

Brereton Frederick Sadleir

How Canada Was Won: A Tale of Wolfe and Quebec



Frederick Brereton

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F. S. Brereton

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Chapter I

The Camp on the River

"Waal? What did yer see? Clear, I reckon."

Jim Hardman looked up swiftly as a couple of tall figures came silently into the clearing in the centre of which the camp fire burned, and he paused for a moment in the task which occupied him. He was squatting on his heels, after the fashion of the Indians and of all backwoodsmen, and was engaged in cleaning the long barrel of his musket, turning the weapon over with loving care, as if it were a child to whom he was devoted. Indeed Jim had no more faithful friend or servant. For this long musket had been his companion on many and many a hunting and prospecting expedition during the past twenty years. He scarcely ever laid it down, but carried it the day long, usually ready in his hands, or when the times were peaceful and quiet, slung across his slender shoulders. Jim could tell tales of how this faithful weapon had brought down buffalo and deer and many another animal, and had helped him to gather the stores of skins in exchange for which he obtained those few luxuries which his simple nature needed. In his more communicative moods he could narrate how the bullets which he had moulded with the aid of a hot camp fire and a supply of lead had been directed against men, against the fierce Indian inhabitants of this Ohio valley, who for years past had waged a ceaseless and pitiless warfare against all white invaders of their old hunting grounds.

Indeed, "Hunting" Jim, as he was styled and known by all the backwoodsmen in those parts, had need to care for his weapon, for without it he would be lost, and his life would be at the mercy of the first redskin who crossed his path.

"Waal?" he repeated, in his backwoods drawl, as he vigorously rubbed at the shining barrel. "Reckon we're through 'em. There ain't a one in sight. Ef there is, Steve and Silver Fox'll know all about 'em."

He looked with approval at his weapon, and getting to his feet he slung it across his shoulders. Then he stepped softly across to the fire, and bending over it, pushed the long ramrod suspended over the embers a little farther on to the forked sticks which held it. A couple of pieces of bear meat were skewered upon the rod, and had been frizzling there for the past quarter of an hour. Now, as they were placed right over the heat they set up a low-voiced but merry tune, while an appetizing odour assailed the nostrils of the two who had come to the camp. One of these two was without doubt a Red Indian, for he was decked elaborately after the custom of his race; his face was freely daubed with paint, which gave him a hideous and cruel appearance that a feathered head-dress served to increase. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man, with long, sinewy arms and legs, and gave one the impression that he was in perfect condition and trained to stand the utmost hardship. He nodded to Jim, and took his place in front of the fire, squatted on his heels, and stared silently at the embers. A minute later he opened his lips and spoke in the Indian tongue, his gaze still fixed on the fire.

"My brothers can sleep and eat in peace and contentment," he said, in tones which were dignified and not unmusical. "Silver Fox and the pale-face youth whom you call Steve, but known to us as Hawk, for his eyes are keen, keener even than are mine or my brother's, – have been through the forest and have watched the river. Our enemies have gone, vanished into the woods. We know this for certain, for we came upon their track. They were journeying towards the head waters of the river."

It was a long speech for Silver Fox, and having delivered it, he felt for the buckskin bag in which he carried his precious store of tobacco, filled his pipe and set fire to the weed by taking one of the burning sticks in his long, thin fingers and lifting it to the bowl.

Meanwhile his companion, who had emerged with him from the thick forest which surrounded the camp, advanced to the fire, sniffed appreciatively, and glanced at the meat which frizzled over the flames, in a manner which showed that the sight was a pleasant one. Then he slipped his musket from his shoulders, and stood for a moment to his full height, thoughtfully regarding Silver Fox and Hunting Jim. He, too, was tall and lissom. From the top of his coon-skin cap to the bottom of his soft moccasins he measured a good six feet. He was dressed in a leather shirt elaborately fringed, as was the habit with all hunters, while his legs were encased in fringed leather leggings and in soft moccasins, all of which he had manufactured from skins he himself had obtained. Stephen Mainwaring looked a typical backwoodsman, and as the sun struck upon his well-developed figure, upon his open face, all tanned with long exposure to the wind and the weather, and upon his strong brown arms and hands, even his bitterest enemy would have been forced to admit that he was a fine young fellow, that there was as much strength in his face, in that square, resolute chin, and in those steady, fearless-looking eyes as could well be found, and that his whole appearance gave promise of honesty, a sterling good nature, and a temper which was not to be easily ruffled. Had there been any doubt on the last point Steve's joviality on this fine summer's morning would soon have set the matter at rest. He might only that moment have risen from his blanket, so fresh and gay was he, and no one would have dreamed that he and Silver Fox had been tramping the forest since night had fallen, scouting for an enemy whom they and their comrades had good cause to fear. He sat down suddenly, dragged off his soaked moccasins, and his coon-skin hat, which glistened with the heavy dew that had fallen upon it, and placed them close to the embers. Then he turned a jovial face to Jim.

"Waal, I reckon you can smoke that ere pipe of yours with ease and comfort, Jim," he sang out, imitating exactly the drawl of the huntsman. "Reckon Silver Fox and I can eat jest all we're able to get our fingers on, and can then put in a bit of sleep. There ain't no Injuns this side of forty mile away."

He laughed merrily as Jim looked severely at him, and taking the ramrod in his hand, turned it so as to expose the farther side of the meat to the heat.

"All's clear," he went on suddenly, in his natural tones, speaking in a manner which showed that though he looked a typical backwoodsman he had had an education, and as regards his conversation, was fit to mix with the gentry of New York, or those of Boston or Charlestown, or even with those of London itself.

"That's a lad for yer, Judge," said Jim, scowling playfully at Steve, and then turning to one of the other figures standing or sitting about the camp. "This Hawk gets born out in the settlements and gets took straight away right into the backwoods. He larns to sit a scrawny pony when he's no higher than a dozen piled-up dollars, and to shoot a gun when he ain't got the strength to stand up to the jar one of these muskets gives. Reckon I've seen him knocked endways with the kick many and many a time."

He looked for an answer, and waited while the broad-shouldered backwoodsman whom he addressed sat up and stared thoughtfully back at him and then at Steve, who squatted by the fire. "Judge" Mainwaring, as he was usually styled, was a big-boned, burly man, bearded and as rugged as the oaks which grew in the wood. His eyes were deep-set and thoughtful, and he had the air of a man who reflects, who says little, and that only after due consideration. Indeed Judge Mainwaring had a reputation for wisdom in the backwoods. No man was more respected in the neighbourhood of the Mohawk country, and there was no more skilful hunter, no more courageous Indian tracker than this big man. He spoke seldom, and then always to the point, and in a manner which proved that he had at one time been very different from these rough, honest fellows of the backwoods with whom he now spent his days. Jim and his comrades had had a talk about Tom Mainwaring or the Judge, many and many a time, and had even endeavoured to worm some of his history from him. But always without success.

"Reckon we'd better shut up," said Jim, after one of these many conversations, when he and Judge and some five others had been gathered at Tom Mainwaring's log hut in the backwoods. "He don't mean to tell whar he's from, nor what he was, and small blame to him. He's here, stout and plucky, a good shot, and jest the fiercest hater I knows of them varmint of redskins. Reckon that's enough."

"And need he's had to hate them too," another had added. "Reckon Judge don't care for much after the boy, than to get even with them varmint."

That was indeed the case. No one knew Tom Mainwaring's history, or could even conjecture where he came from, what calling he had followed or what his fortunes had been. To the many questions with which he had at first been bombarded he had replied shortly and with perfect good temper, but in such a manner that none of those who were so curious were any the wiser. Yes, he knew Boston, and New York, and London. He had lived in all three, and he knew France. That was as far as he could or would go, and the settlers who had picked their holdings in the Ohio valley, to the south of the giant lakes of Erie and Ontario, had to be content. He had come to them one fine spring time, a silent man, bringing a wife and a young son on the back of the one horse which he led. He had set up his log hut like the rest, and had fished and shot, and exchanged his pelts for the few necessaries required by these pioneers of the American forests beyond the Alleghany Mountains. His wife was French, that they knew for a fact; while Judge, and in due course Steve also, could speak the language fluently. But where he came from, why this educated man, who lacked nothing, not even dollars, for it was an open secret that he had abundant means, – should come to the backwoods and there bury himself and his wife and boy none could imagine. But it was apparent that, whatever the reason was, Tom Mainwaring had no need to be ashamed of it. His honest dealings with others, his high principles, and the manner in which he had devoted himself to the education of his boy had proved over and over again that whatever the mystery, there was nothing about it that could call a blush of shame to his cheeks.

As to his undying hate of the Indians, that was easily explained. After all, he did not differ very much in that from the few neighbours who surrounded him. But he had undoubtedly more cause for hatred. That same mystery which was for ever a source of wondering curiosity to these rough pioneers of the forest, took Tom Mainwaring over the Alleghany mountains once in a while in the direction of the American coast. Perhaps he went to New York, perhaps to Boston, and it was even possible, seeing that on occasion he had been absent for six months, that he had been to England – wherever he went, one of these journeys had caused him to leave his wife and child in the care of friendly neighbours, and during his absence these unhappy people had been raided by the relentless Indians, the women of the party had been killed, while Steve and one other who happened to be picking berries in the forest, had alone escaped.

"Reckon that air enough to set any man who is a man agin the varmint," Jim had said long ago. "Judge ain't been the same sence he come back to find the boy alone, and the wife killed and scalped. He's got kinder hard and fierce, and don't them Injuns know it! And now that Steve's got big and grown, and able to look for hisself, the log hut ain't no more use to Judge. Reckon he's happier on the trail."

"There's a lad for yer, Judge," repeated Jim. "Listen to his sauce. He ain't no respect for his betters now that he's got the knack of shootin'."

"It's his spirit, Jim," replied Tom Mainwaring, looking with kindling eye at Steve, and relaxing so far as to smile. "He can use his tongue as well as he can shoot. So all is clear, Steve?"

"Yes, all clear, father. Silver Fox and I trailed round the camp far out, and never came upon a track till early. That hunting tribe that got on to our trace yesterday has given the matter up, and there's no one to harm us anywhere near. We struck a party of Mohawks up the river. They're watching the borders."

"And good need they'll have, too," said Tom with emphasis. "I think there was never such a time as this for raids and murders. We have to thank the French and their Indians for that."

There was silence for a while in the camp, Steve nodding to Silver Fox and chatting in low tones as soon as the meat was cooked, while Jim and Tom stared at the embers, both engrossed with their own thoughts. And while the two at the fire discuss their breakfast of bear's meat, and the two sturdy backwoodsmen stare at the embers and think, let us take a closer look at the camp to which we have already been introduced, and at its surroundings.

It was pitched in a small natural clearing on the Mohawk river, a little before its junction with the Hudson, at the mouth of which New York is situated. Not the New York of to-day, with its regular streets and avenues, its towering buildings, well-named "sky-scrapers," its gigantic hotels, its tenement dwellings and its mansions where millionaires hide from the inquisitive eyes of the people; but the New York of the year 1756, with many Dutch among the inhabitants, who still clung to the city which had once been theirs, but at that time belonged to the English. New York with its smaller and, compared with modern days, unpretentious dwellings above which the only thing that towered was the steeple of the church. South and west of the camp where Steve and his comrades rested was Albany, an up-country Dutch settlement, which boasted many wealthy and aristocratic Dutch, and offered always a means whereby the hunters and trappers of English descent could barter the pelts which they had collected during the previous winter. It was whispered, too, that here, in this quiet Albany, tenanted by Puritan Dutch, French *voyageurs*, and *coureurs de bois*, the backwoodsmen and trappers of that portion of Northern America then owned by France, and now known as Canada, were able to sell the loot obtained from the numerous English settlements which they and their Indian helpers had attacked and captured.

For there was war between the colonial French and the colonial English, and for some little time now the two nations had been engaged in a cruel frontier struggle. In Europe, however, France and England were outwardly at peace, so far as those in America knew, though the spring of the year above mentioned saw England's patience at last destroyed, and a formal declaration of war made. Still, these backwoodsmen had no notion of that, nor had the numerous French *voyageurs* and soldiers who had come across Lake Erie and had marched down into the valley of the Ohio. That was the disputed ground, where the bold English pioneers had settled their log huts and taken up holdings, believing themselves to be on British soil. And now hordes of French, accompanied by their priests and by thousands of Indians, were pushing south and west, were expelling the British colonists, and too often were exterminating them.

No wonder Hunting Jim and Judge Mainwaring and their comrades took precautions against surprise. They were in a country which was overrun by enemies, and since they had set out from their settlement ten days before, they had observed the greatest caution. The huge birch bark canoe in which they had paddled down the Mohawk had never left the centre of that stream, save when night had fallen, and always two of the party had had their eyes glued on the tree-covered banks. In rear of them, piled high in a second canoe, which was attached to the one they paddled, were their pelts, a big store of valuable skins, for which they hoped to obtain a good exchange. It was guarded by one of the two Mohawk Indians who accompanied them, and who sat at the stern, musket in hand.

And so for ten days they had travelled, their camp settled in some clearing at night, sometimes without a fire, for the smoke or the glare would have brought a host about them, and always with two of their number out in the woods keeping careful guard. But now they were safe. It was seldom that French *voyageurs* had penetrated into the English settlements as far as this, while their Indian allies stood in fear of the six united tribes of redskins situated hereabouts, and known as the Iroquois.

About the camp trees clustered thickly, pines and oaks, maple and birch, while scattered here and there amongst the trunks were whortleberry and cranberry bushes, honeysuckle, wild rose trees and bracken. In many and many a spot the scarlet tupelo and the sumac grew bright against the green, with purple asters and balm, and the delicate blue flower of the gentian to keep them company.

A narrow exit led to the Mohawk river, glistening in the sun, and reflecting the deep green of its forest boundaries in deep pools, where the stream ran sluggishly, and where the surface was broken every now and again by the sudden rising of a fish. Wild rice grew in banks at the water's edge, while clusters of the resin plant and of wild lilies could be seen by those who cared to look for them. No wonder that Steve Mainwaring looked fresh and jolly, for these were the surroundings in which he had passed his seventeen years, without a care, save the loss of his mother, which he was too young at the time to realize, and with that spice of danger about him which has drawn men of every race and creed to such parts. Steve knew the forest by heart, could tell the difference between the sharp call of the chickadee and the blue bird, and the howl of fox or wolf. No Indian was more conversant with the secrets of nature than he, and none was more at home in the heart of these forest wildernesses. It was, indeed, his home, and he was never happier than when on the trail.

"Reckon ef we get away within an hour we'll fetch up at Albany before the dark comes," said Jim at length, as he watched Steve and Silver Fox eating. "We'll give yer that time for a smoke, young feller, and then strike camp. Jest raise Mac and that 'ere Talkin' Baar."

He nodded across the camp to the far corner where two figures lay beneath blankets, sleeping lightly. That they were easily roused was clear, for as Steve and his companion had come into the clearing they sat up, only to snuggle under their blankets again. But as Jim called out the name of Talking Bear, one of the figures started into a sitting position, followed by the second.

"We'll be on the road in an hour," explained Jim. "Reckon you two have had a sleep, and ken help me and Judge to get the canoes afloat and the pelts packed into 'em. Rouse yerself, Mac. Never did see such a man for sleep."

"And, faith, niver did Oi set eyes on a man what spoke so much. Sleep did ye say? Sure it's these last two hours Oi've been lyin' alongside of Talking Bear, wid me eyes tight shut, thrying to get off and drame. But ye talk so much, Huntin' Jim. Ye'd kape a regimint awake, so ye would."

The Irishman roused himself with a growl, and throwing off his blanket, strode over to Jim and shook his fist in his face, a broad grin setting his lips wide asunder, and showing a set of strong teeth which were somewhat blackened with constant use of his pipe. He was short and sturdy, and in spite of the severeness of his hunting dress, which was identical with those worn by his comrades, he presented a comical appearance. His skin cap had fallen off, and showed a shock head of very brilliant red hair, continuing down his cheeks to his chin, where it ended in a straggling beard of the same vivid colour. Indeed, Mac was not good-looking, but he had a pair of genial, kindly eyes, and was a merry fellow, whose jests and laughter kept the spirits of his fellows from falling. Once upon a time he had worn a uniform, and had fought for his country. Then he had come to America, and by degrees had drifted to the Alleghany settlements, from which his fondness for danger and adventure had attracted him to the backwoods. And here he was, boon companion to Jim and the Judge, a staunch man in the fight, as merry and as light-hearted as a child.

"Will ye niver larn to keep yer tongue in betwixt yer teeth, Huntin' Jim?" he asked, severely, shaking his fist within an inch of the black bowl which Jim held between his teeth. "Begorra! Take a lisson from the Judge. Reckon he's that silent folks can sleep and take their rest. Git up wid yerself and lind a hand."

He made a sudden dive at Jim's shoulder, and swung him to his feet, for Mac was very powerful. Then, still shaking his fist at the grinning backwoodsman, he hustled him down to the banks of the river. And from there their laughter and their shouts came back to the camp, while Steve watched their antics. Then Silver Fox handed him his tobacco, and soon they were smoking and staring at the embers, now and again exchanging words in the Mohawk language. Presently a shout from Mac told that the canoes were laden, and at the summons Silver Fox and his brother, a painted and bedecked Indian like himself, gathered their blankets about their shoulders, took up their muskets, and trailed off down to the bank, leaving Steve and his father to stamp out the fire, to look round for any forgotten trifle, and then to follow.

"Talkin' Baar's turn for the canoe with the pelts," said Jim, taking the lead. "Me and you'll paddle, Judge, while this 'ere critter of yours and Silver Fox keeps an eye on the banks. Hop in easy thar. Mac, I quite forgot you war there. Slip in in front of me. Now, off we go."

They pushed out into the river, and took to their paddles. That evening, just before darkness fell, they pulled into the shore where the township of Albany was situated, and having found a suitable spot, made for the land. A fire was soon blazing, and within a little while they were eating. When the moon got up that night and rode high in the heavens above them, it looked down upon a silent camp, upon the dying embers of a fire, and upon five silent figures stretched on the ground and hidden beneath their blankets. Within a few feet of their heads stood one solitary figure, erect and motionless, swathed in a blanket. The long barrel of a musket stood up stark against the moon, while the brilliant light showed up the features of Talking Bear, alert and watchful, as careful here of the safety of his pale-face brothers as he would have been in the heart of a hostile country.

Chapter II

French Outlaws and Robbers

"We won't waste no time in gettin' rid of them pelts," said Hunting Jim, early on the following morning, as the little party sat about their fire, which was close to the bank of the Hudson river and within a few yards of the nearest house. "I don't reckon Albany's much of a place fer us jest now. There's the French up by Lake George, and a Dutchman I struck at sunrise, a chap as round as a barrel; guessed that they or their Injuns might hop in here any time. What do yer say, Judge?"

"We need not fear them," was the calm answer, given after more than a minute's silence. "They will hardly dare to raid this place, for at the present time they are doing their utmost to conciliate the Dutch and win them over to their own side. The same may be said of the Indians. You see, boys, we colonists are far more numerous than the French, though they are far better led and organised. Our people seem to devote all their time to squabbling amongst themselves."

"While the poor white critters out in the woods gets scalped by fifties and hundreds. Reckon that's a shame," growled Jim. "But about these pelts."

"Lave it to Steve," burst in Mac, putting his strong fingers through his shock head of tousled hair. "He's our shopman, so he is, and faith he'll get as big a price as any. Bigger, me bhoy, so lave it to him."

"You're right, Mac. Steve's the boy," Jim agreed, with a nod, while Tom Mainwaring smiled approvingly as his son's name was mentioned. "Yer see, that thar feller Schiller's as hard as a stone I reckon, and when it comes to a deal with me, or you, Mac, he jest twists us kinder round his finger. He knows we ain't got no other market, and so he jest offers what'd be a fair price for a dozen of the skins. Then, if we looks disgusted, as like as not he'll put a little extry to his price as a kind of bait. Reckon he's 'cute. He knows we've got to take his stuff or well nigh starve before we reach another settlement. I've felt often that I was being robbed by the skunk, but what air a man to do? Refuse did yer say, Mac?"

"That's so, me bhoy. Indade ye wouldn't be giving the pelts away, so ye wouldn't."

"Then jest you try that 'ere game," exclaimed Jim, somewhat hotly. "That chap Schiller's got the broadest back and the coolest temper I ever saw. It's what he offers or nothing. If you ain't pleased, he jest gets up from his chair and starts to walk into his house. Reckon a fellow can't stand that. He's got to soften and give way. But Steve's the boy. Steve, will yer trade with this 'ere Schiller?"

"Ready and willing, Jim," was the tall lad's eager answer. "I did it last time, and I'll try again on this occasion. But mind you, you must back me up."

"We'll do that," sang out Jim. "Then bring them pelts along."

They went to the pile of skins, and each taking a load, marched into the town of Albany, leaving Tom Mainwaring and the Indians to guard the camp. And a strange procession they made as they came along the wide street, past the prosperous Dutch houses and the well-dressed and comfortable-looking owners. Not that they attracted much attention, for hunters and trappers were a common sight in the streets of Albany in those days, and pelts often exchanged hands there.

To the trapper, the tough and hardy woodsman who had been scouring the forest during the winter and late summer before, hunting game and caring for the skins, this visit to Albany was one of no small importance. This expedition and the stores he would obtain were a source of interest and expectation during the long cold months, and the trade he could do was of no small importance. For each skin meant so much in the way of powder, so much lead, or perhaps a new musket. With the goods he obtained he went back to his log hut, and by dint of great care managed to eke them out over the winter. As for the trader who took the pelts, he found an eager market for them in New York, and made a huge profit over the transaction.

Bearing their pelts on their shoulders, with their muskets in full evidence, and the blades of their keen tomahawks glittering beneath their belts, the three trappers marched down the street sturdily, their heads in the air, looking what they were, a thoroughly independent and hardy trio. And presently they came to Hans Schiller's house, and saw the negro servants of the trader bustling about the place. Dropping their pelts on the stone flagging of the *stoep*, Steve and his comrades squatted down on the steps.

"Hi, there, my black lady," sang out Jim, "reckon we want that Dutch master o' yours. Fetch the boy along."

The negro servant giggled, stared with open admiration in her big eyes at the sturdy backwoodsman, and then departed into the house. They heard her call out in broken Dutch, and soon a heavy tread within showed that someone was coming.

"Now, Steve, reckon you've got to best this 'ere Schiller," said Jim in a warning voice. "Yer did the trade for us last year, and there ain't a doubt as he was more liberal than ever before. See what yer can do this time. H-hush! it's the old gal. He's trying the same old game."

As he spoke an exceedingly fat and unwieldy woman waddled to the open door of the house and pushed her head out. She looked calmly, almost contemptuously at the trio seated on the *stoep*, and then called out in very broken English.

"Hans Schiller," she called, "there's mens here." Then turning again to the trappers she cried, "Vot for yo vant?"

Steve tapped the piled-up skins. "Pelts for exchange, madam," he said, with a little bow. "We are waiting to see Hans Schiller. Ah, here he is. Fill up your pipes, boys."

Steve had been to Hans Schiller before, and had gone all through the excitement of trading with him. He remembered that on the last occasion he was constantly interrupted by Jim or by Mac, and thought that a pipe might help them to remain silent.

"That's the sort, boys," he said. "And just remember, a man can trade best when he's left to himself. Keep a hold on your tongues. Howd'y Mr. Schiller? It's a fine summer."

The Dutchman, who had just emerged from the doorway, thrust out a hot and very fat hand, and allowed Steve to grip it, wincing as the strong fingers squeezed him.

"Stop! These men are wild beasts," he exclaimed beneath his breath, and in somewhat better English than his wife boasted. "He squeeze my hand so last time, and the others always the same. Good day, gentemens. You vant me? Ah, you have some skins. That is sad, ver sad."

He cast a swift look at the piled-up pelts as he exchanged a handshake with Jim and Mac; and Steve, who watched him carefully, noticed that a covetous look came over his fat face. But Hans was quick to smother it.

"Ver sad indeet," he repeated, shaking his bald head. "You come to Albany ver late. All the trapper come and gone perhaps month ago. I hab bought many skin this summer."

"Then we'll not trouble you, Mr. Schiller," said Steve quickly, giving Jim a knowing wink. "We came straight to you because we have always been here. But if you've already bought as much as you want – why, mates, we'll get on further."

It was ludicrous to watch the expression on the various faces. Mac, with the quick wit of his race, grasped Steve's meaning and intention in an instant, and puffing clouds of smoke from his pipe, rose to his feet and shouldered one of the bales. But Jim possessed a somewhat slower intelligence in such matters. He was no trader, and knew nothing of the subtleties of bargaining. His mouth opened wide in his consternation.

"Thunder!" he began. "Blest ef the lad –"

"Jim, what are you waiting for?" asked Steve suddenly. "Can't you hear? Mr. Schiller's bought all he wants, and now we're off down the town to the other folks. Bustle up. We want to get out of this as soon as possible."

"Not so quick, frens," exclaimed Hans, putting a restraining hand on Steve's shoulder and speaking in somewhat anxious tones. "I can buy more if they are good. Sit down and let me see them. Gretchen!"

The three trappers returned to their seats, and the trading was begun. Steve had a very good notion of the value of the skins, and he knew that high prices were to be obtained for them in New York. He was also aware that the trapper as a rule bore all the fatigue and risk of getting the pelts, and was miserably rewarded. He was not avaricious, but at the same time he knew the needs of his comrades, and, unlike them, had the courage to face a possible failure in the negotiations.

"I shall be ruint! Indeet, you will take all that I hab," grumbled Hans, when all the skins were displayed, and Steve had demanded more than double the amount of powder, lead, and other commodities which the Dutchman offered. "I shall be ruint! Nod anoder dollar's worth do you hab. Dat is all. De last cent."

Steve smiled one of his easiest smiles and looked coaxingly at the trader.

"Come, Mr. Schiller," he said pleasantly, "don't let it be said that you lost such a chance. This is the finest lot of skins that you have seen, that you admit. A pity if you let it go to the others farther down the street. Come now, make another offer."

Not for one moment did he become flurried or lose that air of confident assurance which he had worn from the very first. And after a little while the deal was settled and the trio rose to go.

"Reckon you're the 'cutest feller as ever I set eyes on," said Jim, as they trudged back to the camp, half a dozen of the Dutchman's negro servants in their wake bearing sundry bales and boxes. "That 'ere deal war the finest as ever I listened to, and, shucks! ain't you a cool 'un! I didn't jest dare to look at yer too often, nor at Mac nor Hans. I jest sat and smoked, gripping at me pipe ter keep meself from splitting with laughter. Reckon it war better nor an Injun palaver, and that 'ere Hans knew he was beat. Yer watched him give a gasp when you was for movin'?"

"I did," answered Steve. "You can be sure that Hans Schiller lives and grows fat on his earnings. He need never stir out of his house till late in the summer. Then he floats down the Hudson in a flat-bottomed boat, and trades his skins at New York for dollars. A few of those buy the stuff he needs for trading with the trappers, and back he comes, with a sack and more of dollars, and with nothing to do but smoke his pipe all through the winter."

"We've had some friends enquiring after us," said Steve's father when the three had returned to the camp. "A couple of Indians have been questioning Silver Fox and Talking Bear. See them over there."

They swung round, and looking in the direction he indicated, caught sight of a couple of feathered heads peeping from behind the trees.

"I don't like them fellers," said Jim quickly, staring at the heads till they were withdrawn. "What air they after?"

"What do they and their sort generally want?" was Tom's rejoinder.

"Scalps and lead, and sich things as we've jest brought here," Jim answered swiftly. "Reckon we'll have to keep an eye round for them varmint. What do yer say, Silver Fox?"

He suddenly broke into the Mohawk tongue, which all understood, and for a little while all joined in an earnest and low-toned conversation.

"They ain't after no good, I'll swear," said Jim, with emphasis. "Reckon we'll have to go careful, mates."

"Then I vote that we give it out that we are staying here till to-morrow or the next day," broke in Steve. "That will make them keep a careless watch upon us perhaps, and to-night we can slip away unseen."

It was a good suggestion, and brought a grunt of approval from Jim.

"It air a good idea, young feller," he said, as he smoked his pipe. "Jest get out something to eat and pass it round. After that we'll put in a sleep, as if we was fixed to stay here best part of a week. Ef any one comes axin' questions, jest tell 'em what we've arranged."

At such a time all knew well that they could not be too careful, for though a large number of French and their Indian allies would not have ventured to Albany, seeing that this was undoubted British territory, and the Dutch were partisans of the colonists, still the sleepy little trading town was just the place where a roving band of small dimensions might take up its quarters, or rather in its immediate neighbourhood, sending some of their scouts into the town to gather information. And a small band, such as Steve and his friends comprised, with their store of powder and other trade goods, would be a very valuable capture. They could not therefore be too careful, and in order to make it appear as if they were intending to stay for a day or more, Steve and Silver Fox lay down to sleep, while Tom and the others lounged about the camp.

"Reckon I'll stroll along the houses," said Jim, after a while. "Maybe I'll see some more of these 'ere fellows."

He rose to his feet without another word, and was on the point of leaving the camp when Steve sat up.

"I'll come too, Jim," he cried out. "I can't sleep, and a little exercise will do me good."

"Then hop along, young 'un. One of these days, when you've grown older and ha' got more larnin', you'll find it's a wise man who puts in sleep when he's the chance. Pick up that 'ere gun. Yer never knows when a bullet won't be useful."

They left their friends lolling about the camp, and strolled into the town. There were one or two stores to be found, and they hung about these for a little while, staring with all a backwoodsman's curiosity at the goods displayed for sale.

Then they strolled on again till they reached the far end of the street.

"Reckon ther's one of them skunks a watchin'," said Jim, suddenly stopping and calmly filling his pipe. "Jest you walk on, Steve, while I get a light. It'll give me a chanst to turn round."

He sought for his tinder and steel, and began to strike the flint, turning his back to the wind and to his young companion, who strolled on. Two minutes later he had come up to Steve again.

"Jest stroll on as we air, easy like," he said in low tones. "I war right. One of them redskin varmint's got his eyes on us."

"Then we'll slip into the wood up here, as if for a stroll, and when we're hidden we'll turn and watch. What do you say, Jim?"

"That's the ticket, lad. Easy does it."

A little while later the two were making their way through the wood, which grew densely close up to the houses at this end of Albany. They threaded their way in amongst the trees in single file, each unslinging his musket as he stepped out of sight of the road. When they had gone a quarter of a mile Jim came to a sudden halt.

"Jest take cover, Steve," he said softly. "I'll get ahead, so as to let that Injun guess we're still movin'. When he comes along, stand up in his way. That'll put a stop to his little game for to-day at any rate, and'll let him see as we're awake."

A moment later the crash of brushwood being swept aside told that Jim was pushing on into the wood, making far more noise than he would otherwise have done. Steve took his stand in a dense mass of bush, and stepping on to the trunk of a fallen tree, kept a careful watch on the track which they had just covered. And very soon he caught a fleeting glimpse of a feathered head, and of the tip of a barrel. Within three minutes a painted redskin suddenly came into full view, his eyes glued on the track. He was stepping along at a rapid pace, his nostrils distended, his feet making not a sound as he trod, and all his senses engaged in tracking those who had preceded him. As he came opposite the bush, Steve stepped out without so much as a rustle and confronted the man, causing him to come to a sudden stop. For once the coolness of an Indian was upset. He gave a low grunt of astonishment,

and in a twinkling his musket was presented at Steve's head. For just one brief instant our hero stared into the barrel, and then, quick as thought, he ducked. There was a loud report, a tongue of flame and smoke spurted almost into his face, and his coon-skin cap was lifted from his head and carried into the bush behind. Then, long before he could use his own weapon, the Indian was upon him, his keen tomahawk gleaming in his hand. Lucky it was for Steve that the stock of his musket caught the blade of the Indian's weapon, for had it not done so, his head would have been crushed by the blow. But though taken unawares, fortune was on his side, and an involuntary movement warded off the blow. Then he dropped his musket, grasped the Indian's arm, and in an instant they were rolling on the ground in a death struggle, the redskin making frantic efforts to strike with his tomahawk, while Steve gripped the red-painted throat with his fingers, and clung there with all his strength. Not a cry did either give. It was one of those silent and desperate contests which the backwoods had often seen, and nothing but the gasping breaths of the combatants told what was happening.

"Reckon that war a close shave, young 'un," said Jim, in his quiet voice, some few minutes later, staring at Steve as he lay breathing heavily on the ground. "That 'ere varmint was out to kill, and didn't reckon as you'd get a grip of his throat so early. Take a word from Jim. When you've got the best of an Injun, never feel safe till he's dead. There ain't nothing in this world to touch 'em for cunnin'. He knew you was holding his tomahawk arm, and in another half minute he'd have been strangled. So he dropped his blade and used his two hands to shake yer off. Lucky I come along."

Jim had indeed arrived just in the nick of time, and it was well for Steve that his tomahawk had put a sudden end to the contest.

"Reckon it'll be a case of walk quick," said Jim, after a few moments' silence. "We can hide this here critter for a few hours, maybe a day or more. But they'll find him sure enough, and then there'll be a howl. Best get back to the camp." He then picked the dead man up, and stepping some yards away into the thickest bush, placed the body beside a fallen trunk.

"They'd find that as easy as walk," he said, as he returned, "but we'll put 'em off the trail. Come along, young 'un. We'll get back to the camp."

"And what about the other Indian?" said Steve suddenly. "He's watching there, isn't he?"

"Reckon that's so, Steve."

"Do you think that he and this man were alone, Jim?" asked our hero.

"You ain't so 'cute by half as I thought yer," was the answer. "Reckon there's a band of 'em that has made Albany their station. Like as not they've wiped out a power of small trading trappers. These here chaps air their scouts."

"Then let's find the band and take a look at them. Look here, Jim, we'll make through the wood till close to the camp, and pick up the tracks of these scouts. Then we'll –"

It was comical to watch Jim as he grasped his young companion's intentions. He swept his skin cap from his head, and darted a keen look at him.

"That air 'cute," he said. "Reckon I withdraws what I've said. That air the movement for us."

Without further conversation they struck off into the forest, Steve following closely in the wake of the hunter, and neither making so much as a sound. Presently, when they judged that they were approaching their own camp, they came to a halt.

"I've been thinkin' of that 'ere gun shot," said Jim. "But these trees has made it safe. Reckon no one at this end has heard the sound. Let's divide."

A quarter of an hour later, when they came together at the same spot, Steve was able to report that he had come upon a trail in the forest, and that the marks showed plainly that it had been used by two men at least, and probably by half a dozen.

"It's been in use for a couple of months, I should say, Jim, and I think that quite a number must have been along it. There are fresh marks of two moccasined feet."

"Then we'll strike along it and see where it takes us, young feller," was the answer. "We've dropped upon somethin' as may save our scalps. Jest strike off for it. I seed that other varmint keepin'

watch on the camp. He ain't got a thought that his brother has gone to the happy huntin' grounds. That 'ere shot never come to his ears, or else he'd have been looking into the matter by now. Reckon the strong wind and the trees drowned it."

They stood for a few moments preparing their muskets, each powdering the pan afresh, and looking to the flint, for a misfire might have disastrous consequences. Then Steve led the way, and in a little while they had struck into the trail which he had found. An hour's fast walking took them some six miles into the forest, when, seeing that the trail still went on, they broke into a dog trot, which both were well able to keep up for hours at a time. As it happened, however, another hour took them to some rising ground, where the forest grew as thick as ever, and where other tracks, many of them quite fresh ones too, told them that they were in the immediate neighbourhood of a camp.

"That air the whiff of terbacca," said Jim, raising his voice barely to a whisper, and sniffing at the air like a dog. "We're makin' up wind, Steve, and ef I ain't right, why –"

"It's smoke," answered Steve with conviction. "Let's get on."

Stealing forward with their bodies close to the ground, it was not long before the two came in sight of the camp. It was similar to any other trapper's camp in its surroundings. There was a fire in the centre of a narrow clearing, and three or four rough skin shelters were erected under the shadow of the trees. Lounging round the fire were some twenty redskins, while a squaw was busily engaged in tending some cooking pots which swung over the flames.

"This air a find," whispered Jim, squeezing Steve's arm. "These here critters has come to stay, and I reckon there ain't any other redskins within miles, or else this camp would ha' been discovered long ago. A hul tribe might camp under the noses of these fat Dutchmen without a one bein' the wiser."

"And just look at their stores," whispered Steve, pointing to a number of barrels and sacks and bales piled up beneath one of the skin shelters.

"The critters!" growled Jim. "That air the trade of many a small band of trappers same as us. Reckon them chaps has plenty of scalps. Look thar!"

This time there was an unusual amount of emphasis in his words, while his long brown hand shot out, and a finger pointed to the other side of the camp, where one solitary figure was seated. Steve followed his finger, saw the man and watched with dilating eyes as he rose and turned towards them. He was a pale face, a white man like themselves, tanned and weather-beaten, and some twenty-five years of age. He was decked as an Indian, and resembled them exactly, save for the fact that his face was not painted.

An exclamation of dismay burst from Steve. He crouched still lower in the bushes, and then silently withdrew, fearful lest this white man should see him. Jim, too, slid silently away, and very soon the two were speeding back to their own camp at a fast trot, their senses fully alert and their thoughts occupied with the white man and the band of Indians whom they had just discovered. A little later they turned to the left, crept undetected into the town, and strolled in the most casual way into the camp. No one looked up as they entered, but all had been anxiously awaiting them, that was evident, for the eyes of their comrades stole across in their direction, their long absence having roused the fears of the others.

"Air dinner ready?" asked Jim casually. "Then suppose we set down to it."

"We're in a muss," he said some little while later, as all squatted about the fire. "One of them critters that was watchin' followed us through the town and into the wood. It war almost a case with Steve. But we dropped the man. After that we struck the track at the back of this camp, and come upon the band. Boys, there air twenty of 'em at least, and wuss than all there's a Frenchman leadin'. It's that 'ere Jules from over the water."

An exclamation of amazement and dismay burst from the listeners, for Jules Lapon had won an unenviable reputation during the past three years. During that period hundreds of peaceful settlers and backwoods people had been butchered by the Red Indians, hounded on by the French, and in many cases French colonists and regular soldiers had been with them. Bands of desperadoes had

ranged the forests, and of these there was none more cruel, more successful and more feared than that of Jules Lapon, a young Frenchman who had settled some years before within a few miles of Tom Mainwaring's quarters. No wonder that the small band of trappers stared aghast at Jim for some few minutes. Then they found their voices, and began to discuss their future movements.

"Reckon there ain't any doubt as to what's to be done," said Jim. "Ef we stay here till the winter falls, they'll still be waitin'. These here Dutchmen can't give no protection, so we're bound to look to ourselves. We'll have to git, and the sooner the better."

Chapter III

Flight by Night

As the dusk came and settled down upon the peaceful town of Albany, it found the little band of trappers seated about their camp fire, smoking heavily and discussing the question of their flight in earnest and low-pitched tones. They had already taken their evening meal, and were ready to set out at any moment. But so far there was not a sign of preparation. To the casual or the curious onlooker, the little party seemed to have every intention of remaining overnight, more particularly as the sky was overcast, and the rude leather shanty which they had been busily erecting showed that they expected rain, and had prepared a shelter.

"You wouldn't think that there was a question of danger or of our clearing out, boys," said Judge Mainwaring, as he stared round at his comrades. "This town of Albany looks as peaceful as possible, and yet –"

"And yet the facts are clear," burst in Steve. "I suppose that if Albany were filled with Englishmen it would be a different matter."

"That it would, young 'un," chimed in Jim, taking the stem of his black pipe from between his teeth. "And there ain't no sayin' that these Dutchmen wouldn't help us ef we went to 'em. But they ain't here to fight. Reckon they're fer trade. Ef it was our own people, why we'd get 'em together, and them varmint out in the woods would soon be scattered."

"As it is there is no chance of doing that," said Tom Mainwaring quietly. "I've been thinking this out, boys. If we went to the Dutch I doubt very much that they would move to help us. They are traders, as Jim says, and though I believe they are certainly on our side and opposed to the French and their Indians, yet at the present time even that is not too certain. We've got to depend on ourselves. We might wait here for a week, but this rascal Lapon will wait also, and he will watch us like a hawk. We must move, and this very night too, for at present they think no doubt that we do not know of the existence of this band. If we wait they may suspect us –"

"There's the scout we killed," ventured Steve.

"True, there is the scout. They will find him by to-morrow morning, and then they will watch us all the closer. It will rain soon, and we must move."

"Hold hard," said Jim suddenly. "We've got to git, that's as clear as this fire, but thar's that 'ere redskin watchin'. It 'ud take him an hour perhaps to get back to his camp and then the hull lot 'ud be down on us."

That was a point which none had considered, and for a little while they sat staring into the embers, doubtful how to act. In these days of peace, when the neighbourhood of Albany is as secure as that of New York or of London, and when the banks of the Hudson and the Mohawk and the country adjacent are comparatively thickly populated, it is hard to believe that a party of trappers could be in danger of attack. But in the year 1756 it was very different. Thick forest spread over the land, with very few settlements, and still fewer log huts. In time past many and many a pioneer and trapper had forced his way far on into the valley of the Ohio, that promised land, and had there erected his rough shelter. But there were competitors in the field. France was not content with that huge stretch of America to the north of the St. Lawrence and the great lakes. She was pushing south, building forts and peopling the land. For some years, as the reader will have already gathered, these hardy French soldiers and *voyageurs*, with their fierce Indians, had been pressing south and west, exterminating the helpless British colonists. The man who dared to step outside the towns and plunge into the forests took his life in his hands. Bands of desperadoes wandered hither and thither, and the old calling of the trapper was almost extinct. It was therefore not so wonderful to find danger threatening Steve and his friends on the very outskirts of Albany.

"Oi'd loike to hear what Silver Fox and Talkin' Bear has to say," sang out Mac, thrusting his red head into the full light of the fire. "They have sat there loike two logs of wood, and sure they've not yit opened their mouths. Let thim spake and we'll listen."

"Then what shall we do, Fox?" demanded Jim, breaking into the Mohawk. "You know what's happening."

"It will rain to-night, my brothers," was the answer, "and we must go. But this scout must die before we venture from the camp. Talking Bear and Silver Fox will see to this matter."

He glanced round at each one of the party, grunted and nodded to his countryman.

"It is well spoken, brother. He must die," was the short answer.

"Then we'll turn in," said Jim.

One by one the white men of the party stood up, looked about them and then crept into the "shanty," for rain had already begun to fall. And soon Silver Fox joined them, while outside, swathed in his blanket, motionless, stood Talking Bear, guarding the camp during the first hours of the night. His figure was hardly distinguishable even against the dull light of the fire, but all knew that the Indian watcher had his eyes on him. And so two hours passed, till the embers were drenched, and the night was very dark. Not till then was there a movement in the tiny shanty. Steve sat up beside Silver Fox, returned the pressure of his hand and slipped from the cover. Crawling across the camp he touched Talking Bear, and in an instant they had changed places. Steve was now the sentry, swathed in a blanket, tall and erect. Almost at the same instant there was the hoot of an owl away in the forest.

"Them 'ere critters has jest the finest eyes," growled Jim. "Reckon though that they heard somethin'. There goes Silver Fox. We'll give him an hour."

But less than half an hour had passed before the silence of their camp was disturbed. First came the loud hoot of an owl, and then away in the forest was heard the sound of a conflict. Branches snapped, there was a dull thud, and then silence again.

"We have failed. The scalp of this scout who watched the camp hangs at my belt, but he had two others with him. They are gone."

Silver Fox had made not so much as a sound on his return, and his voice was the first thing that warned the occupants of his presence. They sat up with a start while various exclamations burst from them.

"There is not a moment to be lost," said Tom, with decision. "We must pack and paddle for our lives. That band will never rest till they have the scalps of every one of this party."

There was unusual bustle in the camp at once, the members of the party going about their work with method and in perfect silence. Mac and Steve soon had the leather shelter stripped and folded, and by the time they had carried it down to the canoes, the others had placed all their goods in the smaller one. Then they took their places, and at a word from Tom they pushed out from the bank, Steve sitting in the second canoe, his musket across his thighs and his eyes glued on the bank. The five in the leading canoe grasped their paddles and used them with a will, Tom setting the time, and pushing the water back with lusty arms which aided not a little in their progress. They swung up the centre of the stream, turned to their left and entered the Mohawk. Morning found them many miles on their way, still paddling steadily up the centre of the river.

"It were well to consider, my brothers," said Silver Fox, speaking for the first time since they had left Albany. "The sky is clearer, and the rain no longer falls. At present the mist hides us, but in a little while the warmth will suck it up and then we shall be seen."

"And yer think them critters is after us?" demanded Jim.

"They left their camp within the hour of our departure," was the slow answer. "They are now well on their way."

Jim had had no need to ask that simple question. As an old and experienced trapper he knew well enough that the alarm must have reached the camp of the enemy within a very little while of their own departure, and it needed no consideration to tell him that they would make up the Mohawk river.

"They kin tell as we ain't got no business towards New York," he growled, "and this here route air the only one that's left. Reckon the varmint air well on the road. They'll have canoes hid somewhere's within reach, and it won't be long afore they're out on the river. Boys, we've got to choose between holdin' on to those paddles or takin' to the woods."

"Lose all our stores!" demanded Mac, indignantly. "Sure if we take to the forest we'll have to lave these canoes and the things, and for what is the use of that? Arrah! Lit's kape to the paddles, and if they follow we'll use our guns."

"You forget one thing," said Tom Mainwaring, in his quiet and judicial tones. "We have paddled through the night. These rascals have been walking and running. Their arms will be unwearied. They will certainly overhaul us. There is nothing for it, I fear, but to strike across to the south bank, hide our canoes and stores as well as we are able, and then take to the trail."

There was, indeed, little else to be suggested, and it was with sad hearts therefore that the little party turned the bows of the canoe towards the far bank. It was lighter now, though the mist still hid them, an occasional gust of wind blowing a portion of it away, for all the world as if it were a curtain, and disclosing something of their whereabouts, the surface of the silent river, the far bank, or the forest on that side for which they were making.

"Steady a minute. Stop!"

It was Steve's voice which broke the silence, and as they craned their necks to look back at him, they saw the long figure of the young trapper stretched in the small canoe, his musket still across his thighs and one hand upon it. The other shaded his eyes, as if the mist worried him.

"Stop!" he called again in the lowest tone. "Wait while I come up with you."

There was a paddle beside him, placed there to enable him to steer if occasion should make that necessary, and while his friends backed water, he drove his paddle into the river and swung his canoe round till it lay alongside the other. To have endeavoured to bring it up directly would have been useless, for a short tow rope connected the two.

"You said that they would have canoes somewhere within reach," he said. "I overheard it, and I believe I have seen the very spot. The wind blew the mist aside suddenly, and I saw a tiny inlet. It is blocked with weeds and osiers, and they too were disturbed by the wind. I am sure that I got a glimpse of the bow of a canoe."

"Jupiter! That's a find," burst out Jim, while Tom and Mac nodded approvingly. "Reckon we'll git across to them boats and break 'em up. Boys, that air our ticket."

He plunged his paddle into the water, followed by the others, and would have swung the canoe round had not Steve still clung to the side.

"One moment, Jim," he said easily and quietly, for he had inherited his father's quiet and judicial manner. "Supposing you smash their canoes. What then?"

Jim gasped. "What then! Why, they're fixed, young 'un. Thought you was 'cute. They ain't got no way left of followin', unless they runs like dogs along the bank, and for that we don't care nothin'."

"That is, supposing they have no other canoes," answered Steve quickly. "But is that likely. They know that if their boats are discovered they are helpless. It seems to me that they may very well have divided them. That's what we should do. In that case they would still have a chance of reaching us."

"That 'ere lad air doin' his best to get even with the Judge," exclaimed Jim with a shake of his head. "Reckon, boys, that what he says air true as gospel. Them critters will never have put all their boats in one place. We'd best make for the forest straight."

Once more he would have swung the canoe away from Steve, but the lad still clung to the side.

"We might try a surprise," he said eagerly. "These men will follow us right away to the settlement, for Jules Lapon lives near there. We can't go on like this for the next ten days, and if we don't stop them they will be close to us before to-day is past. Let us wait and have it out with the rascals."

This time there was no attempt to break away from him. All stared eagerly into his sun-tanned face, while an exclamation burst from Jim.

"The boy has an idea," said Tom. "Out with it, Steve."

There was no time to waste, for even as they had hung in the stream, drifting with the current, the mist had lifted still further. The sun would be up very soon, and at any moment it might be clear from shore to shore. Steve leaned over the side of his canoe and spoke swiftly and in little more than a whisper.

"I've been thinking it over as we came along," he said. "We've no chance unless we can stop them now, for they are many, and will follow closely, and never give us a moment's rest. We shall be shot down and scalped one after another. I thought of their boats and what we might do. Then I suddenly caught sight of the bows of the one of which I spoke. Listen! This wind and the rustling of the leaves will have drowned the sound of our paddles. Even if the redskins are now on the far bank I doubt whether they have heard us. But they are not there. We have come faster than a man can walk, and you must remember that they will have had to make their way through the forest. Let us get over to their boats, slip ashore without leaving tracks, and hide up under cover. Once we're there one of us can slip back to this bank with our canoes, and can hide them, just leaving the bows of one to show, as if by accident."

"Thunder! The lad's got it, Judge. Reckon you ain't in it with Steve. Boys, he's told us what to do."

Jim sat up stiffly in his astonishment, while Silver Fox, who could understand English, gave a grunt of assent.

"He was always a calculating, thoughtful youngster," said Tom, a note of triumph in his voice. "The lad has suggested a brilliant plan."

Trappers were in the habit of making up their minds in a rapid manner. Often enough there was no opportunity for discussion, and even when there was they were not over talkative. Jim was perhaps the exception. But now there was no need for chatter, and little time for delay. The paddles plunged into the stream again, Steve pushed out from the large canoe, and in a trice they were surging through the stream in the direction of the opposite bank. A little later they were in sight of it, and were paddling along beneath the overhanging trees.

"Jest about here?" asked Jim, his voice hardly a whisper, while his hand pointed to the bank.

Steve stood up carefully in his frail support. His eyes were glued on the bank and for some minutes he remained without movement, while the canoes slid along through the water. Then, suddenly, his hand went up. There was a bank of reeds and osiers, with a patch of wild rice clinging to the edge, and a gust of wind happening to blow across the water at that moment all saw the nose of an Indian canoe. Standing still higher Steve was able to get a better view than his comrades, and caught sight of four other canoes, all nestling in the osiers.

"We can't land here," he sang out softly. "The bank is bare of brush and all trampled. Backwater and strike higher up the river."

Round swung the canoes and paddles sent the water frothing alongside the frail vessels, for excitement was high, and all were eager to get under cover.

"Them 'ere varmint might come along any time," said Jim impatiently. "Reckon this air a find!"

"We can land there," whispered Tom, pointing to the bank. "There is a rock, and perhaps deep water beside it."

A few strokes of the paddles settled the question. There were quite three feet of water beside the rock, which was bare and brown. It ran up on to the bank for some ten feet, and then gave place to dense forest.

"Step ashore," said Jim, huskily. "Gently. Don't let the canoe strike agin the rock, nor a paddle splash it. Them varmint'd spot it in a jiffy. Talkin' Baar, reckon you're the one to git over to the other bank."

In rapid tones he explained the movement required of him to the silent Indian, speaking in the Mohawk tongue. There was a nod of approval, and without a word the feathered redskin took up his paddle again and, pushing out from the rock, made off across the river, the smaller canoe with its load of stores trailing after him. In a little while he was lost in the mist, while none could hear the dip of his paddle. But presently, as the sun rose and sucked up the vapours lying like a pall over forest and river, Steve and his comrades could see just the tip of a canoe protruding from a thick mass of bush which clothed the opposite bank.

"Reckon a baby Injun'd spot that," said Jim. "To look at it you'd say as the wind or the wash of the water had shook it loose from the mud and floated it out. These critters will see it right off, and will try to slip over without a sound, so as to fall upon our party. Reckon there'll be a surprise. Now, what's the ticket?"

"Let the boy tell us," whispered Tom, looking proudly at Steve. "We owe this movement to him, and I think we all agree that he has had good experience of the forest and of these Indians. Now, lad, where are we to take up our stations?"

For answer Steve placed his musket on the rock, and, stepping softly across it, swung himself into a tree, a branch of which overhung their position. They watched him as he clambered up still higher and waited patiently for him to descend.

"I vote that we divide," he said, as he dropped on to the rock again. "When the enemy arrive and see the canoe over yonder they will be all keenness to cross. They will think that we are lying hid in the forest, and will guess that once they are out in the river they will be seen. But remember that our canoes are supposed to be hidden away. If we were over yonder, lying up in the bushes, we should keep under cover and watch, hoping to escape discovery. These Indians will reckon that, and I think will paddle down the far side, staring into the bank. As soon as they get opposite our canoes, they will paddle in with a rush."

"Thet air reason," exclaimed Jim. "What then?"

"My argument proves that they will be careful to get aboard on this side without making too much noise. They will try to let it appear that they have not seen our canoe. They will enter their own and push out stealthily, for they are cunning."

"Cunnin'!" Jim clenched a huge brown fist, and would have growled out something more had not Tom's warning hand restrained him.

"That will be our time. The bank of osiers is big, and they have hidden up their canoes almost in the centre. So there will be room for one gun in that direction. Then this tree commands their boats, and has the advantage of being very thick. Supposing we divide forces, two going into the reeds, and three into the tree? The three can swing themselves up without leaving a trace, while the two who make for the reeds can wade through the water."

"The boy is right. Even you or I could not have made better suggestions," exclaimed Tom. "Let us get into our places."

At any moment now the enemy might put in an appearance, and fearful of being discovered the whole party went to their places at once, Steve swinging himself into the tree after his father and Silver Fox, while Jim and Mac lowered themselves very silently into the river, which came to their waists, and wading along entered the reeds. There they took up a position which enabled them to command the canoes, while they could see, and be seen by, their friends. And as they crouched in their lairs the sun rose higher and higher, while the heat grew greater. The air over forest and river became motionless, what breeze there had been dying down entirely. Not a leaf stirred, while the hundreds of birds which had heralded the morning with their bright song seemed to have gone to roost again.

"Hist! That bird flew from down stream," whispered Tom, suddenly, as a pigeon darted over the water and flew past their hiding place. "We can expect the enemy. Watch the banks carefully."

But half an hour passed without another disturbance, and though all strained their ears nothing could be heard. From his leafy perch Steve saw Jim crouching in the osiers, and noticed that the

cunning backwoodsman turned towards the far bank, leaning in that direction in a listening attitude. But evidently he heard nothing, for within a minute he was engaged with the near bank, his eyes peering between the osiers and the reeds. This was not the first time that Steve had been pursued by the redskins, and his adventurous life in the woods had taught him to maintain his coolness. But on this occasion, do what he would, his heart would thump heavily against his ribs, while his pulse throbbed in an unusual and disturbing manner. He stood in the lowest fork of the tree, his back supported by the trunk, his musket in his hands, and his eye roaming hither and thither. His lips were slightly parted, and there was a determined look on his sun-browned features. He felt no actual fear, only unusual excitement, and a vague wonder as to what would be the end of this conflict. All through the night as he lay in the canoe he had been thinking the matter out. He and all his comrades were well aware of the evil reputation of Jules Lapon's band, and to Steve it had become abundantly clear that, strive as they might, they could not hope to reach their journey's end without molestation. The enemy were too many. They travelled light, while he and his friends carried stores, to which they were absolutely bound to cling, for without them they could not exist through the winter. Then surely it would be better to meet this band of rascals now, while they too were fresh, and do their best to beat them.

"I am sure it is the right movement," he said to himself. "We have a good chance of taking them by surprise, and an ambush is just the thing to upset these redskins. If we can kill a few the rest may give up the attempt. What is that?"

He started and leaned forward to look at Jim. The old trapper had turned right round and was again staring at the far bank. Steve saw him grip his musket barrel, and then signal to those in the tree. A second later he had swung round once more, and was looking to the opposite bank. Then Steve saw something of what was happening. A minute earlier the tip of the bows of their own canoe was alone showing, a bait to catch the enemy. But now the whole canoe was in sight, and there was Talking Bear, stripped of his blanket, his paddle in his hand, pushing out into the river with all his strength. And after him floated the canoe laden with the precious possessions for which they were being hunted.

Steve was dumfounded. He stared with wide-open eyes at the redskin, and then swung round to Jim. The trapper crouched in the osiers like a wild cat, and as Steve looked he signalled with his hand to those in the tree. His long finger shot out, and for a few seconds he pointed to the forest on their own side, warning them as well as he could by means of sundry waves and nods to be in full readiness. Then he turned to the river and repeated the signals.

"They're both sides of the Mohawk," gasped Tom. "Look there."

Stealing through the forest, and making for the canoes as rapidly as was possible were four painted redskins, while away on the far side a hurried glance shewed Steve the hideous heads of two more of their enemies. Had there been any doubt on the matter it was set at rest within a very few seconds, for the peace of the river was suddenly startled by a sharp and loud report, which sent the birds soaring from the branches. A bullet flew from the far side of the river and long before the report had died down Talking Bear crumpled up as if he had been struck on the head with an enormous hammer, and sprawled out in the bottom of the canoe. Then the war whoop of the redskins burst from the trees, that whoop which had set hundreds of white men and women trembling. Some twenty heads burst from the trees on the farther bank, and in a trice one of the painted warriors had leaped into the water and struck out for the drifting canoes.

"He will get aboard and row them back," thought Steve, the meaning of it all flashing across his brain. "Then they will embark, and no matter how many of the men on this side are killed, the others will be able to reach us."

It was clear, in fact, that on the possession of those two helpless canoes depended the result of this momentous engagement. If they were taken the little band of trappers would have the whole howling band about them within a very few minutes, and then what chance would they stand?

Steve did not hesitate. There was a stout twig growing close by his hand, and in an instant his musket dangled from it by means of the sling. His tomahawk flew from his belt to his mouth, where

he gripped it between his teeth. Then, light and active as a cat, he dropped on to the rock beneath, his moccasins making not a sound, and ere his father could gather his intentions the gallant young fellow had entered the water.

Chapter IV

Steve makes a Suggestion

Two strides from the rocky bank took Steve into deep water, where he struck out for the drifting canoes, his long and powerful strokes cleaving a path for him through the river. Behind him he left his father and Silver Fox dumfounded at his sudden action, and almost inclined to follow. But they had another matter to occupy their attention, for Steve had been very wary. He had soon realised that the enemy were in two parties, and guessed that the four redskins making for the hidden canoes were unaware of the presence of the trappers. It was important that they should still remain in ignorance, and, mindful of this, the young fellow had made not a sound as he departed. The bush and the thick leaves of the tree had hidden him from the keen eyes of the enemy, while his presence in the water was hidden by the thick bank of osiers. So careful had he been, in fact, that the redskins had no suspicions, and as their brothers on the far bank set up their hideous war-whoop, the four who were stealing towards the canoes sent back answering whoops, and thinking that longer caution was unnecessary, they dashed towards the bank of reeds.

Crash! They were met with a volley, aimed from the tree and the reeds, and hardly had the reports died down when Jim's voice was heard.

"Two of the varmint's down," he bellowed. "After the others."

Like a hound let loose from the leash this active trapper threw down his musket and dashed through the reeds, his tomahawk in his hand, while Mac went bounding after him, his coon-skin cap fallen from his head, and his red hair blowing out behind him.

"Afther thim, the blackguards!" he cried, waving to Jim.

"Steady! Take the man to the right," shouted Tom suddenly, swinging his smoking musket over his shoulder and reaching out for the weapon which Steve had suspended to the tree. Up went the heavy stock to his shoulder, the barrel poked out through the leaves and for one brief second followed the crouching figure of one of the redskins, who was making off through the forest. A loud report startled the silence, and as Tom dropped the barrel the Indian leaped into the air, a discordant shriek burst from his lips, and in a second he was rolling over and over in the long grass and brambles for all the world like a rabbit which has been shot when bolting.

"My brother has the eye of a hawk, even as has his son," said Silver Fox, busily ramming down a fresh charge and powdering the pan of his long musket. "Three of our number picked out one of these enemies, and he died at once. Another was struck by a single bullet, and he lies there, close to the reeds. The fourth will be slain within a little while. Listen, my brother, there is noise on the far side of the river."

There was indeed a commotion. For a little while the twenty or more warriors over there had kept up their awful whooping, and as their comrades on the near side had responded, the shouts and whoops became even greater. But now that the rifles of the trappers had spoken so suddenly and unexpectedly, the babel became even worse. Painted redskins showed up openly on the bank, frantically waving their muskets, while two stood in the water ready to reinforce the man who was swimming out to the drifting canoes.

"They are as much startled and taken aback as are we," said Tom Mainwaring. "Keep steady here, Silver Fox, and let us see what we can do for the young hawk. My son will reach the canoes almost at the same time as that redskin, and a bullet from us might help. Ah, they are firing." While he spoke he rammed fresh charges into the two muskets with feverish energy, his eyes all the time roaming from the surface of the river to the figures on the far bank. As he had said, it seemed more than likely that Steve would reach the canoes as soon as the redskin, for his long powerful strokes

were taking him through the water at a rapid pace, and as if fortune had decided to help him a slight breeze which had since got up came sweeping along the river and drifted the two craft towards him.

"Stay here, my brother," whispered Silver Fox suddenly. "There are others who are attempting to reach the canoes. Silver Fox will help the young Hawk."

He dropped from the tree as light as a feather, and when Tom looked down there was the Indian stealing along through the trees, his musket trailing and one hand busily engaged in sweeping the ground before him. This redskin had not lived the life of his race for nothing. He knew that even in the excitement of all that was occurring there would be ears on the far side of the river listening for sounds of an enemy, and he was well aware that a broken branch, the crushing of some piece of brittle drift wood, would give the enemy on the far shore an inkling of what was happening. To him it was as simple as playing to creep through the forest like a snake. Even Tom, who knew his intentions and the direction he had taken, could not follow his track. There was not even a swaying branch to show where he was.

Meanwhile Steve had made good progress, and was within a few strokes of the canoes. Could he reach the one in which Talking Bear lay before the Indian came up with it? No! There was a commotion in the water on the far side of the frail craft, a red hand gripped the gunwale, and as he looked the hideous painted face of the Indian came into full view. His leg was thrown over the edge, and in a twinkling he had taken his place, panting with his exertions, the water dripping from his body and streaming from his scalp-lock and his feathered headdress.

"Come nearer that I may kill you easily," he said, gripping his tomahawk and leaning towards Steve. "Come nearer, pale face, for if you would flee I will dive in after you."

Steve made no answer, and indeed took little notice of the man. Without pausing in his course, he surged nearer to the canoe, and then suddenly dived beneath the water as if he were making for the farther side. And very fortunately for him the rain of the previous night had coloured the river a deep brown, so that it was almost impossible to detect the whereabouts of anyone beneath the surface. The Indian stood upright for a moment, staring into the water. Then he leaned one hand on the far side of the canoe, and waited, his keen tomahawk poised in the air, ready to strike the instant the pale face appeared.

"He will come up just beneath me," he said in guttural tones. "I will see how far I can cleave this pale face. Pah! who but a pale face would attempt such a manoeuvre? By taking his eyes from me for even a second he throws his life away. His scalp is mine and shall hang from my belt ere his comrades have time to fire at me. Ah! That was one of their bullets."

A look of scorn passed across his ferocious features as a missile sent from Silver Fox's weapon screamed past his ear. A miss was a miss to this redskin warrior. He had no time for sentiment, for consideration as to how near he had been to losing his life.

"Surely the pale face will rise," he exclaimed, his equanimity somewhat upset by the fact that Steve had not yet appeared. "It is long since he dived. His breath cannot last much longer. Ah! Perhaps he turned back towards the bank when under the water."

He swung round to the other side, his draggled feathers and hair swishing a cascade of water on to the surface of the river. But there was no sign of Steve, nothing to tell where he had got to, nothing but the frantic calls of his comrades on the bank.

"Look behind you. Look to the smaller canoe," they bellowed, for their keen eyes had been watching the contest, and not a movement had escaped them. "Dive! Leave the canoe!"

The Indian started, swung his head round, and then stood as if transfixed. For the cunning of a redskin had for once been outmatched by the astuteness and coolness of a pale face. Steve knew well enough that the man who reached the canoe first would have the game in his hands, and realised that were he to venture to the surface on either side of the craft taken possession of by the Indian he would be immediately tomahawked. An instant before he plunged beneath the water a better plan had flashed across his brain.

"There is a spare musket in the store canoe," he said to himself. "If I can only reach it."

Two strokes beneath the surface took him under the larger canoe and away to the stern of the smaller one. He rose silently to the surface, and as the redskin peered into the river, expecting him to rise at any instant, our hero gripped the gunwale, lifted his head and shoulders clear of the stream and groped with one hand for the musket. It was there, just where he had left it, and in a very little while he had it to his shoulder. It was not the place he would have chosen for a shot, for it is no easy matter to hang to a frail canoe with the gunwale tucked as it were beneath one arm, and lift a heavy musket to the shoulder. However, Steve was not the lad to miss such an opportunity, particularly when the safety and lives of his companions depended on his success. He steadied himself with an effort, brought the barrel in a line with the Indian, and as the latter threw his hands over his head and leaped for the water, he took a steady pull on the trigger. Instantly a frantic cheer burst from the near bank, while Steve slid from the store canoe and clambered into the other.

"Well done, boy! Bravely done, Steve. Look out for those other redskins. Paddle in if you can."

"Git yer fire iron filled," bellowed Jim. "Yer can't paddle away from the critters. Ram in a charge."

But the backwoodsman had forgotten that Steve had been under the water. Everything on him was thoroughly drenched, and no doubt some moisture had leaked into his powder horn. He looked down at it, saw that it was useless to reload, and then plunged a paddle into the water.

"Cover me with your guns," he shouted. "If they come up I will club them with the butt. My powder is saturated. Ah, here come the bullets."

Something screeched past his nose, and as he listened he heard the mass of lead thud with a dull and heavy sound against a tree on the bank. Then followed a dozen shots, one of which penetrated the side of the canoe, while a second chipped a big corner from the end of his paddle. A third lodged on the rock by which he and his comrades had disembarked, and, ricocheting from it, flew off into the forest with a scream which was even more disconcerting than was the sound made by the bullets which had been so near to striking him.

"Bend low! Keep under as much as you can," shouted Tom. "Now, boys, pick off some of those rascals."

The burly backwoodsman had taken his stand beside a small tree, keeping the trunk between himself and the enemy, and now his musket shot up to his shoulder; he took a steady aim at one of the figures on the far bank and calmly pulled the trigger; for Judge Mainwaring was not the man to lose his accustomed coolness, even though his only son was in danger. Jim and Mac followed his example, while Silver Fox stared for a moment at the foremost of the two redskins swimming towards Steve. He dropped his musket suddenly, fell on his face and slid down the steep bank into the water. None of those on the far side saw his figure as he carried out the movement, and the wary native gave them no opportunity after that till he had covered many yards. Then as his head popped up from the surface the enemy on the farther side set up a deafening howl, shouting warnings to their brother.

"Keep up the firing," said Tom, coolly. "Silver Fox will settle that fellow and Steve will get clear. Hah! I doubt whether they are in time to warn the rascal."

"They ain't," responded Jim, shortly. "He don't hear. The water's in his ears and I reckon he ain't a notion what's happening."

It appeared indeed that this was actually the fact, for in spite of the bellows of the redskins on the far bank their comrade still forced his way through the water, evidently unaware that he would soon have a second opponent to deal with. Suddenly the water swirled in front of him, a hand shot out of the muddy depths and the fingers closed about the tomahawk which the man carried between his teeth. Then, as the dragged feathers of Silver Fox's head-dress emerged from the water, a blade gleamed in the air. There was a dull crash, a shrill cry and the contest was over. Silver Fox was swimming back to his friends, the third Indian having meanwhile retreated to the other bank.

"Jest keep on pepperin' the varmint," sang out Jim. "They've given us a good chance, and I reckon we've made a few of the critters sit up. Keep at it, boys, so that they can't fire too strong at Steve and Fox."

Five minutes later Steve steered the leading canoe into the gap made in the big bed of osiers, and having pulled in the second, with its precious store of trade goods, leaped lightly ashore.

"I rather fancy we have had the best of that little action," he said with a smile. "Talking Bear is the only one who has suffered. He was hit in the head, and must have been killed instantaneously."

"That's one to them 'ere varmint, then," growled Jim. "How many air we to put down on our side?"

"The two who swam out, and three others on the far bank, that makes five," said Tom, counting them on his fingers.

"Sure, have ye forgotten the others?" asked Mac. "There was two kilt by the first volley, and one that Tom fetched over with Steve's gun."

"There was that," admitted Jim, grimly. "Then there was the other fellow. He skipped through the forest at a powerful rate, and I doubt that we should ha' got him ef it hadn't been for this here Mac. Tell 'em how you worked it, lad."

Thus called upon, the short and sturdy Irishman pulled his cap from his head and flushed as red as his own hair.

"Sure, Oi've a way of runnin'," he said. "Whin this redskin took off through the forest Oi wint afther him as quick as Oi was able."

"And?" questioned Tom.

"And that's all. Sure Oi was up wid him before ye could wink, and thin we rushed at one another. Thrust an Oirishman to pick up a bhit of sthick whin a row's in the air. Oi caught holt of a fallen branch as Oi ran, and when he jumped at me wid his tomahawk, faith I laid him flat with the branch. He's kilt."

Very carefully did the little band check off the number of the slain, their pleasure damped by the thought that only nine had fallen. For the reader must recollect that these constant conflicts between pale face and redskin were waged without mercy. To expect it from any of the unfriendly tribes was to expect something which no redskin had ever possessed. These inhabitants of the forest wildernesses were trained to ferocity. The history of their tribal wars, of their contests with French and English colonists, is one long tale of atrocities, of frightful cruelties, of sudden attacks upon absolutely defenceless settlements, of merciless butchery of women and children, and of unheard of tortures practised on any who might happen to be spared for a while. Was it wonderful that the white man, with his natural inclination to peace and goodwill, and his abhorrence of unfair fighting and of torture, should be driven in time to fight as did these redskin fiends? Mercy on their part to a fallen enemy was a mistaken virtue. Clemency was rewarded in the majority of cases by the foulest treachery. The redskin who was set free to return to his tribe after an unsuccessful attack too often would turn upon his deliverer when danger was unsuspected, and within an hour of receiving kindness from him, would murder him and his defenceless family, and make off through the woods, triumphant at the thought of scalps so easily obtained.

No. This was always war to the death. A wounded man was as good as dead, for no quarter was asked for or given. Every additional man brought to the ground was an advantage to the weaker side, and a greater inducement to those who had lost him to wreak vengeance on those who had brought about his downfall. Such was the barbarous nature of forest warfare when Steve went on the trail.

"Jest nine of the skunks," said Jim, staring across at the farther bank. "That leaves the critters jest about twenty. Reckon we ain't out of this here muss yet."

"But we are better off by far," cried Tom. "Supposing the division of these redskins had been the other way. Supposing there had been some twenty-five on this side, and only four on the other."

"We hadn't a chance. Reckon we should ha' been wiped clean out by this," said Jim, with emphasis. "Yer can't shoot down twenty-five, however well yer may be posted. They'd have rushed us, most likely, and then it would have been all up. As it air we're well out so far, and I say as we owe it to this here Steve and to Silver Fox. Ef this young feller hadn't slipped into the river and swum to the canoes, them varmint would have been over here by now. I reckon it war a 'cute idea to get a hold of that musket and shoot. How'd yer come to do it, Steve?"

"Well, I didn't see a chance of getting possession of the canoes in any other way," said Steve modestly. "If I had come up alongside after diving, he would have killed me."

"As easy as you'd kill a fly," cried Jim. "You may take that as sartin."

"Then I thought of the gun, and struck out under the water in the direction of the smaller canoe."

"There was never a more astonished Indian," interrupted Tom. "Steve, you've done well. All here agree with what I say. I'm glad you've shown such 'cuteness. It does credit to my teaching, and I've done my best to let you learn the life of a backwoodsman. But let us talk of something else. We are not cut of the mess yet, by a long way. But we have a litt'e time in which to breathe and look round. What will those rascals do now, and how are we to get away up the river?"

He turned to Jim, as the most experienced of the hunters, and waited patiently for him to answer. It was, indeed, a question which required consideration, and even an experienced hunter and trapper, such as Hunting Jim undoubtedly was, could not come to an instant decision.

"Reckon it air one of them points as wants a deal of figuring," he said, as he scratched his head and stared across the river. "Yer may bet as them critters is watchin'. They've got under cover, 'cos they found as our firin' was better'n they thought. But they're thar. Them bushes covers the hul crowd of 'em. Suppose we get to work at their canoes first of all, and that'll give me a chanst to think out this here matter."

Setting Silver Fox to watch the opposite side of the river, the four trappers crossed to the osiers, taking good care to keep well out of sight. They found the five canoes lying side by side, and at once drew their tomahawks with a view to cutting holes in the sides and bottoms. In fact, they were about to commence on the work when Steve gave a sudden exclamation.

"Suppose we wait a little, father," he said eagerly.

"Wait! Supposin' them critters cross higher up?"

It was the wily Jim who asked the question, staring at Steve with a grim smile on his lips. "Ah. Them varmint wants to make us think they're stayin' over yonder. Them bullets came close."

Three reports rang out from the far bank as he spoke, and the shots flew through the osiers, stripping a shower of flat leaves from the reeds.

"Perhaps they guess we are about to destroy their canoes," whispered Tom. "But I admit that they are likely to attempt to swim across unseen, and come down upon us. We should make nothing of such a crossing, and you may be sure that they would not. They would cut down a few reeds to carry their muskets and their powder, and would soon get to this side. If they try that game, we must slip away at once, and we can rely on Silver Fox to give us a warning. Look for yourselves. The river runs without a bend for a very long way, and our look-out would detect any such movement."

"That air right. Reckon you've put it square, Judge," said Jim. "What's this young Steve got to say? You was supposin'."

"I suggested that we should leave these canoes for a time. At any moment we can destroy them, for a few slashes with a tomahawk will do all that is required."

"That air so. What then?"

"One moment," answered Steve. "Supposing we were to get aboard our canoes and put out into the river, what would happen?"

"Happen? Reckon you'd soon hear from them ere critters. Ef yer think of doin' a thing like that, Steve Mainwarin', why you ain't the son of Judge here. Ef yer want to get killed so badly, best

paddle clean across an' invite them fellers to wipe the hul party out properly. It ain't in reason," he went on, hotly. "Ef we was aboard, all packed together, they'd pick us off like birds."

"If they could see us," ventured Steve, smiling at Jim's excitement.

"Ef they could see us! Thunder! Do yer think there's a redskin as wouldn't be able, even at night. 'Sides, the moon'll be up soon after the night comes, and with the light they'd have, shootin' would be easier. Jest shake yerself, Steve."

He looked severely at the young trapper, and then turned as Tom broke in upon the silence which had followed the old backwoodsman's words.

"You wait a little, Jim," said the burly Englishman. "Steve has given us a hint more than once in the past twenty-four hours. Try him again. I'll be bound he's got something under that hunting cap of his. He's a regular young conspirator. What is it, Steve?"

"Just this. We are stranded here I take it. We cannot move into the river, for the Indians would shoot us down. They cannot easily cross, for we have their canoes, and I am sure that they have no others hidden along the river. That is why they sent four men along this side, with instructions to paddle the whole lot across. Until the night comes they can do very little. But once it is dark they will send half their number over, and then we shall be in danger of attack. So it comes to this. They can afford to wait, and, in fact, must do so. We cannot. If we wait they will be across before the night is an hour old, and then with a party on either side, even though they have no canoes, they will have us."

Tom nodded emphatically, while Jim scratched amongst the osiers with the soft toe of his moccasin.

"That air so," he drawled. "Then what's the ticket?"

"We must move. I thought that with these canoes to help us we might manage to get away. Now, Jim, don't open your mouth as if you would like to swallow me. Do you think these reeds would keep out a bullet if piled fairly close together?"

For a second the trapper looked closely at the osiers, feeling them with his hand. He tore one out by the roots, and then gripped it between his teeth.

"They're soft and pulpy inside," he said, a light gathering on his face. "Reckon, as they stand, a bullet would rip through 'em as if they was only cotton. See that! Ain't I right?"

Another series of reports had suddenly rung out from the far side, and again the leaden messengers tore through the osiers.

"Jest as ef they was cotton," he repeated. "But ef yer was to pile 'em close together, then I reckon a bullet would find it hard to get through. Steve, you ain't such a duffer as I thought, not by a long way. What're yer after?"

"Just this," laughed Steve, for his nimble brain had hit upon a plan which might help the whole party. "We have five canoes here. We can break up two of them, and by jamming the sides into two of the others can raise the gunwales from the water. Then we can pack them with reeds. They'll take a lot without sinking, for these stalks are very light and buoyant. Once we're ready we can float them out between us and the redskins, and then they can fire till they're tired."

Jim threw his cap in the air, and, unmindful of the fact that the action immediately brought a shower of bullets, danced and capered in the reeds. He was a queer and light-hearted trapper. For all his sagacity and cunning, he was but a boy, and behaved like one when anything out of the way happened.

"Cap'n," he cried, gripping Steve by the hand. "I ain't fit to lead this party no longer. Reckon you've won the place. Boys, we air goin' ter do as Steve says, and get the laugh on them critters."

Chapter V

Jules Lapon is Disappointed

Steve Mainwaring had suddenly leaped higher in the estimation of his comrades, and even Tom Mainwaring, who was apt to look upon his son with the proud eye of an indulgent father, now regarded him with eyes which shone with strange enthusiasm. For Steve had done well. Even when he was only a little mite he had shown courage, and as he grew bigger and stronger, and mastered the ways of the backwoodsmen and the habits of the Indians, amongst some of whom he was often thrown, his elders had seen that he was a promising pupil, while the redskins themselves had christened him the Hawk, no small compliment from such a race. Then Steve had a great advantage. While learning the ways of the backwoods, he had had an excellent education from his father, which added something to his astuteness. And now, little by little, these grizzled veterans of the forest were beginning to discover his worth. They had already found in him a lad who could barter their pelts far better than they could. Hitherto they had been always able to rely upon his sagacity, his courage, and his shooting, and now —

"Cap'n," repeated Jim again, pushing his coon-skin cap back from his bald head and gripping Steve's hand. "That 'ere plan air 'cute. Thunder! One of these here redskin skunks wouldn't ha' thought of it, and when they see us come out from the bank, why — "

The thought was too much for the old hunter. He stood staring into Steve's face, taking closer stock of the lad perhaps than he had ever done before, for familiarity with a person often makes us slow to discover virtues, which, after all, are only buried beneath the surface. Good points, which are hardly skin deep, and which have escaped our notice hitherto, only become apparent when some unusual incident brings them prominently before our eyes.

"That air a lad to be proud of, Judge," he said, wiping the perspiration from his forehead. "Reckon he's lain quiet up to this, or else we should ha' found him out. He's got a bit of your way of stayin' quiet, and openin' his mouth only when he's axed a question or when there's need for a lawyer or a cap'n. It's sartin he's got the hang of this matter, and I votes that he leads till we're home agin. 'Twon't do no harm to us. What do yer say, red head?"

Mac doubled an enormous fist, shook it in Jim's face and grinned, a grin which set his lips back from his teeth, and exposed a cavity reaching almost from ear to ear. It was the grin of a man who has suddenly heard good news, and who has had a load taken from his mind.

"Red head! Bedad, 'tis mesilf as will choke the loife out of ye, Huntin' Jim. 'Twould be aisier for ye to stand out there and ax some of thim varmint to put a bullet into ye, so it would. Red head!"

The knuckles of his tanned and brawny fist rested against Jim's nose, but provoked not a movement.

"Waal, what do yer say?" Jim growled, his eyes flashing.

"Say? Sure that Oi'll be onaisy if Steve don't take over the place. Faith, 'tis his idea, and a man should have the chanst of carryin' it out."

"It is an honour, and one which the boy will appreciate," said Tom, solemnly. "Steve, we appoint you the captain. Give your orders."

"Yes, give the orders, lad," cried Jim, his kindly features lighting up with real pleasure, while he continued to stare at this tall young hunter, noticing his good looks, his fearless and alert appearance, and the good temper which lurked in every line of his sun-tanned face. "You've settled about them canoes. Git along with the job."

Steve was somewhat overcome at the turn events had taken, but a glance at his father and at his old companions soon assured him that they were in earnest, and would support him.

"I feel too young for the task," he said, "but I grant the experience will be a fine one, and may some day be of the utmost use to me. Then we'll set to work. Take your hunting knives and slit two of

the canoes down through the centre of the bow and stern. Mac, get along and cut a few vine tendrils, and keep that red head down. The redskins couldn't miss you."

There was a roar at that, a hearty laugh which showed that Steve's plan had encouraged the whole party, and had shown them a method by which they might extricate themselves from a very awkward and serious predicament. And to hear this young fellow commence his command by a little good-humoured banter delighted them.

"Arrah, now, Masther Steve. Is that the way ye'd reward me?" cried the jovial Mac, as he powdered the pan of his heavy musket. "Have a care, me bhoy. 'Tis yerself as will be howlin' for mercy if Mac gets a holt of ye."

Steve waved him away, and while the Irishman went to get the tendrils, he and the others splashed through the oozy bed of the river, pushing their way through the reeds till they came to the canoes hidden there by their pursuers. Every now and again a report rang out on the far side of the river, and a bullet whistled through the reeds, but fortunately without hitting any of them, though some came very near. Indeed, on one occasion they were in the greatest danger, for one of the enemy, suspecting that they were amidst the reeds, crept higher up the far bank, till he could get a full view of the nose of the canoe which had first caught Steve's eye. He reckoned that if the pale faces were there they would be in amongst the craft, and levelling his barrel to what he thought must be the correct position, he fired.

"Thunder!" exclaimed Jim, as Tom's skin cap leaped into the air, spun round, and flew in amongst the reeds. "Them 'ere varmint kin shoot. Jest a moment while I talk to that critter. Get out of these reeds."

They crept to the bank and lay down under the bushes, while the active trapper clambered into a tree and stared across the river. Presently they saw his barrel come to the horizontal position, where he held it till something caught his eye. Then the stock went to his shoulder, his brown cheek fell closer to it, and his eye squinted along the sights. There was a sharp crack on the far side, a spurt of flame and smoke issued from the bushes, while a bullet ploughed into the reeds, and thudded heavily against the bank. At the same instant Jim's piece spoke, and as his comrades looked they saw the barrel of a gun suddenly emerge from the cover opposite. It seemed to leap into the air, and after it came the painted face and then the body of an Indian. He stood stock still for an instant, staring at the reeds, and then with a hideous yell fell face foremost into the river, his death bringing loud whoops from his friends.

"Reckon that'll make 'em a bit careful," said Jim, clambering down and reloading. "Them skunks had got to think that we couldn't shoot. They'll see now that some of us know the business-end of a musket. Them orders, Steve?"

"Let us tackle the canoes and make ready."

Once more they crept into the reeds, their hunting knives in their hands. A few slashes cut through the strong sinews with which the ends of the craft were sewn, while Steve divided the huge strip of birch bark along the centre. Another canoe was served in the same manner, when they found themselves in possession of four pieces as long as their own canoe, or almost so. And now they threw themselves on a third canoe, erecting their strips along the side, and pegging them in position with pieces cut from a tree, while Mac made all secure by piercing the strips and lashing them firmly with vine tendrils. The work came happily to their hands, for backwoodsmen were skilled in the manufacture of canoes.

"That 'ere ship air ready," said Jim at length. "We can fill her till the water comes above the gunwale of the canoe, and she won't sink."

"And if we care to carry out the same work with these other two, we can have two ships floating side by side, and they at least should keep out the bullets," said Steve. "What do you think?"

"Think! Ain't you the cap'n?"

"Then we'll do it. Let's get along with the job."

While Steve and Jim began to construct a second craft which would hold a pile of reeds, Mac and Tom crept through the osiers, cutting bundles away with their hunting knives. They kept steadily at the work till they had cut down the greater part of the bed, leaving a thick outer fringe to hide them from the enemy. The leaves were then lopped off, and the stems piled into the first of the special craft constructed, till they reached to a point above the high sides provided.

"Float her now and see whether she is top heavy," said Steve. "That was a good idea of Mac's to put a few rocks at the bottom."

Very carefully they pushed the strange craft into the water till she floated close beside their own canoe. Then they tested her stability by pressing the load over to either side.

"As steady as you could wish," said Steve. "Her gunwale is a couple of inches above the water, so she will ship very little. Now for the second."

Within an hour they were ready, the two craft laden with reeds being lashed firmly together and floated to the far side of their own canoe. There was still a little to do. At Tom's suggestion Mac cut a couple of stout boughs, and these were attached to the stem and stern of the nearest craft, and the other ends to the stem and stern of the canoe in which they would take their places.

"If a bullet does happen to come through, it will drop in the water," he said. "Again, we might find it convenient to set fire to the reeds in the outer one, and make use of the smoke as a covering. The wind is blowing right across to the far side of the river, and the reeds happen to be well soaked after last night's rain. There would be little danger of the covering being burned too soon."

"A grand idea," cried Steve. "What do you say, Jim?"

"That Tom and Steve air mighty 'cute, and don't want no teachin'. Judge, I guessed as yer had somethin' in that big head of yours. That 'ere idea air almost better'n Steve's. Set fire to the reeds we will, and a fine smoke them Injuns'll see. Reckon they'll be choked."

He went off chuckling to bring in Silver Fox, the latter having meanwhile kept an eagle eye on the far bank.

"They have moved a little," he said slowly. "The enemy have spread up and down the bank, and watch us like hawks. Do my brothers think to paddle away? Surely there will be few of us to whom a bullet will not come."

"And supposing we wait till it is dark?" asked Steve.

"Then our scalps will hang at their belts. A little sooner will make no difference. Silver Fox is ready."

"And supposing again that we move off now and have some cover, for instance, this, and set fire to the reeds in the outer canoe?"

Steve pointed to the strange craft which they had prepared, and waited eagerly for the answer, for Silver Fox was a cunning Mohawk, and if a thing could pass his eyes and meet with approval, then it was good. He strode towards the growing reeds, tore one up by the roots and bit it, just as Jim had done. Then he turned gravely to the party.

"The pale faces are great and brave foes," he said. "They press on and on into the forests, which were the hunting grounds of the Indian, and they forget the defeat they have suffered, the dead they have left. Nothing can or will stop them. They die like buffalo, fighting for their lives. Their cunning is at first as nothing to the cunning of the Shawnees and other foes, and so their scalps hang in many and many a wigwam. But death and loss have taught them. They have become men of the river and forests themselves, and their cunning is great. Surely the Great Father must have aided them, for how else could they have thought of such a device. Silver Fox has spoken and is ready."

He walked to the tree at the foot of which Steve and Tom had reverently laid the body of poor Talking Bear, and looked closely into his face. Then he stooped, took the belt, the tomahawk, and the bullet pouch of the fallen redskin, and strode down the bank.

"Farewell, my brother," he said. "You have been a faithful friend, a kind companion, and a mighty fighter. The wigwam will know you no more, and the men of the war parties will miss your strong arm. These I take so that all may keep your memory."

It was a very simple little ceremony, but affecting for all that, and caused Steve to gulp down something which seemed to fill his throat. For the lad, though a skilful hunter, was not hardened to the ways of the Indians and the pioneers of the forest. A life was a life, a friend a friend to be mourned after his death and thought of often.

And so they turned away from the silent figure, leaving the still form of the painted warrior lying there in his blanket, shaded by the foliage of a mighty tree, which has long since been felled to make way for the iron road which now bears the rapid conveyance of this bustling century. Who of those thousands who pass along the line and look out of the windows at the fascinating scenery of the Mohawk think of the days of which we write, or ever paint in their own minds the birch canoes which then were paddled over the silent waters, and the painted faces which stole through the forests, hunting the pale faces, the sturdy fathers of a sturdy race which now fills the land of promise?

"Ready?" asked Steve, taking the lead. "Then, father, show us the way, please, and take the paddle right astern. I will take that in the bows, while Mac can use the one in the centre. Jim, we'll pile the muskets just in front of father, and you will get in a shot if there is an opportunity. One moment. Break up those spare paddles, Mac."

All stepped quietly into their places, while Steve waded into the water and steadied the canoe, pushing the one which held their stores well behind him. When all was in readiness, he waded still farther in and sprinkled a little powder on the reeds which filled the strange craft farthest away. A few strokes of his steel against the flint set the powder fizzling, and in a minute one of the reeds, which happened to be drier than the others, was well alight. Using this as a match, he went all along the load, firing it at close intervals. Then he came back to the stern and made ready to push the canoes out. And meanwhile the flames had done their work. Licking round the portions of the outside layer of reeds, which happened to be dry, they soon set them ablaze, and then began to ignite the damper portions. A cloud of dense black smoke rose above the reeds, and, caught by the wind, went billowing out across the river. Almost at once fierce whoops came from the far shore, and there was a commotion amidst the forest cover.

"Shout and dance, me beauties," laughed Jim grimly. "Set to at one of yer war dances, if that'll do yer good. Reckon them 'ere varmint has a notion we're burnin' their canoes. That's what all the rustle's about."

"They will slay us with the torture should it chance that we fall into their hands," said Silver Fox gravely. "This is a sore blow to our enemies."

"Then they have worse to follow," chimed in Steve. "I fancy that when they see us floating away up the river they'll be more than a trifle angry. Paddles out. Ready? Then, here we go."

He pushed slowly till there was way on the canoes, and then with one vigorous push sent the whole lot surging against the barrier of reeds which hid the party from the enemy. And as he pushed for the last time, he leaned his full weight on the sides of the canoe, and with a dexterous movement clambered aboard.

"Get hold of the paddle and make ready to swing round," sang out Tom.

"We come out bows on, remember that, and shall have to face their fire. There goes the first musket."

They were out. The canoes had burst through the reeds into the open river, and for a minute perhaps Steve looked at the opposite bank. He saw a figure suddenly stand erect and emerge from behind a tree, and watched as the barrel of a musket was levelled at him. There was a loud report, a bullet whisked over his head, and smoke gushed from the forest. Then there was a deafening explosion just behind him, and for a few seconds he experienced the deafness and pain which are felt when

a weapon is discharged close to one's ear. But his eyes held to the far bank, and once more he had need to praise Jim's shooting.

"That 'ere redskin ain't too careful," growled the trapper. "Ef he'd put his iron jest a bit lower, he'd have plugged Huntin' Jim as sure as I'm standin'. Reckon he ain't fit to try again."

It was true. The unerring eye of the trapper had fastened upon the Indian as he levelled his musket, and Jim seldom made a mistake. He was one of the hardy pioneers versed in Indian warfare who had learned that it is better to hold one's fire and keep one's finger from the trigger rather than send a bullet wide of the mark.

"Yer can't afford to miss, Steve," he had often remarked, when the young trapper was out on some excursion with him. "Some of these days yer may run into a crowd of them redskins, and then you'll know that the man as can shoot has a chance of keepin' his scalp. Reckon the chap as don't know how ain't fit to wear haar."

"Round with her. Paddle!" shouted Steve. "That's better. Now they can fire till they are tired of the game. Whew! Doesn't it sound queer to hear the bullets striking."

Indeed it did. As the paddlers forced the strange craft up the river, their course was followed by frantic whoops and by a perfect hail of bullets. As fast as twenty men could fire and load again the muskets sent their contents at the floating target, and time and again the leaden messengers crashed into the reeds, many passing through the outer pile and lodging in the centre of the second one, proving that Steve's suggestion was a good one. Occasionally a bullet would hit the mark somewhere near the top, and a shower of shredded reed would be scattered over the party. Then, too, numbers of missiles flew astern and ahead, for the smoke upset the aim of the enemy.

And so for an hour Steve and his friends paddled up the river, confident now of their security from bullets. As they progressed the howling band ran abreast of them on the bank, and one or two of the redskins actually entered the water in their frantic eagerness to come up with the pale faces. But Jim put a stop to that. The smoke hid him entirely from the sight of the enemy, while he himself had a good view of the bank, and was well protected by the reeds. He stood in the canoe, a pile of muskets at his feet, and just the top of his head showing above the barrier. Then, every now and again, he straightened himself a little more, his weapon went to his shoulder, and a shriek told that the eye of the trapper had not erred. Indeed his good shooting, the pace at which they paddled, and perhaps a failure in ammunition soon resulted in a lull in the contest. Only an occasional bullet now plunged into the reeds.

"We can say good-bye to them very soon," said Steve suddenly, craning his head round the barrier. "A couple of miles up, Swan creek runs into the stream, and that should stop them. They will have to swim or climb, and in either case we can draw away from them. When I give the word, cut away the canoes and upset them. A few blows with a tomahawk will make them useless, and send them to the bottom. Is that right, father?"

He appealed to Tom, for as yet this position of leader was strange to him, and he felt somewhat abashed and modest, considering the age and experience of his comrades. However, he had nothing to fear, for Tom nodded energetically, while the garrulous Jim burst forth with a reply.

"Jest you recollect as you're the cap'n," he laughed. "When yer give an order, why, let it be an order. No hankey pankey, lad. If Mac don't set to and follow your words, why, pass him along to me. I'll make short work of the feller."

"Bedad!" growled the Irishman. "Huntin' Jim, there'll be trouble for ye sooner than ye expect. Will ye be quiet and listen to what the cap'n's sayin'?"

They were a merry party now. Merry and light-hearted, as in truth they had a right to be, for every minute lightened their danger. Indeed, hardly an hour had passed when they came abreast of the creek of which Steve had spoken. It was wide and shallow, and cut into a big, sweeping hollow formed in the side of a long rocky ridge.

"There ain't a redskin as would attempt to swim it," said Jim with decision, "and ef they make round behind the cliff, why, Steve, you and me and Tom and Mac'll be at home long before they come out on the far side. Reckon they'll give it up and get back to their huntin' grounds. Boys, when we're back at the settlement we'll send the news round, and there won't be another party making this side of the fall for Albany. Murderin' cut-throats like them ought to be hounded down, and ef they was our way –"

"We should root them out," said Tom, quietly, "No body of self-respecting settlers would put up with such a state of things. Against such a band we of the settlement are secure. But it will not be always so."

He shook his head dubiously, while Jim and Mac nodded in agreement.

"Reckon the thirteen States has got to put aside their baby squabbles and put their backs to this work ef we air to stay at the settlement," exclaimed Jim. "Trappers ain't powerful enough to stop the journeys of the French and Injuns."

How true his words were likely to prove the reader will be able to learn. For the time had come long since for concerted action. France had set a covetous eye on the valley of the Ohio, on the smiling forest country lying to the west of the Alleghany Mountains, and resistlessly, unchecked as yet, she had poured into the land. There had been no concerted movement to check her. The thirteen States which then constituted our American colonies made no combined movement against the enemy. For the most part they were absolutely apathetic. And while they sat at their ease, surrounded by comfort and security, hundreds and hundreds of the log huts and settlements of their brothers were being ravaged by the French and their relentless Indians. The guns and the courage of thousands of trappers and hardy backwoodsmen were insufficient now to stem the torrent.

"The times are bad. There is trouble ahead," said Tom, thoughtfully. "Let us hope it will pass by and leave our settlement undisturbed. But I fear that that is too much to hope for. There is Jules Lapon."

Yes. There was Jules Lapon, leader of the most reckless and cruel bands of Indians, and a near neighbour now of Tom and his friends.

"Well, we won't think of him and the troubles now," sang out Steve cheerily. "We're well out of shot, and can cut the canoes adrift. Let us get free of them and push on towards home."

They hacked through the creepers which bound the ends of the boughs to their own canoe, and then cut holes in the two craft which they had so deftly prepared, ripping the sides and throwing the reeds out into the river. A few minutes later the canoes which had proved so useful were sweeping along, hopelessly injured, and long before Steve and his friends had turned round the bend of the cliff they had disappeared under the water.

They dug their paddles into the stream now with a vengeance, and sent their craft surging up the Mohawk, the echo of discordant yells and whoops still coming to their ears. But they were secure from pursuit, and never even troubled to look behind them. Turn and turn about they struggled at the paddles, and in the course of seven days found themselves at the end of their river journey. They had reached the lake which emptied into the river, and their coming was greeted by a tribe of Mohawk Indians. Then for two days they trudged through the forest, the Mohawks helping to carry their stores. Above their heads the branches grew in one long, continuous arch, hiding the sun. Steve led the way, his record with this tribe of hardy warriors now vastly increased after his recent exploits. His eye followed the numerous blazes on the trees, slashes cut with Jim's tomahawk, and the trappers' sure method of marking a path.

"The last stage, I think," said Tom, on the evening of the second day, when they came in sight of water.

That evening there was a serious palaver round the camp fire, and Silver Fox and his friends were rewarded with a portion of the stores. On the following day when Steve and his friends stepped

into a canoe which had been hidden in the forest and pushed out on to this new strip of water, the Mohawks waved a farewell to them from the bank.

"Health and strength go with you, our brothers," cried Silver Fox, his features wearing their usual impassiveness. "Call should there be danger, and Silver Fox and his friends will surely come."

Steve watched them as they dived into the forest, and then stared down the river. They were on the Alleghany now, and a strong stream was bearing them down to their own beloved settlement. Indeed, the following day was hardly three hours old when all gave a shout of recognition.

"Thar's the place. And thar's Jimmy!"

It was Jim who waved his cap and shouted, while a faint huzza came back from the shore. They put the nose of the canoe towards a break in the forest, and very soon Jim and Mac were greeting their wives, while Tom and Steve looked on in silence. They unpacked the canoes, pulled them up, and separated, Steve and his father making for their own humble but comfortable log cabin.

Chapter VI

Left in Charge

"Marse Steve, Marse Steve, I'se that glad to see you. I'se prayed and prayed offen, and sometimes I think you never come home agin. Och, honey, I'se glad you'se back agin."

The black boy who acted as Tom's housekeeper wept with joy as the two sturdy trappers stepped into the hut. He was busy superintending the roasting of a wild turkey which hung to a string dangling over the cabin fire, and the return of his masters was entirely unexpected.

"I'se that glad, Marse Mainwaring and Marse Steve. Sammy wonder and wonder when yo gwine to come to de log cab'n agin. Sholy yo stay here now fo' ever."

The faithful fellow looked up at them through his tears while he still gripped both by the hand.

"There, there, Sammy," said Tom at length, touched by the warm welcome which the honest fellow had given them. "Let us have something to eat, and afterwards we'll lie down and take the best rest we have had for many a long day. We've been hunted, lad. Hunted by redskins."

Sammy's mouth opened wide at that, and he stared still harder at his master. Then he let his hand fall, and began to bustle about the table, chattering as he prepared a meal for them.

"Yo's sit down and eat and rest, Marse Mainwaring and Marse Steve," he said, giggling between the words. "Den yo'se lie down, and Sammy watch to seen no Red Injun come near to hurt yo. Marse Steve?"

"Well, Sammy."

"To'morrer p'raps yo sit outside'r the door and speak to Sammy? P'raps yo tell us all what's happ'nd?"

"Perhaps," answered Steve. "Now, hurry up with that turkey. Father and I have not had a peaceful meal for many a day. As for sleep, I fancy we have seldom had both eyes closed."

It was wonderful the way in which they settled down at the log hut which Tom had made his home. As if he had not been away from the place for even an hour, Tom strode across to the fireplace, and, taking his musket in his hand, spilled the powder from the pan, and blew the last of the grains away. Then he laid the weapon across the buck horns nailed to the logs, stringing the powder horn to one of the antlers, and the bag of bullets opposite. His coon-skin cap went still higher, while his damp moccasins were placed a few inches from the embers. Steve followed suit, and very soon the two were discussing the wild turkey.

Some three weeks later, as Steve and Sammy were engaged in manufacturing maple sugar, Tom came and sat on a log close by and watched them carefully. They had three large iron cauldrons dangling over log fires, while a fourth, a smaller one, hung over a separate fire placed some yards from the others. And here they were making a store of sugar to last them throughout the winter. Very early that day Sammy and Steve had been out in the forest, and having blazed certain of the maples, had set their jars beneath the slashes to catch the sap. And now they were boiling the latter down, throwing fresh sap into the larger cauldrons as the bubbling mass threatened to overflow the sides. It was a long process, and for some hours now they had been engaged in the task. They had boiled and boiled the mass till their store of sap was reduced to a third of its former volume, and now that third was placed in the smaller cauldron. Tom watched as they lifted the latter from its iron support and poured its contents into stone vessels to crystallise and cool.

"Steve," he called out. "Steve, I'm going away. I'll be back in a couple of months if nothing turns up to stop me."

Steve was not surprised. His father had gone away from the settlement on some business on several occasions before, while he had remained to keep house.

"Very well, father," he said. "I'll stay here and look out for your return. It will be winter almost by the time you come back."

"Almost, lad. About the Indian summer, I fancy, Steve."

He looked closely at his son as he called him again.

"Steve, my lad, these are uncertain times, and – and I might not have a chance of coming back. If I should not, there is a lot that you should learn in the next few years. Things you have never dreamed of. If I am not back in a year, if anything happens to me, just go to this address and hand in this letter. There it is. Now, I'm going."

It was not the backwoods fashion to take long in preparing for a journey, and so it happened that Tom Mainwaring set out for the Alleghany within half an hour of his conversation with Steve. They parted some ten miles from the log hut, Tom turning his face for the coast, while our hero stepped back to the settlement. And there for a little more than a month he went on quietly with the usual routine. He fished and shot and laid in a store of corn and dried bear's meat for the coming winter, the grinning Sammy looking after the log hut when he was away. Now and again, too, Mac and Jim would come over and spend an evening with him, while Steve would return the visit. For within ten miles of the hut there were some fifteen families, and it was the custom for all to visit one another.

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