

The Hidden Children

By

Robert W. Chambers

Web-Books.Com

The Hidden Children

Chapter 1. The Bedford Road	3
Chapter 2. Poundridge	20
Chapter 3. View Halloo!	41
Chapter 4. A Tryst.....	61
Chapter 5. The Gathering.....	72
Chapter 6. The Spring Waiontha	87
Chapter 7. Lois.....	110
Chapter 8. Old Friends.....	130
Chapter 9. Mid-Summer	144
Chapter 10. In Garrison.....	158
Chapter 11. A Scout Of Six	187
Chapter 12. At The Ford	206
Chapter 13. The Hidden Children.....	227
Chapter 14. Nai Tioga!	242
Chapter 15. Block-House No. 2.....	262
Chapter 16. Lana Helmer.....	283
Chapter 17. The Battle Of Chemung	307
Chapter 18. The Rite Of The Hidden Children.....	322
Chapter 19. Amochol	335
Chapter 20. Yndaia	354
Chapter 21. Chinisee Castle.....	365
Chapter 22. Mes Adieux	390

Chapter 1. The Bedford Road

In the middle of the Bedford Road we three drew bridle. Boyd lounged in his reeking saddle, gazing at the tavern and at what remained of the tavern sign, which seemed to have been a new one, yet now dangled mournfully by one hinge, shot to splinters.

The freshly painted house itself, marred with buckshot, bore dignified witness to the violence done it. A few glazed windows still remained unbroken; the remainder had been filled with blue paper such as comes wrapped about a sugar cone, so that the misused house seemed to be watching us out of patched and battered eyes.

It was evident, too, that a fire had been wantonly set at the northeast angle of the house, where sill and siding were deeply charred from baseboard to eaves.

Nor had this same fire happened very long since, for under the eaves white-faced hornets were still hard at work repairing their partly scorched nest. And I silently pointed them out to Lieutenant Boyd.

"Also," he nodded, "I can still smell the smoky wood. The damage is fresh enough. Look at your map."

He pushed his horse straight up to the closed door, continuing to examine the dismantled sign which hung motionless, there being no wind stirring.

"This should be Hays's Tavern," he said, "unless they lied to us at Ossining. Can you make anything of the sign, Mr. Loskiel?"

"Nothing, sir. But we are on the highway to Poundridge, for behind us lies the North Castle Church road. All is drawn on my map as we see it here before us; and this should be the fine dwelling of that great villain Holmes, now used as a tavern by Benjamin Hays."

"Rap on the door," said Boyd; and our rifleman escort rode forward and drove his rifle-butt at the door, "There's a man hiding within and peering at us behind the third window," I whispered.

"I see him," said Boyd coolly.

Through the heated silence around us we could hear the hornets buzzing aloft under the smoke-stained eaves. There was no other sound in the July sunshine.

The solemn tavern stared at us out of its injured eyes, and we three men of the Northland gazed back as solemnly, sobered once more to encounter the trail of the Red Beast so freshly printed here among the pleasant Westchester hills.

And to us the silent house seemed to say: "Gentlemen, gentlemen! Look at the plight I'm in-- you who come from the blackened North!" And with never a word of lip our heavy thoughts responded: "We know, old house! We know! But at least you still stand; and in the ashes of our Northland not a roof or a spire remains aloft between the dwelling of Deborah Glenn and the ford at the middle fort."

Boyd broke silence with an effort; and his voice was once more cool and careless, if a little forced:

"So it's this way hereabouts, too," he said with a shrug and a sign to me to dismount. Which I did stiffly; and our rifleman escort scrambled from his sweaty saddle and gathered all three bridles in his mighty, sunburnt fist.

"Either there is a man or a ghost within," I said again, "Whatever it is has moved."

"A man," said Boyd, "or what the inhumanity of man has left of him."

And it was true, for now there came to the door and opened it a thin fellow wearing horn spectacles, who stood silent and cringing before us. Slowly rubbing his workworn hands, he made us a landlord's bow as listless and as perfunctory as ever I have seen in any ordinary. But his welcome was spoken in a whisper.

"God have mercy on this house," said Boyd loudly. "Now, what's amiss, friend? Is there death within these honest walls, that you move about on tiptoe?"

"There is death a-plenty in Westchester, sir," said the man, in a voice as colorless as his drab smalls and faded hair. Yet what he said showed us that he had noted our dress, too, and knew us for strangers.

"Cowboys and skimmers, eh?" inquired Boyd, unbuckling his belt.

"And leather-cape, too, sir."

My lieutenant laughed, showing his white teeth; laid belt, hatchet, and heavy knife on a wine-stained table, and placed his rifle against it. Then, slipping cartridge sack, bullet pouch, and powder horn from his shoulders, stood eased, yawning and stretching his fine, powerful frame.

"I take it that you see few of our corps here below," he observed indulgently.

The landlord's lack-lustre eyes rested on me for an instant, then on Boyd:

"Few, sir."

"Do you know the uniform, landlord?"

"Rifles," he said indifferently.

"Yes, but whose, man? Whose?" insisted Boyd impatiently.

The other shook his head.

"Morgan's!" exclaimed Boyd loudly. "Damnation, sir! You should know Morgan's! Sixth Company, sir; Major Parr! And a likelier regiment and a better company never wore green thrums on frock or coon-tail on cap!"

"Yes, sir," said the man vacantly.

Boyd laughed a little:

"And look that you hint as much to the idle young bucks hereabouts-- say it to some of your Westchester squirrel hunters----" He laid his hand on the landlord's shoulder. "There's a good fellow," he added, with that youthful and winning smile which so often carried home with it his reckless will-- where women were concerned-- "we're down from Albany and we wish the Bedford folk to know it. And if the gallant fellows hereabout desire a taste of true glory-- the genuine article-- why, send them to me, landlord-- Thomas Boyd, of Derry, Pennsylvania, lieutenant, 6th company of Morgan's-- or to my comrade here, Mr. Loskiel, ensign in the same corps."

He clapped the man heartily on the shoulder and stood looking around at the stripped and dishevelled room, his handsome head a little on one side, as though in frankest admiration. And the worn and pallid landlord gazed back at him with his faded, lack-lustre eyes-- eyes that we both understood, alas-- eyes made dull with years of fear, made old and hopeless with unshed tears, stupid from sleepless nights, haunted with memories of all they had looked upon since His Excellency marched out of the city to the south of us, where the red rag now fluttered on fort and shipping from King's Bridge to the Hook.

Nothing more was said. Our landlord went away very quietly. An hostler, presently appearing from somewhere, passed the broken windows, and we saw our rifleman go away with him, leading the three tired horses. We were still yawning and drowsing, stretched out in our hickory chairs, and only kept awake by the flies, when our landlord returned and set before us what food he had. The fare was scanty enough, but we ate hungrily, and drank deeply of the fresh small beer which he fetched in a Liverpool jug.

When we two were alone again, Boyd whispered:

"As well let them think we're here with no other object than recruiting. And so we are, after a fashion; but neither this state nor Pennsylvania is like to fill its quota here. Where is your map, once more?"

I drew the coiled linen roll from the breast of my rifle shirt and spread it out. We studied it, heads together.

"Here lies Poundridge," nodded Boyd, placing his finger on the spot so marked. "Roads a-plenty, too. Well, it's odd, Loskiel, but in this cursed, debatable land I feel more ill at ease than I have ever felt in the Iroquois country."

"You are still thinking of our landlord's deathly face," I said. "Lord! What a very shadow of true manhood crawls about this house!"

"Aye-- and I am mindful of every other face and countenance I have so far seen in this strange, debatable land. All have in them something of the same expression. And therein lies the horror of it all, Mr. Loskiel God knows we expect to see deathly faces in the North, where little children lie scalped in the ashes of our frontier-- where they even scalp the family hound that guards the cradle. But here in this sleepy, open countryside, with its gentle hills and fertile valleys, broad fields and neat stone walls, its winding roads and orchards, and every pretty farmhouse standing as though no war were in the land, all seems so peaceful, so secure, that the faces of the people sicken me. And ever I am asking myself, where lies this other hell on earth, which only faces such as these could have looked upon?"

"It is sad," I said, under my breath. "Even when a lass smiles on us it seems to start the tears in my throat."

"Sad! Yes, sir, it is. I supposed we had seen sufficient of human degradation in the North not to come here to find the same cringing expression stamped on every countenance. I'm sick of it, I tell you. Why, the British are doing worse than merely filling their prisons with us and scalping us with their savages! They are slowly but surely marking our people, body and face and mind, with the cursed imprint of slavery. They're stamping a nation's very features with the hopeless lineaments of serfdom. It is the ineradicable scars of former slavery that make the New Englander whine through his nose. We of the fighting line bear no such marks, but the peaceful people are beginning to-- they who can do nothing except endure and suffer."

"It is not so everywhere," I said, "not yet, anyway."

"It is so in the North. And we have found it so since we entered the 'Neutral Ground.' Like our own people on the frontier, these Westchester folk fear everybody. You yourself know how we have found them. To every question they try to give an answer that may please; or if they despair of pleasing they answer cautiously, in order not to anger. The only sentiment left alive in them seems to be fear; all else of human passion appears to be dead. Why, Loskiel, the very power of will has deserted them; they are not civil to us, but obsequious; not obliging but subservient. They yield with apathy and very quietly what you ask, and what they apparently suppose is impossible for them to retain. If you treat them kindly they receive it coldly, not gratefully, but as though you were compensating them for evil done them by you. Their countenances and motions have lost every trace of animation. It is not serenity but apathy; every emotion, feeling, thought, passion, which is not merely instinctive has fled their minds forever. And this is the greatest crime that Britain has wrought upon us." He struck the table lightly with doubled fist, "Mr. Loskiel,"

he said, "I ask you-- can we find recruits for our regiment in such a place as this? Damme, sir, but I think the entire land has lost its manhood."

We sat staring out into the sunshine through a bullet-shattered window.

"And all this country here seems so fair and peaceful," he murmured half to himself, "so sweet and still and kindly to me after the twilight of endless forests where men are done to death in the dusk. But hell in broad sunshine is the more horrible."

"Look closer at this country," I said. "The highways are deserted and silent, the very wagon ruts overgrown with grass. Not a scythe has swung in those hay fields; the gardens that lie in the sun are but tangles of weeds; no sheep stir on the hills, no cattle stand in these deep meadows, no wagons pass, no wayfarers. It may be that the wild birds are moulting, but save at dawn and for a few moments at sundown they seem deathly silent to me."

He had relapsed again into his moody, brooding attitude, elbows on the table, his handsome head supported by both hands. And it was not like him to be downcast. After a while he smiled.

"Egad," he said, "it is too melancholy for me here in the open; and I begin to long for the dusk of trees and for the honest scalp yell to cheer me up. One knows what to expect in county Tryon-- but not here, Loskiel-- not here."

"Our business here is like to be ended tomorrow," I remarked.

"Thank God for that," he said heartily, rising and buckling on his war belt. He added: "As for any recruits we have been ordered to pick up en passant, I see small chance of that accomplishment hereabout. Will you summon the landlord, Mr. Loskiel?"

I discovered the man standing at the open door, his worn hands clasped behind him, and staring stupidly at the cloudless sky. He followed me back to the taproom, and we reckoned with him. Somehow, I thought he had not expected to be paid a penny-- yet he did not thank us.

"Are you not Benjamin Hays?" inquired Boyd, carelessly retying his purse.

The fellow seemed startled to hear his own name pronounced so loudly, but answered very quietly that he was.

"This house belongs to a great villain, one James Holmes, does it not?" demanded Boyd.

"Yes, sir," he whispered.

"How do you come to keep an ordinary here?"

"The town authorities required an ordinary. I took it in charge, as they desired."

"Oh! Where is this rascal, Holmes?"

"Gone below, sir, some time since."

"I have heard so. Was he not formerly Colonel of the 4th regiment?"

"Yes, sir."

"And deserted his men, eh? And they made him Lieutenant-Colonel below, did they not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Colonel-- of what?" snarled Boyd in disgust.

"Of the Westchester Refugee Irregulars."

"Oh! Well, look out for him and his refugees. He'll be back here one of these days, I'm thinking."

"He has been back."

"What did he do?"

The man said listlessly: "It was like other visits. They robbed, tortured, and killed. Some they burnt with hot ashes, some they hung, cut down, and hung again when they revived. Most of the sheep, cattle, and horses were driven off. Last year thousands of bushels of fruit decayed in the orchards; the ripened grain lay rotting where wind and rain had laid it; no hay was cut, no grain milled."

"Was this done by the banditti from the lower party?"

"Yes, sir; and by the leather-caps, too. The leather-caps stood guard while the Tories plundered and killed. It is usually that way, sir. And our own renegades are as bad. We in Westchester have to entertain them all."

"But they burn no houses?"

"Not yet, sir. They have promised to do so next time."

"Are there no troops here?"

"Yes, sir."

"What troops?"

"Colonel Thomas's Regiment and Sheldon's Horse and the Minute Men."

"Well, what the devil are they about to permit this banditti to terrify and ravage a peaceful land?" demanded Boyd.

"The country is of great extent," said the man mildly. "It would require many troops to cover it. And His Excellency has very, very few."

"Yes," said Boyd, "that is true. We know how it is in the North-- with hundreds of miles to guard and but a handful of men. And it must be that way." He made no effort to throw off his seriousness and nodded toward me with a forced smile. "I am twenty-two years of age," he said, "and Mr. Loskiel here is no older, and we fully expect that when we both are past forty we will still be fighting in this same old war. Meanwhile," he added laughing, "every patriot should find some lass to wed and breed the soldiers we shall require some sixteen years hence."

The man's smile was painful; he smiled because he thought we expected it; and I turned away disheartened, ashamed, burning with a fierce resentment against the fate that in three years had turned us into what we were-- we Americans who had never known the lash-- we who had never learned to fear a master.

Boyd said: "There is a gentleman, one Major Ebenezer Lockwood, hereabouts. Do you know him?"

"No, sir."

"What? Why, that seems strange!"

The man's face paled, and he remained silent for a few moments. Then, furtively, his eyes began for the hundredth time to note the details of our forest dress, stealing stealthily from the fringe on legging and hunting shirt to the Indian beadwork on moccasin and baldrick, devouring every detail as though to convince himself. I think our pewter buttons did it for him.

Boyd said gravely: "You seem to doubt us, Mr. Hays," and read in the man's unsteady eyes distrust of everything on earth-- and little faith in God.

"I do not blame you," said I gently. "Three years of hell burn deep."

"Yes," he said, "three years. And, as you say, sir, there was fire."

He stood quietly silent for a space, then, looking timidly at me, he rolled back his sleeves, first one, then the other, to the shoulders. Then he undid the bandages.

"What is all that?" asked Boyd harshly.

"The seal of the marauders, sir."

"They burnt you? God, man, you are but one living sore! Did any white man do that to you?"

"With hot horse-shoes. It will never quite heal, they say."

I saw the lieutenant shudder. The only thing he ever feared was fire-- if it could be said of him that he feared anything. And he had told me that, were he taken by the Iroquois, he had a pistol always ready to blow out his brains.

Boyd had begun to pace the room, doubling and undoubling his nervous fingers. The landlord replaced the oil-soaked rags, rolled down his sleeves again, and silently awaited our pleasure.

"Why do you hesitate to tell us where we may find Major Lockwood?" I asked gently.

For the first time the man looked me full in the face. And after a moment I saw his expression alter. as though some spark-- something already half dead within him was faintly reviving.

"They have set a price on Major Lockwood's head," he said; and Boyd halted to listen-- and the man looked him in the eyes for a moment.

My lieutenant carried his commission with him, though contrary to advice and practice among men engaged on such a mission as were we. It was folded in his beaded shot-pouch, and now he drew it out and displayed it.

After a silence, Hays said:

"The old Lockwood Manor House stands on the south side of the village of Poundridge. It is the headquarters and rendezvous of Sheldon's Horse. The Major is there."

"Poundridge lies to the east of Bedford?"

"Yes, sir, about five miles."

"Where is the map, Loskiel?"

Again I drew it from my hunting shirt; we examined it, and Hays pointed out the two routes.

Boyd looked up at Hays absently, and said: "Do you know Luther Kinnicut?"

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

