

The Captain Of The Gate

By Beulah Marie Dix

SCENE: In the cheerless hour before the dawn of a wet spring morning five gentlemen-troopers of the broken Royalist army, fagged and outworn with three long days of siege, are holding, with what strength and courage are left them, the Gatehouse of the Bridge of Cashala, which is the key to the road that leads into Connaught. The upper chamber of the Gatehouse, in which they make their stand, is a narrow, dim-lit apartment, built of stone. At one side is a small fireplace, and beside it a narrow, barred door, which leads to the stairhead. At the end of the room, gained by a single raised step, are three slit-like windows, breast-high, designed, as now used, for defense in time of war. The room is meagrely furnished, with a table on which are powder-flask, touch-box, etc., for charging guns, a stool or two, and an open keg of powder. The whole look of the place, bare and martial, but depressed, bespeaks a losing fight. On the hearth the ashes of a fire are white, and on the chimneypiece a brace of candles are guttering out.

The five men who hold the Gatehouse wear much soiled and torn military dress. They are pale, powder-begrimed, sunken-eyed, with every mark of weariness of body and soul. Their leader, JOHN TALBOT, is standing at one of the shot-windows, with piece presented, looking forth. He is in his mid-twenties, of Norman-Irish blood, and distinctly of a finer, more nervous type than his companions. He has been wounded, and bears his left hand wrapped in a bloody rag. DICK FENTON, a typical, careless young English swashbuckler, sits by the table, charging a musket, and singing beneath his breath as he does so. He, too, has been wounded, and bears a bandage about his knee. Upon the floor (*at right*) KIT NEWCOMBE lies in the sleep of utter exhaustion. He is an English

lad, in his teens, a mere tired, haggard child, with his head rudely bandaged. On a stool by the hearth sits MYLES BUTLER, a man of JOHN TALBOT'S own years, but a slower, heavier, almost sullen type. Beside him kneels PHELIMY DRISCOLL, a nervous, dark Irish lad, of one and twenty. He is resting his injured arm across BUTLER'S knee, and BUTLER is roughly bandaging the hurt.

For a moment there is a weary, heavy silence, in which the words of the song which FENTON sings are audible. It is the doleful old strain of "the hanging-tune."

[Footnote 1: Included by permission of the author and of Messrs. Henry Holt and Company, the publishers, from the volume *Allison's Lad and Other Martial Interludes*. (1910).]

FENTON (*singing*).

Fortune, my foe, why dost thou frown on me, And will thy favors never greater be? Wilt thou, I say, forever breed me pain, And wilt thou not restore my joys again?

BUTLER (*shifting DRISCOLL'S arm, none too tenderly*). More to the light!

DRISCOLL (*catching breath with pain*). Ah! Softly, Myles!

JOHN TALBOT (*leaning forward tensely*). Ah!

FENTON. Jack! Jack Talbot! What is it that you see?

JOHN TALBOT (*with the anger of a man whose nerves are strained almost beyond endurance*). What should I see but Cromwell's watch-fires along the boreen? What else should I see, and the night as black as the mouth of hell? What else should I see, and a pest choke your throat with your fool's questions, Dick Fenton!

(Resumes his watch.)

FENTON *(as who should say: "I thank you!")*. God 'a' mercy--
Captain Talbot!

(Resumes his singing.)

DRISCOLL. God's love! I bade ye have a care, Myles Butler.

BUTLEK *(tying the last bandage)*. It's a stout heart you have in you, Phelimy Driscoll--you to be crying out for a scratch. It's better you would have been, you and the like of you, to be stopping at home with your mother.

(Rises and takes up his musket from the corner by the fireplace.)

DRISCOLL. You--you dare--you call me--coward? Ye black liar! I'll lesson ye! I'll--

(Tries to rise, but in the effort sways weakly forward and rests with his head upon the stool which BUTLER has quitted.)

BUTLER. A'Heaven's name, ha' done with that hanging tune! Ha' done, Dick Fenton! We're not yet at the gallows' foot.

(Joins JOHN TALBOT at the shot-windows.)

FENTON. Nay, Myles, for us 'tis like to be nothing half so merry as the gallows.

BUTLER. Hold your fool's tongue!

NEWCOMBE *(crying out in his sleep)*. Oh! Oh!

JOHN TALBOT. What was that?

FENTON. 'Twas naught but young Newcombe that cried out in the clutch of a nightmare.

BUTLER. 'Tis time Kit Newcombe rose and stood his watch.

JOHN TALBOT (*leaving the window*). Nay, 'tis only a boy. Let him sleep while he can! Let him sleep!

BUTLER. Turn and turn at the watch, 'tis but fair. Stir yonder sluggard awake, Dick!

FENTON. Aye. (*Starts to rise.*)

JOHN TALBOT. Who gives commands here? Sit you down, Fenton! To your place, Myles Butler!

BUTLER. Captain of the Gate! D'ye mark the high tone of him, Dick?

JOHN TALBOT (*tying a fresh bandage about his hand*). You're out there, Myles. There is but one Captain of the Gate of Connaught--he who set me here--my cousin, Hugh Talbot.

BUTLER (*muttering*). Aye, and it's a deal you'll need to be growing, ere you fill Hugh Talbot's shoes.

JOHN TALBOT. And that's a true word! But 'twas Hugh Talbot's will that I should command, here at the Bridge of Cashala. And as long as breath is in me I--

DRISCOLL (*raising his head heavily*). Water! Water! Myles! Dick! Will ye give me to drink, lads? Jack Talbot! I'm choked wi' thirst.

JOHN TALBOT. There's never a drop of water left us, Phelimy, lad.

FENTON. Owen Bourke drained the last of it, God rest him!

BUTLER. 'Tis likely our clever new Captain of the Gate will hit on some shift to fill our empty casks.

(DRISCOLL rises heavily.)

JOHN TALBOT. Not the new Captain of the Gate. The old Captain of the Gate--Hugh Talbot. He'll be here this day--this hour, maybe.

FENTON. That tale grows something old, Jack Talbot.

JOHN TALBOT. He swore he'd bring us succor. He--

(DRISCOLL *tries to unbar the exit door.*)

Driscoll! Are you gone mad? Stand you back from that door!

(*Thrusts DRISCOLL from the door.*)

DRISCOLL (*half delirious*). Let me forth! The spring--'tis just below--there on the river-bank! Let me slip down to it--but a moment--and drink!

JOHN TALBOT. Cromwell's soldiers hold the spring.

DRISCOLL. I care not! Let me forth and drink! Let me forth!

JOHN TALBOT. 'T would be to your death.

BUTLER. And what will he get but his death if he stay here, Captain Talbot?

DRISCOLL (*struggling with JOHN TALBOT*). I'm choked! I'm choked, I tell ye! Let me go, Jack Talbot! Let me go!

NEWCOMBE (*still half-asleep, rises to his knees, with a terrible cry, and his groping hands upthrust to guard his head*). God's pity! No! no! no!

DRISCOLL (*shocked into sanity, staggers back, crossing himself*). God shield us!

BUTLER. Silence that whelp!

FENTON. Clear to the rebel camp they'll hear him!

JOHN TALBOT (*catching NEWCOMBE by the shoulder*). Newcombe! Kit Newcombe!

NEWCOMBE. Ah, God! Keep them from me! Keep them from me!

JOHN TALBOT. Ha' done! Ha' done!

NEWCOMBE. Not that! Not the butt of the muskets! Not that! Not that!

JOHN TALBOT (*stifling NEWCOMBE'S outcry with a hand upon his mouth*). Wake! You're dreaming!

DRISCOLL. 'Tis ill luck! 'Tis ill luck comes of such dreaming!

NEWCOMBE. Drogheda! I dreamed I was at Drogheda, where my brother--my brother--they beat out his brains--Cromwell's men--with their clubbed muskets--they--

(Clings shuddering to JOHN TALBOT.)

FENTON. English officers that serve amongst the Irish--'t is thus that Cromwell uses them!

BUTLER. English officers--aye, like ourselves!

JOHN TALBOT. Be quiet, Kit! You're far from Drogheda--here at the Bridge of Cashala.

BUTLER. Aye, safe in Cashala Gatehouse, with five hundred of Cromwell's men sitting down before it.

JOHN TALBOT. Keep your watch, Butler!

NEWCOMBE. You give orders? You still command, Jack? Where's Captain Talbot, then?

(Snatches up his sword and rises.)

BUTLER *(quitting the window)*. Aye, where is Captain Talbot?

JOHN TALBOT. You say--

FENTON *(rising)*. We all say it.

JOHN TALBOT. Even thou, Dick?

DRISCOLL. He does not come! Hugh Talbot does not come!

FENTON. He bade us hold the bridge one day. We've held it three days now.

BUTLER. And where is Hugh Talbot with the aid he promised?

JOHN TALBOT. He promised. He has never broken faith. He will bring us aid.

FENTON. Aye, if he be living!

DRISCOLL. Living? You mean that he--Och, he's dead! Hugh Talbot's dead! And we're destroyed! We're destroyed!

NEWCOMBE (*cowering*). The butt of the muskets!

FENTON. God!

(Deliberately BUTLER *lays down his musket.*)

JOHN TALBOT. Take up your piece!

BUTLER. Renounce me if I do!

FENTON. I stand with you, Myles Butler. Make terms for us, John Talbot, or, on my soul, we'll make them for ourselves.

JOHN TALBOT. Surrender?

NEWCOMBE. Will Cromwell spare us, an we yield ourselves now? Will he spare us? Will he--

FENTON. 'Tis our one chance.

NEWCOMBE. Give me that white rag!

(*Crosses and snatches a bandage from chimneypiece.*)

FENTON (*drawing his ramrod*). Here's a staff!

(*Together FENTON and NEWCOMBE make ready a flag of truce.*)

JOHN TALBOT (*struggling with BUTLER and DRISCOLL*). A black curse on you!

BUTLER. We'll not be butchered like oxen in the shambles!

JOHN TALBOT. Your oaths!

BUTLER. We'll not fight longer to be knocked on the head at the last.

NEWCOMBE. No! No! Not that! Out with the flag, Dick!

FENTON. A light here at the grating!

(NEWCOMBE *turns to take a candle, obedient to FENTON'S order. At that moment, close at hand, a bugle sounds.*)

JOHN TALBOT. Hark!

DRISCOLL. The bugle! They're upon us!

BUTLER (*releasing his hold on JOHN TALBOT*). What was that?

JOHN TALBOT. You swore to hold the bridge.

BUTLER. Swore to hold it one day. We've held it three days now.

FENTON. And the half of us are slain.

NEWCOMBE. And we've no water--and no food!

JOHN TALBOT (*pointing to the powder-keg*). We have powder in plenty.

DRISCOLL. We can't drink powder. Ah, for God's love, be swift, Dick Fenton! Be swift!

JOHN TALBOT. You shall not show that white flag!

(Starts toward FENTON, hand on sword.)

BUTLER *(pinioning JOHN TALBOT)*. God's death! We shall! Help me here, Phelimy!

JOHN TALBOT. A summons to parley. What see you, Fenton?

FENTON *(at the shot-window)*. Torches coming from the boreen, and a white flag beneath them. I can see the faces. *(With a cry)* Look, Jack! A'God's name! Look!

(JOHN TALBOT springs to the window.)

DRISCOLL. What is it you're seeing?

FENTON. It *is*--

JOHN TALBOT *(turning from the window)*. 'Tis Hugh Talbot comes! 'Tis the Captain of the Gate!

BUTLER. With them? A prisoner?

JOHN TALBOT. No, no! No prisoner! He wears his sword.

(BUTLER snatches up his piece and resumes watch.)

FENTON. Then he'll have made terms with them! Terms!

NEWCOMBE *(embracing DRISCOLL)*. Terms for us! Terms for us!

JOHN TALBOT. I told ye truth. He has come. Hugh Talbot has come.

(Goes to door.)

HUGH TALBOT (*speaks outside*). Open! I come alone, and in peace.
Open unto me!

JOHN TALBOT. Who goes there?

HUGH TALBOT (*outside*). The Captain of the Gate!

(JOHN TALBOT unbars the door, and bars it again upon the entrance of HUGH TALBOT. *The latter comes slowly into the room. He is a man in his late thirties, a tall, martial figure, clad in much-worn velvet and leather, with sword at side. The five salute him as he enters.*)

HUGH TALBOT (*halts and for a moment surveys his followers*).
Well, lads?

(*The five stand trembling on the edge of a nervous break, unable for the moment to speak.*)

NEWCOMBE. We thought--we thought--that you--that you--

(*Breaks into childish sobbing.*)

FENTON. What terms will they grant us, sir?

JOHN TALBOT. Sir, we have held the bridge.

HUGH TALBOT. You five--

JOHN TALBOT. Bourke is dead, sir, and Tregarris, and Langdale,
and--and James Talbot, my brother.

DRISCOLL. And we've had no water, sir, these many hours.

HUGH TALBOT. So! You're wounded, Phelimy.

DRISCOLL. 'Tis not worth heeding, sir.

HUGH TALBOT. Kit! Kit! (At the voice NEWCOMBE *pulls himself together.*) A light here! Dick, you've your pouch under your hand?

FENTON. 'Tis here, sir.

(*Offers his tobacco pouch.*)

HUGH TALBOT (*filling his pipe*). Leave the window, Myles! They've promised us a half hour's truce--and Cromwell's a man of his word.

NEWCOMBE (*bringing a lighted candle*). He'll let us pass free now, sir, will he not?

HUGH TALBOT (*lighting his pipe at the candle*). You're not afraid, Kit?

NEWCOMBE. I? Faith, no, sir. No! Not now!

HUGH TALBOT. Sit ye down, Phelimy, lad! You look dead on your feet. Give me to see that arm! (*As HUGH TALBOT starts toward DRISCOLL, his eye falls on the open keg of powder. He draws back hastily, covering his lighted pipe.*) Jack Talbot! Who taught ye to leave your powder uncovered, where lighted match was laid?

BUTLER. My blame, sir.

(*Covers the keg.*)

JOHN TALBOT. We opened the keg, and then--

FENTON. Truth, we did not cover it again, being somewhat pressed for time.

(The five laugh, half hysterically.)

HUGH TALBOT *(sitting by fire)*. And you never thought, maybe, that in that keg there was powder enough to blow the bridge of Cashala to hell?

JOHN TALBOT. It seemed a matter of small moment, sir.

HUGH TALBOT. Small moment! Powder enough, put case ye set it there, at the stairhead--d'ye follow me?--powder enough to make an end of Cashala Bridge for all time--aye, and of all within the Gatehouse. You never thought on that, eh?

JOHN TALBOT. We had so much to think on, sir.

HUGH TALBOT. I did suspect as much. So I came hither to recall the powder to your minds.

DRISCOLL. We thought--*(BUTLER motions him to be silent.)* We thought maybe you would not be coming at all, sir. Maybe you would be dead.

HUGH TALBOT. Well? What an if I had been dead? You had your orders. You did not dream of giving up the Bridge of Cashala--eh, Myles Butler?

BUTLER *(after a moment)*. No, sir.

HUGH TALBOT. Nor you, Dick Fenton?

FENTON. Sir, I--No!

HUGH TALBOT (*smoking throughout*). Good lads! The wise heads were saying I was a stark fool to set you here at Cashala. But I said: I can be trusting the young riders that are learning their lessons in war from me. I'll be safe putting my honor into their hands. And I was right, wasn't I, Phelimy Driscoll?

DRISCOLL. Give us the chance, sir, and we'll be holding Cashala, even against the devil himself!

FENTON. Aye, well said!

HUGH TALBOT. Sure, 'tis a passing good substitute for the devil sits yonder in Cromwell's tent.

NEWCOMBE (with a shudder). Cromwell!

HUGH TALBOT. Aye, he was slaying your brother at Drogheda, Kit, and a fine, gallant lad your brother was. And I'm thinking you're like him, Kit. Else I shouldn't be trusting you here at Cashala.

NEWCOMBE. I--I--Will they let us keep our swords?

HUGH TALBOT. Well, it's with yourselves it lies, whether you'll keep them or not.

FENTON. He means--we mean--on what terms, sir, do we surrender?

HUGH TALBOT. Surrender? Terms?

JOHN TALBOT. We thought, sir, from your coming under their white flag--perhaps you had made terms for us.

HUGH TALBOT. How could I make terms?

NEWCOMBE. Captain!

(At a look from HUGH TALBOT he becomes silent, fighting for self-control.)

HUGH TALBOT. How could I make terms that you would hear to? Cashala Bridge is the gate of Connaught.

JOHN TALBOT. Yes.

HUGH TALBOT. Give Cromwell Cashala Bridge, and he'll be on the heels of our women and our little ones. At what price would ye be selling their safety?

DRISCOLL. Cromwell--when he takes us--when he takes us--

NEWCOMBE. He'll knock us on the head!

HUGH TALBOT. Yes. At the last. Your five lives against our people's safety. You'd not give up the bridge?

JOHN TALBOT. Five? Our five? But you--you are the sixth.

FENTON. You stay with us, Captain. And then we'll fight--you'll see how we shall fight.

HUGH TALBOT. I shall be seeing you fight, perhaps, but I cannot stay now at Cashala.

(Rises.)

DRISCOLL. Ye won't be staying with us?

BUTLER (*laughing harshly*). Now, on my soul! Is this your faith, Hugh Talbot? One liar I've followed, Charles Stuart, the son of a liar, and now a second liar--

JOHN TALBOT (*catching BUTLER'S throat*). A plague choke you!

HUGH TALBOT (*stepping between JOHN TALBOT and BUTLER*). Ha' done, Jack! Ha' done! What more, Myles Butler?

BUTLER. Tell us whither you go, when you turn your back on us that shall die at Cashala--you that come walking under the rebel flag--that swore to bring us aid--and have not brought it! Tell us whither you go now!

HUGH TALBOT. Well, I'm a shade doubtful, Myles, my lad, though hopeful of the best.

BUTLER. 'Tis to Cromwell you go--you that have made your peace with him--that have sold us--

DRISCOLL. Captain! A' God's name, what is it that you're meaning?

HUGH TALBOT. I mean that you shall hold the Bridge of Cashala--whatever happen to you--whatever happen to me--

FENTON. To you? Captain Talbot!

HUGH TALBOT. I am going unto Cromwell--as you said, Myles. I gave my promise.

DRISCOLL. Your promise?

JOHN TALBOT. We--have been very blind. So--they made you prisoner?

HUGH TALBOT. Aye, Jack. When I tried to cut my way through to bring you aid. And they granted me this half hour on my parole to come unto you.

JOHN TALBOT. To come--

HUGH TALBOT. To counsel you to surrender. And I have given you counsel. Hold the bridge! Hold it! Whatever they do!

DRISCOLL. Captain! Captain Talbot! God of Heaven! If you go back--'tis killed you'll be among them!

HUGH TALBOT. A little sooner than you lads? Aye, true!

FENTON. They cannot! Even Cromwell--

HUGH TALBOT. Tut, tut, Dick! It's little ye know of Cromwell.

JOHN TALBOT. Then--you mean--

HUGH TALBOT. An you surrender Cashala, we may all six pass free. An you hold Cashala, they will hang me, here before your eyes.

(DRISCOLL *gives a rattling cry.*)

BUTLER. God forgive me!

HUGH TALBOT. You have your orders. Hold the bridge!

(Turns to door.)

JOHN TALBOT (*barring his way*). No, no! You shan't go forth!

FENTON. God's mercy, no!

HUGH TALBOT. Are you stark crazed?

FENTON. You shall stay with us.

JOHN TALBOT. What's your pledged word to men that know not honor?

HUGH TALBOT. My word. Unbar the door, Jack. Why, lad, we're traveling the same road.

FENTON. God! But we'll give them a good fight at the last. (*Goes to the shot-window.*) Take up your musket, Kit.

NEWCOMBB. But I--Captain! When you are gone, I--I--

HUGH TALBOT. I'll not be far. You'll hold the bridge?

JOHN TALBOT. Aye, sir.

BUTLER. We've powder enough--you said it, sir,--laid there at the stairhead, to blow the bridge to hell.

HUGH TALBOT. Aye, Myles, you've hit it!

(*Holds out his hand.*)

BUTLER. Not yet, sir!

HUGH TALBOT. Hereafter, then. God speed you, lads!

JOHN TALBOT. Speed you, sir! (*All five stand at salute as HUGH TALBOT goes out. In the moment's silence upon his exit, JOHN TALBOT bars the door and turns to his comrades.*) You have--Hugh Talbot's orders. Take your pieces! Driscoll! Newcombe!

(Obediently the two join FENTON at windows.) Butler!

BUTLER. Aye! We have Hugh Talbot's orders.

(Points to powder-keg.)

JOHN TALBOT. Are you meaning--

BUTLER. It's not I will be failing him now!

FENTON *(at window)*. God! They waste no time.

JOHN TALBOT. Already--they have dared--

FENTON. Here--this moment--under our very eyes!

DRISCOLL. Christ Jesus!

(Goes back from the window, with his arm across his eyes, and falls on his knees in headlong prayer.)

JOHN TALBOT. Kit! Kit Newcombe!

(Motions him to window.)

NEWCOMBE. I cannot! I--

JOHN TALBOT. Look forth! Look! And remember--when you meet them--remember! (NEWCOMBE *stands swaying, clutching at the grating of the window, as he looks forth.*) Lads! *(Motions to BUTLER and FENTON to carry the powder to the stairhead.)* The time is short. His orders!

(DRISCOLL raises his head and gazes fixedly toward the centre of the room.)

FENTON. Yonder, at the stairhead.

BUTLER. Aye.

(FENTON *and* BUTLER *carry the keg to the door.*)

NEWCOMBE. Not that! Not that death! No! No!

JOHN TALBOT. Be silent! And look yonder! Driscoll! Fetch the light! Newcombe! Come! You have your places, all.

DRISCOLL. But, Captain! The sixth man--where will the sixth man be standing?

(There is a blank silence, in which the men look questioningly at DRISCOLL'S *rapt face and at one another.*)

JOHN TALBOT. Sixth?

FENTON. What sixth?

DRISCOLL. The blind eyes of ye! Yonder!

(*Comes to the salute, even as, a few moments before, he has saluted HUGH TALBOT, living.*)

NEWCOMBE gives a smothered cry, as one who half sees, and takes courage. FENTON *dazedly starts to salute. Outside a bugle sounds, and a voice, almost at the door, is heard to speak.*)

VOICE OUTSIDE. For the last time: will you surrender you?

JOHN TALBOT (*in a loud and confident voice*). No! Not while our commander stands with us!

VOICE OUTSIDE. And who might your commander be?

JOHN TALBOT. Hugh Talbot, the Captain of the Gate! The light here, Phelimy.

(JOHN TALBOT bends to set the candle to the powder that shall destroy Cashala Gatehouse, and all within it. His mates are gathered round him, with steady, bright faces, for in the little space left vacant in their midst they know in that minute that HUGH TALBOT stands.)

[CURTAIN]