

Otis James

On the Kentucky Frontier: A Story of the Fighting Pioneers of the West



James Otis

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PREFACE

"Poor Simon Kenton experienced the bitter effects of wrong, ingratitude, and neglect. On account of some legal matters concerning his lands in Kentucky, he was imprisoned for twelve months upon the very spot where he built his cabin in 1775. In 1802, beggared by lawsuits and losses, he became landless. Yet he never murmured at the ingratitude which pressed him down, and in 1813 the veteran joined the Kentucky troops under Shelby, and was in the battle of the Thames. In 1824, then seventy years old, he journeyed to Frankfort, in tattered garments and upon a miserable horse, to ask the legislature of Kentucky to release the claims of the State upon some of his mountain lands. He was stared at by the boys, and shunned by the citizens, for none knew him. At length General Thomas Fletcher recognized him, gave him a new suit of clothes, and entertained him kindly. When it was known that Simon Kenton was in town, scores flocked to see the old hero. He was taken to the Capitol and seated in the Speaker's chair. His lands were released, and afterward Congress gave him a pension of two hundred and forty dollars a year. He died, at the age of eighty-one years, in 1836, at his residence at the head of Mad River, Logan County, Ohio, in sight of the place where, fifty-eight years before, the Indians were about to put him to death."

(Lossing's "Field-Book of the Revolution.")

CHAPTER I. SIMON KENTON

It is my purpose to set down what I saw during such time as Simon Kenton gave me my first lessons in woodcraft and it is well to make the statement in advance in order that others may be deprived of the opportunity of saying what would sound disagreeable: – that the pupil was for a time so dull that one less patient and painstaking than Kenton would have brought the lessons to a speedy close.

That which now seems the most difficult is to decide how I shall begin this story of the little which I did on the Kentucky frontier during the year of grace 1778, and I can hit upon no plan which promises better success than that of copying here what I read in a printed book long years after I, a green lad, set out to do my little share toward bringing peace and a sense of security to the settlers who were striving to make homes for themselves and their families in what was then known as the colony of Virginia.

I make use of such a beginning because it appears to me as if the wise man who thus explains the condition of affairs among us at that time, tells in a few lines what I might struggle vainly over many pages of paper to put into form one-half so concise and satisfactory:

"With the single exception of Dunmore's expedition in 1774, hostilities west of the Alleghanies were nothing but a series of border conflicts, each little party acting upon its own responsibility, until 1778, when Major George Rogers Clarke led a regular expedition against the frontier posts of the enemy in the wilderness. Clarke first went toward Kentucky in 1772, when he paddled down the Ohio with the Reverend David Jones, then on his way to preach the Gospel to the Western Indians.

"He was at once impressed with the importance of that fertile region, and the necessity of making it a secure place for settlements. His mind was clear and comprehensive; his personal courage of the truest stamp; his energies, physical and mental, always vigorous, and he soon became an oracle among the backwoods-men. During the years 1775 and 1776, he traversed vast regions of the wilderness south of the Ohio, studied the character of the Indians chiefly from the observations of others, and sought to discover a plan by which a tide of emigration might flow unchecked and secure into that paradise of the continent.

"He soon became convinced that the British garrisons at Detroit, Kaskaskia, and Vincennes, were the nests of those vultures who preyed upon the feeble settlements of the west, and deluged the virgin soil with the blood of the pioneers. Virginia, to which province this rich wilderness belonged, was at that time bending all her energies in advancing the cause of independence within her borders east of the Alleghanies, and the settlers west of the mountains were left to their own defense.

"Major Clarke, convinced of the necessity of reducing the hostile forts in the Ohio country, submitted a plan for the purpose to the Virginia Legislature, in December, 1777. His scheme was highly approved, and Governor Henry and his council were so warmly interested that Major Clarke received two sets of instructions, one public, ordering him to 'proceed to the defense of Kentucky,' the other private, directing an attack upon the British fort at Kaskaskia. Twelve hundred pounds were appropriated to defray the expenses of the expedition; and the commandant of Fort Pitt was ordered to furnish Clarke with ammunition, boats, and other necessary equipments.

"His force consisted of only four companies, and they were all prime men. Early in the spring they rendezvoused upon Corn Island, at the falls of the Ohio, six hundred and seven miles by water, below Fort Pitt. Here Clarke was joined by Simon Kenton, one of the boldest pioneers of the west, then a young man of twenty-two years. He had been acting as a spy for two years previously; henceforth he was engaged in a more honorable, but not more useful, service."

Now that this much has been explained by another, I am still at a loss to know how this poor story should be begun, and after much cudgeling of my weak brain have decided to jump into the matter after the same fashion that the events come into my memory after these many years of peace and idleness.

On a certain morning in February, in the year 1778, I went out to look after my traps, and had thrown myself down on the bank of the Ohio River to decide a question which had been vexing me many days.

Never for a moment did I lose sight of the fact that it was necessary I have my wits about me in case I counted on keeping my hair, for many a scalp had been taken in that vicinity within the six months just passed, and I believed that nothing larger than a squirrel could come within striking distance, save by my own knowledge and consent.

Therefore it was I sprang up very suddenly in the greatest alarm when a white man stood before me, having approached so silently that it was almost as if he had come up through the very earth.

It is not to be supposed that Indians were the only beings in form of men we settlers on the Ohio had reason to fear in those days; there were many white men whose hearts were as black as those of the savages, and who would draw bead on one of their kind from sheer love of spilling blood, if no other reason presented itself.

As I have set down here, I sprang to my feet, rifle in hand, ready for the first threatening movement on the part of the stranger; but he gave little token of being an enemy.

His weapon was thrown across the hollow of his arm as he stood looking at me in a friendly manner, and I might easily have shot him down, unless he was quicker with a rifle than any other I had ever met.

A young fellow was this newcomer, hardly more than one and twenty, as it then seemed to me, and there was that in his face which gave token that he might be a close friend or a dangerous enemy, whichever way he was approached.

"Out for fur?" he said rather than asked, glancing down at the traps which lay near at hand.

I nodded; but remained on my guard, determined not to be taken at a disadvantage by soft words.

"It is better to keep movin', than lay 'round where a sneakin' Injun might creep up a bit too near," he said with a smile, as he seated himself near the decaying tree-trunk on which I had left the traps.

"I would have sworn neither white nor red could have come upon me in the fashion you did," I said hotly, and thoroughly ashamed of myself for having been so careless.

"I reckon it might have puzzled an Injun to do the trick. If I couldn't beat them at movin' 'round, my head would have been bare these five years."

It sounded much like boasting, his claiming to be able to beat an Indian at woodcraft, for at that time I believed the savages could outwit any settler who ever lived; but before many weeks had passed I came to understand that I had been sadly mistaken.

"Is that your cabin yonder under the big knoll?" he asked, more as if by way of beginning a conversation than from curiosity.

"Yes; have you been there?"

"I looked it over; but didn't try to scrape acquaintance. Does your mother live there?"

"Yes; she and I alone."

"What sent her down into this wilderness with no one but a lad like yourself?" he asked, speaking as if he was twice my age, when, unless all signs failed, he was no more than five years my elder.

"Father was with us when we came, last year. He was killed by the murdering savage sneaks nearly two months ago."

"Why did you hold on here?" the stranger asked, eying me curiously. "Surely the clearin' isn't so far along that it pays to risk your life for it."

"Mother would have packed off; but I couldn't leave."

"Why?"

"It's a poor kind of a son who won't at least try to wipe off such a score, and I'll hold on here till those who killed the poor old man have found out who I am!"

Tears of mingled rage, grief, and helplessness came into my eyes as I spoke thus hotly, and I wheeled around quickly lest this stranger, seeing them, should set me down for a younger lad than I really was.

"It's quite a job you've shouldered," he said after a pause. "The Injuns nearabout here ain't to be caught nappin' every hour in the day, and the chances are your mother may find herself alone on the clearin' before you have made any great headway in settlin' the score."

"Because you crept up on me, there is no reason why the red snakes can do the same thing!" I cried angrily, whereupon he nodded gravely as if agreeing with me, after which he asked:

"How old are you?"

"Must a fellow have seen so many years more or less before he can do the work of a man?" I demanded, giving proof by my petulance that I was yet little more than a child.

"It was not with anything of the kind in my mind that I asked the question. Perhaps I wondered if you'd had the experience that'll be needed before your work is done."

"I'm just turned sixteen," I replied, thoroughly ashamed of having displayed an ill-temper.

"Where did you come from?"

"Pennsylvania."

"Was your father a Tory?" he asked.

"Indeed he wasn't!" and now I grew hot again. "He believed we might better our condition by pushing into the wilderness, for when a man's land is overrun by two armies, as ours had been, farming is a poor trade."

Then he questioned me yet more closely until I had come to an end of my short story, which began with the day we set out from the colony founded by William Penn, and ended with that hour when I came across my poor father's mangled body scarce half a mile from our clearing, where the beasts in human form had tortured him.

All this I told the stranger as if he had been, an old friend, for there was something, in his voice and manner which won my heart at once, and when the sad tale was ended I came to understand he had not questioned me idly.

"My name is Simon Kenton," he said, after a time of silence, as if he was turning over in mind what I had told him. "The day I was sixteen I took to the wilderness because of – there is no reason why that part of it need be told. It was six years ago, an' in those years I've seen a good bit of life on the frontier, though perhaps it would have been better had I gone east an' taken a hand with those who are fightin' against the king. But a soldier's life would raffle my grain, I reckon, so I've held on out here, nearabout Fort Pitt, where there's been plenty to do."

"Fort Pitt!" I exclaimed. "Why, that's a long distance up the river!"

"Six hundred miles or so."

"Are you down here trapping?" I asked, now questioning him as he had me.

"I'm headin' for Corn Island?"

"Then you haven't much further to go. Its no more than a dozen miles down the river."

"So I guessed. I left my canoe over yonder, an' took to the shore partly to find somethin' in the way of meat, and partly to have a look around."

Then it was, and before I could question him further, he told me why he had come, the substance of which I have already set down in the language of another. At that time he did not give me the story complete as it was written by him whose words I quoted at the beginning of this tale; but I understood the settlers were making a move against the British and Indians, and it seemed to me a most noble

undertaking, for, had not the king's officers incited the savages to bloody deeds, the frontier might have been a land of peace.

When he was come to an end of the story, and Simon Kenton was not one to use more words than were necessary, I proposed that he go with me to my home, for by this time it was near to noon, and I had suddenly lost all desire to continue the work of setting traps.

He agreed right willingly, as if it favored his plans to do so, and we two went back to the clearing, he moving through the thicket more like a shadow than a stoutly built man whose weight seemed against such stealthy traveling. Never had I seen such noiseless progress; a squirrel would have given more token of his presence, and I wondered not that he had been welcomed at Fort Pitt as a scout, spy, or whatever one may please to call his occupation.

My mother made the young man welcome, as she would have done any I might have brought in with me to our home in Pennsylvania, and out here in the wilderness, where we had not seen a strange, yet friendly, face since my poor father was murdered, she was rejoiced to meet one who might give us news of the outside world.

Simon Kenton was not a polished man such as would be met within the eastern colonies; but he gave every token of honest purpose, and it was impossible to remain long in his company without believing him to be one who would be a firm friend at all times.

We enjoyed his visit more than can be told, and then without warning he broached that subject which had a great bearing upon all my life from that moment.

"Why do you try to hold your mother here in the wilderness, Louis Nelson?" he asked suddenly. "Surely a lad like yourself cannot hope to make a clearing unaided, and it is but keeping her in great danger of a cruel death."

"What other can I do?" I asked in surprise, having no inkling as to his true meaning.

"Take her where she will at least be able to lie down at night without fear of being aroused by the gleam of the scalping knife, or the flames of her own dwelling," he replied decidedly.

"All we have in the world is here," my mother said half to herself.

"Then it will not be hard to leave it, for a boy of Louis' age should be able to provide you with as good almost anywhere else."

I looked at him in open-mouthed astonishment, whereupon he said in such a tone as forced one to believe he spoke only the truth:

"We have every reason to believe there will be bloody scenes hereabout before Major Clarke has finished his work. You cannot hope to hold out against the painted scoundrels who will roam up and down the river in search of white blood that can be spilled. Send your mother back to Fort Pitt by the boats that will soon be returnin', an' join me in this expedition. You can go to her in the fall with money enough to provide another home as good, or better, than this, an' what is of more account, you'll have the satisfaction of knowin' that ate is in safety."

There is no good reason why I should set down here all the arguments Simon Kenton used to persuade me to break up the home my father had established, although in poor shape, at the cost of his life, nor yet speak of his efforts to make my mother believe I would be in less danger with Major Clarke's force than if I remained there struggling to make headway against the encroachments of the wilderness, at the same time that I would be forced to remain on the alert lest a pitiless, savage foe take my life.

It is enough if I say that before the shadows of night began to lengthen both my mother and myself were convinced he had given good advice, and were ready to follow it as soon as a new day had dawned.

We decided to leave our poor belongings where they were, and set out with Kenton next morning. Mother should go to Fort Pitt where she would be protected, and I, with the consent of Major Clarke, was to enlist in the troop which it was believed would drive out of the country those

unscrupulous British officers who were constantly striving to stir up the savages against such of the settlers as believed the colonists had good cause to rebel against the king.

Until a late hour did Simon Kenton sit with us two, telling of the many adventures he had met with since the day he left his home in Fauquier County, Virginia, six years before, and although the stories related to deeds of daring and hairbreadth escapes, there was in his speech nothing of boasting. It was as if he spoke of what some other person had done, and without due cause for praise.

Never once did he speak of his reason for leaving home, and there was a certain something in his manner which prevented me from asking any questions. He told so much of his life story as seemed to him proper, and we were content, believing him to be a young man of proven courage and honest purposes.

Kenton and I slept on the skins in front of the fireplace, where I had ever made my bed, and so little fear had we the enemy might be near, that I never so much as looked out of doors after mother went up the ladder which led to the rough attic she called her chamber.

It was the first time since my father's cruel death that I had not circled around the cabin once or more to make certain everything was quiet; the coming of this young man had driven from my mind all thought of possible danger.

Those who live on the frontier sleep lightly, it is true; but they do not waste much time in tossing about on the bed before closing their eyes in slumber – and I was in dreamland within a very few moments after stretching out at full length.

It seemed as if I had but just lost consciousness when I awakened to find a heavy hand covering my mouth, and to hear Simon Kenton whisper:

"There is need for us to turn out. The sneakin' redskins have surrounded the cabin. Are you awake?"

I nodded, for it would have been impossible to speak while his hand was like to shut off my breath, and he rose softly to his feet.

It is not necessary for me to say that we on the Ohio in 1778 thought first in the morning of our rifles, and never lay down at night without having the trusty weapons where we could grasp them readily. Thus it was that, when I followed Kenton's example, I rose up ready for a struggle.

Not a sound could I hear, save the sighing of the wind among the trees; but I knew my companion had good cause for giving an alarm, and had probably been on the alert while I was composing myself to sleep.

"Get word to your mother; but do not let her come down here," he whispered when I joined him at the shuttered window, where he stood with his ear to the crevice. "Make no noise, an' it may be we can take the painted snakes by surprise, which will be a fine turnin' of the tables."

I did as he directed, and heard my mother say in a low voice as I turned to descend the ladder:

"Be careful, Louis, and do not expose yourself recklessly in order to give our visitor the idea that you can equal him in deeds of daring."

Under almost any other circumstances I could have laughed at the idea that I might even hope to equal such as Simon Kenton in bravery; but with death lurking close at hand one does not give way to mirth, and I hastened to the young man's side as a prayer of thankfulness went up from my heart because it had so chanced he was with us when an experienced head and arm were needed.

It is not my purpose to belittle myself. While looking up to our visitor as an elder and one well versed in such warfare as was before us, I knew full well I should not have acted a stupid part had I been alone. I might fail to hold my own against the savages; but death would not have been invited by my own folly.

The door, as well as the window shutters, was loopholed, and here Kenton took his stand, stationing me at that side of the house nearest the knoll, from where we might naturally expect the enemy would come.

My mother appeared before we had made all the arrangements for a fight, and at once set about supplying us with ammunition and food in order that we might not be forced to move from our posts in quest of either.

Then she took up my father's rifle, which was leaning against the side of the hut nearest me, as if to show that it was her purpose to do whatsoever lay in her power toward the defense, whereupon Kenton shook his head disapprovingly, and might have made objection to being aided by a woman; but before he could open his lips to speak the painted fiends were upon us.

With whoops and yells they rose up close under the walls of the cabin, where we might not be able to draw bead upon them, and at the same instant a volley of rifle shots rang out as three bullets came inside between the crevices of the logs.

CHAPTER II. BESIEGED

This kind of warfare was new to me. Although living on the frontier so far from any other settlement, our cabin had never before been attacked by savages.

My father was killed some distance away from home, and, judging from the signs nearabout the place where he had been tortured to death, it seemed certain that no more than three Indians had captured him.

Most likely it was a party of hunters, who had not really come out for mischief, but seeing an opportunity to take the life of a white man seized upon it. If they had been on the warpath, then beyond a peradventure our cabin would have been attacked.

To Simon Kenton, however, this sort of work was by no means new. He had been besieged many times, as we knew from the stories the young man told us a short time previous; but I ventured to say that never before had he been pitted against the painted foes with so small a force, and in a place where it was not probable any help could come.

Our cabin was situated so far back from the river that those passing up or down the stream would not suspect a habitation was near at hand, and, unless well acquainted with the clearing, an hundred men might go back and forth, never thinking that a settler had ventured in this vicinity.

Therefore it was that I, and most likely Simon Kenton also, realized how entirely alone we were. Unless we could beat off this foe which had so suddenly assailed us, within a comparatively short time, the end was near at hand for all, because no preparations had been made for a siege, and our store of provisions and water, even with careful husbanding, must be exhausted within a few days.

As all this came into my mind, and I learned that it was possible for the Indians to send their bullets inside, through the chinks between the logs, provided they were sufficiently good marksmen, my heart sank within me. I said to myself that Kenton had come too late to be of service to us, and too soon for his own safety.

As I have said, the savages had crept up under the cover of darkness close beneath the walls of the cabin, and were able to shoot at us with but little danger to themselves. Our only hope lay in dislodging them from their place of vantage, and this much I realized fully even though unexperienced in warfare.

On reading what is here set down one may say that a boy of sixteen, situated as was I at that moment, would not thus calmly weigh the chances for and against a successful defense. In reply to such criticism, I would say that in my opinion any lad of ordinary intelligence must perforce have had much the same thoughts, because of the ample time for reflection.

After the first volley, and until perhaps ten minutes had elapsed, the Indians gave no sign of life. All was still as if we three were alone in the wilderness – as if it had been some hideous nightmare which awakened us. During such time, Simon Kenton stood like a statue; but in such attitude as gave me to understand that all his senses were alert. He was an experienced Indian fighter, listening for some token which should give him a clue as to how he might best protect his own life.

My mother remained near one of the loopholes at the rear of the house, also on the alert, and I had not moved from the position taken up when we made our first poor preparations for the defense.

Suddenly, and when I had come to believe that our chances for a successful defense were slight indeed, Simon Kenton moved swiftly, yet noiselessly, to that side of the room opposite where I was standing, thrust the muzzle of his rifle between the logs near to the ground and fired.

A cry of pain followed the report of the weapon, and it was as if the noise had but just died away, when the young man had his rifle charged once more, so rapid were his movements.

One, two, three minutes, perhaps, passed in silence, and again, but in another quarter, did Kenton repeat his maneuver, although during this time I had heard nothing whatsoever save my own labored breathing.

A second cry from without told that two of the painted snakes had received a more or less serious dose of lead without having inflicted injury upon us.

I knew that Kenton's acts had been the result of his keen sense of hearing, and said to myself that the man must have been fitted by nature for work like this, since it would be impossible for any person to train his ears to such perfection.

This thought was in my mind when I heard a rustling of the foliage on the outside near where I stood, and that instant I made as if to copy the example of my companion.

"It is too late now," he said in a low tone. "The snakes are creepin' off satisfied that they are like to get the worst of such a game. They will hatch up some other plan before troublin' us again."

"But surely we haven't bested them so soon as this," I replied like a stupid, and he laughed as if there was somewhat of humor in my remark.

"They have come here to plunder this cabin, and are not like to draw off so soon. We will have enough of their company within the next four and twenty hours; but for a time I reckon we have got a breathin' spell. This is the way the British king wages war; provokin' the savages against peaceful settlers; but once Major Clarke has broken up the English nests, I'll venture to say the scurvy redcoats will turn their attention to other matters than playin' the part of butchers."

"If we had only started to meet Major Clarke's force when you first arrived," I said despondently, whereat Simon Kenton clapped me on the shoulder in a friendly fashion, as he cried:

"This is no time to be thinking of what might have happened, Louis Nelson. Men on the frontier must ever look forward, else by gazing backward their hearts may grow timorous. Until we have driven off these savages it should be to us as if Major Clarke's force had never set out."

Mother had made no attempt to join in the conversation. Her pale face and quivering lips told that she was thinking of that time, only such a short distance in the past, when father had been in the clutches of those who at that moment thirsted for our blood, and grief overshadowed all the fears which the future could present.

Observing her, and knowing full well what terrible memories had come trooping into her mind, I fell silent, striving as best I could to keep back the timorousness which threatened to overcome me as I thus realized what the wretches on the outside would do once our feeble defense was overcome.

Simon Kenton moved here and there noiselessly as a cat, intent only upon learning so much of what might be going on outside as his ears could tell him.

While I remained motionless and silent at the post assigned me, he never ceased for an instant his stealthy movements, and the knowledge that he was so keenly on the alert did much toward strengthening my weak heart.

When perhaps an hour had passed thus in silence, a great hope came to me, and foolishly I gave it words.

"The savages, finding that we were prepared for them, have drawn off," I said, whereat Kenton smiled pityingly as one might at the foolish remark of a child.

"We are not rid of them so easily, else are they different from any of the scoundrels I have chanced to come across. Once having made an attack, and blood has been drawn, I warrant you, we must beat them off by sheer force before we can count on their leaving this clearin'."

When perhaps another hour had passed, and yet the enemy made no sign, I was grown more courageous, and ate of the corn cake and dried venison which had been set out for our refreshment; but mother remained wrapped in gloomy thought, and Simon Kenton did not even for the slightest space of time relax his vigilance.

It must have been well on toward morning before we heard aught more of those whose great desire was to shed our blood.

Then the first intimation I had of any movement was the report of Kenton's rifle.

"Did you see anything?" I asked in a tremor.

"No; but they are comin' this way with brushwood, havin' an idea to set fire to the cabin."

Even though the danger which beset us was great, I could not repress my curiosity. It seemed almost as if he had made me a foolish answer, for how might a man know, when it was so dark that one could not see three paces from the cabin in either direction, that the savages were making ready for any such attempt, and I asked how he was so positive as to their movements.

"I have heard them rippin' off the dry branches with their knives, and, just before I fired, knew from the noise in the thicket that they were draggin' the brushwood this way."

I was almost bewildered by this man's knowledge of woodcraft; but refrained from commenting, contenting myself by saying in a tone of satisfaction:

"They will not make much headway at setting these green logs on fire. It is but two days since the rain came down in such torrents that the outside of the cabin must be sodden with water."

"They may succeed in fillin' the room with smoke; but that counts for little. The flames will give us an opportunity which must not be neglected."

It is possible that the savages came to understand all this before carrying out the plan which Kenton believed had been formed, for after he discharged his rifle we heard no more of them, and, finally, when it seemed as if at least eight and forty hours were passed, the gray light came stealing through the thicket, slowly dispelling the darkness, until we had clear range of vision from the loopholes on either hand.

Twenty paces from the front of the house lay a pile of dry brush, telling that Simon Kenton's ears had not deceived him.

There were no signs of our foe. So far as one's eyes might give him information, we were alone in the thicket with none to molest or make afraid.

Kenton set about making a blaze in the fireplace, and such act aroused my mother from her sorrowful memories to a realization of the present.

All her housewifely instincts took possession of her once more, and she set about preparing breakfast – perhaps the last meal we might ever eat.

"Think you the savages count on starving us out?" I asked, rather for the purpose of starting a conversation than to gain information.

"It may be that all the party are not yet arrived, and those who made the first attack are waitin' for more to come up. If the entire force is here, then certain it is they count on starvin' us, although so far as the villains know, that may prove a long task. Were you and I alone, I should favor tryin' to give 'em the slip after midnight; but it would be folly to attempt anything of the kind while your mother is to be protected."

"You will not find her a coward," I said proudly, whereat he replied with a laugh:

"Of that we have already had good proof; but there would be too much danger in attemptin' to fight our way out while she was with us. After a time – "

He was interrupted by rifle shots in the distance. First one, then a couple, and, after an interval of four or five seconds, what sounded like a regular volley.

Then came scattering shots, by which I understood that whoever was engaged in deadly combat had succeeded in gaining a shelter, and was firing only when the possibility of hitting a target presented itself.

"Can it be that some of Major Clarke's force have come our way?" I asked as a great hope came into my heart; but Simon Kenton speedily dashed it.

"The major's men are to sail down the river, and would not stop this side of Corn Island, save through dire necessity."

"Then who can the savages have been firing at?"

"Some white man must have ventured this way, as did I, and walked into the very thick of them."

"But all the while we have lived here you are the first who has come to this clearing by accident," I replied, still bent on believing that some of the major's forces must have gone out of their road, and were thus near enough to lend aid in our time of trouble.

"It is a trapper or, a settler," Kenton said decisively, with the air of one who will not admit himself at fault. "The question in my mind is whether I'm not bound to lend a hand."

"Surely you would never think of leaving the cabin in daylight, when you know beyond a peradventure that the savages are watching it?" my mother said in alarm, and Kenton turned away as if realizing the truth of her words.

It is not possible for me to set down on paper such as will enable another to understand our feelings during this time when we knew white men were struggling for life, and needing the aid which we were powerless to give.

It seemed little short of the veriest cowardice to remain within shelter at such a time, and yet all of us knew full well that speedy death would come to him who should venture out.

Five minutes after the first report was heard all was silent again, for mayhap half an hour, during which time each of us, even Kenton, had come to hope the Indians were baffled in their effort to murder, and with that hope came into my mind a most intense regret that we had not been able to give warning of our sore need.

I persisted in believing that some of Major Clarke's men had been near at hand, and said to myself we might have escaped all our perils could it have been possible to give an alarm.

When half an hour had passed the firing broke out again, not in volleys, but with a shot at intervals of ten or fifteen seconds, and then we all fancied screams of pain and exultation could be heard.

"The savages have succeeded!" Kenton said curtly. "Whoever blundered this way has already paid for the mistake, or will before the sun rises again."

Mother, her mind once more in the past, turned pale as death and I trembled like one with an ague, for it seemed at the moment as if this was a token of what our fate would be.

The breakfast which mother had been preparing was neglected until some time later, when Simon Kenton said with an evident effort at cheerfulness:

"We're playin' the fool to stand here as if waitin' for the painted scoundrels to do their will. We have no reason to despair because they have captured some unfortunate; but should be all the more determined to worst them."

Then he deftly finished the work mother had begun, and insisted upon our sharing in the meal, for, according to his belief, there was no reason why we need stand close guard now that the sun had risen.

Under such circumstances it was difficult to eat, at least I found it so; food well-nigh choked me, but I forced it down because of his stern command, and we made at least the semblance of eating breakfast, with as much zest as you can fancy people display under the shadow of the gallows.

When the pretense of a meal had come to an end, Kenton got up from the table and stood at the loophole in the door an instant, giving vent to a low exclamation of surprise or dismay as he peered forth.

In a twinkling I was by his side, and there saw that which caused the cold chill of fear to run down my back.

Directly in front of the cabin, toward the river, beyond range of our rifles, stood a man and a boy, each bound hand and foot to a tree trunk.

It was the report of their guns that we heard, and fortune had been unkind to them, else death would have come during the fight. It had been delayed that it might be accompanied by the keenest torture.

"Are they neighbors of yours?" Kenton asked.

"So far as I know, there are no settlers nearabout."

"Then this man and boy have come lookin' for a place to make a clearin', or are workin' their way eastward from some point below on the river."

This did not seem a reasonable explanation, to my mind, for if the prisoners had been coming up the river they would not have ventured so far away as must have been the case when the Indians discovered them; but my heart was too heavy to admit of making any argument against his assertion, which, as a matter of fact, was of but little consequence now that they were doomed to a cruel death.

And that they were doomed we knew full well. The savages were counting on torturing them where we might have a full view of the horrible spectacle, and we could not hope anything would happen to prevent it.

On the evening previous Simon Kenton had told us the story of a settler who was beset even as we were then, and whose nearest neighbor was tortured at the stake within his range of vision that the helpless man might see what was in store for him when he could no longer make any defense.

While hearing the story it was impossible for me to realize how agonizing must have been the position of the besieged man. Now I understood it keenly, and resolved not to look out from that side of the house again, lest the painted fiends should begin their horrible work before night came.

Mother knew from our conversation what it was we gazed at, and remained nearabout the fireplace striving to choke back the sobs of grief and sympathy which shook her frame.

After gazing upon the helpless captives five minutes or more, as if to picture indelibly upon his mind all the surroundings, Simon Kenton began moving to and fro across the end of the room, not on the alert against the enemy, but apparently plunged in deep thought.

After a time he said curtly to me:

"Keep a lookout on either side, lad, for some of the snakes may grow careless, an' you will get a shot."

Then he fell to pacing to and fro again, and after what seemed a very long time of most painful silence, said to me as if announcing the most commonplace fact:

"I count on lendin' a hand to those poor fellows yonder."

"Lending a hand!" I repeated in amazement. "Haven't you declared it was impossible to leave this house without being shot down?"

"Yes, an' I reckon that comes pretty near being the truth."

"Then how may you give them any assistance?"

"I am not countin' on tryin' to do anything just now. There's like to be plenty of time, for unless something happens to interrupt the curs, they will not torture the prisoners until evening. When the sun goes down I shall creep out."

"And then is the time when the Indians will keep a closer watch," I ventured to say.

"Ay, lad, you are right, and yet we must contrive to outwit them. Instead of openin' the door, I'll make my way through the small window at the rear, which can be the better guarded by you and your mother while the shutter is unfastened."

"I shall go with you," I said, speaking on impulse, and hardly realizing the meaning of the words.

"You'll do nothing of the kind. Your duty is here, and mine there."

CHAPTER III. THE VENTURE

I could not believe Simon Kenton would dare to make the venture of which he had spoken, for of a verity it seemed no less than the killing of one's self.

We knew beyond a peradventure that the Indians secreted in the thicket round about us were keeping sharp watch over the cabin, on the alert for a movement of such a kind, and there was not a single chance in a hundred that one of us could even show his head out of either window or door without being shot down.

That being the case, and there seemed no doubt about it, how might one venture forth so far as where the poor captives were lashed to the trees looking forward with almost certainty to all the terrible tortures which these brutes could devise?

Thinking over the matter after Simon Kenton had declared his purpose, I said to myself that he had spoken out of the fulness of his heart, and not with a belief that he might carry his proposition into execution. I argued, mentally, that his desire to aid the unfortunate creatures had caused him to believe the impossible might be accomplished; but after he should have time to consider the matter thoroughly, he would realize that he could effect nothing more than his own death.

After having said what he would do, Kenton paced to and fro, keeping sharp watch upon the thicket, and saying nothing.

Once I would have spoken concerning the time when Major Clarke's party might be expected at Corn Island; but he motioned me away as if he had no inclination for conversation.

I had promised myself not to look out in the direction where the unhappy captives were to be seen; but it was as if their helplessness fascinated me to such a degree that I could not keep my eyes from them.

I gazed at short intervals, but for no more than a few seconds at a time, and saw no change, save once when it appeared to me as if the man was speaking earnestly to the boy.

I could readily fancy that the elder was trying to encourage the lad for that terrible time of trial, and the tears overflowed my eyes as I grew faint with horror while thinking of what the evening would bring forth.

There is no good reason why I should try to give the details of our movements or conversation during this wofully long day. We spoke together but little, first because Simon Kenton was buried in his own thoughts or plans, and secondly because my mother's grief had been aroused by sight of the captives to such an extent that her sobs put an end to speech.

Twice did Kenton get a glimpse of a tuft of feathers in the underbrush, and both times he discharged his rifle; once bringing forth a shrill cry of pain, and again evidently missing his aim, which was by no means surprising under the circumstances.

Late in the afternoon mother cooked another meal, and we went through the form of eating as if from a sense of duty. It was but justice to our bodies for us to do so, since no one could say when we might have another opportunity.

Then the shadows of evening began to lengthen, and I glanced at Simon Kenton from time to time in order to learn how he might draw back after having announced so positively that he should make an effort at aiding the captives.

But he had no idea of drawing back, as I should have known had I been acquainted with him longer.

During the latter part of the afternoon he surveyed the thicket in the rear of the house at frequent intervals; partially opened the shutter two or three times to make certain it could be swung outward noiselessly, and, finally, threw off his hunting shirt lest the garment should hamper his movements.

"Are you indeed counting on the attempt?" I asked when he had thus put himself in trim for wriggling through the thicket.

"I have already said so," he replied calmly.

"There is too much danger! You must not risk your life when the chances are all against you!" I cried vehemently.

"It will be easier to go than stay here and listen to that fiendish orgy which will begin before many hours have passed!"

"You can hope to do no more than share the poor fellow's fate!" I exclaimed impatiently.

"There is a chance I shall pull through, and the game is well worth the candle. I may not tell the story to you; but there are good reasons why I, above all others, should risk my life in an effort to save others; or, to put it in other words, why I ought to die trying to help those poor fellows, rather than remain idle."

He spoke in such a solemn tone that I could not have argued further against his going, however much it pained me, and I gazed at him in silence, wondering what might be the meaning of those strange words.

Now that it appeared positive he would set forth, and equally certain he would be killed, I began to realize what might be our condition after he had left my mother and myself alone to defend the cabin against the painted crew who thirsted for our blood.

It was not probable the poor woman and I could hold out many hours after the brave fellow departed, however good our courage or strong our endurance. The Indians would speedily overpower us, and I knew full well what the end must be unless I was so fortunate as to die fighting.

Therefore it was as if I was assisting in an attempt to take my own life, when I did as Simon Kenton bid.

"You are to stand by the window as I leap out," he said when the evening was nearly come, "and on the first flash of a redskin's rifle shoot at random if you see no target. The smoke will serve to partially hide my movements. Your mother is to take up her station at the front door until she hears you fire, and then she'll shoot over my head as soon as possible. I'm countin' that you can keep the savages back till I've gained a shelter in the thicket. After that the shutter is to be barred quickly, and you will both stand on guard at the front door, unless some danger threatens from the rear. If you hear the cry of an owl repeated three times from any quarter, you can be certain I have succeeded, an' there's no need of sayin' that you're to be on the alert for my coming. It's possible I shall be able to get in here again. If I fail in that, and yet remain free, you may be positive help will soon arrive to raise the siege."

He had crossed the room while speaking, and was now standing by the side of the window through which he proposed to pass.

I stepped forward to press his hand, for I knew full well he would not linger once everything was ready for the perilous venture.

It was as if he did not see me – perhaps it did not suit his mood to say good-by. At all events he kept his face from me even after the shutter was unbarred, and then, without turning his head, he whispered:

"Stand ready! Remember what I have said!"

Then, with a quick movement, he flung open the shutter and had leaped through almost before I realized his purpose. His swift bound served to bewilder me, and I stood gazing out, with my rifle raised, not realizing the necessity of closing the opening.

It was mother who flung the shutter into place softly and replaced the bars, and I stood there like a stupid until the house was barricaded once more, when I said stupidly:

"The savages didn't see him!"

"It is God's mercy, Louis," my mother replied devoutly. "Possibly he may be permitted to rescue those poor creatures who must have suffered an hundred deaths already!"

"It can't be that he will succeed while so many keen eyes are close at hand. It is only reasonable to suppose all the crew are near about the captives, therefore how may one man prevail against them?"

"If it be the Lord's will, there need be no counting the odds," and having said this, mother knelt by the side of the table, while I, somewhat recovered from my fear and bewilderment, went to the loophole in the door that I might keep the captives in view so far as the darkness permitted.

It was not yet night, although the gloom of the forest was so dense that one could not distinguish objects very far away.

Simon Kenton had ventured out at that time when the gray of twilight distorts everything, causing even the most familiar features of the landscape to appear weird, and in so doing he had shown much wisdom.

An hour later the Indians would have drawn closer to the cabin, suspecting we might make an attempt to escape under cover of darkness, and an hour earlier the light of day cut off any hope of getting out unseen.

Calculating the time to a nicety, moving swiftly as but few could move, he had left the cabin without alarming the wary foe, and thus far his success was so great as to astonish me.

I could yet barely distinguish the forms of the unhappy prisoners, and, moving to and fro near them like evil things, were shadow-like figures which I knew to be Indians.

As a matter of course it was impossible for me to see the faces of these two over whom hovered a most cruel death; but I could well imagine the expression of despair on their faces.

They could not fail to understand that it was worse than vain to hope aid would come in the hour of their extremity, and yet I doubt not they tried to encourage themselves by saying it was possible a party of white men might pass that way before the horrible orgy should be begun.

While gazing through the loophole, my mother remaining on her knees praying fervently, I said again and again to myself that Simon Kenton could do nothing single-handed against that mob of murdering brutes. In fact, now he was outside the house all the chances were against my ever seeing him again. It was hardly within the range of probability he could save his own life if he made even the slightest effort to rescue the prisoners.

The shadows of night gathered rapidly, and yet it seemed as if each second was a full minute in length. I was in that agonizing frame of mind where one is raised by hope and buried under despair at the same instant.

Although my ears were strained to catch the lightest sound, I heard nothing save the rustling of the foliage as it was stirred by the gentle night wind. If Simon Kenton was attempting to approach the prisoners, he must have made a detour through the thicket to avoid the savages who undoubtedly kept close watch over the cabin lest we unfortunate ones should give them the slip.

After a time, and it was impossible for me to decide whether I had remained on watch one hour or two, a tiny gleam of light could be seen in the direction where I knew the prisoners were stationed, and as it increased in size I understood that the brutes were making ready for their horrible sport.

The flame grew brighter and brighter until I could distinguish the forms of the helpless ones, with dark figures flitting between my line of vision and the fire, and I mentally joined my mother in her prayer for the relief of those whom I believed were beyond all earthly aid.

As I knew the savages had done many times before, so they were about to do now – torture us at the same time they inflicted death on their prisoners.

We were to be shown what would speedily be our own fate.

While I stood there helplessly watching the horrible preparations, a certain frenzy of rage took possession of me, and I no longer gave heed to anything save a desire to bring death upon some of that fiendish crew before they began the work of torture.

"I cannot stay here longer, mother!" I exclaimed suddenly. "If Simon Kenton risks his life to aid those who are strangers to him, why should I not be as brave? Alone he cannot hope to effect

a rescue, and will surely perish. With one other to help him, that which now seems impossible may be compassed."

As I think of the scene now, the wonder is that my dear mother did not remind me of what would be her fate if both Kenton and I were captured; but the brave woman gave no heed to herself, nor to her love for me.

Looking up while still remaining on her knees, she said softly:

"If you believe it your duty, my son, go, and may the good God grant that you come back to me alive!"

These were not exactly the kind of words best calculated to give a lad courage, and I realized that by listening to her many seconds I should become cowardly. Even as I stood by her side my determination grew fainter; in five minutes more timorousness might overcome me.

"I will leave the cabin as he did, mother, and you shall stand at the door ready to give us entrance, if it so be we come back."

Mother rose quickly to her feet; kissed me fervently, and then, without delay, as if understanding that it was not well to prolong the parting, began to unbar the shutter.

In a twinkling I had put on powder horn and pouch; looked well to my rifle, and was ready to follow Simon Kenton in his desperate venture.

The shutter was open. Not daring to look back, I sprang out, believing as I did so that the report of a rifle would be my death knell; but no sound came.

The savages, thinking we were securely caged, had gathered around the prisoners in readiness to begin the terrible work, and I was free to rush on to my own doom.

While believing there was little chance I should succeed in saving my own life, I was not careless.

Moving onward stealthily; stopping at each yard of distance to learn if one of the foe might be near at hand, I pressed forward in a circle, counting on coming within view of the prisoners at a point midway between the cabin and that fork in the path which led to the riverside.

Each instant I expected to come upon Simon Kenton, and as the moments went by I began to understand that if he heard me approaching from the rear he might leap upon me, believing one of the savages was creeping upon him, and such realization caused me to hope it would be possible to avoid him.

It was a strange situation, this being equally afraid of friend and foe, and could have been in a certain degree avoided if I had but accompanied the young scout.

Nothing interfered with my progress, however, until I was arrived at the point for which I had been aiming, and saw full before me the preparations for the torture.

Two fires had been built ten or twelve yards distant from the prisoners, evidently for purposes of illumination, and at the feet of the unfortunate ones was heaped a quantity of dry wood, which would be kindled into a flame when the first portion of the terrible work had been concluded.

Now the savages were making ready for the dance around their victims, and I saw fourteen of the painted brutes, hideous in feathers, beads and gaudy coloring.

To describe that which followed immediately after I had a view of the scene, would be impossible. The fiends were alternately advancing toward the prisoners, and retreating, moving with a certain measured step, and brandishing weapons in the faces of the two who were helpless.

The lad seemed literally frozen with terror; but the man faced his cruel enemies as if defying them to wring a cry of pain from his compressed lips.

Perhaps five minutes passed while I thus remained motionless in the thicket within half a rifle-shot distance, and then one of the murderous brutes approached the boy knife in hand.

I knew the poor lad was to be maimed in some manner. The same blinding rush of rage which had come upon me while I was in the cabin, overpowered all sense of danger.

Giving no heed to my own peril; thinking only to save the frightened lad from immediate pain, I fired point blank at the brute who would have drawn the first blood, and when he fell, as though struck by lightning, a cry of triumph rang from my lips.

What followed I am unable to set down of my own knowledge, for I was become like one in a fever of rage and desperation.

I set about re-charging my rifle without giving heed to the rush which should have followed the shot, and dimly, as if it was something in which I had no concern, I heard the report of another rifle; another cry which seemed but the echo of my own.

Before my feverish brain had taken in all this as a fact, I was ready to shoot again, and never had I aimed with more deliberation. I felt certain this second bullet of mine would find its target, and when it sped on its way I needed not to gaze at the be-feathered brute within range to know that he was dead or disabled.

Again came what was like the echo of my own gun, and I saw four of the villains on the ground, while the others had made for the nearest shelter, each seeking some tree trunk that would shelter his worthless body.

Now I realized that I had come up nearly opposite where Simon Kenton was stationed, and he it was who had fired immediately after my rifle spoke.

Thus attacked on either hand, the savages must have believed they were beset by a large force, and their only desire was to shelter themselves from the deadly fire.

While loading my rifle I looked for an instant at the boy. His eyes were opened wide; his lips parted as if to cry out, and on his face was an expression of mingled hope and doubt painful in its intensity.

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