THE WOMEN of the AMERICAN REVOLUTION

By Elizabeth F. Ellet

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**“NANCY VAN ALSTINE”**

**Nancy**, the daughter of **Peter** and **Sarah Quackinbush**, was born in the vicinity of *Canajoharie*, about the year 1733. She was a descendant of one of the brothers Quackinbush who came from Holland sometime in the seventeenth century, having purchased a tract of land, on which, as is supposed, a large portion of the business part of the city of New York was afterwards built. They were, however, deprived of their rights by some English adventurers whose shrewdness and knowledge of business enabled them to take advantage over the Hollanders, imperfectly acquainted with the language, and unaccustomed to business transactions. The title was found invalid, and the new settlers in New Amsterdam were compelled to resign their possessions to those who had no just claim upon them. After this the brothers separated, and the grandfather of the subject of this sketch removed to the wild but inviting region of the *Mohawk Valley*. Peter, the father of Nancy, was among the early settlers of this country, and did not escape the difficulties many of them were forced to encounter.

He pursued for many years the business of a trader with the Indians, and spent a large portion of his time in travelling to and from the aboriginal settlements — his line lying chiefly upon the *Susquehanna*. The Indians placed the utmost confidence in him, frequently applying to him for advice, and as it occasion- ally happened that he had a full supply of goods when other traders had disposed of all their stock — for he made a practice of providing himself with an extra supply of the most saleable articles — they imagined that he was peculiarly under the care of the good Spirit who gives abundance to those whom he favors. Their kind feelings towards their white brother who "always had something left for the Indian," disposed them to bestow on him some particular mark of regard, and after a meeting for consultation, they decided oh giving him the name of Otsego, and christening the lake for him. The ceremony of naming both him and the lake was performed by pouring liquor upon his head as he knelt on the ground, a portion being afterwards poured into the water. It is probable that few are acquainted with this origin of the name of **Otsego Lake** (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otsego_Lake> [New\_York]); but the family tradition has been confirmed by the recollection of some who witnessed the occurrence.

The mother of Nancy belonged to the Wimple family, considered one of the most respectable Dutch families in the valley. The Brouks and Gansevorts were near connections, and for some time the daughter was an inmate of the family of John Brouk of *Coxsackie*, receiving while there all the instruction in the English language she ever had. Schools were not common among the Dutch settlers, on account of the distance between their farms, and Nancy never enjoyed any advantages of this kind; but possessing superior mental powers and a disposition to study she acquired what in those days was considered a good education. She read *Dutch* with ease, and had her memory well stored from the best of all books — **the** **Bible**. The customs were simple among that primitive people, and they had a natural dislike to innovation. English was not spoken; a **Yankee** was suspected and shunned, and a general prejudice existed against strangers, which it required a long acquaintance to overcome. In business transactions, as verbal agreements were always held sacred, and no writing was necessary among them, it was but natural that they should dread being outwitted by more crafty dealers. The women were of the class described by a distinguished chronicler, who *“stayed at home, read the Bible, and wore pockets.”* Miss Quackinbush was distinguished among them, not only for remarkable beauty of person and a fine voice, but for her intellectual superiority, her more cultivated manners, and a certain pride of bearing common in some of the more ancient families. She had the influence over all with whom she associated inseparable from a strong cast of character, was looked up to by all her youthful companions, and so generally admired that she was for some years known through that region as the belle of the *Mohawk*. To those attractive qualities she joined great industry and ingenuity; she gained the prize among all competitors in the knitting, spinning and weaving match, and moreover was perfect mistress of *needlework* in all its branches — an accomplishment of importance at that time, when all articles of male and female attire were of domestic manufacture. At the age of eighteen she was married to *Martin J. Yan Alstine*, also a descendant of a Holland family who had settled in the valley of the *Mohawk*. It was probably an ancestor of his who was murdered, by the Indians early in the French war — Eva, the wife of Jacob Van Alstine, who then resided in the valley.\* While riding along the road, her little daughter in her arms, she stopped to open a swing gate, and was fired on and killed by the savages. The child was taken to Canada, returned after long captivity, and in 1843 was living, at the age of near a century, with her nephew, **J. C. Yan Alstine**, at *Auriesville, Montgomery County*.

The young people, immediately on their marriage, removed to the Yan Alstine family mansion in the neighborhood, which was their home for nearly thirty years. Their residence here was marked by much suffering from Indian hostility. The valley of the Mohawk, one of the richest agricultural districts in the country, and one of the most populous at the period of the Revolution, presented an inviting aspect to the plundering savages and the refugees who shared a precarious subsistence among them and in the wilds of Canada. Scarcely any other section was so frequently invaded and overrun by the enemy. Month after month during seven years its villages and settlements *were attacked* or destroyed by the relentless foe, its farms laid waste, and the inhabitants driven from their homes, or *killed* and *captured*. The settlers in this particular neighborhood were few, and were obliged to band together for their mutual defense, forming parties to serve as scouts through the country, for the traveler from place to place was liable to attack in the lonely forest, or to a bullet or arrow aimed from the covert of rocks or bushes. Mr. Van Alstine was thus compelled to be much from his home, where none but females were left in his absence, except an old domestic, whose extreme fear of the savages prevented his being of any service. Mrs. Van Alstine, however, had knowledge of the Indian language, which gave her *great advantages*, and her natural sagacity and tact, with her intimate acquaintance with their peculiarities of character, enabled her on several occasions to protect her family. Her hospitality was always freely extended to all who claimed it, although the entertainment of a savage was often not without risk from others who might be lurking close at hand. Many incidents might be mentioned illustrating the dangers of this border life, but it is necessary to record merely a few which concern the family of our heroine, and exhibit her courage and firmness.

Daring the summer of 1778, the Indians and Tories being sufficiently employed in the destruction of Wyoming and Cherry Valley, the Mohawk Valley remained unmolested, with the exception of a descent upon the *German Flats*. In the spring of 1779, ***Gen. Clinton*** moved up the *Mohawk* and encamped at Canajoharie, and in this summer also little mischief was done. But in the spring of 1780 the Indians again appeared, infuriated at the destruction of their villages, and eager to wreak vengeance on the unoffending inhabitants. In August, *Brant***,** with an army of Indians and loyalists, burst upon the defenseless settlements, *plundering, killing, burning* and *desolating* the country; while in the autumn Sir John Johnson ravaged the north side of the river. Thus the destruction of the Mohawk settlements was almost complete, and if here and there a small one escaped, it afforded but a temporary shelter, being likely to be destroyed by the next storm that should sweep over the land.

While the enemy, stationed at *Johnstown*, were laying waste the country, parties continually going about to murder the inhabitants and burn their dwellings, the neighborhood in which Mrs. Van Alstino lived remained in comparative quiet, though the settlers trembled as each sun arose, lest his setting beams should fall on their ruined homes. Most of the men were absent, and when at length intelligence came that the destroyers were approaching, the people were almost distracted with terror. Mrs. Van Alstine called her neighbors together, endeavored to calm their fears, and advised them to make immediate arrangements for removing to an island belonging to her husband near the opposite side of the river. She knew that the spoilers would be in too great haste to make any attempt to cross, and thought if some articles were removed, they might be induced to suppose the inhabitants gone to a greater distance. The seven families in the neighborhood were in a few hours upon the island, having taken with them many things necessary for their comfort during a short stay. Mrs. Yan Alstine remained herself to the last, and then crossed in the boat, helping to draw it far up on the beach. Scarcely had they secreted themselves before they heard the dreaded war whoop, and descried the Indians in the distance. It was not Ions: before one and another saw the homes they loved in flames. When the savages came to Yan Alstine's house, they were about to fire that also, but the chief, interfering, informed them that *Sir John* would not be pleased if that house were burned — the owner having extended civilities to the baronet before the commencement of hostilities. "Let the old wolf keep his den," he said, and the house was left unmolested. The talking of the Indians could be distinctly heard from the island, and Mrs. Yan Alstine rejoiced that she was thus enabled to give shelter to the houseless families who had fled with her. The fugitives, however, did not deem it prudent to leave their place of concealment for several days, the smoke seen in different directions too plainly indicating that the work of devastation was going on. It was this company of Indians that destroyed the family of Mr. Fonda.

The destitute families remained at Van AIstine's house till it was deemed prudent to rebuild their homes. Later in the following autumn an incident occurred which brought much trouble upon them. Three men from the neighborhood of Canajoharie, who had deserted the Whig cause and joined the British, came back from Canada as spies, and were detected and apprehended. Their execution followed; two were shot, and one, a bold, adventurous fellow, named Harry Harr, and was hung in Mr. Van Alstine's orchard. Their prolonged absence causing some uneasiness to their friends in Canada, some Indians were sent to reconnoiter and learn something of them. It happened that they arrived on the day of Harr's execution, which they witnessed from a neighboring hill. They returned immediately with the information, and a party was dispatched — it is said by Brant — to revenge the death of the spies upon the inhabitants. Their continued shouts of **"**Aha, Harry Harr!” while engaged in pillaging and destroying, showed that such was their purpose. In their progress of devastation, they came to the house of Van Alstine, where no preparations had been made for defense, the family not expecting an attack, or not being aware of the near approach of the enemy. Mrs. Van Alstine was personally acquainted with Brant, and it may have been owing to this circumstance that the members of the family were not killed or carried away as prisoners. The Indians came upon them by *surprise*, entered the house without ceremony, and plundered and destroyed everything in their way. Mrs. Van Alstine saw her most valued articles, brought from Holland, broken one after another, till the house was strewed with fragments. As they passed a large mirror without demolishing it, she hoped it might be saved; but presently two of the savages led in a colt from the stable, and the glass being laid in the hall, compelled the animal to walk over it. The beds which they could not carry away they ripped open, shaking out the feathers and taking the ticks with them. They also took all the clothing. One young Indian, attracted by the brilliancy of a pair of inlaid buckles on the shoes of the aged grandmother seated in the corner, rudely snatched them from her feet, tore off the buckles, and flung the shoes in her face. Another took her shawl from her neck, threatening to kill her if resistance were offered. The eldest daughter, seeing a young savage carrying off a basket containing a hat and cap her father had brought her from Philadelphia, and which she highly prized, followed him, snatched her basket, and after a struggle succeeded in pushing him down. She then fled to a pile of hemp and hid herself, throwing the basket into it as far as she could. The other Indians gathered round, and as the young one rose clapped their hands, shouting **"Brave girl!"** while he skulked away to escape their derision. During the struggle Mrs. Van Alstine had palled to her daughter to give up the contest; but she insisted that her basket should not be taken. Having gone through the house, the intruders went up to the kitchen chamber, where a quantity of cream in large jars had been brought from the dairy, and threw the jars down stairs, covering the floor with their contents. They then broke the window glass throughout the house, and unsatisfied with the plunder they had collected, bribed a man servant by the promise of his clothes and a portion of the booty to show them where some articles had been hastily secreted. Mrs. Van Alstine had just finished cutting out winter clothing for her family — which consisted of her mother-in-law, her husband and twelve children, with two black servants— and had stowed it away in barrels. The servant treacherously disclosed the hiding place, and the clothing was soon added to the rest of the booty. Mrs. Van Alstine reproached the man for his perfidy, which she assured him would be punished, not rewarded by the savages, and her words were verified; for after they had forced him to assist in securing their plunder, they bound him and put him in one of their wagons, telling him his treachery to the palefaces deserved no better treatment. The provisions having been carried away, the family subsisted on corn, which they pounded and made into cakes. They felt much they want of clothing, and Mrs. Yan Alstine gathered the silk of milkweed, of which, mixed with flax, she spun and wove garments. The inclement season was now approaching, and they suffered severely from the want of window glass, as well as their bedding, woolen clothes, and the various articles, including cooking utensils, taken from them. Mrs. Van Alstine's most arduous labors could do little towards providing for so many destitute persons; their neighbors were in no condition to help them, the roads were almost impassable, besides being infested by Indians, and their finest horses had been taken. In this deplorable situation, she proposed to her husband to join with others who had been robbed in like manner, and make an attempt to recover their property from the Indian castle, eighteen or twenty miles distant, where it had been carried. But the idea of such an enterprise against an enemy superior in numbers and well prepared for defense, was soon abandoned. As the cold became more intolerable and the necessity for doing something more urgent, Mrs. Van Alstine, unable to witness longer the sufferings of those dependent on her, resolved to venture herself on the expedition. Her husband and children endeavored to dissuade her, but firm for their sake, she left home, accompanied by her son, about sixteen years of age. The snow was deep and the roads in a wretched condition, yet she persevered through all difficulties, and by good fortune arrived at the castle at a time when the Indians were all absent on a hunting excursion, the women and children only being left at home. She went to the principal house, where she supposed the most valuable articles must have been deposited, and on entering was met by the old squaw who had the superintendence, who demanded what she wanted. She asked for food; the squaw hesitated; but on her visitor saying she had never turned an Indian away hungry, sullenly commenced preparations for a meal.

The matron saw her bright copper tea-kettle, with other cooking utensils, brought forth for use. "While the squaw was gone for water, she began a search for her property, and finding several articles gave them to her son to put into the sleigh. When the squaw, returning, asked by whose order she was taking those things, Mrs. Yan Alstine replied, that they belonged to her; and seeing that the woman was not disposed to give them up peaceably, took from her pocket-book a paper, and handed it to the squaw, who she knew could not read. The woman asked whose name was affixed to the supposed order, and being told it was that of **"Yankee Peter"** — a man, who had great influence among the savages, dared not refuse submission. By this stratagem Mrs. Yan Alstine secured, without opposition, all the articles she could find belonging to her, and put them into the sleigh. She then asked where the horses were kept. The squaw refused to show her, but she went to the stable, and there found those belonging to her husband, in fine order — for the savages were careful of their best horses. The animals recognized their mistress, and greeted her by a simultaneous neighing. She made her son cut the halters, and finding themselves at liberty they bounded off and went homeward at full speed. The mother and son now drove back as fast as possible, for she knew their fate would be sealed if the Indians should return. They reached home late in the evening and passed a sleepless night, dreading instant halters pursuit and a night attack from the irritated savages.

Soon after daylight the alarm was given that the Indian**s** were within view, and coming towards the house, painted and in their war costume, and armed with tomahawks and rifles. Mr. Yan Alstine ***saw no course to escape* their vengeance** but to give up whatever they wished to take back; but his intrepid wife was determined on an effort, at least, to retain her property. As they came near she begged her husband not to show himself — for she knew they would immediately fall upon him — but to leave the matter in her hands. The intruders took their course first to the stable, and bidding all the rest remain within doors, the matron went out alone, followed to the door by her family, weeping and entreating her not to expose herself. Going to the stable, she inquired in the Indian language what the men wanted. The reply was "our horses." *She said boldly* — *"They are ours; you came and took them without right; they are ours, and we mean to keep them."* The chief now came forward threateningly, and approached the door. Mrs. Van Alstine placed herself against it, telling him she would not give up the animals they had raised and were attached to. He succeeded in pulling her from the door, and drew out the plug that fastened it, which she snatched from his hand, pushing him away. He then stepped back and presented his rifle, threatening to shoot her if she did not move; but she kept her position, opening her neck handkerchiefand bidding him shoot if he dared. It might be that the Indian feared punishment from his allies for any such act of violence, or that he was moved with admiration of her intrepidity; he hesitated, looked at her for a moment, and then *slowly dropped his gun,* uttering in his native language expressions implying his conviction that the *evil one* must help her, and saying to his companions that she was a **brave woman** and they would not molest her. Giving a shout, by way of expressing their approbation, they departed from the premises. On their way they called at the house of Col. Frey, and related their adventure, saying that the white woman's courage had **saved her** and **her property**, and were there fifty such **brave women** as the wife of 'Big Tree,' the Indians would never have troubled the inhabitants of the Mohawk Valley**.** She *experienced* afterwards the good effects of the impression made at this time.

It is probable some of these Indians were imbued with a portion of the humane disposition shown by Brant in his clemency to the conquered. In the spring a party of Canadian savages was sent to scour the country and collect provisions. Their orders were to take no prisoners, but they captured all who came in their way, murdering those who offered resistance. One of Mrs. Van Alstine's brothers was taken prisoner, and having repeatedly attempted to affect his escape, was sentenced by their council to be *burned*. He was bound to the stake and the faggots were piled around him, when an aged Indian who had not been present at the council interfered to save him, pleading that he had never harmed them, and had a wife and children, and pledging himself for his safe-keeping. The **victim** was accordingly released, and being told to thank each Indian for his life, did so, and though he might have escaped afterwards, remained with his captors till the journey was accomplished — determined to fulfill the pledge given by his preserver.

It was not long after this occurrence that several Indians came upon some children left in the field while the men went to dinner, and took them prisoners, tomahawking a young man who rushed from an adjoining field to their assistance. Two of these — six and eight years of age — were Mrs. Yan Alstine's children. The savages passed on towards the *Susquehanna*, plundering and destroying as they went. They were three weeks upon the journey, and the poor little captives suffered much from hunger and exposure to the night air, being in a deplorable condition by the time they returned to Canada. On their arrival, according to custom, each prisoner was required to run the gauntlet, *two Indian boys* being stationed on either side, armed with *clubs* and *sticks* to beat him as he ran. The eldest was cruelly bruised, and when the younger, pale and exhausted, was led forward, a squaw of the tribe, taking pity on the helpless child, said she would go in his place, or if that could not be permitted, would carry him. She accordingly took him in her arms, and *wrapping her blanket around him*, got through with some severe blows. The children were then washed and clothed by order of the chief, and supper was given them. Their uncle — then also a prisoner — heard of the arrival of children from the Mohawk, and was permitted to visit them. The little creatures were sleeping soundly when aroused by a familiar voice, and joyfully exclaiming, **"Uncle Quackinbush!"** were clasped in his arms. In the following spring the captives were ransomed, and returned home in fine spirits.

In the year 1785 Mr. Yan Alstine removed his family to the banks of the *Susquehanna*, eighteen miles below ***Cooperstown***, where he had purchased a tract of land previous to the war. The comfortable house erected here had been burned by the Indians, and another had to be built before the owners could remove to their new home. There were at that time only three white families in the neighborhood, but several Indians were living near. Many incidents that occurred during their residence here are preserved in the family tradition, and illustrate life in the woods at this period. On one occasion an Indian whom Mr. Yan Alstine had offended, came to his house with the intention of revenging himself. He was not at home, and the men were out at work, but his wife and family were within when the intruder entered. Mrs. Yan Alstine saw his purpose in his countenance. When she inquired his business, he pointed to his rifle, saying, he meant **"to show Big Tree which was the best man."** She well knew that if her husband presented himself he would probably fall a victim unless she could reconcile the difficulty. With this view she commenced a conversation upon subjects in which she knew the savage would take an interest, and admiring his dress, asked permission to examine his rifle, which, after praising, she set down, and while managing to fix his attention on something else, poured water into the barrel. She then gave him back the weapon, and assuming a more earnest manner, spoke to him of the **Good Spirit**, his kindness to men, and their duty to be kind to each other. By her admirable tact she so far succeeded in pacifying him, that when her husband returned he was ready to extend to him the hand of reconciliation and fellowship. He partook of some refreshment, and before leaving informed them that one of their neighbors had lent him the rifle for his deadly purpose. They had for some time suspected this neighbor, who had coveted a piece of their land, of unkind feelings towards them because he could not obtain it, yet could scarcely believe him so depraved. The Indian, to *confirm his story*, offered to accompany Mrs. Yan Alstine to the man's house, and although it was evening she went with him, made him repeat what he had said, and so convinced her neighbor of the wickedness of his conduct, that he was ever afterwards one of their best friends. Thus by her prudence and address she preserved, in all probability, the lives of her husband and family; for she learned afterwards that a number of savages had been concealed near, to rush upon them in case of danger to their companion.

At another time a *young Indian* came in and asked the loan of a *drawing knife*. As soon as he had it in his hand he walked up to the table, on which there was a *loaf of bread*, and unceremoniously cut several slices from it. One of Mrs. Yan Alstine's sons had a deerskin in his hand, and indignantly struck the savage with it. He turned and darted out of the door, giving a *loud whoop* as he fled. The mother just then came in, and hearing what had passed expressed her sorrow and fears that there would be trouble, for she knew the Indian character too well to suppose they would allow the matter to rest. Her apprehensions were soon realized by the approach of a party of savages, headed by the brother of the youth who had been struck. He entered alone, and inquired for the boy who had given the blow. Mr. Van Alstine, starting up in surprise, asked impatiently, "What the devilish Indian wanted?" The savage, understanding the expression applied to his appearance to be anything but complimentary, uttered a sharp cry, and raising his rifle, aimed at Yan Alstine's breast. His wife sprang forward in time to throw up the weapon, the contents of which were discharged into the wall, and pushing out the Indian, who stood just at the entrance, she quickly closed the door. He was much enraged, but she at length succeeded in persuading him to listen to a calm account of the matter, and asked why the quarrel of two lads should break their friendship. She finally invited him to come in and settle the difficulty in an amicable way. To his objection that they had no rum, she answered — "But we have tea;" and at length the party was called in, and a speech made by the leader in favor of the "white squaw," after which he tea was passed round. The Indian then took the grounds, and emptying them into a hole made in the ashes, declared that the enmity was buried forever. After this, whenever the family was molested, the ready tact of Mrs. Van Alstine, and her acquaintance with Indian nature, enabled her to prevent any serious difficulty. They had few advantages for religious worship, but whenever the weather would permit, the neighbors assembled at Van Alstine's house to hear the word preached. His wife, by her influence over the Indians, persuaded many of them to attend, and would interpret to them what was said by the minister.

Often their rude hearts were touched, and they would weep bitterly while she went over the affecting narrative of our Redeemer's life and death, and explained the truths of the Gospel. Much good did she in this way, and in after years many a savage converted to Christianity blessed her as his benefactress.

Mrs. Van Alstine was the mother of *fifteen children*, having passed her fiftieth year when the youngest was born. Twelve of these were sons, and all lived to become useful members of society. Most of them are now deceased, but two of her daughters survive — Mrs. Wimple, who resides at *Syracuse,* and the youngest child, *Mrs. Ellen McKnight*, now living at *Havana*, in the State of New York. Mrs. Van Alstine died in 1831 at *Nampsville, Madison County*, having retained her mental faculties to the last. According to a wish expressed on her death-bed, her Dutch books were buried with her. She feared they might be regarded as rubbish, and knew not how much her descendants would have valued them.