CHAPTER X

DEMERÉ was not a man to consider an omen and attach weight to trifling chances, yet he was in some sort prepared for disaster. Within the hall a pair of candles stood on the table where it was the habit to transact official business, — to write letters; to construct maps of the country from the resources of the information of the officers and the descriptions of the Indians; to make out reports and the accounts of the post. Writing materials were kept in readiness here for these purposes — a due array of quills, paper, inkhorn, wafers, sealing-wax, sand-box, and lights. As the door was opened the candles flickered in the sudden draught, bowed to the wicks grown long and unsnuffed, and in another moment were extinguished, leaving the place in total darkness, with the papers on which hung such weighty interests of life and death, of rescue or despair, unread in his hand.

"The tinder-box — the flint — where are they? Cannot you strike a spark?" he demanded, in agitated suspense, of Stuart, who made more than one

fruitless effort before the timorous flame was started anew on the old and drooping wicks, which had to be smartly snuffed before they would afford sufficient light to discern the hasty characters, that looked as if they might have been written on a drumhead — as in fact they were.

"Here — read them, John — I can't," said Demeré, handing the package to Stuart, and throwing himself into a chair to listen.

Although the suspense had been of the kind that does not usually herald surcease of anxiety, he was not prepared for the face of consternation with which Stuart silently perused the scrawled lines.

"From Montgomery!" he exclaimed. "But our dispatches evidently have never reached him."

For in the bold strain of triumph Colonel Montgomery acquainted the commandant of Fort Loudon with the successful issue of his campaign, having lost only four men, although he had burned a number of Indian towns, destroyed incalculable quantities of provisions, killed and wounded many braves, and was carrying with him a train of prisoners, men, women, and children. He was now on the march to the relief of Fort Prince George, which the savages had invested, where the garrison was in much distress, not for the want of provisions but for fuel to cook food, since the enemy was in

such force that no sortie could be made to the woods to procure a supply. Two of his prisoners he had set at liberty, Fiftoe, and the old warrior of Estatoe, that they might acquaint the nation of his further intentions, for, if the Indians did not immediately sue for peace and deliver up the principal transgressors to justice, he would sally forth from Fort Prince George on another foray, and he would not hold his hand till he had burned every Cherokee town of the whole nation. He deputed Captain Stuart and Captain Demeré to offer these terms to the Upper towns, and let them know that they were admitted to this clemency solely in consideration of the regard of the government for Atta-Kulla-Kulla. This chieftain, the half-king of the Cherokee tribe, had deprecated, it was understood, the renewal of the war, since he had signed the last treaty at the Congarees, and having shown himself friendly on several occasions to the British people his majesty's government esteemed him as he deserved.

The two officers gazed silently at one another. Montgomery was obviously entirely unaware of their situation. Here they were, penned up in this restricted compass, besieged by an enemy so furious that even a hat showing but for one moment above the palisades, — for the soldiers had tried the experiment of poising an old busby on the point of a bayonet, — would be riddled in an instant. Often

a well-directed bullet would enter the small loopholes for musketry, and thus, firing from ambush, endanger the sentinel as he stood within the strong defenses. More than once arrows, freighted with inflammable substances, all ablaze, had been shot into the fort with the effort to fire the houses; it was dry weather mostly, with a prospect of a long drought, and the flames thus started threatened a conflagration, and required the exertions of the entire garrison to extinguish them. This proclivity necessitated eternal vigilance. Ever and anon it was requisite that the cannon should renew their strong, surly note of menace, and again send the balls crashing through the forest, and about the ears of the persistent besiegers. Only the strength of the primitive work saved the garrison from instant massacre, with the women and children and the settlers who had sought safety behind those sturdy ramparts. Of the ultimate danger of starvation the officers did not dare to think. And from this situation to be summoned to send forth threats of sword and fire, and to offer arrogant terms of peace, and to demand the surrender, to the justice of the gibbet, of the principal transgressors in the violation of the treaty!

There were no words that could express what they felt. They could only look at one another, each conscious of the other's sympathy, and say nothing.

Outside, Odalie, Belinda, and Ensign Whitson were singing a trio, the parts somewhat at haphazard, the fugue-like effects coming in like the cadences of the wind, now high, now low, and in varying strength. The stars still glittered down into the parade; the moon cast a gentle shadow along the palisades; the sentries in the block-house towers, the gunners lying flat beneath their great cannon, feeling the dew on their faces, looking toward the moon, the guard ready to turn out at the word, — all listened languorously, and drank in the sweets of the summer night with the music. A scene almost peaceful, despite the guarded walls, and the savage hordes outside, balked, and furious, and thirsting for blood.

"Let us see the express, Paul," said Stuart at last.

The express had repeatedly served as a means of communication between Fort Loudon and Fort Prince George, and as he came in he cautiously closed the door. He was a man of war, himself, in some sort, and was aware that a garrison is hardly to be included in the conference between commanders of a frontier force and their chosen emissary. With the inside of his packet his brain was presumed to have no concern, but in such a time and such a country his eyes and ears, on his missions to and fro, did such stalwart service in the interests of his

own safety that he was often able to give the officers at the end of his route far more important news, the fruits of his observation, than his dispatches were likely to unfold. He was of stalwart build, and clad in the fringed buckskin shirt and leggings of the hunter, and holding his coonskin cap in his hand. He had saluted after the military fashion, and had evidently been enough the inmate of frontier posts to have some regard for military rank. He waited, despite his look of having much of moment to communicate, until the question had been casually propounded by Stuart: "Well, what can you tell us of the state of the country?" then in disconnected sentences the details came in torrents.

Montgomery's campaign had been something unheard of. His "feet were winged with fire and destruction," — that was what Oconostota said. Oh, yes, the express had seen Oconostota. But for Oconostota he could not have made Fort Loudon. He had let him come with the two warriors, set free by Montgomery to suggest terms of peace and spread the news of the devastation, as a safe-guard against any straggling white people they might chance to meet, and in return they afforded him safe-conduct from the Cherokees. The devastation was beyond belief, — dead and dying Indians lying all around the lower country, and many were burned alive in their houses when the towns were fired.

Many were now pitifully destitute. As the fugitives stood on the summits of distant hills and watched their blazing homes and great granaries of corn — "I could but be sorry for them a little," declared Major Grant of Montgomery's command.

But the result was not to be what Montgomery hoped. The Cherokees were arming anew everywhere. They would fight now to the death, to extermination, — even Atta-Kulla-Kulla, who had been opposed to breaking the treaty. Oh, yes, he had seen Atta-Kulla-Kulla. The chief said he would not strike a blow with a feather to break a treaty and his solemn word. But to avenge the blood of his kindred that cried out from the ground he would give his life, if he had as many years to live as there were hairs on his head! The express added that Atta-Kulla-Kulla had been sitting on the ground in his old blanket, with ashes on his head, after the council agreed to break the treaty. But now he was going round with his scalp-lock dressed out with fresh eagle-feathers, and armed with his gun, and tomahawk, and scalp-knife, and wearing his finest gear, and with all his war-paint on — one side of his face red, and the other black, with big white circles around his eyes, — "looks mighty keen," the man exclaimed with a sort of relish of the fine barbaric effect of the fighting trim of the great warrior.

Then his face fell.

"And I told Oconostota that I would not deliver his message to you, Captain Stuart and Captain Demeré, sir," he hesitated; "it was not fit for your worshipful presence; and he said that the deed might go before the word, then."

"What message did he send?" asked Demeré, with flashing eyes.

"Well, sir, he said Fort Loudon was theirs, — that it was built for the Cherokees, and they had paid the English nation for it in the blood they had shed in helping the Virginians defend their frontier against the French and their Indian allies. But you English had possessed the fort; you had claimed it; and now he would say that it was yours, — yours to be burnt in, — to be starved in, — to die in, — to leave your bones in, till they are thrust forth by the rightful owner to be gnawed by the wolf of the wilderness."

There was a momentary silence.

"Vastly polite!" exclaimed Captain Stuart, with a rollicking laugh.

"Lord, sir," said the man, as if the sound grated upon him, "they are a dreadful people. I wouldn't go through again what I have had to risk to get here for — any money! It has been full three weeks since I left Oconostota's camp. He is with the Lower towns — him and Atta-Kulla-Kulla, but Willinawaugh is the head-man of the force out here.

They seemed to think I was spying, — but they have got so many men that I just doubts but what they want you should know their strength."

"You will go back to Colonel Montgomery at Fort Prince George with dispatches?" said Demeré.

The man's expression hardened. "Captain Demeré," he said, "and Captain Stuart, sir, I have served you long and faithful. You know I bean't no coward. But it is certain death for me to go out of that sally-port. I couldn't have got in except for that message from Oconostota. He wanted you to hear that. I believe 'Old Hop' thinks Willinawaugh can terrify you out of this place if they can't carry it by storm. I misdoubts but they expects Frenchmen to join them. They talk so sweet on the French! Every other word is Louis Latinac! That French officer has made them believe that the English intend to exterminate the Cherokees from off the face of the earth."

He paused a moment in rising discontent, — to have done so much, yet refuse aught! "I wouldn't have undertook to bring that message from Oconostota except I thought it was important for you to have your dispatches; it ain't my fault if they ain't satisfactory." He cast a glance of the keenest curiosity at the papers, and Captain Stuart, lazily filling his pipe, took one of the candles in his hand and kindled the tobacco at the blaze.

"Nothing is satisfactory that is one-sided," he said easily. "We don't want Colonel Montgomery to do all the talking, and to have to receive his letters as orders. We propose to say a word ourselves."

A gleam of intelligence was in the scout's eyes. It was a time when there was much professional jealousy rife in the various branches of the service, and he had been cleverly induced to fancy that here was a case in point. These men had a command altogether independent of Colonel Montgomery, it was true, but he was of so much higher rank that doubtless this galled them, and rendered them prone to assert their own position. He bent his energies now, however, to a question touching his pay, and answering a seemingly casual inquiry relative to the fact that he had heard naught of Gilfillan and the other express, was dismissed without being subjected to greater urgency.

The two maintained silence for a time, the coal dying in Captain Stuart's pipe as he absently contemplated the fireless chimney-place filled now with boughs of green pine.

Demeré spoke first. "If we can get no communication with Colonel Montgomery it means certain death to all the garrison."

"Sooner or later," assented Stuart.

The problem stayed with them all that night.

They were forced to maintain a cheerful casual guise in the presence of their little public, and the appearance of the express put great heart into the soldiery. The fact that the commandant was in the immediate receipt of advices from Colonel Montgomery and his victorious army seemed itself a pledge of safety. The express was turned loose among them to rehearse the exploits of Montgomery's troops, — the splendid forced marches they made; the execution of their marksmanship; the terror that the Cherokees manifested of their sputtering grenades, hurled exploding into the ambuscades by the stalwart grenadiers at the word, — "Fall on"; the interest of the Indians in the sound of the bagpipes and in the national dress, the plaid and philibeg, of the Highlanders, which, although now generally proscribed by law, was continued as a privilege granted to those enlisted in regiments in the British army. He told of the delight of the Highlanders in the sight of the Great Smoky Mountains, how they rejoiced to climb the crags and steep ravines even of the foothills. He repeated jokes and gibes of the camp outside Fort Prince George, for Montgomery had overtaken him and raised the siege before he reached the fort, so difficult was the slow progress of the express among the inimical Cherokees. He detailed Colonel Montgomery's relish of the sight of a piece of field artillery which Ensign Milne

showed him; that officer had mounted it one day before the siege when he was with a detail that he had ordered into the woods to get fuel for the post, and a band of Cherokees had descended upon him, — "a Quaker," he called it; you might have heard Colonel Montgomery laugh two hundred miles to Fort Loudon, for of course it wouldn't fight, — a very powerful Friend, indeed, — only a black log mounted between two wheels, which the soldiers had been in the habit of using to ease up the loads of wood. But the Indians were deceived, and with their terror of artillery got out of range in short order, and the soldiers made their way back into the fort under the protection of their "little Quaker."

When the barracks were lost in slumber, and the parade was deserted but for the moon, and the soft wind, and the echo of the tramp of the sentry, Captain Stuart went over to Captain Demeré's house, and there until late the two discussed the practicabilities, that each, like a blind trail, promised thoroughfare and led but to confusion. The officers did not dare to call for volunteers to carry dispatches to Montgomery, in the face of the fact that the express just arrived could not be prevailed on to return. Without, moreover, some assurance of the safety of the messengers previously sent out, no man would now so lightly venture his life as to seek to slip through the vigilant savage hordes.

To explain the terrors of the crisis to the garrison would be to have the ferocious Cherokees without, and panic, mutiny, and violence within. Yet a man must go; a man who would return; a man who would risk torture and death twice. "For we must have some assurance of the delivery of our dispatches," Stuart argued. "I am anxious as to the homing qualities of our dove that we are about to send out of this ark of ours," he said, as he lay stretched out at full length on the buffalo rug on the floor, in the moonlight that fell so peacefully in at the window of his friend's bedroom. Demeré was recumbent on his narrow camp-bed, so still, so silent, that more than once Stuart asked him if he slept.

"How can I sleep, — with this sense of responsibility?" Demeré returned, reproachfully.

But Stuart slept presently, waking once to reply to Demeré's remark that a married man would have the homing quality desired, the fort holding his family; Stuart declared that no one would be willing to leave wife and children to such protection as other men might have presence of mind to give them in a desperate crisis. The mere communication might create a panic.

"Of all things," said Stuart, as he lay at his stalwart length, his long, fair hair blowsing in the wind over the rug, "I am most afraid of fear."

When Demeré presently asked him if he were quite comfortable down there, his unceremonious presence placing him somewhat in the position of guest, his silence answered for him, and he did not again speak or stir until the drums were sounding without and the troops were falling in line for roll-call.

Neither gave sign of their vigil; they both were exceedingly spruce, and fresh, and well set up, to sustain the covert scrutiny of the garrison, who regarded them as a sort of moral barometer of the situation, and sought to discern in their appearance the tenor of Montgomery's official dispatches.

That morning, when Stuart went with his spy-glass to reconnoiter from the tower of one of the block-houses, he noted, always keenly observant, a trifle of confusion, as he entered, in the manner of the sentinel, — the smart, fair-haired, freckled-faced young soldier whose services were sometimes used as orderly, and whose name was Daniel Eske. The boy immediately sought to appear unconcerned. The officer asked no question. He raised the glass to his eye and in one moment discerned, amongst the laurel jungles close to the river, an Indian, a young girl, who suddenly lifted her arm and gracefully waved her hand toward the bastion. Stuart lowered the glass and gravely looked a grim inquiry at the young soldier.

Daniel Eske answered precipitately: "For God's sake, sir, don't let this go against me. I'm not holding any communication with the enemy, — the red devils. That baggage, sir, has been twice a-waving her hand to me when I have been on guard here. I never took no notice, so help me God, — Captain, — I —"

The distance being minimized by the lens, Stuart could discern all the coquettish details of the apparition; the garb of white dressed doe skin — a fabric as soft and flexible, the writers of that day tell us, as "velvet cloth" — the fringed borders of which were hung with shells and bits of tinkling metal; the hair, duly anointed, black and lustrous, dressed high on the head and decorated with small wings of the red bird; many strings of red beads dangled about the neck, and the moccasons were those so highly valued by the Indians, painted an indelible red. With a definite realization of the menace of treachery in her presence, Stuart's face was stern indeed as he looked at her. All at once his expression changed.

"Do as I bid you," he said to the sentry, suddenly remembering "Wing-of-the-Flying-Whip-poor-will," and her talk of the handsome young orderly with his gold hair and freckles, and his gossip touching the Scotchman's beautiful French wife, whom she regarded merely as a captive. "Wait till she waves

again. But no, — she is going, — show yourself at the window, — must risk a shot now and then."

The loop-hole here attained the size of a small window, being commanded only by the river, which would expose any marksman to a direct return fire.

"Now, she sees you," exclaimed Stuart, as the young fellow's face appeared in the aperture, gruff, sheepish, consciously punished and ridiculous, — how could he dream of Stuart's scheme! "Take off your hat. Wave it to her. Wave it with a will, man! There, — she responds. That will do." Then, with a change of tone, "I advise you, for your own good, to stay away from that window, for if any man in this garrison is detected in engaging in sign language with the enemy he will certainly be court-martialed and shot."

"Captain," protested the boy, with tears in his eyes, "I'd as lieve be shot now, sir, as to have you think I would hold any communication with the enemy, — the warriors. As to that girl, — the forward hussy came there herself. I took no notice of her waving her hand. I'd —"

But Captain Stuart was half down the ladder, and, despite young Eske's red coat, and the fact that he smelled powder with more satisfaction than perfume, and could hear bullets whizzing about his head without dodging, and had made forced marches without flinching, when he could scarce bear his sore feet to

the ground, the tears in his eyes overflowed upon the admired freckles on his cheek, and he shed them for the imputation of Captain Stuart's warning as to communicating with the enemy.

That officer had forgotten him utterly, except as a factor in his plan. He sat so jocund and cheerful beside the table in the great hall that Odalie, summoned thither, looked at him in surprise, thinking he must have received some good news, — a theory corrected in another moment by the downcast, remonstrant, doubtful expression on Demeré's face. He rose to offer her a chair, and Stuart, closing the door behind her, replied to something he had already said: —

"At all events it is perfectly safe to lay the matter before Mrs. MacLeod."

To this Demeré responded disaffectedly, "Oh, certainly, beyond a doubt."

"Mrs. MacLeod," said Stuart deliberately, and growing very grave, as he sat opposite to her with one hand on the table, "we are trusting very deeply to your courage and discretion when I tell you that our situation here is very dangerous, and the prospect nearly desperate."

She looked at him silently in startled dismay. She thought of her own, of all that she loved. And for a moment her heart stood still.

"You know that all received methods, all military

usages, fail as applied to Indian warfare. You can be of the greatest service to us in this emergency. Will you volunteer?" There was a little smile at the corner of Stuart's lip as he looked at her steadily.

"No, no, I protest," cried Demeré. "Tell her first what she is to do."

"No," said Stuart, "when you agreed to the plan you expressly stipulated that you were to have no responsibility. Now if Mrs. MacLeod volunteers it is as a soldier and unquestioningly under orders."

"It is sudden," hesitated Odalie. "May I tell my husband?"

"Would he allow you to risk yourself?" asked Stuart. "And yet it is for yourself, your husband, your child, the garrison, — to save all our lives, God willing."

Odalie's color rose, her eyes grew bright. "I know I can trust you to make the risk as slight as it may be, — to place me in no useless danger. I volunteer."

The two men looked at her for one moment, their hearts in their eyes.

Then Captain Stuart broke out with his reassuring raillery. "I always knew it, — such a proclivity for the military life! In the king's service at last."