

THE BEARER OF DESPATCHES.

Shortly after the defeat of the British army at fort Erie, in the brilliant sortie planned and executed by General Brown, that officer received intelligence that General Izard was on his way to join him with a large force.—A few weeks sooner, this intelligence would have been highly gratifying. The American army, hemmed in by a foe whose numbers more than quadrupled their own, had been placed in an embarrassing situation. The fort was situated on low, flat ground, and the season being very wet, the constant ramping of so many men had converted the whole place into one great mud puddle; the garrison, who were lodged in tents, were exposed to continual rains; there was no spot secure from the elements, and a dry vestment bed, or blanket, was at times, not to be found within the lines of the sentinels; while the frequent alarms, and the necessary "watch and ward," left only intervals for the broken slumber which refreshes not. But little pay, if any, had been received during the campaign—money there was absolutely none—and our diet was necessarily confined to the ration of meat and bread, which was not of the best kind. The perpetual shower of cannon balls and bursting of bomb shells was not a matter of complaint, for this was soldiers' luck; to be shot at was our vocation; and as we failed not to amuse ourselves at the batteries during a part of every day, we had, at least, the satisfaction of believing that our fallen companions would not, like Scipio's ghost, "stalk unrevenged among us." But nestling in the mire, and starving, and coughing our lungs away, were matters which had not entered into our contract with the government, and on which our commissions, as well as the "rules and articles," were silent. It was not so "nominated in the bond." Why could not Uncle Sam send us food and physic, and a few lusty fellows to help us fight? Where there are no surplus men, every one who falls leaves a niche; and while we beheld our little force gradually wasting away, it was provoking enough to reflect that our country was full of men, some of whom abused us, some laughed at us, a few praised, and none assisted.—I may add, that the foe had vowed our extermination, and on one occasion had marched up to our batteries, filling the air with the dreadful war-cry, "No quarter—no quarter to the d—n Yankees!" and that noble spirit of emulation, that generous contention, and courteous interchange of kindly offices upon proper occasions, which should exist among civilized armies, were all swallowed up in the deep hate excited by the cold-blooded cruelty of the enemy. As war, disease, and the doctor, daily thinned our ranks, it seemed evident, that unless supplies should arrive, we must become the victims of that unrelenting barbarity, of which our fellow citizens, on various occasions, have had sufficient experience. Our country, however, still fought on, and I know not what would have become of us, had it not been for one kind-hearted gentleman. He was a Quaker gentleman; and the Quakers, you know, are famed for benevolence. Slipping out of the fort one day, about noon, when John Bull never dreamt of such a matter, he dexterously cut off about a third of their army, and by that "free use of the bayonet," which the British commander had recommended upon a recent occasion, he saved his own credit, and the throats and scalps of his men, who filled the air with acclamations. The enemy, completely defeated, retired; and General Brown, not having force enough to pursue, could only make his bow, and wish them good-bye.

At this juncture, a despatch arrived, announcing that General Izard had left Plattsburg; was to embark at Sackett's Harbor, and passing up the lake, touch at the Eighteen Mile Creek, whence his course would be directed, in a great measure, by the intelligence he received from General Brown. It was desirable, therefore, that he should be met at that point, by an officer from fort Erie, who could advise him of the exact situation of the garrison, and the relative positions and strength of the two contending armies, and convey the communications of General Brown. A young artillery officer was accordingly summoned to the General's quarters, and after receiving the necessary instructions, he was ordered to get himself in readiness to start immediately. "General Izard must be met," said the commander, "at the hour he has appointed; can you reach the place by that time?" "Oh yes, certainly, sir," replied the young artilleryist, "though I must confess that I neither know the route nor the distance." The General smiled, named the distance, hastily indicated the route, and reminding his envoy that there was barely time enough left to accomplish the journey by the most rapid riding, wished him a pleasant jaunt.

The bearer of despatches, crossing an arm of the lake, which separates fort Erie from Buffalo, repaired to the quarter-master to procure a horse, and being well mounted, departed early in the afternoon of the same day. Two routes were presented to his choice; the one was the main road which led by Batavia, and was too circuitous to be travelled within the allotted time; the other

was an unfrequented, but more direct path, which, leading in the neighborhood of fort Niagara, then in possession of the enemy, was fraught with danger; but it was necessarily chosen. A large cloak disguised the person of our soldier, concealing his arms and military insignia; and he hoped, under the cover of night, to pass the vicinity of the fort unobserved. By rapid riding he reached the neighborhood of Schlosser a little before sunset, and being unwilling to approach Queenstown early in the evening, he checked his horse and rode leisurely along. Cooped up as he had been, he now enjoyed, with an exquisite relish, the luxuries of pure air, exercise and liberty. His route lay along the margin of the Niagara river, which now separated him from those glorious fields which American valor had been so conspicuously displayed. A few weeks before he had passed along the opposite shore in all the fervor of youthful hope and military pride, surrounded by the pomp and circumstance of glorious war, by the tumult and glitter of an army with flying colors, and drums and hearts beating. Now the solitary horseman rode along; the breeze bore not the accents of men, nor did the distant echo whisper danger in his ear, but his eye dwelt upon scenes of interest; well known spots occasionally glanced upon his vision; here an army had been encamped, there a battle fought, and under those trees slept many a companion! The last rays of the sun fell upon his back, and the trees threw their gigantic shadows along the path before him.—At such an hour the eye is most delighted with the beauties of a wild landscape, when the rocks, and glens, and secluded places begin to darken into the gloom of twilight, while the sunbeams still glimmer on the hills and tree tops, or sleep upon the cave. The Niagara was rippling along its rocky channel, murmuring and fretting as it rushed towards the precipice, over which its descent causes one of the sublimest objects in nature. These circumstances all combined to wrap the heart of the traveller in sweet and pleasing meditation; and he rode on, enjoying these dreams, which creeping imperceptibly into young hearts, hold the imagination entranced in delight; in irresistible delusions, full of rapture, variety, and beauty. The hour was watching, the scene picturesque, the very air melodious, and the realities around him became mellowed, and softened, and spiritualized into airy creations of the fancy. The mind, warmed into romantic feeling, gave its own hue to the surrounding objects; rude and familiar things took to themselves wings and flew away; vulgar associations were banished, the scenery disposed itself into shapes and shades of beauty; bright and varied colors fell upon the landscape; creatures of fancy peopled the shade, and the breeze murmured in numbers.

Our officer halted a moment at Schlosser to make some inquiries relative to his route, and learning that a countryman had just passed along, whose homeward path led in the very direction desired, he determined to profit by his company and guidance. Spurring his steed, therefore, he rode rapidly on.—Near the Falls he overtook the boor, plodding heavily along. He was a man whose general outline announced him to be of the middle age; but his visage placed him in the decline of life. Dissipation had probably anticipated the palsying touch of time, and had wrinkled his face, and slightly tinged his hair with the frosty hue of winter. His bloodshot eyes gave proof of habitual intemperance; but there was speculation in them, and a rife speculation it was; it was the keen cunning steady glance of one who in his time had cut, shuffled, and dealt, who could slip a card and know where the trumps lay.—With this was mingled the dulness of an illiterate man, and the humor of one who was willing to be amused, and meant no harm to others. Saving the besetting sin above alluded to, and perhaps the occasional passing of a counterfeit bill upon strong temptation, a small matter for a frontier man, he might have been an honest fellow; one who knew the courtesies and good feelings of life, passed the cup merrily, would do a neighborly act when it came in his way, never beat his wife when he was sober, nor troubled his children when they kept out of his way.—Such at least was the estimate which our young soldier formed of his companion, during their subsequent ride together, to which it is only necessary to add, that he seemed to have recently parted from good liquor, and to have attained that precise point of elevation, which is well understood in every polite circle by the phrase, "a little high."

When the two riders encountered, they scrutinized each other with that jealous examination which commonly passed between strangers who met in those dangerous times in the vicinity of the hostile armies. The cautious question, and the guarded answer passed mutually, until each had learned as much as he could and disclosed as much as he pleased. Our officer announced himself as a store-keeper, who had been to the army to make a traffic with the settlers, having failed in which, he was now returning home in haste, by a route which was told was much nearer than the main road, and wished to get that night to a place called ——. The countryman lived at that very place, was now go-

ing home, although it was still upwards of sixteen miles distant, and he said he would be glad of our traveller's company.

They reached the Falls while daylight yet lingered over the awful abyss, and the officer who had beheld this wonderful sight from the opposite shore, proposed to his companion to halt, that he might survey it under a new aspect. The latter, who seemed in no haste, cheerfully complied, and even seemed pleased with the opportunity of acting the Cicerone, and detailing all the wonderful tales extant, in relation to the great cataract. He did not, it is true, relate that surprising fact which Goldsmith has recorded, and Morse has copied from him, i. e. that the Indians descended these rapids in their canoes, in perfect safety; because, notwithstanding this circumstance is vouched for by two celebrated doctors, great amateurs in rivers, winds, and mountains, the vulgar give it no credit, and the natives deny it. Strange infatuation, that the assertions of philosophers should not be believed, in preference to our own erring senses and crude notions of probability! When our officer mentioned this story to his guide, he exclaimed, "Impossible! the man's sartilly cracked!" And had he told the same individual that Dr. Mitchell had said that a whale was not a fish, he would have expressed similar astonishment:—so incredulous is ignorance, so unwilling does it bow to science and research. For my part, I make it a rule never to quarrel with a philosopher, and am therefore willing to admit that it is not only a safe but a remarkably salubrious and amusing recreation to paddle a canoe down the falls and back again.

Leaving this spot, the officer was conducted by his guide to another object of admiration. A short distance below the cataract, the river, rushing along with the immense velocity acquired by being precipitated from so great a height, suddenly strikes a perpendicular precipice, which juts boldly into the stream from the American side, and the current thus thrown abruptly to the left, creates a whirlpool, which is not the least among the curiosities of this region. The officer advanced to the edge of the cliff, and gazed in silence on the foaming current, and its overhanging banks, now dimly discovered through the gray twilight. His reveries were broken by his companion, who narrated a melancholy tale connected with the scene of their contemplation. Many years ago, when all of this country was in the possession of the British, a detachment of troops, having under their convoy a number of families with their furniture and baggage, were overtaken by night in the vicinity. They still proceeded, however, in hopes of reaching the forts below. But the French and Indians had formed an ambuscade at this very spot, and just as the devoted party were passing along the brink of the precipice, the savage foe rushed on them with hideous yells. Those alone who have heard the soul-thrilling cry of the Indian warrior, who have heard it breaking through the gloom of the night, with all its horrible accompaniments, with the wail of infants, and the shrieks of women, with the groans of the dying, the prayers and curses of the living, those only can conceive the horror of such a moment. In vain the troops endeavored to resist—the tomahawk was drenched in blood—the European heard the dreadful war-cry, and felt that it was his knell; he received the fatal blow from an unseen hand, and had not the stern pleasure of beholding his antagonist, but fell, without the gratification of avenging his death, or the honor of defending his life. Still the foe pressed on; with the war-whoop was mingled loud shouts of triumph and the laugh of demonic exultation; the soldiers gave back, the horses, panic struck, fled from the din of battle, and in a moment were precipitated into the yawning gulf; men, women, and children followed, and the whole of this unhappy party slept that night under the wave.—"It is said," continued the informer, "that spirits may still be seen of a moonlight night, dancing in circles in the under whirling place where the water goes round rapidly—and now, see there! what is that?" The officer looked in the direction designated by the finger of his companion, and beheld a black object in the whirlpool, rising a foot or two above the surface of the water, circulating rapidly with it, and gradually approaching the centre, until it was swallowed in the vortex. He could easily imagine, that the trunks and boughs of trees, floating down the current, might be drawn into the pool, and whirling around within the vicinity of the water, might assume an upright position, and present the appearance which alarmed the inhabitants, and gave probability to their conjectures. I am glad to add, however, that he had the discretion to conceal his scepticism from his fellow traveller, to whose remark he gravely replied: "That human bodies when not decently buried seldom rested in peace, but that he had never heard of their doing any harm." His companion assented to the truth of this sagacious remark, and they pursued their journey.

These conversations having banished reserve, and the companions beginning to grow into confidence with each other, the officer ventured to inquire how near their route led to fort Niagara, and learned that they must pass within a short distance of that fortress.

Concealing his sense of the danger which this information implied to his person and mission, he said carelessly, "Well, I suppose they will not disturb peaceable travellers?" "Sometimes they do, and sometimes they don't," was the reply. "Do they ever get out as far as your little village?" "Oh! yes, often!" "And how do they behave there?" "Bad enough, bad enough," and he then proceeded to narrate a number of particulars, showing how these petty marauders destroyed their property, insulted their women, and bullied their men, adding to the most monstrous acts of cruelty and oppression, the meanness of picking locks and pilfering trifles. It was by no means a matter of pleasing reflection to the bearer of despatches, that he must rest that night, if he rested at all, under a roof subjected to these domestic visits; but he had other causes of uneasiness. It is well known that all the inhabitants within the reach of an English garrison, who are capable of corruption, become corrupt. English gold, which is but a bug-bear among the virtuous, presents a tempting lure to the loose and unprincipled inhabitants of a frontier, who can scarcely be said to belong to any country; and our armies sometimes encountered spies and traitors, where they had fondly hoped to find friends. On this occasion, our officer, who had incautiously placed himself under the guidance of a stranger, began to feel, as darkness gathered around him, that he had acted imprudently, as the latter could as easily conduct him to fort Niagara as to a place of safety. He concealed his suspicions and determined to act warily.

It was dark when they reached Lewiston, a little village which had been entirely reduced to ashes by the enemy. The moon, which now shone brightly, disclosed the solitary chimneys standing amid the ruins, the fruit trees surrounded by briars, the remains of enclosures, and the marks of desolation. A more beautiful situation could scarcely be imagined, but was now a wilderness. Here they took a path which led them from the river. A thick forest now overshadowed them, and they proceeded in silence, and wrapped in impenetrable darkness, except at intervals, when they reached the summit of a hill, and the moon shot her beams through the branches. It was only by seizing such opportunities to watch the progress, and mark the exact position of this friendly luminary, that our officer, by forming some estimate of the course he was pursuing, could judge correctly of the fidelity of his guide.—They passed an encampment of the Tuscarora Indians, where all was dark and silent; and about midnight arrived at the place of destination, which, though characterized as a village, was composed of only two or three log cabins. To one of these, which was dignified by the name of a public house, our traveller was conducted by his companion, who apologized for not inviting him to his own house, owing to the lateness of the hour and the want of accommodations.

Mine host, though called from his bed, cheerfully assisted his guest in putting away his tired horse, and then led him through a room where three or four rough two-fisted fellows lay snoring with their feet to the fire, to a chamber on the upper floor. Supper he declined, as well from policy as want of appetite; and having secured the door, and laid his pistols under the pillow, he gathered his cloak around him, and threw himself on the bed. From a light slumber he was awakened by a low murmur of voices in the apartment below, to which the precariousness of his situation induced him to listen with an intense and thrilling interest. Then a footstep was heard upon the stairs ascending slowly towards his apartment, and in a moment afterwards the latch was cautiously raised. He rose, seized his arms, and walked across the floor; the footstep retired the voices ceased below, and all was silent. Our officer loved his life as dearly as other men, but it will only be attributing to him on this occasion the feelings of his profession, to suppose that he felt more anxiety for his honor, and the success of his mission.

His broken slumbers yielded but little refreshment during the remainder of the night; and before the first grey streak illuminated the eastern horizon, he arose, and stole forth with noiseless steps, passed the snoring boarders, and in a moment breathed the free air. His horse was soon equipped, and mounting, he rode to the door, and summoned his host, who was the first to hear his loud halloo.—Surprised to find his guest in the saddle, he made no reply to his repeated demand to know his fare, but stepping forward, laid his hand upon the bridle. "Hands off, my friend," said the soldier, "my horse is ticklish about the head." "Alight, sir, alight!" said the host, "and take a dram before you go, it's a raw morning"—and still held the rein. At this moment other faces appeared at the door, the officer liked neither their company nor their looks, and dropping a piece of money at the landlords feet, he struck the spurs into the side of his steed, and dashed off in a gallop, leaving all danger behind.

VILLAGE BEAU.

The calm presence of a sublime mind inspires veneration, excites great thoughts, and noble sentiments in the wise and good.