Wars And Rumors Of Wars

Winston Churchill

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AND so our life went on the same, but yet not the same. For I had the Land of Promise to dream of, and as I went about my tasks I conjured up in my mind pictures of its beauty. Bear hunting with my father, and an occasional trip on the white mare twelve miles to the Cross−Roads for salt and other necessaries, were the only diversions to break the routine of my days. But at the Cross−Roads, too, they were talking of Kaintuckee. For so the Land was called, the Dark and Bloody Ground.

The next year came a war on the Frontier, waged by Lord Dunmore, Governor of Virginia. Of this likewise I heard at the Cross−Roads, though few from our part seemed to have gone to it. And I heard there, for rumors spread over mountains, that men blazing in the new land were in danger, and that my hero, Boone, was gone out to save them. But in the autumn came tidings of a great battle far to the north, and of the Indians suing for peace.

The next year came more tidings of a sort I did not understand. I remember once bringing back from the Cross−Roads a crumpled newspaper, which my father read again and again, and then folded up and put in his pocket. He said nothing to me of these things. But the next time I went to the Cross−Roads, the woman asked me: —

"Is your Pa for the Congress?"

"What's that?" said I.

"I reckon he ain't," said the woman, tartly.

I recall 8 her dimly, a slattern creature in a loose gown and bare feet, wife of the storekeeper and wagoner, with a swarm of urchins about her.

There was no money in that country, and the store took our pelts in exchange for what we needed from civilization. Once a month would I load these pelts on the white mare, and make the journey by the path down the creek. At times I met other settlers there, some of them not long from Ireland, with the brogue still in their mouths. And again, I saw the wagoner with his great canvas−covered wagon standing at the door, ready to start for the town sixty miles away. 'Twas he brought the news of this latest war.

One day I was surprised to see the wagoner riding up the path to our cabin, crying out for my father, for he was a violent man. And a violent scene followed. They remained for a long time within the house, and when they came out the wagoner's face was red with rage. My father, too, was angry, but no more talkative than usual.

"Ye say ye'll not help the Congress?" shouted the wagoner.

"I'll not," said my father.

"Ye'll live to rue this day, Alec Trimble," cried the man. "Ye may think ye're too fine for the likes of us, but there's them in the settlement that knows about ye."

With that he flung himself on his horse, and rode away. But the next time I went to the Cross−Roads the woman drove me away with curses, and called me an aristocrat. Wearily I tramped back the dozen miles up the creek, beside the mare, carrying my pelts with me; stumbling on the stones, and scratched by the dry briers. For it was autumn, the woods all red and yellow against the green of the pines. I sat down beside the old beaver dam to gather courage to tell my father. But he only smiled bitterly when he heard it. Nor would he tell me what the word aristocrat meant.

That winter we spent without bacon, and our salt gave 9 out at Christmas. It was at this season, if I remember rightly, that we had another visitor. He arrived about nightfall one gray day, his horse jaded and cut, and he was dressed all in wool, with a great coat wrapped about him, and high boots. This made me stare at him. When my father drew back the bolt of the door he, too, stared and fell back a step.

"Come in," said he.

"D'ye ken me, Alec?" said the man.

He was a tall, spare man like my father, a Scotchman, but his hair was in a cue.

"Come in, Duncan," said my father, quietly. "Davy, run out for wood."

Loath as I was to go, I obeyed. As I came back dragging a log behind me I heard them in argument, and in their talk there was much about the Congress, and a woman named Flora Macdonald, and a British fleet sailing southward.

And that was the end of it. The man left with scant ceremony, I guiding him down the creek to the main trail.

As the spring drew on I had had a feeling that we could not live thus forever, with no market for our pelts. And one day my father said to me abruptly: —

"Davy, we'll be travelling."

"Where?" I asked.

"Ye'll ken soon enough," said he. "We'll go at crack o' day."

We went away in the wild dawn, leaving the cabin desolate. We loaded the white mare with the pelts, and my father wore a woollen suit like that of our Scotch visitor, which I had never seen before. He had clubbed his hair. But, strangest of all, he carried in a small parcel the silk gown that had been my mother's. We had scant other baggage.

We crossed the Yadkin at a ford, and climbing the hills to the south of it we went down over stony traces, down and down, through rain and sun; stopping at rude cabins or taverns, until we came into the valley of another river. This I know now was the Catawba. My memories of that ride are as misty as the spring weather in the mountains. But presently the country began to open up into broad fields, some of these abandoned to pines. And at last, splashing through the stiff red clay that was up to the mare's fetlocks, we came to a place called Charlotte Town.

What a day that was for me! And how I gaped at the houses there, finer than any I had ever dreamed of! That was my first sight of a town. And how I listened open−mouthed to the gentlemen at the tavern! One I recall had a negro servant to wait on him, and was the principal spokesman. He, too, was talking of war. The Cherokees had risen on the western border, and he was telling of the massacre of a settlement, in no mild language.

"Sirs," he cried, "the British have stirred them to this. Will you sit here while women and children are scalped, and those devils" (he called them worse names) "Stuart and Cameron go unpunished?"

My father got up from the corner where he sat, and stood beside the man.

"I ken Alec Cameron," said he.

The man looked at him with amazement.

"Ay?" said he, "I shouldn't think you'd own it. Damn him," he cried, "if we catch him we'll skin him alive."

"I ken Cameron," my father repeated, "and I'll gang with you to skin him alive."

The man seized his hand and wrung it.

"But first I must be in Charlestown," said my father.

The next morning we sold our pelts. And though the mare was tired, we pushed southward, I behind the saddle. I had much to think about, wondering what was to become of me while my father went to skin Cameron. I had not the least doubt that he would do it. The world is a story−book to a lad of nine, and the thought of Charlestown filled me with a delight unspeakable. Perchance he would leave me in Charlestown.