

THE RABID WOLF.

A VERITABLE TRADITION OF THE VALLEY OF THE TAWASENTHA.

The great Pine Plains, beginning not far south of the junction of the Mohawk with the North River, are still infested by wolves, who harbour in its deep gorges, from which they sally out at night, on the sheep-folds of the farmers, and often put a whole neighbourhood in fear. The railroad track from Albany to Schenectady, passes over a part of these plains, which stretch away in the direction of the blue outlines of the Helderberg mountains. It is many miles across the narrowest part of them, and they reach down to the very outskirts of the city of Albany, where they have of late years, and since Buel's day, begun to cultivate them by sowing clover, planting fruit trees, and in other ways. They constitute the table land of the county, and send out from beneath their heavy mass of yellow sand and broken down sand stones, mica slates, and granites, many springs and streams of the purest and most crystalline waters, which find their outlets chiefly into the valley of the Tawasentha, or, as the river is called in popular language, the Norman's Kill, and are thus contributed to swell the noble volume of the Hudson. These springs issue at the precise point where the arenaceous mass rests on a clay or impervious basis. The effect, in ancient years, has been that the sand is carried off, grain by grain, till a deep ravine or gorge is formed. The sides of this gorge being composed of mixed earth and some mould, and free from the aridity of the surface, bear a dense and vigorous growth of hard wood trees and shrubbery, and are often found to be encumbered with immense trunks of fallen pines and other forest rubbish, which renders it very difficult to penetrate them. It is into these dark gorges that the wolves retreat, after scouring the plains and neighbouring farms for prey; and here they have maintained their ancient empire from time immemorial. Such, at least, was the state of things between the settlers and the wolves, at the date of this story, in 1807.

Sometimes the whole country armed and turned out *en masse*, to ferret them out of their fastnesses and destroy them; and truly the forces assembled on some of these wolf-hunts were surprising, and, in one respect, that is to say, the motley and uncouth character of their arms, they would have put both Bonaparte and Wellington to flight. There was nothing, from a pitchfork to a heavy blunderbuss, which they did not carry, always excepting a good rifle, which I never remember to have seen on these occasions. Indeed, these formal turn-outs were better suited to frighten away, than to kill and capture the foe; so that there was no just cause of surprise why the wolves remained, and even increased. They still kept masters of the Plains—sheep were killed by dozens, night after night, and the alarm went on.

It was at other times tried to trap them, and to bait them in sundry ways. I recollect that we all had implicit faith in the village schoolmaster, one Cleanthus, who knew some Latin, and a little of almost every thing; and among other arts which he cherished, and dealt out in a way to excite wonder for his skill, he knew how to make the wolves follow his tracks, by smearing his shoes with *æsofoedita*, or some other

substance, and then ensconcing himself at night in a log pen, where he might bid defiance to the best of them, and shoot at them besides. But I never could learn that there were any of these pestiferous animals killed, either by the schoolmaster and his party, or any other party, except it was the luckless poor animal I am about to write of, which showed its affinities to the canine race by turning rabid, and rushing at night into the midst of a populous manufacturing village.

Iosco was eligibly seated on the summit and brow of a picturesque series of low crowned hills, just on the southern verge of these great Plains, where the tillable and settled land begins. It was, consequently, in relation to these wolves, a perfect frontier; and we had not only frequent alarms, but also the privilege and benefit of hearing all the wonderful stories of wolf-adventure, to man and beast, for a wide circle. Indeed, these stories often came back with interest, from the German and Dutch along the Swarta Kill, and Boza Kill settlements, away up to the foot of the Helderberg mountains. A beautiful and clear stream of sparkling cold water, called the Hungerkill, after gathering its crystal tributaries from the deep gorges of the plains, ran through the village, and afforded one or two seats for mills, and after winding and doubling on its track a mile or two, rendered its pellucid stores into the Norman's Kill, or, as this stream was called by the ancient Mohawk race, in allusion to their sleeping dead, the Tawasentha. No stream in the country was more famous for the abundance of its fine brook trout, and the neighbouring plains served to shelter the timid hare, and the fine species of northern partridge, which is there always called a pheasant.

The village was supported by its manufacturing interests, and was quite populous. It had a number of long streets, some of which reached across the stream, and over a spacious mill pond, and others swept at right angles along the course of the great Cherry Valley turnpike. In its streets were to be heard, in addition to the English, nearly all the dialects of the German between, the Rhine and the Danube; the Low Dutch as spoken by the common country people on the manor of Rensselaerwyck, the Erse and Gaelic, as not unfrequently used by the large proportion of its Irish and Scotch, and what seemed quite as striking to one brought up in seclusion from it, the genuine Yankee, as discoursed by the increasing class of factory wood choppers, teamsters, schoolmasters, men out at the elbows, and travelling wits. The latter were indeed but a sorry representation of New England, as we have since found it. No small amount of superstitions were believed and recited in the social meetings of such a mixed foreign population. Accounts of instances of the second sight, death-lights on the meadows and in the churchyard, the low howling of premonitory dogs before funerals, and other legendary wares, to say nothing of the actual and veritable number of downright spooks, seen on various occasions, on the lands of the Veeders, the Van Valkenburgs, the Truaxes, and the Lagranges, rendered it a terror to all children under twelve to stir out of doors after dark. There were in the annals of Iosco, several events in the historical way which served as perfect eras to its inhabitants; but none, it is believed, of so striking and general importance as the story of the Mad Wolf, of which I am about to write.

There had been found, soon after the close of the revolutionary war, in a dark wood very near the road, pieces of a cloth coat and metallic buttons, and other things, which rendered it certain that a man had been murdered at that spot, in consequence of which the place was shunned, or hurried by, as if a spirit of evil had its abode there. On another occasion, the body of a poor old man of the name of Homel, was found drowned deep in the Norman's Kill, clasped in the arms of his wife, both dead. A gentleman of standing, who ventured alone, rather groggy, one dark night, over the long unrailed bridge that crossed the mill pond, pitched upon some sharp pallisadoes in the water, and came to a melancholy end. Hormaun, an Iroquois, who haunted the valley, had killed, it was said, ninety-nine men, and was waiting an opportunity to fill his count, by dispatching his hundredth man. This was a greatly dreaded event, particularly by the boys. There was also the era, when a Race Course had been established on a spot called the "Colonel's Farm," and the era of the "Deep Snow." There were many other events celebrated in Iosco, such as the De Zeng era, the Van Rensselaer era, and the Van Kleeck era, which helped the good mothers to remember the period when their children were born; but none, indeed, of so notable a character to youthful minds as the adventure of the mad wolf.

Wolf stories were in vogue, in fact, in the evening and tea party circles of Iosco for many years; and if one would take every thing as it was given, there had been more acts of bravery, conduct, and firm decision of character and foresight, displayed in encountering these wild vixens of the plains and valleys by night, than would, if united, have been sufficient to repel the inroads of Burgoyne, St. Leger, or Sir John Johnson, with Brant, and all his hosts of tories and Indians, during the American revolution.

I chanced one night to have left the city of Albany, in company with one of these heroic spirits. We occupied my father's chaise, an old-fashioned piece of gentility now out of vogue, drawn by a prime horse, one which he always rode on parades. It was late before we got out of the precincts of the city, and up the hill, and night overtook us away in the pine woods, at Billy McKown's, a noted public-house seated half way between the city and Iosco, where it was customary in those days to halt; for besides that he was much respected, and one of the most sensible and influential men in the town, it was not thought right, whatever the traveller might require, that a *horse* should be driven eight miles without drawing breath, and having a pail of water. As I was but young, and less of a charioteer than my valiant companion, he held the whip and reins thus far; but after the wolf stories that poured in upon us at McKown's that evening, he would hold them no longer. Every man, he thought, was responsible to himself. He did not wish to be wolf's meat that night, so he hired a fleet horse from our host, and a whip and spurs, and set off with the speed of a Jehu, leaving me to make my way, in the heavy chaise, through the sandy plains, as best I could.

In truth we had just reached the most sombre part of the plain, where the trees were more thick, the sand deep and heavy, and not a house but one, within the four miles. To render it worse, this was the chief locality of wolf insolence, where he had even

ventured to attack men. It was on this route too, that the schoolmaster had used his medical arts, which made it better known through the country as the supposed centre of their power. Nothing harmed me, however; the horse was fine, and I reached home not only uneaten, but unthreatened by a wolf's jaw.

But I must confine myself to the matter in hand. A large and fierce wolf sallied out of the plains one dark summer's night, and rushed into the midst of the village, snapping to the right and left as he went, and biting every animal that came in his way. Cows, swine, pigs, geese—every species, whether on four legs, or two legs, shared its malice alike. The animal seemed to have a perfect ubiquity—it was every where, and seemed to have spared nothing. It is not recollected that there was a single house, or barn-yard in the village, where something had not been bitten. If he had come on an errand of retribution, for the great and threatening wolf-parties which had gone out against his race, and all the occult arts of the schoolmaster in trying to decoy them at Barrett's hollow, he could not have dealt out his venomous snaps more indiscriminately.

It must have been about midnight, or soon after, that the fearful visiter came. Midnight, in a country village, finds almost every one in bed, but such was the uproar among the animal creation, made by this strange interloper, that *out* of bed they soon come. The cattle bellowed, the pigs squealed, the poultry cackled—there must be something amiss. Santa Claus himself must be playing his pranks. “A wolf!” was the cry—“a wolf is committing havoc.” “It is mad!” came next on the voices of the night. “A mad wolf!—a mad wolf!” Nothing but a mad wolf could venture alone into the heart of the village, and do so much mischief. Out ran the people into the streets, men, women and all. Some caught up guns, some clubs, some pitchforks. If the tories and Indians, in the old French war, had broke into the settlement with fire and sword, there could not have been a greater tumult, and nothing but a mad wolf would have stood his ground. Where is he? which way did he run? who saw him? and a thousand like expressions followed. He had gone south, and south the mob pushed after him. He was away over on the street that leads up from the middle factory. It was a cloudy night, or the moon only came out fitfully, and threw light enough to discern objects dimly, as the clouds rolled before it. Indistinct murmurs came on the breeze, and at length the scream of a woman. The cause of it soon followed. The wolf had bitten Mrs. Sitz. Now Mrs. Sitz was a careful, tall, rigid-faced, wakeful housewife, from the dutchy of Hesse D'Armstadt, who had followed the fortunes of her husband, in trying his mechanical skill in the precincts of Iosco; but while her husband Frank laid fast asleep, under the influence of a hard day's labour, her ears were open to the coming alarm. It was not long before she heard a tumult in her goose pen. The rabid animal had bounded into the midst of them, which created as great an outcry as if Rome had a second time been invaded. Out she ran to their relief, not knowing the character of the disturber, but naturally thinking it was some thief of a neighbour, who wished to make provision for a coming Christmas. The animal gave her one snap and leapt the pen. “Mein hemel!” screamed she, “er hat mein gebissen!” Sure enough the wolf had bit her in the thigh.

The party in chase soon came up, and while some stopt to parley and sympathize with her, others pushed on after the animal—the spitzbug, as she spitefully called him. By this time the wolf had made a circuit of the southern part of the village, and scampered down the old factory road, by the mill dam, under the old dark bridge at the saw mill, and up the hill by the old public store; and thus turned his course back towards the north, into the thickest part of the village, where he had first entered. He had made a complete circuit. All was valour, boasting, and hot speed behind him, but the wolf had been too nimble for them. Unluckily for him, however, while the main group pushed behind, just as he was scampering up the old store hill, he was suddenly headed by a party coming down it. This party was led by old Colonel S., a revolutionary soldier, a field-officer of the county militia, and the superintendent of the extensive manufacturing establishment from which the village drew its prosperity. He was armed with a fusil of the olden time, well charged, and having been roused from his bed in a hurry, could not at the moment find his hat, and clapt on an old revolutionary cocked hat, which hung in the room. His appearance was most opportune; he halted on the brow of the hill, and as the wolf bounded on he levelled his piece at the passing fugitive, and fired. He had aimed at the shoulders; the fleetness of its speed, however, saved its vital parts, but the shot took effect in the animal's hind legs. They were both broken at a shot. This brought him down. The poor creature tried to drag himself on by his fore paws, but his pursuers were too close upon him, and they soon dispatched him with hatchets and clubs.

Thus fell the rabid wolf, to be long talked of by men and boys, and put down as a chief item in village traditions. But the effects of his visit did not end here. In due time, symptoms of madness seized the cattle and other animals, which had come within the reach of his teeth. Many of the finest milch cows were shot. Calves and swine, and even poultry went rabid; and as things of this kind are generally overdone, there was a perfect panic in the village on the subject, and numbers of valuable animals were doubtless shot, merely because they happened to show some restiveness at a very critical epoch.

But what, methinks the reader is ready to ask, became of Mrs. Sitz? Whether it was, that she had brought over some mystical arts from the Wild Huntsman of Bohemia, or had derived protection from the venom through the carefully administered medicines of Dr. Crouse, who duly attended the case, or some inherent influence of the stout hearted woman, or the audacity of the bite itself, had proved more than a match for the wolf, I cannot say; but certain it is, that while oxen and kine, swine and fatlings, fell under the virus and were shot, she recovered, and lived many years to scold her dozing husband Frank, who did not jump up immediately, and come to her rescue at the goose pen.
