The Story of Old Fort Loudon

CHAPTER I

ALONG the buffalo paths, from one salt-lick to another, a group of pioneers took a vagrant way through the dense cane-brakes. Never a wheel had then entered the deep forests of this western wilderness; the frontiersman and the packhorse were comrades. Dark, gloomy, with long, level summit-lines, a grim outlier of the mountain range, since known as the Cumberland, stretched from northeast to southwest, seeming as they approached to interpose an insurmountable barrier to further progress, until suddenly, as in the miracle of a dream, the craggy wooded heights showed a gap, cloven to the heart of the steeps, opening out their path as through some splendid gateway, and promising deliverance, a new life, and a new and beautiful land. For beyond the darkling cliffs on either hand an illuminated vista stretched in every lengthening perspective, with softly nestling

sheltered valleys, and parallel lines of distant azure mountains, and many a mile of level woodland high on an elevated plateau, all bedight in the lingering flare of the yellow, and deep red, and sere brown of late autumn, and all suffused with an opaline haze and the rich, sweet languors of sunset-tide on an Indian-summer day.

As that enchanted perspective opened to the view, a sudden joyous exclamation rang out on the still air. The next moment a woman, walking beside one of the packhorses, clapped both hands over her lips, and turning looked with apprehensive eyes at the two men who followed her. The one in advance cast at her a glance of keen reproach, and then the whole party paused and with tense attention bent every faculty to listen.

Silence could hardly have been more profound. The regular respiration of the two horses suggested sound. But the wind did not stir; the growths of the limitless cane-brakes in the valley showed no slight quiver in the delicately poised fibers of their brown feathery crests; the haze, all shot through with glimmers of gold in its gauzy gray folds, rested on the mute woods; the suave sky hung above the purple western heights without a breath. No suggestion of motion in all the landscape, save the sudden melting away of a flake of vermilion cloud in a faintly green expanse of the crystal heavens.

The elder man dropped his hand, that had been raised to impose silence, and lifted his eyes from the ground. "I cannot be rid of the idea that we are followed," he said. "But I hear nothing."

Although the eldest of the group, he was still young,— twenty-five, perhaps. He was tall, strong, alert, with a narrow, long face; dark, slow eyes, that had a serious, steadfast expression; dark brown hair, braided in the queue often discarded by the hunters of this day. A certain staid, cautious sobriety of manner hardly assorted with the rough-and-ready import of his garb and the adventurous place and time. Both he and the younger man, who was in fact a mere boy not yet seventeen, but tall, muscular, sinewy,— stringy, one might say,— of build, were dressed alike in loose hunting-shirts of buckskin, heavily fringed, less for the sake of ornament than the handiness of a selection of thongs always ready to be detached for use; for the same reason the deerskin leggings, reaching to the thighs over the knee-breeches and long stockings of that day, were also furnished with these substantial fringes; shot-pouch and powder-horn were suspended from a leather belt, and on the other side a knife-hilt gleamed close to the body. Both wore coonskin caps, but that of the younger preserved the tail to hang down like a plume among his glossy brown tangles of curls, which, but

for a bit of restraining ribbon, resisted all semblance to the gentility of a queue. The boy was like his brother in the clear complexion and the color of the dark eyes and hair, but the expression of his eyes was wild, alert, and although fired with the earnest ardor of first youth, they had certain roguish intimations, subdued now since they were still and seriously expectant, but which gave token how acceptably he could play that cherished *rôle*, to a secluded and isolated fireside, of family buffoon, and make gay mirth for the applause of the chimney-corner. The brothers were both shod with deerskin buskins, but the other two of the party wore the shoe of civilization, — one a brodequin, that despite its rough and substantial materials could but reflect a grace from the dainty foot within it; the other showed the stubby shapes deemed meet for the early stages of the long tramp of life. The little girl's shoes were hardly more in evidence than the mother's, for the skirts of children were worn long, and only now and then was betrayed a facetious skip of some active toes in the blunt footgear. Their dresses were of the same material, a heavy gray serge, which fact gave the little one much satisfaction, for she considered that it made them resemble the cow and calf — both great personages in her mind. But she flattered herself; her aspect in the straight, short bodice that enclosed her

stout little rotund figure, and the quaint white mobcap that encircled her chubby, roseate face, all smiles, and indeterminate nose, and expanded, laughing, red mouth, and white, glittering, irregular teeth, had little in common with the mother whom she admired and imitated, and but for the remnant of the elder's stuff gown, of which her own was fashioned, the comparison with the cow and calf would have failed altogether. She was not even a good imitator of the maternal methods. Of course the days of her own infancy, recent though they were, had long been lost to her limited memory, and a token of the length of time that they had dwelt in the wilderness, and the impressions her juvenile faculties had received therefrom might have been given by the fact that her doll was reared after pappoose fashion; on her back was slung a basket in the manner of the peripatetic cradle of the Indian women, and from this protruded the head and the widely open eyes of a cat slightly past kittenhood, that was adapting its preferences to the conditions of the journey with a discretion which might argue an extension of the powers of instinct in pioneer animals, — a claim which has often been advanced.

The cat evidently realized the fact that it was a domesticated creature, that naught was possible for it in these strange woods but speedy destruction by savage beast or man, and that decorous sub-

mission became a cat promoted to the estate of a juvenile settler's baby. The cat was as silent and as motionless during the halt as the rest of the party, looking out watchfully over the shoulder of the little three-year-old, who, with perfect and mute trust, and great, serene eyes, gazed up at the face of her father, nothing doubting his infinite puissance and willingness to take care of her. When he spoke and the tension was over, she began to skip once more, the jostled cat putting out her claws to hold to the wicker-work of her basket; the two had ridden most of the day on one of the packhorses, their trifling weight adding but little to the burden of the scanty store of clothing and bedding, the cooking and farming utensils, the precious frying-pan and skillet, the invaluable axe, hand-saw, auger, and hoe,— the lares and penates of the pioneer. There were some surveying-instruments, too, and in the momentary relaxation of suspense the elder of the brothers consulted a compass, as he had done more than once that day.

"I thought I heard something," said the boy, shouldering his rifle and turning westward, "but I couldn't say what."

"Ah, *quelle barbarie!*" exclaimed the woman, with a sigh, half petulance, half relief.

She seemed less the kind of timber that was to build up the great structure of western civilization

than did the others,— all unfitted for its hardships and privation and labor. Her gray serge gown was worn with a sort of subtle elegance hardly discounted by the plainness of the material and make. The long, pointed waist accented the slender grace of her figure; the skirt had folds clustered on the hips that gave a sort of fullness to the drapery and suggested the charm of elaborate costume. She wore a hood on her head,— a large calash, which had a curtain that hung about her shoulders. This was a dark red, of the tint called Indian red, and as she pushed it back and turned her face, realizing that the interval of watching was over, the fairness of her complexion, the beauty of her dark, liquid eyes, the suggestion of her well-ordered, rich brown hair above her high forehead, almost regal in its noble cast, the perfection of the details of her simple dress, all seemed infinitely incongruous with her estate as a poor settler's wife, and the fact that since dawn and for days past she had, with the little all she possessed, fled from the pursuit of savage Indians. She returned with a severe glance the laughing grimace of the boy, with which, despite his own fear but a moment ago, he had, in the mobility of the moods of youth, decorated his countenance.

"If it were not for you, Hamish," she said to him, "I should not be so terrified. I have seen Indians many a time,— yes,— and when they were

on the war-path, too. But to add to their fury by an act of defiance on our part! It is fatal — they have only to overtake us."

"What was I to do, Odalie?" said Hamish MacLeod, suddenly grave, and excitedly justifying himself. "There was that red Injun, as still as a stump. I thought he was a stump — it was nearly dark. And I heard the wild turkey gobbling, — you heard it yourself, you sent me out to get it for supper, — you said that one more meal on buffalo meat would be the death of you, — and it was nearly dark, — and — gobble — gobble — gobble — so appetizing. I can hear it yet."

With an expression of terror she caught suddenly at his hand as he walked beside her, but he petulantly pulled away.

"I mean *in my mind*, Odalie, — I hear it now *in my mind*. And all of a sudden it came to me that it was that stump up on the slope that was gobbling so cheerful, and gobbling me along into gunshot.[1] And just then I was in rifle range, and I fired at the same minute that the stump fired, or the turkey, whichever you choose to call him — What is the reason, Sandy, that Injuns are so apt to load with too little powder?" he broke off, speaking to his brother. "The turkey shot straight — his ball dropped spent just at my feet."

"*Quelle barbarie!*" exclaimed Mrs. MacLeod,

catching his hand again — this time to give it a little squeeze — impressed with the imminence of the boy's danger and their loss.

But Hamish was quite as independent of caresses and approval as of rebuke, and he carelessly twisted his hand away from his sister-in-law as he cocked his head to one side to hear the more experienced hunter's reply.

"Because their powder is so precious, and scant, and hard to come by, they economize it," said Alexander MacLeod, as he trudged along behind the packhorses, guarding the rear of his little party with his rifle on his shoulder.

"The turkey would better have economized his meat this time," said the boy, swinging round his belt to lift the lid of his powder-horn and peep gloatingly in at the reinforced stores. "He was economical with his powder, but extravagant with his life; for that turkey will gobble no more."

He gobbled a brisk and agitated imitation of the cry of the fowl, and then broke off to exclaim, "*Quelle barbarie!* — eh, Odalie?"

He looked at his sister-in-law with a roguish eye, as he travestied the tone and manner of her favorite ejaculation, which he was wont to call the "family oath." For indeed they had all come to make use of the phrase, in their varying accent, to express their disaffection with the ordering of

events, or the conduct of one another, or the provoking mischance of inanimate objects, — as the gun's hanging fire, or the reluctance of a spark to kindle from flint to make their camp-fire, or the overturning of a pot of buffalo soup, or bear stew, when the famished fugitives were ready to partake in reality of the feast which their olfactory nerves and eyes had already begun. Even the little girl would exclaim, "*Quelle barbarie!*" when thorns caught her skirts and held her prisoner as she had skipped along so low down among the brambles and dense high cane, that one must needs wonder at the smallness of Empire, as expressed in her personality and funny cap, taking its westward way. "*Quelle barbarie!*" too, when the cat's culture in elegant manners required of maternal solicitude a smart box on the ear. And if the cat did not say "*Quelle barbarie!*" with an approved French accent, we all know that she thought it.

"So much better for the soul's health than swearing," Hamish was wont to say, when Odalie showed signs of considering the phrase a bit of ridicule of her and her Frenchy forbears.

Her grandfather had been a Huguenot refugee, driven out of his country by the religious persecution about the time of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, seventy odd years previously. Her father had prospered but indifferently in the more

civilized section of the New World, and had died early. There his daughter had met her young Scotchman, who was piqued by her dainty disdain of his French accent, which MacLeod had recklessly placed on exhibition, and was always seeking to redeem the impression, finally feeling that he must needs improve it by having a perfect Mentor at hand. He had brought from the land of his birth, which he had quitted in early years, but few distinctive local expressions, yet a certain burr clung to his speech, and combined as incongruously as might be with his French accent. She evidently considered the latter incurable, intolerable, and always eyed him, when he spoke in that language, with ostentatious wonder that such verbal atrocities could be, and murmured gently in lieu of reply — "*Quelle barbarie!*" He found his revenge in repeating a similar slogan, one that had often been as a supplement to this more usual phrase, — "*Partons pour la France aujourd'hui, pour l'amour de Dieu!*" It had been urged by her grandmother in moments of depression, and Odalie, born and reared in the royal province of South Carolina, had always the logic and grace to wince at this ungrateful aspiration to return to France, — the dear France that had been so much too hot to hold them. For the family had rejoiced to escape thence with their lives, even at the forfeiture of all that they possessed.

This jesting warfare of words had become established in the MacLeod household, and often recurred, sometimes with a trifle of acrimony. Little they thought how significant it was to be and how it should serve them in their future lives.

The sun was going down. Far, far purple mountains, that they might never have seen but for that great clifty gateway, were bathed in the glory of the last red suffusion of the west; the evening star of an unparalleled whiteness pulsated in the amber-tinted lucidity of the sky. The fragrance of the autumn woods was more marked on the dank night air. One could smell the rich mould along a watercourse near at hand, the branch from a spring bubbling up in the solid rock hard by. Odalie had seated herself on the horizontal ledge at the base of one of the crags and had thrown back her hood, against which her head rested. Her large eyes were soft and lustrous, but pensive and weary.

"Rest, Odalie, while Hamish and I make the fire, and then you can fix the things for supper," her husband admonished her.

It was the first time that they had halted that day, and dinner had been but the fragments of breakfast eaten while on the march. There had been a sudden outbreak of the Cherokee Indians which had driven them from the more frequented way where they feared pursuit, — this, and the fate of the brave

who had sought to lure Hamish to his death last night with the mimicry of the gobbler, and was killed in consequence himself. They could not judge whether he had been alone or one of a party; whether his body might be discovered and his death avenged by the death or capture of them all; whether he had been a scout, thrown out to discover the direction they took, and his natural blood-thirstiness had overmastered his instructions, and he must needs seek to kill the boy before his return with his news.

With this more recent fear that they were followed they had not to-day dared to build a fire lest its smoke betray to the crafty observation of the Indians, although at a great distance, their presence in this remote quarter of the wilderness, far even from the Indian war-path, that, striking down the valley between the Cumberland range and the eastern mountains, was then not only the road that the Indians followed to battle, but the highway of traffic and travel, the only recognized and known path leading from the Cherokee settlements south of the Tennessee River through this great uninhabited park or hunting-ground to the regions of other Indian tribes on the Scioto and to Western Virginia. Now, however, rest and refreshment were necessary; even more imperative was the need of a fire as a protection to the camp against the en-

croachments of wild beasts; for wolves were plentiful and roamed the night-bound earth, and the active panther, the great American cougar, was wont to look down from the branches of overhanging trees. The horses were not safe beyond the flare of the flames, to say nothing of wife and child. Therefore the risk of attracting observation from Indians must be run, especially since it was abated by the descending dusk. The little treacherous smoke escaping from the forest to curl against the blue sky need not be feared at night. The darkness would hide all from a distance; as to foes lurking nearer at hand, why, if any such there were, then their fate was already upon them. With the stout heart of the pioneer, Alexander MacLeod heaped the fagots upon the ground and struck the flint and steel together after giving the officious little Josephine a chance to try her luck with the tinder. Soon the dry dead wood was timidly ablaze, while Hamish led the horses to the water and picketed them out.

Odalie's eyes followed the boy with a sort of belated yet painful anxiety, thinking how near he had been to parting with that stanch young spirit, and what a bereavement would have been the loss of that blithe element from their daily lives.

"*Quelle barbarie!*" she exclaimed suddenly. "*Quelle barbarie!*"

Perhaps her husband realized her fatigue and depression and was willing to put his French accent on parade for her amusement; perhaps it was for the sake of the old flouting retort; he theatrically rejoined without looking up, "*Partons pour la France aujourd'hui, pour l'amour de Dieu.*"

And Josephine, taking the cat out of its basket and kissing its whiskers and the top of its head, was condoling with it on its long restraint:—"*Quelle barbarie, ma poupée, quelle barbarie, ma douce mignonne,*" she poutingly babbled.

Alexander MacLeod paused to listen to this affectionate motherly discourse; then glanced up at his wife with a smile, to call her attention to it.

She had not moved. She had turned to stone. It seemed as if she could never move again. A waving blotch of red sumach leaves in a niche in the dark wall of the crag hard by had caught her notice. A waving blotch of red leaves in the autumnal dusk,—what more natural?

What more wonderful? What more fearful?

There was no wind. How could the bough stir? There was no bough. The blotch of color was the red and black of a hideous painted face that in the dusk, the treacherous dusk, had approached very near and struck her dumb and turned her to stone. It had approached so near that she could see its expression change as the sound of the words

spoken about the fireside arose on the air. Her mental faculties were rallying from the torpor which still paralyzed her physical being; she understood the reason for this facial change, and by a mighty effort of the will summoned all her powers to avail herself of it.

Alexander MacLeod, glancing up with a casual laugh on his face, was almost stunned to see a full-armed and painted Cherokee rise up suddenly from among the bushes about the foot of the cliff. Standing distinctly outlined against the softly tinted mountain landscape, which was opalescent in its illumined hues, faint and fading, and extending his hand with a motion of inquiry toward Odalie, the savage demanded in a lordly tone, — "Flinch? Flanzy?"

As in a dream MacLeod beheld her, nodding her head in silent acquiescence, — as easily as she might were she humming a tune and hardly cared to desist from melody for words. She could not speak!

The Cherokee, his face smeared with vermilion, with a great white circle around one eye and a great black circle around the other, looked not ill-pleased, yet baffled for a moment. "Me no talk him," he observed.

He had never heard of Babel, poor soul, but he was as subject to the inconvenience of the confusion of tongues as if he had had an active share in the

"What more wonderful? What more fearful?"

sacrilegious industry of those ambitious architects who builded in the plains of Shinar.

"But I can speak English too," said Odalie.

"Him?" said the Cherokee, "and him?" pointing at Alexander and then at Hamish — at Hamish, with his recollection of that dead Indian, a Cherokee, lying, face downward, somewhere there to the northward under the dark trees, his blood crying aloud for the ferocious reprisal in which his tribe were wont to glut their vengeance.

"Both speak French," said Odalie.

The Indian gazed upon her doubtfully. He had evidently only a few disconnected sentences of English at command, although he understood far more than he could frame, but he could merely discern and distinguish the sound of the admired "Flanzy." Odalie realized with a shiver that it was only this trifle that had preserved the lives of the whole party. For even previous to the present outbreak and despite the stipulations of their treaties with the English, the Cherokees were known to have hesitated long in taking sides in the struggle between France and Great Britain, still in progress now in 1758, for supremacy in this western country, and many were suspected of yet inclining to the French, who had made great efforts to detach them from the British interest.

"Where go?" demanded the chief, suspiciously.