

**ALTSHELER
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THE FREE RANGERS: A
STORY OF THE EARLY
DAYS ALONG THE
MISSISSIPPI

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Joseph A. Altsheler

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CHAPTER I THE CALL

The wilderness rolled away to north and to south, and also it rolled away to east and to west, an unbroken sweep of dark, glossy green. Straight up stood the mighty trunks, but the leaves rippled and sang low when a gentle south wind breathed upon them. It was the forest as God made it, the magnificent valley of North America, upon whose edges the white man had just begun to nibble.

A young man, stepping lightly, came into a little glade. He was white, but he brought with him no alien air. He was in full harmony with the primeval woods, a part of them, one in whose ears the soft song of the leaves was a familiar and loved tune. He was lean, but tall, and he walked with a wonderful swinging gait that betokened a frame wrought to the strength of steel by exercise, wind, weather, and life always in the open. Though his face was browned by sun and storm his hair was yellow and his eyes blue. He was dressed wholly in deerskin and he carried over his shoulder the long slender rifle of the border. At his belt swung hatchet and knife.

There was a touch to the young man that separated him from the ordinary woods rover. He held himself erect with a certain pride of manner. The stock of his rifle, an unusually fine piece, was carved in an ornate and beautiful way. The deerskin of his attire had been tanned with uncommon care, and his moccasins were sewn thickly with little beads of yellow and blue and red and green. Every piece of clothing was scrupulously clean, and his arms were polished and bright.

The shiftless one—who so little deserved his name—paused a moment in the glade and, dropping the stock of his rifle to the ground, leaned upon the muzzle. He listened, although he expected to hear nothing save the song of the leaves, and that alone he heard. A faint smile passed over the face of Shif'less Sol. He was satisfied. All was happening as he had planned. Then he swung the rifle back to his shoulder, and walked to the crest of a hill near by.

The summit was bare and the shiftless one saw far. It was a splendid rolling country, covered with forests of oak and elm, beech, hickory and maple. Here and there faint threads of silver showed where rivers or brooks flowed, and he drew a long deep breath. The measure of line and verse he knew not, but deep in his being Nature had kindled the true fire of poetry, and now his pleasure was so keen and sharp that a throb of emotion stirred in his throat. It was a grand country and, if reserved for any one, it must be reserved for his race and his people. Shif'less Sol was resolved upon that purpose and to it he was ready to devote body and life.

Yet the wilderness seemed to tell only of peace. The low song of the leaves was soothing and all innocence. The shiftless one was far beyond the farthest outpost of his kind, beyond the broad yellow current of the Mississippi, deep in the heart of the primeval forest. He might travel full three hundred miles to the eastward and find no white cabin, while to westward his own kind were almost a world away. On all sides stretched the vast maze of forest and river, through which roamed only wild animals and wilder man.

Shif'less Sol, from his post on the hill, examined the whole circle of the forest long and carefully. He seemed intent upon some unusual object. It was shown in the concentration of his look and the thoughtful pucker of his forehead. It was not game, because in a glade to windward, at the foot of the hill, five buffaloes grazed undisturbed and now and then uttered short, panting grunts to show their satisfaction. Presently a splendid stag, walking through the woods as if he were sole proprietor,

scented the strange human odor, and threw up his head in alarm. But the figure on the hill, the like of which the deer had never seen before, did not stir or take notice, and His Lordship the Stag raised his head higher to see. The figure still did not stir, and, his alarm dying, the stag walked disdainfully away among the trees.

Birds, the scarlet tanager, the blue bird, the cat bird, the jay and others of their kin settled on the trees near the young man with the yellow hair, and gazed at him with curiosity and without fear. A rabbit peeped up now and then, but beyond the new presence the wilderness was undisturbed, and it became obvious to the animal tribe that the stranger meant no harm. Nor did the shiftless one himself discern any alien note. The sky, a solid curve of blue, bore nowhere a trace of smoke. It was undarkened and unstained, the same lonely brightness that had dawned every morning for untold thousands of years.

Shif'less Sol showed no disappointment. Again all seemed to be happening as he wished. Presently he left the hill and, face toward the south, began to walk swiftly and silently down the rows of trees. There was but little undergrowth, nothing to check his speed, and he strode on and on. After a while he came to a brook running through low soft soil and then he did a strange thing, the very act that a white man travelling through the dangerous forest would have avoided. He planted one foot in the yielding soil near the water's edge, and then stepping across, planted the other in exactly the same way on the far side.

When another yard brought him to hard ground he stopped and looked back with satisfaction. On either side of the brook remained the firm deep impression of a human foot, of a white foot, the toes being turned outward. No wilderness rover could mistake it, and yet it was hundreds of miles to the nearest settlement of Shif'less Sol's kind.

He took another look at the footsteps, smiled again and resumed his journey. The character of the country did not change. Still the low rolling hills, still the splendid forests of oak and elm, beech, maple and hickory, and of all their noble kin, still the little brooks of clear water, still the deer and the buffalo, grazing in the glades, and taking but little notice of the strange human figure as it passed. Presently, the shiftless one stopped again and he did another thing, yet stranger than the pressing-in of the foot-prints beside the little stream. He drew the hatchet from his belt and cut a chip out of the bark of a hickory. A hundred yards further on he did the same thing, and, at three hundred yards or so, he cut the chip for the third time. He looked well at the marks, saw that they were clear, distinct and unmistakable, and then the peculiar little smile of satisfaction would pass again over his face.

But these stops were only momentary. Save for them he never ceased his rapid course, and always it led straight toward the south. When the sun was squarely overhead, pouring down a flood of golden beams, he paused in the shade of a mighty oak, and took food from his belt. He might have eaten there in silence and obscurity, but once more the shiftless one showed a singular lack of caution and woodcraft. He drew together dry sticks, ignited a fire with flint and steel, and cooked deer meat over it. He let the fire burn high, and a thin column of dark smoke rose far up into the blue. Any savage, roaming the wilderness, might see it, but the shiftless one was reckless. He let the fire burn on, after his food was cooked, while the column of smoke grew thicker and mounted higher, and ate the savory steaks, lying comfortably between two upthrust roots. Now and then he uttered a little sigh of satisfaction, because he had travelled far and hard, and he was hungry. Food meant new strength.

But he was not as reckless as he seemed. Nothing that passed in the forest within the range of eyesight escaped his notice. He heard the leaf, when it fell close by, and the light tread of a deer passing. He remained a full hour between the roots, a long time for one who might have a purpose, and, after he rose, he did not scatter the fire and trample upon the brands after the wilderness custom when one was ready to depart. The flames had died down, but he let the coals smoulder on, and, hundreds of yards away, he could still see their smoke. Now, he sought the softest parts of the earth and trod there deliberately, leaving many footprints. Again he cut little chips from the trees as he passed, but never ceased his swift and silent journey to the south. The hours fled by, and a dark shade

appeared in the east. It deepened into dusk, and spread steadily toward the zenith. The sun, a golden ball, sank behind a hill in the west, and then the shiftless one stopped.

He ascended a low hill again, and took a long scrutinizing look around the whole horizon. But his gaze was not apprehensive. On the contrary, it was expectant, and his face seemed to show a slight disappointment when the wilderness merely presented its wonted aspect. Then he built another fire, not choosing a secluded glade, but the top of the hill, the most exposed spot that he could find, and, after he had eaten his supper, he sat beside it, the expectant air still on his face.

Nothing came. But the shiftless one sat long. He raked up dead leaves of last year's winter and made a pillow, against which he reclined luxuriously. Shif'less Sol was one who drew mental and physical comfort from every favoring circumstance, and the leaves felt very soft to his head and shoulders. He was not in the least lonesome, although the night had fully come, and heavy darkness lay like a black robe over the forest. He stretched out his moccasined toes to the fire, closed his eyes for a moment or two, and a dreamy look of satisfaction rested on his face. It seemed to the shiftless one that he lay in the very lap of luxury, in the very best of worlds.

But when he opened his eyes again he continued to watch the forest, or rather he watched with his ears now, as he lay close to the earth, and his hearing, at all times, was so acute that it seemed to border upon instinct or divination. But no sound save the usual ones of the forest and the night came to him, and he remained quite still, thinking.

Shif'less Sol Hyde was in an exalted mood, and the flickering firelight showed a face refined and ennobled by a great purpose. Leading a life that made him think little of hardship and danger he thought nothing at all of them now, but he felt instead a great buoyancy, and a hope equally great.

He lay awake a full three hours after the dark had come, and he rose only twice from his reclining position, each time merely to replenish the fire which remained a red core in the circling blackness. Always he was listening and always he heard nothing but the usual sounds of the forest and the night. The darkness grew denser and heavier, but after a while it began to thin and lighten. The sky became clear, and the great stars swam in the dusky blue. Then Shif'less Sol fell asleep, head on the leaves, feet to the fire, and slept soundly all through the night.

He was up at dawn, cooked his breakfast, and then, after another long and searching examination of the surrounding forest, departed, leaving the coals of the fire to smoulder, and tell as they might that some one had passed. Shif'less Sol throughout that morning repeated the tactics of the preceding day, leaving footprints that would last, and cutting pieces of bark from the trees with his sharp hatchet. At the noon hour he stopped, according to custom, and, just when he had lighted his fire, he uttered a low cry of pleasure.

The shiftless one was gazing back upon his own trail, and the singular look of exaltation upon his face deepened. He rose to his feet and stood, very erect, in the attitude of one who welcomes. No undergrowth was here, and he could see far down the aisles of trunks.

A figure, so distant that only a keen eye would notice it, was approaching. It came on swiftly and silently, much after the manner of the shiftless one himself, elastic, and instinct with strength.

The figure was that of a boy in years, but of a man in size, surpassing Shif'less Sol himself in height, yellow haired, blue-eyed, and dressed, too, in the neatest of forest garb. His whole appearance was uncommon, likely anywhere to attract attention and admiration. The shiftless one drew a long breath of mingled welcome and approval.

"I knew that he would be first," he murmured.

Then he sat down and began to broil a juicy deer steak on the end of a sharpened stick.

Henry Ware came into the little glade. He had seen the fire afar and he knew who waited. All was plain to him like the print of a book, and, without a word, he dropped down on the other side of the fire facing Shif'less Sol. The two nodded, but their eyes spoke far more. Sol held out the steak, now crisp and brown and full of savor, and Henry began to eat. Sol quickly broiled another for himself, and joined him in the pleasant task, over which they were silent for a little while.

"I was on the Ohio," said Henry at last, "when the trapper brought me your message, but I started at once."

"O' course," said Shif'less Sol, "I never doubted it for a minute. I reckon that you've come about seven hundred miles."

"Nearer eight," said Henry, "but I'm fresh and strong, and we need all our strength, Sol, because it's a great task that lies before us."

"It shorely is," said Sol, "an' that's why I sent the message. I don't want to brag, Henry, but we've done a big thing or two before, an' maybe we kin do a bigger now."

He spoke the dialect of the border, he was not a man of books, but that great look of exaltation came into his face again, and the boy on the other side of the fire shared it.

"It seems to me, Sol," said Henry presently, "that we've been selected for work of a certain kind. We finish one job, and then another on the same line begins."

"Mebbe it's because we like to do it, an' are fit fur it," said Sol philosophically. "I've noticed that a river gen'ally runs in a bed that suits it. I don't know whether the bed is thar because the river is, or the river is thar 'cause the bed is, but it's shore that they're both thar together, an' you can't git aroun' that."

"There's something in what you say," said Henry.

Then they relapsed into silence, and, in a half hour, as if by mutual consent, they rose, left the fire burning, and departed, still walking steadily toward the south.

The country grew rougher. The hills were higher and closer together, and the undergrowth became thick. Neither took any precautions as they passed among the slender bushes, frequently trampling them down and leaving signs that the blindest could not fail to see. Now and then the two looked back, but they beheld only the forest and the forest people.

"I don't think I ever saw the game so tame before," said Henry.

"Which means," said Sol, "that the warriors ain't hunted here fur a long time. I ain't seen a single sign o' them."

"Nor I."

They fell silent and scarcely spoke until the sun was setting again, when they stopped for the night, choosing a conspicuous place, as Sol had done the evening before. After supper, they sought soft places on the turf, and lay in peace, gazing up at the great stars. Henry was the first to break the silence.

"One is coming," he said. "I can hear the footstep. Listen!"

His ear was to the earth, and the shiftless one imitated him. At the end of a minute he spoke.

"Yes," he said, "I hear him, too. We'll make him welcome."

He rose, put a fresh piece of wood on the fire, and smiled, as he saw the flame leap up and crackle merrily.

"Here he is," said Henry.

The figure that emerged from the bushes was thick-set and powerful, the strong face seamed and tanned by the wind, rain and sun of years. The man stepped into the circle of the firelight, and held out his hand. Each shook it with a firm and hearty clasp, and Tom Ross took his seat with them beside the fire. They handed him food first, and then he said:

"I was away up in the Miami country, huntin' buffalo, when the word came to me, Sol, but I quit on the minute an' started."

"I was shore you would," said the shiftless one quietly. "Buffaloes are big game, but we're huntin' bigger now."

"I was never in this part of the country before," said Tom Ross, looking around curiously at the ghostly tree trunks.

"I've been through here," said Henry, "and it runs on in the same way for hundreds of miles in every direction."

"Bigger an' finer than any o' them old empires that Paul used to tell us about," said Shif'less Sol.
"Yes," said Henry.

The three looked at one another significantly.

They wrapped themselves in their blankets by and by, and went to sleep on the soft turf. Henry was the first to awake, just when the dawn was turning from pink to red, and a single glance revealed to him an object on the horizon that had not been there the night before. A man stood on the crest of a low hill, and even at the distance, Henry recognized him. His comrades were awaking and he turned to them.

"See!" he said, pointing with a long forefinger.

Their eyes followed, and they too recognized the man.

"He'll be here in a minute," said Shif'less Sol. "He jest eats up space."

He spoke the truth, as it seemed scarcely a minute before Long Jim Hart entered the camp, showing no sign of fatigue. The three welcomed him and gave him a place at their breakfast fire.

"I wuz at Marlowe," he said, "when the word reached me, but I started just an hour later. I struck your trail, Sol, two days back, an' I traveled nearly all last night. I saw Henry join you an' then Tom."

Shif'less Sol laughed. He had a soft, mellow laugh that crinkled up the corners of his mouth, and made his eyes shine. There was no doubt that a man who laughed such a laugh was enjoying himself.

"I reckon you didn't have much trouble follerin' that trail o' ourn," he said.

Jim Hart answered the laugh with a grin.

"Not much," he replied. "It was like a wagon road through the wilderness. The ashes uv your last camp fire weren't sca'cely cold when I passed by."

"We're all here 'cept the fifth feller," said Tom Ross.

"The fifth will come," said Henry emphatically.

"Uv course," said Tom Ross with equal emphasis.

"And when he comes," said Shif'less Sol, "we take right hold o' the big job."

They lingered awhile over their breakfast, but saw no one approaching. Then they took up the march again, going steadily southward in single file, talking little, but leaving a distinct trail. They were only four, but they were a formidable party, all strong of arm, keen of eye and ear, skilled in the lore of the forest, and every one bore the best weapons that the time could furnish.

Toward noon the day grew very warm and clouds gathered in the sky. The wind became damp.

"Rain," said Henry. "I'm sorry of that. I wish it wouldn't break before he overtook us."

"S'pose we stop an' make ready," said Shif'less Sol. "You know we ain't bound to be in a big hurry, an' it won't help any o' us to get a soakin'."

"You're shorely right, Sol," said Jim Hart. "We're bound to take the best uv care uv ourselves."

They looked around with expert eyes, and quickly chose a stony outcrop or hollow in the side of a hill, just above which grew two gigantic beeches very close together. Then it was wonderful to see them work, so swift and skillful were they. They cut small saplings with their hatchets, and, with the little poles and fallen bark of last year, made a rude thatch which helped out the thick branches of the beeches overhead. They also built up the sides of the hollow with the same materials, and the whole was done in less than ten minutes. Then they raked in heaps of dead leaves and sat down upon them comfortably. Many drops of water would come through the leaves and thatch, but such as they, hardened to the wilderness, would not notice them.

Meanwhile the storm was gathering with the rapidity so frequent in the great valley. All the little clouds swung together and made a big one that covered nearly the whole sky. The air darkened rapidly. Thunder began to growl and mutter and now and then emitted a sharp crash. Lightning cut the heavens from zenith to horizon, and the forest would leap into the light, standing there a moment, vivid, like tracery.

A blaze more brilliant than all the rest cleft wide the sky and, as they looked toward the North, they saw directly in the middle of the flame a black dot that had not been there before.

"He's coming," said Henry in the quiet tone that indicated nothing more than a certainty fulfilled.

"Just in time to take a seat in our house," said the shiftless one.

Sol ran out and gave utterance to a long echoing cry that sounded like a call. It was answered at once by the new black dot under the Northern horizon, which was now growing fast in size, as it came on rapidly. It took a human shape, and, thirty yards away, a fine, delicately-chiselled face, the face of a scholar and dreamer, remarkable in the wilderness, was revealed. The face belonged to a youth, tall and strong, but not so tall and large as Henry.

"Here we are, Paul," said Shif'less Sol. "We've fixed fur you."

"And mighty glad I am to overtake you fellows," said Paul Cotter, "particularly at this time."

He ran for the shelter just as the forest began to moan, and great drops of rain rushed down upon them. He was inside in a moment, and each gave his hand a firm grasp.

"We're all here now," said Henry.

"All here and ready for the great work," said Shif'less Sol, his tranquil face illumined again with that look of supreme exaltation.

Then the storm burst. The skies opened and dropped down floods of water. They heard it beating on the leaves and thatch overhead, and some came through, falling upon them but they paid no heed. They sat placidly until the rush and roar passed, and then Henry said to the others:

"We're to stick to the task that we've set ourselves through thick and through thin, through everything?"

"Yes! Yes!"

"If one falls, the four that are left keep on?"

"Yes! yes!"

"If three fall and only two are left, these must not flinch."

"Yes! yes!"

"If four go down and only one is left, then he whoever he may be, must go on and win alone?"

"Yes! yes!" came forth with deep emphasis.

CHAPTER II

A FOREST ENVOY

A group of men were seated in a pleasant valley, where the golden beams of the sun sifted in myriads through the green leaves. They were about fifty in number and all were white. Most of them were dressed in Old World fashion, doublets, knee breeches, hose, and cocked hats. Nearly all were dark; olive faces, black hair, and black pointed beards, but now and then one had fair hair, and eyes of a cold, pale blue. Manner, speech, looks, and dress, alike differentiated them from the borderers. They were not the kind of men whom one would expect to find in these lonely woods in the heart of North America.

The leader of the company—and obviously he was such—was one of the few who belonged to the blonde type. His eyes were of the chilly, metallic blue, and his hair, long and fair, curled at the ends. His dress, of some fine, black cloth, was scrupulously neat and clean, and a silver-hilted small sword swung at his belt. He was not more than thirty.

The fair man was leaning lazily but gracefully against the trunk of a tree, and he talked in a manner that seemed indolent and careless, but which was neither to a youth in buckskins who sat opposite him, a striking contrast in appearance. This youth was undeniably of the Anglo-Saxon type, large and well-built, with a broad, full forehead, but with eyes set too close together. He was tanned almost to the darkness of an Indian.

"You tell me, Señor Wyatt," said Don Francisco Alvarez, the leader of the Spanish band, "that the new settlers in Kaintock¹ have twice driven off the allied tribes, and that, if they are left alone another year or two, they will go down so deep in the soil that they can never be uprooted. Is it not so?"

"It is so," replied Braxton Wyatt, the renegade. "The tribes have failed twice in a great effort. Every man among these settlers is a daring and skillful fighter, and many of the boys—and many of the women, too. But if white troops and cannon are sent against them their forts must fall."

The Spaniard was idly whipping the grass stems with a little switch. Now he narrowed his metallic, blue eyes, and gazed directly into those of Braxton Wyatt.

"And you, Señor Wyatt?" he said, speaking his slow, precise English. "Nothing premeditated is done without a motive. You are of these people who live in Kaintock, their blood is your blood; why then do you wish to have them destroyed?"

A deep flush broke its way through the brown tan on the face of Braxton Wyatt, and his eyes fell before the cold gaze of the Spaniard. But he raised them again in a moment. Braxton Wyatt was not a coward, and he never permitted a guilty conscience to last longer than a throb or two.

"I did belong to them," he replied, "but my tastes led me away. I have felt that all this mighty valley should belong to the Indians who have inhabited it so long, but, if the white people come, it should be those who are true and loyal to their kings, not these rebels of the colonies."

Francisco Alvarez smiled cynically, and once more surveyed Braxton Wyatt, with a rapid, measuring glance.

"You speak my sentiments, Señor Wyatt," he said, "and you speak them in a language that I scarcely expected."

"I had a schoolmaster even in the wilderness," said Braxton Wyatt. "And I may tell you, too, as proof of my faith that I would be hanged at once should I return to the settlements."

"I do not doubt your faith. I was merely curious about your motives. I am sure also that you can be of great help to us."

¹ An early French and Spanish name for Kentucky.

He spoke in a patronizing manner, and Braxton Wyatt moved slightly in anger, but restrained his speech.

"I may say," continued the Spaniard, "that His Excellency Bernardo Galvez, His Most Catholic Majesty's Governor of his loyal province of Louisiana, has been stirred by the word that comes to him of these new settlements of the rebel Americans in the land of the Ohio. The province of Louisiana is vast, and it may be that it includes the country on either side of the Ohio. The French, our predecessors, claimed it, and now that all the colonists east of the mountains are busy fighting their king, it may be easy to take it from them, as one would snip off a skirt with a pair of scissors. That is why I and this faithful band are so far north in these woods."

Braxton Wyatt nodded.

"And a wise thing, too," he said. "I am strong with the tribes. The great chief, Yellow Panther, of the Miamis and the great chief, Red Eagle, of the Shawnees are both my friends. I know how they feel. The Spanish in New Orleans are far away. Their settlements do not spread. They come rather to hunt and trade. But the Americans push farther and farther. They build their homes and they never go back. Do you wonder then that the warriors wish your help?"

Francisco Alvarez smiled again. It was a cold but satisfied smile and he rubbed one white hand over the other.

"Your logic is good," he said, "and these reasons have occurred to me, also, but my master, Bernardo Galvez, the Governor, is troubled. We love not England and there is a party among us—a party at present in power—which wishes to help the Americans in order that we may damage England, but I, if I could choose the way would have no part in it. As surely as we help the rebels we will also create rebels against ourselves."

"You are far from New Orleans," said Braxton Wyatt. "It would take long for a messenger to go and come, and meanwhile you could act as you think best."

"It is so," said the Spaniard. "Our presence here is unknown to all save the chiefs and yourself. In this wilderness, a thousand miles from his superior, one must act according to his judgment, and I should like to see these rebel settlements crushed."

He spoke to himself rather than to Wyatt, and again his eyes narrowed. Blue eyes are generally warm and sympathetic, but his were of the cold, metallic shade that can express cruelty so well. He plucked, too, at his short, light beard, and Braxton Wyatt read his thoughts. The renegade felt a thrill of satisfaction. Here was a man who could be useful.

"How far is it from this place to the land of the Miamis and the Shawnees?" asked Alvarez.

"It must be six or seven hundred miles, but bands of both tribes are now hunting much farther west. One Shawnee party that I know of is even now west of the Mississippi."

Francisco Alvarez, frowned slightly.

"It is a huge country," he said. "These great distances annoy me. Still, one must travel them. Ah, what is it now?"

He was looking at Braxton Wyatt, as he spoke, and he saw a sudden change appear upon his face, a look of recognition and then of mingled hate and rage. The renegade was staring Northward, and the eyes of Alvarez followed his.

The Spaniard saw a man or rather a youth approaching, a straight, slender, but tall and compact figure, and a face uncommon in the wilderness, fine, delicate, with the eyes of a dreamer, and seer, but never weak. The youth came on steadily, straight toward the Spanish camp.

"Paul Cotter!" exclaimed Braxton Wyatt. "How under the sun did he come here!"

"Some one you know?" said Alvarez who heard the words.

"Yes, from the settlements of which we speak," replied Wyatt quickly and in a low tone. He had no time to add more, because Paul was now in the Spanish camp, and was gravely saluting the leader, whom he had recognized instantly to be such by his dress and manner. Francisco Alvarez rose to his feet, and politely returned the salute. He saw at once a quality in the stranger that was not

wholly of the wilderness. Braxton Wyatt nodded, but Paul took no notice whatever of him. A flush broke again through the tan of the renegade's face.

"Be seated," said Alvarez, and Paul sat down on a little grassy knoll.

"You are Captain Francisco Alvarez of the Spanish forces at New Orleans?"

"You have me truly," replied the Spaniard smiling and shrugging his shoulders, "although I cannot surmise how you became aware of my presence here. But the domains of my master, the king, extend far, and his servants must travel far, also, to do his will."

Paul understood the implication in his words, but he, too, had the gift of language and diplomacy, and he did not reply to it. Stirred by deep curiosity, the Spanish soldiers were gathering a little nearer, but Alvarez waved back all but Wyatt.

"I am glad to find you here, Captain Alvarez," said Paul with a gravity beyond his years; indeed, as he spoke, his face was lighted up by that same singular look of exaltation that had passed more than once over the face of the shiftless one. "And I am glad because I have come for a reason, one of the greatest of all reasons. I want to say something, not for myself, but for others."

"Ah, an ambassador, I see," said Francisco Alvarez with a light touch of irony.

But Paul took no notice of the satire. He was far too much in earnest, and he resumed in tones impressive in their solemnity:

"I am from one of the little white villages in the Kentucky woods far to the eastward. There we have fought the wilderness and twice we have driven back strong forces of the allied tribes, although they came with great resolution and were helped moreover by treachery."

Braxton Wyatt moved angrily and was about to speak, but Paul, never glancing in his direction, went on steadily:

"These settlements cannot be uprooted now. They may be damaged. They may be made to suffer great loss and grief, but the vanguard of our people will never turn back. Neither warrior nor king can withstand it."

Now Paul's look was wholly that of the prophet. As he said the last words, "neither warrior nor king can withstand it" his face was transfigured. He did not see the Spaniard before him, nor Braxton Wyatt, the renegade, nor the surrounding woods, but he saw instead great states and mighty cities.

The Spaniard, despite his displeasure, was impressed by the words of the youth, but he took hold of himself bodily, as it were, and shook off the spell. A challenging light sprang into his cold blue eyes.

"I do not know so much about warriors," he said, "but kings may be and are able to do what they will. If my master should choose to put forth his strength, even to send his far-extended arm into these woods, to what would your tiny settlements amount? A pinch of sand before a puff of wind. Whiff! You are gone. Nor could your people east of the mountains help you, because they, on bended knee, will soon be receiving their own lesson from the King of England."

Francisco Alvarez snapped his fingers, as if Paul and his people were annihilated by a single derisive gesture. Paul reddened and a dangerous flash came into his eyes. But the natural diplomatist in him took control, and he replied with the utmost calmness.

"It may be so, but it is not a question that should arise. The King of Spain is at peace with us. We even hear, deep in the woods as we are, that he may take our part against England. France already is helping us. So I have come to ask you to take no share in plots against us, not to listen to evil counsels, and not to turn ear to traitors, who, having been traitors to one people, can readily be traitors to another."

Braxton Wyatt leaped to his feet, his face blazing with wrath, and his hand flew to the hilt of the knife at his belt.

"Now this is more than I will stand!" he exclaimed, "you cannot ignore me, Paul Cotter, until such time you choose, and then call me foul names!"

The Spaniard smiled. The sight of Braxton Wyatt's wrath pleased him, but he put out his hand in a detaining gesture.

"Sit down!" he said in a tone so sharp that Wyatt obeyed. "This is no time for personal quarrels. As I see it, an embassy has come to us and we must discuss matters of state. Is it not so, Señor, Señor—"

"Cotter! Paul Cotter is my name."

Paul felt the sneer in the Spaniard's last words, but he hid his resentment.

"Then your proposition is this," continued Alvarez, "that I and my men have nothing to do with the Indians, that we make no treaty, no agreement with them, that we abandon this country and go back to New Orleans. This you propose despite the fact that the region in which we now are belongs to Spain."

"I would not put it in quite that fashion," replied Paul calmly. "I suggest instead that you be our friend. It is natural for the white races to stand together. I suggest that you send away, also, the messenger of the tribes who comes seeking your help to slaughter women and children."

Braxton Wyatt half rose, but again he was put down by the restraining gesture of Francisco Alvarez.

"No personal quarrels, as I stated before," said the Spaniard, "but to you, Señor Cotter, I wish to say that I have heard your words, but it seems to me they are without weight. I do not agree with you that the settlements of the Americans cannot be uprooted. Nor am I sure that your title to Kaintock is good. It was claimed in the beginning by France, and justly, but a great war gave it by might though not by right to England. Now Spain has succeeded to France. Here, throughout all this vast region, there is none to dispute her title. To the east of the Mississippi great changes are going on, and it may be that Kaintock, also, will revert to my master, the king."

He waved his hand in a gesture of finality, and a look of satisfaction came into Braxton Wyatt's eyes. The renegade glanced triumphantly at Paul, but Paul's face remained calm.

"You would not proceed to any act of hostility in conjunction with the tribes, when Spain and the colonies are at peace?" said Paul to the Spaniard.

Francisco Alvarez frowned, and assumed a haughty look.

"I make neither promises nor prophecies," he said, "I have spoken courteously to you, Señor Cotter, although you are a trespasser on the Spanish domain. I have given you the hospitality of our camp, but I cannot answer questions pertaining to the policy of my government."

Paul, for the first time, showed asperity. He, too, drew himself up with a degree of haughtiness, and he looked Don Francisco Alvarez squarely in the eyes, as he replied:

"I did not come here to ask questions. I came merely to say that our nations are at peace, and to urge you not to help savages in a war upon white people."

"I do not approve of rebels," said Alvarez.

Paul was silent. He felt instinctively that his mission had failed. Something cold and cruel about the Spaniard repelled him, and he believed, too, that Braxton Wyatt had not been without a sinister influence.

Alvarez arose and walked over to his camp-fire. Braxton Wyatt followed him and whispered rapidly to the Spaniard. Paul, persistent and always hopeful, was putting down his anger and trying to think of other effective words that he might use. But none would come into his head, and he, too, rose.

"I am sorry that we cannot agree. Captain Alvarez," he said with the grave courtesy that became him so well, "and therefore I will bid you good day."

A thin smile passed over the face of the Spaniard and the blue eyes shed a momentary, metallic gleam.

"I pray you not to be in haste, Señor Cotter," he said. "Be our guest for a while."

"I must go," replied Paul, "although I thank you for the courtesy."

"But we cannot part with you now," said the Spaniard, "you are on Spanish soil. Others of your kind may be near, also, and you and they have come, uninvited. I would know more about it."

"You mean that you will detain me?" said Paul in surprise.

The Spaniard delicately stroked his pointed beard.

"Perhaps that is the word," he replied. "As I said, you have trespassed upon our domain, and I must hold you, for a time, at least. I know not what plot is afoot"

"As a prisoner?"

"If you wish to call it so."

"And yet there is no war between your country and mine!"

The Spaniard delicately stroked his pointed beard again.

Paul looked at him accusingly, and Francisco Alvarez unable to sustain his straight gaze, turned his eyes aside. But Braxton Wyatt's face was full of triumph, although he kept silent.

Paul thought rapidly. It seemed to him a traitorous design and he did not doubt that Wyatt had instigated it, but he must submit at present. He was powerless inside a ring of fifty soldiers. Without a word, he sat down again on the little grassy knoll and it pleased Alvarez to affect a great politeness, and to play with his prisoner as a cat with a mouse. He insisted that he eat and he made his men bring him the tenderest of food, deer meat and wild turkey, and fish, freshly caught. Finally he opened a flask and poured wine in a small silver cup.

"It is the wine of Xeres, Señor Cotter," he said, "and you can judge how precious it is, as it must be a full five thousand miles from its birthplace."

He handed the little cup in grandiose manner to Paul, and Paul, meeting his humor, accepted it in like fashion. He had not tasted wine often in his life and he found it a strong fluid, but, in this crisis, it strengthened him and put a new sparkle in his blood.

"Thanks," he said as he politely returned the empty cup, and resumed his seat on the knoll. Then Alvarez walked aside, and talked again in whispers with the renegade.

Wyatt urged that Paul be held indefinitely. He would not talk at first, but they must get from him the fullest details about the settlements in Kentucky, the weak points, where to attack and when. If the settlements were left alone they would certainly spread all over Kentucky and in time across the Mississippi into the Spanish domain. Spain was far away, and she could not drive them back. But the Spaniards could urge on the tribes again, and with a hidden hand, send them arms and ammunition. White men with cannon could even join the warriors, and Spain might convincingly say that she knew nothing of it.

The words of the renegade pleased Francisco Alvarez. Deep down in his crafty heart he loved intrigue and cunning.

"Yes, we'll hold him," he said. "He is a trespasser here, although I will admit that he is not the kind of person that I expected to find in the heart of this vast wilderness."

He glanced at Paul, who was sitting on the knoll, calm and apparently unconcerned, his fine features at rest, his blue eyes lazily regarding the forest. The blue of Paul's eyes was different from the blue of the eyes of Alvarez. The blue of his was deep, warm, and sympathetic.

"Is it likely that Cotter is alone?" Alvarez asked of Wyatt.

"Not at all," replied the renegade. "He has friends, and I warn you that they are able and dangerous. We must be on our watch against them."

"What friends?" asked the Spaniard incredulously.

"There is a group. They are five. Where one of them is, the other four are not likely to be far away. There is Cotter's comrade, Henry Ware, a little older, and larger and stronger, wonderful in the woods! He surpasses the Indians themselves in cunning and craft. Then comes Sol Hyde, whom they call the shiftless one, but swift and cunning, and much to be dreaded. Look out for him when he is pretending to be most harmless. And then Tom Ross, who has been, a hunter and guide all his life, and the one they call Long Jim, the swiftest runner in the wilderness. Oh, I know them all!"

"Perhaps you have had cause to know them well," said the Spaniard in a sardonic tone—he was a keen reader of character, and he understood Braxton Wyatt.

But Braxton Wyatt ignored the taunt in his anxiety.

"They must not be taken too lightly," he said. "They are somewhere in these woods, and, Captain, I warn you once more against them."

The Spaniard smiled in his superior way, and, turning to his men, began to give directions for the camp that night. Sunset was not far away, and they would remain in the glade. His was too strong a force to fear attack in that isolated region, but Alvarez posted sentinels, and ordered the others to sleep, when the time came, in a wide ring about the fire. Within the ring he and Paul and Wyatt sat, and the Spaniard, maintaining his light, ironic humor, talked much. Paul, if addressed directly by Alvarez, always answered, but he persistently ignored the renegade. Such a being filled him with horror, and once, when Wyatt gave him a look of deadly hate, Paul shot back one of his own, fully a match for it. But that was all.

Night came on fast. The red sun shot down. Darkness fell upon the forest, and swept up to the circling rim of the camp fire. Chill came into the air. The Spaniards shivered and crept a little nearer to the coals. Talk ceased, and, out of the illimitable forest, came the low, moaning sound of the wind among the leaves. The great stars sprang out, and shone with a thin, pale light on the wilderness.

Francisco Alvarez was a brave man, but he was born on sunny plains where he basked in warmth and the eye ranged far. Now, despite himself, he felt a chill that was uncanny. The forest, thick and black, spread away, he knew, for hundreds of miles, and neither city nor town broke it. A fervent imagination leaped up and peopled it with weird beings. Nor would imagination go down before will and knowledge. Boughs twisted themselves into fantastic, hideous shapes, and the moan of the wind was certainly like the cry of a soul in torment.

Don Francisco Alvarez shivered and the shiver became a shudder. He looked across the fire at his prisoner, but Paul seemed unconscious of the forest and the night, and the demon spell of the two. The lad sat immovable. Upon his face was the dreamy, mystic look that so often came there. He seemed to be gazing far beyond the Spaniard and the renegade into some greater future.

Francisco Alvarez, brave man though he was, felt awe. He rose impatiently, kicked a coal deeper into the fire, looked once more at Paul, who was yet silent, and spoke sharply to the sentinels. Then he returned to his place, and said to Paul:

"We offer you the hospitality of the forest and an extra blanket if you wish it."

"It's a hospitality to which I'm used," replied Paul, "and I don't need the extra blanket, although I thank you for the offer."

He took his own blanket from the little roll at his back, wrapped himself in it, pillowed his head on the knoll, and closed his eyes. Francisco Alvarez looked at him for some minutes, and could not tell whether he was sleeping or waking, but he thought that he slept. His long, regular breathing and the expression of his face, as peaceful as that of a little child, indicated it.

The night grew chillier. The great stars remained pale and cold, and the forest continued to whine, as that strange, wandering breeze slipped through the leaves. Francisco Alvarez of the sunny plains wished that it would stop. It got upon his nerves, and the feeling it gave him was singularly like that of an evil conscience. He saw his men fall to sleep one by one, and he heard their heavy breathing. Braxton Wyatt also wrapped himself in his blanket and soon slumbered. The fire sank, the coals crumbled, and with soft little hisses, fell together. The circling rim of darkness crept up closer and closer, and the trunks of the trees became ghostly in the shadows.

Alvarez saw his sentinels at either side of the camp, to right and left, walking back and forth, and he knew also that they would watch well. Time passed. The night darkened and then a wan moon came out, casting a ghostly, gray shadow over the measureless black forest. The great stars, pale and cold, danced in a dusky blue. Faint moans came out of the depths of the wilderness, as a stray wind wandered here and there among the leaves. Francisco Alvarez, resolute and self-contained though

he was, could not sleep. He had taken a bold step in holding the messenger of peace, and, although one might do much a thousand wilderness miles from the seat of his authority, he was nevertheless anxious to have the full support of Bernardo Galvez, the Spanish governor of Louisiana.

Royalist to the marrow, he wished the colonists to be defeated by their mother country, and he wished, moreover, that Spain might make secure a title to all the immense regions in the valley. If he could skillfully commit Spain to a quarrel with the settlers much might be done for the cause in which his heart was enlisted. He foresaw the truth of Paul's warning that in a little while nothing could uproot the settlers in Kentucky. A blow at them, if it would destroy, must fall quickly, and he meant that the blow should be given.

His anxiety weighed heavily upon him and the wilderness at night grew more uncanny. Sleep refused to come. The coals sank lower. One by one they gleamed with the last fitful sparks of dying fire and then went out. The two sentinels, one to the right and one to the left, had sat down now upon fallen logs, but Alvarez knew that they were still watching with care—they would not dare to do otherwise. All the rest but Alvarez slept.

The Spaniard looked at Braxton Wyatt as he lay in his blanket, one arm under his head, and his lip curled. He despised him, and yet he could be very useful. He would have to work with him and he must treat him at least with superficial politeness. Then he looked at the prisoner. Paul, too, slept soundly, his fine face thrown into relief in the wan moonlight, every sensitive feature revealed. Alvarez wondered again that he should find a youth of such classic countenance and cultivated mind in the deep forest.

The wandering breeze ceased, and the wilderness fell into a silence so deep and heavy that it preyed upon the nerves of the Spaniard. Then, out of the stillness came a long, plaintive note, wailing, but musical, full of a quality that made it seem to Alvarez weird and ominous.

"Only the howl of a wolf," muttered the Spaniard, who recognized the long-drawn cry. But it made him shiver a little, nevertheless. He alone was awake, except the sentinels, and he felt like a tiny, lost speck in all the vast wilderness. A second time came the cry of the wolf, and then it was repeated a third and a fourth time. After the fourth it ceased.

The four cries were so distinct, so equal in length, and repeated at such regular intervals that they seemed to Francisco Alvarez like set notes. He listened intently, but they did not come again. He glanced at the prisoner but Paul had not stirred, the moon's rays illuminating his face with a pale light. The renegade, too, slept soundly.

Alvarez wrapped himself in his blanket after the fashion of the others, and lay down, but still sleep would not come. He knew that it was far in the night and he wished to be rested and fresh for the next day, but he lay awake, nevertheless. A half hour passed, and then came that plaintive cry of the wolf again. As before, it seemed to be wonderfully distinct and full of character, but it was nearer now. Francisco Alvarez raised himself on his elbow, and heard it a second and then a third and fourth time. After that only the heavy silence of the forest.

"The same as before," murmured the Spaniard to himself. "The wolf howled four times. What a coincidence! Bah, I'm becoming a superstitious fool!"

He resolutely closed his eyes and sought slumber once more. It was far past midnight now, and weary nature began at last her task. His nerves were soothed. A soft breeze fanned his eyelids with drowsy wing, the forest wavered, swam away, and he slept.

Red dawn was coming when Francisco Alvarez awoke. The fire was dead and cold, and the men around it yet slumbered. The two sentinels, one to the right and one to the left, still sat on the logs, backs toward him. He took one glance to see if the prisoner, too, slept, and then he leaped to his feet with a cry. The prisoner was not there! Nor was he anywhere in the camp.

"Up! up! you rascals!" shouted the Spaniard. "The boy is gone! escaped. Luiz, Pedro, in what manner have you watched!"

He rushed to the sentinel on the right, Luiz, and struck him sharply across the back with the flat of his sword.

"Wretch!" he cried, "you have slept!" and he struck him again.

Luiz did not stir, even under the sharp blow. He remained, sitting on the log, back to his chief, shoulders bent forward, as if he were in a slumber too profound to be disturbed by anything short of a crash of thunder in his ear. Alvarez, furious with anger, seized him by the shoulder and dragged him back. Then he uttered another cry, in which rage and surprise were mingled in equal portions. But Luiz, the sentinel, still said nothing. He could not. A gag was fixed firmly in his mouth, his arms were bound to his side, his legs to the tree on which he sat, and his rifle had been left standing between his knees and against his shoulder, as if held by one who watched.

The unfortunate sentinel gazed up at his chief with wide-open, appealing eyes, and, leaving him with the men, who were now crowding around he ran to the other sentinel. Pedro, only to find him gagged and bound, exactly like his comrade. It was some minutes before either could speak, after they were cut loose and their gags removed, and then their tales were the same.

"I watched. I watched well, Captain," said Luiz, "by the Holy Virgin I swear it! Never in this whole terrible night, not for a moment, have my eyes closed. I saw nothing, I heard nothing but a wolf howling in the forest, and then, long after midnight, I was suddenly seized from behind by powerful hands. I could not move, so strong were they. I was gagged and bound and I could see only the phantom figures of the men who did it. I know no more."

Pedro, with many supplications, repeated the tale, and Francisco Alvarez was forced to believe them, although he cursed them for carelessness, and promised them punishment. Braxton Wyatt had remained silent, although his face showed deep disappointment. Presently, when the turmoil had died down, he said in a low voice to Alvarez:

"What was it that the sentinel said about hearing the howl of a wolf?"

"I heard it myself," replied Alvarez. "It was about midnight, when a wolf to the north howled four times. An hour or so later I heard it again, somewhat nearer and somewhat to the west, when it howled four times as before."

"Ah!" said Braxton Wyatt.

It was a short exclamation, but it was so full of significance that the Spaniard in surprise, asked him what he meant.

"Four cries," replied the renegade, "and he had four friends, of whom I told you to beware. I told you what they were, what cunning and skill they have, but you would not believe me and you must now! Cotter heard the four cries. He was not asleep and he understood!"

Braxton Wyatt, despite his annoyance at Paul's escape, felt a moment of triumph. His warning had come true. He had been wiser than this Spaniard who had patronised and insulted him.

"We will deal with these people yet," said Francisco Alvarez angrily as he turned away.

"I hope so," replied Braxton Wyatt.

CHAPTER III

AN INVISIBLE CHASE

Deep in a shadowed glade sat the five, eating a quiet breakfast, and talking in low tones of satisfaction.

"I knew that you would come," said Paul, "and when I heard the four cries of the wolf I knew, too, that all four of you were there. When you sent the call Braxton Wyatt, who alone might have suspected, was asleep. The Spanish commander was awake, and he was troubled, but he did not know why."

"Wa'al, I guess he knows now," said Shif'less Sol with a silent but deep laugh. "Ef he's the kind o' man you say he is, Paul, an' I guess he is—he needed our teachin' him a lesson. I hate a man who knows too much, who is too almighty certain, an' I guess the Spaniard is one o' that kind. Think o' him comin' out here in the woods, breakin' faith, so to speak, an' holdin' you, Paul. Ef I wuz to go over to Europe, which I ain't ever goin' to do—an' wuz to light down in one o' them big cities, Paris or London, do you think I'd tell the fellers in the streets that I knowed more about their town than they did?"

"No, Sol," said Paul, "you're too wise a man ever to do such a thing."

"I should hope I wuz," said Sol emphatically. "Jest think o' me stoppin' a lot o' French fellers in the streets o' Paris, me jest happened in from the woods fur the fust time, an' sayin' to them: 'Here, Bob, be keerful how you cross the street thar, it's a right bad spot fur wagons, an' you'd shorely git run over ef you tried it,' or 'Now, Dick, that thar is the wrong street that you're takin', ef you foller it you'll land a full mile from your cabin.'"

"But Frenchmen are not named Bob and Dick," said Paul with a smile.

"Wa'al ef they ain't they ought to be," said the shiftless one with conviction. "Why they want to call theirselves by all them long names nobody can pronounce, when there are a lot o' good, nice, short, handy names like Dick, an' Jim, an' Bill, an' Bob, an' Hank, layin' 'roun' loose an' jest beggin' to be used, is more'n I kin understand."

"We must soon decide what to do," said Henry. "If the Spanish captain concludes to help the Indians, and with Braxton Wyatt at his elbow I think he is likely to do it, our people in Kentucky will again be in great danger. We must drive the Spaniards back to New Orleans."

"I agree with you," said Paul, "but how is it to be done?"

"Mebbe we kin shoo 'em back, skeer 'em, so to speak," said Shif'less Sol. "We're jest bound to keep Spain out o' this country."

"It is true," said Paul. "Great things grow out of little ones. Such a land as this is sure to have a great population some day and what we five do now, obscure and few as we are, may help to decide what that population is to be."

As Paul spoke, his comrades and the shadowed glen floated away, and the look of seer came upon him. Again he saw great towns and a nation. The others regarded him with a little awe. The spiritual, or rather prophetic, quality in Paul always had their deep respect.

"Paul shorely does take mighty long looks ahead," whispered Shif'less Sol to Henry, "an' sometimes I can't follow him clean to the end. I mostly drop by the way. I like to live this very minute, an' I'm pow'ful glad to be alive right now. But I'm with him clean to the finish o' our big job."

Henry nodded and presently he and the shiftless one went away through the woods. Paul, Ross, and Long Jim remained lying at ease in the forest—Paul had learned the great wilderness lesson of patience—and about noon the two returned. They had been spying upon the Spanish camp, and they reported that Alvarez and his men had not moved.

"They seem to be waiting for something," said Henry. "Braxton Wyatt is still with them, and they have posted more sentinels in a wider circle. I don't believe they will move camp for several days. So long as they keep theirs there, we'll keep ours here."

"O' course," said the shiftless one. "We must keep the watch."

Several days passed and there was little to do. One or another of the five at times crept close to the Spanish camp, and always reported that the men there were lounging at their ease and still waiting. Now and then the Spaniards hunted in detachments, usually guided by Braxton Wyatt, and brought in both deer and buffalo. On the fourth day Henry and Paul also went hunting.

"The country west of here," said Henry, "opens out into a big prairie, and we may see something worth seeing."

Paul did not ask what it was, content to go and see, and the two, rifle on shoulder, slipped away through the woods, taking a direct, western course.

Paul noticed that the country soon became much less hilly, and that the forest thinned. After a while hills and forest ceased altogether and the two stood upon the edge of a wide sweep of gently rolling, open country, extending so far that it met the horizon.

"Look," said Henry. "A great prairie!"

"And look what's on it!" exclaimed Paul.

Henry laughed and glanced at his comrade's pleased face. As far as the eye could reach the prairie was covered with a multitude of great, dark animals, grazing on the short, sweet grass. Near by these animals, as Paul saw, were a few feet apart, but further on they seemed to blend into one solid, black, but heaving mass.

"A real buffalo herd," said Henry.

Paul had seen buffaloes often in Kentucky, but there they were usually in small groups of a dozen or so, owing to the wooded nature of the country, and now he looked for the first time upon a great herd, twenty thousand, thirty thousand, maybe more—one could not calculate. The spectacle appealed greatly to his imaginative temperament.

"What a grand sight!" he said.

"Yes," said Henry, "it is wonderful, but, Paul, this is nothing to what you can see on the great plains. When I was a captive with the northwestern Indians I've seen a herd that was passing our party all day, and it was also so wide you could not see across it."

They stood there some time looking. The huge, savage bulls were on the outskirts of the herd, and just beyond them at the fringe of the forest were snarling timber wolves, waiting for a chance to drag down some careless calf, or a bull weakened to the last degree by old age.

As the two youths looked they heard a shot and saw a movement among the buffaloes. Another shot followed and then a half dozen. The portion of the herd near by seemed suddenly to contract and to roll in upon itself. The waiting wolves disappeared in the woods, and snorts of terror arose from the herd.

"There they are! I see them!" exclaimed Paul. "It is the Spaniards, sure enough!"

Five or six men in the Spanish military attire burst from the forest, not more than a hundred yards away, and continued to fire as fast as they could into the herd.

"How foolish!" exclaimed Henry. "Either they are wasting their shots or if they don't waste them they are killing far more buffaloes than they can use!"

The boys withdrew into a thicket, as they did not wish to be seen by the Spaniards, and watched closely. The soldiers continued to reload and fire and uttered shouts of joy whenever a buffalo fell. Transported by excitement they scattered, and one man ran down near Paul and Henry, detaching himself unconsciously from the rest of his comrades.

This Spaniard was young and athletic, and he fired at a huge bull. Had he been an experienced hunter, he would have known better, as the bull was too big and tough to eat, and he was also one

of the savage guardians of the herd. Moreover, the Spaniards were armed mostly with muskets, a weapon far inferior to the Kentucky rifle.

This great bull stung in the flank, but stung only, uttered a roar of pain, and, sharp horns down, charged directly upon the young Spaniard. He was a terrifying sight as he tore up the grass of the prairie, his red eyes flaming. The Spaniard, appalled, dropped his musket and ran for the woods, the great beast thundering at his heels, and his hot breath, in fancy at least, upon his back. Both Paul and Henry at that instant recognized him. It was one of the unfortunate sentinels. Luiz.

"I'll save him," said Henry, "but keep back, Paul! Don't let him see you!"

The Spaniard was about to reach the edge of the wood, but another jump would bring the raging buffalo upon him. His foot caught among some roots and with a despairing cry he fell upon his face. But as he struck the ground there was a sharp, lashing report, far different from the dull boom of a musket, and the great animal suddenly ploughed forward on his head. So violent was his plunge, as he was stricken in mid-charge, that his neck was broken, and, after his crashing fall, he lay quite still.

The young Spaniard, Luiz, sprang to his feet unharmed, and he was confronted by a figure that startled him, the figure of a very tall and powerful youth, clad wholly in deerskin, leaning on a long, slender barreled Kentucky rifle, and looking at him contemplatively. So sudden was his appearance and so fixed his gaze that Luiz, although joyful over his escape from death, was startled and awed. His adventure of a few nights before when he was seized, bound, and gagged by unseen but powerful hands had left him shaken, and now his brain was whirling.

The young Spaniard stared at the figure, which neither moved nor spoke, but which returned his gaze with a fixed look. Was it a spirit, or was it really one of the Americans? But whatever it was, it had, beyond a doubt, saved his life, and deep down in his Spanish heart he was not ungrateful.

"Thanks, Señor!" he stammered. "Your shot—it came just in time!"

The apparition spoke, but only a few words.

"We are your friends, not your enemies, don't forget," it said, and the startled Luiz rubbed his eyes. The figure of the great youth was gone. It had been there and then it was not there, and only some bushes, waving slightly, told where it had been. He regained his musket, and, still bewildered, rejoined his comrades to tell them a story that they did not more than half believe.

Henry, laughing a little, returned to Paul. It had been a simple trick. He had merely darted away among the bushes, while Luiz was still in a daze.

"I did not want to see the man killed," he said, "and maybe we have sowed a good seed, that will grow up in time, and produce something."

"It may be," added Paul.

They went a little farther into the forest and watched the Spaniards finish their hunt, gather up as much of their game as they could carry, and depart. When they were well out of sight, Henry and Paul went to a slain cow that the soldiers had neglected, cut out some of the choicest portions, and took the way to their own camp.

"I think the Spaniards are likely to be disturbed over what has happened," said Henry.

In fact, the shiftless one, who was the scout the following night, returned with a story that the Spanish camp was greatly agitated. Braxton Wyatt and Alvarez were positive that the five were still lingering somewhere near, but the uneducated soldiers were not sure that a spirit was not lurking in the wilderness. It might be a beneficent spirit, as it had saved Luiz, but, on the other hand, it had taken away the American prisoner, and they were afraid of the unknown and mysterious. These vast, dark woods were so different from the open and sunny plains of Spain, where a man knew what to expect, that they were inspired with awe.

Yet Alvarez would not move, so Shif'less Sol reported. He seemed to be still waiting for something, and on the following night Henry, Paul, and Shif'less Sol went forth to watch the Spanish camp again.

"I've a feelin' in me," said the shiftless one, "that somethin' is goin' to happen to-night. I often have these feelin's, omens some people call 'em, min'-readin' other people say. I notice that I gena'lly have 'em jest about when all the circumstances show that things are comm' to a head, jest ez ef Paul here wuz to feel along about 6 or 7 o'clock in the afternoon that sundown couldn't be fur away. You can't beat it. Now when I've gone fifteen or eighteen hours without food I have a feelin'—an' it's a strong one, too—that I'm goin' to be hungry, an' I'm sca'cely ever mistook, jest ez I've got a feelin' when the skies are filled with big black clouds that it's liable to rain purty soon. I tell you, Paul, it's a great thing to have this here power you call second sight."

The three walked steadily on in Indian file through the forest, their trained feet making no sound among the trunks and brushes. The night was dark, just suited to their purpose, and clouds floated up to dim the skies. No stars came out, and the moon was hidden. By and bye the wind rose, and dashes of rain were whipped into their faces.

But the three did not mind. Such things as these had become trifles to them long since. Henry led with sure step, Shif'less Sol came next, and Paul brought up the rear. Henry stopped after a while, and sank down among the bushes. The other two did likewise, and, after a little pause in which they heard nothing, they began to creep forward, taking the utmost care to make not even the slightest sound. They saw presently through the trees and bushes a faint red shade that grew fast to a glow and then to a glare.

Henry stopped, sank lower, and beckoned to his comrades. They crept to his side and looked over a steep little cliff directly upon the Spanish camp. Most of the soldiers were grouped about a large camp fire, and Francisco Alvarez was among them in a place of honor.

Hidden in the deep shrubbery the three occupied points of vantage, and, while secure from observation themselves, they could easily see all that passed in the glade. Several tents had been set, although the flaps were wide open and within one of these sat Francisco Alvarez in all the gorgeous attire of a Spanish officer, most fastidious in his taste. The gold on his uniform glittered, the lace on his cuffs was snowy and fresh, and the polished hilt of his small sword gleamed in the firelight. He had the air of one who expected distinguished guests.

"Now I wonder what has become of Braxton Wyatt," whispered Paul. Nowhere could he see a sign of the renegade.

"He is coming," whispered Henry, who had what Shif'less Sol would have called an intuition.

Two of the Spaniards heaped more wood upon the fire. The logs crackled and blazed merrily, casting long tongues of flame across the glade, and sending a grateful heat into the veins of the warm-blooded Southerners. The flurries of rain ceased, and the skies brightened a little. A star or two peeped out.

"Ah!" said Henry in the lowest of whispers, "here they come!"

The bushes at the far side of the glade parted and three figures came into the open. They took but two or three steps forward and then stopped full in the blaze of the firelight, where every feature showed like carving in the red glow.

The hidden watchers recognized at once the three who had come. They were Braxton Wyatt, Yellow Panther the Miami chief, and Red Eagle the Shawnee chief. Paul repressed a little cry of amazement that he should see the two Indian leaders so far from the territory of their tribes. They must intend much to come such a journey.

Braxton Wyatt stepped back a little, as if having performed his function of guide he would now remain awhile in the background, but the two great chiefs stood motionless, side by side, magnificent specimens of savage life, bronze of skin, tall of figure, powerful of chest, thin, eagle-like faces, and defiant scalp-locks waving above. The imaginative Paul, seeing how well they fitted into the wilderness scene, was forced to admire. The firelight flickered and blazed over them, but they were immovable in all their savage dignity. Henry put his hand upon Paul's shoulder, and pressed gently. It was an intimation to look with all his eyes and listen with all attention. But Paul did not need the hint.

Francisco Alvarez also was impressed. He loved the towns and luxury, but he had acuteness and perception, and he knew that these were strong men of their kind, men with whom he must deal according to the courtesy of the woods. He rose from his tent, bowed to them, and walked forward. He himself was a splendid figure in his gorgeous uniform, and his carriage was marked by dignity.

"Now see them salute," whispered the shiftless one in Paul's ear.

Braxton Wyatt stepped forward again, produced a pipe with a beautifully carved horn handle, and filled it carefully with tobacco, which he lighted with a coal from the fire. Then he handed it to Red Eagle, who was the older of the chiefs, and Red Eagle gravely took a half dozen whiffs. Then he passed it to Yellow Panther, who did likewise, and the chief in his turn handed it to the Spanish commander. Alvarez smoked gravely for a half minute, and then Braxton Wyatt took the pipe.

"Now for the big confab," whispered Sol.

Fine buffalo robes were spread before the fire, and the three leaders and Braxton Wyatt sat upon them. All others kept at a respectful distance. The four began to talk and, although only an occasional word reached the watching three, they knew too well their subject of converse. It was the great conspiracy to draw the Spanish from Louisiana into an attack upon the infant settlements, upon the ground that they were or would be interlopers. It was cannon that the assailants needed to smash the block houses, and cannon in abundance could be brought on the great rivers from New Orleans.

The watchers presently saw Braxton Wyatt take a small parcel from the inside of his deerskin hunting shirt. He unfolded the parcel and the watchers could see that it consisted of large pieces of the finest, tanned deerskin.

"Maps," said Paul intuitively. "That scoundrel, Braxton Wyatt, has made them for the aid of the Spanish, and to disclose all our weak points!"

The fire blazed higher and they could see that on the white deerskin were drawn lines in colored pigment, and the rest they guessed. It was true enough. Braxton Wyatt, no mean draughtsman, had drawn, with the most elaborate care and attention to detail, maps on a large scale of every one of the infant settlements. There was nothing about Wareville in particular that he did not show, and he also designated all the rivers, hills, and valleys as far as they were known. With such aid a Spanish force, backed by cannon and the warriors, must triumph over every post in Kentucky.

"I never thought of this," whispered Paul. Henry merely pressed his shoulder again to indicate that they were ready to deal with it, if man could.

The three watchers remained there more than an hour, and Alvarez, Wyatt, and the chiefs still discussed the maps with every appearance of agreement, bending their heads over them, and now and then disclosing eager faces, as they lifted them in the firelight.

"Alvarez wants to help them," whispered Paul. "He hates us, and, if he can, he will commit the Governor of Louisiana to the Indian alliance."

"Beyond a doubt," replied Henry, "and so it's not worth while for us to wait here any longer."

They slid away in the dark and returned to their own camp. There Long Jim and Tom Ross were placidly awaiting them, and they were not at all surprised at the news. Then the five held another of their conferences.

"I think it likely," said Paul, "that Alvarez will go back at once to New Orleans. He will tell the Governor there that armed bands of Americans are trespassing upon Spanish territory and that they must be driven off. He will come back with cannon and a powerful force to do the driving. That means war, of course, and an attack upon us in Kentucky. How will the Governor of New Orleans know whether the fighting is on Spanish territory or not? And even if Alvarez overstepped the limits he could say that he was attacked first."

"Of course," said Henry, "and it means that we must follow Alvarez all the way to New Orleans if necessary, and it may be that we shall have to carry the message of the Kentuckians to Bernardo Galvez, the Spanish Governor General himself."

"We're ready," said Shif'less Sol lazily. "I wouldn't mind seein' that furrin town. I saw a town once when I wuz a little boy. It wuz Baltimore, an' a pow'ful big place it wuz, most nigh set my head to swimmin'. I heard tell that ez many ez eight or ten thousand people lived thar. Sounds impossible but some o' 'em swore it wuz true."

"We'll prepare at once for the journey," said Henry.
All set to work.

CHAPTER IV

TAKING A "GALLEON"

Henry and Shif'less Sol spied upon the Spanish camp again the next day, and returned with news that the two chiefs had departed, but that Braxton Wyatt had remained, evidently intending to accompany Alvarez to New Orleans, where they were sure the Spanish leader now intended going.

"I think, too," said Henry, "that they will break up camp in the morning and march. I believe that they came up on the Mississippi, and will return the same way."

"Then they have boats," said Paul in dismay, "and we have none."

"But we can get one," said Henry significantly.

"If you want a thing, jest go an' git it," said Shif'less Sol. "I remember once when I wuz a leetle bit o' a boy back in the East, I hankered terribly after some hickory nuts that I knowed wuz in a grove about a mile from our house. I suffered days an' days o' anguish fur them hickory nuts, wishin' mighty bad all the time that I had 'em. At the end o' two weeks I walked over an' got 'em, an' my sufferin' stopped off short."

"That's just what we mean to do about our boat, step over and get it," said Henry laughing. But he did not divulge his plan and the others were content to wait for the event.

As Henry had predicted, the Spanish camp broke up the following morning, and Alvarez and his force took up a march almost due eastward. They traveled in an easy fashion, and showed no signs of apprehension, Alvarez deeming that fifty well-armed men were not in any danger from wandering tribes. He did not know that five resolute borderers were following closely behind him, even looking into his camp at night, and knowing every important thing that he did. Braxton Wyatt may have suspected it, but he said nothing, aware that it could not be prevented.

The five were well prepared. They carried a large supply of ammunition, a blanket each, and jerked meat. If their food supplies gave out there was the forest swarming with game, and they knew that it swarmed in the same fashion all the way down to New Orleans. They would camp at sunset three or four miles from the Spaniards, keeping watch the night through, and in the morning it was easy enough to take up the trail of Alvarez and his men, which, to their experienced eyes, was like a high road leading through the forest.

One evening just as the sun was setting Henry parted some twining bushes and looked over a cliff. The others came to his side and they, too, looked as he was looking.

At their very feet lay the mighty Mississippi. They had seen it before, but it was never so impressive as now. Great at any time it was in spring flood, rolling a vast, yellow current down toward the Gulf. The waters overflowed on the low, eastern shore, and it was so far across that they could not see the further bank in the shadowed evening. The setting sun, nevertheless, lighted up the middle of the current with blood-red gleams, and the five gazed with a certain awe at the mighty stream, as it flowed ever onward. It was the highly imaginative Paul who was impressed the most.

"We know where it goes to," he said, "but I wonder where it comes from."

Henry waved his hand vaguely toward the North.

"Up there somewhere," he said, "a thousand miles from here, or maybe two thousand. Nobody can tell."

Paul did not say anything more, but continued to gaze at the vast, yellow current of the Mississippi, coming out of the unknown regions of the far north and flowing into lands of the far south, almost as mysterious and, vague, once belonging to France but now owning the lordship of Spain. It was the homely language of Shif'less Sol that recalled him from his dreams.

"It's purty big out thar, an' looks ez if you couldn't tamper with it—this here river stands no foolin'—but do you know, Paul, water's pow'ful friendly. It's always travelin' about, always on the

move. Land stands still, it's always thar, an' never sees nothin' new, but water jest keeps a' movin', seein' new countries, here to-day, somewhar else to-morrow, lavin' new banks, breathin' new air, floatin' peacefully on to new people, gatherin' in their talk an' ways.

"Jest think! This river comes out o' we don't know whar, sees all the wilderness, whispers to the bars and buffaloes an' Injun tribes ez it goes by, takes a look at us standin' here on the bank, an', after wonderin' what we're about, slips on down hundreds o' miles to Louisianny, gazin' at the French thar on the bank at New Orleans, an' then shoots out into the sea."

"Thar to be lost," said the unpoetical Long Jim.

"Not to be lost, never to be lost, Jim," said Shif'less Sol earnestly. "That Missip. water is still thar in the sea, an' it goes slippin' an' slidin' along with the salt clean to all them old continents. It takes a look in at England, that's fightin' us in the East, an' if the English could understand the water's language it might tell 'em a lot o' things that wuz wuth their knowin'. An' then it goes on to Spain an' France an' Germany, whar they talk all them useless tongues, an' after a while it takes a whirl clean 'roun' Africa an' Asia, an' sees goodness knows what, an' then goes slippin' off to see islands in oceans that I ain't ever heard tell on. Jumpin' Jehoshaphat but ain't that a movin' an' stirrin' life fur ye!"

Sol drew a deep breath and Paul looked at him with shining eyes.

"You've said a good deal of what I was thinking, Sol," he said, "but for which I couldn't find words."

"We're likely to travel with the river for a while," said Tom Ross, "an' we must purvide a way."

"We'll do it soon," said Henry.

They camped that night in a dense grove near the bank but they built no fire. After midnight Henry and Shif'less Sol slipped away and went northward.

"'Bout four miles on we'll strike them Spaniards," said the shiftless one.

It was a close calculation, as at the end of the four miles they saw the light of a fire flaring through the trees and bushes and knew that they had come upon Alvarez and his men. Their camp lay on rather low ground beside a little bay of the Mississippi, and the keen eyes of the two woodsmen saw at once that the force of Alvarez had been increased.

"He's got about seventy men whar he had about fifty afore," said Shif'less Sol as they crept nearer.

"They came on boats as I thought," replied Henry, "and he left a detachment here with the boats, while he went across country. Maybe he was on an exploring expedition or something of that kind, when Braxton Wyatt overtook him with his proposition."

Sol looked at Henry and Henry looked at Sol. A ray of moonlight fell upon their tanned and stern faces. Then as they looked a twinkle appeared in the eye of each. The twinkle deepened and the two broke simultaneously into a soundless laugh.

"We want one of those boats," said Henry.

"We shorely do," said Shif'less Sol.

"We need it in the course of our duty," said Henry.

"We jest can't git along without it," said Shif'less Sol.

"It will be much easier floating down the middle of the Mississippi in a boat than it will be walking along the bank all the way."

"It will shorely save the feet, an' give a feller time to think, while the current's doin' the work. It jest suits a lazy man like me."

Again they broke simultaneously into a laugh that contained no sound, but which was full of mirth.

"It's taking what doesn't belong to us, and we are not at war with the Spanish," said Henry.

"They tried to hold Paul a prisoner, and they're not at war with us," rejoined Sol. "We've got a right to hit back. Besides, we're doin' it to save a war, and we're only borrowin' their boat fur their own good."

The two, without further ado, made a circuit around the Spanish camp, coming down on the northern side. There fortunately for them the trees and bushes were thick to the water's edge, and the shore was very low. In fact, the river, owing to the flood, overlapped the bushes.

They redoubled their caution, using every art and device of woodcraft to approach without noise. They could see the flare of the camp fire beyond the bushes, and now and then they caught sight of a sentinel's head. They felt amply justified in this attempt, for Alvarez had not only held Paul a prisoner, but was plotting with the Indian chiefs to slay all the white people in Kentucky.

"Here are the boats," whispered Henry.

There they were, eight in number, large, strong boats, every one with several pairs of oars, and tied with ropes to the bushes.

The eyes of Shif'less Sol watered as he gazed.

"They look pow'ful good to a lazy man," he said, "I could shorely sleep mighty comf'table in one o' them while Jim Hart wuz pullin' at the oars."

"I think the small one at the end nearest to us would just suit our party," said Henry; "although it has more, it could be handled easily with a single pair of oars."

"Shorely!" said Shif'less Sol, "but how to git away with it is now the question."

It was indeed a problem, vexing and likewise dangerous. A sentinel, musket on shoulder, walked up and down in front of the Spanish navy, and he seemed to be very wide awake. Moreover, two men slept in each boat.

"We must get that sentinel somehow," said Henry, "not to hurt him, but to see that he doesn't talk for the next half hour or so."

"What's your idea?" asked the shiftless one.

Henry whispered to him rapidly and Sol grinned with satisfaction.

"Good enough," said the shiftless one. "It'll work," and he crept away from Henry deep in the bushes a little west of the sentinel. A moment or two later the Spaniard on watch was startled by a sharp, warning hiss from the edge of the thicket. He knew very well what made it—a rattlesnake, a thing that he loathed and feared. He certainly did not want such a deadly reptile sliding through the grass on his feet, and, clubbing his musket, he walked forward, looking intently for the venomous thing. He did not see it at first and all his faculties became absorbed in the search. Holding the clubbed musket ready for an instant blow he peered into the grass and short bushes. He was a Spaniard not without courage, but he was oppressed by the night, the wilderness, the huge river flowing by, and his feeling that he was far, very far, from Spain. Under the circumstances, the poisonous hiss inspired him with an intense dread and he was eager to slay. He leaned a little farther, swinging the musket butt back and forth, ready for a quick blow when he should see the target.

He did not hear a light step behind him, but he did feel a powerful arm grasp him around the waist, pinning his own arms to his side, while a hand was clasped over his mouth, checking the ready cry that could not pass his lips. Then before his starting eyes a figure rose out of the bushes whence the hiss had come. It was not that of a rattlesnake, but that of a man, a tall man with powerful shoulders, blue eyes, and yellow hair, undoubtedly one of the ferocious Americans.

The sentinel felt that his hour had come, and he began to patter his prayers in his throat, but the two Americans, the one before him, and the one who had grasped him from behind, did not slay him at once. Instead they said words together in their harsh tongue. Then they tore pieces from the sentinel's clothing, made a wad of it and pressed it into his mouth. They also tied a strip from the same clothing over his mouth and behind his head, and, still despoiling his clothing, they bound his hand and foot and laid him in the bushes, where he was invisible to his comrades and could only see a sky in which a few dim stars danced. But on the whole he was glad. They had not killed him as he had expected, and the gag in his mouth was soft. Moreover, his comrades would surely find him in time and release him.

Henry and Shif'less Sol turned away and smiled again at each other.

"Not much trouble, that," whispered the shiftless one. "He wuz shorely a skeered Spaniard ef I kin read a man's face. Guess he wuz glad to get off ez easy ez he did. Now fur the boat!"

"Here we are," said Henry. "We must pitch out the two men sleeping in it—you take one and I'll take the other—and then we must seize the oars and pull like mad, because the whole camp will be up."

The boat was tied with a rope to a stout sapling and two Spanish soldiers slumbered in great peace inside. The oars lay beside them. Henry cut the rope with one sweep of his long-bladed hunting-knife, and then he and Shif'less Sol sprang into the boat. Each seized a man by the shoulders and lifted him in his powerful arms. It was a chance that one of the sleepers was Luiz, and, when he was snatched suddenly from blissful dreams to somber fact, he opened his eyes to see bending over him the same grave, tanned being who had rescued him from the raging buffalo.

But it was not a beneficent spirit, because Luiz was tossed bodily the next moment into three feet of muddy water. He uttered a cry of terror and despair as he went down, and another Spaniard uttered a similar cry at the same moment. Both cries were cut off short by mouthfuls of the Mississippi, but the two Spaniards came up a moment later, and began to wade hastily to the shore. Each cast a frightened glance behind him, and saw their boat disappearing on the river's bosom, carrying the two evil spirits with it.

"I shorely enjoyed that," said Shif'less Sol, as the oars bent beneath his powerful stroke. "That Spaniard's face as he woke up an' found hisself whirled out into the Mississippi wuz the funniest thing I ever seed, an' I had the fun, too, without hurting him. It ain't often, Paul, that you kin do what you need to do an' be full o' laugh, too, an' so when the time comes I make the most o' it."

"It was worth seeing," said Henry, "and we've been in great luck, too. There, hear 'em! They've got the water out of their mouths and are giving tongue again! Pull, Sol! Pull!"

Loud shouts came from the sentinels who had risen from their bath and it was followed by cries in the Spanish camp. Torches flared, there was the sound of running footsteps, and dusky figures appeared at the river's bank.

"Pull, Sol! Pull!" exhorted Henry again. "We're not yet out of range!"

Shots were fired and bullets pattered on the water but none reached the boat. They heard angry cries, imprecations, and they saw one figure apparently giving commands, which they were sure was that of Francisco Alvarez.

"Now if they had our Kentucky rifles and real marksmen," said Shif'less Sol, "they could pick you an' me off without any trouble. Thar's light enough. But with them old bell-mouthed muskets they can't do much. No, Henry, we're bold pirates on the high seas an' we've been an' took a Spanish gall-yun—ain't that what they call their treasure ships? 'Pears to me, Henry, I kinder like bein' a pirate, 'specially when you do the takin', an' ain't took yourself."

"That's so," laughed Henry, "but we'd better keep pulling, Sol, with all our might. They're sure to pursue, and, as they have plenty of men for the oars we need all the start that we can get."

They were well out in the middle of the stream now, and the deep, powerful current of the Mississippi was aiding them greatly, but both glanced back. The shore was lined with men and another volley was fired. All the bullets fell short, and Shif'less Sol laughed contemptuously.

"Now they are beginnin' the pursuit," he said.

Four boats had been cut loose, and, filled with Spaniards, they were pushed from the bank. Henry turned the prow of their own boat until it bore in a slanting direction toward the eastern shore.

"What's your plan?" asked the shiftless one.

"The river, you know, has overflowed on the eastern shore over there for three or four miles; we must lose ourselves in the forest on that side."

"An' let 'em pass us?"

"That's just it. We want 'em to go on ahead of us to Louisiana, while we follow. Besides we've got to pick up Paul and Jim and Tom."

Shouts arose from the pursuers and more shots were fired, but they were still beyond the range of the Spanish muskets and the two were untouched. They were not even alarmed.

"There's a lot of confusion in the boats," said Henry, who looked back again with a critical eye, "and as they don't pull together they're not gaining. The night is also growing darker and that helps us, too. Keep it up, Sol!"

"All right," said the shiftless one, increasing his stroke. "It's fine to be a pirate, Henry. Wonder why I never tried it afore! But I believe I'll always be a pirate at night when you've got more chance to git away."

"You're right as usual, Sol," said Henry as he, too, increased his stroke.

They pulled away for some time without further words, and the pursuers, also, settled into silence save for an encouraging shout now and then to the rowers. Henry thought that he discerned both Alvarez and Braxton Wyatt in the foremost boat and he could imagine the rage and chagrin of both.

"I believe they're gaining," he said presently to Sol.

"Yes," replied the shiftless one, "that big boat thar is creepin' up."

"Crack!" came a report and a bullet embedded itself in the stout wood of their own boat. Both recognized the report. It was not that of a Spanish musket, but the lashing fire of a Kentucky rifle like their own.

"That was Braxton Wyatt," said Henry. "I thought I could make him out in that boat. He's got a rifle that reaches and he's a danger."

"Why don't you talk back?" asked Shif'less Sol.

"I will," replied Henry. "We're not at war with Spain, but we are surely at war with Braxton Wyatt. I think the second man in the boat is Braxton. Hold her steady just a second, Sol."

Henry shipped his oars, knelt a moment, and up went the long, slender barrel of his Kentucky rifle. As he looked down the sight he was sure that the man at whom he was aiming was Braxton Wyatt, and he was sure, moreover, that he would not miss. But a feeling for which he could not account made him deflect slightly the muzzle of his weapon.

Braxton Wyatt richly deserved death for crimes already done and he would be, as long as he lived, a deadly menace to the border. But Henry felt that he could not be both judge and executioner. He and Braxton Wyatt had been young boys together. So, when he deflected the muzzle of his rifle, it was to turn the bullet from his heart to his arm.

The rifle flashed, the sharp report echoed over the flowing waters, and a cry of pain came from the pursuing boat, which quickly slackened its speed.

"I hit him in the arm only," said Henry.

Shif'less Sol glanced at his comrade and he understood, but he made no criticism.

"Ef you've stung him in the arm," he said, "it ain't likely that he kin use that rifle o' his ag'in, an' I notice, too, since you shot that them oarsmen ain't burnin' up with zeal. Now you row, Henry, while I plunk a bullet in among 'em, an' they'll burn less than ever."

Shif'less Sol fired. He did not shoot to kill, but his bullet whistled unpleasantly near the heads of the rowers, and, as he had predicted, they rapidly lost zeal. The captured boat slid swiftly ahead.

"Here we are among the trees," said Henry. "Now, Sol, keep on rowing and I'll look out that we don't run into anything."

The swollen waters rose far up on the trunks of the trees, which grew thickly here, and Sol rowed slowly, making no noise save a slight ripple, while Henry pushed the prow of the boat away from the trunks and the bushes. It was very dark here and in a few minutes the pursuing boats were shut out of sight.

"Thar ain't eyes enough in that Spanish camp to find us now," said Shif'less Sol.

But they rowed deeper and deeper into the forest, and then, in a cluster of trees where they could not be seen ten feet away, they stopped and listened. Not a sound but the lapping of the water came to their ears.

"We'll take a good rest and then row Northward, still keeping in the forest," said Henry.

They shipped their oars and drew long, deep breaths of relief and satisfaction.

"Henry," said Shif'less Sol presently in a tone of great exultation, "have you noticed that this is a shore enough gall-yun that we've took? We didn't know it, but we jest boarded and sailed away with a real treasure ship. Look!"

He opened a locker and took out two fine ornamented guns.

"What are these?" he said.

"Why, those are fowling pieces," replied Henry, "and they are of the very best English make. We'll certainly borrow those, Sol."

"Yes, an' this end o' the locker is full o' powder an' shot fur 'em. Thar's no lack o' ammunition, an' look here, Henry, at these!"

He took out of another locker three beautiful rapiers with polished hilts and decorated scabbards.

"Spaniards like sech tools ez these," continued the shiftless one, "an' they're mighty purty to look at, but ez fur me give me my good old Kentucky rifle. At a hundred yards what chance would them things have ag'in me?"

"We'll borrow them, too," said Henry. "We may have a use for them later on. They're weapons that never have to be reloaded."

Sol drew forth one of the small swords and held it up. A shaft of moonlight fell across the blade, and showed the keen edge.

"They're such fine weepins they must hev belonged to that thar Spanish commander hisself," he said. "After all, a thing like this mightn't be bad when you come to it right close. Mebbe Paul could handle it. You know Mr. Pennypacker used to teach him how to swing the sword. This is how it goes: Ah, ha! Sa ha! touched you thar! How's that my hearty!"

Shif'less Sol lunged at the night air, slashed, cut, swept his sword around in circles, and then laughed again. But none of his exclamations was uttered above a whisper. Henry was forced to smile.

"Put it down, Sol," he said, "and let's see what else we've got. It may be that we've taken Alvarez's own private boat."

Sol opened the locker again, and held up a curiously shaped stone jug, which he contemplated for a few moments. Then he took out the stopper, smelled the contents, and looked appreciatively at his comrade.

"Henry," he said, "I'm going to risk it."

"It's no risk."

Sol turned the jug up to his lips, took a mouthful, which he held for a moment or two, and then swallowed. After waiting a half minute he uttered a deep sigh of content, and rubbed his chest.

"It tasted good all the way down, Henry," he said. "Here's something writ over the label, but I guess it's Spanish, another o' them useless tongues, an' so it tells nothin'."

"Put it back," said Henry. "It's some of those fancy liquors, but we'll keep it for times when we're wet or cold or tired out."

"All right," said Sol, "an' here's three more little jugs like it."

"What else do you find?" asked Henry.

"Oh, look at these, will you!" exclaimed Sol, holding up two splendid double barreled duelling pistols of Spanish make.

"Now I'm sure that this is the boat of Alvarez himself," said Henry. "Such fine things as these could belong only to the Commander. Those are duelling pistols, Sol, but they can be made mighty useful, too, for our defense in case of a pinch. We'll keep them, too."

The shiftless one put them back and opening another locker uttered a little cry of delight.

"A hull carpenter shop!" he exclaimed. "Jest look, Henry! A fine axe, hammers an' hatchets, an' saws an' augers an' a lot o' other things pow'ful useful to fellers like us that have to cut an' bore their own way out here in the woods. This is shorely one o' them gall-yuns that Paul tells us about, an' I guess we're about ez highfalutin' an lucky pirates ez any o' them."

"You're right, Sol," said Henry. "This boat is a great find, and it's lawful prize as they began the war upon us by seizing Paul. Keep on looking, Sol."

"Here's some beautiful blankets," continued the shiftless one. "Guess they were made to trade with the Injuns. But it's more'n likely that this here most gorg-y-us one will, on occasions, shelter, warm, purtect an' otherwise care fur the deservin' body o' one Solomon Hyde, a highly valooable citizen o' the new country they call Kentucky. An' say, Henry, what do you call this?"

His voice took a rapidly rising inflection, as he held up a glittering garment, puffed with magnificent lace.

"That," said Henry, "is what they call a doublet, and I should say that it is the finest one belonging to Captain Alvarez. Oh, won't he be angry!"

Sol slipped off his hunting shirt, and slipped on the doublet.

"It's a little tight in the shoulders," he said, "but I could wear it in a pinch, that is, I guess I'd hev to wear it in a pinch. Say, Henry, ain't I a beauty?"

He stood up in the boat and turned slowly around and around, his arms extended and the doublet glittering. Henry leaned against the side of the boat and laughed.

"It doesn't suit you, Sol," he replied, "you're a fine looking man, but it's in your own way, not the Spanish way."

Sol took off the garment, folded it up carefully, and put it back in the locker.

"Anyway, I'm goin' to claim it," he said. "I want it to make Jim Hart jealous. An', Henry, thar's a lot more things here, a little tent all rolled up, some bottles o' medicine, some more clothes, two big bottles o' brandy, and a whole lot o' house-keepin' truck, like pins an' needles an' thread, an' them things that kin be pow'ful useful to us on a long journey. An' jumpin' Jehoshaphat, Henry, here's a little bag o' silver an' gold!"

"Put that back!" said Henry hastily. "Put it back, Sol! Their goods we'll borrow as fair spoil, but we won't touch their money. Put it back and none of us will ever take that bag out again."

"You're right, Henry," said Sol soberly. "I wouldn't handle a single coin in that bag thar. Here she goes right under the bottom o' everything in this locker, an' thar she'll stay. But, Henry, our gall-yun is the biggest find we ever made in our lives. I never dreamed o' travelin' in sech style an' comfort down the Mississippi."

"Do you think it's going to grow lighter?" asked Henry.

"No," replied Sol decidedly. "It's been a shy kind o' moon to-night, an' it's a gittin' so much shyer that it's plumb afraid to show its face. In three minutes it will hide behind a big cloud that's edgin' up over thar, an' we won't see it no more to-night."

"Then we'll pull down to the edge of the woods and see if the Spaniards have given up the chase."

"An' be keerful not to run into any snags or sech like. We don't want to wreck a magnificent gall-yun like this when we've got her."

They had been lying in the flooded forest about two hours, and now they pulled very cautiously toward the main stream. It was a large boat for two men, however strong, to handle, but they got through without colliding with snag or tree trunk, or making any noise that could be heard a dozen yards away.

CHAPTER V ON THE GREAT RIVER

They remained just within the edge of the forest, but, despite the lack of moonlight, they could see far over the surface of the river. It seemed to be an absolutely clean sweep of waters, as free from boats as if man had never come, but, after long looking, Henry thought that he could detect a half dozen specks moving southward. It was only for a moment, and then the specks were gone.

"I'm sure it was the Spanish boats," said Henry, "and I think they've given up the hunt."

"More'n likely," said Sol, "an' I guess it's about time fur us to pull across an' pick up Paul an' Tom an' Jim. They'll wonder what hez become o' us. An' say, Henry, won't they be s'prised to see us come proudly sailin' into port in our gran' big gall-yun, all loaded down with arms an' supplies an' treasures that we hev captured?"

Sol spoke in a tone of deep content, and Henry replied in the same tone:

"If they don't they've changed mightily since we left 'em."

Both, in truth, were pervaded with satisfaction. They felt that they had never done a better night's work. They had a splendid boat filled with the most useful supplies. As Sol truthfully said, it was one thing to walk a thousand miles through the woods to New Orleans and another to float down on the current in a comfortable boat. They had cause for their deep satisfaction.

They pulled with strong, steady strokes across the Mississippi, taking a diagonal course, and they stopped now and then to look for a possible enemy. But they saw nothing, and at last their boat touched the western shore. Here Sol uttered their favorite signal, the cry of the wolf, and it was quickly answered from the brush.

"They're all right," said Henry, and presently they heard the light footsteps of the three coming fast.

"Here, Paul, here we are!" called out Sol a few moments later, "an' min', Paul, that your moccasins are clean. We don't allow no dirty footsteps on this magnificent, silver-plated gall-yun o' ours, an' ez fur Jim Hart, ef the Mississippi wuzn't so muddy I'd make him take a bath afore he come aboard."

Henry and the shiftless one certainly enjoyed the surprise of their comrades who stood staring.

"I suppose you cut her out, took her from the Spaniards?" said Paul.

"We shorely did," replied Sol, "an', Paul, she's a shore enough gall-yun, one o' the kind you told us them Spaniards had, 'cause she's full o' good things. Jest come on board an' look."

The three were quickly on the boat and they followed Sol with surprise and delight, as he showed them their new treasures one by one.

"You've named her right, Sol," said Paul. "She is a galleon to us, sure enough, and that's what we'll call her, 'The Galleon.' When we have time, Sol, you and I will cut that name on her with our knives."

They tied their boat to a sapling and kept the oars and themselves aboard. Tom Ross volunteered to keep the watch for the few hours that were left of the night. The others disposed themselves comfortably in the boat, wrapped their bodies in the beautiful new Spanish blankets, and were soon sound asleep.

Tom sat in the prow of the boat, his rifle across his knees, and his keen hunting knife by his side. At the first sign of danger from shore he could cut the rope with a single slash of his knife and push the boat far out into the current.

But there was no indication of danger nor did the indefinable sixth sense, that came of long habit and training, warn him of any. Instead, it remained a peaceful night, though dark, and Tom looked contemplatively at his comrades. He was the oldest of the little party and a man of few words,

but he was deeply attached to his four faithful comrades. Silently he gave thanks that his lot was cast with those whom he liked so well.

The night passed away and up came a beautiful dawn of rose and gold. Tom Ross awakened his comrades.

"The day is here," he said, "an' we must be up an' doin' ef we're goin' to keep on the trail o' them Spanish fellers."

"All right," said Shif'less Sol, opening his eyes. "Jim Hart, is my breakfus ready? Ef so, you kin jest bring it to me while I'm layin' here an' I'll eat it in bed."

"Your breakfus ready!" replied Jim Hart indignantly. "What sort uv nonsense are you talkin' now, Sol Hyde?"

"Why, ain't you the ship's cook?" said Sol in a hurt tone, "an' oughtn't you to be proud o' bein' head cook on a splendiferous new gall-yun like this? I'd a-thought, Jim, you'd be so full o' enthusiasm over bein' promoted that you'd have had ready fur us the grandest breakfus that wuz ever cooked by a mortal man fur mortal men. It wuz sech a fine chance fur you."

"I think we can risk a fire," said Henry. "The Spaniards are far out of sight, and warm food will be good for us."

After they had eaten, Henry poured a few drops of the Spanish liquor for each in a small silver cup that he found in one of the lockers.

"That will hearten us up," he said, but directly after they drank it Paul, who had been making an exploration of his own on the boat, uttered a cry of joy.

"Coffee!" he said, as he dragged a bag from under a seat, "and here is a pot to boil it in."

"More treasures," said Sol gleefully. "That wuz shorely a good night's work you an' me done, Henry!"

There was nothing to do but boil a pot of the coffee then and there, and each had a long, delicious drink. Coffee and tea were so rare in the wilderness that they were valued like precious treasures. Then they packed their things and started, pulling out into the middle of the stream and giving the current only a little assistance with the oars.

"One thing is shore," said Shif'less Sol, lolling luxuriously on a locker, "that Spanish gang can't git away from us. All we've got to do is to float along ez easy ez you please, an' we'll find 'em right in the middle o' the road."

"It does beat walkin'," said Jim Hart, with equal content, "but this is shorely a pow'ful big river. I never seed so much muddy water afore in my life."

"It's a good river, a kind river," said Paul, "because it's taking us right to its bosom, and carrying us on where we want to go with but little trouble to us."

It was to Paul, the most imaginative of them all, to whom the mighty river made the greatest appeal. It seemed beneficent and kindly to him, a friend in need. Nature, Paul thought, had often come to their assistance, watching over them, as it were, and helping them when they were weakest. And, in truth, what they saw that morning was enough to inspire a bold young wilderness rover.

The river turned from yellow to a lighter tint in the brilliant sunlight. Little waves raised by the wind ran across the slowly-flowing current. As far as they could see the stream extended to eastward, carried by the flood deep into the forest. The air was crisp, with the sparkle of spring, and all the adventurers rejoiced.

Now and then great flocks of wild fowl, ducks and geese, flew over the river, and they were so little used to man that more than once they passed close to the boat.

"The Spaniards are too far away to hear," said Henry, "and the next time any wild ducks come near I'm going to try one of these fowling pieces. We need fresh ducks, anyway."

He took out a fowling piece, loaded it carefully with the powder and shot that the locker furnished in abundance and waited his time. By and by a flock of wild ducks flew near and Henry

fired into the midst of them. Three lay floating on the water after the shot, and when they took them in Long Jim Hart, a master on all such subjects, pronounced them to be of a highly edible variety.

Paul, meanwhile, took out one of the small swords and examined it critically.

"It is certainly a fine one," he said, "I suppose it's what they call a Toledo blade in Spain, the finest that they make."

"Could you do much with it, Paul?" asked Shif'less Sol.

"I could," replied Paul confidently. "Mr. Pennypacker served in the great French war. He was at the taking of Quebec, and he learned the use of the sword from good masters. He's taught me all the tricks."

"Maybe, then," said Sol laughing, "you'll have to fight Alvarez with one o' them stickers. Ef sech a combat is on it'll fall to you, Paul. The rest of us are handier with rifle an' knife."

"It's never likely to happen," said Paul.

The morning passed peacefully on, and the glory of the heavens was undimmed. The river was a vast, murmuring stream, and the five voyagers felt that, for the present, their task was an easy one. A single man at the oars was sufficient to keep the boat moving as fast as they wished, and the rest occupied themselves with details that might provide for a future need.

Paul brought out one of the beautiful small swords again, and fenced vigorously with an imaginary antagonist. Jim Hart took a captured needle and thread and began to mend a rent in his attire. Henry lifted the folded tent from the locker and looked carefully at the cloth.

"I think that with this and a pole or two we might fix up a sail if we needed it," he said. "We don't know anything about sails, but we can learn by trying."

Tom Ross was at the oars, but Shif'less Sol lay back on a locker, closed his eyes, and said:

"Jest wake me up, when we git to New Or-lee-yuns. I could lay here an' sleep forever, the boat rockin' me to sleep like a cradle."

They saw nothing of the Spanish force, but they knew that such a flotilla could not evade them. Having no reason to hide, the Spaniards would not seek to conceal so many boats in the flooded forest. Hence the five felt perfectly easy on that point. About noon they ran their own boat among the trees until they reached dry land. Here they lighted a fire and cooked their ducks, which they found delicious, and then resumed their leisurely journey.

The afternoon was as peaceful as the morning, but it seemed to the sensitive imagination of Paul that the wilderness aspect of everything was deepening. The great flooded river broadened until the line of water and horizon met, and Paul could easily fancy that they were floating on a boundless sea. An uncommonly red sun was setting and here and there the bubbles were touched with fire. Far in the west dark shadows were stealing up.

"Look," Henry suddenly exclaimed, "I think that the Spanish have gone into camp for the night!"

He pointed down the stream and toward the western shore, where a thin spire of smoke was rising.

"It's that, certain," said Tom Ross, "an' I guess we'd better make fur camp, too."

They pulled toward the eastern shore, in order that the river might be between them and the Spaniards during the night and soon reached a grove which stood many feet deep in the water. As they passed under the shelter of the boughs they took another long look toward the spire of smoke. Henry, who had the keenest eyes of all, was able to make out the dim outline of boats tied to the bank, and any lingering doubt that the Spaniards might not be there was dispelled.

"When they start in the morning we'll start, too," said Henry.

Then they pushed their boat further back into the grove. Night was coming fast. The sun sank in the bosom of the river, the water turned from yellow to red and then to black, and the earth lay in darkness.

"I think we'd better tie up here and eat cold food," said Henry.

"An' then sleep," said Shif'less Sol. "That wuz a mighty comf'table Spanish blanket I had last night an', Jim Hart, I want to tell you that if you move 'roun' to-night, while you're watchin', please step awful easy, an' be keerful not to wake me 'cause I'm a light sleeper. I don't like to be waked up either early or late in the night. Tain't good fur the health. Makes a feller grow old afore his time."

"Sol," said Henry, who was captain by fitness and universal consent, "you'll take the watch until about one o'clock in the morning and then Paul will relieve you."

Jim Hart doubled up his long form with silent laughter, and smote his knee violently with the palm of his right hand.

"Oh, yes, Sol Hyde," he said, "I'll step lightly, that is, ef I happen to be walkin' 'roun' in my sleep, an' I'll take care not to wake you too suddenly, Sol Hyde. I wouldn't do it for anything. I don't want to stunt your growth, an' you already sech a feeble, delicate sort o' creetur, not able to take nourishment 'ceptin' from a spoon."

"Thar ain't no reward in this world fur a good man," said the shiftless one in a resigned tone.

They ate quickly, and, as usual, those who did not have to watch wrapped themselves in their blankets and with equal quickness fell asleep. Shif'less Sol took his place in the prow of the boat, and his attitude was much like that of Tom Ross the night before, only lazier and more graceful. Sol was a fine figure of a young man, drooped in a luxurious and reclining attitude, his shoulder against the side of the boat, and a roll of two blankets against his back. His eyes were half closed, and a stray observer, had there been any, might have thought that he was either asleep or dreaming.

But the shiftless one, fit son of the wilderness, was never more awake in his life. The eyes, looking from under the lowered lids, pierced the forest like those of a cat. He saw and noted every tree trunk within the range of human vision, and no piece of floating debris on the surface of the flooded river escaped his attention. His sharp ears heard, too, every sound in the grove, the rustle of a stray breeze through the new leaves, or the splash of a fish, as it leaped from the water and sank back again.

The hours dragged after one another, one by one, but Shif'less Sol was not unhappy. He was really quite willing to keep the watch, and, as Tom Ross had done, he regarded his sleeping comrades with pride, and all the warmth of good fellowship.

The night was dark, like its predecessor. The moon's rays fell only in uneven streaks, and revealed a singular scene, a forest standing knee deep, as it were, in water.

Shif'less Sol presently took one of the blankets and wrapped it around his shoulders. A cold damp pervaded the atmosphere, and a fog began to rise from the river. The shiftless one was a cautious man and he knew the danger of chills and fever. His comrades were already well wrapped, but he stepped softly over and drew Paul's blanket a little closer around his neck. Then he resumed his seat, maintaining his silence.

Shif'less Sol did not like the rising of the river fog. It was thick and cold, it might be unhealthy, and it hid the view. His circle of vision steadily narrowed. Tree trunks became ghostly, and then were gone. The water, seen through the fog, had a pallid, unpleasant color. Eye became of little use, and it was ear upon which the sentinel must depend.

Shif'less Sol judged that it was about midnight, and he became troubled. The sixth sense, that comes of acute natural perceptions fortified by long habit, was giving him warning. It seemed to him that he felt the approach of something. He raised himself up a little higher and stared anxiously into the thick mass of white fog. He could make out nothing but a little patch of water and a few ghostly tree trunks near by. Even the stern of the boat was half hidden by the fog.

"Wa'al," thought the shiftless one philosophically, "ef it's hard fur me to find anything it'll be hard fur anything to find us."

But his troubled mind would not be quiet. Philosophy was not a sufficient reply to the warning of the sixth sense, and, leaning far over the edge of the boat, he listened with ears long trained to every sound of the wilderness. He heard only the stray murmur of the wind among the leaves—and

was that a ripple in the water? He strained his ears and decided that it was either a ripple or the splash of a fish, and he sank back again in his seat.

Although he had resumed his old position, the shiftless one was not satisfied. The feeling of apprehension, like a mysterious mental signal, was not effaced. That thick, whitish fog was surcharged with an alien quality, and slowly he raised himself up once more. Hark! was it the ripple again? He rose half to his feet, and instantly his eye caught a glimpse of something brown upon the edge of the boat. It was a human hand, the brown, powerful hand of a savage.

The glance of Shif'less Sol followed the hand and saw a brown face emerging from the water and fog. Quick as a flash he fired. There was a terrible, unearthly cry, the hand slipped from the boat and the head sank from view.

"Up! up! boys!" cried Sol in thunderous tones. "We're attacked by swimmin' savages!"

He snatched up one of the double-barreled pistols and fired at another head on the water. The others were awake in an instant and rose up, rifles in hand. But they saw only a splash of blood on the stream that was gone in a moment, then the thick, whitish fog closed in again, and after that silence! But they knew Sol too well to doubt him, and the momentary red splash would have converted even the ignorant.

"Lie low!" exclaimed Henry. "Everybody down behind the sides of the boat! They may fire at any time!"

The boat was built of thick timber, through which no bullet of that time could go, and they crouched down, merely peeping over the edges and presenting scarcely any target. They had their own rifles and the extra fowling pieces and pistols were made ready, also.

But nothing came from the great pall of whitish fog, and the silence was chilly and heavy. It was the most uncanny thing in all Paul's experience. Beyond a doubt they were surrounded by savage enemies, but from which side they would come, and when, nobody could tell until they were at the very side of the boat.

"How many did you see, Sol?" whispered Henry.

"Only two, but one of 'em won't ever attack us again."

"The others must be near by in their canoes, and the swimmers may have been scouts and skirmishers. They know where we are, but we don't know where they are."

"That's so," said Shif'less Sol, "an' it gives 'em an advantage."

"Which, perhaps, we can take from 'em by moving our own boat."

Henry was about to put his plan into action, but they heard a light splash in the water to the west, and another to the north. Spots of piercing red light appeared in the fog, and many rifles cracked. Fortunately, all had thrown themselves down, and the bullets spent themselves in the wood of the boat's side. Henry and Sol and Tom fired back at the flashes, but more rifle shots came out of the fog, and those on the boat had no way of telling whether any of their bullets had hit.

"I think we'd better hold our fire," whispered Henry between rifle shots. "It's wasting bullets to shoot at a fog."

The others nodded and waited. A long cry, quavering at first, and then rising to a fierce top note to die away later in a ferocious, wolfish whine came through the fog. It was uttered by many throats, and in the uncanny, whitish gloom it seemed to be on all sides of them. Then shouts and shots both ceased and the heavy silence came again.

"Now is our time," whispered Henry. "Paul, steer southward. Jim, you and Tom row, and Sol and I will be ready with the guns. Keep your heads down as low as you can."

Jim Hart and Tom Ross took the oars, pulling them through the water with extreme caution and slowness. All knew that sharp ears were listening in the flooded forest, and the splash of oars would bring the war canoes at once. But they were determined that the fog which was such a help to their enemies should be an equal help to them also.

Slowly the heavy boat crept through the water. Paul, at the tiller, steered with judgment and craft, and his was no light task. Now and then low boughs were lapped in the water and bushes submerged to their tops grew in the way. To become tangled in them might be fatal and to scrape against them would be a signal to their enemies, but Paul steered clear every time.

They had gone perhaps fifty yards when Henry gave a signal to stop and Jim and Tom rested on their oars. Then they heard a burst of firing behind them, and a smile of saturnine triumph spread slowly but completely over the face of Shif'less Sol.

"They're shootin' at the place whar we wuz, an' whar we ain't now," he whispered to Henry.

"Yes," Henry whispered back, "they haven't found out yet that we've left, but they are likely to do it pretty soon. I hope now that this fog will hang on just as thick as it can. Start up again, boys."

"'Twould be funny," whispered Sol, "ef the savages should find us an' chase us right into the bosoms o' the Spaniards."

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