JOHN FOX

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Fox J.

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Содержание

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I

Streaks of red ran upward, and in answer the great gray eye of the wilderness lifted its mist-fringed lid. From the green depths came the fluting of a lone wood-thrush. Through them an owl flew on velvety wings for his home in the heart of a primeval poplar. A cougar leaped from the low limb of an oak, missed, and a shuddering deer streaked through a forest aisle, bounded into a little clearing, stopped rigid, sniffed a deadlier enemy, and whirled into the wilderness again. Still deeper in the depths a boy with a bow and arrow and naked, except for scalp-lock and breech-clout, sprang from sleep and again took flight along a buffalo trail. Again, not far behind him, three grunting savages were taking up the print of his moccasined feet.

An hour before a red flare rose within the staked enclosure that was reared in the centre of the little clearing, and above it smoke was soon rising. Before the first glimmer of day the gates yawned a little and three dim shapes appeared and moved leisurely for the woods – each man with a long flintlock rifle in the hollow of his arm, a hunting-knife in his belt, and a coonskin cap on his head. At either end of the stockade a watchtower of oak became visible and in each a sleepy sentinel yawned and sniffed the welcome smell of frying venison below him. In the pound at one end of the fort, and close to the eastern side, a horse whinnied, and a few minutes later when a boy slipped through the gates with feed in his arms there was more whinnying and the stamping of impatient feet.

"Gol darn ye!" the boy yelled, "can't ye wait till a feller gits *his* breakfast?"

A voice deep, lazy, and resonant came from the watch-tower above:

"Well, I'm purty hungry myself."

"See any Injuns, Dave?"

"Not more'n a thousand or two, I reckon." The boy laughed:

"Well, I reckon you won't see any while I'm around – they're afeerd o' *me*."

"I don't blame 'em, Bud. I reckon that blunderbuss o' yours would come might' nigh goin' through a pat o' butter at twenty yards." The sentinel rose towering to the full of his stature, stretched his mighty arms with a yawn, and lightly leaped, rifle in hand, into the enclosure. A girl climbing the rude ladder to the tower stopped midway.

"Mornin', Dave!"

"Mornin', Polly!"

"I was comin' to wake you up," she smiled.

"I just waked up," he yawned, humoring the jest.

"You don't seem to have much use for this ladder."

"Not unless I'm goin' up; and I wouldn't then if I could jump as high as I can fall." He went toward her to help her down.

"I wouldn't climb very high," she said, and scorning his hand with a tantalizing little grimace she leaped as lightly as had he to the ground. Two older women who sat about a kettle of steaming clothes watched her.

"Look at Polly Conrad, won't ye? I declare that gal – "

"Lyddy!" cried Polly, "bring Dave's breakfast!"

At the door of each log cabin, as solidly built as a little fort, a hunter was cleaning a long rifle. At the western angle two men were strengthening the pickets of the palisade. About the fire two mothers were suckling babes at naked breasts. A boy was stringing a bow, and another was hurling a small tomahawk at an oaken post, while a third who was carrying wood for the open fire cried hotly:

"Come on here, you two, an' he'p me with this wood!" And grumbling they came, for that fort harbored no idler, irrespective of age or sex.

At the fire a tall girl rose, pushed a mass of sunburned hair from her heated forehead, and a flush not from the fire fused with her smile.

"I reckon Dave can walk this far – he don't look very puny."

A voice vibrant with sarcasm rose from one of the women about the steaming kettle.

"Honor!" she cried, "Honor Sanders!"

In a doorway near, a third girl was framed – deep-eyed, deep-breasted.

"Honor!" cried the old woman, "stop wastin' yo' time with that weavin' in thar an' come out here an' he'p these two gals to git Dave his breakfast." Dave Yandell laughed loudly.

"Come on, Honor," he called, but the girl turned and the whir of a loom started again like the humming of bees. Lydia Noe handed the hunter a pan of deer-meat and corn bread, and Polly poured him a cup of steaming liquid made from sassafras leaves. Unheeding for a moment the food in his lap, Dave looked up into Polly's black eyes, shifted to Lydia, swerved to the door whence came the whir of the loom.

"You are looking very handsome this morning, Polly," he said gravely, "and Lydia is lovelier even than usual, and Honor is a woodland dream." He shook his head. "No," he said, "I really couldn't."

"Couldn't what?" asked Polly, though she knew some nonsense was coming.

"Be happy even with two, if t'other were far away."

"I reckon you'll have to try some day – with all of us far away," said the gentle Lydia.

"No doubt, no doubt." He fell upon his breakfast.

"Purple, crimson, and gold – daughters of the sun – such are not for the poor hunter – alack, alack!"

"Poor boy!" said Lydia, and Polly looked at her with quickening wonder. Rallying Dave with soft-voiced mockery was a new phase in Lydia. Dave gave his hunting-knife a pathetic flourish.

"And when the Virginia gallants come, where will poor Dave be?"

Polly's answer cut with sarcasm, but not at Dave.

"Dave will be busy cuttin' wood an' killin' food for 'em – an' keepin' 'em from gettin' scalped by Indians."

"I wonder," said Lydia, "if they'll have long hair like Dave?" Dave shook his long locks with mock pride.

"Yes, but it won't be their own an' it'll be *powdered*."

"Lord, I'd like to see the first Indian who takes one of their scalps." Polly laughed, but there was a shudder in Lydia's smile. Dave rose.

"I'm goin' to sleep till dinner – don't let anybody wake me," he said, and at once both the girls were serious and kind.

"We won't, Dave."

Cow-bells began to clang at the edge of the forest.

"There they are," cried Polly. "Come on, Lyddy."

The two girls picked up piggins and squeezed through the opening between the heavy gates. The young hunter entered a door and within threw himself across a rude bed, face down.

"Honor!" cried one of the old women, "you go an' git a bucket o' water." The whir stopped instantly, the girl stepped with a sort of slow majesty from the cabin, and, entering the next, paused on the threshold as her eyes caught the powerful figure stretched on the bed and already in heavy sleep. As she stepped softly for the bucket she could not forbear another shy swift glance; she felt the flush in her face and to conceal it she turned her head angrily when she came out. A few minutes later she was at the spring and ladling water into her pail with a gourd. Near by the other two girls were milking – each with her forehead against the soft flank of a dun-colored cow whose hoofs were

stained with the juice of wild strawberries. Honor dipped lazily. When her bucket was full she fell a-dreaming, and when the girls were through with their task they turned to find her with deep, unseeing eyes on the dark wilderness.

"Boo!" cried Polly, startling her, and then teasingly:

"Are you in love with Dave, too, Honor?"

The girl reddened.

"No," she whipped out, "an' I ain't goin' to be." And then she reddened again angrily as Polly's hearty laugh told her she had given herself away. For a moment the three stood like wood-nymphs about the spring, vigorous, clear-eyed, richly dowered with health and color and body and limb – typical mothers-to-be of a wilderness race. And as Honor turned abruptly for the fort, a shot came from the woods followed by a war-whoop that stopped the blood shuddering in their veins.

"Oh, my God!" each cried, and catching at their wet skirts they fled in terror through the long grass. They heard the quick commotion in the fort, heard sharp commands, cries of warning, frantic calls for them to hurry, saw strained faces at the gates, saw Dave bound through and rush toward them. And from the forest there was nothing but its silence until that was again broken – this time by a loud laugh – the laugh of a white man. Then at the edge of the wilderness appeared – the fool. Behind him followed the other two who had gone out that morning, one with a deer swung about his shoulders, and all could hear the oaths of both as they cursed the fool in front who had given shot and war-whoop to frighten women and make them run. Dave stood still, but his lips, too, were busy with curses, and from the fort came curses – an avalanche of them. The sickly smile passed from the face of the fellow, shame took its place, and when he fronted the terrible eyes of old Jerome Sanders at the gate, that face grew white with fear.

"Thar ain't an Injun in a hundred miles," he stammered, and then he shrank down as though he were almost going to his knees, when suddenly old Jerome slipped his long rifle from his shoulder and fired past the fellow's head with a simultaneous roar of command:

"Git in – ever'body – git in – quick!"

From a watch-tower, too, a rifle had cracked. A naked savage had bounded into a spot of sunlight that quivered on the buffalo trail a hundred yards deep in the forest and leaped lithely aside into the bushes – both rifles had missed. Deeper from the woods came two war-whoops – real ones – and in the silence that followed the gates were swiftly closed and barred, and a keen-eyed rifleman was at every port-hole in the fort. From the tower old Jerome saw reeds begin to shake in a cane-brake to the left of the spring.

"Look thar!" he called, and three rifles, with his own, covered the spot. A small brown arm was thrust above the shaking reeds, with the palm of the hand toward the fort – the peace sign of the Indian – and a moment later a naked boy sprang from the cane-brake and ran toward the blockhouse, with a bow and arrow in his left hand and his right stretched above his head, its pleading palm still outward.

"Don't shoot! – don't nobody shoot!" shouted the old man. No shot came from the fort, but from the woods came yells of rage, and as the boy streaked through the clearing an arrow whistled past his head.

"Let him in!" shouted Jerome, and as Dave opened the gates another arrow hurtled between the boy's upraised arm and his body and stuck quivering in one of its upright bars. The boy slid through and stood panting, shrinking, wild-eyed. The arrow had grazed his skin, and when Dave lifted his arm and looked at the oozing drops of blood he gave a startled oath, for he saw a flash of white under the loosened breech-clout below. The boy understood. Quickly he pushed the clout aside on his thigh that all might see, nodded gravely, and proudly tapped his breast.

"Paleface!" he half grunted, "white man!"

The wilds were quiet. The boy pointed to them and held up three fingers to indicate that there were only three red men there, and shook his head to say there would be no attack from them. Old Jerome studied the little stranger closely, wondering what new trick those red devils were trying now

to play. Mother Sanders and Mother Noe, the boys of the fort, the gigantic brothers to Lydia, Adam and Noel, the three girls had gathered about him, as he stood with the innocence of Eden before the fall.

"The fust thing to do," said Mother Sanders, "is to git some clothes for the little heathen." Whereat Lydia flushed and Dave made an impatient gesture for silence.

"What's your name?" The boy shook his head and looked eagerly around.

"Français – French?" he asked, and in turn the big woodsman shook his head – nobody there spoke French. However, Dave knew a little Shawnee, a good deal of the sign-language, and the boy seemed to understand a good many words in English; so that the big woodsman pieced out his story with considerable accuracy, and turned to tell it to Jerome. The Indians had crossed the Big River, were as many as the leaves, and meant to attack the whites. For the first time they had allowed the boy to go on a war-party. Some one had treated him badly – he pointed out the bruises of cuffs and kicks on his body. The Indians called him White Arrow, and he knew he was white from the girdle of untanned skin under his breech-clout and because the Indian boys taunted him. Asked why he had come to the fort, he pointed again to his bruises, put both hands against his breast, and stretched them wide as though he would seek shelter in the arms of his own race and take them to his heart; and for the first time a smile came to his face that showed him plainly as a curious product of his race and the savage forces that for years had been moulding him. That smile could have never come to the face of an Indian. No Indian would ever have so lost himself in his own emotions. No white man would have used his gestures and the symbols of nature to which he appealed. Only an Indian could have shown such a cruel, vindictive, merciless fire in his eyes when he told of his wrongs, and when he saw tears in Lydia's eyes, the first burning in his life came to his own, and brushing across them with fierce shame he turned Indian stoic again and stood with his arms folded over his bow and arrows at his breast, looking neither to right nor left, as though he were waiting for judgment at their hands and cared little what his fate might be, as perfect from head to foot as a statue of the ancient little god, who, in him, had forsaken the couches of love for the tents of war.

II

All turned now to the duties of the day – Honor to her loom, Polly to her distaff, and Lydia to her spinning-wheel, for the clothes of the women were home-spun, home-woven, home-made. Old Jerome and Dave and the older men gathered in one corner of the stockade for a council of war. The boy had made it plain that the attacking party was at least two days behind the three Indians from whom he had escaped, so that there was no danger that day, and they could wait until night to send messengers to warn the settlers outside to seek safety within the fort. Meanwhile, Jerome would despatch five men with Dave to scout for the three Indians who might be near by in the woods, and the boy, who saw them slip out the rear gate of the fort, at once knew their purpose, shook his head, and waved his hand to say that his late friends were gone back to hurry on the big war-party to the attack, now that the whites themselves knew their danger. Old Jerome nodded that he understood, and nodded to others his appreciation of the sense and keenness of the lad, but he let the men go just the same. From cabin door to cabin door the boy went in turn – peeking in, but showing no wonder, no surprise, and little interest until Lydia again smiled at him. At her door he paused longest, and even went within and bent his ear to the bee-like hum of the wheel. At the port-holes in the logs he pointed and grunted his understanding and appreciation, as he did when he climbed into a blockhouse and saw how one story overlapped the other and how through an opening in the upper floor the defenders in the tower might pour a destructive fire on attackers breaking in below. When he came down three boys, brothers to the three girls, Bud Sanders, Jack Conrad, and Harry Noe, were again busy with their games. They had been shy with him as he with them, and now he stood to one side while they, pretending to be unconscious of his presence, watched with sidelong glances the effect on him of their prowess. All three threw the tomahawk and shot arrows with great skill, but they did not dent the impassive face of the little stranger.

"Maybe he thinks he can do better," said Bud; "let's let him try it."

And he held forth the tomahawk and motioned toward the post. The lad took it gravely, gravely reached for the tomahawk of each of the other two, and with slow dignity walked several yards farther away from the mark. Then he wheeled with such ferocity in his face that the boys shrank aside, clutching with some fear to one another's arms, and before they could quite recover, they were gulping down wonder as the three weapons whistled through the air and were quivering close, side by side, in the post.

"Gee!" they said. Again the lad's face turned impassive as he picked up his bow and three arrows and slowly walked toward the wall of the stockade so that he was the full width of the fort away. And then three arrows hurtled past them in incredibly swift succession and thudded into the post, each just above a tomahawk. This time the three onlookers were quite speechless, though their mouths were open wide. Then they ran toward him and had him show just how he held tomahawk and bow and arrow, and all three did much better with the new points he gave them. Wondering then whether they might not teach him something, Jack did a standing broad jump and Bud a running broad jump and Harry a hop, skip, and a jump. The young stranger shook his head but he tried and fell short in each event and was greatly mortified. Again he shook his head when Bud and Jack took backholds and had a wrestling-match, but he tried with Jack and was thumped hard to the earth. He sprang to his feet looking angry, but all were laughing, and he laughed too.

"Me big fool," he said; and they showed him how to feint and trip, and once he came near throwing Bud. At rifle-shooting, too, he was no match for the young pioneers, but at last he led them with gestures and unintelligible grunts to the far end of the stockade and indicated a foot-race. The boy ran like one of his own arrows, but he beat Bud only a few feet, and Bud cried:

"I reckon if *I* didn't have no clothes on, he couldn't 'a' done it"; and on the word Mother Sanders appeared and cried to Bud to bring the "Injun" to her cabin. She had been unearthing clothes for

the “little heathen,” and Bud helped to put them on. In a few minutes the lad reappeared in fringed hunting shirt and trousers, wriggling in them most uncomfortably, for they made him itch, but at the same time wearing them proudly. Mother Sanders approached with a hunting-knife.

“I’m goin’ to cut off that topknot so his hair can ketch up,” she said, but the boy scowled fearfully, turned, fled, and scaling the stockade as nimbly as a squirrel, halted on top with one leg over the other side.

“He thinks you air goin’ to take his scalp,” shouted Bud. The three boys jumped up and down in their glee, and even Mother Sanders put her hands on her broad hips and laughed with such loud heartiness that many came to the cabin doors to see what the matter was. It was no use for the boys to point to their own heads and finger their own shocks of hair, for the lad shook his head, and outraged by their laughter kept his place in sullen dignity a long while before he could be persuaded to come down.

On the mighty wilderness the sun sank slowly and old Jerome sat in the western tower to watch alone. The silence out there was oppressive and significant, for it meant that the boy’s theory was right; the three Indians had gone back for their fellows, and when darkness came the old man sent runners to the outlying cabins to warn the inmates to take refuge within the fort. There was no settler that was not accustomed to a soft tapping on the wooden windows that startled him wide awake. Then there was the noiseless awakening of the household, noiseless dressing of the children – the mere whisper of “Indians” was enough to keep them quiet – and the noiseless slipping through the wilderness for the oak-picketed stockade. And the gathering-in was none too soon. The hooting of owls started before dawn. A flaming arrow hissed from the woods, thudded into the roof of one of the cabins, sputtered feebly on a dew-drenched ridge-pole, and went out. Savage war-whoops rent the air, and the battle was on. All day the fight went on. There were feints of attack in front and rushes from the rear, and there were rushes from all sides. The women loaded rifles and cooked and cared for the wounded. Thrice an Indian reached the wall of the stockade and set a cabin on fire, but no one of the three got back to the woods alive. The stranger boy sat stoically in the centre of the enclosure watching everything, and making no effort to take part, except twice when he saw a gigantic Indian brandishing his rifle at the edge of the woods, encouraging his companions behind, and each time he grunted and begged for a gun. And Dave made out that the Indian was the one who had treated the boy cruelly and that the lad was after a personal revenge. Late in the afternoon the ammunition began to run low and the muddy discoloration of the river showed that the red men had begun to tunnel under the walls of the fort. And yet a last sally was made just before sunset. A body pushed against Dave in the tower and Dave saw the stranger boy at his side with his bow and arrow. A few minutes later he heard a yell from the lad which rang high over the din, and he saw the feathered tip of an arrow shaking in the breast of the big Indian who staggered and fell behind a bush. Just at that moment there were yells from the woods behind – the yells of white men that were answered by joyful yells within the fort:

“The Virginians! The Virginians!” And as the rescuers dashed into sight on horse and afoot, Dave saw the lad leap the wall of the stockade and disappear behind the fleeing Indians.

“Gone back to ’em,” he grunted to himself. The gates were thrown open. Old Jerome and his men rushed out, and besieged and rescuers poured all their fire after the running Indians, some of whom turned bravely to empty their rifles once more.

“Git in! Git in, quick!” yelled old Joel. He knew another volley would come as soon as the Indians reached the cover of thick woods, and come the volley did. Three men fell – one the leader of the Virginians, whose head flopped forward as he entered the gate and was caught in old Joel’s arms. Not another sound came from the woods, but again Dave from the tower saw the cane-brush rustle at the edge of a thicket, saw a hand thrust upward with the palm of peace toward the fort, and again the stranger boy emerged – this time with a bloody scalp dangling in his left hand. Dave sprang down and met him at the gate. The boy shook his bow and arrow proudly, pointed to a crisscross scar

on the scalp, and Dave made out from his explanation that once before the lad had tried to kill his tormentor and that the scar was the sign. In the centre of the enclosure the wounded Virginian lay, and when old Jerome stripped the shirt from his breast he shook his head gravely. The wounded man opened his eyes just in time to see and he smiled.

"I know it," he said faintly, and then his eyes caught the boy with the scalp, were fixed steadily and began to widen.

"Who is that boy?" he asked sharply.

"Never mind now," said old Joel soothingly, "you must keep still!" The boy's eyes had begun to shift under the scrutiny and he started away.

"Come back here!" commanded the wounded man, and still searching the lad he said sharply again:

"Who is that boy?" Nor would he have his wound dressed or even take the cup of water handed to him until old Joel briefly told the story, when he lay back on the ground and closed his eyes.

Darkness fell. In each tower a watcher kept his eyes strained toward the black, silent woods. The dying man was laid on a rude bed within one cabin, and old Joel lay on the floor of it close to the door. The stranger lad refused to sleep indoors and huddled himself in a blanket on the ground in one corner of the stockade. Men, women, and children fell to a deep and weary sleep. In the centre the fire burned and there was no sound on the air but the crackle of its blazing. An hour later the boy in the corner threw aside his blanket, and when, a moment later, Lydia Noe, feverish and thirsty, rose from her bed to get a drink of water outside her door, she stopped short on the threshold. The lad, stark naked but for his breech-clout and swinging his bloody scalp over his head, was stamping around the fire – dancing the scalp-dance of the savage to a low, fierce, guttural song. The boy saw her, saw her face in the blaze, stricken white with fright and horror, saw her too paralyzed to move and he stopped, staring at her a moment with savage rage, and went on again. Old Joel's body filled the next doorway. He called out with a harsh oath, and again the boy stopped. With another oath and a threatening gesture Joel motioned to the corner of the stockade, and with a flare of defiance in his black eyes the lad stalked slowly and proudly away. From behind him the voice of the wounded man called, and old Joel turned. There was a ghastly smile on the Virginian's pallid face.

"I saw it," he said painfully. "That's – that's my son!"

III

From the sun-dial on the edge of the high bank, straight above the brim of the majestic yellow James, a noble path of thick grass as broad as a modern highway ran hundreds of yards between hedges of roses straight to the open door of the great manor-house with its wide verandas and mighty pillars set deep back from the river in a grove of ancient oaks. Behind the house spread a little kingdom, divided into fields of grass, wheat, tobacco, and corn, and dotted with whitewashed cabins filled with slaves. Already the house had been built a hundred years of brick brought from England in the builder's own ships, it was said, and the second son of the reigning generation, one Colonel Dale, sat in the veranda alone. He was a royalist officer, this second son, but his elder brother had the spirit of daring and adventure that should have been his, and he had been sitting there four years before when that elder brother came home from his first pioneering trip into the wilds, to tell that his wife was dead and their only son was a captive among the Indians. Two years later still, word came that the father, too, had met death from the savages, and the little kingdom passed into Colonel Dale's hands.

Indentured servants, as well as blacks from Africa, had labored on that path in front of him; and up it had once stalked a deputation of the great Powhatan's red tribes. Up that path had come the last of the early colonial dames, in huge ruffs, high-heeled shoes, and short skirts, with her husband, who was the "head of a hundred," with gold on his clothes, and at once military commander, civil magistrate, judge, and executive of the community; had come officers in gold lace, who had been rowed up in barges from Jamestown; members of the worshipful House of Burgesses; bluff planters in silk coats, the governor and members of the council; distinguished visitors from England, colonial gentlemen and ladies. At the manor they had got beef, bacon, brown loaves, Indian corn-cakes, strong ales, and strong waters (but no tea or coffee), and "drunk" pipes of tobacco from lily-pots – jars of white earth – lighted with splinters of juniper, or coals of fire plucked from the fireplace with a pair of silver tongs. And all was English still – books, clothes, plates, knives, and forks; the church, the Church of England; the Governor, the representative of the King; his Council, the English House of Lords; the Burgesses, the English Parliament – socially aristocratic, politically republican. For ancient usage held that all "freemen" should have a voice in the elections, have equal right to say who the lawmakers and what the law. The way was open as now. Any man could get two thousand acres by service to the colony, could build, plough, reap, save, buy servants, and roll in his own coach to sit as burgess. There was but one seat of learning – at Williamsburg. What culture they had they brought from England or got from parents or minister. And always they had seemed to prefer sword and stump to the pen. They hated towns. At every wharf a long shaky trestle ran from a warehouse out into the river to load ships with tobacco for England and to get in return all conveniences and luxuries, and that was enough. In towns men jostled and individual freedom was lost, so, Ho! for the great sweeps of land and the sway of a territorial lord! Englishmen they were of Shakespeare's time but living in Virginia, and that is all they were – save that the flower of liberty was growing faster in the new-world soil.

The plantation went back to a patent from the king in 1617, and by the grant the first stout captain was to "enjoy his landes in as large and ample manner to all intentes and purposes as any Lord of any manours in England doth hold his grounde." This gentleman was the only man after the "Starving Time" to protest against the abandonment of Jamestown in 1610. When, two years later, he sent two henchmen as burgesses to the first general assembly, that august body would not allow them to sit unless the captain would relinquish certain high privileges in his grant.

"I hold my patent for service done," the captain answered grandiloquently, "which noe newe or late comers can meritt or challenge," and only with the greatest difficulty was he finally persuaded to surrender his high authority. In that day the house was built of wood, protected by a palisade, prescribed by law, and the windows had stout shutters. Everything within it had come from England.

The books were ponderous folios, stout duodecimos encased in embossed leather, and among them was a folio containing Master William Shakespeare's dramas, collected by his fellow actors Heminge and Condell. Later by many years a frame house supplanted this primitive, fort-like homestead, and early in the eighteenth century, after several generations had been educated in England, an heir built the noble manor as it still stands – an accomplished gentleman with lace collar, slashed doublet, and sable silvered hair, a combination of scholar, courtier, and soldier. And such had been the master of the little kingdom ever since.

In the earliest days the highest and reddest cedars in the world rose above the underbrush. The wild vines were so full of grape bunches that the very turf overflowed with them. Deer, turkeys, and snow-white cranes were in incredible abundance. The shores were fringed with verdure. The Indians were a "kind, loving people." Englishmen called it the "Good Land," and found it "most plentiful, sweet, wholesome, and fruitful of all others." The east was the ocean; Florida was the south; the north was Nova Francia, and the west unknown. Only the shores touched the interior, which was an untravelled realm of fairer fruits and flowers than in England; green shores, majestic forests, and blue mountains filled with gold and jewels. Bright birds flitted, dusky maids danced and beckoned, rivers ran over golden sand, and toward the South Sea was the Fount of Youth, whose waters made the aged young again. Bermuda Islands were an enchanted den full of furies and devils which all men did shun as hell and perdition. And the feet of all who had made history had trod that broad path to the owner's heart and home.

Down it now came a little girl – the flower of all those dead and gone – and her coming was just as though one of the flowers about her had stepped from its gay company on one or the other side of the path to make through them a dainty, triumphal march as the fairest of them all. At the dial she paused and her impatient blue eyes turned to a bend of the yellow river for the first glimpse of a gay barge that soon must come. At the wharf the song of negroes rose as they unloaded the boat just from Richmond. She would go and see if there was not a package for her mother and perhaps a present for herself, so with another look to the river bend she turned, but she moved no farther. Instead, she gave a little gasp, in which there was no fear, though what she saw was surely startling enough to have made her wheel in flight. Instead, she gazed steadily into a pair of grave black eyes that were fixed on her from under a green branch that overhung the footpath, and steadily she searched the figure standing there, from the coonskin cap down the fringed hunting-shirt and fringed breeches to the moccasined feet. And still the strange figure stood arms folded, motionless and silent. Neither the attitude nor the silence was quite pleasing, and the girl's supple slenderness stiffened, her arms went rigidly to her sides, and a haughty little snap sent her undimpled chin upward.

"What do you want?"

And still he looked, searching her in turn from head to foot, for he was no more strange to her than she was to him.

"Who are you and what do you want?"

It was a new way for a woman to speak to a man; he in turn was not pleased, and a gleam in his eyes showed it.

"I am the son of a king."

She started to laugh, but grew puzzled, for she had the blood of Pocahontas herself.

"You are an Indian?"

He shook his head, scorning to explain, dropped his rifle to the hollow of his arm, and, reaching for his belt where she saw the buckhorn handle of a hunting-knife, came toward her, but she did not flinch. Drawing a letter from the belt, he handed it to her. It was so worn and soiled that she took it daintily and saw on it her father's name. The boy waved his hand toward the house far up the path.

"He live here?"

"You wish to see him?"

The boy grunted assent, and with a shock of resentment the little lady started up the path with her head very high indeed. The boy slipped noiselessly after her, his face unmoved, but his eyes were darting right and left to the flowers, trees, and bushes, to every flitting, strange bird, the gray streak of a scampering squirrel, and what he could not see, his ears took in – the clanking chains of work-horses, the whir of a quail, the screech of a peacock, the songs of negroes from far-off fields.

On the porch sat a gentleman in powdered wig and knee-breeches, who, lifting his eyes from a copy of *The Spectator* to give an order to a negro servant, saw the two coming, and the first look of bewilderment on his fine face gave way to a tolerant smile. A stray cat or dog, a crippled chicken, a neighbor's child, or a pickaninny – all these his little daughter had brought in at one time or another for a home, and now she had a strange ward, indeed. He asked no question, for a purpose very decided and definite was plainly bringing the little lady on, and he would not have to question. Swiftly she ran up the steps, her mouth primly set, and handed him a letter.

"The messenger is the son of a king."

"A what?"

"The son of a king," she repeated gravely.

"Ah," said the gentleman, humoring her, "ask his highness to be seated."

His highness was looking from one to the other gravely and keenly. He did not quite understand, but he knew gentle fun was being poked at him, and he dropped sullenly on the edge of the porch and stared in front of him. The little girl saw that his moccasins were much worn and that in one was a hole with the edge blood-stained. And then she began to watch her father's face, which showed that the contents of the letter were astounding him. He rose quickly when he had finished and put out his hand to the stranger.

"I am glad to see you, my boy," he said with great kindness. "Barbara, this is a little kinsman of ours from Kentucky. He was the adopted son of an Indian chief, but by blood he is your own cousin. His name is Erskine Dale."

IV

The little girl rose startled, but her breeding was too fine for betrayal, and she went to him with hand outstretched. The boy took it as he had taken her father's, limply and without rising. The father frowned and smiled – how could the lad have learned manners? And then he, too, saw the hole in the moccasin through which the bleeding had started again.

"You are hurt – you have walked a long way?"

The lad shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"Three days – I had to shoot horse."

"Take him into the kitchen, Barbara, and tell Hannah to wash his foot and bandage it."

The boy looked uncomfortable and shook his head, but the little girl was smiling and she told him to come with such sweet imperiousness that he rose helplessly. Old Hannah's eyes made a bewildered start!

"You go on back an' wait for yo' company, little Miss; I'll 'tend to *him*!"

And when the boy still protested, she flared up:

"Looky here, son, little Miss tell me to wash yo' foot, an' I'se gwinter do it, ef I got to tie you fust; now you keep still. Whar you come from?"

His answer was a somewhat haughty grunt that at once touched the quick instincts of the old negress and checked further question. Swiftly and silently she bound his foot, and with great respect she led him to a little room in one ell of the great house in which was a tub of warm water.

"Ole marster say you been travellin' an' mebbe you like to refresh yo'self wid a hot bath. Dar's some o' little marster's clothes on de bed dar, an' a pair o' his shoes, an' I know dey'll jus' fit you snug. You'll find all de folks on de front po'ch when you git through."

She closed the door. Once, winter and summer, the boy had daily plunged into the river with his Indian companions, but he had never had a bath in his life, and he did not know what the word meant; yet he had learned so much at the fort that he had no trouble making out what the tub of water was for. For the same reason he felt no surprise when he picked up the clothes; he was only puzzled how to get into them. He tried, and struggling with the breeches he threw one hand out to the wall to keep from falling and caught a red cord with a bushy red tassel; whereat there was a ringing that made him spring away from it. A moment later there was a knock at his door.

"Did you ring, suh?" asked a voice. What that meant he did not know, and he made no answer. The door was opened slightly and a woolly head appeared.

"Do you want anything, suh?"

"No."

"Den I reckon hit was anudder bell – Yassuh."

The boy began putting on his own clothes.

Outside Colonel Dale and Barbara had strolled down the big path to the sun-dial, the colonel telling the story of the little Kentucky kinsman – the little girl listening and wide-eyed.

"Is he going to live here with us, papa?"

"Perhaps. You must be very nice to him. He has lived a rude, rough life, but I can see he is very sensitive."

At the bend of the river there was the flash of dripping oars, and the song of the black oarsmen came across the yellow flood.

"There they come!" cried Barbara. And from his window the little Kentuckian saw the company coming up the path, brave with gay clothes and smiles and gallantries. The colonel walked with a grand lady at the head, behind were the belles and beaux, and bringing up the rear was Barbara, escorted by a youth of his own age, who carried his hat under his arm and bore himself as haughtily as his elders. No sooner did he see them mounting to the porch than there was the sound of a horn in the rear, and

looking out of the other window the lad saw a coach and four dash through the gate and swing around the road that encircled the great trees, and up to the rear portico, where there was a joyous clamor of greetings. Where did all those people come from? Were they going to stay there and would he have to be among them? All the men were dressed alike and not one was dressed like him. Panic assailed him, and once more he looked at the clothes on the bed, and then without hesitation walked through the hallway, and stopped on the threshold of the front door. A quaint figure he made there, and for the moment the gay talk and laughter quite ceased. The story of him already had been told, and already was sweeping from cabin to cabin to the farthest edge of the great plantation. Mrs. General Willoughby lifted her lorgnettes to study him curiously, the young ladies turned a battery of searching but friendly rays upon him, the young men regarded him with tolerance and repressed amusement, and Barbara, already his champion, turned her eyes from one to the other of them, but always seeing him. No son of Powhatan could have stood there with more dignity, and young Harry Dale's face broke into a smile of welcome. His father being indoors he went forward with hand outstretched.

"I am your cousin Harry," he said, and taking him by the arm he led him on the round of presentation.

"Mrs. Willoughby, may I present my cousin from Kentucky?"

"This is your cousin, Miss Katherine Dale; another cousin, Miss Mary; and this is your cousin Hugh."

And the young ladies greeted him with frank, eager interest, and the young gentlemen suddenly repressed patronizing smiles and gave him grave greeting, for if ever a rapier flashed from a human head, it flashed from the piercing black eye of that little Kentucky backwoodsman when his cousin Hugh, with a rather whimsical smile, bowed with a politeness that was a trifle too elaborate. Mrs. Willoughby still kept her lorgnettes on him as he stood leaning against a pillar. She noted the smallness of his hands and feet, the lithe, perfect body, the clean cut of his face, and she breathed:

"He is a Dale – and blood *does* tell."

Nobody, not even she, guessed how the lad's heart was thumping with the effort to conceal his embarrassment, but when a tinge of color spread on each side of his set mouth and his eyes began to waver uncertainly, Mrs. Willoughby's intuition was quick and kind.

"Barbara," she asked, "have you shown your cousin your ponies?"

The little girl saw her motive and laughed merrily:

"Why, I haven't had time to show him anything. Come on, cousin."

The boy followed her down the steps in his noiseless moccasins, along a grass path between hedges of ancient box, around an ell, and past the kitchen and toward the stables. In and behind the kitchen negroes of all ages and both sexes were hurrying or lazing around, and each turned to stare wonderingly after the strange woodland figure of the little hunter. Negroes were coming in from the fields with horses and mules, negroes were chopping and carrying wood, there were negroes everywhere, and the lad had never seen one before, but he showed no surprise. At a gate the little girl called imperiously:

"Ephraim, bring out my ponies!"

And in a moment out came a sturdy little slave whose head was all black skin, black wool, and white teeth, leading two creamy-white little horses that shook the lad's composure at last, for he knew ponies as far back as he could remember, but he had never seen the like of them. His hand almost trembled when he ran it over their sleek coats, and unconsciously he dropped into his Indian speech and did not know it until the girl asked laughingly:

"Why, what are you saying to my ponies?"

And he blushed, for the little girl's artless prattling and friendliness were already beginning to make him quite human.

"That's Injun talk."

"Can you talk Indian – but, of course, you can."

"Better than English," he smiled.

Hugh had followed them.

"Barbara, your mother wants you," he said, and the little girl turned toward the house. The stranger was ill at ease with Hugh and the latter knew it.

"It must be very exciting where you live."

"How?"

"Oh, fighting Indians and shooting deer and turkeys and buffalo. It must be great fun."

"Nobody does it for fun – it's mighty hard work."

"My uncle – your father – used to tell us about his wonderful adventures out there."

"He had no chance to tell me."

"But yours must have been more wonderful than his."

The boy gave the little grunt that was a survival of his Indian life and turned to go back to the house.

"But all this, I suppose, is as strange to you."

"More."

Hugh was polite and apparently sincere in interest, but the lad was vaguely disturbed and he quickened his step. The porch was empty when they turned the corner of the house, but young Harry Dale came running down the steps, his honest face alight, and caught the little Kentuckian by the arm.

"Get ready for supper, Hugh – come on, cousin," he said, and led the stranger to his room and pointed to the clothes on the bed.

"Don't they fit?" he asked smiling.

"I don't know – I don't know how to git into 'em."

Young Harry laughed joyously.

"Of course not. I wouldn't know how to put yours on either. You just wait," he cried, and disappeared to return quickly with an armful of clothes.

"Take off your war-dress," he said, "and I'll show you."

With heart warming to such kindness, and helpless against it, the lad obeyed like a child and was dressed like a child.

"Now, I've got to hurry," said Harry. "I'll come back for you. Just look at yourself," he called at the door.

And the stranger did look at the wonderful vision that a great mirror as tall as himself gave back. His eyes began to sting, and he rubbed them with the back of his hand and looked at the hand curiously. It was moist. He had seen tears in a woman's eyes, but he did not know that they could come to a man, and he felt ashamed.

V

The boy stood at a window looking out into the gathering dusk. His eye could catch the last red glow on the yellow river. Above that a purplish light rested on the green expanse stretching westward – stretching on and on through savage wilds to his own wilds beyond the lonely Cumberlands. Outside the window the multitude of flowers was drinking in the dew and drooping restfully to sleep. A multitude of strange birds called and twittered from the trees. The neighing of horses, the lowing of cattle, the piping of roosting turkeys and motherly clutter of roosting hens, the weird songs of negroes, the sounds of busy preparation through the house and from the kitchen – all were sounds of peace and plenty, security and service. And over in his own wilds at that hour they were driving cows and horses into the stockade. They were cooking their rude supper in the open. A man had gone to each of the watch-towers. From the blackening woods came the curdling cry of a panther and the hooting of owls. Away on over the still westward wilds were the wigwams of squaws, pappooses, braves, the red men – red in skin, in blood, in heart, and red with hate against the whites.

Perhaps they were circling a fire at that moment in a frenzied war-dance – perhaps the hooting at that moment, from the woods around the fort was not the hooting of owls at all. There all was hardship – danger; here all was comfort and peace. If they could see him now! See his room, his fire, his bed, his clothes! They had told him to come, and yet he felt now the shame of desertion. He had come, but he would not stay long away. The door opened, he turned, and Harry Dale came eagerly in.

“Mother wants to see you.”

The two boys paused in the hall and Harry pointed to a pair of crossed rapiers over the mantelpiece.

“Those were your father’s,” he said; “he was a wonderful fencer.”

The lad shook his head in ignorance, and Harry smiled.

“I’ll show you to-morrow.”

At a door in the other ell Harry knocked gently, and a voice that was low and sweet but vibrant with imperiousness called:

“Come in!”

“Here he is, mother.”

The lad stepped into warmth, subtle fragrance, and many candle lights. The great lady was just rising from a chair in front of her mirror, brocaded, powdered, and starred with jewels. So brilliant a vision almost stunned the little stranger and it took an effort for him to lift his eyes to hers.

“Why, *this* is not the lad you told me of,” she said. “Come here! Both of you.” They came and the lady scrutinized them comparingly.

“Actually you look alike – and, Harry, you have no advantage, even if you are my own son. I am glad you are here,” she said with sudden soberness, and smiling tenderly she put both hands on his shoulders, drew him to her and kissed him, and again he felt in his eyes that curious sting.

“Come, Harry!” With a gallant bow Harry offered his left arm, and gathering the little Kentuckian with her left, the regal lady swept out. In the reception-room she kept the boy by her side. Every man who approached bowed, and soon the lad was bowing, too. The ladies courtesied, the room was soon filled, and amid the flash of smiles, laughter, and gay banter the lad was much bewildered, but his face showed it not at all. Barbara almost cried out her astonishment and pleasure when she saw what a handsome figure he made in his new clothing, and all her little friends were soon darting surreptitious glances at him, and many whispered questions and pleasing comments were passed around. From under Hugh’s feet the ground for the moment was quite taken away, so much to the eye, at least, do clothes make the man. Just then General Willoughby bowed with noble dignity before Mrs. Dale, and the two led the way to the dining-room.

“Harry,” she said, “you and Barbara take care of your cousin.”

And almost without knowing it the young Kentuckian bowed to Barbara, who courtesied and took his arm. But for his own dignity and hers, she would have liked to squeal her delight. The table flashed with silver and crystal on snowy-white damask and was brilliant with colored candles. The little woodsman saw the men draw back chairs for the ladies, and he drew back Barbara's before Hugh, on the other side of her, could forestall him. On his left was Harry, and Harry he watched keenly – but no more keenly than Hugh watched him. Every now and then he would catch a pair of interested eyes looking furtively at him, and he knew his story was going the round of the table among those who were not guests in the house. The boy had never seen so many and so mysterious-looking things to eat and drink. One glass of wine he took, and the quick dizziness that assailed him frightened him, and he did not touch it again. Beyond Barbara, Hugh leaned forward and lifted his glass to him. He shook his head and Hugh flushed.

"Our Kentucky cousin is not very polite – he is something of a barbarian – naturally."

"He doesn't understand," said Barbara quickly, who had noted the incident, and she turned to her cousin.

"Papa says you *are* going to live with us and you are going to study with Harry under Mr. Brockton."

"Our tutor," explained Harry; "there he is across there. He is an Englishman."

"Tutor?" questioned the boy.

"School-teacher," laughed Harry.

"Oh!"

"Haven't you any school-teachers at home?"

"No, I learned to read and write a little from Dave and Lyddy."

And then he had to tell who they were, and he went on to tell them about Mother Sanders and Honor and Bud and Jack and Polly Conrad and Lydia and Dave, and all the frontier folk, and the life they led, and the Indian fights which thrilled Barbara and Harry, and forced even Hugh to listen – though once he laughed incredulously, and in a way that of a sudden shut the boy's lips tight and made Barbara color and Harry look grave. Hugh then turned to his wine and began soon to look more flushed and sulky. Shortly after the ladies left, Hugh followed them, and Harry and the Kentuckian moved toward the head of the table where the men had gathered around Colonel Dale.

"Yes," said General Willoughby, "it looks as though it might come."

"With due deference to Mr. Brockton," said Colonel Dale, "it looks as though his country would soon force us to some action."

They were talking about impending war. Far away as his wilds were, the boy had heard some talk of war in them, and he listened greedily to the quick fire of question and argument directed to the Englishman, who held his own with such sturdiness that Colonel Dale, fearing the heat might become too great, laughed and skilfully shifted the theme. Through hall and doorways came now merry sounds of fiddle and banjo.

"Come on, cousin," said Harry; "can you dance?"

"If your dances are as different as everything else, I reckon not, but I can try."

Near a doorway between parlor and hall sat the fiddlers three. Gallant bows and dainty courtesyings and nimble feet were tripping measures quite new to the backwoodsman. Barbara nodded, smiled, and after the dance ran up to ask him to take part, but he shook his head. Hugh had looked at him as from a superior height, and the boy noticed him frowning while Barbara was challenging him to dance. The next dance was even more of a mystery, for the dancers glided by in couples, Mr. Byron's diatribe not having prevented the importation of the waltz to the new world, but the next cleared his face and set his feet to keeping time, for the square dance had, of course, reached the wilds.

"I know that," he said to Harry, who told Barbara, and the little girl went up to him again, and this time, flushing, he took place with her on the floor. Hugh came up.

"Cousin Barbara, this is our dance, I believe," he said a little thickly.

The girl took him aside and Hugh went surlily away. Harry saw the incident and he looked after Hugh, frowning. The backwoodsman conducted himself very well. He was lithe and graceful and at first very dignified, but as he grew in confidence he began to execute steps that were new to that polite land and rather boisterous, but Barbara looked pleased and all onlookers seemed greatly amused – all except Hugh. And when the old fiddler sang out sonorously:

"Genelmen to right – cheat an' swing!" the boy cheated outrageously, cheated all but his little partner, to whom each time he turned with open loyalty, and Hugh was openly sneering now and genuinely angry.

"You shall have the last dance," whispered Barbara, "the Virginia reel."

"I know that dance," said the boy.

And when that dance came and the dancers were drawn in two lines, the boy who was third from the end heard Harry's low voice behind him:

"He is my cousin and my guest and you will answer to me."

The lad wheeled, saw Harry with Hugh, left his place, and went to them. He spoke to Harry, but he looked at Hugh with a sword-flash in each black eye:

"I don't want nobody to take up for me."

Again he wheeled and was in his place, but Barbara saw and looked troubled, and so did Colonel Dale. He went over to the two boys and put his arm around Hugh's shoulder.

"Tut, tut, my boys," he said, with pleasant firmness, and led Hugh away, and when General Willoughby would have followed, the colonel nodded him back with a smile, and Hugh was seen no more that night. The guests left with gayety, smiles, and laughter, and every one gave the stranger a kindly good-by. Again Harry went with him to his room and the lad stopped again under the crossed swords.

"You fight with 'em?"

"Yes, and with pistols."

"I've never had a pistol. I want to learn how to use *them*."

Harry looked at him searchingly, but the boy's face gave hint of no more purpose than when he first asked the same question.

"All right," said Harry.

The lad blew out his candle, but he went to his window instead of his bed. The moonlight was brilliant – among the trees and on the sleeping flowers and the slow run of the broad river, and it was very still out there and very lovely, but he had no wish to be out there. With wind and storm and sun, moon and stars, he had lived face to face all his life, but here they were not the same. Trees, flowers, house, people had reared some wall between him and them, and they seemed now to be very far away. Everybody had been kind to him – all but Hugh. Veiled hostility he had never known before and he could not understand. Everybody had surely been kind, and yet – he turned to his bed, and all night his brain was flashing to and fro between the reel of vivid pictures etched on it in a day and the grim background that had hitherto been his life beyond the hills.

VI

From pioneer habit he awoke before dawn, and for a moment the softness where he lay puzzled him. There was no sound of anybody stirring and he thought he must have waked up in the middle of the night, but he could smell the dawn and he started to spring up. But there was nothing to be done, nothing that he could do. He felt hot and stuffy, though Harry had put up his windows, and he could not lie there wide awake. He could not go out in the heavy dew in the gay clothes and fragile shoes he had taken off, so he slid into his own buckskin clothes and moccasins and out the still open front door and down the path toward the river. Instinctively he had picked up his rifle, bullet-pouch, and powder-horn. Up the river to the right he could faintly see dark woods, and he made toward and plunged into them with his eyes on the ground for signs of game, but he saw tracks only of coon and skunk and fox, and he grunted his disgust and loped ahead for half an hour farther into the heart of the woods. An hour later he loped back on his own tracks. The cabins were awake now, and every pickaninny who saw him showed the whites of his eyes in terror and fled back into his house. He came noiselessly behind a negro woman at the kitchen-door and threw three squirrels on the steps before her. She turned, saw him, and gave a shriek, but recovered herself and picked them up. Her amazement grew as she looked them over, for there was no sign of a bullet-wound, and she went in to tell how the Injun boy must naturally just "charm 'em right out o' de trees."

At the front door Harry hailed him and Barbara came running out.

"I forgot to get you another suit of clothes last night," he said, "and we were scared this morning. We thought you had left us, and Barbara there nearly cried." Barbara blushed now and did not deny.

"Come to breakfast!" she cried.

"Did you find anything to shoot?" Harry asked.

"Nothin' but some squirrels," said the lad.

Colonel Dale soon came in.

"You've got the servants mystified," he said laughingly. "They think you're a witch. How *did* you kill those squirrels?"

"I couldn't see their heads – so I barked 'em."

"Barked?"

"I shot between the bark and the limb right under the squirrel, an' the shock kills 'em. Uncle Dan'l Boone showed me how to do that."

"Daniel Boone!" breathed Harry. "Do you know Daniel Boone?"

"Shucks, Dave can beat him shootin'."

And then Hugh came in, pale of face and looking rather ashamed. He went straight to the Kentuckian.

"I was rude to you last night and I owe you an apology."

He thrust out his hand and awkwardly the boy rose and took it.

"And you'll forgive me, too, Barbara?"

"Of course I will," she said happily, but holding up one finger of warning – should he ever do it again. The rest of the guests trooped in now, and some were going out on horseback, some for a sail, and some visiting up the river in a barge, and all were paired off, even Harry.

"I'm going to drive Cousin Erskine over the place with my ponies," said Barbara, "and – "

"I'm going back to bed," interrupted Hugh, "or read a little Latin and Greek with Mr. Brockton." There was impudence as well as humor in this, for the tutor had given up Hugh in despair long ago.

Barbara shook her head.

"You are going with us," she said.

"I want Hugh to ride with me," said Colonel Dale, "and give Firefly a little exercise. Nobody else can ride him."

The Kentucky boy turned a challenging eye, as did every young man at the table, and Hugh felt very comfortable. While every one was getting ready, Harry brought out two foils and two masks on the porch a little later.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.