

ALTSHELER JOSEPH ALEXANDER

THE LORDS OF THE WILD:
A STORY OF THE OLD
NEW YORK BORDER

Joseph Altsheler

**The Lords of the Wild: A Story
of the Old New York Border**

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FOREWORD

"The Lords of the Wild" tells a complete story, but it is also a part of the French and Indian War Series, of which the predecessors were "The Hunters of the Hills," "The Shadow of the North," "The Rulers of the Lakes" and "The Masters of the Peaks." Robert Lennox, Tayoga, Willet, St. Luc, Tandakora and all the principal characters of the earlier volumes reappear.

CHAPTER I

THE BLUE BIRD

The tall youth, turning to the right, went down a gentle slope until he came to a little stream, where he knelt and drank. Despite his weariness, his thirst and his danger he noticed the silvery color of the water, and its soft sighing sound, as it flowed over its pebbly bed, made a pleasant murmur in his ear. Robert Lennox always had an eye for the beautiful, and the flashing brook, in its setting of deep, intense forest green, soothed his senses, speaking to him of comfort and hope.

He drank again and then sat back among the bushes, still breathing heavily, but with much more freedom. The sharp pain left his chest, new strength began to flow into his muscles, and, as the body was renewed, so the spirit soared up and became sanguine once more. He put his ear to the earth and listened long, but heard nothing, save sounds natural to the wilderness, the rustling of leaves before the light wind, the whisper of the tiny current, and the occasional sweet note of a bird in brilliant dress, pluming itself on a bough in its pride. He drew fresh courage from the peace of the woods, and resolved to remain longer there by the stream. Settling himself into the bushes and tall grass, until he was hidden from all but a trained gaze, he waited, body and soul alike growing steadily in vigor.

The forest was in its finest colors. Spring had never brought to it a more splendid robe, gorgeous and glowing, its green adorned with wild flowers, and the bloom of bush and tree like a gigantic stretch of tapestry. The great trunks of oak and elm and maple grew in endless rows and overhead the foliage gleamed, a veil of emerald lace before the sun.

Robert drank in the glory, eye and ear, but he never failed to watch the thickets, and to listen for hostile sounds. He knew full well that his life rested upon his vigilance and, often as he had been in danger in the great northern woods, he valued too much these precious days of his youth to risk their sudden end through any neglect of his own.

He looked now and then at the bird which still preened itself on a little bough. When the shadows from the waving foliage fell upon its feathers it showed a bright purple, but when the sunlight poured through, it glowed a glossy blue. He did not know its name, but it was a brave bird, a gay bird. Now and then it ceased its hopping back and forth, raised its head and sent forth a deep, sweet, thrilling note, amazing in volume to come from so small a body. Had he dared to make a sound Robert would have whistled a bar or two in reply. The bird was a friend to one alone and in need, and its dauntless melody made his own heart beat higher. If a creature so tiny was not afraid in the wilderness why should he be!

He had learned to take sharp notice of everything. On the border and in such times, man was compelled to observe with eye and ear, with all the five senses; and often too with a sixth sense, an intuition, an outgrowth of the other five, developed by long habit and training, which the best of the rangers possessed to a high degree, and in which the lad was not lacking. He knew that the minutest trifle must not escape his attention, or the forfeit might be his life.

While he relaxed his own care not at all, he felt that the bird was a wary sentinel for him. He knew that if an enemy came in haste through the undergrowth it would fly away before him. He had been warned in that manner in another crisis and he had full faith now in the caution of the valiant little singer. His trust, in truth, was so great that he rose from his covert and bent down for a third drink of the clear cool water. Then he stood up, his figure defiant, and took long, deep breaths, his heart now beating smoothly and easily, as if it had been put to no painful test. Still no sound of a foe, and he thought that perhaps the pursuit had died down, but he knew enough of the warriors of the woods to make sure, before he resumed a flight that would expose him in the open.

He crept back into the thicket, burying himself deep, and was careful not to break a twig or brush a leaf which to the unerring eyes of those who followed could mark where he was. Hidden

well, but yet lying where he could see, he turned his gaze back to the bird. It was now pouring out an unbroken volume of song as it swayed on a twig, like a leaf shaken in the wind. Its voice was thrillingly sweet, and it seemed mad with joy, as its tiny throat swelled with the burden of its melody. Robert, in the thicket, smiled, because he too shared in so much gladness.

A faint sound out of the far west came to him. It was so slight that it was hard to tell it from the whisper of the wind. It barely registered on the drum of the ear, but when he listened again and with all his powers he was sure that it was a new and foreign note. Then he separated it from the breeze among the leaves, and it seemed to him to contain a quality like that of the human voice. If so, it might be hostile, because his friends, Willet, the hunter, and Tayoga, the Onondaga, were many miles away. He had left them on the shore of the lake, called by the whites, George, but more musically by the Indians, Andiatarocte, and there was nothing in their plans that would now bring them his way. However welcome they might be he could not hope for them; foes only were to be expected.

The faint cry, scarcely more than a variation of the wind, registered again though lightly on the drum of his ear, and now he knew that it came from the lungs of man, man the pursuer, man the slayer, and so, in this case, the red man, perhaps Tandakora, the fierce Ojibway chief himself. Doubtless it was a signal, one band calling to another, and he listened anxiously for the reply, but he did not hear it, the point from which it was sent being too remote, and he settled back into his bed of bushes and grass, resolved to keep quite still until he could make up his mind about the next step. On the border as well as elsewhere it was always wise, when one did not know what to do, to do nothing.

But the tall youth was keenly apprehensive. The signals indicated that the pursuing force had spread out, and it might enclose him in a fatal circle. His eager temperament, always sensitive to impressions, was kindled into fire, and his imagination painted the whole forest scene in the most vivid colors. A thought at first, it now became a conviction with him that Tandakora led the pursuit. The red leader had come upon his trail in some way, and, venomous from so many failures, would follow now for days in an effort to take him. He saw the huge Ojibway again with all the intensity of reality, his malignant face, his mighty body, naked to the waist and painted in hideous designs. He saw too the warriors who were with him, many of them, and they were fully as eager and fierce as their chief.

But his imagination which was so vital a part of him did not paint evil and danger alone; it drew the good in colors no less deep and glowing. It saw himself refreshed, stronger of body and keener of mind than ever, escaping every wile and snare laid for his ruin. It saw him making a victorious flight through the forest, his arrival at the shining lake, and his reunion with Willet and Tayoga, those faithful friends of many a peril.

He knew that if he waited long enough he would hear the Indian call once more, as the bands must talk to one another if they carried out a concerted pursuit, and he decided that when it came he would go. It would be his signal too. The only trouble lay in the fact that they might be too near when the cry was sent. Yet he must take the risk, and there was his sentinel bird still pluming itself in brilliant colors on its waving bough.

The bird sang anew, pouring forth a brilliant tune, and Robert from his covert smiled up at it again. It had a fine spirit, a gay spirit like his own and now it would surely warn him if danger crept too close. While the thought was fresh in his mind the third signal came, and now it was so clear and distinct that it indicated a rapid approach. But he was still unable to choose a way for his flight and he lingered for a sign from the bird. If the warriors were stealing through the bushes it would fly directly from them. At least he believed so, and fancy had so much power over him, especially in such a situation that belief became conviction.

The bird stopped singing suddenly, but kept his perch on the waving bough. Robert always insisted that it looked straight at him before it uttered two or three sharp notes, and then, rising in the air, hovered for a few minutes above the bough. It was obvious to him that his call had come.

Steeped in Indian lore he had seen earth and air work miracles, and it was not less wonderful that a living creature should perform one now, and in his behalf.

For a breathless instant or two he forgot the warriors and watched the bird, a flash of blue flame against the green veil of the forest. It was perched there in order to be sure that he saw, and then it would show the way! With every pulse beating hard he stood up silently, his eyes still on the blue flash, confident that a new miracle was at hand.

The bird uttered three or four notes, not short or sharp now, but soft, long and beckoning, dying away in the gentlest of echoes. His imagination, as vivid as ever, translated it into a call to him to come, and he was not in the least surprised, when the blue flame like the pillow of cloud by day moved slowly to the northeast, and toward the lake. Stepping cautiously he followed his sign, thrilled at the doing of the miracle, his eyes on his flying guide, his ears attuned to warn him if any danger threatened from the forest so near.

It never occurred to Robert that he might not be led aright. His faith and confidence were supreme. He had lived too much with Tayoga not to share his belief that the hand of Manitou was stretched forth now to lead those who put their trust in him.

The blue flame that was a living bird flew slowly on, pausing an instant or two on a bough, turning for a short curve to right or left, but always coming back to the main course that pointed toward Andiatarocte.

He walked beside the little brook from which he had drunk, then across it and over a low hill, into a shallow valley, the forest everywhere, but the undergrowth not too dense for easy passage. His attentive ear brought no sound from either flank save those natural to the woods, though he was sure that a hostile call would come soon. It would be time for the bands to talk to one another. But he had no fear. The supreme intervention had been made in his favor, and he kept his eyes on his flying guide.

They crossed the valley and began the ascent of another and high hill, rough with rocky outcrops and a heavy growth of briars and vines. His pace became slower of necessity and once or twice he thought he had lost the blue flame, but it always reappeared, and, for the first time since its flight from the bough, it sang a few notes, a clear melodious treble, carrying far through the windy forest.

The lad believed that the song was meant for him. Clearly it said to him to follow, and, with equal clearness, it told him that safety lay only in the path he now traveled. He believed, with all the ardor of his soul, and there was no weariness in his body as he climbed the high hill. Near the summit, he heard on his right the long dying Indian cry so full of menace, its answer to the left, and then a third shout directly behind him. He understood. He was between the horns of a crescent, and they were not far away. He left faint traces only as he fled, but they had so much skill they could follow with speed, and he was quite sure they expected to take him. This belief did not keep his heart from beating high. They did not know how he was protected and led, and there was the blue flame before him always showing him the way. He reached the crest of the hill, and saw other hills, fold on fold, lying before him. He had hoped to catch a glimpse of the lake from the summit, but no glint of its waters came, and then he knew it must yet be miles away. His heart sank for a moment. Andiatarocte had appealed to him as a refuge. Just why he did not know, but he vaguely expected to find safety there. Perhaps he would meet Willet and Tayoga by its shore, and to him the three united always seemed invincible.

His courage was gone only an instant or two. Then it came back stronger than ever. The note of his guide, clear and uplifting, rose again, and he increased his speed, lest he be enclosed within those horns. The far slope was rocky and he leaped from one stony outcrop to another. Even if he could hide his trail only a few yards it would be so much time gained while they were compelled to seek it. He was forced to watch his steps here, but, when he was at the bottom and looked up, the blue flame was still before him. On it went over the next slope and he followed at speed, noticing with joy that the rocky nature of the ground continued, and the most skillful warrior who ever lived must spend many minutes hunting his traces. He had no doubt that he was gaining and he had proof

of it in the fact that the pursuers now uttered no cry. Had they been closing in on him they would have called to one another in triumph.

Well for him that he was so strong and sound of heart and lung! Well for him too that he was borne up by a great spirit and by his belief that a supreme power was working in his behalf. He felt little weariness as he climbed a ridge. His breath was easy and regular and his steps were long and swift. His guide was before him. Whatever his pace, whether fast or slow, the distance between them never seemed to change. The bird would dart aside, perhaps to catch an insect, but it always returned promptly to its course.

His eyes caught a gleam of silver from the crest of the fourth ridge that he crossed, and he knew it was a ray of sunlight striking upon the waters of the lake. Now his coveted haven was not so far away, and the great pulses in his temples throbbed. He would reach the lake, and he would find refuge. Tandakora, in all his malice, would fail once more. The thought was so pleasant to him that he laughed aloud, and now feeling the need to use the strength he had saved with such care he began to run as fast as he could. It was his object to open up a wide gap between himself and the warriors, one so great that, if occasion came, he might double or turn without being seen.

The forest remained dense, a sea of trees with many bushes and clinging vines in which an ignorant or incautious runner would have tripped and fallen, but Robert was neither, and he did not forget, as he fled, to notice where his feet fell. His skill and presence of mind kept him from stumbling or from making any noise that would draw the attention of possible pursuers who might have crept up on his flank. While they had only his faint trail to guide them the pursuit was impeded, and, as long as they did not see him, his chance to hide was far greater.

He lost sight of his feathered guide two or three times, but the bird never failed to reappear, a brilliant blue flame against the green wall of the wilderness, his emblem of hope, leading him over the hills and valleys toward Andiatarocte. Now he saw the lake from a crest, not a mere band of silver showing through the trees, but a broad surface reflecting the sunlight in varied colors. It was a beacon to him, and, summoning the last ounce of his strength and will, he ran at amazing speed. Once more he heard the warriors behind him calling to one another, and they were much farther away. His mighty effort had not been in vain. His pulses beat hard with the throb of victory not yet won, but of which he felt sure, and he rejoiced too, because he had come again upon rocky ground, where his flight left so little trace that Tandakora himself would be baffled for a while.

He knew that the shores of the lake at the point he was nearing were comparatively low, and a vague plan to hide in the dense foliage at the water's edge came into his mind. He did not know just how he would do it, but he would be guided by events as they developed. The bird surely would not lead him on unless less to safety, and no doubt entered his mind. But it was highly important to widen yet more the distance between him and the warriors, and he still ran with all the speed at his command.

The last crest was reached and before him spread the splendid lake in its deep green setting, a glittering spectacle that he never failed to admire, and that he admired even now, when his life was in peril, and instants were precious. The bird perched suddenly on a bough, uttered a few thrilling notes, and was then gone, a last blue flash into the dense foliage. He did not see it again, and he did not expect to do so. Its work was done. Strong in the faith of the wilderness, he believed and always believed.

He crouched a few moments on a ledge and looked back. Tandakora and his men had not yet come in sight, nor could he hear them. Doubtless they had lost his trail, when he leaped from one stone to another, and were now looking for it. His time to hide, if he were to have one, was at hand, and he meant to make the most of the chance. He bent lower and remained there until his breathing became regular and easy after his mighty effort, all his five senses and the sixth that was instinct or divination, alert to every sound.

Two or three birds began to sing, but they were not his bird and he gave them no attention. A rabbit leaped from its nest under the bushes and ran. It went back on his trail and he considered

it a sure sign that his pursuers were yet distant. He might steal another precious minute or two for his overworked lungs and heart. He knew the need of doing everything to gain a little more strength. It was his experience in border war and the stern training of Willet and Tayoga that made him able to do so, and he was ruler enough of himself to wait yet a little longer than he had planned. Then when he felt that Tandakora must be near, he straightened up, though not to his full height, and ran swiftly down the long slope to the lake.

He found at the bottom a narrow place between cliff and water, grown thickly with bushes, and he followed it at least half a mile, until the shores towered above him dark and steep, and the lake came up against them like a wall. He could go no farther and he waded into a dense growth of bushes and weeds, where he stood up to his waist in water and waited, hidden well.

He knew that if the warriors followed and saw him he would have little opportunity to escape, but the chances were a hundred to one against their finding him in such a covert. Rock and water had blotted out his trail and he felt safe. He secured his belt, containing his smaller weapons and ammunition, about his shoulders beyond touch of water, and put his rifle in the forks of two bushes, convenient to his hands.

It was a luxury to rest, even if one did stand half-sunken in a lake. The water was cold, but he did not yet feel the chill, and he listened for possible sounds of pursuit. He heard, after a while, the calls of warriors to one another and he laughed softly to himself. The shouts were faint and moreover they came from the crest of the cliff. They had not found his trail down the slope and they were hunting for him on the heights. He laughed again with sheer satisfaction. He had been right. Rock and water had come to his aid, and he was too well hidden even for the eager eyes of Tandakora and his warriors to follow him.

He waited a long time. He heard the cries nearer him, then farther away, and, at last, at such a great distance that they could barely be separated from the lap of the waters. He was growing cold now; the chill from the lake was rising in his body, but with infinite patience bred by long practice of the wilderness he did not stir. He knew that silence could be deceptive. Some of the warriors might come back, and might wait in a thicket, hoping that he would rise and disclose himself, thinking the danger past. More than one careless wanderer in the past had been caught in such a manner, and he was resolved to guard against the trick. Making the last call upon his patience, he stood motionless, while the chill crept steadily upward through his veins and muscles.

He could see the surface of the open lake through the veil of bushes and tall grass. The water broke in gentle waves under a light wind, and kept up a soft sighing that was musical and soothing. Had he been upon dry land he could have closed his eyes and gone to sleep, but, as it was, he did not complain, since he had found safety, if not comfort. He even found strength in himself, despite his situation, to admire the gleaming expanse of Andiatarocete with its shifting colors, and the far cliffs lofty and dim.

Much of Robert's life, much of its most eventful portion, was passing around this lake, and he had a peculiar affection for it. It always aroused in him a sense of beauty, of charm and of majesty, and he had grown too to look upon it as a friend and protector. He believed that it had brought him good luck, and he did not doubt that it would do so again.

He looked for a canoe, one perhaps that might contain Willet and Tayoga, seeking him and keeping well beyond the aim of a lurking marksman on the shore, but he saw no shadow on the water, nothing that could be persuaded into the likeness of a boat, only wild fowl circling and dipping, and, now and then, a gleam where a fish leaped up to fall swiftly back again. He was alone, and he must depend upon himself only.

He began to move a little, to lift one foot and then the other, careful to make no splash in the water, and the slight exercise checked the creeping chill. Encouraged, he increased it, stopping at intervals to listen for the approach of a foe. There was no sound and he walked back and forth a little. Presently his eyes, trained to observe all things, noticed a change in the air. A gray tint, so far a matter

of quality rather than color, was coming into it, and his heart leaped with joy. Absorbed in his vital struggle he had failed to reckon the passage of time. The day was closing and blessed, covering night was at hand. Robert loved the day and the sun, but darkness was always a friend of those who fled, and now he prayed that it would come thick and dark.

The sun still hung over the eastern shores, red and blazing, but before long it went down, seeming to sink into the lake, and the night that Robert had wished, heavy and black, swept over the earth. Then he left the water, and stood upon dry land, the narrow ledge between the cliff and the waves, where he took off his lower garments, wrung them as nearly dry as he could, and, hanging them on the bushes, waited for the wind to do the rest. His sense of triumph had never been so strong. Alone and relying only upon his own courage and skill, he had escaped the fierce Tandakora and his persistent warriors. He could even boast of it to Willet and Tayoga, when he found them again.

It was wonderful to feel safe, after great peril, and his bright imagination climbed the heights. As he had escaped them then, so he would slip always from the snares of his foes. It was this quality in him, the spirit of eternal hope, that appealed so strongly to all who knew him, and that made him so attractive.

After a while, he took venison and hominy from his knapsack and ate with content. Then he resumed his clothing, now dried completely by the wind, and felt that he had never been stronger or more fitted to cope with attack.

The darkness was intense and the surface of the lake showed through it, only a fitful gray. The cliff behind him was now a black bank, and its crest could not be seen at all. He was eager to go, but he still used the patience so necessary in the wilderness, knowing that the longer he waited the less likely he was to meet the band of Tandakora.

He lay down in a thicket of tall grass and bushes, resolved not to start before midnight, and he felt so much at peace that before he knew he was going to sleep he was sleeping. When he awoke he felt a little dismay at first, but it was soon gone. After all, he had passed the time of waiting in the easiest way, and no enemy had come. The moon and stars were not to be seen, but instinct told him that it was not beyond midnight.

He arose to go, but a slight sound came from the lake, and he stayed. It was merely the cry of the night bird, calling to its mate, one would have said, but Robert's attention was attracted by an odd inflection in it, a strain that seemed familiar. He listened with the utmost attention, and when it came a second time, he was so sure that his pulses beat very fast.

Willet and Tayoga, as he had hoped in the day, were out there on the lake. It had been foolish of him to think they would come in the full sunlight, exposed to every hostile eye. It was their natural course to approach in the dark and send a signal that he would know. He imitated the call, a soft, low note, but one that traveled far, and soon the answer came. No more was needed. The circle was complete. Willet and Tayoga were on the lake and they knew that he was at the foot of the cliff, waiting.

He took a long breath of intense relief and delight. Tandakora would resume the search for him in the morning, hunting along the crest, and he might even find his way to the narrow ledge on which Robert now stood, but the lad would be gone across the waters, where he left no trail.

He saw a stout young bush growing on the edge of the lake, and, leaning far out while he held on to it with one hand, he watched. He did not repeat the call. One less cautious would have done so, but he knew that his friends had located him already and he meant to run no risk of telling the warriors also where he stood. Meanwhile, he listened attentively for the sound of the paddles, but many long minutes passed before he heard the faint dip, dip that betokened the approach of Willet and Tayoga. He never doubted for an instant that it was their canoe and again his heart felt that triumphant feeling. Surely no man ever had more loyal or braver comrades! If he had malignant enemies he also had staunch friends who more than offset them.

He saw presently a faint shadow, a deeper dark in the darkness, and he uttered very low the soft note of the bird. In an instant came the answer, and then the shadow, turning, glided toward him. A canoe took form and shape and he saw in it two figures, which were unmistakably those of Willet and Tayoga, swinging their paddles with powerful hands. Again he felt a thrill of joy because these two trusty comrades had come. But it was absurd ever to doubt for an instant that they would come!

He leaned out from the tree to the last inch, and called in a penetrating whisper:

"Dave! Tayoga! This way!"

The canoe shifted its course a little, and entered the bushes by the side of Robert, the hunter and the Onondaga putting down their dripping paddles, and stepping out in the shallow water. In the dusk the great figure of Willet loomed up, more than ever a tower of strength, and the slender but muscular form of Tayoga, the very model of a young Indian warrior, seemed to be made of gleaming bronze. Had Robert needed any infusion of courage and will their appearance alone would have brought it with them.

"And we have found Dagaegoga again!" said the Onondaga, in a whimsical tone.

"No I have found you," said Robert. "You were lost from me, I was not lost from you."

"It is the same, and I think by your waiting here at midnight that you have been in great peril."

"So I have been, and I may be yet—and you too. I have been pursued by warriors, Tandakora at their head. I have not seen them, but I know from the venom and persistence of the pursuit that he leads them. I eluded them by coming down the cliff and hiding among the bushes here. I stood in the water all the afternoon."

"We thought you might be somewhere along the western shore. After we divided for our scout about the lake, the Great Bear and I met as we had arranged, but you did not come. We concluded that the enemy had got in the way, and so we took from its hiding place a canoe which had been left on a former journey, and began to cruise upon Andiatarocete, calling at far intervals for you."

He spoke in his usual precise school English and in a light playful tone, but Robert knew the depth of his feelings. The friendship of the white lad and the red was held by hooks of steel like that of Damon and Pythias of old.

"I think I heard your first call," said Robert. "It wasn't very loud, but never was a sound more welcome, nor can I be too grateful for that habit you have of hiding canoes here and there in the wilderness. It's saved us all more than once."

"It is merely the custom of my people, forced upon us by need, and I but follow."

"It doesn't alter my gratitude. I see that the canoe is big enough for me too."

"So it is, Dagaegoga. You can enter it. Take my paddle and work."

The three adjusted their weight in the slender craft, and Robert, taking Willet's paddle instead of Tayoga's, they pushed out into the lake, while the great hunter sat with his long rifle across his knees, watching for the least sign that the warriors might be coming.

CHAPTER II

THE LIVE CANOE

Robert was fully aware that their peril was not yet over—the Indians, too, might have canoes upon the lake—but he considered that the bulk of it had passed. So his heart was light, and, as they shot out toward the middle of Andiatarocte, he talked of the pursuit and the manner in which he had escaped it.

"I was led the right way by a bird, one that sang," he said. "Your Manitou, Tayoga, sent that bird to save me."

"You don't really believe it came for that special purpose?" asked the hunter.

"Why not?" interrupted the Onondaga. "We do know that miracles are done often. My nation and all the nations of the Hodenosaunee have long known it. If Manitou wishes to stretch out his hand and snatch Dagaega from his foes it is not for us to ask his reason why."

Willet was silent. He would not say anything to disturb the belief of Tayoga, he was never one to attack anybody's religion, besides he was not sure that he did not believe, himself.

"We know too," continued Tayoga devoutly, "that Tododaho, the mighty Onondaga chief who went away to his star more than four hundred years ago, and who sits there watching over the Hodenosaunee has intervened more than once in our behalf. He is an arm of Manitou and acts for him."

He looked up. The sky was hidden by the thick darkness. No ray of silver or gray showed anywhere, but the Onondaga knew where lay the star upon which sat his patron saint with the wise snakes, coil on coil, in his hair. He felt that through the banks of mist and vapor Tododaho was watching over him, and, as long as he tried to live the right way taught to him by his fathers, the great Onondaga chieftain would lead him through all perils, even as the bird in brilliant blue plumage had shown Robert the path from the pursuit of Tandakora. The sublime faith of Tayoga never wavered for an instant.

The wind rose a little, a heavy swell stirred the lake and their light craft swayed with vigor, but the two youths were expert canoemen, none better in all the wilderness, and it shipped no water. The hunter, sitting with his hands on his rifle, did not stir, nor did he speak for a long time. Willet, at that moment, shared the faith of his two younger comrades. He was grateful too because once more they had found Robert, for whom he had all the affection of a father. The three reunited were far stronger than the three scattered, and he did not believe that any force on the lakes or in the mountains could trap them. But his questing eyes watched the vast oblong of the lake, looking continually for a sign, whether that of friend or foe.

"What did you find, Robert?" he asked at last.

"Nothing but the band of Tandakora," replied the lad, with a light laugh. "I took my way squarely into trouble, and then I had hard work taking it out again. I don't know what would have happened to me, if you two hadn't come in the canoe."

"It seems," said the Onondaga, in his whimsical precise manner, "that a large part of our lives, Great Bear, is spent in rescuing Dagaega. Do you think when we go into the Great Beyond and arrive at the feet of Manitou, and he asks us what we have done with our time on earth, he will put it to our credit when we reply that we consumed at least ten years saving Dagaega from his enemies?"

"Yes, Tayoga, we'll get white marks for it, because Robert has also saved us, and there is no nobler work than saving one's fellow creatures. Manitou knows also that it is hard to live in the wilderness and a man must spend a lot of his time escaping death. Look to the east, Tayoga, lad, and tell me if you think that's a point of light on the mountain over there."

The Onondaga studied intently the dark wall of the east, and presently his eyes picked out a dot against its background, infinitesimal like the light of a firefly, but not to be ignored by expert woodsmen.

"Yes, Great Bear," he replied, "I see it is not larger than the littlest star, but it moves from side to side, and I think it is a signal."

"So do I, lad. The lake is narrow here, and the answer, if there be any, will come from the west shore. Now we'll look, all together. Three pairs of eyes are better than one."

The two lads ceased paddling, holding the canoe steady, with an occasional stroke, and began to search the western cliffs in methodical fashion, letting the eye travel from the farthest point in the north gradually toward the south, and neglecting no place in the dark expanse.

"There it is!" exclaimed Robert. "Almost opposite us! I believe it's in the very cliff at the point of which I lay!"

"See it, winking and blinking away."

"Yes, that's it," said Robert. "Now I wonder what those two lights are saying to each other across Lake George?"

"It might be worth one's while to know, for they're surely signaling.

It may be about us, or it may be about the army in the south."

"I didn't find anything but trouble," said Robert. "Now what did you and Tayoga find?"

"Plenty traces of both white men and red," replied the hunter. "The forests were full of French and Indians. I think St. Luc with a powerful force is near the north end of Lake George, and the Marquis de Montcalm will soon be at Ticonderoga to meet us."

"But we'll sweep him away when our great army comes up from New York."

"So we should, lad, but the Marquis is an able general, wily and brave. He showed his quality at Fort William Henry and we mustn't underrate him, though I am afraid that's what we'll do; besides the forest fights for the defense."

"It's not like you to be despondent, Dave," said Robert.

"I'm not, lad. I've just a feeling that we should be mighty cautious. Some think the Marquis won't stand when our big army comes, but I do, and I look for a great battle on the shores of either George or Champlain."

"And we'll win it," said Robert in sanguine tones.

"That rests on the knees of the gods," said Willet thoughtfully. "But we've got to deal with one thing at a time. It's our business now to escape from the people who are making those lights wink at each other, or the battle wherever it's fought or whoever wins won't include us because we'll be off on another star, maybe sitting at the feet of Tayoga's Tododaho."

"There's another light on the west shore toward the south," said the Onondaga.

"And a fourth on the eastern cliff also toward the south," added Robert. "All four of them are winking now. It seems to be a general conversation."

"And I wish we could understand their language," said the hunter earnestly. "I'm thinking, however, that they're talking about us. They must have found out in some manner that we're on the lake, and they want to take us."

"Then," said Robert, "it's time for Manitou to send a heavy mist that we may escape in it."

"Manitou can work miracles for those whom he favors," said Tayoga, "and now and then he sends them, but oftenest he withholds his hand, lest we become spoiled and rely upon him when we should rely upon ourselves."

"You never spoke a truer word, Tayoga," said the hunter. "It's the same as saying that heaven helps those who help themselves, and we've got to do a lot of work for ourselves this night. I think the Indian canoes are already on Andiatarocle looking for us."

Robert would have felt a chill had it not been for the presence of his comrades. The danger was unknown, mysterious, it might come from any point, and, while the foe prepared, they must wait until he disclosed himself. Waiting was the hardest thing to do.

"I think we'd better stay just where we are for a while," said the hunter. "It would be foolish to use our strength, until we know what we are using it for. It's certain that Manitou intends to let us fend for ourselves because the night is lightening, which is a hard thing for fugitives."

The clouds floated away toward the north, a star came out, then another, and then a cluster, the lofty shores on either side rose up clear and distinct, no longer vague black walls, the surface of the water turned to gray, but it was still swept by a heavy swell, in which the canoe rocked. Willet finally suggested that they pull to a small island lying on their right, and anchor in the heavy foliage overhanging the water.

"If it grows much lighter they'll be able to see us from the cliffs," he said, "and for us now situated as we are the most important of all things is to hide."

It was a tiny island, not more than a quarter of an acre in size, but it was covered with heavy forest, and they found refuge among the long boughs that touched the water, where they rested in silence, while more stars came out, throwing a silver radiance over the lake. The three were silent and Robert watched the western light that lay farthest south. It seemed to be about two miles away, and, as he looked he saw it grow, until he became convinced that it was no longer a light, but a fire.

"What is the meaning of it?" he asked, calling the attention of Willet.

The hunter looked for a while before replying. The fire still grew and soon a light on the eastern shore began to turn into a fire, increasing in the same manner.

"I take it that they intend to illuminate the lake, at least this portion of it," said Willet. "They'll have gigantic bonfires casting their light far over the water, and they think that we won't be able to hide then."

"Which proves that they are in great force on both shores," said Tayoga.

"How does it prove it?" asked Robert.

The Onondaga laughed softly.

"O Dagaegoga," he said, "you speak before you think. You are always thinking before you speak, but perhaps it is not your fault. Manitou gave you a tongue of gold, and it becomes a man to use that which he can use best. It is very simple. To drag up the fallen wood for such big fires takes many men. Nor would all of them be employed for such work. While some of them feed the flames others are seeking us. We can look for their canoes soon."

"Their plan isn't a bad one for what they want to do," said the hunter. "A master mind must be directing them. I am confirmed in my opinion that St. Luc is there."

"I've been sure of it all the time," said Robert; "it seems that fate intends us to be continually matching our wits against his."

"It's a fact, and it's strange how it's come about," said the hunter thoughtfully.

Robert looked at him, hoping he would say more, but he did not continue the subject. Instead he said:

"That they know what they're doing is shown by the fact that we must move. All the area of the lake about us will be lighted up soon."

The two bonfires were now lofty, blazing pyramids, and a third farther north began also to send its flames toward the sky.

The surface of the lake glowed with red light which crept steadily toward the little island, in the shadow of which the three scouts lay. It became apparent that they had no time to waste, if they intended to avoid being trapped.

"Push out," said Willet, and, with strong sweeps of the paddle, Robert and Tayoga sent the canoe from the shelter of the boughs. But they still kept close to the island and then made for another

about a hundred yards south. The glow had not yet come near enough to disclose them, while they were in the open water, but Robert felt intense relief when they drew again into the shelter of trees.

The bonfire on the western shore was the largest, and, despite the distance, he saw passing before the flames tiny black figures which he knew to be warriors or French, if any white men were there. They were still feeding the fire and the pyramid of light rose to an extraordinary height, but Robert knew the peril was elsewhere. It would come on the surface of the lake and he shifted his gaze to the gray waters, searching everywhere for Indian canoes. He believed that they would appear first in the north and he scoured the horizon there from side to side, trying to detect the first black dot when it should show over the lake.

The waters where his eyes searched were wholly in darkness, an unbroken black line of the sky meeting a heaving surface. He looked back and forth over the whole extent, a half dozen times, and found nothing to break the continuity. Hope that the warriors of Tandakora were not coming sprang up in his breast, but he put it down again. Although imagination was so strong in him he was nevertheless, in moments of peril, a realist. Hard experience had taught him long since that when his life was in danger he must face facts.

"There's another island about a half mile away," he said to Willet.

"Don't you think we'd better make for it now?"

"In a minute or two, lad, if nothing happens," replied the hunter.

"I'd like to see what's coming here, if anything at all comes."

Robert turned his gaze back toward the north, passing his eyes once more to and fro along the line where the dusky sky met the dusky lake, and then he started a little. A dot detached itself from the center of the line, followed quickly by another, another and others. They were points infinitely small, and one at that distance could have told nothing about them from their appearance only, but he knew they were Indian canoes. They could be nothing else. It was certain also that they were seeking the three.

"Do you see them?" asked Robert.

"Yes, and it's a fleet," replied Willet. "They are lighting up the lake with their bonfires, and their canoes are coming south to drive us into the open. There's generalship in this. I think St. Luc is surely in command."

The hunter expressed frank admiration. Often, in the long duel between them and the redoubtable French leader, he paid tribute to the valor and skill of St. Luc. Like Robert, he never felt any hostility toward him. There was nothing small about Willet, and he had abundant esteem for a gallant foe.

"It's time now to run for it again," he said, "and it's important to keep out of their sight."

"I think it will be better for us to swim," said Tayoga, "and let the canoe carry our weapons and ammunition."

"And for us to hide behind it as we've done before. You're right, lad. The canoe is low and does not make much of a blur upon the lake, but if we are sitting upright in it we can be much more easily seen. Now, quick's the word!"

They took off all their outer clothing and moccasins, putting the garments and their weapons into the little craft, and, sinking into the water behind it, pushed out from the overhanging boughs. It was a wise precaution. When they reached the long open stretch of water, Robert felt that the glow from the nearest bonfire was directly upon them, although he knew that his fancy made the light much stronger than it really was.

The canoe still merged with the color of the waves which were now running freely, and, as the three swam with powerful strokes sending it swiftly ahead of them, Robert was hopeful that they would reach the next island, unseen.

The distance seemed to lengthen and grow interminable, and their pace, although rapid, was to Robert like that of a snail. Yet the longest journey must come to an end. The new island rose at last before them, larger than the others but like the rest covered throughout with heavy forest.

They were almost in its shelter, when a faint cry came from the lofty cliff on the west. It was a low, whining sound, very distant, but singularly penetrating, a sinister note with which Robert was familiar, the Indian war whoop. He recognized it, and understood its significance. Warriors had seen the canoe and knew that it marked the flight of the three.

"What do you think we'd better do?" he said.

"We'll stop for a moment or two at the island and take a look around us," replied Willet.

They moored the canoe, and waded to the shore. Far behind them was the Indian fleet, about twenty canoes, coming in the formation of an arrow, while the bonfires on the cliffs towered toward the sky. A rising wind swept the waves down and they crumbled one after another, as they broke upon the island.

"It looks like a trap with us inside of it," said the hunter. "That shout meant that they've seen our canoe, as you lads know. Warriors have already gone below to head us off, and maybe they've got another fleet, which, answering their signals, will come up from the south, shutting us between two forces."

"We are in their trap," admitted Robert, "but we can break out of it.

We've been in traps before, but none of them ever held us."

"So we can, lad. I didn't mean to be discouraging. I was just stating the situation as it now is. We're a long way from being taken."

"The path has been opened to us," said the Onondaga.

"What do you mean?" asked Robert.

"Lo, Dagaëoga, the wind grows strong, and it sweeps toward the south the way we were going."

"I hear, Tayoga, but I don't understand."

"We will send the canoe with wind and waves, but we will stay here."

"Put 'em on a false scent!" exclaimed the hunter. "It's a big risk, but it's the only thing to be done. As the bird saved Robert so the wind may save us! The waves are running pretty fast toward the south now and the canoe will ride 'em like a thing of life. They're too far away to tell whether we are in it."

It was a daring thing to do but Robert too felt that it must be done, and they did not delay in the doing of it. They took out their clothing, weapons, and ammunition, Willet gave the canoe a mighty shove, and it sailed gallantly southward on the crest of the high waves.

"I feel as if I were saying good-by to a faithful friend," said Robert.

"It's more than a friend," said Willet. "It's an ally that will draw the enemy after it, and leave us here in safety."

"If Manitou so wills it," said Tayoga. "It is for him to say whether the men of Tandakora will pass us by. But the canoe is truly alive, Dagaëoga. It skims over the lake like a great bird. If it has a spirit in it, and I do not know that it has not, it guards us, and means to lead away our enemy in pursuit of it."

Quick to receive impressions, Robert also clothed the canoe with life and a soul, a soul wholly friendly to the three, who, now stooping down on the island, amid the foliage, watched the action of the little craft which seemed, in truth, to be guided by reason.

"Now it pauses a little," said Robert. "It's beckoning to the Indian fleet to follow."

"It is because it hangs on the top of a wave that is about to break," said Willet. "Often you see waves hesitate that way just before they crumble."

"I prefer to believe with Dagaëoga," said the Onondaga. "The canoe is our ally, and, knowing that we want the warriors to pass us, it lingers a bit to call them on."

"It may be as you say," said the hunter, "I'm not one to disturb the faith of anybody. If the canoe is alive, as you think, then—it is alive and all the better for us."

"Spirits go into the bodies of inanimate things," persisted the red youth, "and make them alive for a while. All the people of the Hodenosaunee have known that for centuries."

"The canoe hesitates and beckons again," said Robert, "and, as sure as we are here, the skies have turned somewhat darker. The warriors in the fleet or on the shore cannot possibly tell the canoe is empty."

"Again the hand of Manitou is stretched forth to protect us," said Tayoga devoutly. "It is he who sends the protecting veil, and we shall be saved."

"We'll have to wait and see whether the warriors stop and search our island or follow straight after the canoe. Then we'll know," said Willet.

"They will go on," said Tayoga, with great confidence. "Look at the canoe. It is not going so fast now. Why? Because it wishes to tantalize our enemies, to arouse in their minds a belief that they can overtake it. It behaves as if we were in it, and as if we were becoming exhausted by our great exertions with the paddles. Its conduct is just like that of a man who flees for his life. I know, although I cannot see their eyes, that the pursuing warriors think they have us now. They believe that our weakness will grow heavier and heavier upon us until it overpowers us. Tandakora reckons that our scalps are already hanging at his belt. Thus does Manitou make foolish those whom he intends to lead away from their dearest wish."

"I begin to think they're really going to leave us, but it's too early yet to tell definitely," said the hunter. "We shouldn't give them an earthly chance to see us, and, for that reason, we'd better retreat into the heart of the island. We mustn't leave all the work of deception to the canoe."

"The Great Bear is right," said Tayoga. "Manitou will not help those who sit still, relying wholly on him."

They drew back fifteen or twenty yards, and sat down on a hillock, covered with dense bushes, though from their place of hiding they could see the water on all sides. Unless the Indians landed on the island and made a thorough search they would not be found. Meanwhile the canoe was faithful to its trust. The strong wind out of the north carried it on with few moments of hesitation as it poised on breaking waves, its striking similitude to life never being lost for an instant. Robert began to believe with Tayoga that it was, in very fact and truth, alive and endowed with reason. Why not? The Iroquois believed that spirits could go into wood and who was he to argue that white men were right, and red men wrong? His life in the forest had proved to him often that red men were right and white men wrong.

Whoever might be right the canoe was still a tantalizing object to the pursuit. It may have been due to a slight shift of the wind, but it began suddenly to have the appearance of dancing upon the waves, swinging a little to and fro, teetering about, but in the main keeping its general course, straight ahead.

Tayoga laughed softly.

"The canoe is in a frolicsome mood," he said. "It has sport with the men of Tandakora. It dances, and it throws jests at them. It says, 'You think you can catch me, but you cannot. Why do you come so slowly? Why don't you hurry? I am here. See, I wait a little. I do not go as fast as I can, because I wish to give you a better chance.' Ah, here comes the fleet!"

"And here comes our supreme test," said Willet gravely. "If they turn in toward the island then we are lost, and we'll know in five minutes."

Robert's heart missed a beat or two, and then settled back steadily. It was one thing to be captured by the French, and another to be taken by Tandakora. He resolved to fight to the last, rather than fall into the hands of the Ojibway chief who knew no mercy. Neither of the three spoke, not even in whispers, as they watched almost with suspended breath the progress of the fleet. The bonfires had never ceased to rise and expand. For a long distance the surface of the lake was lighted up brilliantly.

The crests of the waves near them were tipped with red, as if with blood, and the strong wind moaned like the voice of evil. Robert felt a chill in his blood. He knew that the fate of his comrades and himself hung on a hair.

Nearer came the canoes, and, in the glare of the fires, they saw the occupants distinctly. In the first boat, a large one for those waters, containing six paddles, sat no less a person than the great Ojibway chief himself, bare as usual to the waist and painted in many a hideous design. Gigantic in reality, the gray night and the lurid light of the fires made him look larger, accentuating every wicked feature.

He seemed to Robert to be, in both spirit and body, the prince of darkness himself.

Just behind Tandakora sat two white men whom the three recognized as Auguste de Courcelles and François de Jumonville, the French officers with whom they had been compelled to reckon on other fields of battle and intrigue. There was no longer any doubt that the French were present in this great encircling movement, and Robert was stronger than ever in his belief that St. Luc had the supreme command.

"I could reach Tandakora from here with a bullet," whispered Willet, "and almost I am tempted to do it."

"But the Great Bear will not yield to his temptation," Tayoga whispered back. "There are two reasons. He knows that he could slay Tandakora, but it would mean the death of us all, and the price is too great. Then he remembers that the Ojibway chief is mine. It is for me to settle with him, in the last reckoning."

"Aye, lad, you're right. Either reason is good enough. We'll let him pass, if pass he means, and I hope devoutly that he does."

The fleet preserving its formation was now almost abreast of the island, and once Robert thought it was going to turn in toward them. The long boat of Tandakora wavered and the red giant looked at the island curiously, but, at the last moment the empty canoe, far ahead and dim in the dark, beckoned them on more insistently than ever.

"Now the die is cast," whispered the Onondaga tensely. "In twenty seconds we shall know our fate, and I think the good spirit that has gone into our canoe means to save us."

Tandakora said something to the French officers, and they too looked at the island, but the fleeing canoe danced on the crest of a high wave and its call was potent in the souls of white men and red alike. It was still too far away for them to tell that it was empty. Sudden fear assailed them in the darkness, that it would escape and with it the three who had eluded them so often, and whom they wanted most to take. Tandakora spoke sharply to the paddlers, who bent to their task with increased energy. The long canoe leaped forward, and with it the others.

"Manitou has stretched forth his hand once more, and he has stretched it between our enemies and us," said Tayoga, in a voice of deep emotion.

"It's so, lad," said the hunter, his own voice shaking a little. "I truly believe you're right when you say that as the bird was sent to save Robert so a good spirit was put into the canoe to save us all. Who am I and who is anybody to question the religion and beliefs of another man?"

"Nor will I question them," said Robert, with emphasis.

They were stalwart men in the Indian fleet, skilled and enduring with the paddle, and the fugitive canoe danced before them, a will o' the wisp that they must pursue without rest. Their own canoes leaped forward, and, as the arrow into which they were formed shot past the island, the three hidden in its heart drew the deep, long breaths of those who have suddenly passed from death to life.

"We won't stop 'em!" said Robert in a whimsical tone. "Speed ye, Tandakora, speed ye! Speed ye, De Courcelles and De Jumonville of treacherous memory! If you don't hasten, the flying canoe will yet escape you! More power to your arms, O ye paddlers! Bend to your strokes! The canoe that you pursue is light and it is carried in the heart of the wind! You have no time to lose, white men

and red, if you would reach the precious prize! The faster you go the better you will like it! And the better we will, too! On! swift canoes, on!"

"The imagination of Dagaegoga has been kindled again," said Tayoga, "and the bird with a golden note has gone into his throat. Now he can talk, and talk much, without ever feeling weariness—as is his custom."

"At least I have something to talk about," laughed Robert. "I was never before so glad to see the backs of anybody, as I am now to look at the backs of those Indians and Frenchmen."

"We won't do anything to stop 'em," said the hunter.

From their hillock they saw the fleet sweep on at a great rate toward the south, while the fires in the north, no longer necessary to the Indian plan, began to die. The red tint on the water then faded, and the surface of the lake became a solemn gray.

"It's well for us those fires sank," said the hunter, "because while Tandakora has gone on we can't live all the rest of our lives on this little island. We've got to get to the mainland somehow without being seen."

"And darkness is our best friend," said Robert.

"So it is, and in their pursuit of the canoe our foes are likely to relax their vigilance on this part of the lake. Can you see our little boat now, Robert?"

"Just faintly, and I think it's a last glimpse. I hope the wind behind it will stay so strong that Tandakora will never overtake it. I should hate to think that a canoe that has been such a friend to us has been compelled to serve our enemies. There it goes, leading straight ahead, and now it's gone! Farewell, brave and loyal canoe! Now what do you intend to do, Dave?"

"Swim to the mainland as soon as those fires sink a little more. We have got to decide when the head of a swimming man won't show to chance warriors in the bushes, and then make a dash for it, because, if Tandakora overtakes the canoe, he'll be coming back."

"In a quarter of an hour it will be dark enough for us to risk it," said the Onondaga.

Again came the thick dusk so necessary to those who flee for life. Two fires on the high cliffs blazed far in the south, but the light from them did not reach the island where the three lay, where peril had grazed them before going on. The water all about them and the nearer shores lay in shadow.

"The time to go has come," said the hunter. "We'll swim to the western side and climb through that dip between the high cliffs."

"How far would you say it is?" asked Robert.

"About a half mile."

"Quite a swim even for as good swimmers as we are, when you consider we have to carry our equipment. Why not launch one of those fallen trees that lie near the water's edge and make it carry us?"

"A good idea, Robert! A happy thought does come now and then into that young head of yours."

"Dagaegoga is wiser than he looks," said the Onondaga.

"I wish I could say the same for you, Tayoga," retorted young Lennox.

"Oh, you'll both learn," laughed Willet.

As in the ancient wood everywhere, there were fallen trees on the island and they rolled a small one about six inches through at the stem into the lake. They chose it because it had not been down long and yet had many living branches, some with young leaves on them.

"There is enough foliage left to hide our heads and shoulders," said Willet. "The tree will serve a double purpose. It's our ship and also our refuge."

They took off all their clothing and fastened it and the arms, ammunition and knapsacks of food on the tree. Then, they pushed off, with a caution from the hunter that they must not allow their improvised raft to turn in the water, as the wetting of the ammunition could easily prove fatal.

With a prayer that fortune which had favored them so much thus far would still prove kind, they struck out.

CHAPTER III IN THE CLIFF

It was only a half mile to the promised land and Robert expected a quick and easy voyage, as they were powerful swimmers and could push the tree before them without trouble.

"When I reach the shore and get well back of the lake," he said to Tayoga, "I mean to lie down in a thicket and sleep forty-eight hours. I am entitled now to a rest that long."

"Dagaeoga will sleep when the spirits of earth and air decree it, and not before," replied the Onondaga gravely. "Can you see anything of our foes in the south?"

"Not a trace."

"Then your eyes are not as good as mine or you do not use them as well, because I see a speck on the water blacker than the surface of the lake, and it is moving."

"Where, Tayoga?"

"Look toward the eastern shore, where the cliff rises tall and almost straight."

"Ah, I see it now. It *is* a canoe, and it *is* moving."

"So it is, Dagaeoga, and it is coming our way. Did I not tell you that Manitou, no matter how much he favors us, will not help us all the time? Not even the great and pious Tododaho, when he was on earth, expected so much. Now I think that after saving you with the bird and all of us with the empty canoe he means to leave us to our own strength and courage, and see what we will do."

"And it will be strange, if after being protected so far by a power greater than our own we can't protect ourselves now," said Willet gravely.

"The canoe is coming fast," said Tayoga. "I can see it growing on the water."

"So it is, and I infer from its speed that it has at least four paddles in it. There's no doubt they are disappointed in not finding us farther down, and their boat has come back to look for us."

"This is not the only tree uprooted by the wind and afloat on the lake," said Tayoga, "and now it must be our purpose to make the warriors think it has come into the water naturally."

Long before the French word "camouflage" was brought into general use by a titanic war the art of concealment and illusion was practiced universally by the natives of the North American wilderness. It was in truth their favorite stratagem in their unending wars, and there was high praise for those who could use it best.

"Well spoken, Tayoga," said Willet. "Luckily these living branches hide us, and, as the wind still blows strongly toward the south, we must let the tree float in that direction."

"And not go toward the mainland!" said Robert.

"Aye, lad, for the present. It's stern necessity. If the warriors in that canoe saw the tree floating against the wind they'd know we're here. Trust 'em for that. I think we're about to run another gauntlet."

The trunk now drifted with the wind, though the three edged it ever so slightly, but steadily, toward the shore.

Meanwhile the canoe grew and grew, and they saw, as Willet had surmised, that it contained four paddles. It was evident too that they were on a quest, as the boat began to veer about, and the four Indians swept the lake with eager eyes.

The tree drifted on. Farther to the west and near the shore, another tree was floating in the same manner, and off to the east a third was beckoning in like fashion. There was nothing in the behavior of the three trees to indicate that one of them was different from the other two.

The eyes of the savages passed over them, one after another, but they saw no human being hidden within their boughs. Yet Robert at least, when those four pairs of eyes rested on his tree, felt them burning into his back. It was a positive relief, when they moved on and began to hunt elsewhere.

"They will yet bring their canoe much closer," whispered Willet. "It's too much to expect that they will let us go so easily, and we've got to keep up the illusion quite a while longer. Don't push on the tree. The wind is dying a little, and our pace must be absolutely the pace of the breeze. They notice everything and if we were to go too fast they'd be sure to see it."

They no longer sought to control their floating support, and, as the wind suddenly sank very much, it hung lazily on the crests of little waves.

It was a hard test to endure, while the canoe with the four relentless warriors in it rowed about seeking them. Robert paid all the price of a vivid and extremely brilliant imagination. While those with such a temperament look far ahead and have a vision of triumphs to come out of the distant future, they also see far more clearly the troubles and dangers that confront them. So their nerves are much more severely tried than are those of the ordinary and apathetic. Great will power must come to their relief, and thus it was with Robert. His body quivered, though not with the cold of the water, but his soul was steady.

Although the wind sank, which was against them, the darkness increased, and the fact that two other trees were afloat within view, was greatly in their favor. It gave them comrades in that lazy drifting and diverted suspicion.

"If they conclude to make a close examination of our tree, what shall we do?" whispered Robert.

"We'll be at a great disadvantage in the water," the hunter whispered back, "but we'll have to get our rifles loose from their lashings and make a fight of it. I'm hoping it won't come to that."

The canoe approached the tree and then veered away again, as if the warriors were satisfied with its appearance. Certainly a tree more innocent in looks never floated on the waves of Lake George.

The three were masters of illusion and deception, and they did not do a single thing to turn the tree from its natural way of drifting. It obeyed absolutely the touch of the wind and not that of their hands, which rested as lightly as down upon the trunk. Once the wind stopped entirely and the tree had no motion save that of the swell. It wandered idly, a lone derelict upon a solitary lake.

Robert scarcely breathed when the canoe was sent their way. He was wholly unconscious of the water in which he was sunk to the shoulders, but every imaginative nerve was alive to the immense peril.

"If they return and come much nearer we must immerse to the eyes," whispered Willet. "Then they would have to be almost upon us before they saw us. It will make it much harder for us to get at our weapons, but we must take that risk too."

"They have turned," said Robert, "and here they come!"

It looked this time as if the savages had decided to make a close and careful inspection of the tree, bearing directly toward it, and coming so close that Robert could see their fierce, painted faces well and the muscles rising and falling on their powerful arms as they swept their paddles through the water. Now, he prayed that the foliage of the tree would hide them well and he sank his body so deep in the lake that a little water trickled into his mouth, while only the tips of his fingers rested on the trunk. The hunter and the Onondaga were submerged as deeply as he, the upper parts of their faces and their hair blending with the water. When he saw how little they were disclosed in the dusk his confidence returned.

The four savages brought the canoe within thirty feet, but the floating tree kept its secret. Its lazy drift was that of complete innocence and their eyes could not see the dark heads that merged so well with the dark trunk. They gazed for a half minute or so, then brought their canoe about in a half circle and paddled swiftly away toward the second tree.

"Now Tododaho on his star surely put it in their minds to go away," whispered the Onondaga, "and I do not think they will come back again."

"Even so, we can't yet make haste," said the hunter cautiously. "If this tree seems to act wrong they'll see it though at a long distance and come flying down on us."

"The Great Bear is right, as always, but the wind is blowing again, and we can begin to edge in toward the shore."

"So we can. Now we'll push the tree slowly toward the right. All together, but be very gentle. Robert, don't let your enthusiasm run away with you. If we depart much from the course of the wind they'll be after us again no matter how far away they are now."

"They have finished their examination of the second tree," said Tayoga in his precise school English, "and now they are going to the third, which will take them a yet greater distance from us."

"So they are. Fortune is with us."

They no longer felt it necessary to keep submerged to the mouth, but drew themselves up, resting their elbows on the trunk, floating easily in the buoyant water. They had carefully avoided turning the tree in any manner, and their arms, ammunition and packs were dry and safe. But they had been submerged so long that they were growing cold, and now that the immediate danger seemed to have been passed they realized it.

"I like Lake George," said Robert. "It's a glorious lake, a beautiful lake, a majestic lake, the finest lake I know; but that is no reason why I should want to live in its waters."

"Dagaeoga is never satisfied," said Tayoga. "He might have been sunk in some shallow, muddy lake in a flat country, but instead he is put in this noble one with its beautiful cool waters, and the grand mountains are all about him."

"But this is the second time I've been immersed in a very short space, Tayoga, and just now I crave dry land. I can't recall a single hour or a single moment when I ever wanted it more than I do this instant."

"I'm of a mind with you in that matter, Robert," said the hunter, "and if all continues to go as well as it's now going, we'll set foot on it in fifteen minutes. That canoe is close to the third tree, and they've stopped to look at it. I think we can push a little faster toward the land. They can't notice our slant at that distance. Aye, that's right, lads! Now the cliffs are coming much nearer, and they look real friendly. I see a little cove in there where our good tree can land, and it won't be hard for us to find our way up the banks, though they do rise so high. Now, steady! In we go! It's a snug little cove, put here to receive us. Be cautious how you rise out of the water, lads! Those fellows see like owls in the dark, and they'd trace us outlined here against the shore. That's it, Tayoga, you always do the right thing. We'll crawl out of the lake behind this little screen of bushes. Now, have you lads got all your baggage loose from the tree?"

"Yes," replied Robert.

"Then we'll let it go."

"It's been a fine tree, a kind tree," said Robert, "and I've no doubt Tayoga is right when he thinks a good spirit friendly to us has gone into it."

They pushed it off and saw it float again on the lake, borne on by the wind. Then they dried their bodies as well as they could in their haste, and resumed their clothing. The hunter shook his gigantic frame, and he felt the strength pour back into his muscles and veins, when he grasped his rifle. It had been his powerful comrade for many years, and he now stood where he could use it with deadly effect, if the savages should come.

They rested several minutes, before beginning the climb of the cliff, and saw a second and then a third canoe coming out of the south, evidently seeking them.

"They're pretty sure now that we haven't escaped in that direction," said Willet, "and they'll be back in full force, looking for us. We got off the lake just in time."

The cliffs towered over them to a height of nearly two thousand feet, but they began the ascent up a slanting depression that they had seen from the lake, well covered with bushes, and they took it at ease, looking back occasionally to watch the futile hunt of the canoes for them.

"We're not out of their ring yet," said Willet. "They'll be carrying on another search for us on top of the cliffs."

"Don't discourage us, Dave," said Robert. "We feel happy now having escaped one danger, and we won't escape the other until we come to it."

"Perhaps you're right, lad. We'll enjoy our few minutes of safety while we can and the sight of those canoes scurrying around the lake, looking for their lost prey, will help along our merriment."

"That's true," said Robert, "and I think I'll take a glance at them now just to soothe my soul."

They were about three quarters of the way up the cliff, and the three, turning at the same time, gazed down at a great height upon the vast expanse of Lake George. The night had lightened again, a full moon coming out and hosts of stars sparkling in the heavens. The surface of the lake gleamed in silver and they distinctly saw the canoes cruising about in their search for the three. They also saw far in the south a part of the fleet returning, and Robert breathed a sigh of thankfulness that they had escaped at last from the water.

They turned back to the top, but the white lad felt a sudden faintness and had he not clung tightly to a stout young bush he would have gone crashing down the slope. He quickly recovered himself and sought to hide his momentary weakness, but the hunter had noticed his stumbling step and gave him a keen, questing glance. Then he too stopped.

"We've climbed enough," he said. "Robert, you've come to the end of your rope, for the present. It's a wonder your strength didn't give out long ago, after all you've been through."

"Oh, I can go on! I'm not tired at all!" exclaimed the youth valiantly.

"The Great Bear tells the truth, Dagaëoga," said the Onondaga, looking at him with sympathy, "and you cannot hide it from us. We will seek a covert here."

Robert knew that any further effort to conceal his sudden exhaustion would be in vain. The collapse was too complete, but he had nothing to be ashamed of, as he had gone through far more than Willet and Tayoga, and he had reached the limit of human endurance.

"Well, yes, I am tired," he admitted. "But as we're hanging on the side of a cliff about fifteen hundred feet above the water I don't see any nice comfortable inn, with big white beds in it, waiting for us."

"Stay where you are, Dagaëoga," said the Onondaga. "We will not try the summit to-night, but I may find some sort of an alcove in the cliff, a few feet of fairly level space, where we can rest."

Robert sank down by the friendly bush, with his back against a great uplift of stone, while Willet stood on a narrow shelf, supporting himself against a young evergreen. Tayoga disappeared silently upward.

The painful contraction in the chest of the lad grew easier, and black specks that had come before his eyes floated away. He returned to a firm land of reality, but he knew that his strength was not yet sufficient to permit of their going on. Tayoga came back in about ten minutes.

"I have found it," he said in his precise school English. "It is not much, but about three hundred feet from the top of the cliff is a slight hollow that will give support for our bodies. There we may lie down and Dagaëoga can sleep his weariness away."

"Camping securely between our enemies above and our enemies below," said Robert, his vivid imagination leaping up again. "It appeals to me to be so near them and yet well hidden, especially as we've left no trail on this rocky precipice that they can follow."

"It would help me a lot if they were not so close," laughed the hunter. "I don't need your contrasts, Robert, to make me rest. I'd like it better if they were a hundred miles away instead of only a few hundred yards. But lead on, Tayoga, and we'll say what we think of this inn of yours when we see it."

The hollow was not so bad, an indentation in the stone, extending back perhaps three feet, and almost hidden by dwarfed evergreens and climbing vines. It was not visible twenty feet above or below, and it would have escaped any eye less keen than that of the Onondaga.

"You've done well, Tayoga," said Willet. "There are better inns in Albany and New York, but it's a pretty good place to be found in the side of a cliff fifteen hundred feet above the water."

"We'll be snug enough here."

They crawled into the hollow, matted the vines carefully in front of them to guard against a slip or an incautious step, and then the three lay back against the wall, feeling an immense relief. While not so worn as Robert, the bones and muscles of Willet and Tayoga also were calling out for rest.

"I'm glad I'm here," said the hunter, and the others were forced to laugh at his intense earnestness.

Robert sank against the wall of the cliff, and he felt an immense peace. The arching stone over his head, and the dwarfed evergreens pushing themselves up where the least bit of soil was to be found, shut out the view before them, but it was as truly an inn to him at that moment as any he had ever entered. He closed his eyes in content and every nerve and muscle relaxed.

"Since you've shut down your lids, lad, keep 'em down," said the hunter. "Sleep will do you more good now than anything else."

But Robert quickly opened his eyes again.

"No," he said, "I think I'll eat first."

Willet laughed.

"I might have known that you would remember your appetite," he said.

"But it's not a bad idea. We'll all have a late supper."

They had venison and cold hominy from their knapsacks, and they ate with sharp appetites.

Then Robert let his lids fall again and in a few minutes was off to slumberland.

"Now you follow him, Tayoga," said Willet, "and I'll watch."

"But remember to awake me for my turn," said the Onondaga.

"You can rely upon me," said the hunter.

The disciplined mind of Tayoga knew how to compel sleep, and on this occasion it was needful for him to exert his will. In an incredibly brief time he was pursuing Robert through the gates of sleep to the blessed land of slumber that lay beyond, and the hunter was left alone on watch.

Willet, despite his long life in the woods, was a man of cultivation and refinement. He knew and liked the culture of the cities in its highest sense. His youth had not been spent in the North American wilderness. He had tasted the life of London and Paris, and long use and practice had not blunted his mind to the extraordinary contrasts between forest and town.

He appreciated now to the full their singular situation, practically hanging on the side of a mighty cliff, with cruel enemies seeking them below and equally cruel enemies waiting for them above.

The crevice in which they lay was little more than a dent in the stone wall. If either of the lads moved a foot and the evergreens failed to hold him he would go spinning a quarter of a mile straight down to the lake. The hunter looked anxiously in the dusk at the slender barrier, but he judged that it would be sufficient to stop any unconscious movement. Then he glanced at Robert and Tayoga and he was reassured. They were so tired and sleep had claimed them so completely that they lay like the dead. Neither stirred a particle, but in the silence the hunter heard their regular breathing.

The years had not made Willet a skeptic. While he did not accept unquestioningly all the beliefs of Tayoga, neither did he wholly reject them. It might well be true that earth, air, trees and other objects were inhabited by spirits good or bad. At least it was a pleasing belief and he had no proof that it was not true. Certainly, it seemed as if some great protection had been given to his comrades and himself in the last day or two. He looked up through the evergreen veil at the peaceful stars, and gave thanks and gratitude.

The night continued to lighten. New constellations swam into the heavenly blue, and the surface of the lake as far as eye could range was a waving mass of molten silver. The portion of the Indian fleet that had come back from the south was passing. It was almost precisely opposite the covert now and not more than three hundred yards from the base of the cliff. The light was so good that Willet distinctly saw the paddlers at work and the other warriors sitting upright. It was not possible

to read eyes at such a distance, but he imagined what they expressed and the thought pleased him. As Robert had predicted, the snugness of their hiding place with savages above and savages below heightened his feeling of comfort and safety. He was in sight and yet unseen. They would never think of the three hanging there in the side of the cliff. He laughed softly, under his breath, and he had never laughed with more satisfaction.

He tried to pick out Tandakora, judging that his immense size would disclose him, but the chief was not there. Evidently he was with the other part of the fleet and was continuing the vain search in the south. He laughed again and with the same satisfaction when he thought of the Ojibway's rage because the hated three had slipped once more through his fingers.

"An Ojibway has no business here in the province of New York, anyway," he murmured. "His place is out by the Great Lakes."

The canoes passed on, and, after a while, nothing was to be seen on the waves of Lake George. Even the drifting trees, including the one that had served them so well, had gone out of sight. The lake only expressed peace. It was as it might have been in the dawn of time with the passings of no human beings to vex its surface.

Something stirred in the bushes near the hunter. An eagle, with great spread of wing, rose from a nest and sailed far out over the silvery waters. Willet surmised that the nearness of the three had disturbed it, and he was sorry. He had a kindly feeling toward birds and beasts just then, and he did not wish to drive even an eagle from his home. He hoped that it would come back, and, after a while, it did so, settling upon its nest, which could not have been more than fifty yards away, where its mate had remained unmoving while the other went abroad to hunt.

There was no further sign of life from the people of the wilderness, and Willet sat silent a long time. Dawn came, intense and brilliant. He had hoped the day would be cloudy, and he would have welcomed rain, despite its discomfort, but the sun was in its greatest splendor, and the air was absolutely translucent. The lake and the mountains sprang out, sharp and clear. Far to the south the hunter saw a smudge upon the water which he knew to be Indian canoes. They were miles away, but it was evident that the French and Indians still held the lake, and there was no escape for the three by water. There had been some idea in Willet's mind of returning along the foot of the cliffs to their own little boat, but the brilliant day and the Indian presence compelled him to put it away.

The sun, huge, red and scintillating, swung clear of the mighty mountains, and the waters that had been silver in the first morning light turned to burning gold. In the shining day far came near and objects close by grew to twice their size. To attempt to pass the warriors in such a light would be like walking on an open plain, thought the hunter, and, always quick to decide, he took his resolution.

It was characteristic of David Willet that no matter what the situation he always made the best of it. His mind was a remarkable mingling of vigor, penetration and adaptability. If one had to wait, well, one had to wait and there was nothing else in it. He sank down in the little cove in the cliff and rested his back against the stony wall. He, Robert and Tayoga filled it, and his moccasined feet touched the dwarfed shrubs which made the thin green curtain before the opening. He realized more fully now in the intense light of a brilliant day what a slender shelf it was. Any one of them might have pitched from it to a sure death below. He was glad that the white lad and the red lad had been so tired that they lay like the dead. Their positions were exactly the same as when they sank to sleep. They had not stirred an inch in the night, and there was no sign now that they intended to awake any time soon. If they had gone to the land of dreams, they were finding it a pleasant country and they were in no hurry to return from it.

The giant hunter smiled. He had promised the Onondaga to awaken him at dawn, and he knew that Robert expected as much, but he would not keep his promise. He would let nature hold sway; when it chose to awaken them it could, and meanwhile he would do nothing. He moved just a little to make himself more comfortable and reclined patiently.

Willet was intensely grateful for the little curtain of evergreens. Without it the sharp eyes of the warriors could detect them even in the side of the lofty cliff. Only a few bushes stood between them and torture and death, but they stood there just the same. Time passed slowly, and the morning remained as brilliant as ever. He paid little attention to what was passing on the lake, but he listened with all the power of his hearing for anything that might happen on the cliff above them. He knew that the warriors were far from giving up the chase, and he expected a sign there. About two hours after sunrise it came. He heard the cry of a wolf, and then a like cry replying, but he knew that the sounds came from the throats of warriors. He pressed himself a little harder against the stony wall, and looked at his two young comrades. Their souls still wandered in the pleasant land of dreams and their bodies took no interest in what was occurring here. They did not stir.

In four or five minutes the two cries were repeated much nearer and the hunter fairly concentrated all his powers into the organ of hearing. Faint voices, only whispers, floated down to him, and he knew that the warriors were ranging along the cliff just above them. Leaning forward cautiously, he peeped above the veil of evergreens, and saw two dark faces gazing over the edge of the precipice. A brief look was enough, then he drew back and waited.

CHAPTER IV

THE DARING ATTEMPT

Willet knew from their paint that the faces looking down were those of Huron warriors, but he was quite sure they had not seen anything, and that the men would soon pass on. It was impossible even for the sharpest eyes to pick out the three behind the evergreen screen. Nevertheless he put his rifle forward, ready for an instant shot, if needed, but remained absolutely still, waiting for them to make the next move.

His sensitive hearing brought down the faint voices again and once or twice the light crush of footsteps. Evidently, the warriors were moving slowly along the edge of the cliff, talking as they went, and the hunter surmised that the three were the subject of their attention. He imagined their chagrin at the way in which the chase had vanished, and he laughed softly to think that he and the lads lay so near their enemies, but invisible and so well hidden.

The voices became fainter and died away, the soft crush of footsteps came no more, and the world returned to all the seeming of peace, without any trace of cruelty in it; but Willet was not lured by such an easy promise into any rash act. He knew the savages would come again, and that unbroken vigilance was the price of life. Once more he settled himself into the easiest position and watched. He had all the patience of the Indians themselves, to whom time mattered little, and since sitting there was the best thing to be done he was content to sit there.

Robert and Tayoga slept on. The morning was far gone, but they still rambled happily in the land of dreams, and showed no signs of a wish to return to earth. Willet thought it better that they should sleep on, because youthful bodies demanded it, and because the delay which would be hard for Robert especially would thus pass more easily. He was willing for them to stay longer in the far, happy land that they were visiting.

The sun slowly climbed the eastern arch of the heavens. The day lost none of its intense, vivid quality. The waters of the lake glowed in wonderful changing colors, now gold, now silver, and then purple or blue. Willet even in those hours of anxiety did not forget to steep his soul in the beauty of Lake George. His life was cast amid great and continuous dangers, and he had no family that he could call his own. Yet he had those whom he loved, and if he were to choose over again the land in which to live he would choose this very majestic land in which he now sat. As human life went, the great hunter was happy.

The sound of a shot, and then of a second, came from the cliff above. He heard no cry following them, no note of the war whoop, and, thinking it over, he concluded that the shots were fired by Indians hunting. Since the war, game about the lake had increased greatly, and the warriors, whether attached to the French army or roving at their own will, relied chiefly upon the forest for food. But the reports were significant. The Indian ring about them was not broken, and he measured their own supplies of venison and hominy.

A little after noon Tayoga awoke, and he awoke in the Indian fashion, without the noise of incautious movements or sudden words, but stepping at once from complete sleep to complete consciousness. Every faculty in him was alive.

"I have slept long, Great Bear, and it is late," he said.

"But not too late, Tayoga. There's nothing for us to do."

"Then the warriors are still above!"

"I heard two shots a little while ago. I think they came from hunters."

"It is almost certainly so, Great Bear, since there is nothing in this region for them to shoot at save ourselves, and no bullets have landed near us."

"Yours has been a peaceful sleep. Robert too is now coming out of his great slumber."

The white lad stirred and murmured a little as he awoke. His reentry into the world of fact was not quite as frictionless as that of his Indian comrade.

"Do not fall down the cliff while you stretch yourself, Dagaega," said the Onondaga.

"I won't, Tayoga. I've no wish to reach the lake in such fashion. I see by the sun that it's late. What happened while I slept?"

"Two great attacks by Tandakora and his men were beaten off by the Great Bear and myself. As we felt ourselves a match for them we did not consider it necessary to awaken you."

"But of course if you had been pushed a bit harder you would have called upon me. I'm glad you've concluded to use me for tipping the scales of a doubtful combat. To enter at the most strenuous moment is what I'm fitted for best."

"And if your weapons are not sufficient, Dagaega, you can make a speech to them and talk them to death."

The hunter smiled. He hoped the boys would always be willing to jest with each other in this manner. It was good to have high spirits in a crisis.

"Take a little venison and hominy, lads," he said, "because I think we're going to spend some time in this most spacious and hospitable inn of ours."

They ate and then were thirsty, but they had no water, although it floated peacefully in millions of gallons below.

"We're dry, but I think we're going to be much dryer," said Willet.

"We must go down one by one in the night for water," said Tayoga.

"We are to reckon on a long stay, then!" said Robert.

"Yes," said Willet, "and we might as well make ourselves at home. It's a great climb down, but we'll have to do it."

"If I could get up and walk about it would be easier," said Robert. "I think my muscles are growing a bit stiff from disuse."

"The descent for water to-night will loosen them up," said Willet philosophically.

It was a tremendously long afternoon, one of the longest that Robert ever spent, and his position grew cramped and difficult. He found some relief now and then in stretching his muscles, but there was nothing to assuage the intense thirst that assailed all three. Robert's throat and mouth were dry and burning, and he looked longingly at the lake that shimmered and gleamed below them. The waters, sparkling in their brilliant and changing colors, were cool and inviting. They bade him come, and his throat grew hotter and hotter, but he would make no complaint. He must endure it in silence all the afternoon, and all the next day too, if they should be held there.

Late in the afternoon they heard shots again, but they were quite sure that the reports, as before, were due to Indian hunters. Rogers with rangers might be somewhere in the region of the lakes, but they did not think he was anywhere near them. If a skirmish was occurring on the cliff they would hear the shouts of the combatants.

"The warriors will have a feast to-night," said Tayoga.

"And they will have plenty of water to drink," said Robert ruefully. "You remember that time when we were on the peak, and we found the spring in the slope?"

"But there is no spring here," said Tayoga. "We know that because we came up the cliff. There is no water for us this side of the lake."

The afternoon, long as it was, ended at last. The intense burning sunlight faded, and the cool, grateful shadows came. The three stirred in the niche, and Robert felt a little relief. But his throat and mouth were still dry and hard, and they pained him whenever he talked. Yet they forced themselves to eat a scant supper, although the food increased their thirst, but they knew that without it their strength would decrease, and they expected to obtain water in the dark.

The twilight passed, night came, but they waited with infinite patience refusing to move too soon, despite their great thirst. Instead, Tayoga suggested that he go to the crest of the cliff and see

if there was a possible way out for them in that direction. Willet agreed, and the Onondaga crept up, without sound, disappearing in a few seconds among the short bushes that hung in the face of the cliff.

Tayoga was a trailer of surpassing skill, and he reached the top without rustling a bush or sending a single pebble rolling. Then he peered cautiously over the rim and beheld a great fire burning not more than a hundred yards away. Thirty or forty warriors were sitting around it, eating. He did not see Tandakora among them, but he surmised, that it was an allied band and that the Ojibway was not far off.

The feast that the three had expected was in full progress. The hunt had been successful, and the Indians, with their usual appetites, were enjoying the results. They broiled or roasted great pieces of deer over the coals, and then devoured them to the last shred. But Tayoga saw that while the majority were absorbed in their pleasant task, a half dozen sentinels, their line extending on either side of the camp, kept vigilant watch. It would be impossible for the three to pass there. They would have to go down to the lake for water, and then hide in their niche.

Tayoga was about to turn back from the cliff, when he heard a shout that he knew was full of significance. He understood the meaning of every cry and he translated it at once into a note of triumph. It sounded like the whoop over the taking of a scalp or the capture of a prisoner, and his curiosity was aroused. Something had happened, and he was resolved to see what it was.

Several of the warriors by the fire replied to the whoop, and then it came again, nearer but with exactly the same note, that of triumph. The Onondaga flattened his body against the earth, and drew himself a little higher. In the dusk, his black eyes glowed with interest, but he knew that his curiosity would soon be gratified. Those who had sent forth the cry were swiftly approaching the camp.

Four warriors came through the undergrowth and they were pushing a figure before them. It was that of a man in a bedraggled and torn red uniform, his hands tied behind him, and all the color gone from his face. Powerful as was his self-control, Tayoga uttered a low cry of surprise. It was the young Englishman, Grosvenor, a prisoner of the hostile warriors, and in a most desperate case.

The Onondaga wondered how he had been taken, but whatever the way, he was in the hands of enemies who knew little mercy.

The warriors around the fire uttered a universal yell of triumph when they saw the captain, and many of them ran forward to meet Grosvenor, whirling their tomahawks and knives in his face, and dancing about as if mad with joy. It was a truly ferocious scene, the like of which was witnessed thousands of times in the great North American forests, and Tayoga, softened by long contact with high types of white men, felt pity. The light from the great fire fell directly on Grosvenor's face and showed its pallor. It was evident that he was weary through and through, but he tried to hold himself erect and he did not flinch when the sharp blades flashed close to his face. But Tayoga knew that his feelings had become blunted. Only the trained forest runner could keep steady in the face of such threats.

When they came near the fire, one of the warriors gave Grosvenor a push, and he fell amid cruel laughter. But he struggled to his feet again, stood a few minutes, and then sank down on a little hillock, where his captors left him alone for the present. Tayoga watched him thoughtfully. He knew that his presence in the Indian camp complicated their own situation. Robert would never hear of going away without an attempt at rescue and Tayoga's own good heart moved him to the same course. Yet it would be almost impossible to take the young Englishman from the center of the Indian camp.

Tayoga knew too what grief his news would cause to young Lennox, between whom and Grosvenor a great friendship had been formed. For the matter of that, both the Onondaga and the hunter also were very partial to the Englishman.

The warriors presently untied Grosvenor's hands and gave him some food. The captive ate a little—he had no appetite for more—and then tried to smooth out his hair and his clothing and to make himself more presentable. He also straightened his worn figure, and sat more erect. Tayoga gave silent approval. Here was a man! He might be a prisoner, and be in a most desperate plight, but

he would present the best possible face to his foes. It was exactly what an Onondaga or a Mohawk warrior would do, and the young Englishman, though he knew little of the forest, was living up to its traditions.

"If he has to die," reflected Tayoga, "he will die well. If his people hear that he has gone they will have no cause to be ashamed of the way in which he went. Here is the making of a great white warrior."

The Onondaga knew that Robert and Willet were now expecting him back, but his interest in Grosvenor kept him a while longer, watching at the cliff's rim. He thought it likely that Tandakora might come, and he had not long to wait. The huge Ojibway came striding through the bushes and into the circle of the firelight, his body bare as usual save for breech cloth, leggins and moccasins, and painted with the hideous devices so dear to the savage heart.

The warriors received him with deference, indicating clearly to Tayoga that they were under his authority, but without making any reply to their salutation he strode up to the prisoner, and, folding his arms across his mighty breast, regarded him, smiling cruelly. The Onondaga did not see the smile, but he knew it was there. The man would not be Tandakora if it were not. In that savage heart, the chivalry that so often marked the Indians of the higher type found no place.

Grosvenor, worn to the bone and dazed by the extraordinary and fearful situation in which he found himself, nevertheless straightened up anew, and gave back defiantly the stare of the gigantic and sinister figure that confronted him. Then Tayoga saw Tandakora raise his hand and strike the young Englishman a heavy blow in the face. Grosvenor fell, but sprang up instantly and rushed at the Ojibway, only to find himself before the point of a knife.

The young officer stood still a few minutes, then turned with dignity and sat down once more. Tayoga knew and appreciated his feelings. He had suffered exactly the same humiliation from Tandakora himself, and he meant, with all his soul, that some day the debt should be paid in full. Now in a vicarious way he took upon himself Grosvenor's debt also. The prisoner did not have experience in the woods, his great merits lay elsewhere, but he was the friend of Robert, therefore of Tayoga, and the Onondaga felt it only right that he should pay for both.

Tandakora sat down, a warrior handed him a huge piece of deer meat, and he began to eat. All the others, interrupted for a few minutes by the arrival of the chief, resumed the same pleasant occupation. Tayoga deciding that he had seen enough, began to climb down with great care. The descent was harder than the ascent, but he reached the niche, without noise, and the sight of him was very welcome to Robert and the hunter who had begun to worry over his absence, which was much longer than they had expected.

"Did you see the warriors, Tayoga?" asked young Lennox.

"I saw them, Dagaega. They are at the top of the cliff, only two or three hundred yards away; they have a good fire, and they are eating the game they killed in the day."

"And there is no chance for us to pass?"

"None to-night, Dagaega. Nor would we pass if we could."

"Why not? I see no reason for our staying here save that we have to do it."

"One is there, Dagaega, whom we cannot leave a prisoner in their hands."

"Who? It's not Black Rifle! Nor Rogers, the ranger! They would never let themselves be taken!"

"No, Dagaega, it is neither of those. But while I watched at the cliff's rim I saw the warriors bring in that young Englishman, Grosvenor, whom you know and like so well."

"What! Grosvenor! What could he have been doing in this forest!"

"That, I know not, Dagaega, save that he has been getting himself captured; how, I know not either, but I saw him brought in a prisoner. Tandakora came, while I watched, and smote the captive heavily in the face with his hand. That debt I take upon myself, in addition to my own."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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