CHAPTER XXIV.

THE early part of the year 1781 was the gloomiest period of the war, chiefly because of the financial embarrassments arising out of the depreciation of the paper money issued by the Congress. It had then become almost worthless, and the acts of the Congress to sustain its credit had been in vain. Happily for the country, there was a man possessing sufficient personal credit and business ability to save it from ruin, at that time. He was Robert Morris, who, in May, 1781, was appointed Superintendent of Finance, or Secretary of the Treasury, with large discretionary powers.

One of the first acts of Morris's financial government was the proposition to Congress of a plan for the establishment of a National Bank. Such an institution was immediately chartered, under the name of the Bank of North America, and was opened for business on the 1st of January, 1782. It proved to be an efficient aid in the management of the finances of the country. So admirably did Morris perform the duties of his office that the expenses of the government were greatly diminished. It had, before, cost Congress about $18,000,000 a year to carry on the war; during his administration of the finances it cost only about $5,000,000.

So soon as Morris was installed in office, he called to his aid the best men of the country. General Schuyler

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was among the first to whom he applied for help. To that gentleman he wrote:

"You will probably have heard that Congress have done me the honor to bestow their confidence by appointing me to the important station of Superintendent of the Finance of North America, a station that makes me tremble when I think of it, and which nothing could tempt me to accept but a gleam of hope that my exertions may possibly retrieve this poor, distressed country from the ruin with which it is now threatened, merely from want of system and economy in expending and vigor in raising the Public Monies. Pressed by all my friends, acquaintances and fellow-citizens, and still more pressed by the *necessity*, the *absolute necessity*, of a change in our monied systems, to work salvation, I have yielded, and taken a load on my shoulders which it is not possible to get clear of without the faithful support and assistance of those good citizens who not only wish but will promote the service of their country. In this light I now make application to you, sir, whose abilities I know, and whose zeal I have every reason to believe."*

Morris then stated that General Washington was distressed by the want of flour; that there was not an unappropriated dollar in the Treasury, wherewith to purchase any, and that it would be some time before he could get his system into sufficient working order to procure funds. Under these circumstances he asked Schuyler to furnish, on a long credit, one thousand barrels of flour, saying:

"As I don't know any gentleman of such resources as yourself, you seem the most likely of all men to give assistance under the circumstances."

He added: "You may either take me as a public or private man, for I pledge myself to repay you with hard money, wholly, if required, or part hard and part paper, if you so transact the business."

In a postscript, Morris added: "Remember that I put absolute dependence on you for this one thousand barrels of flour, and it must be sent to the army directly."

Schuyler immediately complied with the Secretary's request; furnished the required amount of flour, and more; obtained liberal subscriptions to the stock of the

* Autograph Letter, May 29, 1781.

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national bank, and gave to Morris such judicious suggestions concerning the management of his Department, that the latter wrote him a most cordial letter of thanks.

The war was at this time carried on chiefly in the Southern States, but the northern frontier was continually menaced with or disturbed by petty invasions and incursions from Canada, while it was with the greatest difficulty that Schuyler and his associate Commissioners kept the Indians at bay. One of these incursions, made in the summer of this year, had for its object the carrying away captive of General Schuyler, for he had ever been considered the chief obstacle in the way of the success of every expedition which had come from the north and west, from the petty marauders to the army of Burgoyne. Whoever should capture Schuyler would be sure of a rich reward.

At the time in question, Schuyler was residing at his town house, in the southern suburbs of Albany, which was continually guarded by six soldiers, for some notable abductions had recently taken place. A bold partisan, named John Walter Meyer, who was at the head of a band of Tories, Canadians and Indians, and who was well acquainted with the house of General Schuyler (for he had eaten bread at his table), was employed to capture him. He repaired to the neighborhood of Albany, where he seized a Dutch laborer, from whom he learned the precise condition of affairs at Schuyler's house; and, after exacting from him an oath of secrecy, allowed him his liberty. The Dutchman seems to have made a mental reservation, for he immediately informed Schuyler of the alarming event. A loyalist, who was the general's personal friend, also gave him warning, for he was cognizant of Meyer's designs, and Schuyler and his family were on the alert.

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At the close of a sultry August day, while the general and his family were sitting in the front hall; the servants were dispersed about the premises; three of the guards, relieved from duty, were asleep in the basement, and the other three were reclining on the cool grass in the garden, a servant told the general that a stranger at the back gate desired to speak with him. Schuyler comprehended his errand. The doors were immediately closed and barred, and the family were collected in an upper room. The general ran to his bed room, for his fire-arms, when, from his window, he observed that the house was surrounded by armed men. They were Meyer and his gang. For the purpose of rousing the sentinels on the grass, and, perchance, to alarm the town, he fired a pistol from his window. Indians then burst open the doors, when, at the same moment, Mrs. Schuyler perceived that in the confusion and alarm when they retreated from the hall, her infant child, a few months old, had been left in the cradle below. She was about to fly to its rescue, when the general interposed and prevented her. Her life was more valuable than that of the babe. But her third daughter—afterward the wife of Stephen Van Rensselaer (the Patroon), of Albany—rushed down the stairs, snatched the baby from the cradle, and bore it off in safety. As she was ascending the stairs, a savage threw a sharp tomahawk at her, which slightly injured her dress, as it passed within a few inches of the infant's head and stuck in the stair-railing. At the same moment, one of the miscreants, supposing her to be a servant, called out: "Wench, wench, where is your master?" With quick presence of mind she replied, "Gone to alarm the town." The Tories, who accompanied the Indians, were then in the dining-room, plunder-

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ing it of the plate and other valuables. The general then threw up his window, and, with a loud voice, as if speaking to numbers, he called out: "Come on, my brave fellows; surround the house, and secure the villains who are plundering." The marauders made a precipitate retreat, carrying with them a large quantity of silver plate. The guards had been quickly overpowered, and the three in the house were carried off as prisoners.*

The infant who was rescued at that time was Catharine Van Rensselaer, the youngest of General Schuyler's children. She died at Oswego (the latest survivor of them), on the 26th of August, 1857, the widow of Major James Cochran, son of Dr. John Cochran who was at one time Surgeon-general of the army of the Revolution.

General Schuyler received many letters congratulating him on his escape.

Washington wrote:

"I sincerely hope that you will increase your vigilance, and strengthen your guard, for I am persuaded that there is a deep-laid scheme for the seizure of your person, and that of other men in your State distinguished for their zeal in the cause of our country."†

Governor Clinton wrote from Poughkeepsie:

"I sincerely congratulate you on your fortunate escape from the villainous attempt of Meyer and his party. Your letter, advising me of it, I received on Sunday afternoon. It enabled me to prepare an account of the transaction, which I forwarded to Holt, but it was too late, it seems, for his paper, in which I find an imperfect one, previously delivered him by Mr. Peter Yates. The evening before I received your letter, I received an account by express from his Excellency, General Washington, of a party out from New York, to seize

* These men, who were off duty, were asleep in the house when the marauders came, and the latter seized their arms before the guards could get them. They fought lustily with their fists, until overpowered. When they were exchanged, the grateful and generous Schuyler gave each of them a farm in Saratoga County.

† Autograph Letter, August 19, 1781.

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and deliver me there, for which they are promised a considerable reward. I have persons out to watch their motions, and am not without hopes of soon having some of them, at least, in my power. This is the third party which has been sent out on this business, and of which I have been apprised, in the course of the spring and summer, and some of them have met their fate at this place, tho' for different crimes."*

The marauders carried off their plunder from Schuyler's house to Canada, and he had some correspondence on the subject with British officers. Meyer, it seems, was an officer under Colonel St. Leger, the assailant of Fort Schuyler four years before, who wrote to General Schuyler, saying:

"I beg you to be assured that the liberties an officer and his party took with a small part of your plate gave me the greatest mortification, the intent of that scout being for very different purposes. The moment I heard of it I did everything in my power to rescue from the hands of a scoundrelly silversmith what had escaped the disfiguration of his crucible, which is now in my possession, and ought to have reached you before this, but for a blunder of a flag to Vermont."†

No portion of the plate was ever sent back to General Schuyler.‡

During the summer and autumn of 1781, General Stark, with a considerable force, was stationed at Saratoga, to watch the movements of British parties on the lakes, who were continually threatening invasion. He made his head-

* Autograph Letter, August 14, 1781.

† Autograph Letter, November 7, 1781.

‡ Major Cochran, in 1848, related to me an interesting incident connected with this booty. Among the plundered articles was a silver soup tureen. Cochran was at Washington City on the occasion of the inauguration of President Harrison, in 1841; and while in the rotunda of the Capitol, viewing Trumbull's picture of the *Surrender of Burgoyne*, a stranger at his elbow inquired, "Who is that fine-looking man in the group, in citizen's dress?" "General Schuyler," Major Cochran replied. "General Schuyler!" repeated the stranger; "why, I ate soup not long ago, at Belleville, in Canada, from a silver tureen that was carried off from his house by some Tories, in the Revolution." This was the first and only time, save the letter of St. Leger above quoted, the family ever heard of any of the plundered articles.

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quarters at Schuyler's country-seat there, which was the cause of the general's residence in his town-house at that time. Mrs. Schuyler and her daughter spent a few days there in October, but, "tired of the noise of a garrison," Stark wrote, they soon returned to Albany.

At about the same time, General Schuyler entertained at his home, young Aaron Burr, then twenty-five years of age, who was introduced to the former by the following letter from General McDougall:

"This will be handed you by Lieutenant-colonel Burr, who goes to Albany to solicit license in our courts. Being a stranger in that part of the country, I beg leave by this to introduce him to you. He is a soldier, an officer, and a worthy *citizen*, and commanded the advanced corps of the army in the southernmost part of this State in the winter of 1779, during which he discharged his duty with uncommon vigilance. I am persuaded, from my knowledge of him, he will merit every attention you may think proper to show him."*

Burr obtained his license, and began the practice of law in Albany, in April, 1882.

At that time the movements at the north had become specially alarming. The enemy had crossed the lakes, and had penetrated the country almost to Fort Edward. Stark wrote for Schuyler to come up to Saratoga and give him the benefit of his counsel. He hastened thither, but the cause of alarm soon disappeared, for the invaders withdrew, and returned to Canada early in November. They had been sent by General Haldimand, to assist in separating, as far as possible, the Vermontese from the Union. That was their principal object. They were in force at Ticonderoga when the news of the surrender of Cornwallis reached that post; and, so confident was Haldimand at that time of the success of the negotiations for the annexation of Vermont to the British empire, that his design was

* Autograph Letter, October 12, 1781.

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openly proclaimed in printed manifestoes, inviting the people of that State to become happy by a return to their allegiance to the British crown. Never were men more skilfully duped. "The people of the Grants," Major Stark wrote to Schuyler, "are playing a deep game." And so they were. It was also a perilous one, but they were the winners. With admirable tact, the leaders replied to the invitation, that "the news of the surrender of Cornwallis would render such a step extremely dangerous, and which was the sure way to prevent all prospect of its success." Still hoping to produce a solid defection of the dissatisfied State, the British officers withdrew their troops, and went into winter-quarters in Canada.

It has been observed that the war was carried on chiefly in the Southern States during the year 1781. Some of the most hotly-contested conflicts of the war occurred in Virginia and the Carolinas during that year; and the struggles of the colonists for independence achieved their final triumph when, on the 19th of October, 1781, Earl Cornwallis and his army were surrendered to the combined military and naval forces of the Americans and Frenchmen, under Washington, Rochambeau and De Grasse, at Yorktown, in Virginia.

That event sent great joy over the land. From every family altar where a love of freedom dwelt—from pulpits, legislative halls, the army, and from the Congress, there went up voices of thanksgiving and praise to the Lord God Omnipotent. The clouds which, for seven long years, had brooded like a pall, seemed to be breaking. The splendors of the dawn of peace began to kindle along the horizon, like the light of a clear morning after a dismal night of tempest and woe. The strong desires for peace, which the British people

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had long felt, now found such potential expression, in both houses of Parliament, that the British ministry were compelled to heed it. Lord North and his compeers, who, for twelve years, had misled and misgoverned the nation, gave way under the pressure of the peace sentiment, and retired from office on the 20th of March, 1782. The advocates of peace then came into power; and, early in the following May, Sir Guy Carleton arrived in New York, with propositions for a reconciliation. Measures were immediately taken by the Congress and the British Government to arrange a treaty of peace. Commissioners were appointed by the high contracting powers, in which France, as an ally of the Americans, was included; and, on the 30th of November, 1782, a preliminary treaty was signed at Paris. A definitive treaty was signed at the same place on the 3d of September, 1783. In that treaty England acknowledged the independence of the United States; allowed ample boundaries to their domain, extending northward to the great lakes, and westward to the Mississippi river, and an unlimited right of fishing on the banks of New Foundland. At the same time England made peace with France, Spain and Holland.

Preparations were speedily made for carrying the treaty into effect. The first step must be the departure of British troops from the soil of the United States. The city of New York was their last tarrying place. On the 15th of November, Washington wrote as follows to General Schuyler, from Poughkeepsie:

"It gives me great pleasure to inform you that Sir Guy Carleton [who was in command at New York] has announced to me his intention to relinquish the posts he holds on York Island, from Kingsbridge to McGowan's Pass, inclusive, on the 21st instant; Herrick's and Hempstead, and all to the eastward on Long Island, on the same day; and, if

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possible, to give up the city, with Brooklyn, on the day following; and Paulus' Hook [Jersey City], Denyce's [Harlem River], and Staten Island, as soon after as practicable.

"From this disposition, I have great hopes that, in case no accident should happen, I shall have it in my power to congratulate you on the full possession of this State by its government before the close of the present month."*

On the 3d of November, the Continental army, by order of the Congress, was disbanded. A small force was retained, under a definite enlistment, until a peace establishment should be organized. These were now at West Point, under the command of General Knox.

The final evacuation of the British troops occurred on the 25th of November, 1783. On the morning of that day—a cold, frosty, brilliant morning—the American troops, under Knox, who had come down from West Point and encamped at Harlem, marched toward the city, and halted at the upper end of the Bowery Lane (present junction of Third and Fourth avenues), where they remained until about one o'clock in the afternoon, when the British marched to Whitehall, and embarked. Then the troops, with Washington at their head, accompanied by Governor Clinton and chief officers of State, marched into and took formal possession of the city. On the 4th of December, the Commander-in-chief, at his quarters on the corner of Broad and Pearl streets, in New York, took a final farewell of his officers and other compatriots; and on the 23d of the same month, at Annapolis, in Maryland, where the Congress was then in session, he resigned his commission to that body, from whom he had received it, and retired to private life at Mount Vernon.

In all of these closing scenes of the old war for independence, excepting the last, General Schuyler was a con-

* Autograph Letter.

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spicuous actor. He had stood by Washington and his country when the perils of a serious mutiny seemed to threaten both, in the spring of 1783—a menace of revolt, which was doubtless inspired by the jealous Gates; and he was with Washington in the camp, at Newburgh, when the Chief, by the mere force of his moral character, crushed the serpent. Washington had already rebuked a proposition to make him King by the force of the army, in imitation of the old Roman method.

The discontents of the army were very great at that time, because of delay in the payment of their wages. The Treasury had been empty for some time. Neither officers nor soldiers had received any pay for their services for a very long period, and there seemed a prospect of their being discharged and sent home, ragged and penniless. There were men foolish enough to believe that the grand old army would, under the pressure of such circumstances, sully their honor by turning their bayonets against their government. Their patriotism was sorely tried, and was not found wanting. Ably composed anonymous addresses, written by an accomplished aid of General Gates, were circulated throughout the camp at Newburgh, in March, 1783, which advised that army to take matters into their own hands, make a demonstration that should arouse the fears of the people and the Congress, and so obtain justice for themselves. For this purpose a meeting of officers was called. Washington took the direction of it, and was present at the gathering. Doubtless suspecting that Gates had a hand in the matter, he requested that officer to preside, as he was the senior in rank. As the Chief arose to read an address which he had prepared for the occasion, he put on his spectacles, and said: "You see, gentlemen, that I have

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not only grown *gray*, but *blind*, in your service." The remark had a powerful effect upon the assemblage; and when he had concluded reading a most earnest appeal to their judgment and their patriotism, and a scathing rebuke of the movement, in which he said: "My God! what can this writer have in view by recommending such measures? Can he be a friend to the army?—can he be a friend to this country? Rather is he not an insidious foe—some emissary, perhaps, from New York—plotting the ruin of both by sowing the seeds of discord and separation between the civil and military powers of the continent?" there seemed to be but one mind among the officers present. They immediately passed resolutions, among which was one that declared their unbroken confidence in the good faith of Congress, and their determination to bear with patience their grievances, until, in due time, they should be redressed.*

* Another resolution thus expressed the feelings of the assembly:

"*Resolved unanimously,* That the officers of the American army view with abhorrence and reject with disdain, the infamous propositions contained in a late anonymous address to the officers of the army, and resent with indignation the secret attempts of some unknown persons to collect the officers together in a manner totally subversive of all discipline and good order."

"Never, through all the war," Schuyler wrote, "did his Excellency achieve a greater victory than on this occasion—a victory over jealousy, just discontent and great opportunities. The whole assembly were in tears at the conclusion of his address. I rode with General Knox to his quarters in absolute silence, because of the solemn impression on our minds. I have no doubt that posterity will repeat the closing words of his Excellency's address—'Had this day been wanting, the world had never seen the last stage of perfection to which human nature is capable of attaining.'"—Autograph Letter to Stephen Van Rensselaer, March 17, 1783.

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