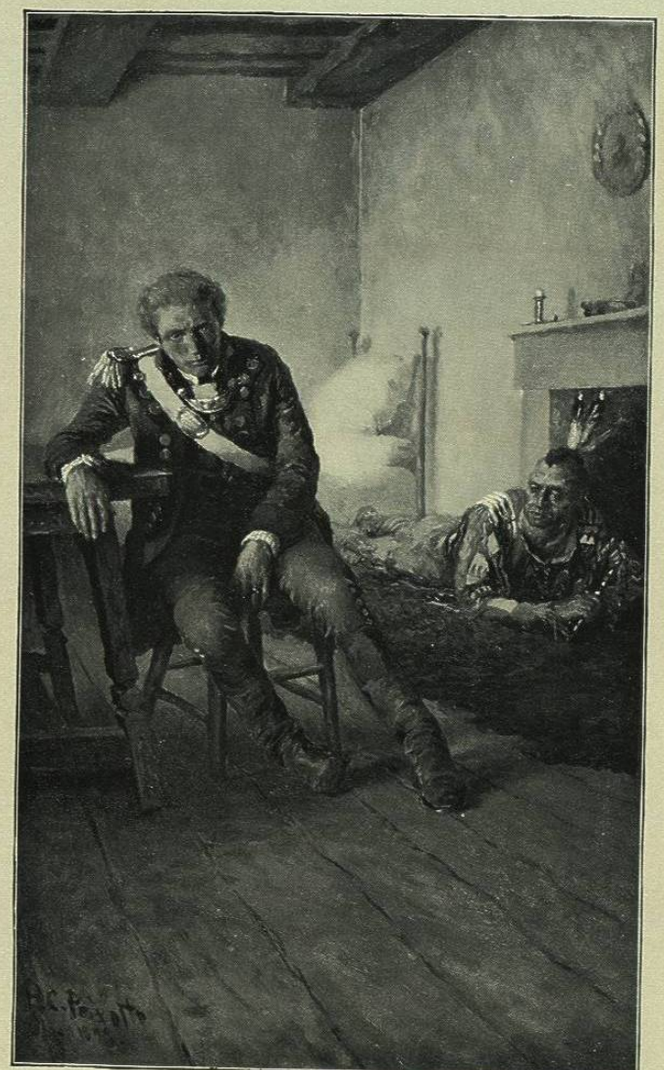
CHAPTER XIII

STUART seemed utterly vanquished — his spirit gone. In silence he was conducted back to his quarters in Demeré's house at Fort Loudon. And as there he sat in the spare, clean room, in the single chair it contained, with one elbow on the queer, rough little table, constructed according to a primitive scheme by the post carpenter, he stared forward blankly at the inevitable prospect so close before him. He had not now the solace of solitude in which he might have rallied his faculties. On the buffalo rug on the floor Atta-Kulla-Kulla reclined and smoked his long-stemmed pipe and watched him with impenetrable eyes. Once he spoke to him of the preparations making without, selecting the men for the gunners of the expedition. Stuart lifted his head abruptly.

"I will not go!" he cried in sudden passion. "So help me, God! I will die first! — a thousand deaths. So help me, God!" He lifted his clinched right hand in attestation and shook it wildly in the air.

He had a momentary shame in thus giving way



"He stared forward blankly at the inevitable prospect."

to his surcharged feelings, but as he rose mechanically from his chair his restless eyes, glancing excitedly about the room, surprised an expression of sympathy in the face of the Cherokee as he lay coiled up on the rug.

"Atta-Kulla-Kulla!" Stuart exclaimed impulsively, holding out both arms, "feel for me! Think of me! The poor remnant of the garrison! My 'young men'! My own command! I will die first, myself, a thousand deaths!"

Atta-Kulla-Kulla began to argue, speaking partly in Cherokee and now and again in fragmentary English. Neither the one nor the other might be the victim. The commandant at Fort Prince George would yield under this strong coercion.

"Never! Never!" cried Stuart. "His duty is to hold the fort. He will defend it to the last man and the last round of ammunition and the last issuance of rations. For his countrymen to be tortured and burned in his sight and hearing would doubtless give him great pain. But his duty is to his own command, and he will do it."

Atta-Kulla-Kulla seemed doubtful. "And then," argued Stuart, "would such torturing and burning of the surrendered garrison of Fort Loudon before the eyes of the garrison of Fort Prince George be an inducement to them to surrender too, and perhaps meet the same fate? Be sure they will

sell their lives more dearly! Be sure they will have heard of the massacre of the soldiers under the Cherokees' pledge of safe-conduct on the plains of Taliquo."

"*To-e-u-hah!*" Atta-Kulla-Kulla broke out furiously. "*To-e-u-hah!* It is most true!"

His countenance had changed to extreme anger. He launched out into a bitter protest that he had always contemned, and deprecated, and sought to prevent this continual violation of their plighted word and the obligations of their treaties on the part of the Cherokee nation. It invariably hampered their efforts afterward, as it was hampering them now. It took from their hand the tool of negotiation, the weapon of the head-men, and left only the tomahawk, the brute force of the tribe. *Wahkane, wahkane!* Was it not so when the treaty of Lyttleton was broken and Montgomery, the Terrible, came in his stead? And when the Cherokees had driven him out, and had taken their revenge on him for the blood which had been shed in his first foray, of what avail to massacre the garrison evacuating Fort Loudon, the possession of which had been for so long a coveted boon, and thus preclude a peaceful rendering of Fort Prince George and the expulsion of all English soldiery from Cherokee soil!

Stuart, cautiously reticent, let him dilate upon

all the wrongs wrought in council by the disregard of his advice, only now and again dropping a word as fuel to the flame. Cautiously, too, he led to the topic of the regard and the admiration which the acute mind and the more enlightened moral sentiment of this chief had excited in the English authorities, and the service this official esteem would have been to the headstrong nation if they had availed themselves of it. For was not Montgomery instructed to offer them terms on *his* account only? Their cruelty Atta-Kulla-Kulla was brought to perceive had despoiled them of the fruits of their victory; they might have, for all their patience and all their valor, and all their statecraft, only a few more scalps here and there; for presently the great English nation would be pressing again from the south, with Fort Prince George as a base, and the war would be to begin anew.

Deep into the night Atta-Kulla-Kulla dwelt on the treachery toward him, — for he had known naught of the enterprise of the massacre — that had so metamorphosed victory into disaster. The moonlight was coming in at the window, reminding Stuart of that night when he lay at length on the rug and consulted with Demeré and anxiously foreboded events, the news of Montgomery's departure from the country having fallen upon them like a crushing blow. How prescient of disaster they had felt —

but how little they had appraised its force! Paler now was the moon, more melancholy, desolate to the last degree as it glimmered on the white-washed walls of the bare, sparely furnished room. His attention had relaxed with fatigue as he still sat with his elbow on the table, his head on his hand, vaguely hearing the Indian councillor droning out his griefs of disregarded statesmanship and of the preferable attitude of affairs, so rudely, so disastrously altered. Suddenly his tone changed to a personal note.

"But it was ill with you, starving with your young men, in this place — long days, heap hungry."

"They seem happy days, now," said Stuart drearily, rousing himself.

"And to-morrow — and yet next day?" asked Atta-Kulla-Kulla.

Stuart stirred uneasily. "I can only die with what grace and courage I can muster," he said reluctantly. He glanced about him with restless eyes, like a hunted creature. "I cannot escape."

He looked up in sudden surprise. The Indian was standing now, gazing down at him with a benignity of expression which warranted the character of bold and forceful mind, and broad and even humane disposition, which this Cherokee had won of his enemies in the midst of the bloodshed and the treachery and the hideous cruelty of the warfare in which he was so much concerned.

"John Stuart," he said, "have I not called you my friend? Have I not given all I possess of wealth to save your life? Do I not value it, and yet it is yours!"

Stuart had forgotten the chief's words that Christmas night at the great gates, but they came back to him as Atta-Kulla-Kulla repeated them, anew.

"I know your heart, and I do not always forget! I do not *always* forget!"

In Stuart's amazement, in the abrupt reaction, he could hardly master the details of the unfolded plan. The Cherokee declared he had made up his mind to a stratagem, such as might baffle even the designs of Oconostota. He doubted his own power to protect his prisoner, should the king learn that Stuart still refused his services in the expedition to Fort Prince George. Oconostota's heart was set upon the reduction of this stronghold, and so was that of all the Cherokee nation. And yet Atta-Kulla-Kulla could but perceive the flagrant futility of the expectation of the surrender of the garrison on the coercion that Oconostota had devised, especially as Fort Prince George was so much nearer than Fort Loudon to communication with the white settlements. "I contemplate the fact before it happens, they only afterward," he said.

On the pretext of diverting Stuart's mind after his glut of horrors, and in affording him this recrea-

tion to secure an influence over him, eminently in character with the wiles of the Cherokee statesman, he gave out that he intended to take his prisoner with him for a few days on a hunting expedition. The deer were now in prime condition, and Captain Stuart was known by the Indians to be specially fond of venison. In the old days at Fort Loudon they had often taken note of this preference, and stopped there to leave as a gift a choice haunch, or saddle, or to crave the privilege of nailing a gigantic pair of antlers to vie with the others on the walls of the great hall. Stuart himself was a famous shot, and was often called by them in compliment *A-wah-ta-how-we*, the "great deer-killer." The project created no surprise, and Stuart saw with amazement the door of his prison ajar. One might have thought in such a crisis of deliverance no other consideration could appeal to him. But his attachment to the British interest seems to have been like the marrow in his bones. He demanded of Atta-Kulla-Kulla the privilege of being accompanied by two men of the garrison of his own choice.

The chief cast upon him a look of deep reproach. Did he fear treachery? Had his friend, his brother, deserved this?

"I ask much of a friend — nothing of an enemy," declared Stuart, bluffly. "You know my heart — trust me."

Atta-Kulla-Kulla yielded. If he experienced curiosity, the names of the two men which Stuart gave him afforded no clue as to the reason for their selection; one was a gun-smith, an armorer of uncommon skill, and Stuart knew that he was capable of dismounting and removing the cannon, without injury, through the tangled wilderness to Fort Prince George, should coercion overcome his resistance to the demands of the savages; the other, an artillery-man of long experience and much intelligence, himself adequately fitted to take command of the guns of the expedition, with a good chance of a successful issue. The massacre had swept away most of the cannoneers, and Stuart was aware that the infantry-men left of the garrison would be hardly more capable of dealing with the problems of gun service than was Oconostota, their careless and casual observation being worth little more than his earnest, but dense ignorance. Nevertheless, with his exacting insistence on the extreme limit of demand, he begged Atta-Kulla-Kulla, whose patience was wearing dangerously thin, to let him see them, speak to them for one moment."

"You can hear all I say — you who understand the English so well."

As he stepped into the old exhausted store-room, where the soldiers were herded together, squalid, heart-broken, ill, forlorn, Atta-Kulla-Kulla outside

closing the door fast, a quavering cheer went up to greet Stuart. For one moment he stood silent while their eyes met — a moment fraught with feeling too deep for words. Then his voice rang out and he spoke to the point. He wanted to remind them, he said, how the action of the garrison had forced the surrender and left the officers no choice, no discretion; however the event would have fallen out, it would not have happened thus. "But I did not come here to mock your distress," he protested. "I wish to urge you to rely upon me now. I have hopes of securing the ransom of the garrison by the government," — again a pitiful cheer, — "and as I may never be allowed to see you again this is my only chance. *Be sure of this*, — no man need hope for ransom who affords the Cherokees the slightest assistance in any enterprise against Fort Prince George, or takes up arms at their command."

He smiled, and waved his hat in courteous farewell, and stepped backward out of the door, apparently guarded by Atta-Kulla-Kulla, while that quavering huzza went up anew, the very sound almost breaking down his self-control.

The next day Stuart, accompanied by Atta-Kulla-Kulla, the warrior's wife, his brother, the armorer, and the artillery-man, — the supposititious hunting party, — set gayly and leisurely forth. But once out of reach of espionage they traveled in a north-

eastern direction with the utmost expedition night and day through the trackless wilderness, guided only by the sun and moon. What terrors of capture, what hardships of fatigue, what anxious doubt and anguish of hope they endured, but added wings to the flight of the unhappy fugitives. Nine days and nights they journeyed thus, hardly relaxing a muscle.

On the tenth day, having gained the frontiers of Virginia, they fortunately fell in with a party of three hundred men, a part of Bird's Virginia regiment, thrown out for the relief of any soldiers who might be escaping in the direction of that province from Fort Loudon, for through Hamish's dispatches its state of blockade and straits of starvation had become widely bruited abroad. With the succor thus afforded and the terror of capture overpast, the four days' further travel were accomplished in comparative ease, and brought the fugitives to Colonel Bird's camp, within the boundaries of Virginia.

Here Stuart parted from Atta-Kulla-Kulla, with many a protestation and many a regret, and many an urgent prayer that the chief would protect such of the unhappy garrison as were still imprisoned at Fort Loudon until they could be ransomed, measures for which Stuart intended to set on foot immediately. So the half-king of the Cherokees went his way back to his native wilds, loaded by Stuart with presents and commendations, and in

no wise regretting the radical course he had taken.[14] Stuart had instantly sent off messengers to apprise the commandant of Fort Prince George of the threatened attack, and to acquaint the governor of South Carolina with the imminence of its danger and the fall of Fort Loudon, for Governor Bull had expected Virginia to raise the siege of Loudon, unaware that that province had dropped all thought of the attempt, finding its means utterly inadequate to march an army thither through those vast and tangled wildernesses carrying the necessary supplies for its own subsistence. Provisions for ten weeks were at once thrown into Fort Prince George, and a report was industriously circulated among the Indians that the ground about it on every side had been craftily mined to prevent approach.[15]

Stuart found that Hamish MacLeod, after performing his mission and setting out for his return to the beleaguered fort with the responsive dispatches, had succumbed to the extreme hardship of those continuous journeys throughout the wild fastnesses, many hundred miles of which were traversed on foot and at full speed under a blazing summer sun, and lay ill of brain-fever at one of the frontier settlements. There Stuart saw him — still so delirious that, although recognizing the officer in some sort, he talked wildly of pressing dispatches, of the inattention and callous hearts of officials in high

station, of delays and long waitings for audience in official anterooms, of the prospect of any expedition of relief for the fort, of Odalie, and red calashes, and Savanukah, and rifle-shots, and Fifine, and "top-feathers," and Sandy — Sandy — Sandy; always Sandy!

Later, Stuart was apprised that the boy was on the way to recovery when he received a coherent letter from Hamish, who had learned that Stuart was using every endeavor — moving heaven and earth as the phrase went — to compass the ransom of the survivors of the garrison still at Fort Loudon or the Indian villages in its neighborhood. Hamish had heard of the fall of the fort and the massacre of the evacuating force, and still staggering under the weight of the blow, he reminded Stuart peremptorily enough of the services which Odalie had rendered in venturing forth from the walls under the officer's orders, when he dared not seek to induce a man to volunteer nor constrain one to the duty, and to urge upon his consideration the fact that she might be justly esteemed to have earned her ransom and that of her husband and child. Hamish had an immediate reply by a sure hand.

If it could avail aught to Mrs. MacLeod or any of her household, Stuart wrote with an uncharacteristic vehemence of protest, every influence he