

CHAPTER III.

THE FIRST STEP TO FAME.

The time had now come when Wash-ing-ton was to take a fresh start in life, and win for him-self high rank.

The French, who thought they had just as good a right as the Eng-lish to take up land in A-mer-i-ca, pressed their claims, and built forts on the great Lakes and on the banks of the O-hi-o Riv-er. They made friends of the red-men at or near these posts, and made it known that they would fight the Eng-lish at all points.

The red-men on the north shore of Lake On-ta-ri-o were good friends with the French; but those on the south shore were not. They had been well dealt with by the Eng-lish, and their chief, Half-King did not like the war-like move that was made by the French.

He went to the French post on Lake E-rie, and spoke thus to the troops there: "You have no right to come here and build towns, and take our land from us by fraud and force. We raised a flame in Mon-tre-al some time a-go, where we asked you to stay and not to come here on our land. I now ask you to go back to that place, for this land is ours.

"Had you come in a peace-ful way, like the Eng-lish, we should have

let you trade with us as they do, but we will not let you come and build on our land and take it by force.

"You and the Eng-lish are white. We live in a land be-tween you, to which you and they have no right. The Great Be-ing gave it to us. We have told the Eng-lish to move off, and they have heard us, and now we tell it to you. We do not fear you, and we mean to keep you both at arm's length."

The French-man said to Half-King: "You talk like a fool. This land is mine, and I will have it, let who will stand up a-gainst me. I have no fear of such as you. I tell you that down the O-hi-o I will go, and build forts on it. If it were blocked up I have troops e-nough to break through it and to tread down all who would try to stop me. My force is as the sand of the sea!"

This proud speech made Half-King feel as if he had been stabbed to the heart. It was the death-blow to his race. But he turned with hope and trust to the Eng-lish, who thus far had not shown a wish to do what was not just to his tribe.

On Oc-to-ber 30, 1753, Wash-ing-ton set out from Will-iams-burg in Vir-gin-i-a with a small band of men. He was just of age, and ranked as Ma-jor Wash-ing-ton. He was to go to the French out-post near Lake E-rie, with a note from Gov-er-nor Din-wid-die to the head man there, and to ask for a re-ply in the name of King George.

He was to find out where forts had been built, and how large a force of troops had crossed the Lakes, and to learn all that he could of those who had dared to set up the flag of France on soil which the English claimed as their own.

Wash-ing-ton's route lay through thick woods and swamps where the foot of man had not trod; he had to climb steep and rough hills where wild beasts had their lairs; and to cross streams on frail rafts, if they could not swim or ford them. There were but eight men in the whole band, and the post they were to reach lay 560 miles off, and the whole of the way had to be made on horse-back or on foot.

They met some of the In-di-an chiefs at a place called Logs-town and Wash-ing-ton made his first speech to the red-men. He told them what he had come for, and asked that some of their braves might go with him as guides and safe-guards for the rest of the way. He then gave them what was called a "speech-belt," wrought with beads, as a sign that they were friends and full of peace and good-will.

The chiefs were mild and full of peace. They said that Wash-ing-ton might have some of their men as guides, but he would have to wait for two or three days as the young braves had gone out in search of game.

This Wash-ing-ton could not do. There was no time to lose, and so he set out with but four red-men as guides, and Half-King was one of them.

Through rain and snow, through a long stretch of dark woods that seemed to have no end, through deep streams and swamps where there was no sure foot-hold for man or beast, the brave band kept on their way.

At the end of 35 days from the time they left Will-iams-burg they reached a place called Ven-an-go, where they saw a house from the top of which a French flag flew, and Wash-ing-ton called a halt. The head man in charge asked him and his friends to sup with him. The wine was passed with a free hand, but Wash-ing-ton did not drink like his French host. He knew he would need to keep a cool head for his work. When the French-man had his tongue loosed by the wine, he told a good deal.

"We have got the land," he said, "and we mean to keep it. You Eng-lish may have two men to our one, but you are slow. It takes you a long time to move."

The man's tongue wagged on in a free way, and Wash-ing-ton, who had kept his wits, wrote down all he said that could be of use to him.

The next day it rained hard and they could not go on. Then for the first time the French-man found that there were red-men with the Eng-lish. Wash-ing-ton had kept them back, for he feared to trust them to the wiles of the French. But now the shrewd man made a great time, and hailed them as dear friends. He was so glad to see them! How could they be so near and not come to see him? He gave them gifts and plied them with strong drink, till Half-King and his braves thought no more of what they had pledged to the Eng-lish. They were soon in such a

state that they did not care to move. It took some time for Wash-ing-ton to get them free from the wiles of the French, and it took four days more of snow and rain, through mire and swamp, to reach the fort for which they had set out.

Here Wash-ing-ton met the chief of the fort and made known the cause that had brought him. He gave him the note from Gov-er-nor Din-wid-die, in which it was asked why the French had come in-to a State that was owned by Great Brit-ain, and they were bid to go in peace. The French took two days in which to think of the course they should take, and in this time Wash-ing-ton set down in his note book the size and strength of the fort and all that he could find out. He told his men to use their eyes, and to count the boats in the stream, and the guns in the fort.

The first chance he had, Wash-ing-ton drew a plan of this fort, and it was sent to Eng-land for King George to see.

Wash-ing-ton saw that the Half-King and the braves with him had much to say to the French, and he did not trust them. He heard that the Eng-lish who sought to trade on the O-hi-o were seized by the French, and that some red-men had passed the fort with two or three white scalps.

All this made him wish to get off safe with his small band, and when the French chief gave him a sealed note, he had a shrewd guess as to what was in it. At last, when the start was to be made, the French

chief had large stores of food and wine put on their boats, and made a great show of good will, but at the same time he tried to keep the red-men with him, and told them he would give them guns for gifts the next day. Wash-ing-ton was pressed by the red-men to wait that long for them, and the next morn the French had to give the guns. Then they tried to get the red-men to drink once more, but Wash-ing-ton plead with them, and at last got them to start.

It was hard to steer the boats, as the stream was full of ice, and at times they had to leap out and stand in the wet for half an hour at a time, to drag the boats by main force off the shoals. On the part of the trip that had to be made by land, they had a hard time too. It was cold, the roads were deep in mire, and the steeds were so worn out, that it was feared they would fall by the way. Wash-ing-ton gave up his horse to help bear the food and things for use, and he asked his friends to do so too. They all went on foot, and the cold grew worse. There was deep snow that froze as it fell. For three days they toiled on in a slow way.

At last Wash-ing-ton made up his mind to leave the men and steeds in charge of one of his band, and to strike off with his pack on his back and his gun in his hand by a way which, it seemed to him, would take him home by a short cut. He had the sealed note that he wished to give up as soon as he could. He took but one man with him. At night they lit a fire, and camped by it in the woods. At two in the morn, they were once more on foot.

They fell in with a red-man who claimed to know Mr. Gist, the man who was with Wash-ing-ton, and called him by his name in his own tongue and seemed glad to see him. They asked the red-man if he would go with them and show them a short-cut to the Forks of the Al-le-gha-ny Riv-er. The red-man seemed glad to serve them, and took Wash-ing-ton's pack on his own back. Then the three set out, and walked at a brisk pace for eight or ten miles.

By this time Wash-ing-ton's feet were so sore that he could not take a step with-out pain, and he was well tired out. He thought it best to camp where they were, and the red-man begged Wash-ing-ton to let him bear his gun. But the Ma-jor would not let it go out of his own hands. This made the red-man cross, and he urged them to keep on and said there were red-skins in the woods who would scalp them if they lay out all night. He would take them to his own hut where they would be safe.

The white men lost faith in their guide, and were soon quite ill at ease. When the red-man found that he could not make them go his way, or do as he said, he ceased to wear the face of a friend. At heart he was the foe of all white men. All at once he made a stop, and then turned and fired on them.

Wash-ing-ton found that he was not hit, so he turned to Mr. Gist, and said, "Are you shot?"

"No," said Gist. Then the red-man ran to a big white oak tree to load his gun. Gist would have killed him, but Wash-ing-ton would not let

him.

Gist says, "We let him charge his gun. We found he put in a ball; then we took care of him. The Ma-jor or I stood by the guns. We made him make a fire for us by a small run as if we meant to sleep there. I said to the Ma-jor; 'As you will not have him killed, we must get rid of him in some way, and then we must march on all night;' on which I said to the red-man, 'I suppose you were lost and fired your gun.'

"He said he knew the way to his log-hut and it was not far off.

'Well,' said I, 'do you go home; and as we are tired we will follow your track in the morn-ing, and here is a cake of bread for you, and you must give us meat in the morn-ing.' He was glad to get off,"

Wash-ing-ton says, "We walked all the rest of the night, and made no stop, that we might get the start so far as to be out of their reach the next day, since we were quite sure they would get on our track as soon as it was light."

But no more was seen or heard of them, and the next night, at dusk, the two white men came to the Al-le-gha-ny, which they thought to cross on the ice.

This they could not do, so they had to go to work with but one small axe, and a poor one at that, and make a raft. It was a whole day's work. They next got it launched, and went on board of it; then set off.

But when they were in mid-stream the raft was jammed in the ice in such a way that death seemed to stare them in the face.

Wash-ing-ton put out his pole to stay the raft so that the ice might pass by; but the tide was so swift that it drove the ice with great force. It bore down on the pole so hard that Wash-ing-ton was thrown in-to the stream where it was at least ten feet deep. He would have been swept out of sight if he had not caught hold of one of the raft logs. As they found they could not cross the stream, or get back to the shore they had left, they quit the raft, and got on a small isle near which they were borne by the tide.

But this was not the end of their ill luck. It was so cold that Mr. Gist's hands and feet froze, and both he and Wash-ing-ton were in great pain through-out the long dark night. A gleam of hope came with the dawn of day, for they found the ice 'twixt them and the east bank of the stream was so hard as to bear their weight, and they made their way on it, and the same day came to a place where they could rest. Here they spent two or three days.

They set out on the first of Jan-u-a-ry, and the next day came to Mon-on-ga-he-la, where Wash-ing-ton bought a horse. On the 11th he got to Bel-voir, where he stopped one day to take the rest he was in need of, and then set out and reached Will-iams-burg on the 16th of Jan-u-a-ry. He gave to Gov-er-nor Din-wid-die the note he had brought from the French chief, showed him the plans of the fort, and told him all that he had seen and done.

The fame of his deeds, of the ills he had borne, and the nerve and pluck he had shown, was soon noised a-broad, and George Wash-ing-ton, though a mere youth, was looked up to by young and old.