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THE EYES OF THE
WOODS: A STORY OF THE
ANCIENT WILDERNESS

Joseph Altsheler

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Story of the Ancient Wilderness**

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CHAPTER I THE FLIGHT

A strong wind swept over the great forest, sending green leaves and twigs in showers before it, and bringing clouds in battalions from the west. The air presently grew cold, and then heavy drops of rain came, pattering at first like shot, but soon settling into a hard and steady fall that made the day dark and chill, tingeing the whole wilderness with gloom and desolation.

The deer sought its covert, a buffalo, grazing in a little prairie, thrust its huge form into a thicket, the squirrel lay snug in its nest in the hollow of a tree, and the bird in the shelter of the foliage ceased to sing. The only sounds were those of the elements, and the world seemed to have returned to the primeval state that had endured for ages. It was the kingdom of fur, fin and feather, and, so far as the casual eye could have seen, man had not yet come.

But in the deep cleft of the cliff, from which coign of vantage they had fought off Shawnee and Miami, Henry Ware, Paul Cotter and Long Jim Hart sat snug, warm and dry, and looked out at the bitter storm. Near them a small fire burned, the smoke passing out at the entrance, and at the far end of the hollow much more wood was heaped. There were five beds of dry leaves with the blankets lying upon them, useful articles were stored in the niches of the stone, and jerked meat lay upon the natural shelves. It was a secret, but cheerful spot in that vast, wet and cold wilderness. Long Jim felt its comfort and security, as he rose, put another stick of wood on the fire, and then resumed his seat near the others.

"I'm sorry the storm came up so soon," said Henry. "Of course, Sol and Tom are hardened to all kinds of weather, but it's not pleasant to be caught in the woods at such a time."

"And our ammunition," said Paul. "It wouldn't hurt the lead, of course, but it would be a disaster for the powder to be soaked through and through. They'd have to go back to the settlements, and that would mean a long journey and a lot of lost time."

"I don't think we need be afraid about the powder," said Henry. "Whatever happens, Sol and Tom will protect it, even if their own bodies suffer."

"Then I'm thinkin' they'll have to do a lot of protectin'," said Long Jim. "The wind is blowin' plum' horizontal, an' the rain is sweepin' long in sheets."

Henry, despite his consoling words, was very anxious. Since their great battle with the invading Indian force and the destruction of the cannon, their supply of ammunition had run very low, and without powder and bullets they were lost in the wilderness. He walked to the narrow entrance of the cave, and, standing just where the rain could not reach him, looked out upon the cold and dripping forest, a splendid figure clothed in deerskin, specially adapted in both body and mind to wilderness life.

He saw nothing but the foliage bending before the wind and the chill sheets sent down by the clouds. The somber sky and the desolation would not have made him feel lonely, even had he been without his comrades. He had faced primeval nature too often and he knew it too well to be overcome or to be depressed by any of its dangers. Yet his heart would have leaped had he beheld the shiftless and the silent ones, making their way among the trees, the needed packs on their backs.

"Any sign, Henry?" asked Paul.

"None," replied the tall youth, "but they said they'd be here today."

Paul, who was lying on a great buffalo robe with his feet to the fire, shifted himself into an easier position. His face expressed content and he felt no anxiety about the traveling two.

“If Shif’less Sol promised to be here he’ll keep his word,” he said, “and Silent Tom will come without making any promises.”

“You do talk won’erful well sometimes, Paul,” said Long Jim, “an’ I reckon you’ve put the facts jest right. I ain’t goin’ to be troubled in my mind a-tall, a-tall ’bout them fellers. They’ll be here. Tom loves nice tender buffler steak best, an’ I’m goin’ to have it ready fur him, while Sol dotes most on fat juicy wild turkey, an’ that’ll be waitin’ fur him, too.”

He turned to his stores, and producing the delicacies his comrades loved began to fry them over the coals. The pleasant odors filled their rocky home.

“I give them two a half hour more,” he said. “I ain’t got any gift uv second sight. I don’t look into the future—nobody does—but I jest figger on what they are an’ what they kin do, an’ then I feel shore that a half hour more is enough.”

“Henry,” asked Paul, “do you think the Miamis and the Shawnees will come back after us?”

“I reckon upon it,” replied Henry, still watching the wet forest. “Red Eagle and Yellow Panther are shrewd and thoughtful chiefs, and Braxton Wyatt and Blackstaffe are full of cunning. They are all able to put two and two together, and they know that it was we who destroyed their cannon when they attempted the big attack on the settlements. They’ll look upon us as the scouts and sentinels who see everything they do.”

“The eyes of the woods,” said Paul.

“Yes, that expresses it, and they’ll feel that they’re bound to destroy us. As soon as the warriors get over their panic they’ll come back to put out the eyes that see too much of their deeds. They know, of course, that we hold this hollow and that we’ve made a home here for a while.”

“But as they won’t return for some time I mean to take my comfort while I can,” said Paul sleepily. “I wouldn’t exchange this buffalo robe, the leaves under it, the fire before my feet and the roof of rock over my head for the finest house in all the provinces. The power of contrast makes my present situation one of great luxury.”

“Power uv contrast! You do use a heap uv big words, Paul,” said Long Jim, “but I ’spose they’re all right. Leastways I don’t know they ain’t. Now, I’m holdin’ back this buffler steak an’ wild turkey, ’cause I want ’em to be jest right, when Sol an’ Tom set down afore the fire. See anythin’ comin’ through the woods, Henry?”

“No, Jim, nothing stirs there.”

“It don’t bother me. They’ll ’pear in good time. They’ve a full ten minutes yet, an’ thar dinners will be jest right fur ’em. I hate to brag on myself, but I shorely kin cook. Ain’t we lucky fellers, Paul? It seems to me sometimes that Providence has done picked us out ez speshul favorites. Good fortune is plum’ showered on us. We’ve got a snug holler like this, one uv the finest homes a man could live in, an’ round us is a wilderness runnin’ thousands uv miles, chock full uv game, waitin’ to be hunted by us. Ev’ry time the savages think they’ve got us, an’ it looks too ez ef they wuz right, we slip right out uv thar hands an’ the scalps are still growin’ full an’ free, squar’ly on top uv our heads. We shorely do git away always, an’ it ’pears to me, Paul, that we are ’bout the happiest an’ most fort’nate people in the world.”

Paul raised his head and looked at Jim, but it was evident to the lad that his long comrade was in dead earnest, and perhaps he was right. The lad shifted himself again and the light of the blaze flickered over his finely-chiseled, scholarly face. Long Jim glanced at him with understanding.

“Ef you had a book or two, Paul,” he said, “you could stay here waitin’ an’ be happy. Sometimes I wish that I liked to read. What’s in it, Paul, that kin chain you to one place an’ make you content to be thar?”

“Because in the wink of an eye, Jim, it transports you to another world. You are in new lands, and with new people, seeing what they do and doing it with them. It gives your mind change, though your body may lie still. Do you see anything yet, Henry, besides the forest and the rain?”

“A black dot among the trees, Paul, but it’s very small and very far, and it may be a bear that’s wandered out in the wet. Besides, it’s two dots that we want to see, not one, and—as sure as I live there are two, moving this way, though they’re yet too distant for me to tell what they are.”

“But since they’re two, and they’re coming towards us, they ought to be those whom we’re expecting.”

“Now they’ve moved into a space free of undergrowth and I see them more clearly. They’re not bears, nor yet deer. They’re living human beings like ourselves.”

“Keep looking, Henry, and tell us whether you recognize ’em.”

“The first is a tall man, young, with light hair. He is bent over a little because of the heavy pack on his back, and the long distance he has come, but he walks with a swing that I’ve seen before.”

“I reckon,” said Long Jim, “that he’s close kin to that lazy critter, Shif’less Sol.”

“Closer even than a twin brother,” continued Henry. “I’d know him anywhere. The other just behind him, and bent also a little with his heavy pack, is amazingly like a friend of ours, an old comrade who talks little, but who does much.”

“None other than Silent Tom,” said Paul joyfully, as he rose and joined Henry at the door. “Yes, there they are, two men, staunch and true, and they bring the powder and lead. Of course they’d come on time! Nothing could stop ’em. The whole Shawnee and Miami nations might be in between, but they’d find a way through.”

“An’ the buffler steak an’ the wild turkey are jest right,” called Long Jim. “Tell ’em to come straight in an’ set down to the table.”

Henry, putting his fingers to his lips, uttered a long and cheerful whistle. The shiftless one and the silent one, raising their heads, made glad reply. They were soaked and tired, but success and journey’s end lay just before them, and they advanced with brisker steps, to be greeted with strong clasps of the hand and a warm welcome. They entered the rocky home, put aside the big packs with sighs of relief and spread out their fingers to the grateful heat.

“That’s the last work I mean to do fur a year,” said Shif’less Sol. “Twuz a big job, a mighty big job fur me, a lazy man, an’ now I’m goin’ to rest fur months an’ months, while Long Jim waits on me an’ feeds me.”

“Jest now I’m glad to do it, Sol,” said Jim. “Take off your clothes, you an’ Tom, hang ’em on the shelf thar to dry, an’ now set to. The steaks an’ the turkey are the finest I ever cooked, an’ they’re all fur you two. An’ I kin tell you fellers that the sight uv you is good fur weak eyes.”

Shif’less Sol and Silent Tom ate like epicures, while, denuded of their wet deerskins but wrapped in dry blankets, they basked in the heat.

“Not a drop of rain got at the powder,” said the shiftless one presently, “an’ even ef we don’t capture any from the Injuns we ought to hev enough thar to last us many months.”

“Did you see anything of the warriors?” asked Henry.

“We hit one trail ’bout fifty miles south uv here, but we didn’t have time to foller it. Still, it’s ’nough to show that they’re in between us an’ the settlements.”

“We expected it. We discovered sufficient while you were gone to be sure they’re going to make a great effort to end us. They look upon us as the eyes of the woods, and they’ve concluded that their first business is with us before they make another attack on our villages.”

Shif’less Sol helped himself to a fresh piece of the wild turkey, and made another fold of the blanket about his athletic body.

“Paul hez talked so much ’bout them old Romans wrapped in their togys that I feel like one now,” he said, “an’ I kin tell you I feel pow’ful fine, too. That wuz a cold rain an’ a wet rain, an’ the fire an’ the food are mighty good, but it tickles me even more to know how them renegades an’ warriors

rage ag'inst us. I've a heap o' respect fur Red Eagle an' Yellow Panther, who are great chiefs an' who are fightin' fur thar rights ez they see 'em, but the madder Blackstaffe an' Wyatt git the better I like it."

"Me, too," said Silent Tom with emphasis, relapsing then into silence and his preoccupation with the buffalo steak. The shiftless one regarded him with a measuring gaze.

"Tom," he said, "why can't you let a feller finish his dinner without chatterin' furever? I see the day comin' when you'll talk us all plum' to death."

Silent Tom shook his head in dissent. He had exhausted speech.

Paul, who had remained at the door, watching, announced an increase of rain and wind. Both were driving so hard that leaves and twigs were falling, and darkness as of twilight spread over the skies. The cold, although but temporary, was like that of early winter.

"We needn't expect any attack now," said Henry. "Join us, Paul, around the fire, and we'll have a grand council, because we must decide how we're going to meet the great man hunt they're organizing for us."

Paul left the cleft, and sat down on a doubled blanket with his back against the wall. He felt the full gravity of the crisis, knowing that hundreds of warriors would be put upon their trail, resolved never to leave the search until the five were destroyed, but he had full confidence in his comrades. In all the world there were not five others so fit to overcome the dangers of the woods, and so able to endure their hardships.

"I suppose, Henry," said Paul, with his mind full of ancient lore, "now that the Roman Senate, or its successor, is in session you are its presiding officer."

"If that's the wish of the rest of you," said Henry.

"It is!" they said all together.

Henry, like Paul, was sitting on his doubled blanket with his back against the stony wall. Jim Hart, his long legs crossed, occupied a similar position, and, by the flickering light of the fire, Shif'less Sol and Silent Tom, wrapped in their blankets, looked in truth like Roman senators.

"Will you tell us, Henry, what you found out while we wuz away?" asked the shiftless one. Henry had made a scouting expedition while the two were gone for the powder and lead.

"I made one journey across the Ohio," replied their chief, "and at night I went near a Shawnee village. Red Eagle was there, and so were Blackstaffe and Wyatt. Lying in the bushes near the fire by which they sat, I could catch enough of their talk to learn that the Shawnee and Miami nations are going to bend all their energies and powers to our destruction. That is settled."

"I feel a heap flattered," said Shif'less Sol, "that so many warriors should be sent ag'inst us, who are only five. What wuz it that old feller was always sayin', Paul, every time he held up a bunch o' fresh figs before the noses o' the Roman senators?"

"*Delenda est Carthago*, which is Latin, Sol, and it means just now, when I give it a liberal translation, that we five must be wiped clean off the face of the earth."

"I've heard you say often, Paul, that Latin was a dead language, an' so all them old dead sayin's won't hev any meanin' fur us. I kin live long on the threats o' Braxton Wyatt an' Blackstaffe, an' so kin all o' us. But go on, Henry. I 'pologize fur interruptin' the presidin' officer."

"I learned all I could there," continued Henry, "but I was able to gather only their general intention, that is their resolve to crush us, a plan that both Wyatt and Blackstaffe urged. However, when I trailed a large band two days later, and crept near their camp, I discovered more."

"What wuz it?" exclaimed the shiftless one, leaning forward a little, his face showing tense and eager in the glow of the flames.

"They're going to spread a net for us. Not one body of warriors will seek us, but many. Red Eagle will lead a band, Yellow Panther will be at the head of another, Braxton Wyatt will be in charge of a third, Blackstaffe will take a fourth, and there will be at least seven or eight more, though some of them may unite later. Shif'less Sol has put it right. We'll be honored as men were never honored

before in this wilderness. At least a thousand warriors, brave and skillful men, all, will be hunting us, two hundred to one and maybe more.”

“And while they’re hunting us,” said Paul, his eyes glistening, “we’ll draw ’em off from the settlements, and we’ll be serving our people just as much as we did when we were destroying the big guns, and filling the warriors with superstitious alarm.”

“True in every word,” said Henry, his soul rising for the contest. “Let ’em come on and we’ll lead ’em such a chase that their feet will be worn to the bone, and their minds will be full of despair!”

“You put it right,” said the shiftless one. “I think I’ll enjoy bein’ a fox fur awhile. The forest is full o’ holes an’ dens, an’ when they dig me out o’ one I’ll be off fur another.”

“We know the wilderness as well as they do,” said Henry, “and we can use as many tricks as they can. Now, since they’re spreading a great net, we must take the proper steps to evade it. Having besieged our refuge here once, they’ll naturally look again for us in this place. If they catch us inside they’ll sit outside until they starve us to death.”

“Which means,” said Paul regretfully, “that we must leave our nice dry home.”

“So it does, but not, I think, before tomorrow morning, and we’ll use the hours meanwhile to good advantage. We must begin at once molding into bullets the lead that Sol and Tom brought.”

Every one of the five carried with him that necessary implement in the wilderness, a bullet mold, and they began the task immediately, all save Henry, who went outside, despite the fierce rain, and scouted a bit among the bushes and trees. The four made bullets fast, melting the lead in a ladle that Jim carried, pouring it into the molds, and then dropping the shining and deadly pellets one by one into their pouches. Three of them talked as they worked, but Silent Tom did not speak for a full hour. Then he said:

“We’ll have five hundred apiece.”

Shif’less Sol looked at him reprovingly.

“Tom,” he said, “I predicted a while ago that the time wuz soon comin’ when you’d talk us to death. You used five words then, when you know your ’lowance is only one an hour.”

Tom Ross flushed under his tan. He hated, above all things, to be garrulous. “Sorry,” he muttered, and continued his work with renewed energy and speed. The bullets seemed to drop in a shining stream from his mold into his pouch. But Shif’less Sol talked without ceasing, his pleasant chatter encouraging them, as music cheers troops for battle.

“It ain’t right fur me to hev to work this way,” he said, “me sich a lazy man. I ought to lay over thar on a blanket, an’ go to sleep while Jim does my share ez well ez his own.”

“When I’m doin’ your share, Sol Hyde,” said Long Jim, “you’ll be dead. Not till then will I ever tech a finger to your work. You are a lazy man, ez you say, an’ fur sev’ral years now I’ve been tryin’ to cure you uv it, but I ain’t made no progress that I kin see.”

“I don’t want you to make progress, Jim. I like to be lazy, an’ jest now I feel pow’ful fine, fed well, an’ layin’ here, wrapped in a blanket before a good warm fire.”

Henry went back to the cleft, and took another long look. The conditions had not changed, save that night was coming and the wilderness was chill and hostile. The wind blew with a steady shrieking sound, and the driving rain struck like sleet. Leaves fell before it, and in every depression of the earth the water stood in pools. Over this desolate scene the faint sun was sinking and the twilight, colder and more solemn than the day, was creeping. He looked at the wet forest and the coming dusk, and then back at the dry hollow and the warm fire behind him. The contrast was powerful, but only one choice was left to them.

“Boys,” he said, “we’ll have to make the most of tonight.”

“Because we must leave our home in the morning?” said Paul.

“Yes, that’s it. We’ll have to take to the woods, no matter how hard it is. Chance doesn’t favor us this time. I fancy the band led by Braxton Wyatt will make straight for our house here.”

“Since it’s the last dry bed I’ll have fur some time I’m goin’ to sleep,” said Shif’less Sol plaintively. “Everybody pesters a lazy man, an’ I mean to use the little time I hev.”

“You’ve a right to it, Sol,” said Henry, “because you’ve walked long and far, and you’ve brought what we needed most. The sooner you and Tom go to sleep the better. Paul, you join ’em and Jim and I will watch.”

The shiftless one and the silent one turned on their sides, rested their heads on their arms and in a minute or two were off to the land of slumber. Paul was slower, but in a quarter of an hour or so he followed them to the same happy region. Long Jim put out the fire, lest the gleam of the coals through the cleft should betray their presence to a creeping enemy—although neither he nor Henry expected any danger at present—and took his place beside his watchful comrade.

The two did not talk, but in the long hours of rain and darkness they guarded the entrance. Their eyes became so used to the dusk that they could see far, but they saw nothing alive save, late in the night, a lumbering black bear, driven abroad and in the storm by some restless spirit. Long Jim watched the ungainly form, as it shambled out of sight into a thicket.

“A bad conscience, I reckon,” he said. “That b’ar would be layin’ snug in his den ef he didn’t hev somethin’ on his mind. He’s ramblin’ ’roun’ in the rain an’ cold, cause’s he’s done a wrong deed, an’ can’t sleep fur thinkin’ uv it. Stole his pardner’s berries an’ roots, mebbe.”

“Perhaps you’re right, Jim,” Henry said, “and animals may have consciences. We human beings are so conceited that we think we alone feel the difference between right and wrong.”

“I know one thing, Henry, I know that b’ars an’ panthers wouldn’t leave thar own kind an’ fight ag’in’st thar own race, as Braxton Wyatt an’ Blackstaffe do. That black b’ar we jest saw may feel sore an’ bad, but he ain’t goin’ to lead no expedition uv strange animals ag’in’st the other black b’ars.”

“You’re right, Jim.”

“An’ fur that reason, Henry, I respeck a decent honest black b’ar, even ef he is mad at hisself fur some leetle mistake, an’ even ef he can’t read an’ write an’ don’t know a knife from a fork more than I do a renegade man who’s huntin’ the scalps uv them he ought to help.”

“Well spoken, Jim. Your sense of right and wrong is correct nearly always. Like you, I’ve a lot of respect for the black bear, and also for the deer and the buffalo and the panther and the other people of the woods. Do you think the rain is dyin’ somewhat?”

“Pears so to me. It may stop by day an’ give us a chance to leave without a soakin’.”

They relapsed again into a long silence, but they saw that their hope was coming true. The wind was sinking, its shriek shrinking to a whisper and then to a sigh. The rain ceased to beat so hard, coming by and by only in fitful showers, while rays of moonlight, faint at first, began to appear in the western sky. In another half hour the last shower came and passed, but the forest was still heavy with dripping waters. Henry, nevertheless, knew that it was time to go, and he awakened the sleepers.

“We must make up our packs,” he said.

The five worked with speed and skill. All the lead, newly brought, had been molded into bullets, and the powder, save that in their horns, was carried in bags. This, with the blankets and portions of food, constituted most of their packs. Some furs and skins they left to those who might come, and then they slipped from the warm hollow, which had furnished such a grateful shelter to them.

“It’s just as well,” said Henry, “that we should let ’em think we’re still in there. Then they may waste a day or two in approaching, so hide your footprints.”

The earth was soft from the rain, but the stony outcrop ran a long distance, and they walked on it cautiously so far as it went, after which they continued on the fallen trunks and brush, with which the forest had been littered by the winds of countless years. They were able, without once touching foot to ground, to reach a brook, into which they stepped, following its course at least two miles. When they emerged at last they sat down on stones and let the water run from their moccasins and leggings.

“I don’t like getting wet, this way,” said Henry, “but there was no choice. At least, we know we’ve come a great distance and have left no trail. There’ll be no chance to surprise us now. How long would you say it is till day, Sol?”

“Bout two hours,” replied the shiftless one, “an’ I ’spose we might ez well stay here a while. We’re south o’ the hollow an’ Wyatt an’ his band are purty shore to come out o’ the north. The woods are mighty wet, but the day is goin’ to be without rain, an’ a good sun will dry things fast. What we want is to git a new home fur a day or two, in some deep thicket.”

They began to search and presently found a dense tangle, with several large trees growing near the center of it, the trunk of one of them hollowed out by time. In the opening they put their bags of powder, part of their bullets and other supplies, and then, wrapped in their blankets, sat down in the brush before it.

“Now, Henry,” said Shif’less Sol, “it’s shore that we ain’t goin’ to be besieged, though our empty holler may be, an’ that bein’ the case, an’ the trouble bein’ passed fur the moment, you an’ Jim, who watched most o’ the night, go to sleep, an’ Tom an’ Paul too might take up thar naps whar they left ’em off. I’ll do the watchin’, an’ I’ll take a kind o’ pride in doin’ it all by myself.”

The others made no protest, but, leaning their backs against the tree trunks, soon fell asleep, while the shiftless one, rifle under his arm, went to the edge of the canebrake, and began his patrol. He bore little resemblance to a lazy man now. He was, next to Henry, the greatest forest runner of the five, a marvel of skill, endurance and perception, with a mighty heart beating beneath his deerskins, and an intellect of wonderful native power, reasoning and drawing deductions under his thatch of blonde hair.

Shif’less Sol listened to the drip, drip of water from the wet boughs and leaves, and he watched a great sun, red and warm, creep slowly over the eastern hills. He was not uncomfortable, nor was he afraid of anything, but he was angry. He remembered with regret the pleasant hollow, so dry and snug. It belonged, by right of discovery and improvement, to his comrades and himself, but it might soon be defiled by the presence of Indians, led by the hated renegade, Braxton Wyatt. They would sleep on his favorite bed of leaves, they would cook where Long Jim Hart had cooked so well, though they could never equal him, and they would certainly take as their own the furs and skins they had been compelled to leave behind.

The more he thought of it the stronger his wrath grew. Had it not been for his fear of leaving a betraying trail he would have gone back to see if the warriors were already approaching the hollow; but his sense of duty and obvious necessity kept him at the edge of the brake in which his comrades lay, deep in happy slumber.

Morning advanced, warm and beautiful, sprinkling the world at first with silver and then with gold, the sky gradually turning to a deep velvety blue, as intense as any that the shiftless one had ever seen. The myriads of raindrops stood out at first like silver beads on grass and leaves, and then dried up rapidly under the brilliant rays of the sun. A light breeze blew through the foliage, and sang a pleasant song as it blew.

Shif’less Sol felt a wonderful uplift of the spirits. In the darkness and rain of the night before he might have been depressed somewhat at leaving their good shelter for the wet wilderness, but in the splendid dawn he was all buoyancy and confidence.

“Let ’em come,” he said to himself. “Let Braxton Wyatt an’ Blackstaffe an’ all the Miamis an’ Shawnees hunt us fur a year, but they won’t get us, no, not one of us.”

Then he sank silently in the deep grass and slid cautiously away, not toward the dense brake, but to a point well to one side. His acute ear had heard a sound which was not a part of the morning, and while it might be made by a wild animal, then again it might be caused by wilder man. He thanked his wary soul, when, looking above the tops of the grass, he saw two warriors, Shawnees by their paint, emerge from the woods and walk northward, to be followed presently by a full score more, Braxton Wyatt himself at their head.

And so the band had come out of the south, instead of the north! Doubtless they had circled about before approaching, in order to make the surprise complete, and the trigger drew the finger of the shiftless one like a magnet, as he looked at the renegade, the most ruthless hunter among those who hunted the five. Although the temptation to do so was strong, Shif'less Sol did not fire, knowing that his bullet would draw the attack of the band upon his comrades and himself. Instead, he followed them cautiously about half a mile.

He was confirmed in his opinion—in truth, little short of certainty in the first instance—that they were marching against the hollow, and its supposed inmates, as presently they began to advance with extreme care, kneeling down in the undergrowth and sending out flankers. Shif'less Sol laughed. It was a low laugh, but deep, and full of unction. He knew that the farther march of Wyatt and his warriors would be very slow, having in mind the deadly rifles of the five, the muzzles of which they would feel sure were projecting from the mouth of the rocky retreat. It was likely that the entire morning would be spent in an enveloping movement, dusky figures creeping forward inch by inch in a semi-circle, and then nothing would be inside the semi-circle.

Shif'less Sol laughed to himself again, and with the same deep and heartfelt unction. Then he turned and went back to his comrades, who yet slept soundly in the brake. The cane was so dense that they lay in the dimness of the shadows, and there was no disturbing light upon their eyes to awaken them. Shif'less Sol contemplated them with satisfaction, and then he sat down silently near them. He saw no reason to awaken them. Braxton Wyatt was now formally arranging the siege of the rocky refuge and its vanished defenders, and he would not interrupt him for worlds in that congenial task. For the third time he laughed to himself with depth and unction.

The sun rose higher in a sky that arched in its perfect blue over a day of dazzling beauty. The last drop of rain on leaf or grass dried up, and the forest was a deep green, suffused and tinted, though, with a luminous golden glow from the splendid sun. The shiftless one raised his head and inhaled its clear, sweet odors, the great heart under the deerskins and the great brain under the thatch of hair alike sending forth a challenge. Not all the Shawnees, not all the Miamis, not all the renegades could drive the five from this mighty, unoccupied wilderness of Kain-tuck-ee, which his comrades and he loved and in which they had as good a right as any Indian or renegade that ever lived.

It was so still in the canebrake that the birds over the head of the watcher began to sing. Another black bear lumbered toward them, and, catching the strange, human odor, lumbered away again. A deer, a tall buck, holding up his head, sniffed the air, and then ran. Wild turkeys in a distant tree gobbled, a bald eagle clove the air on swift wing, but the sleepers slept placidly on.

CHAPTER II

THE GREAT JOKE

Mid-morning and Henry awoke, yawning a little and stretching himself mightily. Then he looked questioningly at Shif'less Sol who sat in a position of great luxury with his doubled blanket between his back and a tree trunk, and his rifle across his knees. The look of satisfaction that had come there in the morning like a noon glow still overspread his tanned and benevolent countenance.

"Well, Sol?"

"Well, Henry?"

"What has happened while we slept?"

"Nothin', 'cept that Braxton Wyatt an' twenty Shawnee warriors passed, takin' no more notice o' us than ef we wuz leaves o' the forest."

"Advancing on our old house?"

"Yes, they've set the siege by now."

"And we're not there. I'll wake the others. They must share in the joke."

Paul, Long Jim and Silent Tom wiped the last wisp of sleep from their eyes, and, when they heard the tale of a night and a morning, they too laughed to themselves with keen enjoyment.

"What will we do, Henry?" Paul asked.

"First, we'll eat breakfast, though it's late. Then we'll besiege the besiegers. While they're drawing the net which doesn't enclose us we might as well do 'em all the harm we can. We're going to be dangerous fugitives."

The five laughed in unison.

"We'll make Braxton Wyatt and the Shawnees think the forest is full of enemies," said Paul.

Meanwhile they took their ease, and ate breakfast of wild turkey, buffalo steak and a little corn bread that they hoarded jealously. The sun continued its slow climb toward the zenith and Paul, looking up through the canes, thought he had never seen a finer day. Then he remembered something.

"I suggest that we don't move today," he said. "They won't approach the hollow until night anyway, and it wouldn't hurt for us to lie here in the shelter of the brake and rest until dark."

Henry looked at him in surprise.

"Your idea is sudden and I don't understand it," he said.

"So it is, Henry, but it never occurred to me until a moment ago that this was Sunday. We haven't observed Sunday in a long time, and now is our chance. We can't wholly forget our training."

He spoke almost with apology, but the leader did not upbraid him. Instead, he looked at the others and found agreement in their eyes.

"Paul talks in a cur'ous manner an' has cur'ous notions sometimes," said Shif'less Sol, "but I don't say they ain't good. It's a long time since we've paid any 'tention to Sunday, but the idee sticks in my mind. Mebbe it would be a good way fur us to start our big fight ag'inst the tribes an' the renegades."

"When Cromwell and his Ironsides advanced against the Royalists," said Paul, "they knelt down and prayed first on the very field of battle. Then they advanced with their pikes in a solid line, and nothing was ever able to stand before them."

"Then we'll keep Sunday," said Henry decisively.

Paul, feeling a thrill of satisfaction, lay back on his blanket. The idea that they should observe Sunday, that it would be a good omen and beginning, had taken hold of him with singular power. His character was devout and a life in the wilderness among its mighty manifestations deepened its quality. Like the Indian he wanted the spirits of earth and air on his side.

The five had acquired the power of silence and to rest intensely when nothing was to be done. Their food finished, they lay back against their doubled blankets in a calm and peace that was deep and enduring. It was not necessary to go to the edge of the canebrake, as in the brilliant light of the day they might be noticed there, and, where they lay, they could see anyone who came long before he arrived.

Paul, as he breathed, absorbed belief and confidence in their success. Surely so bright a sky bending over them was a good omen! and the tall canes themselves, as they bent before the wind, whispered to him that all would be well. Henry in his own way was no less imaginative than his young comrade. He let his eyelids droop, not to sleep, but to listen. Then as no one of the five stirred, he too heard the voice of the wind, but it sang to him a song far more clear than any Paul heard. It told of triumphs achieved and others yet to come, and, as the great youth lifted his lazy lids and looked around at the others, he felt that they were equal to any task.

The afternoon, keeping all its promise of brilliant beauty, waxed and waned. The great sun dipped behind the forest. The twilight came, at first a silver veil, then a robe of dusk, and after it a night luminous with a clear moon and myriads of stars wrapped the earth, touching every leaf and blade of grass with a white glow.

Still the five did not stir. For a long time they had seemed a part of the forest itself, and the wild animals and birds, rejoicing in the dry and beautiful night after the stormy one that had passed, took them to be such, growing uncommonly brave. The restless black bear came back, looked at them, and then sniffing disdainfully went away to hunt for roots. The great wings of the eagle almost brushed the cane that hung over Henry's head, but the little red eyes were satisfied that what they saw was not living, and the dark body flashed on in search of its prey.

"Three hours more at least, Paul," said Henry at last, "until Sunday is over."

"And I suggest that we wait the full three hours before we make any movement. I know it looks foolish in me to say it, but the feeling is very strong on me that it will be a good thing to do."

"Not foolish at all, Paul. I look at it just as you do, and since we've begun the observance we ought to carry it through to the finish. You agree with me, don't you, boys?"

"I shorely do," said the shiftless one.

"Ef Paul thinks it's right it's right," said Long Jim.

"Can't hurt anythin'; it may help," said Silent Tom.

They resumed their silence and waiting, and meanwhile they listened attentively for any sound that might come from those who were stalking their old home. But the deep stillness continued, save for the light song of the wind that sang continually among the leaves. Henry, in his heart, was truly glad of Paul's idea, and that they had concluded to observe it. A spiritual atmosphere clothed them all. They had come of religious parents, and the borderer, moreover, always personified the great forces of nature, before which he was reverential. The five now were like the Romans and the Greeks, who were anxious to propitiate the gods ere going into action.

Henry gazed at the moon, a silver globe in the heavens, and he distinctly saw the man upon its surface, who returned his looks with benevolence, while the countless stars about it quivered and glittered and shed a propitious light. Then he gazed at his comrades, resting against the trunks of the trees, and unreal in the silver mist. They were yet so still that the wild animals might well take them to be lifeless, and the power to sit there so long without stirring a muscle was one acquired only by warriors and scouts.

A faint whining cry came out of the silver dark, a sound that had traveled a great distance on waves of air, and every one of the five understood it, on the instant. It was one of the most ominous sounds of the forest, a sound full of ferocity and menace, the howl of the wolf, but they knew it came from human lips, that, in truth, it was a signal ordered by the leader of the besieging band. Presently the reply, a similar cry, came from another point of the compass, traveling like the first on waves of air, until it died away in a savage undernote.

“They’ve probably set their lines all the way around our hollow, and they’re sure now they’ll hold us fast,” said Henry, with grim irony.

“That’s ’bout it, I take it,” said Shif’less Sol, “an’ it ’pears to me that this is the time for us to laugh, purvidin’ it won’t be in any way breakin’ uv our agreement to keep the day till its very last minute.”

He looked questioningly at Paul.

“To laugh is not against our compact,” replied the lad, “since it has such good cause. When a net is cast for us, and those who cast it are so confident we’re in it, we’ve a right to laugh as long as we’re outside it.”

“Then,” said Shif’less Sol with conviction, “ez thar’s so much to laugh at, an’ we’ve all agreed to laugh, we’ll laugh.”

The five accordingly laughed, but the laughs were soundless. Their eyes twinkled, their lips twitched, but the canebrake, save for the ceaseless rustle of the singing wind, was as silent as ever. No one five feet away would have known that anybody was laughing.

“Thar, I feel better,” said Shif’less Sol, when his face quit moving, “but though they’re a long distance off I kin see with my mind’s eyes Braxton Wyatt an’ his band stalkin’ us in our home in the rock, an’ claspin’ us in a grip that can’t be shook off.”

“Shettin’ down on us,” said Silent Tom.

The shiftless one bent upon him a reproving look.

“Thar you are, Tom!” he said, “talkin’ ’us to death ag’in. Can’t you ever give your tongue no rest?”

Silent Tom blushed once more under his tan, but said nothing, abashed by his comrade’s stern rebuke.

“Yes, I kin see Braxton Wyatt an’ his band stalkin’ us,” resumed Shif’less Sol, having the floor, or rather the earth, again to himself. “Braxton’s heart is full o’ unholy glee. He is sayin’ to hisself that we can’t git away from him this time, that he’s stretched ’bout us a ring, through which we’ll never break. He’s laughin’ to hisself jest az we laugh to ourselves, though with less cause. He’s sayin’ that he an’ his warriors will set down at a safe distance from our rifles an’ wait patiently till we starve to death or give up an’ trust ourselves to his tender mercy. He’s braggin’ to hisself ’bout his patience, how he kin set thar fur a month, ef it’s needed, an’ I kin read his mind. He’s thinkin’ that even ef we give up it won’t make no diff’unce. Our scalps will hang up to dry jest the same, an’ he will take most joy in lookin’ at yours, Henry, your ha’r is so fine an’ so thick an’ so yellow, an’ he hez such a pizen hate o’ you.”

“Your fancy is surely alive tonight, Sol,” said Henry, “and I believe the thought of Braxton Wyatt’s disappointment later on is what has stirred it up so much.”

“I ’low you’re right, Henry, but I’m thinkin’ ’bout the grief o’ that villain, Blackstaffe, too. Oh, he’ll be a terrible sorrowful man when the net’s closed, an’ he finds thar’s nothin’ in it. It will be the great big disappointment o’ his life an’ I ’low it will be some time afore Moses Blackstaffe kin recover from the blow.”

The silent laugh again overspread the countenance of the shiftless one and lingered there. It was one of the happiest moments that he had ever known. There was no malice in his nature, but he knew the renegades were hunting for his life with a vindictiveness and cruelty surpassing that of the Indians themselves, and he would not have been true to human nature had he not obeyed the temptation to rejoice.

“A half hour more and Sunday will have passed,” said Henry, who was again attentively surveying the man in the moon.

“An’ then,” said Long Jim, “we’ll take a look at what them fellers are doin’.”

“It will be a good move on our part, and if we can think of any device to make ’em sure we’re still in the hollow it will help still more.”

“Which means,” said Paul, “that one of us must pass through their lines and fire upon them from the inside, that is, he must give concrete proof that he’s in the net.”

“Big words!” muttered Long Jim.

“I think you put it about right,” said Henry.

“Mighty dang’rous,” said Shif’less Sol.

“I expected to undertake it,” said Henry.

“You speak too quick,” said the shiftless one. “I said it wuz dang’rous ’cause I want it fur myself. It’s got to be a cunnin’ sort o’ deed, jest the kind that will suit me.”

“By agreement I’m the leader, and I’ve chosen this duty for myself,” said Henry firmly.

“Thar are times when I don’t like you a-tall, a-tall, Henry,” said Shif’less Sol plaintively. “You’re always pickin’ out the good risky adventures fur yourse’f. Ef thar’s any fine, lively thing that will make a feller’s ha’r stan’ up straight on end an’ the chills chase one another up an’ down his back, you’re sure to grab it off, an’ say it wuz jest intended fur you. That ain’t the right way to treat the rest o’ us nohow.”

“No, it ain’t,” grumbled Silent Tom, but Shif’less Sol turned fiercely on him.

“Beginnin’ to talk us to death ag’in, are you, Tom Ross?” he exclaimed. “Runnin’ on forever with that garrulous tongue o’ yourn! You jest let me have this out with Henry!”

Again Tom Ross blushed in the darkness and under the tan. A terrible fear seized him that he had indeed grown garrulous, a man of many and empty words. It was all right for Shif’less Sol to talk on forever, because the words flowed from his lips in a liquid stream, like water coursing down a smooth channel, but it did not become Tom Ross, from whom sentences were wrenched as one would extract a tooth. Paul laughed softly but with intense enjoyment.

“When I die, seventy or eighty years from now,” he said, “and go to Heaven, I expect, when I pass through the golden gates, to hear a steady and loud but pleasant buzz. It will go on and on, without ceasing. Maybe it will be the droning of bees, but it won’t be. Maybe it will be the roar of water over a fall, but it won’t be. Maybe it will be a strong wind among the boughs, but it won’t be. Oh, no, it will be none of those things. It will be one Solomon Hyde, formerly of Kentucky, and they’ll tell me that his tongue has never stopped since he came to Heaven ten years before, and off in one corner there’ll be a silent individual, Tom Ross, who entered Heaven at the same time. And they’ll say that in all the ten years he has spoken only once and that was when he passed the gates, looked all around and said: ‘Good, but not much better than the Ohio Country.’”

Both Shif’less Sol and Silent Tom grinned, but the discussion was not pursued, as Henry announced that he was about to leave them in order to enter the Indian ring, and make Wyatt and the warriors think the rocky hollow was defended.

“The rest of you would better stay in the canebrakes or the thickets,” he said.

“We won’t go so fur away that we can’t hear any signal you may make,” said Long Jim Hart. “Give us the cry uv the wolf. Thar are lots uv wolves in these woods, Injun an’ other kinds, but we know yourn from the rest, Henry.”

“And don’t take too big risks,” said Paul.

“I won’t,” said Henry, and he quickly vanished from their sight among the bushes. Two hundred yards away, and he stopped, but he could not hear them moving. Nor had he expected that any sound would come from them to him, knowing that they would lie wholly still for a long time, awaiting his passage through the Indian lines.

The heart of the great youth swelled within him. As truly a son of the wilderness as primitive man had been thousands of years ago, before civilization had begun, when he depended upon the acuteness of his senses to protect him from monstrous wild beasts, he was as much at home now as the ordinary man felt in city streets, and he faced his great task not only without apprehension, but with a certain delight. He had the Indian’s cunning and the white man’s intellect as well, and he was eager to match wits and cunning against those of the warriors.

He would have been glad had the night turned a little darker, but the full burnished moon and showers of stars gave no promise of it, and he must rely upon his own judgment to seek the shadows, and to pass where they lay thickest. The forest, spread about him, was magnificent with oak and beech and elm of great size, but the moonlight and the starshine shone between the trunks, and moving objects would have been almost as conspicuous there as in the day. Hence he sought the brushwood, and advancing swiftly in its shelter, he approached the place that had been such a comfortable home for the five, but which they had thought it wise to abandon. A whimsical fancy, a desire to repay them for the evil they were doing, seized him. He would not only draw the warriors on, but he would annoy and tantalize them. He would make them think the evil spirits were having sport with them.

A half mile, and he sank to the earth, lying so still that anyone a yard away could not have heard him breathe. Two warriors stood under the boughs of an oak and they were looking in the direction of the hollow. He had no doubt they were watchers, posted there to prevent the flight of the besieged in that direction, and he was shaken with silent laughter at this spectacle of men who stood guard that none might pass, when there was none to pass. He was already having his revenge upon them for the trouble they were causing and he felt that the task of repayment was beginning well.

The two Shawnees walked back and forth a little, searching everything with their questing eyes, but they did not speak. Presently they turned somewhat to one side, and Henry, still using the shelter of the brushwood, flitted silently past them. Three or four hundred yards farther and he lay down, laughing again to himself. It had been ridiculously easy. All his wild instincts were alive and leaping, and his senses became preternaturally acute. He heard some tiny animals of the cat tribe, alarmed by his presence, stealing away among the bushes, and the sound of an owl moving ever so slightly in the thick leaves on a bough came to his ears. But he was so still that the owl became still too, and did not know when he arose and moved on.

Henry believed that the two warriors were merely guards on the outer rim and that soon he would encounter more, a belief verified within ten minutes. Then he heard talking and saw Braxton Wyatt himself and three Shawnees, one a very large man who seemed to be second in command. Lying at his ease and in a good covert he watched them, laughing again and again to himself. For such as he this was, in truth, fine sport, and he enjoyed it to the utmost. Wyatt was looking toward the point where the cliffs that contained the rocky hollow showed dimly in the silver haze. His face expressed neither triumph nor confidence, and Henry, seeing that he was troubled, enjoyed it.

“I wish we knew how well they are provided with food and ammunition,” he heard him say.

“They will have plenty,” the big warrior said. “The mighty young chief, Ware, will see to it.”

Henry felt a thrill at the words. The Shawnee was paying a tribute to him, and he could not keep from hearing it.

“They beat us off before,” said Wyatt gloomily. “We had them trapped in the hollow, but we could not carry it.”

“But this time,” said the warrior, “we will sit down before it, and wait until they come out, trembling with weakness and begging us to give them food that they may keep the life in their bodies.”

“It will be a sight to make my eyes and heart rejoice,” said Braxton Wyatt.

The hammer and trigger of Henry’s rifle were a powerful magnet for his hand. The young renegade’s voice expressed so much revenge and malice, so much accumulated poison that the world would be a much better place without him. Then why not rid it of his presence? He stood there outlined sharp and clear in the silver dusk, and a marksman, such as Henry, could not miss. But his will restrained the eager fingers. It was not wise now, nor could he shoot even a renegade from ambush. Using the extremest caution, lest the moving of a leaf or a blade of grass betray his presence, he passed on, and now he was sure that he was well within the Indian ring.

Advancing more rapidly he ascended the slope, and came to the hollow, which he reached while yet under cover. He waited a long time to see whether Wyatt had posted any sentinels within eyeshot

or earshot, as he had no desire to be trapped inside, and then, feeling sure that they were not near, he entered.

Their home was undisturbed. The dead ashes of their last fire lay untouched. Various articles that they could not take with them were undisturbed on the rocky shelves. But he gave the interior only a few rapid and questing looks, and then he went outside again, his mind set on a dense clump of bushes that grew near the entrance.

He buried himself in the heavy shade, but he did not seek it alone because of shelter. He saw that a good line of retreat led from it over the shoulder of the hill, and then down a slope that admitted good speed. Having made sure of his ground, he filled his lungs and sent forth the cry of the wolf, long and sinister and full of a power that carried far over the forest. He knew that the listening four would hear it, and he knew, too, that it would reach the ears of Braxton Wyatt and all the Shawnees. And hearing it, they would be absolutely sure that the five were now in the hollow where they might be held until they dropped dead of hunger or yielded themselves to the mercy of those who knew no mercy.

Fierce, triumphant yells came from all the points of the circle about him, and once more and with deep content Henry laughed. He would fool them, he would play with them, and meanwhile his comrades, to keep the sport going, might sting them on the flank. After the yells, the night resumed its usual silence, and Henry, lying in his covert, watched on all sides, while he laid his plans to vex and torment Braxton Wyatt and his band. He knew it was an easy matter for his comrades and himself to escape this particular expedition sent against them, but it was likely that they would encounter other and larger forces farther south, and he wished the battlefield, if it shifted at all, to shift northward. Hence he intended to hold Wyatt there as long as possible.

After a while, he was sure that he saw the tops of some bushes moving in a direction not with the wind, and he was equally sure that Shawnees were coming forward. Nearly half an hour passed and then a bead of fire appeared as a rifle was discharged, and the shot had an uncommonly loud sound in the clear, noiseless night. He heard, too, the click of the bullet as it struck against the stone near the mouth of the hollow, and once more he laughed. It was an amusing night for him. The warriors, now that they had crept within range, would be sure to sprinkle the stone around the cleft with bullets, and lead was too precious in the wilderness to be wasted.

He flattened himself upon the earth, merely keeping his rifle thrust forward for an emergency, and he blended so perfectly with grass and foliage that not even the keen eyes of Shawnees ten feet away could have detected him. A second shot was fired, and he heard the bullet clipping leaves not far away; a third followed and then a volley, all of the bullets striking at some point near the entrance. The volley was followed by a long and fierce war whoop and far down the valley Henry caught sight of a dusky form. Quick as lightning he raised his rifle, pulled the trigger and the figure disappeared. Then another war whoop, now expressing grief and rage, came, and he knew that the band would think the bullet had been sent from the mouth of the rock fortress. He crept a little farther away, lest a stalker should stumble upon him, and reloaded his rifle.

He lay quite still a long time, and the first sound he heard was of slow and cautious footsteps. He listened to them attentively and he wondered. A warrior surely would not come walking in a manner that soon became shambling. Putting his ear to the earth he heard a soft and uncertain crush, crush, and then, raising his head a little, he traced a dark, ambiguous figure. But he knew it, nevertheless, by the two red eyes blinking in doubt and dismay. It was a black bear, doubtless the same one they had already disturbed.

Here he was, like Henry himself, within the Shawnee ring, but, unlike him, not there of his own free will. The shots and the war whoops had terrified him to the utmost, and they had always driven him back toward the center of the circle. Henry, moved by a spirit that was as much friendliness as sport, uttered a low woof. The bear paused, raised his head a little higher, and inhaled the wind. At any other time he would have fled in dismay from the human odor, but he was a harried and frightened black bear and that woof was the first friendly sound he had heard in a day. So he remained where he

was, his figure crouched, his red eyes quivering with curiosity. Henry smiled to himself. His feeling for the animal was one of pure friendship, allied with sympathy. He knew that if the bear tried to plunge through the Indian ring in his panic they would certainly kill him. Moreover, they would cook him and eat him the next day. The Indians liked fat young bear better than venison.

It was a whimsical impulse of his generous nature to try to save the bear, and he edged around until the puzzled animal was between him and the mouth of the cave. The bear once started to run to the west, but a rifle shot fired suddenly in that segment of the circle stopped him. He remained again undecided, his tongue lolling out and his red eyes full of dismay. Henry crept slowly toward him, uttering the low woof, woof, several times, and bruin, disturbed in his mind and unable to judge between friends and enemies, edged away as slowly, until his back was almost at the mouth of the hollow. Then, with all the possibilities against such a combination of chances, it occurred nevertheless. A louder woof than usual from him was followed almost instantly by a Shawnee rifle shot, and the frightened bear, giving back, almost fell into the crevice. Then whirling, and seeing a refuge before him, he darted inside.

Henry, retreating into the dense bushes, flattened himself in the grass, and laughed once more. He had laughed many times that night, but now his mirth had a fresh savor. The bear and not the Indians had become the new occupant of their old home, and, despite the fact that it had been so recently a human habitation, he felt quite sure the animal, owing to his terror and the confusion of his ideas, would remain there until morning at least. The Shawnees would exert all their patience and skill in the siege of one bear that lived chiefly on roots, the greatest crime of which was to rob bees of their stored honey.

He raised himself until he could see the mouth of the cave, but all was still and dark there. Evidently the bear was at home and was using all available comforts. He would not come out to face the terror of the shots and of human faces. Henry could imagine him with his head almost hidden in one of their beds of leaves, and gradually acquiring confidence because danger was no longer before his eyes.

His whimsical little impulse having met with complete success he lay in his shroud of bushes and intense enjoyment thrilled through every vein. He had not known a happier night. All his primitive instincts were gratified. The hunted was having sport with the hunters, and it was rare sport too.

The mournful howl of a wolf came faintly from the northern rim of the forest. It made Henry start and wonder a little. He thought at first the cry had been sent forth by Silent Tom or Shif'less Sol, but as it was inside the Indian circle he concluded it must have been made by one of the warriors. But he changed his mind again, when the long, whining cry was repeated. His hearing was not less acute than his sight, able to differentiate between the finest shades of sound, and he felt sure now that the howl of a wolf was made by a wolf itself, the real genuine article in howls, true to the wilderness. When several more of the uneasy whines came doubt was left no longer. The Indian ring that had enclosed the rocky hollow and the black bear had also enclosed an entire pack of wolves. It complicated the situation, but for Wyatt and his band, not for Henry, and once more the spontaneous laugh bubbled up from his throat.

He inferred now that he had not seen all of the Indian force. There were probably other detachments to the west and north that had been drawn in to complete the ring, but he did not care how many they might be. The more they were the greater their troubles. A soft pad, pad in the thicket roused him to the keenest attention. Some larger animal was approaching him, unaware of his presence, the wind blowing in the wrong direction. But the wind came right for Henry and soon he discovered a strong feline odor. He knew that it was a panther, and presently he saw it in the moonlight, yellowish and monstrous, the hugest beast of its kind that he had ever beheld.

But the panther, despite its size and strength, would run away from man, and Henry understood. The Indian ring had closed about it too, and, frightened, it was seeking refuge. Powerful, clawed and toothed for battle, it would not fight unless it was driven into a corner, and then it would fight with

ferocity. Henry reflected philosophically that the net might miss the particular fish for which it was cast and yet catch others. If the Indians closed in they had the panther and the black bear and perhaps the pack of wolves too. What would they do with them? His irrepressible mirth bubbled up. It was their problem, not his.

Resolved not to intervene again in these delicate affairs, he crouched as closely as he could to the earth, wishing the panther neither to see nor to hear him, but curious himself to know what it would do. The beast stalked out into the open, and it was magnified greatly by the luminous quality of the moonlight. It looked like one of its primitive ancestors in the far dawn of time, when man fought for his life with the stone axe. But the panther was afraid. The howls of the wolf, both the real and the false, frightened him. His instinct too told him that he was walled around by beings that could slay at a distance, and, within a certain area, he was a prisoner. He was sorely troubled and his great body trembled with nervous quivers. The wolf pack howled again, and he must have found something more alarming than ever in it, as he sheered off to one side, and his tawny eyes caught a glimpse of a black opening that almost certainly led to a magnificent den and refuge.

But the panther was cautious. He lived a life in which the foresight that comes from experience was compelled to play a great part. He did not dive directly for the cleft, and he might not have gone in at all, had not a sudden shift in the wind brought to him the human odor that came from the body lying so near in the bushes. Driven by his impulse he turned away and then sprang straight into the hollow.

Henry had not expected this sudden movement on the part of the panther, and he rose to his knees to see what would happen. A terrible growling and snarling and the shuffling of heavy bodies came instantly from the dusky interior. A moment or two later the panther bounded out, a huge ball of yellowish fur, in which two frightened and angry red eyes glared. Henry saw several streaks of blood on him and he stared at the animal, amazed. He did not know that a black bear could make such a fight against a powerful feline brute, but evidently, wild with terror, he had used all his claws and teeth at once. The panther caught sight of Henry looking at him, and, uttering a scream or two, bounded into the bushes. In the cave, the bear remained silent and triumphant.

“What will happen next?” said Henry to himself.

The howl of the wolf pack came in reply.

CHAPTER III

A MERRY NIGHT

The long whine, a mingling of ferocity, fear and perhaps of hunger too, came from a point nearer than before, and Henry was confirmed in his opinion that Wyatt's main band had been joined by other and smaller ones, thus enabling them to form a circle practically continuous, through which the wolves had not dared to break. The pack, moreover, was steadily being driven in toward the center of the circle which was naturally the rocky hollow. He foresaw further complications.

Henry was very thoughtful. Affairs were not going as he had expected, and yet he was not disappointed. He had believed that he would have to show great activity himself, slipping here and there, and putting in a timely shot or two, but other factors had entered into the situation, and, with his normal flexibility of mind, he resolved at once to put them to the best use.

The wind was blowing from the pack toward him, and, if it shifted, he meant to shift with it, but meanwhile he made himself as inconspicuous as possible, finding a small depression in which he stretched his body, thus being hidden from any eye except the keenest. Although the night was far advanced, it retained its quality of silky or luminous brightness, the whole world still swimming in the silver haze which the full moon and the countless stars cast.

He wondered what had become of the scratched and angry panther. Endowed with strength, but only with a fitful courage, it too must be lying somewhere near in the forest, torn by wrath and perplexity. He was quite sure that like the wolves it was encircled by the Indian ring, and would not dare the attempt to break it. He was compelled to laugh once more to himself. It was, in truth, a merry night.

But as the laugh died in his throat his whole body gave a nervous quiver. A cry came from a point not ten yards distant, a long, melancholy, quavering sound, not without a hint of ferocity, in fact the complaining voice of an owl. The imitation of the owl was a favorite signal with the forest runners, both white and red, but Henry knew at once that this cry was real. Looking long and thoroughly, he saw at last the feathered and huddled shape on the bough of an oak. It was a huge owl, and the rays of the moon struck it at such an angle that they made it look ghostly and unsubstantial. Had Henry been superstitious, had he been steeped too much in Indian lore, he would have called it a phantom owl. Nay, it looked, in very truth, like such a phantom, taking the shape of an owl, and, despite all his mind and courage, a little shudder ran through him.

Again the great owl cried his loneliness and sorrows to the night. It was a tremendous note, mournful, uncanny and ferocious, and it seemed to Henry that it must go miles through the clear air, until it came back in a dying echo, more sinister than its full strength had been. The Indian cast was bringing into the net more than Wyatt or any of the warriors had anticipated, but the owl at least was hooting its defiance.

The singular combination of the night and circumstance affected Henry's own spirit. He was touched less by the present and reality than by his sense of another time and the primordial elements became strong within him. In effect he was transported far back into those dim ages, when man fought with the stone axe, and his five senses were so preternaturally acute to protect his life that he had a sixth and perhaps a seventh. A whiff came on the wind. It was faint, because it had traveled far, but he knew it to be the odor of the panther. The big cowardly beast was crouched in a little valley to his right, and he was trembling, trembling at the approaching warriors, trembling at the great youth who lay in the depression, trembling at the unknown and monstrous creature that had plunged its iron claws into him in the dark, and trembling at the cry of the owl which it had heard so often before, but which struck now with a new terror upon its small and frightened brain.

Henry's own feeling of the supernatural passed. It was merely the old, old world in which he must fight for his life and turn aside the bands from his comrades and himself. Although the warriors had not called again to one another he divined that they were closing in, and he thought rapidly and with all the intensity and clearness demanded by the situation.

The owl hooted once more, the tremendous note swelling far over the wilderness, and then returning in its melancholy whine. Instantly setting his lips and swelling all the muscles of his mighty throat he gave back the cry, long, full and a match in its loneliness and ferocity for the owl's own call. Then he crouched so close that he seemed fairly to press himself into the earth.

He saw the owl on the bough move a little and he knew that it was in a state of stupid amazement. Like the panther its brain was adapted only to its own affairs and environment, else it would have made some progress in all the ages, and the cry of an owl coming from the ground when owls usually cried from trees was more than it could understand. Nevertheless it soon gave forth its long complaining note once more, and Henry promptly matched it. He was thinking not so much of its effect upon the owl as upon the Indians. Delicate as their senses were, they were not as delicate as his, and they might think the two notes were those of challenge indicating that the whole five, reinforced perhaps by a half dozen stalwart hunters, were within the ring, ready and eager to give battle, setting in very truth a trap of their own.

He heard presently the cry of a wolf from a point at least a half mile away, and it was answered from another segment of the circle at an equal distance. The sounds, as he easily discerned, were made by warriors, and it was absolutely certain now that the voices of the owls had caused them to pause and think. Having thus started this train he felt that he could wait and see what would happen, but he was stirred by curiosity, and he pulled himself forward until the thicket ended, and the earth fell away into the deep ravine that ran before the stony hollow.

He kept himself hidden in the edge of the dense bushes, but he could see in various directions. The great owl on the bough was quivering a little, as if it were still amazed and terrified by the answer to its own calls, coming from the heart of the earth itself and surcharged with mystery. The moonlight turned it to a feathery mass of silver in which the cruel beak and claws showed like sharp pieces of steel. Yet the bird did not fly away, and Henry knew that it was held by fear as well as curiosity, the dangers near seeming less than those far.

He looked then down into the ravine, and he was startled by the sight of the wolf pack at full attention. The wolves of the Mississippi Valley were not as large as the great timber wolf of the mountains, but when driven by hunger they showed like their brethren elsewhere extreme ferocity, and were known to devour human beings. Now the wolves like the owl were magnified in the luminous moonlight, and one at their head seemed to be truly of gigantic size. He reminded Henry of the king wolf that had pursued Shifless Sol and himself, and he had a singular fancy that he was the same great brute, reincarnated. He shivered at his own thought, and then chided himself fiercely. The king wolf had been killed, he was as dead as a stone, and he could not come back to earth to plague him.

But the beast, like the bird, was truly monstrous. He stood upon a slight mound at the bottom of the ravine, and his figure bathed in the glow of the moon and the stars rose to twice its real height. Henry saw the foam upon the red mouth, the white fangs and the savage eyes, in which, his fancy still vivid, he read hunger, ferocity and terror too. Around him but on the lower plane were gathered the full score of the pack, gaunt and fierce. Suddenly, the leader raised his head and like a dog bayed the moon. The score took up the cry and the long whine was carried far on the light wind, to be followed by deep silence.

The voice of the wolf bore Henry even farther back than the voice of the owl, and his preternaturally acute senses took on an edge which the modern man never knows in his civilized state. He heard the fluff of the owl's feathers as it moved and the panting of the wolves in the valley below. Then he saw the leader walk from the low mound and take a slow and deliberate course along the slope, with the others following in single file like Indians. The king was leading them nearer to the

rocky hollow, and Henry suspected they were changing their position because the ring of warriors was beginning to close in again. He heard a flapping of wings, and a huge bald-headed eagle settled on a bough near him, whence it looked with red eyes at the owl, while the owl, with eyes equally red, looked back again.

The suspicious, not to say jealous, manner with which the two birds regarded each other, when the forest was wide enough for both, and countless millions more like them, amused Henry. Both were alarmed, and it was easy enough for them to fly away, but they did not do so, drawn in a kind of fascination toward the danger they feared. Meanwhile the wolves were still coming up the slope, but the black bear in the snug hollow never stirred.

The warriors signaled once more to one another and now they were much nearer. Henry retreated a little farther into the thicket, and then his plan came to him. The Indians were bound to approach him from the east and he would meet them with a weapon they little expected. The forest was still in dense green, but the wood was dry from summer heats, the effect of the great rain having passed quickly, and the ground was littered as usual with the dead boughs and trunks fallen through arboreal ages.

He drew softly away toward the mouth of the hollow, and then passed behind it, where, stooping in the thicket, he produced his flint and steel, which he put upon the turf beside him. Then, he gathered together a little pile of dry brushwood, and again took notice of the wind, which was still blowing directly toward the east and down the ravine, the only point from which the Indian attack could come. It had been repulsed there once before, but then Henry's comrades were with him, and five good rifles and the tremendous voice of Long Jim had prevailed. Now he was alone, and he did not intend to rely upon bullets. The moonlight held, clear and amazingly bright, and he distinctly saw the troubled owl and the vexed eagle, apparently still staring at each other and wondering what was the matter with the night and the place. The Indian calls to one another sounded once more, their own natural voices now and not the imitation of bird or animal, and their nearness indicated that the circle was closing in fast.

Henry had built up his heap of tinder wood, somewhat behind the mouth of the hollow, and, kneeling down, he used flint and steel with amazing rapidity and power. The sparks leaped forth in a shower, the dry wood ignited, and up came little flames which swiftly grew into bigger ones. Then he fanned his bonfire with all his might, and the flames sprang high in the air, roaring as they set a fresh blaze to every dry thing they touched. In less than two minutes a forest fire was in full and great progress, sweeping eastward and down the ravine directly into the faces of Braxton Wyatt and his advancing warriors. A great sheet of fire in varying reds, pinks and yellows, and sometimes with a blue tint, rose above the tops of the trees, and, as it rushed forward, it sent forth showers of ashes and sparks in myriads from its crimson throat.

Henry sprang up behind the fire and uttered terrific shouts, leaping and dancing as that far dim ancestor of his must have leaped and danced when he was glowing with a sudden and mighty triumph. The spirit of the ages had descended upon him too and as he bounded back and forth in the light of the flames he roared forth bitter taunts in a voice worthy of Long Jim himself. He told the owl to be up and away, and, rising on heavy wings and uttering a dismal hoot, it obeyed. Its big body was outlined for a moment or two against the red, and then it flew away over the forest. The eagle uttered a hoarse cry, drawn from its frightened throat, and followed the owl.

Then came another shriek, singularly like that of a human being, and the huge panther, driven from its covert by the intense heat, leaped madly forth and raced down the ravine before the pillar of flame. That panther was in a sorely troubled state even before the fire began, and now the collapse of its small intellect was complete. It saw the advancing Indian warriors, but, in its madness, was reckless of them. It advanced with great bounds straight at the line, cannoned against Braxton Wyatt himself, knocking him senseless into a thicket, and, magnified to twice its usual size before the amazed eyes of the Indians, disappeared at last in a yellowish streak down the ravine.

Terror tore at the hearts of the Indians themselves, brave warriors though they were. The strange cries of the night, of such varying character and coming from so many points, had depressed their spirits and filled them with superstitious awe. There was more in this than the human mind could account for and the sudden upspringing of the fire, bringing on its front the monstrous panther, if, in truth, it was a panther and not some huge and legendary beast, sent them to the verge of panic.

Their white leader, who might have restored their courage, lay senseless in the bush, and as the second in command, the big warrior, seized him to drag him away from the fire, the wall of flame emitted something even more terrifying than the magnificent figure of the mad panther. Out of the red glare shot a huge gaunt figure with long white teeth and slaving jaws, the king wolf, to the warriors the demon wolf. After him came a full score or more of wolves, almost as large, and howling their terror to the moon. Behind them was the gigantic figure of a phantom black bear, rushing with all its might, and through the red wall itself came the sound of threatening and awful cries.

The Shawnees could stand no more. Uttering yells of fright they fled, and fortunate it was for Braxton Wyatt that the big warrior slung him over his shoulder and carried him away in the crush.

Henry heard the cries of the warriors and he knew from their nature that panic was in complete control of the band. All things had worked for him. The bear in its fright, and as he had expected, had rushed from the cave just in time to flee before the flames, and he knew very well that his own shouts would be interpreted by the Indians as the menace of the evil spirits.

He followed the flames about a mile down the ravine, and then returned slowly toward the hollow. He knew that the fire would soon reach a prairie somewhat farther on, where it would probably die out, but he knew also that his triumph was achieved. Circumstances and the presence of the animals and the birds had helped him greatly, but his own quick wit and infinity of resource had put the capstone on success. He began to feel now the effect of the immense exertions he had made with both body and mind, and, before he reached the hollow, he turned aside into the woods where the fire had not passed and sat down on a rock.

He saw two or three miles away the wall of flame still moving eastward, but the distance even did not keep him from knowing that it had diminished greatly in height and vigor. As he had surmised, it would die presently at the prairie and the night would return to its wonted silence, lighted now only by the moon and stars. He was weary, but he had an immense feeling of satisfaction and he sat a while, looking at the fire, which soon sank out of sight behind the horizon, although its pathway, the broad swath that it had cut, still glowed with coals and sparks.

He wondered just where his comrades were. He might have sent forth a call for them, but he decided that it would be wiser not to do so at present, since they could reunite easily in the morning, and he remained, sitting in an easy position, still looking at the luminous point under the horizon, where the last embers of the fire were fading. A long time passed, and the stillness was so peaceful that he sank into a doze, from which he was aroused by a flare of lightning in the west. The beauty of the night had been too intense to last. The moon and stars that he had admired so much were going away, and the silky blue robe, shot with silver that was the sky, was dimmed by a long row of somber clouds trailing up from the west. The wind that touched Henry's face was damp and he knew rain would soon come.

He had no mind to have a wetting through and through after his great strain and labors, and his thoughts turned at once to the rocky hollow. The bear had rushed out of it madly and there must have been much heat there for awhile, but it had probably cooled by this time, and would afford him a good shelter.

He found to his great delight and relief that the interior was free from smoke, and not damaged at all. Some articles they had left on the shelves were not even charred, and the leaves that made their beds had escaped ignition. He would not have asked for anything better, and, after eating some venison from his knapsack and drinking from the cold water of the rivulet, he lay down on the bed nearest the cleft, where he could see the ravine and the forest beyond.

A storm was gathering, but secure in his shelter it soothed and lulled his spirit. The lightning, now red and intense, flared from every horizon, and the wilderness was filled with the deep roll of incessant thunder. The wind ceased to blow, but he knew that soon it would spring up again, and then the rain would come with it, although he would remain dry and warm in the stony shelter that nature had provided. An enormous sense of comfort, even luxury, pervaded him, both body and mind. He was like his primordial ancestor who had escaped from the dangers of the monstrous beasts and who now rested at ease in his cave. The strain upon his nerves departed, and soon he felt fit and able to meet any new danger, whenever it should come. But he was so sure that no such danger would appear that he allowed himself to fall asleep, having first covered his body with the blanket that he always carried at his back, as the night, under the influence of the wind and rain, was growing cold.

When he awoke the day had not yet come and it was very dark. The rain was pouring heavily, but not a drop reached him where he lay on his easy bed of leaves with the warm blanket drawn around his body. Without rising he pulled himself forward a little and looked forth. The last ember from the forest fire had been blotted out long since, and he heard the wash of the water as it rushed down the slopes, and the sweep of the torrent in the ravine. The contrast heightened the splendor of his own situation, which was all that one who was wild for the time could ask. He thought of his comrades and of what a home the hollow would be to them too, but he was not troubled about them. Such forest runners as Shifless Sol and the others would be sure to find protection from the storm.

He fell asleep again, and, when he awoke the second time, dawn had come more than an hour, the rain had stopped and the heavens were burnished silver. Foliage and grass were already drying fast under a warm western wind, and Henry, making a breakfast off what was left of his venison, prepared to go forth. But he was halted by a shambling, dark figure that appeared on the slope leading down into the ravine. It was the black bear, and apparently it had some idea of returning to the fine shelter it had abandoned in such fright the night before. Henry was surprised that it should have come back. It must have been beaten about much in the storm, and, either its memory was short, or it had sunk its terrors in the recollection of the finest den that ever a bear had entered in the northern part of Kain-tuck-ee.

Henry had a friendly feeling for the bear, which he regarded as an animal of a companionable disposition, and no enemy, unless driven in a corner. Since he had to leave the hollow and his comrades would have to go with him he preferred on the whole that the bear should have it, but when he stood up in the entrance the animal caught sight of his tall figure and scrambled away in the forest. His place was taken by the figure of a huge cat which glared at Henry with yellowish-green eyes, and then turned back among the trees, filled with rage that the terrible, strange creature was yet there.

“It seems that I’m still an object of terror,” thought Henry, with amusement. “Now for the eagle and the owl.”

A great bird came out of the blue, and sailed on slow wing over the hollow and ravine. He knew instinctively that it was the bald eagle of the night before, drawn back with a fascination it could not resist to the place where it had been frightened so badly. But it did not alight. Keeping at a good height, it circled about and about and then disappeared again and for the last time to the eastward.

Henry’s eyes searched the opposite slope of the ravine, and at last he discovered a mournful figure perched on the high bough of an oak. Its feathers were drooping, its head was bent down until it was almost buried in the feathers below its neck, and its entire attitude showed despondency. The owl, too, had come back, but only a part of the way, and, blinded by the sun, it sat there on the bough, mourning and mourning.

Henry laughed. He had laughed many times the night before and he could not keep from laughing that morning. The owl was quite the saddest spectacle the woods could afford, and he had no mind to disturb it.

“Stay there and grieve, my solemn friend,” he said. “Truly, with the sun on you, your eyes closed and your heart sunk you’ll be silent, but tonight you’ll give forth your melancholy hoot, although I won’t be here to hear it.”

He looked to his ammunition, and stepped forth into a new and refreshed world, filled with cool drying airs and the appealing odor of leaf and grass. He descended into the ravine, the water falling in beads from the leaves as he brushed by, and followed for a little distance in the bare trail left by the fire. A mile farther on and a pair of great red eyes peering at him from a thicket saw in him a terrible beast that even the master of the wolves should avoid.

The huge leader gave a yelp, and as Henry turned suddenly, he saw the great wolf flitting away up the ravine, followed by the twenty gaunt figures of his pack. He could have dropped the big wolf with a bullet, but there was no need to do so, and he merely watched them until they disappeared in the forest, concluding that his companions of the night were as much afraid of him in the day as in the dark. All of them, save one band, had come back in a frightened way, but he knew that the Indians would not return. He was sure that they were still on their terrified flight toward the Ohio, and he followed in the path of the fire, until he came to the prairie where it had burned itself out.

It was only a little prairie, about two miles across, no other kind having been found in Kentucky, and, on the far side, he picked up the trail of the Indian band. He did not see any footsteps that turned out, and he wondered at their absence. What had become of Braxton Wyatt? His body had not been found in the path of the flames, and certainly he had not perished. Henry, after some thought, came to the right conclusion, namely, that he was being carried. But his hurt could not be any wound received in battle, and probably he would recover soon, another correct surmise, as a short distance farther on the trail of toes that turned out appeared.

All the steps seemed to be long, and Henry judged hence that the band was going fast, terror still stabbing at their hearts, long after the night had passed. Braxton Wyatt would be the first to recover from it, and Henry smiled at the thought of his rage when he should not be able to persuade the Shawnees that evil spirits, sent by Manitou, had not driven them from the valley. Their second defeat at the same place, and this time by invisible forces, would persuade them they must never return to the attack on the hollow.

Henry dropped the pursuit for the present, knowing that it was time to reunite his own forces, and he sent forth the cry of the wolf that the five, in common with the Indians, used so much. No reply and he repeated it a second and yet a third time before the answer came. Then it was in the south and it was very faint, but he had no doubt it was the voice of Shif’less Sol. Call and reply went on for a little while, and then, after a long wait, he saw the figures of the four appearing among the trees, the shiftless one leading.

The greeting was not effusive, but joyful. Henry told them in rapid words, tense and brief, all that had occurred the night before, and the shoulders of the four shook with silent laughter.

“You certainly scared them good, Henry,” said Paul.

“I was helped a lot by circumstances.”

“But you used the chances when they came.”

“Where did you four hide when the storm broke?”

“We took refuge under the matted trees and boughs of a huge old windrow. It wasn’t like the hollow, and some water came through, but on the whole we did fairly well, and soon dried out thoroughly this morning. We were mighty glad to hear your call, but we hardly hoped you would achieve as much as you did.”

“An’ havin’ routed the first band that came ag’in’st us,” said Long Jim, “what do you ’low we ought to do next?”

“We’ve broken only a piece of the iron ring they’re forging about us, and they’ll soon mend that piece. It’s a good thing to hit first at those you see are trying to hit at you, and so I think we ought to follow up the success fortune has given us.”

“An’ it ’pears we kin do that best by keepin’ right on the trail o’ Braxton Wyatt an’ his band,” said Shif’less Sol.

“That’s the way I see it,” said Henry. “How do you feel about it, Tom?”

“Right plan,” replied Ross.

Shif’less Sol fixed upon him such a look of stern reproof that Silent Tom reddened once more under his tan.

“Here you go gettin’ volyble ag’in,” said the shiftless one. “You used two words then, Tom Ross, when, ef you’d thought an’ hunted ’roun’ a leetle you might hev found one that would hev done ez well.”

“And you Paul?” said Harry.

“I’m glad to follow where you lead.”

“And you, Jim?”

“I’m uv Paul’s mind.”

“Then it’s settled. Now, we’ll have something to eat, and talk it over.”

They soon found a little valley in which a clear rivulet was flowing. One was never more than a mile from running water in that country—and Long Jim and Silent Tom produced food from their deerskin pouches.

“Here’s some ven’son,” said Jim. “It’s cold an’ it’s tough, but I reckon it’ll do.”

“I’m thinkin’,” said Shif’less Sol, “that after a night like the one Henry has had he’ll be pow’ful hungry fur somethin’ better than cold ven’son.”

“Mebbe so,” rejoined Long Jim, “an’ mebbe it’s true uv all uv us, but whar are we goin’ to git it?”

“I’m an eddycated man, Jim Hart, eddycated in the ways o’ the woods, an’ one o’ the fust things you do when you’re gittin’ that sort o’ an eddication is to learn to use your eyes. I hev used mine, an’ jest before we set down here I noticed the fresh trail o’ buffler runnin’ off to the right, ’bout a dozen, I’d say, an’ jest ez shore ez I’m here they’re not more’n a mile away. I kin see ’em now, grazin’ in a little open, an’ thar is a young cow among ’em, juicy an’ tender. Now I don’t want to kill a young cow buffler, but we must hev supplies before we go on this expedition.”

“Sol is right,” said Henry, “and since he is so it’s his duty to go and kill the buffalo. Tom, you’ll go with him, won’t you?”

“O’ course,” replied Silent Tom.

Shif’less Sol rose and looked to his rifle.

“I knowed I would hev to do all the work, besides supplyin’ the thinkin’,” he said. “Here I tell what’s to be done when the others ain’t able to think it out, an’ then they tell me to go an’ do it. It ain’t fair to a lazy man, one who furnishes the intelleck. The rest o’ you ought to work fur him.”

“Go on you, Sol Hyde,” said Long Jim Hart, rebukingly, “an’ kill that buffler. Don’t you know that when you kill it I’ll hev to cook it, an’ I ain’t complainin’?”

“Quit braggin’ on yourse’f, Jim Hart. You ain’t complainin’, ’cause you ain’t got sense ’nuff to complain. You’re plum’ sunk so deep in sloth an’ ig’rance that you’re jest satisfied with anythin’, no matter how bad it is. It’s men o’ intelleck like me who complain and look fur better things, who make the world go forward.”

“Your idea uv goin’ forward, Sol Hyde, is to do it ridin’ on my shoulders.”

“O’ course, Jim. Ain’t that what you’re made fur? You’re a hind—ain’t that the beast, Paul, that carries burdens?—an’ I’m the knight with the shinin’ lance that goes forth to slay dragons, an’ I go ridin’, too.”

“You go ridin’, too! I don’t see no hoss! An’ you ain’t been astride no hoss in years, Sol Hyde!”

“You deserve to be what you are, a hind, a toter o’ burdens, Jim Hart, ’cause your mind is so slow an’ dull. You ain’t got no light, no imagination, no bloom, a-tall, a-tall! Did I say I wuz ridin’ a real hoss? No, sir, not fur a second! But in the fancy, in the sperrit, so to speak, I’m ridin’ the finest hoss that ever pranced, an’ I’m settin’ in a silver saddle, holdin’ reins o’ blue silk, an’ that proud hoss o’ mine champs an’ champs his jaws on a bit made o’ solid gold. Come on, Tom, I ain’t ’preciated

here. We'll kill that buffler, ef you don't talk me to death on the way. Remember now to hold your volyble tongue. The last time you spoke, ez I told you, you used two words when one would hev done jest ez well. Don't let your gabblin' skeer the buffler plum' to the other side o' the Ohio."

He stalked haughtily away, his rifle in the hollow of his arm, and Silent Tom followed meekly. The admiring gaze of Jim Hart followed the shiftless one as long as he was in sight.

"Ain't he the most beautiful talker you ever heard?" he asked. "Me an' him hev our little spats, but it's a re'l pleasure to hear him fetch out reasons an' prove that the thing that ain't is, an' the thing that is ain't. That's what I call a mighty smart man. Ef the Injuns ever git him he'll talk to 'em so hard that they'll either make him thar head chief, or turn him loose to keep from bein' talked to death."

They heard the sound of a shot, and then a faint halloo from the shiftless one, and when Henry went to the spot he found that he had slain a young cow buffalo, just as he had predicted. Long Jim Hart cooked the tender steaks in his finest style and they spent the rest of the day preparing for the journey, which they believed would take them across the Ohio, and which they knew would be full of dangers.

They put out their fire and rested until dusk came. Then they took up again the trail of Wyatt's band and traveled until midnight, when they slept until morning, all save the watch. Henry reckoned that they would reach the river by the next night, and there was a chance that the warriors might recover sufficiently from their fright to rally at the stream. But he felt that in any event he and his comrades must strike. Blackstaffe, Yellow Panther and Red Eagle with their forces would soon be in pursuit, and to escape the net would test the skill and courage of the five to the utmost. Yet all of them believed attack to be the best plan, and, after their sleep, they resumed the trail with renewed strength and vigor, pressing northward at great speed through the deep green wilderness.

CHAPTER IV

THE CAPTURED CANOE

As the five advanced they read the trail with unfailing eye. Henry saw more than once the traces of footsteps with the toes turned out, that is those of Braxton Wyatt, and he noticed that they were wavering, not leading in a straight line like those of the Indians.

“Braxton must have had a nice crack of some kind or other on the head,” he said, “and he still feels the effects of it, as now and then he reels.”

“Twould hev been a good thing,” said Shif’less Sol, “ef the crack, whatever it may hev been, hed been a lot harder, hard enough to finish him. I ain’t bloodthirsty, but it would help a lot if Braxton Wyatt wuz laid away. Paul, you’re eddicated, an’ you hev done a heap o’ thinkin’, enough, I guess, to last a feller like Long Jim fur a half dozen o’ lives, now what makes a man turn renegade an’ fight with strangers an’ savages ag’in his own people?”

“I think,” replied Paul, “that it’s disappointment, and fancied grievances. Some people want to be first, and when they can’t win the place they’re apt to say the world is against ’em, in a conspiracy, so to speak, to defraud ’em of what they consider their rights. Then their whole system gets poisoned through and through, and they’re no longer reasoning human beings. I look upon Braxton Wyatt as in a way a madman, one poisoned permanently.”

“I hev noticed them things, too,” said Shif’less Sol. “Thar are diff’unt kinds o’ natures, the good an’ the bad, an’ the bad can’t bear for other people to lead ’em. Then they jest natchelly hate an’ hate. All through the day they hate, an’ ef they ain’t got nothin’ to do, even ef the weather is fine ’nuff to make an old man laugh, they jest spend that time hatin’. An’ ef they happen to wake up at night, do they lay thar an’ think what a fine world it is an’ what nice people thar are in it? No, sir, they jest spend all the time between naps hatin’, an’ they fall asleep ag’in, with a hate on thar lips an in’ thar hearts.”

“You’re talkin’ re’l po’try an’ truth at the same time, Sol,” said Long Jim. “It’s cur’ous how people hate them that kin do things better than theirselves. Now, I’ve noticed when I’m cookin’ buffler steaks an’ deer meat an’ wild turkey an’ nice, juicy fish, an’ cookin’ mebbe better than anybody else in all Ameriky kin, how you, Shif’less Sol Hyde, turn plum’ green with envy an’ begin makin’ disrespectful remarks ’bout me, Jim Hart, who hez too lofty an’ noble a natur ever to try to pull you down, poor an’ ornery scrub that you be.”

Shif’less Sol drew himself up with haughty dignity.

“Jim Hart,” he said, “I’m wrapped ’bout with the mantle o’ my own merit so well from head to foot that them invig’ous remarks o’ yours bounce right off me like hail off solid granite. To tell you the truth, Jim Hart, I feel like a big stone mountain, three miles high, with you throwin’ harmless leetle pebbles at me.”

“And yet,” said Paul, “while you two are always pretending to quarrel, each would be eager to risk death for the other if need be.”

“It’s only my sense o’ duty, an’ o’ what you call proportion,” said Shif’less Sol. “Long Jim, ez you know, is six feet an’ a half tall. Ef the Injuns wuz to take him an’ burn him at the stake he’d burn a heap longer than the av’rage man. What a torch Jim would make! Knowin’ that an’ always b’arin’ it in mind, I’m jest boun’ to save Jim from sech a fate. It ain’t Jim speshully that I’m thinkin’ on, but I’d hate to know that a man six an’ a half feet long wuz burnin’ ’long his whole len’th.”

“Another band has joined Wyatt,” said Henry. “See, here comes the trail!”

The new force had arrived from the east, and it contained apparently twenty warriors, raising Braxton Wyatt’s little army to about sixty men.

“But they still run,” said Shif’less Sol. “The new ones hev ketched all the terror an’ superstition that the old ones feel, an’ the whole crowd is off fur the Ohio. Look how the trail widens!”

“And Braxton Wyatt is beginning to feel better,” said Henry. “His own particular trail does not waver so much now. Ah, they’ve stopped here for a council. Braxton probably stood on that old fallen log and addressed them, because the traces of his footsteps lead directly to it. Yes, the bark here is rubbed a little, where he stood. They gathered in a half circle before him, as their footprints show very plainly, and they listened to him respectfully. He, being white, was recovering from the superstitious terror, but the Shawnees were still under its spell. After hearing him they continued their flight. Here goes their trail, all in a bunch, straight toward the north!”

“An’ thar won’t be no stop ’til they strike the Ohio,” said Shif’less Sol with conviction.

“I agree with you,” said Henry.

“And so do all of us,” said Paul.

“And of course we follow on,” said Henry, “right to the water’s edge!”

“We do,” said the others all together.

“The Ohio isn’t very far now,” said Henry.

“Ten or fifteen miles, p’raps,” said Shif’less Sol.

“And it’s likely that we’ll find a big force gathered there.”

“Looks that way to me, Henry. Mebbe the band o’ Blackstaffe will be waitin’ to join that o’ Wyatt. Then, feelin’ mighty strong, they’ll come back after us.”

“Less we fill ’em full o’ fear whar they stan’. Mebbe they’ll stop at the river a day or two, an’ then we kin git to work. Water which hides will help us.”

They passed on through the forest, noting that the trail was growing wide and leisurely. At one point the Indians had stopped some time, and had eaten heavily of game brought in by the hunters. The bones of buffalo, deer and wild turkey were scattered all about.

“They’re feeling better,” said Henry. “I don’t think now they’ll cross the Ohio, but we must do so and attack from the other side. They’re not looking for any enemy in the north, and we may be able to terrify ’em again.”

It was not long before they came to the great yellow stream of the Ohio, and in an open space, not far from the shore, they saw the fires of the Indian encampment.

“I think we’ll have work to do here,” said Henry, “and we’ll keep well into the deep woods until long after dark.”

They did not light any fire, but lying close in the thicket, ate their supper of cold food. Three or four hours after sunset Henry, telling the others to await his return, crept near the Indian camp. As he had surmised, two formidable forces had joined, and nearly two hundred warriors sat around the fires. The new army, composed partly of Miamis and partly of Shawnees, with a small sprinkling of Wyandots, was led by Blackstaffe, who was now with Wyatt, the two talking together earnestly and looking now and then toward the south.

Henry had no doubt that the five were the subject of their conversation. Wyatt must have recovered by this time all his faculties and was telling Blackstaffe that their enemies were only mortal and could be taken, if the steel ring about them was recast promptly. Henry had no doubt that an attempt to forge it anew would speedily be made by the increased force, but his heart leaped at the thought that his comrades and he would be able to break it again.

As he crept a little nearer he saw to his surprise a fire blazing on the opposite shore, and he was able to discover the forms of warriors between him and the blaze. With the Indians bestride the stream the task of the five was complicated somewhat, but Henry was of the kind that meet fresh obstacles with fresh energy.

He returned to his comrades and reported what he had seen, but all agreed with him that they should cross the river, despite the encampment on the far shore, and make the attack from the north.

“We’ll do like that old Roman, Hannybul,” said Long Jim, “hit the enemy at his weakest part, an’ jest when he ain’t expectin’ us.”

“Hannibal was not a Roman, Jim,” said Paul.

“Well, then, he was a Rooshian or a Prooshian.”

“Nor was he either of those.”

“Well, it don’t make no diff’unce, nohow. He wuz a furriner, that’s shore, an’ he’s dead, both uv which things is ag’inst him. It looks strange to me, Paul, that a furriner with the outlandish ways that furriners always hev should hev been sech a good gen’ral.”

“He was probably the best the world has produced, Jim. He was able with small forces to defeat larger ones, and we must imitate his example.”

“And to do that,” said Henry, “we shall cross the Ohio tonight. I think we’d better drop down a mile or two, beyond their fires and their sentinels, and then make for the northern shore.”

“The river must be ’bout a mile wide here,” objected Shif’less Sol. “That’s a big swim with all our weepuns, an’ ef some o’ the warriors in canoes should ketch us in the water then we’d be goners, shore.”

“You’re right, there, Sol,” said Henry. “It would be foolish in us to attempt to swim the river, when the warriors are looking for us, as they probably are by now, since Blackstaffe and Wyatt have got them back to realities.”

“Then ef we don’t swim how do you expect us to git across, Henry? Ez fur me, I can’t wade across a river a mile wide an’ twenty feet deep.”

“That’s true, Sol. Even Long Jim isn’t long enough for that. I’m planning for us to cross in state, untouched by water and entirely comfortable; in fact, in a large, strong canoe.”

“Nice good plan, Henry, ’cept in one thing; we ain’t got no canoe.”

“I intend to borrow one from the Indians. You and I will slip along up the bank and take it from under their noses. You’re a marvel at such deeds, Sol.”

“It’s ’cause he’s stealin’ somethin’ from somebody,” said Long Jim.

“Shut up, Jim,” said Henry. “It’s lawful to steal from an enemy to save your own life, and these Indians mean to hunt us down if they have to employ three thousand warriors and three months to do it. Suppose we go now.”

The five turned toward the south and west, making a deep curve away from the camp, a precaution taken wisely, as they soon had evidence, hearing shots here and there, which they were quite sure were those of red hunters seeking game, wild turkeys on the bough, or deer drinking at the small streams. They were compelled to go very slowly, in order to avoid them, but the night, luckily, was dark enough to hide their trail from all eyes, save those that might be looking especially for it.

They spoke only in whispers, but the young leader himself said scarcely anything, his mind being occupied with deep and intense thought. He knew that the venture in search of an Indian canoe would be accompanied by most imminent risks, the vigilance and skill of Shif’less Sol and himself would be tested to the last degree, but a canoe they must have, and they would dare every peril to get it.

They had gone about a mile when Henry suddenly raised his hand, and the five sank silently in the bush. A dozen warriors, treading without noise, passed within twenty feet of them and their course led toward the south. They flitted by so swiftly that it seemed almost as if shadows had passed, but Henry, who saw their faces, knew that they were not mere hunters. These men were on the warpath. Perhaps they had seen the trail of the five somewhere, and were going south to close up the broken segment of the circle there.

“They’ve probably had a hint from Blackstaffe,” said Henry. “Next to Simon Girty he’s the shrewdest and most cunning of all the renegades. He has reasoning power, and knowing that we’ll take the bolder method, he’s probably concluded that we’ve followed Wyatt’s band.”

“An’ so he hez sent that other band south to shut us in,” said Shif’less Sol.

“An’ we might hev fled south ourselves from the fust,” said Long Jim, “but I cal’late we ain’t that kind uv people.”

“No,” said Henry. “We can’t lead ’em in this chase back on the settlements. So long as they’re trying to spread a net around us we’ll draw ’em in the other direction. Now, boys, fall in behind me, and the first one that causes a blade of grass to rustle will have to make a present of his rifle to the others.”

Following the great curve which they were traveling it was a full five miles to the point on the river they wished to reach. The forest, they knew, was full of warriors, some hunting, perhaps, but many thrown out on the great encircling movement intended to enclose the five. Now, the trailers, with deadly peril all about them, gave a superb exhibition of skill. There was no danger of any one losing his rifle, because no blade of grass rustled, nor did any leaf give back the sound of a brushing body. They were endowed peculiarly by birth and long habit to the life they lived and the dangers they faced. Their hearts beat high, but not with fear. Their muscles were steady, and eye and ear were attuned to the utmost for any strange presence in the forest.

Henry led, Paul followed, Long Jim came next, then Silent Tom, and Shif’less Sol defended the rear. This was usually their order, the greatest trailer at the head of the line, and the next greatest at the end of it. They invariably fell into place with the quickness and precision of trained soldiers.

A panther, not as large and fierce as the one that Henry had driven in fright down the ravine, saw them, looking upon human beings for the first time. It was his first impulse to make off through the woods, but they were soundless and in flight, and curiosity began to get the better of fear. He followed swiftly, somewhat to one side, but where he could see, and the silent line went so fast that the panther himself was compelled to extend his muscles. He saw them come to a brook. The foremost leaped it, the others in turn did the same, landing exactly in his footsteps, and they went on without losing speed. Then the panther turned back, satisfied that he could not solve the problem his curiosity had raised.

Henry caught a yellow gleam through the leaves, and he knew that it was the Ohio. In two or three minutes, they were at the low shore, although the opposite bank was high. Both were wooded densely. The stream itself was here a full mile in width, a vast mass of water flowing slowly in silent majesty. They thought they saw far up the channel a faint reflection of the Indian fires, but they were not sure. Where they stood the river was as lone and desolate as it had been before man had come. The moonlight was not good, and their view of the farther shore was dim, leaving them only the certainty that it was lofty and thick with forest.

“Paul, you and Jim and Tom lie here, where this little spit of land runs out into the water,” said Henry. “There’s good cover for you to wait in, and Sol and I will come down the river in our new canoe, or we won’t.”

“At any rate come,” said Paul.

“You can trust us,” replied Henry, and he and the shiftless one started at once along the edge of the river toward the northeast, where the Indian camp lay. Henry reckoned that it was about three miles away, but it would have to be approached with great care. As they advanced they kept a watch on the farther shore also, and rounding a curve in the river they caught their first sight of its reflection.

“It’s fur up the stream,” said Shif’less Sol, “an’ I cal’late it’s ’bout opposite the big camp. Thar must be some warriors passin’ back an’ forth from band to band, an’ that, I reckon, will give us our chance fur a canoe.”

“Yes, if we can make off with it without being seen,” said Henry. “A pursuit would spoil everything. We’d have to abandon the canoe and retreat back from the southern shore.”

“’Spose we go a leetle further up,” said Shif’less Sol. “The bank’s low here, but it’s high enough to hide us, an’ the bushes are mighty thick. The nearer we come to the Indian camp the greater the danger is, but the greater is our chance, too, to git a canoe.”

“That’s right, Sol. We’ll try it.”

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