

CHAPTER VI.

A TYPICAL FRONTIER FIGHT WITH INDIANS.

To reorganize the demoralized militia of the northern counties, Governor Clinton in November offered the command of the entire frontier to Johnson, who after due consideration accepted. Besides having the confidence of the people, among whom he was personally popular, Johnson, being backed by the Executive Council, was able to do the work expected of him, and bring about much needed reform, especially in improving the quality of the officers and the general discipline. The able-bodied men of the Mohawk Valley, mostly Dutch and German, with a few English, Irish, and Scots, were organized into nine companies of militia. Each village or settlement had its company of one hundred men, the most westward being at German Flats. Schenectady had two companies, and at Albany there were several ; while all the farmers living in the open country, between forts or palisaded villages, were likewise enrolled.

Johnson's wealth as farmer, fur-trader, army-contractor, and salaried officer was now steadily increasing. Even the victualling of Oswego ceased to be a losing enterprise, since the Assembly, in February, 1748, voted two hundred pounds to reimburse him for the

extraordinary charges to which he had been put. The same Assembly, however, voted one hundred and fifty pounds to Mr. Horsmanden, whom Clinton had arbitrarily deposed from the Council, and also appointed an agent to reside in London to represent them and act with them and for the people against the governor. In this the Dutch legislators were following a precedent which their fathers had established, in having agents to represent them to the States-General in Holland, and which they continued under English rule, when they sent Peter Stuyvesant to the Court of King Charles II. in 1667.

The expedition to Canada being wholly given up, it was necessary to conciliate the Indians with presents. In April, Johnson set out to Onondaga, the central council-fire of the Iroquois Confederacy, to meet the delegates of all the tribes, in order to ascertain their temper and invite them to a great council at Albany. His other purposes in going were to circumvent the schemes of Joncaire the French Jesuit, and talk the Indians into giving their permission to have forts erected in their country. As usual, he was not too squeamish in the use of means to accomplish his purpose. He wrote from Albany, April 9, 1748, to Captain Catherwood: "I shall leave no stone unturned to accomplish what I go at, either by fair or foul means; for if they are obstinate — I mean the Onondagas — I shall certainly talk very harsh with them, and try what that will do."

Leaving Mount Johnson with a guard of fifty men, with Captain Thomas Butler and Lieutenant Laurie as

officers, he set off, in bateaux heavily laden with presents and provisions, up the Mohawk. To move these loaded boats against the current, by punting, pushing, pulling, sailing, or floating their way along, was slow work, but was safely accomplished. Some of the Indians had come with pleasant remembrances of the courtesy of Mount Johnson. They felt deeply that sort of gratitude which has been defined as a "lively sense of favours to come." Having arrived some days before, and waited with attenuated rations, they were ravenous when Johnson and his stores arrived on April 24. After a salute of fire-arms and the unfurling of a British flag, three bark houses were assigned to the company, while Johnson was escorted to a large new lodge in which the mats were fresh and clean. That night a feast was given to the Indians out of the stores brought, all business being deferred until next day.

With all formality of pipes and tobacco, splendour of Indian and civilized costume, the council opened next morning. It was a contest of tongues, and one garrulous Irishman was here to enter the lists and to pit himself, with seemingly interminable prolixity of speech and the fixed ammunition of Indian rhetoric, against a host of tireless tongues. With plenty of talk to fill their ears and abundance of good things to tickle their stomachs, Johnson succeeded in strengthening the covenant of Corlaer; and the issue of the council was, on the whole, all that, even to Johnson, could be expected. In reporting results, Johnson suggested to the governor that proper regulation of the

sale of rum among the Indians was the first thing to be considered.

Clinton, while happy in knowing that the Iroquois would come to the Albany council, was brooding over the tendency everywhere manifest in the colonies to assert their independence. Johnson's full report of the tongue-victory at the Onondaga council was laid before the Assembly, June 21. The governor added, that to hold the Indians loyal to the English it would be necessary to prosecute the expedition against Crown Point, and at once make arrangements for exchange of prisoners. In this latter suggestion, and with that recommending a severe enactment against rumsellers, the Assembly at once concurred. A few days after came news of the treaty of peace at Aix-la-Chapelle.

Johnson, by unremitting exertion, had succeeded in securing the largest attendance of Indians that had ever assembled in Albany. They came from all the tribes of the Confederacy and from the lake region westward, besides remnants of New England and Hudson River Indians. Many of these Indians had never seen a civilized town, and greatly enjoyed the regular meals and other comforts of civilization, while interested in studying houses with chimneys, carpets, glass windows, and other things unknown to forest life. Great preparations had been made to receive them and to keep them in the best of humour. What with the clerks, quartermasters, interpreters, and others of the official class, the militia and the citizens, the farming folk who had flocked into the city to see the sights, in addition to villagers from the region around,

Albany had never before beheld so large a population, nor shown such picturesque activity in her streets. In the oldest city in any of the colonies north of the municipality on Manhattan Island, these few days in the month of July were long remembered.

The eighteenth day of July had come; and all the Indians expected, hundreds in number, had already arrived, and were beginning to think "Brother Corlaer" was as dilatory as his war operations had all along been. Governor Shirley and the Massachusetts commissioners, however, had come; and all lay down at night expecting the great palaver would be but a day or two off. But before Clinton was to arrive, they were to learn how near the enemy was even at that moment.

In the evening exciting news was brought them from Schenectady. A battle had been fought between a party of Canadian Indians and the militia and villagers just beyond Schenectady, in which twenty whites had been killed and a number taken prisoners. The drums at once beat to quarters, and Captain Chew with one hundred militiamen and two hundred of the Indians, told off from those in convention, marched at once in pursuit. The Indians from Albany expected to head off the raiders, and hence went along the usual trails to Canada; but this time the Canada savages had retreated along the Sacandaga road and creek, "by a different road from what they used to go," as Onnasdego, an Onondaga sachem, said to Clinton in his oration a few days afterward. Johnson remained in Albany attending to his horde of

guests ; while Captain Chew and his band made vain pursuit. On the 22d, the day of the opening of the council, he received a letter from Albert Van Slyck, dated "Schonaictaiday, July 21st, 1749," giving a brief detail of the bloody affray. Van Slyck was an honest Dutch farmer, whose defective powers in English composition were in contrast with his courage ; and his Dutch-English account is difficult to make certain sense of, especially in its blotted, time-stained, and torn condition in the Johnson manuscripts at Albany ; but, except some entries in the family Bibles of people in or near the town, this is the only known contemporaneous writing by one who was in the fight. It is not mentioned even in Parkman's "Montcalm and Wolfe," nor in the colonial or more recent histories, except Drake's, though sometimes referred to inaccurately.

Further, it was difficult, until 1752, for an intelligent Hollander or American of Holland descent, whose ancestors since 1581 had adopted the calendar of Christendom to keep the run of English chronology, which was eleven days behind the rest of the world. For over a century and a half, England was very much in the condition of Russia of the present day, as compared with the rest of Europe. The English used "the old style," or the calendar of Julius Cæsar, while the continental nations made use of the modern or Gregorian calendar. It may be that this explains why Van Slyck dated his letter one year ahead, 1749, instead of 1748.

Van Slyck's letter describes an event which for a generation formed a leading topic at the evening fire-

sides of the people of Schenectady, and of many in Connecticut. The tremendous loss in men, chiefly heads of families, that fell upon this frontier town is almost unknown to history ; yet the fight at Beechdale was one of the most stubbornly contested little battles of the Old French War. Instead of being "an autumnal foray" upon a party of woodmen, it was a stand-up, hand-to-hand fight by the Schenectady men against savages who were consummate ambuscaders, and well versed in all the arts of woodcraft and the tricks most likely to confound raw militiamen.

The battle-field lies on the Toll Farm, three miles west of Schenectady, and is visible from the car-windows to the right of a train on the New York Central Railroad going westward. A company of Schenectady men were at Maalwyck, a place not far from the town, on the north side of the river. Messrs. Dirk Van Voast and Daniel Toll, with Toll's negro slave, Ryckert, left their comrades to find their horses which had strayed off. A few minutes after they had left, firing was heard in the direction in which they had gone, by the Van Slyck brothers, Adrian and Albert, one of whom was afterward in the fight and wrote the meagre account which is now among the Johnson papers. They at once sent a messenger, their negro slave, to Schenectady to give the alarm, which was doubtless sounded out from the belfry of the strong fortress-church by the Widow Margarita Veeder, the *klok-luyer* or bell-ringer at that time. The summons came first before noon. The negro delivered his message, bidding the men go out to Abraham De

Graaf's house at Beukendal, where Van Slyck would meet them.

At this time there was a company of New England militia in the town under the command of Captain Stoddard, who was then absent, his place being filled by Lieut. John Darling. The militiamen were from Connecticut, and were raw levies unused to Indian warfare. They started off accompanied by five or six young men and Daniel Van Slyck, another brother of the writer. The party numbered about seventy men in all. Another company of armed men, whose number is not stated, left for the scene of conflict a few minutes later, to see if they could find or see Daniel Toll.

Toll and Van Voast, after leaving the Van Slycks at Maalwyck, had reached a place two miles away, near the house of De Graaf, and called in Dutch, Poopendaal, or later, Beukendal or Beech Dale. Within or beyond the dale, was a well-known place on hard clayey soil, full of deer-licks at which the deer used to come to lick the salt. At this *kleykuil*, or clay-pit, the two men imagined they heard, about ten o'clock, the sound of horses' hoofs stamping on the hard ground, but with a regularity that seemed very suspicious. Approaching warily nearer, they discovered that the noise came from a party of Indians playing quoits. Almost as soon as the two white men came in sight, they were fired on by the savages, who had seen their coming. Toll was instantly killed, and Van Voast was wounded and made prisoner. The black man, Ryckert, fled toward Schenectady.

The wily savages now prepared to ambuscade the party which they knew would soon appear from Schenectady. For this purpose they laid a sensational trap in a field, somewhat off from the path and in a defile near the creek, which was surrounded with forest and bush. Taking the dead body of Mr. Toll, they set it up against a fence and tied a live crow in front of the corpse. This curious sight of a wild crow flying up and down before an apparently living man they knew would at once excite the attention, especially of the impulsive and unwary young men who, as they supposed, would be the first on the field. The sequel proves they were not disappointed.

Lieutenant Darling and his Connecticut men marched out, cautiously searching for the enemy, but seeing no trace of any. At Mr. Simon Groot's unoccupied house they found Adrian Van Slyck, who with a few men had arrived and learned from the negro boy Ryckert, that his master, Mr. Toll, had been shot. Though nearly paralyzed with fear, he offered to point out the place where he fell. The negro was furnished with a horse, and acted as pilot to the advance party of about forty men. Soon after they had gone, Ackes Van Slyck arrived and remained with his men near the house.

Pretty soon the strange phenomenon of a crow playing near a man arrested their attention, and they at once marched into the trap to see the curious sight. Very soon they discovered that the man was a corpse, and the crow was tied to it with a string. At this moment when nearly all were in the defile along the creek,

and off their guard, the crash of the enemy's guns enlightened them as to the situation. They found themselves in a ravine or hollow curved like a horse-shoe, and nearly surrounded on both sides by woods, from which puffs of white smoke and flashes of fire were issuing from unseen enemies. Eight or ten of the whites were at once stretched dead on the clay ground, and then the yelling savages leaped out of cover with knife and hatchet.

The militiamen soon broke and ran, but the Schenectady men bravely stood their ground. It took a moment to deliver their fire, and then with musket clubbed or thrown aside, the fighting became, for a few minutes, a series of desperate encounters between white and red man, in which it happened more than once that both buried their knives in each other. After the battle the bodies of Glen, De Graaf, and other noted Indian fighters were found alongside their dead enemies with whom they had wrestled in deadly struggle. In this hand-to-hand fight twelve of the party of whites were killed, and five made prisoners; Lieutenant Darling's company losing seven men, who were shot dead, and six missing.

Adrian Van Slyck and a company of New York militiamen now reached the scene, where the little band of whites were found behind trees and stumps holding the enemy at bay; Lieutenant Darling having been killed at the first fire, Ackes Van Slyck was directing the fight. No sooner had the New York reinforcements got into the line of Indian fire, than they all fled in the most cowardly manner. Adrian

Van Slyck and the two or three Schenectady men who stood by him in this part of the field were shot down.

The rest of the original party of whites now retreated out through the western entrance of the vale, and joined by Albert Van Slyck and a few men from the village, reached the house of Abraham De Graaf near by. This substantial edifice — still standing, but used as a dried-apple bleacher when the writer visited it — was not then occupied, but was new and strong, and stood on commanding ground. The fact of its being empty shows the condition of affairs; the people who lived in isolated farm-houses being at this time gathered almost wholly in palisaded villages or other fortified places.

Hastily entering, they barred the door, and reaching the second story, tore off all the boards near the floor and eaves, and prepared for a stubborn defence. With their keen marksmanship they kept the enemy at bay, completely baffling the savages, who peppered the house in vain. While this siege was going on, the two Indian lads left in charge of Dirk Van Voast, eager to see the fight, tied their prisoner to a tree, and climbing up the slope of the ravine, became absorbed in the firing. Van Voast succeeded in reaching his knife, cut the thongs binding him, and ran off to Schenectady, meeting another squad of armed men from the village hastening to the scene. These were led by Jacob Glen, and Albert Van Slyck, the writer describing the event.

Van Slyck had hoped to gather enough men to get

out and surround the Indians so as to capture the whole band ; but Garret Van Antwerp, fearing lest the town would be left without a garrison in case of attack, would suffer no more to leave the palisades. However, this last reinforcement reached the battle-ground in time to drive off the savages, who were fighting the previously sent party from behind trees, and to save the bodies of Adrian Van Slyck and the dead men near him from being scalped and stripped. Seeing this last party approaching, the savages drew off, retreating up the Sacandaga road. All the whites, including the last comers, the scattered out-door fighters behind trees, and the little garrison in the house, now united. They proceeded at once to count up their loss, and to gather up the dead men and load them on wagons for burial in Schenectady.

What the loss of the Indians was in this battle, as in most others, the white men were never able to find out. Except at the scene of the first firing and ambuscade, Indian corpses were not visible. The first purpose of the redskins, as soon as the opening fury of battle slackened, was to conceal their loss. To run out from cover, even in the face of the fire, and draw away the corpses of their friends, was their usual habit, and to this they were thoroughly trained. Exposure in such work was more cheerfully borne than in regular combat, though usually the dead body was reached by cautious approach, and with as much concealment as possible in the undergrowth. A noose at the end of a rope was skilfully thrown over the head of the corpse, and the end of the rope carried back

into cover. As skilfully as a band of medical students or resurrectionists can put a hook under the chin of a corpse and hoist it up from under the coffin-lid half sawed off, the savages in ambush would draw the body of their fallen comrade out of sight, to be quickly concealed or buried. Indian fighters often told stories of dead men apparently turning into snakes and gliding out of sight. Owing to this habit of the Indians, it was very difficult to arrive at the exact execution done by the white man's fire. As most of the Schenectady men were trained Indian fighters, the loss of the savages was probably great.

This was a sad day for Schenectady. One third of the white force engaged were dead or wounded. Twenty corpses — twelve of them Schenectady fathers, sons, or brothers, and eight Connecticut men — were laid on the floor of a barn, near the church, which is still standing. The sorrowing wives, mothers, and sisters came to identify the scalped and maimed dear ones. Thirteen or fourteen men were missing, while the number of wounded was never accurately known. In the Green Street burying-ground, east of the "Old Queen's Fort," the long funeral procession followed the corpses, while Domine Van Santvoord committed dust to dust.

Many are the touching traditions of sorrow connected with this "Beukendal massacre." So it, indeed, appeared to the people of Schenectady, because of so many of their prominent men thus suddenly slain. To them it was in some sense a repetition of

the awful night of Feb. 8, 1690. Yet, instead of its being a massacre, it was a stand-up, hand-to-hand fight in Indian fashion, and a typical border-battle. In the superb and storied edifice of "The First Reformed Protestant Dutch Church of Schenectady, in the county of Albany,"—so called in the old charter given by King George II., and so rich in the graphic symbols of "the church in the Netherlands under the Cross," as well as of local history,—a tablet epitomizing the history of the church in its five edifices was set in its niche after the two hundredth anniversary of the founding of the church, celebrated June 21, 1880. It is "in pitiful remembrance of the martyrs who perished in the massacres of February 9th, 1690, and July 18th, 1748." From the rear church window one may still look, in 1891, on the barn on the floor of which the bodies were brought and laid for identification on the day when the sturdy Dutch-American Albert Van Slyck signed his letter to "Coll. William Johnson at Albany," "your Sorrowfull and Revengfull friend on those Barbarous Enemys, and am at all Times on your Command."

Clinton, accompanied by his satellitè, Dr. Colden, and some other members of his council, arrived in Albany, July 20. The next day, after those necessary ceremonies to which the Indians are as great bond-slaves as their civilized brethren, the council fairly opened. A great palaver ensued, and talk flowed unceasingly for hour after hour, until many ears needed rest even more than the few busy tongues. The governor wound up his long address by refer-

ring to the battle of Beukendal, so recent and so near by.

After three days of smoke and thought, a wordy warrior from Onondaga replied for the Confederacy in prolix detail. The day was closed with a dance by the young braves, and the king's health was drunk in five barrels of beer.

On the following day the River Indians spoke, expressing gratitude for favours past, and asserting that if they had been present when news of the Schenectady battle reached Albany, they would have cheerfully joined in pursuit, even to the gate of Crown Point.

By this time it was no longer possible to suppress the news of peace in Europe, and the poor savages who had been goaded into digging up the hatchet and neglecting their hunting, and who were thirsting for revenge, were now left in the lurch, and told to go quietly home. Nevertheless, most of the colonists were satisfied with the result of the council, and Johnson's popularity increased. The Iroquois were pleased when they found that both Shirley and Clinton were about to send back all the French prisoners to Canada, and to ask for the return of both the white, red, and black captives, who had been carried away from their homes south of the St. Lawrence.

Lieutenant Stoddard and Captain Anthony Van Schaick went to Canada, and into the Indian country; but their success was not gratifying. Only twenty-four prisoners accompanied Lieutenant Stoddard when he left Canada, June 28, 1750. The white boys

and girls who had nearly or wholly forgotten their old home and kin, and had been adopted into the tribes, declined, or were forced to decline, going back. Occasionally white women had abjured their religion, and in other cases the red squaws threatened sure death to the adopted captives should they try to return, even at the French governor's orders. With the Indians, however, exchange was more easy, though the savages were unable to understand the delays of diplomacy between Clinton and Gallissonière; and to pacify them, Johnson was often at his wits' end. However, by his personal influence, by visits of condolence, by social participation in their games and feasts, by persistent patience, public eloquence, private persuasion, and the frequent use of money and other material gifts, he won fresh laurels of success. In spite of the diplomacy of La Gallissonière, the ceaselessly active Jesuit priests, French cunning and strategy on the one hand, and English and Dutch weakness and villany on the other, he held the whole Iroquois Confederacy loyal to the British Crown. The greatness of Johnson is nobly shown in thus foiling the French and all their resources.

This year, amid manifold commercial, military, and domestic cares, he entertained the famous Swedish botanist, naturalist, and traveller, Peter Kalm, with whose name the evergreen plant *Kalmia* is associated. He had come at the suggestion of Linnæus to investigate the botany and natural history of North America. He arrived at Fort Johnson with a letter from Dr. Colden, who was as fond of physical science as he

was of his Toryism. After dispensing courtly hospitality, Johnson furnished him with a guide to Oswego and Niagara, and a letter to the commandant at the former place. Kalm's "Voyage to North America" was translated and published in London in 1777, and the map accompanying it is of great interest. After him was named that family of evergreens in which is found the American laurel, *Kalmia latifolia*, which has been proposed as the national flower of the United States.