

CHAPTER XI.

A SAD YEAR.

Christ-mas night was the time set to cross the Del-a-ware, and at sun-set the troops were on the move. It was a dark, cold night. The wind was high, the tide strong, and the stream full of cakes of ice which drove the boats out of their course. It seemed at times as if the boats would be crushed to bits, Men who were used to boats, and had been brought up on the sea, and had fought with fierce storms and wild gales, found it hard work, with all their skill, to make their way from shore to shore.

Wash-ing-ton, who crossed with the troops, stood on the east bank till all the field-guns were brought to land, and it was four o'clock ere the men took up their line of march. Tren-ton was nine miles off, and they could not reach there till day-light, too late to take the King's troops off their guard.

Most of the troops at Tren-ton were Hes-sians, from Hesse, a small Ger-man state whose prince had lent his troops to King George for hire. As I have told you they were in charge of Rahl. Rahl thought more of his brass band than he did of his men, was full of good cheer and liked to have a good time. He would sit up till a late hour in the night, and then lie in bed till nine o'clock the next day.

The one who leads troops to war should be like a watch-dog, quick to see and to hear all that goes on, and to be on guard at all times.

Each day he had the guns drawn out and dragged through the town, just to make a stir and have the band out. But when the Ma-jor told him that he should have earth-works thrown up on which to place the guns he said, "Pooh! pooh! Let the foe come on! We'll charge on them with the bay-o-net!"

"But Herr Col-o-nel," said the old Ma-jor, "it costs not much, and if it does not help it will not harm."

But Rahl laughed as if he thought it a good joke, turned on his heel and went off, and the works were not thrown up.

On this night, too, there was a great stir in the camp at Tren-ton, for the men did their best to keep Christ-mas, and their thoughts were of home and the dear ones there. They made what cheer they could, and did not dream that the foe was so near.

A storm of hail and snow set in as soon as our troops took up their march. They could scarce see their way through the sleet they had to face. The night was so cold that two of the men froze to death. At dawn of day some of the men came to a halt at a cross-road, where they did their best to dry their guns. But some were past use, and word was sent to Wash-ing-ton of the state of their arms. They were in doubt what to do.

Wash-ing-ton in a burst of rage bade the man go back to his chief at once, and tell him to push on and charge if he could not fire.

At eight o'clock Wash-ing-ton drew near the town at the head of his troops. He went up to a man who had come out to chop wood by the road-side and asked him where the guard was who stood at the out-post of Rahl's camp.

The man said in a harsh voice, "I don't know."

"You may tell him," said one of our men who stood near, "for that is Gen-er-al Wash-ing-ton."

At once a great change came o'er the man to whom Wash-ing-ton spoke. He raised his hands, and cried, "God bless you! God bless you!" and then showed where the guards could be found.

Soon was heard the cry from Rahl's men, "The foe! the foe! turn out! turn out!" Drums beat to arms. The whole place was in a stir. Wash-ing-ton came in on the north, Sul-li-van on the west, and Stark at the south end of the town.

Rahl scarce knew how to act. He rode to the front of his troops and got them out of the town. Then he seemed to feel that it was a shame to fly in that way, for he was a brave man, so he led his men back in a wild dash out of the woods and in-to the town to meet the foe.

In the midst of the fight, a shot struck him and he fell from his horse. The troops would heed no voice but that of their chief, and fled up the banks of a creek on the way to Prince-ton.

Wash-ing-ton saw the stir and thought they had wheeled to form a new line. He was told that they had laid down their arms, and his joy was great. The day was ours!

But for the wild flight of Rahl's men, it would have gone hard with our troops. Wash-ing-ton did not know it at the time, but he found out that Ew-ing and Put-nam had tried to cross the stream but were kept back by the ice, and he with his raw troops would, he was sure, have been put to rout had Rahl and his men been on their guard.

The poor Ma-jor, who had in vain urged Rahl to throw up breast-works, had a bad wound of which he died in Tren-ton; and Rahl him-self, to whom the red-coats owed their ill-luck, was laid to rest in a grave-yard in that town.

And where was Gen-er-al Howe all this time? In New York, where he thought to take his ease till the Del-a-ware froze so that his troops could cross. He was much shocked at the news that the Hes-sians who had been brought up to war should have laid down their arms for a troop of raw men in rags. He sent Lord Corn-wal-lis back to take Jer-sey, and, as he said, "to bag the fox."

By the third of Jan-u-a-ry red-coats, with Corn-wal-lis at their head, were near at hand. Wash-ing-ton was in a tight place, with a small creek 'twixt his few raw troops and the large force of the foe. Back of him lay the Del-a-ware which it was now not safe to cross.

In this dark hour a gleam of hope came to his mind. He saw a way out of the trap, and that was by a quick night-march to get at the rear of the King's troops, dash on the camp at Prince-ton, seize the stores that were left there, and push on to New Bruns-wick.

A thaw had set in which made the roads deep with mire, but in the course of the night the wind veered to the north, and in two hours the roads were once more hard and frost-bound.

That the foe might not guess his plan, Wash-ing-ton bade some of his men keep at work with their spades on the pits near the bridge, go the rounds, change guards at each bridge and ford, and keep up the camp-fires till day-break, when they were to join those on the way to Prince-ton.

In the dead of the night Wash-ing-ton drew his troops out of camp and the march took place. The road which they had to take was cut through woods, and the stumps of the trees made the march a slow one, so that it was near sun-rise when Wash-ing-ton came to the bridge at the brook three miles from Prince-ton.

As our troops left the woods they came face to face with a force of

red-coats, and a sharp fight took place, which did not last long.

Wash-ing-ton was in the midst of it. In the heat of the fight, his aide-de-camp lost sight of him in the dusk and smoke. The young man dropped the reins on the neck of his horse, drew down his cap to hide the tears in his eyes, and gave him up for lost. When he saw Wash-ing-ton come out from the cloud with his hat raised and the foe in flight, he spurred up to his side.

"Thank God you are safe!" cried he.

"A-way, and bring up the troops," said Wash-ing-ton, "the day is our own!"

At day-break, when Gen-er-al Howe thought to bag his fox, he found the prize had slipped from his grasp, and soon learned that the King's troops had lost their hold on New Jer-sey.

The fame of Wash-ing-ton, and of the brave deeds of those who fought to be free, went a-cross the sea, and made friends for him and the cause. Not a few came to their aid. One of these brave souls was a Pole, whose name was Kos-ci-us-ko.

The com-mand-er-in-chief said to him "What do you seek here?"

"To fight for the cause you have at heart."

"What can you do?"

"Try me."

This style of speech, and the air of the man, pleased Wash-ing-ton so well that he at once made him an aide-de-camp. This was in 1777. He served the cause well, and went back to his own land in 1786 with the rank of Brig-a-dier Gen-er-al.

In 1777 La-fay-ette came from France to join the troops led by Wash-ing-ton. He had wealth and high rank in his own land, and had lived but a score of years. He left his young wife, and the gay court of France, and made his way to A-mer-i-ca to do what he could to aid the foes of King George.

He came, he said, to learn and not to teach, and would serve with-out pay, and as one who came of his own free-will.

He soon won his way to the heart of Wash-ing-ton, and a strong bond of love grew up 'twixt the two which naught but death could break.

In the mean-time the whole of our land south of the Great Lakes was a scene of strife and blood-shed, and it was hard work for our troops to keep the red-skins and red-coats at bay.

I have not space to tell you of all the fights that took place, nor the ways in which Wash-ing-ton sought to vex the King's troops.

On the third of Oc-to-ber of this year--1777--we find him at Ger-man-town, where the main force of the red-coats were in camp. His plan was to drive them out, but though his troops fought with much skill and in the midst of a dense fog, they were forced back, and the day was lost.

The ships-of-war in the Del-a-ware led Wash-ing-ton to think that Lord Howe meant to turn his guns on Phil-a-del-phi-a, and his mind was filled with doubts and fears.

In the same month word came to him that Bur-goyne--who was at the head of the King's troops in the north--had been forced to yield to Gen-er-al Gates at Fish-kill. This was such a blow to the King's cause that the troops at West Point and else where on the Hud-son, who were to have gone to the aid of Bur-goyne, left the forts and made their way to New York.