

THE



CHAPLAINS AND CLERGY

OF

THE REVOLUTION.

BY

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MARSHALS," ETC., ETC.

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CHAPTER XXXIX.

NATHAN KER.

HIS BIRTH AND ANCESTRY.—ANECDOTE OF HIS GRANDFATHER.—HIS PATRIOTISM.—
ABJURES ALL ALLEGIANCE TO GREAT BRITAIN.—TORIES AND INDIANS.—MAS-
SACRE AT MINISINK.—SLAUGHTER OF MR. KER'S CONGREGATION.—ANECDOTE OF
HIM AND LAFAYETTE.—A FRIEND OF WASHINGTON.—LOANS THE GOVERNMENT
EIGHT THOUSAND DOLLARS, FOR WHICH HE RECEIVED NOTHING BUT "OLD LIB-
ERTY."—CELEBRATION AT THE CLOSE OF THE WAR.

NATHAN KER, of Goshen, Orange County, hardly comes under the head of chaplains, because he received no special commission in the army, yet he had a general permit to pass through the forces and fortresses scattered over West Point, Fishkill and Newburgh, as a minister to exercise his functions as he saw proper.

He was born in Freehold, New Jersey, September 7th, 1736, and embraced religion under the preaching of the celebrated William Tennent. Devoting himself at once to the gospel ministry, he entered Princeton College, and completing his education was licensed in 1763. For some years he labored as an itinerant, the field of his duties extending over a thousand miles along the continent. Subsequently he settled in Goshen, where he remained till his death in 1804. He took decided ground against the mother country in her unjust demands on the Colonies, and when hostilities commenced, and American blood was shed, he

called together his entire family, and making it an act of religious worship, solemnly abjured all allegiance to the British king and government, and took an oath before God to stand firm and true to his country. Tall and commanding in person, he bore so strong a resemblance to Washington that he was often called "the General." Of a firm and fearless spirit, he exerted the wide influence he wielded, zealously and successfully for the cause of liberty. He came honestly by his love of freedom and unyielding opposition to tyranny, for his grandfather before him suffered persecutions in Scotland for exhibiting the same noble spirit. The latter being asked one day (when such a question tested to the utmost the courage of a man), "Who was the head of the Church?" fearlessly replied, "The Lord Jesus Christ." That same night he received warning that he had better leave the kingdom. He immediately fled to the mountains and hid himself in caves. But hunted from one place of concealment to another like a beast of prey, he finally made his escape to America. It was but natural that the descendant of such a sire should be a bold and uncompromising advocate of both civil and religious liberty.

The whole region around Goshen was for a long time subject to the ravages of the Indians and Tories, and Count Pulaski was stationed at Minisink, near by, with a body of cavalry to protect it. When, in February, 1779, this gallant officer was ordered to South Carolina to aid General Lincoln, the Indians and Tories once more took the field; and in the following July made a descent upon the town, killing and scattering

the inhabitants, and burning their dwellings. When the news reached Goshen, Dr. Tusten, colonel of the militia, ordered his troops to meet him at Minisink, the next day, with as many volunteers as would join him. The congregation of such a fearless patriot as Mr. Ker would not hesitate in a crisis so alarming, and a hundred and forty-nine were at the rendezvous the next morning. The flower of his flock were all there. After a short consultation, the intrepid little band started in pursuit of the Indians and were joined on the way by a small force from Warwick, which swelled their number to a hundred and sixty or seventy men.

Ascertaining from some of the inhabitants who had escaped the massacre, that the marauding party was too large for the small, undisciplined force under him, Colonel Tusten advised to give over the pursuit, but Major Meeker mounting his horse, and waving his sword and shouting, "Let the brave men follow me, the cowards may stay behind," swept away all caution and prudence, and amid shouts of excitement they streamed forward on the trail of the savages.

Continuing their march all night they came, at sunrise, upon the smouldering camp-fires of the Indians, which the latter had apparently but just left. The number of these, showing clearly how large the force was, again brought the officers to a stand, and a council was called to decide whether to continue or abandon the pursuit. The majority were in favor of the latter course, but the minority scoffing at the decision as cowardly, the majority yielded, and the march was resumed. Brandt, who commanded the Tories and

Indians, being made aware by his scouts of the number and movements of the Americans, resolved at once on their destruction. At nine in the morning, the latter having ascended a high hill overlooking the Delaware, saw the enemy below them making toward a ford of the river. They immediately determined to intercept them there, and made their dispositions accordingly. But the moment they descended the heights, and some intervening hills shut them from sight, Brandt wheeled his column, and plunging into a deep, narrow ravine, marched rapidly back until he got in their rear, and then burst with his fearful war-cry upon them. The Americans, though taken completely by surprise, met the onset of the savages firmly, but, overwhelmed by numbers, were gradually borne back until they occupied scarce an acre of ground on the top of a rocky hill. Here, in a hollow square, they withstood their assailants hour after hour, until the hot July sun stooped behind the western wilderness. Darkness was now coming on, and their ammunition began to give out. No longer able to keep at bay their savage assailants, their firm formation was broken, and the battle became a massacre. The night was made hideous with frantic yells, while the gleaming tomahawk descended on the strong and helpless alike. Of all that gallant little band, only thirty remained to tell the story of how they fought, and how they fell. Mr. Ker's congregation the next Sabbath was clad in mourning, for most of the young men that composed it had been slain, while thirty-three widows present, told how fearful the blow had fallen on heads of fam-

ilies. He himself repaired to the bloody field, and spent the whole night with one of his aged parishioners searching for the dead body of his son.

The remembrance of this massacre made the troops of Sullivan look with grim exultation afterwards on the burning paradise of the Senecas and Cayugas, to which they had applied the avenging torch.

A curious anecdote of Lafayette, in connection with Mr. Ker, has been related to me by one of the descendants of the latter. While Washington lay at Brandywine he had occasion to despatch Lafayette with orders to a portion of the army in New York State. The latter stopped on his way at an inn in Sussex Co., N. J., where he was compelled to sleep in the same room with another traveler. When he awoke in the morning he found his fellow lodger gone, and on dressing himself discovered that some valuable jewels and a miniature had been abstracted from his pockets. Being entrusted with important despatches, he could not stop to take any measures for the recovery of his property, and hastened on his way. He made efforts, however, at every place through which he passed, to obtain tidings of the robber. Reaching Goshen, he endeavored to make the landlord of the tavern where he halted, acquainted with his troubles, but being unable to speak English was wholly unsuccessful. The only sentence he could utter so as to be understood was, "De picture of de lady," "De picture of de lady," and 'De picture of the lady' was constantly on his tongue, accompanied with many anxious gestures. No one in the place understanding French the rest of his lan-

guage could not be made out. They saw he was an officer of rank, and hence were exceedingly anxious to understand his wants, and as a last resort took him to their pastor, thinking that he might be able to comprehend him. Mr. Ker did not understand French, but inferring from the appearance of the stranger that he was an educated man, addressed him in Latin. The countenance of the latter brightened at once, for he had at last found a medium through which he could make his troubles and wishes known. Mr. Ker soon understood the whole case, and drawing from him an accurate description of his fellow lodger, he sat down and wrote several placards, describing the man and stating the robbery. These he told the stranger to distribute freely on his route. The latter thanked him profusely, and taking his departure, mounted his horse and hastened forward. A fortnight after, Mr. Ker was surprised by a second visit from the stranger, who, after warmly thanking him for his kindness, stated that through it he had been able to secure the robber and recover his property. He then, to the astonishment of the clergyman, introduced himself as Lafayette, and added, that the miniature, the loss of which affected him more than that of his jewels, was a portrait of his wife.

Mr. Ker's second daughter married the son of the hero patriot and martyr, Rev. John Caldwell, whom Lafayette took to his home at La Grange, and educated as a son of his own.

During the latter part of the war, Lafayette, Rochambeau, and Count de Grasse were accustomed to

visit the patriotic divine as personal friends. Washington, also, was warmly attached to him, and when at West Point and Newburgh frequently invited him to dinner at head-quarters.

Out of his moderate fortune, this good man loaned the government eight thousand dollars, for which he received nothing in return except an old blind horse, which he caused to be tenderly cared for, and which, as a memento of the past, was christened "Old Liberty."

When the war was over he had a celebration on the 4th of July in his parish, at which thirteen young ladies dressed in white, with green sashes, and crowned with laurel wreaths, appeared, representing the thirteen States. As the venerable man looked over the crowded seats, radiant with joyful faces, his heart overflowed with devout thankfulness and he recounted the past, and told how the Lord had led His people, as He did Israel of old, to the promised land, till the tears of his audience were mingled with his own.