



SIR WILLIAM JOHNSON

AND

THE SIX NATIONS.

CHAPTER I.

THE FIRST SETTLERS OF THE MOHAWK VALLEY.

THE MOHAWK VALLEY was first settled by men escaping from feudalism. The manor-system, a surviving relic of the old days of lordship and villeinage, had long cursed England, Germany, and Holland, though first outgrown and thrown off in the latter country. It was from this system, almost as much as from Church laws, that the Pilgrim Fathers were glad to escape and find free labour as well as liberty of conscience in Holland, — the land where they “heard,” and found by experience, “that all men were free.”

The Netherlands was the political training-school of the Pilgrims, and of most of the leaders of the Puritans, who before 1640 settled New England. In America they were more fortunate than their more southern neighbours, in that they were freed from the semi-feudalism of the Dutch Patroons and the manorlords of Maryland and Virginia. The Hollanders, on

coming to New Netherland and settling under the Patroons, enjoyed far less liberty than when in their own country. They were practically under a new sort of feudalism unknown in their "Patria." Their Teutonic instincts and love of freedom soon, however, drove them to relinquish their temporary advantages as manor-tenants, and to purchase land from the Indians and settle in the "Woestina," or wilderness. These Dutch farmers cheerfully braved the dangers and inconveniences of "the bush," in order to hold land in fee simple and be their own masters.

It was this spirit of independence that led a little company of worthy sons or grandsons of men who had fought under William the Silent, to settle in the "Great Flat," or Mohawk Valley. They were led by Arendt Van Curler, who, though first-cousin of the absentee Patroon Van Rensselaer, of Rensselaerwyck, had educated himself out of the silken meshes of semi-feudalism. Finding men like-minded with himself, who believed that the patroon or manor system was a bad reversion in political evolution, he led out the Dutch freemen, and founded the city of Schenectady. On the land made sacred to the Mohawks for centuries, by reason of council-fires and immemorial graves, this free settlement began. Here, not indeed for the first time in New Netherlands, and yet at a period when the proceeding was a novelty, the settlers held land in fee simple, and demanded the rights of trade.

It was before 1660 that these men, who would rather have gone back to Patria, or Holland, than

become semi-serfs under a manor-lord, came to Van Curler, or "Brother Corlaer" as the Iroquois called him, and asked him to lead them westward. In Fort Orange, July 21, 1661, in due legal form, by purchase from and satisfaction to the Mohawk Indian chiefs, the Indian title was extinguished. Thus, by a procedure as honourable and generous as William Penn's agreement with the Lenni Lenapes under the great elm at Shackamaxon, was signalized the entrance of Germanic civilization in the Mohawk Valley.

Early in the spring of 1662 Van Curler led his fourteen freemen and their families into their new possession. Travelling westward, up what is now Clinton Avenue in Albany, until they reached Norman's Kill, they struck northward, following the Indian trail of blazed trees, until after a circuit of twenty miles they reached their future home, on a low plateau on the banks of the Mohawk. On this old site of an Indian village they began the erection of their houses, mill, church, and palisades. The aboriginal name of the village, from which the Mohawks had removed, pointed to the vast piles of driftwood deposited on the river-flats after the spring floods; but not till after the English conquest did any one apply the old Indian name of the site of Albany — that is, "Schenectady" — to Van Curler's new settlement. Both French and Indians called the village "Corlaer," even as they also called the Mohawk River "the river of Corlaer," and the sheet of water in which he was drowned, not after its discoverer, Champlain, but "Corlaer's Lake." Nevertheless, since the Mohawks

had already retired from the Hudson River, and "the place outside the door of the Long House" was no longer Albany, but "Corlaer," they and the Europeans, soon after 1664, began to speak of the new settlement as "Schenectady;" especially, as by their farther retirement up the valley, "Corlaer" was now the true "Schenectady;" that is, outside the door of the Iroquois confederacy or Long House. Schenectady enjoys the honour of being more variously spelled than any other place in the United States; and its name has been derived from Iroquois, German, and Japanese, in which languages it is possible to locate the word as a compound. It is a softened form of a long and very guttural Indian word.

Then was begun, by these Dutch freeholders, the long fight of fifty years for freedom of trade with the Indians. Their contest was against the restrictive jealousy of Albany, including both Colony and Manor. With Dutch tenacity they held on, until victory at last crowned their persistence in 1727.

In a word, in its initiation and completion, the opening of the Mohawk Valley to civilization forms a noble episode in the story of American freedom. One of the first places in New York on which the forces representing feudalism and opposed to freeholding of land, and on which mediæval European notions arrayed against the ideas which had made America were beaten back, was at Schenectady, in the throat of the Mohawk Valley. Here was struck by liberty-loving Hollanders a key-note, of which the long strain has not yet ceased.

The immigrants who next followed the Dutch pioneers, — like them, as real settlers, and not as land-speculators and manor-builders, — and who penetrated still farther westward up the valley, were not English, but German. These people, who, as unarmed peasants in the Rhine Valley, had been unable to resist the invasion of Louis XIV. or to face the rigours of poverty in their desolated homeland, made the best sort of colonists in America. Brought by the British Government to settle on remote frontiers, to bear the brunt of contact with Indians, Spaniards, and Frenchmen, these sturdy Protestants soon proved their ability, not only to stand their ground, but to be lively thorns in the sides of despotic landlords, crown-agents, and governors.

The "first American rebel" Leisler, born at Mannheim in Germany, was a people's man. In his own rude way he acted with the intent of making ideas dominant then, which are commonplace now. His "rebellion" grew out of a boast made by the British Lieutenant-Governor Nicholson, that the Dutch colonists were a conquered people, and not entitled to the right of English citizenship. Hanged, by order of a drunken English governor, near the site of the Tribune Building, May 16, 1691, it is more than probable that he will yet have his statue in the metropolitan city of America. He belongs to the list of haters of what is falsely named aristocracy, the un-American state-church combination, and other relics of feudalism which survive in England, but which had been cast off by the Dutch Republic, in whose service

as a soldier he had come to America. His place in the list of the winners of American liberty is sure.¹

Under Governor Hunter's auspices, in 1710, nearly three thousand Germans from the Palatinate settled along the Hudson and in New York. By a third immigration, in 1722, ten per cent was added to the population by the Palatines, who settled all along the Mohawk Valley, advancing farther westward into the "Woestina." At German Flats and at Palatine Bridge their "concentration" was greatest. So jealous were the money-loving English of their wool-monopoly, that these Germans were forbidden under extreme penalties to engage in the woollen manufacture. The same intense jealousy and love of lucre which, until the Revolution, kept at home all army contracts that could possibly be fulfilled in Great Britain, prescribed the ban which was laid on the Mohawk Valley Palatines. With chains thus forged upon the Germans, who were expected to furnish "naval stores," there was no encouragement for them to raise sheep or improved stock. In this way it happened that Sir William Johnson was later enabled to boast that he was the first who introduced fine sheep and other live-stock in the Mohawk Valley.

The characteristics of these Germans were an intense love of liberty, and a deep-seated hatred against feudalism and the encroachments of monarchy in every form. The great land-owners, both Dutch and English, who wished to use these people as serfs,

¹ See "The Leisler Troubles of 1689," by Rev. A. G. Vermilye, D.D. New York. 1891.

found that they possessed strange notions of liberty. Poor as they were, they were more like hornets to sting than blue-bottles to be trapped with molasses. The Hessian fly had a barb in his tail. Loyal to the Crown, they refused to submit to the tyranny of the great landlords. It was one of these Germans, a poor immigrant, that first fought and won the battle of the freedom of speech and of the press. Now, entrenched in the Constitution of the United States, it is to us almost like one of the numerous "glittering generalities" of the Declaration of Independence, at which Englishmen smile, but which Americans, including the emancipated negroes, find so real. Then the freedom of the press was a dream. In 1734 John Peter Zenger, who incarnated the spirit and conscience of these Palatine Germans, was editor of the "New York Weekly Journal." He was reproached as a foreigner and immigrant, for daring to criticise the royal representatives, or ever to touch upon the prerogatives of Governor Cosby, the king's foolish representative. Zenger was imprisoned, but managed to edit his paper while in jail. At his trial he was defended by Hamilton, a lawyer from a colony whose constitution had been written by the son of a Dutch mother, in Holland, where printing had been free a century or more before it was even partially free in England. James Alexander Hamilton was the Scottish lawyer who had left his European home, to the detriment of his fortune, in order to enjoy richer liberty in Pennsylvania. He it was who first purchased Independence Square in Philadelphia, for

the erection thereon of the State House, in which the Liberty Bell was to hang, and "proclaim liberty to all the land, and to all the inhabitants thereof." Going to New York at his own expense, he, without fee, defended Zenger and secured his acquittal. This event marks an important point in the making of America and in the story of American freedom. It was in its effects as significant as the skirmish at Lexington. The doctrine, novel at that time in England but not in Holland, was advanced, that the truth of the facts in the alleged libel could be set up as defence, and that in this proceeding the jury were judges both of the law and the facts.

Though hundreds of Germans left New York for the greater advantage of land and the liberty of Pennsylvania, which had been settled under republican influences, yet those Palatines who rooted themselves in the Schoharie and Mohawk Valleys proved one of the best stocks which have made the American people. They were never popular with the men or women who wanted to make America a new London or a new England, with courts and castles, aristocracy and nobles, so called, entail and primogeniture, the landlords of feudal domain, and other old-world burdens. Honest, industrious, brave, God-fearing, truthful, and clean, they soon dotted the virgin forest with clearings, farms, and churches. Whatever else in their wanderings they lost or were robbed of, they usually managed to hold to their hymn-books and Bibles, and, in the case of the Reformed Churchmen, their Heidelberg Catechism. Their brethren

in Pennsylvania — the holy land of German-Americans — published the first Bible in America, printed in a European tongue ; and many early copies found their way northward. They lived on terms of peace with the Indians, treating these sons of the soil with kindness, and helping them in generous measure to the benefits of Christianity. The most honest and influential of Johnson's Indian interpreters were of Dutch or German stock.

Though other nationalities — Scottish, Irish, English — afterward helped to make the Mohawk Valley at first polyglot, and then cosmopolitan, it was by people of two of the strongest branches of the Teutonic race that this fertile region was first settled. The dominant idea of these people was freedom under law, reinforced by hearty contempt for the injustice which masquerades under the forms of prerogative and of "majesty." For all the self-styled, insolent vicegerents of God, in both Church and State, they felt a detestation, and were glad to find in America none of these. If found, they felt bound to resist them unto the end. Theirs was the democratic idea in Church and State, and they expressed it strongly.

It was this spirit which explains the rude and rough treatment, by Germans of both sexes, of arrogant royal agents and landlords in the Schoharie Valley, and which at the erection of churches built by public money, in which only a liturgical sect could worship, led to turbulence and riot. Certain historic old edifices now standing were once finished only after the king's bayonets had been summoned to protect masons

and carpenters from people who hated the very sight of an established or government church, built even partly by taxation, but shut to those of the sects not officially patronized.

Among such a people, strong in the virtues of unspoiled manhood; exhilarant with the atmosphere and splendid possibilities of the New World; trained in the school of Luther's Bible and the Heidelberg Catechism; taught by Dutch laws commanding purchase of land from the aborigines, and by the powerful example of Van Curler and their domines or pastors, to be kind to the Indians, — Sir William Johnson, one of the greatest of the makers of our America, came in 1738. It was the daughter of one of the people of this heroic stock that he married. At a susceptible age he learned their ideas and way of looking at things, especially at their method of justly treating the Indians of the Six Nations, who were looked upon as the rightful owners of the soil. Among these people Johnson lived all his adult life. He was ever in kindly sympathy with them, never sharing the supercilious contempt of those who were and who are ignorant alike of their language, abilities, and virtues.