

FICTION

Mary Noailles Murfree

The Lost Guidon



eBookTakeAway

FICTION

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

THE LOST GUIDON

By Charles Egbert Craddock

1911

Night came early. It might well seem that day had fled affrighted. The heavy masses of clouds, glooming low, which had gathered thicker and thicker, as if crowding to witness the catastrophe, had finally shaken asunder in the concussions of the air at the discharges of artillery, and now the direful rain, always sequence of the shock of battle, was steadily falling, falling, on the stricken field. Many a soldier who might have survived his wounds would succumb to exposure to the elements during the night, debarred the tardy succor that must needs await his turn. One of the surgeons at their hasty work at the field hospital, under the shelter of the cliffs on the slope, paused to note the presage of doom and death, and to draw a long breath before he adjusted himself anew to the grim duties of the scalpel in his hand. His face was set and haggard, less with a realization of the significance of the scene—for he was used to its recurrence—than simply with a physical reflection of horror, as if it were glassed in a mirror. A phenomenon that had earlier caught his attention in the landscape appealed again to his notice, perhaps because the symptom was not in his line.

"Looks like a case of dementia," he observed to the senior surgeon, standing near at hand.

The superior officer adjusted his field-glass. "Looks like 'Death on the White Horse!'" he responded.

Down the highway, at a slow pace, rode a cavalryman wearing a gray uniform, with a sergeant's chevrons, and mounted on a steed good in his day, but whose day was gone. A great clot of blood had gathered on his broad white chest, where a bayonet had thrust him deep. Despite his exhaustion, he moved forward at the urgency of his rider's heel and hand. The soldier held a long, heavy staff planted on one stirrup, from the top of which drooped in the dull air the once gay guidon, battle-rent and sodden with rain, and as he went he shouted at intervals, "Dovinger's Bangers! Rally on the guidon!" Now and again his strident boyish voice varied the appeal, "Hyar's yer Dov-inger's Rangers! Bally, boys! Rally on the reserve!"

Indeed, despite his stalwart, tall, broad-shouldered frame, he was scarcely more than a boy. His bare head had flaxen curls like a child's; his pallid, though sunburned face was broad and soft and beardless; his large blue eyes were languid and spiritless, though now and then as he turned an intent gaze over the field they flared anew with hope, as if he expected to see rise up from that desolate expanse, from among the stiffening carcasses of horses and the stark corpses of the troopers, that gallant squadron went to follow, so dashing and debonair, wherever the guidons might mark the way. But there was naught astir save the darkness slipping down by slow degrees—and perchance under its cloak, already stealthily afoot, the ghoulish robbers of the dead that haunt the track of battle. They were the human forerunners of the vulture breed, with even a keener scent for prey, for as yet the feathered carrion-seekers held aloof; two or three only were descried from the field hospital, perched on the boughs of a dead tree near the river, presently joined by another, its splendid sustained flight impeded somewhat by the rain, battling with its big, strong wings against the downpour of the torrents and the heavy air.

And still through all echoed the cry, "Rally on the guidon! Dovinger's Rangers! Rally on the reserve!"

The bridge that crossed the river, which was running full and foaming, had been burnt; but a span, charred and broken, still swung from the central pier. Over toward the dun-tinted west a house was blazing, fired by some stray bomb, perhaps, or by official design, to hinder the enemy from utilizing the shelter, and its red rage of destruction bepainted the clouds that hung so low above the chimneys and dormer-windows. To the east, the woods on the steeps had been shelled, and a myriad boughs and boles riven and rent, lay in fantastic confusion. Through the mournful chaos the wind had begun to sweep; it sounded in unison with the battle clamors, and shrieked and wailed and roared as it surged adown the defiles. Now and then there came on the blast the fusillade of dropping shots from the south, where the skirmish line of one faction engaged the rear-guard of the other, or the pickets fell within rifle-range. Once the sullen, melancholy boom of distant cannon shook the clouds, and then was still, and ever and again sounded that tireless cry, "Dovinger's Rangers. Hyar's yer guidon! Rally, boys! Rally on the guidon! Rally on the reserve!"

The senior surgeon, as the road wound near, stepped down toward it when the horseman, still holding himself proudly erect, passed by. "Sergeant," he hailed the guidon, "where is Captain Dovinger?"

The hand mechanically went to the boy's forehead in the usual military salute. "Killed, sir."

"Where are the other officers of the squadron—the junior captain, the lieutenants?"

"Killed, sir."

"What has become of the troopers?"

"Killed, sir, in the last charge."

There was a pause. Then Dr. Trent broke forth: "Are you a fool, boy? If your command is annihilated, why do you keep up this commotion?"

The young fellow looked blank for a moment. Then, as if he had not reasoned on the catastrophe: "I thought at first they mought be scattered--some of'em. But ef--ef--they *war* dead, but could once *see* the guidon, sure 't would call 'em to life. They *couldn't* be so dead but they would rally to the guidon! Guide right!" he shouted suddenly. "Dovinger's Rangers! Rally on the guidon, boys! Rally on the reserve!"

It was a time that hardened men's hearts. The young soldier had no physical hurt that might appeal to the professional sympathies of the senior surgeon, and he turned away with a half laugh. "Let him go along! He can't rally Dovinger's Rangers this side of the river Styx, it seems."

But an old chaplain who had been hovering about the field hospital, whispering a word here and there to stimulate the fortitude of the wounded and solace the fears of the dying, recognized moral symptoms alien to any diagnosis of which the senior surgeon was capable. The latter did not deplore the diversion of interest, for the old man's presence was not highly esteemed by the hospital corps at this scene of hasty and terrible work, although, having taken a course in medicine in early life, he was permitted to aid in certain ways. But the surgeons were wont to declare that the men began to bleat at the very sight of the chaplain. So gentle, so sympathetic, so paternal, was he that they made the more of their wretched woes, seeing them so deeply deplored. The senior surgeon, moreover, was not an ardent religionist. "This is no time for a revival, Mr. Whitmel," he would insist. "Jack, there, never spoke the name of God in his life, except to swear by it. He is too late for prayers, and if *I* can't pull him through, he is a goner!" But the chaplain was fond of quoting:

*"Between the stirrup and the ground
He mercy sought and mercy found----"*

and sometimes the scene was irreverently called a "love feast" when some hard-riding, hard-swearing, hard-fighting, unthinking sinner went joyfully out of this world from the fatherly arms of the chaplain into the paternal embrace of an eternal and merciful Father, as the man of God firmly believed.

He stood now, staring after the guidon borne through the rain and the mist, flaunting red as the last leaves of autumn against the dun-tinted dusk, that the dead might view the gallant and honored pennant and rise again to its leading!

No one followed but the tall, thin figure of the gaunt old chaplain, unless indeed the trooping shadows that kept him company had mysteriously roused at the stirring summons. Lanterns were now visible, dimly flickering in one quarter where the fighting had been furious and the slain lay six deep on the ground. Their aspirations, their valor, their patriotism, had all exhaled--volatile essences, these incomparable values!--and now their bodies, weighted with death, cumbered the earth. They must be hurried out of sight, out of remembrance soon, and the burial parties were urged to diligence at the trenches where these cast-off semblances were to lie undistinguished together. And still the reflection of the burning house reddened the gloomy west, and still the cry, "Rally on the guidon! Dovinger's Rangers!" smote the thick air.

Suddenly it was silent. The white horse that had been visible in the flare from the flaming house, now and again flung athwart the landscape, no longer loomed in the vista of the shadowy road. He had given way at last, sinking down with that martial figure still in the saddle, and, with no struggle save a mere galvanic shiver, passing away from the scene of his faithful devoirs.

Fatigue, agitation, anguish, his agonized obsession of the possibility of rallying the squadron, had served to prostrate the soldier's physical powers of resistance. He could not constrain his muscles to rise from the recumbent position against the carcass. He started up, then sank back, and in another moment triumphant nature conquered, and he was asleep--a dull, dreamless sleep of absolute exhaustion, that perchance rescued his reason as well as saved his life.

The old chaplain was a man of infinite prejudice, steeped in all the infirmities and fantasies of dogma; a lover of harmony, and essentially an apostle of peace. Nevertheless, it would not have been physically safe to call him a Jesuit. But indeed he scarcely hesitated; he stepped over the great inert bulk of the dead horse, unclenched the muscular grasp of the soldier, as if it had been a baby's clasp, slipped the staff, technically the lance, of the guidon from its socket, and stood with it in his own hand, looking suspiciously to and fro to descry if perchance he were observed. The coast clear, he turned to the wall of rock beside the road, for this was near the mountain sandstone formation, fissured, splintered, with the erosions of water and weather; and into one of the cellular, tunnel-like apertures he ran the guidon, lance and all,--lost forever from human sight.

In those days one might speak indeed of the march of events. Each seemed hard on the heels of its precursor. Change ran riot in the ordering of the world, and its aspect was utterly transformed when Casper Girard, no longer bearing the guidon of Dovinger's Rangers, came out of the war with a captain's shoulder-straps, won by personal

fitness often proved, the habit of command, and a great and growing opinion of himself. He was a changeling, so to speak. No longer he felt a native of the mountain cove where he had been born and reared. He had had a glimpse of the world from a different standpoint, and it lured him. A dreary, disaffected life he led for a time.

"Minds me of a wild tur-r-key in a trap," his mother was wont to comment. "Always stretchin' his neck an' lookin' up an' away--when he mought git out by looking down." And the simile was so apt that it stayed in his mind--looking up and away!

Of all dull inventions, in his estimation the art of printing exceeded. He had made but indifferent progress in education during his early youth; he was a slow and inexpert reader, and a writer whose chirography shrank from exhibition. Now, however, a book in the hand gave him a cherished sentiment of touch with the larger world beyond those blue ranges that limited his sphere, and he spent much time in sedulously reading certain volumes which he had brought home with him.

"Spent *money* fur 'em!" his mother would ejaculate, contemplating this extreme audacity of extravagance.

As she often observed, "the plough-handles seemed red-hot," and as soon as political conditions favored he ran for office. On the strength of his war record, a potent lever in those days, he was elected register of the county. True, there was only a population of about fifty souls in the county town, and the houses were log-cabins, except the temple of justice itself, which was a two-story frame building. But his success was a step on the road to political preferment, and his ambitious eyes were on the future. Into the midst of his quiet incumbency as register came Fate, all intrusive, and found him through the infrequent medium of a weekly mail. It was at the beginning of the retrospective enthusiasm that has served to revive the memories of the War, and he received a letter from an old comrade-in-arms, giving the details of a brigade reunion shortly to be held at no great distance, and, being of the committee, inviting him to be present.

Girard had participated in great military crises; he had marshalled his troop in line of battle; as a mere boy, he had ridden with the guidon lance planted on his stirrup, with the pennant flying above his head, as the marker to lead the fierce and famous Dov-inger Rangers into the thickest of the fight; yet he had never felt such palpitant tremors of excitement as when he stood on the hotel piazza of the New Helvetia Springs, where the banqueters had gathered, and suffered the ordeal of introduction to sundry groups of fashionable ladies. He had earlier seen specimens of the species in the course of military transitions through the cities of the lowlands, and he watched them narrowly to detect if they discerned perchance a difference between him and the men of education and social station with whom his advancement in the army had associated him. He did not reflect that they were too well-bred to reveal any appreciation of such incongruity, but he had never experienced a more ardent glow of gratification than upon overhearing a friend's remark: "Girard is great! Anybody would imagine he was used to all this!"

No strategist was ever more wary. He would not undertake to dance, for he readily perceived that the gyrations in the ball-room were utterly dissimilar to the clumsy capering to which he had been accustomed on the puncheon floor of a mountain cabin. He had the less reason for regret since he was privileged instead to stroll up and down the veranda,--"promenade" was the technical term,--a slender hand, delicately gloved, on the sleeve of his gray uniform, the old regimentals being *de rigueur* at these reunions. A white ball-gown, such as he had never before seen, fashioned of tissue over lustrous white silk, swayed in diaphanous folds against him, for these were the days of voluminous draperies; a head of auburn hair elaborately dressed gleamed in the moonlight near his shoulder. Miss Alicia Duval thought him tremendously handsome; she adored his record, as she would have said--unaware how little of it she knew--and she did not so much intend to flirt as to draw him out, for there was something about him different from the men of her set, and it stimulated her interest.

"Isn't the moon heavenly!" she observed, gazing at the brilliant orb, now near the full, swinging in the sky, which became a definite blue in its light above the massive dark mountains and the misty valley below; for the building was as near the brink as safety permitted--nearer, the cautious opined.

"Heavenly? Not more'n it's got a right to be. It's a heavenly body, ain't it?" he rejoined.

"Oh, how sarcastic!" she exclaimed. "In what school did you acquire your trenchant style?"

He thought of the tiny district school where he had acquired the very little he knew of aught, and said nothing, laughing constrainedly in lieu of response.

The music of the orchestra came, to them from the ball-room, and the rhythmic beat of dancing feet; the wind lifted her hair gently and brought to them the fragrance of flowering plants and the pungent aroma of mint down in the depths of the ravine hard by, where lurked a chalybeate spring; but for the noisy rout of the dance, and now and again the flimsy chatter of a passing couple on the piazza, promenading like themselves, they might have heard the waters of the fountain rise and bubble and break and sigh as the pulsating impulse beat like heart-throbs, and perchance on its rocky marge an oread a-singing.

"But you don't answer me," she pouted with an affectation of pettishness. "Do you know that you trouble yourself to talk very little, Captain Girard!"

"I think the more," he declared.

"Think? Oh, dear me! I didn't know that anybody does anything so unfashionable nowadays as to *think!* And what do you think about, pray?"

"About you!"

And that began it: he was a gallant man, and he had been a brave one. He was not aware how far he was going on so short an acquaintance, but his temerity was not displeasing to the lady. She liked his manner of storming the citadel, and she did not realize that he merely spoke at random, as best he might. He was in his uniform a splendid and martial presentment of military youth, and indeed he was much the junior of his compeers.

"Who are Captain Girard's people, Papa?" she asked Colonel Duval next morning, as the family party sat at breakfast in quasi seclusion at one of the small round tables in the crowded dining-room, full of the chatter of people and the clatter of dishes.

"Girard?" Colonel Duval repeated thoughtfully. "I really don't know. I have an impression they live somewhere in East Tennessee. I never met him till just about the end of the war."

"Oh, Papa! How unsatisfactory you are! You never know anything about anybody."

"I should think his people must be very plain," said Mrs. Duval. Her social discrimination was extremely acute and in constant practice.

"I don't know why. He is very much of a gentleman," the Colonel contended. His heart was warm to-day with much fraternizing, and it was not kind to brush the bloom off his peach.

"Oh, trifles suggest the fact. He is not at all *au fait.*"

He was, however, experienced in ways of the world unimagined in her philosophy. The reunion had drawn to a close, ending in a flare of jollity and tender reminiscence and good-fellowship. The old soldiers were all gone save a few regular patrons of the hotel, who with their families were completing their summer sojourn. Captain Girard lingered, too, fascinated by this glimpse of the frivolous world, hitherto unimagined, rather than by the incense to his vanity offered by his facile acceptance as a squire of dames. For the first time in his life he felt the grinding lack of money. Being a man of resource, he set about swiftly supplying this need. In the dull days of inaction, when the armies lay supine and only occasionally the monotony was broken by the engagement of distant skirmishers or a picket line was driven in on the main body, he had learned to play a game at cards much in vogue at that period, though for no greater hazards than grains of corn or Confederate money, almost as worthless. In the realization now that the same principles held good with stakes of value, he seemed to enter upon the possession of a veritable gold mine. The peculiar traits that his one unique experience of the world had developed--his coolness, his courage, his discernment of strategic resources--stood him in good stead, and long after the microcosm of the hotel lay fast asleep the cards were dealt and play ran high in the little building called the casino, ostensibly devoted to the milder delights of billiards and cigars.

Either luck favored him or he had rare discrimination of relative chances in the run of the cards, or the phenomenally bold hand he played disconcerted his adversaries, but his almost invariable winning began to affect injuriously his character. Indeed, he was said to be a rook of unrivalled rapacity. Colonel Duval was in the frame of mind that his wife called "bearish" one morning as his family gathered for breakfast in the limited privacy of their circle about the round table in the dining-room.

"I want you to avoid that fellow, Alicia," he growled *sotto voce*, as he intercepted a bright matutinal smile that the fair Alicia sent as a morning greeting to Girard, who had just entered and taken his seat at a distance. "We know nothing under heaven about his people, and he himself has the repute of being a desperate gambler."

His wife raised significant eyebrows. "If that is true, why should he stay in this quiet place?"

Colonel Duval experienced a momentary embarrassment. "Oh, the place is right enough. He stays, no doubt, because he likes it. You might as well ask why old Mr. Whitmel stays here."

"The idea of mentioning a clergyman in this connection!"

"Mr. Whitmel is professionally busy," cried Alicia. "He told me that he is studying 'the disintegration of a soul.' I hope it is not *my* soul."

The phrase probably interested Alicia in her idleness, for she was certainly actuated by no view of a moral uplift in the character of Girard, the handsome gambler. She did not recognize a subtle cruelty in her system of universal fascination, but her vanity demanded constant tribute, and she was peculiarly absorbed in the effort to bring to her feet this man of iron, her knight in armor, as she was wont to call him, to control him with her influence, to bend this unmalleable material like the proverbial wax in her hands. She had great faith in the coercive power of her hazel eyes, and she brought their batteries to bear on Girard on the first occasion when she had him at her mercy.

"I have heard something about you which is very painful," she said one day as they sat together beside the chalybeate spring. The crag, all discolored in rust-red streaks by the dripping of the mineral water through its interstices, towered above their heads; the ferns, exquisite and of subtle fragrance, tufted the niches; the trees were close about them, and below, on the precipitous slope; sometimes the lush green boughs parted, revealing a distant

landscape of azure ranges, far stretching against a sky as blue, and in the valley of the foreground long bars of golden hue, where fields, denuded of the harvested wheat, took the sun. Girard lounged, languid, taciturn, and quiescent as ever, on the opposite side of the circular rock basin wherein the clear water fell.

"I will tell you what it is," Alicia went on, after a pause, for, though he looked attentive, he gave not even a glance of question. "I hear that you gamble."

His gaze concentrated as he knitted his brows, but he said nothing.

She pulled her broad straw hat forward on her auburn hair and readjusted the flounces of her white morning dress, saying while thus engaged, "Yes, indeed; that you gamble--like--like fury!"

"Why, don't you know that's against the law?" he demanded unexpectedly.

"I know that it is very wrong and sinful," she said solemnly.

"Thanky. I'll put that in my pipe an' smoke it! I'm very wrong and sinful, I am given to understand."

"Why, I didn't mean *you* so much," she faltered, perturbed by this sudden charge of the enemy. "I meant the practice."

"Oh, I know that I'm a sinner in more ways 'n one; but I *didn't* know that you were a lady-preacher."

"You mean that it is none of my business----"

"You ought to be so glad of that," he retorted.

She maintained a silence that might have suggested a degree of offended pride, and she was truly humiliated that her vaulted hazel eyes had so signally failed to work their wonted charm. As they strolled back together up the steep path to the hotel he seemed either unobservant or uncaring, so impassive were his manners, and she was aware that her demonstration had resulted in giving him information which he could not otherwise have gained. Later, she was nettled to notice that he had utilized it in prosaic fashion, for that night no lights flared late from the casino.

The gamblers, informed that rumors were a-wing, had betaken themselves elsewhere. A small smoking-room in the hotel proper seemed less obnoxious to suspicion in the depleted condition of the guest-list, since autumn was now approaching. After eleven o'clock the coterie would scarcely be subject to interruption, and there they gathered as the hour waxed late. The cards were duly dealt, the draw was on, when suddenly the door opened and old Mr. Whitmel, his favorite meerschaum in his hand and a sheaf of newly arrived journals, entered with the evident intention of a prolonged stay. A "standpatter" seemed hardly so assured as before he encountered the dim, surprised gaze, but the old clergyman was esteemed a good sort, and he ventured on a reminder:

"You have been here before, haven't you, Mr. Whitmel? Saw a deal of this sort of thing in the army!" And he rattled the chips significantly.

"Used to see that sort of thing in the army? Yes, yes, indeed--more than I wanted to see--very much more!"

Colonel Duval took schooling much amiss. He turned up his florid face with its auburn mustachios and Burnside whiskers from its bending over the cards and showed a broad arch of glittering white teeth in an ungenial laugh.

"Remember, Mr. Whitmel, at that fight we had in the hills not far from the Ocoee, how you rebuked two artillerymen for swearing? Something was wrong with the vent-hole of the piece, and one of the gunners asked what business you had with their language; and you said, 'I am a minister of the Lord,' and the fellow gave it back very patly, 'I ain't carin' ef you was a minister of state!' Then you said, 'No, you would doubtless swear in the presence of an angel.' And the fellow with the sponge-staff declared, 'Say, Mister, ef you are *that*, you are an angel off your feed certain'--you were worn to skin and bone then--'an' the rations of manna must be ez skimpy in heaven ez the rations o' bacon down here in Dixie.' Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Whitmel had taken a seat in an easy-chair; he had struck a match and was composedly kindling his pipe. "I felt nearer a higher communion that day than often since," he said.

The coterie of gentlemen looked at one another in disconsolate uncertainty, and one turned his cards face downward and laid them resignedly on the table. The party was evidently in for one of the old chaplain's long stories, with a few words by way of application, and there was no decent opportunity to demur. They were the intruders in the smoking-room--not he! Here with his pipe and his paper, he was within the accommodation assigned him. They must hie them back to the casino to be at ease, and this would they do when he should reach the end of his story--if indeed it had an end.

For with the prolixity of the eye-witness he was detailing the points of the battle; what troops were engaged; how the flank was turned; how the reserve was delayed; how the guns were planted; how the cavalry was ordered to charge over impracticable ground, and how in consequence he saw a squadron literally annihilated; how for hours after the fight was over a sergeant of the Dovingers pervaded the field with the guidon, calling on them by name to rally.

"And, gentlemen," he continued, turning in his chair, the fire kindling in his eyes as it died in the bowl of his pipe, "not one man responded, for none could rise from that horrid slaughter."

There was a moment of tense silence. Then, "Back and forth the guidon flaunted, and the rain began to fall, and the night came on, and still the dusk echoed the cry, 'Guide right! Dovinger's Rangers! Rally on the guidon! Rally on the reserve!'"

The old chaplain stuck his pipe into his mouth and brought it aflame again with two or three strong indrawing respirations.

"The surgeons said it would end in a case of dementia. I was sorry, for I had seen much that day that hurt me, and more than all was this. For I could picture that valiant young spirit going through life, spared by God's mercy; and it seemed to me that when the enemy, in whatever guise, should press him hard and defeat should bear him down he would have the courage and the ardor and the moral strength to rally on the reserve. He would rally on the guidon."

The old chaplain pulled strongly at his pipe, setting the blue wreaths of smoke circling about his head. "I should know that young fellow again wherever I might chance to see him."

"Did he collapse at last and verify the surgeon's prophecy!" asked the dealer.

"Well," drawled the chaplain, with a little flattered laugh, "I myself took care of that Many years ago I studied medicine, before I was favored with a higher call. Neurology was my line. When the boy's horse sank exhausted beneath him, and he fell into a sleep or stupor on the carcass, I removed the object of the obsession. I slipped the flag-staff, guidon and all, into a crevice of the rocks, where it will remain till the end of our time, be sure." He laughed in relish of his arbitrary intervention.

"There was a fine healthy clamor in camp the next morning about the lost guidon. But I did the soldier no damage, for he had been promoted to a lieutenantcy for special gallantry on the field, and he therefore could no longer have carried the guidon if he had had both the flag and the troop."

The stories of camp and field, thus begun, swiftly multiplied; they wore the fire to embers, and the oil sank low in the lamps. There was a chill sense of dawn in the blue-gray mist when the group, separating at last, issued upon the veranda; the moon, so long hovering over the sombre massive mountains, was slowly sinking in the west.

Among the shadows of the pillars a tall, martial figure lurked in ambush for the old chaplain, as he rounded the corner of the veranda on his way to his own quarters.

"Pa'son," a husky voice spoke from out the dim comminglement of the mist and the moon, "'twas me that carried that guidon in Dovinger's Bangers."

"I know it," declared the triumphant tactician. "I recognized you as soon as I saw you again."

"I'm through with this," the young mountaineer exclaimed abruptly, with an eloquent gesture of renunciation toward the deserted card-table visible through the vista of open doors. "I'm going home--to work! I'll never forget that I was marker in Dovinger's Rangers. I carried the guidon! And that last day I marked their way to glory! There's nothing left of them except honor and duty, but I'll rally on that, Chaplain. Never fear for me, again. I'll rally on the reserve!"