

CHAPTER XV.

THE siege of Fort Schuyler began on the 4th of August, when a few bombs were thrown into the little fortress, and the Indians, concealed behind trees and bushes, wounded several men engaged in heightening the parapets. These annoyances continued the next day, and toward evening the savages spread themselves in the woods around the post and by horrid yells tried to intimidate the garrison. St. Leger had learned the weakness of the post, and, confident of success, wrote to Burgoyne that day, assuring him that Fort Schuyler would soon be in his possession, and that he hoped to have the pleasure of meeting him soon, a victor, at Albany.

Meanwhile there were stirring and important movements a little further down the valley. When General Herkimer was informed of the passage of St. Leger and his army over Oneida Lake, he summoned the Tryon County militia to the field to give succor to Fort Schuyler. The wolf was at the door and must be repulsed. Courage took the place of fear, and the call of Herkimer was nobly responded to not only by the militia, but by most of the members of the Tryon County Committee, who entered the field as volunteers and officers. They rendezvoused at Fort Dayton, on the German Flatts, and on the day when the Indians encircled Fort Schuyler, they were at Oriskany, within cannon sound of that post, eight hundred strong, marching to the relief of the beleaguered garrison.

On the night of the 5th, Herkimer sent messengers to Colonel Gansevoort, by way of an unguarded swamp, to tell him of the approach of help, and requested him to telegraph back to him, by three rapid discharges of a cannon which might be heard at Oriskany, the fact of the arrival of the courier. He waited patiently but heard no signal. He intended, at the moment when he should hear it, to press forward and cut his way through the besiegers, and he desired Gansevoort to make a coöperating sortie from the fort at the same time.

The morning of the 6th dawned, and yet no signal was heard. Herkimer's officers, pressed by the impatience of their men, urged him to move forward. The old man (he was then sixty-five) was brave but cautious, self-relying and firm. He determined to halt till he should hear the signal at the fort. Impertinent officers talked harshly to him, and denounced the old patriot as a coward and a Tory. The taunt stirred the very depths of his soul, but duty to others governed his feelings, and he calmly replied: "I am placed over you as a father and guardian, and shall not lead you into difficulties from which I may not be able to release you." Their ungenerous taunts were increased until, at length, stung by the repeated charge of cowardice which came from the impatient young men, he yielded and gave the word "March on;" at the same time telling those who boasted loudest of their courage that they would be the first to run on the appearance of the enemy.

Herkimer's messenger did not reach the fort until between ten and eleven o'clock the next day. Gansevoort had observed the silence of the enemy, and also the movement of some of the beleaguering troops along the margin of the wood, down the river. The arrival of the messen-

ger explained the mystery, and assured him that they had gone to meet Herkimer. It was so. St. Leger had heard of his advance and had detached a division of Johnson's Greens under Major Watts, Colonel Butler with his Rangers, and Brant with a strong body of Indians, to intercept him.

So soon as the messenger arrived at the post, two hundred and fifty men, consisting of a portion of Gansevoort's and Wesson's regiments, with an iron three-pounder, were ordered out under Colonel Marinus Willet, to coöperate with Herkimer. That New York Colonel was a man of daring and at the same time he was a man of good judgment. Rain had fallen copiously during the forenoon. The moment it ceased he sallied forth, and fell furiously upon the camp of Johnson's Greens, a portion of whom had gone to intercept Herkimer. The assault was so sudden, unexpected, and sharp, that the advanced guard were driven in and the Baronet was not allowed time to put on his coat to join in the flight of his men across the river to St. Leger's temporary camp. The frightened Indians as suddenly disappeared and buried themselves in the deep forest near. Twenty-one wagon loads of spoil—clothing, blankets, stores and camp equipage, five British standards, the baggage of Sir John, with all his papers and those of other officers, containing every kind of information necessary for the garrison to know—were captured and carried into the fort by Willet and his party without the loss of a man. The five British colors were immediately raised in full view of the enemy, upon the flag-staff of the fort under the uncouth American banner made of shirts and coats. For this exploit Congress voted Colonel Willet an elegant sword in the name of the United States.

In the meantime the detachment sent down the river by St. Leger concealed themselves in ambush in a deep ravine that crossed the path of Herkimer. That general was entirely ignorant of what was going on above, and at the words "March on!" his little army, composed of the militia regiments of Cox, Paris (a member of the Tryon County Committee), Visscher and Klock, was moving toward the fort in a not very orderly manner on account of the demoralization of the whole corps by the unseemly contentions of the subordinate officers with their commander. These contentions had delayed their march until nine o'clock.

About two miles west of the mill Herkimer's troops came to a marshy ravine where their path lay across a causeway of earth and logs. On each side of this the ground was level, and thickly covered with timber and underwood. Upon high ground on the west side of this ravine lay concealed the Tories and Indians in such a way that they almost surrounded the troops of Herkimer while crossing the causeway. Brant gave a signal, and in a moment the unsuspecting militia were furiously assailed at all points by spear and hatchet, and deadly rifle balls which fell upon them like awful hail from the clouds above, accompanied by the horrid war-whoop of the savages. The rear-guard, which had been loudest in denouncing Herkimer because he would not move forward, in fulfilment of the general's prediction, broke and fled the very moment they heard the yell of the Indians, and left their companions in the ravine to their fate.

Confusion disordered the ranks of the patriots at the beginning of this fierce onslaught, but they soon recovered and fought like veterans. The slaughter was dreadful.

Colonel Cox (who had been the most violent in his taunts of Herkimer), a son of Colonel Paris, and Captain Van Slyk, were killed at the first fire, and the general had a horse killed under him by a musket ball, which shattered his own leg just below the knee, at the beginning of the fray. With the coolest courage he ordered his saddle to be taken from his dead horse and placed against a large beech tree. Seated upon it there, his men falling around him like the foliage, and the bullets flying like driving sleet, he calmly gave his orders, and so signally rebuked those who had called him a coward. In this way he was exposed for nearly an hour, while the fierce battle raged, and which ended in a terrible hand to hand conflict, when Johnson's Greens and a portion of Butler's Tories made a bayonet charge, and were firmly met by the patriots. At that juncture a heavy thunder-peal broke over the forest, and the rain came down in such torrents that the combatants ceased their strife and sought shelter beneath the trees. It was at the close of this shower that Willet made his sortie from the fort and fell upon Johnson's camp.

During this lull in the battle both parties viewed the ground and made new preparations for attack. It soon began with such a destructive fire on the part of the patriots that the Indians gave way. Then Major Watts came up with Johnson's Greens, the most of them refugees from the Mohawk Valley, who were recognized by Herkimer's men. Mutual resentments fired the zeal of each, and the struggle was deadly. They leaped upon each other like contending tigers, and fought hand to hand with bayonets and knives, with all the cruelty and fierceness which generally distinguish civil wars.

While this conflict was raging, a firing was heard in

the direction of the fort. It was the attack of Willet upon the enemy's camp. Colonel Butler instantly employed a stratagem which was nearly successful. He so changed the dress of a portion of Johnson's Greens as to make them appear like the patriots, and marching from the direction of the fort, they were at first (as Butler intended) mistaken for a reinforcement. The mistake was only momentary. The pretended friends were furiously attacked and soon scattered in disorder. The dismayed Indians raised the cry of retreat and fled in all directions. The Tories and Canadians caught the panic, and the whole force of invaders ran westward followed by the patriots with shouts of victory.

For six hours the conflict, known as the battle of Oriskany, had lasted. It was the bloodiest encounter, considering the numbers engaged, that occurred during the war. Both parties had suffered dreadfully and neither might claim a victory. The patriots remained masters of the field, but they did not afford relief to Fort Schuyler. Their commander was carried to his home, just below the Little Falls of the Mohawk, where he died nine days afterward. The loss of the patriots was estimated at one hundred and sixty killed and a large number wounded. The Indians lost about seventy, among whom were several chiefs. What number of the British white people were lost is not known. It was said that quite a large number of Johnson's Tories were killed by the Indians, who conceived the idea that there was a secret understanding between Herkimer and Johnson that the savages should be massacred.

St. Leger so closely besieged Fort Schuyler after this sortie that no correct statement of the affairs at Oriskany

could reach the garrison. He took advantage of this circumstance to claim a victory in that battle, and to set forth in glowing colors a pretended victorious advance of Burgoyne down the valley of the Hudson, hoping, through trepidation, to bring the garrison to a surrender. Two prisoners, Colonel Bellinger and Major Frey, were forced to write a letter to Gansevoort on the evening after the battle, containing many misrepresentations and advising him to cease further resistance. This was taken to the fort under a flag by Colonel Butler, who made a verbal demand for a surrender. Gansevoort refused to receive any such demand excepting from St. Leger himself. On the following day Butler and two other officers returned with such demand from the British commander. One of these officers, speaking for St. Leger, assured Gansevoort that the only salvation for the garrison from massacre lay in an immediate surrender, for it was with much difficulty that they could restrain the Indians; that the commander made the proposition through feelings of humanity; that the Indians were eager to march down the country and destroy the inhabitants, and that if the garrison did not comply it would be out of the power of St. Leger to renew the proposition; that the garrison should be allowed honorable terms, and that the total destruction of Herkimer's relief corps, and the fact that Burgoyne had possession of Albany, extinguished all hope of succor for the garrison. This speech, made up of falsehoods, persuasion, and threats, excited the indignation of the patriots, and Colonel Willet, deputed by Gansevoort to reply, said, as he relates in his narrative: "Do I understand you, sir? I think you say that you came from a British colonel, who is commander of the army that invests this fort, and, by

your uniform, you appear to be an officer in the British service. You have made a long speech on the occasion of your visit which, stripped of all its superfluities, amounts to this—that you come from a British colonel to the commandant of this garrison, to tell him that if he does not deliver up the garrison into the hands of your colonel, he will send his Indians to murder our women and children. You will please to reflect, sir, that their blood will be upon your heads, not upon ours. We are doing our duty; this garrison is committed to our charge, and we will take care of it. After you get out of it you may turn round and look at its outside, but never expect to come in again, unless you come a prisoner. I consider the message you have brought a degrading one for a British officer to send, and by no means reputable for a British officer to carry. For my own part, I declare, before I would consent to deliver this garrison to such a murdering set as your army, by your own account, consists of, I would suffer my body to be filled with splinters and set on fire, as you know has at times been practised by such hordes of woman and children killers as belong to your army.” The sentiments of the garrison were in accord with these brave words, and the officers were satisfied that Herkimer’s party could not be destroyed and that Burgoyne could not be at Albany, for if so, St. Leger would not seem so anxious for an immediate surrender of the garrison.

On the 9th of August, St. Leger sent a written demand for a surrender, in substance like that given by Major Ancram, the mouth piece of Colonel Butler. Gansevoort immediately replied: “Sir, your letter of this date I have received, in answer to which I say that it is my determined resolution, with the force under my command, to defend

this post to the last extremity, in behalf of the United States, who have placed me here to defend it against all their enemies." This answer was unexpected to St. Leger, and he saw before him a long siege, for his cannon had no effect upon the sod-work of the fort. So he commenced approaching it by the slow process of parallels, and running a mine under its most formidable bastions. At the same time he sent out an address to the people of Tryon County, signed by Johnson, Claus, and Butler, in which they strongly declared their desire for peace, promised pardon and protection to all who should submit, and threatening all the horrors of Indian cruelty if they should continue to resist. They called upon the principal men of the Valley to come up to Fort Schuyler and compel the garrison to do at once what they would be compelled to do finally—surrender. Like St. Leger's proclamation, this was treated with contempt and the siege went on.

Gansevoort, fearing the besiegers might be reinforced, or that the siege might continue until his provisions were exhausted, now determined to send to General Schuyler, then at Stillwater, information concerning the state of affairs at the fort, and implore his assistance. The brave Willet volunteered to be the messenger. Lieutenant Stockwell, an excellent wood-craftsman, agreed to accompany him as a guide. At ten o'clock on a very stormy night, while thunder-shower after thunder-shower came down in fury, these men left the fort by the sally-port, each armed with a spear, and crept stealthily upon their hands and knees along a morass to the river. They crossed the stream upon a log, and were soon beyond the line of drowsy sentinels. It was extremely dark, for the heavens were hung with the thickest clouds. Their pathway led

through tangled forests and oozy morasses, and very soon, with nothing to guide them, they lost their way. They heard the barking of a dog which indicated that they were near an Indian camp, and for hours they stood still, fearing to move forward for fear of penetrating the circle of an enemy. Toward dawn the last shower ceased, the clouds broke, and the morning star in the east beamed out brilliantly like a harbinger of hope. They saw their course and pursued it in a ziz-zag way, sometimes, like the Indians, traversing the bed of a stream to foil pursuers that might be upon their trail. In this manner they reached the settlement at the German Flatts in safety, where, after a brief rest, they mounted fleet horses and hurried down the valley to the house of Dirck Swart, at Stillwater (yet standing), where General Schuyler had his head-quarters, and laid the whole matter before that commander. That was on the afternoon of the 12th of August. He had already been informed of the affair at Oriskany by a letter from General Herkimer, dated on the 8th, and to which he had replied: "The gallantry of you and the few men that stood with you, and repulsed such a superior number of savages, reflects great honor upon you I have sent on some Continental troops three days ago, another party is gone to-day, and as the militia is coming up I shall send you further reinforcements, and hope we shall be able to give effectual relief to Fort Schuyler." He was devising other measures for the relief of that post, when Willet and Stockton reached him.

Not a moment was to be lost. The subjugation of the whole valley would immediately follow the surrender of Fort Schuyler, and the victors, gathering strength from the timid Whigs and encouraged Tories, might fall like an

avalanche upon Albany, or, by junction with Burgoyne, swell to huge proportions his approaching army, then moving slowly down from Fort Edward toward Saratoga, with a belief that Baume would bring ample supplies from Bennington. The prudent foresight and far-reaching humanity of General Schuyler at once dictated his course. He called a council of officers immediately, and proposed sending a detachment of the army to the relief of the beleaguered garrison. His officers opposed him with the fact that his whole army was not then sufficiently strong to stay the march of Burgoyne. The clearer judgment of Schuyler made him persist in his opinion and vehemently urge the necessity of the proposed course. They still opposed him, and while he was pacing the floor of the room in the most anxious solicitude, he overheard the half-whispered remark, "He means to weaken the army." It was an epitome of all the slanders with which he had been assailed since the evacuation of Ticonderoga, and he heard this charge of implied treason with the hottest indignation. He turned instantly upon the slanderer, and unconsciously biting into several pieces a clay pipe which he was smoking, he exclaimed, in a voice that awed the whole company into silence: "Gentlemen, I shall take the responsibility upon myself; where is the brigadier that will take command of the relief? I shall beat up for volunteers to-morrow." The brave and impulsive Arnold, ever ready for deeds of daring, who was one of the council, and knew how unjust was the thought that there could be treason in the heart of General Schuyler, at once stepped forward and offered his services. On the following morning (August 13th, 1777) the drum beat for volunteers, and before noon eight hundred stalwart men were enrolled for

the expedition. "It gives me great satisfaction," Schuyler wrote to Arnold that day, in giving him instructions for the conduct of the expedition, "that you have offered to go and conduct the military operations in Tryon County." He was directed to repair thither as soon as possible with his volunteers, assume command of all the Continental troops in that region, and to take with him as many militia as he might prevail upon to go. He was directed to hasten to the relief of Fort Schuyler, and to apply to Henry Glenn, of Schenectady, the deputy quarter-master-general, for transportation in the form of wagons and batteaux; at the same time he was assured that his march need not be retarded in waiting for supplies, as the country through which he would march was capable of furnishing them in sufficient quantity. He instructed him not to unnecessarily offend the already too unfriendly Mohawks; gave him a warrant for \$1,000 in specie with which he was to conciliate the Oneidas and induce them to assist him; and he directed Arnold to tell them that he had "a genteel present for them" whenever any of them should come down. As the inhabitants of Tryon County were chiefly Germans, he suggested that it might be well for Arnold to praise their bravery in the affair at Oriskany, and ask their gallant aid in the enterprise before him. He added: "If Fort Schuyler shall unhappily have fallen into the enemy's hands, you will then so dispose of your troops as may best cover the country."