

ALTSHELER JOSEPH ALEXANDER

THE RULERS OF THE
LAKES: A STORY OF
GEORGE AND CHAMPLAIN

Joseph Altsheler

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Story of George and Champlain**

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FOREWORD

"The Rulers of the Lakes" is a complete story, but it is also the third volume of the French and Indian War Series, following "The Hunters of the Hills" and "The Shadow of the North." Robert Lennox, Tayoga, Willet, and all the important characters in the earlier romances reappear.

CHAPTER I

THE HERALDS OF PERIL

The three, the white youth, the red youth, and the white man, lay deep in the forest, watching the fire that burned on a low hill to the west, where black figures flitted now and then before the flame. They did not stir or speak for a long time, because a great horror was upon them. They had seen an army destroyed a few days before by a savage but invisible foe. They had heard continually for hours the fierce triumphant yells of the warriors and they had seen the soldiers dropping by hundreds, but the woods and thickets had hid the foe who sent forth such a rain of death.

Robert Lennox could not yet stop the quiver of his nerves when he recalled the spectacle, and Willet, the hunter, hardened though he was to war, shuddered in spite of himself at the memory of that terrible battle in the leafy wilderness. Nor was Tayoga, the young Onondaga, free from emotion when he thought of Braddock's defeat, and the blazing triumph it meant for the western tribes, the enemies of his people.

They had turned back, availing themselves of their roving commission, when they saw that the victors were not pursuing the remains of the beaten army, and now they were watching the French and Indians. Fort Duquesne was not many miles away, but the fire on the hill had been built by a party of Indians led by a Frenchman, his uniform showing when he passed between eye and flame, the warriors being naked save for the breech cloth.

"I hope it's not St. Luc," said Robert.

"Why?" asked Willet. "He was in the battle. We saw him leading on the Indian hosts."

"I know. That was fair combat, I suppose, and the French used the tools they had. The Chevalier could scarcely have been a loyal son of France if he had not fought us then, but I don't like to think of him over there by the fire, leading a band of Indians who will kill and scalp women and children as well as men along the border."

"Nor I, either, though I'm not worried about it. I can't tell who the man is, but I know it's not St. Luc. Now I see him black against the blaze, and it's not the Chevalier's figure."

Robert suddenly drew a long breath, as if he had made a surprising recognition.

"I'm not sure," he said, "but I notice a trick of movement now and then reminding me of someone. I'm thinking it's the same Auguste de Courcelles, Colonel of France, whom we met first in the northern woods and again in Quebec. There was one memorable night, as you know, Dave, when we had occasion to mark him well."

"I think you're right, Robert," said the hunter. "It looks like De Courcelles."

"I know he is right," said Tayoga, speaking for the first time. "I have been watching him whenever he passed before the fire, and I cannot mistake him."

"I wonder what he's doing here," said Robert. "He may have been in the battle, or he may have come to Duquesne a day or two later."

"I think," said Willet, "that he's getting ready to lead a band against the border, now almost defenseless."

"He is a bad man," said Tayoga. "His soul is full of wickedness and cruelty, and it should be sent to the dwelling place of the evil minded. If Great Bear and Dagaega say the word I will creep through the thickets and kill him."

Robert glanced at him. The Onondaga had spoken in the gentle tones of one who felt grief rather than anger. Robert knew that his heart was soft, that in ordinary life none was kinder than Tayoga. And yet he was and always would be an Indian. De Courcelles had a bad mind, and he was also a danger that should be removed. Then why not remove him?

"No, Tayoga," said Willet. "We can't let you risk yourself that way. But we might go a little closer without any great danger. Ah, do you see that new figure passing before the blaze?"

"Tandakora!" exclaimed the white youth and the red youth together.

"Nobody who knows him could mistake him, even at this distance. I think he must be the biggest Indian in all the world."

"But a bullet would bring him crashing to earth as quickly as any other," said the Onondaga.

"Aye, so it would, Tayoga, but his time hasn't come yet, though it will come, and may we be present when your Manitou deals with him as he deserves. Suppose we curve to the right through these thick bushes, and from the slope there I think we can get a much better view of the band."

They advanced softly upon rising ground, and being able to approach two or three hundred yards, saw quite clearly all those around the fire. The white man was in truth De Courcelles, and the gigantic Indian, although there could have been no mistake about him, was Tandakora, the Ojibway. The warriors, about thirty in number, were, Willet thought, a mingling of Ojibways, Pottawattomies and Ottawas. All were in war paint and were heavily armed, many of them carrying big muskets with bayonets on the end, taken from Braddock's fallen soldiers. Three had small swords belted to their naked waists, not as weapons, but rather as the visible emblems of triumph.

As he looked, Robert's head grew hot with the blood pumped up from his angry heart. It seemed to him that they swaggered and boasted, although they were but true to savage nature.

"Easy, lad," said Willet, putting a restraining hand upon his shoulder.

"It's their hour. You can't deny that, and we'll have to bide a while."

"But will our hour ever come, Dave? Our army has been beaten, destroyed. The colonies and mother country alike are sluggish, and now have no plans, the whole border lies at the mercy of the tomahawk and the French power in Canada not only grows all the time, but is directed by able and daring men."

"Patience, lad, patience! Our strength is greater than that of the foe, although we may be slower in using it. But I tell you we'll see our day of triumph yet."

"They are getting ready to move," whispered the Onondaga. "The Frenchman and the band will march northward."

"And not back to Duquesne?" said Willet. "What makes you think so, Tayoga?"

"What is left for them to do at Duquesne? It will be many a day before the English and Americans come against it again."

"That, alas, is true, Tayoga. They're not needed longer here, nor are we. They've put out their fire, and now they're off toward the north, just as you said they would be. Tandakora and De Courcelles lead, marching side by side. A pretty pair, well met here in the forest. Now, I wish I knew where they were going!"

"Can't the Great Bear guess?" said the Onondaga.

"No, Tayoga. How should I?"

"Doesn't Great Bear remember the fort in the forest, the one called Refuge?"

"Of course I do, Tayoga! And the brave lads, Colden and Wilton and Carson and their comrades who defended it so long and so well. That's the most likely point of attack, and now, since Braddock's army is destroyed it's too far in the wilderness, too exposed, and should be abandoned. Suppose we carry a warning!"

Robert's eyes glistened. The idea made a strong appeal to him. He had mellow memories of those Philadelphia lads, and it would be pleasant to see them again. The three, in bearing the alarm, might achieve, too, a task that would lighten, in a measure, the terror along the border. It would be a relief at least to do something while the government disagreed and delayed.

"Let's start at once for Fort Refuge," he said, "and help them to get away before the storm breaks. What do you say, Tayoga?"

"It is what we ought to do," replied the Onondaga, in his precise English of the schools.

"Come," said Willet, leading the way, and the three, leaving the fire behind them, marched rapidly into the north and east. Two miles gone, and they stopped to study the sun, by which they meant to take their reckoning.

"The fort lies there," said Willet, pointing a long finger, "and by my calculations it will take us about five days and nights to reach it, that is, if nothing gets in our way."

"You think, then," asked Robert, "that the French and Indians are already spreading a net?"

"The Indians might stop, Robert, my lad, to exult over their victory and to celebrate it with songs and dances, but the French leaders, whose influence with them is now overwhelming, will push them on. They will want to reap all the fruits of their great triumph by the river. I've often told you about the quality of the French and you've seen for yourself. Ligneris, Contrecoeur, De Courcelles, St. Luc and the others will flame like torches along the border."

"And St. Luc will be the most daring, skillful and energetic of them all."

"It's a fact that all three of us know, Robert, and now, having fixed our course, we must push ahead with all speed. De Courcelles, Tandakora and the warriors are on the march, too, and we may see them again before we see Fort Refuge."

"The forest will be full of warriors," said Tayoga, speaking with great gravity. "The fort will be the first thought of the western barbarians, and of the tribes from Canada, and they will wish to avenge the defeat they suffered before it."

It was not long until they had ample proof that the Onondaga's words were true. They saw three trails in the course of the day, and all of them led toward the fort. Willet and Tayoga, with their wonderful knowledge of the forest, estimated that about thirty warriors made one trail, about twenty another, and fifteen the smallest.

"They're going fast, too," said the hunter, "but we must go faster."

"They will see our traces," said Tayoga, "and by signaling to one another they will tell all that we are in the woods. Then they will set a force to destroy us, while the greater bands go on to take the fort."

"But we'll pass 'em," said Robert confidently. "They can't stop us!"

Tayoga and the hunter glanced at him. Then they looked at each other and smiled. They knew Robert thoroughly, they understood his vivid and enthusiastic nature which, looking forward with so much confidence to success, was apt to consider it already won, a fact that perhaps contributed in no small measure to the triumph wished so ardently. At last, the horror of the great defeat in the forest and the slaughter of an army was passing. It was Robert's hopeful temperament and brilliant mind that gave him such a great charm for all who met him, a charm to which even the fifty wise old sachems in the vale of Onondaga had not been insensible.

"No, Robert," said the Great Bear gravely, "I don't think anything can stop us. I've a prevision that De Courcelles and Tandakora will stand in our way, but we'll just brush 'em out of it."

They had not ceased to march at speed, while they talked, and now Tayoga announced the presence of a river, an obstacle that might prove formidable to foresters less expert than they. It was lined on both sides with dense forest, and they walked along its bank about a mile until they came to a comparatively shallow place where they forded it in water above their knees. However, their leggings and moccasins dried fast in the midsummer sun, and, experiencing no discomfort, they pressed forward with unabated speed.

All the afternoon they continued their great journey to save those at the fort, fording another river and a half dozen creeks and leaping across many brooks. Twice they crossed trails leading to the east and twice other trails leading to the west, but they felt that all of them would presently turn and join in the general march converging upon Fort Refuge. They were sure, too, that De Courcelles, Tandakora and their band were marching on a line almost parallel with them, and that they would offer the greatest danger.

Night came, a beautiful, bright summer night with a silky blue sky in which multitudes of silver stars danced, and they sought a covert in a dense thicket where they lay on their blankets, ate venison, and talked a little before they slept.

Robert's brilliant and enthusiastic mood lasted. He could see nothing but success. With the fading of the great slaughter by the river came other pictures, deep of hue, intense and charged with pleasant memories. Life recently had been a great panorama to him, bright and full of changes. He could not keep from contrasting his present position, hid in a thicket to save himself from cruel savages, with those vivid days at Quebec, his gorgeous period in New York, and the gay time with sporting youth in the cozy little capital of Williamsburg.

But the contrast, so far from making him unhappy, merely expanded his spirit. He rejoiced in the pleasures that he had known and adapted himself to present conditions. Always influenced greatly by what lay just around him, he considered their thicket the best thicket in which he had ever been hidden. The leaves of last year, drifted into little heaps on which they lay, were uncommonly large and soft. The light breeze rustling the boughs over his head whispered only of peace and ease, and the two comrades, who lay on either side of him, were the finest comrades any lad ever had.

"Tayoga," he asked, and his voice was sincerely earnest, "can you see on his star Tododaho, the founder and protector of the great league of the Hodenosaunee?"

The young Onondaga, his face mystic and reverential, gazed toward the west where a star of great size and beauty quivered and blazed.

"I behold him," he replied. "His face is turned toward us, and the wise serpents lie, coil on coil, in his hair. There are wreaths of vapor about his eyes, but I can see them shining through, shining with kindness, as the mighty chief, who went away four hundred years ago, watches over us. His eyes say that so long as our deeds are just, so long as we walk in the path that Manitou wishes, we shall be victorious. Now a cloud passes before the star, and I cannot see the face of Tododaho, but he has spoken, and it will be well for us to remember his words."

He sank back on his blanket and closed his eyes as if he, too, in thought, had shot through space to some great star. Robert and Willet were silent, sharing perhaps in his emotion. The religion and beliefs of the Indian were real and vital to them, and if Tododaho promised success to Tayoga then the promise would be fulfilled.

"I think, Robert," said Willet, "that you'd better keep the first watch.

Wake me a little while before midnight, and I'll take the second."

"Good enough," said Robert. "I think I can hear any footfall Tandakora may make, if he approaches."

"It is not enough to hear the footfall of the Ojibway," said Tayoga, opening his eyes and sitting up. "To be a great sentinel and forester worthy to be compared with the greatest, Dagaega must hear the whisper of the grass as it bends under the lightest wind, he must hear the sound made by the little leaf as it falls, he must hear the ripple in the brook that is flowing a hundred yards from us, and he must hear the wild flowers talking together in the night. Only then can Dagaega call himself a sentinel fit to watch over two such sleeping foresters as the Great Bear and myself."

"Close your eyes and go to sleep without fear," said Robert in the same vein. "I shall hear Tandakora breathing if he comes within a mile of us, at the same distance I shall hear the moccasin of De Courcelles, when it brushes against last year's fallen leaf, and at half a mile I shall see the look of revenge and cruelty upon the face of the Ojibway seeking for us."

Willet laughed softly, but with evident satisfaction.

"You two boys are surely the greatest talkers I've heard for a long time," he said. "You have happy thoughts and you put 'em into words. If I didn't know that you had a lot of deeds, too, to your credit, I'd call you boasters, but knowing it, I don't. Go ahead and spout language, because you're only lads and I can see that you enjoy it."

"I'm going to sleep now," said Tayoga, "but Dagaega can keep on talking and be happy, because he will talk to himself long after we have gone to the land of dreams."

"If I do talk to myself," said Robert, "it's because I like to talk to a bright fellow, and I like to have a bright fellow talk to me. Sleep as soundly as you please, you two, because while you're sleeping I can carry on an intellectual conversation."

The hunter laughed again.

"It's no use, Tayoga," he said. "You can't put him down. The fifty wise old sachems in the vale of Onondaga proclaimed him a great orator, and great orators must always have their way."

"It is so," said the Onondaga. "The voice of Dagaega is like a river. It flows on forever, and like the murmur of the stream it will soothe me to deeper slumbers. Now I sleep."

"And so do I," said the hunter.

It seemed marvelous that such formal announcements should be followed by fact, but within three minutes both went to that pleasant land of dreams of which they had been talking so lightly. Their breathing was long and regular and, beyond a doubt, they had put absolute faith in their sentinel. Robert's mind, so quick to respond to obvious confidence, glowed with resolve. There was no danger now that he would relax the needed vigilance a particle, and, rifle in the hollow of his arm, he began softly to patrol the bushes.

He was convinced that De Courcelles and Tandakora were not many miles away—they might even be within a mile—and memory of a former occasion, somewhat similar, when Tayoga had detected the presence of the Ojibway, roused his emulation. He was determined that, while he was on watch, no creeping savage should come near enough to strike.

Hand on the hammer and trigger of his rifle he walked in an ever widening circle about his sleeping comrades, searching the thickets with eyes, good naturally and trained highly, and stopping now and then to listen. Two or three times he put his ear to the earth that he might hear, as Tayoga had bade him, the rustle of leaves a mile away.

His eager spirit, always impatient for action, found relief in the continuous walking, and the steady enlargement of the circle in which he traveled, acquiring soon a radius of several hundred yards. On the western perimeter he was beyond the deep thicket, and within a magnificent wood, unchoked by undergrowth. Here the trees stood up in great, regular rows, ordered by nature, and the brilliant moonlight clothed every one of them in a veil of silver. On such a bright night in summer the wilderness always had for him an elusive though powerful beauty, but he felt its danger. Among the mighty trunks, with no concealing thickets, he could be seen easily, if prowling savages were near, and, as he made his circles, he always hastened through what he called to himself his park, until he came to the bushes, in the density of which he was well hidden from any eye fifty feet away.

It was an hour until midnight, and the radius of his circle had increased another fifty yards, when he came again to the great spaces among the oaks and beeches. Halfway through and he sank softly down behind the trunk of a huge oak. Either in fact or in a sort of mental illusion, he had heard a moccasin brush a dry leaf far away. The command of Tayoga, though spoken in jest, had been so impressive that his ear was obeying it. Firm in the belief that his own dark shadow blurred with the dark trunk, and that he was safe from the sight of a questing eye, he lay there a long time, listening.

In time, the sound, translated from fancy into fact, came again, and now he knew that it was near, perhaps not more than a hundred yards away, the rustling of a real moccasin against a real dry leaf. Twice and thrice his ear signaled to his brain. It could not be fancy. It was instead an alarming fact.

He was about to creep from the tree, and return to his comrades with word that the enemy was near, but he restrained his impulse, merely crouching a little lower that his dark shadow might blend with the dark earth as well as the dark trunk. Then he heard several rustlings and the very low murmur of voices.

Gradually the voices which had been blended together, detached themselves and Robert recognized those of Tandakora and De Courcelles. Presently they came into the moonlight, followed

by the savage band, and they passed within fifty yards of the youth who lay in the shelter of the trunk, pressing himself into the earth.

The Frenchman and the Ojibway were talking with great earnestness and Robert's imagination, plumbing the distance, told him the words they said. Tandakora was stating with great emphasis that the three whose trail they had found had gone on very fast, obviously with the intention of warning the garrison at the fort, and if they were to be cut off the band must hasten, too. De Courcelles was replying that in his opinion Tandakora was right, but it would not be well to get too far ahead. They must throw out flankers as they marched, but there was no immediate need of them. If the band spread out before dawn it would be sufficient.

Robert's fancy was so intense and creative that, beginning by imagining these things so, he made them so. The band therefore was sure to go on without searching the thickets on either right or left at present, and all immediate apprehension disappeared from his mind. Tandakora and De Courcelles were in the center of the moonlight, and although knowing them evil, he was surprised to see how very evil their faces looked, each in its own red or white way. He could remember nothing at that moment but their wickedness, and their treacherous attacks upon his life and those of his friends, and the memory clothed them about with a hideous veil through which only their cruel souls shone. It was characteristic of him that he should always see everything in extreme colors, and in his mind the good were always very good and the bad were very bad.

Hence it was to him an actual physical as well as mental relief, when the Frenchman, the Ojibway and their band, passing on, were blotted from his eyes by the forest. Then he turned back to the thicket in which his comrades lay, and bent over them for the purpose of awakening them. But before he could speak or lay a hand upon either, Tayoga sat up, his eyes wide open.

"You come with news that the enemy has been at hand!"

"Yes, but how did you know it?"

"I see it in your look, and, also when I slept, the Keeper of Dreams whispered it in my ear. An evil wind, too, blew upon my face and I knew it was the breath of De Courcelles and Tandakora. They have been near."

"They and their entire band passed not more than four hundred yards to the eastward of us. I lay in the bush and saw them distinctly. They're trying to beat us to Fort Refuge."

"But they won't do it, because we won't let 'em," said Willet, who had awakened at the talking. "We'll make a curve and get ahead of 'em again. You watched well, Robert."

"I obeyed the strict injunctions of Tayoga," said young Lennox, smiling faintly. "He bade me listen so intently that I should hear the rustle of a dry leaf when a moccasin touched it a mile away in the forest. Well, I heard it, and going whence the sound came I saw De Courcelles, Tandakora and their warriors pass by."

"You love to paint pictures with words, Robert. I see that well, but 'tis not likely that you exaggerate so much, after all. I'm sorry you won't get your share of sleep, but we must be up and away."

"I'll claim a double portion of it later on, Dave, but I agree with you that what we need most just now is silence and speed, and speed and silence."

The three, making a curve toward the east, traveled at high speed through the rest of the night, Tayoga now leading and showing all his inimitable skill as a forest trailer. In truth, the Onondaga was in his element. His spirits, like Robert's, rose as dangers grew thicker around them, and he had been affected less than either of his comrades by the terrible slaughter of Braddock's men. Mentally at least, he was more of a stoic, and woe to the vanquished was a part of the lore of all the Indian tribes. The French and their allies had struck a heavy blow and there was nothing left for the English and Americans to do but to strike back. It was all very simple.

Day came, and at the suggestion of Willet they rested again in the thickets. Robert was not really weary, at least the spirit uplifted him, though he knew that he must not overtask the body. His

enthusiasm, based upon such a sanguine temperament, continued to rise. Again he foresaw glittering success. They would shake off all their foes, reach the fort in time, and lead the garrison and the people who had found refuge there safely out of the wilderness.

Where they lay the bushes were very dense. Before hiding there they had drunk abundantly at a little brook thirty or forty feet away, and now they ate with content the venison that formed their breakfast. Over the vast forest a brilliant sun was rising and here the leaves and grass were not burned much by summer heat. It looked fresh and green, and the wind sang pleasantly through its cool shadows. It appealed to Robert. With his plastic nature he was all for the town when he was in town, and now in the forest he was all for the forest.

"I can understand why you love it so well," he said to Tayoga, waving his hand at the verdant world that curved about them.

"My people and their ancestors have lived in it for more generations than anyone knows," said the Onondaga, his eyes glistening. "I have been in the white man's schools, and the white man's towns, and I have seen the good in them, but this is my real home. This is what I love best. My heart beats strongest for the forest."

"My own heart does a lot of beating for the woods," said Willet, thoughtfully, "and it ought to do so, I've spent so many years of my life in them—happy years, too. They say that no matter how great an evil may be some good will come out of it, and this war will achieve one good end."

"What is that, Great Bear?"

"It will delay the work of the ax. Men will be so busy with the rifle that they will have mighty little time for the ax. The trees will stop falling for a while, and the forest will cover again the places where it has been cleared away. Why, the game itself will increase!"

"How long do you think we'd better stay here?" asked Robert, his eager soul anxious to be on again.

"Patience! patience, my lad," replied Willet. "It's one thing that you'll have to practice. We don't want to run squarely into De Courcelles, Tandakora and their band, and meanwhile we're very comfortable here, gathering strength. Look at Tayoga there and learn from him. If need be he could lie in the same place a week and be happy."

"I hope the need will not come," laughed the Onondaga.

Robert felt the truth of Willet's words, and he put restraint upon himself, resolved that he would not be the first to propose the new start. He had finished breakfast and he lay on his elbow gazing up through the green tracery of the bushes at the sky. It was a wonderful sky, a deep, soft, velvet blue, and it tinted the woods with glorious and kindly hues. It seemed strange to Robert, at the moment, that a forest so beautiful should bristle with danger, but he knew it too well to allow its softness and air of innocence to deceive him.

It was almost the middle of the morning when Willet gave the word to renew the march, and they soon saw they had extreme need of caution. Evidence that warriors had passed was all about them. Now and then they saw the faint imprint of a moccasin. Twice they found little painted feathers that had fallen from a headdress or a scalplock, and once Tayoga saw a red bead lying in the grass where it had dropped, perhaps, from a legging.

"We shall have to pass by Tandakora's band and perhaps other bands in the night," said Tayoga.

"It's possible, too," said Willet, "that they know we're on our way to the fort, and may try to stop us. Our critical time will soon be at hand."

They listened throughout the afternoon for the signals that bands might make to one another, but heard nothing. Willet, in truth, was not surprised.

"Silence will serve them best," he said, "and they'll send runners from band to band. Still, if they do give signals we want to know it."

"There is a river, narrow but deep, about five miles ahead," said Tayoga, "and we'll have to cross it on our way to the fort. I think it is there that Tandakora will await us."

"It's pretty sure to be the place," said Willet. "Do you know where there's a ford, Tayoga?"

"There is none."

"Then we'll have to swim for it. That's bad. But you say it's a narrow stream?"

"Yes, Great Bear. Two minutes would carry us across it."

"Then we must find some place for the fording where the trees lean over from either side and the shadow is deep."

Tayoga nodded, and, after that, they advanced in silence, redoubling their caution as they drew near to the river. The night was not so bright as the one that had just gone before, but it furnished sufficient light for wary and watching warriors to see their figures at a considerable distance, and, now and then, they stopped to search the thickets with their own eyes. No wind blew, their footsteps made no sound and the intense stillness of the forest wove itself into the texture of Robert's mind. His extraordinary fancy peopled it with phantoms. There was a warrior in every bush, but, secure in the comradeship of his two great friends, he went on without fear.

"There is no signal," whispered Tayoga at last. "They do not even imitate the cry of bird or beast, and it proves one thing, Great Bear."

"So it does, Tayoga."

"You know as well as I do, Great Bear, that they make no sound because they have set the trap, and they do not wish to alarm the game which they expect to walk into it."

"Even so, Tayoga. Our minds travel in the same channel."

"But the game is suspicious, nevertheless," continued Tayoga in his precise school English, "and the trap will not fall."

"No, Tayoga, it won't fall, because the game won't walk into it."

"Tandakora will suffer great disappointment. He is a mighty hunter and he has hunted mighty game, but the game that he hunts now is more wary than the stag or the bear, and has greater power to strike back than either."

"Well spoken, Tayoga."

The hunter and the Onondaga looked at each other in the dark and laughed. Their spirits were as wild as the wilderness, and they were enjoying the prospect of the Ojibway's empty trap. Robert laughed with them. Already in his eager mind success was achieved and the crossing was made. After a while he saw dim silver through the trees, and he knew they had come to the river. Then the three sank down and approached inch by inch, sure that De Courcelles, Tandakora and their forces would be watching on the other side.

CHAPTER II

THE KINDLY BRIDGE

The thicket in which the three lay was of low but dense bushes, with high grass growing wherever the sun could reach it. In the grass tiny wild flowers, purple, blue and white were in bloom, and Robert inhaled their faint odor as he crouched, watching for the enemy who sought his life. It was a forest scene, the beauty of which would have pleased him at any other time, nor was he wholly unconscious of it now. The river itself, as Tayoga had stated, was narrow. At some points it did not seem to be more than ten or fifteen yards across, but it flowed in a slow, heavy current, showing depths below. Nor could he see, looking up and down the stream, any prospect of a ford.

Robert's gaze moved in an eager quest along the far shore, but he detected no sign of Tandakora, the Frenchman or their men. Yet he felt that Tayoga and Willet were right and that foes were on watch there. It was inevitable, because it was just the place where they could wait best for the three. Nevertheless he asked, though it was merely to confirm his own belief.

"Do you think they're in the brush, Dave?"

"Not a doubt of it, Robert," the hunter whispered back. "They haven't seen us yet, but they hope to do so soon."

"And we also, who haven't seen them yet, hope to do so soon."

"Aye, Robert, that's the fact. Ah, I think I catch a glimpse of them now. Tayoga, wouldn't you say that the reflection in the big green bush across the river is caused by a moonbeam falling on a burnished rifle barrel?"

"Not a doubt of it, Great Bear. Now, I see the rifle itself! And now I see the hands that hold it. The hands belong to a live warrior, an Ojibway, or a Pottowattomie. He is kneeling, waiting for a shot, if he should find anything to shoot at."

"I see him, too, Tayoga, and there are three more warriors just beyond him. It's certainly the band of Tandakora and De Courcelles, and they've set a beautiful trap for three who will not come into it."

"It is so, Great Bear. One may build a splendid bear trap but of what use is it if the bear stays away?"

"But what are we to do?" asked Robert. "We can't cross in the face of such a force."

"We'll go down the stream," replied Willet, "keeping hidden, of course, in the thickets, and look for a chance to pass. Of course, they've sent men in both directions along the bank, but we may go farther than any of them."

He led the way, and they went cautiously through the thickets two or three miles, all the time intently watching the other shore. Twice they saw Indian sentinels on watch, and knew that they could not risk the passage. Finally they stopped and waited a full two hours in the thickets, the contest becoming one of patience.

Meanwhile the night was absolutely silent. The wind was dead, and the leaves hung straight down. The deep, slow current of the river, although flowing between narrow banks, made no noise, and Robert's mind, colored by the conditions of the moment, began to believe that the enemy had gone away. It was impossible for them to wait so long for foresters whom they did not see and who might never come. Then he dismissed imagination and impression, and turned with a wrench to his judgment. He knew enough of the warriors of the wilderness to know that nobody could wait longer than they. Patience was one of the chief commodities of savage life, because their habits were not complex, and all the time in the world was theirs.

He took lessons, too, from Tayoga and Willet. The Onondaga, an Indian himself, had an illimitable patience, and Willet, from long practice, had acquired the ability to remain motionless for

hours at a time. He looked at them as they crouched beside him, still and silent figures in the dusk, apparently growing from the earth like the bushes about them, and fixed as they were. The suggestion to go on that had risen to his lips never passed them and he settled into the same immobility.

Another hour, that was three to Robert, dragged by, and Tayoga led the way again down the stream, Robert and the hunter following without a word. They went a long distance and then the Onondaga uttered a whisper of surprise and satisfaction.

"A bridge!" he said.

"Where? I don't see it," said Robert.

"Look farther where the stream narrows. Behold the great tree that has been blown down and that has fallen from bank to bank?"

"I see it now, Tayoga. It hasn't been down long, because the leaves upon it are yet green."

"And they will hide us as we cross. Tododaho on his star has been watching over us, and has put the bridge here for our use in this crisis."

Tayoga's words were instinct with faith. He never doubted that the great Onondaga who had gone away four hundred years ago was serving them now in this, their utmost, need. Robert and Willet glanced at each other. They, too, believed. An electric current had passed from Tayoga to them, and, for the moment, their trust in Tododaho was almost as great as his. At the same time, a partial darkening of the night occurred, clouds floating up from the south and west, and dimming the moon and stars.

"How far would you say it is from one shore to the other?" asked Robert of Willet.

"About sixty feet," replied the hunter, "but it's a long tree, and it will easily bear the weight of the three of us all the way. We may be attacked while we're upon it, but if so we have our rifles."

"It is the one chance that Tododaho has offered to us, and we must take it," said Tayoga, as he led the way upon the natural bridge. Robert followed promptly and Willet brought up the rear.

The banks were high at that point, and the river flowed rather more swiftly than usual. Robert, ten feet beyond the southern shore, looked down at a dark and sullen current, seeming in the dim moonlight to have interminable depths. It was only about fifteen feet below him, but his imagination, heightened by time and place, made the distance three or fourfold greater.

He felt a momentary fear lest he slip and fall into the dark stream, and he clung tightly to an upthrust bough.

The fallen tree swayed a little with the weight of the three, but Robert knew that it was safe. It was not the bridge that they had to fear, but what awaited them on the farther shore. Tayoga stopped, and the tense manner in which he crouched among the boughs and leaves showed that he was listening with all his ears.

"Do you hear them?" Robert whispered.

"Not their footsteps," Tayoga whispered back, "but there was a soft call in the woods, the low cry of a night bird, and then the low cry of another night bird replying. It was the warriors signaling to one another, the first signal they have given."

"I heard the cries, too," said Willet, behind Robert, "and no doubt Tandakora and De Courcelles feel they are closing in on us. It's a good thing this tree was blown down but lately, and the leaves and boughs are so thick on it."

"It was so provided by Tododaho in our great need," said Tayoga.

"Do you mean that we're likely to be besieged while we're still on our bridge?" asked Robert, and despite himself he could not repress a shiver.

"Not a siege exactly," replied Willet, "but the warriors may pass on the farther shore, while we're still in the tree. That's the reason why I spoke so gratefully of the thick leaves still clinging to it."

"They come even now," said Tayoga, in the lowest of whispers, and the three, stopping, flattened themselves like climbing animals against the trunk of the tree, until the dark shadow of their bodies blurred against the dusk of its bark. They were about halfway across and the distance of the stream

beneath them seemed to Robert to have increased. He saw it flowing black and swift, and, for a moment, he had a horrible fear lest he should fall, but he tightened his grasp on a bough and turning his eyes away from the water looked toward the woods.

"The warriors come," whispered Tayoga, and Robert, seeing, also flattened himself yet farther against the tree, until he seemed fairly to sink into the bark. Their likeness to climbing animals increased, and it would have required keen eyes to have seen the three as they lay along the trunk, deep among the leaves and boughs thirty feet from either shore.

Tandakora, De Courcelles and about twenty warriors appeared in the forest, walking a little distance back from the stream, where they could see on the farther bank, and yet not be seen from it. The moon was still obscured, but a portion of its light fell directly upon Tandakora, and Robert had never beheld a more sinister figure. The rays, feeble, were yet strong enough to show his gigantic figure, naked save for the breech cloth, and painted horribly. His eyes, moreover, were lighted up either in fact or in Robert's fancy with a most wicked gleam, as if he were already clutching the scalps of the three whom he was hunting so savagely.

"Now," whispered Tayoga, "Tododaho alone can save us. He holds our fate in the hollow of his hand, but he is merciful as well as just."

Robert knew their danger was of the uttermost, but often, in the extreme crises of life and death, one may not feel until afterward that fate has turned on a hair.

De Courcelles was just behind Tandakora, but the light did not fall so clearly upon him. The savage had a hideous fascination for Robert, and the moon's rays seemed to follow him. Every device and symbol painted upon the huge chest stood out like carving, and all the features of the heavy, cruel face were disclosed as if by day. But Robert noticed with extraordinary relief that the eyes so full of menace were seeking the three among the woods on the farther shore, and were paying little attention to the tree. It was likely that neither Tandakora nor De Courcelles would dream that they were upon it, but it was wholly possible that the entire band should seek to cross that way, and reach the southern shore in the quest of their prey.

The three in the depths of the boughs and leaves did not stir. The rising wind caused the foliage to rustle about them again. It made the tree sway a little, too, and as Robert could not resist the temptation to look downward once, the black surface of the river seemed to be dancing back and forth beneath him. But, save the single glance, his eyes all the while were for the Ojibway and the Frenchman.

Tandakora and De Courcelles came a little closer to the bank. Apparently they were satisfied that no one was on the farther shore, and that they were in no danger of a bullet, as presently they emerged fully into the open, and stood there, their eyes questing. Then they looked at the bridge, and, for a few instants, Robert was sure they would attempt the crossing upon it. But in a minute or so they walked beyond it, and then he concluded that the crisis had passed. After all, it would be their plan to hold their own shore, and prevent the passage of the three.

Yet Tandakora and De Courcelles were cruelly deliberate and slow. They walked not more than fifteen feet beyond the end of the tree, and then stood a while talking. Half of the warriors remained near them, standing stolidly in the background, and the others went on, searching among the woods and thickets. The two glanced at the tree as they talked. Was it possible that they would yet come back and attempt the crossing? Again Robert quivered when he realized that in truth the crisis had not passed, and that Tandakora and De Courcelles might reconsider. Once more, he pressed his body hard against the tree, and held tightly to a small bough which arched an abundant covering of leaves over his head. The wind rustled among those leaves, and sang almost in words, but whether they told him that Tandakora and De Courcelles would go on or come upon the bridge he did not know.

Five minutes of such intense waiting that seemed nearer to an hour, and the leaders, with the band, passed on, disappearing in the undergrowth that lined the stream. But for another five minutes the three among the boughs did not stir. Then Tayoga whispered over his shoulder:

"Great is the justice of Tododaho and also great is his mercy. I did not doubt that he would save us. I felt within me all the time that he would cause Tandakora and De Courcelles to leave the bridge and seek us elsewhere."

Robert was not one to question the belief of Tayoga, his sagacious friend. If it was not Tododaho who had sent their enemies away then it was some other spirit, known by another name, but in essence the same. His whole being was permeated by a sort of shining gratitude.

"At times," he said, "it seems that we are favored by our God, who is your Manitou."

"Now is the time for us to finish the crossing," said Willet, alive to the needs of the moment. "Lead, Tayoga, and be sure, Robert, not to give any bough a shake that might catch the eye of a lurking savage in the forest."

The Onondaga resumed the slow advance, so guiding his movements that he might neither make the tree quiver nor bring his body from beneath the covering of leaves. Robert and the hunter followed him in close imitation. Thus they gained the bank, and the three drew long breaths of deep and intense relief, as they stepped upon firm ground. But they could not afford to linger. Tayoga still in front, they plunged into the depths of the forest, and advanced at speed a half hour, when they heard a single faint cry behind them.

"They've found our trail at the end of the natural bridge," said Willet.

"It is so," said Tayoga, in his precise school English.

"And they're mad, mad clean through," said the hunter. "That single cry shows it. If they hadn't been so mad they'd have followed our trail without a sound. I wish I could have seen the faces of the Ojibway and the Frenchman when they came back and noticed our trace at the end of the tree. They're mad in every nerve and fiber, because they did not conclude to go upon it. It was only one chance in a thousand that we'd be there, they let that one chance in a thousand go, and lost."

The great frame of the hunter shook with silent laughter. But Robert, in very truth, saw the chagrin upon the faces of Tandakora and De Courcelles. His extraordinary imagination was again up and leaping and the picture it created for him was as glowing and vivid as fact. They had gone some distance, and then they had come back, continually searching the thickets of the opposite shore with their powerful and trained eyesight. They had felt disappointed because they had seen no trace of the hunted, who had surely come by this time against the barrier of the river. Frenchman and Ojibway were in a state of angry wonder at the disappearance of the three who had vanished as if on wings in the air, leaving no trail. Then Tandakora had chanced to look down. His eye in the dusky moonlight had caught the faint imprint of a foot on the grass, perhaps Robert's own, and the sudden shout had been wrenched from him by his anger and mortification. Now Robert, too, was convulsed by internal laughter.

"It was our great luck that they did not find us on the tree," he said.

"No, it was not luck," said Tayoga.

"How so?"

"They did not come upon the tree because Tododaho would not let them."

"I forgot. You're right, Tayoga," said Robert sincerely.

"We'll take fresh breath here for five minutes or so," said the hunter, "and then we'll push on at speed, because we have not only the band of Tandakora and De Courcelles to fear. There are others in the forest converging on Fort Refuge."

"Great Bear is right. He is nearly always right," said Tayoga. "We have passed one barrier, but we will meet many more. There is also danger behind us. Even now the band is coming fast."

They did not move until the allotted time had passed. Again Robert's mind painted a picture in glowing colors of the savage warriors, led by Tandakora and De Courcelles, coming at utmost speed upon their trail, and his muscles quivered, yet he made no outward sign. To the eye he was as calm as Tayoga or Willet.

An hour after the resumption of their flight they came to a shallow creek with a gravelly bed, a creek that obviously emptied into the river they had crossed, and they resorted to the commonest and most effective of all devices used by fugitives in the North American wilderness who wished to hide their trail. They waded in the stream, and, as it led in the general direction in which they wished to go, they did not leave the water until they had covered a distance of several miles. Then they emerged upon the bank and rested a long time.

"When Tandakora and De Courcelles see our traces disappear in the creek and fail to reappear on the other side," said Willet, "they'll divide their band and send half of it upstream, and half downstream, looking everywhere for our place of entry upon dry land, but it'll take 'em a long time to find it. Robert, you and Tayoga might spread your blankets, and if you're calm enough, take a nap. At any rate, it won't hurt you to stretch yourselves and rest. I can warn you in time, when an enemy comes."

The Onondaga obeyed without a word, and soon slept as if his will had merely to give an order to his five senses to seek oblivion. Robert did not think he could find slumber, but closing his eyes in order to rest better, he drifted easily into unconsciousness. Meanwhile Willet watched, and there was no better sentinel in all the northern wilderness. The wind was still blowing lightly, and the rustling of the leaves never ceased, but he would have detected instantly any strange note, jarring upon that musical sound.

The hunter looked upon the sleeping lads, the white and the red. Both had a powerful hold upon his affection. He felt that he stood to them almost in the relationship of a father, and he was proud, too, of their strength and skill, their courage and intelligence. Eager as he was to reach Fort Refuge and save the garrison and people there, he was even more eager to save the two youths from harm.

He let them sleep until the gold of the morning sun was gilding the eastern forest, when the three drew further upon their supplies of bread and venison and once more resumed the journey through the pathless woods towards their destination. There was no interruption that day, and they felt so much emboldened that near sundown Tayoga took his bow and arrows, which he carried as well as his rifle, and stalked and shot a deer, the forest being full of game. Then they lighted a fire and cooked delicate portions of the spoil in a sheltered hollow. But they did not eat supper there. Instead, they took portions of the cooked food and as much as they could conveniently carry of the uncooked, and, wading along the bed of a brook, did not stop until they were three or four miles from the place in which they had built the fire. Then they sat down and ate in great content.

"We will fare well enough," said Willet, "if it doesn't rain. 'Tis lucky for us that it's the time of year when but little rain falls."

"But rain would be as hard upon those who are hunting us as upon us," said Robert.

"'Tis true, lad, and I'm glad to see you always making the best of everything. It's a spirit that wins."

"And now, Great Bear," said Tayoga, his eyes twinkling, "you have talked enough. It is only Dagaega who can talk on forever."

"That's so about Robert, but what do you mean by saying I've talked enough?"

"It is time for you to sleep. You watched last night while we slept, and now your hour has come. While you slumber Dagaega and I will be sentinels who will see and hear everything."

"Why the two of you?"

"Because it takes both of us to be the equal of the Great Bear."

"Come, now, Tayoga, that's either flattery or irony, but whatever it is I'll let it pass. I'll own that I'm sleepy enough and you two can arrange the rest between you."

He was asleep very soon, his great figure lying motionless on his blanket, and the two wary lads watched, although they sat together, and, at times, talked. Both knew there was full need for vigilance. They had triumphed for the moment over Tandakora and De Courcelles, but they expected many other lions in the path that led to Fort Refuge. It was important also, not only that they should arrive

there, but that they should arrive in time. It was true, too, that they considered the danger greater by night than by day. In the day it was much easier to see the approach of an enemy, but by night one must be very vigilant indeed to detect the approach of a foe so silent as the Indian.

The two did not yet mention a division of the watch. Neither was sleepy and they were content to remain awake much longer. Moreover, they had many things of interest to talk about and also they indulged in speculation.

"Do you think it possible, Tayoga," asked Robert, "that the garrison, hearing of the great cloud now overhanging the border, may have abandoned the fort and gone east with the refugees?"

"No, Dagaega, it is not likely. It is almost certain that the young men from Philadelphia have not heard of General Braddock's great defeat. French and savage runners could have reached them with the news, could have taunted them from the forest, but they would not wish to do so; they seek instead to gather their forces first, to have all the effect of surprise, to take the fort, its garrison and the people as one takes a ripe apple from a tree, just when it is ready to fall."

"That rout back there by Duquesne was a terrible affair for us, Tayoga, not alone because it uncovers the border, but because it heartens all our enemies. What joy the news must have caused in Quebec, and what joy it will cause in Paris, too, when it reaches the great French capital! The French will think themselves invincible and so will their red allies."

"They would be invincible, Dagaega, if they could take with them the Hodenosaunee."

"And may not this victory of the French and their tribes at Duquesne shake the faith of the Hodenosaunee?"

"No, Dagaega. The fifty sachems will never let the great League join Onontio. Champlain and Frontenac have been gone long, but their shadows still stand between the French and the Hodenosaunee, and there is Quebec, the lost Stadacona of the Ganegaono, whom you call the Mohawks. As long as the sun and stars stand in the heavens the Keepers of the Eastern Gate are the enemies of the French. Even now, as you know, they fight by the side of the Americans and the English."

"It is true. I was wrong to question the faith of the great nations of the Hodenosaunee. If none save the Mohawks fight for us it is at least certain that they will not fight against us, and even undecided, while we're at present suffering from disaster, they'll form a neutral barrier, in part, between the French and us. Ah, that defeat by Duquesne! I scarcely see yet how it happened!"

"A general who made war in a country that he did not know, with an enemy that he did not understand."

"Well, we'll learn from it. We were too sure. Pride, they say, goes before a fall, but they ought to add that those who fall can rise again. Perhaps our generals will be more cautious next time, and won't walk into any more traps. But I foresee now a long, a very long war. Nearly all of Europe, if what comes across the Atlantic be true, will be involved in it, and we Americans will be thrown mostly upon our own resources. Perhaps it will weld our colonies together and make of them a great nation, a nation great like the Hodenosaunee."

"I think it will come to pass, Dagaega. The mighty League was formed by hardship and self-denial. A people who have had to fight long and tenaciously for themselves grows strong. So it has been said often by the fifty sachems who are old and very wise, and who know all that it is given to men to know. Did you hear anything stirring in the thicket, Dagaega?"

"I did, Tayoga. I heard a rustling, the sound of very light footfalls, and I see the cause."

"A black bear, is it not, seeing what strangers have invaded the bush! Now, he steals away, knowing that we are the enemies most to be dreaded by him. Doubtless there are other animals among the bushes, watching us, but we neither see nor hear them. It is time to divide the watch, for we must save our strength, and it is not well for both to remain awake far into the night."

It was arranged that Robert should sleep first and the Onondaga gave his faithful promise to awaken him in four hours. The two lads meant to take the burden of the watch upon themselves, and, unless Willet awoke, of his own accord, he was to lie there until day.

Robert lay down upon his blanket, went to sleep in an instant, and the next instant Tayoga awakened him. At least it seemed but an instant, although the entire four hours had passed. Tayoga laughed at the dubious look on his face.

"The time is up. It really is," he said. "You made me give my faithful promise. Look at the moon, and it will tell you I am no teller of a falsehood."

"I never knew four hours to pass so quickly before. Has anything happened while I slept?"

"Much, Dagaega. Many things, things of vast importance."

"What, Tayoga! You astonish me. The forest seems quiet."

"And so it is. But the revolving earth has turned one-sixth of its way upon itself. It has also traveled thousands and thousands of miles in that vast circle through the pathless void that it makes about the sun. I did not know that such things happened until I went to the white man's school at Albany, but I know them now, and are they not important, hugely important?"

"They're among the main facts of the universe, but they happen every night."

"Then it would be more important if they did not happen?"

"There'd be a big smash of some kind, but as I don't know what the kind would be I'm not going to talk about it. Besides, I can see that you're making game of me, Tayoga. I've lived long enough with Indians to know that they love their joke."

"We are much like other people. I think perhaps that in all this great world, on all the continents and islands, people, whether white or red, brown or black, are the same."

"Not a doubt of it. Now, stop your philosophizing and go to sleep."

"I will obey you, Dagaega," said Tayoga, and in a minute he was fast asleep.

Robert watched his four hours through and then awakened the Onondaga, who was sentinel until day. When they talked they spoke only in whispers lest they wake Willet, whose slumbers were so deep that he never stirred. At daybreak Tayoga roused Robert, but the hunter still slept, his gigantic bulk disposed at ease upon his blanket. Then the two lads seized him by either shoulder and shook him violently.

"Awake! Awake, Great Bear!" Tayoga chanted in his ear. "Do you think you have gone into a cave for winter quarters? Lo, you have slept now, like the animal for which you take your name! We knew you were exhausted, and that your eyes ached for darkness and oblivion, but we did not know it would take two nights and a day to bring back your wakefulness. Dagaega and I were your true friends. We watched over you while you slept out your mighty sleep and kept away from you the bears and panthers that would have devoured you when you knew it not. They came more than once to look at you, and truly the Great Bear is so large that he would have made breakfast, dinner and supper for the hungriest bear or panther that ever roamed the woods."

Willet sat up, sleep still heavy on his eyelids, and, for a moment or two, looked dazed.

"What do you mean, you young rascals?" he asked. "You don't say that I've been sleeping here two nights and a day?"

"Of course you have," replied Robert, "and I've never seen anybody sleep so hard, either. Look under your blanket and see how your body has actually bored a hole into the ground."

Then Willet began to laugh.

"I see, it's a joke," he said, "though I don't mind. You're good lads, but it was your duty to have awakened me in the night and let me take my part in the watch."

"You were very tired," said Robert, "and we took pity on you. Moreover, the enemy is all about us, and we knew that the watch must be of the best. Tayoga felt that at such a time he could trust me alone, and I felt with equal force that I could trust him alone. We could not put our lives in the hands of a mere beginner."

Willet laughed again, and in the utmost good humor.

"As I repeat, you're sprightly lads," he said, "and I don't mind a jest that all three of us can enjoy. Now, for breakfast, and, truth to say, we must take it cold. It will not do to light another fire."

They ate deer meat, drank water from a brook, and then, refreshed greatly by their long rest, started at utmost speed for Fort Refuge, keeping in the deepest shadows of the wilderness, eager to carry the alarm to the garrison, and anxious to avoid any intervening foe. The day was fortunate, no enemy appearing in their path, and they traveled many miles, hope continually rising that they would reach the fort before a cloud of besiegers could arrive.

Thus they continued their journey night and day, seeing many signs of the foe, but not the foe himself, and the hope grew almost into conviction that they would pass all the Indian bands and gain the fort first.

CHAPTER III

THE FLIGHT

They were within twenty-four hours of the fort, when they struck a new trail, one of the many they had seen in the forest, but Tayoga observed it with unusual attention.

"Why does it interest you so much?" asked Robert. "We've seen others like it and you didn't examine them so long."

"This is different, Dagaega. Wait a minute or two more that I may observe it more closely."

Young Lennox and Willet stood to one side, and the Onondaga, kneeling down in the grass, studied the imprints. It was late in the afternoon, and the light of the red sun fell upon his powerful body, and long, refined, aristocratic face. That it was refined and aristocratic Robert often felt, refined and aristocratic in the highest Indian way. In him flowed the blood of unnumbered chiefs, and, above all, he was in himself the very essence and spirit of a gentleman, one of the finest gentlemen either Robert or Willet had ever known. Tayoga, too, had matured greatly in the last year under the stern press of circumstance. Though but a youth in years he was now, in reality, a great Onondaga warrior, surpassed in skill, endurance and courage by none. Young Lennox and the hunter waited in supreme confidence that he would read the trail and read it right.

Still on his knees, he looked up, and Robert saw the light of discovery in the dusky eyes.

"What do you read there, Tayoga?" he asked.

"Six men have passed here."

"Of what tribe were they?"

"That I do not know, save as it concerns one."

"I don't understand you."

"Five were of the Indian race, but of what tribe I cannot say, but the sixth was a white man."

"A Frenchman. It certainly can't be De Courcelles, because we've left him far behind, and I hope it's not St. Luc. Maybe it's Jumonville, De Courcelles' former comrade. Still, it doesn't seem likely that any of the Frenchmen would be with so small a band."

"It is not one of the Frenchmen, and the white man was not with the band."

"Now you're growing too complex for my simple mind, Tayoga. I don't understand you."

"It is one trail, but the Indians and the white man did not pass over it at the same time. The Indian imprints were made seven or eight hours ago, those of the white man but an hour or so since. Stoop down, Great Bear, and you will see that it is true."

"You're right, Tayoga," said Willet, after examining minutely.

"It follows, then," said the young Onondaga, in his precise tones, "that the white man was following the red men."

"It bears that look."

"And you will notice, Great Bear, and you, too, Dagaega, that the white man's moccasin has made a very large imprint. The owner of the foot is big. I know of none other in the forest so big except the Great Bear himself."

"Black Rifle!" exclaimed Robert, with a flash of insight.

"It can be none other."

"And he's following on the trail of these Indians, intending to ambush them when they camp tonight. He hunts them as we would hunt wolves."

Robert shuddered a little. It was a time when human life was held cheap in the wilderness, but he could not bring himself to slay except in self-defense.

"We need Black Rifle," said Willet, "and they'll need him more at the fort. We've an hour of fair sunlight left, and we must follow this trail as fast as we can and call him back. Lead the way, Tayoga."

The young Onondaga, without a word, set out at a running walk, and the others followed close behind. It was a plain trail. Evidently the warriors had no idea that they were followed, and the same was true of Black Rifle. Tayoga soon announced that both pursuers and pursued were going slowly, and, when the last sunlight was fading, they stopped at the crest of a hill and called, imitating first the cry of a wolf, and then the cry of an owl.

"He can't be more than three or four hundred yards away," said Willet, "and he may not understand either cry, but he's bound to know that they mean something."

"Suppose we stand out here where he can see us," said Robert. "He must be lurking in the thickets just ahead."

"The simplest way and so the right way," said Willet. "Come forth, you lads, where the eyes of Black Rifle may look upon you."

The three advanced from the shelter of the woods, and stood clearly outlined in an open space. A whistle came from a thicket scarce a hundred yards before them, and then they saw the striking figure of the great, swarthy man emerging. He came straight toward them, and, although he would not show it in his manner, Robert saw a gleam of gladness in the black eyes.

"What are you doing here, you three?" he asked.

"Following you," replied Robert in his usual role of spokesman.

"Why?"

"Tayoga saw the trail of the Indians overlaid by yours. We knew you were pursuing them, and we've come to stop you."

"By what right?"

"Because you're needed somewhere else. You're to go with us to Fort Refuge."

"What has happened?"

"Braddock's army was destroyed near Fort Duquesne. The general and many of his officers were killed. The rest are retreating far into the east. We're on our way to Fort Refuge to save the garrison and people if we can, and you're to go with us."

Black Rifle was silent a moment or two. Then he said:

"I feared Braddock would walk into an ambush, but I hardly believed his army would be annihilated. I don't hold it against him, because he turned my men and me away. How could I when he died with his soldiers?"

"He was a brave man," said Robert.

"I'm glad you found me. I'll leave the five Indians, though I could have ambushed 'em within the hour. The whole border must be ablaze, and they'll need us bad at Fort Refuge."

The three, now four, slept but little that night and they pressed forward all the next day, their anxiety to reach the fort before an attack could be made, increasing. It did not matter now if they arrived exhausted. The burden of their task was to deliver the word, to carry the warning. At dusk, they were within a few miles of the fort. An hour later they noticed a thread of blue smoke across the clear sky.

"It comes from the fort," said Tayoga.

"It's not on fire?" said Robert, aghast.

"No, Dagaega, the fort is not burning. We have come in time. The smoke rises from the chimneys."

"I say so, too," said Willet. "Unless there's a siege on now, we're ahead of the savages."

"There is no siege," said Tayoga calmly. "Tododaho has held the warriors back. Having willed for us to arrive first, nothing could prevent it."

"Again, I think you're right, Tayoga," said Robert, "and now for the fort. Let our feet devour the space that lies between."

He was in a mood of high exaltation, and the others shared his enthusiasm. They went faster than ever, and soon they saw rising in the moonlight the strong palisade and the stout log houses

within it. Smoke ascended from several chimneys, and, uniting, made the line across the sky that they had beheld from afar. From their distant point of view they could not yet see the sentinels, and it was hard to imagine a more peaceful forest spectacle.

"At any rate, we can save 'em," said Robert.

"Perhaps," said Willet gravely, "but we come as heralds of disaster occurred, and of hardships to come. It will be a task to persuade them to leave this comfortable place and plunge into the wilderness."

"It's fortunate," said Robert, "that we know Colden and Wilton and Carson and all of them. We warned 'em once when they were coming to the place where the fort now is, and they didn't believe us, but they soon learned better. This time they'll know that we're making no mistake."

As they drew near they saw the heads of four sentinels projecting above the walls, one on each side of the square. The forest within rifle shot had also been cleared away, and Black Rifle spoke words of approval.

"They've learned," he said. "The city lads with the white hands have become men."

"A fine crowd of boys," said Willet, with hearty emphasis. "You'll see 'em acting with promptness and courage. Now, we want to tell 'em we're here without getting a bullet for our pains."

"Suppose you let me hail 'em," said Robert. "I'll stand on the little hill there—a bullet from the palisades can't reach me—and sing 'em a song or two."

"Go ahead," said the hunter.

Standing at his full height, young Lennox began to shout:

"Awake! Awake! Up! Up! We're friends! We're friends!"

His musical voice had wonderful carrying power, and the forest, and the open space in which the fort stood, rang with the sound. Robert became so much intoxicated with his own chanting that he did not notice its effect, until Willet called upon him to stop.

"They've heard you!" exclaimed the hunter. "Many of them have heard you! All of them must have heard you! Look at the heads appearing above the palisade!"

The side of the palisade fronting them was lined with faces, some the faces of soldiers and others the faces of civilians. Robert uttered a joyful exclamation.

"There's Colden!" he exclaimed. "The moonlight fell on him just then, and I can't be mistaken."

"And if my eyes tell me true, that's young Wilton beside him," said the hunter. "But come, lads, hold up your hands to show that we're friends, and we'll go into the fort."

They advanced, their hands, though they grasped rifles, held on high, but Robert, exalted and irrepressible, began to sing out anew:

"Hey, you, Colden! And you, too, Wilton and Carson! It's fine to see you again, alive and well."

There was silence on the wall, and then a great shout of welcome.

"It's Lennox, Robert Lennox himself!" cried someone.

"And Willet, the big hunter!"

"And there's Black Rifle, too!"

"And Tayoga, the Onondaga!"

"Open the gate for 'em! Let 'em come in, in honor."

The great gate was thrown wide, and the four entered quickly, to be surrounded at once by a multitude, eager for news of the outside world, from which they had been shut off so long. Torches, held aloft, cast a flickering light over young soldiers in faded uniforms, men in deerskin, and women in home-made linsey. Colden, and his two lieutenants, Wilton and Carson, stood together. They were thin, and their faces brown, but they looked wiry and rugged. Colden shook Robert's hand with great energy.

"I'm tremendously glad to see you," he exclaimed, "and I'm equally glad to see Mr. Willet, the great Onondaga, and Black Rifle. You're the first messengers from the outside world in more

than a month. What news of victory do you bring? We heard that a great army of ours was marching against Duquesne."

Robert did not answer. He could not, because the words choked in his throat, and a silence fell over the crowd gathered in the court, over soldiers and men and women and children alike. A sudden apprehension seized the young commander and his lips trembled.

"What is it, Lennox, man?" he exclaimed. "Why don't you speak? What is it that your eyes are telling me?"

"They don't tell of any victory," replied Robert slowly.

"Then what do they tell?"

"I'm sorry, Colden, that I have to be the bearer of such news. I would have told it to you privately, but all will have to know it anyhow, and know it soon. There has been a great battle, but we did not win it."

"You mean we had to fall back, or that we failed to advance? But our army will fight again soon, and then it will crush the French and Indian bands!"

"General Braddock's army exists no longer."

"What? It's some evil jest. Say it's not true, Lennox!"

"It's an evil jest, but it's not mine, Colden. It's the jest of fate. General Braddock walked into a trap—it's twice I've told the terrible tale, once to Black Rifle and now to you—and he and his army were destroyed, all but a fragment of it that is now fleeing from the woods."

The full horror of that dreadful scene in the forest returned to him for a moment, and, despite himself, he made tone and manner dramatic. A long, deep gasp, like a groan, came from the crowd, and then Robert heard the sound of a woman on the outskirts weeping.

"Our army destroyed!" repeated Colden mechanically.

"And the whole border is laid bare to the French and Indian hosts," said Robert. "Many bands are converging now upon Fort Refuge, and the place cannot be held against so many."

"You mean abandon Fort Refuge?"

"Aye, Colden, it's what wiser men than I say, Dave here, and Tayoga, and Black Rifle."

"The lad is speaking you true, Captain Colden," said Willet. "Not only must you and your garrison and people leave Fort Refuge, but you must leave it tomorrow, and you must burn it, too."

Again Robert heard the sound of a woman weeping in the outskirts of the crowd.

"We held it once against the enemy," protested Colden.

"I know," said Willet, "but you couldn't do it now. A thousand warriors, yes, more, would gather here for the siege, and the French themselves would come with cannon. The big guns would blow your palisades to splinters. Your only safety is in flight. I know it's a hard thing to destroy the fort that your own men built, but the responsibility of all these women and children is upon you, and it must be done."

"So it is, Mr. Willet. I'm not one to gainsay you. I think we can be ready by daylight. Meanwhile you four rest, and I'll have food served to you. You've warned us and we can count upon you now to help us, can't we?"

"To the very last," said Willet.

After the first grief among the refugees was over the work of preparation was carried on with rapidity and skill, and mostly in silence. There were enough men or well grown boys among the settlers to bring the fighting force up to a hundred. Colden and his assistants knew much of the forest now, and they were willing and anxious, too, to take the advice of older and far more experienced men like Black Rifle and Willet.

"The fighting spirit bottled up so long in our line has surely ample opportunity to break out in me," said Wilton to Robert toward morning. "As I've told you before, Lennox, if I have any soldierly quality it's no credit of mine. It's a valor suppressed in my Quaker ancestors, but not eradicated."

"That is, if you fight you fight with the sword of your fathers and not your own."

"You put it well, Lennox, better than I could have stated it myself.

What has become of that wonderful red friend of yours?"

"Tayoga? He has gone into the forest to see how soon we can expect Tandakora, De Courcelles and the Indian host."

The Onondaga returned at dawn, saying that no attack need be feared before noon, as the Indian bands were gathering at an appointed place, and would then advance in great force.

"They'll find us gone by a good six hours," said Willet, "and we must make every minute of those six hours worth an ordinary day, because the warriors, wild at their disappointment, will follow, and at least we'll have to beat off their vanguard. It's lucky all these people are used to the forest."

Just as the first rim of the sun appeared they were ready. There were six wagons, drawn by stout horses, in which they put the spare ammunition and their most valuable possessions. Everybody but the drivers walked, the women and children in the center of the column, the best of the scouts and skirmishers in the woods on the flanks. Then at the command of Colden the whole column moved into the forest, but Tayoga, Willet and a half dozen others ran about from house to house, setting them on fire with great torches, making fifty blazes which grew rapidly, because the timbers were now dry, uniting soon into one vast conflagration.

Robert and Colden, from the edge of the forest, watched the destruction of Fort Refuge. They saw the solid log structures fall in, sending up great masses of sparks as the burning timbers crashed together. They saw the strong blockhouse go, and then they saw the palisade itself flaming. Colden turned away with a sigh.

"It's almost like burning your own manor house which you built yourself, and in which you expected to spend the remainder of your life," he said. "It hurts all the more, too, because it's a sign that we've lost the border."

"But we'll come back," said Robert, who had the will to be cheerful.

"Aye, so we will," said Colden, brightening. "We'll sweep back these French and Indians, and we'll come here and rebuild Fort Refuge on this very spot. I'll see to it, myself. This *is* a splendid place for a fort, isn't it, Lennox?"

"So it is," replied Robert, smiling, "and I've no doubt, Colden, that you'll supervise the rebuilding of Fort Refuge."

And in time, though the interval was great, it did come to pass.

Colden was not one to be gloomy long, and there was too much work ahead for one to be morbid. Willet had spoken of the precious six hours and they were, in, truth, more precious than diamonds. The flight was pushed to the utmost, the old people or the little children who grew weary were put in the wagons, and the speed they made was amazing for the wilderness. Robert remained well in the rear with Tayoga, Willet and Black Rifle, and they continually watched the forest for the first appearance of the Indian pursuit. That, in time, it would appear they never doubted, and it was their plan to give the vanguard of the warriors such a hot reception that they would hesitate. Besides the hundred fighting men, including the soldiers and boys large enough to handle arms, there were about a hundred women and children. Colden marched with the main column, and Wilton and Carson were at the rear. Black Rifle presently went ahead to watch lest they walk into an ambush, while Tayoga, Robert and Willet remained behind, the point from which the greatest danger was apprehended.

"Isn't it likely," asked Robert, "that the Indians will see the light of the burning fort, and that it will cause them to hasten?"

"More probably it will set them to wondering," replied the hunter, "and they may hesitate. They may think a strong force has come to rescue the garrison and people."

"But whatever Tandakora and the officer of Onontio may surmise," said Tayoga, "our own course is plain, and that is to march as fast as we can."

"And hope that a body of Colonial troops and perhaps the Mohawks will come to help us," said Willet. "Colonel William Johnson, as we all know, is alert and vigorous, and it would be like him to

push westward for the protection of settlers and refugees. "T'would be great luck, Tayoga, if that bold young friend of yours, Daganoweda, the Mohawk chief, should be in this region."

"It is not probable," said the Onondaga. "The Keepers of the Eastern Gate are likely to remain in their own territory. They would not, without a strong motive, cross the lands of the other nations of the Hodenosaunee, but it is not impossible. They may have such a motive."

"Then let us hope that it exists!" exclaimed Robert fervently. "The sight of Daganoweda and a hundred of his brave Mohawks would lift a mighty load from my mind."

Tayoga smiled. A compliment to the Mohawks was a compliment to the entire Hodenosaunee, and therefore to the Onondagas as well. Moreover the fame and good name of the Mohawks meant almost as much to him as the fame and good name of the Onondagas.

"The coming of Daganoweda would be like the coming of light itself," he said.

They were joined by Wilton, who, as Robert saw, had become a fine forest soldier, alert, understanding and not conceited because of his knowledge. Robert noted the keen, wary look of this young man of Quaker blood, and he felt sure that in the event of an attack he would be among the very best of the defenders.

"The spirit of battle, bursting at last in you, Will, from its long confinement, is likely to have full chance for gratification," he said.

"So it will, Lennox, and I tremble to think of what that released spirit may do. If I achieve any deed of daring and valor bear in mind that it's not me, but the escaped spirit of previous ages taking violent and reckless charge of my weak and unwilling flesh."

"Suppose we form a curtain behind our retreating caravan," said Robert. "A small but picked force could keep back the warriors a long time, and permit our main column to continue its flight unhampered."

"A good idea! an idea most excellent!" exclaimed Willet.

As a matter of form, the three being entirely independent in their movements, the suggestion was made to Colden, and he agreed at once and with thorough approval. Thirty men, including Willet, Robert, Tayoga and Wilton, were chosen as a fighting rear guard, and the hunter himself took command of it. Spreading out in a rather long line to prevent being flanked, they dropped back and let the train pass out of sight on its eastern flight.

They were now about ten miles from the burned fort, and, evidences of pursuit not yet being visible, Robert became hopeful that the caution of Tandakora and De Courcelles would hold them back a long time. He and Tayoga kept together, but the thirty were stretched over a distance of several hundred yards, and now they retreated very slowly, watching continually for the appearance of hostile warriors.

"They have, of course, a plain trail to follow," Robert said. "One could not have a better trace than that made by wagon wheels. It's just a matter of choice with them whether they come fast or not."

"I think we are not likely to see them before the night," said Tayoga. "Knowing that the column has much strength, they will prefer the darkness and ambush."

"But they're not likely to suspect the screen that we have thrown out to cover the retreat."

"No, that is the surprise we have prepared for them. But even so, we, the screen, may not come into contact with them before the dark."

Tayoga's calculation was correct. The entire day passed while the rear guard retreated slowly, and all the aspects of the forest were peaceful. They saw no pursuing brown figures and they heard no war cry, nor the call of one band to another. Yet Robert felt that the night would bring a hostile appearance of some kind or other. Tandakora and De Courcelles when they came upon the site of the burned fort would not linger long there, but would soon pass on in eager pursuit, hoping to strike a fleeing multitude, disorganized by panic. But he smiled to himself at the thought that they would strike first against the curtain of fire and steel, that is, the thirty to whom he belonged.

When night came he and Tayoga were still together and Willet was a short distance away. He watched the last light of the sun die and then the dusk deepen, and he felt sure that the approach of the pursuing host could not be long delayed. His eyes continually searched the thickets and forest in front of them for a sight of the savage vanguard.

"Can you see Tododaho upon his star?" he asked Tayoga in all earnestness.

"The star is yet faint in the heavens," replied the Onondaga, "and I can only trace across its face the mists and vapors which are the snakes in the hair of the great chieftain, but Tododaho will not desert us. We, his children, the Onondagas, have done no harm, and I, Tayoga, am one of them. I feel that all the omens and presages are favorable."

The reply of the Onondaga gave Robert new strength. He had the deepest respect for the religion of the Hodenosaunee, which he felt was so closely akin to his own, and Tododaho was scarcely less real to him than to Tayoga. His veins thrilled with confidence that they would drive back, or at least hold Tandakora and De Courcelles, if they came.

The last and least doubt that they would come was dispelled within an hour when Tayoga suddenly put a hand upon his arm, and, in a whisper, told him to watch a bush not more than a hundred yards away.

"A warrior is in the thicket," he said. "I would not have seen him as he crept forward had not a darker shadow appeared upon the shadow of the night. But he is there, awaiting a chance to steal upon us and fire."

"And others are near, seeking the same opportunity."

"It is so, Dagaega. The attack will soon begin."

"Shall we warn Willet?"

"The Great Bear has seen already. His eyes pierce the dark and they have noted the warrior, and the other warriors. Lie down, Dagaega, the first warrior is going to fire."

Robert sank almost flat. There was a report in the bush, a flash of fire, and a bullet whistled high over their heads. From a point on their right came an answering report and flash, and the warrior in the bush uttered his death cry. Robert, who was watching him, saw him throw up his hands and fall.

"It was the bullet of the Great Bear that replied," said Tayoga. "It was rash to fire when such a marksman lay near. Now the battle begins."

The forest gave forth a great shout, penetrating and full of menace, coming in full volume, and indicating to the shrewd ears of Tayoga the presence of two or three hundred warriors. Robert knew, too, that a large force was now before them. How long could the thirty hold back the Indian hosts? Yet he had the word of Tayoga that Tododaho looked down upon them with benignity and that all the omens and presages were favorable. There was a flash at his elbow and a rifle sang its deadly song in his ear. Then Tayoga uttered a sigh of satisfaction.

"My bullet was not wasted," he said.

Robert waited his opportunity, and fired at a dusky figure which he saw fall. He was heart and soul averse to bloodshed, but in the heat of action, and in self-defense, he forgot his repugnance. He was as eager now for a shot as Tayoga, Willet, or any other of the thirty. Tayoga, who had reloaded, pulled trigger again and then a burst of firing came from the savage host. But the thirty, inured to the forest and forest warfare, were sheltered well, and they took no hurt. The Indians who were usually poor marksmen, fired many bullets after their fashion and wasted much lead.

"They make a great noise, inflict no wounds, and do not advance," whispered Tayoga to Robert.

"Doubtless they are surprised much at meeting our line in the forest, and think us many times more numerous than we are."

"And we may fill their minds with illusions," said Robert hopefully. "They may infer from our strong resistance that reinforcements have come, that the Mohawks are here, or that Colonel Johnson himself has arrived with Colonial troops."

"It may be that Waraiyageh will come in time," said Tayoga. "Ah, they are trying to pass around our right flank."

His comment was drawn by distant shots on their right. The reports, however, did not advance, and the two, reassured, settled back into their places. Three or four of the best scouts and skirmishers were at the threatened point, and they created the effect of at least a dozen. Robert knew that the illusion of a great force confronting them was growing in the Indian mind, and his heart glowed with satisfaction. While they held the savage host the fugitive train was putting fresh miles between them and pursuit. Suddenly he raised his own rifle and fired. Then he uttered a low cry of disappointment.

"It was Tandakora himself," he said. "I couldn't mistake his size, but it was only a glimpse, and I missed."

"The time of the Ojibway has not come," said Tayoga with conviction, "but it will come before this war is over."

"The sooner the better for our people and yours, Tayoga."

"That is so, Dagaëoga."

They did not talk much more for a long time because the combat in the forest and the dark deepened, and the thirty were so active that there was little time for question or answer. They crept back and forth from bush to bush and from log to log, firing whenever they saw a flitting form, and reloading with quick fingers. Now and then Willet, or some other, would reply with a defiant shout to the yells of the warriors, and thus, while the combat of the sharpshooters surged to and fro in the dim light, many hours passed.

But the thirty held the line. Robert knew that the illusion of at least a hundred, doubtless more, was created in the minds of the warriors, and, fighting with their proverbial caution, they would attempt no rush. He had a sanguine belief now that they could hold the entire host until day, and then the fleeing train would be at least twenty miles farther on. A few of the thirty had been wounded, though not badly enough to put them out of the combat, but Robert himself had not been touched. As usual with him in moments of success or triumph his spirits flamed high, and his occasional shout of defiance rose above the others.

"In another hour," said Tayoga, "we must retreat."

"Why?" asked Robert. "When we're holding 'em so well?"

"By day they will be able to discover how few we are, and then, although they may not be able to force our front, they will surely spread out and pass around our flanks. I do not see the Great Bear now, but I know he thinks so, too, and it will not be long before we hear from him."

Within five minutes Willet, who was about a hundred yards away, uttered a low whistle, which drew to him Robert, Tayoga and others, and then he passed the word by them to the whole line to withdraw swiftly, but in absolute silence, knowing that the longer Tandakora and De Courcelles thought the defenders were in their immediate front the better it was for their purpose. Seven of the thirty were wounded, but not one of them was put out of the combat. Their hurts merely stung them to renewed energy, and lighted higher in them the fire of battle.

Under the firm leadership of Willet they retreated as a group, wholly without noise, vanishing in the thickets, and following fast on the tracks left by the wagons. When the sun rose they stopped and Tayoga went back to see if the Indian host was yet coming. He returned in an hour saying there was no indication of pursuit, and Robert exulted.

"We've come away, and yet we are still there!" he exclaimed.

"What do you mean?" asked Willet.

"We abandoned our position, but we left the great illusion there for the warriors. They think we're still before 'em and so long as that illusion lasts it will hold 'em. So you see, Dave, an illusion is often fully as good as reality."

"It may be for a little while, but it doesn't last as long. Within another hour Tandakora and De Courcelles will surely find out that we've gone, and then, raging mad, they'll come on our trail."

"And we'll meet 'em with a second stand, I suppose?"

"If we can find a good place for defense."

One of the men, Oldham, who had been sent ahead, soon returned with news that the train had crossed a deep creek with rather high banks.

"It was a hard ford," he said, "but I followed the trail some distance on the other side, and they seem to have made the passage without any bad accident."

"Was the far bank of the creek thick with forest?" asked Willet.

"Trees and undergrowth are mighty dense there," replied Oldham.

"Then that's the place for our second stand. If we can hold the creek against 'em for three or four hours more it will be another tremendous advantage gained. With high banks and the woods and thickets on 'em so dense, we ought to create what Robert would call a second illusion."

"We will!" exclaimed Robert. "We can do it!"

"At least, we'll try," said Willet, and he led the little force at speed toward the creek.

CHAPTER IV

A FOREST CONCERT

The deep creek with its high banks and interwoven forest and thickets on the other side formed an excellent second line of defense, and Willet, with the instinct of a true commander, made the most of it, again posting his men at wide intervals until they covered a distance of several hundred yards, at the same time instructing them to conceal themselves carefully, and let the enemy make the first move. He allowed Robert and Tayoga to remain together, knowing they were at their best when partners.

The two lay behind the huge trunk of a tree torn down by some old hurricane and now almost hidden by vegetation and trailing vines. They were very comfortable there, and, uplifted by their success of the night they were sanguine of an equal success by day.

To the right Robert caught occasional glimpses of Willet, moving about in the bushes, but save for these stray glances he watched the other side of the stream. Luckily it was rather open there, and no savage, however cunning, could come within fifty yards of it without being seen by the wary eyes in the thickets.

"How long do you think it will be before they come?" Robert asked of Tayoga, for whose forest lore he had an immense respect.

"Three hours, maybe four," replied the Onondaga. "Tandakora and De Courcelles may or may not know of this creek, but when they see it they are sure to advance with caution, fearing a trap."

"What a pity our own people don't show the same wisdom!"

"You are thinking of the great slaughter at Duquesne. Every people has its own ways, and the soldiers have not yet learned those of the forest, but they *will* learn."

"At a huge cost!"

"Perhaps there is no other way? You will notice the birds on the bushes on the far side of the stream, Dagaega?"

"Aye, I see 'em. They're in uncommon numbers. What a fine lot of fellows with glossy plumage! And some of 'em are singing away as if they lived for nothing else!"

"I see that Dagaega looks when he is told to look and sees when he is told to see. The birds are at peace and are enjoying themselves."

"That is, they're having a sunlight concert, purely for their own pleasure."

"It is so. They feel joy and know that danger is not present. They are protected by the instinct that Manitou, watching over the least of his creatures, has given to them."

"Why this dissertation on birds at such a time, Tayoga?"

"Dissertation is a very long word, but I am talking for Dagaega's own good. He has learned much of the forest, but he can learn more, and I am here to teach him."

"Wondrous good of you, Tayoga, and, in truth, your modesty also appeals to me. Proceed with your lesson in woodcraft, although it seems to me that you have chosen a critical time for it."

"The occasion is most fitting, because it comes out of our present danger. We wish to see the approach of our enemies who will lie down among the grass and bushes, and creep forward very silently. We will not see them, perhaps, but others will give warning."

"Oh, you mean that the birds, alarmed by the warriors, will fly away?"

"Nothing else, Dagaega."

"Then why so much circumlocution?"

"Circumlocution is another very long word, Dagaega. It is the first time that I have heard it used since we left the care of our teacher in Albany. But I came to the solution by a circular road,

because I wished you to see it before I told it to you. You did see it, and so I feel encouraged over the progress of my pupil."

"Thanks, Tayoga, I appreciate the compliment, and, as I said before, your modesty also appeals to me."

"You waste words, Dagaëoga, but you have always been a great talker.

Now, watch the birds."

Tayoga laughed softly. The Indian now and then, in his highest estate, used stately forms of rhetoric, and it pleased the young Onondaga, who had been so long in the white man's school, to employ sometimes the most orotund English. It enabled him to develop his vein of irony, with which he did not spare Robert, just as Robert did not spare him.

"I will watch the birds," said young Lennox. "They're intelligent, reasoning beings, and I'll lay a wager that while they're singing away there they're not singing any songs that make fun of their friends."

"Of that I'm not sure, Dagaëoga. Look at the bird with the red crest, perched on the topmost tip of the tall, green bush directly in front of us. I can distinguish his song from those of the others, and it seems that the note contains something saucy and ironic."

"I see him, Tayoga. He is an impudent little rascal, but I should call him a most sprightly and attractive bird, nevertheless. Observe how his head is turned on one side. If we were only near enough to see his eyes I'd lay another wager that he is winking."

"But his head is not on one side any longer, Dagaëoga. He has straightened up. If you watch one object a long time you will see it much more clearly, and so I am able to observe his actions even at this distance. He has ceased to sing. His position is that of a soldier at attention. He is suspicious and watchful."

"You're right, Tayoga. I can see, too, that the bird's senses are on the alert against something foreign in the forest. All the other birds, imitating the one who seems to be their leader, have ceased singing also."

"And the leader is unfolding his wings."

"So I see. He is about to fly away. There he goes like a flash of red flame!"

"And there go all the rest, too. It is enough. Tandakora, De Courcelles and the savages have come."

Robert and Tayoga crouched a little lower and stared over the fallen log. Presently the Onondaga touched the white youth on the arm. Robert, following his gaze, made out the figure of a warrior creeping slowly through a dense thicket toward the creek.

"It is likely that Great Bear sees him, too," said Tayoga, "but we will not fire. He will not come nearer than fifty yards, because good cover is lacking."

"I understand that the contest is to be one of patience. So they can loose their bullets first. I see the bushes moving in several places now, Tayoga."

"It is probable that their entire force has come up. They may wait at least an hour before they will try a ford."

"Like as not. Suppose we eat a little venison, Tayoga, and strengthen ourselves for the ordeal."

"You have spoken well, Dagaëoga."

They ate strips of venison contentedly, but did not neglect to keep a wary watch upon the creeping foe. Robert knew that Tandakora and De Courcelles were trying to discover whether or not the line of the creek was defended, and if Willet and his men remained well hidden it would take a long time for them to ascertain the fact. He enjoyed their perplexity, finding in the situation a certain sardonic humor.

"The Ojibway and the Frenchman would give a good deal to know just what is in the thickets here," he whispered to Tayoga. "But the longer they must take in finding out the better I like it."

"They will delay far into the afternoon," said Tayoga. "The warriors and the Frenchmen have great patience. It would be better for the Americans and the English if they, too, like the French, learned the patience of the Indians."

"The birds gave us a warning that they had come. You don't think it possible, Tayoga, that they will also give the savages warning that we are here?"

"No, Dagaega, we have been lying in the thickets so long now, and have been so quiet that the birds have grown used to us. They feel sure we are not going to do them any harm, and while they may have flown away when we first came they are back now, as you can see with your own eyes, and can hear with your own ears."

Almost over Robert's head a small brown bird on a small green bough was singing, pouring out a small sweet song that was nevertheless clear and penetrating. Within the radius of his sight a half dozen more were trilling and quavering, and he knew that others were pouring out their souls farther on, as the low hum of their many voices came to his ears. Now and then he saw a flash of blue or brown or gray, as some restless feathered being shot from one bough to another. The birds, unusual in number and sure that there was no hostile presence, were having a grand concert in honor of a most noble day.

Robert listened and the appeal to his imagination and higher side was strong. Overhead the chorus of small sweet voices went on, as if there were no such things as battle or danger. Tayoga also was moved by it.

"By the snakes in the hair of the wise Tododaho," he said, "it is pleasant to hear! May the wilderness endure always that the birds can sing in it, far from men, and in peace!"

"May it not be, Tayoga, that the warriors watching the thickets here will see the birds so thick, and will conclude from it that no defenders are lying in wait?"

"De Courcelles might, but Tandakora, who has lived his whole life in the forest, will conclude that the birds are here, unafraid, because we have been so long in the bushes."

Time went on very slowly and the forest on either side of the creek was silent, save for the singing of the birds among the bushes in which the defenders lay hidden. Robert, from whom the feeling of danger departed for the moment, was almost tempted into a doze by the warmth of the thicket and the long peace. His impressions, the pictures that passed before his mental and physical eye, were confused but agreeable. He was lying on a soft bank of turf that sloped up to a huge fallen trunk, and warm, soothing winds stole about among the boughs, rustling the leaves musically. The birds were singing in increased volume, and, though his eyes were half veiled by drooping lids, he saw them on many boughs.

"'Tis not their daily concert," he said to Tayoga "In very truth it must be their grand, annual affair I believe that a great group on our right is singing against another equally great group on our left. I can't recall having heard ever before such a volume of song in the woods. It's in my mind that a contest is going on, for a prize, perhaps. Doubtless juicy worms are awaiting the winners."

Tayoga laughed.

"You are improving, Dagaega," he said in precise tones. "You do not merely fight and eat and sleep like the white man. You are developing a soul. You are beginning to understand the birds and animals that live in the woods. Almost I think you worthy to be an Onondaga."

"I know you can pay me what is to you no higher compliment, but I have a notion the end of the concert is not far away. It seems to me the volume of song from the group on the left is diminishing."

"And you notice no decrease on our right?"

"No, Tayoga. The grand chorus there is as strong as ever, and unless my ears go wrong, I detect in it a triumphant note."

"Then the test of song which you have created is finished, and the prize has been won by the group on the right. It is a fine conceit that you have about the birds, Dagaega. I like it, and we will see it to the end."

The song on their left died, the one on their right swelled anew, and then died in its turn. Soon the birds began to drift slowly away. Robert watched some of them as they disappeared among the green boughs farther on.

"I also am learning to read the signs, Tayoga," he said, "and, having observed 'em, I conclude that our foes are about to make an advance, or at least, have crept forward a little more. The birds, used to our presence, know we are neither dangerous nor hostile, but they do not know as much about those on the other side of the creek. While the advance of the warriors is not yet sufficient to threaten 'em, it's enough to make 'em suspicious, and so they are flying away slowly, ready to return if it be a false alarm."

"Good! Very good, Dagaega! I can believe that your conclusions are true, and I can say to you once more that almost you are worthy to be an Onondaga. If you will look now toward the spot where the banks shelve down, and the grass grows high you will see four warriors on their hands and knees approaching the creek. If they reach the water without being fired upon they will assume that we are not here. Then the entire force will rush across the stream and take up the trail."

"But the creeping four will be fired upon."

"I think so, too, Dagaega, because there is no longer any reason for us to delay, and the rifle of the Great Bear will speak the first word."

There was a report near them, and one of the warriors, sinking flat in the grass, lay quite still. Robert, through the bushes, saw Willet, smoking rifle in hand. The three savages who lived began a swift retreat, and the others behind them uttered a great cry of grief and rage. They fired a dozen shots or so, but the bullets merely clipped leaves and twigs in the thickets. Nobody among the defenders save Willet pulled trigger, but his single shot was a sufficient warning to Tandakora and De Courcelles. They knew that the creek was held strongly.

Now ensued another long combat in which the skill, courage and ingenuity of warriors and hunters were put to the supreme test. Many shots were fired, but faces and bodies were shown only for an instant. Nevertheless a bullet now and then went home. One of Willet's men was killed and three more sustained slight wounds. Several of the warriors were slain, and others were wounded, but Robert had no means of telling the exact number of their casualties, as it was an almost invisible combat, which Willet and Tayoga, as the leaders, used all their skill to prolong to the utmost with the smallest loss possible. What they wanted was time, time for the fugitive train, now far away among the hills.

So deftly did they manage the defense of the creek that the entire afternoon passed and Tandakora and De Courcelles were still held in front of it, not daring to make a rush, and Willet, Robert and Tayoga glowed with the triumph they were achieving at a cost relatively so small. Night arrived, fortunately for them thick and black, and Willet gathered up his little force. They would have taken away with them the body of the slain man, but that was impossible, and, covering it up with brush and stones, they left it. Then still uplifted and exulting, they slipped away on the trail of the wagons, knowing that the Indian horde might watch for hours at the creek before they discovered the departure of the defenders.

"You see, Dagaega," said Tayoga to Robert, "that there is more in war than fighting. Craft and cunning, wile and stratagem are often as profitable as the shock of conflict."

"So I know, Tayoga. I learned it well in the battle by Duquesne. What right had a force of French and Indians which must have been relatively small to destroy a fine army like ours!"

"No right at all," said Willet, "but it happened, nevertheless. We'll learn from it, though it's a tremendous price to pay for a lesson."

"Do we make a third stand somewhere, Dave?" asked Robert, "and delay them yet another time?"

"I scarcely see a chance for it," replied the hunter. "We must have favorable ground or they'd outflank us. How old does the trail of the wagons look, Tayoga?"

"They are many, many hours ahead," replied the Onondaga. "They have made good use of the time we have secured for them."

"Another day and night and they should be safe," said Willet. "Tandakora and De Courcelles will scarcely dare follow deep into the fringe of settlements. What is it, Tayoga?"

The Onondaga had stopped and, kneeling down, he was examining the trail as minutely as he could in the dusk.

"Others have come," he replied tersely.

"What do you mean by 'others'?" asked Willet.

"Those who belong neither to pursued nor pursuers, a new force, white men, fifteen, perhaps. They came down from the north, struck this trail, for which they were not looking, and have turned aside from whatever task they were undertaking to see what it means."

"And so they're following the fugitive train. Possibly it's a band of French."

"I do not think so, Great Bear. The French do not roam the forest alone. The warriors are always with them, and this party is composed wholly of white men."

"Then they must be ours, perhaps a body of hunters or scouts, and we need 'em. How long would you say it has been since they passed?"

"Not more than two hours."

"Then we must overtake 'em. Do you lead at speed, Tayoga, but on the bare possibility that they're French, look out for an ambush."

"The new people, whoever they are," said Robert, "are trailing the train, we're trailing them, and the French and Indians are trailing us. It's like a chain drawing its links through the forest."

"But the links are of different metals, Robert," said Willet.

They talked but little more, because they needed all their breath now for the pursuit, as Tayoga was leading at great speed, the broad trail in the moonlight being almost as plain as day. It was a pleasure to Robert to watch the Onondaga following like a hound on the scent. His head was bent forward a little, and now and then when the brightest rays fell across them, Robert could see that his eyes glittered. He was wholly the Indian, his white culture gone for the moment, following the wilderness trail as his ancestors had done for centuries before him.

"Do the traces of the new group grow warmer?" asked Robert.

"They do," replied Tayoga. "We are advancing just twice as fast as they."

"We will overtake them before midnight."

"White men, and only by the barest possibility French," said Robert. "So the chances are nine out of ten that they're our own people. Now, I wonder what they are and what they're doing here."

"Patience, Dagaegoga," said the young Onondaga. "We will learn by midnight. How often have I told you that you must cultivate patience before you are worthy to be an Onondaga?"

"I'll bear it in mind, O worthy teacher. Your great age and vast learning compel me to respect your commands."

The new trail, which was like a narrow current in the broad stream of that left by the flying train, was now rapidly growing warmer. The speed of the thirty was so great that it became evident to Tayoga that they would overtake the strange band long before midnight.

"They stopped here and talked together a little while," he said, when they had been following the trail about two hours. "They stood by the side of the path. Their footprints are gathered in a group. They knew by the wagon tracks that white settlers, fleeing, were ahead of them, and they may have thought of turning back to see who followed. That is why they drew up in a group, and talked. At last they concluded to keep on following the train, and they cannot be more than a half hour ahead now."

Willet knelt down for the first time, and examined the traces with the greatest care and attention.

"The leader stood here by this fallen log," he said, "He had big feet, as anybody can see, and I believe I can make a good guess at his identity. I hope to Heaven I'm right!"

"Whom do you mean?" exclaimed Robert eagerly.

"I won't say just yet, because if I'm wrong you won't know the mistake I've made. But come on, lads. 'Twill not take long to decide the question that interests us so much."

He led the way with confidence, and when they had gone about a mile he sank down in a thicket beside the trail, the others imitating him. Then the hunter emitted a sharp whistle.

"I think I'll soon get an answer to that," he said, "and it'll not come from French or Indian."

They waited a minute or two and then the whistling note, clear and distinct, rose from a point ahead of them. Willet whistled a second time, and the second reply soon came in similar fashion.

"Now, lads," he said, rising from the bush, "we'll up and join 'em. It's the one I expected, and right glad I am, too."

He led the way boldly, making no further effort at concealment. Robert saw outlined in the moonlight on a low hill in front of them a group of fifteen or sixteen white men, all in hunter's garb, all strong, resolute figures, armed heavily. One, a little in advance of the others, and whom the lad took at once to be the leader, was rather tall, with a very powerful figure and a bold, roving eye. He was looking keenly at the approaching group and as they drew near his eyes lighted up with recognition and pleasure.

"By all that's glorious, it's Dave Willet, the Great Bear himself, the greatest hunter and marksman in all the northern province! Of a certainty it's none other!"

"Yes, Rogers, it's Willet," said the hunter, extending his hand, "though you complimented me too prettily. But glad am I, too, to see you here. You're no beauty, but your face is a most welcome sight."

Then Robert understood. It was Robert Rogers from the New Hampshire grants, already known well, and destined to become famous as one of the great partisan leaders of the war, a wild and adventurous spirit who was fully a match for Dumas and Ligneris or St. Luc himself, a man whose battles and hairbreadth escapes surpassed fiction. Around him gathered spirits dauntless and kindred, and here already was the nucleus of the larger force that he was destined to lead in so many a daring deed. Now his fierce face showed pleasure, as he shook the hunter's powerful hand with his own hand almost as powerful.

"It's a joy to meet you in these woods, Dave," he said. "But who are the two likely lads with you? Lads, I call 'em because their faces are those of lads, though their figures have the stature and size of men."

"Rogers, this is Tayoga, of the clan of the Bear, of the nation Onondaga, of the great League of the Hodenosaunee, a friend of ours, and no braver or more valiant youth ever trod moccasin. Tayoga, this is Robert Rogers of the New Hampshire grants."

The sunburnt face of Rogers shone with pleasure.

"I've heard of the lad," he said, "and I know he's all that you claim for him, Dave."

"And the other youth," continued Willet, "is Robert Lennox, in a way a ward of mine, in truth almost a son to me. What Tayoga is among the Onondagas, he is among the white people of New York. I can say no more."

"That's surely enough," said Rogers, "and glad am I to meet you, Lennox. I've come from the north and the east, from Champlain and George, with my brave fellows, hearing of Braddock's defeat and thinking we might be needed, and by chance we struck this broad trail. It's plain enough that it's made by settlers withdrawing from the border, but whether 'tis a precaution or they're pursued closely we don't know. We thought once of turning back to see. But you know, Dave."

Willet explained rapidly and again the fierce face of Rogers shone with pleasure.

"'Twas in truth a fortunate chance that guided us down here," he said.

"It was Tododaho himself," said Tayoga with reverence.

Then Willet also called rapidly the names of his hunters and scouts, who had remained in a little group in the rear, while the leaders talked.

"Dave," said Rogers, "you and I will be joint leaders, if you say so. We've now nearly two score stout fellows ready for any fray, and since you've twice held back Tandakora, De Courcelles and their scalp hunters, our united bands should be able to do it a third time. I agree with you that the best way to save the train is to fight rear guard actions, and never let the train itself be attacked."

"If we had about twenty more good men," said Willet, "we might not only defend a line but push back the horde itself. What say you to sending Tayoga, our swiftest runner, to the wagons for a third force?"

"A good plan, a most excellent plan, Dave! And while he's about it, tell him to make it thirty instead of twenty. Then we'll burn the faces of these Indian warriors. Aye, Dave, we'll scorch 'em so well that they'll be glad to turn back!"

It was arranged in a minute or two and Tayoga disappeared like one of his own arrows in the forest and the darkness, while the others followed, but much more slowly. It would not escape the sharp eyes of the warriors that a reinforcement had come, but, confident in their numbers, they would continue the pursuit with unabated zeal.

The united bands of hunters and scouts fell back slowly, and for a long time. Robert looked with interest at Rogers' men. They were the picked survivors of the wilderness, the forest champions, young mostly, lean, tough of muscle, darkened by wind and weather, ready to follow wherever their leader led, ready to risk their lives in any enterprise, no matter how reckless. They affiliated readily with Willet's own band, and were not at all averse to being overtaken by the Indian horde.

After dawn they met Tayoga returning with thirty-five men, rather more than they had expected, and also with the news that the train was making great speed in its flight. Willet and Rogers looked over the seventy or more brave fellows, with glistening eyes, and Robert saw very well that, uplifted by their numbers, they were more than anxious for a third combat. In an hour or so they found a place suitable for an ambush, a long ravine, lined and filled with thickets which the wagons evidently had crossed with difficulty, and here they took their stand, all of the force hidden among the bushes and weeds. Robert, at the advice of Willet, lay down in a secure place and went to sleep.

"You're young, lad," he said, "and not as much seasoned in the bark as the rest of us who are older. I'll be sure to wake you when the battle begins, and then you'll be so much the better for a nap that you'll be a very Hercules in the combat."

Robert, trained in wilderness ways, knew that it was best, and he closed his eyes without further ado. When he opened them again it was because the hunter was shaking his shoulder, and he knew by the position of the sun that several hours had passed.

"Have they come?" he asked calmly.

"We've seen their skirmishers in the woods about two hundred yards away," replied the hunter. "I believe they suspect danger here merely because this is a place where danger is likely to be, but 'twill not keep them from attacking. You can hold your rifle ready, lad, but you'll have no use for it for a good quarter of an hour. They'll do a lot of scouting before they try to pass the ravine, but our fellows are happy in the knowledge that they'll try to pass it."

Robert suppressed as much as he could the excitement one was bound to feel at such a time, and ate a little venison to stay him for the combat, imitating the coolness and providence of Tayoga, who was also strengthening his body for the ordeal.

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