

THE TENT CHURCH IN OLD
WESTMORELAND

IT was an anniversary observance; and the church had been turned into a "museum" of pioneer antiquities. The pulpit was draped with a Revolutionary flag; a spinning-wheel had been placed at the edge of the choir platform; while an old flint-lock hung over the fireplace in a chimney corner.

An added touch of realism was furnished by the spectacled clerk, seated under the pulpit, in powdered hair, and buff vest and knee-breeches,—psalm-book and pitchpipe in hand. Facing him in a front pew, bowed the reverent figure of a backwoodsman clad in homespun, his long-barrelled rifle in the hollow of his arm.

Suitably, also, was the sexton antiquated, and limped up and down the broad aisle, with all the immemorial gravity of his office. The minister, though disappointingly youthful, displayed an ample knowledge of the neighbourhood folk-lore gathered from the lips of the old men and women, the rusty pages of the parish records, and the inscriptions on the mossy headstones of the pioneers' cor-

ner of the churchyard. Lately, too, he had patched together fragments of a tradition concerning the origin of the little old church itself, which he now gave out for the first time; yet it was not so much a narrative as a spectacle, for we were taken on a "time journey," and set down at a station, some hundred and thirty years ago, among the settlers' cabins, and the dim forest lanes, so that we had the actual sense of living amidst the scenes which he was describing.

This is the tradition:

At sundown on Saturday, July 13, 1782,—a year and a day now famous in the annals of Westmoreland—John McIlduff stood, leaning on the top rail of the bars that he had just put up, while he surveyed meditatively his three-acre clearing, its yellow stubble dotted thickly with brown shocks of wheat and blackened stumps. Since the dew was off the swath, he had laboured at binding into sheaves his first harvest of the backwoods, and now having "caught up with his work," he planned to take the coming Monday for the long-delayed trip to the county seat at Hannastown, to record the deed for his five hundred acres of forest land.

An Ulster-Scot, come over from the other side a few years before this date, he had made the purchase on the other side of the mountains, tempted by the bargain pressed on him by a faint-hearted settler, who had trailed back into civilization. And

he and the young wife and the boy had loved the woods, from the day they took possession of the log cabin, perched on the brink of the elliptical cup, carved out of the hill at the head of the hollow, at the bottom of which the spring slipped out under a rock.

It was a cosy world—rimmed round with the green forest—with its picketed garden and a grain field and a pasture and the chickens and the horse and cow; and its stillness broken only by the birds and the axe, and the hum of the spinning-wheel, and, now and then when the larder ran low, the crack of the rifle.

Every morning John McIlduff and his wife rose with the sun, and, when the dark crept up the hollow, they barred the stout oak door against it and lay down to dreamless sleep.

They had only one dread,—the forest was Indian-haunted. But as the months passed without any report of the savage raider, there grew up a sense of security, so that at prayers, John liked to read from the prophet Micah, where the verse runs—"They shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid."

They were up with the first dawn of Monday. Soon the blue smoke curled up the chimney; the coffee simmered on its bunch of red coals raked out on the hearth, and the eggs and bacon sputtered in the skillet; while the head of the house, with fre-

quent calls for assistance, was getting into his best clothes.

There were all the pleasant bustle and expectancy of a holiday. John's head was full of his trip as an important landowner, with all its incidental interest of the gossip of the settlement, and the latest news from the war; while Ann planned a day off from the house-round—a ramble in the woods, with the boy and the dog for good company.

After breakfast, the man stooped the clear fearless eyes down over his wife's face, pulled up the boy for a kiss, felt in his inner pocket to make sure of the precious parchment, and taking down his rifle from the hooks on the wall, went out into the morning.

Crossing the dingle, he briskly climbed the hill, and as he reached its crest overlooking the broad valley, the sun came up to meet him. Far below, a wisp of grayish fog winding with the course of the stream, began to twist and writhe at the first touch of sunlight, and, in a moment had pulled itself into fragments, which went scurrying off through the tree-tops.

The leaves started to rustle, the twittering birds broke into song. A party of frisking gray squirrels, out to cut their morning capers, crashed along among the branches overhead. A bronze turkey-cock, with scarlet wattle, was ruffling, strutting and gobbling, at the edge of the clearing, but at sight of

John, stalked off into the thicket. And when he crossed the deer-path leading down to the lick, there were fresh marks of a herd, the antlered stag in the lead, his hoofs toeing in.

And all the undergrowth fringing the wood-road was full of odour and colour, for the forest flowers had pressed down to the trail for a place in the sun, and the berries, shining with the dew, were ripening within grasp of his fingers, and belated Indian pinks and tall phlox in lavender, and black-eyed gallardias, huddled in bunches or strung out in long files, on either side.

He crossed the stream on a fallen sycamore, and breasted the steep ascent, leading up into the highlands, now known as Denmark Manor. Well on toward the top of this slope he approached the home of Jacob Longanecker, his nearest neighbour. The sun was burning in the little square windows of the east gable, flanking the chimney top, and the white, barred porch was gleaming. At the gate he hallooed: "Good morning, neighbours."

The dog snoozing on the earth-path set up a friendly barking; there was the flash of a red wamus among the garden shrubbery, and the old couple, their wrinkled faces beaming, came pattering down the walk, brushing mint odours off their bergamots.

"Good morning, Mr. McIlduff," they chimed, "you're out early, you're on a journey, we see," eyeing him admiringly, so blithe and fine in his

gallant dress. "You're through with harvest, then; and how's the sweet wife?" They volleyed their questions.

He picked out the last one for an answer, because he was a little anxious over leaving her alone for the whole day.

"She's well. I'm going to the county seat, and she's going to take the day for a picnic in the woods with the boy and the dog."

"Maybe they'll come this way," cried the old lady gleefully, "I want to show her my garden, and my new linen reel."

"I'm just helping in the garden," broke in the old man apologetically, "while the swath is drying."

The talk ran on to flailing out of the grain, the scutching of the flax and on the fine mill-site down where the creek curved back, almost looping; then it veered off sharply into the great world—the war, Washington and Lafayette; but when John chanced to mention the Indians, Jacob's face darkened and he flung a sudden warning look at him, shaking his head, with a sidelong glance at his wife, as though he had some secret.

The two men went down to the spring for a ladle of water. Jacob, under cover of courtesy, accompanying his neighbour out through the gate; but no sooner were they outside, than in an anxious undertone he said, "There's something wrong in there," jerking his thumb toward the woods, on his left.

"Indians?" asked the other, startled.

"I fear."

"What signs?"

"Did you taste smoke in the fog as you came across the bottom lands? No? Well, I got a whiff of it yesterday, and Saturday a blue cloud of it drifted down the east hollow yonder."

"Oh! if that's all," said the other, relieved, "it's only a fire in a clearing."

"But that's why I asked if you tasted it. No brush smoke was it, but a tang of mortar and feathers. The dog stood at the gate snuffing the wind, and then went slinking to the porch, and curled up, growling; and, in the afternoon, a herd of scared deer broke across the pasture. I'm afeard," said Jacob, solemnly shaking his head. "Leastwise, you'd better keep a sharp lookout."

He went off, over the fence to his harvest. Half-way up the field, he turned to wave his hand and shout, "Be sure and stop and tell us the news."

John McIllduff, after a little hesitation, decided to proceed. He could at least do a little cautious scouting. Besides, old Jacob's alarm was very vague. Likely the solitude had got on his nerves. And then the woods were always Indian-haunted, at midsummer—the season of the raid—to the imagination of the old pioneer. So, by the time John had reached the uplands without any sign, the matter that had made a moment's misgiving, had almost cleared out of his mind.

The sun now slanted his rays through the tree-tops and flung flickering bars of light across the path; the air was dancing in the middle distance, where the vapour off the damp mould rose into the heat; and a brooding noon stillness had succeeded the mattinal celebration of the wild life of the backwoods.

As he drew near to the military road, cut through the forest from Ligonier to Pittsburgh almost thirty years before, at a curve where the path dipped and the rank undergrowth on either side was matted into a thicket, there dashed suddenly across the road in front of him a young Indian, rifle in one hand and tomahawk in the other. A puff of smoke and the crack of a rifle, and the savage checked in mid-leap, crumpled up and with a choked cry of fear and rage, tumbled to the ground—the blood spurting from his neck and spattering his face and arms and the earth about him. With a desperate effort he rose on one elbow, and staggered to his feet, but his knees twisting under him, he fell flat—his hands clawing at his throat. Trunk and limbs began to flop violently; convulsive jerks went through his frame from head to foot: then he stiffened out, and his eyes fixed in a steady stare at the strip of blue sky between the trees.

A settler came rushing up, his rifle smoking. Snatching a clotted bunch of brown hair from the Indian's girdle, he put it to his lips, and pressed it into the bosom of his hunting-shirt. Then he

thrust his hunting knife and turned it three times in the heart that had already ceased to beat. A half-dozen armed men sprang up from ambush, and came running to the spot, their faces distorted in a black wrath.

"The Senecas!" was all they said to McIlduff's eager questionings, but, as they pushed forward, along the path by which he had just come,—he going with them—he caught snatches of the account of the raid, from the lips of one and another. On the previous Saturday, the Seneca chief, Guyasuta, with a band of one hundred and fifty braves, had surprised the county seat, burned it—the court house and thirty houses, all but the block-house and stockade—ravaged the neighbourhood—came in on a wedding party, south of the Forbes Road,—killed eleven—carried off in all fifteen—among them the bridal pair. The blockhouse had held, and now the defenders and every able-bodied man of the settlement were out on the trail for rescue and vengeance."

Shortly they came upon a broad trail out of the woods. Those skilled in woodcraft, scanning it carefully, said that the raiders numbered thirty, "some on horse and some afoot," and had with them ten captives, besides those carried behind the saddle.

They hurried on, thinking to overtake the raiding Indians in the valley, but when the crest of the hill was reached, there was no sign, except John

McIlduff's house in flames on the opposite ridge. All looked at him. Not a word did he say, but the cloud darkened on his face, as he brought his rifle off his shoulder to the length of his arm, and went on at a pace that quickly left the others far behind. Down the hill he rushed, in a fury of haste, past his neighbours' house; he glimpsed it as he sped by.

But the others, following more cautiously, discovered that the savages had lifted heavy toll from the little farmstead. The house stood, but the dog lay across the stoop—his skull cleft to the brain. The old woman, all in a heap, was found in the garden. There was no sign of Jacob until they caught a gleam of his coat against the stubble on the hillside. He was doubled up over the unbound sheaf with a wisp of straw in his left hand, and when they turned him over, there was a spot above his heart, as large as a man's hand, where the wamus was stained a dark red.

McIlduff scooped water with the hollow of his hand, for his parched throat, as he dashed through the stream. On the long ascent his pace slackened; his breath came rough and fast; there was a roaring in his ears; his eyes were bloodshot and smarted; but he desperately stumbled on, and just as he reached the clearing, slung like a saddle over the backbone of the hill, out of the bushes came a smothered cry—"John!"

With the last remnants of his strength, he flung himself into the arms of his wife.

"'Twas the holiday saved us," she said, "the ramble in the woods."

"And the favour of God," he added piously.

And while he lay, stretched out on the ground, recovering his breath and thrilled with the joy born of his wife's preservation, she told how, in the morning, after she had watched him disappear behind the turn in the lane, she had cleared away the breakfast things, and, after that, sat on the porch for a while. Then, with the boy and the dog, she had followed the by-path up the hollow from the foot of the garden, filling her basket with berries and her apron with wild flowers. Reaching the hilltop, she had sat down to enjoy the far view up and down the long, winding valley.

In the pellucid atmosphere, the neighbour's house seemed almost within hail. She could see the good wife bending over her vegetables; and up in the clearing Jacob stooping and rising, as he raked up the swath and bound the sheaf. All about her, in the cool shade, the birds were flitting; and she sang some old home songs, without a quaver, she was so content.

Then a puff of white smoke, and another, and the red wamus was flattened down into the stubble, and there was no sign at all of the good wife, but across the wind came the mortal howl of a dog, and a yell so wild and savage that "she felt all her heart's blood curdle cold."

She seized the boy's hand and fled into the

thicket at the edge of the clearing. Crouching at the roots of an oak, she pulled the short, thick branches of undergrowth down over them, as a frightened child pulls the coverlet over its head. Then she pressed the sprigs apart, making a slit, through which she might watch, through the thin foliage. With one hand over the mouth of the dog, and the other caressing the boy, she glued her eyes against the little window in her leaf-shelter, and, fearing to draw her breath, waited.

The savages came by, silently, in single file.

The chief rode first—she knew him by his bonnet of feathers—on a great roan, his face set straight forward, and his black, beady eyes roving. Flung across his cruppers was the form of a white maiden. His band followed, their faces agleam with the remorseless passion of loot and slaughter, more than one with gory trophy at his belt, beside knife and hatchet. Interspersed among the band were the captives, their heads hanging on their breasts, their faces white, drawn and pitiful to see, with apprehensive horror stamped upon them. McIlduff's wife, hidden behind her little window, mere woman as she was and helpless, felt all her fear swept out of her in a great surge of wrath and pity, so that she almost stood up and shouted. The dog caught the quiver of her excitement and growled, although her fingers pressed tightly over his muzzle. The chief heard the growl, and pulled his bridle, and made as though he would order a

search of the bushes, but the crack of a rifle in the woods, and a death-screch, changed his mind.

At a swifter pace, the Indians moved on up the hill. At the top, white faces full of anguish turned backward for some sign of help, and white arms were flung up in despair.

She threw herself on the ground in a passion of weeping.

It was thus that John McIlduff found her.

Lurid smoke rose from behind the hill. The log-hut, containing all their goods, packed laboriously over the mountains, and all the heirlooms from across the sea, was burning down, but they were too engrossed in gratitude to go near it. They sat on, enfolded in each other's arms, and with a comforting sense of an overshadowing divine protection about them.

John prayed devoutly without kneeling. He thanked God for His mercy; he promised Him the tithe of all he had, and he vowed that he and his would serve Him unto the latest generation.

A year later, when the great war was over, and security had hung up her banners all along the border of Westmoreland, the settlers, with time now for other thoughts, gathered to plan for a meeting-house. Then John McIlduff stood up and told of his vow, and ended with an offer of the deed of two acres, around the spot where he had prayed, for a church and a churchyard. The place being hallowed by Providence and the vow, and other-

wise suitable, the settlers could do no less than take it, and so they voted; and in due time the meeting-house arose in the woods.

Here he worshipped through many years,—a pillar of the church. His grave is next the wall, with that of his wife Ann Wallace beside it, and—the boy of the Indian raid—the son, when seventy-six years old, was laid in the lengthening row.

Thus the minister ended his recital of the tradition of the origin of the little church in the woods. After the hymn and the benediction the folk lingered to look over the "antiquities" collected for the occasion, and to converse in hushed tones about those early pioneer days now so real. The older people had their own long memories, and some were there of the strain of him who in gratitude for deliverance from a great peril, had devoted to the worship of God the ground on which the church stood.

At length, to the strains of the postlude, the congregation passed out of doors, and I rubbed my eyes as I looked down on the modern town under the hill, all its roofs gleaming in the glare of the noon-light. A puffing engine was trailing a string of cars down the valley. Half-way up the opposite hill crouched a black tippie, its haunches in its hole, with the gray gob at its feet—entrails of the earth.

The sight broke the spell.

The past faded off in vanishing views of forest lanes and in faint echoes of savage yells. The lit-

the church looked old, from moss-grown roof to the brown stones of its foundation; and the pioneer graves were matted and the tombs rusty: I could scarcely decipher, "John McIlduff b. 1744."

But the clumps of ancient oaks were lusty and kept up a great rustling, and through their branches opened up patches of fresh blue sky. The choir, practicing for the vesper service, was singing,—the strain came out through the open window—

*"Thy Church is praying yet,
A thousand years the same,"*

and across the way—only now a gate swung where the bars had been, and the blackened stumps were gone,—brown shocks dotted the yellow stubble, as in the sunshine of that other thirteenth day of July: for kind earth keeps her dole for each generation. At the foot of a great oak—doubtless the settler lads and maidens had set the precedent—stood two descendants of the old stock,—she with delicate oval face, in the half-shadow of the broad rim of her hat, upturned to his, and he, with clear, gray, fearless eyes looking down into hers. For life and love are ever new in the hearts of man and maid.