The Free Rangers eBook

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THE CALL

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

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

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

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

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

Yet the wilderness seemed to tell only of peace. The low song of the leaves was soothing and all innocence. The shiftless one was far beyond the farthest outpost of his kind, beyond the broad yellow current of the Mississippi, deep in the heart of the

primeval forest. He might travel full three hundred miles to the eastward and find no white cabin, while to westward his own kind were almost a world away. On all sides stretched the vast maze of forest and river, through which roamed only wild animals and wilder man.

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Shif'less Sol, from his post on the hill, examined the whole circle of the forest long and carefully. He seemed intent upon some unusual object. It was shown in the concentration of his look and the thoughtful pucker of his forehead. It was not game, because in a glade to windward, at the foot of the hill, five buffaloes grazed undisturbed and now and then uttered short, panting grunts to show their satisfaction. Presently a splendid stag, walking through the woods as if he were sole proprietor, scented the strange human odor, and threw up his head in alarm. But the figure on the hill, the like of which the deer had never seen before, did not stir or take notice, and His Lordship the Stag raised his head higher to see. The figure still did not stir, and, his alarm dying, the stag walked disdainfully away among the trees.

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

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

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

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

that they were clear, distinct and unmistakable, and then the peculiar little smile of satisfaction would pass again over his face.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“There’s something in what you say,” said Henry.

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

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

“I don’t think I ever saw the game so tame before,” said Henry.

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

“Nor I.”

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

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

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

“Yes,” he said, “I hear him, too. We’ll make him welcome.”

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

“Here he is,” said Henry.

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

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

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

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

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

“Bigger an’ finer than any o’ them old empires that Paul used to tell us about,” said Shif’less Sol.

“Yes,” said Henry.

The three looked at one another significantly.

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

“See!” he said, pointing with a long forefinger.

Their eyes followed, and they too recognized the man.

“He’ll be here in a minute,” said Shif’less Sol. “He jest eats up space.”

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

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

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

“I reckon you didn’t have much trouble follerin’ that trail o’ ourn,” he said.

Jim Hart answered the laugh with a grin.

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

“We’re all here ’cept the fifth feller,” said Tom Ross.

“The fifth will come,” said Henry emphatically.

“Uv course,” said Tom Ross with equal emphasis.

“And when he comes,” said Shif’less Sol, “we take right hold o’ the big job.”

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

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

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“Rain,” said Henry. “I’m sorry of that. I wish it wouldn’t break before he overtook us.”

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

“You’re shorely right, Sol,” said Jim Hart. “We’re bound to take the best uv care uv ourselves.”

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

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

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

“He’s coming,” said Henry in the quiet tone that indicated nothing more than a certainty fulfilled.

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

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

“Here we are, Paul,” said Shif’less Sol. “We’ve fixed fur you.”

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

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

“We’re all here now,” said Henry.

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

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

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“We’re to stick to the task that we’ve set ourselves through thick and through thin, through everything?”

“Yes! Yes!”

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

“Yes! yes!”

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

“Yes! yes!”

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

“Yes! yes!” came forth with deep emphasis.

CHAPTER II

A FOREST ENVOY

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

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

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

“You tell me, Senor Wyatt,” said Don Francisco Alvarez, the leader of the Spanish band, “that the new settlers in Kaintock[A] have twice driven off the allied tribes, and that, if

they are left alone another year or two, they will go down so deep in the soil that they can never be uprooted. Is it not so?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You speak my sentiments, Senor Wyatt,” he said, “and you speak them in a language that I scarcely expected.”

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

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

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

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

Braxton Wyatt nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Francisco Alvarez, frowned slightly.

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes, from the settlements of which we speak,” replied Wyatt quickly and in a low tone. He had no time to add more, because Paul was now in the Spanish camp, and was gravely saluting the leader, whom he had recognized instantly to be such by his dress and manner. Francisco Alvarez rose to his feet, and politely returned the salute. He saw at once a quality in the stranger that was not wholly of the wilderness. Braxton Wyatt nodded, but Paul took no notice whatever of him. A flush broke again through the tan of the renegade’s face.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It may be so, but It is not a question that should arise. The King of Spain is at peace with us. We even hear, deep in the woods as we are, that he may take our part against

England. France already is helping us. So I have come to ask you to take no share in plots against us, not to listen to evil counsels, and not to turn ear to traitors, who, having been traitors to one people, can readily be traitors to another."

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

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

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

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

“Cotter! Paul Cotter is my name.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Francisco Alvarez frowned, and assumed a haughty look.

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

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

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

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“I do not approve of rebels,” said Alvarez.

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

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

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

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

“I pray you not to be in haste, Senor Cotter,” he said. “Be our guest for a while.”

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

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

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

The Spaniard delicately stroked his pointed beard.

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

“As a prisoner?”

“If you wish to call it so.”

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

The Spaniard delicately stroked his pointed beard again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What friends?” asked the Spaniard incredulously.

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

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

But Braxton Wyatt ignored the taunt in his anxiety.

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

The Spaniard smiled in his superior way, and, turning to his men, began to give directions for the camp that night. Sunset was not far away, and they would remain in

the glade. His was too strong a force to fear attack in that isolated region, but Alvarez posted sentinels, and ordered the others to sleep, when the time came, in a wide ring about the fire. Within the ring he and Paul and Wyatt sat, and the Spaniard, maintaining his light, ironic humor, talked much. Paul, if addressed directly by Alvarez, always answered, but he persistently ignored the renegade. Such a being filled him with horror, and once, when Wyatt gave him a look of deadly hate, Paul shot back one of his own, fully a match for it. But that was all.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Alvarez saw his sentinels at either side of the camp, to right and left, walking back and forth, and he knew also that they would watch well. Time passed. The night darkened and then a wan moon came out, casting a ghostly, gray shadow over the measureless black forest. The great stars, pale and cold, danced in a dusky blue. Faint moans came out of the depths of the wilderness, as a stray wind wandered here and there among the leaves. Francisco Alvarez, resolute and self contained though he was, could not sleep. He had taken a bold step in holding the messenger of peace, and, although one might do much a thousand wilderness miles from the seat of his authority, he was nevertheless anxious to have the full support of Bernardo Galvez, the Spanish governor of Louisiana.

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

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

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

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

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

The four cries were so distinct, so equal in length, and repeated at such regular intervals that they seemed to Francisco Alvarez like set notes. He listened intently, but

they did not come again. He glanced at the prisoner but Paul had not stirred, the moon's rays illuminating his face with a pale light. The renegade, too, slept soundly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ah!” said Braxton Wyatt.

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

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

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

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

“I hope so,” replied Braxton Wyatt.

FOOTNOTES:

[Footnote A: An early French and Spanish name for Kentucky.]

CHAPTER III

AN INVISIBLE CHASE

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

“I knew that you would come,” said Paul, “and when I heard the four cries of the wolf I knew, too, that all four of you were there. When you sent the call Braxton Wyatt, who

alone might have suspected, was asleep. The Spanish commander was awake, and he was troubled, but he did not know why."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“O’ course,” said the shiftless one. “We must keep the watch.”

Several days passed and there was little to do. One or another of the five at times crept close to the Spanish camp, and always reported that the men there were lounging at

their ease and still waiting. Now and then the Spaniards hunted in detachments, usually guided by Braxton Wyatt, and brought in both deer and buffalo. On the fourth day Henry and Paul also went hunting.

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

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

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

“Look,” said Henry. “A great prairie!”

“And look what’s on it!” exclaimed Paul.

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

“A real buffalo herd,” said Henry.

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

“What a grand sight!” he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This Spaniard was young and athletic, and he fired at a huge bull. Had he been an experienced hunter, he would have known better, as the bull was too big and tough to eat, and he was also one of the savage guardians of the herd. Moreover, the Spaniards were armed mostly with muskets, a weapon far inferior to the Kentucky rifle.

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

“I’ll save him,” said Henry, “but keep back, Paul! Don’t let him see you!”

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

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

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

“Thanks, Senor!” he stammered. “Your shot—it came just in time!”

The apparition spoke, but only a few words.

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

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

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

“It may be,” added Paul.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“He is coming,” whispered Henry, who had what Shif’less Sol would have called an intuition.

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

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

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

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

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

Francisco Alvarez also was impressed. He loved the towns and luxury, but he had acuteness and perception, and he knew that these were strong men of their kind, men with whom he must deal according to the courtesy of the woods. He rose from his tent,

bowed to them, and walked forward. He himself was a splendid figure in his gorgeous uniform, and his carriage was marked by dignity.

“Now see them salute,” whispered the shiftless one in Paul’s ear.

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

“Now for the big confab,” whispered Sol.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We’ll prepare at once for the journey,” said Henry.

All set to work.

CHAPTER IV

Taking A “*Galleon*”

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

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

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

“But we can get one,” said Henry significantly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Henry waved his hand vaguely toward the North.

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

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

“It’s purty big out thar, an’ looks ez if you couldn’t tamper with it—this here river stands no foolin’—but do you know, Paul, water’s pow’ful friendly. It’s always travelin’ about, always on the move. Land stands still, it’s always thar, an’ never sees nothin’ new, but water jest keeps a’ movin’, seein’ new countries, here to-day, somewhar else to-morrow, lavin’ new banks, breathin’ new air, floatin’ peacefully on to new people, gatherin’ in their talk an’ ways.

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

“Thar to be lost,” said the unpoetical Long Jim.

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

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

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

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

“We’ll do it soon,” said Henry.

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

“’Bout four miles on we’ll strike them Spaniards,” said the shiftless one.

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

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

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

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

“We want one of those boats,” said Henry.

“We shorely do,” said Shif’less Sol.

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

“We jest can’t git along without it,” said Shif’less Sol.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Here are the boats,” whispered Henry.

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

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

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

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

“Shorely!” said Shif’less Sol, “but how to git away with it is now the question.”

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

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

“What’s your idea?” asked the shiftless one.

Henry whispered to him rapidly and Sol grinned with satisfaction.

“Good enough,” said the shiftless one. “It’ll work,” and he crept away from Henry deep in the bushes a little west of the sentinel. A moment or two later the Spaniard on watch was startled by a sharp, warning hiss from the edge of the thicket. He knew very well what made it—a rattlesnake, a thing that he loathed and feared. He certainly did not

want such a deadly reptile sliding through the grass on his feet, and, clubbing his musket, he walked forward, looking intently for the venomous thing. He did not see it at first and all his faculties became absorbed in the search. Holding the clubbed musket ready for an instant blow he peered into the grass and short bushes. He was a Spaniard not without courage, but he was oppressed by the night, the wilderness, the huge river flowing by, and his feeling that he was far, very far, from Spain. Under the circumstances, the poisonous hiss inspired him with an intense dread and he was eager to slay. He leaned a little farther, swinging the musket butt back and forth, ready for a quick blow when he should see the target.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Pull, Sol! Pull!” exhorted Henry again. “We’re not yet out of range!”

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

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

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

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

“Now they are beginnin’ the pursuit,” he said.

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

“What’s your plan?” asked the shiftless one.

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

“An’ let ’em pass us?”

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

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

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

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

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“You’re right as usual, Sol,” said Henry as he, too, increased his stroke.

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

“I believe they’re gaining,” he said presently to Sol.

“Yes,” replied the shiftless one, “that big boat thar is creepin’ up.”

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

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

“Why don’t you talk back?” asked Shif’less Sol.

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

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

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

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

“I hit him in the arm only,” said Henry.

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

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

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

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

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

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“Thar ain’t eyes enough in that Spanish camp to find us now,” said Shif’less Sol.

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

“We’ll take a good rest and then row Northward, still keeping in the forest,” said Henry.

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

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

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

“What are these?” he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's no risk."

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

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

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

“All right,” said Sol, “an’ here’s three more little jugs like it.”

“What else do you find?” asked Henry.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Do you think it’s going to grow lighter?” asked Henry.

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

“Then we’ll pull down to the edge of the woods and see if the Spaniards have given up the chase.”

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

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

CHAPTER V

ON THE GREAT RIVER

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

“I’m sure it was the Spanish boats,” said Henry, “and I think they’ve given up the hunt.”

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

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

“If they don’t they’ve changed mightily since we left ’em.”

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

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

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“They’re all right,” said Henry, and presently they heard the light footsteps of the three coming fast.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But there was no indication of danger nor did the indefinable sixth sense, that came of long habit and training, warn him of any. Instead, it remained a peaceful night, though dark, and Tom looked contemplatively at his comrades. He was the oldest of the little party and a man of few words, but he was deeply attached to his four faithful comrades. Silently he gave thanks that his lot was cast with those whom he liked so well.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He took out a fowling piece, loaded it carefully with the powder and shot that the locker furnished in abundance and waited his time. By and by a flock of wild ducks flew near and Henry fired into the midst of them. Three lay floating on the water after the shot, and when they took them in Long Jim Hart, a master on all such subjects, pronounced them to be of a highly edible variety.

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

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

“Could you do much with it, Paul?” asked Shif’less Sol.

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

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

“It’s never likely to happen,” said Paul.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s that, certain,” said Tom Ross, “an’ I guess we’d better make fur camp, too.”

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

“When they start in the morning we’ll start, too,” said Henry.

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

“I think we’d better tie up here and eat cold food,” said Henry.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But the shiftless one, fit son of the wilderness, was never more awake in his life. The eyes, looking from under the lowered lids, pierced the forest like those of a cat. He saw

and noted every tree trunk within the range of human vision, and no piece of floating debris on the surface of the flooded river escaped his attention. His sharp ears heard, too, every sound in the grove, the rustle of a stray breeze through the new leaves, or the splash of a fish, as it leaped from the water and sank back again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But his troubled mind would not be quiet. Philosophy was not a sufficient reply to the warning of the sixth sense, and, leaning far over the edge of the boat, he listened with ears long trained to every sound of the wilderness. He heard only the stray murmur of the wind among the leaves—and was that a ripple in the water? He strained his ears and decided that it was either a ripple or the splash of a fish, and he sank back again in his seat.

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

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

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“Up! up! boys!” cried Sol in thunderous tones. “We’re attacked by swimmin’ savages!”

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

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

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

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

“How many did you see, Sol?” whispered Henry.

“Only two, but one of ’em won’t ever attack us again.”

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

“That’s so,” said Shif’less Sol, “an’ it gives ’em an advantage.”

“Which, perhaps, we can take from ’em by moving our own boat.”

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

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

The others nodded and waited. A long cry, quavering at first, and then rising to a fierce top note to die away later in a ferocious, wolfish whine came through the fog. It was

uttered by many throats, and in the uncanny, whitish gloom it seemed to be on all sides of them. Then shouts and shots both ceased and the heavy silence came again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes," replied Henry, "and for that reason I think we'd better bend around a circle and then go up stream. I'll tell Paul to steer that way."

They went on again, creeping through the white darkness; fifty yards or so at a time, and then a pause to listen. Henry judged that they were about a half mile from their original anchorage, when the solemn note of an owl arose, to be answered by a similar note from another point.

"They've discovered our departure," he whispered, "and they're telling it to each other. I imagine that their war canoes will now come in a kind of half circle toward the center of the river. They'll guess that we won't retreat toward the land, because then we might be hemmed in."

"No doubt of it," replied Sol, "and I think we'd better pull off toward the north now. Mebbe we kin give 'em the slip."

Henry gave the word and Paul steered the boat in the chosen course. The forest grew thinner, showing that they were approaching the true stream, but the fog held fast. After a hundred yards or so they stopped again, and then they distinctly heard the sound of paddles to their right. It was not a great splash, but they knew it well. Paul, at the tiller, fancied that he could see the faces of the savages bending over their paddles. They were eager, he knew, for their prey, and either chance or instinct had brought them through the white pall in the right course.

The uncertainty, the fog, and the great mysterious river weighed upon Paul. He wished, for a moment, that the vapors might lift, and then they could fight their enemies face to face. He glanced at his own comrades and they had taken on an unearthly look. Their forms became gigantic and unreal in the white darkness. As Henry leaned forward to listen better his figure was distorted like that of a misshapen giant.

“Steer straight toward the north, Paul,” he whispered. “We must shake them off somehow or other.”

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Silently the boat slid through the water but they heard again those signal cries, the hoots of the owl and now they were much nearer.

“They must have guessed our course,” whispered Henry, “or perhaps they have heard the splash of an oar now and then. Stop, boys, and let’s see if we can hear their canoes.”

Their boat lay under the thick, spreading boughs of some oaks. Paul could see the branches and twigs showing overhead through the white fog like lace work, but everything else was invisible twenty feet away. All heard, however, now and then the faint splash, splash of paddles, perhaps a hundred yards distant. Henry tried to tell from the sounds how many war canoes might be in the party, and he hazarded a wild guess of twenty. As he listened, the splash grew a little louder. Obviously the canoes were keeping on the right course. Shif’less Sol wet his finger and held it up. When he took it down he whispered in some alarm to Henry:

“The wind has begun to blow, an’ it’s shore to rise. It’ll blow the fog away, an’ we’ll lay in plain sight o’ all o’ them savages.”

Henry’s instinct for generalship rose at once and he saw a plan.

“We must keep on for midstream,” he said. “We know what direction that is, and, out in open water, we’d have one advantage even over their numbers. Theirs are only light canoes, while ours is a big strong boat that will shelter us from any bullet. Pull away, boys! I’ll help Sol keep up the watch.”

The boat once more resumed its progress toward the main current. The wind, as Sol had predicted, rapidly grew stronger. The deep curtain of fog began to thin and lighten. Suddenly a canoe appeared through it and then a second.

A bullet, fired from the first canoe, whizzed dangerously near the head of Shif’less Sol. He replied instantly, but the light was so uncertain and tricky that he missed the savage at whom he had aimed. The heavy bullet instead ploughed through the side and bottom of the bark canoe, which rapidly filled and sank, leaving its occupants struggling in the water. A bullet had come from the second canoe, also, but it flew wild, and then the whitish fog, thick and impenetrable, caught by a contrary current of wind, closed in again.

“Did you hit anything, Sol?” asked Henry.

“Only a canoe, but I busted it all up, an’ they’re swimmin’ from tree to tree until they get to the bank.”

“Now, boys, pull with all your might!” exclaimed Henry, “and, Paul, you steer us clear of trees, brush, logs, and snags. They know where we are and we must get out into the stream, where there’s a chance for our escape.”

Then ensued a flight and running combat in a tricky fog that lifted and closed down over and over again. Henry put down his oars presently and took up his rifle, but Jim Hart and Tom Ross continued to pull, and Paul kept a steady hand on the tiller.

Paul’s task was the most trying of all. Highly sensitive and imaginative, this battle rolling along in alternate dusky light and white obscurity, was to him uncanny and unreal. He saw pink dots of rifle fire in the fog, he caught glimpses now and then of brown, savage faces or the prow of a canoe, and then the heavy fog would come down like a blanket again, shutting out everything.

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Paul's hand trembled. Every nerve in him was jumping, but he resolutely steered the boat while the others rowed and fought. Once he barely grazed a snag and he shivered, knowing how one of these terrible obstructions could rip the bottom out of a boat. But soon the trees and bushes almost disappeared. They were coming into open water. The fog, too, ceased to close down, and the wind began to blow steadily out of the north. Banks and streamers of white vapor rolled away toward the south. In a few minutes it would all be gone. Out of the mists behind them rose the shapes of war canoes not far away, and the fierce triumphant yell that swept far over the river sent a chill to Paul's very marrow. Once again rose the rifle fire, and it was now a rapid and steady crackle, but the bullets thudded in vain on the thick sides of "The Galleon."

All except Paul now pulled desperately for the middle of the stream, while he, bending as low as he could, still kept a steady hand on the tiller. The triumphant shout behind them rose again, and the great stream gave it back in a weird echo. Paul suddenly uttered a gasp of despair. Directly in front of them, not thirty yards away, was a large war canoe, crowded with a dozen savages while behind them came the horde.

"What is it, Paul?" asked Henry.

"A big canoe in front of us full of warriors. We're cut off! No, we're not! I have it! Bend low! bend low, you fellows, and pull with all the might that's in you!"

Paul had an inspiration, and his blood was leaping. The rifle shots still rattled behind them, but, as usual, the bullets buried themselves in the wood with a sigh, doing no harm. Four pairs of powerful arms and four powerful shoulders bent suddenly to their task with new strength and vigor. Paul's words had been electric, thrilling, and every one felt their impulse instantly. The prow of the heavy boat cut swiftly through the water, and Paul bent still lower to escape the rifle-shots. No need for him to choose his course now! The boat was already sent upon its errand.

A wild shout of alarm rose from the war canoe, and the next instant the prow of "The Galleon" struck it squarely in the middle. There were more shouts of alarm or pain, a crunching, ripping and breaking of wood, and then "The Galleon," after its momentary check, went on. The war canoe had been cut in two, and its late occupants were swimming for their lives. Not in vain had Paul read in an old Roman history of the battles between the fleets when galley cut down galley.

Henry, although he did not look up, knew at once what had happened, and he could not restrain admiration and praise.

"Good for you, Paul!" he cried. "You took us right over the war canoe and that's what's likely to save us!"

Henry was right. The other canoes, appalled by the disaster, and busy, too, in picking up the derelicts, hung back. Henry and Shif'less Sol took advantage of the opportunity, and sent bullet after bullet among them, aiming more particularly at the light bark canoes. Three filled and began to sink and their occupants had to be rescued. The utmost confusion and consternation reigned in the savage fleet, and the distance between it and "The Galleon" widened rapidly as the latter bore in a diagonal course across the Mississippi.

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“They’ve had all they want,” said Henry, as he laid down his rifle and took up the oars again, “but it’s this big heavy boat that’s saved us. She’s been a regular floating fort.”

“We took our gall-yun just in time,” said Shif’less Sol jubilantly, “an’ she is shore the greatest warship that ever floated on these waters. Oh, she’s a fine boat, a beautiful boat, the reg’lar King o’ the seas!”

“Queen, you mean,” said Paul, who felt the reaction.

“No, King it is,” replied Sol stoutly. “A boat that carries travelers may be a she, but shorely one that fights like this is a he.”

The fog was gone, save for occasional wisps of white mist, but the day had not yet come, and the night was by no means light. When they looked back again they could not see any of the Indian canoes. Apparently they had retreated into the flooded forest. Henry and Sol held a consultation.

“It’s hard to pull up stream,” said Henry, “and we’d exhaust ourselves doing it. Besides, if the Indians chose to renew the pursuit, that would cut us off from our own purpose. We must drop down the river toward the Spanish camp.”

“You’re always right, Henry,” said the shiftless one with conviction. “The Spaniards o’ course, know nothin’ about our fight, ez they wuz much too fur off to hear the shots, an’, ez we go down that way, the savages likely will think that we belong to the party, which is too strong for them to attack. This must be some band that Braxton Wyatt don’t know nothin’ about. Maybe it’s a gang o’ southern Indians that’s come away up here in canoes.”

The boat swung close to the western shore, which was overhung throughout by heavy forests, and then dropped silently down until it came within two miles of the Spanish camp. There, in a particularly dark cove, they tied up to a tree, and drew mighty breaths of relief. Both Henry and Paul felt an intense gladness. Despite all the dangers and hardships through which they had gone, they were but boys.

CHAPTER VI

BATTLE AND STORM

It was yet dark, in fact much darker than it had been just after the fog lifted, and the dawn was a full three hours away. Although the flooded area of forest on the western shore was much less than on the eastern, it was sufficient to furnish ample concealment for the boat, and, when they tied up amid dense foliage, they could not see the main stream behind them.

Jim Hart laid down his oars, stood up, and carefully cracked his joints.

"I *am* tired," he said. "Never wuz I so tired afore in my life."

"But, Jim," said Shif'less Sol, "Think what a pow'ful lively naval battle you hev been through. Ef you ever git a wife—which I doubt, 'cause you ain't beautiful, Jim—you kin tell her how once you rowed right over a great Injun warship. Mebbe, Jim, she'll believe all them fancy details you'll stick on to it."

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“I know I ain’t beautiful,” said Long Jim thoughtfully, “an’ I don’t know ez I want to be, but ef any woman wuz to marry me she’d most likely believe whatever I told her, bein’ ez I hev a truthful countenance, but ez fur you, Sol, anybody kin tell by lookin’ at you that ef you wuz to ketch in this river a little cat-fish six inches long you’d tell them that didn’t know that it wuz a whale.”

“Seems to me,” said Tom Ross, “that I wuz waked up kinder suddint a few hours ago. I wuz in the middle uv a most bee-yu-ti-ful nap, and I know right whar I stopped it. I’m goin’ back an’ pick up that nap at the exact place whar I left off.”

Without another word he pulled his blanket over him and stretched himself on a seat. In a minute or two he was sound asleep. Tom Ross was a veteran campaigner. He not only knew what to do, but he could and would do it.

“Paul, you and Jim follow him,” said Henry, “I’ll keep what’s left of the watch with Sol.”

Jim was treading the easy path of slumber in five minutes, but it took Paul at least ten to pass through the gates. Henry and Sol sat in the boat, silent but watchful.

“We’re between two fires,” whispered Henry at last. “I don’t think that war party will give up just yet, and maybe we’d better stick here in the woods for a while, on the chance that they think we belong to the Spanish force and have rejoined it.”

“We’ve got to stay in hidin’ fur a spell, that’s shore,” said Shif’less Sol. “We might stick here all day. We kin overtake the Spaniards any time, cause we have only one road to foller an’ that’s the river.”

Henry nodded and they settled back to the watch and silence. Their three comrades stretched on seats, lockers, or the boat’s bottom, slept soundly, and they could hear their regular breathing. But they heard nothing else save the light lapping of the water against the tree trunks.

Dawn came, golden and beautiful. Tom Ross opened his eyes.

“Anything happened?” he asked.

“No,” replied Henry, “and we are not going to move yet. Sleep on.”

Tom closed his eyes again, and in a minute was back in the pleasant land of slumber. The other two did not awake and Henry and Sol still did not stir. From the leafy arbor in which “The Galleon” was moored, they were intently watching the surface of the river. An hour passed and the sun rose higher and higher, flooding the surface of the great stream with golden beams.

“Do you see anything, Henry?” asked Sol.

“Yes, I think there’s a canoe among the trees on the opposite shore.”

“I reckoned that I saw it, too, but I wuzn’t certain. Must be a scout canoe.”

“Do you see anything to the southward, Sol?”

“I reckoned that I saw somethin’ thar, too, an’ I took it fur smoke.”

“The Spanish camp, of course.”

“O’ course.”

“And I think the Indians are spying upon it. They are quite sure now that we were a part of the Spanish force.”

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“They think they know it, an’ they’ll hang ‘roun’ until to-night, when they’re more’n likely to shoot into the Spanish camp.”

“Which won’t hurt us, Sol.”

“Not a leetle bit. We kin sing all the time, ’dog eat dog, go it one, go it tother.’”

“Instead of singing,” said Henry smiling, “we can put in most of the time sleeping.”

“Both please me,” said Shif’less Sol, rubbing his hands gleefully.

Everything befell as they thought it would. Other canoes appeared at the edge of the wood on the far shore, but on every occasion further down the river. There was no doubt in the minds of the watchful observers aboard “The Galleon” that they were spying upon the Spanish camp and meditated an attack at night. It was equally certain that the Spaniards knew nothing of the Indians’ presence. All the five were now awake and they rejoiced at the prospect.

“I see an easy day comin’ to me,” said Shif’less Sol luxuriously. “’Tain’t often that a lazy man like me kin hev sech a good time an’ I’m goin’ to make the most o’ it.”

“I think,” said Henry, “that while the Indians are busy with the Spaniards we’d better try to fix up that sail. We don’t need a tent and we do need a sail. Some time or other, when we get in a pinch, the sail might do the pulling, leaving the rowers free to use their rifles.”

“Jest ez I might hev expected,” said Sol in a tone of disgust. “All ready for rest, fixed fur it most bee-yu-ti-ful-ly, an’ told instead that I must go to work. This world shorely ain’t kind to a good man.”

Once more the staunch ship, “The Galleon,” proved herself to be a treasure house. They found in the lockers plenty of rope and stout cord, and they cut in the forest a stout young sapling which they made of the right length, peeled off the bark, and adjusted in rude fashion, as a mast. They also made a boom and then rigged a single sail, somewhat after the fashion of the cat-boat of the present day.

This would have been an impossible task to them, had not “The Galleon” been so well provided with axes, saws, hammers, other valuable tools, and cord and nails. The mast could be taken down in an emergency, but they were all of the opinion that the sail would draw, and draw well. It might not always be easy to control it, but “The Galleon” was built in Spanish fashion, heavy, deep, and square, and it would take a great deal to make her capsize.

While the others worked one watched, and the boats of the Indians were seen again at the edge of the far forest. The last time they saw them they were so far down that they

were almost opposite the point where the Spaniards lay, which indicated two things to them, first the certainty that Alvarez had not moved, and second that “The Galleon” and her crew were absolutely safe for the time being, where they lay.

“I suppose that Alvarez is in no hurry and decided to take a day of rest,” said Henry.

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They finished their own labors late in the afternoon and contemplated the mast and sail with pride.

“Now that it’s done, I’m glad that it hez been done,” said Shif’less Sol. “It’ll save me a lot o’ work hereafter. It would be jest like you fellers to make me git callous spots all over the inside o’ my hands, when the hide on Jim Hart’s is already so thick it wouldn’t hurt him to do all his rowin’ an’ mine, too.”

“I jest love to see you work, Sol,” said Long Jim Hart. “I can’t enjoy my rest real good, ‘less at the same time I’m layin’ on my back watchin’ you heavin’ away.”

Nevertheless, all took a long rest though maintaining a vigilant watch, and, with pleasure, they saw a dark night come on. When the twilight was completely gone they steered once more for the main stream, not using their sail yet, because of the boughs and bushes.

“We’ve got to keep in the edge of the forest,” whispered Henry, and in that manner they crept cautiously southward. After a while they stopped suddenly and all exclaimed together. They distinctly heard the sound of rifle shots straight toward the south and perhaps a mile away.

“The savages hev attacked,” said Shif’less Sol in a whisper. “Go it, Spaniard, go it, Injun, one may lick and tother may lick, but whether one may lick tother or tother lick which. I don’t care.”

They pulled a little nearer to the last line of trees in the water and there off to the south they saw the little pinkish dots that marked the rifle and musket fire. It was too far away for them to see anything else, but they heard distinctly the intermittent crackle of the shots.

“Neither will win,” said Henry. “The Spaniards are too strong to be defeated, but they won’t venture the unknown terrors of the river at night. The Indians, who are in their canoes, will draw off when they find they are not doing much harm.”

“Wish we could put up that sail,” said Shif’less Sol, who was still at the oars. “I’m shore gittin’ a callous lump in the pa’m o’ my hand.”

“It wouldn’t do, Sol,” said Henry. “We’re going to run past a battle, and we mean to lie as low as possible.”

Paul again steered, Henry sat, rifle in hand, and the others rowed. They took a diagonal course across the stream once more, but this time toward the eastern shore. They advanced slowly, hugging the dark. Fortunately there was no moon and the dusk came close up to the boat.

“That’s a right noisy fight,” said Shif’less Sol, looking toward the south, where pink and red spots of flame still appeared in the dark and the rattling fire of rifle and musket grew louder.

“More noise than anything else,” said Tom Ross, “but it keeps ’em pow’ful busy an’ that’s a good thing fur us.”

They were now near the flooded forest on the eastern shore, and they moved slowly along in its shadow, still watching the distant battle. It lightened a little, the rim of a moon came out, and they saw toward the western bank the dark silhouettes of canoes moving back and forth on the water. Flashes came from the canoes and returning flashes came from the bank.

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“Go it, Spaniard, go it, Injun, go it, one, go it, tother,” muttered Shif’less Sol again.

“The Galleon” slowly passed by in the darkness. The pink and red dots went out and the sound of the rifle fire died behind hem. They could neither see nor hear anything more of the battle, and all were of the opinion that it would soon cease by a sort of mutual agreement of the contestants.

Paul once more turned the head of the boat toward the middle of the stream, and she swung gaily into the current, where her speed soon increased greatly.

“We can fix up our mast and hoist our sail now,” said Henry. “Since there is nobody to look, it won’t hurt us to make speed for a while.”

It required some time and exertion to put the mast in place and then they unfurled the sail. They were rather clumsy about it from lack of experience, but the tent cloth filled with the north wind, and “The Galleon” leaped forward in the water, her broad nose parting the stream swiftly, while the youthful hearts of Henry and Paul swelled with exultation.

Shif’less Sol drew in his oars and bestowed upon the sail a look of deep approval.

“That’s the most glorious sight that hez met the eyes o’ a tired man in a year,” he said. “Blow, Mr. Wind, blow! an’ let me rest.”

The others also rested, but Sol and Henry put all their attention upon the boom and sail. They did not intend to be wrecked by ignorance or any sudden flaw in the wind. The breeze, however, was steady and strong, and “The Galleon” continued to move gallantly before it.

They sailed for three or four hours and during the latter part of the time they coasted along the western bank. There they came to the mouth of a small river, thickly lined on both shores with gigantic trees.

“I think we’d better take down our sail and run up this,” said Henry. “We can go back some distance and hide close to the bank. The Spaniards of course will not dream of coming up it, and we can stay here until they go by.”

“A safe and pleasant haven as long as it is needed,” said Paul.

They took down the sail and pulled at least a mile up the little river. There they tied close to the bank, and, happy over their success, sought sleep, all except the watch, the night passing without disturbance.

The day came, again unclouded and beautiful, and the five regarded it, the boat, and themselves with a great deal of satisfaction.

“I’m thinkin’ that our treasure ship, the gall-yun, ought to hev the most credit,” said Shif’less Sol. “She brought us past all them warrin’ people in great style. Without her we’d hev a hard time, follerin’ the Spaniards to New Or-lee-yuns.”

After breakfast they remained awhile in the boat, content to lie still and await events. Everywhere around them was the deep forest, oak, hickory, chestnut, maple, elm, and all the other noble trees that flourish in the great valley. Just above them was a low point in the hank of the little river and they could see that it was trodden by many feet.

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“Game comes down to drink thar,” said Shif’less Sol.

“Lie still and let’s see,” said Paul. The boat was almost hidden in the thick foliage that overhung the river, and nobody on it stirred. Two deer presently walked gingerly to the water, drank daintily, and then walked as gingerly away. Soon a black bear followed them and shambled to the water’s edge. He looked up and down the stream, but he saw nothing and the wind blowing from him toward the boat brought no dread odor to his sensitive nostrils. He drank, wrinkled his face in a comical manner, scratched himself with his left paw, and then shambled away. Shif’less Sol laughed.

“I’d hev to be hard pushed afore I shot that feller,” he said. “Ain’t the black bear a comic chap when he tries to be. I declare I hev a real feller feelin’ fur him. I couldn’t ever feel that way toward a panther. They always look mean an’ they always are mean, but I could hobnob right along with a jolly, fat black bear.”

“Yes,” said Paul, looking dreamily far into the future. “It’s a pity they have to go.”

“Hev to go, what do you mean, Paul?” interrupted Long Jim Hart, as he cracked a joint or two.

“Why,” replied Paul, “all this country will be settled up some day, and how can bears and panthers and buffaloes roam wild on farms?”

Long Jim looked at him with eyes slowly widening in wonder.

“Paul,” he exclaimed, “you do say the beatinest things sometimes! Now what do you mean by sayin’ that all this country will be settled up? Why, thar ain’t enough people in the world fur that, an’ thar won’t never be.”

“Yes there will be, Jim,” said Paul decisively, “although it will not occur in your time.”

“Not if I lived to be a hundred years old, Paul, or mebbe a hundred an’ twenty, ’cause I’m a pow’ful healthy man?”

“No, not if you lived to be a hundred and twenty.”

Long Jim heaved a deep sigh of relief—he had the true soul of the woodsman.

“That’s mighty relievin’ an’ soothin’,” he said. “Think uv havin’ to walk every day through cleared ground! Think uv lookin’ every day fur a bee-yu-ti-ful sky only to see cabin-smoke! Think uv drawin’ your sights on what you fust take to be a fine buffalo, an’ then find out is only your neighbor’s old cow! Think uv your goin’ off to a river to trap beaver, an’ findin’ nothin’ thar but a saw-mill! Think uv your havin’ to meet mornin’ an’ evenin’ all kinds uv people that you don’t care nothin’ about! Think uv your goin’ out on a great huntin’ expedition only to find all them noble trees cut down a thousan’ miles every way,

an' nothin' wanderin' around thar but old lame horses an' gruntin' pigs! I'm plum' thankful that I'm livin' at the time I do, when thar's lots uv countries you don't know nothin' about, an' lots uv fun guessin' what they are, an' mostly guessin' wrong. An' I'm glad too that I didn't live in them old days that Sol tells about, when people had to build walls around theirselves in towns, an' wuz afraid to go out in the woods an' hunt bear an' buffalo like men!"

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Jim Hart, after this speech, so long for him, stopped for want of breath, and Shif'less Sol, regarding him with a look of deep sympathy, held out a brown and sinewy hand.

"Jim Hart," he said, "shake. I'll be proud to hev you do it. You ain't no beauty, Jim, an' somehow you an' me are kinder disputatious now an' then, but you are lettin' flow at this minute a solid stream o' wisdom, a fountain, ez Paul would say in his highfalutin' way, at which everybody ought to drink."

Jim Hart also reached out a brown and sinewy hand and the two met in a powerful and friendly clasp.

"I'm like Jim," continued Shif'less Sol. "'Tain't what you git that makes you happy, but thar's a heap in bein' suited. I'm glad I'm livin' when I am, an' whar I am. Me an' things suit each other. What Paul says may come true, but it won't bust my heart, 'cause I won't be here to see it."

An hour or so later Henry and Sol went through the woods and watched for the Spanish fleet. They saw it presently moving in single file down the Mississippi, and showing, so far as they could judge, no signs of damage.

"Twas ez we guessed last night it would be, a dogfall," said Shif'less Sol, "lots o' noise and not much done. Now that Injun crowd hez drawed off to the east, an' I think we've seed the last o' them, while the Spaniards, thinkin' they've had enough o' excitement, will keep straight on to New Or-lee-yuns."

"I've no doubt you're right," said Henry, "and we'll follow to-night. We'll let them take a good start."

They watched the little fleet until it passed out of sight down the river and then returned to their own boat. There they devoted the day to further preparations for a long journey. As game was close at hand in such abundance, they shot two deer and took the meat on board. They also undertook to provide shelter, as this was the period of the spring rains and they did not wish to be drenched or have their stores damaged. Fortunately they found a tarpaulin in one of the lockers and, taking this and the two deerskins, they united all in a larger covering which they could spread over nearly the whole boat. This all considered a highly important task, and they meant to enlarge the tarpaulin still more as they killed more deer. Meanwhile they let it lie in the sun, in order that the deerskins might dry.

Their tasks occupied them until about 10 o'clock at night and then they decided to start again, thinking that night traveling would be safer for a day or two. They rowed down the river until they entered the Mississippi, and then they set their sail again.

No other human beings were afloat on the river, at least not within the range of their vision, but there was a plenty of floating trees and other debris brought down by the spring flood. Careful steering was necessary, but they went on without any accident. Shif'less Sol, however, gazed up at the moon with an unquiet eye.

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“She looks too soft an’ fleecy,” he said, speaking of the moon. “When she’s peepin’ through them lacy-lookin’ clouds it means that trouble is about to stir.”

“We’ll keep a watch,” said Henry.

They continued until midnight and Sol’s troubles still kept off, but about that time all noticed a sudden increase of the breeze, accompanied by an equal increase of dampness.

“Something like a storm is coming and you were right, Sol,” said Henry. “Now, I wish we knew a lot about sailing.”

“But as we don’t,” said Paul, “I think we’d better take in our sail at once.”

They quickly did so and their precaution was wise. The wind, blowing out of the north, began to shriek, and the boat, even without the aid of a sail, leaped forward. Driving clouds suddenly shut out the moon, and the yellow waters of the giant stream, lashed by the wind, began to heave and surge in waves like those of the sea. The treasure ship, “The Galleon,” pitched and rocked like a real galleon in the long swells of the Pacific, but the five knew that she was perfectly safe. The broad, square Spanish boat could not be swamped.

“Thank God, we’ve taken in that sail,” said Henry. “We’re going to have a night of it! Do you think we’d better pull for the shore?”

“Not now,” replied Shif’less Sol, “the wind’s risin’ too fast, an’ we’d hit a tree or a snag, shore. Better keep ez nearly in the middle o’ the river ez we kin!”

The soundness of Sol’s judgment became apparent at once. The shriek of the wind rose to a scream and then a roar. The night became pitchy dark. They could see nothing around them but a narrow circle of muddy waters heaving violently. Under the far horizon in the south and west, low, sullen thunder began to mutter. Suddenly the sky parted before a tremendous flash of lightning that blazed for a moment across the heavens and then went out, leaving the night darker than before. But in that moment they caught a vivid glimpse of the flooded forest, the great waste of troubled waters, and all the vast desolation about them. It was weird and uncanny to the last degree, and despite all the dangers and hardships through which they had passed on land, the five steadied their nerves only with supreme efforts of the will.

“We’ve forgot the covering for our boat,” exclaimed Henry. “Paul, keep her steady, while the rest of you help me.”

It required the strength of four to spread the tarpaulin in the wind and make it all secure, but they were a strong four and the task was quickly done. Meanwhile the turbulence of air and water were increasing. The waves on the river rose higher and higher and the

wind drove the foam in their faces. The thunder, no longer a mutter, became one terrific peal after another, and the lightning burned across the great stream in flash after flash.

“I sp’ose it’s jest the same ez bein’ at sea,” said Sol between crashes. “I don’t know much choice between bein’ drowned in the Mississippi, which I know is muddy, an’ the sea, which they say is salt.”

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“No danger of either!” said Paul cheerfully, “but I’m glad this is such a wide river. So long as we can keep the boat straight there is not much risk of being driven into anything.”

Then everyone jumped suddenly to his feet. There was a tremendous crash of thunder louder than all the rest, and the whole river swam for a moment in a burning glare. The lightning seemed to have struck upon the surface of the water not far from them. Then, when the lightning and the thunder passed, they heard only the wind and saw only the darkness.

“This ain’t so easy ez it looked,” said Shif’less Sol in a plaintive tone. “It’s nice ridin’ on a boat, but if the lightning should strike ’The Gall-yun,’ whar are we? I’d a heap rather be on the land.”

“That must have been its climax,” said Paul, “and if so look out for the rain.”

Paul was right. The lightning began to decline in intensity and the thunder sank in volume. The wind died rapidly. Yet there was no increase of light, and presently they heard afar a rushing sound. Great drops beat like hail upon their tarpaulin, and all except the man who was steering snuggled to cover. The steersman happened to be Shif’less Sol this time, and he wrapped one of the new Spanish blankets tightly around him from heel to throat.

“Now let it come,” murmured the indomitable man.

It took him at his word and it came with a sweep and a roar. The heavens opened and a deluge fell out. The thunder and lightning ceased entirely and from the black skies the rain poured in amazing quantities. Now and then all except the steersman were forced to bail out the boat, but mostly they kept to cover under their tarpaulin, which was a good one.

Shif’less Sol held the good ship “The Galleon,” in the middle of the current, and all the time he strained his eyes ahead for floating debris and particularly for the terrible snags which were such a danger in the early Mississippi. Keen as were his eyes, he could see little ahead of him but the black water, now beaten into a comparatively smooth plain by the steady rain.

Shif’less Sol had taken off his cap and the rain drove steadily on the back of his head; but his body, thanks to the thick blanket wrapped so tightly around his neck, remained dry.

Shif’less Sol was not uncomfortable. Neither was he alarmed or unhappy. There was a strain of chivalry and romance in his forest-bred soul, and the situation appealed to him. He was in a strong boat, his four faithful comrades were with him, and he was

piercing a new mystery, that of a vast and unknown river. The spirit that has always driven on the great explorers and adventurers thrilled in every nerve of Solomon Hyde, nicknamed the Shiftless One, but not at all deserving the title.

The boat went steadily on in the blackness and the rain, and Sol's soul swelled jubilantly within him. He could see perhaps thirty or forty feet ahead of him over the smooth plain of black water, and at an equal distance to right and left the black wall rose, also. So far as feeling went, the land might be a thousand miles away, and he was glad of it.

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“Which sea are we ploughin’ through now, Paul?” he said. “Is it the Atlantic or the Pacific or one I ain’t heard tell of a-tall, a-tall? But which ever it is, I’m Christopher Columbus the second, on my way to discover a new continent bigger than all the others put together! Jumpin’ Jehoshaphat! but that was a narrow escape! It made my flesh creep!”

Sol had shifted the boat in her course, just in time to escape an ominous snag, but in a moment his joyousness came back, and without giving Paul time to answer, he continued:

“A boat goin’ down stream on a river is shorely the right way o’ travelin’ fur a lazy man like me. I wish it wuz all like this!”

The violence of the rain abated somewhat in an hour or so, but it continued to come down for a long time. Far after midnight the clouds began to part. A damp patch of sky showed, but it was clear sky nevertheless and soon it broadened.

The flooded world rose up before the five voyagers, the vast river, still black in the night light, floating trees, perhaps rooted up by the stream from shores thousands of miles to the north and west, the low dim outline of forest to right and left, and all around them an immense desolation. Everything to other minds would have been gigantic, somber, and menacing. Gigantic it was to the five, but neither somber nor menacing. Instead it told them of safety and comfort and it was, at all times, full of a varied and supreme interest.

As soon as the light was strong enough for them to find a suitable place they pulled the boat among the trees on the western shore and tied it up securely. Here they made a critical examination and found that none of their precious goods had suffered a wetting. Powder, provisions, clothing, all were dry and every one except the watch went to sleep with a sound conscience.

CHAPTER VII

THE LONE VOYAGER

Henry Ware awoke, rubbed his eyes, and looked through the tree trunks at the Mississippi, now wider than ever.

“What do you see, Tom?” he asked of Tom Ross, who had kept the watch.

“Nothin’ but a black speck fur across thar. It come into sight only a minute ago. Fust I thought it wuz a shadder, then I thought it wuz a floatin’ log, an’ now I do believe it’s a canoe. What do you make uv it, Henry?”

Henry looked long.

“It is a canoe,” said he at last, “and there’s a man in it. They’re floating with the stream down our way.”

“You’re right,” said Tom Ross, “an’ ef I ain’t mistook that man an’ that canoe are in trouble. Half the time he’s paddlin’, half the time he’s bailin’ her out, an’ all the time he’s making a desperate effort to git to land.”

The others were now up and awake, and they gazed with intense interest.

“It’s a white man in the canoe ez shore ez I’m a livin’ sinner!” exclaimed Shif’less Sol.

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“And it’s a question,” added Henry, “whether his canoe gets to the bank or the bottom of the river first.”

“It’s a white man and we must save him!” cried Paul, his generous boy’s heart stirred to the utmost.

They quickly untied their boat and pulled with great strokes toward the sinking canoe and its lone occupant. They were alongside in a few minutes and Henry threw a rope to the man, who caught it with a skillful hand, and tied his frail craft stoutly to the side of the strong “Galleon.” Then, as Paul reached a friendly hand down to him he sprang on board, exclaiming at the same time in a deep voice: “May the blessing of Heaven rest upon you, my children.”

The five were startled at the face and appearance of the man who came upon their boat. They had never thought of encountering such a figure in the wilderness. He was of middle age, tall, well-built, and remarkably straight, but his shaven face was thin and ascetic, and the look in his eyes was one of extraordinary benevolence. Moreover, it had the peculiar quality of seeming to gaze far into the future, as it were, at something glorious and beautiful. His dress was a strange mixture. He wore deerskin leggins and moccasins, but his body was clothed in a long, loose garment of black cloth and on his head was a square cap of black felt. A small white crucifix suspended by a thin chain from his neck lay upon his breast and gleamed upon the black cloth.

Every one of the five instantly felt veneration and respect for the stranger and Paul murmured, “A priest.” The others heard him and understood. They were all Protestants, but in the deep wilderness religious hatred and jealousy had little hold; upon them none at all.

“Bless you, my sons,” repeated the man in his deep, benevolent voice, and then he continued in a lighter tone, speaking almost perfect English, “I do believe that if you had not appeared when you did I and my canoe should have both gone to the bottom of this very deep river. I am a fair swimmer, but I doubt if I could have gained the land.”

“We are glad, father,” said Paul respectfully, “that we had the privilege to be present and help at such a time.”

The priest looked at Paul and smiled. He liked his refined and sensitive face and his correct language and accent.

“I should fancy, my young friend,” he said, still smiling, “that the debt of gratitude is wholly mine. I am Pierre Montigny, and, as you perhaps surmise, a Frenchman and priest of the Holy Church, sent to the New World to convert and save the heathen. I belong to the mission at New Orleans, but I have been on a trip, to a tribe called the Osage, west of the Great River. Last night my canoe was damaged by the fierce storm

and I started forth rather rashly this morning, not realizing the extent to which the canoe had suffered. You have seen and taken a part in the rest."

"You were going back to New Orleans alone, and in a little canoe?" said Paul.

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“Oh, yes,” replied Father Montigny, as if he were speaking of trifles. “I always go alone, and my canoe isn’t so very little, as you see. I carry in it a change or clothing, provisions, and gifts for the Indians.”

“But no arms,” said Henry who had been looking into the canoe.

“No arms, of course,” replied Father Montigny.

“You are a brave man! About the bravest I ever saw!” burst out Tom Ross, he of few words.

Father Montigny merely smiled again.

“Oh, no,” he said, “I have many brethren who do likewise, and there are as many different kinds of bravery as there are different kinds of life. You, I fancy, are brave, too, though I take it from appearances that you sometimes fight with arms.”

“We have to do it, Father Montigny,” said Paul in an apologetic tone.

The priest made no further comment and, taking him to the shore, with much difficulty they built a fire, at which they prepared him warm food while he dried his clothing. They had no hesitation in telling him of their errand and of the presence of Alvarez and his force on the river. Father Montigny sighed.

“It is a matter of great regret,” he said, “that Louisiana has passed from the hands of my nation into those of Spain. France is now allied with your colonies, but Spain holds aloof. She fears you and perhaps with reason. Every country, if its people be healthy and vigorous, must ultimately be owned by those who live upon it.”

“Do you know this Alvarez?” asked Henry.

“Yes, a man of imperious and violent temper, one who, with all his courage, does not recognize the new forces at work in the world. He thinks that Spain is still the greatest of nations, and that the outposts of your race, who have reached the backwoods, are nothing. It is we who travel in the great forests who recognize the strength of the plant that is yet so young and tender.”

The priest sighed again and a shade of emotion passed over his singularly fine face.

“Alvarez would be glad to commit the Spanish forces in America to the cause of your enemies,” he resumed, “and he is bold enough to do any violent deed at this distance to achieve that end. In fact, he is already allied with the renegade and the Indians against you and began war when he seized one of you. Perhaps it is just as well that you are going to New Orleans, since Bernardo Galvez, the Spanish Governor, is a man of different temper, young, enthusiastic, and ready, I think, to listen to you.”

While the priest was talking by the fireside Shif'less Sol, Long Jim, and Tom Ross slipped away. They hauled his canoe out on dry land, and with the tools that they had found on "The Galleon" quickly made it as good as ever. They also quietly put some of their own stores in the canoe, and then returned it to the water.

"O' course, he won't go comf'tably with us in our boat to New Or-lee-yuns," said Shif'less Sol. "He'll stick to his canoe an' stop to preach to Injuns who mebbe will torture him to death, but he has my respeck an' ef I kin do anything fur him I want to do it."

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“So would I,” said Jim Hart heartily. “I’m a pow’ful good cook ez you know, Sol, bein’ ez you’ve et in your time more’n a hundred thousand pounds uv my victuals, an’ I’d like to cook him all the buffaler an’ deer steak he could eat between here an’ New Or-lee-yuns, no matter how long he wuz on the way.”

“An’ me,” said Tom Ross simply, wishing to add his mite, “I’d like to be on hand when any Injun tried to hurt him. That Injun would think he’d been struck by seven different kinds uv lightnin’, all at the same time.”

The fire was built on a hillock that rose above the flood. It had been kindled with the greatest difficulty, even by such experienced woodsmen as the five, but, once well started, it consumed the damp brush and spluttered and blazed merrily. Gradually a great bed of coals formed and threw out a temperate, grateful heat. All were glad enough, after the storm and the cold and the wet, to sit around it and to feel the glow upon their faces. It warmed the blood.

The hill formed an island in the flood and “The Galleon” and the canoe were tied to trees only thirty or forty feet away. Far to the west extended the great sweep of the river and around them the flooded forest was still dripping with the night’s rain.

“I think I’m willin’ to rest a while,” said Shif’less Sol. “That wuz a pow’ful lively time we had last night, but thar wuz enough o’ it an’ I’d like to lay by to-day, now that our friend’s canoe hez been fixed.”

Father Montigny glanced up in surprise.

“My canoe repaired!” he said. “I don’t understand.”

“’Twas only a little job fur fellers like us,” said the shiftless one. “She’s all done, an’ your canoe, ez good ez new, is tied up thar alongside o’ our ‘Gall-yun.’”

“You are very good to me,” said the priest raising his hands slightly in the manner of benediction, “and I suggest, since we have a comfortable place here, that we remain on this little island until to-morrow. Do you know what day it is?”

“No,” replied Paul, “to tell you the truth, Father Montigny, we’ve been through so much and we’ve had to think so hard of other things that we’ve lost count of the days. I’d scarcely know how to guess at it.”

“It’s the Holy Sabbath,” said Father Montigny. “You, I have no doubt, belong to a church other than mine, but the wilderness teaches us that we’re merely traveling by different roads to the same place. We six are alone upon this little spot of ground in a great river flowing through a vast desolation. Surely we can be comrades, too, and give thanks together for the mercy that is taking us through such great dangers and hardships.”

“We’re like Noah and his family after the ark landed,” whispered Shif’less Sol to Henry, in a tone that was far from irreverence. But Paul said aloud:

“I’m sure that we’re all in agreement upon that point, Father Montigny. We do not have to hasten and we’ll remain here on the island in a manner proper to the day.”

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Father Montigny glanced at the five in turn and the rare, beautiful smile lighted up his face. He read every thought of theirs in their open countenances, and he knew that they were in thorough accord with him. But Paul, as usual, appealed to him most of all—the deeply spiritual quality in the lad was evident to the priest and reader of men.

Father Montigny took a little leather-bound book from under his black robe and stood up. The others stood up also. Then the priest read a prayer. It was in Latin and the five—Paul included—did not understand a word of it, but not a particle of its solemnity and effect was lost on that account.

It was to Paul, in many ways, the most impressive scene in which he had ever taken part, the noble, inspired face of the priest, the solemn words, and no other sound except the peaceful murmur made by the flowing of the great river. They seemed as much alone on their little hill as if they stood on a coral island in the south seas.

Nature was in unison with the rite. A brilliant sun came out, the dripping trees dried fast, and, under the blue sky, the yellow of the river took on a lighter hue.

After the prayer they resumed their seats by the fire, which they left at intervals only to get something from the boat or to bring the dryest wood that they could find for the replenishing of the fire. Paul and Shif'less Sol went together on one of the trips for firewood.

"He is shorely a good man," said the shiftless one nodding in the direction of the priest, "but don't you think, Paul, he's undertook a mighty big job, tryin' to convert Injuns?"

"Undoubtedly," replied Paul, "but that is the purpose to which he has devoted his life. He does good, but it seems a pity to me too, Sol, that he goes on such missions. In the end he'll find martyrdom among some cruel tribe, and he knows it."

While Father Montigny, like others of his kind, expected martyrdom and willingly risked it, his spirits were darkened by no shadow now. Not one of the five was more cheerful than he, and he gave them all the news at his command.

"And I am glad," he continued, "that you are going to New Orleans. You are really messengers of peace and, unofficial heralds though you are, you may save more than one nation from great trouble."

The five were deeply gratified by his words. If they had needed any encouragement in their self-chosen task they would have received it now.

"Since you are returning to New Orleans, Father Montigny," said Paul, "why don't you go with us in our big boat? It is far safer and more comfortable than a canoe."

Father Montigny shook his head.

“It is a kind offer,” he replied, “but I cannot accept it. I leave you to-morrow at the mouth of a river on our right as we descend. There is a small village of peaceful Indians several miles up that stream and I wish to stay with them a day or two. I and my canoe have traveled many thousands of miles together and we will continue.”

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They would have repeated the offer, but they saw that he was not to be moved and they talked of other things. The rest was, in truth, welcome to all, as the labors and dangers of the night had been a severe strain upon their nerves and strength, and they luxuriated before the fire while the peaceful day passed. Henry noticed that the water was still rising, and that the mass of floating debris was also increasing.

“It’s been a tremendous rain,” he said, “and it’s extended far up. It must have been raining on all the great rivers that run into the Mississippi on either side, away off there in the north. It’s going to be a mighty big flood, and this hill itself will go under.”

“You’re right,” said Shif’less Sol. “It’s a mighty big river any time but is shorely gittin’ to be like a sea now.”

They walked back to the little party by the fire. The day had considerable coolness in it after the rain, and the warmth was still welcome. Little was left for them to do and they still luxuriated in rest. Like all woodsmen in those times who were compelled to endure long and most strenuous periods of toil and danger, they knew how to do nothing when the time came, and let Nature recuperate the tired faculties.

The brilliant sun shone on the river, the muddy waters were gilded with gold. The east turned to rose, then to red, and after that came the shadows. The mellow voice of the priest was lifted in a solemn Latin hymn. His song carried far over the darkening waters, and Paul, under its influence, felt more deeply than ever the immense majesty of the scene. Red light from the sunken sun still lingered over the longest of rivers, but the shadows now covered all the eastern shore. Through the increasing night the firelight on the little island twinkled like a beacon, but for the time being, they were careless who saw it.

The hymn died away in a last long echo, the red light was wholly gone, darkness was over everything, and they prepared for a long night of sleep. The next morning they started together, the big boat and the little canoe. Every one of the five offered to paddle the canoe for Father Montigny as far as they were going together, but he smilingly declined.

“No,” he said, “my good canoe and I have been closely associated too long to be separated now, nor must I be spoiled. I see that you have put fresh stores in the canoe, and I accept them. You have good hearts, as I knew when I first saw you.”

The five would not put up their sail while they were in company, and “The Galleon” and the canoe drifted together until they reached the mouth of the river up which the peaceful Indian village lay. There Father Montigny gave them his blessing and bade them farewell. They held their own boat in the current while they watched him paddle with strong arms up the tributary stream. He stopped at the first curve, lifted his paddle

in a last salute, which they returned with their own lifted oars, and then he passed out of sight.

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“We may never see him again,” said Paul—but Paul could not read the future.

Then they set their sail, swung into the middle of the stream and swept forward on their great journey. But the meeting with the priest had a strong influence upon every one of them.

“He is sure to suffer a violent death some time or other,” said Paul, “and he knows it, but it never mikes him gloomy. There are other French priests like him, too, boys, going thousands of miles, alone and unarmed, over this vast continent.”

“‘Pears to me that we are wrong when we talk about the French bein’ dancin’ masters an’ sech like,” said Shif’less Sol. “My father fit in the great French war up thar along the Canady line an’ in Canady, an’ he says the French wuz ez good fighters ez anybody. Besides, they took naterally to the woods, makin’ fust rate scouts an’ hunters, an’ ef that ain’t proof o’ the stuff that’s in people, nothin’ is.”

This day upon the waters was one of unbroken peace. The flood, as Henry had predicted, continued to rise, spreading far into the woods and out of sight. Now and then some portion of the shore, eaten into continually by the powerful stream, would give way and fall with a sticky sigh into the river. Uprooted trees floated in the current or became wedged in the forest. But the sunlight remained undimmed and they began to grow familiar with the river. It was a friend now, bearing them whither they would go.

About noon they saw two deer marooned on an island made by the flood, and they shot one of them for the sake of the fresh meat.

Now ensued a long journey, unbroken by danger, but full of interest. They came near enough once or twice to ascertain that the Spanish force was just ahead of them, but they saw no chance to secure the precious maps and plans or interfere in any other way with the dangerous project of Alvarez, and they waited patiently.

The flood began to subside, but it was a mighty river yet, and would still be so when all the flood was gone. They passed the mouths of great rivers to right and to left, but they did not know their names, nor whence they came. The air grew much warmer and they were very glad indeed now that they had the sail, which, allied with the current, carried them on as fast as they wished.

Shif’less Sol lay lazily under the sail, his limbs relaxed, and his face a picture of content.

“I could float on an’ on forever,” he said sleepily, “an’ I don’t care how long it takes to git to New Or-lee-yuns. I think I’m goin’ to like that place. I saw a trapper once who had been thar, an’ he said you could be jest ez lazy an’ sleepy ez you wished an’ nobody would blame you—they kinder look upon it ez the right thing, an’ that suits me. He said them Spaniards an’ French had orange trees about. You could lay in your bed, reach a

han' out o' the window, pull an orange off the tree, suck it, an' then go back to sleep without ever havin' disturbed the cover. I never seed an orange, but I know it's nice."

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The same day they rowed the boat a few miles up a small but deep and very clear river that emptied into the Mississippi from the east. Their object was to fish, the greater river itself being too muddy for the succulent kind that they wished. The incomparable "Galleon" had also been supplied with fishing tackle, and in a short time they caught a splendid supply of black bass and perch, which proved to be very fine and toothsome. As their boat floated back from the smaller stream into the Mississippi, Shif'less Sol heaved a deep sigh.

"What's the matter, Sol?" asked Paul.

"I wuz thinkin' o' Christopher Columbus," replied Shif'less Sol. "Ef it wuzn't that I'd be dead now, I wish I'd been with him. I do enjoy sailin' on an' discoverin' lands an' waters that ain't yet got no name to 'em. It looks funny to me that we wuzn't discovered sooner, when we've always been here, but Columbus has all my respeck an' admiration 'cause he done it when the others didn't."

"That shorely wuz a man," said Tom Ross, his eyes lighting up. "I've heard the tale how he kep' tryin' an' tryin' to git a ship, an' couldn't, an' at last the Spanish lady pulled off her earrings an' finger rings an' bracelets an' said: 'Here, Chris, these, these are my jewels, take 'em, trade 'em fur the best ship thar is in the market, an' discover Ameriky.' An' then he got his ship, an' kep' sailin' on an' on, an' the sailors they began to git skeered an' then more skeered. They're afraid they're goin' to drop off on the other side uv the world an' they go to Chris an' say: 'Thar ain't no sech continent ez Ameriky an' we ain't goin' to discover it. We're goin' to turn right 'round an' go straight back to Spain.'

"Chris says in the knowin'est manner like a father talkin' to his child. 'Thar is sech a continent ez Ameriky, an' it's a big one, too. It's layin' over thar straight to the west, an' it's full uv big lakes an' big rivers an' big mountains an' red Injuns that fight with bows an' arrers, and b'ars an' buffalers an' deer an' panthers an' all things fine, jest waitin' fur us. Thar's whar we're goin'.' And the sailors say more uppish than ever: No, we ain't, we ain't goin' to discover Ameriky, thar ain't no sech place, we're goin' right back to Spain.' Then a kinder funny look comes into Chris's eye. He reaches fur his long rifle, an' he draws a bead on the foremost uv them sailors, the feller that speaks fur 'em all, an' he says, droppin' that fatherly manner an' speakin' up sharp an' snappy: 'I reckin we're either goin' to discover Ameriky, or go right back to Spain, which is it?'

"An' that foremost sailor, the one that speaks fur 'em all, sees the funny look in Chris's eye, an' he thinks, too, he kin see clean down the barrel uv that long rifle to whar the bullet is layin', an' he answers right off: 'We're goin' to discover Ameriky'; an' shore enough they did, this fine, big continent, full uv big lakes an' big rivers an' big mountains an' red Injuns that fight with bows an' arrers an' b'ars and buffalers an' deer an' panthers an' all things fine."

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“I didn’t know Tom Ross had sech a gift o’ gab,” said Shif’less Sol. “He stirs me all up, he makes me want to hev some lady buy a ship fur me an’ start me out to discoverin’ continents. Do you think, Paul, thar’s any lady who would sell her earrings an’ finger rings fur me ez that Spanish one did fur Columbus?”

“But think, Sol, what a chance you’ve got whether there is or not,” said Henry Ware. “America is discovered but not much of it is explored. There’s enough here to keep you roaming about for the next fifty or sixty years.”

“That’s so,” said the shiftless one brightening up. “What am I growlin’ about, when here’s a river, mebbe ten thousand miles long that we know next to nothin’ ‘bout, an’ buffalers an’ b’ars an’ panthers an’ deer to shoot, an’ red Injuns to fight ez long ez I live. After all, we’re shorely mighty lucky to live at the time we do, ez I’ve said before. Do you think thar’ll ever be any times hereafter as interestin’ ez ourn, Paul?”

“I can’t say,” replied Paul with a smile, “but they’re not likely to be as interesting to us.”

They went on their way, and the air became still warmer. Moreover, it grew heavy and oppressive, and the spring rains were resumed with great violence. They had worked meanwhile on their tarpaulin, enlarging and strengthening it with skins which they had allowed to dry on the boat, and they rested, sheltered and secure, as they floated along.

Although Frenchmen had gone up and down the river long before, they felt like genuine explorers. So little was known of the mighty stream that they regarded every stretch and turn with keen interest. It was not beautiful now, a vast, brown flood flowing between low and changing shores, but in its size and loneliness it had a majesty peculiarly its own.

Wild geese and wild ducks flew over the river in abundance, and they were so little used to man that often they passed near “The Galleon.” The fowling pieces proved useful again, as the five were able to sit in comfort on their boat and shoot geese and ducks for their needs. Some were of kinds that they had never seen before, but all proved to be good eating, and they were welcome.

Jim Hart also exercised his ingenuity in a very useful manner. In the prow of the boat, but under the tarpaulin, he spread a layer of mud about two inches thick. Protected from the rain, it soon dried, forming a hard, impervious, brick-like covering for the bottom of the boat, and upon this he built a small smothered fire of dry sticks, a supply of which they kept in the boat. Here Jim, with all the skill and delicacy of a gastronomic artist, would cook their wild ducks and wild geese, and, considering the limited area and resources for the exercise of his favorite occupation, he did extremely well. Nor was it any longer necessary for them to run in to the shore and worry in the dripping forest with wet wood.

“It ain’t like that stove we built the time we wuz on the ha’nted islan’,” Long Jim would say, “but it’s a heap sight better than nothin.”

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“It shorely is,” said Shif’less Sol. “You ain’t much account for anything, Jim, but you kin cook a leetle bit.”

Long Jim smiled contentedly.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CHATEAU OF BEAULIEU

They noticed one day a high bluff shooting up on the eastern bank and running along for some distance. It was clothed in dense green forest, and it was rather a welcome break in the monotony of the low shores.

“A big city will be built there some day,” said the prophetic Paul.[B]

“Now, Paul, why in tarnation do you say that?” exclaimed Tom Ross.

“Why, because it’s such a good place. It’s a high hill on a great river so well suited to navigation, and it has a vast, rich country behind it.”

But Tom Ross shook his head.

“Seems to me, Paul,” he said, “that you’re bitin’ off a lot more’n you can chaw. Things that are to happen a hundred years from now ain’t never happenin’ fur me.”

But Paul merely smiled and held to his opinion.

On the following day they tied up at a point, where the river began a sharp and wide curve around a long, narrow peninsula. It was just about dark when they stopped and, as usual, they were able to run the boat into dense foliage at the margin, where not even the keenest eye could see it.

“We’ve got plenty of goose and duck left over from dinner,” said Henry, “so I’m thinking, Jim, that you’d better not light the fire on your bricks to-night.”

“All right,” replied Jim, “I don’t mind restin’. I feel about ez lazy ez Sol Hyde looks.”

But Henry Ware had another and more important thing in mind. His was the keenest eye of them all, and just before landing he had noticed to the southward and on the other side of the peninsula a faint, dark line against the edge of the sunset. Few, even with an eye good enough to see it, would have taken it for anything but a wisp of cloud, but the physical sense of Henry Ware, so acute that it bordered upon intuition, was not deceived.

“Sol,” he said after they had eaten a little, “let’s walk across this neck of land and explore a bit.”

“It’s a dark night to be traveling,” said Paul. But Henry only laughed. Tom Ross may have had his suspicions, but he did not deem it worth while to say anything. He knew that Henry and Shif’less Sol were quite competent to achieve any task that they might be undertaking.

Henry and Sol strolled carelessly into the bush, but before they had gone a dozen steps their whole manner changed. Each became eager and alert.

“What is it, Henry?” asked Shif’less Sol. “What have you seed?”

“Smoke! the smoke of a camp fire and it’s on the other side of this neck. I think it’s the camp of Alvarez. He must have been going more slowly than we thought.”

“We’ll soon find out,” said Shif’less Sol, as they advanced.

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But the task was not as easy as they had thought. The peninsula was very low and the greater part of it had been overflowed recently. Their feet, no matter how lightly they stepped, sank in the mire, and when they pulled them out again the mud emitted a sticky sigh. An owl perched in a tree, high above the marsh, began to hoot dismally, and Shif'less Sol uttered a growl.

"I wish we had the big, dry woods o' Kentucky to go through," he whispered to Henry. "I ain't much o' a mud-crawler."

"But as we haven't got those big, dry woods," Henry whispered back, "we'll have to crawl, creep, or walk through the mud."

It was about two miles across the neck, and as they went very slowly for fear of making noise, it took them a full hour to reach the other side, or to come near enough to see what might be there. Then they found that Henry's belief, or rather intuition, was right.

They could see quite well from the dense covert. All the Spanish boats were tied up at the shore and two or three fires had been built for the purposes of cooking. The soldiers in their picturesque costumes lounged about. The hum of conversation and now and then a laugh arose.

Henry soon marked Francisco Alvarez. The Spanish leader sat on a little heap of boughs on the highest and dryest spot in the camp, and all who approached him did so with every sign of respect—if they spoke it was hat in hand.

The firelight fell in a red blaze across the face of Francisco Alvarez and revealed every feature in minute detail to the keen eyes in the covert. It was a thin, haughty face, clear-cut and cruel, but just now it's air was that of satisfaction, as if in the opinion of Francisco Alvarez all things were going well with his plans. Henry believed that he could guess his thoughts. "He thinks that the Spanish are already committed against us and that he and Braxton Wyatt with a force of Spaniards and the tribes will yet destroy our settlements in Kentucky."

Thinking of Braxton Wyatt he looked for him and, as he looked, the renegade came from a point near the shore toward the commander. It was evident that Wyatt had been faring well. His frontier dress had been partly replaced with gay Spanish garments. He now wore a cap with a feather in it, and a velvet doublet. He, too, had a most complacent look.

Wyatt approached Alvarez and the commander courteously invited him to a seat on the hillock near him. When he took the seat a soldier brought the renegade a cup of wine, and he drank, first lifting the cup toward Alvarez as if he drank a toast to the success of the alliance. There could be no doubt about the perfect understanding of the two; and

Henry's anger rose. It was impossible to set a limit to what a ruthless and determined man like Francisco Alvarez might do.

Wyatt rose presently after a nod to the commander and walked among the soldiers. He seemed to have no particular object in view and his strollings brought him near to the edge of the swampy forest.

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“Perhaps he’s spying about, and will come into the woods where we are,” whispered Henry. “Maybe he has those maps and plans upon him, and it would be a great thing to get them. I don’t believe he could make a new set soon.”

“It’s a risky thing to try,” said Shif’less Sol, “but ef he comes in here, an’ you think it the best thing to do, I’m ready to help.”

The two crouched a little lower and remained breathless. Braxton Wyatt strolled on. He was making a sort of vague inspection of the camp, but he was really thinking more about the great triumph that he saw ahead. Since he had turned renegade, leaving his own white race to join the Indians, a thing that was sometimes done, he had been stung by many defeats and he wished a great revenge that would pour oil upon all these wounds.

A bad nature grows worse with failure. Seeking to injure his former people and failing at every turn, Braxton Wyatt hated them more and more all the time. His wrath was particularly directed against the five who had been such great instruments in sending his careful plans astray. His scheme with the Indian league had failed chiefly through them, but he felt that he could now come with a Spanish force that would prove irresistible. That was why he glowed with internal warmth and pride. The settlements would be destroyed and he, in fact, would be the destroyer.

Braxton Wyatt entered the edge of the woods, still occupied with the cruel triumph that was to be his. He did not notice that the foliage was gradually shutting out the firelight. Presently he saw, or believed that he saw, a shadowy but terrible figure. It was the figure of the one whom he dreaded most on earth.

It was but a glimpse of a form, seen through the bushes, but Wyatt’s blood turned cold in every vein. He uttered a half-choked cry, and running back through the bushes, sprang into the firelight. Two or three Spanish soldiers looked at him in amazement, but he was not a coward, and he had pride of a kind. As soon as he leaped back into the firelight he felt that he had made a fool of himself. Henry Ware could not have been there—he and his comrades had been left behind long ago. Coming suddenly out of his thoughts, he had been deceived in the dark by a bush and imagination had done the rest. Yes, it was only fancy!

“A rattlesnake! I nearly trod on him,” he said in broken Spanish words that he had picked up, and then walked in as careless a manner as he could assume toward the mound where Francisco Alvarez sat. But he could not wholly control himself—the shock had been too great—and his body yet trembled. He did not know it, but the pallor of his face showed through the tan, and Alvarez noticed it.

“You have had a fright, Senor Wyatt,” he said in his precise, cold English. “What is it?”

“Not a fright,” replied Wyatt in tones that he sought to make indifferent, “but a start. I nearly trod on a rattlesnake that lay coiled ready to strike, and I got away just in time.”

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The Spaniard regarded him with a penetrating look, but the chilly blue eyes expressed nothing. Yet Francisco Alvarez thought that a bold woodsman like Braxton Wyatt would not show so much fear after a harmless passage with any kind of a snake.

“Do you think the five, the party that you said were so much to be dreaded, are still following us?” he asked presently.

The pallor showed again for a moment through the tan in Braxton Wyatt’s face, but he answered again as carelessly as he could:

“It may be. I hate them, but I do not deny that they are bold and resourceful. They have a good boat, and they may follow; but what harm could they do?”

“As I told you, they might go before Bernardo Galvez, our Governor General at New Orleans, and spoil the pretty plan that you and I have formed. Galvez is—as he calls himself—a Liberal. He would help these rebels and fight England. How can a Spaniard lend himself to the cause of Republican rebels and injure monarchy? Cannot he foresee, cannot he look ahead a little and tell what rebel success means? It would in the end be as great a blow to Spain as to England. If Kaintock is permitted to grow she will threaten Louisiana. These men in their buckskins are daring and dangerous and we must attend to them!”

The Spaniard clenched his hands in anger, and the blue light of his eyes was singularly cruel.

“Galvez is a fool,” he continued. “He is not allowing the English to trade at New Orleans, but he is giving the American rebels full chance. He his allowed one, Pollock, Oliver Pollock, to establish a base there. This Pollock has formed a company of New York, Philadelphia, and Boston merchants, and they are sending arms and ammunition in fleets of canoes up the Mississippi and then up the Ohio to Fort Pitt, where they are unloaded and then taken eastward by land for the use of the rebels. A fleet of these canoes is to start about the time we arrive in New Orleans.”

“We might meet it,” suggested Braxton Wyatt, “and say that it attacked us.”

The Spaniard smiled.

“The idea is not bad,” he said, “and it could be done. We could sink their whole fleet of canoes with the pretty little cannon that we carry, and we could prove that they began the attack. But I do not choose to run the risk of compromising myself just yet. There is a more glorious enterprise afoot. Hark you, Senor Wyatt.”

Braxton Wyatt leaned forward and listened attentively. Francisco Alvarez had drank of wine that evening, and his blood was warm. He, too, dreamed a great dream.

“You are a man of discretion and you have helped me. I speak to you as one devoted to my cause. If you should but breathe what I say to another I would first swear that it was a lie, and then deliver you to these five gentlemen, former friends of yours, who would tear you in pieces.”

Braxton Wyatt shivered again, and the Spaniard, seeing the shiver, laughed and was convinced.

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“Why should I betray you?” said the renegade. “I have no motive to do so and every possible motive to keep faith.”

“I know it,” replied Alvarez, “and that is why I speak. It is to your interest to be faithful to me and when my enterprise succeeds, as it certainly will, you shall have your proper share of the reward. Bernardo Galvez, as you know, is the Governor General of Louisiana, and his father is the Viceroy of Mexico. They are powerful, very powerful, and I am only a commander of troops under the son, but I, too, am powerful. My family is one of the first in Spain. It sits upon the very steps of the throne and more than once royal blood has entered our veins. I was a favorite at the court and I have many friends there. The King might be persuaded that Bernardo Galvez is not a fit representative of the royal interests in Louisiana.”

Francisco Alvarez leaned a little forward and his blue eyes, usually so chill, sparkled now with fire. He was speaking of what lay next to his heart. Braxton Wyatt, full of shrewdness and perception, understood at once.

“Bernardo Galvez might give way as Governor General of Louisiana,” said the renegade, “to be succeeded by a better man, one who had the real interests of Spain at heart, one who would refuse to give the slightest aid to rebels, rebels who would strike against a throne!”

The Spaniard looked pleased.

“I see that you are a man of penetration, Senor Wyatt,” he said, “and I am fortunate in having you as a lieutenant. You have divined my thought. I work, not for the interests of a man whose name has been mentioned by neither of us, but for the true interests of Spain and the divine right of kings. What is this miserable Kaintock which is springing up? We will crush it out as you would have crushed the rattlesnake! The people of New Orleans and Louisiana hate rebels! Why should they not? It is the rebels who in time will take Louisiana from us if they can, not England.”

Braxton Wyatt smiled. He was delighted to the very center of his cunning heart. His plans and those of Alvarez marched well together. Each strengthened the other.

“I am with you to the end,” he said.

“The end will be a glorious triumph,” said the Spaniard in emphatic tones.

Meanwhile Henry and Shif’less Sol still lay in the thicket. Their project to seize Braxton Wyatt and strip him of the maps and plans had been defeated. Henry knew that the renegade had caught a glimpse of him in the dusk and among the thick bushes and he expected an immediate alarm. But when Wyatt raised none, he and Sol lingered. They saw the renegade go to the Spaniard’s side on the little mound, and they saw the two

talk long and earnestly, but, of course, they could not understand a word of what was said.

“They look mighty pleased with one another,” whispered Shif’less Sol, “so it’s bound to mean that they’re up to the worst sort o’ mischief.”

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“Yes,” replied Henry, “and that mischief is sure to be aimed at our people.”

They waited about a half hour longer and then picked their way back through the marsh to their own side of the peninsula.

It was now very late and Paul and Jim Hart were sound asleep in the boat, but Tom Ross was keeping vigilant guard.

“Wuz it them?” he asked.

“Yes,” replied Henry. “They’re camped on the other side of this neck, and Braxton Wyatt is still with them. There’s big mischief afoot and we’ve got to keep on following, waiting our chance, which, I think, will come.”

They did not start until noon the next day, in order to give the Spaniards a longer lead, and they rounded the neck of land very slowly lest they run into a trap. But when the river lay straight before them again they beheld nothing. They passed the point where the Spaniards had camped and saw the dead coals of their fires, but they did not stop, continuing instead their steady progress down stream.

It now grew hot upon the water. They had come many hundreds of miles since the start, and they were in a warmer climate. The character of the vegetation was changing. The cypress and the magnolia became frequent on the banks, and now and then they saw great, drooping live oaks. The soil seemed to grow softer and the water was more deeply permeated with mud. Although the flood was gone, the river spread out in places to a vast width, and even at its narrowest it was a gigantic stream. Other great, lazy rivers poured in their volume from east and west. Narrow, deep inlets, half-hidden in vegetation, extended from either side. There were bayous, although the five had not yet heard the name, and many of them swarmed with fish.

The warm air was heavy and languorous and now Shif’less Sol confessed.

“I’m gittin’ too much o’ it, even fur a lazy man,” he said. “’Pears to me I’m always wantin’ to sleep. Now, I like about sixteen hours sleepin’ out o’ the twenty-four, but when it comes to keepin’ awake jest long enough to eat three meals a day I ain’t in favor o’ it.”

“It must be a rich country, though,” said Tom Ross. “No wonder them Spaniards want to keep it.”

That day they passed at some distance three canoes containing Indians, but the canoes showed no wish to come near and investigate. Henry said that the Indians in them looked sprawling and dirty, unlike the alert, clean-limbed natives of the North.

“They probably belong,” said Paul, “to the Natchez tribe who were beaten into submission long ago by the French, and who doubtless lack energy anyhow.”

The Indian canoes went lazily on, and soon were lost to sight. Now a serious problem arose. They were approaching the settled parts of Louisiana. It is true, it was only the thinnest fringe of white people extending along either shore of the river a short distance above New Orleans, but they were coming to a region in which they would be noticed, and they might have to explain their presence before they wished to do so. Nor had they found any opportunity to capture Braxton Wyatt and his maps and plans. Nevertheless, they hung so closely on the trail of Alvarez that every night and morning they could see the smoke of his camp fire.

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They stopped one evening in a cove of the river, sheltered by great mournful cypresses, and Henry and Shif'less Sol went out again to scrutinize the Spanish camp. They returned before midnight with unusual news. Alvarez with his whole force had turned from the Mississippi and had gone up a bayou about four miles. There he had landed some of his small cannon and stores at a rude wharf, and showed all the signs of making a stay, but whether short or long they could not tell.

"Alvarez must have a place, a plantation, I believe they call it, near here," said Paul intuitively, "and he's going to stop at it. As he wants to get Spain into a war with us he could plot a lot of mischief in a house of his own away from New Orleans."

"Of course, that's it," said Henry with conviction. "Now if we could only capture Braxton Wyatt and then carry off the fellow and his maps and plans with us, it would be a great stroke. It might make Alvarez quit his wicked plot."

Henry and Shif'less Sol slept briefly, and rising before daylight, went forth to investigate again. When they arrived at the edge of the bayou, they saw that the work of removal had been resumed already. All the boats had been tied up securely, and a mongrel lot of new men had joined the Spanish force, shiftless and half-civilized Houma and Natchez Indians, coal black negroes, some from the West Indies and some from Africa, Acadians, and fierce-looking adventurers from Europe. Most of them seemed to be laborers, however, and they worked with the arms and baggage taken from the boats. Among these laborers were several stalwart negro women with blazing red handkerchiefs tied around their heads.

Alvarez came off one of the boats, followed by Braxton Wyatt. The Spanish commander had attired himself with great care, and he was a really splendid figure in his glittering uniform and plumed hat. His gold-hilted small sword swung by his side. He bore himself as a lord proprietor, and in fact he was such at this moment. He was about to go, surrounded by his retainers, to his own house on a huge grant of land made to him by the Spanish King—Spanish kings granted lands very freely in America to favorites, and the relatives of favorites.

Braxton Wyatt also showed pride. Was he not the most trusted friend of an able man who was dreaming a great dream, a dream that would come true? The last remnants of his border attire had disappeared and he, too, was dressed wholly as a Spanish officer, though by no means so splendidly as his chief.

Alvarez addressed a few words to a man in civilian attire, evidently his overseer, a dark, heavy West India Spaniard who carried a pistol in his sash, and then advanced through the rabble, which quickly fell back on either side to let him pass.

Horses were in waiting for Alvarez, Wyatt, and several others, and mounting, they rode off, Henry and Shif'less Sol watching from the bush as well as they could, and

following. The way of the officers led through a great plantation but partially redeemed from the ancient forest. Cane and grain fields were on either side of the path, and presently they approached a large house of only one story, built of wood, and surrounded by a wide veranda supported with posts at regular intervals. This house was built around a court in the center of which was a clear pool.

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Henry and the shiftless one saw Alvarez and his company dismount and enter the house. They noticed others who approached on foot, but who did not enter, obviously men who did not dare to enter unless asked. Among them was a thin, middle-aged Natchez Indian, whose extraordinary, feline face had won for him the name of The Cat. Henry particularly observed this man, whose manner was in accordance with his appearance and name. Like those they had seen in the canoes he had a hangdog, shiftless look, different from the bold warrior of the more northerly forests.

The two did not remain long. So many people were about that they were likely to be seen, and they returned through the forest to the cypress cove in which "The Galleon" lay hidden. Here, it was agreed that they should go forth later in the day on another tour of inspection, re-inforced by Tom Ross, while Long Jim and Paul should remain to guard the boat and their precious stores.

When the three had gone, Long Jim sat on the edge of the boat and looked around at the sluggish waters of the bayou, the sad cypresses, and the drooping live oaks. An ugly water snake twined its slimy length just within the edge of the bayou, and the odor of the still forest about them was heavy and oppressive.

Long Jim took a long, comprehensive look, and then heaved a deep sigh.

"What's the matter?" asked Paul.

"I don't think the country and the climate agree with me," replied Long Jim lugubriously. "I wuz never so fur south afore, an' I'm a delicate plant, I am. I need the snow and the north wind to keep me fresh an' bloomin'. All this gits on me. My lungs don't feel clean. I'm longin' fur them big, fine woods up in our country, whar you may run agin a b'ar, but whar you ain't likely to step on a snake afore you see it."

"Give me the temperate climate, too," said Paul, "but we've come on a great errand, Jim, and we've come a long way. It's good, too, to see new things."

"So it is, but I don't like to set here waitin' in this swamp. Think I'll stretch my legs a little on the bank thar, ef it's firm enough to hold me up, though I do have an abidin' distrust uv most uv the land hereabouts."

Jim leaped upon the bank which upheld him, and stretched his long legs with obvious relief.

"A boat's mighty easy," he said, "but now an' then walkin's good."

He strode up and down two or three times and then he stopped. He had heard a sound, faint, it is true, but enough to arrest the attention of Long Jim. Then he went on with a look of disgust. It was surely one of those snakes again!

He was about to pass a great cypress when a pair of long, brown arms reached out and grasped him by the throat. Long Jim was a strong man and, despite his early advantage, it would have gone hard with the owner of the arms, none other than The Cat himself, but three or four men, springing from the covert, threw themselves upon him.

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Paul heard the first sounds of the contest and sprang up. He saw Long Jim struggling in the grasp of many hands, and snatching at the first weapon that lay near, he sprang to the bank, rushing to the assistance of his comrade.

A shout of derisive laughter greeted Paul. Long Jim had been thrown down and held fast and the lad was confronted by none other than Alvarez himself, while Braxton Wyatt, smiling in malignant triumph, stood just behind him.

“Well, my young man of Kaintock,” said Francisco Alvarez in his precise English, “we have taken you and at least one of your brother thieves. In good time we’ll have the others, too. It was an evil day when you ventured on my plantation so near such a wonderful tracker as The Cat. Why, he detected them instinctively when your comrades ventured near us!”

The eyes of the stooping Natchez Indian flashed at the compliment but, in a moment, he resumed his immobility. All the blood rushed to Paul’s face, and he could not contain his anger.

“Thief! how dare you call me a thief!” he said.

“This is my boat before me,” replied Alvarez. “You stole it.”

“Not so,” replied Paul. “We captured it. You seized and held me a prisoner when I came to your camp on a friendly mission, and we took it in fair reprisal and for a good purpose. Moreover, you are plotting with that vile renegade there to destroy our people in Kentucky!”

“You are a thief,” repeated Francisco Alvarez calmly, “you stole my boat. Why, the very sword that you hold in your hand is mine, stolen from me.”

Paul glanced down. In his haste and excitement he had snatched up one of the beautiful small swords when he leaped from the boat, but he had been unconscious of it. He was yet free and he held a sword in his hand. One of the men who was holding Jim Hart suddenly kicked him to make him keep quiet, and Paul’s wrath blazed up under the double incentive of the blow and the sneering face of Francisco Alvarez.

The lad rushed forward, sword in hand, and one of the soldiers raised his musket. Alvarez pushed the weapon down.

“Since this young rebel wants to fight, and has a stolen sword of mine in his hand,” he said, “he can fight with me. I will give him that honor.”

So speaking Alvarez drew his own sword and held up the blade to the light until it glittered. A shout of approval arose from the soldiers, but Long Jim cried out:

“It ain’t fair! It ain’t right to take one uv your kind uv weepins an’ attack him! It’s murder! Let me loose an’ I’ll fight you with rifles.”

“Have you got that ruffian securely bound?” asked Alvarez.

“Yes,” replied one of his men.

“Then I’ll teach this youth a lesson, as I said.”

Paul had stopped in his rush, and suddenly he became cool and collected.

“Don’t you be afraid for me, Jim,” he said. “I can take care of myself, and I’ll fight him.”

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Alvarez laughed derisively and the others echoed the laugh of their master, but Paul held up his own sword, also, until it glittered in the light. Every nerve and muscle became taut, and the blood went back from his brain, leaving it cool and clear.

“Come on,” he said to Alvarez. “I’m ready.”

They stood in a level glade, and the two faced each other, the sunshine lighting up all the area enclosed by the cypresses. Around them stood Braxton Wyatt and the followers of Alvarez.

FOOTNOTES:

[Footnote B: It is probable that the bluff, indicated by Paul, is the one on which the present city of Memphis stands.]

CHAPTER IX

PAUL AND THE SPANIARD

Francisco Alvarez never suffered from the vice of humility. While he was planning to make himself Governor General of Louisiana he thought also that the selection was a most admirable one. Nor would he have condescended now to cross a blade with this boy from the backwoods, but his pride had been bitterly hurt by the deeds of Paul and his comrades. Such presumption must be punished, and the punishment must be of a humiliating kind.

The Spaniard took the point of his sword between his thumb and forefinger and bent the blade a little. The steel was flexible and true. Then he put himself on guard, and physically he was a splendid figure of a man, tall, compact, and obviously skilled with his weapon.

Long Jim Hart writhed again in his bonds. His heart yearned over Paul, his young comrade.

“Stop it! stop it!” he cried. “It’s murder, I say, fur a man used to them weepins to set upon a boy.”

“Shall we gag this fellow, Captain?” asked Braxton Wyatt, who enjoyed the scene.

“No,” replied Alvarez, scornfully. “Let him make as much noise as he pleases.”

Paul heard Long Jim’s second protest, but now he did not answer. He was intently watching Alvarez. He had read the look in the eye of the Spanish leader, and he knew

that Alvarez not only intended to punish him, but also to make that process as mortifying as possible. But Paul was yet unafraid. Although not as large and powerful as Henry, he was nevertheless a very strong youth, used to the open air and exercise, and wonderfully flexible and alert. He held the sword lightly but firmly with the point well forward, ready for any movement by his antagonist.

Alvarez came a step nearer. His sword flashed, but Paul dextrously caught the stroke upon his own weapon, and the blade glanced off, ringing. Alvarez was surprised. He had seen from Paul's position and the manner in which he held his weapon that he knew something about the sword, but he was not prepared for such a skillful parry.

"Good, Paul! Good!" cried Long Jim, a sudden hope bounding up in his heart. "Go in! Trim him! Slice off his mustache for him!"

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Alvarez was stung by the taunt. Braxton Wyatt made an angry movement toward Long Jim, but the Spaniard again waved him back. His own pride would not permit him to silence the taunter in such a way. No, he would silence him in another manner. But the cry of Long Jim had its effect upon Paul, too. It aroused him to a supreme effort. He leaped forward suddenly, thrust quick as lightning, and then leaped away. The Spaniard had parried, but the blade nevertheless cut the cloth of his brilliant coat, making a long gash. The cut was not in the flesh, only in the cloth, but Alvarez was stung by it and the sting became the more bitter when Long Jim cried out:

“Hooray, Paul! That wuz somethin’ like! He thought he wuz goin’ to murder you, but he ain’t!”

Alvarez, furious, rushed in and Paul, keen of eye and alert of muscle, fought on the defensive. Lucky for him now that he remembered all the lessons taught to him by the old soldier of the great French and Indian war, and lucky for him, too, that he had lived such a temperate life! Steel met steel and the ringing sound filled the little glade. The others were silent, leaning a little forward, lips slightly apart. A new element of uncertainty had come into the combat, and even Braxton Wyatt shared in the excitement that had been aroused by it.

Alvarez uttered a cry of satisfaction and then stepped back. Paul stood still while the blood came slowly from a cut across his left arm and dyed his sleeve. He had thrown out the arm just in time to ward off a thrust at his heart, but he received a slash in its place. The pain was considerable but Paul scarcely felt it; his mind was too intent on the crisis, and his head was yet clear and cool.

“Never you mind, Paul! Never you mind!” cried Long Jim. “’Twas only a lucky sweep uv his! you’ll git him yet.”

Paul gave his informal second a smile of confidence, for second he was with his encouraging tongue, even though bound and helpless otherwise.

Paul suddenly rushed in, struck swiftly, and, although the blow was parried, he thrust again so quickly that his blade passed inside the guard of Alvarez, pierced through his doublet, and wounded him in the side. Mad with pain and rage Alvarez struck furiously, but Paul caught the blow so skillfully that the Spaniard’s sword broke in his hand.

Long Jim shouted with delight.

“You’ve beat him, Paul! you’ve beat him!” he cried. “Go in now and trim his mustache right off his face!”

Braxton Wyatt struck him a blow on the cheek.

“Shut up, will you!” he cried.

Paul, sword in hand, turned away. He would not cut down an unarmed man, and some strain of chivalry hidden beneath the Spaniard's ambition and cruelty recognized the boy's nobility. He stepped aside and rebuked Braxton Wyatt for striking Long Jim. Then he took off his doublet and one of the men bound up his wound, which was painful but not at all dangerous. His heart was full of rage and chagrin, but he did not show either.

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“You have done well with the sword,” he said to Paul, “I admit it, and I am in a position to know. But you must surrender it, and come as my prisoner. Your sword can be no defense against the bullets of my soldiers.”

Paul yielded his weapon. It would have been folly to resist when the soldiers stood close by, loaded guns in hand, but he felt, nevertheless, a deep satisfaction. He had performed a deed of valor, worthy of Shif’less Sol or Henry, and he proudly took his place by the side of the other prisoner, Long Jim. The wound in his arm had already stopped bleeding.

“I didn’t know it was in you, Paul,” whispered Long Jim, “but I never had anything in my life do me more good. A lot uv wicked hopes wuz disapp’inted when you give him that slash in the side, an’ then broke his sword.”

“I did better than I expected,” replied Paul briefly, “but the result is not likely to endear us to Captain Alvarez.”

“Ef I’d been keepin’ the right kind uv a watch,” said Long Jim, “this wouldn’t have happened. We could a’ got ‘The Gall-yun’ out in the stream an’ away.”

“No, Jim,” replied Paul, “it was no fault of yours. Cunning was at work. They had located us in some manner and they prepared a surprise.”

Alvarez and Braxton Wyatt went on ahead. Paul and Jim followed in the midst of a strong guard of soldiers. The road led again through corn and grain fields where cultivation was making a struggle against the luxuriance of a semi-tropical wilderness, although with small success, as yet.

A stooping figure with a hideous, feline face shambled up by the side of Paul, and purposely struck his elbow against the wound upon his arm. It was The Cat, but Paul, whose arms had been left unbound, whirled, without hesitation, and struck the Natchez in the face.

The Cat staggered but he promptly drew a knife and Paul might have been slain, but a soldier knocked the knife from the Indian’s hand and rebuked him severely. The soldier was Luiz, a Spaniard of height and strength. He had fared badly at the hands of the five, but his life had also been saved by one of them, and he was not ungrateful. He did not mean that these two prisoners should be treated any worse than the captain ordered. He compelled The Cat to fall back, and he smiled pleasantly at Paul and Long Jim.

“I’ll take it that we’ve got one friend in this crowd,” said Long Jim.

“Yes,” said Paul, “and we’ll need all we can get. Alvarez seems to have a big place here, a sort of feudal estate.”

It seemed to Paul that he had come into another world; the difference between this and Kentucky was so enormous. There, in the little settlements, every man spoke his mind and the life was all freedom. Here, fear and suspicion abounded, there were degrees of importance, and Alvarez was an autocrat who could make or mar as he pleased. It was an atmosphere heavy to Paul's lungs, and, like Long Jim, he

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longed for the great forests of the Ohio River country. Behind the chateau were some low, heavy out buildings of logs, and Paul and Long Jim were thrust into one of these, the door being fastened behind them with a huge padlock. Alvarez detailed Luiz, who seemed to rank a little above his fellows, and three others to keep watch and then, feeling that he held his prisoners securely, the commander went into the chateau. But he stopped at the door and ordered that a gold coin and as much rum as he could drink should be given to The Cat.

"It was due to his wonderful instinct and cunning," he said, "that we captured these fellows and recovered my boat. It was an important achievement."

Braxton Wyatt looked with intense interest at the chateau, which was unlike anything that he had ever seen before. It was a strange compound of luxury and roughness. The walls were of wood, often ill-hewn, but several pieces of beautifully-woven tapestry hung upon them. Some of the floors were entirely bare, others were covered partly by Eastern rugs. Carved and curved weapons of many lands adorned the walls, and in one room were a mandolin and guitar.

Alvarez led the way to an inner court or patio, waving back all except Braxton Wyatt. The patio was large, with little beds of flowers in the corners, and a pool of pure, fresh water in the center. The pool was fed by a little stream that ran from a brook near the chateau, and it was drained by a similar stream.

The patio was enclosed by a narrow, interior veranda, and the veranda held deep cane chairs, one of which Alvarez took, waving Braxton Wyatt to another.

The Spanish commander with a great air of relief and luxury leaned back in his cane chair. He loved the south and the sunshine to which he was born, and, although bold and hardy, he had little liking for the great, cold forests of the North. He clapped his hand and a servant brought glasses and wine. Alvarez filled the glasses himself and handed the first courteously to Wyatt.

"Drink," he said, "I am glad that expedition is over. The Governor General wished me to go, to explore, to make treaties, and to secure our title, but the wilderness, though interesting, grows monotonous."

"It is comfortable here," said Braxton Wyatt, stretching himself in the great cane chair. He was entirely recovered from his own wound and he appreciated the luxury of the place.

"Yes, it is indeed grateful to the tired body and limbs. I could feel a complete sense of rest and victory, if it were not for the sting of the wound that boy gave me. Who could

have thought that I should be defeated with the sword by a boy from the woods of Kaintock?”

The Spaniard frowned and narrowed his cruel blue eyes. Braxton Wyatt murmured some words of sympathy, but in his heart he was not sorry because of the incident. He thought that Alvarez at times had patronized him too much, had assumed too lofty an air, and he was willing to see him suffer mortification. Moreover, he could use the hurt pride of Alvarez as an additional incitement against the five whom he hated.

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“You told me once,” said Alvarez “that the three comrades of the two, the three whom we have not captured, are much to be dreaded, and we have had proof of it?”

“It is so.”

“But what can they do now?”

“But little,” answered the renegade. “It was farther north in the great wilderness, where they are so much at home, that they could do us harm. Here within the fringe of the French and Spanish settlements, they will be hampered too much.”

“Yes, I should think so,” said Alvarez thoughtfully. “As you perhaps surmise, I am going to stay here indefinitely, Wyatt. This place of mine, Beaulieu, I call it, is at a suitable distance from New Orleans and I am an absolute monarch while I remain. Here, on the border, I am as a military commander, practically lord of life and death, and on one excuse or another I can hold the troops as long as I please.”

“Which seems to me to be very convenient for all our plans,” said Braxton Wyatt.

The Spaniard smiled, but speedily contracted his brows again. The cut that Paul had given him was hurting.

“I should like to punish that boy in some spectacular manner,” he said. “I should want him to be humiliated in the presence of others as I was.”

Suddenly he raised his head, which he had bent in thought, and his lips curled in laughter under his yellow mustache.

“I have it!” he exclaimed. “An idea! Since young Kaintock can use the sword I shall give him a chance to do it again! Oh, I shall give him every opportunity!”

Then he leaned over and spoke in lower tones to Braxton Wyatt. The renegade’s eyes lighted up with delight.

“The very thing!” he exclaimed. “I’d have it done at once!”

Paul and Long Jim Hart meanwhile were resting in their log prison. Jim’s arms had been unbound and, after rubbing them freely, he said that the circulation was restored. Then the two turned their attention to their prison. Paul surmised that it had been built as a tool house or store house, but at present it was empty save for himself and his comrade, Long Jim.

The only light came from two little windows made merely by cutting out a section of log and quite too small to admit a human body. They tried the door but it was so strong that they could not shake it. Then Long Jim lay calmly down on the floor.

“Paul,” he said, “I don’t believe I wuz ever fastened up in sech a little place ez this afore. Ef I stretch out my legs my feet will hit the wall over thar, an’ the place is so close an’ hot I don’t breathe good.”

“We’ll have to stand it for a while,” said Paul philosophically.

“That’s so,” said Long Jim, “I don’t s’pose they mean to murder us ez we’re not at real war with the Spaniards, so I wonder what they mean to do.”

Paul shook his head. But he understood better than Long Jim the dangers of their situation. He knew the temper and character of Alvarez, and he knew, too, that at this distant chateau he was omnipotent. Alvarez was bent on making war upon the settlers in Kentucky, and nothing would stop him.

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“Henry an’ Sol an’ Tom are free,” said Long Jim. “They’ll git us out, shore.”

They remained a long time undisturbed, and the air in the room was so close and hot that both became languorous and sleepy. Nor was there any sound except the droning of some flies overhead and this added to the heaviness. Paul finally rose and gazed through the little windows, but he saw only an empty field and the edge of the forest. Save for this glimpse of green they were completely cut off from the world. He sat down again on the floor and composed his figure as comfortably as he could.

“How long do you think we hev been in here, Paul?” asked Long Jim.

“About four hours.”

“Four hours! why, I thought it wuz four months. Paul, I don’t believe I could stand this more’n a week, no matter ef they fed me upon the finest things in the land. At the end uv a week I’d turn right over an’ die, an’ when they examined me to see the cause uv my death, they’d find that my heart wuz broke in two, right squar’ down the middle.”

“They say that some wild animals die in captivity, and you might call it of a broken heart.”

“I’m one uv them kind. I like lots uv room. I want it to be clean woods an’ prairie runnin’ a thousan’ miles from me in every direction. An’ I don’t want too many people trampin’ ‘roun’ in them woods either, save Injuns to keep you lookin’ lively, an’ mebbe twenty or thirty white men purty well scattered. I reckon I’d call that my estate, Paul, an’ I’d want it swarmin’ with b’ars an’ buffaler an’ deer, an’ all kinds uv big an’ little game. Then I’d want a couple uv good rifles, one to take the place uv tother when it went bad, an’ a couple uv huts p’raps three or four hundred miles apart to sleep in, when the weather wuz too tarnation bad, lots uv ammunition an’, Paul, I’d be happy on that thar estate uv mine.”

“Aren’t you a little bit grasping, Jim?” asked Paul.

“Me, graspin’,” replied Long Jim in a surprise. “What makes you ask sech a foolish question, Paul? Why, all I ask is to range ez fur an’ ez long ez I like an’ not to be bothered by no interlopers. I don’t want to crowd nobody, an’ I don’t want nobody to crowd me. But, Paul, ef a feller could do that fur about a thousand years wouldn’t it be a life wuth livin’? Just think uv all the deer hunts an’ buffaler hunts an’ b’ar hunts you could hev! An’ the long beaver trappin’ trips, you could go on? An’ the new rivers an’ new mountings you could find! The Injuns has the right idea about Heaven, Paul. They make it the happy huntin’ grounds. Them huntin’ grounds o’ theirs run ten million miles in every direction. You couldn’t ever come to any end. No matter how fur you went you’d see oceans uv green trees ahead uv you, an’ on one side uv you prairies covered

with buffaler herds so big that they'd be a week passin' you, an' then they'd still be passin'."

Long Jim heaved a deep sigh and was silent for a while. Paul, too, was silent. At last Long Jim said:

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“I s’pose it don’t pay, Paul, to be drawin’ sech splendiferous pictures uv what ain’t. Now I’ve gone an’ made myself onhappy, talkin’ uv them glorious huntin’ grounds that stretch away without end, when here we are in this hot box so narrer I can’t straighten out my legs. Besides, I’m gittin’ pow’ful hungry. I wonder ef they mean to starve us to death. Strikes me that’s an awful mean way uv killin’ a man. He not only dies but he’s so terrible hungry sech a long time.”

But Long Jim’s forebodings were not fulfilled. When the light that came through the little windows began to grow dusky, the door was thrown open and Luiz and another man entered with food and water. Luiz could not speak English, but he could make pantomime, and in that dumb but suggestive way he invited them to partake freely. Long Jim’s good humor returned.

“Don’t keer ef I do, Mr. Spaniard,” he said jovially. “It’s a failin’ uv mine to want to eat whenever I’m hungry, an’ since you’re invitin’, why, I’ll jest accept.”

The door was left open while Luiz and the soldier were inside, but several other soldiers were on guard at the opening, and there was no chance for a dash. But fresh air came in, the cooler air of the evening, and Paul and Long Jim were greatly relieved. Yet Jim Hart cast many a longing glance at the open door. Outside was the wide world, and his place was there. Darkness was coming, but darkness would have no terrors for Long Jim, if only there were no walls about him.

When hunger and thirst were satisfied, Luiz and his comrade fell back respectfully. A tall figure, followed by a man bearing a torch, entered the doorway.

The man was Francisco Alvarez, but neither Paul nor Long Jim rose, Paul because he disliked the Spaniard and considered him a bitter enemy of his people, Long Jim because he saw no reason why he should rise for anybody.

Alvarez looked down at them and the sight of the two caused him a mixture of anger and triumph. His wound still stung, but at the bottom of his heart was a feeling that he had deserved it. In the presence of his own retainers, and with all the circumstances in his favor, he had sought to humiliate a boy. But this faint feeling was not enough to induce corresponding action. He was also something of a statesman, and he saw the power behind these two who had come out of the woods. They were foresters, they wore the tanned skin of the deer, but they belonged to the soil; they were natives, while he, in all his brilliant uniform and gold lace, was a foreigner, merely the long, extended arm of a power four thousand miles away. The two were but a vanguard, others would come and yet others in a volume, always increasing. The only possibility of saving Louisiana was to cut off the stream at the fountain head, while it was yet a thin and trickling rill, and he, Francisco Alvarez, was the man for the deed.

It was because such thoughts as these were passing through his head that he did not speak for at least a minute, but stood steadily regarding Paul and Long Jim. He knew instinctively that it was Paul to whom he must speak, the boy with the thoughtful, dreamy eye, who, like himself, would gaze far into the future.

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“Where are your comrades?” he asked, “the other three who helped you to steal my boat?”

“Captured it, you mean,” replied Paul, calmly. “So long as you use the words ‘steal’ and ‘thief,’ you can talk to the air. I’ve nothing to say.”

“Nor me either, Paul,” said Long Jim, “I can’t remember another time in my life when I felt so little like talkin’.”

Long Jim leaned his head against the wall and half closed his eyes. His manner expressed the utmost indifference. Alvarez frowned, but he remembered that they were wholly in his power and he had plans.

“I’ll change the words,” he said, “but I repeat the question. Where are your comrades?”

“I don’t know,” replied Paul, and feeling a sudden happy thrill of defiance he added: “They are probably somewhere arranging the details of our rescue.”

Alvarez frowned again.

“That is impossible,” he said. “Perhaps you do not know your position. You are not at New Orleans. Here I am both the civil and military chief and this is my own place. I can put you to death as brigands or guerillas, caught red-handed upon Spanish soil.”

“Both charges, you know, are false,” said Paul, “you know, too, that we have come to defeat, if we can, a conspiracy between you and Braxton Wyatt, a renegade whose life is doubly forfeit to his people. He carries plans, maps, and full information of our settlements in Kentucky, and he expects that you will go with many soldiers and cannon to help him and the tribes destroy us. What plans you and he have beyond this I do not know, but these, my friends and I hope to defeat, and we feel we could not be engaged in a greater or holier task.”

Paul spoke with great fire and eloquence. His soul was revealed in his eyes, and Alvarez felt that he was in touch with a mind of no common order.

“Imagination!” said the Spaniard trying to laugh the impression away. “I find in Senor Wyatt a pleasant and intelligent assistant. He understands the rights of the King of Spain in these vast regions, and has a due regard for them. You and your comrades are outlaws, subject to the penalty of death and I hold you in my hand. Yet I am disposed to be generous. Give me your oath that you and your comrade here and the three in the woods will go back to Kaintock at once and remain there, and I will release you.”

Paul regarded him steadily. Bold man as he was, the Spaniard’s eyes fell at last.

“We can give no such promise,” said Paul. “I think that the reasons why we should go on to New Orleans are exceedingly strong.”

“Ez fur me,” said Long Jim, “I ain’t ever been fond uv goin’ back on my own tracks until I git good an’ ready.”

“I merely came here to give you a chance,” said Alvarez, still addressing himself to Paul. “Do you think that a few woodsmen can stand in the path of Spain? Do you think that a great ancient monarchy can be held back by stray settlers?”

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“You seem to be afraid of it yourself,” said Paul who was regarding him closely.

A flush, despite himself, came into the Spaniard’s cheeks, and it was partly of anger because a boy had read his mind so well. It was not a thing to be endured.

“I repeat that I came merely to give you a chance,” he said. “Whatever you may suffer you can now bear in mind that you are the cause of it. Come, Luiz, I have wasted too much time.”

He walked out followed by the soldier, but Francisco Alvarez had known before entering the prison that his offer would be declined. He merely wished to clear away any light burden that might rest on his conscience, before proceeding with another plan that he had in mind.

Paul and Jim did not say a word until the door was fastened and they were left to the darkness. Then it was Jim who unburdened himself.

“Paul,” he said, “did you ever see a panther gittin’ ready to jump? Notice how his eyes turn a yellery-green, ‘cause he thinks he’s goin’ to git what he wants right away? Notice how his mouth is slobberin’ ’cause he thinks he’s goin’ to hev his dinner on the spot. Notice how his body is drawed up, an’ his tail is slowly movin’ side to side, ’cause he thinks he’s goin’ to sink his claws in tender flesh the next second! Wa’al that panther makes me think uv this here Spaniard, Alvarez. I think we kin look fur jest about ez much kindness an’ gentlin’ from him ez a fawn could expect from a hungry panther.”

“You are certainly right, Jim,” said Paul.

“Uv course! Ef I didn’t know thar wuz so many soldiers about, I’d send a whoop through one uv them little winders thar, an’ bring Henry, Tom, an’ Sol here to let us out.”

“As we can’t do that, Jim,” said Paul, “I think I’ll go to sleep.”

CHAPTER X

A BARBARIC ORDEAL

When Paul awoke the next morning just after daylight, he did not feel very good. Accustomed all his life to fresh air and infinite spaces, the close, hot little log house oppressed him. His head felt heavy and his lungs choked. Jim felt likewise and made audible complaint, but the door was soon opened, and again it was Luiz and a comrade with food.

“Luiz, you ain’t no beauty an’ you can’t talk a real decent language,” said Long Jim, “but I’m pow’ful glad to see you.”

The words were foreign to Luiz, but he understood Long Jim's tone. He smiled and showed his white teeth, but when his glance fell upon Paul he became sad. Then he looked quickly away. He did not wish either Paul or his comrade to read anything in that glance. Luiz did not have a bad heart and he was troubled.

When they had eaten their breakfast, Luiz put his hand on Paul's shoulder, and pointed to the door, beckoning also to Long Jim. His manner indicated plainly that they were to leave the prison.

"All right, pardner," said Long Jim. "You won't have to git no pole to pry me out uv this place."

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Luiz led the way and the two followed gladly. The air was crisper and fresher than usual, and to both of them it felt divine. They inhaled deep breaths, and thought that the world had never looked so beautiful. What a golden sunrise! What a blue sky! What magnificent green woods off there under the horizon! They felt strength and courage rushing back in a flood.

“Which way now, Mr. Spaniard?” said Long Jim. “Has your captain repented, an’ does he want to give us the finest rooms in his house? I can’t say that we liked the tavern he made us stop at last night.”

Luiz shook his head, either to signify that he did not understand or that there was no reply, and led the way down a narrow path shut in on either side with magnolias and cypresses. The little group of soldiers enclosed Paul and Long Jim, but all their glances were for the boy, none for the man.

The enclosed path led on for two or three hundred yards. Paul now and then caught glimpses through the trees of the chateau or a passing face, and he heard a low murmur that seemed to be the hum of many voices.

The path ended presently at a gate in a high board wall, and both gate and wall were thick and strong Here a Spaniard dressed like a minor officer was waiting, and began to unlock the gate.

“Now what under the sun can they be about?” asked Long Jim, to whom all this seemed very strange. “Are they goin’ to tie us up in a pen?”

The heavy gate was unlocked and swung open a foot or so. Two soldiers suddenly seized Long Jim and pulled him back, while another thrust Paul into the open space. The officer put in his hand a sword—the very one with which he had wounded Alvarez, Paul’s fingers closing mechanically over the hilt. Then they shoved Paul inside, and quickly closed and locked the gate behind him. But the last look that Luiz had bent upon the boy was one of pity and sympathy.

Paul staggered with the force of the push that the men had given him, and for a moment or two he was dazed, but eye and brain alike cleared as a great shout arose. Then he beheld an extraordinary scene.

The boy stood within a ring fence enclosing a circular space perhaps thirty yards across, free from grass, and trodden hard. The fence was of boards only about half way around, the rest of it being made of strong parallel bars about two feet apart and fastened to posts. At the far side a rude log stable seemed to open into it. The place might have been intended as a breaking ground for horses but Paul did not have time to think.

Facing him just outside the fence and sitting on a hastily constructed wooden seat was Francisco Alvarez, still in his finest uniform. Beside him was Braxton Wyatt, also in a Spanish uniform, and all about them on either side, wherever the fence was made of parallel bars and open to see, clustered the mob, soldiers, laborers, servants, white faces, black faces, yellow faces, brown faces, straight hair, curly hair, and kinky hair, French, Spaniards, Portuguese, Indians, negroes, and many mixtures, every one eager and tense, and every eye bent upon Paul who stood, back to the gate, holding the sword in his hand, but unconscious that he held it.

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What was this mummery? Why was he a spectacle for that mob? All the blood rushed to Paul's head and the little pulses in his temples began to beat like hammers. He looked at Alvarez, but the Spaniard had turned his face into a stony mask, and he could read no meaning there. Then he looked at Braxton Wyatt, and the renegade's countenance plainly expressed malignity and triumph.

The great shout that greeted the entrance of Paul died away to a silence so heavy that it seemed ominous. Then Francisco Alvarez looked toward the wooden building, at the far side of the ring, and raised his hand. A gate there was thrown open, and a man, sword in hand, strolled lazily out. Again a tremendous shout arose, and the mob pressed closer to the bars, those in front sitting on the grass and those behind standing up in order that they might look over them.

Francisco Alvarez raised his hand a second time, and instantly there was silence once more. He was like a feudal lord dispensing justice in the open air before all his retainers.

"Kaintock," he called in a loud voice, "since you are so expert with the sword, we give you another chance to display your skill. Defend yourself from this champion."

Again the approving shout of the mob arose, and Paul looked across the ring, where the swordsman had come forth.

The man was of great size, and his whole appearance reminded Paul of the ancient gladiators of whom he had read. He seemed to be a West Indian of Spanish descent, very dark and with immense shoulders. He wore a red shirt, which added to his strange and savage appearance. He carried in his hand a long sword, much longer than Paul's and when he faced the lad he suddenly grasped the hilt of his weapon in both hands and twirled it about until it made a glittering circle. The crowd set up a shout, but Paul felt chilled through and through.

"I have no quarrel with this man," he called to Alvarez, "and I will not fight him."

"You have no choice," replied Alvarez, and the more savage in the crowd, who wished to see barbaric sport, shouted their approval. But some were silent. Long Jim struggled with four men, and exclaimed, "It's murder! He's only a boy!" But the four held him fast.

The swordsman, grinning in the certainty of easy triumph, advanced upon Paul.

Now Paul understood. He was there to furnish sport, terrible, deadly sport, and he must fight if he would save himself. As Alvarez truly said, no choice was left to him. If he sprang for the barrier they would thrust him back, and that was not a thing to be endured.

Francisco Alvarez, spurred on by the sting of his wound, and urged, too, by Braxton Wyatt, who was mad for the deed the moment he heard of it, had done this wicked thing. The strain of cruelty in his nature, inherited perhaps, from far-off ancestors who had looked upon pitiless games in the arena in the Roman cities in Spain, was completely in control.

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“It is better than I thought,” he said to Braxton Wyatt. “The ring serves the purpose well. We shall have some royal sport If Kaintock will but fight.”

“He will fight,” said Braxton Wyatt.

The swordsman advanced upon Paul and thrust with his shining blade. Paul felt intuitively that he was a master of the weapon, reinforced, too, by enormous strength. He, a boy, would have but little chance. Yet he parried the thrust and replied with one of his own that flashed dangerously near the man’s side. The crowd again shouted approval, but as before some were silent. Long Jim made another effort to drag himself loose, but he could not. The men held him. Nevertheless, he repeated his cry: “It’s murder! He’s only a boy!”

The rapid interchange of thrust and parry followed, and the swordsman grew angry. He was there not only to furnish sport, but to have it also for himself. He did not like to be held back by one over whom he had thought victory so easy. Suddenly he exerted his full strength and broke through Paul’s guard. The lad felt his left shoulder and arm seared as if by a great flame, and, with a cry that he could not repress, he dropped back.

The swordsman, too, stepped back, sure now of his triumph. The shout came from the crowd once more, but only from a part of it, and brave, faithful Long Jim closed his eyes that he might not see what would follow.

The elated swordsman held up his weapon as one would a banner. It was a broad blade like a cutlass and it glittered in the brilliant sunlight. The next moment there was the sound of a shot, the man uttered a cry of pain, although himself untouched, and the sword, broken in several pieces, fell to the ground. It had been shot from his hand with a rifle bullet.

Long Jim, opening his eyes, uttered a cry of joy and Henry Ware, smoking rifle in hand, pressed his way through the crowd, which he had entered unnoticed in the excitement.

Francisco Alvarez sprang to his feet in anger. Not for some moments did he see the figure of the one who fired the shot, and even then he did not know who it was. But Braxton Wyatt knew Henry Ware at once, and he was resolved that he should not escape.

“Seize him! seize him!” cried the renegade. “He is the most dangerous of them all!”

But Henry offered no resistance, as the soldiers rushed toward him, quietly surrendering his rifle. Tom Ross, who was behind him, angrily threw back the crowd and would have fought, but Henry said: “Give up, Tom, it’s best for the present.”

Henry's eyes were upon his comrade who had been subjected to such treatment. Paul stood erect, but there were stains on his shoulder, and he was pale and weak.

"Look to him," said Henry threateningly to Francisco Alvarez who was approaching. "It is an outrage of which the Governor General of Louisiana shall know."

Alvarez flushed. He felt now slight prickings of the conscience and of apprehension. It was indeed a wicked deed that he had done, but he had no mind to be bearded by another from Kaintock.

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“He will receive the proper attention,” he said, “but you are my prisoner, and so is this man who has just been taken with you. I tell you, too, that I am in supreme command here, and I take the responsibility for all my acts.”

Braxton Wyatt had crowded near, but Henry and Tom refused to notice him. Luiz went into the ring and led Paul away, binding up his shoulder where the flesh was cut, although the hurt was not serious. “Take their arms and put them all in the same prison,” said Alvarez to one of his officers and the four were escorted to the log house which Paul and Long Jim had left not long before.

“Our plan has been marked by some success after all,” said Alvarez to Braxton Wyatt. “It has drawn two more into our hands.”

“There is a fifth,” said Braxton Wyatt. “The one they call Shif’less Sol, and we have not got him. As long as a single one of them is free we are in danger.”

The Spaniard laughed.

“You exaggerate their powers,” he said. “We have nothing to fear from one wandering hunter.”

“But this man, Shif’less Sol, is full of cunning,” said Braxton Wyatt.

The Spaniard’s only reply was to hold his head a little higher. It was his plan now to assume his haughtiest manner. The little fear that he had done wrong, that his act in forcing Paul into the ring against a professional swordsman, a gladiator as it were, was mediaeval, and that harm might come to him from it, clung to him. But pride bade him never to show it.

As he and Braxton Wyatt went into the Chateau of Beaulieu, the doors of the log prison closed upon the four comrades. Paul, under the care of Luiz, reached it first but the others were just behind. Paul sat on the floor and leaned against the wall. The others bent tenderly over him. But Paul looked up at them and smiled.

“It isn’t much,” he said. “The sword only grazed me. My clothing saved me from a bad cut. But I wish you boys, whatever happens, would remember that Spaniard, Luiz. He’s been kind to me.”

“We’ll do it,” said Henry. “I don’t know what will come of all this, Paul, but I feel sure that we’ll succeed.”

“Of course,” said Paul, “but you came just in time, and that was a great shot of yours.”

“We were in the woods,” said Henry, “and we saw the crowd gathering. We knew some mischief was afoot, and they were so eager on it that we came up unnoticed. I wanted Tom to stay back, but he was afraid he would be needed.”

“And Shif’less Sol?” said Paul. “Where is he?”

Henry laughed.

“The shiftless one is about the shiftiest man in the wilderness,” he replied. “Do you suppose that he would ever walk into a trap, when there was nothing inside the trap worth the risk? Didn’t he know that Tom and I were sufficient for any task that might be ahead of us this morning?”

Paul laughed, too, and the others were glad to see the color coming back into his face.

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“Good old Sol,” he said, “I’m glad he didn’t come too. He’s somewhere out there in the woods, and he’s the one link between us and Kentucky. We’ll be sure to hear from him.”

They talked of their plans, but for the time, they could see no way. Shif’less Sol might go on alone to New Orleans, but it needed the presence of the five to be convincing.

“He wouldn’t go anyhow,” said Paul. “Sol would never leave us here.”

Luiz brought them food and water at noon, and then they were left again to themselves.

CHAPTER XI

THE SPANIARD’S OFFER

The afternoon passed without incident in the log prison save another and very welcome visit from Luiz, who brought water and some cloth bandages to be used on Paul’s shoulder. Henry and Long Jim, familiar with hurts, dressed it carefully and skillfully. Paul’s healthy blood would quickly do the rest.

“It will be stiff a little for three or four days,” said Henry, “but you’ll forget in a week that you ever had it.”

Then he turned to Luiz.

“We’d like to thank you,” he said, “I know you don’t understand our words, but maybe you take our meaning.”

Luiz nodded violently, smiled at the boy, and then held out his hand in quite an American fashion. His face expressed not only understanding but gratitude as well. Henry, of the acute eye and retentive mind, took a second look. Then he remembered.

“The man whom the buffalo was about to gore and run over!” he exclaimed. “Well, I am glad I was there to help you, and it seems that a lucky chance has made us a friend.”

He took the proffered hand and shook it heartily. When Luiz had gone he explained to the others.

“He is surely a friend,” he said, “and we have certainly had a piece of good fortune.”

But Long Jim instantly demurred.

“Henry,” he said, “you’re a smart fellow, but you’re talkin’ real foolish. It wuz your good heart that done it. Ef it hadn’t told you to help him when that mad bull wuz about to run

over him an' gore him an' trample him clean out uv sight in the earth, he wouldn't a-been here now, grinnin' at you an' with the gratitude oozin' out uv him all over."

Just before the sunset the door was opened again and Braxton Wyatt thrust in his hateful face. Behind him stood four Spanish soldiers.

"I hope you are enjoying yourselves," he said with irony.

"We'd rather be here, as we are, than be in your place, having done what you have done," exclaimed Paul passionately.

Wyatt paled a little, but instantly recovered himself.

"A bear can growl a lot when it's in a trap but growling doesn't help it out," he said airily.

"We kin do more than growl. We've got sharp teeth, too, ez you ought to know," said Tom Ross, the man of few words.

"I'll admit that you have had some successes in the past," said Wyatt, smiling maliciously, "but your time is done. We are the victors, and you'll never get out of this."

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The four as if by common consent turned their backs upon him and did not utter another word. The renegade understood the contempt expressed by those four silent backs, and the willful flush broke through the tan of his face. He had never hated them more bitterly.

“Come you, Henry Ware,” he said roughly, “Captain Alvarez wishes to ask you some questions.”

“I wouldn’t go, Henry,” said Long Jim. “I wouldn’t hev a word to say to that Spaniard or to this white Injun either.”

“He will go, whether willingly or unwillingly,” said Braxton Wyatt. “I’ve men enough here to drag him.”

“I will go willingly, Jim,” said Henry addressing himself to his comrade rather than to the renegade. “It cannot do any harm, and it may help.”

“Yes, it is wiser,” said Paul.

“So long, boys,” said Henry. “I’ll be back pretty soon.”

He stepped out, calmly ignoring the existence of Braxton Wyatt, and placed himself in the center of the little group of soldiers. His manner indicated clearly that he would make no attempt to escape, and, armed though the four soldiers were, and unarmed though their captive was, they breathed four simultaneous sighs of relief. Henry Ware, boy though he was, with his great height and powerful shoulders, chest, and limbs, was a truly formidable figure.

Braxton Wyatt turned the key noisily in the huge padlock that held the door.

“There,” he said, “I think we’ve got that cattle securely fastened in the pen!”

Henry knew that the insulting words were intended for his ear, but he gave no sign of hearing them. He stood expressionless, awaiting the word to the soldiers to march. Braxton Wyatt quickly gave it. He was angrier than ever, because he could not stir Henry Ware, whom he hated most of all, to open anger.

The march led straight to the Chateau of Beaulieu, across well-trimmed sward, and Henry’s alert eye took in everything, the pretentious house, so unlike anything erected by his own people in Kentucky, the low outbuildings, and the occasional gleam of a uniform.

But Henry did not observe at this moment with any eye to the escape of himself and his comrades. His condition of mind was spiritual and he felt a satisfaction for which he could not have accounted if he had tried. He felt sure that his friends and he would

escape. He did not doubt it even now, when only one of the five was free in the woods out there. The spring sun was setting in great clouds of red and gold fire, a pleasant coolness was coming over the heated landscape, and every building, fence, and tree was touched by a soft but vivid light.

Braxton led the way into the house and into a great room, where Francisco Alvarez sat in a high chair, keeping state like a feudal lord. He waved his hand and the soldiers withdrew. Then he said to Braxton Wyatt:

“I wish to speak alone, absolutely alone, to Senor Ware, and I must ask you to leave us for a little while.”

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Braxton turned on his heel, his anger but half concealed, and the Spaniard smiled to himself, Francisco Alvarez was a wily man, a reader of the minds of others, and he did not object to the present displeasure of Wyatt.

But he said nothing until the renegade was gone. Henry, meanwhile, had quietly taken his seat in a cane chair. He was not of any mind to stand in the presence of this man who bore himself as if he were master of everything by right divine.

Francisco Alvarez observed the act and understood its meaning. He smiled again to himself. He had not misjudged the youth, and it confirmed him in the plan that had come suddenly into his cunning mind.

“Senor Ware,” he said, veiling his voice and speaking with a velvety courtesy that was unusual in him, “I have brought you here to tell you first that I repent my act to-day, by which I placed your comrade’s life in seeming danger. I was hasty, but I had been goaded greatly, and it may be, too, that I was influenced by the sinister advice of one who hates you and your friends in a manner almost beyond belief. Besides, the swordsman had orders not to slay.”

Henry Ware looked at him in great surprise. Five minutes ago he would not have dreamed it possible that he could hear such a speech in such a tone from Francisco Alvarez. He waited to see what it meant. Alvarez regarded him in a sort of kindly contemplation, as a man would look upon a youth for whom he had benevolent plans.

“We have been enemies so far,” he resumed in his winning tone, “you and your comrades against myself and my people. But I have learned one thing, and I am confirmed in it by the opinion of others; boy as you are, you are the strongest and most dangerous of the five who oppose me; you are the leader.”

The words, although true, were those of compliment and flattery, and Henry felt the touch of poison in the silky tone. He stiffened himself slightly as if he would resist a danger, unknown as yet, but all the more to be dreaded on that account. He still remained silent.

“Yes, you are the strongest and the one most to be feared,” continued Alvarez musingly, “I am not saying it to flatter you, but because it is a matter that I have weighed well for reasons pertaining to statecraft. There sentiment or personal liking cannot count. I have plans, large plans, in regard to this country. I suppose that every ambitious man who comes here has them. How can he help it when he sees so vast and fertile a land inhabited only by savages? My plan, I believe, is right, in accordance with probability and justice. You, Senor Ware, are a representative of a race that has crossed the mountains into a new region. You have there, in Kaintock, thin and feeble settlements that must soon be crushed.”

Henry spoke for the first time, but he showed no excitement, although his heart had begun to beat faster.

“I think you are wrong, Captain Alvarez,” he said. “The settlements in Kentucky have already driven back some formidable forays, and they grow stronger every day.”

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“Forays of savages only. What could they do if a force of white men, a powerful force, armed with cannon came?”

“But will they come?” asked Henry pointedly.

“Ah, I see you are clever,” said Alvarez, still smiling. “You and the other youth, Cotter, are educated, and you must realize the truth of what I say. Yes, that force will come. Your Eastern colonies are about to be defeated by the King of England. You are rebels, and there is no place for defeated rebels but the depths of the wilderness. Spain has been coquetting with these colonies, but she will come back to the side of the English monarchy where she belongs. The monarchies must stand together against all rebels.”

“How do you know that Spain will help England to fight us?” asked Henry.

Alvarez smiled once more, but the smile now, instead of being merely winning, was superior.

“It is a long distance from here to Europe,” he replied, “but news may come even into the depths of the woods. I have many friends in Spain, friends near the court, who inform me whenever the wind changes.”

Henry did not like that superior smile. It was a mistake of Francisco Alvarez, a mistake that many strong men make, to assume a patronizing manner even for a moment in the presence of another who was also strong. Henry’s intuition at once put him on guard at all points.

“I have heard,” he said, “that Bernardo Galvez, the Spanish Governor General at New Orleans, is no friend of the British power. But why do you discuss these things with me or tell me of them?”

“It is because I have considered you and recognize your worth,” replied Alvarez slowly. “Why rush on to destruction with the foolish rebels? No, do not speak! Pay good heed to what I say. There is more passing on this continent than you think. Great events are about to occur. I do not speak merely of the war between the rebels—or, if you prefer it, the Americans—and the English, but of another change.

“Spain is seated at New Orleans near the mouth of the Mississippi, which flows through a larger area of fertile and temperate country than any other river in the world. The waters of hundreds of navigable streams converge there, and it must become the rival of London and Paris. What can Quebec, Boston, New York, or Charleston be to New Orleans? Can Spain give up such a site and such a vast and fertile territory as Louisiana? Never! And here is the greatest opportunity in the world for strong men! Come with me! Bring your friends with you! We need such as you! I offer you a career that could not even enter your dreams in the woods of Kaintock!”

A deep, red flush overspread Henry's face.

"Do you think that we could fight against our own people," he exclaimed. "Do you think that we are made of such stuff as that miserable renegade, Braxton Wyatt?"

Alvarez did not flinch. His words had been delivered with extraordinary emphasis, and they carried the ring of his own conviction. His great plan possessed him, and he saw before him an instrument of which he could make good use.

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“I do not ask you to go against your own people,” he replied. “Remain in Louisiana. Great work can be found here for you and your friends. And where Kaintock is concerned another way could be made. It is far from the Eastern colonies, divided by mountains, the forest, and Indians. Where could they find a better friend to whom to turn than the King of Spain? And they will surely need a powerful friend!”

Henry gazed at him in amazement, and yet he felt a certain respect for the scope and largeness of the man’s plan, repellent though the plan was to him. He saw that Alvarez was not an ordinary man, that he was one with whom the people for whom he cared would have to reckon. But he was not afraid, nor was he tempted for a moment by the promise of a glittering future that Alvarez held out to him. He felt an immense indignation, but he was still master of himself, and he replied quietly.

“I could not leave my own people, nor would any of my comrades. The air of Louisiana does not suit us. We are accustomed to a colder climate. We feel, too, that Kaintock can take care of herself. Nor is it sure that the Eastern colonies will be crushed by the King. But, should they be, Kentucky would never desert them to join Spain.”

Alvarez frowned, and his temper began to rise. Henry was showing more finesse and more knowledge of the world and its events than he had thought possible in one just come out of the woods.

“By entering my service, by becoming a lieutenant of mine, you have all to gain and nothing to lose,” he said, resuming his customary tone of superiority.

Henry instantly felt the change of manner and resented it.

“I could not dream of accepting such an offer,” he said, “but, if I should, I’d merely take the place that you’ve already given to Braxton Wyatt, a renegade. He thinks it is his, and you have made him think it is his. If you do not keep faith with him how could I believe that you would keep faith with me?”

The dark blood of anger flushed the Spaniard’s face. He half rose from his seat and then sat down again.

“I have made you an offer,” he said, “one that any youth or young man should be proud to accept, and you insult me by saying that you doubt my faith. You are a child, a backwoodsman, and an ignorant fellow!”

“I am not ignorant about some things of importance,” replied Henry calmly, “but, if I were low enough to be tempted by your offer, I should still be wise enough to know that a man who plots against his own superior officer could not be trusted by me.” “What do you mean?” asked Alvarez, paling for a moment.

“Is it not true that by fair or foul means you expect shortly to succeed Bernardo Galvez as Governor General of Louisiana?”

The Spaniard’s hand flew to his sword hilt. Such things as these were not to be known by everybody. But Henry met his gaze steadily, and the hand fell away from the sword-hilt. He had gone too far already. He was sorry that he had turned the professional swordsman loose on Paul—it had been an unwise deed—and another act of violence in a single day was unworthy a man of his self-control. No, a new and better plan came suddenly into his mind.

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The two sat for a few moments gazing steadily at each other. Alvarez was in the higher chair, and that gave him the physical advantage, but the look of the fearless youth was like the sharp sword that cuts scornfully through the maze and web of intrigue and trickery. Alvarez was forced to turn his gaze aside, and his soul was full of tumult and anger because he had to yield. The new plan that he had conceived in regard to this daring boy now seemed a peculiarly happy thought. Henry's pride and spirit must be broken, and he, Francisco Alvarez, was the man for the task.

He clapped his hands and a soldier entered. He sent a message by him and several more came, accompanied by Braxton Wyatt. Alvarez motioned Wyatt to a seat.

"Senor Wyatt," he said in his slow, precise English, "I have been having a talk with your friend, your former friend here, and I find him to be as unworthy as you have described him to be. I offered only kindness to himself and his friends. I chose to believe that they had been merely foolish, misled by ignorance, but his reply has been only to insult me and to blacken you."

The renegade did not seek to conceal the joy that shone in his eyes. He had been in fear when he was sent out of the hall, in fear lest Alvarez had some plan by which he would suffer, and now it was obvious that nothing had been changed.

"It is his character," said Wyatt. "He is vicious and the truth has never been in him."

Henry did not know what all this talk meant, but he refused to notice Braxton Wyatt. His manner indicated that the renegade had ceased to exist, and it made Wyatt furious.

"You tell the truth," continued Alvarez, "but he is dangerous, too, as you told me, a strong, wily fellow, and I shall not take any chances on his escape. See, I am providing against it."

A soldier entered, bearing balls and chain, and Alvarez pointed to Henry. The youth sprang to his feet. He knew that this was intended as an indignity, and his mind rebelled.

"Put them on him," said Alvarez, and the soldiers approached. Henry hurled the first back and then the second, but the others were about to fling themselves upon him in a heap, when a voice from the door cried:

"Stop!"

It was not a loud voice, but one full of dignity and command, and the soldiers instantly fell back.

A tall man, robed in black, and with a thin face, smoothly shaven and austere, stood in the doorway. The eyes, usually benevolent and kindly, sparkled with indignation, and one hand was uplifted in rebuke.

“Father Montigny!” said Henry, under his breath.

“Who says ‘stop!’ here, where I command?” Alvarez exclaimed, and then he paled at sight of the priest. The Spaniard was a bold man, but he wished no conflict with Holy Church.

“I said ‘stop,’” replied the priest with calm dignity, advancing into the room. “Francisco Alvarez, you were about to perform a deed unworthy of yourself, one that you would have cause to regret. There is no war between Louisiana and Kaintock. What right have you to put this youth in chains?”

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He took a step further, and the rebuking hand was still uplifted. The soldiers shrank back and more than one crossed himself. Yet they were relieved, as Father Montigny had interfered with a task that they did not like.

“I have the utmost respect for Holy Church,” replied Alvarez, though it cost him an effort to utter the words, “but I am in command here and all military affairs fall under my jurisdiction. This young man is a dangerous spy and plotter from Kaintock, one who has used force against us. He and his comrades seized one of our boats and that was an act of war.”

“He is a good youth,” said Father Montigny. “He and his comrades did me a great service. I know that his motives are good, and I will not see him treated in such barbarous fashion.”

The face of Alvarez darkened. This was more than he could stand.

“I am the judge in these matters,” he replied, “and I tell you, Father Montigny, that you must not interfere. Your order, the Capuchins, are in power now at New Orleans, as I know, but the Jesuits may come back. I should favor their returning.”

“It is not a question of Capuchin or Jesuit,” replied Father Montigny sternly, “and you, Francisco Alvarez, should know it. It is a question of you and what you are doing here. You need not make any threats against me. I care for none of them, but Bernardo Galvez, the Governor General at New Orleans, shall know of what is passing at Beaulieu.”

The face of Alvarez contracted into a terrible frown. Nevertheless he feared the unarmed priest. He was helpless against him and he feared, too, that if he persisted Father Montigny would quickly learn of other and deeper matters. He broke into a short and by no means hearty laugh.

“Perhaps I was going rather far,” he said, “but this youth has provoked me beyond endurance. Take away those things, Gaspar.”

The Spaniard whom he indicated took the irons, and Henry sat down again in his chair. The threatened ignominy had stung him deeply and he said under his breath: “I thank you, Father Montigny.” Then Alvarez ordered Henry to be taken away, also.

Henry arose without resistance, and walked from the hall with the soldiers. As he passed, Father Montigny put his hand on his shoulder and said: “I am your friend, my son.”

Henry said nothing but gave him a look of deep gratitude as he walked proudly out.

CHAPTER XII

THE SHADOW IN THE FOREST

Luiz and his comrades escorted Henry back to the prison, and the expressive face of Luiz showed pleasure. He made a vigorous pantomime and spoke words in Spanish.

“Yes, I understand your meaning if not your language, my friend,” said Henry, “and I thank you. I am glad to know that I have your good will.”

When the door of his prison was thrown open and Henry was then shut in again with his comrades they looked at him expectantly.

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“Well?” said Paul.

“What happened?” said Long Jim.

“Anything to tell?” said Tom Ross.

“How’s your shoulder, Paul?” asked Henry.

“Fast getting well,” replied Paul, who knew that his comrade would speak in his own good time.

Henry sat on the floor and leaned against the wall in as comfortable a position as he could assume. Then he looked rather humorously at his comrades.

“Alvarez wanted to bribe me,” he said.

“To bribe you? What do you mean?”

“Yes, to bribe me—and all of us together. He wanted us to serve him here in Louisiana, and help him in an attempt to bring over Kentucky to Spain.”

“That is, he wanted to make Braxton Wyatts out of us?” said Paul.

“You put it exactly right, Paul,” said Henry, “I laughed at him, and called him by the names that belonged to him. He brought in Braxton Wyatt and the soldiers and ordered me to be put in irons, there in his presence.”

“What!” exclaimed Paul, “did he dare that, too?”

“Yes. His object, of course, was to humiliate me—and all of us. It was stopped by one who came in at the right moment. You couldn’t guess who it was.”

“It must a-been Shif’less Sol,” said Long Jim, whose mind ran to physical deeds. “I guess he sent a bullet right into the middle uv that rascal crew. Sol’s the boy to be right on the spot when he’s needed.”

Henry laughed.

“No, Jim,” he said. “That’s a pretty wild guess. It was none other than Father Montigny, the man whom we helped. He paid us back sooner than we thought. You ought to have seen him, Paul. He looked like an avenging angel. He stood there, a single, unarmed man, and they were afraid of him. I could see fear on every one of their faces.”

Paul's vivid imagination instantly painted the whole scene. It appealed to him with tremendous power. It was the triumph of mind and character over force and wickedness.

"I can see Father Montigny now," he said. "A man who always does right and has no fear whatever of death, is afraid of nothing, either in this world or the world to come."

"Which gives him a pow'ful sight uv freedom," said Long Jim.

"When he told them to stop they took away their balls and chain," said Henry, "and sent me back here. Alvarez realized that he had gone too far, but I think that he fears Father Montigny for other reasons, too. The priest may put the Governor General on his guard."

"So we ain't alone," said Long Jim musingly. "Curious how you git help when you ain't expectin' it. The wicked hev it their way fur a while, an' then they don't. They don't ever seem able to finish up their work. Sometimes I think the right is jest like a river flowin' on in its nateral channel, an' boun' to git to the sea after a while, no matter what happens. The wrong is all them dams, an' san' bars an' snags, and brush an' drift-wood that people an' chance pile up in the way. They do choke up the waters, an' send 'em around in other channels, an' make a heap uv trouble, but by and by them waters git to the sea jest the same."

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“I hope so, Jim,” said Paul.

“Now thar ain’t no doubt uv what I say,” said Long Jim. “Take this case uv ourn. Jest when we need it most fur a thousand miles uv river travel we git a bee-yu-ti-ful boat, all fitted up with everything we want. Jest when that Spaniard gits his paws on us, he don’t git his paws on one uv us, an’ that’s Shif’less Sol out thar in the woods. An’ so long ez Shif’less Sol is free out thar in the woods we’re mighty nigh free ourselves. Then, when this same Spaniard is ready to load irons on Henry in a way that no free-born man kin stand, in pops a priest who likes us—an’ we don’t belong to his church either—an’ puts a stop to the whole thing.”

While they were talking Francisco Alvarez also was busy with a kindred theme, as he entertained a guest. That guest was Father Montigny, to whom he had made up his mind to be courteous, although he would not condescend to any further apology. He ordered that the priest should receive food and attention, and that men should look after and replenish his canoe which was now tied in the bayou. After all these orders were given, Alvarez sat in the great room of Beaulieu and smoked the cigarro of his time.

There was a bitter drop in the well of his satisfaction. The coming of the priest had been unforeseen and unfortunate. He knew Father Montigny, and Father Montigny knew him. Now how much did Father Montigny know of his plans? That was the important question.

While he was yet speaking, Father Montigny, whom a very little of rest and food always sufficed, entered the room, his manner full of austerity. Francisco Alvarez rose, all blandness and courtesy.

“Be seated, Father,” he said. “It is a poor place that we have here, but we give you of our best. Who would deserve it more than you, a man of such long travels and such great hardships in the holiest of all causes?”

The face of the priest did not relax. He sat down upon one of the cane chairs and gazed sternly at Alvarez. Truly, it is a terrible thing to meet the accusing gaze of a man who fears neither torture, nor death, nor the world to come! The accusation is likely to be true. Alvarez looked away. Twice within one day he who, with reason, thought himself so courageous had been forced to yield to the gaze of another, and his heart was full of angry rebellion. But he knew that knowledge and power dwelt under the simple black robe of this man.

“It seems,” said Father Montigny, and there was a slight touch of irony in his tone, “that I came at the right moment.”

Francisco Alvarez compelled his face to smile, though his heart was raging.

“I have already apologized, Father Montigny,” he said, “for what I was about to do. And yet the phrase ‘about to do’ is wrong. Even if you had not come I should have repented of myself, and sent away the irons. I can repeat, too, in my defense that I was provoked beyond endurance by this youth’s insolence.”

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His tone was silky, light, indolent, as if he would dismiss a trifle about which too much had been said already. It might have been convincing to any other man, but he felt the stern, reproving gaze of Father Montigny still fixed upon him.

“And what of the ring and the professional swordsman?” said the priest. “Are you to turn a youth to a gladiator, even as the blessed martyrs were given to the lions and tigers by the Roman pagans! What of that, Francisco Alvarez? Are such deeds to be done, here, in our day, in Louisiana, and to pass unchallenged?”

The priest’s voice rose and it cut like the sharp edge of a knife. Never since his boyhood had Francisco Alvarez flushed more deeply, and he moved uneasily on his cane chair.

“You give it a name that does not belong to it,” he said. “It was play, or not much more. Romildo, the swordsman, had orders not to hurt him much.”

“That may or may not be true, Francisco Alvarez,” said the priest, speaking slowly and precisely. “But I have more to ask you. What of this plot of yours to set the Indian tribes and a Spanish force with cannon upon Kaintock? What of your plan to become Governor General in place of Galvez? What of your intention to make distant war upon the rebel colonies and therefore commit Spain to an alliance with England? Answer me, Francisco Alvarez. What of these things?”

The priest rose from his seat, as he spoke, and lifted that stern, accusing finger. Alvarez was as still as if struck by lightning. His great plan known to this man, this man who feared not even torture, or death, or the world to come! He shrank visibly both mentally and physically, but then his courage came back under the spur of dreadful necessity.

“A priest can take great liberties,” he said. “Sometimes I think it scarcely fair that you of the Book may denounce us of the sword and that we may say nothing in return, although we may be right and you may be wrong. It is sufficient now for me to tell you that I do not know what you are talking about. I, the Governor General! Any man may dream of that! I have done so, and I have no doubt that many others have done the same. I favor, too, an alliance with England, as do nearly all the Spanish officers in Louisiana, but I am a faithful servant of His Majesty, the King, and though I may hold my opinions, I know of no plot, either against Bernardo Galvez or to make a war upon Kaintock.”

“I have heard you, Francisco Alvarez,” said the priest, “but it is for your actions to prove the truth of your words. See to it, also, that there is no further cruelty practised against these men from Kaintock.”

“They are my prisoners,” replied Alvarez, “and I mean to hold them. There you cannot interfere, Father Montigny. They were taken in arms against us upon our soil of Louisiana, and that they are my prisoners even you cannot dispute.”

“No,” replied Father Montigny, “I do not dispute it; at least not for the present. But if they are held as prisoners they should be sent to Bernardo Galvez at New Orleans, and not be retained here.”

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He walked out without waiting for an answer, and Francisco Alvarez was glad to see him go. Five minutes later the Spaniard sent for Braxton Wyatt and the two remained long in consultation.

Meanwhile, something was stirring in the forest not far from Beaulieu. It was a forest of magnolia, willow, and cypress, and of oaks, from which hung great solemn festoons of moss. A deep still bayou cut across it, and here and there were pools of stagnant water, in which coiling black forms swam.

Night was deepening over the wilderness upon which the estate of Beaulieu had made only a scratch. Pale moonlight fell over the drooping green forest and across the deep waters of the bayou. The something that had stirred resolved itself into the shadowy figure of a man who came out of the heart of the forest toward its edge. He walked with a singularly agile step. His moccasined feet made no noise when they touched the ground and the bushes seemed to part for the passage of his body.

When the man reached the edge of the forest next to the Chateau of Beaulieu, he paused for a long time, standing in the shadow of the trees. Always he looked fixedly at a single building, the log hut, in which Alvarez held his four prisoners from Kaintock. While he stood there, stray rays of moonlight coming through the cypresses fell upon him, revealing a tanned face, yellow hair, and a tall, athletic form. He did not look like a Spaniard or an Acadian, or one of the Frenchmen who had emigrated from Canada, or any kind of a West Indian. His was certainly an alien presence in those regions.

The moon slid back behind a cloud, the silver rays failed, and the figure of the man became more indistinct, almost a shadow, thin and impalpable. Then he bent far over in a stooping position, passed rapidly through a patch of scrub bushes, and came much nearer to the log prison.

At the edge of the bushes he stopped again and watched the prison for at least a minute. Two soldiers were on watch in front of it before the single door, two soldiers in Spanish uniform, who were suffering from tedium, and who were quite sure, anyway that unarmed prisoners could not escape from a one-room building of logs with but a single door, secured by a huge, oak shutter, and two windows, each too small to admit the passage of a boy's or man's body.

The two soldiers slouched in their walk, and presently, when their beats met before the door, they let the butts of their guns rest on the ground, and exchanged pleasant talk about pretty, dark girls that they had known in far-away Spain. One boldly lighted a cigarrito and the other encouraged by his example did likewise. Hark, what was that? "A lizard in the grass," said Carlos. "Yes, certainly," said Juan. They continued to smoke their cigarritos blissfully, and talk of the pretty, dark girls that they had known in far-away Spain.

As they smoked and talked, and found smoke, talk and company pleasant, they did not see a shadow glide swiftly from the bushes and pass to the rear of the log prison that they were guarding so well. Nor could they see the shadow, since the building was now between them, resolve itself again into the figure of a man, who stood upright against the wall, his face at one of the little slits of windows.

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Their own talk was so pleasant, and the sound of their voices was such a cure for lonesomeness on a dark night, that they did not hear the man at the little slit of a window utter a faint warning hiss. Nor did they hear something a moment later fall with a slight metalic sound on the bark floor of the prison. The sound was repeated in an instant, but still they did not hear it, and then the figure of a man, melting back to a shadow, glided away from the house and into the bushes and thence to the forest, where it was lost.

Carlos and Juan chatted until their cigarritos were smoked out. Then they shouldered their muskets and continued the watch that seemed to them so easy. How could unarmed men escape through such a thickness of logs? The shadow in the forest was lost to the sight of any possible Spaniard, but not to the sight of another shadow that arose from the bushes and flitted after it. The two shadows were now deep in the forest, but the second hung close on the first, making no noise, and sinking quickly to the ground, when the other looked back.

This second shadow, as it passed through a partially open space, also revealed itself in the moonlight as a man, but a man ghastly and terrible in appearance. He had a hideous, feline face, and he was naked, save a breech-cloth at the waist. He carried but a single weapon, a knife in his ready hand, but the eyes were those of the most utter savage expecting a speedy prey.

The first shadow reached a little grove free from undergrowth and stopped. He was about to lie down, rifle by his side, and seek sleep, but his ear, attuned to the wilderness, caught a faint sound. It was not the wind among the leaves, nor the gliding of a snake nor the chirp of an insect, but a sound that was not a part of the night harmony. The sensitive ear had given him warning, as the instinct of an animal warns that an enemy has come.

The first shadow slid from the grove and into the undergrowth, sank low, and, waiting, caught sight of the second shadow, the man who pursued. He saw the naked figure, the feline face, and the ready knife in hand. The skill and wonderful forest intuition of the second man had been matched by those of the first.

The pursued, when he caught that glimpse of his pursuer, laid his rifle carefully on the earth, because he did not wish a shot to be heard, and drew his own knife. Slight as was the sound that he made the other heard it, turned in a flash, and the two sprang at each other.

The moonlight streamed for a moment along their knife blades and then they struck. One stepped back, and remained standing upright. The other swayed a moment and then fell without a sound, lying upon his back.

He who lay staring with sightless eyes up at the moon was the man with the feline face and the body naked save for the cloth at the waist. The other, unharmed, stood, looking at him a moment or two, and then plunged deeper into the forest.

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Morning dawned. The sun swung up through a terrace of rosy clouds, and Luiz brought the four their breakfast, *callas tous chauds*, other food of La Louisiane, and milk and coffee. They ate and drank with a great appetite, and it seemed to Luiz that they were quite cheerful, for which he was truly glad, because one of these men had saved his life, and the wounded youth who made an especial appeal to him had been subjected to barbarous treatment. But Paul could use his injured arm already. His blood was so healthy that the scratch of the sword healed fast.

Two or three hours later Francisco Alvarez and Braxton Wyatt entered the prison. The renegade was not above showing by his looks that he rejoiced in his triumph over his enemies, but the face of Alvarez was without expression.

“I have come to tell you,” said the Spaniard, “that you will be held here subject to my will. But you will not be treated badly. At such time as I think fit you may be taken to New Orleans.”

“It seems that the words of Father Montigny were not to be despised,” said Henry maliciously.

“Father Montigny disposes of nothing here,” said Alvarez. “This is to be done because I think it best.”

Then he and Wyatt went out, but that afternoon when Alvarez was sitting in the cool shadow of the pillared portico, there came to him a man, dusty, and riding fast, who delivered to him a document sealed with red seals, and important in appearance.

When Alvarez read the paper he frowned, and then cursed under his breath. It was written in plain letters and its meaning was plain, also. It stated that Bernardo Galvez, the Governor General at New Orleans, had learned that his brave and loyal captain, Don Francisco Louis Philip Ferdinand Alvarez, held in his possession four prisoners from Kaintock, persons of daring, whose presence in Louisiana might be of great significance. Therefore His Excellency, Bernardo Galvez, Governor General of Louisiana, commanded his trusty and loyal captain, Don Francisco Louis Philip Ferdinand Alvarez, to bring the aforesaid four prisoners, from Kaintock, to New Orleans at once.

“At once!” repeated Alvarez angrily to himself. “That means not next week but now, and I am compelled to obey. To refuse or to evade would make a breach too soon.”

He sent for Braxton Wyatt and told him of the letter. The renegade was startled, but he counseled immediate obedience from motives of policy.

“How could Galvez have known?” said Alvarez. “How could the news have reached New Orleans so soon?”

“Perhaps the priest has told,” suggested Wyatt.

“No, that is impossible. He came from up river, and I am glad to say that he left again in his canoe this morning. Those Capuchins to whom he belongs shall be well punished, if I gain the power in Louisiana. They shall be expelled, every one of them, from New Orleans, and their old rivals, the Jesuits, shall take their place. It’s one of the first things that I mean to do.”

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“It would be a wise thing to do,” said Braxton Wyatt. He cared nothing for either Capuchin or Jesuit, but he hated and feared Father Montigny, and would be glad to know that he was driven from the country.

“We must start in the morning,” said Alvarez. “It will not take us long to reach New Orleans by the river, and I can spin a tale that will lull the suspicions of Galvez.”

“You can prove many things by me,” said Braxton Wyatt significantly.

“Yes, Senor Wyatt, you are a good lieutenant,” said Alvarez, and he meant it. “We will make our preparations to-night and start with a strong force in the morning. We need not bring the prisoners forth until we are ready.”

Alvarez, slept peacefully that night. He had recovered his spirits, shaken by the arrival of the King’s messenger. Aided by the dexterous renegade, Braxton Wyatt, he would soon persuade Bernardo Galvez that he had acted for the best in the matter of the men from Kaintock.

He rose early the next morning and, as a mark of signal favor, invited Braxton Wyatt to take breakfast with him. While they sat together Luiz came in with a long face.

“Now what is it, my brave Luiz?” said Alvarez, who was in an exceeding good humor, “why this saturnine countenance?”

“I beg to report, your Excellency,” said Luiz, “that the Natchez Indian whom they call The Cat had been found dead in the forest, of a knife thrust that came out behind the shoulder.”

“That is bad,” said Alvarez. “Have they found out who did it?”

“No, Your Excellency. There were some signs of a struggle, and a few traces of foot-steps, but the trail was gone before they had followed it a dozen yards.”

“We have lost a good man,” said Alvarez, “a matchless spy and trailer, but it cannot be helped. I suppose it was a quarrel with some savage like himself. I would investigate the matter, but we have not time now. Come, Luiz, we will take out the prisoners, and then to the boats.”

He led the way across the grass to the log house,—two sentinels, again it was Carlos and Juan—walked up and down in front of it—and the Spanish captain was pleased at their vigilance. He gave them a very good morning as they saluted respectfully.

“Unlock the door, Luiz,” he said. “This is a strong prison and a close one. I’ve no doubt our gallants from Kaintock, where there is much room, will be glad to be outside again.”

Luiz inserted the huge iron key, turned it in the lock, and threw wide the door. Alvarez looked in, and then uttered a cry so charged with rage that even Braxton Wyatt was startled. He pressed close up to his chief and gazed over his shoulder.

The prison was empty!

“What does this mean?” shouted Alvarez at the trembling sentinels. “The prisoners have escaped! Idiots! Blind men! What have you been doing? Have you helped them yourselves? If it is so, both of you shall be shot!”

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The unfortunates, Carlos and Juan, stared at the empty prison and crossed themselves. “Witchcraft,” muttered Carlos, the readier of the two. “We have watched faithfully all night, my captain. We saw nothing, we heard nothing, and the door was locked, as you behold. We are honest men and we have been faithful!”

Braxton Wyatt pointed to the dark corner of the prison.

“See,” he said, “that is how they went.”

Heaped against the wall was a pile of dirt, and in its place a hole large enough to admit a man’s body led under the logs. The Spaniard cried out in rage again.

“We see how they have gone!” he exclaimed, “but in what way did they do it? Who has helped them!”

Braxton Wyatt examined the tunnel. The bottom logs of the cabin rested squarely upon the ground, after the primitive fashion. The floor was of bark, and a section of this had been lifted. The prisoners had then dug their hole under the log.

“It was done with metal tools of some kind,” said Wyatt. “But they had nothing when we locked them in here. I can swear to that, as I was one of those who searched them well.”

“Then they must have had help!” exclaimed Alvarez, and again he turned fiercely upon the sentinels, but Braxton Wyatt intervened. He was glad that he could patronize Alvarez at least once and show himself to be the superior in discernment.

“These men, Your Excellency, of whom I told you to beware, were five,” he said. “We captured four, therefore one was left, and I said beware of him, even alone. He is a fellow of great cunning and skill who would try anything. He has come for his comrades, and he has taken them away with him.”

“It must be as you say,” said Alvarez, seeking now to hide his anger. He was not sorry on the whole that the sentinels were obviously innocent, as he needed as many adherents as he could keep, in order to carry out his great plan.

“Knowing that the window was too small to admit them, we watched only the front where the door is, Your Excellency,” said Carlos, still trembling. “Who would have dreamed that these men of Kaintock were magicians, that without picks or shovels they could burrow under the earth and be gone like ghosts.”

“Begone yourselves!” exclaimed Alvarez. “Get ready for the boats at once!”

Carlos and Juan fled away, glad to escape the sight of their master.

“Now that they have escaped, what do you think they will do?” asked Alvarez of Wyatt.

“They will go to New Orleans,” replied the renegade promptly, “and appear before Bernardo Galvez to denounce you.”

“Then our own start must not be delayed a moment!” exclaimed Alvarez.

In an hour he and his force were ready to embark.

CHAPTER XIII

THE WHITE STALLION

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Shif'less Sol led the way through the forest and four ghostly figures followed in single file. They made no noise as they passed among the cypresses and magnolias, and oaks of the drooping foliage. No one spoke, but the leader laughed more than once in his throat, a laugh which never passed the lips, but which was full of satisfaction nevertheless. He felt that he, Solomon Hyde, nicknamed the shiftless one, had not lived in vain. He had achieved the greatest triumph of a life already crowded with dangers and deeds. To use the phrase of a later day, it was his crowded hour, and his four comrades gave him all the honor and glory of it.

They came presently to a still, dark channel of water, the bayou, and stopped on its bank. A light wind had risen, and as it blew among the cypresses and magnolias and oaks of the drooping foliage, it blew the song of the triumph of Shif'less Sol. The moonlight fell on his face now and as his features drew into a smile he, at last, permitted himself to laugh outright.

"It was wonderful, Sol," said Henry. "We always knew that you were near us, and we knew, too, that because you were near us we were near to freedom."

He stepped forward, grasped the hand of the shiftless one, and gave it a fervent shake. Paul at once did the same, then followed Long Jim and Tom Ross. Shif'less Sol's face became beatific. He had received his silent tribute and it was enough. The flavor of it would be with him all the rest of his life.

"What did you fellers think?" he asked, "when them two big knives came fallin' down on the floor. I'd hev called to you, but I wuz afeard I'd stir up them two sentinels on the other side of the house."

"We knew it was you, Sol," replied Paul, "and we knew then that our escape was certain. Where did you get the knives?"

"I stole them from a tool house," replied Sol with pride. "I guess they use 'em to cut cane with, or something like that."

"We certainly cut dirt with 'em at a great rate," said Henry, "and here we are free, the five of us together again, but without arms except the two knives you threw to us."

The moonlight was deepening and the shiftless one stood in the center of it. His figure seemed suddenly to swell and the calm, victorious light of the supreme conqueror came into his eyes.

"Boys," he said, and his voice was even and precise, as a victor's should be, "when I undertook this here job o' settin' us on our feet agin, I undertook to do it all. I not only meant to put us on our feet, but to git us ready fur runnin', too. Boys, I hev took 'The Gall-yun' from the Spaniards ag'in an' she's waitin' fur us."

“What! what!” they cried in chorus. “You don’t mean it, Sol?”

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“I shorely do mean it. All the boats that they expect to use to-day wuz anchored in the bi-yoo or hay-yoo or whatever they call it. ’The Gall-yun,’ our gall-yun, wuz at the end o’ the line nearest to the big river. Nobody wuz on board, but she wuz tied to the boat next to her. I slipped on her—it was pow’ful dark then an’ the Spaniards wuz keepin’ a slip-shod watch, anyhow—cut the rope an’ floated her down the stream, where I’ve tied her up under sech thick brush that nobody ’cept ourselves is likely to find her. She’ll be thar, waitin’ fur us, an’ don’t you doubt it. An’ fellers all our rifles an’ ammunition an’ things are on her. It wuz the captain’s boat, an’ I s’pose he thought he might ez well hev them trophies, an’ use ’em.”

“Is this really true, Sol?” exclaimed Paul, although he did not doubt.

“Gospel truth. We’re jest ez well off ez we wuz afore we wuz captured. I don’t think, either, them Spaniards will miss ‘The Gall-yun’ until mornin’. So we kin be up an’ away with somethin’ o’ a start.”

“Lead on, Sol,” said Henry.

Sol led, and resumed the noiseless Indian file. They found the good ship, “The Galleon,” under the overhanging bushes where Sol had left her, and rejoicingly they took possession again of the boat, their arms, and supplies.

“Now for New Orleans and the Governor General,” said Paul, as they pushed out into the bayou. There was no current here, but their powerful arms at the oars soon sent the boat into the Mississippi. There they set the sail which had been left unchanged, and as a good wind caught it they went on at a quickening pace. Wind, current, and oars combined made the low banks pass swiftly by.

It was now the darkest hour and all things were veiled. Each felt a great satisfaction. They had the courage, after such a great and skillful escape, to attempt anything.

“It’s only lately that I’ve been gittin’ friendly with the Missip,” said Shif’less Sol. “It’s a pow’ful big river an’ a new one, but me an’ this river are already jest like brothers. It ought all to belong to us people o’ Kentucky. When we git to be a great big settled country, hev we got to float everything down it, right in among the Spaniards or the French, an’ they able to stop us ef they want to? ’Pears to me thar oughtn’t to be anything but a string o’ free countries all along the length o’ this big river.”

“I think that is what is likely to happen,” said Paul looking into the future, as he did so often. “We’ll always be pressing down, and we can’t help it.”

“Anyhow,” resumed Shif’less Sol, “I’m glad that we’ve left that thar place o’ Booly, or Bee-yu-ly, or whatever they call it. Funny these furrin’ people can’t pronounce names like they spell. Now we Americans, an’ the English, who use our language, call words

jest ez they are, but you never know what a Frenchman or a Spaniard is goin' to make out o' 'em."

They made good progress throughout the day, and saw no sign of the flotilla of Alvarez which they had feared might overtake them. They were agreed that it would be wise for them to reach New Orleans first, and hence they went boldly forward into the country that they regarded as that of the enemy, confident of their fortune.

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The river widened and narrowed frequently, but always it was very deep. It was not beautiful here, but the vast current flowing between low shores had a somber majesty all its own. Its effect upon the imagination of every one of them was heightened by the knowledge that the stream had come an immeasurable distance, from unknown regions, and that in the coming it had gathered into itself innumerable other rivers, most of which also had come from lands of mystery.

They stopped one morning in the mouth of a clear creek that flowed into the Mississippi, and decided to spend the day in making repairs, a general cleaning-up, and a search for fresh food. It was the universal opinion that they would profit more by such a halt than by pushing on regardless of everything.

It was a beautiful spot in which they lay. They had gone about a hundred yards up the creek, and its waters here, about thirty feet across and five or six feet deep, were perfectly transparent. But this silver stream the moment it entered the Mississippi was lost in the great, brown current, swallowed up in an instant by the giant river.

The banks of the creek were low and on either side brilliant wild flowers grew to the very water's edge. Ferns, lilies, and other plants of deeper hues, were massed in great beds that ran from the creek edges back to the forest. Tall birds on immensely long and slender legs stood in the shallower water and now and then as quick as a flash of lightning darted down a hooked bill. Invariably the bill came up with a fish struggling in its grasp.

Beautiful flamingoes hovered about the bank and many birds of brilliant plumage darted from tree to tree. Few of these sang, except the mocking bird, which gave forth an incessant mellow note. But it was a scene of uncommon peace and beauty and all felt its influence.

Henry looked at the creek and the forest through which it came with an appreciative eye. He knew because the waters of the creek were clear that it must flow through hard, firm ground, and he was thinking at that moment of a plan which he intended to carry out later.

Their first work was with the boat. In its long voyage on the river it had gathered mud and other objects on its bottom. This they could see perfectly now that it lay in the clear water, and Shif'less Sol and Jim Hart volunteered to scrape it with two of the shovels that were contained in the invaluable store house of "The Galleon."

Their offer was accepted, and taking off their clothing, they sprang into the water. Once a huge cat fish from the Mississippi, unused to man, brushed against Long Jim's leg, its horn raking him slightly. With a shout Long Jim sprang almost out of the water and clambered up the side of the boat.

“Somethin’ big bit me!” he cried. “It took one uv my legs with him!”

“It’s only a scared cat fish and you still have two legs, Jim,” replied Henry laughing boyishly, because a boy he was in spite of his size and experience.

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Jim looked down, and a great smile of delight unfolded like a fan across his face from side to side.

“Guess you’re right, Henry,” he said, “an’ I am still all in one piece.”

He sprang back into the water, and he and Sol soon finished their task. After that it was arranged that Sol, Jim, and Tom should give a thorough furbishing to the boat’s interior, wash and dry their spare clothing and bedding, while Henry and Paul went on a hunt for a deer to replenish their larder.

“You see, Paul,” said Henry, “the waters of this creek are quite clear, which means that it comes through good, hard ground. It’s likely that it isn’t far back to one of the little prairies which I’ve heard are common in this part of Louisiana, and in a wild country like this where there’s a prairie there’s pretty likely to be deer.”

The logic seemed good to Paul. At any rate he was willing enough to go on a hunt, stretch his legs, and see a new region. Saying that they should probably be gone all day they started at once, leaving the others absorbed in the task of housecleaning.

They reached solid ground not far from the creek’s edge and walked along briskly, following the course of the stream back toward its source. The soil was black and deep and the forest magnificent. Great beeches and hickories were mingled with the willows and live oaks and cypresses, and the foliage was thick, green, and beautiful. The birds seemed innumerable, and now and then flocks of wild fowl rose with a whir from the creek’s edge. Keen, penetrating odors of forest and wild flower came to their nostrils.

Both boys threw up their heads, inhaled the odors, and thrilled in every fiber. They were very young, care could never stay with them long and now they felt only the sheer, pure delight of living. They looked back. The forest had already shut out their boat, and one who did not know would not have dreamed that the longest river in the world was only a mile or two away. They were alone in the wilderness and they did not care. They were sufficient, for the moment, each to the other.

As they advanced, the creek narrowed and the forest thickened. The trees not only grew closer together, but there was a vast mass and network of trailing vines, extended from trunk to trunk and bough to bough. One huge oak in the very center of an intricate maze of vines was drawn far over and its boughs were twisted into strange, distorted shapes. It was obvious to both that the vines, singly so feeble, collectively so powerful, had done it, and they stood a moment or two wondering at this proof of the power of united and unceasing effort.

They went a mile or so further on, and Henry led the way toward the left and from the creek. An instinct or the lay of the land, perhaps, warned him that the open country was in that direction. The trees, had begun to thin already, and in another mile they came

out upon a beautiful little rolling prairie. It was quite clear of trees; grass, mingled with wild flowers, grew high upon it, and at the far edge they saw the figures of animals grazing.

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“Deer!” exclaimed Paul. “There they are, Henry! Just waiting for us!”

Henry took a long and keen look, then shook his head.

“No, not deer, Paul,” he said. “Now guess what they are.”

“They can’t be buffaloes,” replied Paul. “I think, Henry, I’m right; they’re deer.”

“No,” said Henry, “they’re horses.”

“Horses! Why there are no plantations hereabouts!”

“Not tame horses. Wild horses. Descendants of the horses that the Spaniards brought to Mexico two or three hundreds ago.”

“And which have been spreading northward ever since,” continued Paul, alive with interest. “Let’s try to get a near look at them, Henry.”

“I’m with you,” said Henry.

Full of boyish curiosity they went around the prairie, keeping in the edge of the woods until they came much nearer to the herd of wild horses, which numbered about thirty. As a considerable wind was blowing their odor away from the animals, they could approach very closely without their presence being suspected.

The horses were clean limbed and well-shaped, and all except one were small and dark of color. But that one was a noticeable exception. He was almost pure white, far larger than the others, and he had a great flowing white mane and tail.

The herd grazed in a bunch, but the magnificent white stallion stood apart on the side next to the woods. He, too, grazed at intervals, but most of the time he stood, head erect like a sentinel or rather a leader. It seemed to both the boys that his whole attitude was full of spirit and majesty, the vast freedom of the wilderness. He carried, too, the responsibility for the whole herd and he knew it.

“A prairie King,” whispered Paul. “Wouldn’t I like to catch such a splendid animal, Henry, and ride him into New Orleans!”

“No you wouldn’t, Paul,” replied Henry, “That stallion wasn’t made to be ridden by anybody. Look. Paul, look!”

Henry’s last word rose to an excited whisper, and Paul’s gaze quickly followed his pointing finger. Even then he would not have seen anything had he not looked long and carefully. At last he made out a long, tawny shape on a low-lying bough of a tree at the

very edge of the forest. The shape was flattened against the bough and almost blended with it.

“A panther!” whispered Paul.

Henry nodded. It was, in fact, a large specimen of the panther or southern cougar, and Henry whispered again:

“See what he is after!”

A small colt from the herd had wandered dangerously near to the forest and the bough on which the cougar lay, watching him with the yellow, famished eyes of the great, hungry cat.

“Shoot him, Henry! Shoot him!” whispered Paul. “You can reach him with a bullet from here. Don’t let him kill the poor, little colt!”

“I’d do it if it were needed,” replied Henry, “but I don’t think it will be. See, Paul, the Prairie King suspects!”

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The great white stallion raised his head a little higher. It may be that he caught a glimpse of the tawny form and yellow, hungry eyes amid the foliage of the bough, or it may be that a sudden flaw in the wind brought to his nostrils the pungent odor of the big cat. He reared and stamped, the startled colt turned away, and the cougar, afraid that he was about to lose his chance, sprang.

A yellow compact mass, bristling with sharp, white teeth and long, hooked claws shot through the air, but the distance was too great. The colt had turned just in time, and the cougar fell short. He gathered himself instantly for another spring, but quick as he was, he was not quick enough.

The boys heard a fierce neigh, and the great stallion, wild with rage, launched himself upon the cougar. Agile and powerful though the great cat was, the sharp hoofs trampled him down. Taken at a disadvantage, just at the moment when his first spring had spent itself, he was no match for the protector of the herd. No bone could resist the impact of those heavy terrible hoofs. No skull was thick enough to save. The cougar squealed, clawed, and bit wildly, but in an incredibly quick space he was trampled to death and lay quite still. The boys believed that every bone in him must have been broken.

The herd had run some distance away in fright at the cougar's leap, but while the swift combat lasted it stood looking on. Now the stallion, after a last look at the slain robber, turned and walked away in triumph to the herd that he had protected so well. It seemed to the glorified fancy of the boys that he held his head higher than ever, and that his great mane and tail flowed away in new ripples. He stalked proudly at the head of the herd down to the other side of the prairie, where they went placidly on with their grazing.

"That is certainly one thing that turned out right," said Paul in a gratified tone.

"The hoofs of a powerful and enraged wild stallion are a terrible thing," said Henry. "Even a deer, which is far smaller, can kill a man with its hoofs. But if you'll look again, Paul, you'll see that a new danger threatens our king of horses."

Paul followed Henry's gaze, and he distinctly saw two or three human figures at the edge of the wood. These figures were hidden from the horses by a swell of the prairies, and, as in the case of the cougar, the wind blew their odor away. "Indians?" asked Paul.

"I can't tell at this distance," replied Henry, "but it's more likely that they belong to the party of Alvarez, and perhaps they know that wild horses frequent this prairie and others hereabouts. See what they are doing!"

Paul saw well enough, One man carrying on his arm a coll of rope, the lariat of Mexico, lay down in the long grass which completely hid him, but both Henry and Paul knew that

he was creeping forward inch by inch toward the beautiful stallion that was grazing not ten yards from the woods.

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“When he comes close enough, if he can do so before the horse takes the alarm,” said Henry, “he will throw the rope and catch the horse by the neck in the running noose at the end.”

“But the horse will take alarm,” said Paul hopefully.

“I don’t know,” said Henry. “He may think in his horse mind that one enemy in one day is as much as he has need to dread.”

It seemed that Henry was right. Exultant in his victory over the cougar, the Prairie King had relaxed his vigilance. More often now his head was down, cropping the grass like the rest of the herd. Henry and Paul believed that they could see the grass rippling as the new and more cunning enemy crept forward. But it was only agile fancy—they were too far away.

“What ever happens it’s bound to happen soon,” said Henry.

Even as he spoke the man in the grass sprang to his feet, threw forth his right arm, and the rope shot out like a snake uncoiling itself as it sprang. Both Paul and Henry felt a pang when they saw the loop enclose the neck of the noble horse, while the man himself and his comrades uttered loud shouts of exultation.

“He has caught him!” exclaimed Paul sadly.

“Yes,” said Henry, “and I’m sorry, but it was a wonderful feat of skill and patience!”

The frightened herd ran away, and the white stallion reared and struggled, his great eyes red and distended with rage and astonishment. Two men ran forward and seized the rope which their comrade had thrown so skillfully. Then the three pulled hard.

But the quarry was too magnificent. They had miscalculated the white stallion’s strength. Caught by the neck, he dragged, nevertheless, all three over the prairie, and then, suddenly making a mighty lunge, tore the rope from their grasp, leaving them thrown headlong to the earth. Away he went, the long rope flying out behind him like a streamer.

Doubtless some failure of the noose to draw tightly around his neck had saved the horse, and this was proved when the rope catching in a bush slipped off over his head as he struggled again. Then the stallion, by chance, or because his horse’s mind inclined him to it, uttered a long, shrill neigh of triumph, kicked his heels high in the air, and galloped away, his flowing tail streaming out behind him, a banner of triumph.

“He’s won again,” said Henry in a tone of gladness. “I told you that horse wasn’t made ever to be ridden.”

“But he has to struggle continually for life and freedom,” said Paul.

“Just the same as we do,” rejoined Henry. “See those fellows are picking themselves up; but they’ve been slow about it.”

“I don’t blame them. I fancy they suffered some pretty severe bruises when the horse jerked them down. Paul, I think I can make out two white faces in that party, which almost certainly means that they are the men of Alvarez. And it says to us that we ought to hurry.”

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“But not without our deer, I hope,” said Paul. They gave one last look at the far edge of the prairie, where they could still dimly see the white stallion, now keeping well away from the woods.

“I don’t think anything will get him,” said Henry, “and I hope not. Just as we do, he loves to be free.”

They, too, re-entered the woods and were fortunate enough to find a deer quickly. Henry was willing to risk the chance of the shot being heard by their enemies and his bullet brought it down. Then they cut up the body and took it back to the boat, where they told all that had occurred. The others agreed that if Alvarez and his men were in the vicinity they ought to leave at once, and, transferring the drying clothes from the bank to the boat, they entered the Mississippi once more and set sail down its stream.

CHAPTER XIV

NEW ORLEANS

They sailed and rowed steadily on for several days. Once or twice they saw canoes or boats containing white men, who regarded them curiously, but none approached. They inferred that they were now very near New Orleans, and all the five were alert with anticipation. Besides the accomplishment of their great task, they were about to visit a metropolis, a seat of government, a city of eight or ten thousand people, commanding the road to the heart of the North American continent, swarming with many races, and destined, as all the world then believed, to be the largest place in either America. It is no wonder that the bosoms of the five throbbed with curiosity, and that they looked forward to strange and varied sights.

“Now, Jim,” said Shif’less Sol in a warning tone to Long Jim, “I’ve got advice to give you. I wuz in a big town once. I told you about that time I went to Baltimore when I wuz a little boy, an’ so I’m fit to tell you how to behave. New Or-lee-yuns ain’t like the woods, Jim. Don’t you be too handy with your gun. Ef you see a man follerin’ along behind you ez ef he wuz trailin’ you, don’t you up an’ take a shot at him. Like ez not he’s about his business, only it happens to be in the same direction that you’re goin’. An’, Jim, don’t you go to gittin’ dizzy, through seein’ so many people about. Mebbe you don’t think thar will be sech a crowd, but you’ll believe it when you see it.”

“Sol Hyde,” rejoined Long Jim indignantly, “I’m sorry New Or-lee-yuns ain’t right at the sea, ‘cause the sea is salt, so I’ve heard, an’ then ef I wuz to dip you in it three or four times it would do you a pow’ful lot uv good. Salt is shorely mighty helpful in the curin’ up uv fresh things.”

“There goes another of those canoes,” said Paul, “but I can’t tell whether it’s a white man or an Indian in it.”

“It’s a white man,” said Henry, “but I fancy it’s a West Indian Frenchman or Spaniard. I’ve heard that some of them are as dark as Indians.”

“Time to think ‘bout tyin’ up for the dark,” said Tom Ross. “We might go on all night, but we need to save our strength fur to-morrow. What do you say to that little cove over thar on the west bank, Henry?”

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“Looks as if it would be the right place,” replied Henry, “and it is certainly time to stop. The sun seems to go down faster here than it does In Kentucky.”

The twilight was spreading swiftly over the arch from west to east as they entered the cove and tied “The Galleon” to a live oak. Paul leaped joyfully ashore, glad to stretch his limbs again. The others quickly followed, and they set about gathering wood to build a fire. They were out of the Indian country now and they had no need to be cautious.

Paul bestirred himself looking for brushwood. Presently he found at the edge of the water a dead bough which was long enough to be broken into several sticks of convenient length. He picked it up, and for the purpose of breaking it brought it down heavily on a large brown log lying in the mud near the water.

To Paul’s amazement and horror, the big brown log got into action at either end. One end, in the shape of a tail, whipped around at him, barely missing him, and the other end, splitting itself horizontally in half, revealed huge jaws lined with terrible teeth. Paul sprang back with a cry, and Henry, who was near, rifle in hand, fired a ball into the monster’s brain. The big brown log, that was no log, turned partially over and died.

“An alligator,” said Henry, “I’ve heard of them, but this is the first that I’ve ever seen.”

“I’ve heard of them, too,” said Paul, “but I never thought I’d walk almost into the mouth of one without knowing it.”

Shif’less Sol had his grievance, too. “Now that’s another o’ the ways o’ this here southern country!” he exclaimed in a pained tone, “A big, hungry, wild animal, tryin’ to pass itself off ez, an old dead log. Up in Kentucky, a good honest bear, or even a sneakin’ panther, would be ashamed to look you in the face after tryin’ to play sech a low-down trick on a man.”

“It is certainly a hideous brute,” said Paul.

“I’m thinkin’ that we’d better build our fire big,” said Long Jim. “I don’t want to wake up in the mornin’ an’ find myself devoured by an alligator, jest when I wuz about to reach the great town uv New Or-lee-yuns.”

But they were not molested that night by either man or animal, and the next day, watchful and surcharged with interest, they approached New Orleans, which was bulking so large to them. The river looped out into a crescent and narrowed greatly. As they came to the city, the Mississippi did not seem to them to be more than a third of a mile wide, but they knew that it was extremely deep.

But there, snugly within the crescent, lay New Orleans, a town enclosed within palisaded fortifications that faced the levee for about a thousand yards, and that ran back perhaps half as far. The levee was lined with vessels. Already New Orleans was

famous for shipping, and they saw the flags of many nations. Schooners there were and brigs and brigantines, and barks and barkentines, and other craft from Europe and the West Indies and South America. Near the shore was a great, high ship, from which the red and yellow flag of Spain fluttered in more than one place, while the muzzles of cannon protruded from her wooden sides.

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“That’s an armed galleon,” said Paul.

“She’s a big ship an’ she’s got lots o’ men on her,” said Shif’less Sol, “but I wouldn’t trade our gall-yun fur her.”

“No, our boat suits us best,” said Henry.

They saw about them on the river many small craft like their own, ships, boats, canoes, barges, dug-outs, and other kinds, manned by white men, red men, yellow men, and brown men. They heard strange cries in foreign tongues, and now and then the sound of a trumpet blown at one of the forts in the palisaded wall. Officers in brilliant uniforms appeared on the levee.

The eyes of Long Jim Hart opened wider and wider.

“It shorely is a big town,” he said. “Sol, I’d been thinkin’ that you an’ Paul wuz tellin’ a good deal that ain’t, but I reckon it’s the truth. The world has a lot more people than I thought it had. I’m pow’ful glad I came.”

They turned “The Galleon” toward the levee, and an officer in a boat pulled by four uniformed oarsmen hailed them in Spanish, which none of them understood.

“Must be a harbor master or something of that kind,” said Henry.

They brought “The Galleon” to a stop, and the other boat came alongside. The officer in the bow was a Catalan, richly dressed, and small, but with a thin, alert face. He looked at the five with as much curiosity as they looked at him. Secretly he admired their splendid shoulders and chests, and their obvious strength. He was acute enough, too, to guess whence they came. Lieutenant Diego Bernal had not been two years in New Orleans for nothing.

“You come from Kaintock?” he said in fair and not unfriendly English.

“Yes,” replied Henry, “we are all the way from Kentucky, and we have an important message for the Governor General, Bernardo Galvez. Can you tell us how to reach him?”

Lieutenant Diego Bernal glanced at “The Galleon,” which was obviously of Spanish build, but he was a shrewd officer who would make his way in the world and he knew that many strange things passed inspection in this great Franco-Spanish metropolis of New Orleans.

“His Excellency, the Governor General,” he replied, “is now at his house at the corner of Toulouse street and Rue de la Levee, but it is too late for you to see him to-day. To-

morrow morning you may secure audience with him if you have the important message that you say."

The five disregarded the ironical tone in his voice. They were good enough judges of character to surmise that Lieutenant Diego Bernal, whose name and career were unknown to them, did not care a particle how they had come into possession of the boat which was so obviously of Spanish build. There was no advantage to him in asking too many questions, and he calmly waved them to a landing.

They pulled in and tied their boat to the levee, while men and women, white, yellow, brown, and black, and all the colors between, stood about and looked at the giants from Kaintock, where people were reported to be of such extraordinary size and ferocity, and where they certainly were, as their own eyes could tell them, of uncommon height and strength, even boys such as they saw Henry and Paul to be.

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While the five were engaged in this task, *rabbais*, or peddling merchants, some Provencals and some Catalans came to sell them goods, which they carried in coffin-shaped vehicles pushed before them. They had wares, mostly small articles from Spain and France and the West Indies. Colored women carrying immense cans of milk or coffee on their heads passed by or lingered in hope of a sale. Others were calling for sale *callas* and cakes *tous chauds* in monotonous, drawling voices. Negresses, also, were trying to sell *belles chandelles*, which were dirty candles made from green myrtle wax, the chief light then sold in the city.

The five understood the gestures of this rabble, although not their words, and waved them away, not caring to buy anything.

“Keep cool, Jim! keep cool!” said Shif’less Sol. “Don’t shoot. They don’t want to kill you; they jest want to rob you.”

“Depends on what they want to rob me uv,” replied Long Jim with a grin. “I never had more’n ten shillin’s at one time in my life, an’ I’ve got a purty strong grip on my rifle an’ the clothes that I hev on.”

“I think we’d better go ashore an’ do a little scoutin’,” said Tom Ross. “It’s always well to know the groun’ on which you’re goin’ to act.”

“No doubt of it, Tom,” said Henry, “and we’ll all go together.”

They had a little money of English coinage which was taken readily in cosmopolitan New Orleans, and with two shillings they hired a levee watchman, whom they judged they could trust, to look after “The Galleon.” Then, rifle on shoulder, they entered the fortified city by the gate called *Chemin des Tchoupitoulas*. Spain, officially at least, was the friend of the colonies and the enemy of England, and the sentinels at the gate readily passed them after a few questions.

Here they asked again for the Governor General, Bernardo Galvez, and the statement of Lieutenant Diego Bernal that he could not be seen was confirmed. He had arrived only a few hours before from a two days’ expedition down the river, and was now immersed in important papers that had awaited his coming.

They saw the Governor General’s house, a one-story building fronting the river with a gallery on one side, gardens on the other, and kitchen and outbuildings behind. They looked longingly at it, as they desired very much to see Bernardo Galvez at once. But presently they passed on into the Place d’Armes, a wide open space used as a review ground. At the very moment they entered it a company of Spanish soldiers were going through their evolutions, and, after the fashion of to-day, children and their dark-faced nurses were watching them. The five did not think much of the soldiers, who seemed to them to be dwarfed and without zeal.

“Ef ever Kentucky comes down the long river,” said Shif’less Sol, “it will take bigger men than these to hold her back.”

Paul’s gaze wandered from the soldiers, and he saw in a corner of the Place d’Armes a great wooden gallows that made him shudder. It was a gallows very often used, too, and any one could have pointed out to Paul the spot in the middle of the Place d’Armes where five gallant French gentlemen, among the best citizens of New Orleans, had been shot not long before for planning to throw off the rule of Spain and make Louisiana a free republic.

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They strolled on, still filled with curiosity and gratifying it. They saw many buildings that surpassed anything hitherto in their experience, the brick parish church, on the site of which the Cathedral of St. Louis was afterwards built, the arsenal, the jail, and the house of the Capuchins, who had lately triumphed over the Jesuits. The largest building of all that they saw was the convent of the Ursuline Nuns, standing in the city square on the river front, and this was, in fact, the largest building in New Orleans.

While there were many houses of brick, the cheaper were of cypress wood, and the sidewalks were only four or five feet wide, with a wooden drain for a gutter. There was no paving of the streets, which, now deep in dust, would turn to quagmires when the rain came. At long intervals were wooden posts with projecting arms from which hung oil lamps, to be lighted when nightfall came.

Long Jim uttered an exclamation of disgust, and gripped his nose firmly between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand.

“I never smelt sech smells afore in all my life,” he said, pointing to the heaps of garbage scattered about. “A big town like this here is pow’ful interestin’, but it ain’t clean. Paul, remember them great forests up thar in Kentucky an’ across the Ohio! Remember how clean an’ nice the ground is! Remember all them big, fine, friendly trees, millions an’ millions uv ’em! Remember all them nice little springs uv clean, cold water, clear enough to be lookin’ glasses, one, an’ sometimes more, every three or four hundred yards! Remember all them nice smells uv the wild flowers, an’ the trees, an’ the grass, an’ me settin’ at the foot uv the biggest tree uv ‘em all, cookin’ on a roarin’ fire, fat, juicy buffaler an’ deer steaks fur you fellers!”

“I remember,” replied Paul smiling. “I remember it all, and I do believe, Jim, that you are homesick for the woods.”

“Not homesick eggzackly, but I jest want to say that a big town like this kin be mighty interestin’, but after I’ve seed it, give me back our own clean woods.”

“I believe I agree with you, Jim,” said Paul thoughtfully.

They strolled back into the Place d’Armes, where the review was still in progress, and where more people were gathering. The women were bare-headed, and generally wore a short round skirt, and long basque like overgarments, the two invariably of different, but bright, colors. All of them wore much ribbon and jewelry, but, as a rule, they were too dark of countenance to suit the ideas of the five concerning feminine beauty. At rare intervals, however, they saw a girl with light hair and light eyes and light complexion, and all these were really handsome.

“Those, I imagine, are French,” said Paul. “We’ve got into the habit of thinking of the French as always dark, but many of them are fair. I’ve heard our school teacher, Mr.

Pennypacker, say so often, and he ought to know. For the matter of that, some of the Spaniards are light, too."

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“Yes, thar’s Alvarez,” said Shif’less Sol. “He’s light, an’ that’s one reason why I mistrusted him the first time I saw him. It looks more nateral fur a Spaniard to be dark.”

As they stood in the Place d’Armes looking at the sights, the five themselves began to attract much attention. Their height and strength, their long, sender barreled rifles, and their deerskin attire made them highly picturesque figures. The motley population of New Orleans was used to all kinds of people, armed or unarmed, but generally armed. These, however, were different. They bore themselves with dignity, there was about them an air of absolute simplicity and honesty, and they kept close together in a manner that indicated a faithful brotherhood, closer even than the brotherhood of blood. They seemed to come from another world than that which furnished so many desperate adventurers and former galley slaves to New Orleans.

Henry noticed the attention that they were attracting, and he did not like it.

“Perhaps, boys, we’d better go back to our boat,” he said.

But before any one could answer he was tapped lightly on the arm and, turning about, he saw the small, trim figure of Lieutenant Diego Bernal, who had been the first man to greet them as they entered New Orleans.

“We met on the water, as you know,” said the little lieutenant, smiling in a friendly manner. “My name is Bernal, Diego Bernal, and I am a lieutenant in the service of our most excellent Governor General, Bernardo Galvez.”

His manner was polite, and Henry met him half way. He had nothing to conceal, and he gave him the names of his comrades and himself. Lieutenant Bernal all the time was regarding them shrewdly.

“It is evident that you are mighty men despite the youth of some of you,” he said, “and I begin to suspect it from other facts also.”

“What other facts?” asked Henry.

“Now, there is the matter of your boat,” replied the lieutenant jauntily. “I had a belief, wrong no doubt, that she was of Spanish build. I also seemed to have a recollection, wrong, too, no doubt, that I had once seen Francisco Alvarez, the chief of our captains, aboard that boat and bearing himself in a manner that indicated ownership. I am wrong, no doubt. My impressions are often false and my memory always weak. Gladly would I stand correction. Gladly would I be convinced that I am misled by some fancied resemblance.”

“Them’s pow’ful big words,” said Long Jim.

Henry, who was always the leader of the five when they were together, looked into the eyes of Diego Bernal, and he seemed to see there the curious contraction that is called a wink. He gave judgment at once concerning Diego Bernal.

“I take it,” he said by way of reply, “that you are no great friend of the captain, Francisco Alvarez?”

“If a higher officer rebukes you unjustly and sneers at a commander whom you respect and like, is it calculated to promote friendship?”

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The gaze of the two met again, and Henry understood.

“I see what your choice would be if you were compelled to choose between Bernardo Galvez and Francisco Alvarez,” he said. “It may be that you will have to make such a choice, and I will tell you, too, that the boat did belong to the Captain Alvarez. We took it from him because, first, he made an outrageous attack upon us; secondly, he is plotting to set all the Indian tribes upon us in Kentucky, aided with Spanish soldiers and Spanish guns, and, thirdly, he hopes to become Governor General of Louisiana, and commit Spain to an alliance with England in the war upon the Americans.”

Henry spoke boldly and earnestly, and the others nodded assent.

Lieutenant Diego Bernal, a trim, dandified little man, drew forth from the pocket of his waistcoat a small gold snuff box and delicately took a pinch of snuff, a habit to which the five were unaccustomed.

“Speak it low, my friend,” he said deliberately. “All this, if it be true, is great news, and you do right in coming to New Orleans to see Bernardo Galvez. Can you prove it when you see the Governor General?”

“We can give proofs,” replied Henry guardedly.

“It is well, and I am pleased that I have met you. Know then that I am the enemy of Francisco Alvarez, and that I may aid you. Who can tell? It is well for strangers to have friends in New Orleans. I have an impression that I have some influence. I am usually wrong and my memory is always weak, but this particular impression persists, nevertheless.”

Long Jim opened his mouth in wonder.

“’Pears strange to me,” he said, “that a furrin man kin pick more big words out uv our language, an’ rope ’em together than we kin.”

Lieutenant Diego Bernal smiled. He was pleased.

“I learned English when I was a boy,” he said, “and now it serves me well. I would hear more of your news, gentlemen, but for the present I wish to offer you refreshments. Come with me, if you please.”

He led the way into a low building of brick, an inn fashioned after the manner of those in France.

They entered the public room, which was large and square, with a fairly clean, sanded floor, and many men about drinking liquors unknown to the five.

They took seats at a table in a rather retired corner, and gazed with interest at the variegated crowd. Many of the men wore great, gold rings in their ears, something entirely new to the five, and others were tattooed in strange designs. They drank deep and swore much and loudly in strange tongues. Also, they smoked cigarros, cigarritos, and pipes, and there was scarcely one present who did not have either knife or pistol or both at belt.

“Undoubtedly there is more than one pirate from the Gulf or the Caribbean among them,” said Lieutenant Bernal, “but the pirates perhaps are not the worst. Louisiana and New Orleans can supply many a desperate villain of their own.”

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“Sent by Europe!” said Paul.

“Truly so. An old country always seeks to disgorge such people upon a new one. But Monsieur Gilibert, the proprietor of this inn, on the whole, maintains good order among his customers. As you can now see, Monsieur Gilibert is a man of parts.”

The proprietor, wearing a cook’s cap and white apron, emerged that moment from his kitchen. He was not above supervising, and even doing his own cooking, and, because of it, his inn had acquired a great reputation for excellence of food, as well as drink.

Many of the French in New Orleans were Provencals, but Monsieur Gilibert was from the North of France, a huge, flaxen-haired man with a large square chin, and a fearless countenance. His blue eye roved around the room and lighted upon the five and their host, Lieutenant Diego Bernal, at the secluded table. He noted that every one of the five had a long rifle leaning by his chair, and he shrewdly surmised that they were from the wilderness of the far North.

Monsieur Francois Eugene Gilibert did not love the Spanish, although he did like Lieutenant Diego Bernal, who was a Catalan and therefore, in the opinion of Monsieur Gilibert, almost a Frenchman. Neither did he like the passing of New Orleans from the French into the hands of the Spanish, although trade was as good as ever at his Inn of Henri Quatre, despite the narrow Spanish rule, which was not to his taste. It was perhaps one half his love of freedom and one-half his objection to the rule of Spain that made him look with friendly eyes upon any far wanderers from Kaintock.

He strolled to the table and greeted Lieutenant Bernal, who returned his greeting pleasantly and gave the names of the five.

“They come from Kaintock,” said the lieutenant, significantly, “and they do not like Francisco Alvarez.”

“Ah,” said Monsieur Gilibert, who also spoke English. “I do not love that man Alvarez. He is the enemy of the French.”

“Not more than he is of Kaintock,” said the Lieutenant. Then he turned to the five and said:

“I did not bring you here merely to hear words. I wish something to drink for my friends, kind Monsieur Gilibert. The inn has rum of both New England and Barbadoes, Spanish and French wines. Now what shall it be?”

He turned to the five, and as they answered, one by one, the eyes of the young Spanish lieutenant opened wider and wider in astonishment. They had never tasted rum and were quite sure they would not care for it. Wine they knew, almost as little about, using that they had found on “The Galleon” chiefly as a medicine, and they ended, one and

all, by choosing a mild West Indian drink, a kind of orange water. Lieutenant Bernal reached over and with his two hands felt gingerly of Henry's mighty right arm.

"Do you mean to tell me," he said, "that such a muscle and such a body have been built up and nourished by things as mild as orange water?"

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“Not orange water, but plain water,” replied Henry laughing. “But in Maryland where I was born, and in Kentucky, where I’ve been growing up, the water is very good, clear, pure, and cold.”

“Will you kindly stand up a moment?” said the lieutenant.

Henry promptly stood up and then Lieutenant Diego Bernal, standing by the side of him, was about a head the shorter. Then the young lieutenant made a wry face.

“And I have drunk wine all my life,” he said plaintively, “and he has drunk only water!”

The two sat down again, and the others laughed. Their talk and actions had attracted the attention of a number in the room, and a large man with great gold bands in his ears, rose and sauntered over toward them. He was a dark fellow, evidently a West Indian Spaniard with a dash of Carib.

“I have drunk rum and wine and all other liquors all my life,” he said, “but I am neither little nor weak.”

His tone was truculent, and his flushed face indicated that he had already taken too much.

“Go away, Menocal,” said Monsieur Gilibert, in a voice half soothing, half warning. “I do not wish my guests to be annoyed.”

But Menocal would not turn away. He put his hand upon Henry’s shoulder.

“This is a great youth,” he said. “They grow large in the new country to the north that they call Kaintock, but I, Alonzo Menocal of Santo Domingo, am the stronger. Stand up, thou youth of Kaintock, by the side of me!”

Henry promptly stood up again, and the young giant towered above Alonzo Menocal of Santo Domingo, tall though the West Indian was. Moreover he had greater breadth of shoulder and a deeper chest.

“Ha, thou Kaintock!” exclaimed Menocal, “thou art the taller and the larger, but I am the stronger, as I shall quickly prove!”

The size of Henry acted as an irritant upon Menocal, already flushed with intoxicants, and he seized the youth by the waist in an attempt to hurl him to the floor and thus prove his superior strength. Henry, with an instant, powerful effort, threw oft the encircling arms, seized the West Indian by both shoulders, and made use of a trick that Shif’less Sol had taught him.

He thrust the man backward with a mighty shove, put out his foot, and Menocal went over it. But the West Indian did not touch the floor. Henry caught him by the neck and waist, and, with a great heave, lifted him high above his head. He held him there a moment, and then said gravely to Monsieur Francois Eugene Gilibert:

“Shall I cast him through yonder window, or put him back in the chair in which he was sitting before he came to us uninvited?”

Monsieur Gilibert looked longingly at the window—he was a man of strength and dexterity himself—and he admired great strength and great dexterity in others—but motives of prudence and humanity prevailed.

“Put him back in his chair,” he said.

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Henry walked all the way across the room and gently put the half-stunned man in a sitting position in his chair. A roar of applause shook the room at this remarkable performance, and Monsieur Gilibert was not the slackest among those who cheered. Never before had the Inn of Henri Quatre witnessed such an extraordinary feat of strength. Lieutenant Diego Bernal sprang to his feet and again seized Henry's right hand in both of his.

"Senor," he exclaimed, "it is an honor to me to deem myself your friend!"

Alonzo Menocal arose from his chair and came across the room. Paul's hand moved to the butt of the pistol in his belt, but the intentions of the West Indian were not hostile.

"Thou hast conquered," he said to Henry in his queer thee- and thou-English. "Thou art not only the taller and the larger, but also the stronger and the more skillful. It is the first time that Alonzo Menocal was ever picked up, carried across a room, and put down in his chair, as a mother puts her baby to bed."

He put out his hand in quite an American fashion, and Henry shook it, glad that the man was good-natured. More applause greeted this act of friendship by the two and, taking advantage of it, the five went out, accompanied by Lieutenant Bernal, all in great good humor.

Night was coming on, and they felt that it was time to return to "The Galleon." A man was already lighting the smoking oil lamps that hung from the wooden arms of the posts, and from one of the forts a sentinel was calling the hour.

New Orleans looked better under the softening hue of the twilight. Many of the asperities that go as a matter of course with newness were hidden, but the smells remained.

"Wish I could sleep in the woods to-night, with nuthin' but trees runnin' away at least ten miles in every direction," said Long Jim.

"It will be all right in our boat on the river," said Paul.

"I think I shall go with you as far as your boat," said Lieutenant Bernal.

"You're welcome. Come on," said Henry, confident of his friendship.

The five and the lieutenant walked swiftly toward the Mississippi.

CHAPTER XV

BEFORE BERNARDO GALVEZ

It took only a few minutes to reach the banks of the stream, and they saw at once that an event was occurring. New Orleans could rejoice, if she choose, in honor of an important arrival.

A fleet of a dozen large boats swung from the middle of the stream and made for the levee. In the boats were men in uniform.

“I have an impression, though my impressions are often wrong and my memory always weak, that yonder cavalier who sits haughtily in the boat as if he were sole proprietor of the Mississippi, is your good friend, Don Francisco Alvarez,” said Lieutenant Bernal in his mincing way.

They had all recognized Alvarez, and they expected quick trouble. As it was bound to come they had no objection to its coming at once. The boat of Alvarez made the landing and as he sprang out he was followed by Braxton Wyatt, also in the uniform of a Spanish officer. The eyes of the Captain instantly caught sight of “The Galleon,” then of the five, and then of Lieutenant Diego Bernal standing near the Americans.

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“Men,” he cried to some of his soldiers who had landed. “Seize this boat at once! It is my property, taken from me by these American thieves!”

The soldiers moved to obey, but the little Catalan, Lieutenant Diego Bernal stepped forward. Never was he more mincing, and it is likely that he never felt more satisfaction than he did now at the role that he was about to play.

“Gently! Gently! my good captain,” he said. “I am a port officer and boats cannot be seized at will in His Most Catholic Majesty’s city of New Orleans.”

His manner stung Alvarez, who replied hotly:

“I repeat, it is my boat! It was stolen from me by these thieves from Kaintock!”

“But that must be proved,” and the lieutenant’s voice was very soft and silky. “The law is still administered in the City of New Orleans. And let me assure you, my good captain, that the matter of the boat is a trifle. What really concerns is your delay in coming to New Orleans with your American captives, whom you held at your place of Beaulieu. His Excellency, the Governor General, Don Bernardo Galvez, is very much afraid that you have involved Spain in serious difficulties with a friendly people.”

Alvarez looked fiercely at Bernal. How much did this man know? But the little lieutenant merely stroked his mustache, and his face was expressionless.

“If explanations are due,” said Alvarez, “I shall make them to Don Bernardo.”

“Very good! very good!” murmured the lieutenant. “I am quite sure that Don Bernardo will be greatly pleased.”

Alvarez turned angrily, gave some orders to his men, and then stalked away followed by Wyatt and two others. The renegade had never spoken a word, but he and the five had exchanged some threatening glances.

Alvarez and Bernal had spoken in Spanish, but Henry and the others surmised the import of their words. They knew, too, by the manner of Alvarez that the little triumph had been with Bernal.

“He wanted the boat, did he not?” said Henry.

“Yes,” replied the lieutenant, “but you can sleep in it to-night. I warn you, however, to see Bernardo Galvez in the morning as soon as you can. After all, you are Americans and foreigners, while Alvarez is a Spaniard and one of us. You will have much to overcome.”

They perceived the truth of his suggestion and thanked him. He gave them a friendly good night and went away. The five went on board “The Galleon” and prepared for sleep, having dismissed their watchman with ample pay.

As the boat was securely tied there was no need to keep a watch and all prepared for the night. But they did not go to sleep yet, although they did not talk, every one being occupied with his own thoughts.

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Paul sat at the stern of the boat leaning against the side, and his eyes were on New Orleans, where he saw the formless shapes of buildings and twinkling lights here and there. The city, in a way, attracted him and, in another way, it repelled him. It interested him, but he had no desire to live there. It was a port, a gate, as it were, opening into the vast old world, to which belonged the centuries, and of which he had read and thought so much, but the single taste of it turned Paul's heart with a stronger affection than ever toward the New World to which he belonged. The great forests of the north seemed clean and fresh to him as they had seemed to Jim. There, at least, a man could know who were his friends and who were his enemies.

He saw boats passing on the turbid, brown current of the Mississippi and he heard snatches of strange, foreign songs. The night had fully come and heavy darkness hung over land and water, but New Orleans did not sleep. The smugglers, the adventurers, the former galley slaves, the riff-raff of Europe, and the mixed bloods of the West Indies were abroad in pursuit of either business or pleasure, each equally favored by the dusk.

Shif'less Sol and Long Jim were already asleep, but Paul was restless and slumber would not come. Henry, too, was wakeful, and Paul at last suggested that they walk in the city. Henry accepted, and with a word to Tom Ross they sprang ashore.

New Orleans was even more interesting to them by night than by day, as it had now a peculiarly uncanny look added to its other qualities. The night was close, heavy, and warm, and the brown current of the river showed but dismally through it. Lights were still moving on the Mississippi, but the boats that bore them were invisible. From the side of the river pleasant odors came to their nostrils, the clean, sweet scents of vast, undefiled woods and prairies, the flavor of a wind blowing over wild flowers, but from the side of the city the smells were as variegated and repellent as ever.

Nevertheless the two youths turned into the city, lit faintly by the flaring oil lanterns, and walked along through one street and another seeing what they could see. The night life was active and much of it was sodden. Oaths played a great part in the talk they heard and intoxication was a prevalent note. Sounds of strife, either without or within, arose now and then, but Henry and Paul, wishing to keep clear of all trouble, never stayed to see the result. They more than suspected that knives shone too often in these orgies.

They stopped a few moments by the old church in front of the Place d'Armes. The church was flanked on one side by a low brick building, very white with roof of red and yellow tiles, while to the left of the church stood a villa-like house half hidden among the trees. They admired the effect of the moonlight on the tiles, and then, passing through the wooden fence that enclosed it, they entered the deserted Place d'Armes.

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“I can breathe better here,” said Henry. “I know that I shall never be fond of towns.”

But the imaginative Paul shuddered.

“Look,” he said, “the gallows!”

He pointed to the huge gallows that stood in the Place d’Armes, ready for frequent use. The moonlight had now grown dim. In its wavering beams the gallows rose to immense proportions and seemed also to take on the semblance of life. It reached out its long wooden arm as if to grasp Paul and with another shudder he turned his back to it.

The two continued down one side of the Place d’Armes in the shade of magnolias and cypresses that drooped over the wooden fence. As they passed they heard the sound of a shot.

“Somebody in the city fighting with a rifle or pistol instead of a knife,” said Paul.

But Henry stood motionless and silent for a moment or two. He had distinctly felt the rush of air on his face as a bullet passed by. He was seeking to see whence the shot had come and he thought he caught a glimpse of a figure among the cypresses.

“No, Paul,” he exclaimed, “that shot was aimed at me!”

He sprang over the wooden fence and was followed by Paul. They searched diligently among the trees but found nothing. Then they looked at each other, and each read the same opinion in the other’s eyes.

“It was either Braxton Wyatt or somebody else in the service of Alvarez,” said Henry.

“Yes,” said Paul, nodding assent, “and I think that ‘The Galleon’ is a much safer place for us at night than the City of New Orleans.”

“That is true,” said Henry, “and it is not worth while for us to make a complaint about being shot at. We cannot prove anything, and New Orleans is too turbulent a place to pay attention to a stray rifle or pistol shot at night.”

They were back at the boat in a few minutes. Shif’less Sol and Long Jim still slept soundly, but Tom Ross was awake. They told him briefly what had occurred, and Tom shook his head sagely.

“Better stay on the boat ez long ez we kin keep it,” he said. “Ez fur me, I’d rather be shot at by Injuns in the woods uv Kentucky than be hevin’ white men drawin’ beads on me here in a town. It looks more nateral. Uv course it wuz Braxton Wyatt or some other tool uv that wicked Spaniard, Alvarez.”

Early the next morning the five, after hiring the same watchman to care again for their boat, went to the house of the Governor General, the large, low building at the corner of Toulouse Street and Rue de la Levee. Early as they were they were not the first to arrive.

A tall man, neatly dressed in a fine brown suit with fine, snow-white, puffed linen, silver-buckled shoes, and hair, tied in a powdered queue, stood on the veranda. He had a frank, open face, and the rive knew at once that he was an American. Had not his appearance proclaimed his nationality, his speech would have done it for him.

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“Good morning,” he exclaimed, cheerily, “you are the gentlemen from Kentucky who arrived yesterday? Yes, you must be! All New Orleans has heard of the feat of strength and dexterity, performed by one of you last night in Monsieur Gilibert’s Inn of Henri Quatre! And he who did it could be none other than you, my friend!”

He looked fixedly and admiringly at Henry, and the youth blushed under his tan.

“It was merely done to stop an annoyance,” he said. “I did not mean to make any display.”

The prepossessing stranger laughed.

“Doubtless,” he said, “but you have received a great advertisement, nevertheless. Some rumor concerning the cause of your visit has also spread in New Orleans, and for this reason I am here to meet you at the door of the Governor General.”

The five looked at him inquiringly. He smiled, and they liked him better than ever.

“I don’t mean to make a mystery of anything,” he said. “My name is Pollock, Oliver Pollock.”

“Ah,” exclaimed Paul, his face alight, “you are the head of the company of Philadelphia, New York and Boston merchants that is sending arms from New Orleans up the Mississippi and Ohio to Pittsburg, where they are landed and taken across the country for the use of our hard-pressed brethren in the east!”

The shrewd merchant’s eyes twinkled.

“I see, my young friend,” he said to Paul, “that you are alert, even if you have just come out of the wilderness. Yes, I am that man, and I am proud to be the head of such a company. I tell you, too, that you have come at the right time. The English, as you know, are forbidden for the present to trade at New Orleans, while we are unrestricted. But England is powerful, far more powerful than Spain, and she is pushing hard for the privilege. If she gets it we shall he hit in a vital spot. Moreover, an exceedingly strong faction here, one with great influence, is striving continually to help England and to crush us.”

“Alvarez!” exclaimed Henry and Paul together.

“Yes, Alvarez! We must not underrate his strength and cunning, but if he is engaged in plotting, in actual treason, or what is very near it, your coming may help us to prove it and thus strengthen the hand of Bernardo Galvez, who is our friend.”

“There is no doubt of the fact!” said Henry earnestly. “He is planning to make himself Governor General in place of Galvez!”

“Ah, but to prove it! to prove it! You are strangers and foreigners, and Alvarez is before you here. No, don’t blame yourselves, you could not help it. But he is the commander of the Spanish forces in Northern Louisiana. He came, summoned urgently on the King’s business, and he gained access to Bernardo Galvez last night. Oh, he’s a shrewd man, and a cunning one, and we know not what plausible tale he may have poured out to the Governor General. But come, the sentinel here wishes to know our business and I shall go in with you, if I may.”

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“Of course,” said Henry. “We thank you for your aid.”

They saw in a moment how valuable this help could be as Mr. Pollock spoke rapidly in Spanish to one of the sentinels, who seemed impressed, and who quickly disappeared within the house. They spent some anxious minutes in waiting, but the sentinel returned in a few minutes with word that they would be received.

“That is good,” said Mr. Pollock to the five. “It is well to strike before the blow of Alvarez sinks in too deeply.”

They entered an ante-chamber furnished with a splendor that the Kentuckians had never seen before. There were pictures and the arms of Spain upon the walls, and rich heavy rugs upon the floor. The sentinel said something in Spanish to Mr. Pollock and the merchant laughed.

“He makes the polite request,” said Mr. Pollock, “that you leave your rifles here. Ah, you see that the fame of the Kentucky rifle has already reached New Orleans. They will be perfectly safe, I assure you.”

The five leaned their rifles in a row against the wall, long, slender-barreled weapons, which were destined to make one day an unparalleled record before this very city of New Orleans.

A wide door was thrown open and an attendant dressed in gorgeous Spanish livery announced their names as they entered a large room furnished with as great a degree of state as could be reproduced at that time in New Orleans. An armed soldier stood on either side of the door, and, at the far end of the room, sitting in a great chair on a slightly raised platform, was a handsome, youngish man in the uniform of a Spanish colonel. He had a strong, open countenance, and the five knew that it was Bernardo Galvez, the Governor General of Louisiana. The favorable impression of him that they had received from reports was confirmed by his appearance.

Bernardo Galvez rose with punctilious courtesy and saluted Oliver Pollock, who introduced in turn the five, to every one of whom the Governor General gave a bow and a friendly word. Like all others in New Orleans who had seen them, he bestowed an admiring look upon their size, their straightness, and above all, the extraordinary air of independence and resolution that characterized every one of them, indicated, not by the words they said or the things they did, but by an atmosphere they created, something that cannot be described. They had never been in such a room before, one containing so much of the splendor of old Europe, but they were not awed in the least by it, and Bernardo Galvez knew it.

Oliver Pollock, the shrewd merchant and patriot, man of affairs, and judge of his kind, observed them closely and, observing, he felt a great thrill of satisfaction. The five,

boys though two of them were, had felt the vast importance of their mission and, now that they had come, he too, felt it. It was a most critical and delicate moment for the struggling young nation. He knew much of Francisco Alvarez, and he surmised more.

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“I have heard of you,” said the Governor General to the five, and his tones became judicial and severe, as became the ruler of a million square miles of fertile territory belonging to His Most Catholic Majesty, the King of Spain. “You are the subject of formal complaint made by the captain of our forces in the North, Don Francisco Alvarez.”

It was now Paul, the scholar, youth of imagination, and future statesman, who responded and it seemed fitting to all that he should do so.

“Will Your Excellency state the complaint against us?” he asked in a grave and manly way.

“I will leave it to Don Francisco to state it,” replied Bernardo Galvez. “I expected that you would be here this morning, so I have chosen to confront you with him. Each side shall tell its story.”

This seemed fair, and the five, who had been waved to seats by a great window with Mr. Pollock, made no protest. There they sat in silence for a few minutes, while the Governor General dictated to a secretary who sat at a little table by his side and who wrote with a goose-quill.

The wide door was at length thrown open again, and the usher announced Don Francisco and his aide, Senor Braxton Wyatt. The five were amazed and indignant at the assurance of the renegade, but they said nothing.

Alvarez walked into the room, cool, dignified, and austere, but his manner was not calculated to ruffle his superior officer. It seemed rather to indicate a confidence that the Governor General would punish as was fitting the impertinence of the intruders from Kaintock. He bestowed only a single glance upon them, as if his victory over such insignificant opponents were already assured. The blood slowly rose to the faces of Paul and Henry, but they were about to witness an extraordinary exhibition of Spanish pliancy and dexterity.

Braxton Wyatt was as thoroughly the Spaniard as clothes could make him, which was not thorough at all, and he imitated his leader even to the supercilious glance at the Kentuckians and the following look of assured victory. The five took no notice of him.

Alvarez gave to the Governor General a military salute, which Galvez returned in like fashion. Then the captain sat down in a chair near the Governor General, and the latter said, maintaining his judicial tone:

“Those against whom you made the complaint last night are here, Don Francisco. Will you state again the charges? It is but fair that they should hear and make reply, if they can.”

He spoke in English that the five might understand, and Alvarez replied in the same language.

“Your Excellency,” he said, and his tone seemed frank, open, and convincing—the five were amazed that he could have such a truthful look and manner of injured innocence—“you know that I have been a most faithful guardian of the interests of our master, the King. I have done long and hard service in the far north, in a wilderness infested by hostile savages.”

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“No one doubts your courage and endurance, Don Francisco,” said Bernardo Galvez.

“My devotion to Spain is the great passion of my life,” continued Alvarez in a gratified tone.

“You know how jealously I have sought to guard against incursions from Kaintock. The settlements of the Americans there are but two or three year old, yet these people press already upon the Mississippi and threaten His Majesty’s territory of Louisiana.”

“I think that we wander a little from the subject,” said Galvez, “It would be better to state the core of your complaint.”

Alvarez made a deprecating gesture.

“I deemed the preamble necessary to a full understanding of what has followed,” he said. “When I tell of Kaintock I tell what these men are. Suffice it now to say that, of their own accord and by their own hands, they have made war upon Spain. They have stolen away a boat of mine, loaded with arms and stores, they have fired upon His Majesty’s subjects, and one of them has slain a Natchez trailer, a faithful, valuable man in my service.”

When Alvarez spoke of The Cat, he pointed at Shif’less Sol—he was acting on a hint of Wyatt’s. The look of Alvarez followed the accusing finger, but the shiftless one rose undaunted.

“That part of what he tells is true,” said Shif’less Sol. “I slew that Injun—an’ a meaner face I never saw in fa’r fight. He slipped upon me in the dark to murder me, an’ thar wuzn’t nothin’ else left fur me to do.”

Freed of his speech and his wrath, the shiftless one sat down again. Alvarez and the renegade gave him looks of sneering incredulity, but the look of Bernardo Galvez was one of interest and surprise.

“What of the other charges?” he asked, turning to Paul, the spokesman.

The gift of imagination often implies the orator’s tongue and Paul had an inspired moment. He stood up, his cheeks flushing and his eyes alight, as they always were when he was deeply moved.

“It is true,” he said, “that we took a boat belonging to Captain Alvarez, but it was because he forced us to do it. It is he who first made war upon Kentucky, not we upon Spain. I went into his camp upon a peaceful mission. He seized and held me a prisoner. I was rescued by my comrades, although they inflicted no harm upon any of the men of Captain Alvarez. He has sought in every way to destroy us, and because he was the beginner of violence and because he is planning a great treason and war upon

Kentucky, we took his boat and have come to New Orleans for the sole purpose of appearing before you."

Alvarez burst into a sneering laugh and Braxton Wyatt, as a matter of course, imitated him, but Bernardo Galvez asked in a grave tone:

"What do you mean by a great treason? No, Don Francisco, wait! Let him speak! It is their right."

"I mean," said Paul boldly, "that he expects to become Governor General of Louisiana in your place. It is not the policy of Spain to attack us. Yet Red Eagle and Yellow Panther, the head chiefs of the powerful Shawnee and Miami nations were in his camp, and he has agreed to help them with Spanish soldiers and Spanish cannon in a raid upon Kentucky."

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“This is an extraordinary statement,” said Bernardo Galvez. “Your proof?”

“Yes, your proof!” sneered Alvarez, and Braxton Wyatt sneered, too.

“This man,” said Paul, pointing to the renegade, “is from Kentucky. We were boys together but he deserted the white people, his own people, to go with the red. He has continually urged the Indian attack upon us and he has brought to Captain Alvarez complete maps of every settlement in Kentucky, Wareville, Marlowe, Lexington, Harrodsburg, and all the others. Why is he here! Why has he come to New Orleans, if not to bind the red chiefs and Captain Alvarez together in such an enterprise?”

Alvarez again burst into a laugh, ironical and taunting. Paul flushed deeply.

“I know,” he exclaimed, “that we cannot bring you absolute proofs, but it is true, nevertheless. The Indian chiefs, Yellow Panther and Red Eagle, have his agreement made without any authority from you, and there are the maps.”

“A map does not necessarily mean war,” said Alvarez, “even if they should exist, and they do not exist. I took these people, arms in hand, upon His Majesty’s soil, and it was my intention to bring them to New Orleans for examination and punishment by you.”

“Doubtless it is so,” said Bernardo Galvez, “but you were in no hurry to perform the mission. I was forced to send a message to you at Beaulieu to come to New Orleans with your prisoners, but it seems they have escaped and come of their own accord.”

“And I may state, your Excellency,” said Henry Ware rising, “that while my comrade, Paul Cotter, was a prisoner at Beaulieu, he was forced into a ring and a professional swordsman was set upon him. That, Captain Alvarez cannot deny. It was witnessed by too many people.”

Bernardo Galvez gave Alvarez a surprised and stern look. The captain winced, but it was only for a moment.

“Is this true, Don Francisco?” asked the Governor General gravely. “Did you do this thing?”

Alvarez made a gesture as if It were true, but yet a trifle.

“I confess, Your Excellency,” he said. “I had forgotten the circumstance, but, since I am reminded of it, I will not deny. The thing seems much worse in the telling than it was in the happening. The young man had shown great skill with the sword—he had disarmed me in a little encounter; I admit that, too—and we wished to test his agility and courage against a master, who was instructed not to hurt him seriously under any circumstances.”

He spoke rapidly and lightly, almost convincingly. But Henry Ware interrupted.

“His object,” he said, “was to have Paul Cotter killed.”

Bernardo Galvez looked from one to the other and back again. It was the word of a stranger and a foreigner against that of a Spanish captain in his service, a man of noble lineage, and with powerful friends at the Court of Madrid. But the seeds of doubt had been sown nevertheless. The youth, Paul, and his comrade Henry, also, had spoken with singular earnestness. Moreover, Francisco Alvarez was an ambitious man, and Bernardo Galvez also believed him to be unscrupulous. If he aimed at the place of Governor General and the commitment of Spain to an alliance with England, it was a daring thing to do.

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Bernardo Galvez was sorely troubled and he looked from Alvarez to the five and then back again. Alvarez sat smiling. His look was that of one who was right, who knew that he was right, and who knew that others knew it. Oliver Pollock sitting by the big window, close to the five, was also watching shrewdly in order that he might draw from all this coil some capital for the patriot cause.

“In any event,” said Bernardo Galvez at last, speaking slowly, as if he carefully considered each word, “you were wrong, Don Francisco, to expose this youth to such an encounter. If, as you say, it was merely a little sport, then the sport was ill-chosen and ill-timed. Whether that or another was your purpose, it reflects upon your judgment and sense of humanity.”

He paused, and Alvarez flushed darkly, but he was still master of his supple self.

“Your words are none too severe, Your Excellency,” he said. “I did indeed do a foolish thing. It was a thoughtless impulse.”

“But,” resumed Galvez, as if Alvarez had not spoken, “you are an officer high in the service of His Majesty, and these who accuse you are strangers belonging to another race. They do not bring the proof of their charges, and the fact that they have violently seized and put to their own use the property of Spain cannot be denied, as the boat is now anchored at the levee.”

Francisco Alvarez and Braxton Wyatt lifted their chins in triumph and the five were downcast. But the face of Oliver Pollock, the shrewd merchant and far-seeing judge of affairs and men, showed nothing.

“Therefore,” continued the Governor General, “the boat must be returned at once to Don Francisco, and for the present those who seized it must be the prisoners of Spain.”

Paul was about to spring up in protest, but Henry’s hand on his arm held him down. Oliver Pollock, too, gave him a warning glance. Yet the triumphant looks of the Spanish captain and the renegade were hard to bear.

“On the other hand,” continued the Governor General, still weighing his words, “the actions of Don Francisco have not been beyond rebuke. He seems to have regarded those from Kaintock as the prisoners of himself and not of Spain. He made no report of these matters to me, his superior officer, and he has lingered at his place of Beaulieu as if he were subject to no orders save those of his own will.”

Alvarez again flushed and raised his hand in protest, but Bernardo Galvez went on, disregarding him:

“Because these offenses give some color to the charges against him, it is my order that he be relieved for the present of his command, and that he do not depart, under any circumstance, from the City of New Orleans until he receive further instructions.”

Alvarez, sprang up in anger, but a commanding gesture from the Governor General waved him down in silence.

“I do not wish to hear any protests, Don Francisco,” he said, “but I do intend to look further into these matters.”

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“If we have not won, neither has the Spaniard,” whispered Henry in Paul’s ear.

Oliver Pollock glanced out of the big window and the turning of his head hid the twinkle in his eye. Yes, these were very delicate matters, and two great nations and another that hoped to be great, too, were involved, but one might make progress nevertheless.

Bernardo Galvez spoke to his secretary, who left the room, but returned in a few minutes with no less a personage than Lieutenant Diego Bernal, mincing, scrupulously dressed, but very alert of eye.

“You will take six soldiers,” said the Governor General to him, “and escort these five to the fortress. Treat them well, but hold them until further orders.”

Oliver Pollock gave a nod to Henry. It said plainly, “go without protest.” Henry and his comrades rose and followed Lieutenant Bernal from the Governor General’s house. Thence they went to one of the forts in the wall that surrounded the town.

CHAPTER XVI

IN PRISON

Their fortress prison was built of brick, but it was not a particularly somber place. They were all put in one large room which had two windows barred with iron; but plenty of air came in at the windows, and the place, though bare, was clean.

“Well,” said Lieutenant Bernal, when they were inside, “tell me all that occurred before Bernardo Galvez.”

Paul was again the spokesman telling everything that was said as literally as he could.

“I have an impression,” said Lieutenant Bernal, “although my impressions are usually wrong and my memory is always weak, that you have scored, at least partially. You have sowed the fertile crop of suspicion in the mind of Bernardo Galvez. He has shown that by making Francisco Alvarez virtually a prisoner, also, and you have a powerful advocate in the Senor Pollock, the great merchant, and I may add the great diplomat, also.”

“How long do you think we will be kept in here?” asked Shif’less Sol, looking around at the room, which, though wide, was by no means so wide as the forests of Kentucky.

“I do not know,” replied the lieutenant, smiling—he understood the look of the shiftless one, “but you shall not be ill-treated, and do not feel that any disgrace lies upon you. This is a military prison. Good men have been confined here; I myself, for instance,

because of some little breach of military discipline magnified by my officers into a fault. Oh, you shall not suffer!"

He bustled about cheerily. He had food and drink brought to them, and then he departed, volunteering to see that their private property on "The Galleon" was saved and brought to them.

No one spoke for a little while after his going, and then the silence was broken by a long, dismal sigh. It was drawn up from the depths of Long Jim's chest.

"Are you sick, Jim?" asked Henry.

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“Yes, Henry,” replied Jim in a melancholy tone, “I’m sick; sick uv all this jawin’, sick uv seein’ things pulled here, an’ then pulled yonder, sick uv hearin’ people lyin’, knowin’ that they’re lyin’, and knowin’ that other people know that they’re lyin’.”

“Why, Jim,” said Paul, who had a twinkle in his eye, “that’s diplomacy, and the man who practises it is called a diplomatist or diplomat. It’s considered a great accomplishment.”

“It ain’t so considered by me, an’ I’m bein’ heard from,” said Long Jim with great emphasis. “Them dy-plo-may-tists or dy-plo-maws may reckon theirselves pow’ful big boys, but I’ve got another an’ better name fur ‘em, and it’s spelled with jest four letters, uv which the furst is l an’ the last is r, an’ them that comes in between are i an’ a, with the i first. Why, Paul, it makes me plum’ sick, all these goin’s on. In a big town like this, full uv Spaniards an’ Frenchmen an’ Injuns an’ niggers an’ mixed breeds, an’ the Lord knows what, you can never tell nuth’in’ ’bout nobody, ‘cept that he says what he don’t believe, an’ that he ain’t what he is.

“I guess I’m in love more with the big woods than ever. Thar things is what they is. A buffaler don’t pretend to be a b’ar. He’d be ashamed to be caught tryin’ to play sech a trick, an’ a b’ar has the same respect fur hisself; he’d never dream uv sayin’ in his b’ar language, ’Look at me, admire me, see what a fine big buffaler I am!’ An’ I’ve a lot uv respeck fur the Injun, too. He’s an Injun an’ he don’t say he ain’t. He don’t come sneakin’ along claimin’ that he’s an old friend uv the family, he jest up an’ lets drive his tomahawk at your head, ef he gits the chance, an’ makes no bones ’bout it. I’d a heap ruther be killed by a good honest Injun who wuz pantin’ fur my blood an’ didn’t pretend that he wuzn’t pantin’, than be done to death down here, in some cur’us, unbeknown, hole-in-the-dark way, by a furrin’ man who couldn’t speak a real word of the decent English language, but who wuz tryin’ to let on all the time that he hated to do it.”

Long Jim stopped, breathing hard with his long speech and anger. Shif’less Sol rose, walked across the room, and solemnly held out his hand to his comrade.

“Jim,” he said, “you don’t often talk sense, but you’re talkin’ a heap o’ it now. Shake.”

Long Jim shook and added with a grin:

“When me an’ you agree, Sol, ‘bout anythin’, it’s shorely right.”

Then they fell silent for a while, each thinking in his own way of what had occurred. Henry Ware walked to one of the windows and looked out for a long while. He relished little the idea of being a prisoner for the second time, even if the second imprisonment were a sort of courtesy affair. He saw from the windows the roofs of houses amid green foliage and he knew that only a few hundred yards beyond lay the great forest, which, now in the freshest and tenderest tints of spring, rolled away unbroken, save for the few

scratches that the French or Spanish had made, for thousands of miles, and for all he knew to the Arctic Circle itself.

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The words of Long Jim stirred the youth deeply. He did not like intrigue and double-dealing and the ways of foreign men. Like Long Jim he longed for the great honest forest, and he, too, had his respect for the Indian who would tomahawk him without claiming to be a friend. He was glad, very glad, that he had come upon so great an errand, but he would like to cleave through the whole web of intrigue with one sturdy blow and then be off into the forest which was calling to him with such a dearly loved voice.

Paul saw Henry's face and he understood its expression. He knew that it was harder for his comrade than for himself to endure the confinement within four walls, but he said nothing. Words would be wasted.

Later in the day their door was opened, and Mr. Pollock came in bringing with him a cheery breeze.

"I've come to tell you what news there may be," he said, "and also to ask questions. Now, sit down and make yourselves comfortable. That's right. The cunning and ambitious Don Francisco Alvarez is in a rage. He is also somewhat frightened. He knows that Bernardo Galvez will be busy the next few days trying to secure the proof of the charges that you make against him. In my opinion, Galvez believes that they are true, but, as you will agree, he cannot act without proof."

"But that is exactly what we lack at this time," said Henry, "and how can we get it while we are locked up here?"

"Just so! Just so! That is a point to which I am coming. Now, about this renegade, this Braxton Wyatt. You say he is the man who drew the maps and who has been the intermediary in this whole nefarious scheme. Maps could be drawn, of course, for a purpose not wicked, but if they could be produced, and above all if Alvarez had made any notes upon them in his own handwriting, they would go far to help. If not proof, they would at least be a strong indication. Now, where do you think these maps are kept?"

"On the person of Braxton Wyatt," replied Henry promptly.

The merchant smiled with pleasure.

"Of course! Of course!" he said. "They belong to Wyatt and naturally he would keep them. Naturally, also, Alvarez would want him to keep them. He would take care that such things were not found on his own person. We must get possession of those maps. But we must go further. This renegade has lived among both the Shawnees and Miamis and is high in their confidence, is it not so?"

"Yes, both the great head-chiefs, Yellow Panther and Red Eagle, trust him."

“And to carry out this nefarious alliance some promise must have passed between Alvarez and the two head chiefs. That promise had to take a concrete form to be binding.”

“War belts,” suggested Henry.

“But a white man does not send war belts. He has another kind of token, and he makes that token with paper, ink, and a goose quill. Yes, Alvarez is cunning, I know, but the most cunning of all men when he enters a great conspiracy must leave a loose end hanging about somewhere. Or, to change my simile, there is no armor of deception so complete that there is not a crack in it. We must find that loose end, we must find that crack, and when we do, we can see victory just ahead of us.”

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“Do you mean,” said Henry, “that Alvarez has probably sent a letter to the Northern chiefs, promising that as Governor General of Louisiana he will help them with soldiers and cannon against us in Kentucky?”

“I think it likely, quite likely,” returned Oliver Pollock, nodding his head to give emphasis to his words. “He had to give them something that would bind. A conspirator must take a risk and in this case it seemed small. The villages of those chiefs are beyond the Ohio, fifteen hundred miles at least from here. The chance that such a letter would reappear in New Orleans was most remote, and Alvarez, might have expected to provide against that, too, by being Governor General within a few months. I feel confident that there is such a letter and we must find it.”

“It’s a pretty problem,” said Paul.

“I admit it,” said Oliver Pollock, “but a new continent teaches one to achieve the impossible. That is what are we to do; how, I do not yet know, but we must do it.”

“It’s important,” said Henry, “that it be done soon.”

“It certainly is,” said Mr. Pollock with great emphasis, “because I wish to start North soon with a great fleet of canoes and other boats loaded with rifles, powder, lead, blankets, medicines, and other absolutely necessary things for our suffering brethren in the east. They are hard pressed there, and it takes a long time to pull up the Mississippi and the Ohio and then carry these things across four or five hundred miles of country to our army.”

“It’s shorely a wonderful thing,” said Shif’less Sol, “that you kin take boats up a big river hundreds an’ hundreds o’ miles into the heart o’ a continent, then bend off into another river runnin’ into it that takes you nearly over to the Atlantic. An’ mebbe ef you took one o’ the rivers that runs in it on the other side you might follow it up ’till you got purty near to the western ocean. It says to me plain ez print that we must hev this here Mississippi all the way to its mouth. We can’t stay bottled up.”

“Sh-sh,” said Mr. Pollock, warningly. “Leave that to the future. It will adjust itself, and I think it will adjust itself in the way that we wish, but we cannot talk of it now, while Bernardo Galvez is our good friend and Spain inclines to our side. Of course Louisiana may be passed back to France, but France is a better and more powerful friend than Spain can be.”

“Do you think you can get hold of Braxton Wyatt?” asked Henry of Mr. Pollock.

“I shall try,” replied the merchant. “Our association has agents here, and in such times as these and in such a great emergency much may be excused. If we can get hands

upon him at a convenient moment and place we'll see whether he has those maps about him."

"He'll surely have them," said Henry. "But he'll stick close to Alvarez."

"Yes, there lies the trouble," said Mr. Pollock, "but we'll do our best."

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He took his departure, and they were left again to loneliness. Several days passed thus and they chafed terribly. Food and drink they had in plenty, and even some English books were sent to them. But the narrow space and the four enclosing walls were always there. Outside the spring was deepening. All the great forest throbbed with the life of bird and beast, but they, the highest of creation, could not walk ten paces in any direction.

“Jim,” said Shif’less Sol to Long Jim, “there’s a spring ’bout twenty miles north o’ Wareville that you an’ me hev sat by many a time. Thar are hundreds a’ springs through that country, yes, thousands o’ ’em, but this one is the finest o’ ’em all. It comes right out o’ the side o’ a rock hill, a stream so pure that you kin see right through it same ez ef it wuzn’t thar, then it falls into a most bee-yu-ti-ful rock pool scooped out by Natur, an’ ez the pool overflows, it runs away through the grass an’ the woods in a stream ‘bout two feet wide an’ four inches deep. I think that’s ‘bout the nicest, coldest, an’ most life-givin’ water in all Kentucky. You an’ me, Jim, hev gone thar many a time, hot an’ tired from the hunt, an’ hev felt ez ef we had landed right on the steps o’ Heaven itself. An’ the game, Jim! The game, big an’ little, knowed ’bout that spring, too. Remember that tre-men-je-ous big elk you an’ me killed ’bout two hundred yards north o’ the spring. He stood most ez high ez a horse. An’ remember, Jim, when we climbed up on top o’ the hill out o’ which the spring runs, we could see a long distance every way, north, south, east an’ west, over the most bee-yu-ti-ful country, an’ we could go whar we pleased. We could follow the buffaler clean to the western ocean ef we felt like it.”

Long Jim had been sitting on the floor. Now he rose and advanced in a threatening manner upon Shif’less Sol.

“See here, Sol Hyde!” he exclaimed, “me an’ you hev had words many a time, but they hev always ended in smoke! They hev never gone ez fur ez this! An’ I want to tell you right here, Sol Hyde, that I kin stand a lot uv things but I can’t stand this! ’Ef you say another word about that bee-yu-ti-ful spring, an’ them bee-yu-ti-ful woods, an’ that bee-yu-ti-ful game, thar’ll be a heap uv trouble, an’ it’ll all be fur you!”

“Hit him anyway, Jim,” said Tom Ross. “He’s done filled me clean up with discontent, and he ought to be punished.”

Shif’less Sol laughed.

“I won’t do it again, Jim,” he said. “It wuz ’cause I feel ez bad about it ez you do, an’ I jest had to let off some meanness.”

Lieutenant Diego Bernal reappeared at last. He bestowed shrewd looks upon the five and said:

“I have an impression, though my impressions are usually false and my memory always weak, that you are pining. You wish the liberty and the open air of Kaintock. Your legs are long and you would stretch them.”

“You hev shore hit it, leftenant,” said Tom Ross. “Sometimes I think uv startin’ off walkin’ ez straight an’ hard ez I kin, goin’ right through the wall thar, an’ then through any house that might git in the way, an’ never to stop goin’ ’till I got to Kentucky, whar a man may breathe free an’ easy.”

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Lieutenant Diego Bernal laughed and daintily stroked his little mustache.

“I understand you and you have my sympathy,” he said. “We Catalans are at heart republicans, and I am interested in this new place of yours that you call Kaintock. But you will have to endure this fort a while longer. The good Senor Pollock does not make progress. He cannot produce the proof of what you charge. Yet Bernardo Galvez waits. He believes in you, and he holds Alvarez and Wyatt in the city. He is strengthened in his opinion, too, by gossip that has come down from Beaulieu, but that is not proof and he cannot act upon it. But be patient. I have an impression, although my impressions are usually false, that time is fighting for you.”

He stayed with them an hour, precise and affected, but they believed him to be brave and true. A few days later Oliver Pollock himself came again.

“I have not been able to get hold of Wyatt,” he said. “He stays too closely with Alvarez. I don’t think that my agents are skillful enough. Hence I decided to procure a new one and fortunately I have succeeded.”

“Who is that?” asked Henry.

“Yourself.”

“Myself!” exclaimed Henry in astonishment.

“No one but you,” replied the merchant. “I have been able, by the use of great influence, to secure from Bernardo Galvez your temporary release. It is to his interest to have this plot exposed if it really exists, and accordingly he has allowed me to borrow you. You can go forth with me if you give your word of honor that you will not leave New Orleans or its vicinity and will report again here.”

“Why, of course I’ll go! I’ll”—exclaimed Henry joyfully, and then he stopped suddenly, looking around at his comrades. Then he added: “I don’t feel right, Mr. Pollock, to go away and leave the boys in this place.”

Up rose Tom Ross.

“Don’t you fret about us, Henry,” he said. “You’re goin’ on a good work an’ you’ll do it, too. We need to hev one uv our gang outside. Remember up at Boo-ly, when Alvarez had us, how much better we felt ’cause he didn’t hev Sol. ’Twas a comfort to think that Sol wuz out thar in the woods.”

It was a long speech for Tom Ross, but it expressed the sentiments of them all. Henry left with Mr. Pollock and they went to a handsome brick house in the city. This house was store, office, and residence combined, and several clerks were about. But these

clerks did not have pale faces and bent backs. They were mostly strong-limbed, broad-shouldered men with tanned faces.

“They work out of doors,” said Mr. Pollock briefly. “Some are to go with the fleet up the rivers, others have been as far as the West Indies accumulating supplies. It is necessary for them all to be able to write and shoot.”

Henry liked their looks, but he did not have a chance to speak to any of them as Mr. Pollock quickly led the way Into a small inner office, where he motioned Henry to a chair and took one himself. Henry was now within narrower walls than those that confined him in the prison, but he felt a huge sense of relief. He was free. If he wanted to open the door and walk out he could do so. He expanded his great chest and took a mighty breath. Mr. Pollock heard the suspiration, looked up, and laughed. He understood perfectly.

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“I’d feel that way, too, if I had been in your place,” he said. “Now what we want to do is to devise some plan of trapping your friend and enemy. Mr. Wyatt. What do you think?”

“Once,” replied Henry, “when, he was carrying war belts between the Shawnees and Miamis we simply seized him and took them away from him. We must do something of this kind. Where is he staying?”

“Alvarez, has a house near the river. He is there. I know that the two are plotting all the while, but I cannot get the proof.”

“Do Wyatt and Alvarez know that I’m out?”

“No, neither of them.”

“That’s good. I think I can surprise Braxton Wyatt. If I can get my hands on him I’m sure that we’ll find those maps. What kind of a house has Alvarez?”

“You can see it from that window. A pretty place, standing among the trees.”

Henry looked, and the longer he looked the more pleased he felt. The trees were thick around the house of Alvarez and the fact gave him an idea.

“I think I know how to do it,” he said.

Oliver Pollock leaned forward, his shrewd face eager, and for a few minutes the two talked low and earnestly.

CHAPTER XVII

THE FLAW IN THE ARMOR

Don Francisco Alvarez was in a fairly happy frame of mind. It is true that he could have been happier, but a revulsion from a great state of suspense had come to him. When he had been so boldly accused in the presence of the Governor General, cold fear had struck at his heart, despite his courage and cunning. He knew that the seeds of suspicion had been sowed deep in the heart of Bernardo Galvez and that the plant would grow fast in the warm, moist air of intrigue that overhung New Orleans.

But days had passed and nothing had happened. Moreover, the five whom he feared so much were hard and fast in the military prison within the walls, and no proof of their charges had been brought forth. Time, too, worked steadily for him. It not only weakened the accusation against him, but it also gave his powerful friends at the court of Madrid time to help him and his ambition. That little strain of royal blood in his veins

was well worth having. He would certainly succeed to Bernardo Galvez, whether the wait he long or short.

He kept Braxton Wyatt with him all the time. He had learned to appreciate the value of the renegade's unscrupulous cunning, and he was necessary, too, in order to carry out the great alliance with the tribes which Alvarez meant should become an accomplished fact.

It was a pleasant house that Alvarez had within the walls, one story of brick covered with red tiles, surrounded by piazzas, and standing in grounds thick with magnolias, cypresses, and orange trees. In truth, the foliage was so dense that by daylight the house was almost entirely hidden from the city, and by night it was quite invisible unless lights chanced to twinkle through the leaves.

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The Spaniard and Braxton Wyatt were sitting now upon the piazza drinking a cool decoction of West Indian origin, and Alvarez was commenting upon what he called his good fortune.

“All things favor us, Wyatt,” he said. “No proof reaches the ears of Bernardo Galvez and the galleon, Dona Isabel, will certainly arrive next week from Spain. If I mistake not, she will bring news welcome to me and unwelcome to Bernardo Galvez.”

“If you become Governor General what will you do with the Kentuckians in the fort?” asked Wyatt.

Alvarez laughed, and it was a very unpleasant laugh to hear.

“I do not know what I shall do with them,” he said, “but I am sure of one fact. They will never see Kaintock again. The powers of a Governor General are very great.”

Braxton Wyatt was satisfied with the answer. His wicked heart throbbed at the thought that the five would never more roam their beloved forests. He, too, looked forward to the arrival of the galleon, Dona Isabel, with welcome news. He saw how useful he was to Alvarez, and if the Spaniard rose, he must rise with him.

The two, after these few words, sat in silence, each occupied with his own thoughts, which, however, were largely the same. Alvarez rose presently and went into the house. If all things went as he wished, there were certain letters that he would send to powerful friends in Spain, and now was a good time to make rough drafts of them.

Braxton Wyatt remained on the piazza. It was wonderfully cool and pleasant there, after the heat of the day. The wind blew musically among the orange trees, and the air was spiced with pleasant odors. Braxton Wyatt’s thoughts were pleasant, too. He liked this luxurious southern life. Though born to the forest, and a good woodsman, he had sybaritic tastes, which needed only opportunity to bud and bloom.

Now, like the Arab who had the glass for sale, he was building his great future. Alvarez would be Governor General of Louisiana, and he, Braxton Wyatt, would be his trusted and necessary lieutenant. The five whom he hated would be removed under the new rule from the military prison to dungeons, where they would gradually be lost to the sight of man, never to be heard of again. The Indians and the Spaniards with their cannon would destroy the settlements in Kentucky, and he would become, if not the first, at least the second man in His Most Catholic Majesty’s huge province of Louisiana. And it was not absolutely necessary to be Spanish-born to become in time a Governor General himself.

Time passed. It was very quiet within the belt of magnolias and cypresses and orange trees and but little noise came from the town, the stray shout of a reveler, a snatch of a song, and then nothing more.

Braxton Wyatt, still filled with his dreams, arose and stepped down from the piazza. The happy future promoted in him a certain physical activity, and he wanted to walk among the trees. He stepped into their shadow, strolled a rod or so, and then stopped. His acute, forest-bred ear had brought to him a sound which was not that of the wind nor any echo of a gay reveler's song.

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The renegade stopped. It was very dark among the trees. He could see neither the house behind, nor the city before him. He did not hear the sound again, but he was troubled. His pleasant thoughts were disturbed. It was like waking from a happy dream. He turned to go back to the house and then he saw a flitting shadow. The wicked heart of Braxton Wyatt stood still. If he had not known that Henry Ware was safely in the military prison he would have taken the terrible shadow for him. He knew too well the great height, the broad shoulders, and the fierce accusing countenance. Once he had laughed at the Shawnees and Miamis because they had believed in ghosts. But could it be true?

Braxton Wyatt turned back toward the house, where he might renew his interrupted and pleasant dream, but the next instant the terrible shadow turned itself into a reality more terrible.

A powerful form hurled itself upon him, and he was thrown to the ground. He looked up and met the eyes of Henry Ware, who knelt upon him. No, it was certainly not a shadow but the most unpleasant of all facts!

Braxton Wyatt was at first paralyzed by terror and the suddenness of the attack. When he recovered, one hand of Henry pressed heavily upon his mouth, while the other felt rapidly through his clothing. “Look for any unusual thickness in his waistcoat; that is probably the place,” Oliver Pollock had said. Henry’s hand in a few moments ran upon something folded between the cloth and lining of the waistcoat. He snatched out his knife, cut them apart and out fell several folds of fine, thin deerskin. He knew that the prize had been secured, and he meant to keep it.

Henry thrust the folds of deerskin in his pocket and sprang to his feet.

“Now, you scoundrel!” he exclaimed, “tell what tale you please and we will prove another!”

Then the terrible reality resolved itself back into a shadow, and was gone. Braxton Wyatt sprang to his feet, clapped his hand to his mangled waistcoat where the precious package had been, and uttered a strangled cry. Then he ran through the trees to the house of Alvarez.

* * * * *

A quarter of an hour later Oliver Pollock was sitting at his own window in the little office and his thoughts were not happy. He wished his fleet of supply canoes to start on the great river journey at once, but it could not depart while such storms were threatening. Alvarez was too serious a danger, and he must be removed. But the merchant realized that he had made little progress. Alvarez seemed to be secure in his plot.

There came a knock at his door, and in reply to his request to enter, a clerk said that the young man, Mr. Ware, had returned. Mr. Pollock rose to his feet as Henry came in. Henry carefully closed the door behind him, advanced, and put a small package in Mr. Pollock's hand.

"There they are!" he said, "the maps drawn up by Braxton Wyatt, and with notes on them in handwriting, which I take to be that of Francisco Alvarez."

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The merchant stared at first in astonishment and delight. Then he ran to the lamp and spread out the sheets of fine, thin deerskin. He looked at them, one by one, and laughed with delight.

“Yes,” he said, “the notes are in the handwriting of Francisco Alvarez! I know it—I have seen it often enough—and Bernardo Galvez will know it, too! Oh, it is a great find! a great find! It is not conclusive proof, but it will go far toward swaying belief! How did you get them?”

Henry had recovered from all signs of his struggle with the renegade, and was now sitting placidly in a chair.

“I took them,” he said. “I found Braxton Wyatt in the grove around the house of Alvarez, and I seized him. I found these in the lining of his waistcoat.”

“You did not kill him?”

“Oh, no. He is not hurt.”

“It is well. I did not wish any unnecessary violence, but we had a right to seize these documents which mean so much to us and Bernardo Galvez. You will leave them with me.”

“Of course,” said Henry. “And now that this task is finished, I’ll go back to prison with my comrades.”

“It’s unnecessary for you to join them there,” said the merchant still laughing in his pleasure. “I’ll have them out to join you, and that speedily, too. Go into the next room and sleep. You’ve earned the right to it.”

The five, reduced to four, were sitting in their prison the next afternoon chafing more than ever. It seemed to every one of them that those walls, already so narrow, were still contracting. They did not even like to look out of the window. The contrast was too painful, and they did not wish to increase their sorrow.

“Jim,” said Shif’less Sol in plaintive tones to Long Jim Hart, “won’t you please come here, an’ hold up my head?”

“Now, Sol Hyde,” said Long Jim, “what do you want me to come thar an’ hold up your head fur? Are you too lazy to hold it up fur yourself?”

“No, Jim, I ain’t too lazy to hold it up fur myself, I’m jest too weak. Lack o’ exercise an’ fresh air, an’ elbow room hev done fur poor Sol Hyde at last. I’m pinin’ away. Tell Henry when he comes back, ef he ever does, that I fell into a decline. I done my best to b’ar up, but my best wuzn’t good enough.”

“Now you shut up, Sol Hyde,” said Jim Hart, “or you’ll hev me down real sick with your foolish talk, ez I jest can’t stand it.”

They stopped because at that moment there came unto them Lieutenant Diego Bernal, fresh, chipper, with a few additional flounces and ruffles added to his jaunty uniform, and a smile upon his dark, pleasant face.

“Ah, my gallant four, who were once my gallant five,” he said as he stroked his little mustache, “I have news for you, important news. You are even to be summoned again to the presence of His Excellency, Bernardo Galvez, the Governor General of Louisiana, and that summons is immediate. I have an impression, though my impressions are usually false and my memory always weak, that the large youth, the strong youth, the splendid youth, surnamed the Ware, who was released for the time at the intercession of Senor Pollock, has been achieving something. This, I think, is the reason of the sudden call to the audience with His Excellency.”

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Paul was all life at once. He sprang up, his eyes sparkling and the flush of anticipation coming into his face.

“Henry has succeeded!” he cried. “He has done something big! I knew he would! He has defeated Alvarez and that wretch Wyatt!”

The Catalan regarded Paul with admiration. He liked this enthusiasm, this infinite trust in a comrade. The five and their faith in one another continued to make the strongest of appeals to him.

“I think it is even so,” he said. “The young giant surnamed the Ware, must have done a great deed, because Don Francisco Alvarez, is summoned, at the same time, to the presence of His Excellency, the Governor General, Bernardo Galvez, and I hear that he is in no pleasant frame of mind because of it. Come!”

The four went forth joyfully. Shif’less Sol was the first to put foot on Mother Earth, and he stopped, raised his head, and opened his mouth to its widest extent.

“Jim,” he said to Long Jim Hart, “I want to breathe it in, this outdoors an’ fresh air an’ freedom, everywhar I kin, at my mouth, nose, ears, an’ eyes, too, ef they’re any good at that sort o’ business.”

“An’ at the pores, too, Sol,” said Paul.

“What’s pores?”

“Millions and millions of fine little holes all over you.”

“Wa’ll, I ain’t ever seed any o’ them holes, or felt ’em, but ef they’re in me I hope they’re all workin’ right now, drawin’ the good fresh air.”

Lieutenant Diego Bernal led the way rapidly to the house of the Governor General, and four soldiers closed up by the side of them as an escort and guard. But the four had no thought of attempting escape. Their minds were wholly occupied with what might occur when they were a second time in the presence of the Governor General.

They were taken through the anteroom and then into the large hall of audience where the Governor General sat, as before, in the great chair with his secretary at the little table at his right. At one side of the room were Francisco Alvarez, and Braxton Wyatt, both frowning, and at the other side were Oliver Pollock and Henry Ware, neither frowning at all. Henry came forward and shook hands warmly with his comrades.

“What is it, Henry?” whispered Paul. “What has happened?”

“Wait,” replied Henry in a similar whisper. “We must see what Bernardo Galvez is going to do.”

The Governor General motioned the four, now the five once more, to seats, and they noticed that the audience was marked by unusual state. Two soldiers, as a guard, stood near one of the windows, and the secretary was ready with his ink and goose quills to write down whatever he might be ordered to write. Alvarez and Braxton Wyatt were visibly uneasy. Bernardo Galvez sat upright, his face stern, his look commanding. He was every inch of him a Governor General.

“Gentlemen,” he said speaking in precise English, “a charge was made in this chamber some days since, a charge involving the integrity and loyalty of a high officer in the service of Spain, Don Francisco Alvarez. This charge was made by five men and youths from the new region called by themselves Kentucky and known here as Kaintock, but they brought little proof to support it.”

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Francisco Alvarez moved his chair, and a look of relief came over his face. The opening promised well. The expressions of Henry Ware and Oliver Pollock did not change, and Bernardo Galvez continued:

“I could not hold an officer of Spain, one high in the service, upon such charges, when they were without sufficient support, and hence, as these five men and boys had committed acts of violence upon Spanish soil and against Spanish subjects, I sent them to a military prison, pending further disclosures if there should be any, and I have held Don Francisco Alvarez in New Orleans in order that he might clear his good name of these charges and of certain talk that has been afloat concerning him.”

Alvarez stirred again and his expression changed slightly. The continuation was not quite as good as the beginning. Did he not detect a slight undertone of irony or satire in the voice of Bernardo Galvez? But neither Henry Ware nor Oliver Pollock moved a particle. The four looked curiously from one to another of the actors in this tense scene.

“It was my object,” resumed Bernardo Galvez, and now his tone had a curious hard quality like steel, “to find the truth. Only in that way could justice be done. Now I have to say that proof of these charges, not conclusive, but incriminating nevertheless, has been found, and is in my possession.”

Alvarez leaped from his chair. He felt as if he had received a blow of a hammer on his temple, but he cried out:

“It is not true! there can be no such proof!”

“It is true,” said Bernardo Galvez sternly and accusingly, “because I hold this evidence here in my hand. The war-maps which you are charged with having, drawn by the one Wyatt, the friend of the Indians, and annotated in your hand, are here.”

He opened his palm and laid the strips of deerskin upon the table. Alvarez staggered back and looked savagely at Braxton Wyatt.

“It is true,” stammered the renegade in a whisper. “I was set upon last night by Ware! He took me by surprise and robbed me of them! I could not help it, but I was afraid to tell you then.”

“I knew that Henry would find a way! I knew it!” Paul was murmuring to himself.

“What of these maps, Don Francisco Alvarez?” said the Governor General.

The bold and flexible Spaniard quickly recovered himself.

“Maps do not mean anything,” he said. “Any military officer provides himself with them whenever he can. He need not he at war with a country to secure them.”

“No, not in the case of ordinary maps, but here we have plans for an attack upon the settlements in Kaintock. I find noted by the side of one station in your handwriting: ‘Could be destroyed easily with two cannon.’ It is obvious that you have exceeded your authority. How much further you have gone is to be seen.”

“Your Excellency, I protest against”—began Alvarez, but at that moment the door was opened and Lieutenant Diego Bernal appeared upon the threshold.

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“What is this interruption? How dare you?” exclaimed the Governor General.

But the little Catalan was never more thoroughly master of himself. His uniform was never more resplendent, and the lace at throat and sleeves never fuller. He bore himself, too, with the utmost dignity because he knew that he was about to make an announcement of the utmost importance. Moreover, he was a favorite with Bernardo Galvez.

“Your Excellency,” he said, with dramatic effect, “a man has come craving immediate audience with you. He says that his news cannot wait, and, in order to secure entrance at once to your presence, he has given me the purport of it. He is here now.”

A tall figure in a black robe, the face thin and austere, walked boldly into the room. Mighty was the power of Holy Church in the colonies of France and Spain and this priest who expected torture and death some day feared neither Bernardo Galvez nor anybody else.

“Father Montigny!” exclaimed every one of the five and, “Father Montigny!” repeated Francisco Alvarez and Braxton Wyatt. Bernardo Galvez rose from his chair and saluted the priest courteously. He knew him well.

“What is this business, so urgent in its nature, Father,” said the Governor General.

“I came to Beaulieu when Captain Alvarez had set the bully upon this youth,” said Father Montigny, pointing to Paul.

“I have already acknowledged my fault there,” exclaimed Alvarez. “It was an impulse! Need I be accused of it again?”

Father Montigny turned his gaze upon Alvarez, and the Captain, bold as he was, feared it more than that of Bernardo Galvez.

“That is but a preamble,” continued the priest, the Governor General not noticing the interruption, “but it caused me to take especial notice of what might be occurring in Louisiana at the furthest limits of settlement. I went thence among the Cherokees and Creeks and kindred tribes and I found them stirred by a great emotion. They were preparing for the war trail. Messengers had come from tribes in the far north, Shawnees, Miamis, Wyandots, and others, whom they have fought for generations in the region, lying between them, known to them as the Dark and Bloody Ground, and to us as Kaintock.”

Francisco Alvarez suddenly paled, and looked away from the priest.

“What was the purport of these messages?” asked Bernardo Galvez.

“That there must be peace for the time being between the northern and southern tribes. The northern tribes would march south and the southern would march north. When they met they would be joined also by Spanish soldiers with cannon, and the three forces would destroy forever the new white settlements in Kaintock.”

The pallor of Alvarez deepened, but Oliver Pollock still sat immovable, his expression not changing. Bernardo Galvez looked straight at Alvarez, and there was lightning in his gaze.

“How was this alliance formed?” asked the Governor General. “Some powerful connection, some strong intermediary, must have drawn these warring northern and southern tribes together. And above all why did they expect Spanish troops and Spanish cannon?”

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“There was a letter,” replied the priest in a grave, sad tone, “a letter written by a Spanish officer, high in position and distinction. It was sent to Red Eagle, head chief of the Shawnees, and Yellow Panther, head chief of the Miamis. The writer said that he would soon be Governor General of Louisiana and that Spain would then help the Indians to destroy Kaintock.”

“It is a lie!” continued Alvarez. “There is no such letter.”

“It is no lie,” continued the priest calmly. “There is such a letter. The great chiefs, Red Eagle and Yellow Panther, as proof of the promise, sent it south to the Cherokees and Creeks, among whom I have been. I have seen it, I have read it, I have it, and to you, Bernardo Galvez, I now give it. It is signed by Don Francisco Alvarez.”

Father Montigny drew a letter from his robe and handed It to the Governor General. Francisco Alvarez fell back in his chair as if he had been struck by a thunder-bolt. And it was little less. The letter that he had sent into the vast Northern wilderness, and which he considered as obscure as one leaf among millions, had come back to convict him. The one flaw in the armor of his wild ambition had been found. He cast a baleful look at the priest and was silent. It was not worth while now to deny anything.

Bernardo Galvez read the letter and read it again. Then he folded it and put it in his pocket.

“It is enough,” he said, “Francisco Alvarez, you are guilty of attempting to usurp to yourself the powers that belong only to his Majesty, the King of Spain. I can conceive of a man of your knowledge and craft writing such a letter as this upon only one possibility, and that possibility has passed. The galleon, Dona Isabel, from Spain came this morning up the Mississippi and she brings letters from Madrid. Your friends at the court, powerful as they are, have failed. You are not to be the Governor General of Louisiana. I am confirmed in my appointment and you remain under my authority.”

“What do you intend to do?” asked Alvarez.

The words came from a dry throat, and they had a harsh, rasping sound.

“The galleon, Dona Isabel, returns to Spain next week. You will remain a prisoner in one of the forts until then, when you are to go to Spain on the galleon to answer there for your acts here. The man, Wyatt, is not a Spanish subject, but he must leave New Orleans within an hour. The five who have been held in the fort are released from this moment. Lieutenant Bernal, take away the prisoner.”

It was the cause of intense gratification to Lieutenant Diego Bernal that he had been permitted to see the last and most striking part of this drama. Francisco Alvarez had treated him with scorn more than once, and it was not his part or that of Bernardo

Galvez to insult a fallen enemy. He merely put his hand lightly on the sleeve of Alvarez, and the prisoner, without a word, followed him.

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CHAPTER XVIII

NORTHWARD WITH THE FLEET

When Alvarez was gone, the five rose and thanked the Governor General. They, too, did not wish to rejoice over a fallen foe, but it was the moment of their complete triumph. Success had come better than they had ever hoped and the great three-faced conspiracy was shattered. It was Spanish cannon that they had dreaded and now they could not thunder against the wooden walls in Kentucky. They crowded around the priest, too, and shook his hand and were grateful for his timely assistance. He had come at the most opportune of all moments.

It was Paul who acted as spokesman for them with Bernardo Galvez.

“Your Excellency, we came this vast distance confiding in your justice, and we have found our confidence well placed,” he said.

Bernardo Galvez smiled. It was a moment of triumph for him, too. A bold conspiracy against him had been crushed, and the five had been the chief instruments in the crushing of it. Even without the aid of his good heart, his feelings toward them would have been very kindly.

“If New Orleans has proved inhospitable to you for a time,” he said, “she is now ready to make atonement. Your good friend, Mr. Pollock, will care for you.”

The five withdrew with the merchant, still elated, still feeling the full sense of victory. Mr. Pollock had been very quiet but when they reached the open air he burst forth.

“Lads,” he said, “’tis a great task that you have done. You have saved Kentucky—and these things are far-reaching—you may have saved all the colonies beside. If the Mississippi had been closed to us we could not reach our friends in the east with the supplies that they need so badly. But I can’t say more. You were surely inspired when you set out upon this errand, and there is a tremendous debt of gratitude coming to you.”

He shook hands with them all, one by one. But Long Jim heaved a mighty sigh of relief.

“Is it all over, Paul?” he asked.

“I think so, Jim. We seem to have destroyed for good and all the great three-cornered conspiracy against us.”

“Then,” said Jim, “ef it’s all done I want to talk sense. I’m in favor uv our startin’ to Kentucky right away, that is, in about five minutes. Them big woods keep callin’ to me, I

heard ’em callin’ last night in my dreams, an’ I hear ’em callin’ now when I’m awake. I’ve breathed indoor air long enough. It’s layin’ heavy on my lungs, an’ I want to put in its place air that’s swep’ clean across from the Pacific Ocean an’ that ain’t hit not bin’ foul on the way.”

“Five minutes is too short notice, Jim,” laughed Paul, “but we’ll surely start soon, though it’s a tremendously long tramp through the woods and even if we had ‘The Galleon’ we’d have to pull and sail against the current.”

Oliver Pollock was watching them as they talked and his eyes gleamed, but he said nothing until they were within his house, where he took them and gave them refreshments. There he had a proposition to make.

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“The boat, of course, you have lost,” he said, “as it belongs to Spain, but your arms and other equipment are all in my possession—they were given to me to keep for you. But our fleet of canoes loaded with arms and supplies will start north in three days. Will you go on it? Not to work, not to paddle, unless you wish, but to guide and to fight. It is no favor that I am conferring upon you, but one that you can confer upon me if you will. We need such as you and with you I shall feel that the fleet is safer.”

It was a most welcome offer. They could serve the cause and themselves at the same time. All things seemed to fall out as they wished.

“Sir, we thank you,” said Henry speaking for them all. “You do not have to make such an offer twice.”

“Good! Good!” said Oliver Pollock. “Then the main feature of the bargain is closed and now I must have you to know the captain of the fleet. Oh, I think that you will agree with him famously. He will be in charge of the navigation and the fleet, though not of you. You are to remain in your role of free rangers.”

He clapped his hand upon a little bell on the table and one of the stalwart, sunbrowned clerks entered.

“Bring in Captain Colfax. I want him to make some new friends,” said Oliver Pollock, who was in the greatest of good humors.

Captain Adam Colfax of New Hampshire, who found the climate of New Orleans very warm, came in in a minute or two, and his was a figure to attract the attention of anybody. Middle aged, nearly as tall as Jim Hart, red haired, with a sharp little tuft of red whisker on his chin, and with features that seemed to be carved out of some kind of metal, he was a combination of the seaman and landsman, as tough and wiry as they ever grow to be. He regarded Oliver Pollock out of twinkling little blue eyes that could be merry or severe, as they pleased.

“Captain Colfax,” said Oliver Pollock, “These are the five from Kentucky of whom you heard. They are to go with you on your great journey as far as Kentucky, but they are to do as they please. They are scouts, warriors, and free rangers. You will find them of great service.”

He introduced them one by one, and Adam Colfax gave them a hearty grip with a hand which seemed to be made of woven steel wire.

“Good woodsmen and good riflemen I take it,” he said, “and we may need both. I hear that the Creeks, Cherokees, and others, are feeling full of fight. Now, I ain’t looking for a fight, but if it happens to get in my way I’m not running from it.”

“You old war horse,” said Oliver Pollock, laughing, “it’s your business to get these supplies through, not to be shooting at Indians. I wish I could go with you. It’s a wonderful journey, but I have to stay here in New Orleans. This is the gate and we must see that it is not closed. How many canoes and boats have we now, Adam?”

“About sixty, and they are manned by at least three hundred men. As I see it, we can take care of ourselves.”

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“Adam,” said Mr. Pollock laughing, “I believe you’re really looking for a fight.”

Adam Colfax showed two rows of fine, white teeth, but said nothing. After a little more hearty talk he went away to look after his fleet, and Mr. Pollock made arrangements for the five to stay at his house until their departure north. They were to occupy a single big room, and their rifles, other arms, and general equipment were already there waiting for them.

“I’ll miss ‘The Galleon,’” said Paul, “I’d like to be going back in her. I suppose it’s sentiment, but I became attached to that boat.”

“She wuz shorely comf’table,” said Shif’less Sol. “I had a good time floatin’ down her on the Missip’. Now I reckon Jim here will hev to row me or paddle me all the way back to Kaintuck.”

“Ef you wait fur me to row or paddle you, you won’t ever travel more’n six inches,” said Long Jim.

“Jest like you, Jim; you ain’t got no gratitood at all fur me gittin’ you away from New Orlee-yuns.”

Paul, who had been speaking to Henry in a low tone, now turned again to Mr. Pollock.

“There is one more thing that we want you to do for us, if you will, Mr. Pollock,” he said. “We took the boat from Alvarez because he attacked us first, and we put it to what we think was a good use. But it really belonged to Spain and Bernardo Galvez. So if any wages are coming to us we wish that you would take enough in advance and pay the Governor General for the use of the boat and what stores we may have consumed.”

“It shall be done,” said Oliver Pollock, “and I like your spirit in wishing it to be done.”

It was a promise that he kept faithfully.

When they reached their room they found their rifles and other arms in perfect order. Lieutenant Diego Bernal had taken good care of them. Long Jim picked up his rifle and handled it lovingly.

“It feels good jest to tech it,” he said. “I didn’t think I could ever like a Spaniard ez well ez I do that thar little leftenant. I’ll miss him when we go ploughin’ up the river.”

They were preparing to leave the room and breathe all out of doors, as Sol put it, when they were stopped by the entrance of Father Montigny. They crowded around him, expressing anew the gratitude that they had shown to him at the house of the Governor General.

“It was really you, Father Montigny, who saved everything,” said Paul.

The priest smiled and shook his head.

“No,” he said, “It was not I, but your courage and tenacity. I had the rare good fortune to find the letter among the Chickasaws and obtain it. It was sent by the Shawnees and Miamis as a sort of token, a war belt as it were. It was only a remote chance that brought it back to New Orleans, and even then Alvarez confidently expected to be Governor General.”

“What will become of Alvarez?” asked Paul.

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“It is the plan to send him a prisoner to Spain on the galleon, Dona Isabel, as you know, but I fear that we have not heard the last of him. He is a man of fierce temper, and now he is wild with rage and mortification. Moreover, he has many followers here in New Orleans. All the desperadoes, adventurers, former galley slaves, and others of that type would have been ready to rally around him. But I have come to tell you good-bye. I go again in my canoe up the Mississippi.”

“Can’t you stay a while in New Orleans and rest?” asked Paul—the sympathy between Paul and the priest was strong, each having a certain spiritual quality that was in agreement.

“No,” replied Father Montigny, “I cannot stay. You came on your task in spite of hardships and dangers because you felt that a power urged you to it. Farewell. We may meet again or we may not, as Heaven wills.”

They followed him to the door and when he was almost out of sight he turned and waved his hand to them.

The next day New Orleans, which was already deeply stirred by news of the plot of Alvarez and its discovery, had another thrill. It was Lieutenant Diego Bernal who told the five of it at the counting house of Oliver Pollock.

“Francisco Alvarez has escaped,” he said. “The watch at the prison was none too strict; it may be that some of the guards themselves were friends of his. In any event, he is gone from the city, and his going has been followed by the departure of many men whom New Orleans could well spare. But whether their going now will be to our benefit I cannot tell.”

“Do you mean to say,” asked Henry, “that all these men have gone away to join Alvarez in some desperate adventure?”

“I have an impression, although my impressions are usually false,” replied the Lieutenant, “that such is the case. The Chickasaws, the Creeks, and other tribes of these regions are his friends because he has promised them much. A capable officer with a hundred desperate white men at his back and a horde of Indians might create stirring events.”

The five became very thoughtful over what he said, but when Lieutenant Diego Bernal was taking his leave he looked at them rather enviously.

“You five inspire me with a certain jealousy,” he said. “I have an impression, although my impressions are usually wrong and my memory always weak, that you are strongly attached to one another, that no one ever hesitates to risk death for the others, that you are bound together by a hundred ties, and that you act together for the common good.

Ah, that is something like friendship, real friendship, I should like to be one of a band like yours, but I look in vain for such a thing in New Orleans."

"I wish that you were going with us," said Henry heartily.

"I wish it, too. Often I long for the great forests and the free air as you do, but my service is due here to Bernardo Galvez, who is my good friend. But it is pleasant to see that you have triumphed so finely."

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“We may encounter great dangers yet,” said Henry.

“It is quite likely, but I have an impression, and upon this occasion at least I am sure my impression is not wrong, that you will overcome them as you have done before.”

When he was gone, and every one of the five felt genuine regret at his departure, they went down to the river, where their fleet was anchored, and were welcomed by Adam Colfax.

“We’re certainly going to-morrow,” said the captain, “but nobody can tell when we’ll get to Fort Pitt.”

It was indeed a fine fleet of canoes and boats to be propelled by paddle, oar, and sail, and it bore a most precious cargo. Eight of the larger boats carried a twelve pound brass cannon apiece to be used if need be on the way, but destined for that far-distant and struggling army in the northeast. Stored in the other boats and canoes were five hundred muskets, mostly from France, barrels of powder, scores of bars of lead, precious medicines worth their weight in gold, blankets, cloth for uniforms and underclothing. It was the most valuable cargo ever started up the Mississippi and there were many strong and brave men to guard it.

“We carry things both to kill and to cure,” said Paul.

“An’ we’re goin’, too!” said Long Jim, heaving again that mighty sigh of relief. “That’s the big thing!”

They started the next day at the appointed time. Henry, Paul, and Long Jim were In one of the leading boats, and Tom Ross and Shif’less Sol were in another near them. The population of New Orleans was on the levee to see them go, and some wished them good luck and many wished them bad. The majority of the French were for them, and the majority of the Spanish against them.

But the five, now that the time was at hand, felt only elation. The breeze blew strong and fresh over the mighty river that came from their beloved-forests and vast unknown regions beyond. They seemed to feel in it some of the tang and sparkle of the north.

“Good-bye, New Orleans,” said Jim Hart, waving a long hand on a long arm; “I’m glad I’ve seed you, I’m glad I’ve laid my weary head to rest inside your walls fur a few nights, but I’m glad I don’t stay in you, nor in any other town. Good-bye.”

One of the brass cannon fired a salute, cannon on the fort and the galleon, Dona Isabel, replied. Adam Colfax gave the word, and at the same instant hundreds of oars and paddles dipped into the muddy current of the Mississippi. The great supply fleet leaped forward as if it were one whole, and soon New Orleans and its intrigues sank under the curve behind them.

Henry and Paul, although they did not have to work, pulled at the oars with the others, and more than one man noticed how the mighty muscles of Henry Ware's arm swelled and bunched as he made the boat leap forward. But they did not maintain their high rate of speed long. As the rivers ran it was a good two thousand miles to Fort Pitt, and they did not wish to exhaust themselves on the first twenty. Long Jim at last let his oar rest and patted Paul joyfully on the shoulder.

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“Ain’t you noticed nothin’, Paul?” he asked.

“I’ve noticed a lot of river, and a fine little fleet on it.”

“But somethin’ better than that. Look at the trees, Paul, all along on either side, an’ not a house in sight, an’ not a human bein’ ’cept ourselves, not a single trail uv smoke to dirty the sky. Nothin’ but the woods ez God made ’em. I tell you, Paul, it’s pow’ful fine jest to live!”

Paul shared his enthusiasm, but his feelings went further. Beyond a doubt they had been successful in their great journey to the south, but another and large purpose was yet left. Their task had brought them into contact with the world outside, and Paul devoutly hoped that the supply train would reach Fort Pitt in time.

The day went smoothly on. The fleet kept its formation something, like that of an arrow, with Adam Colfax’s boat the point of the arrow, and those containing the five just behind. The river assumed a wholly wilderness aspect. Spanish or French boats were few and they gave the fleet a wide berth. Wild fowl swarmed once more, and they saw a bear on the bank regarding them with a half wise, half comic countenance.

When the sun was low the boats containing the five were turned toward the land. There they found a cove in which the boats could be safely tied and a fine grove in which they could cook, and which would also furnish a good place for those who wished to sleep ashore. Henry Ware and Shif’less Sol scouted in the country about but saw no sign of anything that might disturb.

All five slept on land wrapped in their blankets under the trees, and early the next morning the journey was resumed. Progress could not be rapid. They had to face the slow, heavy current of the Mississippi, and now and then Henry and Shif’less Sol and Tom Ross walked through the woods along the shore. They early established their reputations as the best hunters and shots in the fleet, and they kept the men supplied with game, bear, deer, and water fowl.

Several days passed in this manner, and Henry noticed that people were even scarcer than they had been when they were coming down. Then they had seen a few, now not more than two or three, and these avoided them.

“I don’t believe they are really friendly to us,” said Henry to Paul, “and something to injure us may be on foot. I wish that we were beyond the last French and Spanish settlement.”

“We are too strong to be attacked,” said Paul, “I don’t think we have anything to fear.”

Henry shook his head somewhat doubtfully, but he said nothing more on the subject at that time, and the fleet moved steadily on without event. Adam Colfax exercised a stern

discipline. There were wild men in his fleet, adventurers, fellows who had floated about the world, but he was a match for any of them, and those who did not respect his voice feared his ready hand. But even these were animated by the great purpose and the thrill of a two-thousand mile journey on unknown rivers through a vast wilderness.

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Half of the men slept ashore every night. They would build great fires, cook their suppers, and then sit around awhile talking. Some one would sing, and others would play strange, old tunes on accordion or guitar. Paul heard many a snatch of song in Spanish or French or Portuguese, and the wilderness would lend an additional charm to the melody. Adam Colfax, stern ruler that he was, never forbade these amusements.

“It isn’t well to stop up things too tight,” he would say. “Children have got to make noise, and men are a good deal the same way. If you seal ’em up they’ll bust.”

These evening scenes always made a deep impression upon Paul. There were the cheerful fires, lighted for cooking, and now dying down to great beds of coals, the surrounding darkness seeming to come closer and closer, but within it a wide circle of light in which many men sat or reclined at ease, smoking or talking, or doing both. All were good-natured, the weather was fair so far, the journey easy, the work not excessively hard, and the hunters brought in fresh game in plenty.

They passed the mouth of the bayou near which the Chateau of Beaulieu stood, and Henry and Shif’less Sol went to see it. They found a small detachment of Spanish soldiers sent by Bernardo Galvez in possession, but the followers of Alvarez had disappeared. The place seemed lonely and deserted, as the soldiers of Galvez kept close to the house, as if they were afraid of the wilderness.

Henry and Shif’less Sol sped back through the forest toward the river.

“Now I wonder,” said Shif’less Sol, “what could hev become o’ that Spanish feller. He wuz jest the kind, so proud he wuz, an’ thinkin’ so much o’ himself, to be burnin’ up with hate over what has happened.”

“He has made himself an outlaw,” said Henry, “and it’s my opinion, Sol, that he’s somewhere in these regions. And Braxton Wyatt is with him, too. That fellow will never rest in his plots against us. We’ll hear from them both again. They’ll try for some sort of revenge.”

They rejoined the boats at noon, and three or four hours later they saw a canoe ahead of them upon the water. It contained two occupants who graded their speed to that of the fleet, keeping well out of rifle-shot.

“What do you take them to be?” called out Adam Colfax to Henry.

“Indians, I know, and spies, I think,” replied Henry.

Several of the more powerful boats moved ahead of the fleet and endeavored to overtake the canoe, but they could not. The two Indians who occupied it evidently had skill and powerful arms, as they maintained the distance between themselves and their pursuers. Henry and Paul, stirred by the interest of the chase, also seized oars and

pulled hard, but the canoe presently turned up a small tributary river, where they did not have time to follow it, and they saw it no more.

It was something that many might have passed as a mere incident of the river, but Henry did not forget it. His sixth sense, the sense of danger, as it were, had received a definite impression, and he paid heed to the warning.

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That afternoon clouds came up for the first time. It had been very warm on the river, but the heat and closeness did not develop into a rapid storm of thunder and lightning as so often happens in the Mississippi valley. Instead, the air turned colder, and a raw, drizzling rain set it. It was then that they appreciated the comfort of their well-equipped boats. Everybody was wrapped up and protected, and they moved steadily on.

Henry and Shif'less Sol, as usual, went ashore later on to seek a landing place, and a site suitable for a camp, as it was considered wise always to give the men warm food. Presently they found a fairly well sheltered spot near the shore, a slope surrounded by high trees, and when Adam Colfax received the word the boats were tied to the bank. Some tents were pitched in the opening, and with considerable difficulty the fires were lighted. A drizzling rain still fell, but the fires finally triumphed over it, and blazed and crackled merrily. Nevertheless, this lightness and merriment were not communicated to the men, who shivered in the wet, drew close to the flames, and had downcast faces. All the five were ashore and in the shadow of the woods they held a little conference of their own, talking with great earnestness.

"I think," said Henry, "that we're being watched and that there is danger, great danger. One never knows what the wilderness contains."

"Suppose that all of us watch the night through," said Paul.

"No," said Henry, "I think, Paul, that you ought to sleep and Long Jim should do so, too. There are enough without you. To-morrow night will be your turn. We shouldn't waste our resources."

This satisfied Paul and Jim, and soon they were asleep in one of the tents, but Henry, Shif'less Sol, and Tom Ross were in the dripping forest outside Adam Colfax's own line of sentinels, seeking the hidden danger. The three remained together, and they looked everywhere. They were on the east bank and there was nothing but forest. The moon lay behind sodden clouds, and the trees were dark and shadowy. Now and then the wind swept a dash of rain in their faces, and the air remained raw and chill. Sharp as were their eyes, they could not see very far into the forest, but they could see behind them the flame of their own camp fires, a core of light in the wilderness.

"It might be better to put out all those fires," said Henry, "but I don't believe Captain Colfax would hear to it. He thinks we're too strong to fear any serious attack."

"No," said Shif'less Sol, "he wouldn't do it, an' the men would grumble, too. We've got to be the outside guard ourselves."

The three kept together, continuing their steady patrol in a semi-circle about the camp, the side of the river being guarded by the boats themselves. The rain died to a drizzle, but the clouds remained, and the skies were dark. Hours passed, and nearly everybody

slept soundly by the fires, but the faithful three, gliding among the wet trees and bushes, still watched.

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They heard faint noises in the forest, the passage of the wind, or the stir of a wild animal, and after a while they heard the long, plaintive and weird note, with which they were so familiar, the howl of the wolf.

It was characteristic of the three that when this faint note, almost like the sigh of the wind among the wet trees, reached their ears, they said nothing, but merely stopped and in the obscurity glanced at one another with eyes of understanding. They listened patiently, and the low, plaintive howl came again and then once more, all from different points of the compass. There had been a time when Henry Ware was deceived for a moment by these cries, but it was not possible now.

“It must be a gathering of the southern tribes,” he said, “and I imagine that Braxton Wyatt is with them, giving them advice. Sol, suppose that you go to the right and Tom to the left. I’ll stay in the center, and if any one of us sees an enemy he’s to shoot at it and rouse the camp.”

The two were gone in an instant, and Henry was left alone. That instant all the old, primeval instincts, so powerful in him, were aroused. His sixth sense, the sense of danger, was speaking to him in a voice that he could not but hear. There, too, was the quaver of the wolf. All the signals of alarm were set, and he resolved that he should be the first to see danger when It showed its head.

The clouds piled in heavier masses in the sky, and the darkness thickened. The wind blew lightly and its sound among the boughs and leaves was a long, plaintive sigh that had in it a tone like the cry of a woman. The rain came only in gusts, but when it struck it was sharp and cold. The trees stood out, black and ill-defined, like skeletons. But the forest, its wet, its chill, and its loneliness, had no effect upon the attuned mind of Henry Ware. He was in his native element, and every nerve in him thrilled with the knowledge that he would rise to meet the crisis, whatever it might be.

He was crouched by the side of a great oak, his form blurring with its trunk, his eyes, now used to the darkness, searching every covert in front—he knew that Shif’less Sol and Tom Ross would watch to right and left.

The cry of the wolf did not come again, save for a lone note, now much nearer. But when its sound passed through the forest, Henry Ware’s form seemed to become a little more taut and he leaned a little further forward. Beyond the slight bending motion he did not stir.

He still saw nothing and heard nothing, but that voice which was his sixth sense was calling to him more loudly than ever, and he was ready to respond.

In front of him, thirty yards away, lay a thicket or undergrowth, and he watched it incessantly. It seemed to him now that he knew every bush and briar and vine.

Presently a briar moved, and then a bush, and then a vine, but they moved against the wind, and the sharp eyes of the watcher saw it. He sank a little lower and the muzzle of his rifle stole forward. He made not the slightest sound, and good eyes, only a few yards away, could not have separated his dark figure from that of the tree trunk.

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The same briar and bush moved a third time, and, as before, against the wind. It did not escape the notice of Henry Ware. Now he saw a sharp, red nose appear, and then the shaggy head behind it.

The nose remained—projected and lifted in the air, a-sniff to catch the fleeting scent of an enemy. Fancy could readily paint the ugly head of the lank body behind it. But Henry Ware was not deceived for an instant. The muzzle of the rifle that had been thrust forward, was raised now, and taking swift aim, he fired.

A wild and terrible cry swelled through the forest. An Indian warrior sprang to his feet, casting off his guise of a wolfskin, stood perfectly still for a moment, and then fell headlong among the wet bushes. The cry came back in many real echoes, the shouts of the warriors who knew now that there was to be no surprise for them. Their battle cry swelled in volume, fierce with anger, but Henry, Shif'less Sol, and Tom Ross were already running back upon the camp, sounding the alarm, and the men, roused from sleep, were springing to arms.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BATTLE OF THE BANK

"What is it? what is it?" cried Adam Colfax, as the three sentinels, who were worth all the others combined, dashed into the camp.

"An Indian army!" replied Henry Ware. "We do not yet know how strong, but we have seen their scouts! hark to them!"

The fierce war whoop rose and swelled through all the forest, died away, then swelled and died again. From the dark wall of the trees came the crackling fire of rifles. No one could be in doubt now.

"Out with the fires! Scatter them, trample them down!" exclaimed Henry.

He set the example, kicking the wood and embers in every direction. Adam Colfax was not one to resent such a sudden assumption of authority, when he saw that it meant the saving of human lives. He repeated the order and joined in the work himself. Fortunately the fires had burned low and the task was soon done, but not before two or three men had been hit by bullets from the surrounding darkness.

"Lie down, everybody!" cried Henry, and the order was obeyed at once. Then the strange night battle in the heart of the wilderness began. The savages, after their first attack, ceased to shout, and the voyagers on their own part made little noise. But they knew that the assailing force was numerous. It rimmed them on all sides save that of the river, and the little pink and red beads of fire seemed to flash from every bush. The

men on the boats swarmed to the shore, but Adam Colfax allowed only half of them to come, the land force at the same time falling back on the river to meet them. He had no mind to let his communications be cut.

As the white line fell back the red came on, and uttered again the long-drawn, high-pitched war whoop, a cry of exultation. But it was not repeated, as the white line withdrew only to the bank, and yielded no more. Then both lines lay in the forest, faces invisible, but the pink and red beads of opposing fire ran back and forth in a stream. Now and then, even in the darkness, a bullet struck true. A groan would start in the white line, but it would be checked at the lips, because these were men too proud to give expression to pain.

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“They can’t make much progress in this way,” said Adam Colfax to Henry, who had crept to his side.

“They can make it terribly wearing by keeping it up all night.”

“We can withdraw to the boats entirely and row away.”

“I wouldn’t do it. They’re sure to have boats, too, knowing that we could take to the water, and if we were to leave here they’d take it as a sign of victory and follow. Then we’d have another and worse fight.”

Adam Colfax was of the same opinion. He was not in favor of yielding an inch.

“I think I can see some of their figures dancing about there among the bushes,” he whispered to Henry.

“I see them, too,” replied the youth, “and I think that I see white men. They must be the desperate gang that followed Alvarez out of New Orleans.”

“No doubt of it.”

Adam Colfax presently crept down the river bank, but came back in a few minutes.

“Now we’ll see something,” he whispered to Henry, and what the cautious leader said was quick to come true.

The fire of both sides died for a moment, and then came a heavy crash and a jet of fire from the river; there was a long, shrill scream as a missile curved high over the white line and dropped in the red, where it burst, flinging red-hot pieces of steel in a shower. It was followed instantly by another report, another jet of fire, and another shower of metal in the bushes. The brass twelve-pounders on the boat had opened fire, and with shot after shot they were searching the dark thickets, whence cries of rage now came.

The Americans sent up shouts of triumph and redoubled their rifle fire. Many of the more zealous were eager to creep to the thickets and turn the defensive into the offensive, but the leaders restrained them.

“No use to waste life in any such foolish fashion,” said shrewd Adam Colfax. “While we stay under the cannon they won’t rush us, but if we follow them into the bushes they’ll have an overwhelming advantage.”

It began to lighten a little, but the wind blew stronger and very cold for the time of the year. The red line was withdrawn further into the forest, but it continued an intermittent fire, and now and then uttered a challenging war whoop. The cannon every ten minutes sent a shot among them, but whether it did any damage the Americans could not tell.

The defenders saved their bullets, firing only when there seemed to be a chance for a hit, and thus the hours dragged their leaden weight slowly by.

A score of the Americans had been wounded by the rifle fire, but in most cases the wounds were slight. Six were dead and they were taken to the boats, where stones were tied to them and they were dropped into the Mississippi to disappear forever. Rovers, adventurers, masterless men, they had been, but they died in a good cause, and they were not without mourners, as their bodies slid into the brown waters.

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Adam Colfax had coffee made on several of the boats provided with a cooking apparatus, and it was served in the darkness to those who fought on shore. One man had the tin cup shot from his hand as he was raising it to his lips, but he calmly called for another, and when he had drunk it, went on with his part of the battle.

The hot coffee heartened them wonderfully, and the ten minute cannon shots were good company. They grew to look for them, and so strong is habit, that they knew almost to the second when the shot was due. It was like a slow, steady chorus, cheering them and telling them to hold on.

Far toward morning there was a tremendous burst of fire from the thickets, the fierce, high-pitched war shout was repeated three times, and after that, silence. Then the darkness sank away, and the day came in a burst of red and gold, gilding river and forest.

“They are gone,” said Henry, “you’ll find now that the woods are empty.”

Many of the voyagers rushed into the forest to discover that he spoke the truth. Nowhere was there a sign of an enemy. No tree sheltered a warrior, the thickets were harmless. The peaceful morning breeze had no note of warning in its song. But when they looked more closely they saw that many dark stains had soaked into the earth, and they knew that not all the bullets and cannon balls had gone amiss.

“Well, we drove them off that time,” said Adam Colfax cheerfully. “They found that they couldn’t surprise us, and I guess they’ve concluded that they couldn’t rush us either. I fancy it’s the last we’ll see of ’em.”

Henry shook his head, and Shif’less Sol and Tom Ross, who were standing by, also shook theirs.

“We’re pretty’ sure that a big league of the southern tribes has been formed,” Henry said, “and there are also many white men with them, white men who are driven by hate and revenge. They’ll stick.”

“Then we’ve got to defend this fleet to the last,” said Adam Colfax. “It’s bound to get through; and the first thing I’ll have done is to cover up our barrels of powder, so no fire or hot bullets can reach it. Those barrels of powder are as precious as gold.”

This task was begun at once and everybody reembarked, a joyful little army that had won a triumph and that felt able to win more if need be. The wounded made light of their wounds and all felt new strength and courage with the daylight. The five returned with the others to their boats.

“Well, Jim,” said Paul to Long Jim Hart, “there’s trouble to be found away from New Orleans as well as in it. Last night was not so very peaceful, and the woods did contain danger.”

Long Jim heaved a satisfied sigh.

“Yes, Paul,” he replied, “thar wuz shorely a heap uv danger stirrin’ ’bout last night, an’ thar wuz lots uv chances that some uv it would come knockin’ up ag’inst me, but, Paul, I knowed it wuz thar, I knowed it wuz in the woods in front uv us; it wuzn’t settin’ by my side, talkin’ soft things to me, an’ sayin’ it wuz my friend. No, Paul, ef I had got killed last night I would hev knowed, ef I knowed anythin’ at all, that it wuz an honest Injun bullet that done it, one that meant to do it, an’ no foolin’.”

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The fleet resumed its passage up the river in its usual arrow formation, with the five near the tip of the barb, but the bright promise of the morning was deceitful. Toward noon the clouds of the night before that had not retreated far, came back again, filing solemnly across the sky in a long, somber procession. No air stirred. The wide, yellow river stretched before them, a smooth, molten surface.

The motion of the fleet became perceptibly slower. The men in that turgid atmosphere felt languid and inert, and their hands rested but lightly on oar and paddle. Cheerfulness gave way to depression. The voyage was far less easy than it had seemed a few hours before. Overhead the clouds united and drew a leaden blanket from horizon to horizon.

“It’s a storm, of course,” said Henry. “Remember the one that struck us when we were coming down the river. It’s just such another.”

There was a sudden rush of hot air. Dull thunder, singularly uncanny in its low, distant note, began to grumble. Lightning of an intense coppery color flashed again and again across the heavens. The river began to rise in yellow waves that crumbled and rose again.

Some of the boats had sails, but these were quickly taken in—Adam Colfax was no careless seaman. The fleet, nevertheless, began to heave on the troubled water, break its formation, and fall into imminent danger of frequent collision. The great river, usually so friendly, and, like a long cord, uniting the green lands on either side, was now full of wrath and fury. Burst after burst of wind, screaming ominously, swept over it, and the waves rolled like those of the sea. Despite powerful hands on oar and paddle, the fleet was driven about like a covey of frightened birds. Meanwhile, the darkness increased until it was almost like night.

Adam Colfax struggled hard. He wished to keep to the middle of the river, and a single boat might have fought out the storm there, but the danger was steadily increasing. Two boats, already, were in collision, and with great difficulty were saved from sinking.

“We’ll have to make for the shore and tie up,” he shouted to Henry, who was in the boat next to him. “I think it’s the most violent storm I ever saw on the Mississippi.”

“We may find a sheltered place,” Henry shouted back above the roar of the wind.

“There’s nothing else to do,” said Adam Colfax. “The eastern shore looks the lower, and we’ll go for it at once.”

He gave the signal with hand and voice, and all the boats began to pull with their whole strength in a diagonal course toward the east bank, while the wind shrieked in gust after

gust, the thunder crashed incessantly, and the coppery lightning flared in great saber-cuts across the sky.

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It was enough to daunt the heart of many a brave man, but Henry Ware was not appalled. His primeval instincts had risen to the surface again. He saw the grandeur of it rather than the weirdness and danger. Like Long Jim, though less outspoken, he had been troubled by the intrigue, the shiftiness, and the false seeming of New Orleans, and now his spirit replied to the battle of the elements. He was the most active man in the fleet. His quick hand and eye and powerful arm kept one canoe loaded with medical stores, which had in them the saving of many lives, from going to the bottom. The harder the wind blew and the rougher the waves grew the higher his spirit rose to meet them.

“Look!” he shouted to Adam Colfax, as they approached the shore, “an opening! See it? I think it’s a bayou, and if we go up that we’ll be safe!”

Henry was right. Its mouth almost hidden by trees, the deep, still bayou opened out before them, and ran its narrow length far back into the land. One could not conceive a better anchorage for the small boats such as constituted their fleet. The men, when they saw it, gave a hearty cheer that rose above the wind. Hardy as they were, fear had entered most of them.

The leading boats passed into the bayou, and all the others, many struggling hard with wind, current, and waves, followed them. The change was immediate. They came into quarters comparatively still, but there was a new danger. A tree, snapped through its mighty trunk by the hurricane, fell across the bayou directly in front of them. It was lucky that no canoe was in its way.

“Out, men, with axes!” shouted Adam Colfax, and a dozen leaped to obey his command. The tree was quickly cut apart and a score more dragged the two halves up to the banks, leaving a passage once more for the fleet. This was repeated further on, and now they began to look anxiously for more open country. Only good fortune had saved them so far.

The bayou ran on narrow and deep, and they pulled and paddled with all their might, until at last they came to a place that was fringed only by high bushes. The forest on either side was two or three hundred yards away, and Adam Colfax, despite his stern New Hampshire nature, did not repress a cry of joy. Here they were safe, alike from the Mississippi and the forest.

“Tie up!” he shouted, and the boats were soon fastened to the bushes in parallel rows on either side of the bayou. Then they hurried to make shelter for themselves. The supplies were already covered. The skies were now at the darkest, a solid circle of heavy black clouds. The lightning and thunder alike ceased, and then, borne on the swift wind, came a mighty rain. It was so heavy, so steady, and so searching that they were put to their utmost labor and ingenuity to keep their precious cargo dry.

“If the rain were not so tremendously heavy I would look through the forest to see if any enemies were about,” said Henry to the leader.

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Adam Colfax glanced up at the water which was falling in sheets and laughed, a laugh of genuine relief from a great strain.

“Why, Henry,” he said, “I don’t believe that a man could keep his feet out there in all that pelting flood long enough to go many miles. I wish I was always as safe from attack as I feel now.”

It was certainly far more comfortable in the boats than it could possibly be in the sodden forest, where little lakes were already forming. In addition, night, very dark, was coming on, and no cessation of the rain was promised. It was useless, in the face of the deluge, to attempt to build fires on the shore, and huddling in the boats under tarpaulins, sails, and blankets, they ate cold food. But Adam Colfax, as a precaution, allowed a little brandy to be served to every man.

“It’s medicine in this case, boys,” he said, “and you must look on it so. I don’t think you’ll get any more.”

Bye and bye the rain slackened a little. Some one began a line of a song, but it did not catch. Nobody joined in, and the singer stopped. The atmosphere was not favorable to any kind of music. The hours passed slowly, but it was nearly midnight when the rain ceased, and a timid moon came out to cast a few pale rays over a soaked and dripping forest. Most of the men were now asleep under their covers, but not one of the five slumbered, nor did Adam Colfax and a dozen others.

“Thank God, it’s stopped at last!” said Adam Colfax devoutly—he was a religious man, and his gratitude was not merely oral. “The clouds are clearing away and I think we can soon see where we are.”

“Yes, it will be much lighter soon,” said Henry Ware, “but in the meantime we are about to receive a visitor. Look!”

He pointed down the bayou toward the river. A light canoe was emerging from the mists and shadows. It contained a single occupant, and came straight on up the narrow channel.

The man who sat in the canoe was tall and thin and wrapped in a dripping black robe. His head was bare and his gray hair fell in long, straight locks. The moonlight fell directly upon his thin, ascetic face, and something in the eyes that Adam Colfax saw, or thought he saw, sent a thrill through him.

“Is it a ghost?” he asked of Henry Ware in an awed whisper.

At that moment the moonlight shifted and fell upon something metallic that gleamed upon the breast of the mystic visitor.

“It is Father Montigny,” said Henry. He, too, felt awe, not at any ghostly apparition but because the priest had come suddenly at such a time.

“What does it portend?” was his silent thought.

Paddling with a strong hand the priest came straight toward them. The moonlight continued to shine upon his face, and Henry thought that he read there the impulse of a great mission.

CHAPTER XX

THE BATTLE OF THE BAYOU

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The priest came directly to the boat, in which Henry Ware and Adam Colfax were sitting—the remainder of the five were in the next boat—and held up his hand as a sign of recognition and relief.

“Father Montigny!” said Henry.

“Yes, my son, it is I, and I give thanks to Heaven that I have found you in time.”

“What is it, father?” It seemed natural that at this moment Henry should be the spokesman for the fleet.

“A great danger has closed upon you and all here.”

“Alvarez?”

“Yes, he is the master spirit, but back of him are the allied tribes of the south, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, even Osages from the west, and others, and in addition there are two hundred desperate white men drawn from all nations. Alvarez has promised to lead them to great spoil and plunder. He is the buccaneer chief now and they will follow him. At night-fall they surprised a French trading schooner tied to the shore for safety, slaughtered those on board, and have now drawn the schooner across the mouth of the bayou to shut you in. The vessel also carries four bronze nine pounders which they will use against you. Outside in the Mississippi is a great fleet of Indian war-canoes which has been above you in the stream.”

Adam Colfax paled a little.

“It seems,” he said, “that when we thought we were pulling to safety we were merely entering a trap.”

“It was a trap,” said Henry with energy, “but we’re strong enough to break any trap into which we may fall.”

“That’s so,” said Adam Colfax.

“You may ask me how I knew all this,” continued the priest. “I tell you not what I have heard, but what I have seen. I was with the Choctaws, and I sought to dissuade them from this campaign upon which they were marching. I told them that Alvarez was mad with ambition and disappointment, that he had rebelled against lawful authority, that he was an outlaw and buccaneer, and that he could not keep his promises. My words availed nothing. I continued with them, hoping still to dissuade them and the other bands that met them, but still I failed.

“I was yet with the tribe when they met Alvarez and the wicked renegade, the one Wyatt, and their men. Alvarez would have used force, he would have driven me from

the camp with heavy blows; even this, the white man who has inherited Holy Church would have done, but the red men, born savages, would not let him. Although they would not listen to me they let me stay, unharmed. I witnessed, or rather heard, their attack upon you last night, and their repulse has made them only the more eager for your destruction. It has also united them the more firmly."

"When do you think they will attack us, Father Montigny?" asked Henry.

"That I cannot tell. I heard their plans, and I deemed it my duty to warn you. A guard, one whom I have converted to our faith, let me slip away and here I am."

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“And our debt to you is still growing,” said Henry. “As for myself, I think the attack will come to-night, when they deem us disorganized and beaten down by the storm.”

“And so do I,” said Adam Colfax. “We have no time to waste.”

“May God preserve you,” said the priest. “I have no desire to witness scenes of slaughter but I trust, for the sake of yourselves, for the sake of Bernardo Galvez, the good Governor General of Louisiana, and for the welfare of this region, that you may beat them off. But the contest will be fierce and bloody.”

A young man, at the order of Adam Colfax, sounded a trumpet, a low thrilling call that aroused the men from their brief sleep, and the word was quickly passed that they were blockaded in the bayou, and that the hordes were advancing to a new attack. They grumbled less now than at the storm. Here was a danger that they knew how to meet. Battle had been a part of all their lives, and they did not fear it.

The moonlight increased, the forest was dripping, but there was a noise now of bullet clinking against bullet, of the ramrod sent home in the rifle barrel, and of men talking low.

Adam Colfax called a conference in his boat. His best lieutenants and the five were present. Should they await the attack or advance to meet it? In any event, the fleet must escape from the bayou, and the nearer they were to the river when the battle occurred the better it would be for them.

“Ef we know thar’s a danger,” said Tom Ross, “the best thing fur us to do is to go to it, an’ lay hold uv it.”

The vote on Tom’s suggestion was unanimous in its favor, and the fleet once more began to move. A small force of riflemen marched on either bank in order to uncover possible skirmishers.

The advance was very slow and in silence save for the dip of the oars and the paddles. The moonlight grew stronger and stronger, and they could now see a good distance on the deep, still bayou.

The five had remained in the leading boats and they watched closely for sight or sound of the hostile force, but as yet eye and ear told nothing. The trees now grew close to the water’s edge and, looped heavily with trailing vines, they presented a black wall on either side. But they had no fear of shots from such a source, as they knew that the trusty riflemen going in advance would clear out any skirmishers who might have hidden themselves there.

Paul was beside Henry. Near him was Long Jim and in the boat next to them was Shif’less Sol and Tom Ross. At this moment, which they felt to be heavy with import, it

was good to be together. Paul in particular, Paul, the impressionable and imaginative, looked around at the familiar figures in the clearing moonlight, and drew strength and comfort from their near presence.

The dark fleet moved slowly on, cutting the deep still waters of the bayou with almost noiseless keel. The men had ceased whispering. Now and then an oar splashed or the water gave back the echo of a paddle's dip, but little else was heard. All looked straight ahead.

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Suddenly they saw in the middle of the bayou, about a hundred yards before them, a small, black shape, so low that it seemed to blend with the water. It was an Indian canoe, the first outpost of the savage force, and its occupant, promptly firing a rifle, raised a long, warning shout. In an instant the woods on either side began to crackle with rifle-fire. Skirmishers had met skirmishers, and the battle of the bayou had begun.

“Press on! Press on! We must cut through somehow!” cried Adam Colfax, and the American fleet moved steadily and unfalteringly on toward its goal. They came now to the narrowest part of the bayou, and stretched across it they saw a dark line of canoes, all crowded with Indians and the desperadoes of Alvarez. Behind them heaved up the dark bulk of the captured schooner.

The battle blazed in an instant into volume and fury. Two lines of fire facing each other were formed across the bayou, one bent upon pushing forward, the other bent upon holding it back. These lines, moreover, stretched far into the woods on either bank, where sharpshooters lay, and both sides shouted at intervals as the blood in their veins grew hot.

The dark hulk of the schooner suddenly burst into spots of flame, and the woods and waters echoed with heavy reports. The captured nine pounders were now helping to block the passage, but the brass twelve pounders on the supply fleet replied. Steadily the fire of both sides grew in volume and the lines came closer and closer together.

The moonlight faded again and little clouds of smoke began to rise. These clouds gradually grew bigger, then united into one heavy opaque mass that hung over the combatants. Strips of vapor were detached from it and floated off into the forest. A sharp, pungent odor, the smell of burnt gunpowder, filled the nostrils of the men and added to the fire that burned in their veins.

This, the largest battle yet fought in the southern woods, had a somber and unreal aspect to Paul. All around them now was the encircling darkness. Only the area in which the battle was fought showed any light, but here the flashes of the firing were continuous and intense. The crash of the rifles never ceased. Now and then it rose to greater volume and then fell again, but rising or falling it always went on, while over it boomed the big guns answering one another in defiant notes of thunder.

The schooner was the most formidable obstacle to the passage. It lay full length across the narrow bayou and, even if the boats of the supply fleet should reach it, there was little room to pass on either side. From its decks the nine pounders were fired fast and often with precision, and the majority of the Spaniard’s desperate band found shelter there also, firing with rifles, muskets, and pistols. Others sent bullets, also, from the comparative security of port holes. The possession of the schooner gave them a great advantage and they did not neglect it. Now and then they sent up fierce yells, the war-cries of the West Indian pirates, and their Indian allies answered them with their own

long-drawn, high pitched whoop, so full of ferocity and menace. Both looked forward to nothing less than complete triumph.

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The space between the combatants was lighted up by the incessant flash of the firing. Little jets of water where a missent bullet struck were continually spouting up, and then would come a bigger one when a cannon ball plunged into the depths of the bayou.

Paul suddenly heard a heavy impact, a crash, as of ripping wood, and a cry. A canoe near them had been struck by a cannon ball, and practically broken in half. It sank in an instant, and one of the men in it, wounded in the arm, and crippled, was sinking a second time, when Paul sprang into the water and helped him into their own boat. But not all the wounded were so fortunate. Some sank, to stay, and the dark night battle, far more deadly than that of the night before, reeled to and fro.

The combat at first had been more of a spectacle than anything else to Paul. The extraordinary play of light and darkness, the innumerable shadows and flashes on the surface of the bayou, the black tracery of the forest on either bank, the red beads of flame from the rifle fire appearing and re-appearing, made of it all a vast panorama for him. There were the sounds, too, the piratical shout, hoarse and menacing, the Indian whoop, shriller and with more of the wild beast's whine in it, the fierce, sharp note of the rifle fire, steady, insistent, and full of threat, and over it the heavy thudding of the great guns.

It was Paul's eye and ear at first that received the deep impression, but now the aspect of a panorama passed away and his soul was stirred with a fierce desire to get on, to cut through the hostile line, to crush down the opposition, and to reach the full freedom of the wide river. He began to hate those men who opposed them, the fire of passion that battle breeds was surely mounting to his head. Unconsciously, Paul, the scholar and coming statesman, the grave quiet youth, began to shout and to hurl invectives at those who presumed to hold them back. The barrel of his rifle grew hot in his hand with constant loading and firing, but he did not notice it. He still, at imminent risk to himself, sent his bullets toward the dark line of Indian canoes and the flashing hulk of the ship behind them.

The supply fleet was beginning to suffer severely. A number of boats and canoes had been sunk and nearly a score of men had been killed. Many more were wounded and, despite all this loss, they had made no progress. The fire from the bank, moreover, was beginning to sting them and to stop it Adam Colfax landed more men. The increased force of the Americans on the shore served the purpose but they were still unable to force the mouth of the bayou. The schooner seemed to be fixed there and she never ceased to send a storm of bullets and cannon balls at them.

Adam Colfax had a slight wound in the arm, but his slow cold blood was now at the boiling point.

"We've got to force that schooner!" he cried. "We've got to take her, if it has to be done with boarders! We can never get by unless we do it!"

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But the loss of life even if the attempt were a success, would be terrible. That was apparent to everybody and Henry made a suggestion.

“Let’s concentrate our whole fire upon the ship,” he said. “Mass the cannon and the rest of us will back them up with our rifles. Maybe we can silence her, and if we do then’s the time to take her by storm.”

The supply fleet drew back and its fire died. It seemed, in truth, as if it were beaten and that, hemmed in by fire, as it were in the narrow bayou, it must surrender. A tremendous shout of triumph burst forth from the men on the schooner, and the Indians took it up in a vast and shriller but more terrible chorus.

Then came one of those sudden and ominous silences that sometimes occur in a battle. The fire of the Americans ceasing, that of their enemies ceased for the moment also. But the pause was more deadly and menacing in its stillness than all the thunder and shouting of the combat had been. It seemed unnatural to hear again the sighing of the wind through the forest and the quiet lap of water against the shore. The bank of smoke, no longer increased from below, lifted, thinned, broke up into patches, and began to float away. The moon’s rays shot through the mists and vapors once more, and lighted up the watery battlefield of the night, the schooner, the desperate men on it, the swarms of canoes, the coppery, high-cheeked faces of the Indians, the supply fleet packed now in a rather close mass, the tanned faces of the men on board it, animated by the high spirit of daring and enterprise, the wounded lying silent in the boats, and the wreckage floating on the bayou.

But the stillness endured for only a few moments. It was broken by the American fleet, which seemed to draw itself together into closer and more compact form. An order in a low tone, but sharp and precise, was carried from boat to boat, and it seemed to strengthen the men anew, heart and body. They straightened up, signs of exhaustion passed from their faces, and every one made ready all the arms that he had.

Paul, like the others, had felt the sudden silence, but perhaps most acutely of all. His whole imaginative temperament was on fire. He knew—he would have known, even had he not heard—that the sudden cessation of the firing was merely preliminary, a fresh drawing of the breath as it were for another and supreme effort. He clasped his hands to his temples, where the pulses were beating rapidly and heavily, and his face burned as if in a fever. But it was a fever of the mind not of the body.

“It’s a big battle, Paul,” said Shif’less Sol, who had come with Tom Ross into their boat, “but it’s wuth it. The arms and other things that we carry in these boats may be wuth millions an’ millions to the people who come after us.”

“Do you think we’ll ever break through, Sol?” asked Paul.

“Shorely,” replied the shiftless one. “Henry’s got the plan, and we’re goin’ to cut through like a wedge druv through a log. Something’s got to give. Up, Paul, with your gun! Here she goes ag’in!”

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The battle suddenly burst forth afresh and with greater violence. All the American twelve pounders were now in a row at the head of the fleet, and one after another, from right to left and then from left to right and over and over again, they began to fire with tremendous rapidity and accuracy at the schooner. All the best gunners were around the twelve pounders. If one fell, another took his place. Many of them were stripped to the waist, and their own fire lighted up their tan faces and their brown sinewy arms as they handled rammer and cannon shot.

The fire of the cannon was supported by that of scores and scores of rifles, and the enemy replied with furious energy. But the supply fleet was animated now by a single purpose. The shiftless one's simile of a wedge driven into a log was true. No attention was paid to anybody in the hostile boats and canoes. They could fire unheeded. Every American cannon and rifle sent its load straight at the schooner. All the upper works of the vessel were shot away. The men of Alvarez could not live upon its decks; they were even slain at the port holes by the terrific rifle fire; cannon shot, grape shot, and rifle bullets searched every nook and corner of the vessel, and her desperate crew, one by one, began to leap into the water and make for the shores.

A shout of exultation rose from the supply fleet, which was now slowly moving forward. Flames suddenly burst from the schooner and ran up the stumps of her masts and spars, reaching out long arms and laying hold at new points. The cannon shots had also reached the inside of the ship as fire began to spout from the port holes, and there was a steady stream of men leaping from the schooner into the water of the bayou and making for the land.

The American shout of exultation was repeated, and the forest gave back the echo. The Indians answered it with a fierce yell of defiance, and the forest gave back that, too.

But Adam Colfax had been watching shrewdly.

In his daring life he had been in more than one naval battle, and when he saw the schooner wrapped and re-wrapped in great coils and ribbons of flame he knew what was due. Suddenly he shouted in a voice that could be heard above the roar of the battle:

"Back! Back, all! Back for your lives!"

It reached the ears of everybody in the American fleet, and whether he understood its words or not every man understood its tone. There was an involuntary movement common to all. The fleet stopped its slow advance, seemed to sway in another direction, and then to sit still on the water. But all were looking at the schooner with an intense, fascinated, yet horrified gaze.

Nobody was left on the deck of the vessel but the dead. The huge, intertwining coil of fiery ribbons seemed suddenly to unite in one great glowing mass, out of which flames shot high, sputtering and crackling. Then came an awful moment of silence, the vessel trembled, leaped from the water, turned into a volcano of fire and with a tremendous crash blew up.

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The report was so great that it came rolling back in echo after echo, but for a few moments there was no other sound save the echo. Then followed a rain of burning wood, many pieces falling in the supply fleet, burning and scorching, while others fell hissing in the forest on either shore. Darkness, too, came over land and water. All the firing had ceased as if by preconcerted signal, though the combatants on either side were awed by the fate of the vessel. The smoke bank came back, too, thicker and heavier than before, and the air was filled with the strong, pungent odor of burnt gunpowder.

But the schooner that had blocked the mouth of the bayou was gone forever and the way lay open before them. Adam Colfax recovered from the shock of the explosion.

“On, men! On!” he roared, and the whole fleet, animated by a single impulse, sprang forward toward the mouth of the bayou, the cannon blazing anew the path, the gunners loading and firing, as fast as they could. But the simile of the shiftless one had come true. The wedge, driven by tremendous strokes, had cleft the log.

The Indian fleet, many of the boats containing white men, too, closed in and sought to bar the way, but they were daunted somewhat by their great disaster, and in an instant the American fleet was upon them cutting a path through to the free river. Boat often smashed into boat, and the weaker, or the one with less impulse, went down. Now and then white and red reached over and grasped each other in deadly struggle, but, whatever happened, the supply fleet moved steadily on.

It was to Paul a confused combat, a wild and terrible struggle, the climax of the night-battle. White and red faces mingled before him in a blur, the water seemed to flow in narrow, black streams between the boats and the pall of smoke was ever growing thicker. It hung over them, black and charged now with gases. Paul coughed violently, but he was not conscious of it. He fired his rifle until it was too hot to hold. Then he laid it down, and seizing an oar pulled with the energy of fever.

When the boats containing the cannon were through and into the river, they faced about and began firing over the heads of the others into the huddled mass of the enemy behind. But it was only for a minute or two. Then the last of the supply fleet; that is, the last afloat, came through, and the gap that they had made was closed up at once by the enemy, who still hung on their rear and who were yet shouting and firing.

The Americans gave a great cheer, deep and full throated, but they did not pause in their great effort. Boats swung off toward either bank of the bayou’s mouth. The skirmishers in the bushes who had done such useful work must be taken on board. Theirs was now the most dangerous position of all, pursued as they certainly would be by the horde of Indians and outlaws, bent upon revenge.

The boat containing the five was among those that touched the northern side of the bayou's mouth, and everyone of them, rifle in hand, instantly sprang ashore.

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CHAPTER XXI

THE DEFENSE OF THE FIVE

Henry Ware was the first on land, Shif'less Sol came just behind him, and then the other three. The boat from which they had leaped, and which now contained but two oarsmen, swung back a little into the stream, and in a moment the darkness, closing down, shut it from view. They stood in a patch of undergrowth and the battle still flamed around them on the bayou, on the river, and in the woods. It was now fiercest in the forest, which crackled with the rifle shots and the sound of singing bullets. Innumerable jets of flame sparkled here and there, and then went out, to be succeeded instantly by others.

Many of the Indian canoes had been sunk by the explosion or the sweep of the supply fleet, but it was easy for their occupants, if not seriously wounded, to escape to the land, and they greatly increased the savage swarm in the woods, chiefly on the north bank of the bayou. Henry and his friends could hear their warning cries to one another, even their tread, and they realized that their own skirmishers in the woods would be pressed hard. Only a determined effort could hold back the horde long enough for the men to reach the fleet.

While they stood there, seeking the best thing to do, two skirmishers dashed up, breathless, both slightly wounded, and exclaiming that they were pursued by a formidable force.

"Jump into the water!" cried Henry. "The boats are only a few yards away! We'll hold back the savages!"

There were two plunks, as the skirmishers sprang into the Mississippi, sinking a moment from sight, and then, as they reappeared, swimming swiftly for the boats. Behind them came their pursuers in a swarm, but they were driven back by the rifle fire of the little party from Kentucky. Another skirmisher burst through the bushes, and, helped in the same way, sprang into the Mississippi, swimming for the boats. Then came a fourth and a fifth and everyone escaped as the others had done.

"It's well we came," said Henry. "This is not the least of our task. Lie down, boys."

They stretched themselves on the damp earth, the great, yellow river close behind them, and the forest in front swarming with the savage force. They had expected other men who had landed to come to their aid, but the parties had become separated in the darkness and confusion of the battle, and they were left alone. Nevertheless a dauntless heart beat in every breast, and they expected to hold that neck of land, which seemed to be a channel for the pursued, until the last fugitive was safe.

Lying upon their faces, half supported by their elbows, they could load and fire whenever they saw a hostile figure in front of them. Again and again the pursuit of a skirmisher was driven back by these deadly riflemen. Now and then a cannon shot fired from their own fleet whistled over their heads and struck in the forest among their foes, but they paid no attention to it. They were intent upon their own work and every faculty was concentrated for the task.

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They had the bayou on one side and a little bay of the river on the other, and they could not be surrounded by land. The foe was always straight before them, in a way, eye to eye, and there they sent bullets that rarely missed.

A fever was in their blood, the long battle, its tremendous events, and the new phase that it had now assumed, set every nerve to going. Certain faculties useless for that crisis had become atrophied for the time. They no longer heard the sounds of the cannon shots over their heads or the shouts of the men on the boats, they saw and heard nothing but their own battle and what lay directly in front of them.

The position was growing more dangerous. Their searching fire had drawn upon them an enemy always increasing in numbers. The savages converged in front of them in a semicircle, and their fire grew heavier and heavier. Bullets whistled over them, struck the earth about them, or clipped their clothing.

Another fugitive passed them and escaped, and then yet another. It was evident that their task was not yet done, and they would not leave, although the fire poured upon them, still increased in heat and the bullets came in showers.

Presently the attack seemed to veer away from them somewhat, as if the attention of the enemy were turned elsewhere, and Paul, who was at the end of the line, crept forward a little in the thicket. The fever was still burning in his veins and he was anxious to see what lay in front of him. He did not hear the warning cries of his comrades, or, if hearing, he did not heed them. He was still burning with the desire to see what lay there in the depths of the forest. Paul, the scholar, the thinker, the future statesman, had become transformed. In such a surcharged atmosphere he, too, had turned into the primitive man, the fighter, the man who looks upon every other man not proven a friend, as his natural enemy. The bullets had ceased for the time being to whistle above his head and to strike up the earth about him. He became conscious once more of the cannon shots, shrieking over him, and the crash of the rifle fire came from right and left.

A stick broke under Paul and he heard a shout in front of him. The shout was so fierce, so fully charged with malice, that he sprang to his feet as if he had been propelled by an electric shock. He stood face to face with Don Francisco Alvarez, the plotter, the rebel, and leader of the attacking army, a wild and terrible figure, clothes torn, bleeding from wounds, but animated now by a savage joy. His pistol was leveled at the surprised youth, and the next moment the deadly bullet would have been sped, but a tall black-robed figure rose up from the bushes and threw Alvarez back.

“Francisco Alvarez, thou hast done crime enough already!” exclaimed the priest.

Alvarez regained his balance, cast one look of hate at the man who had intervened, and cried:

“Ha! it is you, priest, who have come in my way once more! Then go the way of martyrdom!”

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Turning his pistol he fired the bullet full into the black-robed chest, and Father Montigny fell dying.

Paul stood still, unable to move. Every muscle in him was paralyzed by this deed which seemed to him not murder alone, but sacrilege. Of all the events of that terrible night this was the worst. But a man behind Paul, retained every faculty, alive and alert. Up rose Shif'less Sol, his honest face ablaze with wrath. His rifle flew to his shoulder, his finger pressed the trigger, and the soul of Don Francisco Alvarez, grandee of Spain, sped to judgment from the darkness and obscurity of the North American wilderness.

"Come back, Paul! Come back!" cried Shif'less Sol, seizing the youth by the shoulder.

"But Father Montigny is dying!" cried Paul, falling upon his knees beside the priest. The tears ran down his cheeks and fell upon the pale face of the dying man.

Paul and Father Montigny, Protestant and Catholic, young man and old, were kindred spirits, and each had felt it from the first. In the soul of each was the same mysticism, the same imaginative quality, the same spiritual eye always looking into the future. It had occurred more than once to the priest that, if he had remained outside the cloth, and had lived as other men lived, he would have wished such a son as Paul.

Now he smiled and opened his eyes as he saw this beloved youth of his later days weeping over him, as he lay in the forest with his death wound. The one face that he wished most to see beside him, as he drew his last breath, was there.

"Paul!" he said, "Paul, my son! Do not weep. It is the fate—in one form or another—of all who travel in these woods—on such missions as mine. I have long expected it—and I have often wondered that it has been delayed so long. I escape, too, the torture—that more than one of my brethren has suffered."

He reached out one hand, and put it lightly upon Paul's bare head. There it lay and Paul felt it grow cold upon him.

"Come away, Paul," said the shiftless one gently. "The good priest is dead. It's the livin' that need our help."

Bullets began to whistle from the thickets. The battle converged toward them again, and Paul knew that he was needed to help the others hold the little neck of land so important to all. A cannon shot shrieked over his head, and then another. Once more they were the focus of the combat. The forest in front of them sparkled as rapidly as before with beads of flame.

Paul rose reluctantly and turned away. The priest lay on his back, his face, pale and perfectly peaceful, upturned to the skies. Alvarez was a dozen yards away, but his figure, still forever, was motionless in the shadows. Paul did not bestow a glance upon

him, but he gave Father Montigny a last long look of affection and sorrow as he turned away.

“Down, Paul, down!” cried Henry, when Paul and Shif’less Sol reached the others. “We saw what happened! You cannot do anything for him now!”

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He dragged Paul down, and in an instant all of them turned their full energy to the defense. The attack upon them was renewed with uncommon fire and fury. The Indians and desperadoes wished to pass that particular neck of land in order that they might pour a storm of bullets upon the crippled fleet and the skirmishers who were yet coming in; but the little band, headed by Henry Ware, still held them back.

Henry looked once or twice toward the river and saw the boats hovering far out in the stream. He judged that, in the darkness and confusion, Adam Colfax no longer knew where the Kentuckians lay, and it was even possible that he might lose them entirely; but the fact did not shake Henry's resolve. It was vital that they should hold the neck, and he intended to do it. He and his comrades, lying close together, replied rapidly and with deadly aim to the fire in front of them, forming a compact little body, with blazing rifles, which the savage army was not yet able to displace.

The night darkened, there were signs of rain, induced perhaps, by so much firing; the moon was completely hidden by gathering clouds; the river became a black, flowing mass and the boats upon it blurred with its surface, save when they leaped into the light in the blaze of a cannon shot. The woods, too, seemed a solid, black wall, along the front of which rifle shots sparkled in clusters.

"Good boys! good boys!" exclaimed Henry in low tones, surcharged with excitement. He, too, had the mounting blood hot in his brain. All the old primeval passion was flaming in him. But the fire of the enemy converged nearer and nearer, and the bullets sang a ceaseless little song in his ears as they passed. "Ah!" he exclaimed as one struck him in the arm. But that was all he said. He went on with his loading and firing.

"Are you hit, Henry?" asked Shif'less Sol.

"A scratch! Nothing more! Look how Long Jim fights!"

Long Jim was almost flat upon his face, but the man, usually so mild and good tempered, was now wholly possessed by the rage of combat. His long thin figure fitted around the sinuosities of the earth, and he seemed to have a curious gliding motion, sliding forward slowly to meet the enemy. The darkness was nothing now to his accustomed eyes, and he sent his bullets with sure aim toward the shadowy forms in the bushes in front of them.

Long Jim forgot everything now but his rifle and the enemy there in the thicket. He slid further and further, still drawing himself over the ground in that terrible semblance of a serpent. Paul, seeing his face, was frightened. "Jim! Jim!" he cried. "Stop!" But Long Jim slid slowly on. Tom Ross said something, but it was lost in the whistling of a cannon shot overhead.

They saw Long Jim stop the next moment, and Paul believed that he heard him utter a little sigh. Long Jim's limbs contracted and straightened out again with a jerk. Then he turned slowly over on his side and lay still, a moment or two, after which he began to writhe violently. At the same time he clapped his hand to his head and it came back red.

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“Sol sometimes says I’ve a thick skull, an’ ’ef so it’s a good thing,” he muttered to himself.

He shook his head again and again, as if to clear it, and crept back to his friends. There he tore off a portion of his deerskin hunting shirt, tied it tightly around the wound, and went on with his firing.

“Don’t be too enthusiastic, Jim,” said Henry.

“I won’t,” replied Long Jim, “I’m cured.”

Lower crouched the five, taking advantage of the bushes and little hillocks, and sending a bullet every time they saw a flitting figure in the forest in front of them. Behind them they could still hear the roar of the combat on the river. The crackle of the rifles and the muskets was steady in their ears, while now and then the note of a cannon boomed above it, and a solid shot, curving over their heads, whizzed into the thickets. But they paid little attention to the main battle; it was merely a chorus, a background, as it were, for their own corner of the struggle, which absorbed all their energies.

Their fire was so incessant, it was so well aimed, and it stung the allied army so severely, that an increasing force was steadily concentrating in front of them. Nor did they escape wholly unhurt. A bullet grazed Henry’s arm and another did the same for Shif’less Sol’s shoulder; but neither paid any attention to his wounds, loading and reloading, facing the enemy with undiminished zeal and courage.

Its whole aspect was now a phantom battle to them all. The incessant crash and roaring in their ears, and the smoke and vapor in their nostrils, heated their brains and made everything look unreal. They were but phantoms themselves, and the foes who leaped about in the forest were phantoms, too. Darker and darker the clouds rolled up and the smoke and vapors thickened in the forest, but through the blackness the lines of flame still replied to each other.

Paul’s excitement was so great that he could not keep himself down. He was burning with fever, but passion seemed to be departing from him. He thought that, if they were all to die, it was a privilege to die together. He saw now the deep cool woods, a beautiful lake, and an island enclosed within it, like a green gem in a blue setting. Paul’s thoughts, and his vision with them, were wandering into the past.

“Steady, Paul, steady!” said Henry. But Paul saw nothing now. A bullet, singing merrily, gave him a leaden kiss, and he sank down very gently, lying upon one arm, the red fast dyeing his buckskin hunting shirt.

Henry gave a cry when he saw Paul fall, and bent anxiously over his friend. The light was faint, but the bullet seemed to have gone entirely through the youth. Henry put his ear to his chest, and could hear his heart still beating, though faintly.

“Hold ’em back!” he shouted to his friends, “and I’ll help Paul!”

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Shif'less Sol, Tom, and Long Jim, although overwhelmed with anxiety for their young comrade, steadily turned their faces toward the foe, and replied to his fire. Henry, while the bullets whistled above his head, bent down and cut away Paul's hunting shirt. Yes, the bullet had gone entirely through his body and it was lucky for Paul that it had done so. No need now of the surgeon's probe. Henry bound up the wound tightly and stopped the bleeding. Then he undertook to lift the lad; but Paul, although still unconscious and a dead weight in his arms, groaned with pain. Henry laid him gently back on the ground.

"Boys," he said, "Paul is too weak to be moved, and we've got to hold this place until help comes or the enemy quits."

"I think the last skirmisher has escaped now," said Shif'less Sol, "but here we stay."

He spoke for them all, and Henry, unable to do anything more for Paul, turned his attention anew to the enemy. There was a sudden increase of the firing in front. The clouds and vapors rolled back, and the dancing figures in the thickets took on more semblance of reality. Suddenly Henry uttered a cry. His eyes of almost preternatural keenness had recognized one of the figures.

"What is it, Henry?" asked Shif'less Sol.

"Braxton Wyatt. He's in the thicket. I saw him a moment ago. I know his face and figure too well to be mistaken."

"I saw him, too," replied the shiftless one. "O' course he's escaped the bullets so fur. It's jest his luck."

"I think he knows we're here," said Henry, "and he's leading the attack on us. But we'll never yield this ground and Paul to such a fellow."

"No!" said the others with one voice.

The clouds and vapors closed in again. The darkness rolled up in wave after wave, and the renegade, leading on outlaw and red man, pressed the attack; but the four met them with courage and spirit unshaken.

The clouds and vapors rolled over attack and defense, but through the darkness fire answered fire. After a while the forest and the bayou, which had witnessed such a desperate display of human energy, sank into darkness and silence. The clouds, now in the zenith, began to give forth rain, but it was a gentle, beneficent rain, and it fell silently on the faces of the living and the dead alike.

CHAPTER XXII

THE CHOSEN TASK

Adam Colfax had gone through the battle unharmed, but that terrible night left new gray in his hair. He was a religious man, and, when the rifle fire died down in the forest and then went out, he uttered a devout prayer of thankfulness. He and his train, on the whole, had come through better than he had expected. There had been moments in the bayou when he thought no mortal strength or skill could break the chain that bound them. But the savage army and navy had been beaten off, and the core of his fleet was saved. He could still go on to Pittsburgh with his precious cargo.

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The trumpet was sounded again, and the boats, drawing together, began to count their losses. It was a long sad count, but those who survived were elated over their great victory.

It was then that Adam Colfax discovered the loss of the five who had helped him so much. Some one had seen them spring ashore to protect the escape of the skirmishers, and he ordered the fleet at once toward the land to save them, or, if too late, to bring their bodies to the boat.

A dozen boats swung in toward the bank and that of Adam Colfax was foremost. He was not conscious of the gentle rain, save that it felt cooling and pleasant on his face after the heat and smoke of the battle. Yet the brain of the stern New Hampshire man was still fevered, too. The battle had ceased, but the roar of the cannon-shots and the crash of the rifles yet echoed in his ears. The black forest that came down to the water's edge, was full of mystery and terror, and his was no timid heart. Smoke of the battle drifted among the trees or over the river, and the rain did not drive it all away. In the far distance low thunder muttered, and now and then flashes of heat lightning drew a belt of coppery red along the dark horizon.

Adam Colfax, stern man that he was, shuddered. But he would not flinch. He was the first to spring ashore. The forest assumed its most somber aspect. The trees were weird and ghostly, and there was no sound at all but the gentle drip, drip of the rain. Here the vapors and mists seemed to be imprisoned by the boughs and foliage, and the odors were heavy and acrid.

He had landed upon a little neck of land, and some one remarked: "It was here that the Kentuckians landed." But there was no sound in the forest and the scouts had reported already that the enemy had gone away. A great fear gripped at the heart of Adam Colfax. "They are all dead," he thought.

Men brought torches, as they no longer had any fear of sharpshooters; and Adam Colfax, followed by twenty others, entered the forest. The wind rose slightly and whipped the rain in his face, but he stepped into the deepest shadow, and, taking a torch from one of the men, held it aloft with his own hand. The light fell upon a little open space and, despite himself, Adam Colfax uttered a cry.

A figure lay outstretched under the shelter of arching boughs and bushes, and four more beside it were still and silent, leaning against a fallen log. There was such an absolute lack of motion, that Colfax at first thought that the soul of every one was sped.

"Good God! Dead! All dead!" he exclaimed.

But a great figure quickly uprose.

“No,” said Henry Ware, a fine smile passing over his boyish face. “We beat them off, and we’re just resting and waiting. Only Paul is seriously hurt, and so far we’ve been afraid to move him.”

Shif’less Sol, Jim Hart, and Tom Ross rose, too, and shook the raindrops from their clothes.

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“We didn’t have good shelter here,” said Shif’less Sol, “but I think the rain and its coolness have helped Paul.”

Adam Colfax bent over the boy and, in the dawning light, made a critical examination.

“He will live,” he said. “We’d have come to your relief long ago, had we known you were here.”

“It was Braxton Wyatt who led the last attack against us,” said Henry, “and as usual, he has had the good luck to escape. At least, we can’t find his body here, and I haven’t the slightest doubt that he’s living to do more mischief and that we’ll meet him again.”

It was true, and a diligent search revealed no trace of Wyatt. He had escaped, fleeing North after the battle, to rejoin his old friends, the Shawnees and Miamis.

Paul was lifted gently, after receiving treatment from the surgeon of the fleet, and carried to a boat, where he regained consciousness. His wound was severe, but his blood was so healthy that he would recover, according to the surgeon, with great rapidity.

When all five were together, Adam Colfax said to them collectively:

“You did the most of all to save the fleet.”

That was enough reward for them.

The body of Father Montigny was buried in the forest, and a little wooden cross was put at his head, Christian burial was given to the body of Alvarez, too, and the supply fleet prepared for a new start.

* * * * *

The fleet, two weeks later, was making its slow progress northward on the Mississippi. The great river was in an uncommonly friendly mood. Its usual yellow seemed silver in the brilliant morning light. Heavy masses of green fringed either low shore, and keen pleasant odors came from the wilderness.

Oliver Pollock, hearing of the battle of the bayou, had sent a second detachment from New Orleans to replace the men and boats lost and the ammunition shot away by the first, and now, stronger than ever, it continued under the brave and skillful leadership of Adam Colfax, on its great mission.

The five sat in the end of one of the largest boats, under the shade of a sail. Paul’s strength was fast coming back; he would not suffer the slightest harm, and they were happy.

“This is jest the life fur a lazy man like me,” said Shif’less Sol. “Nothin’ to do but go on an’ on, with people to wait on you, an’ say you hev already done your part.”

“We have had a wonderful escape,” said Paul.

The face of the shiftless one became grave, even reverent.

“So we hev, Paul,” he said. “Seems to me sometimes that we wuz spared fur a purpose. We wouldn’t hev come alive, every one of us, through all that, ef it hadn’t been intended that we should go on with the work that we are doin’, helpin’ and defendin’ our people the best we kin. I think we’ve been chose.”

“I think so, too,” said Paul, “and here and now we should devote ourselves to it, as long as it is needed. I want to do so. Are the rest of you willing?”

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“I am,” said Henry with emphasis.

“And I!” said the shiftless one.

“And I!” said Tom Ross.

“And I!” said Long Jim.

“Amen!” said Paul.

THE END