

The Blue Wall

Winston Churchill

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I WAS born under the Blue Ridge, and under that side which is blue in the evening light, in a wild land of game and forest and rushing waters. There, on the borders of a creek that runs into the Yadkin River, in a cabin that was chinked with red mud, I came into the world a subject of King George the Third, in that part of his realm known as the province of North Carolina.

The cabin reeked of corn-pone and bacon, and the odor of pelts. It had two shakedown, on one of which I slept under a bearskin. A rough stone chimney was reared outside, and the fireplace was as long as my father was tall. There was a crane in it, and a bake kettle; and over it great buckhorns held my father's rifle when it was not in use. On other horns hung jerked bear's meat and venison hams, and gourds for drinking cups, and bags of seed, and my father's best hunting shirt; also, in a neglected corner, several articles of woman's attire from pegs. These once belonged to my mother. Among them was a gown of silk, of a fine, faded pattern, over which I was wont to speculate. The women at the Cross-Roads, twelve miles away, were dressed in coarse butternut wool and huge sunbonnets. But when I questioned my father on these matters he would give me no answers.

My father was how shall I say what he was? To this day I can only surmise many things of him. He was a Scotchman born, and I know now that he had a slight Scotch accent. At the time of which I write, my early childhood, he was a frontiersman and hunter. I can see him now, with his hunting shirt and leggings and moccasins; his powder horn, engraved with wondrous scenes; his bullet pouch and tomahawk and hunting knife. He was a tall, lean man with a strange, sad face. And he talked little save when he drank too many "horns," as they were called in that country. These lapses of my father's were a perpetual source of wonder to me, and, I must say, of delight. They occurred only when a passing traveller who hit his fancy chanced that way, or, what was almost as rare, a neighbor. Many a winter night I have lain awake under the skins, listening to a flow of language that held me spellbound, though I understood scarce a word of it.

"Virtuous and vicious every man must be,
Few in the extreme, but all in a degree."

The chance neighbor or traveller was no less struck with wonder. And many the time have I heard the query, at the Cross-Roads and elsewhere, "Whar Alec Trimble got his larin'?"

The truth is, my father was an object of suspicion to the frontiersmen. Even as a child I knew this, and resented it. He had brought me up in solitude, and I was old for my age, learned in some things far beyond my years, and ignorant of others I should have known. I loved the man passionately. In the long winter evenings, when the howl of wolves and "painters" rose as the wind lulled, he taught me to read from the Bible and the "Pilgrim's Progress." I can see his long, slim fingers on the page. They seemed but ill fitted for the life he led.

The love of rhythmic language was somehow born into me, and many's the time I have held watch in the cabin day and night while my father was away on his hunts, spelling out the verses that have since become part of my life.

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As I grew older I went with him into the mountains, often on his back; and spent the nights in open camp with my little moccasins drying at the blaze. So I learned to skin a bear, and fleece off the fat for oil with my hunting knife; and cure a deerskin and follow a trail. At seven I even shot the long rifle, with a rest. I learned to endure cold and hunger and fatigue and to walk in silence over the mountains, my father never saying a word for days at a spell. And often, when he opened his mouth, it would be to recite a verse of Pope's in a way that moved me strangely.

In the hot days of summer, over against the dark forest, the bright green of our little patch of Indian corn rippled in the wind. And towards night I would often sit watching the deep blue of the mountain wall and dream of the mysteries of the land that lay beyond. And by chance, one evening as I sat thus, my father reading in the twilight, a man stood before us. So silently had he come up the path leading from the brook that we had not heard him. Presently my father looked up from his book, but did not rise. As for me, I had been staring for some time in astonishment, for he was a better-looking man than I had ever seen. He wore a deer-skin hunting shirt dyed black, but, in place of a coonskin cap with the tail hanging down, a hat. His long rifle rested on the ground, and he held a roan horse by the bridle.

"Howdy, neighbor?" said he.

I recall a fear that my father would not fancy him. In such cases he would give a stranger food, and leave him to himself. My father's whims were past understanding. But he got up.

"Good evening," said he.

The visitor looked a little surprised, as I had seen many do, at my father's accent.

"Neighbor," said he, "kin you keep me over night?"

"Come in," said my father.

We sat down to our supper of corn and beans and venison, of all of which our guest ate sparingly. He, too, was a silent man, and scarcely a word was spoken during the meal. Several times he looked at me with such a kindly expression in his blue eyes, a trace of a smile around his broad mouth, that I wished he might stay with us always. But once, when my father said something about Indians, the eyes grew hard as flint.

After supper the two men sat on the log step, while I set about the task of skinning the deer my father had shot that day. Presently I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder.

"What's your name, lad?" he said.

I told him Davy.

"Davy, I'll larn ye a trick worth a little time," said he, whipping out a knife. In a trice the red carcass hung between the forked stakes, while I stood with my mouth open. He turned to me and laughed gently.

"Some day you'll cross the mountains and skin twenty of an evening," he said. "Ye'll make a woodsman sure. You've got the eye, and the hand."

This little piece of praise from him made me hot all over.

"Game rare?" said he to my father.

"None sae good, now," said my father.

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"I reckon not. My cabin's on Beaver Creek some forty mile above, and game's going there, too."

"Settlements," said my father. But presently, after a few whiffs of his pipe, he added, "I hear fine things of this land across the mountains, that the Indians call the Dark and Bluidy Ground."

"And well named," said the stranger.

"But a brave country," said my father, "and all tramped down with game. I hear that Daniel Boone and others have gone into it and come back with marvellous tales. D'ye ken him?"

The ruddy face of the stranger grew ruddier still.

"My name's Boone," he said.

My father rose without a word, went into the cabin, and immediately reappeared with a flask and a couple of gourds, one of which he handed to our visitor.

"Tell me about it," said he.

That was the fairy tale of my childhood. Far into the night I lay on the dewy grass listening to Mr. Boone's talk. I recall but little of it, being so small a lad, but I crept closer and closer until I could touch this superior being who had been beyond the Wall. Marco Polo was no greater wonder to the Venetians than Boone to me.

He spoke of leaving wife and children, and setting out for the Unknown with other woodsmen. He told how, crossing over our blue western wall into a valley beyond, they found a "Warrior's Path" through a gap across another range, and so down into the fairest of promised lands. And as he talked he lost himself in the tale of it, and the very quality of his voice changed. He told of a land of wooded hill and pleasant vale, of clear water running over limestone down to the great river beyond, the Ohio—a land of glades, the fields of which were pied with flowers of wondrous beauty, where roamed the buffalo in countless thousands, where elk and deer abounded, and turkeys and feathered game, and bear in the tall brakes of cane. And he told how, when the others had left him, he stayed for three months roaming the hills alone with Nature herself

"And you are going back?" asked my father, presently.

"Aye, that I am. There are many families on the Yadkin below going, too. And you, neighbor, you might come with us. Davy is the boy that would thrive in that country."

My father did not answer. It was late indeed when we lay down to rest, and the night I spent between waking and dreaming of the wonderland beyond the mountains, hoping against hope that my father would go. The sun was just flooding the slopes when our guest arose to leave, and my father bade him God-speed with a heartiness that was rare to him

He mounted his roan and rode away down the slope, waving his hand to us. And it was with a heavy heart that I went to feed our white mare, whinnying for food in the lean-to.