

Blizzard of 1779, Conclusion

“I was both enchanted and miserable. To stay in this beautiful home would be most delightful. To lose the time from my classes would be almost unendurable. My father settled the matter by asking quietly if our host could not get us each a pair of snowshoes.

“At first our hosts treated this request as a pleasantry, but when they perceived that my father was quite in earnest their dismay was amusing. The general habit of using snowshoes, which at a very early period had been adopted from the Indians, had already nearly disappeared, but down to a comparatively recent period there had been a few persons who continued to use them in places where there were no interruptions from fences. My father, a slight but sinewy and most athletic man, had spent two or three years of his early life as teacher in a school which had been recently established for the instruction of Indians in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and there he had joined in all the athletic sports of the natives, gaining a great influence among them by his prowess in running, leaping and wrestling. (It has nothing to do with our present purpose, but my descendants may like to know that the marks reached by my father, when a student at Yale, for running and standing leaps, were kept as the highest attained by any student on the college campus. No one else had been able to reach the same until I did so in my senior year.)

“It was among the Indians that my father had learned to use the snowshoes with great skill and as much grace as the unwieldy things would permit, but I could never see him or any one else on them without an inclination to laugh which was sometimes stronger than my filial reverence. But, as my father had a strong vein of humor, he always rather joined in my mirth than rebuked me for it. Fore-seeing that there might be some occasion on which this somewhat unusual accomplishment might prove of service, my father had taught me also to become moderately expert in the use of snowshoes.”

“Fortunately Judge Reeve had stored away in his garret, more as a curiosity than for any use that he expected to be made of them, two pairs of snowshoes of the finest Indian manufacture, so that we had not to spend any time in searching for them, and by nine o’clock on Wednesday morning we climbed out of an upper story window upon the hard crust of frozen snow and started off with no other burden than the light, but cumbersome snowshoes attached to our feet, and a small roll like a knapsack, fastened to each of our backs.”

“I was a boy of unusual strength for my years, and my father, although a Parson, was remarkable for his vigor, but I can assure you that we were both of us thankful when at nightfall we reached the little town of Bethlehem and the hospitable abode of my father’s very dear friend, the Rev. Dr. Joseph Bellamy. Although the distance is a little more than ten miles as the crow flies, it had seemed a long journey and I had never been so tired before.”

“On Thursday the roads continuing impassable, we could not abandon our snowshoes, though they made our ankles ache so that we could hardly stand upon them. The air was of a clear, still cold that would have been severe if we had not been exercising ourselves so greatly. Even as it was, our dread-naughts [these were caped

coats of exceedingly thick homespun cloth, belted around the waist and descending well below the knees] were none too warm.”

“Our second day’s journey on the snowshoes was much like the first, and of about the same length, bringing us to Woodbury and the house of the Rev. Noah Benedict where we were entertained with warm hospitality. Mr. Benedict was a peace making man in his congregation, and his gentle spirit long influenced the manners and the actions of the people of his flock. But in public matters he was as war-like as any of us. Woodbury, like Litchfield, was a place for the collection and storage of the supplies for the patriot armies. Here we found the streets, running each way from the Meeting House, piled high on either side for a hundred yards or more with barrels and hogsheads of pork, beef, lard and flour, besides great quantities of bales of blankets, tents and clothing for the troops. All these now made miniature mountains under the snow. Almost all the able bodied male inhabitants more than seventeen years of age were enrolled in the armies, and the work pertaining to the stores was carried on by the women and children under the direction of a few old men. Many shoes were made in this place for the troops. Parson Benedict had himself been taught to make them that he might assist in the work. On this evening the women of the family were paring apples to dry for the army use and as my father and I could not assist Mr. Benedict and the men servants in shoemaking, we took our part in the apple paring. And a very merry and delightful evening we all had together, for to work with a good will is a sure road to happiness, let our circumstances be as untoward as they may.”

“Friday morning found the temperature greatly modified, and, by the time we had accomplished the first five or six miles of our journey toward New Haven we found ourselves in an evil case, for the snow was beginning to get wet and soft and held down the four foot length of snowshoe so that at every step it became harder to lift our feet. Glad enough were we when at last we reached an inn where the accommodations were poor enough, but where we could at least get a little refreshment for ourselves and were able to leave the snowshoes to await some later opportunity to be returned to Judge Reeve, and to hire horses to ride upon to New Haven. From this point the snow was not nearly so deep and we had but little trouble in making, by eight in the evening, the eighteen miles to the house of the Rev. Dr. Daggett, the venerable ex-President of Yale College; which house was almost a second home to us.”

“Tired as I had been the day before, I found myself still more so tonight; but my father would not allow me to complain, saying that I should never make a soldier who could serve his country, as our soldiers were now doing, if I gave out so easily. Never the less, I observed that my father was himself very lame for the next few days and by no means in haste to depart for home again as he would otherwise have been. I have never regretted the experience, since no harm save a few days of stiff joints and sore bones came of it, but I think that my mother’s remark when she heard of it showed much common sense: ‘A week or two more or less would not have spoiled our Johnny’s prospects, and lung fevers might have destroyed both your lives. I say, leave Indian ways to Indian folk.’”

“ ‘Never the less,’ answered my father, with a merry twinkle in his eye, ‘never the less, my dear, I observe that when you have anything to do you brook no delays and you shirk no labor. Your wisdom seems rather to be for others than for yourself.’”

“My mother shook her head slightly and walked away, turning to say over her shoulder, - ‘And would you have the great-granddaughter of Captain John Gallup any more timorsome than her husband?’”