



BEHIND THE  
BLUE RIDGE

FRANCES COURTENAY BAYLOR

# BEHIND THE BLUE RIDGE.

A HOMELY NARRATIVE.

BY

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## I.

“Is not the life of every such man a Tragedy made up of Fate and one’s own Deservings?”—CARLYLE.

LEADING through a rocky pass in the Blue Ridge—a pass dust-choked in summer, snow-blocked in winter—is a road that seems just the ordinary prosaic highway of the country,—laid out by an engineer, built by a turnpike company, used as a connecting link between the beautiful Valley of Virginia and the world lying on the other side of the mountains. But it is something more. It is wide enough now for two or more carriages to pass each other on it without difficulty. It was originally a faint trail, growing ever more distinct with use, made by the buffalo that went pushing and trampling and trotting along it; by the deer daintily picking their way among some of its obstructions and leaping gracefully over others; by surly, slow-moving bear taking their own time for the journey. Panthers glided swiftly over it, rabbits darted across it, wolves lurked beside it, flocks of wild turkeys flopped or strutted along it morning and evening; the fox, the lynx knew it, as did every bird and beast in the whole country-side. And a creature that added the instinct of all these animals to an acute human intelligence knew it, too, for the Shawnees

dumped along its whole length. "Good heavens! what does this mean?" it thought. "I am ruined forever! What on earth do I want with all that abominable stuff when people are always complaining of the few stones that I've always had? What are they going to do with it?" It soon found out; for next day an army of men in masks seated themselves on these heaps, hammer in hand, and having pounded them into bits, spread them evenly across its surface, and then having rolled an enormous iron cylinder across that, went their way, boasting, with the utmost effrontery, of what they had done for "the old road." Crushed to the earth, the road could only submit and rail out its grief to the whole valley. "This is what comes of having anything to do with *man*," it said. "Think of what I have done for him, and look how he has served me,—worse than the very beasts! I might as well have been a rock! I that used to be as green as a May meadow, and that had white violets and wild-roses blooming on both sides of me, and anemones and strawberries and laurel and all kinds of lovely flowers and fruits growing *down the middle*! And now look at me, covered from end to end with this hard stone and filthy dust! Now I am indeed buried alive! I that complained of the buffalo have been trampled to death,—yes, had all the life pressed out of me forever by that hideous mountain on wheels that they passed over me again and again."

The road was now a turnpike, but dead it was not;—more alive than ever, on the contrary, in one way, for all its heart was broken, and it was only the stone effigy of its old self. The ever-changing, ever-moving procession went on over its grave at least, as it does over all graves,

—armies of blue-coats now ; other armies of gray-coats ; parks of artillery that were almost as bad as the cylinders ; regiments of horse thundering forward ; regiments of foot falling back ; couriers galloping madly hither and thither ; trains of wagons a mile long creaking along to camp or capture, with a limping group of stragglers acting as volunteer escort, their fortunate muskets sticking out from the canvas interior where the poor fellows longed to be riding ; ambulances carrying the wounded to the rear ; general officers, with the staff curveting and caracoling and reconnoitring ; guilty citizens on foot flying to the mountains ; guiltless citizens hurried off in handcuffs ; peaceable farmers in carts getting twice as much as they should for vegetables ; frightened women walking away from burning houses, leading little children by the hand.

The road got tired to death of it all as it gleamed white and dusty in the sunshine. It sighed for the days when it was an obscure, dewy, leafy trail, and thought the war would never be over, and looked up at the patient stars in mute despair. But it did come to an end at last, which deceived the road into thinking that peace had come for it as well as for the country. But in this it was mistaken. The procession, somewhat changed in character, went on, only with less demonstration ; still goes on, and ever will. Now it is a pair of lovers in a smart gig spinning briskly along to the county fair ; the doomed invalid drawn slowly along in an open barouche that he may get a little wan pleasure from country sights and sounds, with his solicitous relatives all about him and Death in the rumble ; the farmer perched high on his wood-wagon crawling at a snail's

pace towards the nearest market-town as he lazily cracks a long whip over horses that go their own sober way, or returning home, perhaps, singing and shouting, shaking his head, lashing his horses, his rustic wits and hard-won wage both gone; the schoolboy whistling merrily as he whirls down-hill on his new bicycle; the good doctor's buggy bowling rapidly away in mortal haste towards this or that neighboring farm-house; the shackling, heavy-bodied stage-coach which rattles over its twenty miles or more in a ponderously-lively fashion that allows the summer tourist to patronize the scenery, and the South generally, quite at his leisure.

Governor Spottiswood's tramontane expedition had not long gone its romantic way when there came over the mountain trail an English sailor-pioneer named John Shore. He was a large-framed, light-hearted Autolyceus of a wanderer, who had left his own country for the El Dorado that was waiting to be inherited by the brave and adventurous across the Atlantic. Settling in New England, he tried being everything by turns and nothing long for some years, and then finding that it did not differ materially from old England so far as any improvement in his fortunes was concerned, and feeling himself decidedly out of sympathy with its strictly respectable and sternly religious atmosphere, he "weighed anchor," as he phrased it, and again followed a beckoning Fortune over hill and dale until she led him into the wilderness. The valley he had entered was almost an unbroken forest. It had once been a great lake that increased in volume until it burst through the encompassing mountains at the point now called Harper's Ferry, and ran its triumphant

course through the Potomac into the ocean beyond. The whole district of country of which it formed a part was the final expression of King James's liberal sentiments towards the London Company, and extended "westward to the Pacific Ocean and for a hundred miles into the sea beyond." It was so little known that it was not until 1778 that the geographical effort of defining the whole State of Illinois as "a county" was made. It was just the time and place for our pioneer; this era of large views and hazy proprietorship was the golden age of which he had dreamed, in which everything was to be had for the taking. He had left nothing behind him except the memory of an unhappy home and a succession of experiences which he chose to call failures and misfortunes, but which had more than once brought him to the stocks and the whipping-post, heavy punishments for light offences being the justice of the period. The trouble had been that everything had belonged to somebody else. He saw it clearly now. He had brought with him only a stout heart, a good gun, and a sagacious dog, but he was in a country in which land was held in fee simple. He had only to choose an estate to suit him and keep it as he had won it. He felt the embarrassment of riches, and could not decide for a day or two where to "locate" with all the forest before him to choose from. It hardly seemed worth while to appropriate anything where all was his. He had been long enough in the New World to learn some woodcraft, and he had a fine natural intelligence,—two important possessions when the site of a future home is to be chosen. At last, after prowling about extensively, looking at the sit-

uation, soil, advantages offered by various places (as determined by certain tests of his own not known to the modern surveyor, such as examining the bark on the trees, dipping his fingers in water and holding them up to see which way the wind blew, and the like), he fixed upon a certain spot on Little South Mountain that particularly pleased him. It was primarily a splendid grove of oaks. It commanded an extensive and beautiful view. A mountain-stream ran by it as pure as though its every drop had been filtered, as cold as though it had been iced, as sparkling as though it had been just air-bewitched. It was sheltered from the prevailing north and northwest winds, as he had ascertained by the primitive but effective plans already mentioned. All these were points so much in its favor that he eagerly proceeded to mark it for his own. This he did literally. He ran as lightly as a squirrel up a certain fine beech in the grove. When about forty feet above the earth he took a hatchet from his belt and struck several lusty blows that all the listening forest heard. They rang out in cheerful defiance on the still air, and were given back in surprised melody. The moist chips dropping on the earth sent the scared lizards like green flashes across the grass into their hiding-places. It was the knell of fauns, and dryads, and elves, if any such were about, and of the Indians who, all unconscious of their doom, were revelling in the excitements of their great yearly chase not far away. Gone were chiefs, squaws, papooses, wigwams, moccasins, calumets, tomahawks, from that moment. The new kingdom had come.

As for John Shore, he dropped to the green sward

below, and when he had marked several other trees in the vicinity in a way that he thought he could not fail to recognize, he took his bearings again carefully, looked about him with an air of satisfied ownership, and departed as he came from the valley, the season being autumn and unfavorable to immediate settlement.

Early in the following spring he was back again, bringing with him a train of heavily-laden pack-horses, and accompanied by three men whose minds he had inflamed by his description of the land he had spied out.

These hardy adventurers, like their brave brother-pioneers all over the country, now set to work courageously to plant the acorn of this our American civilization,—a mighty oak now, which may yet be five hundred years coming to perfection. God save it from decay!

The wolves were soon howling at night around rude log cabins set great distances apart in the valley. The aborigines, who, according to the learned Mr. Nicholas Fuller, are "the posterity of our great-grandfather Japheth," found themselves obliged to tolerate a branch of their family giving good presumptive proof of being relatives in their willingness, even stern determination, to share the family inheritance. John Shore, especially, was soon very widely known among them as "Long Knife," and respected as a brave man and mighty hunter, whom it would be a positive pleasure to scalp. But he, for his part, kept his powder dry, and showed himself a match for them at every point. For three years he played the dangerous game of a life for a life with them, and hunted, and fished, and shot, and

rode, and bade fair to become as savage as any Shawnee of them all. And then, yielding to a vagrant impulse, he went off into Pennsylvania for awhile. He was not gone long, and when he returned he went to work in earnest to build a house on the site selected. Being an Englishman, he had his own fixed ideas on most subjects, including house-building, and, being an obstinate man, he was bent on carrying them out. He had no intention of putting up a frail shanty that would "tumble about his ears in a few years, and might blow down any day." If it was a question of that sort of temporary shelter, he preferred a tarpaulin, he said. So he took his axe and hatchet and gun and went off day after day for some months to a neighboring grove, where he propped his gun against a tree and worked with a will, choosing every bit of his wood carefully, and whistling "Bess of Bednall-Green" as he wrought it into the shape and size required. When he had got all the necessary material and had seasoned it, he put up, with a little aid, a well-built, substantial two-roomed cottage of a pattern familiar to him. He had seen such in many an English lane, and when he had put on its steep overhanging roof (which took some time, and kept him "up aloft" much longer than he had expected), and had got a tiny porch in front of it, and a shed at the back, and a rail-fence around it, he was a proud and happy man. Nor was this all. He took incredible pains with his rafters and puncheon floor, and skilfully daubed and chinked the interior. He inserted one precious pane of glass in the stout, cross-barred wooden shutter. He put up some shelves in a way that would not have disgraced a skilled workman. And then, with

the "handiness" of the sailor, he set about making some rude furniture, consisting chiefly of a kitchen-dresser, a settee, a table, and some hide-bottomed chairs, and succeeded in that, too. A sociologist would have known what was to come next. Given a man and a house, and what follows? A woman, of course. John Shore swept up his shavings, locked his door, put the key in his pocket, and went off straightway in search of that woman. It was not a search, either, exactly, for he had seen in his previous absence a remarkably pretty Dutch girl, very blue as to the eyes and flaxen as to the tresses, knitting in the court-yard of a certain wayside inn in Pennsylvania; and though he had only exchanged a few words with her, it was she who had inspired his recent labors. The wooing was a remarkably brief and entirely successful one. In a week he brought the inspiration back, and that with her father's blessing, and mounted on top of her mother's feather-bed, tricked out in all her simple finery and still knitting on the particular pair of stockings on which she had been engaged when her impetuous suitor swept down upon her and bore her off. In this way one of the first families of Virginia, in actual practical precedence, if not in the aristocratic sense, was founded.

A small stream of new-comers now began to filter family by family over the Ridge, and in a few years the settlement of the country had become an accomplished fact. When the boundary-line between the States of Virginia and Pennsylvania was run after the Revolution, the commissioners so far respected the "tomahawk rights," as they were called, of the early settlers as to allow four hundred acres to every claim of the kind.

This was a respectable property for a small farmer if it had been at all valued or preserved as it should have been. But in the majority of cases it was not. If it was not gambled or raced or thrown away like the large estates of from ten to fifty thousand acres owned by the gentry from the low-country, it was, in its degree, as foolishly managed, or rather mismanaged,—fifty good, broad acres being exchanged freely for a cow and calf, a horse and wagon, or any other possession coveted by the petty proprietors. Gradually the early settler was pushed off by the growth of the new civilization just as the Shawnee had been. The free life (whose worst pains are preferred by some men to the best pleasures that the most sophisticated sybarite could offer) died out,—a mode of existence more congenial to the natural man than any other, having for its gravest duty the cultivation, in odd half-hours, of “a corn-patch” and the garden on which the women-folk insisted, and for its daily compensation getting “to the leeward” of your game and bringing down a wild turkey, bear, three-pronged buck, or Indian chief, as the case might be.

The country filled up with a different class of people altogether: canny Scotch-Irish colonists; Germans from the Middle States, thick-headed, horny of hand; a band of Quakers, involuntary emigrants these, like the babies crowing in cradles hollowed out of large logs,—sly Friends suspected of trading with the enemy, and summarily sent to the rear to meditate on the harshness of “George Washington, that man of war;” a troop of Hessians brought down by that doughty old warrior, General Morgan, who made them turn their swords into trowels and pickaxes and build him a fine house before

being disbanded. Dull care had come, and toil, and taxes, and trouble,—in short, civilization. The country was free, but the people were no longer so, and the pioneer, with the Shawnee and the buffalo, vanished forever from Virginia.

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The valley could not go, and so it stayed at home and got more and more beautiful steadily for a century, more carefully tilled, fertile, gracious of aspect, until it is a wonder its heart was not lifted up as well as its hills as it sat in the sunshine a thousand feet above the sea, girdled by its mountains, glorified by its woods, illuminated by the long-shining curves of the Shenandoah, "daughter of the stars."

And John Shore's house remained. He had builded better than he knew. It looked a weather-beaten structure enough in the brilliant October sunshine; but it had held its own bravely, considering that it was not founded upon a rock and had long been exposed to every wind of heaven. If it spread itself somewhat, somewhere about the time that the last oak of the grove that had screened it fell, it was only to get a better hold on the earth. And it was in making this effort to accommodate itself to its changed circumstances that it lost its compact air and got a loose and irregular expression, which showed that it had entered upon a struggle for existence that made it careless of appearances. It settled down in the rear and hugged the hillside in a way that made the front porch lean in a panic against the wall. The front door, unprepared for and alarmed by such a demonstration, tried to get out of the way, but only succeeded in straining its

hinges so that it ever afterwards swung in at a most dissipated angle and outward with great difficulty. The chimney outside went crazy on the spot, and fancied itself a pyramid, and did its best to assume that shape, running up in a wavy line irresolutely for a certain distance, and then stopping and trying to throw stones down on the heads of people passing below. The whole structure was enveloped in a mantle of Time's own weaving,—a sort of atmosphere made visible,—a surtout, pinned on with lichens and fungi that matched so perfectly that they were never noticed by careless observers; marvels of workmanship all the same, olive-green, or gray, for the most part, brown occasionally, and very semi-occasionally crimson, or orange, and fashioned in imitation of other growths, such as a rose, or a miniature forest of firs. But the house was still a good house, and, in its modest way, a comfortable home, which could not be said for the clusters and rows of tumble-down shanties that stretched along the mountain-side, and together made a blur on the fair landscape. No Highland shieling or Russian isba or Colorado "claim shack" could have been more dismally suggestive of wretchedness than those hovels and their outlying "appertainments." Nothing could equal their forlornness unless it was their inhabitants,—that swarm of free-born but fate-fettered American citizens not to be insultingly classified as "peasants," but as poverty-stricken and miserable as the humblest vine-dresser or goat-herd that ever languished under a monarchy, owned allegiance to king or lord, and confessed himself a vassal or serf. A strip of land belonged to each: a few acres of stony ground that a respectable South-