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THE FOREST RUNNERS: A
STORY OF THE GREAT
WAR TRAIL IN EARLY
KENTUCKY

Joseph Altsheler

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Great War Trail in Early Kentucky**

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Joseph A. Altsheler

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CHAPTER I

PAUL

Paul stopped in a little open space, and looked around all the circle of the forest. Everywhere it was the same—just the curving wall of red and brown, and beyond, the blue sky, flecked with tiny clouds of white. The wilderness was full of beauty, charged with the glory of peace and silence, and there was naught to indicate that man had ever come. The leaves rippled a little in the gentle west wind, and the crisping grass bowed before it; but Paul saw no living being, save himself, in the vast, empty world.

The boy was troubled and, despite his life in the woods, he had full right to be. This was the great haunted forest of *Kain-tuck-ee*, where the red man made his most desperate stand, and none ever knew when or whence danger would come. Moreover, he was lost, and the forest told him nothing; he was not like his friend, Henry Ware, born to the forest, the heir to all the primeval instincts, alive to every sight and sound, and able to read the slightest warning the wilderness might give. Paul Cotter was a student, a lover of books, and a coming statesman. Fate, it seemed, had chosen that he and Henry Ware should go hand in hand, but for different tasks.

Paul gazed once more around the circle of the glowing forest, and the shadow in his eyes deepened. Henry and the horses, loaded with powder for the needy settlement, must be somewhere near, but whether to right or left he could not tell. He had gone to look for water, and when he undertook to return he merely went deeper and deeper into the forest. Now the boughs, as they nodded before the gentle breeze, seemed to nod to him in derision. He felt shame as well as alarm. Henry would not laugh at him, but the born scholar would be worth, for the time, at least, far less than the born trailer.

Yet no observer, had there been any, would have condemned Paul as he condemned himself. He stood there, a tall, slender boy, with a broad, high brow, white like a girl's above the line of his cap, blue eyes, dark and full, with the width between that indicates the mind behind, and the firm, pointed chin that belongs so often to people of intellect.

Paul and Henry were on their way from Wareville, their home, with horses hearing powder for Marlowe, the nearest settlement, nearly a hundred miles away. The secret of making powder from the nitre dust on the floors of the great caves of Kentucky had been discovered by the people of Wareville, and now they wished to share their unfailing supply with others, in order that the infant colony might be able to withstand Indian attacks. Henry Ware, once a captive in a far Northwestern tribe, and noted for his great strength and skill, had been chosen, with Paul Cotter, his comrade, to carry it. Both rejoiced in the great task, which to them meant the saving of Kentucky.

Paul's eyes were apt at times to have a dreamy look, as if he were thinking of things far away, whether of time or place; but now they were alive to the present, and to the forest about him. He listened intently. At last he lay down and put his ear to the earth, as he had seen Henry do; but he heard nothing save a soft, sighing sound, which he knew to be only the note of the wilderness. He might have fired his rifle. The sharp, lashing report would go far, carried farther by its own echoes; but it was more likely to bring foe than friend, and he refrained.

But he must try, if not one thing, then another. He looked up at the heavens and studied the great, red globe of the sun, now going slowly down the western arch in circles of crimson and orange

light, and then he looked back at the earth. If he had not judged the position of the sun wrong, their little camp lay to the right, and he would choose that course. He turned at once and walked swiftly among the trees.

Paul stopped now and then to listen. He would have uttered the long forest shout, as a signal to his comrade, but even that was forbidden. Henry had seen signs in the forest that indicated more than once to his infallible eye the presence of roving warriors from the north, and no risk must be taken. But, as usual, it was only the note of the wilderness that came to his ears. He stopped also once or twice, not to listen, but to look at the splendid country, and to think what a great land it would surely be.

He walked steadily on for miles, but the region about him remained unfamiliar. No smoke from the little camp-fire rose among the trees, and no welcome sight of Henry or the horses came to his eyes. For all he knew, he might be going farther from the camp at every step. Putting aside caution, he made a trumpet of his two hands, and uttered the long, quavering cry that serves as a signal in the forest. It came back in a somber echo from the darkening wilderness, and Paul saw, with a little shiver, that the sun was now going down behind the trees. The breeze rose, and the leaves rustled together with a soft hiss, like a warning. Chill came into the air. The sensitive mind of the boy, so much alive to abstract impressions, felt the omens of coming danger, and he stopped again, not knowing what to do. He called himself afraid, but he was not. It was the greater tribute to his courage that he remained resolute where another might well have been in despair.

The sun went down behind the black forest like a cannon shot into the sea, and darkness swept over the wilderness. Paul uttered the long cry again and again, but, as before, no answer came back; once he fired his rifle, and the sharp note seemed to run for miles, but still no answer.

Then he decided to take counsel of prudence, and sleep where he was. If he walked on, he might go farther and farther away from the camp, but if he stopped now, while he might not find Henry, Henry would certainly find him. Any wilderness trail was an open road to his comrade.

He hunted a soft place under one of the trees, and, despising the dew, stretched himself between two giant roots, his rifle by his side. He was tired and hungry, and he lay for a while staring at the blank undergrowth, but by and by all his troubles and doubts floated away. The note of the wind was soothing, and the huge roots sheltered him. His eyelids drooped, a singular feeling of peace and ease crept over him, and he was asleep.

It was yet the intense darkness of early night, and the outline of his figure was lost between the giant roots, but after a while a silver moon brought a gray tint to the skies, and the black bank over the forest began to thin and lighten. Then two figures, hideous in paint, crept from the undergrowth, and stared at the sleeping boy with pitiless eyes.

Paul slept on, and mercifully knew nothing of his danger; yet it would have been hard to find in the world two pairs of eyes that contained more savagery than those now gazing upon him. Their owners crept nearer, looking with fierce joy through the darkness at the sleeping boy who was so certainly their prey. Their code contained nothing that taught them to spare a foe, and this youth. In the van of the white invasion, was the worst of foes.

The boy still slept, and his slumber was deep, sweet, and dreamless. No warning came to him while the savage eyes, bright with cruel fire, crept closer and closer, and the merciful darkness, coming again, tried to close down and hide the approaching tragedy of the forest.

Paul returned with a jerk from his peaceful heaven. Hands and feet were seized suddenly and pinned to the earth so tightly that he could not move, and he gazed up at two hideous, painted faces, very near to his own, and full of menace. The boy's heart turned for a moment to water. He saw at once, through his vivid and powerful imagination, all the terrors of his position, and in the same instant he leaped forward also to the future, and to the agony it had in store for him. But in a moment his courage came back, the strong will once more took command of the body and the spirit, and he

looked up with stoical eyes at his captors. He knew that resistance now would be in vain, and, relaxing his muscles, he saved his strength.

The warriors laughed a little, a soundless laugh that was full of menace, and bound him securely with strips of buckskin cut from his own garments. Then they stood up, and Paul, too, rose to a sitting position, gazing intently at his captors. They were powerful men, apparently warriors of middle age, and Paul knew enough of costume and paint to tell that they were of the Shawnee nation, bitterly hostile to him and his kind.

His terrors came back upon him in full sweep. He loved life, and, scholar though he was, he loved his life in the young wilderness of Kentucky, where he was at the beginnings of things. Every detail of what they would do to him, every incident of the torture was already photographed upon his sensitive mind, but again the brave lad called up all his courage, and again he triumphed, keeping his body still and his face without expression. He merely looked up at them, as if placidly waiting their will.

The two warriors talked together a little, and then, seeming to change their minds, they unbound the boy's feet. One touched him on the shoulder, and, pointing to the north, started in that direction. Paul understood, and, rising to his feet, followed. The second warrior came close behind, and Paul was as securely a prisoner as if he were in the midst of a band of a hundred. Once or twice he looked around at the silent woods and thought of running, but it would have been the wildest folly. His hands tied, he could have been quickly overtaken, or, if not that, a bullet. He sternly put down the temptation, and plodded steadily on between the warriors, the broad, brown back of the one in front of him always leading the way.

It seemed to him that they sought the densest part of the undergrowth, where the night shadows lay thickest, and he was wise enough to know that they did it to hide their trail from possible pursuit. Then he thought of Henry, his comrade, the prince of trailers! He might come! He would come! Paul's blood leaped at the thought, and his head lifted with hope.

Clouds swept up, the moon died, and in the darkness Paul had little idea of direction. He only knew that they were still traveling fast amid the thick bushes, and that when he made too much noise in passing one or other of the brown savages would prod him with the muzzle of a gun as a hint to be more careful. His face became bruised and his feet weary, but at last they stopped in an opening among the trees, by the side of a little brook that trickled over shining pebbles.

The warriors wasted little time. They rebound Paul's feet in such tight fashion that he could scarcely move, and then, lying down near him, went to sleep so quickly that it seemed to Paul they accomplished the feat by some sort of a mechanical arrangement. Tired as he was, he could not close his own eyes yet, and he longed for his comrade. Would he come?

Paul's sensitive nerves were again keenly alive to every phase of his cruel situation. The warriors, lying almost at his feet, were monsters, not men, and this wilderness, which in its finer aspects he loved, was bristling in the darkness with terrors known and unknown. Yet his clogged and weary brain slept at last, and when he awoke again it was day—a beautiful day of white and gold light, with the autumnal tints of the forest all about him, and the leaves rustling in a gentle wind.

But his heart sank to the uttermost depths when he looked at the warriors. By day they seemed more brutal and pitiless than at night. From their long, narrow eyes shone no ray of mercy, and the ghastly paint on their high cheek bones deepened their look of ferocity. It was not the appearance of the warriors alone, it was more the deed for which they were preparing that appalled Paul. They were raking dead leaves and fallen brushwood of last year around a small but stout sapling, and they went on with their task in a methodical way.

Paul knew well, too well. Hideous tales of such doings had come now and then to his ears, but he had never dreamed that he, Paul Cotter, in his own person would be such a victim. Even now it seemed incredible in the face of this beautiful young world that stretched away from him, so quiet

and so peaceful. He, who already in his boyhood was planning great things for this splendid land, to die such a death!

The warriors did not cease until their task was finished. It was but a brief one after all, for Paul had made no mistake in his guess. There was not time, perhaps, to take a prisoner beyond the Ohio, and they could not forego a savage pleasure. They dragged the hoy to the sapling, stood him erect against the slim trunk, and bound him fast with green withes. Then they piled the dead leaves and brushwood high about him above his knees, and, this done, stood a little way off and looked at their work.

The warriors spoke together for the first time since Paul had awakened, and their black eyes lighted up with a hideous glow of anticipation. Paul saw it, and an icy chill ran through all his veins. Had not the green withes held him, he would have fallen to the ground. Once more his active mind, foreseeing all that would come, had dissolved his strength for the moment; but, as always, his will brought his courage back, and he shut his eyes to put away the hateful sight of the gloating savages.

He had never asked in any way for mercy, he had never uttered a word of protest, and he resolved that he would not cry out if he could help it. They should not rejoice too much at his sufferings; he would die as they were taught to die, and he would show to them that the mind of a white boy could supply the place of a red man's physical fortitude. But Henry might come! Would he come? Oh, would he come? Resigned to death, Paul yet hoped for life.

He opened his eyes, and the warriors were still standing there, looking at him; but in a moment one approached, and, bending down, began to strike flint and steel amid the dry leaves at the boy's feet. Again, despite himself, the shivering chill ran through Paul's veins. Would Henry come? If he came at all, he must now come quickly, as only a few minutes were left.

The leaves were obstinate; sparks flew from the flint and steel, but there was no blaze. Paul looked down at the head of the warrior who worked patiently at his task. The second warrior stood on one side, watching, and when Paul glanced at him he saw the savage move ever so little, but as if driven by a sudden impulse, and then raise his head in the attitude of one who listened intently. Heat replaced the ice in Paul's veins. Had something moved in the forest? Was it Henry? Would he come?

The standing warrior uttered a low sound, and he who knelt with the flint and steel raised his head. Something had moved in the forest! It might be Henry. For Paul, the emotions of a life were concentrated in a single moment. Fear and hope tripped over each other, and the wilderness grew dim to his sight. A myriad of little black specks danced before his eyes, and the blood was beating a quick march in his ears.

The two savages were motionless, as if carved of brown marble, and over all the wilderness hung silence. Then out of the silence came a sharp report, and the warrior who stood erect, rifle in hand, fell to the earth, stricken by instant death. Henry had come! His faithful comrade had not failed him! Paul shouted aloud in his tremendous relief and joy, forgetful of the second warrior.

The kneeling savage sprang to his feet, but he had made a fatal mistake. To light the fire for the torture, he had left his rifle leaning against the trunk of a tree twenty feet away, and before he could regain it a terrible figure bounded from the bushes, the figure of a great youth, clad in buckskin, his face transformed with anger and his eyes alight. Before the savage could reach his weapon he went down, slain by a single blow of a clubbed rifle, and the next moment Henry was cutting Paul loose with a few swift slashes of his keen hunting knife.

"I knew you would come! I knew it!" exclaimed Paul joyously and wildly, as he stood forth free. "Nobody in the world but you could have done it, Henry!"

"I don't know about that, Paul," said Henry, "but I'd have had you back sooner if it hadn't been for the dark. I followed you all night the best way I could, but I couldn't come up to you until day, and they began work then."

He glanced significantly at the leaves and brushwood, and then, handing Paul's rifle to him, looked at those belonging to the savages.

"We'll take 'em," he said. "It's likely we'll need 'em, and their powder and bullets will be more than welcome, too."

Paul was rubbing his wrists and ankles, where the blood flowed painfully as the circulation was restored, but to him the whole affair was ended. His life had been saved at the last moment, and the world was more brilliant and beautiful than ever. His imagination went quickly to the other extreme. There was no more danger.

But Henry Ware did not lose his eager, wary look. It did not take him more than a minute to transfer the ammunition of the warriors to the pouches and powder-horns of Paul and himself. Then he searched the forest with keen, suspicious glances.

"Come, Paul," he said, "we must run. The woods are full of the savages. I've found out that there's a great war party between us and Marlowe, and I've hid the powder in a cave. I turned the horses loose, hoping that we'll get 'em some time later; but just now you and I have to save ourselves."

Paul came back to earth. Danger still threatened! But he was free for the time, and he was with his comrade!

"You lead the way, Henry," he said. "I'll follow, and do whatever you say."

Henry Ware made no reply, but bent his ear again, in the attitude of one who listens. Paul watched his face attentively, seeking to read his knowledge there.

"The big war band is not far away," said Henry, "and it's likely that they've heard my shot. It would carry far on such a still, clear morning as this. I didn't want them to hear it."

"But I'm glad you did shoot," said Paul. "It was a mighty welcome sound to me."

"Yes," said Henry, with grim humor, "it was the right thing at the right time. Hark to that!" A single note, very faint and very far, rose and was quickly gone, like the dying echo of music. Only the trained ranger of the wilderness would have noticed it at all, but Henry Ware knew.

"Yes, they've heard," he said, "and they're telling it to each other. They are also telling it to us. They're between us and Marlowe, and they are between us and Wareville, so we must run to the north, and run as fast as we can."

He led the way with swift, light footsteps through the forest, and Paul followed close behind, each boy carrying on his shoulder two rifles and at his waist a double stock of bullets and powder.

Paul scarcely felt any fear now for the future. The revulsion from the stake and torture was so great that it did not seem to him that he could be taken again. Moreover, they had seized him the first time when he was asleep. They had taken an unfair advantage.

The sun rose higher, gilding the brown forest with fine filmy gold, like a veil, and the boys ran silently on among the trees and the undergrowth. Behind them, and spread out like a fan, came many warriors, fierce for their lives. Amid such scenes was the Great West won.

CHAPTER II IN THE RIVER

Paul, while not the equal of Henry in the woods, was a strong and enduring youth. His muscles were like wire, and there were few better runners west of the mountains. Although the weight of the second rifle might tell after a while, he did not yet feel it, and with springy step he sped after Henry, leaving the choice of course and all that pertained to it to his comrade. After a while they heard a second cry—a wailing note—and Henry raised his head a little.

"They've come to the two who fell," he said.

But after the single lament, the warriors were silent, and Paul heard nothing more in the woods but their own light footsteps and his own long breathing. Little birds flitted through the boughs of the trees, and now and then a hare hopped up and ran from their path. The silence became terrible, full of omens and presages, like the stillness before coming thunder.

"It means something," said Henry; "I think we've stumbled into a regular nest of those Shawnees, and they're likely to be all about us."

As if confirming his words, the far, faint note came from their right, and then, in reply, from their left. Henry stopped so quickly that Paul almost ran into him.

"I was afraid it would be that way," he said. "They're certainly all around us except in front, and maybe there, too."

Visions of the torture rose before Paul again.

"What are we to do?" he said.

"We must hide."

"Hide I Why, they could find us in the forest, as I would find a man in an open field."

"I don't mean hide here," said Henry; "the river is just ahead, and I think that if we reach it in time we can find a place. Come, Paul, we must run as we never ran before."

The two boys sped with long, swift bounds through the forest as only those who run for their lives can run. Now the voices of the pursuit became frequent, and began to multiply. Henry, with his instinctive skill in the forest, read their meaning. The pursuers were sure of triumph. But Henry shut his lips tightly, and resolved that he and Paul should yet elude them.

"The river is not more than a half mile ahead," he said. "Come, Paul, faster! A little faster, if you can!"

Paul obeyed, and the two, bending their heads lower, sped on with astonishing speed. Trees and bushes slid behind them. Before them appeared a blue streak, that broadened swiftly and became a river.

"We must not let them see us," said Henry. "Bend as low as you can, and be as quiet as you can!"

Paul obeyed, and in a few more minutes they were at the river's edge.

"Fasten your bullets and powder around your neck," said Henry, "and keep the rifle on your shoulder."

Paul did so, following Henry's quick example, and the two stepped into the water, which soon reached to their waists. Henry had been along this river before, and at this crisis in the lives of his comrade and himself he remembered. Dense woods lined both banks of the stream, which was narrow here for miles, and a year or two before a hurricane had cut down the trees as a reaper mows the wheat. The surface of the water was covered with fallen trunks and boughs, and for a half mile at least they had become matted together like a great raft, out of which grass and weeds already were growing. But Paul did not know it, and suddenly he stopped.

"Why, what has become of the river?" he exclaimed, pointing ahead.

The stream seemed to stop against a bank of logs and foliage.

Henry laughed softly.

"It is the great natural raft," he said. "There is where we are to hide."

He hastened his steps, wading as rapidly as he could, and Paul kept by his side. He comprehended Henry's plan, their last and desperate chance. In a few moments more they were at the great raft, and in the bank, amid a dense, almost impenetrable mass of foliage, they hid their rifles and ammunition. Henry uttered a deep sigh as he did it.

"I hate like everything to leave them," he said, "but if we come to close quarters with any of those fellows, we must trust to our knives and hatchets."

Then he turned reluctantly away. It was not a deep river, nowhere above their necks, and he pushed a way amid the trees and foliage that were packed upon the surface, Paul, as usual, following closely. Now and then he dived under a big log, and came up on the other side, his head well hidden among upthrust boughs and among the weeds and grass that had grown in the soil formed by the silt of the river. And Paul always carefully imitated him.

When they were about thirty yards into the mass Paul felt Henry's hand on his shoulder. "Look back, Paul," was whispered in his ear, "but be sure not to move a single bough." Paul slowly and cautiously turned his head, and saw a sight that made him quiver.

Running swiftly, savage warriors were coming into view on either bank of the river—tall men, dark with paint, and, as he well knew, hot with the desire to take life.

"I thank God that this place is here!" breathed Paul.

"Yes, it was just made for us," said Henry, and he laughed ever so little. "Come, Paul, we must get farther into it. But be sure you don't shake any boughs."

They waded on, only their heads above the current, and these always hidden by the interlacing trunks and branches. A great shout, fierce with triumph, rose behind them.

"They've found where our trail entered the water, and they think they've got us," whispered Henry. "Now, be still, Paul; we'll hide here."

They pushed themselves into a mass of debris, where logs and boughs, swept by the current, formed a little arch over the stream. There they stood up to their chins in water, with their heads covered by the arch. Through the slits between the trunks and boughs they could see their pursuers.

It was a numerous band—thirty or forty men—and they divided now into several parties. Some ran along the banks of the stream and others sprang from log to log over the raft, searching everywhere, with keen, black eyes trained to note every movement of the wilderness.

Paul felt Henry's hand again on his shoulder, but neither boy spoke. Both felt as if they were in a little cage, with the fiercest of all wild animals around it and reaching long paws through the bars at them. Each sank a little deeper into the water, barely leaving room to breathe, and watched their enemies still searching, searching everywhere. They heard the patter of moccasins on the logs, and now and then they saw brown, muscular legs passing by. Two warriors stopped within ten feet of them and exchanged comment. Henry, who understood their language, knew that they were puzzled and angry. But Paul, without knowing a word that they said, understood, too. His imagination supplied the place of knowledge. They were full of wrath because they had lost the trail of the two whom they had regarded as certainly theirs, and to seek them in the vast maze of logs and brush was like looking for one dead leaf among the millions.

The two warriors stood still for a full minute, and then moved on out of sight. Paul drew a deep breath of relief, like a sigh, and Henry's hand was pressed once more upon his shoulder.

"Not a sound yet, not a sound, Paul!" he whispered ever so softly. "They will hunt here a long time."

More warriors, treading on the logs, showed that his caution was not misplaced. They poked now and then in the water, amid the great mass of debris, and one stood on a log so near to the two lads that they could have reached out and touched his moccasined feet. But their covert was too close to be suspected, and soon the man passed on.

Presently all of them were out of sight; but Henry, a true son of caution and the wilderness, would not yet let Paul stir.

"They will come back this way," he said. "We risk nothing by waiting, and we may save much."

Paul made no protest, but he was growing cold. The chill from the water of the river was creeping into his veins, and he longed for the dry land and a chance to stir about. Yet he clenched his teeth and resolved to endure. He would not move until Henry gave the word.

He saw what a wise precaution it was, when, a half hour later, seven or eight warriors came walking back on the logs, and thrust with sticks into the little patches of open water between them. Henry and Paul crouched closer in their covert, and the warriors stalked back and forth, still searching.

Henry knew that the Shawnees, failing to find a place beyond the debris where the fugitives had emerged upon the bank, would believe that they might be hidden under the logs, and would not give up the hunt there. If they should happen to find the rifles and ammunition, they would certainly be confirmed in the conclusion, but so far they had not found them. Henry, looking between the logs, saw them pass near the place of concealment, but they did not stop, and were soon near the other bank. It would have bitterly hurt his pride if they had found the rifles, even had he and Paul escaped.

An hour more they waited, and then the last warrior was out of sight, gone up the river.

"I think we may crawl out now," whispered Henry; "but we've still got to be mighty careful about it."

Paul took a step and fell over in the water. His legs were stiff with the wet and cold; but Henry dragged him up, and before trying it again he stretched first one leg and then the other, many times.

"We must make our way back through the logs and brush to the rifles," whispered Henry, "and then take to the woods once more."

"I think I've lived in a river long enough to last me the rest of my life," Paul said.

Henry laughed. He, too, was stiff and cold; but, a born woodsman, he now dismissed their long hiding in the water as only an incident. The two reached the precious rifles and ammunition, drew them forth from concealment, and stepped upon the bank, rivulets pouring from their clothing, and even their hair.

"I think we'd better go back on our own trail now," said Henry. "The war party has passed on, and is still looking for us far ahead."

"We've got to dry ourselves, and somehow or other get that powder to Marlowe," said Paul.

"That's so," said Henry. "We came to do it, and we will do it."

He spoke with quiet emphasis, but Paul knew that he meant to perform what he had set out to do, come what might, and Paul was willing to go with him through anything. Neither would abandon the great task of helping to save Kentucky. But they were still in a most serious position. They had been many hours in water which was not now warmed by summer heat, and they were bound to feel the effect of it soon in every bone. Henry glanced up at the heavens. It was far past noon, and the golden sun was gliding down the western arch.

"I think," said Henry, "that it would be best for us to walk, as fast as we can on the back track, and then try to dry out our clothing a little."

He started at once, and Paul walked swiftly by his side. The rivulets that ran from their clothing decreased to tiny streams, and then only drops fell. The sinking sun shot sheaves of brilliant beams upon them, and soon Paul felt a grateful warmth, driving for the time the chill from his bones. He swung his arms as he walked, as much as the rifles would allow, and nearly every muscle in his frame felt the touch of vigorous exercise. His clothing dried rapidly.

Two hours and three hours passed, and they heard no more the cries of the warriors calling to each other. Silence again hung over the wilderness. Rabbits sprang up from the thickets. A deer, frightened by the sound of the boys' footsteps, held up his head, listened a moment, and then fled away among the trees. Henry took his presence as a sign that no other human being had passed that way in the last hour.

The sun sank, the twilight came and died, and darkness clothed the wilderness. Then Henry stopped.

"Paul," he said, "I've got some venison in my knapsack, but you and I ought to have a fire. While our clothes are drying outside they are still wet inside and we can't afford to have a chill, or be so stiff that we can't run. You know we may have another run or two yet."

"But do we dare make a fire?" asked Paul.

"I think so. I can hide the blaze, and the night is so dark that the smoke won't show."

He plunged deeper into the thickets, and came to a rocky place, full of gullies and cavelike hollows. It was so dark that Paul could see only his dim form ahead. Presently their course led downward, and Henry stopped in one of the sheltered depressions.

"Now we'll make our fire," he said.

It was pitchy black where they stood. The walls of the hollow rose far above their heads, and its crest was lined on every side with giant trees and dense undergrowth.

The two boys dragged up dead leaves and brushwood, and Henry patiently ignited the heap with his flint and steel. A tiny blaze arose, but he did not permit it to grow into a flame. Heavier logs were placed upon the top, and the fire only burned beneath, amid the small boughs. Smoke arose, but it was lost in the black heavens. The fire, thus confined, burned fiercely and rapidly within its narrow limits, and a fine bed of coals soon formed. It was time! The night had come on cold, and the chill returned to Paul's veins. Before the fire was lighted he had begun to shiver, but when the deep bed of coals was formed, he sat before it and basked in the grateful and glowing heat.

"I think we'd better take off our clothing and dry it," said Henry, and both promptly did so. They hung part of their garments before the fire, on a stick thrust in the ground, until they were dry, and then, putting them on again, replaced them with the remainder, to dry in their turn. Meanwhile they ate of the venison that Henry carried in his knapsack, and felt very happy. It was a wonderful experience for Paul. This was comfort and safety. They were only a pin point in the wilderness, but for the present the stony hollow fenced them about, and the hidden fire gave forth warmth and pleasure.

"Do you think you could sleep, Paul?" asked Henry, when they had put on again the last of the dried clothing.

Paul laughed.

"Could I sleep?" he said. "Would a hungry wolf eat? Will water run down hill? I don't think I could do anything else just now."

"Then try it," said Henry. "After a while I'll wake you up for your watch, and take a turn at it myself."

Paul said not another word, but sank back on the grass and leaves, with his feet to the great bed of coals. He saw their glow for a moment or two, then his eyelids shut down, and he was wafted away on a magic carpet to a dreamless region of happy peace. Henry's eyes, grown used to the dark, looked at him for a moment or two, and then the larger boy smiled. Paul, his faithful comrade, filled a great place in his heart—they liked each other all the better because they were so unlike—and he was silently, but none the less devoutly thankful that he had come.

Henry was warm and dry, and as he tested his muscles he found them supple and strong. Now he took precautions, thinking he had let the fire burn as long as was safe. He scattered the coals with a stick, and then softly crushed out each under the stout heel of his moccasin. With the minute patience that he had learned from his forest life, he persisted in his task until not a single spark was left anywhere. Then he sat down in Turkish fashion, with his rifle lying across his lap and the other rifles near, listening, always listening, with the wonderful ear that noted every sound of the forest, and piercing the thickets with eyes whose keenness those of no savage could surpass. He knew that they were in the danger zone, that the Shawnees were on a great man-hunt, and regarded the two boys as stilt within their net, although they could not yet put their hands upon them. That was why

he listened and watched so closely, and that was why he would break his word to Paul and not waken him, keeping the nightlong vigil himself.

The night advanced, the darkness shredded away a little before a half moon, and Henry was very glad that he had put out the last remnant of the fire. Yet the trees still enclosed the hollow like a black wall, and he did not think a foe had one chance in a thousand of finding them there while the night lasted. But he never ceased to watch—a silent, powerful figure, with the rifle lying across his lap, ready to be used at a moment's notice. His stillness was something marvelous. Even had it been light, an ordinary observer would not have seen him move a hair's breadth. He was a part of the silent wilderness.

Midnight, and then the long hours. Faint noises arose in the thickets, bet the ear of the gray statue was alive, and he knew. The rabbits were hopping about, at play, perhaps, in the moonlight; a deer was passing; perhaps a panther stirred somewhere; but these were things that neither he nor Paul feared; it was only man that they dreaded. After a while a faint, clear note rose, far to the east, and to it came three replies like it, and also far away. Henry laughed low. They were the familiar signals, but he and Paul were well hidden, and they would escape through the lines before morning. They might easily go back to Wareville, too, but he was resolved not to abandon either the horses or the powder. The powder was needed at Marlowe, and it would be a bitter humiliation not to take it there.

Two hours more passed, and then Henry heard the signals again, but now closer. By chance, perhaps, the Shawnees had formed their ring about the right place, and it was time to act. Paul had slept well and was rested, so Henry leaned over and shook him. Paul opened his eyes, and any question that he might have wished to ask was cut short at his lips by Henry's low, but commanding,

"Caution! Caution!"

"It is far after midnight, and we must move, Paul," said Henry. "They may have blundered on our trail before it was dark, and they are still looking for us. I think they are coming this way."

Paul understood in a moment, but he asked no question; if Henry said so, it was true, it did not matter how he knew. He rose, imitating Henry, taking his two rifles, and they stole silently away from the little cove that had been so full of comfort for both.

"We'll go toward the south now," said Henry, "and on your life, Paul, don't stumble!"

Paul knew the worth of this advice, and he was woodsman enough to avoid tripping on the vines and bushes, despite the darkness. One mile dropped behind them, then two, then three, and Henry suddenly put his hand upon the shoulder of Paul, who, understanding the signal, sank down at once beside his comrade.

The bushes were thick there, but Paul soon saw the danger, of which Henry's ear had already warned him. A dozen warriors marched in a silent file through the undergrowth. Well for the two that they were some distance away, and that the bushes grew thick and long! And well for them, too, that it was night! The warriors looked keenly on every side as they passed, apparently seeking out the last little leaf and twig; but, acute as were their eyes, they did not see the boys in the bushes. And perhaps it was well for some of them that they did not find what they sought, as the wilderness furnished no more formidable antagonist than Henry Ware, and Paul Cotter, too, was both brave and skillful.

But the warriors passed, and the black wilderness hid them. Henry watched a little bush that one had brushed against, swinging in the moonlight with short jerks that became shorter until it grew quite still again. But he did not yet go. He and Paul knew that they must not move for many minutes. A warrior might turn on his track, see their risen forms, and with his cry bring the whole band back again. They yet lay motionless and still, while the moonlight filtered through the leaves and the silence of the forest endured. Henry rose at last, and led the way again.

"They are certainly beating up the woods for us," said he, "and I think that party will stumble right upon the little hollow where we rested. It was well we moved."

They increased their southward pace, and when it was scarcely two hours to the dawn Henry said:

"I know of a good place in which to rest, and a still better place in which to fight if they should find us."

"Where?"

"Holt's lone cabin. It's less than half a mile from here. I've had it in mind."

Paul did not know what he meant by Holt's lone cabin, but he was always willing to trust Henry without questions. His imagination, flowering at once into splendor, depicted it as some kind of an impregnable fortress.

"Come, we mustn't lose time!" said Henry, and he suddenly increased his speed, running so fast that Paul had much to do to keep pace with him. Paul looked up, and he saw why Henry hastened. The black curtain was rolled back a little in the east, and a splendid bar of gray appeared just at the horizon's edge. As Paul looked, it broadened and turned to silver, and then gold. Paul thought it a very phantasy of fate that the coming of day, which is like life, should bring such terrors.

They reached a clearing—a high, stony piece of ground—and in its center Paul saw a little old log cabin, with a heavy open door that sagged on rude wooden hinges.

"Come," said Henry, and they crossed the clearing to the cabin, pushing open the door. Paul looked around at the narrow place, and the protecting walls gave him much comfort. Evidently it had been abandoned in great haste. In one corner lay a tiny moccasin that had been a baby's shoe, and no one had disturbed it. On a hook on the wall hung a woman's apron, and two or three rude domestic utensils lay on the floor. The sight had its pathos for Paul, but he was glad that the Holts had gone in time. He was glad, too, that they had left their house behind that he and Henry might use it when they needed it most, because he began to be conscious now of a great weakness, both of body and spirit.

Hooks and a stout wooden bar still remained, and as Henry closed the door and dropped the bar into place, he exclaimed exultantly:

"They may get us, Paul, but they'll pay a full price before they do it."

"I'd rather they wouldn't get us at all," said Paul.

Nevertheless his imagination, leaping back to the other extreme, made the lone cabin the great fortress that he wished. And a fortress it was in more senses than one. Built of heavy logs, securely chinked, the single window and the single door closed with heavy oaken shutters, no bullet could reach them there. Paul sat down on a puncheon bench, and breathed laboriously, but joyously. Then he looked with inquiry at Henry.

"It was built by a man named Holt," said Henry. "He was either a great fool or a very brave man to come out here and settle alone. But a month ago, after the Indian wars began, he either became wiser or less brave, and he went into Marlowe with his family, leaving the place just as it is."

"He left in time," said Paul.

CHAPTER III

THE LONE CABIN

Henry was deeply thankful for this shelter because he knew how badly it was needed. He went to the single little window, which sagged half open on hinges made of the skin of the buffalo. He pushed it back in place, and fastened it, too, with a smaller bar, which he was lucky enough to find lying on the floor.

"Well, Paul, we are here," he said.

As he spoke he looked keenly and anxiously at his comrade.

"Yes, Henry," Paul replied. "Here we are, and mighty glad am I. It's good to be in a house again after that river."

Henry noticed at once that his voice was thinner and weaker than usual, and he saw also that the color on Paul's face was high—the rest and the little fire in the forest had not been enough. Again he was deeply grateful for the presence of the cabin. He looked around, with inquiring eyes that could see everything. It was dusky in the cabin with both door and window closed, but he observed with especial pleasure, among the abandoned articles, a small iron pot, suitable for cooking purposes, and a large water bowl. When he summed up all, it seemed to this resourceful son of the wilderness that Fortune had been very kind to them. Then he looked at Paul and distinctly saw a tremor pass over his frame.

"Paul," he said, "are you cold?"

"A little," replied Paul reluctantly. It hurt his pride to confess that he felt on the verge of physical collapse.

"Then we must have a fire, and I'm going to build it now."

"Won't it be dangerous?" asked Paul. "Won't it be seen?"

"Oh, no," replied Henry lightly. "We are alone in the forest now."

His tone was convincing to Paul, but Henry himself was aware that they were taking great risks. Yet they must be taken.

"Now, Paul," he said cheerfully, "you keep a good watch while I bring in deadwood. But first we will rake clean the welcoming hearth of our good friends who departed so quickly."

Ashes and dead coals were lying in the fireplace, and he raked them carefully to one side. Then he unbarred the door. The crisp October air rushed into the close, confined space, and it felt very welcome to Henry, but Paul shivered again.

"Sit down in one of those chairs and rest, Paul," he said, as he pointed to two homemade chairs that stood by the wall. "I'll be back in a minute or two."

Then he shut the door behind him.

"I must take the risk," he murmured. It was characteristic of Henry Ware, that in this emergency not even a vague thought of deserting his comrade entered his mind. And faithful as he was to Paul, Paul would have been as faithful to him. Both meant to finish together their great errand.

Henry looked around. The settler had made but little impression upon the surrounding forest. The trees had been cut away for a distance of fifteen or twenty paces on every side, but the wilderness still curved in solid array about the lone cabin, as if it would soon reclaim its own and blot out the sole sign of man's intrusion. Everywhere the foliage glowed with the deep reds and yellows and browns of October, and afar hung a faint bluish haze, like an early sign of Indian summer. The slight wind among the leaves had a soothing note, and breathed of nothing but peace. Peace Henry Ware devoutly hoped that it would be.

His task was easy. The forest all about was littered with the fallen and dead wood of preceding years, and in a few moments he gathered up an armful, with which he returned to the house. Then he brought in dry leaves, and heaped leaves and wood together in the chimney-place. He glanced at

Paul and saw him trembling. As if by chance he touched his comrade's hand, and it felt ice-cold. But he did not depart one jot from his cheerful manner, all his words showing confidence.

"Now, Paul," he said, "In less than a minute you'll see burning before you the finest, warmest, glowingest and most comfortable fire in all the West."

Paul's eyes glistened.

Henry drew forth flint and steel, and with a few strokes sent out the vivifying spark. The dry leaves caught, a light flame formed, the wood caught in its turn, and then the blaze, leaping high, roared up the chimney. In a moment the hearth was glowing, and presently a bed of deep red coals began to grow.

Paul uttered a low laugh of joy, and spread out his hands to the flames. The red light glowed across the delicately cut but strong face of the boy, and Henry noticed now that all his color was gone, leaving his features white and drawn.

"Sit a little closer, Paul, a little closer," he said, still in tones of high, good cheer. "Isn't it the most beautiful fire you ever saw?"

"Yes," said Paul, "it is. It looks mighty good, but it's curious that it doesn't warm me more."

Henry had closed the door, and it was already very hot in the cabin; but he decided now on another step—one that would take more time, but it must be taken.

"Paul," he said, "I'm going out in the woods to look for something, and I may be gone at least half an hour. Take good care of our house while I'm away."

"All right," said Paul. But as he spoke his teeth struck together.

Henry closed the door once more, with himself on the outside. Then he walked to the edge of the clearing, and looked back at the cabin. He had been careful to choose the kind of wood that would give out the least smoke, and only a thin column rose from the chimney. The wind caught it before it rose far, and it was lost among the great trees of the wilderness. It seemed again to Henry Ware that Fortune was kind to them.

The single look sufficed, and then, drawing his long-bladed hunting knife from its sheath, he began to search the forest. Henry Ware had been long a captive among the Northwestern Indians, and he had learned their lore. He had gained from the medicine men and old squaws a knowledge of herbs, and now he was to put it to use. He sought first for the bitter root called Indian turnip, and after looking more than twenty minutes found it. He dug it up with his sharp knife, and then, with another search of a quarter of an hour, he found the leaves of wild sage, already dried in the autumn air. A third quarter of an hour and he added to his collection two more herbs, only the Indian names of which were known to him. Then he returned to the house, to find that the icy torrent in Paul's blood had now become hot.

"I can't stand this, Henry," he said. "We've got the door and window closed and a big fire burning, and I'm just roasting hot."

"Only a little while longer," said Henry. "The truth is, Paul, you've had a big chill, and now the fever's come on you. But I'm Dr. Ware, and I'm going to cure you. When I was up there among the Indians, I learned their herb remedies, and mighty good some of 'em are, too. They're particularly strong with chills and fever, and I'm going to make you a tea that'll just lay hold of you and drive all the fever out of your veins. What you want to do, Paul, is to sweat, and to sweat gallons."

He spoke in rapid, cheerful tones, wishing to keep up Paul's spirits, in which effort he succeeded, as Paul's eyes sparkled, and a gleam of humor lighted up his face.

"Well, Dr. Ware," he said, "I'm mighty glad to know what's the matter with me. Somehow you always feel better when you know, and I'll trust to your tea."

He meant what he said. He knew Henry too well to doubt him. Any assertion of his inspired him with supreme confidence.

"Now, Paul," Henry resumed, "you keep house again, and I'll find where our unknown friend got his drinking water."

He took the iron pot that he had noticed and went forth into the forest. It was an instinctive matter with one bred in the wilderness like Henry Ware to go straight to the spring. The slope of the land led him, and he found it under the lee of a little hill, near the base of a great oak. Here a stream, six inches broad, an inch deep, but as clear as burnished silver, flowed from beneath a stony outcrop in the soil, and then trickled away, in a baby stream, down a little ravine. There was a strain of primitive poetry, the love of the wild, in Henry's nature, and he paused to admire.

He saw that human hands had scraped out at the source a little fountain, where one might dip up pails of water, and looking down into the clear depths he beheld his own face reflected back in every detail. It seemed to Henry Ware, who knew and loved only the wilderness, that the cabin, with its spring and game at its very doors, would have made a wonderfully snug home in the forest. Had it been his own, he certainly would have undertaken to defend it against any foe who might come.

But all these thoughts passed in a second, treading upon one another's heels. Henry was at the fountain scarcely a moment before he had filled the pot and was on the way back to the cabin. Then he cast in the herbs, put it upon a bed of red coals, and soon a steam arose. He found an old, broken-sided gourd among the abandoned utensils, and was able to dip up with it a half dozen drinks of the powerful decoction. He induced his comrade to swallow these one after another, although they were very bitter, and Paul made a wry face. Then he drew from the corner the rude bedstead of the departed settler, and made Paul lie upon it beside the fire.

"Now go to sleep," he said, "while I watch here."

Paul was a boy of great sense, and he obeyed without question, although it was very hot before the fire. But it was not a dry, burning heat that seemed to be in the blood; it was a moist, heavy heat that filled the pores. He began to feel languid and drowsy, and a singular peace stole over him. It did not matter to him what happened. He was at rest, and there was his faithful comrade on guard, the comrade who never failed. The coals glowed deep red, and the sportive flames danced before him. Happy visions passed through his brain, and then his eyes closed. The red coals passed away and the sportive flames ceased to dance. Paul was asleep.

Henry Ware sat in silence on one of the chairs at the corner of the hearth, and when Paul's breathing became long, deep, and regular, he saw that he had achieved the happy result. He rose soundlessly, and put his hand upon Paul's forehead. It came back damp. Paul was in a profuse perspiration, and his fever was sinking rapidly. Henry knew now that it was only a matter of time, but he knew equally well that in the Indian-haunted wilderness time was perhaps the most difficult of all things to obtain.

No uneasiness showed in his manner. Now the lad, born to be a king of the wilderness, endowed with all the physical qualities, all the acute senses of a great, primitive age, was seen at his best. He was of one type and his comrade of another, but they were knitted together with threads of steel. It had fallen to his lot to do a duty in which he could excel, and he would shirk no detail of it.

He brought in fresh wood and piled it on the hearth. At a corner of the cabin stood an old rain barrel half full of water. He emptied the barrel and brought it inside. Then, by means of many trips to the little spring with the iron pot, he filled it with fresh water. All the while he moved soundlessly, and Paul's deep, peaceful slumber was not disturbed. He took on for the time many of the qualities that he had learned from his Indian captors. Every sense was alert, attuned to hear the slightest sound that might come from the forest, to feel, in fact, any alien presence as it drew near.

When the store of water was secure he looked at their provisions. They had enough venison in their knapsacks to last a day or two, but he believed that Paul would need better and tenderer food. The question, however, must wait a while.

The day was now almost gone. Great shadows hovered over the eastern forest, and in the west the sun glowed in its deepest red as it prepared to go. Henry put his hand upon Paul's forehead again. The perspiration was still coming, but the fever was now wholly gone. Then he took his rifle and went to the door. He stood there a moment, a black figure in the red light of the setting sun. Then he slid

noiselessly into the forest. The twilight had deepened, the red sun had set, and only a red cloud in the sky marked its going. But Henry Ware's eyes pierced the shadows, and none in the forest could have keener ears than his. He made a wide circle around the cabin, and found only silence and peace. Here and there were tracks and traces of wild animals, but they would not disturb; it was for something else that he looked, and he rejoiced that he could not find it. When he returned to the cabin the last fringe of the red cloud was gone from the sky, and black darkness was sweeping down over the earth. He secured the door, looked again to the fastenings of the window, and then sat down before the fire, his rifle between his knees.

Paul's slumber and exhaustion alike were so deep that he would not be likely to waken before morning, so Henry judged, and presently he took out a little of the dried venison and ate it. He would boil some of it in the pot in the morning for Paul's breakfast, but for himself it was good enough as it now was. His strong white teeth closed down upon it, and a deep feeling of satisfaction came over him. He, too, was resting from great labors, and from a task well done. He realized now, for the first time, how great a strain had been put upon him, both mind and body.

The night was sharp and chill, but it was very warm and comfortable in the little cabin. Paul slept on, his breathing as regular as the ticking of a clock, healthy color coming back into his pale face as he slept. Henry's own eyes began to waver. A deep sense of peace and rest soothed him, heart and brain. He had meant to watch the night through, but even he had reached the limit of endurance. The faint moaning of the wind outside, like the soft, sweet note of a violin, came to his ears, and lulled him to slumber. The fire floated far away, and, still sitting in his chair with his rifle between his knees, he slept.

Outside the darkness thickened and deepened. The forest was a solid black, circling wall, and the cabin itself stood in deepest shadow. Inside a fresh piece of wood caught, and the blaze burned brighter and higher. It threw a glow across the faces of the two boys, who slept, the one lying upon the bed and the other sitting in the chair, with the rifle between his knees. It was a scene possible only in the great wilderness of *Kain-tuck-ee*.

Meanwhile word was sent by unknown code through the surrounding forest to all its inhabitants that a great and portentous event had occurred. Not long before they had welcomed the departure of the strange intruder, who had come and cut down the forest and built the house. Then, with the instinct that leaped into the future, they saw the forest and themselves claiming their own again; the clearing would soon be choked with weeds and bushes, the trees would grow up once more, the cabin would rot and its roof fall, and perhaps the bear or the panther would find a cozy lair among its timbers.

Now the strange intruders had come again. The fox, creeping to the edge of the clearing, saw with his needlelike eyes a red gleam through the chinks of the cabin. The red gleam smote him with terror, and he slunk away. The wolf, the rabbit, and the deer came; they, too, saw the red gleam, and fled, with the same terror striking at their hearts. All, after the single look, sank back into the shadows, and the forest was silent and deserted. Paul and Henry, as they slept, were guarded by a single gleam of fire from all enemies save human kind.

But as the night thickened there had been a whirring in the air not far away. An hour earlier the twilight had been deepened by something that looked like a great cloud coming before the sun. It was a cloud that moved swiftly, and it was made of a myriad of motes, closely blended. It resolved itself soon into a vast flock of wild pigeons, millions and millions flying southward to escape the coming winter.

Presently they settled down upon the forest for the night, and all the trees were filled with the chattering multitude. Often the bough bent almost to the ground beneath the weight of birds, clustered so thick that they could scarcely find a footing. The fox and the wolf that had looked at the lone cabin came back now to seek, an easier prey.

Henry Ware slept until far after midnight, and then he awoke easily, without jerk or start. The fire had burned down, and a deep bed of coals lay on the hearth. Paul still slept, and when Henry

touched him he found that he had ceased to perspire. No trace of the fever was left. Yet he would be very weak when he awoke, and he would need nourishing food. It was his comrade's task to get it. Henry took his rifle and went outside. The moon was shining now, and threw a dusky silver light over all the forest. He might find game, and, if so, he resolved to risk a shot. The chances were that no human being save himself would hear it. He felt rather than saw that nothing had happened while he slept. No enemy to be feared had come, while all his own strength and elasticity had returned to him. Never had he felt stronger or more perfectly attuned in body and mind.

He moved again in a circuit about the cabin, watching carefully, and now and then looking up among the trees. Perhaps an opossum might be hanging from a bough! But he saw nothing until he widened his circuit, and then he ran directly into the myriads of wild pigeons. Here was food for an army, and he quickly secured plenty of it. The danger of the rifle report was gone, as he had nothing to do but take a stick and knock off a bough as many of the pigeons as he wished. Then he hastened back to the cabin with his welcome burden. Paul still slept, and it pleased Henry to give him a surprise. He kindled the fire afresh, cleaned two of the youngest, fattest, and tenderest of the pigeons, and began to boil them in the pot.

When the water simmered and pleasant odors arose, he was afraid that Paul would awake, as he turned once or twice on his bed and spoke a few incoherent words. But he continued to sleep, nevertheless, and at last the pigeon stew was ready, throwing out a savory odor.

The day was now coming, and Henry opened the window. The forest, wet with morning dew, was rising up into the light, and afar in the east shone the golden glory of the sun. He drew a deep breath of the fresh, good air, and decided to leave the window open. Then he filled the broken gourd with the grateful stew, and, holding it in his right hand, shook Paul violently with his left. Paul, who had now slept his fill, sat up suddenly and opened his eyes.

"Here, Paul, open your mouth," said Henry commandingly, "and take this fine stew. Dr. Ware has prepared it for you specially, and it is sure to bring back your strength and spirits. And there's plenty more of it."

Paul sniffed hungrily, and his eyes opened wider and wider.

"Why—why, Henry!" he exclaimed. "How long have I slept, and where did you get this?"

"You've slept about twenty hours, more or less," replied Henry, laughing with satisfaction, "and this is wild pigeon stew. Fifteen or twenty millions roasted out there in the forest last night, and they won't miss the dozen or so that I've taken. Here, hurry up; I'm hungry, and it's my turn next."

Paul said no more, but, thankful enough, took the stew and ate it. Then, by turns, they used the broken gourd and ate prodigiously, varied by drinks from the water barrel. They had fasted long, they had undergone great exertions, and it took much to remove the sharp edge from their appetites. But it was done at last, and they rested content.

"Henry," said Paul, upon whose mind the fortunate advent of the wild pigeons made a deep impression, "while we have had great mischances, it seems to me also that we have been much favored by Providence. Our finding of this cabin was just in time, and then came the pigeons as if specially for us. You remember in the Bible how the Lord sent the manna in the wilderness for the Israelites; it seems to me that He's doing the same thing for us."

"It looks so," replied Henry reverently. "The Indians with whom I once lived think that the Great Spirit often helps us when we need it most, and I suppose that their Great Spirit—or Manitou, as they call Him—is just the same as our God."

Both boys were now silent for a while. They had been reared by devout parents. Life in the forest deepens religious belief, and it seemed to them that there had been a special interposition in their favor.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Paul at length.

"We can't take up our journey again for a day or two," replied Henry. "We've got to get that powder to Marlowe some time or other. Wareville sent us to do the job, and we'll do it; but you are

yet too weak, Paul, to start again. You don't know how really weak you are. Just you get up and walk about a little."

Paul rose and walked back and forth across the room, but in a few moments he became dizzy and had to sit down. Then he uttered an impatient little cry.

"You're right, Henry," he said, "and I can't help it. Find the horses and take the powder to Marlowe by yourself. I guess I can get back to Wareville, or come on later to Marlowe."

Henry laughed.

"You know I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing, Paul," he said. "Besides, I don't think they need to be in any hurry at Marlowe for that powder. We'll rest here two or three days, and then take a fresh start."

Paul said no more. It would have been a terrible blow to him to have no further share in the enterprise, but he had forced himself nevertheless to make the offer. Now he leaned back luxuriously, and was content to wait.

"Of course," said Henry judicially, "we run risks here. You know that, Paul"

"Everybody who lives in Kentucky runs risks, and big ones," said Paul.

"Then we'll sit here for the present and watch the forest. I don't like to keep still, but it's a fine country to look at, isn't it, Paul?"

The love of the wilderness was upon Henry, and his eyes glowed as he looked at the vast surrounding forest, the circling wall of deep-toned, vivid colors. For him, danger, if absent, did not exist, and there was inspiration in the crisp breeze that came over a thousand miles of untenanted woods. He sat in the doorway, the door now open, and stretched his long legs luxuriously. He was happy; while he might be anxious to go on with the powder, he pined for neither Wareville nor Marlowe for their own sakes.

Paul looked at his comrade with understanding and sympathy. The forest made its appeal to him also, but in another way; and since Henry was content, he would be content, too. Used as he was to hardships and narrow quarters, the little cabin would not be a bad place in which to pass two or three days. He turned back to the fire and held out his hands before the mellow blaze.

Henry examined the forest again, widening his circle, and saw no traces of an enemy. He judged that they had passed either to east or west, and that he and Paul would not be molested just yet, although he had no confidence in their permanent security. He saw a deer, but in view of their bountiful supply of pigeons he did not risk a shot, and returned before noon, to find Paul rapidly regaining his strength. He cooked two more of the pigeons in their precious iron pot, and then they rested.

They left both door and window open now, and they could see forest and sky. Henry called attention to a slight paleness in the western heavens, and then noted that the air felt damp.

"It will rain to-night, Paul," he said, "and it is a good thing for you, in your weakened condition, that we have a roof."

They ate pigeon again for supper, and their wilderness appetites were too sharp to complain of sameness. They had barred window and door, and let the fire die down to a bed of glowing coals, and while they ate, Paul heard the first big drops of rain strike on the board roof. Other drops came down the chimney, fell in the coals, and hissed as they died. Paul shivered, and then felt very good indeed in the dry little cabin.

"You were a real prophet, Henry," he said. "Here's your storm."

"Not a storm," said Henry, "but a long, cold, steady rain. Even an Indian would not want to be out in it, and bear and panther will hunt their holes."

The drops came faster, and then settled into a continuous pour. Paul, after a while, opened the window and looked out. Cold, wet air struck his face, and darkness, almost pitchy, enveloped the cabin. Moon and stars were gone, and could not see the circling wail of the forest. The rain beat with a low, throbbing sound on the board roof, and, with a kind of long sigh, on the ground outside. It

seemed to Paul a very cold and a very wet rain indeed, one that would be too much for any sort of human beings, white or red.

"I think, we're safe to-night, Henry," he said, as he closed and fastened the window.

"Yes, to-night," replied Henry.

Paul slept a dreamless sleep, lulled by the steady pour of the rain on the roof, and when he awoke in the morning the sun was shining brightly, without a cloud in the sky. But the forest dripped with rain. He was strong enough now to help in preparing the breakfast, and Henry spoke with confidence of their departure the next morning.

The hours passed without event, but when Henry went as usual through the forest that afternoon, he came upon a footprint. He followed it and found two or three more, and then they were lost on rocky ground. The discovery was full of significance to him, and he thought once of hurrying back to the cabin, and of leaving with Paul at once. But he quickly changed his mind. In the forest they would be without defense save their own strong arms, while the cabin was made of stout logs. And perhaps the danger would pass after all. Already the twilight was coming, and in the darkness his own footprints would not be seen.

Paul was at the door when Henry returned, and he did not notice anything unusual in his comrade's face, but Henry advised that they stay inside now. Then he looked very carefully to the bars of the door and the window, and Paul understood. The danger flashed instantly on his mind, but his strong will prepared him to meet it.

"You think we are likely to be besieged?" he said.

"Yes," replied Henry.

Paul did not ask why Henry knew. It was sufficient that he did know, and he examined his arms carefully. Then began that long period of waiting so terrible to a lad of his type. It seemed that the hours would never pass. The coals on the hearth were dead now, and there was no light at all in the cabin. But his eyes grew used to the dusk, and he saw his comrade sitting on one of the benches, one rifle across his lap and the other near, always listening.

Paul listened, too. The night before the rain had fallen on the board roof with a soothing sound, but now he could hear nothing, not even the wind among the trees. He began to long for something that would break this ominous, deadly silence, be it ever so slight—the sound of a falling nut from a tree, or of a wild animal stirring in the undergrowth—but nothing came. The same stillness, heavy with omens and presages, reigned in all the forest.

CHAPTER IV

THE SIEGE

The whole night passed without event and the day came. Paul saw the light grow deeper and deeper, but nothing stirred in the forest. It stretched before him, a living curve of glowing red and yellow and brown, but it was now like a sea of dangerous depths, and the little cabin was their sole island of safety.

"It's a good thing we brought the extra rifles with us," said Henry. "They look like good weapons, and they may save us in case of a rush. Ah, there they come!"

Paul had noticed nothing, but Henry had seen the bushes at the edge of the forest quiver, and then move contrary to the wind. His eye did not rest upon any brown body, but he knew as well as if they had cried out that the warriors were there. How many? That was the question that concerned him most. If a great war party, they might hang on a long time; but if only a small one, he and Paul might beat them off as often as they came. They had four rifles, plenty of ammunition, enough food to last several days, and he thanked God for the providential presence of the rain barrel.

These were but brief passing thoughts, and he never ceased to watch the forest. Still no sign of a face, but now and then the unnatural quiver of the bushes, and above them the sun spinning a fine golden, veil over all the great wilderness.

"Our guests have come, Paul," said he, "but from safe cover they are inspecting our front yard."

"And they don't know yet whether or not they would like to disport themselves on our lawn."

"That is just it. They have doubts about their welcome."

"That being so," said Paul, in the light, jesting spirit that he loved, "I'll just wait until they knock at our door. Meanwhile I'll take a drink from that lucky cistern of ours."

He bent his head into the barrel, and as he drank he felt fresh strength and courage rushing into his veins.

"It was great luck, wasn't it, to find this barrel?" he said.

"It certainly was," replied Henry, and his words came from the bottom of his heart. "Now you watch while I take a drink."

Paul did so, but he noticed nothing unusual in the woods. The faint signs that Henry read with such an unerring eye were hidden from him. But his skill was sufficient to cover all the cleared space. No warrior could pass there unseen by him. Henry rejoined him.

"You watch from one side and I'll take the other," he said.

They did so, but the single room of the cabin was so small that they were only a few feet from each other, and could talk together in low tones.

"It will be a trial of patience," said Henry. "The Indian always has more time than anybody else in the world, and he is willing to make the most of it."

Paul, too, knew that Shawnees, no matter what their numbers, would not yet risk a headlong attack on the cabin, and now his curiosity as to what they would do was aroused. It was surprise that Henry and he must guard against. What was to be expected? His sense of curiosity was as keenly aroused as his sense of danger.

Over an hour dragged slowly by, minute by minute. The sun blazed brilliantly over the wilderness, and the shut little cabin grew close and hot. No fresh air came except by the loopholes, and it was not enough for coolness. Paul's forehead grew damp, and his eyes ached from continual watching at the loophole. Curiosity now began to give way to anger. If they were going to do anything, why didn't they do it? He watched the forest so much and so intently that he began to create images there for himself. A tall stump was distorted into the figure of an Indian warrior, a clump of bushes took the shape of an entire group of Shawnees, and many savage, black eyes looked from the leaves.

Paul's reason told him that he beheld nothing, but his fancy put them there, nevertheless. He saw presently a little jet of smoke, rising like a white feather; he heard a report, and then the sound of a bullet burying itself with a soft sigh in a log of the cabin. He laughed at the futility of it, but Henry said:

"They're just trying us a little—skirmishing, so to speak. Be careful there, Paul! A chance bullet might catch you in the eye at the loophole."

More lead came from the forest, and there was a sharp crackle of rifle fire. Bullets thudded into the stout walls of the cabin, and Paul's soul swelled with derision. His vivid mind pictured himself as safe from the warriors as if they were a thousand miles away. He was attracted suddenly by a slight, gurgling sound, and then a cry of dismay from Henry. He wheeled in alarm. Henry had sprung to the water barrel, the precious contents of which were oozing from a little round hole in the side, about two thirds of the way up. A bullet had entered one of the loopholes and struck the barrel. It was an unfortunate chance, one in a thousand, and had not Henry's acute ear detected at once the sound of flowing water, it might have proved a terrible loss.

But Henry was rapidly stuffing a piece of buckskin, torn from his hunting shirt, into the little round hole, and he waved Paul back to the wall.

"You stay there and watch, Paul," he said. "I'll fix this."

The buckskin stopped all the flow but a slight drip. Then, with his strong hunting knife, he cut a piece of wood from the bench, whittled it into shape, and drove it tightly into the bullet hole.

"That's all secure," he said, with a sigh of relief. "Now I must get it out of range."

He wheeled it to a point in the cabin at which no chance bullet could reach it, and then resumed the watch with Paul.

"Aren't you glad, Paul," said Henry, "that you were not in the place of the water barrel?"

"Yes," replied Paul lightly, "because a piece of buckskin and a round stick wouldn't have healed the damage so quickly."

He spoke lightly because he was still full of confidence. The little cabin was yet an impregnable castle to him. The crackle of rifle fire died, the last plume of white smoke rose over the forest, drifted away, and was lost in the brilliant sunshine. Silence and desolation again held the wilderness.

"Nothing will happen for some hours now," said Henry cheerfully, "so the best thing that we can do, Paul, is to have dinner."

"Yes," said Paul, with his quick fancy. "We can dine sumptuously—venison and pigeon and spring water."

"And lucky we are to have them," said Henry.

They ate of the venison and pigeon, and they drank from the barrel. They were not creatures of luxury and ease, and they had no complaint to make. When they finished, Henry said:

"Paul, you ought to take a nap, and then you'll be fresh for to-night, when things will be happening."

Paul at first was indignant at the idea that he should go to sleep with the enemy all about them, but Henry soon persuaded him what a wise thing it would be. Besides, the air was all the time growing closer and warmer in the little cabin, and he certainly needed sleep. His head grew heavy and his eyelids drooped. He lay down on the bed, and in a surprisingly quick time was slumbering soundly.

Henry looked at the sleeping lad, and his look was a compound of great friendship and admiration. He knew that Paul was not, like himself, born to the wilderness, and he respected the courage and skill that could triumph nevertheless. But it was only a fleeting look. His eyes turned back to the forest, where he watched lazily; lazily, because he knew with the certainty of divination that they would not attempt anything until dark, and he knew with equal certainty that they would attempt something then.

He awakened Paul in two hours, and took his place on the bench. He had not slept at all the night before, when they were expecting a foe who had not yet come, and he, too, must be fresh when the conflict was at hand.

"When you see shadows in the clearing, wake me, without fail, Paul," he said.

Then he closed his eyes, and like Paul slept almost at once. Neither the weary waiting nor the danger could upset his nerves so much that sleep would not come, and his slumber was dreamless.

The afternoon waned. Paul, peeping from the loophole, saw the sun, red like fire, seeking its bed in the west, but the shadows were not yet over the clearing. Refreshed by his sleep, and his nerves steadied, he no longer saw imaginary figures in the wilderness. It was just a wall of red and yellow and brown, and it was hard to believe that men seeking his life lay there. By and by the east began to turn gray, and over the clearing fell the long shadows of coming twilight. Then Paul awakened Henry, and the two watched together.

The shadows lengthened and deepened, a light wind arose and moaned among the oaks and beeches, a heavy, dark veil was drawn across the sky, and the forest melted into a black blur. Now Henry looked with all his eyes and listened with all his ears, because he knew that what the warriors wanted, the covering veil of the night, had come.

It was a very thick and black night, too, and that was against him and Paul, as the objects in the clearing were hidden almost as well now as anything in the forest. Hence he trusted more to ear than to eye. But he could yet hear nothing, save the wind stirring the leaves and the grass. Inside the little cabin it grew dark, too, but their trained eyes, becoming used to the gloom, were able to see each other well enough for all the needs of the defense.

Time passed slowly on, and to Paul every moment was tense and vivid. The darkness was far more suggestive of danger than the day had been. He took his eyes now and then from the loophole, for a moment, to glance at Henry's face, and about the third or fourth time he saw a sudden light leap into the eyes of his comrade. The next instant Henry thrust his rifle into the loophole and, taking quick aim, fired.

A long, quavering cry arose, and after that came a silence that lay very still and deadly upon Paul's soul. Henry had seen in the shadow a deeper shadow quiver, and he had fired instantly but with deadly aim. Paul, looking through the loophole on his own side of the cabin, could see nothing for a little space, but presently arose a patter of feet, and many forms darted through the dusk toward the cabin. He quickly fired one rifle, and then the other, but whether his bullets hit he could not tell. Then heavy forms thudded against the log walls of the hut, and through the loophole he heard deep breathing.

"They've gained the side of the cabin," said Henry, "and we can't reach 'em with our rifles now."

"I did my best, Henry," said Paul ruefully. Conflict did not appeal to him, but the wilderness left no choice.

"Of course, Paul," said Henry, with every appearance of cheerfulness, "it's not your fault. In such darkness as this they were bound to get there. But they are not inside yet by a long sight. Be sure you don't get in front of any of the loopholes."

There came a heavy push at the door, but neither it nor the bar showed the slightest sign of giving way. Henry laughed low.

"They can't get enough warriors against that door to push it in," he said.

The two boys rapidly reloaded the empty rifles, and now each crouched against the wall, where no chance bullet through a loophole could reach him. An eye unused to the darkness could have seen nothing there. Their figures were blended against the logs, and they did not speak, but each, listening intently, could hear what was going on outside. Paul's fancy, as usual, added to the reality. He heard men moving cautiously, soft footfalls going pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat around the cabin, and it seemed to him a stray word of advice or caution now and then.

The silence was broken suddenly by a blaze of fire that seemed to come through the wall, a report that roared like a cannon in the cabin. A spurt of smoke entered at one of the holes, and a bullet burred itself in the opposite wall. A savage had boldly thrust the muzzle of his rifle into a loophole and fired.

"Be still, Paul," whispered Henry. "They can't hit us, and they are wasting their ammunition."

A second shot was tried by the besiegers, but the result was only the roaring, echoing report, the smoke and the flame, and the bullet that found a vain target of wood. But to Paul, with an imagination fed by stories of mighty battles, it was like a cannonade. Great guns were trained upon Henry and himself. A thin, fine smoke from the two shots had entered the cabin, and it floated about, tickling his nostrils, and adding, with its savor, to the fever that began to rise in his blood. He dropped to his knees, and was creeping, rifle ready, toward one of the loopholes, eager with the desire to fire back, when Henry's strong hand fell upon his shoulder.

"I understand what you want, Paul," he whispered. "I, too, feel it, but it pays us to wait. Let 'em waste their lead."

Paul stopped, ashamed of himself, and his blood grew cooler. He was not one to wish anybody's life, and again his mind rebelled at the necessity of conflict.

"Thank you, Henry," he said, and resumed his place by the wall.

No more shots were fired. The warriors could not know whether or not their bullets had hit a human mark, and Henry inferred that they would wait a while, crouched against the cabin. He reckoned that when they did move they would attack the door, and he noiselessly made an additional prop for it with the heavy wooden bench. But the faint sound of footsteps suddenly ceased, and Henry, listening intently, could hear nothing save the rising wind. He looked through one of the loopholes, but he could not see anything of the savages. Either they were still crouching against the wall, or had slipped back to the forest. But he saw enough to tell him that the night was growing cloudy, and that the air was damp.

Presently rain fell in a slow drizzle, but Henry still watched at the loophole, and soon he caught a glimpse of two parallel rows of men bearing something heavy, and approaching the cabin. They had secured a tree trunk, and would batter down the door; but they must come within range, and Henry smiled to himself. Then he beckoned to Paul to come to his side.

"Bring me your two rifles," he whispered. "This is the only place from which we can reach them now, and I want you to pass me the loaded guns as fast as I can fire them."

Paul came and stood ready, although his mind rebelled once more at the need to shoot. Henry looked again, and saw the brown files approaching. He thrust the muzzle of the rifle through the hole and fired at a row of brown legs, and then, with only a second between, he discharged another bullet at the same target. Cries of pain and rage arose, there was a thud as the heavy log was dropped to the ground, and Henry had time to send a third shot after the fleeing warriors as they ran for the forest.

"They won't try that again," said Henry. "They cannot approach the door without coming within range of the loophole, and they'll rest a while now to think up some new trick."

"What will be the end of it?" asked Paul.

"Nobody can say," replied the great youth calmly. "Indians don't stick to a thing as white men do; they may get tired and go away after a while, but not yet, and it's for you and me, Paul, to watch and fight."

A certain fierce resolve showed in his tone, and Paul knew that Henry felt himself a match for anything.

"Better eat and drink a little more, Paul," said Henry. "Take the half of a pigeon. We'll need all our strength."

Paul thought the advice good, and followed it. Then came another period of that terrible waiting.

CHAPTER V

THE FLIGHT

Paul was half reclining against the wall, when he suddenly saw Henry look up. Paul's eyes followed his comrade's, and then he heard a soft, faint sound over their heads. He understood at once. Danger had come from a new quarter. The Shawnees were upon the board roof, through which a rifle bullet could easily pass. The menace was serious, but the men up there could not see their targets below, and they themselves were in a precarious position.

Henry once pointed his rifle toward a portion of the roof from which a slight sound came, but for a reason that he did not give he withheld his fire. Then came a dead stillness, to be broken a few moments later by fierce war cries all around the cabin and a crash of rapid shots. It seemed to Paul that an attack in great force was being made from every side, and, thrusting his rifle through the loophole, he fired quickly at what he took to be the flitting form of a foe. The next moment he became aware of a terrible struggle in the cabin itself. He heard a thud, the roar of a rifle shot within the confined space, a fall, and then, in the half darkness, he saw two powerful figures writhing to and fro. One was Henry and the other a mighty Shawnee warrior, naked to the waist, and striving to use a tomahawk that he held in a hand whose wrist was clenched in the iron grasp of his foe. Lying almost at their feet was the body of another warrior, stark and dead.

Paul sprang forward, his second and loaded rifle in his hand.

"No, no, Paul!" cried Henry. "The chimney! Look to the chimney!"

Paul whirled about, and he was just in time. A savage warrior dropped down the great wide chimney that all the log cabins had, and fell lightly on his feet among the dead embers of a month ago. His face was distorted horribly with ferocity, and Paul, all the rage of battle upon him now that battle had come, fired squarely at the red forehead, the rifle muzzle only three feet away. The savage fell back and lay still among the cinders. The next instant the deep, long-drawn sigh of a life departing came from behind, and Paul whirled about again, his heart full of sickening fear.

But it was Henry who stood erect. He had wrenched the warrior's own tomahawk from him, and had slain him with it. His face was flushed with a victorious glow, but he stood there only a moment. Then he seized his own second and loaded rifle, and ran to the chimney. But nothing more came down it, and there were no more sounds of warriors walking on the roof. The three who had come had been daring men, but they had paid the price. The shots and shouts around continued for a little space, forms dashed heavily against the door, and then, as suddenly as it began, the tumult ceased.

Paul felt a chill of horror creeping through his bones. It was all so ghastly. The dead warriors lay, each upon his back, one among the dead coals, and Paul could hear nothing but his own and Henry's heavy breathing.

"It was a daring thing to do," said Henry at last, "to come down the chimney that way; but it has been done before in Kentucky."

Then they reloaded their rifles, but Paul was like one in a dream. It seemed to him now that he could not endure the long hours in the cabin with those dead faces on the floor staring at him with their dead eyes.

"Henry," he said, "we can't keep them here."

"No," replied Henry, "we can't; but we must wait a little."

Paul sat down on the bench. He felt for a moment faint and sick. The little cabin was full of rifle smoke, and it lay heavy in his nostrils and upon his lungs. He felt as if he were breathing poisoned air. But the smoke gradually drifted away up the chimney, and the thick, clogging feeling departed from his lungs and nostrils. Strength and spirit came back.

"How are we to get rid of them?" he asked, nodding toward the dead warriors.

"Let's wait an hour at least, and I'll show you," replied Henry.

The hour passed, but to Paul it seemed two. Then Henry took the largest of the warriors and dragged him to the wall just beneath the window. The second and third he did the same way.

"Now, Paul," he said, "you must take down the bar and open the window. Then I'll pitch them out. The besiegers will be surprised, and they won't have time to get at us."

Paul accepted his part of the task eagerly. There might be danger, but better that than having the dead men lying on the floor and staring at him with dead eyes. He took down the bar and quickly held the window open. Henry heaved up the bodies of the warriors and cast them out, one by one, each falling with a dull, heavy sound to the ground below. Then Paul slammed back the window and shot the bar into place. As he did so three or four rifles flashed from the forest, and the bullets pattered upon the heavy oaken shutter.

"Too late," said Henry, "We took 'em by surprise, as I thought we should."

Paul drew a long and deep breath. The cabin had taken on a brighter aspect.

"I'm mighty glad that's done," he said.

"If you'll listen carefully, I think you'll hear something later," said Henry.

Henry was right. In about half an hour they heard soft, shuffling noises beside the cabin, just under the window.

"They're taking away the dead warriors," said Henry.

"I don't want to fire on them while they're doing it," said Paul.

"Nor I," said Henry. "We might reach 'em, but I'm glad they're doing what they are."

The slight, sliding noises continued for a little while, and then they heard only the light sweep of the rain. On the roof it became a patter, and here and there a drop made its way between the boards and fell on the floor. It was soothing to Paul after the excitement of those terrible moments, and he felt a queer, pleasant languor. His eyes half closed, but his vague look fell on somber, dark spots on the floor, and the sight was repellent to him. He went to the hearth, heaped up the whole of the embers and ashes, and sprinkled them carefully over the spots, which would have been red in the light, but which were black in the night and gloom of the cabin. Henry watched him do it, but said nothing. He understood Paul, and gave him his sympathy.

Paul sat down again on the floor, and leaned against the wall. The pleasant, languorous feeling came once more, but he was roused suddenly by scattered rifle shots, and sprang up. Henry laughed.

"They're not attacking," he said. "It was only a volley, fired from the wood, to show how angry they are. I don't think we need expect anything more to-night. You might really go to sleep, Paul, if you feel like it."

"No, I will not!" exclaimed Paul with energy. "I won't do all the sleeping, and let you do all the watching. Besides, I couldn't sleep, anyhow; my nerves wouldn't let me. I looked sleepy just because I was tired, it's your time."

"All right," said Henry. "Now, you watch good, Paul."

Then Henry lay down upon the floor and closed his eyes. He might not have done so, but he felt sure that nothing more would be attempted that night; and if, by any chance, they should attack again, Paul would be sure to waken him in time. The rain grew harder on the roof, and its steady patter was like the rocking of a cradle to a child. His nerves were of steel, and the mechanism of his body and brain were not upset at all. The half-dropped lids dropped down entirely, and he slept, breathing peacefully.

Paul watched, his brief lethargy gone; but his accustomed eyes could see little now through the loopholes, only the dim forest and the rain, falling slowly but steadily. He and Henry seemed to be alone in the world. Outside all the wilderness was in gloom, but in the little cabin it was dry and warm. The few drops that came through the boards now and then, and fell with a little pat on the floor, were nothing. He and Henry were dry and safe, and it seemed to him that so far, at least, they had all the better of the battle. The glow of triumph came again.

Paul watched until dawn, and saw the sun spring up over the eastern forests. Then he awakened Henry, and the great youth, stretching himself, uttered a long sigh.

"That was fine, Paul!" he said, "fine! Now, what are our friends outside doing?"

"Nothing that I can see. There are only stumps in the clearing, and trees and hushes in the forest. I see no warrior."

Henry laughed, and his laugh had a most cheerful tone.

"They are not far away," he said. "It is likely they'll try to starve us out, or rather conquer us with thirst. They don't know anything about our barrel of water."

"Blessed barrel!" ejaculated Paul.

It seemed that Henry was right in his prediction. As long hours passed, the sun rose higher and higher, and it grew very close in the little cabin. Paul thought the warriors must have gone away, disgusted with their losses, but Henry cautioned him against savage patience. Toward noon they ate a little more of their pigeon and dried venison, and Paul looked with some dismay at the small portions that were left.

"Henry," he exclaimed, "there is enough for supper, and no more."

"Just so," said Henry, "and our enemies remain on guard. They'll wait for us."

He thought it best to put the case plainly and in all its hideous phases to Paul. While savages sometimes abandoned a siege very soon, they did not show signs of ceasing now. Perhaps they relied on starving out the besieged, and if they only knew the state of affairs within the cabin theirs was a good reliance.

Their brief dinner over, the two boys sat down on the floor, and from the loopholes on either side watched the forest. To Paul the whole air and atmosphere of the cabin had now become intolerably oppressive. At first it had been such a strong, snug place of refuge that he rejoiced, but at last his sensitive spirit was weighed down by the long delay, the gloom, and the silence. The sight of their limited rations brought to him all the future—the vigilant enemy on guard, the last little piece of food gone, then slow starvation, or a rush on the savage bullets and sure death. As usual, his uncommon imagination was depicting everything in vivid colors, far in advance.

But he said nothing, nor did Henry. They had already exhausted all subjects for talk, and they waited—Henry with real, and Paul with assumed patience. Fully two hours passed in silence, but after that time it was naturally Paul who spoke first.

"Henry," he said in a tone that indicated unbelief in his own words, "don't you think that they must have got tired and gone away?"

"No, they are surely in the forest about us; but since they won't go, Paul, you and I must leave to-night."

"What do you mean?" Paul's words expressed the greatest surprise.

Henry stood up, and figure, face, and words alike showed the greatest decision.

"Paul," he said, "our last piece of venison will soon be gone, and the Shawnees, I think, will stay, expecting to starve us out, which they can do; but the night shows all the signs of being very dark, and you and I must slip through their lines some way or other. Are you ready to try it?"

It was like a signal to Paul, those words, "Are you ready to try it?" He was ready to try anything now, as a release from the cabin, and a fine flare of color mounted to his cheeks as he replied:

"I'll follow you anywhere, Henry."

Henry said nothing more; Paul's reply was sufficient; but he resumed his position at the loophole, and attentively watched the heavens. Somber clouds were rolling up from the southwest and the air was growing cooler, but heavy with damp. Already the sun, so bright and pitiless in the morning, was obscured, and mists and vapors hung over the forest. He judged that it would be a dark night, with flurries of mist and rain, just suited to his purpose, and he felt a sensation of relief.

"Paul," he said, after a while, "I think we'd better take the two captured rifles with us again. If we come face to face with 'em, a couple of extra shots might save us."

"Whatever you say, Henry," replied Paul.

The afternoon passed slowly away, and the night came on thick and dark, as Henry had hoped. The rain fell again in intermittent showers, and it was carried in gusts by the wind. The two boys drank deeply from the barrel, and ate what was left of the venison.

"Be sure your powder horns are stopped up tight, Paul," said Henry. "We've got to keep our powder dry. The sooner we go the better, because the Shawnees won't be expecting us to come out so soon."

The darkness was now rolling up so thick and black that to Paul it seemed like a great sable curtain dropping its folds over them. It enveloped the forest, then the clearing, then the hut, and those within it. The inky sky was without a star. The puffs of rain rattled dismally on the roof of the old cabin. But all this somberness of nature brought comfort and lightness of heart to the besieged. Paul's spirits rose with the blackness of the night and the wildness of the rain.

"Are you all ready, Paul?" asked Henry.

"Yes," replied Paul cheerfully.

Accustomed as they were to the darkness of the cabin, they could not see each other's faces now, only the merest outlines of their figures.

"We must keep close together," said Henry. "It won't do to lose sight of each other."

He slipped to the door, lifted the bar and put it soundlessly on one side, and he and Paul stood together in the open space, just a moment, waiting and listening.

The rush of air and raindrops on Paul's face felt wonderfully cool and invigorating. His chest expanded and his spirits rose to the top. It was like leaving a prison behind.

"Step more lightly than you ever did before in your life," said Henry, and he and Paul put foot together on mother earth. The very pressure of the damp earth felt good to Paul all the way through his moccasins. A step or two from the door they paused again, waiting and listening. The forest was invisible, and so were the stumps in the clearing. But nothing stirred. Henry's acute ear told him that.

"We'll follow the wall around to the other side of the cabin," he whispered to Paul. "They don't know yet that we've come out, and naturally they'll watch the door closest. Be careful where you put your feet."

But the very dampness prevented any rustle in the weeds and grass, and they passed to the other side of the cabin without an alarm coming from the forest. There they paused again, and once more Henry whispered his instructions.

"I think we'd better get down and crawl," he said. "It's a hard thing to do with two rifles each, but we must do it until we get to the woods."

It was difficult, as Henry had said, and Paul felt, too, a sense of humiliation; but then one's life was at stake, and without hesitation he dropped to his knees, crawling slowly after the dark figure of his comrade. Henry made no sound and Paul but a little, not enough to be heard ten feet away. Henry stopped now and then, as if he would listen intently a moment or two, and Paul, of course, stopped just behind him. Fortune seemed to favor their daring. The great silence lasted, broken only by puffs of wind and rain, and the wet leaves of the forest rubbing softly against each other. Paul looked back once. The cabin was already melting into a blur, although not twenty yards distant, and in as many yards more it would be lost completely in the surrounding darkness.

Now the forest was only a few yards away, but to Paul it seemed very far. His knees and wrists began to ache, and the two rifles became awkward for him to carry. He wondered how Henry could go forward with so much ease, but he resolved to persist as long as his comrade led the way.

The dark outline of the wood slowly came nearer, then nearer yet, and then they entered it, pressing silently among the hushes and the black shadows of the lofty trees. Here Henry rose to his feet and Paul imitated him, thankful to rest his aching knees and wrists, and to stand up in the form and spirit of a man.

"We may slip through unseen and unheard," whispered Henry, "and then again we may not. Come on; we'll need all our caution now."

But as they took the first step erect, a cry arose behind them, a cry so full of ferocity and chagrin that Paul absolutely shuddered from head to foot. It came from the clearing, near the hut, and Paul, without the telling of it, knew what had happened.

"They've tried the door of the cabin, only to find it open and the place empty," whispered Henry. "Now, we must not go too fast, Paul. In this pitchy darkness not even a Shawnee could see us ten feet away, but he could hear us. No noise, Paul!"

They stole forward, one close behind the other, going but slowly, seeking with sedulous care to avoid any noise that would bring the savages upon them. The rain, which had grown steadier, was a Godsend. It and the wind together kept up a low, moaning sound that hid the faint pressure of Paul's footsteps. The cry behind them at the cabin was repeated once, echoing away through the black and dripping forest. After that Paul heard nothing, but to the keener ears of Henry came now and then the soft, sliding sound of rapid footsteps, a word or two uttered low, and the faint swish of bushes, swinging back into place after a body passed. He knew that the warriors were now seeking eagerly for them, but with the aid of the intense darkness he hoped that he and Paul would steal safely through their lines. They went slowly forward for perhaps half an hour, stopping often and listening. Once Henry's hand on Paul's shoulder, they sank a little lower in the bushes, and Henry, but not Paul, saw the shadowy outline of a figure passing near.

Fortunately the forest was very dense, but unfortunately the clouds began to thicken, and a rumble dull and low came from the far horizon. Then the clouds parted, cut squarely down the middle by a flash of lightning, and for a moment a dazzling glow of light played over the dripping forest. Everything was revealed by it, every twig and leaf stood out in startling distinctness, and Paul, by impulse, sank lower to hide himself among the bushes.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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