

# **The Spirit of the Border**

by

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# The Spirit of the Border

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## Introduction

The author does not intend to apologize for what many readers may call the "brutality" of the story; but rather to explain that its wild spirit is true to the life of the Western border as it was known only a little more than one hundred years ago.

The writer is the fortunate possessor of historical material of undoubted truth and interest. It is the long-lost journal of Colonel Ebenezer Zane, one of the most prominent of the hunter-pioneer, who labored in the settlement of the Western country.

The story of that tragic period deserves a higher place in historical literature than it has thus far been given, and this unquestionably because of a lack of authentic data regarding the conquering of the wilderness. Considering how many years the pioneers struggled on the border of this country, the history of their efforts is meager and obscure.

If the years at the close of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century were full of stirring adventure on the part of the colonists along the Atlantic coast, how crowded must they have been for the almost forgotten pioneers who daringly invaded the trackless wilds! None there was to chronicle the fight of these sturdy, travelers toward the setting sun. The story of their stormy lives, of their heroism, and of their sacrifice for the benefit of future generations is too little known.

It is to a better understanding of those days that the author has labored to draw from his ancestor's notes a new and striking portrayal of the frontier; one which shall paint the fever of freedom, that powerful impulse which lured so many to unmarked graves; one which shall show his work, his love, the effect of the causes which rendered his life so hard, and surely one which does not forget the wronged Indian.

The frontier in 1777 produced white men so savage as to be men in name only. These outcasts and renegades lived among the savages, and during thirty years harassed the border, perpetrating all manner of fiendish cruelties upon the settlers. They were no less cruel to the redmen whom they ruled, and at the height of their bloody careers made futile the Moravian missionaries' long labors, and destroyed the beautiful hamlet of the Christian Indians, called Gnaddenhutten, or Village of Peace.

And while the border produced such outlaws so did it produce hunters Eke Boone, the Zanes, the McCollochs, and Wetzel, that strange, silent man whose deeds are still whispered in the country where he once roamed in his insatiate pursuit of savages and renegades, and who was purely a product of the times. Civilization could not have brought forth a man like Wetzel. Great revolutions, great crises, great moments come, and produce the men to deal with them.

The border needed Wetzel. The settlers would have needed many more years in which to make permanent homes had it not been for him. He was never a pioneer; but always a hunter after Indians. When not on the track of the savage foe, he was in the settlement, with his keen eye and ear ever alert for signs of the enemy. To the superstitious Indians he was a shadow; a spirit of the border, which breathed menace from the dark forests. To the settlers he was the right arm of defense, a fitting leader for those few implacable and unerring frontiersmen who made the settlement of the West a possibility.

And if this story of one of his relentless pursuits shows the man as he truly was, loved by pioneers, respected and feared by redmen, and hated by renegades; if it softens a little the ruthless name history accords him, the writer will have been well repaid.

Z. G.

## Chapter 1.

"Nell, I'm growing powerful fond of you."

"So you must be, Master Joe, if often telling makes it true."

The girl spoke simply, and with an absence of that roguishness which was characteristic of her. Playful words, arch smiles, and a touch of coquetry had seemed natural to Nell; but now her grave tone and her almost wistful glance disconcerted Joe.

During all the long journey over the mountains she had been gay and bright, while now, when they were about to part, perhaps never to meet again, she showed him the deeper and more earnest side of her character. It checked his boldness as nothing else had done. Suddenly there came to him the real meaning of a woman's love when she bestows it without reservation. Silenced by the thought that he had not understood her at all, and the knowledge that he had been half in sport, he gazed out over the wild country before them.

The scene impressed its quietness upon the young couple and brought more forcibly to their minds the fact that they were at the gateway of the unknown West; that somewhere beyond this rude frontier settlement, out there in those unbroken forests stretching dark and silent before them, was to be their future home.

From the high bank where they stood the land sloped and narrowed gradually until it ended in a sharp point which marked the last bit of land between the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers. Here these swift streams merged and formed the broad Ohio. The new-born river, even here at its beginning proud and swelling as if already certain of its far-away grandeur, swept majestically round a wide curve and apparently lost itself in the forest foliage.

On the narrow point of land commanding a view of the rivers stood a long, low structure enclosed by a stockade fence, on the four corners of which were little box-shaped houses that bulged out as if trying to see what was going on beneath. The massive timbers used in the construction of this fort, the square, compact form, and the small, dark holes cut into the walls, gave the structure a threatening, impregnable aspect.

Below Nell and Joe, on the bank, were many log cabins. The yellow clay which filled the chinks between the logs gave these a peculiar striped appearance. There was life and bustle in the vicinity of these dwellings, in sharp contrast with the still grandeur of the neighboring forests. There were canvas-covered wagons around which curly-headed youngsters were playing. Several horses were grazing on the short grass, and six red and white oxen munched at the hay that had been thrown to them. The smoke of many fires curled upward, and near the blaze hovered ruddy-faced women who stirred the contents of steaming kettles. One man swung an axe with a vigorous sweep, and the clean, sharp strokes rang on the air; another hammered stakes into the ground on which to hang a

kettle. Before a large cabin a fur-trader was exhibiting his wares to three Indians. A second redskin was carrying a pack of pelts from a canoe drawn up on the river bank. A small group of persons stood near; some were indifferent, and others gazed curiously at the savages. Two children peeped from behind their mother's skirts as if half-curious, half-frightened.

From this scene, the significance of which had just dawned on him, Joe turned his eyes again to his companion. It was a sweet face he saw; one that was sedate, but had a promise of innumerable smiles. The blue eyes could not long hide flashes of merriment. The girl turned, and the two young people looked at each other. Her eyes softened with a woman's gentleness as they rested upon him, for, broad of shoulder, and lithe and strong as a deer stalker, he was good to look at.

"Listen," she said. "We have known each other only three weeks. Since you joined our wagon-train, and have been so kind to me and so helpful to make that long, rough ride endurable, you have won my regard. I--I cannot say more, even if I would. You told me you ran away from your Virginian home to seek adventure on the frontier, and that you knew no one in all this wild country. You even said you could not, or would not, work at farming. Perhaps my sister and I are as unfitted as you for this life; but we must cling to our uncle because he is the only relative we have. He has come out here to join the Moravians, and to preach the gospel to these Indians. We shall share his life, and help him all we can. You have been telling me you--you cared for me, and now that we are about to part I--I don't know what to say to you--unless it is: Give up this intention of yours to seek adventure, and come with us. It seems to me you need not hunt for excitement here; it will come unsought."

"I wish I were Jim," said he, suddenly.

"Who is Jim?"

"My brother."

"Tell me of him."

"There's nothing much to tell. He and I are all that are left of our people, as are you and Kate of yours. Jim's a preacher, and the best fellow--oh! I cared a lot for Jim."

"Then, why did you leave him?"

"I was tired of Williamsburg--I quarreled with a fellow, and hurt him. Besides, I wanted to see the West; I'd like to hunt deer and bear and fight Indians. Oh, I'm not much good."

"Was Jim the only one you cared for?" asked Nell, smiling. She was surprised to find him grave.

"Yes, except my horse and dog, and I had to leave them behind," answered Joe, bowing his head a little.

"You'd like to be Jim because he's a preacher, and could help uncle convert the Indians?"

"Yes, partly that, but mostly because--somehow--something you've said or done has made me care for you in a different way, and I'd like to be worthy of you."

"I don't think I can believe it, when you say you are 'no good,'" she replied.

"Nell," he cried, and suddenly grasped her hand.

She wrenched herself free, and leaped away from him. Her face was bright now, and the promise of smiles was made good.

"Behave yourself, sir." She tossed her head with a familiar backward motion to throw the chestnut hair from her face, and looked at him with eyes veiled slightly under their lashes. "You will go with Kate and me?"

Before he could answer, a cry from some one on the plain below attracted their attention. They turned and saw another wagon-train pulling into the settlement. The children were shooting and running alongside the weary oxen; men and women went forward expectantly.

"That must be the train uncle expected. Let us go down," said Nell.

Joe did not answer; but followed her down the path. When they gained a clump of willows near the cabins he bent forward and took her hand. She saw the reckless gleam in his eyes.

"Don't. They'll see," she whispered.

"If that's the only reason you have, I reckon I don't care," said Joe.

"What do you mean? I didn't say--I didn't tell--oh! let me go!" implored Nell.

She tried to release the hand Joe had grasped in his broad palm, but in vain; the more she struggled the firmer was his hold. A frown wrinkled her brow and her eyes sparkled with spirit. She saw the fur-tader's wife looking out of the window, and remembered laughing and telling the good woman she did not like this young man; it was, perhaps, because she feared those sharp eyes that she resented his audacity. She opened her mouth to rebuke him; but no words came. Joe had bent his head and softly closed her lips with his own.

For the single instant during which Nell stood transfixed, as if with surprise, and looking up at Joe, she was dumb. Usually the girl was ready with sharp or saucy words and impulsive in her movements; but now the bewilderment of being kissed, particularly

within view of the trader's wife, confused her. Then she heard voices, and as Joe turned away with a smile on his face, the unusual warmth in her heart was followed by an angry throbbing.

Joe's tall figure stood out distinctly as he leisurely strolled toward the incoming wagon-train without looking backward. Flashing after him a glance that boded wordy trouble in the future, she ran into the cabin.

As she entered the door it seemed certain the grizzled frontiersman sitting on the bench outside had grinned knowingly at her, and winked as if to say he would keep her secret. Mrs. Wentz, the fur-trader's wife, was seated by the open window which faced the fort; she was a large woman, strong of feature, and with that calm placidity of expression common to people who have lived long in sparsely populated districts. Nell glanced furtively at her and thought she detected the shadow of a smile in the gray eyes.

"I saw you and your sweetheart makin' love behind the willow," Mrs. Wentz said in a matter-of-fact voice. "I don't see why you need hide to do it. We folks out here like to see the young people sparkin'. Your young man is a fine-appearin' chap. I felt certain you was sweethearts, for all you allowed you'd known him only a few days. Lize Davis said she saw he was sweet on you. I like his face. Jake, my man, says as how he'll make a good husband for you, and he'll take to the frontier like a duck does to water. I'm sorry you'll not tarry here awhile. We don't see many lasses, especially any as pretty as you, and you'll find it more quiet and lonesome the farther West you get. Jake knows all about Fort Henry, and Jeff Lynn, the hunter outside, he knows Eb and Jack Zane, and Wetzel, and all those Fort Henry men. You'll be gettin' married out there, won't you?"

"You are--quite wrong," said Nell, who all the while Mrs. Wentz was speaking grew rosier and rosier. "We're not anything---"

Then Nell hesitated and finally ceased speaking. She saw that denials or explanations were futile; the simple woman had seen the kiss, and formed her own conclusions. During the few days Nell had spent at Fort Pitt, she had come to understand that the dwellers on the frontier took everything as a matter of course. She had seen them manifest a certain pleasure; but neither surprise, concern, nor any of the quick impulses so common among other people. And this was another lesson Nell took to heart. She realized that she was entering upon a life absolutely different from her former one, and the thought caused her to shrink from the ordeal. Yet all the suggestions regarding her future home; the stories told about Indians, renegades, and of the wild border-life, fascinated her. These people who had settled in this wild region were simple, honest and brave; they accepted what came as facts not to be questioned, and believed what looked true. Evidently the fur-trader's wife and her female neighbors had settled in their minds the relation in which the girl stood to Joe.

This latter reflection heightened Nell's resentment toward her lover. She stood with her face turned away from Mrs. Wentz; the little frown deepened, and she nervously tapped her foot on the floor.



"Where is my sister?" she presently asked.

"She went to see the wagon-train come in. Everybody's out there."

Nell deliberated a moment and then went into the open air. She saw a number of canvas-covered wagons drawn up in front of the cabins; the vehicles were dusty and the wheels encrusted with yellow mud. The grizzled frontiersman who had smiled at Nell stood leaning on his gun, talking to three men, whose travel-stained and worn homespun clothes suggested a long and toilsome journey. There was the bustle of excitement incident to the arrival of strangers; to the quick exchange of greetings, the unloading of wagons and unharnessing of horses and oxen.

Nell looked here and there for her sister. Finally she saw her standing near her uncle while he conversed with one of the teamsters. The girl did not approach them; but glanced quickly around in search of some one else. At length she saw Joe unloading goods from one of the wagons; his back was turned toward her, but she at once recognized the challenge conveyed by the broad shoulders. She saw no other person; gave heed to nothing save what was to her, righteous indignation.

Hearing her footsteps, the young man turned, glancing at her admiringly, said:

"Good evening, Miss."

Nell had not expected such a matter-of-fact greeting from Joe. There was not the slightest trace of repentance in his calm face, and he placidly continued his labor.

"Aren't you sorry you--you treated me so?" burst out Nell.

His coolness was exasperating. Instead of the contrition and apology she had expected, and which was her due, he evidently intended to tease her, as he had done so often.

The young man dropped a blanket and stared.

"I don't understand," he said, gravely. "I never saw you before."

This was too much for quick-tempered Nell. She had had some vague idea of forgiving him, after he had sued sufficiently for pardon; but now, forgetting her good intentions in the belief that he was making sport of her when he should have pleaded for forgiveness, she swiftly raised her hand and slapped him smartly.

The red blood flamed to the young man's face; as he staggered backward with his hand to his cheek, she heard a smothered exclamation behind her, and then the quick, joyous barking of a dog.

When Nell turned she was amazed to see Joe standing beside the wagon, while a big white dog was leaping upon him. Suddenly she felt faint. Bewildered, she looked from

Joe to the man she had just struck; but could not say which was the man who professed to love her.

"Jim! So you followed me!" cried Joe, starting forward and flinging his arms around the other.

"Yes, Joe, and right glad I am to find you," answered the young man, while a peculiar expression of pleasure came over his face.

"It's good to see you again! And here's my old dog Mose! But how on earth did you know? Where did you strike my trail? What are you going to do out here on the frontier? Tell me all. What happened after I left---"

Then Joe saw Nell standing nearby, pale and distressed, and he felt something was amiss. He glanced quickly from her to his brother; she seemed to be dazed, and Jim looked grave.

"What the deuce--? Nell, this is my brother Jim, the I told you about. Jim, this is my friend, Miss Wells."

"I am happy to meet Miss Wells," said Jim, with a smile, "even though she did slap my face for nothing."

"Slapped you? What for?" Then the truth dawned on Joe, and he laughed until the tears came into his eyes. "She took you for me! Ha, ha, ha! Oh, this is great!"

Nell's face was now rosy red and moisture glistened in her eyes; but she tried bravely to stand her ground. Humiliation had taken the place of anger.

"I--I--am sorry, Mr. Downs. I did take you for him. He--he has insulted me." Then she turned and ran into the cabin.

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