CHAPTER IV

WITH the earliest flush of dawn Hamish MacLeod was seeking one of the officers in order to solicit a guide to enable him to go in search of his brother with some chance of success.

Captain Stuart, whom he finally found at the block-house in the northwestern bastion, was standing on the broad hearth of the great hall, where the fire was so brightly aflare that although it was day the place had all the illuminated effect of its aspect of last night. The officer's fresh face was florid and tingling from a recent plunge in the cold waters of the Tennessee River. He looked at Hamish with an unchanged expression of his steady blue eye, and drawing the watch from his fob consulted it minutely.

"The hunters of the post," he said, still regarding it, "have been gone for more than half an hour. There is no use in trying to overtake them. They have their orders as to what kind of game they are to bring in."

He smiled slightly, with the air of a man who in indulgent condescension would humor natural anxiety and overlook the effort of intermeddling, and as he returned the watch to his pocket, Hamish felt dismissed from the presence. The sun was well over the great range of purple bronze mountains in the east, their snowy domes a-glister in the brilliance between the dark slopes below and the blue sky above, and the fort, as he came forth, was a scene of brisk activity. The parade ground had already been swept like a floor, and groups of soldiers were gathered about the barracks busily burnishing and cleaning their arms, pipe-claying belts and rotten-stoning buckles and buttons, and at the further end near the stables horses were in process of being groomed and fed; one of them, young and wild, broke away, and in a mad scamper, with tossing mane and tail, and head erect and hoofs scattering the gravel, plunged around and around the enclosure, baffling his groom. A drill-sergeant was busy with an awkward squad; another squad without arms, in charge of a corporal, was marching and marching, making no progress, but vigorously marking time, whether for exercise or discipline Hamish could hardly determine, for he began to have a very awesome perception of the rigor of authority maintained in this frontier post. He had noticed — and the gorge of a freeman had

risen at the sight — a soldier mounted high upon a trestle, facetiously called a horse, and he was well aware that this was by no means a new and a merry game. Hamish wavered a little in his mental revolt against the powers that be, as he noticed the reckless devil-may-care look of the man. He was a ruddy young fellow; he had a broad visage, with a wide, facetious red-lipped mouth, a quick, blithe, brown eye, and a broad, blunt nose. Hamish knew intuitively that this was the typical inhabitant, the native, so to speak, of the guard-house; his sort had ridden the wooden-horse, for many a weary hour in every country under the sun, and when an Indian's tomahawk or a Frenchman's bullet should clear the ranks of him, the gap would be filled by a successor so like him in spirit that he might seem a lineal descendant instead of a mere successor in the line. He had long ago been dubbed the "Devil's Dragoon," and he looked down with a good-humored glance at a bevy of his comrades, who from the door of the nearest log-cabin covertly cast gibes at him, calling out *sotto voce*, "Right about wheel — Trot! — March!"

In another quarter of the parade the regular exercise was in progress, and Hamish listened with interest to the voice of the officer as it rang out crisp and clear on the frosty air.

"Poise — Firelock!"

A short interval while the sun glanced down the gleaming barrels of the muskets.

"Cock — Firelock!"

A sharp metallic click as of many sounds blent into one.

"Take — Aim!"

A moment of suspense.

"Fire!"

A resonant detonation of blank cartridges — and all the live echoes leaped in the woods, while the smoke drifted about the parade and glimmered prismatic in the sun, and then cleared away, escaping over the ramparts and blending with the timorous dissolving mists of the morning.

Several Indians had come in through the open gate, some arrayed in feather or fur match-coats and others in buckskin shirt and leggings, with their blankets purchased from the traders drawn up about their ears; they were standing near the walls of one of the block-houses to see the drill. A certain expectancy hung upon this group as they watched the movements of the men now loading anew.

"Half-cock — Firelock!" came the order in the peremptory voice of the officer.

Once more that sharp, metallic, unnerving click.

"Handle — Cartridge!"

A sudden swift facial expression went along the

line with a formidable effect. With the simultaneous show of strong teeth it was as if each soldier had fiercely snarled like a wild beast. But each had only bitten the end of the cartridge.

"Prime!"

The eyes of the Indians followed with an unwinking, fascinated stare the swift, simultaneous movement of the rank as of one man, every muscle animated by the same impulse.

"Shut — Pan!"

Once more the single sound as of many sounds.

"Charge with — Cartridge!"

The watchful eyes of the Indians narrowed.

"Draw — Rammer!"

Once more the loud, sharp, clash of metal rising to a menace of emphasis with the succeeding, —

"Ram down — Cartridge!"

"Return — Rammer!"

And as hard upon the clatter of the ramrods, slipping back into their grooves, came the orders —

"Shoulder — Firelock!"

"Advance — Arms!" the Cherokees drew a long breath as of the relief from the tension of suspense. They were evidently seeking to discern the utility of these strange military gyrations. This the Indians, although always alert to perceive and adopt any advantage in arms or military method, despite their characteristic tenacity to their ancient customs

in other matters, could not descry. They had, even at this early day, almost discarded the bow and arrow for the firelock, wherever or however it could be procured, but the elaborate details of the drill baffled them, and they regarded it as in some sort a mystery. Their own discipline had always sufficed, and their military manœuvres, their march in single file or widely extended lines, their skulking approach, stalking under cover from tree to tree, were better suited, as even some of their enemies thought, for military movements, than tactical precision, to the broken character of the country and the dense forest of the trackless wilderness.

They noticed with kindling eyes a brisk reprimand administered to Corporal O'Flynn, when Lieutenant Gilmore called attention to the fact that one of the men had used three motions instead of the prescribed two motions in charging with cartridge, and two motions, instead of one, in ramming down cartridge. Corporal O'Flynn's mortification was painted in a lively red on his fresh Irish cheek, for this soldier was of a squad whose tuition in the manual exercise had been superintended by no less a tactician than himself.

"Faith, sir," he said to his superior officer, "I don't know what ails that man. He has motion without intelligence. Like thim windmills, ye'll remember, sir, we seen so much on the Continent.

He minds me o' thim in the way he whur-r-ls his ar-rms."

The lieutenant — they had served together in foreign countries — laughed a trifle, his wrath diverted by the farcical suggestion, and the instant the command to break ranks had been given, Corporal O'Flynn, with the delinquent under close guard, convoyed him to the scene of the exploits of the awkward squad, where he might best learn to discard the free gestures of the windmills of the Continent of Europe.

"To disgrace me afore the officers," said Corporal O'Flynn, "and I fairly responsible for ye! I larned ye all ye know — and for ye to show the leftenant how little 'tis! Ye've got to quit that way of loading with ca'tridge with as many motions as an old jontleman feeling for his snuff-box! I'm fairly responsible for yez. I'm yer sponsor in this business. I feel like yer godfathers, an' yer godmothers, an' yer maiden aunt. I never seen a man so supple! Ye have as much use of yer hands as if ye was a centipede!"

The matter and manner of this discourse tried the gravity of the awkward squad, but no one dared to laugh, and Corporal O'Flynn himself was as grave as if it were a question of the weightiest importance involved, as he stood by and watched for a time the drill of the men.

The Indians turned their attentive eyes to Captain Stuart and Captain Demeré, who were both upon the terre-pleine at the shoulder-point of a bastion where one of the twelve cannon, mounted *en barbette*, looked grimly forth over the parapet. The gunners were receiving some instructions which Stuart was giving in reference to serving the piece; now and again it was pointed anew; he handled the heavy sponge-staff as if in illustration; then stepped swiftly back, and lifted the match, as if about to fire the gun. The Indians loitering in the shade watched the martial figure, the sun striking full on the red coat and cocked hat, and long, heavy queue of fair hair hanging on his shoulders, and as he stood erect, with the sponge-staff held horizontally in both hands, they turned and looked with a common impulse at one another and suddenly spat upon the ground. The sentry in a sort of cabin above the gate — a gate-house, so to speak — maintained a guard within as well as without, for an outer sentinel was posted on the crest of the counterscarp beyond the bridge; he kept his eye on the Cherokees, but he did not note their look. He was not skilled in deciphering facial expression, nor did he conceive himself deputed to construe the grimaces of savages. Gazing without for a moment, he turned back and cast a glance of kindly concern on Hamish MacLeod,

who was disconsolately strolling about, not daring to go back and encounter the reproaches of Odalie, who doubtless thought him even now in the wilderness with a searching party, too urgent to admit of the time to acquaint her with so hasty a departure — and yet striving against his eagerness to go on this very errand, relying on the superior wisdom of the officers even while rebelling against it. All that he observed tended to confirm this reliance. How safe it was here! How trebly guarded! Even to his callow experience it was most obvious that whatever fate held in store for this garrison, whose lives were intrusted to the wisdom and precaution of the commandant, surprise was not among the possibilities. He remembered anew poor Sandy, far from these stanch walls, the very citadel of security, within which he felt so recreant; and as he thought again of the perils to which his brother was exposed, and a possibly impending hideous fate, he felt a constriction about his throat like the clutch of a hand. The tears rose to his eyes — and through them as he looked toward the gate he saw Sandy coming into the fort! In the extremity of the revulsion of feeling Hamish gave a sudden shrill yell that rang through the woods like a war-whoop. Even the Indians, still loitering in the diminishing shadow of the blockhouse, started at the sound and gazed at him amazed,

as he dashed across the parade and flung his arms around his brother. Sandy, who had had his own terrors to endure concerning the fate of his family, was not altogether appreciative of their terrors for his sake. He felt amply capable of taking care of himself, and if he were not — why, his scalp was not worth saving! He extricated himself with unflattered surprise from Hamish's frantic embrace that was like the frenzied hug of a young bear and made his ribs crack.

"That's enough, Hamish; that's enough!" he said. "Of course I'm safe, all right. That's enough."

He advanced with what grace he could command after such an exhibition to shake hands with the two officers near the sally-port and thank them for the shelter the fort had afforded his family.

And here was Odalie, — for a good-natured soldier, one of the boat's crew of the previous evening, had instantly run to her cabin with the news of the arrival — restored to her normal poise in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, by the shattering of her dismal forebodings in the glad reality of MacLeod's safety. So composed was her manner, so calmly happy, that Captain Stuart could not forbear to unmask the sham, and let the poor man know how he had been bewept yesterday at even.

"We were very glad to take in the wanderers,

although I cannot say it was a cheerful scene. I never realized until Mrs. MacLeod reached the gate here the meaning of the phrase 'dissolved in tears.'"

Alexander looked anxiously at his wife — had she found the journey, then, so vexatious?

"I was tired and dusty," she said demurely, as if in explanation. "My shoes — one of them was in tatters; and, Sandy, I was *so* ashamed."

Captain Stuart stared at her for a moment and broke into a laugh. "That's putting the shoe on the other foot, at all events," he said.

He and Captain Demeré, accompanied by the newcomer, turned into the block-house, in order to question Sandy as to any information he might have been able to acquire concerning French emissaries, the disposition of the Cherokees, the devastation of the Virginia settlements, and any further news of General Forbes and the fall of Fort Duquesne, now called Fort Pitt. However, Sandy had naught to report, save the angry threat with the tomahawk which gave way upon the assurance that the party was French. In the solitary journey with those who had resigned their boat to Willinawaugh, he had experienced no worse treatment than the destruction of his pocket compass. With this at first they had been highly delighted, but some ten miles from the fort they

had been joined by an Indian who declared he had seen such things in Carolina, doubtless among land-surveyors, and who stigmatized it as a "land-stealer," forthwith crushing it with his tomahawk. MacLeod had expected this revelation to bring about ill-feeling, but the party shortly met the hunters of the post, who had insisted on conducting him to the fort on suspicion of being a Frenchman.

These pioneers never forgot that day, a rich, languid day of the lingering St. Martin's summer-tide. What though in the early morn the frost had lain in rime as white as snow on the bare branches of the great trees where now the yellow sunshine dripped in liquid light! A tender haze like that of spring suffused the depths of the forest, the gleaming, glancing reaches of the river, the level summit-lines of the great massive purple mountains of the west, and half concealed, and shifting half revealed, always elusively, the fine azure snow-capped domes against the pearl-tinted eastern sky. What though the flowers were dead, the leaves had fled, the woods were bare and rifled, — when the necromancy of the powers of the air filled all the winter day with sweet, subtle odors that excelled the fragrance of summer, as a memory might outvie the value of the reality, seeming to exhale now from the forest, and again from the river, and anon from some quality of the beneficent sunshine, or to exist

in ethereal suspension in the charmed atmosphere. Nature was in such blessed harmony, full of graceful analogy; a bird would wing his way aloft, his shadow careering through the sun-painted woods below; a canoe with its swift duplication in the water would fly with its paddles like unfeathered wings down the currents of the river; those exquisite traceries of the wintry woods, the shadows of the leafless trees, would lie on a sandy stretch like some keen etching, as if to illustrate the perfection of the lovely dendroidal design and proportion of the growth it imaged; now and again the voice of herds of buffalo rose thunderously, muffled by distance; a deer splashed into the river a little above the fort, and gallantly breasting the current, swam to the other side, while a group of soldiers standing on the bank watched his progress and commented on his prowess. No shot followed him; the larders were filled, and orders had been given to waste no powder and ball.

The newcomers were made most heartily welcome in the settlement near the fort, as newcomers were apt to be in every pioneer hamlet, whatever their quality; for the frontiersmen, in their exposed situation, earnestly appreciated the strength in numbers. But this gratulation was of course infinitely increased when the arrivals were, like these, people of character, evidently so valuable an addition to the community.

Finally several of the settlers persisted in carrying off Sandy to look at a fertile nook where the river swung round in a bend, earnestly recommending the rich bottom lands for the growth of corn, and the crest of the hill with a clear free-stone spring for that home he sought to plant in the far west. Hamish went too, — he could not bear Sandy to be out of his sight and was "tagging" after him as resolutely and as unshake-off-ably as when he was four and Sandy was twelve years of age.

In their absence Odalie and Josephine and the *douce mignonne* sat on the doorstep of their latest entertainer, and watched the shadows and sunshine shift in the woods, and listened to the talk of their hostess. And here was where the trail of the serpent began to be manifest; for this old woman was a professed gossip, and Odalie speedily learned the points of view from which the settlement about Fort Loudon ceased to present the aspect of the earlier Paradisaic era.

Mrs. Halsing had a hard, set visage, and was very shrewd, — none the worse gossip for that, — and went straight to the weak point, and unraveled the tangle of mystery in any subject that presented itself for discussion. She was thin and angular and uncultivated, and had evidently come of people who had been used to small advantages in education and breeding. Equally humble of origin was

another of Odalie's future neighbors, with a sort of homespun dress made after the fashion called a "short gown," a red petticoat, and a pair of moccasons in lieu of shoes. Her face was as broad as the moon, and as bland. Much smiling had worn dimples around her mouth instead of wrinkles in her forehead. She, too, had a keen gleam of discernment in her eyes, but tempered with a perception of the sweetly ludicrous in life, which converted folly into the semblance of fun. She seemed to love her comfort, to judge by her leisurely motions and the way her arms fell into easy foldings, but the wife of a pioneer could never have lived at ease in those days. She sat opposite Mrs. Halsing, by the cabin door, on a bench which the hostess had vacated in her favor, adopting instead an inverted tub, and although admitting as true much that was said, Mrs. Beedie advanced palliating theories which, paradoxically enough, while they did not contradict the main statement, had all the effect of denial.

For her part, said Mrs. Halsing, she did not see what anybody who was safe in Virginia or Carolina, or anywhere else, would come to this country for. She wouldn't, except that her husband was possessed! The sight of a road put him into a "trembly fit." He was moving west to get rid of civilization, and he was as uncivilized as a "bar himself, or an Injun."

Odalie learned that a number of the men were wild, roving, roaring fellows, who came here because they hated law and order; then, without contradiction, Mrs. Beedie's exposition tended to show that it was a new country with splendid prospects and they desired to take advantage of its opening opportunities; some of them being already poor, sought here cheaper homes, with more chance for development.

And, pursuing the interpretation of her side of the shield, Mrs. Halsing detailed the fact that some people love change and adventure, because no matter what the Lord gave 'em they wouldn't fold their hands and be thankful. Were the Rush people poor and oppressed in Carolina? Mighty well off, they seemed to her — had cows, if the wolves hadn't got 'em, and had owned property and held their heads mighty high where they came from, and claimed kin with well-to-do people in England. People said Captain Stuart said he knew who they were — but the Lord only knew what Captain Stuart knew! Then Mrs. Halsing further unfolded the fact that Mrs Rush's husband had been the son of a bishop, but had got among the dissenters, and had been cast out like a prodigal, because he took to preaching.

"Preachin' being in the blood, I reckon," Mrs. Beedie palliated.

Thereupon he emigrated to America and was seized with a mission to the Indians, that fastened upon him like a plague; and he lost his scalp and his life — not even a red Indian would tolerate the doctrine he set up as the Word! And Mrs. Halsing pursed her lips with a truly orthodox fixity. And now we have no religion at the fort and the settlement.

But here Mrs. Beedie took up her testimony with unction and emphasis. We had Captain Stuart!

Mrs. Halsing gave a sudden cry of derision like the abrupt squawk of a jay-bird. Captain Stuart was not a humble man. That back of his was never bent! She wondered if his heart had ever felt the need of aught.

"Yes," Mrs. Beedie affirmed. "When one of the soldiers died of the pleurisy last winter in the fort and Captain Demeré was ill himself, Captain Stuart read the service all solemn and proper, and had men to march with arms reversed and fire a volley over the grave."

Mrs. Halsing rose to the occasion by demanding what good such evidences of religion might do in such a lot as there was at the fort. Forgetting her scorn of the bishop's son, who had taken to Methodism and Indians, she set forth the fact that the whole settlement was given to dances — that the settlers with their wives and daughters, not content

with dances at home, must needs go to the fort on state and special occasions, such as Christmas, and there participate in the ball, as they called it, given in the officers' mess-hall. They went in daylight, and did not return till daylight, and the fiddle it sang the whole night through! And cards — the soldiers played cards, and the settlers too; and the officers, they played "loo," as they called it, as if that made it any better. Even Captain Demeré! This latter phrase occurred so frequently in Mrs. Halsing's prelection that it created a sort of mitigating effect, and made the enormity it qualified gain a trifle of respectability from the fact that Captain Demeré countenanced it. Odalie knew already that he was the commandant, and it was plain to be seen that Captain Demeré stood first in Mrs. Halsing's estimation. And the officers all, she declared, the captains, the frisky lieutenants, and the ensigns, all drank tafia.

"When they can git it," interpolated Mrs. Beedie, with twinkling eyes.

"They are deprived, I will say, by the slowness and seldomness of the express from over the mountains. But if they are a sober set, it is against their will, and that I do maintain," Mrs. Halsing added, turning an unflinching front toward Mrs. Beedie. Then resuming her dissertation to Odalie: —

"But there's one thing that rests on my mind.