg shattered by a cannon-ball.

Who was the rider of the black horse? Do you not guess his name? Then bend down and gaze on that shattered limb, and you will see that it bears the mark of a former wound. That wound was received in the storming of Quebec. The rider of the black horse was Benedict Arnold.

Source:

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