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THE MASTERS OF THE
PEAKS: A STORY OF THE
GREAT NORTH WOODS

Joseph Altsheler
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FOREWORD

"The Masters of the Peaks," while presenting a complete story in itself is the fourth volume of the French and Indian War Series, of which the predecessors were "The Hunters of the Hills," "The Shadow of the North," and "The Rulers of the Lakes." Robert Lennox, Tayoga, Willet, and all the other important characters of the earlier romances reappear in the present book.

CHAPTER I

IN THE DEEP WOODS

A light wind sang through the foliage, turned to varying and vivid hues now by the touch of autumn, and it had an edge of cold that made Robert Lennox shiver a little, despite a hardy life in wilderness and open. But it was only a passing feeling. A moment or two later he forgot it, and, turning his eyes to the west, watched the vast terraces of blazing color piled one above another by the sinking sun.

Often as he had seen it the wonderful late glow over the mighty forest never failed to stir him, and to make his pulse beat a little faster. His sensitive mind, akin in quality to that of a poet, responded with eagerness and joy to the beauty and majesty of nature. Forgetting danger and the great task they had set for themselves, he watched the banks of color, red and pink, salmon and blue, purple and yellow, shift and change, while in the very heart of the vast panorama the huge, red orb, too strong for human sight, glittered and flamed.

The air, instinct with life, intoxicated him and he became rapt as in a vision. People whom he had met in his few but eventful years passed before him again in all the seeming of reality, and then his spirit leaped into the future, dreaming of the great things he would see, and in which perhaps he would have a share.

Tayoga, the young Onondaga, looked at his comrade and he understood. The same imaginative thread had been woven into the warp of which he was made, and his nostrils and lips quivered as he drank in the splendor of a world that appealed with such peculiar force to him, a son of the woods.

"The spirit of Areskouï (the Sun God) is upon Dagaëoga, and he has left us to dwell for a little while upon the seas of color heaped against the western horizon," he said.

Willet, the hunter, smiled. The two lads were very dear to him. He knew that they were uncommon types, raised by the gift of God far above the normal.

"Let him rest there, Tayoga," he said, "while those brilliant banks last, which won't be long. All things change, and the glorious hues will soon give way to the dark."

"True, Great Bear, but if the night comes it, in turn, must yield to the dawn. All things change, as you say, but nothing perishes. The sun tomorrow will be the same sun that we see today. Black night will not take a single ray from its glory."

"It's so, Tayoga, but you talk like a book or a prophet. I'm wondering if our lives are not like the going and coming of the sun. Maybe we pass on from one to another, forever and forever, without ending."

"Great Bear himself feels the spell of Areskouï also."

"I do, but we'd better stop rhapsodizing and think about our needs. Here, Robert, wake up and come back to earth! It's no time to sing a song to the sun with the forest full of our red

enemies and the white too, perhaps."

Robert awoke with a start.

"You dragged me out of a beautiful world," he said.

"A world in which you were the central star," rejoined the hunter.

"So I was, but isn't that the case with all the imaginary worlds a man creates? He's their sun or he wouldn't create 'em."

"We're getting too deep into the unknown. Plant your feet on the solid earth, Robert, and let's think about the problems a dark night is going to bring us in the Indian country, not far south of the St. Lawrence."

Young Lennox shivered again. The terraces in the west suddenly began to fade and the wind took on a fresh and sharper edge.

"I know one thing," he said. "I know the night's going to be cold. It always is in the late autumn, up here among the high hills, and I'd like to see a fire, before which we could bask and upon which we could warm our food."

The hunter glanced at the Onondaga.

"That tells the state of my mind, too," he said, "but I doubt whether it would be safe. If we're to be good scouts, fit to discover the plans of the French and Indians, we won't get ourselves cut off by some rash act in the very beginning."

"It may not be a great danger or any at all," said Tayoga. "There is much rough and rocky ground to our right, cut by deep chasms, and we might find in there a protected recess in which

we could build a smothered fire."

"You're a friend at the right time, Tayoga," said Robert. "I feel that I must have warmth. Lead on and find the stony hollow for us."

The Onondaga turned without a word, and started into the maze of lofty hills and narrow valleys, where the shadows of the night that was coming so swiftly already lay thick and heavy.

The three had gone north after the great victory at Lake George, a triumph that was not followed up as they had hoped. They had waited to see Johnson's host pursue the enemy and strike him hard again, but there were bickerings among the provinces which were jealous of one another, and the army remained in camp until the lateness of the season indicated a delay of all operations, save those of the scouts and roving bands that never rested. But Robert, Willet and Tayoga hoped, nevertheless, that they could achieve some deed of importance during the coming cold weather, and they were willing to undergo great risks in the effort.

They were soon in the heavy forest that clothed all the hills, and passed up a narrow ravine leading into the depths of the maze. The wind followed them into the cleft and steadily grew colder. The glowing terraces in the west broke up, faded quite away, and night, as yet without stars, spread over the earth.

Tayoga was in front, the other two following him in single file, stepping where he stepped, and leaving to him without question the selection of a place where they could stay. The

Onondaga, guided by long practice and the inheritance from countless ancestors who had lived all their lives in the forest, moved forward with confidence. His instinct told him they would soon come to such a refuge as they desired, the rocky uplift about him indicating the proximity of many hollows.

The darkness increased, and the wind swept through the chasms with alternate moan and whistle, but the red youth held on his course for a full two miles, and his comrades followed without a word. When the cliffs about them rose to a height of two or three hundred feet, he stopped, and, pointing with a long forefinger, said he had found what they wished.

Robert at first could see nothing but a pit of blackness, but gradually as he gazed the shadows passed away, and he traced a deep recess in the stone of the cliff, not much of a shelter to those unused to the woods, but sufficient for hardy forest runners.

"I think we may build a little fire in there," said Tayoga, "and no one can see it unless he is here in the ravine within ten feet of us."

Willet nodded and Robert joyfully began to prepare for the blaze. The night was turning even colder than he had expected, and the chill was creeping into his frame. The fire would be most welcome for its warmth, and also because of the good cheer it would bring. He swept dry leaves into a heap within the recess, put upon them dead wood, which was abundant everywhere, and then Tayoga with artful use of flint and steel lighted the spark.

"It is good," admitted the hunter as he sat Turkish fashion on

the leaves, and spread out his hands before the growing flames. "The nights grow cold mighty soon here in the high hills of the north, and the heat not only loosens up your muscles, but gives you new courage."

"I intend to make myself as comfortable as possible," said Robert. "You and Tayoga are always telling me to do so and I know the advice is good."

He gathered great quantities of the dry leaves, making of them what was in reality a couch, upon which he could recline in halfway fashion like a Roman at a feast, and warm at the fire before him the food he carried in a deerskin knapsack. An appetizing odor soon arose, and, as he ate, a pleasant warmth pervaded all his body, giving him a feeling of great content. They had venison, the tender meat of the young bear which, like the Indians, they loved, and they also allowed themselves a slice apiece of precious bread. Water was never distant in the northern wilderness, and Tayoga found a brook not a hundred yards away, flowing down a ravine that cut across their own. They drank at it in turn, and, then, the three lay down on the leaves in the recess, grateful to the Supreme Power which provided so well for them, even in the wild forest.

They let the flames die, but a comfortable little bed of coals remained, glowing within the shelter of the rocks. Young Lennox heaped up the leaves until they formed a pillow under his head, and then half dreaming, gazed into the heart of the fire, while his comrades reclined near him, each silent but with his mind turned

to that which concerned him most.

Robert's thoughts were of St. Luc, of the romantic figure he had seen in the wilderness after the battle of Lake George, the knightly chevalier, singing his gay little song of mingled sentiment and defiance. An unconscious smile passed over his face. He and St. Luc could never be enemies. In very truth, the French leader, though an official enemy, had proved more than once the best of friends, ready even to risk his life in the service of the American lad. What was the reason? What could be the tie between them? There must be some connection. What was the mystery of his origin? The events of the last year indicated to him very clearly that there was such a mystery. Adrian Van Zoon and Master Benjamin Hardy surely knew something about it, and Willet too. Was it possible that a thread lay in the hand of St. Luc also?

He turned his eyes from the coals and gazed at the impassive face of the hunter. Once the question trembled on his lips, but he was sure the Great Bear would evade the answer, and the lad thought too much of the man who had long stood to him in the place of father to cause him annoyance. Beyond a doubt Willet had his interests at heart, and, when the time came for him to speak, speak he would, but not before.

His mind passed from the subject to dwell upon the task they had set for themselves, a thought which did not exclude St. Luc, though the chevalier now appeared in the guise of a bold and skillful foe, with whom they must match their wisdom and

courage. Doubtless he had formed a new band, and, at the head of it, was already roaming the country south of the St. Lawrence. Well, if that were the case perhaps they would meet once more, and he would have given much to penetrate the future.

"Why don't you go to sleep, Robert?" asked the hunter.

"For the best of reasons. Because I can't," replied the lad.

"Perhaps it's well to stay awake," said the Onondaga gravely.

"Why, Tayoga?"

"Someone comes."

"Here in the ravine?"

"No, not in the ravine but on the cliff opposite us."

Robert strained both eye and ear, but he could neither see nor hear any human being. The wall on the far side of the ravine rose to a considerable height, its edge making a black line against the sky, but nothing there moved.

"Your fancy is too much for you, Tayoga," he said. "Thinking that someone might come, it creates a man out of air and mist."

"No, Dagaega, my fancy sleeps. Instead, my ear, which speaks only the truth, tells me a man is walking along the crest of the cliff, and coming on a course parallel with our ravine. My eye does not yet see him, but soon it will confirm what my ear has already told me. This deep cleft acts as a trumpet and brings the sound to me."

"How far away, then, would you say is this being, who, I fear, is mythical?"

"He is not mythical. He is reality. He is yet about three

hundred yards distant. I might not have heard him, even with the aid of the cleft, but tonight Areskouï has given uncommon power to my ear, perhaps to aid us, and I know he is walking among thick bushes. I can hear the branches swish as they fly back into place, after his body has passed. Ah, a small stick popped as it broke under his foot!"

"I heard nothing."

"That is not my fault, O Dagaeoga. It is a heavy man, because I now hear his footsteps, even when they do not break anything. He walks with some uncertainty. Perhaps he fears lest he should make a false step, and tumble into the ravine."

"Since you can tell so much through hearing, at such a great distance, perhaps you know what kind of a man the stranger is. A warrior, I suppose?"

"No, he is not of our race. He would not walk so heavily. It is a white man."

"One of Rogers' rangers, then? Or maybe it is Rogers himself, or perhaps Black Rifle."

"It is none of those. They would advance with less noise. It is one not so much used to the forest, but who knows the way, nevertheless, and who doubtless has gone by this trail before."

"Then it must be a Frenchman!"

"I think so too."

"It won't be St. Luc?"

"No, Dagaeoga, though your tone showed that for a moment you hoped it was. Sharp Sword is too skillful in the forest to

walk with so heavy a step. Nor can it be either of the leaders, De Courcelles or Jumonville. They also are too much at home in the woods. The right name of the man forms itself on my lips, but I will wait to be sure. In another minute he will enter the bare space almost opposite us and then we can see."

The three waited in silence. Although Robert had expressed doubt he felt none. He had a supreme belief in the Onondaga's uncanny powers, and he was quite sure that a man was moving upon the bluff. A stranger at such a time was to be watched, because white men came but little into this dangerous wilderness.

A dark figure appeared within the prescribed minute upon the crest and stopped there, as if the man, whoever he might be, wished to rest and draw fresh breath. The sky had lightened and he was outlined clearly against it. Robert gazed intently and then he uttered a little cry.

"I know him!" he said. "I can't be mistaken. It's Achille Garay, the one whose name we found written on a fragment of a letter in Albany."

"It's the man who tried to kill you, none other," said Tayoga gravely, "and Areskouï whispered in my ear that it would be he."

"What on earth can he be doing here in this lone wilderness at such a time?" asked Robert.

"Likely he's on his way to a French camp with information about our forces," said Willet. "We frightened Mynheer Hendrik Martinus, when we were in Albany, but I suppose that once a spy and traitor always a spy and traitor. Since the immediate danger

has moved from Albany, Martinus and Garay may have begun work again."

"Then we'd better stop him," said Robert.

"No, let him go on," said Willet. "He can't carry any information about us that the French leaders won't find out for themselves. The fact that he's traveling in the night indicates a French camp somewhere near. We'll put him to use. Suppose we follow him and discover what we can about our enemies."

Robert looked at the cheerful bed of coals and sighed. They were seeking the French and Indians, and Garay was almost sure to lead straight to them. It was their duty to stalk him.

"I wish he had passed in the daytime," he said ruefully.

Tayoga laughed softly.

"You have lived long enough in the wilderness, O Dagaega," he said, "to know that you cannot choose when and where you will do your work."

"That's true, Tayoga, but while my feet are unwilling to go my will moves me on. So I'm entitled to more credit than you who take an actual physical de light in trailing anybody at any time."

The Onondaga smiled, but did not reply. Then the three took up their arms, returned their packs to their backs and without noise left the alcove. Robert cast one more reluctant glance at the bed of coals, but it was a farewell, not any weakening of the will to go.

Garay, after his brief rest on the summit, had passed the open space and was out of sight in the bushes, but Robert knew that

both Tayoga and Willet could easily pick up his trail, and now he was all eagerness to pursue him and see what the chase might disclose. A little farther down, the cliff sloped back to such an extent that they could climb it without trouble, and, when they surmounted the crest, they entered the bushes at the point where Garay had disappeared.

"Can you hear him now, Tayoga?" asked Robert.

"My ears are as good as they were when I was in the ravine," replied the Onondaga, "but they do not catch any sounds from the Frenchman. It is, as we wish, because we do not care to come so near him that he will hear."

"Give him a half mile start," said Willet. "The ground is soft here, and it won't be any sort of work to follow him. See, here are the traces of his footsteps now, and there is where he has pushed his way among the little boughs. Notice the two broken twigs, Robert."

They followed at ease, the trail being a clear one, and the light of moon and stars now ample. Robert began to feel the ardor of the chase. He did not see Garay, but he believed that Tayoga at times heard him with those wonderful ears of his. He rejoiced too that chance had caused them to find the French spy in the wilderness. He remembered that foul attempt upon his life in Albany, and, burning with resentment, he was eager to thwart Garay in whatever he was now attempting to do. Tayoga saw his face and said softly:

"You hate this man Garay?"

"I don't like him."

"Do you wish me to go forward and kill him?"

"No! No, Tayoga! Why do you ask me such a cold-blooded question?"

The Onondaga laughed gently.

"I was merely testing you, Dagaecoga," he said. "We of the Hodenosaunee perhaps do not regard the taking of life as you do, but I would not shoot Garay from ambush, although I might slay him in open battle. Ah, there he is again on the crest of the ridge ahead!"

Robert once more saw the thick, strong figure of the spy outlined against the sky which was now luminous with a brilliant moon and countless clear stars, and the feeling of resentment was very powerful within him. Garay, without provocation, had attempted his life, and he could not forget it, and, for a moment or two, he felt that if the necessity should come in battle he was willing for a bullet from Tayoga to settle him. Then he rebuked himself for harboring rancor.

Garay paused, as if he needed another rest, and looked back, though it was only a casual glance, perhaps to measure the distance he had come, and the three, standing among the dense bushes, had no fear that he saw them or even suspected that anyone was on his traces. After a delay of a minute or so he passed over the crest and Robert, Willet and Tayoga moved on in pursuit. The Frenchman evidently knew his path, as the chase led for a long time over hills, down valleys and across small streams.

Toward morning he put his fingers to his lips and blew a shrill whistle between them. Then the three drew swiftly near until they could see him, standing under the boughs of a great oak, obviously in an attitude of waiting.

"It is a signal to someone," said Robert.

"So it is," said Willet, "and it means that he and we have come to the end of our journey. I take it that we have arrived almost at the French and Indian camp, and that he whistles because he fears lest he should be shot by a sentinel through mistake. The reply should come soon."

As the hunter spoke they heard a whistle, a faint, clear note far ahead, and then Garay without hesitation resumed his journey. The three followed, but when they reached the crest of the next ridge they saw a light shining through the forest, a light that grew and finally divided into many lights, disclosing to them with certainty the presence of a camp. The figure of Garay appeared for a little while outlined against a fire, another figure came forward to meet him, and the two disappeared together.

From the direction of the fires came sounds subdued by the distance, and the aroma of food.

"It is a large camp," said Tayoga. "I have counted twelve fires which proves it, and the white men and the red men in it do not go hungry. They have deer, bear, fish and birds also. The pleasant odors of them all come to my nostrils, and make me hungry."

"That's too much for me," said Robert. "I can detect the blended savor, but I know not of what it consists. Now we go on,

I suppose, and find out what this camp holds."

"We wouldn't dream of turning back," said the hunter. "Did you notice anything familiar, Robert, about the figure that came forward to meet Garay?"

"Now that you speak of it, I did, but I can't recall the identity of the man."

"Think again!"

"Ah, now I have him! It was the French officer, Colonel Auguste de Courcelles, who gave us so much trouble in Canada and elsewhere."

"That's the man," said Willet. "I knew him at once. Now, wherever De Courcelles is mischief is likely to be afoot, but he's not the only Frenchman here. We'll spy out this camp to the full. There's time yet before the sunrise comes."

Now the three used all the skill in stalking with which they were endowed so plentifully, creeping forward without noise through the bushes, making so little stir among them that if a wary warrior had been looking he would have taken the slight movement of twig or leaf for the influence of a wandering breeze. Gradually the whole camp came into view, and Tayoga's prediction that it would be a large one proved true.

Robert lay on a little knoll among small bushes growing thick, where the keenest eye could not see him, but where his own vision swept the whole wide shallow dip, in which the French and Indian force was encamped. Twelve fires, all good and large, burned gayly, throwing out ruddy flames from great beds of

glowing coals, while the aroma of food was now much stronger and very appetizing.

The force numbered at least three hundred men, of whom about one third were Frenchmen or Canadians, all in uniform. Robert recognized De Courcelles and near him Jumonville, his invariable comrade, and a little farther on a handsome and gallant young face.

"It's De Galissonnière of the Battalion Languedoc, whom we met in Québec," he whispered to Tayoga. "Now I wonder what he's doing here."

"He's come with the others on a projected foray," Tayoga whispered back. "But look beyond him, Dagaëga, and you will see one more to be dreaded than De Courcelles or Jumonville."

Robert's gaze followed that of the young Onondaga and was intercepted by the huge figure of Tandakora, the Ojibway, who stood erect by one of the fires, bare save for a breech cloth and moccasins, his body painted in the most hideous designs, of which war paint was possible, his brow lowering.

"Tandakora is not happy," said Tayoga.

"No," said Robert. "He is thinking of the battle at Lake George that he did not win, and of all the scalps he did not take. He is thinking of his lost warriors, and the rout of his people and the French."

"Even so, Dagaëga. Now Tandakora and De Courcelles talk with the spy, Garay. They want his news. They rejoice when he tells them Waraiyageh and his soldiers still make no

preparations to advance after their victory by the lake. The long delay, the postponement of a big campaign until next spring will give the French and Indians time to breathe anew and renew their strength. Tandakora and De Courcelles consider themselves fortunate, and they are pleased with the spy, Garay. But look, Dagaegoga! Behold who comes now!"

Robert's heart began to throb as the handsomest and most gallant figure of them all walked into the red glow of the firelight, a tall man, young, lithe, athletic, fair of hair and countenance, his manner at once graceful and proud, a man to whom the others turned with deference, and perhaps in the case of De Courcelles and Jumonville with a little fear. He wore a white uniform with gold facings, and a small gold hilted sword swung upon his thigh. Even in the forest, dress impresses, and Robert was quite sure that St. Luc was in his finest attire, not from vanity, but because he wished to create an effect. It would be like him, when his fortunes were lowest, to assume his highest manner before both friend and foe.

"You'd think from his looks that he had nothing but a string of victories and never knew defeat," whispered Willet. "Anyway, his is the finest spirit in all that crowd, and he's the greatest leader and soldier, too. Notice how they give way to him, and how they stop asking questions of Garay, leaving it to him. And now Garay himself bows low before him, while De Courcelles, Jumonville and Tandakora stand aside. I wish we could hear what they say; then we might learn something worth all our risk in

coming here."

But their voices did not reach so great a distance, though the three, eager to use eye even if ear was of no use, still lay in the bushes and watched the flow of life in the great camp. Many of the French and Indians who had been asleep awoke, sat up and began to cook breakfast for themselves, holding strips of game on sharp sticks over the coals. St. Luc talked a long while with Garay, afterward with the French officers and Tandakora, and then withdrew to a little knoll, where he leaned against a tree, his face expressing intense thought. A dark, powerfully built man, the Canadian, Dubois, brought him food which he ate mechanically.

The dusk floated away, and the sun came up, great and brilliant. The three stirred in their covert, and Willet whispered that it was time for them to be going.

"Only the most marvelous luck could save us from detection in the daylight," he said, "because presently the Indians, growing restless, will wander about the camp."

"I'm willing to go," Robert whispered back. "I know the danger is too great. Besides I'm starving to death, and the odors of all their good food will hasten my death, if I don't take an antidote."

They retreated with the utmost care and Robert drew an immense breath of relief when they were a full mile away. It was well to look upon the French and Indian camp, but it was better to be beyond the reach of those who made it.

"And now we make a camp of our own, don't we?" he said. "All my bones are stiff from so much bending and creeping. Moreover, my hunger has grown to such violent pitch that it is tearing at me, so to speak, with red hot pincers."

"Dagaeoga always has plenty of words," said Tayoga in a whimsical tone, "but he will have to endure his hunger a while longer. Let the pincers tear and burn. It is good for him. It will give him a chance to show how strong he is, and how a mighty warrior despises such little things as food and drink."

"I'm not anxious to show myself a mighty warrior just now," retorted young Lennox. "I'd be willing to sacrifice my pride in that respect if I could have carried off some of their bear steaks and venison."

"Come on," said Willet, "and I'll see that you're satisfied. I'm beginning to feel as you do, Robert."

Nevertheless he marshaled them forward pretty sternly and they pursued a westward course for many miles before he allowed a halt. Even then they hunted about among the rocks until they found a secluded place, no fire being permitted, at which it pleased Robert to grumble, although he did not mean it.

"We were better off last night when we had our little fire in the hollow," he said.

"So we were, as far as the body is concerned," rejoined Willet, "but we didn't know then where the Indian camp lay. We've at least increased our knowledge. Now, I'm thinking that you two lads, who have been awake nearly all night and also the half of

the morning that has passed, ought to sleep. Time we have to spare, but you know we should practice all the economy we can with our strength. This place is pretty well hidden, and I'll do the watching. Spread your blankets on the leaves, Robert. It's not well even for foresters to sleep on the bare ground. Now draw the other half of it over you. Tayoga has done so already. I'm wondering which of you will get to sleep first. Whoever does will be the better man, a question I've long wanted to decide."

But the problem was still left for the future. They fell asleep so nearly at the same time that Willet could tell no difference. He noticed with pleasure their long, regular breathing, and he said to himself, as he had said so often before, that they were two good and brave lads.

Then he made a very comfortable cushion of fallen leaves to sit upon, and remained there a long time, his rifle across his knees.

His eyes were wide open, but no part of his body stirred. He had acquired the gift of infinite patience, and with it the difficult physical art of remaining absolutely motionless for a long time. So thorough was his mastery over himself that the small wild game began to believe by and by that he was not alive. Birds sang freely over his head and the hare hopped through the undergrowth. Yet the hunter saw everything and his very stillness enabled him to listen with all the more acuteness.

The sun which had arisen great and brilliant, remained so, flooding the world with golden lights and making it wonderfully alluring to Willet, whose eyes never grew weary of the forest's

varying shades and aspects. They were all peaceful now, but he had no illusions. He knew that the hostile force would send out many hunters. So many men must have much game and presently they would be prowling through the woods, seeking deer and bear. The chief danger came from them.

The hours passed and noon arrived. Willet had not stirred. He did not sleep, but he rested nevertheless. His great body was relaxed thoroughly, and strength, after weariness, flowed back into his veins. Presently his head moved forward a little and his attitude grew more intent. A slight sound that was not a part of the wilderness had come to him. It was very faint, few would have noticed it, but he knew it was the report of a rifle. He knew also that it was not a shot fired in battle. The hunters, as he had surmised, were abroad, and they had started up a deer or a bear.

But Willet did not stir nor did his eyelids flicker. He was used to the proximity of foes, and the distant report did not cause his heart to miss a single beat. Instead, he felt a sort of dry amusement that they should be so near and yet know it not. How Tandakora would have rejoiced if there had been a whisper in his ear that Willet, Robert and Tayoga whom he hated so much were within sound of his rifle! And how he would have spread his nets to catch such precious game!

He heard a second shot presently from the other side, and then the hunter began to laugh softly to himself. His faint amusement was turning into actual and intense enjoyment. The Indian hunters were obviously on every side of them but did

not dream that the finest game of all was at hand. They would continue to waste their time on deer and bear while the three formidable rangers were within hearing of their guns.

But the hunter was still silent. His laughter was wholly internal, and his lips did not even move. It showed only in his eye and the general expression of his countenance. A third shot and a fourth came, but no anxiety marred his sense of the humorous.

Then he heard the distant shouts of warriors in pursuit of a wounded bear and still he was motionless.

Willet knew that the French and Tandakora suspected no pursuit. They believed that no American rangers would come among the lofty peaks and ridges south of the border, and he and his comrades could lie in safe hiding while the hunt went on with unabated zeal. But he was sure one day would be sufficient for the task. That portion of the wilderness was full of game, and, since the coming of the war, deer and bear were increasing rapidly. Willet often noted how quickly game returned to regions abandoned by man, as if the wild animals promptly told one another the danger had passed.

Joyous shouts came now and then and he knew that they marked the taking of game, but about the middle of the afternoon the hunt drifted entirely away. A little later Tayoga awoke and sat up. Then Willet moved slightly and spoke.

"Tandakora's hunters have been all about us while you slept," he said, "but I knew they wouldn't find us."

"Dagaeoga and I were safe in the care of the Great Bear,"

said the Onondaga confidently. "Tandakora will rage if we tell him some day that we were here, to be taken if he had only seen us. Now Lennox awakes also! O Dagaega, you have slept and missed all the great jest."

"What do you mean, Tayoga?"

"Tandakora built his fire just beyond the big bush that grows ten feet away, and sat there two hours without suspecting our presence here."

"Now I know you are romancing, Tayoga, because I can see the twinkle in your eyes. But I suspect that what you say bears some remote relation to the truth."

"The hostile hunters passed while you slept, and while I slept also, but the Great Bear was all eyes and ears and he did not think it needful to awaken us."

"What are we going to do now, Dave?"

"Eat more venison. We must never fail to keep the body strong."

"And then?"

"I'm not sure. I thought once that we'd better go south to our army at Lake George with news of this big band, but it's a long distance down there, and it may be wiser to stay here and watch St. Luc. What do you say, Robert?"

"Stay here."

"And you, Tayoga?"

"Watch St. Luc."

"I was inclining to that view myself, and it's settled now. But

we mustn't move from this place until dark; it would be too dangerous in the day."

The lads nodded and the three settled into another long period of waiting.

CHAPTER II

ON THE RIDGES

Late in the afternoon Willet went to sleep and Robert and Tayoga watched, although, as the hunter had done, they depended more upon ear than eye. They too heard now and then the faint report of distant shots from the hunt, and Robert's heart beat very fast, but, if the young Onondaga felt emotion, he did not show it. At twilight, they ate a frugal supper, and when the night had fully come they rose and walked about a little to make their stiffened muscles elastic again.

"The hunters have all gone back to the camp now," said Tayoga, "since it is not easy to pursue the game by dusk, and we need not keep so close, like a bear in its den."

"And the danger of our being seen is reduced to almost nothing," said Robert.

"It is so, Dagaegoga, but we will have another fight to make. We must strive to keep ourselves from freezing. It turns very cold on the mountains! The wind is now blowing from the north, and do you not feel a keener edge to it?"

"I do," replied Robert, sensitive of body as well as mind, and he shivered as he spoke. "It's a most unfortunate change for us. But now that I think of it we've got to expect it up among the high mountains toward Canada. Shall we light another fire?"

"We'll talk of that later with the Great Bear when he comes out of his sleep. But it fast grows colder and colder, Daga-eoga!"

Weather was an enormous factor in the lives of the borderers. Wilderness storms and bitter cold often defeated their best plans, and shelterless men, they were in a continual struggle against them. And here in the far north, among the high peaks and ridges, there was much to be feared, even with official winter yet several weeks away.

Robert began to rub his cold hands, and, unfolding his blanket, he wrapped it about his body, drawing it well up over his neck and ears. Tayoga imitated him and Willet, who was soon awakened by the cold blast, protected himself in a similar manner.

"What does the Great Bear think?" asked the Onondaga.

The hunter, with his face to the wind, meditated a few moments before replying.

"I was testing that current of air on my face and eyes," he said, "and, speaking the truth, Tayoga, I don't like it. The wind seemed to grow colder as I waited to answer you. Listen to the leaves falling before it! Their rustle tells of a bitter night."

"And while we freeze in it," said Robert, whose imagination was already in full play, "the French and Indians build as many and big fires as they please, and cook before them the juicy game they killed today."

The hunter was again very thoughtful.

"It looks as if we would have to kindle a fire," he said, "and tomorrow we shall have to hunt bear or deer for ourselves,

because we have food enough left for only one more meal."

"The face of Areskouï is turned from us," said Tayoga. "We have done something to anger him, or we have failed to do what he wished, and now he sends upon us a hard trial to test us and purify us! A great storm with fierce cold comes!"

The wind rose suddenly, and it began to make a sinister hissing among all the passes and gorges. Robert felt something damp upon his face, and he brushed away a melting flake of snow. But another and another took its place and the air was soon filled with white. And the flakes were most aggressive. Driven by the storm they whipped the cheeks and eyes of the three, and sought to insert themselves, often with success, under their collars, even under the edges of the protecting blankets, and down their backs. Robert, despite himself, shivered violently and even the hunter was forced to walk vigorously back and forth in the effort to keep warm. It was evident that the Onondaga had told the truth, and that the face of Areskouï was in very fact turned from them.

Robert awaited the word, looking now and then at Willet, but the hunter hung on for a long time. The leaves fell in showers before the storm, making a faint rustling like the last sigh of the departing, and the snow, driven with so much force, stung his face like hail when it struck. He was anxious for a fire, and its vital heat, but he was too proud to speak. He would endure without complaint as much as his comrades, and he knew that Tayoga, like himself, would wait for the older man to speak.

But he could not keep, meanwhile, from thinking of the

French and Indians beside their vast heaps of glowing coals, fed and warmed to their hearts' content, while the three lay in the dark and bitter cold of the wilderness. An hour dragged by, then two, then three, but the storm showed no sign of abating. The sinister screaming of the wind did not cease and the snow accumulated upon their bodies. At last Willet said:

"We must do it."

"We have no other choice," said Tayoga. "We have waited as long as we could to see if Areskoui would turn a favoring face upon us, but his anger holds. It will not avail, if in our endeavor to escape the tomahawk of Tandakora, we freeze to death."

The fire decided upon, they took all risks and went about the task with eagerness. Ordinary men could not have lighted it under such circumstances, but the three had uncommon skill upon which to draw. They took the bark from dead wood, and shaved off many splinters, building up a little heap in the lee of a cliff, which they sheltered on the windward side with their bodies. Then Willet, working a long time with his flint and steel, set to it the sparks that grew into a blaze.

Robert did not stop with the fire. Noticing the vast amount of dead wood lying about, as was often the case in the wilderness, he dragged up many boughs and began to build a wall on the exposed side of the flames. Willet and Tayoga approving of the idea soon helped him, and three pairs of willing hands quickly raised the barrier of trunks and brush to a height of at least a yard.

"A happy idea of yours, Robert," said the hunter. "Now we

achieve two ends at once. Our wall hides the glow of the fire and at the same time protects us in large measure from the snow and wind."

"I have bright thoughts now and then," said Robert, whose spirits had returned in full tide. "You needn't believe you and Tayoga have all of 'em. I don't believe either of you would have ever thought of this fine wooden wall. In truth, Dave, I don't know what would become of you and Tayoga if you didn't have me along with you most all the time! How good the fire feels! The warmth touches my fingers and goes stealing up my arms and into my body! It reaches my face too and goes stealing down to meet the fine heat that makes a channel of my fingers! A glorious fire, Tayoga! I tell you, a glorious fire, Dave! The finest fire that's burning anywhere in the world!"

"The quality of a fire depends on the service it gives," said the hunter.

"Dagaeoga has many words when he is happy," said the Onondaga. "His tongue runs on like the pleasant murmur of a brook, but he does it because Manitou made him that way. The world must have talkers as well as doers, and it can be said for Lennox that he acts as well as talks."

"Thanks, I'm glad you put in the saving clause," laughed Robert. "But it's a mighty good thing we built our wooden wall. That wind would cut to the bone if it could get at you."

"The wind at least will keep the warriors away," said Tayoga. "They will all stay close in the camp on such a night."

"And no blame to them," murmured the hunter. "If we weren't in the Indian country I'd build our own fire five times as big. Now, Robert, suppose you go to sleep."

"I can't, Dave. You know I slept all the morning, but I'm not suffering from dullness. I'm imagining things. I'm imagining how much worse off we'd be if we didn't have flint and steel. I can always find pleasure in making such contrasts."

But he crouched down lower against the cliff, drew his blanket closer and spread both hands over the fire, which had now died down into a glowing mass of coals. He was wondering what they would do on the morrow, when their food was exhausted. They had not only the storm to fight, but possible starvation in the days to come. He foresaw that instead of discovering all the plans of the enemy they would have a struggle merely to live.

"Areskouï must truly be against us, Tayoga," he said. "Who would have predicted such a storm so early in the season?"

"We are several thousand feet above the sea level," said Willet, "and that will account for the violent change. I think the wind and snow will last all tonight, and probably all tomorrow."

"Then," said Robert, "we'd better gather more wood, build our wall higher and save ample fuel for the fire."

The other two found the suggestion good, and all three acted upon it promptly, ranging through the forest about them in search of brushwood, which they brought back in great quantities. Robert's blood began to tingle with the activity, and his spirits rose. Now the snow, as it drove against his face, instead

of making him shiver, whipped his blood. He was the most energetic of the three, and went the farthest, in the hunt for fallen timber.

One of his trips took him into the mouth of a little gorge, and, as he bent down to seize the end of a big stick, he heard just ahead a rustling that caused him with instinctive caution to straighten up and spring back, his hand, at the same time, flying to the butt of the pistol in his belt. A figure, tall and menacing, emerged from the darkness, and he retreated two or three steps.

It was his first thought that a warrior stood before him, but reason told him quickly no Indian was likely to be there, and, then, through the thick dusk and falling snow, he saw a huge black bear, erect on his hind legs, and looking at him with little red eyes. The animal was so near that the lad could see his expression, and it was not anger but surprise and inquiry. He divined at once that this particular bear had never seen a human being before, and, having been roused from some warm den by Robert's advance, he was asking what manner of creature the stranger and intruder might be.

Robert's first impulse was one of friendliness. It did not occur to him to shoot the bear, although the big fellow, fine and fat, would furnish all the meat they needed for a long time. Instead his large blue eyes gave back the curious gaze of the little red ones, and, for a little space, the two stood there, face to face, with no thought of danger or attack on the part of either.

"If you'll let me alone I'll let you alone," said the lad.

The bear growled, but it was a kindly, reassuring growl.

"I didn't mean to disturb you. I was looking for wood, not for bear."

Another growl, but of a thoroughly placid nature.

"Go wherever you please and I'll return to the camp with this fallen sapling."

A third growl, now ingratiating.

"It's a cold night, with fire and shelter the chief needs, and you and I wouldn't think of fighting."

A fourth growl which clearly disclosed the note of friendship and understanding.

"We're in agreement, I see. Good night, I wish you well."

A fifth growl, which had the tone of benevolent farewell, and the bear, dropping on all fours, disappeared in the brush. Robert, whose fancy had been alive and leaping, returned to the camp rather pleased with himself, despite the fact that about three hundred pounds of excellent food had walked away undisturbed.

"I ran upon a big bear," he said to the hunter and the Onondaga.

"I heard no shot," said Willet.

"No, I didn't fire. Neither my impulse nor my will told me to do so. The bear looked at me in such brotherly fashion that I could never have sent a bullet into him. I'd rather go hungry."

Neither Willet nor Tayoga had any rebuke for him.

"Doubtless the soul of a good warrior had gone into the bear and looked out at you," said the Onondaga with perfect sincerity.

"It is sometimes so. It is well that you did not fire upon him or the face of Areskoui would have remained turned from us too long."

"That's just the way I felt about it," said Robert, who had great tolerance for Iroquois beliefs. "His eyes seemed fully human to me, and, although I had my pistol in my belt and my hand when I first saw him flew to its butt, I made no attempt to draw it. I have no regrets because I let him go."

"Nor have we," said Willet. "Now I think we can afford to rest again. We can build our wall six feet high if we want to and have wood enough left over to feed a fire for several days."

The two lads, the white and the red, crouched once more in the lee of the cliff, while the hunter put two fresh sticks on the coals. But little of the snow reached them where they lay, wrapped well in their blankets, and all care disappeared from Robert's mind. Inured to the wilderness he ignored what would have been discomfort to others. The trails they had left in the snow when they hunted wood would soon be covered up by the continued fall, and for the night, at least, there would be no danger from the warriors. He felt an immense comfort and security, and by-and-by fell asleep again. Tayoga soon followed him to slumberland, and Willet once more watched alone.

Tayoga relieved Willet about two o'clock in the morning, but they did not awaken Robert at all in the course of the night. They knew that he would upbraid them for not summoning him to do his share, but there would be abundant chance for him to serve later on as a sentinel.

The Onondaga did not arouse his comrades until long past daylight, and then they opened their eyes to a white world, clear and cold. The snow had ceased falling, but it lay several inches deep on the ground, and all the leaves had been stripped from the trees, on the high point where they lay. The coals still glowed, and they heated over them the last of their venison and bear meat, which they ate with keen appetite, and then considered what they must do, concluding at last to descend into the lower country and hunt game.

"We can do nothing at present so far as the war is concerned," said Willet. "An army must eat before it can fight, but it's likely that the snow and cold will stop the operations of the French and Indians also. While we're saving our own lives other operations will be delayed, and later on we may find Garay going back."

"It is best to go down the mountain and to the south," said Tayoga, in his precise school English. "It may be that the snow has fallen only on the high peaks and ridges. Then we'll be sure to find game, and perhaps other food which we can procure without bullets."

"Do you think we'd better move now?" asked Robert.

"We must send out a scout first," said Willet.

It was agreed that Tayoga should go, and in about two hours he returned with grave news. The warriors were out again, hunting in the snow, and although unconscious of it themselves they formed an almost complete ring about the three, a ring which they must undertake to break through now in full daylight, and

with the snow ready to leave a broad trail of all who passed.

"They would be sure to see our path," said Tayoga. "Even the short trail I made when I went forth exposes us to danger, and we must trust to luck that they will not see it. There is nothing for us to do, but to remain hidden here, until the next night comes. It is quite certain that the face of Areskouï is still turned from us. What have we done that is displeasing to the Sun God?"

"I can't recall anything," said Robert.

"Perhaps it is not what we have done but what we have failed to do, though whatever it is Areskouï has willed that we lie close another day."

"And starve," said Robert ruefully.

"And starve," repeated the Onondaga.

The three crouched once more under the lee of the cliff, but toward noon they built their wooden wall another foot higher, driven to the work by the threatening aspect of the sky, which turned to a somber brown. The wind sprang up again, and it had an edge of damp.

"Soon it will rain," said Tayoga, "and it will be a bitter cold rain. Much of the snow will melt and then freeze again, coating the earth with ice. It will make it more difficult for us to travel and the hunting that we need so much must be delayed. Then we'll grow hungrier and hungrier."

"Stop it, Tayoga," exclaimed Robert. "I believe you're torturing me on purpose. I'm hungry now."

"But that is nothing to what Dagaeoga will be tonight, after

he has gone many hours without food. Then he will think of the juicy venison, and of the tender steak of the young bear, and of the fine fish from the mountain streams, and he will remember how he has enjoyed them in the past, but it will be only a memory. The fish that he craves will be swimming in the clear waters, and the deer and the bear will be far away, safe from his bullet."

"I didn't know you had so much malice in your composition, Tayoga, but there's one consolation; if I suffer you suffer also."

The Onondaga laughed.

"It will give Dagaega a chance to test himself," he said. "We know already that he is brave in battle and skillful on the trail, and now we will see how he can sit for days and nights without anything to eat, and not complain. He will be a hero, he will draw in his belt notch by notch, and never say a word."

"That will do, Tayoga," interrupted the hunter. "While you play upon Robert's nerves you play upon mine also, and they tell me you've said enough. Actually I'm beginning to feel famished."

Tayoga laughed once more.

"While I jest with you I jest also with myself," he said. "Now we'll sleep, since there is nothing else to do."

He drew his blanket up to his eyes, leaned against the stony wall and slept. Robert could not imitate him. As the long afternoon, one of the longest he had ever known, trailed its slow length away, he studied the forest in front of them, where the cold and mournful rain was still falling, a rain that had at least one advantage, as it had long since obliterated all traces of a trail

left by Tayoga on his scouting expedition, although search as he would he could find no other profit in it.

Night came, the rain ceased, and, as Tayoga had predicted, the intense cold that arrived with the dark, froze it quickly, covering the earth with a hard and polished glaze, smoother and more treacherous than glass. It was impossible for the present to undertake flight over such a surface, with a foe naturally vigilant at hand, and they made themselves as comfortable as they could, while they awaited another day. Now Robert began to draw in his belt, while a hunger that was almost too fierce to be endured assailed him. His was a strong body, demanding much nourishment, and it cried out to him for relief. He tried to forget in sleep that he was famished, but he only dozed a while to awaken to a hunger more poignant than ever.

Yet he said never a word, but, as the night with its illimitable hours passed, he grew defiant of difficulties and dangers, all of which became but little things in presence of his hunger. It was his impulse to storm the Indian camp itself and seize what he wanted of the supplies there, but his reason told him the thought was folly. Then he tried to forget about the steaks of bear and deer, and the delicate little fish from the mountain stream that Tayoga had mentioned, but they would return before his eyes with so much vividness that he almost believed he saw them in reality.

Dawn came again, and they had now been twenty-four hours without food. The pangs of hunger were assailing all three

fiercely, but they did not yet dare go forth, as the morning was dark and gloomy, with a resumption of the fierce, driving rain, mingled with hail, which rattled now and then like bullets on their wooden wall.

Robert shivered in his blanket, not so much from actual cold as from the sinister aspect of the world, and his sensitive imagination, which always pictured both good and bad in vivid colors, foresaw the enormous difficulties that would confront them. Hunger tore at him, as with the talons of a dragon, and he felt himself growing weak, although his constitution was so strong that the time for a decline in vitality had not yet really come. He was all for going forth in the storm and seeking game in the slush and cold, ignoring the French and Indian danger. But he knew the hunter and the Onondaga would not hear to it, and so he waited in silence, hot anger swelling in his heart against the foes who kept him there. Unable to do anything else, he finally closed his eyes that he might shut from his view the gray and chilly world that was so hostile.

"Is Areskouï turning his face toward us, Tayoga?" he asked after a long wait.

"No, Dagaëoga. Our unknown sin is not yet expiated. The day grows blacker, colder and wetter."

"And I grow hungrier and hungrier. If we kill deer or bear we must kill three of each at the same time, because I intend to eat one all by myself, and I demand that he be large and fat, too. I suppose we'll go out of this place some time or other."

"Yes, Dagaëoga."

"Then we'd better make up our minds to do it before it's too late. I feel my nerves and tissues decaying already."

"It's only your fancy, Dagaëoga. You can exist a week without food."

"A week, Tayoga! I don't want to exist a week without food! I absolutely refuse to do so!"

"The choice is not yours, now, O Dagaëoga. The greatest gift you can have is patience. The warrior, Daatgadose, of the clan of the Bear, of the nation Onondaga, of the great League of the Hodenosaunee, even as I am, hemmed in by enemies in the forest, and with his powder and bullets gone, lay in hiding ten days without food once passing his lips, and took no lasting hurt from it. You, O Dagaëoga, will surely do as well, and I can give you many other examples for your emulation."

"Stop, Tayoga. Sometimes I'm sorry you speak such precise English. If you didn't you couldn't have so much sport with a bad situation."

The Onondaga laughed deeply and with unction. He knew that Robert was not complaining, that he merely talked to fill in the time, and he went on with stories of illustrious warriors and chiefs among his people who had literally defied hunger and thirst and who had lived incredible periods without either food or water. Willet listened in silence, but with approval. He knew that any kind of talk would cheer them and strengthen them for the coming test which was bound to be severe.

Feeling that no warriors would be within sight at such a time they built their fire anew and hovered over the flame and the coals, drawing a sort of sustenance from the warmth. But when the day was nearly gone and there was no change in the sodden skies Robert detected in himself signs of weakness that he knew were not the product of fancy. Every inch of his healthy young body cried out for food, and, not receiving it, began to rebel and lose vigor.

Again he was all for going forth and risking everything, and he noticed with pleasure that the hunter began to shift about and to peer into the forest as if some plan for action was turning in his mind. But he said nothing, resolved to leave it all to Tayoga and Willet, and by-and-by, in the dark, to which his eyes had grown accustomed, he saw the two exchanging glances. He was able to read these looks. The hunter said: "We must try it. The time has come." The Onondaga replied: "Yes, it is not wise to wait longer, lest we grow too feeble for a great effort." The hunter rejoined: "Then it is agreed," and the Onondaga said: "If our comrade thinks so too." Both turned their eyes to young Lennox who said aloud: "It's what I've been waiting for a long time. The sooner we leave the better pleased I'll be."

"Then," said Willet, "in an hour we'll start south, going down the trail between the high cliffs, and we'll trust that either we've expiated our sin, whatever it was, or that Areskouï has forgiven us. It will be terrible traveling, but we can't wait any longer."

They wrapped their blankets about their bodies as additional

covering, and, at the time appointed, left their rude shelter. Yet when they were away from its protection it did not seem so rude. When their moccasins sank in the slush and the snow and rain beat upon their faces, it was remembered as the finest little shelter in the world. The bodies of all three regretted it, but their wills and dire necessity sent them on.

The hunter led, young Lennox followed and Tayoga came last, their feet making a slight sighing sound as they sank in the half-melted snow and ice now several inches deep. Robert wore fine high moccasins of tanned mooseskin, much stronger and better than ordinary deerskin, but before long he felt the water entering them and chilling him to the bone. Nevertheless, keeping his resolution in mind, and, knowing that the others were in the same plight, he made no complaint but trudged steadily on, three or four feet behind Willet, who chose the way that now led sharply downward. Once more he realized what an enormous factor changes in temperature were in the lives of borderers and how they could defeat supreme forethought and the greatest skill. Winter with its snow and sleet was now the silent but none the less potent ally of the French and Indians in preventing their escape.

They toiled on two or three miles, not one of the three speaking. The sleet and hail thickened. In spite of the blanket and the deerskin tunic it made its way along his neck and then down his shoulders and chest, the chill that went downward meeting the chill that came upward from his feet, now almost frozen. He could not recall ever before having been so miserable of

both mind and body. He did not know it just then, but the lack of nourishment made him peculiarly susceptible to mental and physical depression. The fires of youth were not burning in his veins, and his vitality had been reduced at least one half.

Now, that terrible hunger, although he had striven to fight it, assailed him once more, and his will weakened slowly. What were those tales Tayoga had been telling about men going a week or ten days without food? They were clearly incredible. He had been less than two days without it, and his tortures were those of a man at the stake.

Willet's eyes, from natural keenness and long training, were able to pierce the dusk and he showed the way, steep and slippery though it was, with infallible certainty. They were on a lower slope, where by some freak of the weather there was snow instead of slush, when he bent down and examined the path with critical and anxious eyes. Robert and Tayoga waited in silence, until the hunter straightened up again. Then he said:

"A war party has gone down the pass ahead of us. There were about twenty men in it, and it's not more than two hours beyond us. Whether it's there to cut us off, or has moved by mere chance, I don't know, but the effect is just the same. If we keep on we'll run into it."

"Suppose we try the ascent and get out over the ridges," said Robert.

Willet looked up at the steep and lofty slopes on either side.

"It's tremendously bad footing," he replied, "and will take

heavy toll of our strength, but I see no other way. It would be foolish for us to go on and walk straight into the hands of our enemies. What say you, Tayoga?"

"There is but a single choice and that a desperate one. We must try the summits."

They delayed no longer, and, Willet still leading, began the frightful climb, choosing the westward cliff which towered above them a full four hundred feet, and, like the one that faced it, almost precipitous. Luckily many evergreens grew along the slope and using them as supports they toiled slowly upward. Now and then, in spite of every precaution, they sent down heaps of snow that rumbled as it fell into the pass. Every time one of these miniature avalanches fell Robert shivered. His fancy, so vitally alive, pictured savages in the pass, attracted by the noise, and soon to fire at his helpless figure, outlined against the slope.

"Can't you go a little faster?" he said to Willet, who was just ahead.

"It wouldn't be wise," replied the hunter. "We mustn't risk a fall. But I know why you want to hurry on, Robert. It's the fear of being shot in the back as you climb. I feel it too, but it's only fancy with both of us."

Robert said no more, but, calling upon his will, bent his mind to their task. Above him was the dusky sky and the summit seemed to tower a mile away, but he knew that it was only sixty or seventy yards now, and he took his luxurious imagination severely in hand. At such a time he must deal only in realities and

he subjected all that he saw to mathematical calculation. Sixty or seventy yards must be sixty or seventy yards only and not a mile.

After a time that seemed interminable Willet's figure disappeared over the cliff, and, with a gasp, Robert followed, Tayoga coming swiftly after. The three were so tired, their vitality was so reduced that they lay down in the snow, and drew long, painful breaths. When some measure of strength was restored they stood up and surveyed the place where they stood, a bleak summit over which the wind blew sharply. Nothing grew there but low bushes, and they felt that, while they may have escaped the war band, their own physical case was worse instead of better. Both cold and wind were more severe and a bitter hail beat upon them. It was obvious that Areskoui did not yet forgive, although it must surely be a sin of ignorance, of omission and not of commission, with the equal certainty that a sin of such type could not be unforgivable for all time.

"We seem to be on a ridge that runs for a great distance," said Tayoga. "Suppose we continue along the comb of it. At least we cannot make ourselves any worse off than we are now."

They toiled on, now and then falling on the slippery trail, their vitality sinking lower and lower. Occasionally they had glimpses of a vast desolate region under a somber sky, peaks and ridges and slopes over which clouds hovered, the whole seeming to resent the entry of man and to offer to him every kind of resistance.

Robert was now wet through and through. No part of his body

had escaped and he knew that his vitality was at such a low ebb that at least seventy-five per cent, of it was gone. He wanted to stop, his cold and aching limbs cried out for rest, and he craved heat at the cost of every risk, but his will was still firm, and he would not be the first to speak. It was Willet who suggested when they came to a slight dip that they make an effort to build a fire.

"The human body, no matter how strong it may be naturally, and how much it may be toughened by experience, will stand only so much," he said.

They were constantly building fires in the wilderness, but the fire they built that morning was the hardest of them all to start. They selected, as usual, the lee of a rocky uplift, and, then by the patient use of flint and steel, and, after many failures, they kindled a blaze that would last. But in their reduced state the labor exhausted them, and it was some time before they drew any life from the warmth. When the circulation had been restored somewhat they piled on more wood, taking the chance of being seen. They even went so far as to build a second fire, that they might sit between the two and dry themselves more rapidly. Then they waited in silence the coming of the dawn.

CHAPTER III

THE BRAVE DEFENSE

Robert hoped for a fair morning. Surely Areskoui would relent now! But the sun that crept languidly up the horizon was invisible to them, hidden by a dark curtain of clouds that might shed, at any moment, torrents of rain or hail or snow. The whole earth swam in chilly damp. Banks of cold fog filled the valleys and gorges, and shreds and patches of it floated along the peaks and ridges. The double fires had dried his clothing and had sent warmth into his veins, increasing his vitality somewhat, but it was far below normal nevertheless. He had an immense aversion to further movement. He wanted to stay there between the coals, awaiting passively whatever fate might have for him. Somehow, his will to make an effort and live seemed to have gone.

While weakness grew upon him and he drooped by the fire, he did not feel hunger, but it was only a passing phase. Presently the desire for food that had gnawed at him with sharp teeth came back, and with it his wish to do, like one stirred into action by pain. Hunger itself was a stimulus and his sinking vitality was arrested in its decline. He looked around eagerly at the sodden scene, but it certainly held out little promise of game. Deer and bear would avoid those steepes, and range in the valleys. But the will to action, stimulated back to life, remained. However

comfortable it was between the fires they must not stay there to perish.

"Why don't we go on?" he said to Willet.

"I'm glad to hear you ask that question," replied the hunter.

"Why, Dave?"

"Because it shows that you haven't given up. If you've got the courage to leave such a warm and dry place you've got the courage also to make another fight for life. And you were the first to speak, too, Robert."

"We must go on," said Tayoga. "But it is best to throw slush over the fire and hide our traces."

The task finished they took up their vague journey, going they knew not where, but knowing that they must go somewhere, their uncertain way still leading along the crests of narrow ridges, across shallow dips and through drooping forests, where the wind moaned miserably. At intervals, it rained or snowed or hailed and once more they were wet through and through. The recrudescence of Robert's strength was a mere flare-up. His vitality ebbed again, and not even the fierce gnawing hunger that refused to depart could stimulate it. By-and-by he began to stumble, but Tayoga and Willet, who noticed it, said nothing—they staggered at times themselves. They toiled on for hours in silence, but, late in the afternoon, Robert turned suddenly to the Onondaga.

"Do you remember, Tayoga," he said, "something you said to me a couple of days since, or was it a week, or maybe a

month ago? I seem to remember time very uncertainly, but you were talking about repasts, banquets, Lucullan banquets, more gorgeous banquets than old Nero had, and they say he was king of epicures. I think you spoke of tender venison, and juicy bear steaks, and perhaps of a delicate broiled trout from one of these clear mountain streams. Am I not right, Tayoga? Didn't you mention viands? And perhaps you may still be thinking of them?"

"I *am*, Dagaëoga. I am thinking of them all the time. I confess to you that I am so hungry I could gnaw the inside of the fresh bark upon a tree, and if I were turned loose upon a deer, slain and cooked, I could eat him all from the tip of his nose to the tip of his tail."

"Stop, you boys," said Willet sternly. "You only aggravate your sufferings. Isn't that a valley to the right, Tayoga, and don't you catch the gleam of a little lake among its trees?"

"It is a valley, Great Bear, and there *is* a small lake in the center. We will go there. Perhaps we can catch fish."

Hope sprang up in Robert's heart. Fish? Why, of course there were fish in all the mountain lakes! and they never failed to carry hooks and lines in their packs. Bait could be found easily under the rocks. He did not conceal his eagerness to descend into the valley and the others were not less forward than he.

The valley was about half a square mile in area, of which the lake in the center occupied one-fourth, the rest being in dense forest. The three soon had their lines in water, and they waited

full of anticipation, but they waited in vain until long after night had come. Not one of the three received a bite. The lines floated idly.

"Every lake in the mountains except one is full of fish—except one!" exclaimed Robert bitterly, "and this is the one!"

"No, it is not that," said Tayoga gravely. "It means that the face of Areskouï is still turned from us, that the good Sun God does not relent for our unknown sin. We must have offended him deeply that he should remain angry with us so long. This lake is swarming with fish, like the others of the mountains, but he has willed that not one should hang upon our hooks. Why waste time?"

He drew his line from the water, wound it up carefully and replaced it in his pack. The others, after a fruitless wait, imitated him, convinced that he was right. Then, after infinite pains, as before, they built two fires again, and slept between them. But the next morning all three were weak. Their vitality had declined fast in the night, and the situation became critical in the extreme.

"We must find food or we die," said Willet. "We might linger a long time, but soon we won't have the strength to hunt, and then it would only be a question of when the wolves took us."

"I can hear them howling now on the slopes," said Tayoga. "They know we are here, and that our strength is declining. They will not face our rifles, but will wait until we are too weak to use them."

"What is your plan, Dave?" asked Robert.

"There must be game on the slopes. What say you, Tayoga?"

"If Areskouï has willed for game to be there it will be there. He will even send it to us. And perhaps he has decided that he has now punished us enough."

"It certainly won't hurt for us to try, and perhaps we'd better separate. Robert, you go west; Tayoga, you take the eastern slopes, and I'll hunt toward the north. By night we'll all be back at this spot, full-handed or empty-handed, as it may be, but full-handed, I hope."

He spoke cheerfully, and the others responded in like fashion. Action gave them a mental and physical tonic, and bracing their weak bodies they started in the direction allotted to each. Robert forgot, for a little while, the terrible hunger that seemed to be preying upon his very fiber, and, as he started away, showed an elasticity and buoyancy of which he could not have dreamed himself capable five minutes before.

Westward stretched forest, lofty in the valley, high on the slopes and everywhere dense. He plunged into it, and then looked back. Tayoga and Willet were already gone from his sight, seeking what he sought. Their experience in the wilderness was greater than his, and they were superior to him in trailing, but he was very hopeful that it would be his good fortune to find the game they needed so badly, the game they must have soon, in truth, or perish.

The valley was deep in slush and mire, and the water soaked through his leggings and moccasins again, but he paid no

attention to it now. His new courage and strength lasted. Glancing up at the heavens he beheld a little rift in the western clouds. A bar of light was let through, and his mind, so imaginative, so susceptible to the influences of earth and air, at once saw it as an omen. It was a pillar of fire to him, and his faith was confirmed.

"Areskoui is turning back his face, and he smiles upon us," he said to himself. Then looking carefully to his rifle, he held it ready for an instant shot.

He came to the westward edge of the valley, and found the slope before him gentle but rocky. He paused there a while in indecision, and, then glancing up again at the bar of light that had grown broader, he murmured, so much had he imbibed the religion and philosophy of the Iroquois:

"O Areskoui, direct me which way to go."

The reply came, almost like a whisper in his ear:

"Try the rocks."

It always seemed to him that it was a real whisper, not his own mind prompting him, and he walked boldly among the rocks which stretched for a long distance along the slopes. Then, or for the time, at least, he felt sure that a powerful hand was directing him. He saw tracks in the soft soil between the strong uplifts and he believed that they were fresh. Hollows were numerous there, and game of a certain kind would seek them in bitter weather.

His heart began to pound hard, too heavily, in fact, for his weakened frame, and he was compelled to stop and steady himself. Then he resumed the hunt once more, looking here and

there between the rocky uplifts and in the deep depressions. He lost the tracks and then he found them, apparently fresher than ever. Would he take what he sought? Was the face of Areskoui still inclining toward him? He looked up and the bar of light was steadily growing broader and longer. The smile of the Sun God was deeper, and his doubts went away, one by one.

He turned toward a tall rock and a black figure sprang up, stared at him a moment or two, and then undertook to run away. Robert's rifle leaped to his shoulder, and, at a range so short that he could not miss, he pulled the trigger. The animal went down, shot through the heart, and then, silently exulting, young Lennox stood over him.

Areskoui had, in truth, been most kind. It was a young bear, nearly grown, very fat, and, as Robert well knew, very tender also. Here was food, splendid food, enough to last them many days, and he rejoiced. Then he was in a quandary. He could not carry the bear away, and while he could cut him up, he was loath to leave any part of him there. The wolves would soon be coming, insisting upon their share, but he was resolved they should have none.

He put his fingers over his mouth and blew between them a whistle, long, shrill and piercing, a sound that penetrated farther than the rifle shot. It was answered presently in a faint note from the opposite slope, and, then sitting down, he waited patiently. He knew that Tayoga and Willet would come, and, after a while, they appeared, striding eagerly through the forest. Then Robert

rose, his heart full of gratitude and pride, and, in a grand manner, he did the honors.

"Come, good comrades," he said. "Come to the banquet. Have a steak of a bear, the finest, juiciest, tenderest bear that was ever killed. Have two steaks, three steaks, four steaks, any number of them. Here is abundant food that Areskouï has sent us."

Then he reeled and would have fallen to the ground had not Willet caught him in his arms. His great effort, made in his weakened condition, had exhausted him and a sudden collapse came, but he revived almost instantly, and the three together dragged the body of the bear into the valley. Then they proceeded dextrously, but without undue haste, to clean it, to light a fire, and to cook strips. Nor did they eat rapidly, knowing it was not wise to do so, but took little pieces, masticating them long and well, and allowing a decent interval between. Their satisfaction was intense and enormous. Life, fresh and vigorous, poured back into their veins.

"I'm sorry our bear had to die," said Robert, "but he perished in a good cause. I think he was reserved for the especial purpose of saving our lives."

"It is so," said Tayoga with deep conviction. "The face of Areskouï is now turned toward us. Our unknown sin is expiated. We must cook all the bear, and hang the flesh in the trees."

"So we must," said the hunter. "It's not right that we three, who are engaged in the great service of our country, should be hindered by the danger of starvation. We ought now to be

somewhere near the French and Indians, watching them."

"Tomorrow we will seek them, Great Bear," said Tayoga, "but do you not think that tonight we should rest?"

"So we should, Tayoga. You're right. We'll take all chances on being seen, keep a good fire going and enjoy our comfort."

"And eat a big black bear steak every hour or so," said Robert.

"If we feel like it that's just what we'll do," laughed Willet. "It's our night, now. Surely, Robert, you're the greatest hunter in the world! Neither Tayoga nor I saw a sign of game, but you walked straight to your bear."

"No irony," said Robert, who, nevertheless, was pleased. "It merely proves that Areskouï had forgiven me, while he had not forgiven you two. But don't you notice a tremendous change?"

"Change! Change in what?"

"Why, everything! The whole world is transformed! Around us a little while ago stretched a scrubby, gloomy forest, but it is now magnificent and cheerful. I never saw finer oaks and beeches. That sky which was black and sinister has all the gorgeous golds and reds and purples of a benevolent sunset. The wind, lately cold and wet, is actually growing soft, dry and warm. It's a grand world, a kind world, a friendly world!"

"Thus, O Dagaëoga," said Tayoga, "does the stomach rule man and the universe. It is empty and all is black, it is filled and all that was black turns to rose. But the rose will soon be gone, because the sunlight is fading and night is at hand."

"But it's a fine night," said Robert sincerely. "I think it about

the finest night I ever saw coming."

"Have another of these beautiful broiled steaks," said Willet, "and you'll be sure it's the finest night that ever was or ever will be."

"I think I will," said Robert, as he held the steak on the end of a sharpened stick over the coals and listened to the pleasant sizzling sound, "and after this is finished and a respectable time has elapsed, I may take another."

The revulsion in all three was tremendous. Although they had hidden it from one another, the great decrease in physical vitality had made their minds sink into black despair, but now that strength was returning so fast they saw the world through different eyes. They lay back luxuriously and their satisfaction was so intense that they thought little of danger. Tandakora might be somewhere near, but it did not disturb men who were as happy as they. The night came down, heavy and dark, as had been predicted, and they smothered their fire, but they remained before the coals, sunk in content.

They talked for a while in low tones, but, at length, they became silent. The big hunter considered. He knew that, despite the revulsion in feeling, they were not yet strong enough to undertake a great campaign against their enemies, and it would be better to remain a while in the valley until they were restored fully.

Beside their fire was a good enough place for the time, and Robert kept the first watch. The night, in reality, had turned

much warmer and the sky was luminous with stars. The immense sense of comfort remained with him, and he was not disturbed by the howling of the wolves, which he knew had been drawn by the odor of game, but which he knew also would be afraid to invade the camp and attack three men.

His spirits, high as they were already, rose steadily as he watched. Surely after the Supreme Power had cast them down into the depths, a miracle had been worked in their behalf to take them out again. It was no skill of his that had led him to the bear, but strength far greater than that of man was now acting in their behalf. As they had triumphed over starvation they would triumph over everything. His sanguine mind predicted it.

The next morning was crisp and cold, but not wet, and Robert ate the most savory breakfast he could recall. That bear must have been fed on the choicest of wild nuts, topped off with wild honey, to have been so juicy and tender, and the thought of nuts caused him to look under the big hickory trees, where he found many of them, large and ripe. They made a most welcome addition to their bill of fare, taking the place of bread. Then, they were so well pleased with themselves that they concluded to spend another day and night in the valley.

Tayoga about noon climbed the enclosing ridge to the north, and, when he returned, Willet noticed a sparkle in his eyes. But the hunter said nothing, knowing that the Onondaga would speak in his own good time.

"There is another valley beyond the ridge," said Tayoga, "and

a war party is encamped in it. They sit by their fire and eat prodigiously of deer they have killed."

Robert was startled, but he kept silent, he, too, knowing that Tayoga would tell all he intended to tell without urging.

"They do not know we are here, I do not think they dream of our presence," continued the Onondaga, "Areskoui smiles on us now, and Tododaho on his star, which we cannot see by day, is watching over us. Their feet will not bring them this way."

"Then you wouldn't suggest our taking to flight?" said Willet. "You would favor hiding here in peace?"

"Even so. It will please us some day to remember that we rested and slept almost within hearing of our enemies, and yet they did not take us."

"That's grim humor, Tayoga, but if it's the way you feel, Robert and I are with you."

Later in the afternoon they saw smoke rising beyond the ridge and they knew the warriors had built a great fire before which they were probably lying and gorging themselves, after their fashion when they had plenty of food, and little else to do. Yet the three remained defiantly all that day and all through the following night. The next morning, with ample supplies in their packs, they turned their faces southward, and cautiously climbed the ridge in that direction, once more passing into the region of the peaks. To their surprise they struck several comparatively fresh trails in the passes, and they were soon forced to the conclusion that the hostile forces were still all about them. Near midday they stopped

in a narrow gorge between high peaks and listened to calls of the inhabitants of the forest, the faint howls of wolves, and once or twice the yapping of a fox.

"The warriors signaling to one another!" said Willet.

"It is so," said Tayoga. "I think they have noticed our tracks in the earth, too slight, perhaps, to tell who we are, but they will undertake to see."

"I hear the call of a moose directly ahead," said Robert, "although I know it is no moose that makes it. Our way there is cut off."

"And there is the howl of the wolf behind us," said Tayoga. "We cannot go back."

"Then," said Robert, "I suppose we must climb the mountain. It's lucky we've got our strength again."

They scaled a lofty summit once more, fortunately being able to climb among rocks, where they left no trail, and, crouched at the crest in dense bushes, they saw two bands meet in the valley below, evidently searching for the fugitives. There was no white man among them, but Robert knew a gigantic figure to be that of Tandakora, seeking them with the most intense and bitter hatred. The muzzle of his rifle began to slide forward, but Willet put out a detaining hand.

"No, Robert, lad," he said. "He deserves it, but his time hasn't come yet. Besides your shot would bring the whole crowd up after us."

"And he belongs to me," added Tayoga. "When he falls it is

to be by my hand."

"Yes, he belongs to you, Tayoga," said Willet "Now they've concluded that we continued toward the south, and they're going on that way."

As they felt the need of the utmost caution they spent the remainder of the day and the next night on the crest. Robert kept the late watch, and he saw the dawn come, red and misty, a huge sun shining over the eastern mountains, but shedding little warmth. He was hopeful that Tandakora and his warriors had passed on far into the south, but he heard a distant cry rising in the clear air east of the peak and then a reply to the west. His heart stood still for a moment. He knew that they were the whoops of the savages and he felt that they signified a discovery. Perhaps chance had disclosed their trail. He listened with great intentness, but the shouts did not come again. Nevertheless the omen was bad.

He awoke Willet and the Onondaga, who had been sleeping soundly, and told them what had happened, both agreeing that the shouts were charged with import.

"I think it likely that we will be attacked," said the hunter. "Now we must take another look at our position."

The peak, luckily for them, was precipitous, and its crest did not cover an area of more than twenty or thirty square yards. On the three sides the ascent was so steep that a man could not climb up except with extreme difficulty, but on the fourth, by which they had come, the slope was more gradual. The gentle

climb faced the east, and it was here that the hunter and Robert watched, while Tayoga, for the sake of utmost precaution, kept an eye on the steep sides.

Knowing that it was wise to economize and even to increase their strength, they ate abundantly of the bear steaks, afterward craving water, which they were forced to do without—the one great flaw in their position, since the warriors might hold them there to perish of thirst.

Robert soon forgot the desire for water in the tenseness of watching and waiting. But even the anxiety and the peril to his life did not keep him from noticing the singularity of his situation, upon the slender peak of a high mountain far in the wilderness. The sun, full of splendor but still cold, touched with gold all the surrounding crests and ridges and filled with a yellow but luxurious haze every gorge and ravine. He was compelled to admire its wintry beauty, a beauty, though, that he knew to be treacherous, surcharged as it was with savage wile and stratagem, and a burning desire for their lives.

A time that seemed incredible passed without demonstration from the enemy. But he realized that it was only about two hours. He did not expect to see any of the warriors creeping up the slopes toward them, but too wise to watch for their faces he did expect to notice the bushes move ever so slightly under their advance. He and Willet remained crouched in the same positions in the shelter of high rocks. Tayoga, who had been moving about the far side, came to them and whispered:

"I am going down the northern face of the cliff!"

"Why, it's sheer insanity, Tayoga!" said the astonished hunter.

"But I'm going."

"What'll you achieve after you've gone? You'll merely walk into Tandakora's hands!"

"I go, Great Bear, and I will return in a half hour, alive and well."

"Is your mind upset, Tayoga?"

"I am quite sane. Remember, Great Bear, I will be back in a half hour unhurt."

Then he was gone, gliding away through the low vegetation that covered the crest, and Robert and the hunter looked at each other.

"There is more in this than the eye sees," said young Lennox. "I never knew Tayoga to speak with more confidence. I think he will be back just as he says, in half an hour."

"Maybe, though I don't understand it. But there are lots of things one doesn't understand. We must keep our eyes on the slope, and let Tayoga solve his own problem, whatever it is."

There was no wind at all, but once Robert thought he saw the shrubs halfway down the steep move, though he was not sure and nothing followed. But, intently watching the place where the motion had occurred, he caught a gleam of metal which he was quite sure came from a rifle barrel.

"Did you see it?" he whispered to the hunter.

"Aye, lad," replied Willet. "They're there in that dense clump,

hoping we've relaxed the watch and that they can surprise us. But it may be two or three hours before they come any farther. Always remember in your dealings with Indians that they have more time than anything else, and so they know how to be patient. Now, I wonder what Tayoga is doing! That boy certainly had something unusual on his mind!"

"Here he is, ready to speak for himself, and back inside his promised half hour."

Tayoga parted the bushes without noise, and sat down between them behind the big rocks. He offered no explanation, but seemed very content with himself.

"Well, Tayoga," said Willet, "did you go down the side of the mountain?"

"As far as I wished."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I have been engaged in a very pleasant task, Great Bear."

"What pleasure can you find in scaling a steep and rocky slope?"

"I have been drinking, Great Bear, drinking the fresh, pure water of the mountains, and it was wonderfully cool and good to my dry throat."

The two gazed at him in astonishment, and he laughed low, but with deep enjoyment.

"I took one drink, two drinks, three drinks," he said, "and when the time comes I shall take more. The fountain also awaits the lips of the Great Bear and of Dagaeoga."

"Tell it all," said Robert.

"When I looked down the steep side a long time I thought I caught a gleam as of falling water in the bushes. It was only twenty or thirty yards below us, and, when I descended to it, I found a little fountain bursting from a crevice in the rock. It was but a thread, making a tiny pool a few inches across, before it dropped away among the bushes, but it is very cool, very clear, and there is always plenty of it for many men."

"Is the descent hard?" asked Willet.

"Not for one who is strong and cautious. There are thick vines and bushes to which to hold, and remember that the splendid water is at the end of the journey."

"Then, Robert, you go," said the hunter, "and mind, too, that you get back soon, because my throat is parching. I'd like to have one deep drink before the warriors attack."

Robert followed Tayoga, and, obeying his instructions, was soon at the fountain, where he drank once, twice, thrice, and then once more of the finest water he could recall. Then, deeply grateful for the Onondaga's observation, he climbed back, and the hunter took his turn.

"It was certainly good, Tayoga," he said, when he was back in position. "Some men don't think much of water, but none of us can live without it. You've saved our lives."

"Perhaps, O Great Bear," responded the Onondaga, "but if the bushes below continue to shake as they are doing we shall have to save them again. Ah!"

The exclamation, long drawn but low, was followed by the leap of his rifle to the shoulder, and the pressing of his finger on the trigger. A stream of fire sprang from the muzzle of the long barrel to be followed by a yell in one of the thickets clustering on the slope. A savage rose to his feet, threw up his arms and fell headlong, his body crashing far below on the rocks. Robert shut his eyes and shivered.

"He was dead before he touched earth, lad," said the hunter. "Now the others are ready to scramble back. Look how the bushes are shaking again!"

Robert had shut his eyes only for a moment, and now he saw the scrub shaking more violently than ever. Then he had a fleeting glimpse of brown bodies as all the warriors descended rapidly. Anyone of the three might have fired with good aim, but they did not raise their rifles. Since their enemies were retreating they would let them retreat.

"They're all back in the valley now," said the hunter after a little while, "and they'll think a lot before they try the steep ascent a second time. Now it's a question of patience, and they hope we'll become so weak from thirst that we'll fall into their hands."

"Tandakora and his warriors would be consumed with anger if they knew of our spring," said Tayoga.

"They'll find out about it soon," said Robert.

"I think not," said Tayoga. "I noticed when I was at the fountain that the rivulet ran back into the cliff about a hundred feet below, and one can see the water only from the crest. If

Areskouï has allowed us to be besieged here, he at least has created much in our favor."

He looked toward the east, where the great red sun was shining, and worshiped silently. It seemed to Robert that his young comrade stared unwinking for a long time into the eye of the Sun God, though perhaps it was only a few seconds. But his form expanded and his face was illumined. Robert knew that the Onondaga's confidence had become supreme, and he shared in it.

The hunter and Tayoga kept the watch after a while, and young Lennox was free to wander about the crest as he wished. He examined carefully the three sides they had left unguarded, but was convinced that no warrior, no matter how skillful and tenacious, could climb up there. Then he wandered back toward the sentinels, and, sitting down under a tree, began to study the distant slopes across the gorge.

He saw the warriors gather by-and-by in a deep recess out of rifle shot, light a fire and begin to cook great quantities of game, as if they meant to stay there and keep the siege until doomsday, if necessary. He saw the gigantic figure of Tandakora approach the fire, eat voraciously for a while and then go away. After him came a white man in French uniform. He thought at first it was St. Luc and his heart beat hard, but he was able to discern presently that it was an officer not much older than himself, in a uniform of white faced with violet and a black, three-cornered hat. Finally he recognized young De Galissonnière, whom he had met in Québec, and whom he had seen a few days since in the

French camp.

As he looked De Galissonnière left the recess, descended into the valley and then began to climb their slope, a white handkerchief held aloft on the point of his small sword. Young Lennox immediately joined the two watchers at the brink.

"A flag of truce! Now what can he want!" he exclaimed.

"We'll soon see," replied Willet. "He's within good hearing now, and I'll hail him."

He shouted in powerful tones that echoed in the gorge:

"Below there! What is it?"

"I have something to say that will be of great importance to you," replied De Galissonnière.

"Then come forward, while we remain here. We don't trust your allies."

Robert saw the face of the young Frenchman flush, but De Galissonnière, as if knowing the truth, and resolved not to quibble over it, climbed steadily. When he was within twenty feet of the crest the hunter called to him to halt, and he did so, leaning easily against a strong bush, while the three waited eagerly to hear what he had to say.

CHAPTER IV

THE GODS AT PLAY

De Galissonnière gazed at the three faces, peering at him over the brink, and then drew himself together jauntily. His position, perched on the face of the cliff, was picturesque, and he made the most of it.

"I am glad to see you again Mr. Willet, Mr. Lennox and Tayoga, the brave Onondaga," he said. "It's been a long time since we met in Québec and much water has flowed under that bridge of Avignon, of which we French sing, but I can't see that any one of you has changed much."

"Nor you," said Robert, catching his tone and acting as spokesman for the three. "The circumstances are unusual, Captain Louis de Galissonnière, and I'm sorry I can't invite you to come up on our crest, but it wouldn't be military to let you have a look at our fortifications."

"I understand, and I do very well where I am. I wish to say first that I am sorry to see you in such a plight."

"And we, Captain, regret to find you allied with such a savage as Tandakora."

A quick flush passed over the young Frenchman's face, but he made no other sign.

"In war one cannot always choose," he replied. "I have come

to receive your surrender, and I warn you very earnestly that it will be wise for you to tender it. The Indians have lost one man already and they are inflamed. If they lose more I might not be able to control them."

"And if we yield ourselves you pledge us our lives, a transfer in safety to Canada where we are to remain as prisoners of war, until such time as we may be exchanged?"

"All that I promise, and gladly."

"You're sure, Captain de Galissonnière, that you can carry out the conditions?"

"Absolutely sure. You are surrounded here on the peak, and you cannot get away. All we have to do is to keep the siege."

"That is true, but while you can wait so can we."

"But we have plenty of water, and you have none."

"You would urge us again to surrender on the ground that it would be the utmost wisdom for us to do so?"

"It goes without saying, Mr. Lennox."

"Then, that being the case, we decline."

De Galissonnière looked up in astonishment at the young face that gazed down at him. The answer he had expected was quite the reverse.

"You mean that you refuse?" he exclaimed.

"It is just what I meant."

"May I ask why, when you are in such a hopeless position?"

"Tayoga, Mr. Willet and I wish to see how long we can endure the pangs of thirst without total collapse. We've had quite a

difference on the subject. Tayoga says ten days, Mr. Willet twelve days, but I think we can stand it a full two weeks."

De Galissonnière frowned.

"You are frivolous, Mr. Lennox," he said, "and this is not a time for light talk. I don't know what you mean, but it seems to me you don't appreciate the dire nature of your peril. I liked you and your comrades when I met you in Québec and I do not wish to see you perish at the hands of the savages. That is why I have climbed up here to make you this offer, which I have wrung from the reluctant Tandakora. It was he who assured me that the besieged were you. It pains me that you see fit to reject it."

"I know it was made out of a good heart," said Robert, seriously, "and we thank you for the impulse that brought you here. Some day we may be able to repay it, but we decline because there are always chances. You know, Captain, that while we have life we always have hope. We may yet escape."

"I do not see wherein it is possible," said the young Frenchman, with actual reluctance in his tone. "But it is for you to decide what you wish to do. Farewell."

"Farewell, Captain de Galissonnière," said Robert, with the utmost sincerity. "I hope no bullet of ours will touch you."

The captain made a courteous gesture of good-by and slowly descended the slope, disappearing among the bushes in the gorge, whence came a fierce and joyous shout.

"That was the cry of the savages when he told them our answer," said Willet. "They don't want us to surrender."

They think that by-and-by we'll fall into their hands through exhaustion, and then they can work their will upon us."

"They don't know about that fountain, that pure, blessed fountain," said Robert, "the finest fountain that gushes out anywhere in this northern wilderness, the fountain that Tayoga's Areskoui has put here for our especial benefit."

His heart had become very light and, as usual when his optimism was at its height, words gushed forth. Water, and their ability to get it whenever they wanted it, was the key to everything, and he painted their situation in such bright colors that his two comrades could not keep from sharing his enthusiasm.

"Truly, Dagaega did not receive the gift of words in vain," said Tayoga. "Golden speech flows from him, and it lifts up the minds of those who hear. Manitou finds a use for everybody, even for the orator."

"Though it was a hard task, even for Manitou," laughed Robert.

They watched the whole afternoon without any demonstration from the enemy—they expected none—and toward evening the Onondaga, who was gazing into the north, announced a dark shadow on the horizon.

"What is it?" asked Robert. "A cloud? I hope we won't have another storm."

"It is no cloud," replied Tayoga. "It is something else that moves very fast, and it comes in our direction. A little longer and

I can tell what it is. Now I see; it is a flight of wild pigeons, a great flock, hundreds of thousands, and millions, going south to escape the winter."

"We've seen such flights often."

"So we have, but this is coming straight toward us, and I have a great thought, Dagaeoga. Areskoui has not only forgiven us for our unknown sin—perhaps of omission—but he has also decided to put help in our way, if we will use it. You see many dwarf trees at the southern edge of the crest, and I believe that by dark they will be covered with pigeons, stopping for the night."

"And some of them will stop for our benefit, though we have bear meat too! I see, Tayoga."

Robert watched the flying cloud, which had grown larger and blacker, and then he saw that Tayoga was right. It was an immense flock of wild pigeons, and, as the twilight fell, they covered the trees upon their crest so thickly that the boughs bent beneath them. Young Lennox and the Onondaga killed as many as they wished with sticks, and soon, fat and juicy, they were broiling over the coals.

"Tandakora will guess that the pigeons have fed us," said Robert, "and he will not like it, but he will yet know nothing about the water."

They climbed down in turn in the darkness and took a drink, and Robert, who explored a little, found many vines loaded with wild grapes, ripe and rich, which made a splendid dessert. Then he took a number of the smaller but very tough stems,

and knotting them together, with the assistance of Tayoga ran a strong rope from the crest down to the fountain, thus greatly easing the descent for water and the return.

"Now we can take two drinks where we took one before," he said triumphantly when the task was finished. "If you have your water there is nothing like making it easy to be reached. Moreover, while it was safe for an agile fellow like me, you and Dave, Tayoga, being stiff and clumsy, might have tumbled down the mountain and then I should have been lonesome."

Willet, who had been keeping the watch alone, was inclined to the belief that they might expect an attack in the night, if it should prove to be very dark. He felt able, however, should such an attempt come, to detect the advance of the savages, either by sight or hearing, especially the latter, ear in such cases generally informing him earlier than eye. But as neither Robert nor Tayoga was busy they joined him, and all three sat near the brink with their rifles across their knees, and their pistols loosened in their belts, ready for their foes should they come in numbers.

They talked a while in low tones, and then fell silent. The night had come, starless and moonless, favorable to the designs of Tandakora, but they felt intense satisfaction, nevertheless. It was partly physical. Robert's making of an easy road to the water, the coming of the pigeons, to be eaten, apparently sent by Areskouï, and the ease with which they believed they could hold their lofty fortress, combined to produce a victorious state of mind. Robert looked over the brink once or twice at the steep slope, and he felt

that the warriors would, in truth, be taking a mighty risk, if they came up that steep path against the three.

He and Tayoga, in the heavy darkness, depended, like Willet, chiefly on ear. It was impossible to see to the bottom of the valley, where the dusk had rolled up like a sea, but, as the night was still, they felt sure they could hear anyone climbing up the peak. In order to make themselves more comfortable they spread their blankets at the very brink, and lay down upon them, thus being able to repose, and at the same time watch without the risk of inviting a shot.

Young Lennox knew that the attack, if it came at all, would not come until late, and restraining his naturally eager and impatient temper, he used all the patience that his strong will could summon, never ceasing meanwhile to lend an attentive ear to every sound of the night. He heard the wind rise, moan a little while in the gorge and then die; he heard a fitful breeze rustle the boughs on the slopes and then grow still, and he heard his comrades move once or twice to ease their positions, but no other sound came to him until nearly midnight, and then he heard the fall of a pebble on the slope, absolute proof to one experienced as he that it had been displaced by the incautious foot of a climbing enemy.

The rattling of the pebble was succeeded by a long interval of silence, and the lad understood that too. The warriors, to whom time was nothing, fearing that suspicion had been aroused by the fall of the pebble, would wait until it had been lulled

before resuming their advance. They would flatten themselves like lizards against the slope, not stirring an inch. But the three were as patient as they, and while a full hour passed after the slip of the stone before the slightest sound came from the slope, they did not relax their vigilance a particle. Then all three heard a slight rustle among the bushes and they peered cautiously over.

They were able to discern the dim outline of figures among the bushes about twenty feet below, and Wilier, who directed the defense, whispered that Tayoga and he would take aim, while Robert held his fire in reserve. Then the Onondaga and he picked their targets in the darkness and pulled trigger. Shouts, the fall of bodies and the crackling of rifles came back. A half dozen bullets, fired almost at random, whistled over their heads and then Robert sent his own lead at a shadow which appeared very clearly among the bushes, a crashing fall following at once.

Then the three, not waiting to reload, snatched out their pistols and held themselves ready for a further attack, if it should come. But it did not come. Even the rage of Tandakora had had enough. His second repulse had been bloodier than the first, and it had been proved with the lives of his warriors that they could not storm that terrible steep, in the face of three such redoubtable marksmen.

Robert heard a number of pebbles rolling now, but they were made by men descending, and the three, certain of abundant leisure, reloaded their rifles. Their eyes told them nothing, but they were as sure as if they had seen them that the warriors had

disappeared in the sea of darkness with which the gulf was filled. The lad breathed a long sigh of relief.

"You're justified in your satisfaction," said Willet. "I think it's the last direct attack they'll make upon us. Now they'll try the slow methods of siege and our exhaustion by thirst, and how it would make their venom rise if they knew anything about that glorious fountain of ours! Since it's to be a test of patience, we'd better make things easy for ourselves. I'll sit here and watch the slope, and, as the night is turning cold, you and Tayoga, Robert, can build a fire."

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