The Nollichucky Trace

Winston Churchill

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Some to endure, and many to quail,
Some to conquer, and many to fail,
Toiling over the Wilderness Trail.
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TOM had promised the Kentucky settlers, fighting for their lives in their blockhouses, that he would come back again, for a good shot was sorely missed in that country in those days. But Polly Ann refused to listen when he implored her to let him return alone, to come back for her when the furies of war had abated. And she insisted that Tom take me, too. So after much discussion it was arranged that one of the Winn boys should come over to stay with old Mr. Ripley until quieter times.

As for me, the thought of going with them into that promised land was like wine, and, wondering what the place was like, I could not sleep of nights. Then came the morning we started on our journey across the Blue Wall. Before the sun chased away the filmy veil of mist from the brooks in the valley, the McChesneys, father, mother, and children, were gathered to see us depart. And as they helped us to tighten the packsaddles Tom himself had made from chosen tree−forks, they did not cease lamenting that we were going to certain death. Our scrawny horses splashed across the stream, and we turned to see a gaunt and lonely figure standing apart against the sun, stern and sorrowful. We waved our hands, and set our faces towards Kaintuckee.

Tom walked ahead, rifle on shoulder, then Polly Ann; and lastly I drove the two shaggy ponies, the instruments of husbandry we had been able to gather awry on their packs, — a scythe, a spade, and a hoe. I triumphantly carried the axe.

It was not long before we were in the wilderness, shut in by mountain crags, and presently Polly Ann forgot her sorrows in the perils of the trace. Choked by briers and grapevines, blocked by sliding stones and earth, it rose and rose through the heat and burden of the day until it lost itself in the open heights. As the sun was wearing down to the western ridges the mischievous sorrel mare turned her pack on a sapling, and one of the precious bags burst. In an instant we were on our knees gathering the golden meal in our hands. Polly Ann baked 82 journeycakes on a hot stone from what we saved under the shiny ivy leaves, and scarce had I spancelled the horses ere Tom returned with a fat turkey he had shot.

"Was there ever sech a wedding journey!" said Polly Ann, as we sat about the fire, for the mountain air was chill. "And Tom and Davy as grave as parsons. Ye'd guess one of you was Rutherford himself, and the other Mr. Boone."

No wonder he was grave. I little realized then the task he had set himself, to pilot a woman and a lad into a country where single men feared to go this season. But it was on the whole a merry journey, the first part of it, if a rough one. Often Polly Ann would draw me to her and whisper: "We'll hold out, Davy. He'll never 83 know." When the truth was that the big fellow was going at half his pace on our account. He told us there was no fear of Indians here. Yet, when the scream of a painter or the hoot of an owl stirred me from my exhausted slumber, I caught sight of him with his back to a tree, staring into the forest, his rifle at his side.

It was wonderful to me how he chose his way through the mountains. Once in a while we caught sight of a yellow blaze in a tree, made by himself scarce a month gone, when he came southward alone to fetch Polly Ann. At sundown, when we loosed our exhausted horses to graze on the wet grass by the streams, Tom would go off to look for a deer or turkey, and often not come back to us until long after darkness had fallen.

"Davy'll take care of you, Polly Ann," he would say as he left us.

And she would smile at him bravely and say, "I reckon I kin look out for Davy awhile yet."

But when he was gone, and the crooning stillness set in broken only by the many sounds of the night, we would sit huddled together by the fire. And in both our minds rose red images of hideous foes skulking 84 the forest floor.

Strangely enough it was I who chanced upon the Nollichucky Trace, which follows the meanderings of that river northward through the great Smoky Mountains. It was made long ago by the Southern Indians as they threaded their way to the Hunting Lands of Kaintuckee, and was shared now by Indian traders. The path was redolent with odors, and bright with mountain shrubs and flowers, — the pink laurel bush, the shining rhododendron, and the grape and plum and wild crab. The clear notes of the mountain birds were in our ears by day, and the music of the water falling over the ledges, mingled with that of the leaves rustling in the wind, lulled us to sleep at night. High above us, as we descended, the gap, from naked crag to timber−covered ridge, was spanned by the eagle's flight. And virgin valleys, where future generations were to be born, spread out and narrowed again, — valleys with a deep carpet of cane and grass, where the deer and elk and bear fed unmolested.

Our way was down past the great bend of the Nollichucky below Lick Creek, and so to the Great War−path, the trail by which countless parties of red marauders had travelled north and south. It led northeast between the mountain ranges. And at length we forded the Holston and came to the scattered settlement in Carter's Valley.

I have since racked my brain to remember at whose cabin we stopped there. He was a rough backwoodsman with a wife and a horde of children. But I recall that a great rain came out of the mountains and down the valley. We were counting over the powder gourds in our packs, when there burst in at the door as wild a man as has ever been my lot to see. His brown beard was grown like a bramble patch, his eye had a violet light, and his hunting shirt was in tatters. He was thin to gauntness, ate ravenously of the food that was set before him, and throwing off his soaked moccasins, he spread his scalded feet to the blaze, the steaming odor of drying leather filling the room.

"Whar be ye from?" asked Tom.

For answer the man bared his arm, then his shoulder, and two angry scars, long and red, revealed themselves, and around his wrists were deep gouges where he had been bound.

"They killed Sue," he cried, "sculped her afore my very eyes. And they chopped my boy outen the hickory withes and carried him to the Creek Nation. At a place where there was a standin' stone I broke loose from three of 'em and come here over the mountains, and I ain't had nothin', stranger, but berries and chainey brier−root for ten days. God damn 'em!" he cried, standing up and tottering with the pain in his feet, "if I can get a Deckard —"

"Will you go back?" said Tom.

"Go back!" he shouted, "I'll go back and fight 'em while I have blood in my body."

He fell into a bunk, but his sorrow haunted him even in his troubled sleep, and his moans awed us as we listened. The next day he told us his story with more calmness, and it was horrible indeed, and might well have frightened a less courageous woman than Polly Ann. Imploring her not to go, he became wild again, and brought tears to her eyes when he spoke of his own wife.

"They tomahawked her, ma'am, because she could not walk, and the baby beside her, and I standing by with my arms tied."

Now Tom pleaded with Polly Ann to stay behind, but she would not listen to him.

"You're going, Tom?" she said.

"Yes," he answered, turning away, "I gave 'em my word."

"And your word to me?" said Polly Ann.

He did not answer.

We fixed on a Saturday to start, to give the horses time to rest, and in the hope that we might hear of some relief party going over the Cumberland Gap. On Thursday Tom made a trip to the store in the valley, and came back with a Deckard rifle he had bought for the stranger, whose name 92 was Weldon. There was no news from Kaintuckee, but the Carter's Valley settlers seemed to think that matters were better there. It was that same night, I believe, that two men arrived from Fort Chiswell. One, whose name was Cutcheon, was a little man with a short forehead and a bad eye, and he wore a weather−beaten blue coat of military cut. The second was a big, light−colored, fleshy man, and a loud talker. He wore a hunting shirt and leggings. They were both the worse for rum they had had on the road, the big man talking very loud and boastfully.

"Afeard to go to Kaintuckee!" said he. "I've met a parcel o' cowards on the road, turned back. There ain't nothin' to be afeard of, eh, stranger?" he added, to Tom, who paid no manner of attention to him. The small man

scarce opened his mouth, but sat with his head bowed forward on his breast when he was not drinking. We passed a dismal, crowded night in the room with such companions. And when they heard that we were to go over the mountains, nothing would satisfy the big man but to go with us.

"Come, stranger," said he to Tom, "two good rifles such as we is ain't to be throwed away."

"Why do you want to go over?" asked Tom. "Be ye a Tory?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Why do you go over?" retorted Riley, for that was his name. "I reckon I'm no more of a Tory than you."

"Whar did ye come from?" said Tom.

"Chiswell's mines, taking out lead for the army o' Congress. But there ain't excitement enough in it."

"And you?" said Tom, turning to Cutcheon and eying his military coat.

"I got tired of their damned discipline," the man answered surlily. He was a deserter.

"Look you," said Tom, sternly, "if you come, what I say is law."

Such was the sacrifice we were put to by our need of company. But in those days a man was a man, and scarce 93 enough on the Wilderness Trail in that year of '77. So we started away from Carter's Valley on a bright Saturday morning, the grass glistening after a week's rain, the road sodden, and the smell of the summer earth heavy. Tom and Weldon walked ahead, driving the two horses, followed by Cutcheon, his head dropped between his shoulders. The big man, Riley, regaled Polly Ann.

"My pluck is," said he, "my pluck is to give a redskin no chance. Shoot 'em down like hogs. It takes a good un to stalk me, Ma'am. Up on the Kanawha I've had hand−to−hand fights with 'em, and made 'em cry quits."

"Law!" exclaimed Polly Ann, nudging me, "it was a lucky thing we run into you in the valley."

But presently we left the road and took a mountain trail, — as stiff a climb as we had yet had. Polly Ann went up it like a bird, talking all the while to Riley, who blew like a bellows. For once he was silent.

We spent two, perchance three, days climbing and descending and fording. At night Tom would suffer none to watch save Weldon and himself, not trusting Riley or Cutcheon. And the rascals were well content to sleep. At length we came, to a cabin on a creek, the corn between the stumps around it choked with weeds, and no sign of smoke in the chimney. Behind it slanted up, in giant steps, a forest−clad hill of a thousand feet, and in front of it the stream was dammed and lined with cane.

"Who keeps house?" cried Tom, at the threshold.

He pushed back the door, fashioned in one great slab from a forest tree. His welcome was an angry whir, and a huge yellow rattler lay coiled within, his head reared to strike. Polly Ann leaned back.

"Mercy," she cried, "that's a bad sign."

But Tom killed the snake, and we made ready to use the cabin that night and the next day. For the horses were to be rested and meat was to be got, as we could not use our guns so freely on the far side of Cumberland Gap. In the morning, before he and Weldon left to hunt, Tom took me around the end of the cabin.

"Davy," said he, "I don't trust these rascals. Kin you shoot a pistol?"

I reckoned I could.

He took had taken one out of the pack and pushed it between the logs where the clay had fallen out. "If they try anything," said he, "shoot 'em. And don't be afeard of killing 'em." He patted me on the back, and went off up the slope with Weldon. Polly Ann and I stood watching them until they were out of sight.

About eleven o'clock Riley and Cutcheon moved off to the edge of a cane−brake near the water, and sat there for a while, talking in low tones. The horses were belled and spancelled near by, feeding on the cane and wild grass, and Polly Ann was cooking journey−cakes on a stone.

"What makes you so sober, Davy?" she said.

I didn't answer.

"Davy," she cried, "be happy. 'Tis a fine day, and Kaintuckee's over yonder." She picked up her skirts and sang: —

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"First upon the heeltap,
Then upon the toe."
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The men by the cane−brake turned and came towards us.

"Ye're happy to−day, Mis' McChesney," said Riley.

"Why shouldn't I be?" said Polly Ann; "we're all a−goin' to Kaintuckee."

"We're a−goin' back to Cyarter's Valley," said Riley, in his blustering way. "This here ain't as excitin' as I thought. I reckon there ain't no redskins nohow."

"What!" cried Polly Ann, in loud scorn, "ye're a−goin' to desert? There'll be redskins enough by and by, I'll warrant ye."

"How'd you like to come along of us," says Riley; "that ain't any place for wimmen, over yonder."

"Along of you!" cried Polly Ann, with flashing eyes. "Do you hear that, Davy?"

I did. Meanwhile the man Cutcheon was slowly walking towards her. It took scarce a second for me to make up my mind. I slipped around the corner of the house, seized the pistol, primed it with a trembling hand, and came back to behold Polly Ann, with flaming cheeks, facing them. They did not so much as glance at me. Riley held a little back of the two, being the coward. But Cutcheon stood ready, like a wolf.

I did not wait for him to spring, but, taking the best aim I could with my two hands, fired. With a curse that echoed in the crags, he threw up his arms and fell forward, writhing, on the turf.

"Run for the cabin, Polly Ann," I shouted, "and bar the door."

There was no need. For an instant Riley wavered, and then fled to the cane.

Polly Ann and I went to the man on the ground, and turned him over. His eyes slid upwards. There was a bloody froth on his lips.

"Davy!" cried she, awestricken, "Davy, ye've killed him!"

I grew dizzy and sick at the thought, but she caught me and held me to her. Presently we sat down on the door log, gazing at the corpse. Then I began to reflect, and took out my powder gourd and loaded the pistol.

"What are ye a−doing?" she said.

"In case the other one comes back," said I.

"Pooh," said Polly Ann, "he'll not come back."

Which was true. I have never laid eyes on Riley to this day.

"I reckon we'd better fetch it out of the sun," said she, after a while. And so we dragged it under an oak, covered the face, and left it.

That day the journey−cakes which Polly Ann had made were untasted by us both. The afternoon dragged interminably. Try as we would, we could not get out of our minds the Thing that lay under the oak.

It was near sundown when Tom and Weldon appeared 96 on the mountain side carrying a buck between them. Tom glanced from one to the other of us keenly.

"Whar be they?" said he.

"Show him, Davy," said Polly Ann.

I took him over to the oak, and Polly Ann told him the story. He gave me one look, then he seized a piece of cold cake from the stone.

"Which trace did he take?" he demanded of me.

But Polly Ann hung on his shoulder.

"Tom, Tom!" she cried, "you beant goin' to leave us again. Tom, he'll die in the wilderness, and we must git to Kaintuckee."

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The next vivid thing in my memory is the view of the last barrier Nature had reared between us and the delectable country. It stood like a lion at the gateway, and for some minutes we gazed at it in terror from Powell's Valley below. How many thousands have looked at it with sinking hearts! How many weaklings has its frown turned back! There seemed to be engraved upon it the dark history of the dark and bloody land beyond.

For fifty miles we travelled under it, towards the Gap, our eyes drawn to it by a resistless fascination. The sun went over it early in the day, as though glad to leave the place, and after that a dark scowl would settle there. At night we felt its presence, like a curse. Even Polly Ann was silent. And she had need to be now. When it was necessary, we talked in low tones, and the bell−clappers on the horses were not loosed at night. It was here, but four years gone, that Daniel Boone's family was attacked, and his son killed by the Indians.

We passed, from time to time, deserted cabins and camps, and some places that might once have been called settlements: Elk Garden, where the pioneers of the last four years had been wont to lay in a simple supply of seed

corn and Irish potatoes; and the spot where Henderson and his company had camped on the way to establish Boonesboro two years before. And at last we struck the trace that mounted upward to the Gateway itself.