

FICTION

Edward Sylvester Ellis

Ned in the Block-House

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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FICTION



THE TELL-TALE ARROW.

BOY PIONEER SERIES.

NED IN THE BLOCK-HOUSE.

A TALE OF

EARLY DAYS IN THE WEST.

By EDWARD S. ELLIS,
AUTHOR OF "FIRE, SNOW AND WATER," "PERSEVERANCE PARKER," "A
YOUNG HERO," "SWEPT AWAY," ETC., ETC.

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"Mr. Ellis's works are favorites and deserve to be. He shows variety and originality in his characters; and his Indians are human beings and not fancy pieces."--NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW.

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NED IN THE BLOCK-HOUSE.



CHAPTER I.

IN THE FOREST.

"Now you've got him, Ned!"

"Sh! keep quiet!"

The boy who was addressed as Ned was kneeling behind a fallen oak, in a Kentucky forest, carefully sighting at a noble buck that stood in the middle of a natural clearing or opening, with head upraised and antlers thrown back, as though he scented danger, and was searching for the point whence it threatened.

The splendid animal was no more than a hundred yards distant, so that no better target could have been offered. He was facing the youth, who aimed at the point above his fore legs, which opened the path to the heart of the creature.

The lad, who was sighting so carefully, was Ned Preston, and his companion was a colored boy with the unique name of Wildblossom Brown. There was not a week's difference in their ages, each having been born four years before the immortal Declaration of Independence. As the date on which we introduce him to the reader was the autumn of 1788, the years of the two may be calculated without trouble.

Ned Preston, as he drew bead on the deer, was as certain of bringing him down as he was of "barking" the gray squirrel, when it chirped its mimic defiance from the topmost limbs of the gnarled oak or branching sycamore.

Wildblossom, or "Blossom," as he was invariably called, was anxious that his young master should not miss, for the chilly autumn day was drawing to a close, and they had eaten nothing since morning. They were eager to reach the block-house, known as Fort Bridgman, and scarcely allowed themselves any halt for many hours; but night was closing in, and they must soon go into camp; food was therefore as indispensable as fire.

The deliberation of Ned Preston led Blossom to fear the game would bound away before the trigger was pulled. When, therefore, the African saw the long brown barrel pointed for several seconds at the animal, he became impatient, and uttered the words given above.

The next moment there was a flash, and the buck made a prodigious bound, dashed straight toward the fallen tree behind which the boys were crouching, and fell within fifty feet of them.

"Dar's our supper suah's yo' born!" shouted the delighted negro, making a strong effort to leap over the prostrate oak so as to reach the game ahead of his companion. He would have succeeded if the oak had lain somewhat nearer the ground. As it was, he landed on his head and shoulders, and rolled over; but he was unharmed, and scrambling to his feet, ran to the deer.

Ned Preston was but a brief distance behind him, trailing his long rifle, walking rapidly, and very much puzzled over what was certainly an extraordinary occurrence; for although he had aimed at the buck, pulled the trigger, and the game had fallen, yet the astonishing fact remained, that Ned had not fired his gun.

Blossom Brown in his excitement did not notice that there was no report of the weapon--that, in short, the flint-lock (percussion guns being unknown at that day) had "flashed in the pan." When he saw the frantic leap and fall of the animal, he supposed, as a matter of course, it had been killed by the bullet of his young master; and if the latter had not stopped to examine his piece, he might have believed the same, so exactly did the wounding of the game accord with the useless click of the lock and flash of the powder.

"I didn't shoot that buck," called out Ned, as he ran up behind Blossom; "my gun wasn't fired at all."

"Dat hasn't got nuffin to do with it," was the sturdy response of Blossom, who was bent on having his meal without any unnecessary delay; "you p'inted de gun at him, and he drapped; dat's sufficacious."

"But *I* didn't kill him," insisted Ned, more determined on solving the mystery than he was on procuring supper.

"I tell you dat you did--no, you didn't!"

At that instant Blossom, who had drawn his hunting-knife, stooped over to apply it to the throat of the buck, when he gave an unexpected flirt of his head, bringing his antlers against the boy with such violence that he was thrown backward several feet. When Blossom found himself going, he made his last remark, inasmuch as the deer just then proved he was alive in a most emphatic manner.

But it was the last expiring effort, and the negro approached him again, knowing that all danger was past.

"De way ob it was dis way," he added, turning partly around so as to face his friend, who was examining his rifle as he poured powder from his horn into the pan; "you p'inted dat gun ob yours at de buck, and as he war lookin' dis way he seed you frough de bushes, and he knowed it war no use; so he jes' made a jump into de air, and come down pretty near dead, so as to sabe you de expense ob firin' off de powder, which aint very plenty in Kentucky."

This explanation seemed to satisfy the one who made it, but not his listener, who knew that the game was brought to earth by some one else.

And yet he was sure he had not heard the report of any other gun at the moment the animal seemed to have received its death-wound, so that it would seem some other cause must have ended its career.

While Blossom was working with his knife, Ned caught sight of something which gave him a suspicion of the true cause. The game lay on its side, and that which arrested the eye of the youthful pioneer was the feather of an Indian arrow.

"Turn him over," said Ned; and the lad, wondering why he told him to do so, complied.

The truth was then made known. From the side of the buck protruded a few inches of the shaft of an Indian arrow, to which the eagle's feather was attached. The flinty head had been driven clean through the heart and some distance beyond, so that the sharp point must have been near the surface on the other side.

The deer scarcely ever is known to fall instantly, no matter how it is shot; so that, with such a formidable weapon dividing the very seat of life, it still ran several rods before falling.

When Blossom saw the arrow his appetite vanished. He stooped over, staring at it a moment, and then suddenly straightened up and exclaimed:

"Let's run; dis aint any place for fellers like us!"

And, without waiting for the advice of his young master, the negro lad caught up his gun and made a dash for the prostrate tree from which he had rushed when the buck first fell.

Ned Preston was frightened beyond expression, for that which he had discovered was proof positive that one red man at least was close at hand; and when the American Indian was encountered in the Kentucky or Ohio forest, in the year of our Lord 1788, it was wise to consider him the most dangerous kind of an enemy.

Ned had poured the powder in his priming-pan and shaken it into the tube before he caught sight of the arrow, for he had been instructed, from the first day he carried a gun, that, after discharging the piece, he must not stir from his steps until it was reloaded and ready for use again.

The moment he understood what killed the buck he looked around for the Indian who did it. He could easily tell the direction whence the missile came, from the position of the game when struck; but the penetrating eye of the lad could detect nothing when he turned his gaze toward that, nor indeed toward any other point.

This did not surprise him, for the nature of the Indian leads him to be secretive in all he does; and many a time has his most destructive work been done without the sufferer catching a glimpse of him.

The conclusion of Ned was that a party of warriors were in the immediate neighborhood, and that, as an inevitable certainty, he and Blossom were at their mercy. If they chose to send in a shower of arrows, or fire the guns which some of them were likely to own, nothing could save the two lads.

If they chose to rush forward and take the boys captives, it was beyond the power of the youths to escape; in fact, as Ned looked at it, the two were already as good as prisoners, and the Indians were only keeping in the background for a brief while, for the sake of amusing themselves, as a cat sometimes plays with a mouse before crunching it in her jaws.

The situation was an alarming one in every sense, but Ned Preston showed a courage that his life on the frontier had taught him was the only wise course in such a trying time. He stooped over the carcass of the deer, and carefully cutting a choice slice from it, turned about and walked deliberately back to where Blossom was awaiting him, behind the oak.

Ned's desire to break into a run and plunge off into the woods was almost uncontrollable, and the sensation of expecting every minute an Indian arrow driven into his back, while resolutely keeping down to a slow and dignified walk, was beyond description.

Blossom Brown, who had started away in such haste, so dreaded some such shot that he threw himself behind the tree, where he lay still. He was strongly led to this course by his affection for his young master, whom he could not desert even for his own benefit.

"Whar am de Injines?" asked Blossom, in a husky whisper, as his friend walked around the root of the oak and joined him.

"They can't be far off," was the answer of Ned, "and there isn't any use of trying to run away from them. There must be a war party, and when they are ready they will come and take us. So let's kindle a fire and cook the meat."

This was an amazing proposition to make, but it was acted upon at once, extraordinary as it may seem. Blossom was very nervous while gathering wood and giving what assistance he could. He continually glanced around him, and peeped furtively over the trunk, wondering why the red men did not come forward and take them prisoners.

The youths were so accustomed to camping out that it was an easy matter to prepare their evening meal. They would have preferred the venison not quite so fresh, but they were glad enough to get it as it was; and when they sprinkled some of the salt and pepper, always carried with them, on the crisp, juicy steak, it was as toothsome and luscious as a couple of hungry hunters could wish.

True, the circumstances under which the meal was eaten were not conducive to enjoyment, for no person can be expected to feel unrestrained happiness when surrounded by a party of treacherous red men, who are likely to send in a shower of arrows, or a volley of bullets, just as you are raising a piece of meat to your mouth.

And yet, despite all that, Ned Preston and Blossom Brown masticated and swallowed the last morsel of the liberal piece taken from the buck slain by the Indian arrow.

The bleak, blustery autumn day was drawing to a close, when the boys arose to their feet, uncertain what was the best to do in the extraordinary situation.

The sky had been overcast during the afternoon, though there were no indications of an immediate storm. The wind blew strongly at times, with a dull, moaning sound, through the trees, from which the leaves rustled downward in showers. Now and then a few flakes of snow drifted on the air for some minutes before fluttering to the ground. Everything betokened the coming of winter, and, though it was the royal season for game, yet there was something so impressive in the autumn forest, now that the seasons were sinking into decay and death, that Ned Preston, sturdy and practical though he was, could not avoid a feeling of sadness when he set out from his home for the Block House, thirty miles away.

"Ned, what am de use ob loafin' round here?" asked Blossom a minute after they rose from their supper. "If dem Injines don't want to come forrard and speak to us, what's de use ob waiting for 'em?"

There was some wisdom in this question, and it was one that had presented itself to Ned while thoughtfully eating his venison steak.

Was it not possible that the warrior who fired the fatal arrow believed the boys belonged to a large party of white hunters and scouts, and had withdrawn long before? Was there not a chance of getting away by a sudden dash?

Night was not far off, and if they could keep out of the hands of the red men until then there was good ground for hoping they would elude them altogether.

Nothing was to be gained by discussing or thinking over the matter, and Ned acted at once.

"Follow me," he whispered to Blossom, "and don't make any noise."

The young hunter, trailing his rifle, stooped forward as far as he could without impeding the power to walk, and then ran directly from the tree, and back over the path that had brought them to the clearing.

Blossom was at his heels, traveling quite rapidly; but glancing behind him so often, he stumbled more than once. The negro had quick eyesight, and once when he turned his head he saw something flutter in the forest behind him; then there was what seemed to be the flitting shadow of a bird's wing as it shot by with the speed of a bullet.

But at the same instant a faint whizz caught his ear, and some object whisked past his cheek and over the shoulder of the crouching Ned Preston. The African had scarcely time to know that such a thing had taken place when he heard a quick thud, and there it was!

From the solid trunk of a massive maple projected an arrow, whose head was buried in the bark; the shaft, with the eagle's feather, still tremulous from the force with which it had been driven from the bow.

The same Indian who had brought down the buck had sent a second missile over the heads of the fugitives, and so close indeed that the two might well pause and ask themselves whether it was worth their while to run from such an unerring archer, who had the power to bring them down with as much certainty as though he fired the rifle of Daniel Boone or Simon Kenton.

But neither Ned Preston nor Blossom Brown was the one to stand still when he had the opportunity of fleeing from danger. They scarcely halted, therefore, for one glance at the significant missile, when they made a slight turn to the left, and plunged into the woods with all the speed they could command.

CHAPTER II.

THE BOY PIONEER--DEERFOOT, THE SHAWANOE.

Before proceeding further it is proper to give the information the reader needs in order to understand the incidents that follow.

Macaiah Preston and his wife were among the original settlers of Wild Oaks, a small town on the Kentucky side of the Ohio, during the latter portion of the last century, their only child being Ned, who has already been introduced to the reader. Beside him they had the bound boy Wildblossom Brown, a heavy-set, good-natured and sturdy negro lad, whom they took with them at the time they removed from Western Pennsylvania. He was faithful and devoted, and he received the best of treatment from his master and mistress.

Ned was taller and more graceful than the African, and the instruction from his father had endowed him with more book learning than generally falls to the lot of boys placed in his circumstances. Besides this, Mr. Preston was one of the most noted hunters and marksmen in the settlement, and he gave Ned thorough training in the art which is always such a delight for a boy to acquire.

When Ned was thirteen years old he fired one day at a squirrel on the topmost branch of a mountain ash, and brought it down, with its body shattered by the bullet of his rifle. The father quietly contemplated the work for a minute or so, and then, without a word, cut a hickory stick, and proceeded to trim it. While he was thus employed Ned was looking sideways at him, gouging his eyes with his knuckles and muttering,

"You might excuse me this time--I didn't think."

When the hickory was properly trimmed, the father deliberately took his son by his coat collar with one hand and applied the stick with the other, during which the lad danced and shouted like a wild Miami Indian. The trouncing completed, the only remark made by the father was--

"After this I reckon when you shoot a squirrel you will hit him in the *head*."

"I reckon I will," sniffled Ned, who was certain never to forget the instructions of his parent on *that* point.

Such was the training of Ned Preston; and at the age of sixteen, when we introduce him to the reader, there were none of his years who was his superior in backwoods "lore" and woodcraft.

In those times a hunter differed in his make-up from those of to-day. The gun which he carried was a long, single-barreled rifle, heavy, costly of manufacture, and scarcely less unerring in the hands of a veteran than is the modern weapon. It was a flint-lock, and of course a muzzle-loader. The owner carried his powder-horn, bullet-pouch, and sometimes an extra flint. Lucifer matches were unknown for nearly a half century later, the flint and tinder answering for them.

Ned Preston wore a warm cap made of coonskin; thick, homespun trowsers, coat and vest; strong cowhide shoes, and woollen stockings, knit by the same deft hands that had made the linen for his shirt. The coat was rather short, and it was buttoned from top to bottom with the old style horn button, over the short waistcoat beneath. The string of the powder-horn passed over one shoulder, and that of the game-bag over the other. Neither Ned nor Blossom carried a hunting-bag, for they had not started out for game, and the majority shot in Kentucky or Ohio in those days were altogether too bulky for a single hunter to take home on his back.

Some thirty miles in the interior from the settlement stood Fort Bridgman, a block-house on the eastern bank of the Licking River. It was erected six years before the time of which we are speaking, and was intended as a protection to a settlement begun at the same period; but, just as the fortification was finished, and before the settlers had all their dwellings in good form, the Shawanoes and Wyandots swooped down on them, and left nothing but the block-house and the smoking ruins of the log dwellings.

This effectually checked the settlers for the time; but one or two courageous pioneers, who liked the locality, began erecting other cabins close to the massive block-house, which had resisted the fierce attack of the red men. The man who had charge of the fortification was Colonel Hugh Preston, a brother of Macaiah, and of course the uncle of Ned, the hero of this story. He maintained his foothold, with several others as daring as he, and his wife and two daughters

kept him company.

There was a warm affection between the brothers, and they occasionally exchanged visits. When this was inconvenient, Ned Preston acted as messenger. He often carried papers sent down the Ohio to his father for the uncle, together with the letters forwarded to the settlement from their friends in the East.

On the day of which we are speaking he had, in the inner pocket of his coat, a letter for his uncle, one for his aunt, and one each for two of the garrison; so that his visit to the post was sure to be a most welcome one.

Between the settlement on the Ohio and the block-house on the Licking lay the thirty miles of unbroken forest. Ned and Blossom had made this journey in one day in the month of June, but their custom was to encamp one night on the way so as to give themselves abundance of time; and the trip was generally a most enjoyable one to them.

It must not be supposed they forgot the danger most to be dreaded was from the Indians who roamed over the Dark and Bloody Ground, and who held almost undisputed possession of hundreds of square miles of Kentucky at the opening of the present century.

There were scouts and runners threading their way through the trackless forests north and south of the Ohio, or coursing up and down the rivers, or spying out the actions of the war parties when they gathered near their villages and threw the tomahawk, daubed their faces with paint, and danced the war dance. These intrepid runners kept the frontier well informed of any formidable movements contemplated by the red men, so that no effective demonstration against the whites was feared.

Weeks and months passed, during which Ned Preston was not permitted to cross the intervening space between the block-house and the settlement, for the runners who came in reported great danger in doing so. Then again it looked almost as if the dawn of peace had come, and men were not afraid to move to and fro many furlongs distant from their homes.

Nearly twenty years had passed since the great pioneer, Daniel Boone, had explored a portion of the wonderful territory, and the numerous scenes of violence that had taken place on its soil made the name of the Dark and Bloody Ground characteristic and well-merited.

The several military expeditions which the Government had sent into the West had either been overwhelmingly defeated by the combined forces of Indians, or had accomplished nothing toward subduing the red men. The decisive campaign was yet to come.

But without dwelling on this portion of our story, we may say that in the autumn of 1788 comparative peace reigned over the portion of Kentucky of which we are speaking. When, therefore, the letters came down the Ohio in a flat-boat for Colonel Hugh Preston and several of those with him, and Ned asked permission to take them to his uncle, there was scarcely any hesitation in giving consent.

With this explanation the reader will understand how it came about that Ned and Blossom were in the depths of the Kentucky forest when the autumn day was closing, and while fully a dozen miles remained to pass before they could reach the block-house.

They had made a later start than usual from home, and rather singularly, although they had passed over the route so many times, they went astray, and lost several hours from that cause.

Soon after their departure from the settlement a friendly Shawanoe visited the place and warned the pioneers that trouble was coming, and it was wise to take more than usual precautions against surprise. When this Indian runner added that he was quite sure an assault was intended on the block-house, it can be understood that the parents of Ned were extremely alarmed for the safety of himself and Blossom.

If they should get through the stretch of forest to the block-house, their danger would not be removed; for an attack on that post was contemplated, and knowing its precise defensive power, as the Indians did, they would be likely to render the battle decisive.

"I hope the boys will reach the Colonel," said the father of Ned to his wife, "for they will have a chance to make a good fight for themselves."

"But the Colonel may know nothing of the attack intended, and he and the rest will be taken by surprise."

This doubt so disturbed the husband that he hurriedly sought the Shawanoe, who was still in the settlement, and asked him whether Colonel Preston had been apprised of the danger which threatened him. When informed that he had not, Mr. Preston insisted that Deerfoot, as the young Shawanoe was called, should make his way to the block-house

without delay. The Indian, known to be one of the fleetest of warriors, said that he was on the eve of starting on that errand, and he left at once.

Before going, he was told that the two boys were threading their way through the forest toward the station, and the anxious father asked him to bring the lads back, if he deemed it the safer course. Ned was a great favorite with the Shawanoe youth, and the latter promised to use every effort to befriend him.

The question left to Deerfoot was whether it was his duty to hasten forward and apprise Colonel Preston of the peril impending over the garrison, or whether it would be safe to let him wait until the lads were conducted back to Wild Oaks. Deerfoot was disposed to hurry to the Licking; but when a few miles from the settlement he struck the trail of the lads, which he followed with as much ease as the bloodhound would have displayed under similar circumstances.

As both parties had started in the same direction, the prospect was that a junction would speedily take place, and the three could make the rest of the journey together; but before long Deerfoot was surprised to discover that Ned and Blossom had strayed from the true course. He could not understand why this happened, and his misgiving for Ned, whom he liked so well, led him to resolve to follow up the boy, and find out the cause.

Deerfoot was pushing forward on his loping trot, which he was able to maintain hour after hour without fatigue, when his wonderful instinct or reason told him he was in the vicinity of a large war party of Wyandots, the natural allies of his own tribe in their wars upon the settlements.

His belief was that the boys had been captured by them, in which event little hope remained; but it required no special maneuvering on his part to learn that his fears were baseless. The trail of the lads made an abrupt turn, showing that Ned Preston had suddenly "located" himself, and had returned to the right course. Although the footprints of the Wyandots actually approached within a hundred yards of those of the boys, yet singularly enough they came no nearer, and diverged from that point; so that, in all probability, the war party never suspected how close they were to the prize that would have been so welcome to them.

Accustomed as Deerfoot was to all species of danger in the woods, his dusky face flushed when he looked to the ground and saw how narrowly the boys had missed a frightful fate.

Such being the case, it became the duty of the Shawanoe to acquaint himself with the purpose of the Wyandot party. He therefore went directly among them to make his inquiries. This was a delicate and dangerous proceeding, for although the subtle Indian had done his utmost to keep secret from his own people his friendship and services for the whites (inasmuch as such a knowledge on the part of his race would have ended his usefulness and life), he knew well enough that his double-dealing must become known sooner or later to the Indians, and for a year or more he had never appeared among his people without misgiving as to the result.

All the wonderful cunning of his nature was brought into play when he advanced to meet the Wyandots, who were in their war-paint. He saw there were twenty-three, and that they numbered the bravest and most daring of their tribe. The leader was the chief Waughtauk, a fierce foe of the whites, whose tomahawk and scalping-knife had been reddened with innocent blood many a time.

Deerfoot was received with every appearance of cordiality by the chief and his men, for all knew what a splendid warrior the young Shawanoe was, and some of them had witnessed the extraordinary speed which had saved his life more than once.

It is as easy for the American to play a part as for the Caucasian, and Deerfoot was not entirely satisfied. He kept his wits about him, and used extreme care in not placing himself at any disadvantage which it was possible to avoid; but all the friendship seemed genuine, and when Waughtauk told him it was his intention to attack the exposed cabins of the settlers, Deerfoot believed him. When he added that he meant also to take a survey of the settlements along the Ohio, with the object of seeing which offered the most favorable opening for a sudden assault by a large war party, the Shawanoe was quite certain he spoke the truth.

Deerfoot then asked why they did not assail the block-house on the Licking, whose exposed situation seemed to invite such attack. Waughtauk answered that Colonel Preston had proved a good friend to the Indians who visited him, and it was decided to spare him.

This answer excited the suspicion of the youthful Shawanoe that the Wyandot chieftain had been deceiving him from the first; but Deerfoot was too cunning to reveal anything of his thoughts. When he bade his friends good-by, they at least were misled into the belief that he held no suspicion of the "double tongue" with which they had spoken.

It was no difficult matter for Deerfoot, when fairly away from the Wyandots, to shadow them until he learned whether they had falsified or not.

They kept to the northward several miles, until they had every reason to believe a long distance separated them from the Shawanoe, when they changed to the left, turning again a short distance further on, until their faces were directly toward Fort Bridgman, the block-house on the Licking.

That settled the question beyond dispute; they had told untruths to Deerfoot, and their purpose was to descend upon the station defended by Colonel Preston and only three able-bodied men.

After this discovery, the Shawanoe stood a moment leaning thoughtfully on his bow; an important truth impressed him:

"They suspect that Deerfoot is a friend of the white man, and therefore an enemy of his own race," was the thought of the Indian, who realized the fearful meaning to him of such a suspicion.

CHAPTER III.

OLD FRIENDS.

The discharge of the second arrow over the head and shoulders of Ned Preston and Wildblossom Brown lent wings to their flight; instead of coming to a standstill, as they did a short time before, they bent all their energies to escape, and ran with the utmost speed.

In such an effort the advantage was on the side of Ned as compared with the negro, for he was much more fleet of foot, and, as a consequence, within two or three minutes he was almost beyond sight.

"Hold on dar!" shouted Blossom; "dat aint de fair ting to leave a chap dat way."

Ned Preston could not desert the lad in this fashion, though it would not help him to stay behind and share his fate.

But his own disposition and the training received from his father led him to reproach himself for leaving him even for so short a time. He therefore stopped, and called back--

"Hurry, Blossom; every minute counts."

"Dat's jes' what I am a doin'," panted Blossom, struggling forward; "but I never could run as well as you----"

At that moment Ned Preston, who was looking toward the African, caught sight of an Indian close behind him. The warrior was in close pursuit, though the intervening vegetation for the moment prevented the young pioneer from seeing him distinctly. Enough was visible, however, to make his aim sure, and Ned brought his rifle to his shoulder.

"I hear de Injines! Dey're right behind me!" shouted the terrified Blossom; "get 'em in range, Ned, and shoot 'em all!"

Such a performance as this was out of the question, as a matter of course, but the boy was determined to do his utmost to help his friend.

When Ned raised his gun there was but the single warrior visible, and the sight of him was indistinct; but it was enough to make the aim certain, and the youth felt that one red man was certain to pay for his vindictiveness. At the same time he wondered why no others were seen.

But at the very moment the finger of Ned was pressing the trigger, the Indian disappeared as suddenly as if he had dropped through the mouth of a cavern. The target at which the gun was aimed had vanished.

Mystified and astounded, Ned Preston lowered his piece and stared at the point where the red man was last seen, as if he doubted his own senses. At the same moment a suppressed whoop was heard, and the warrior stepped to view from behind the sycamore, where he had leaped to dodge the bullet of the rifle which he saw aimed at him.

Ned was in the act of raising his gun again, when he almost let it fall from his grasp, with the exclamation--

"DEERFOOT!"

As the single word fell from his lips, his eyes rested on the figure of a young Indian of singular grace and beauty, who, without regarding the bewildered Blossom, walked forward to greet Ned Preston.



THE MEETING WITH DEERFOOT.

Deerfoot the Shawanoe, at the most, was no more than a year older than young Preston. He was about the same height, but of lighter mould, and with a length of lower limbs and a suppleness of frame which betokened great natural abilities as a runner: when we add that these capabilities had been cultivated to the highest point, it will not seem unreasonable that Deerfoot's unequalled swiftness of foot was known to several tribes besides his own.

Although a Shawanoe by birth (which tribe at that day had their hunting-grounds north of the Ohio), Deerfoot roamed through the forests south, and the exploits of the youth in running were told in the lodges by the camp-fires of the Shawanoe, the Wyandot, the Miami, the Delaware, and the Cherokee.

His expertness with the bow and arrow, his bravery in battle, his skill on the hunt, the fact that his mother was shot by settlers, and his father was killed in the famous Crawford expedition, caused Deerfoot to be formally ranked as a warrior when he was only fourteen years of age.

His deftness with his primitive weapons was no less remarkable than his fleetness of foot. Had he been living to-day, he would have taken the prize at the annual archery tournaments, even though he used a hickory bow instead of the double-backed yew or lancewood, and his missiles were made of the former material, with a single feather instead of the three, and were tied instead of being glued in place.

The bow and arrows of Deerfoot would have made a sorry show among those of the fair ladies and graceful gentlemen at the archery contests in these times; but those same shafts of the dusky American, with the keen flint or iron heads, had been driven by him with such prodigious force that they had found the heart of the deer or bear or bison at scarcely less than a hundred yards.

Deerfoot therefore refused to use the rifle, but clung to the bow, whose use he began studying when he was less than three years old.

As we have said, the young Shawanoe, now no more than seventeen years of age, was graceful of figure, with elastic, supple limbs, and with a perfect symmetry of frame. When he smiled, which happened now and then, he disclosed two rows of teeth as white, even, and beautiful, and free from decay, as ever existed. The nose was slightly aquiline, the eyes as black and piercing as those of a serpent, the forehead high, the cheek bones slightly prominent, the whole expression pervaded by that slight tinge of melancholy which seems to be the characteristic of the American race.

Deerfoot's costume and dress were those of the defiant warrior, who was the implacable foe of the white man. His hair, as long, black and coarse as that of a horse's mane, was gathered in a knot or scalp-lock on the crown, where it was tied

and ornamented with eagle feathers, that were stained several brilliant hues; his hunting-shirt encased his sinewy arms, chest and waist, the ornamented skirt descending to his knees. The whole garment, made of buckskin obtained from the traders, was of a yellow color, the fringe being a deep crimson. Deerfoot shared the love of his people for flaring colors, as was shown by his handsomely decorated moccasins which encased his shapely feet, the various-hued fringes of his leggings, the string of bright beads around his neck, and the golden bracelet that he wore on his left wrist.

The red leathern belt, which clasped the waist of the young Shawanoe, formed a pretty contrast to the pale yellow of the hunting-shirt, and, a short distance off, would have been taken for the crimson sash worn by the civilized officer of modern times.

Behind this belt were thrust a tomahawk and hunting-knife, both keen of edge and terribly effective in the hands of the owner. The bundle of arrows was supported by a string passing around the neck, the missiles themselves resting behind the shoulder, the feathered points plainly seen by any one as they projected upward in front. In this place they were so accessible that Deerfoot, in discharging them at a foe or an animal, would have two or three in the air at the same time, there being what might be called a procession of arrows from the bow to the target, whatever it might be.

In the coldest weather, the youthful warrior gathered a heavy blanket about his shoulders, which hid all his figure, from his chin down to his twinkling moccasins. During the sultry season he occasionally threw off his hunting-shirt, except the skirt, so that arm, chest and neck were covered only by the rude figures which the mother had tattooed there by a most painful process during the days when Pa-wa-oo-pa, or Deerfoot, was a stoical papoose, tied to a flat piece of bark, and swinging in the tree branches, or lying motionless on the ground with limbs tied, and calmly watching the torturing operation with the bravery which is a part of the nature of the dusky hunters of the forest.

The bow of Deerfoot was of seasoned hickory, the string was dried sinew, and the weapon itself was all of six feet in length; so that, in discharging it, he did not hold it perpendicular, as is the rule, but in a slanting position; in short, the young Shawanoe violated more than one fundamental regulation in archery, but the fact remained that he could spit the gray squirrel on the top of the tallest oak; he could bring down the buck when leaping through the air; he had driven his sharp-pointed shaft through the shaggy body of the bison, and had brought the eagle flapping and dying to the ground when circling in the clear air far above his head.

Two years before, Deerfoot was the most vindictive enemy of the pioneers, who had slain both his father and mother. While attacking some settlers' cabins near Maysville, with nearly a score of other Shawanoes, they were surprised and almost annihilated by a party of whites led by Macaiah Preston, father of Ned. Deerfoot was wounded and taken captive. He fought like a young tiger, and the settlers, who knew his extraordinary skill and the injury he had done them, insisted on putting him to death.

But Macaiah Preston interposed, and would not permit it. He took him to his own home, and carefully nursed him back to rugged health and strength.

On the part of the good Samaritan he was assisted by his wife and Ned, who formed a strong attachment for the captive Shawanoe. The young brave more than reciprocated this friendship, the sentiment of gratitude being the most characteristic trait in his nature. He became henceforth the unfaltering ally and friend of the white race; from the bitterest enemy he was transformed into the most devoted friend, his fervency, like that of Saul of Tarsus, being as extreme as was his previous hatred.

The better to aid the settlers, Deerfoot returned to his own people, and kept up the semblance of enmity toward the pioneers. He even took part in several expeditions against them, but all proved disastrous failures to the assailants, and the youth did most effective service for those whom he had fought so fiercely a short time before.

It was of the utmost importance to Deerfoot that his true sentiments and real doings should be concealed from his people; for whenever the truth should become known to them, the most frightful death that could be conceived would be visited upon him.

The daring warrior believed his secret must be discovered; he believed he would fall a victim to their terrible vengeance sooner or later; but he was none the less faithful to the settlers. He simply resolved that he would never submit tamely to his fate; but, if the aborigines secured him for torment, it would be done by superior daring and subtlety.

Thus it was that the youthful Shawanoe was playing a most perilous and dangerous part; but he had played it so well that not until to-day had he seen just cause to believe any suspicion was afloat concerning himself.

The action of the Wyandots indicated that they preferred not to trust him with their secret. It was the first time anything of the kind had occurred, and it could not but cause uneasiness in the mind of Deerfoot.

It did not affect in the least, however, his course of action. He had set out to befriend Ned Preston and Wildblossom

Brown, and it was his purpose to apprise Colonel Preston at Fort Bridgman of the danger to which his block-house was exposed.

"Deerfoot!" exclaimed Ned Preston, stepping hastily toward him and extending his hand; "I never was more glad to see you in all my life."

The handsome mouth of the Shawanoe expanded just enough to show the white teeth between the dusky lips, and he took the hand of Ned and pressed it warmly, immediately allowing the palm to drop from his own.

Then, without speaking, he turned toward Blossom, who, having seen how matters stood, was scrambling rapidly forward to greet the young warrior, whom he knew so well, and who was the most valuable companion they could have at such a time.

Deerfoot was left-handed by birth, but he had trained himself until he was ambidextrous, and he could draw the bow, hurl the tomahawk or wield the scalping-knife with the right as well as with the left hand.

In no single respect, perhaps, was his mental power more clearly shown than in the celerity with which he acquired the English language. When several years younger he was able to hold a conversation with the traders; and during the short time he remained with Macaiah Preston, before "escaping" to his people again, he became so proficient that he could readily act as interpreter.

"War dat you dat fired dat arrer at us?" demanded Wildblossom, as he caught the hand of Deerfoot, who nodded his head, with just a shadowy smile.

The American Indian, as a rule, does not like the African race, and he often shows an unreasonable prejudice against him. There seemed to be such a distaste on the part of Deerfoot, but he concealed it so well that Blossom Brown never suspected its existence. He treated the negro lad kindly because he belonged to the Prestons, whom the Shawanoe loved above all others.

"I thought you war a better shot dan to miss us," added Blossom, with the purpose of teasing their dusky friend; "your arrer neber teched me nor Ned."

"Did it hit the buck?" asked Deerfoot, smiling a little more decisively.

"Dat war 'cause you war so close to him."

"Deerfoot stood further away than did his white brother, who harmed him not with his gun."

"That was because my rifle missed fire," Ned hastened to explain; "if it was not for that, the buck would have fallen in his tracks."

"*This* gun never misses fire," said the Shawanoe, holding up the bow with no little pride.

"But it misses folks dat it amp'inted at," remarked Blossom, reaching out and giving Deerfoot a nudge in the back.

"Will my brother with the face of the night, walk a long ways in the wood and let Deerfoot send a single arrow toward him?"

There was a gleam in the dark eye of the young Shawanoe as he made this request, and no doubt it would have proven a dangerous challenge for Blossom to accept. The negro himself did not notice the full significance of the question, but Ned Preston did, and he trembled over the temerity of Blossom, who believed that Deerfoot felt as strong friendship for him as he himself felt for the matchless young warrior.

Unsuspecting of the slumbering storm, the African lad fortunately took the very best course to avert it. Shaking his head with a laugh, he said:

"Dar aint no better rifle-shots dan masser Ned dar; and I'd radder stand up afore him a hundred yards off, and let him draw bead on me, dan hab Deerfoot send one ob dem arrers whizzin' arter dis chile."

CHAPTER IV.

THROUGH THE TRACKLESS FOREST--THE CAUSE.

The compliment to the young Shawanoe, although rudely expressed, was genuine, and at once dissipated the latent lightning that was on the point of bursting forth.

The lowering eclipse that overspread the dusky countenance instantly cleared away, and Deerfoot smiled more than before as he turned toward Ned Preston to see how he accepted the remark of his servant.

The young pioneer was pleased, and, slapping the lad on the shoulder, exclaimed heartily--

"You show your good sense there, Blossom; and after this, when I hear the folks say you are the stupidest boy in all Kentucky, I will quote what you have just said to prove they are mistaken."

Wildblossom raised his cap and scratched his head, somewhat doubtful as to how he should accept this remark. While he was considering the matter, Deerfoot and Ned faced each other, and talked concerning more important matters.

The sun, which had been scarcely visible during the day, was now below the horizon, and the shadows of night were creeping through the autumn woods. The air continued chilly, and moaned among the branches, from which the crisp leaves, turning from bright yellow and flaming crimson to dull brown, were continually drifting downward. The squirrels whisked from limb to limb, gathering their winter store of nuts, and chattering their defiance from the highest branches of elm, oak, ash, hickory, chestnut, or maple.

Now and then feathery particles of snow whirled around them, so light and downy that they scarcely found their way to the leaves below. It was the time of the sad and melancholy days, though the most joyous one to the hunter.

Ned Preston had been told by Deerfoot that he was the only Indian near them, and he was vastly relieved that the danger was found to be scarcely any danger at all.

As it was becoming colder, and night was closing in, the boy was anxious to go into camp. He could conceive of no reason why they should push forward any further before morning, as he held no suspicion of the critical condition of affairs.

But he quickly learned the truth from Deerfoot, who related, in his pointed way, the story of the Wyandots under the fierce war chief Waughtauk.

"And they are going to the block-house!" exclaimed the astonished lad.

The young warrior nodded his head to signify there could be no doubt of the fact.

"Then we had better turn around and go back to Wild Oaks as quickly as we can."

"Deerfoot must hurry to Colonel Preston and tell him of the Wyandots," said the Shawanoe; "that is Deerfoot's first duty."

"Of course; I didn't expect you to go with us; we can make our way home without help."

"But your feet wandered from the path only a few hours ago."

"We were careless, for we felt there was no need of haste," replied young Preston; "that could not happen again, when we know such a mistake might work us ill."

"But that was in the daytime; it is now night."

Ned felt the force of this fact, but he would not have hesitated to start on the back trail without a minute's delay.

"When we found we were going wrong we could stop and wait till the rising of the morning sun. I have several letters which you can deliver to my uncle."

Deerfoot shook his head; he had another course in mind.

"We will go to the fort; you will hand the letters to the white soldier; Deerfoot will show the way."

"Deerfoot knows best; we will follow in his footsteps."

The Shawanoe was pleased with the readiness of the young pioneer, who, it must be stated, could not see the wisdom of the decision of their guide.

If Waughtauk and his warriors were in the immediate vicinity of the block-house, the boys must run great risk in an attempt to enter the post. They could not reach the station ahead of the Wyandots, and it would be a task of extreme difficulty to open communication with Colonel Preston, even though he knew the loyalty of the dusky ally of the whites.

Deerfoot would have a much better prospect of success alone than if embarrassed by two companions, whom the other Indians would consider in the light of the very game for which they were hunting.

It seemed to Ned that it would be far more prudent for the young Shawanoe to take the letters and make his way through the trackless forest, while Ned and Blossom spared no time or effort in returning to Wild Oaks.

But the matchless subtlety and skill of Deerfoot were appreciated by no one more than by young Preston, who unhesitatingly placed himself under his charge.

But cheerfully as the wishes of the Shawanoe were acceded to by the white boy, the African lad was anything but satisfied. Of a sluggish temperament, he disliked severe exertion. He had not only been on the tramp most of the day, but, during the last half hour, had been forced to an exertion which had tired him out; he therefore objected to a tramp that was likely to take the better portion of the night.

"We'd better start a fire here," said he, "and den in de mornin' we'll be fresh, and we can run all de way to de Lickin', and get dar 'bout as soon as if we trabel all night and got tired most to def."

The Shawanoe turned upon him in the dusky twilight, and said--

"My brother with the face of the night may wait here; Deerfoot and his friend will go on alone."

With which decisive remark he wheeled about, and, facing southwest, strode off toward the block-house on the Licking.

"Wildblossom aint gwine to stay here, not if he knows hisself, while you folks go to your destruction," exclaimed the servant, falling into line.

The strange procession was under way at once. Deerfoot, as a matter of course, took the lead, Ned Preston stepping close behind him, while the African kept so near his young master that he trod on his heels more than once.

The Shawnee displayed his marvellous woodcraft from the first. Although the ground was thickly strewn with leaves, his soft moccasins touched them as lightly as do the velvet paws of the tiger when stealing through the jungle. Ned Preston took extreme care to imitate him, and partially succeeded, but the large shoes of Blossom Brown rumbled and tumbled the dry vegetation despite every effort to avoid it.

It was not until reproved by Ned, and the gait was slackened, that, to a certain extent, the noisy rustling was stopped.

There were no stars nor moon in the sky, there was no beaten path to follow, and they were not on the bank nor along the watercourse of any stream to guide them; but the dusky leader advanced as unerringly as does the bloodhound when trailing the panting fugitive through the marshy swamps and lowlands.

As the night deepened, Ned saw only dimly the figure of the lithe and graceful young warrior in front. His shoulders were thrown forward, and his head projected slightly beyond. This was his attitude while on the trail, and when all his faculties were alert. Eye and ear were strained to the highest tension, and the faint cry of a bird or the flitting of a shadowy figure among the forest arches would have been detected on the instant.

Ned Preston could catch the outlines of the scalp-lock and eagle feathers, which took on a slightly waving motion in response to the long, loping tread of the Indian; occasionally he could detect a part of the quiver, fastened back of the shoulder, and the upper portion of the long bow, which he carried unstrung in his right hand.

Then there were moments when the guide was absolutely invisible, and he moved with such silence that Ned feared he had left them altogether. But he was there all the time, and the journey through the desolate woods continued with scarcely an interruption.

Suddenly Deerfoot came to a halt, giving utterance at the same moment to a sibilant sound as a warning to Ned Preston, who checked himself with his chin almost upon the arrow-quiver. It was different with Blossom, who bumped

his nose against the shoulders of his young master with such violence that Ned put up his hand to check himself from knocking the guide off his feet.

Neither Ned nor Blossom had caught the slightest sound, and they wondered what it was that had alarmed Deerfoot.

No one spoke, but all stood as motionless as the tree trunks beside them, those behind waiting the pleasure of him who was conducting them on this dangerous journey.

For fully five minutes (which seemed doubly that length) the tableau lasted, during which the listening followers heard only the sighing of the night-wind and the hollow murmur of the great forest, which was like the voice of silence itself.

Then the faint rustle of the leaves beneath the moccasins of the Shawanoe showed that he was moving forward again, and the others resumed walking, with all the caution consistent with necessary speed.

Fully a half mile was passed in this manner, the three advancing like automata, with never a whisper or halt. Blossom, although wearied and displeased, appreciated the situation too well to express his feelings, or to attempt anything to which either of the others would object.

"Dey aint likely to keep dis up for more dan a week," was the thought which came to him; "and when I make up my mind to it, I can stand it as long as bofe of 'em together."

However, Blossom had almost reached the protesting point, when he heard the same warning hiss from the Shawanoe, and checked himself just in time to avoid a collision with his young master.

The cause of this stoppage was apparent to all: they stood on the bank of a creek a hundred yards wide, which it was necessary to cross to reach the block-house. It ran into the Licking a number of miles south, and so far below Fort Bridgman that there was no way of "going round" it to reach the station.

It was the custom of the boys, when making the journey between Wild Oaks and the block-house, to ferry themselves over on a raft which they had constructed, and which was used on their return. As they took a course each time which brought them to the same point on the tributary, this was an easy matter. During the summer they sometimes doffed their garments, and placing them and their guns on a small float, swam over, pushing their property before them.

The water was too cold to admit of any such course now, unless driven to it by necessity; and as Deerfoot had brought them to a point on the bank far removed from the usual ferrying place, Ned concluded they were in an unpleasant predicament, to say the least.

"How are we going to get across?" he asked, when they had stood motionless several minutes looking down on the dim current flowing at their feet.

"The creek is not wide; we can swim to the other shore."

"There is no doubt of that, for I have done it more than once; but there is snow flying in the air, and it isn't a favorite season with me to go in bathing."

A slight exclamation escaped the Shawanoe, which was probably meant as an expression of contempt for the effeminacy of his white friend.

Be that as it may, he said nothing, nor did he, in point of fact, mean to force the two to such a disagreeable experience.

"Wait till Deerfoot comes back."

As he uttered these words he moved down the bank, while Blossom Brown threw himself on the ground, muttering--

"I would like to wait here all night, and I hope he has gone for some wood to kindle a fire."

"There is no likelihood of that," explained Ned, "for he is too anxious to reach the block-house."

"I tink he is anxiouser dan----*See dat!*"

At that moment the dip of a paddle was heard, and the lads caught the faint outlines of a canoe stealing along the stream close to the shore. In it was seated a single warrior, who did not sway his body in the least as he dipped the paddle first on one side the frail boat and then on the other.

"He's arter us!" whispered Blossom, cocking his rifle.

"Of course he is; it's Deerfoot."

"I forgot all about dat," said the lad, lowering his piece, with no little chagrin.

Ned Preston now cautiously descended the bank, followed by Blossom, and while the Shawanoe held the craft against the shore, they stepped within, Ned placing himself in the bow, while his companion took a seat at the stern.

Then, while Deerfoot deftly poised himself in the middle, he lightly dipped the ashen paddle alternately on the right and left, sending the canoe forward as gracefully as a swallow.

"Whose boat is that?" asked Ned.

"It belongs to some Pottawatomie," answered the Shawanoe, speaking with a confidence which showed he held no doubt in the matter, though he might have found it hard to tell his companions the precise means by which he gained the information.

Deerfoot, instead of speeding directly across, headed south, as though he meant to follow the stream to its confluence with the Licking. Suspecting he was not aware of his mistake, Blossom deemed it his duty to remind him of it.

"You are gwine de wrong way, if you did but know it, Deerfoot; de oder side am ober dar."

Perhaps the young Shawanoe indulged in a quiet smile; if so, he made no other sign, but continued down the creek with arrowy swiftness for two or three hundred yards, when he began verging toward the other shore.

Ned Preston made no remark, but alternately peered ahead to discern where they were going, and back, that he might admire the grace and skill with which the Indian propelled the light structure.

All at once, with a sweep of the paddle, the boat was whirled around with such suddenness that Blossom Brown thought they were going to upset and be precipitated into the water. By the time he recovered himself the delicate prow touched the shore as lightly as if drawn by a lady's hand.

Ned instantly stepped out, the others doing the same. When everything was removed, Deerfoot stooped over, and, without any apparent effort, raised the canoe from the water.

"I s'pose he am gwine to take dat along to hold ober our heads when it rains."

But Blossom was altogether wide of the mark in his theory. The Shawanoe carried it only a few paces, when he placed it under a clump of bushes, pulled some leaves over it, laying the paddle beneath, and then once more turned to resume their journey.

CHAPTER V.

"SHUT OUT."

Deerfoot informed his friends that they were now within seven miles of the block-house. Although the night was far advanced, he expected to reach their destination long before morning. At that season the days were short, and as the Shawanoe was familiar with the woods, and could travel with as much certainty in the darkness as the light, there was no delay counted upon, unless they should approach the vicinity of some of the Wyandots.

The order of march was taken up precisely as before, Deerfoot warning the others to walk with the least noise possible, he setting the example by advancing absolutely without any sound that could betray his footsteps.

Ned Preston felt the touch of a few wandering snowflakes against his cheek, but there were not enough to show themselves on the leaves. The exercise of walking and their thick garments kept them sufficiently warm, though it would have been different had they been in camp. In the latter case, as they had no encumbering blankets, it would have gone ill without a roaring camp-fire.

The journey now became monotonous, even to young Preston, who found it tiresome to walk so continuously without the least noise or occurrence to awaken alarm. They must have gone at least four miles in this manner, Blossom plodding along with a certain dogged resolution which kept him close on the heels of his young master.

The latter often felt like protesting, but nothing could have persuaded him to do so. It would have offended Deerfoot, who was the guide of the party, and who was directing affairs in accordance with his own theory of strategy. He knew that that scout is sure to meet disaster, sooner or later, who allows his impatience to influence his judgment, and who fails to use the most extreme caution whenever and wherever there is the shadow of danger.

When Preston began to believe they were in the vicinity of the Licking, Deerfoot came to an abrupt and noiseless halt. This time he spoke the single word--

"Listen!"

The two did as requested, but were unable to detect anything beside the hollow moaning of the wind through the trees, and the faint, almost inaudible murmur of the distant Licking. Several minutes passed, and then the guide asked--

"Do my brothers hear anything?"

They answered that they could distinguish nothing more than was always to be heard at such times.

"We are close to the camp of the Wyandots," was the alarming information.

"How do you know that?" inquired his friend.

"Deerfoot heard them," was the explanation, in such a guarded undertone that his companions barely caught his words.

No one thought of doubting the assertion of the Indian, incredible as it sounded, and the truth of his declaration was soon manifest. Certain as he was that they were close to a party of his own race, the advance was made with greater care than before.

He picked his way with such patience and slowness that Blossom found plenty of time in which to lift his feet as high as he knew how, setting them down as though afraid of waking a slumbering baby near at hand.

Within two rods of the spot where they halted they suddenly caught the starlike twinkle of a point of fire directly ahead. Instantly all stopped, and no one spoke; they knew that it was the camp-fire of the party whose presence the Shawanoe learned a few minutes before.

Nothing more than the glimmer of the light could be seen, because there were so many trees and so much vegetation intervening.

"Let my brothers wait till I return," said Deerfoot, turning his head so as not to speak too loud.

"It shall be done," replied Ned Preston, who was on the point of asking a question, when he became aware that he and

Blossom were alone: Deerfoot had vanished with the silence of a shadow.

"If we've to wait yar a long time," said Blossom in a husky whisper, "we might as well sot down."

Preston made no objection to this on the part of his servant, but he remained standing himself, leaning against a tree, while Blossom supported his head in the same way.

"I don't care if Deerfoot doesn't come back for a week," remarked the negro lad, with a sigh of contentment that at last he was permitted to rest his limbs.

"He will not stay long," said Ned; "and the best thing we can do while he is away is to do nothing."

"Dat's just what I'm doin' as hard as I can."

"I wouldn't even speak, Blossom, for some of the Indians may be near us."

"Dat suits me jes' as well," assented the other, who thereafter held his peace.

Meanwhile, Deerfoot the Shawanoe approached the camp-fire of the Indians with all the care and skill he could command. Possibly he would have incurred no great risk by stalking boldly forward, for he was already known among the tribe, which was an ally of the Shawanoes.

But the incident of the afternoon had taught him a lesson, and he knew such a course would deepen the suspicion which some of the Wyandots already held against him.

They had given him to understand they were on their way to reconnoiter Wild Oaks and some of the settlements along the Ohio. If they should find he was dogging them, what other proof could they ask that he was playing the part of spy and enemy?

For this reason the Shawanoe determined to avoid observation, and to make his reconnoissance precisely as though he were an avowed foe of those of his own race.

He had not gone far when he gained a full view of the camp. That which immediately caught his attention and increased his misgiving was the fact that this was a new party altogether. Waughtauk did not lead these warriors, none of whom was with the company whom the young scout encountered during the afternoon.

But several other important facts were significant: these were also Wyandots; they numbered thirteen, and they were in their war-paint. They had probably left their towns north of the Ohio at the same time with Waughtauk, and they had separated, the better to carry out some project the chief had in view.

Shrewd and sagacious beyond his years as was the Shawanoe, he was in a situation in which he was compelled to do no little guessing. He was satisfied that the chief and his warriors intended to compass the destruction of the block-house, sometimes known as Fort Bridgman, and to massacre every one within it.

The Wyandots, like the Shawanoes, were brave fighters, and why they had not assailed the post was hard to tell, when it would seem they numbered enough to overwhelm the garrison. It looked as if Colonel Preston had discovered his danger, though it was not an uncommon thing for a war party to delay their attack on a station a long time after it seemed doomed beyond all hope.

The Wyandots had disposed themselves in a fashion that looked as though they meant to stay where they were through the night. They had evidently finished a meal on something, and were now smoking their pipes, lolling on their blankets, sharpening their knives with peculiar whetstones, cleaning their guns, now and then exchanging a few guttural words, the meaning of which not even the sharp-eared Shawanoe could catch.

"They mean to attack the block-house," was the conclusion of Deerfoot, who tarried only a few minutes, when he began a cautious return to his two friends, who were found as he had left them, except that Blossom Brown was on the verge of slumber.

Deerfoot quickly explained what he had learned, and added that the difficulty of entering the block-house was increased; but he believed, by acting promptly, it could be done with safety. Ned Preston was inclined to ask wherein the use lay of all three going thither, when one would do as well, and the obstacles were much greater than in the case of a single person.

But the course of the guide convinced Preston that he had some plan which he had not yet revealed, and which necessitated the entrance of the young pioneer at least into the block-house.

"Have you any knowledge when the Wyandots will attack Colonel Preston?"

"The break of day is a favorite hour with Deerfoot's people, but they often take other seasons."

"Why are they not closer to the station?"

"They are already close; we are within three hundred yards of the fort; Deerfoot will lead the way, and if the warriors' eyes are not like those of the owl, we may pass through the gate before the first sign of light in the east."

There was no necessity of telling Ned and Blossom that their caution must not be relaxed a single moment: no one could know better than they that the briefest forgetfulness was likely to prove fatal, for the Wyandots were all around them. The detection of either lad would seal his fate.

The purpose of Deerfoot was to steal nigh enough to the block-house to apprise the inmates that they were on the outside, and awaiting an opportunity to enter. Could they succeed in letting Colonel Preston know the truth, all three could be admitted in the darkness, with little danger to themselves or to the garrison.

What the Shawanoe feared was that the Wyandots had established a cordon, as it might be termed, around the block-house. It was more than probable that Colonel Preston had discovered the approach of the hostiles in time to make quite thorough preparations.

While this might not avert the attack of the red men, it was certain to delay it. The next most natural proceeding for the commandant would be to dispatch a messenger to Wild Oaks, to inform the settlers of his peril, and to bring back help. The assailing Indians would anticipate such a movement by surrounding the block-house so closely that the most skillful ranger would find it impossible to make his way through the lines.

If such were the case, it followed as a corollary that no friend of the garrison would be able to steal through the cordon and secure entrance into the building: the gauntlet, in the latter case, would be more difficult than in the former, inasmuch as it would be necessary first to open communication with Colonel Preston, and to establish a perfect understanding before the task could be attempted.

Deerfoot turned to the right, so as to pass around the camp-fire, but his advance was with a caution which can hardly be pictured. Ned Preston could not hear the slightest sound, and where the darkness was so deep it was hard work to keep informed of his movements.

When the Shawanoe stopped, he merely reached his hand back and touched Ned, who did the same to Blossom; when the start was made again, a slight sibilant sound, which a listening Indian twenty feet distant would not have noticed, told the fact. No one ventured to speak, even in the most guarded whisper.

Had Deerfoot been alone, he would have advanced much faster; but he gave his companions time to raise their feet and put them down again with such slowness and care that not a leaf was overturned.

Blossom Brown did much better than Preston anticipated. The lad understood the need of this elaborate caution, and as he had the two in front of him, there was no excuse for his making a false step. Once he began a sentence in a husky whisper, but before it was half finished his young master gripped him by the shoulder, as if with an iron vise, and the attempt was not repeated.

After a time, which seemed almost interminable, the camp-fire was flanked, though still in sight. The situation of the three, as a consequence, became more delicate and perilous than before; for, to effect a safe withdrawal from the neighborhood, they would have to pass through the lines again, while there could be no doubt "the woods were full" of other warriors.

Suddenly the serpent-like hiss of the Shawanoe sounded, and all three came to a stand-still. This was scarcely done when Deerfoot, for the first time since the reconnoissance proper began, broke silence by exclaiming, in a voice just audible,

"Stoop down!"

His order was obeyed (for his companions knew the danger was imminent) without a word or a second's hesitation.

Their senses were on the alert, but for a minute or two they neither heard nor saw anything to explain the cause of the alarm of their guide. At the end of the brief spell, a faint rustling was noticed near them, and the listeners held their very breath.

This disturbance of the leaves must have been caused by the feet of Wyandot warriors, who were altogether closer than was comfortable for the lads crouching on the ground. In the gloom, deepened by the shadow of the wood, it was impossible to see a half dozen feet; but while Ned Preston was peering through the darkness in the direction whence

came the noise, a figure suddenly passed across the field of vision between him and the camp-fire.

Looking in the latter direction, he could see something moving before the light. That which arrested the attention of Ned was the head and shoulders of an Indian warrior, who was gliding with a silence which led the spectator to suspect at first he was deceived. But the contour of the scalp-lock, shoulders and chest was unmistakable.

The first had scarcely vanished, when a second and a third followed in precisely the same fashion; but though the eye strained itself to catch sight of more, none appeared. The three were all who came so near detecting the boys.

Ned Preston and Blossom Brown felt that the perfect caution displayed by the Shawanoe was more than repaid; for had it been less, the hostiles would have learned their presence before they themselves were detected.

All at once young Preston became aware that Deerfoot was gone; he had quietly departed, as was his custom, and would return when he saw fit. Ned crept far enough backward to allow him to whisper the fact to Blossom, without any risk of being heard by other ears no matter how near them.

A full half hour passed, when the Shawanoe returned as silently as he had departed.

As Preston suspected, he had been off on a reconnoissance, where he wanted no companions. He announced the result in the alarming words--

"Wyandots are everywhere; we cannot enter the fort."

CHAPTER VI.

THE BLOCK-HOUSE.

The block-house, known near a century ago as Fort Bridgman, stood on the right bank of the Licking river in Kentucky, and was some thirty odd miles southwest of the present city of Maysville.

The block-house proper was a substantial structure of heavy logs, and consisted of only two rooms--one above and below. The lower story was a dozen yards square, and the upper was two feet greater in each direction, for the builders followed the frontier fashion of projecting the second story over the first. This projection being pierced with portholes, gave opportunity to the garrison to fire down on the heads of their assailants, who might attempt to batter down the door, or make a rush for the interior.

The roof was so steeply shelving that the most agile Indian could not sustain himself on it. On each side was a trap-door, intended for use in emergency. The roof itself was composed of thick slabs of oak, and, like the logs, doors, and every portion of the building, was bullet-proof.

The structure stood at the angle of a square of one hundred feet, which was inclosed by a strong stockade. This consisted of logs split through the middle, one end sharpened and driven deep into the earth, leaving the upper portions, which were of irregular height, nine or ten feet above the ground.

Standing at the angle of this square, it will be seen that the block-house formed a part of two sides. On that which faced the Licking was a door and one window; on the opposite side, which opened into the stockade or inclosure, were also a door and window. On the other two sides were two windows, but no door; the former were so narrow that no Indian warrior could force his way through them, while the doors of puncheon slabs would have resisted for a long time the pounding of a battering-ram. The windows were all on the ground floor.

The fort having been built expressly for defensive purposes, where the peril was known to be great, it lacked nothing which the rude frontier warfare could suggest. It was so abundantly pierced with loop-holes that the garrison commanded every approach.

If the red men attempted to scale the stockade at any point, they had to expose themselves to the bullets of the unerring Kentuckians behind the logs; while, if they secured a closer approach on in the darkness of night, the defenders could shoot them through the loopholes in the projecting floor above.

There was a gate on each side of the stockade, except on that furthest removed from the block-house. Only one of these was used, and that was on the southern side. The wooden chimney was at the corner, entirely within the stockade, and the numerous attacks which the structure had repelled proved, more than anything else, the strength and power of resistance of the defence.

The interior of the fort, as some called it, was of the most primitive character. Below was a rough slab floor, with a fireplace, the smoke from which found its vent up the wooden chimney. There were a bench, a table, and several rude chairs, while a barrel of corn-meal was generally kept pretty well filled against the emergency which all felt was liable to arise without an hour's notice.

The second story, although larger, as we have already stated, was furnished with the same simplicity. It was supposed that, in case of danger, this floor would be used more than the other by the defenders. It had the two trap-doors in the steep roof, and was liberally ventilated by means of the numerous loopholes which let in bars of light from every direction, and permitted the outlook to take in as extensive a vision as though the spectator was not surrounded by any walls at all.

Fort Bridgman faced the Licking river on the west, the stockade extending eastward. It was originally intended to embrace the six cabins which were put up by the settlers, but these were finally left outside, and the inclosed square looked like a small parade-ground, to be used for the benefit of the garrison. It contained near the centre a well, to be appealed to in emergency, though it was not placed within the building itself, so as to shut off the possibility of its being seized by an attacking force. Colonel Preston more than once had expressed a purpose to have such a well dug, but it was deferred from time to time until, as is generally the case, the necessity was forgotten altogether.

In the roomy upper story of the block-house was always kept a barrel of water, blankets, a few chairs, a number of axes,

shovels, spades, picks, and utensils useful in a new settlement. Fort Bridgman at one time promised to become an important town in Kentucky; but a fierce raid by a band of red men, one tempestuous night in mid-winter, destroyed every cabin except the block-house, in which only a few settlers found safe refuge from the vengeful warriors.

In the autumn of which we are speaking there were only two cabins beside the defence. These stood outside the stockade, and one was occupied by Colonel Hugh Preston, his wife Maria, and his two daughters--Mary, aged ten, and Susie, eight years old.

Jo Stinger, an old Indian fighter of the early days in Kentucky, made his home with the family, while Jim Turner and Sam Megill occupied the other. The last two were brothers-in-law, and it was the intention of the latter to bring his wife and three children from Wild Oaks in the spring to live in the dwelling which he had taken so much pains to erect and fit for their coming.

Such was the garrison of the block-house in the autumn when Colonel Preston, while hunting in the woods, learned of the presence of a war party of Wyandots. It was by a pure accident, or rather providence, that he discovered the alarming fact, and he lost not a moment in improving the important knowledge.

He hastened home, and the settlers gathered in the block-house, with such extra provisions, blankets, fuel, and other necessaries as they could get together. The doors of the building and the gates of the stockade were fastened, and the men stationed themselves in the most available points to detect the approach of their enemies.

The little garrison were none too soon in these preparations, for within the succeeding half hour the Wyandots were seen on the edge of the woods, and creeping along the bank of the Licking one hundred yards away. They were quick to note that, with all their secrecy of movement, their approach had been discovered; if they had any doubts on the point, they were removed by a couple of rifle-shots that were sent hurtling among the bushes which partly concealed their bodies.

"It's a great disappointment to them," said Jo Stinger, as he peered through a loophole, "for they had every reason to believe we would be surprised."

"I hope it will be so much of a disappointment that they will postpone the siege," remarked the Colonel.

The old hunter shook his head, and added--

"That depends very much on how many redskins are out there. If the party is not very large, they will be apt to give it up; but if there are as many as I fear, the varmints will hang on, in the hope of cleanin' us out."

"They will have no easy task to do that," remarked the Colonel, with a flash of the eye; "this isn't the first time it has been tried, and it won't be the first time it has failed."

"Suppose it is a success?" said his wife gently.

The Colonel turned when he heard the familiar voice at his elbow, and, as he noticed Mary and Susie playing on the floor, something like a pang went to his heart. The sight caused him to feel more vividly than ever before the dreadful meaning of the word "failure," which had just passed the lips of his beloved wife.

"Failure!" he repeated, as he placed his arm affectionately on her shoulder; "do you regard it possible, when I have *you* and the little ones depending on us?"

"I know every man, and myself as well, will fight to the end, but even that does not always avail: the bravest must succumb when the assailants overwhelm them."

Tears glistened in her eyes, as she tried hard to look courageous, but a mother lives in her affections, and no one could have felt more deeply than did she, that all she valued in the world was at that moment within the wooden walls of the block-house, while a merciless foe was on the outside, as eager as so many jungle tigers to reach them.

"We have an abundance of ammunition," added the husband, seeking to hide a vague fear which was creeping over him; "and we can stand a longer siege than the Indians will care to maintain against us."

"I trust so, but I cannot feel the hope which sustains you: I wish you would send word to your brother at Wild Oaks, that he may give us help before it is too late."

This plan, although not named until now, was in the minds of more than one member of the garrison. Colonel Preston had asked himself whether it was not the prudent thing to do, and he looked at Jo Stinger to learn what he thought of it.

The old scout nodded his head in a way to signify he was favorable, and said--

"It's the right thing, Colonel, and I'm the man to do it."

"But how can you get out? The Indians will be on the watch, and we are too few in number to spare a man."

"Didn't I carry the news to Wild Oaks two years ago, when it looked as though all of us was going under sure?"

"You did--that's a fact; but was the risk as great as now?"

"I think this is no greater, and it may not be as great: that's to be found out. That time, I took three hours to get through the red skin lines; but when I had shook 'em clear, I done some of the tallest traveling of my life."

"If you think it best, you may try it after dark."

"I'll do it," said the settler, with a compression of the lips which showed his earnestness. He had perilled his life many a time during the years spent on the frontier, and he was not the man to hesitate, when duty called him.

It was now the middle of the afternoon of the blustery autumn day which saw the approach of Ned Preston, Blossom Brown and the Shawanoe, Deerfoot, to the vicinity of the block-house. The garrison were sure to use the utmost vigilance until the all-important question was settled, and it was not probable the besieging Wyandots would make any serious attack before the night was well advanced.

When Megill, a tall, sinewy, iron-limbed pioneer, learned the intention of Stinger to make the attempt to reach Wild Oaks with a view of bringing help, he commended the plan and said he would gladly take his place. But Stinger would not consent, and it was understood that the dangerous task was to be undertaken by him who proposed it.

As the chilly night settled over river, forest and clearing, every one in the block-house was impressed with the solemnity of the situation. Even little Mary and Susie talked in hushed voices of the wicked Indians on the outside, and wondered why they wished to harm those who had never harmed them. When they knelt at their mother's knee, their prayers were touching in their earnestness and simple faith, and brought tears to the eyes of their parents.

"God will take care of us," said Mary to the elder, with the trusting belief of childhood; "so don't feel bad, papa and mamma."

The mother had made them a bed in the corner, beyond the reach of any stray bullets that might find their way through the loopholes; and, as she tucked the blankets around them and kissed them good-night, she added her own petition to heaven that it would guard and shield them from all harm.

Stinger, Megill and Turner were at the loopholes; and, while the twilight was deepening within the gloomy block-house, Colonel Preston lingered a few minutes beside his wife, who was seated on a rude stool waiting for the little ones to close their eyes in slumber.

"Why should we feel alarmed, Maria," he asked, "when, as I told you a short time ago, we have plenty of ammunition and the means to defend ourselves? There are five rifles, one for each of us, including yourself; these walls are too strong to be battered down, and we can make our aim too sure for the Wyandots to expose themselves long to it."

"That is all true, Hugh, and I hope that nothing I have said will cause misgiving on your part; but, at the best, there are only a very, *very* few of us, and you know accidents may happen: suppose," she added in a tremulous voice, "one or two of you should fall----"

"Colonel, begging pardon," interrupted Jo Stinger, at this moment advancing toward them, "you observe it's so dark inside that we couldn't see each other's faces if it wasn't for that taller candle burning on the stand, and I don't know of a better time to start for Wild Oaks."

"Is it fully dark on the outside?" asked the Colonel, glad of excuse to end the gloomy conversation.

"As dark as a wolf's mouth--so dark that I'm hopeful of getting through the lines, without any bother; you know that every hour counts, and I shall have to put in some big licks to reach Wild Oaks and bring the boys here by to-morrow night."

There could be no disputing this fact, and Colonel Preston peeped through the loopholes, first on one side of the block-house and then on the other, until he had looked toward each point of the compass.

It may be said that nothing but blank darkness met his eye. He could hear the sound of the flowing river, the solemn sighing of the night-wind among the trees, but nowhere could he catch the glimmer of the Indian camp-fire, nor hear the red man's war-whoop which had fallen on his ear more than once since he made his home on the Dark and Bloody Ground.

This impressive stillness told as eloquently of the presence of the red man as the sounds of conflict could have done.

"There is no need of waiting longer," remarked the Colonel.

As he spoke, he began descending the ladder, which answered for the stairs, Stinger following him. On the lower floor there was not the slightest ray of light, but both were so familiar with the room that they needed no lamp.

Reaching the door, Colonel Preston placed his hand on the heavy bars which held it in place, and the two listened for several minutes. Nothing was heard, and the fastenings were drawn with much care and in almost complete silence.

"If you have to come back," whispered the commandant, "give the signal and I will let you in."

"I'll do so;--good bye," and, without any more words, the scout vanished in the gloom.

To the consternation of Colonel Preston, he heard the familiar whistle of Stinger a couple of hours later, at which time he hoped he was well on his way to Wild Oaks.

The messenger was safely admitted within the block-house shortly after, and his first words were--

"It's no use, Colonel; a rabbit couldn't creep through the lines, they're watching so close."

CHAPTER VII.

THE MESSAGE.

The declaration of Deerfoot the Shawanoe and of Stinger the scout that the Wyandots were holding such strict watch of the approaches to the block-house that no one could leave or approach it, was proof of the thoroughness of their precautions. It showed still further that the red men had determined to slay every one within the building.

The first requisite to the success of such a scheme was to prevent any one going to their help. The assailants knew just how many people composed the garrison; and, though the provisions might last for days and possibly weeks, yet the end must come sooner or later, when they would lose the power of resistance from very exhaustion.

Deerfoot, with all the skill he could command, conducted his two companions to a point along the river bank nearly in front of the block-house. This attained, he gave them to understand that they were in a very dangerous position, and it was necessary to keep carefully hidden from the Wyandots.

Having gone thus far, it would seem that the subtle Shawanoe ought to have gone further and secured entrance into the block-house itself. Had Colonel Preston known the exact situation, this could have been done, as in the case of the scout Stinger; but it was necessary first that a perfect understanding should be established. There were Wyandots everywhere: the watchful Shawanoe heard them moving stealthily hither and thither, and any one less skilful than he would have brought on a collision long before.

Any act, signal or communication which would apprise Colonel Preston of the truth, would attract the notice of the watchful red men themselves; so it would seem that Deerfoot had all his pains for nothing. But we shall show that the remarkable Shawanoe youth had not reached the end of his rope by any means.

A question has doubtless presented itself to the reader as to the necessity of the lads entering the block-house at all. Inasmuch as Stinger wished to get out, and they wished to get in, they might as well have exchanged positions. Deerfoot could turn about and hasten to Wild Oaks with news of the danger of the little garrison, leaving all the men to defend it until assistance arrived.

But, as afterwards became known, Deerfoot was following a special plan of his own. He was quick to discover that Colonel Preston knew his peril and would therefore do his utmost to defend the post; but the wily Shawanoe, from what he had learned, believed that the force of assailants was so numerous and strong, that they were able to carry the post before help could reach it from Wild Oaks. In his estimation, the all-important thing was to get re-inforcements into the block-house without an hour's unnecessary delay: that done, the time would then come for application to their friends on the Ohio.

If Ned Preston and Blossom Brown could be safely passed through the door, there would be two guns added to the five within, and such an addition was likely to prove the "balance of power," that would save the garrison from destruction.

This was the belief of the Shawanoe, and, though he did not explain his purpose at first, he was none the less determined that Colonel Preston should receive the benefit of these two guns, before application was made to his brother.

Between the block-house and Licking river was a cleared space of one hundred yards, the cultivated ground on every hand being so extensive that the stockade could not be approached by any foe unseen, except at night. The banks of the Licking were from four to six feet above the surface, while along the eastern shore, in front of the block-house, was a fringe of bushes and undergrowth, which offered a tempting hiding-place to a foe.

It was natural to expect the Wyandots to make use of this place, and they had done so, but they already commanded the situation.

Deerfoot had one important advantage in the fact that the Wyandots held no suspicion of the presence of any friends of the whites in the vicinity of the block-house, and consequently they were not searching for such allies.

But it was easy to lose this ground, and he convinced his companions that if it should be found impossible to join Colonel Preston, it would be equally fatal to attempt to leave the neighborhood before night: detection was inevitable.

Such was the state of affairs when the sun rose on the morning succeeding Jo Stinger's failure to pass through the lines (which effort was made a number of hours before Deerfoot and his friends reached the spot). The sky had cleared, and there was scarcely a cloud to obscure its light.

Peeping carefully out from among the bushes and undergrowth, the boys saw the massive block-house standing at the corner of the stockade, grim, silent, and as forbidding as though no living person was within. The heavy oaken door, the huge logs, the narrow windows, the steeply shelving roof, with one trap-door visible, the wooden chimney, the numerous loopholes, the sides of the stockade stretching away to the left from the building itself: all these added to the gloom and tomb-like appearance of the structure.

Not a person could be seen, as a matter of course, nor was any sound heard from the interior; but while the three were stealthily studying the building, they observed a faint, steely blue smoke creeping upward from the wooden chimney. Mrs. Preston had doubtless kindled a fire on the hearth in the lower story, for the comfort of her little ones on this crisp autumn morning, or she was preparing a meal for the garrison.

"If we were sure that door would be opened on the instant," said young Preston, alluding to the entrance of the block-house which confronted them, "we could make a dash across the clearing and get inside, before the Wyandots would suspect what was going on."

Deerfoot nodded his head to signify that his friend was right, but the problem remained as to how Colonel Preston should be apprised of the fact that his friends were waiting so near at hand for a chance to join him.

These boys were huddled as closely together as possible under the bank, where they were not likely to be seen, because there was no special reason for the Wyandots seeking the same hiding-place.

Having reached the spot through much tribulation, as may be said, the friends were careful not to throw away the advantage gained. They stealthily peeped over the edge of the bank, and their words were spoken in guarded undertones that could not have been heard by any one within twenty feet.

"It's got the idee," said Blossom Brown, thrusting forward his dusky countenance all aglow with pleasure: "I know jes' how we can tell de Colonel we're out yar, without de Injines knowing a thing about it."

"How would my brother with the face of the night do?" asked the Shawanoe, turning toward him.

"I'll jes' gib a lot ob hoots like a big owl dat am scared, and de Colonel will know it's me, 'cause de last time I war at de block-house I done it to please de little gals, Mary and Susie."

"That will never do," Ned Preston hastened to say; "for the Wyandots would suspect the truth the instant they heard your hooting, and it wouldn't be long before they called on us."

"Den," added the African, who seemed to think the responsibility of settling the question rested with him, "let's jes' set up a yellin' dat de Colonel will hear, and make a rush for de house: he'll know we're comin' and will slip down and open de door, or, if he don't, we can climb ober de fence and run round de back way."

The Shawanoe did not consider the proposals of Blossom worthy of notice, though they were made in all seriousness. Looking at Ned, he asked--

"Will my brother let Deerfoot see one of his letters?"

Wondering at the meaning of this request, Preston drew a missive from the inner pocket of his coat and handed it to the Indian. It was written on a large sheet of blue paper, the last page of which was unruled, so as to permit the superscription, for the ordinary envelope was unknown in those days. The sheet was carefully folded and doubled within itself, being sealed with a large red wafer, and the name of Colonel Hugh Preston, and the somewhat voluminous address, were written in a large plain hand in ink of glossy blackness.

It was the penmanship which excited the wonder of the Shawanoe more than did anything on which he had looked for many a day. He held the letter in his hand, and, for several minutes, scrutinized the writing with an interest that can hardly be described. Through the paper his keen eyes detected the faint tracery of some of the letters inside. Balancing the missive edgewise, between his thumb and forefinger, he gently pressed it until it partly spread open, despite the seal. Then, raising it before his face, he closed one eye as though he were aiming his arrow at something, and peeped within.

The glimpse of the writing was as pleasing to him as the sight of the circus is to the urchin who creeps under the canvas; and, though he could not decipher the meaning of a character, he stared for several minutes, almost holding his breath, as though he would force the secrets from the "Rosetta stone."

He had heard of such things before, but it was hard for his untutored mind to understand that what a man had said to his friend was in that little package, and when opened, it would speak the same message to him. His feelings must have been similar to those of his white brother, could he have seen the telephone of to-day perform its wonderful work.

"We write our words on the paper," said Ned, hoping to help the mind of the youth grasp the subject: "and when our friend gets the paper, there are the words looking him in the face."

Deerfoot inclined his head, as though he understood the explanation, but Ned saw that it was like the assent of the school-boy who doesn't wish his classmates to consider him stupid.

"If I should make a figure on the paper that looked like a deer, and some one should take it to you, and you looked at it, you would know that it was meant for a deer, wouldn't you?"

The Indian nodded emphatically this time: he clearly understood *that*.

"Suppose I should make some lines and characters which you and I agreed beforehand should mean, 'I am your friend and brother'; when those lines and characters were brought to you on paper, wouldn't you remember what they meant?"

The black eyes of Deerfoot sparkled. He had caught, for the first time in his life, an inkling of the mystery. He saw, as through a glass, darkly, the achievements of the white man who could forward his words hundreds of miles, hidden in a small piece of paper.

"Will my brother teach Deerfoot how to send his thoughts to the Great Spirit?"

There was a wistful expression in the dark eyes of the Shawanoe, which touched Ned Preston. The voice of the lad trembled, as he answered impressively--

"You need no such means to reach the Great Spirit, as you must have heard from your own people: *our* Great Spirit is always looking down in kindness on his children, and his ears are ever open to hear what they have asked him."

"Will my white brother tell Deerfoot of the Great Spirit of the pale faces, that the missionary talks about?"

"I will be glad to do so, for it is what all of your people should know; when we can gain the time, I will teach you how to read books and write letters just as well as any white man can do, for I am sure that one who is so bright as you, will learn it with much ease."

"Deerfoot will never forget his pale-faced brother," said the Shawanoe gratefully.

"And if masser Ned don't got de time, den I'll jes' take you hummin' frough all de knowledge dat you want," said Blossom with an exaggerated idea of his importance.

"It would be well for you to learn how to read and write yourself, before trying to teach others," said Preston.

"I reckon dar aint many dat can beat me 'round de settlements; I can spell 'dog' and 'cat'."

"Let's hear you."

"D-o-a-g, dog; r-a-t, cat--no, dat spells something else,--I forget what, but I'm dar all de time, jes' de same."

Deerfoot was still holding the letter in his hand and looking earnestly at Ned, without noticing the words of Blossom.

"Can my white brother write on the back of this the words which Colonel Preston can read?"

It flashed upon young Preston that the keen-witted youth was unraveling the plan he had held in mind from the first.

"Certainly I can."

"Write some message on this paper for him."

"But, Deerfoot, I have no pen, nor ink, nor pencil, or I would only be too glad to do so."

The Shawanoe was prepared for this.

"Deerfoot will bring you something that will do."

He moved away from his young friends, with that silence and stealth which seemed a part of his nature, while the delighted and expectant friend turned to Blossom Brown--

"Do you understand what his plan is to reach--"

Ned did not finish the question, for he saw that his servant, despite the gravity of the situation and the crispness of the air, was lying on his side sunk in a sound slumber. Fortunately his posture was such an easy one that he did not breathe loud enough to create any danger of being heard.

The Shawanoe was gone only a few minutes, when he reappeared holding in his hand a piece of reddish brown stone, almost as soft as the mineral known as "red chalk," and which he had evidently broken from some crumbling rock.

Ned Preston carefully sharpened it to a point, as though it were a lead-pencil. It could not be said to work very well, when applied to paper, but he found that patience and care would enable him to write considerable that would be legible to any one who understood writing.

Accordingly with much pains and labor he traced the following lines, first consulting Deerfoot as to what should be placed in the communication--

"DEAR UNCLE HUGH:

"Deerfoot, the friendly Shawanoe, Blossom Brown, our servant, and I are along the bank of the river, exactly opposite the front of the block-house. We want to join you, so as to help you fight off the Wyandots, but they are so plenty all around us that we daresn't try it, unless you are prepared to let us in the door, the instant we reach it. When you are ready, wave your hand through the front window, and we'll make the start.

"Your affectionate nephew,
"NED."

CHAPTER VIII.

OPENING COMMUNICATION.

Ned Preston read the note to Deerfoot, the Shawanoe, speaking slowly and distinctly each word, while the young Indian listened with an expression of intense interest and pleasure.

"If the Colonel sees that, then will he read those words you have spoken to me?"

"They will be the same."

"Then he shall see them."

As the young warrior spoke, he extended his hand for the missive, which was given him. He deftly drew an arrow from his quiver and began tying the letter to the missile, doing it with much care, for the task he was about to essay seemed an almost impossible one.

"We are a hundred yards from the block-house," said Ned Preston; "it is a long shot for the bow and arrow."

"Would my brother like to use his gun?" asked Deerfoot with his shadowy smile, his question being intended to remind his friend of the superiority of the primitive weapon over the rifle, at least in such an emergency as the present.

"The gun is of no use just now," said Preston, "and I mistrust that your bow will not serve you as well as you think."

"You shall see," was the comment of the owner, who gave his full attention to the task before him. He used a shred of deer-sinew and fastened the letter directly behind the iron barb. That done, the faithful bow was carefully strung, and then the youth bent himself to the work.

His intention was to send the arrow, if possible, through the narrow window to the left of the front door of the block-house. This had no glass, nor screen, but as it was no more than eight inches wide, although three times as high, and as the shaft was weighted with a foreign substance, likely to affect its accuracy of flight, some idea of the difficulty of the feat may be gained.

Furthermore, it was necessary that the shot should be fired secretly. Deerfoot had no opportunity of standing out on the open ground, where his limbs would be unimpeded, but he must aim from behind the bank, so that no vigilant Wyandot would detect him.

He set to work, standing below the bank and pointing between an intervening bush or two, making sure, however, that an unobstructed path was open for his arrow. The missile was pointed at an elevation of fully forty-five degrees; and, with one eye closed, he slowly drew back the string until the head touched the right hand, which grasped the middle of the bow.

It was held thus ten seconds, during which the athlete was as rigid and motionless as if moulded in iron, while his eye rested on the narrow slit-like window cut in the solid logs, all of a hundred yards away.

Ned Preston kept his gaze fixed on the Indian, who at that moment formed a picture worthy of the finest artist that ever touched brush to canvas.

Suddenly there was a faint twang, the bow straightened out like lightning, and the arrowy messenger started on its path weighted with the all-important message.

Preston instantly glanced at the block-house, centering his eye on the straight opening, but with scarcely a hope that Deerfoot could succeed in what would certainly be a marvelous exploit.

As the arrow was speeding directly away from the lads, it was impossible to distinguish its course through the air, though it could have been seen easily, had they been stationed at right angles to its line of flight.

The Shawanoe, having discharged the weapon, immediately lowered it, and then peered forward to learn the result of his shot.

But Preston had scarcely time to fix his gaze on the distant window, when he saw something like the flutter of a shadow--so to speak--directly in the opening itself. It came and went with the quickness of a flash, and he could not

define it.

But where was the arrow?

It vanished from sight the instant it left the bowstring, and Ned had not seen it since. It should have struck somewhere in a very few seconds, but had the head buried itself in the ground between the river and the block-house, the eagle-feather would have been visible. Had it fallen on the roof, its sharp point would have held the shaft motionless.

"You must have sent it over the block-house," said Ned, turning to Deerfoot; "and in that case----"

He stopped, for the same shadowy smile on the handsome face of the young Shawanoe told the truth: the arrow had gone directly through the window, and the curious fluttering shadow which caught the eye of Preston was the missile with its message.

"That is the most wonderful shot I ever saw!" exclaimed Ned in a burst of admiration; "if I could use the bow as you do, I never would touch a gun. But, Deerfoot, is there not danger that some of the Wyandots saw the arrow in its flight?"

"If they were looking across the clearing, they saw it perhaps; but Deerfoot hopes they did not."

"Suppose you had missed the window,--that the arrow had struck the roof, or the ground, or the logs at the side of the opening, it would have buried its head and stayed in plain sight, would it not?"

"Yes, and the Wyandots would be certain to see it."

"And would soon know where it came from?"

"Nothing could have prevented."

"My gracious!" exclaimed Ned; "you ran a great risk."

"We did; there was no way to prevent it."

Ned was almost speechless, when he realized how much had depended on the success of the shot of the Shawanoe: in fact, had he known all, he never would have consented that the task should have been attempted.

Had the arrow gone a few inches to the right or left, or had it fallen short, or flown too high, the Wyandots would have swooped down on the archer and his friends, before they could have left the spot.

Ned Preston regarded the shot as amazing as the mythical one made by William Tell; and, but for the urgency of the danger, would have given further expression to his admiration. Deerfoot himself was somewhat uneasy, and, for several minutes, glanced right and left, and through the undergrowth for signs of danger; but nothing appeared, and it looked as though a piece of extremely good fortune had attended the remarkable exploit.

Such being the case, Preston now devoted his attention to the window, from which he expected to see the hand of his uncle, Colonel Preston, waving in friendly signal for them to make the desperate run across the clearing.

While he was thus employed, the keener vision of the Shawanoe was roaming over the open space, each side of the stockade, the woods beyond, and especially did he scrutinize the two deserted cabins that stood to the right.

The visual search had not continued long, when it was rewarded by the unwelcome discovery that in the building nearest him were several Wyandots, who had probably spent the night there. He saw their heads and shoulders, as they passed the windows where they were beyond sight of the garrison, but were in plain view of the Shawanoe.

This cabin was much nearer the block-house than were the boys, from which the daring nature of the project will be understood. Deerfoot was hopeful before this that the houses were clear of Wyandots, in which event his friends would have had a much better prospect of success.

As it was, it all depended on how complete the surprise could be made for the red men. If they failed to note the running youths until the block-house was nearly reached, they would be too late to head them off, except by a shot from their guns, and this risk could not be avoided under any circumstances.

"*There it is!*"

It was Ned Preston who uttered the exclamation in such excitement that his voice was dangerously high.

"Sh! not so loud!" whispered Deerfoot, scrutinizing the window through which he sent his arrow a few minutes before.

Ned Preston was right: the hand of a person was thrust through the opening and waved several times. It swayed back and forth, and up and down, with much deliberation, as though the owner was fearful it would not be observed by his friends along the river bank.

More than that, Deerfoot was sure he saw the face of the one who signalled them, though the distance was such that nothing like a recognition took place.

After withdrawing his hand, it was put forth again, and the motion was repeated. Colonel Preston evidently meant that, if any mistake was made, it should not be his fault.

Ned Preston now carefully awakened Blossom Brown and explained what had been done and what was contemplated.

"You have got to run as you never ran before," said his master, "and when you have once started, there is no turning back."

"What would I want to turn back for?" was the wondering question of the African.

"You might think it better to stay where we are, and it may be that it is; but after the Wyandots learn we are here, it is run or die with us."

"My brother speaks the truth," said Deerfoot, who was looking across the clearing at the nearest cabin: "there are red men there, and they will try and hinder you from reaching your friends."

There was no reason to hope the prospect would improve by waiting, and it was decided to start at once. Deerfoot, it was understood, was to remain where he was and to make no attempt for the present to enter the block-house. It was expected that, after Blossom and Ned were safely within the building, the guide would hasten to Wild Oaks and bring assistance to the beleaguered garrison.

When the boys were ready, the Shawanoe impressed one fact upon them: they were not to cease running for an instant, unless stopped beyond all power to overcome, but, fixing their eyes on the door of the block-house, strain every nerve to reach the goal.

Each lad was to carry his loaded gun in his right hand, but not to use it, unless forced to do so: if Colonel Preston should delay admitting them, they would be lost; but there was no cause to fear such a miscarriage.

The boys stealthily moved forward and up the bank, and, pausing near the margin, awaited the word from the Shawanoe. The perilous point, in the eye of the latter, was the cabin where he knew the Wyandots to be, and he watched it closely for several minutes. Nothing was to be seen of them just then, and he said in a low voice--

"Go!"

On the instant, Ned Preston and Blossom Brown bounded across the clearing in the direction of the block-house: it was a straight run of a hundred yards over a level piece of land, on which only a few stumps remained to show that it was once covered by the forest.

The African, it need not be said, strained every nerve and fibre of his being to reach the goal. His heavy, lumbering build made him less fleet than Preston, who could have drawn away from the beginning; but he could not desert his companion in such extremity and he timed his speed, so as to keep just ahead of Blossom, and thus urge him to his utmost.

Crouching under the shelter of the river bank, Deerfoot watched the run for life with the intensest interest. He grasped his strong bow with his right hand, while one of his arrows was held in the left, ready to use on the instant it might become necessary for the safety of either of the fugitives.

Those who knew Deerfoot best, said he was reluctant to employ his marvelous skill on any person, and would not do so as long as it was safe to refrain; but it would have required only a single glance at his glittering eye and compressed lips, to understand that he considered the emergency was now at hand.

It so happened that the fugitives had gone no more than ten yards on their swift run, when the Wyandots in the cabin discovered them and made known the fact in the most alarming manner.

First several whoops broke the stillness within the building, and then two sharp reports followed. The Wyandots had fired, but their aim was so hurried that, as it seemed to Deerfoot, neither of the fugitives was harmed. At least they continued their flight with unabated speed.

But the efforts of the Wyandots to check the boys was not to end with the simple discharge of their rifles. The two that

had used their pieces, sprang from the front windows of the cabin and dashed quartering across the clearing, with the intent to head off the youths, before they could reach the block-house.

This brought both in range of the terrible bow of Deerfoot who placed the arrow in position; but it was his intention to hold the weapon until it should become imperatively necessary to use it, for it will be seen that, if he took part in the singular contest, it would be such a complete unveiling of his true character that his usefulness to the whites would be almost destroyed.

Besides, each boy carried a loaded rifle which he knew how to use, and it was not to be supposed that either would allow himself to be tomahawked or taken prisoner without resistance.

The Wyandots who ran forth in the effort to throw themselves across the path of the fugitives, were as daring warriors as ever mingled in the fierce fight with settlers or those of their own race. They had emptied their guns in the futile effort to bring down the boys, and, throwing the weapons aside, they now sprang forward with the resolution to make them prisoners, despite the risk to themselves, for they must have known that the garrison would endeavor to protect their friends, and they could not help suspecting that there was one or more along the river bank, who were likely to take part in the singular struggle.

Be that as it may, the red men ran straight from the deserted cabin across the path of the boys, who found themselves confronted by the brawny redskins, before they had gone half the distance to the building.

"Let's sneak 'round ahind de block-house and climb ober de fence and hide," said Blossom, when he saw the gauntlet he had to run.

"Straight for the door!" commanded Preston: "that is our only chance!"

But the youth had scarcely spoken the words, when he saw that a collision with the Wyandots was inevitable: they were between them and the fort, and there was no possible way of flanking them.

The superior fleetness of Ned held him slightly in advance of his companion. The former ran until close to the Wyandots, when he turned to the left. The warriors immediately leaped forward so that they were still directly in front of the fugitives.

"It must be done!" exclaimed Ned, coming to an instant halt, raising his rifle and aiming at the nearest Indian, who was in the very act of poising himself to throw his tomahawk.

Everything passed so swiftly that the spectators could scarcely follow the movements. At the moment Ned drew his gun to position, he caught the flash of the implement as it circled with lightning quickness over the bronzed skull of his enemy.

Young Preston knew what was coming. Pausing only long enough to catch the gleam of the warrior's eyes, over the sights of his rifle, he pressed the trigger.

The Indian aimed at the head of the youth and drove the tomahawk with prodigious force and unerring accuracy; but the blade of the implement glanced against the barrel of the rifle, sending out a streak of flame, and, with a tremendous rebound or ricochet, shot by the shoulder of the lad, touching the ground fifty feet away, and rolling over and over several times, before it lay still. When it left the hand of the warrior, it was with a force that would have cloven the skull of the lad, as though it were cardboard.

The throw and miss were remarkable, but, by a striking coincidence, the rifle of Ned Preston was discharged at the second the two weapons collided. The violent shock to the gun turned it aside, and the ball buried itself harmlessly in the ground, far to the right of the crouching Wyandot.

The latter saw by what a hair's-breadth he had escaped, and snatching his hunting-knife from the belt at his waist, he bounded toward the youth, who, nothing daunted, recoiled a single step, and, grasping his weapon by its barrel, awaited the attack.

All this took place in a few seconds, during which the other Wyandot, feeling that the dark-faced fugitive was his own, watched the extraordinary conflict, with an interest as intense as that of the other spectators further away.

Had the encounter between young Preston and the sinewy Wyandot been permitted to go on, there could have been but one result; but Deerfoot, who was holding his breath, with his eyes riveted on the combatants, now drew his arrow to its head and aimed at the assailing warrior.

Although the distance between him and his target was no more than half way across the clearing, yet the feat was

immeasurably more difficult than that of sending the letter through the narrow window; for, unfortunately, Ned Preston and the Wyandot were standing so nearly in a line that the young Shawanoe could only see the head and shoulders of the powerful savage a few feet beyond.

Beside this, the two were likely to change their respective positions any instant: they might do so indeed after the launching of the arrow, which would not only miss the red man at whom it was pointed, but was liable to strike the boy himself.

Even Deerfoot doubted his own success and he therefore aimed with the greater care and caution, slowly drawing back the shaft, and with nerves like iron, looked steadily along the reed and at the tableau far beyond.

But before the fingers let go the string, the necessity for doing so vanished. The incidents which we have undertaken to describe, passed with such swiftness that it would have been hard for a spectator to follow each phase, few as they were; but it need not be said that every man within the block-house was watching the extraordinary scene on the clearing with an interest as intense, as absorbing and breathless, as that of Deerfoot himself.

Colonel Preston was standing by the door, with one hand on the cumbersome latch, ready to draw it inward the instant the boys reached the proper point; while Jo Stinger, Jim Turner and Sam Megill held their rifles ready to use, the very second it should become necessary.

There was such bewildering rapidity in the events narrated, that the spectators within the block-house did not comprehend the extreme peril of young Preston, until they saw the Wyandot advancing on him with his drawn knife.

"Boys," said Jo Stinger, "it's the opinion of the undersigned that this is a good time of day to fire off a gun."

"Quick!" called out Colonel Preston from below, as he peeped through the door; "shoot that Indian!"

"That's just what is contemplated," replied Stinger, whose rifle was already thrust through a loophole, while he was looking along the gleaming barrel.

But, to the consternation of the veteran, the moment he drew bead on the warrior, he discovered he stood in such exact line with young Preston that it was impossible to shoot the red man without the absolute certainty of striking the lad directly beyond.

"I've got to wait," called out Jo, by way of explaining his inaction, "until they shift their positions."

Had the vengeful Wyandot comprehended the vast advantage he gained by holding the youth directly in front, he would have continued to do so; but it was almost impossible that he should have been subtle enough to make such a discovery.

Meanwhile, Ned Preston, daring, resolute and defiant, grasped the barrel of his rifle, and with one foot thrown forward, and with the stock of his gun flung back in the position, and with the pose of a skilled batsman awaiting the pitching of a ball, braced himself for the assault.

The Indian, powerful, active and alert, bent his knees and back slightly, like a panther gathering for a leap, and glared in the face of the youthful David, who so calmly confronted the fierce Goliath.

It was a trying position for the boy, who looked dauntlessly into the hideous countenance daubed with ochre and paint. It was probably the truth that the Wyandot was testing the power of his eye, as the rattle-snake does with the bird. If such were the case, the result could not have been gratifying to the warrior.

All at once, without removing his eyes from those of Ned, the Indian deftly extended his left foot slightly forward and a brief distance to one side. Then he gradually shifted the weight of his body over upon it, until he had transferred himself nearly a foot out of alignment.

Deerfoot the Shawanoe instantly detected this, and pointed his arrow with full confidence; Jo Stinger was equally on the alert, and his keen gray eye glanced along the barrel with more certainty; but, not unnaturally perhaps, the two marksmen, from opposite standpoints, understood the peculiar maneuvering which the Wyandot had begun: he intended to circle slowly around the boy, who stood on the defensive, watching for an opening, which he would seize with the quickness of lightning.

If such should prove the fact, the spectators had but a short while to wait: and such did prove to be the fact.

Once more the Wyandot moved his left foot, almost as far as the limb permitted, and held it motionless, with the toe resting on the ground. All the time his black eyes were fixed with burning intensity on the youth, and his right hand grasped the haft of the knife, as though he would crush it to nothingness.

Ned Preston suspected the purpose of his assailant and he instantly turned, so as to face him, who had not such an easy task as might have been supposed.

For a full minute, the left leg of the Wyandot remained extended, with nothing but the toe of the foot daintily touching, as though he meant to draw a line upon the earth with it. Then his weight gracefully glided over upon the limb, the gleaming eyes never once shifting from the pale face of the boy pioneer.

Scarcely was this movement--slight as it was--completed, when the oppressive stillness was broken by the explosive report of a rifle, a blue puff of smoke curled upward from one of the loopholes of the block-house, and those who were looking at the Wyandot, saw him suddenly throw his hands above his head, walk rapidly and uncertainly backward several steps, and then, with a faint cry, fall, with limbs outstretched, stone-dead.

The second warrior became so absorbed in the scene that he fixed his gaze on the two, paying no heed to the African, who, he must have believed, was at his mercy, when he chose to give his attention to him.

With a shrewdness hardly to be expected, the servant was quick to see that another's extremity was his opportunity.

"Nobody aint tinkin' 'bout Wildblossom Brown jes' now," was the belief of the lad, "which shows dat it am a good time to tink 'bout hisself."

He immediately began what may be called a flank movement around the three parties, who took no notice of him, although Deerfoot and the onlookers in the block-house observed the prudent action of the lad. They were greatly relieved, inasmuch as he could not offer the slightest help by staying behind.

Thus it came to pass that, at the moment the rifle was fired from the block-house, Blossom was well on his way toward it, and his subsequent action was like that of a runner who awaited the report as a signal. At the very instant it broke the stillness, he made a burst of speed and ran with might and main straight for shelter. The start that his own foresight had secured, placed him so far in advance of his enemies that his safety was virtually obtained.

"Open dat door!" he shouted in a voice that must have been heard a half mile away; "open her wide, or I'll smash her in!"

He plunged across the clearing like a steam-engine, and the door was drawn inward, while he was twenty paces distant, so that everything was in his favor.

Without checking himself in the least he "took a header" through the entrance and went clean across the lower floor and against the opposite side of the room, with a force that shook the entire building.

"My gracious, Blossom, it was a narrow escape!" exclaimed the Colonel, alluding to the flight of the lad from the warrior who had marked him for his own.

"Yes," said Blossom; "I like to have knocked my brains out agin de oder side de ole fort."

"I'm more afraid the block-house has been injured than I am that you have suffered; but you are safe now, and I can only hope that Ned may be equally fortunate."

The address and courage displayed by the surviving Wyandot aroused the admiration of the garrison, for it far surpassed their expectation.

The very instant the first red man was struck, and while he was staggering backwards, Ned Preston started with might and main for the sheltering block-house: he was thus quick to adopt the only course that offered safety, for the other warrior still held his knife and tomahawk at command, and was more alert, cunning and brave than the one that had fallen.

Young Preston's promptness gained him considerable start, but he was no more than fairly under way, when the other made for him with the speed of a deer. Ned was fleet for his years, but he was no match for the pursuing warrior, who gained rapidly.

The amazing daring of this pursuit can scarcely be explained: the Wyandot was straining every nerve to overtake the fugitive, who was striving with equal desperation to reach the block-house before him. The red man held his formidable tomahawk in his right hand, and was running straight toward the building from which the shot was fired, and from which he must have known others were certain to come. It was precisely as if a single soldier should deliberately charge upon a masked battery, of whose precise location he was well aware.

As may be supposed, the Wyandot had not run half the intervening distance, when another blue puff, floating aside from the loophole, accompanied the report of a rifle. Jim Turner had fired at the approaching Wyandot, but he did it so

hastily that he missed him altogether.



NED MAKES A NARROW ESCAPE.

"Is there no way of stopping him?" muttered Sam Megill, hurriedly bringing his gun to bear and discharging it; but, astonishing as it may seem, he missed also.

Jo Stinger was hastily reloading his piece, determined that the daring red man should not escape him, when Ned Preston dashed through the door and was safe.

As the Colonel quickly shut and fastened the entrance, a heavy thud was heard. The Wyandot had hurled his tomahawk with such prodigious force at the vanishing fugitive that the blade was buried half way to its head, and the handle projecting outward, would have required a power like that of King Arthur to draw it forth.

CHAPTER IX.

WITHIN THE BLOCK-HOUSE.

Having hurled his tomahawk with such venomous force at the vanishing fugitive, the baffled Wyandot, for the first time, seemed to think of his own safety.

The momentum of his furious pursuit carried him almost against the door of the block-house and directly beneath the overhanging floor, built so as to allow the defenders to fire down on the heads of their assailants. The rapid shifting of position served to confuse the garrison to a certain extent, but the action of the Indian was incomprehensible.

Making a sharp turn to the left, he ran with astonishing swiftness along the front of the building and stockade, until he was half way to the north-western angle, around which he had only to dart to be beyond reach of any bullet; but he seemed to think all at once that he had made a mistake. He stopped like a flash, turned with inconceivable quickness, and sped directly over the ground he had traversed, passing in front of the stockade and the block-house, his evident purpose being to reach the deserted cabin from which he had emerged in the first place.

As he was running with tremendous speed in front of the building, another gun was discharged at him, but he showed no sign of being harmed, and, without a second's hesitation, made for the cabin, where a brother brave awaited him.

"I consider that that 'ere beats all creation!" exclaimed Jo Stinger, aggravated over the repeated escapes of the daring redskin; "all I want is a chance to get a pop at him."

There was little time to spare, for the movements of the Wyandot proved him to be no ordinary athlete, and he was going for the open window of the cabin, like the wind.

Jo Stinger, by the utmost haste, beat him in the novel contest, and, thrusting his gun hastily through the loophole, aimed and fired with unusual nervousness.

"I struck him!" he exclaimed in great glee, as the warrior sprang in air, as if shot upward by a catapult.

"You haven't harmed a hair of his head!" laughed Jim Turner, who was peering through one of the loopholes; "it wasn't your bullet that made him jump."

"You're right," muttered the chagrined scout; "if I had another gun, I would break this one to pieces."

"It wasn't the fault of your *rifle*," was the truthful remark of his companion.

At the very moment Jo Stinger took his hasty aim and fired his gun, the fleeing Wyandot was so near the cabin that he bounded upward from the ground and went through the door, as the performer in the circus bounds through the hoop covered with paper.

The bullet which so rarely missed its mark did so in this instance by a hair's-breadth; but under such circumstances, a miss was as good as a mile, and the courageous Wyandot plunged through the entrance without a scratch, or so much as the "smell of fire" about his garments.

He had played a most desperate game and won so brilliantly that the veteran Jo Stinger, while exasperated over his own failure, felt like cheering the exploit.

The safety of the brave seemed to be the signal for a general fire along the lines. The Wyandots began discharging their rifles from the wood beyond the stockade, north, east and south, while Deerfoot was somewhat alarmed to hear several shots from the river bank where he was crouching, and at no great distance from him.

A number crept up to the rear of the nearest cabin, into which they entered without much danger to themselves, and from the windows of which they discharged their pieces at the block-house. This seemed a useless expenditure of ammunition, but there was a chance or two of doing something. Some of the bullets sent from the woods and cabins might enter a loophole: a number did pass through the narrow windows and were buried in the heavy logs beyond.

Unless the inmates were specially careful, one or more of these invisible messengers would strike them, and it was this hope which led the assailants to keep up the desultory firing for more than an hour succeeding the remarkable incidents on the clearing.

The garrison did not throw away their ammunition: they kept a sharp lookout for signs of their enemies, and, when there was a chance of doing execution, they were quick to take advantage of it, but there was no shooting at random, as is too often the case, under similar circumstances.

While these dropping shots were heard from many different points, the figure of the fallen Wyandot was stretched on the clearing in front of the block-house. It lay flat on its back, with the swarthy face turned upward, still and motionless, and an impressive evidence of the frightful and inexcusable enmity of the members of the same human family toward each other.

No one ventured to approach it, although the American Indian leaves no effort untried to remove his dead from the battle-ground. They would have gone forward on the present occasion to withdraw the remains, but they could not expect immunity from the rifles of the Kentuckians.

Under such circumstances, the dead warrior must wait until the darkness of the night, which is the chosen season of his race for carrying out his designs against all enemies.

Jo Stinger, who had followed the trail and lived in the woods for many years, was intensely mortified over his failure, and carefully reloading his gun, resolved that the blunder on his part should be retrieved.

He cautioned the new arrivals, and especially the children of Mrs. Preston, to keep away from the loopholes, through which the leaden missiles were likely to come any moment, on their mission of death. The good mother was too sensible of the peril to which they were all exposed, to allow her children to run any risk that could be avoided: there were places both above and below stairs, where no bullet could penetrate, and she made certain that her children never wandered beyond these somewhat narrow limits.

As soon as the door was securely fastened behind the entrance of Blossom Brown and Ned Preston, the Colonel, who, of course, was on the lower floor, grasped each in turn by the hand and congratulated them most warmly. Mrs. Preston, as soon as it was safe, descended the ladder and joined in the expressions of thankfulness.

Both the boys were panting from their tremendous exertions, and they sat down each on a chair until they could recover breath. As Ned drew forth the letters from his inner pocket and handed them to the Colonel, he said--

"It was the hardest struggle of my life; I never want to go through such another."

"Are you hurt in any way?" asked his aunt, laying her hand on the head of her nephew, who had taken off his cap and was drawing his handkerchief across his forehead.

"Not in the least, and I thank heaven, for, when that Wyandot let drive his tomahawk, it came like a cannon-ball, and if it hadn't struck my rifle-barrel as it did, it would have ended my days. I wonder whether it hurt the gun," suddenly added Ned, with that rapid transition from one subject to another which is characteristic of boyhood.

He examined the weapon, but although the brown barrel was pretty well scraped, it showed no real injury, and, in accordance with the teachings of his father, Ned now proceeded to reload the piece, while the dull reports of the guns, overhead and along the edge of the woods and the bank of the river, were heard.

By this time, Blossom Brown had recovered his breath, and he imitated the example of his young master. When he had completed his task, he regained a great deal of his assurance.

"Tings was sort ob lively for a while," he remarked in his offhand manner, as though there was nothing remarkable in their escape, "but I knowed we was comin' out all right."

"How could you know that," asked the surprised Mrs. Preston, "when we could not be certain, until you were both within the house?"

"I seed from de way dat Injine drew back his tomahawk and squinted his eye, dat he wasn't goin' to shoot straight, and I knowed too dat de tomahawk was gwine to glance along de barrel jes' as it did, which am why I moved off to one side so dat it wouldn't tech me."

"That won't do," said Ned, with a shake of the head; "you knew just as much as I did, which was nothing at all."

"P'raps I did and p'raps I didn't," said Blossom in his loftiest manner, throwing his head back; "I neber brag ob what I'm doin', but I show from de way I act dat I knows what's what. I seed dat tings was gettin' mixed, and so I started for de house to impress de Colonel how it was and to git him to manage tings right."

At this moment, Mary and Susie Preston hurried down the ladder to greet their cousin.

"O Ned!" they shouted together, as they came near tumbling through the rounds; "we're so glad to see you!"

And the words were scarcely out of their mouths, when Susie, the younger, leaped from the middle round straight into the arms of Ned, which were outspread to receive her. Mary embraced the waist of the sturdy lad and insisted on attention. So Ned, after kissing the younger several times, set her down on the floor and did the same with the elder. Then he resumed his chair, and, holding them on his knees, laughed and talked as though he had passed through no such fearful scene as we have described, and as though no peril was yet impending over their heads.

"I knew the wicked Indians wouldn't hurt you," said little Susie, turning her pretty face up to that of her cousin.

"And how could you know that, little one?"

"Cause Mary and I prayed to God, when we saw you coming across the clearing, to take care of you."

"Well, I prayed hard too," said Ned, "and then did the best I knew how, and I think God always takes care of those who do that: it isn't any use of praying unless you try to help yourselves."

This was orthodox, though the sentiment was not very original, and the little sisters subscribed to it as fully as though they had been taught it at their mother's knee.

Colonel Preston had delivered the letters to the parties to whom they belonged, and had read his own. He had looked out for the opportunity to use his gun, but saw none, and he now turned about and gave his whole attention to his "recruits."

"Where is Deerfoot?" was his first natural question.

"He was on the edge of the clearing, when we left, and I suppose he is there yet, unless the Wyandots have driven him out."

"It isn't likely he has been allowed to stay there long, for I notice that some of the shots come from that direction. How was it he befriended you as he did?"

"He is a great friend of mine, you know, Uncle."

"That isn't what I mean; how was it he brought you here and helped you to enter the block-house?"

In a few words, Ned Preston told the story which is already known to the reader. Before it was finished, the Colonel saw plainly the purpose of the Shawanoe youth.

"He believed there was instant necessity for me to have more guns at command, and that was why he used such great exertion to run you in."

"Do you think he did right, Uncle?"

"I must say I cannot see the necessity of his taking such terrible risks, when your help, although very welcome, was not so all important that our lives depended on it. Inasmuch as all of you were safely on the outside, where Jo Stinger tried so hard to get, it would have been the wiser plan, in my opinion, for you to have made all haste to Wild Oaks: the distance is not so great that you could not have brought help to us within two or three days."

"That is just the way I put the case to Deerfoot; but he insisted that the first thing to be done was to place us inside the block-house, and nothing could change his view. He knows so much more about such things than we, that I could not refuse to do as he wished."

"He may have had reasons which he has not made known, for he is an extraordinary Indian, although still a boy."

"That arrow which came through the window was a surprise, was it not?"

"A very great one: no one had any thought that it was anything other than a hostile one. I supposed it was intended to set fire to the building."

"Did you see it coming?"

"None of us saw it; but the thud it made, when it struck, told us its nature, and I went down to find out whether it was likely to do any damage. The moment my eyes rested on it, I noticed the paper tied around the shaft: that told the story, of course, and soon every one within knew the message. Well, you were not long in getting the signal you asked for, and you know the rest. That was a wonderful shot of the young Shawanoe."

"And would you believe, Uncle, that he told me after making it, that, if he had missed sending the arrow through the

window, it would have been the death of all three of us."

"In what way?"

"The Wyandots would have found it and would have been quick to learn what it meant: then, as he said, we were in such a position that we could not get away from them."

"I have no doubt he spoke the truth, which shows what a fearful risk he ran; but he must have had great confidence in his ability to use his bow."

"And he has good reason for his confidence, as he has proven more than once; but, in spite of all his skill, I cannot help feeling that he has put himself in a trap from which he cannot free himself. Because the Wyandots have surrounded the block-house, and because some of them are always watching it, they must have seen the flight of the shaft through the air."

"If they did, they could not have known its errand."

"No, but they would recall that none of them use the bow except to shoot burning arrows, and they would be apt to suspect something was wrong."

"They often use such things to set fire to buildings."

"But this was not one, as they could have seen with but a single glance; and, had it been, they would have known all about it, if it was discharged by one of their own party."

"Ned," said Colonel Preston, "I have been talking against my own convictions, just to see what you thought about it: I agree with you. Subtle as the Shawanoe is, beyond any of his years, he has done a thing for which I cannot see the reason, and I believe he has placed himself in peril that admits of no escape. If such proves to be the case, he has also deprived himself of the opportunity to do us the great service we need."

"Scuse me," interrupted Blossom Brown, who had been showing uneasiness for several minutes, and who was now snuffing the air in a suggestive way; "I tinks I smell corn bread, and I haben't dined dis mornin' yet."

CHAPTER X.

FLAMING MESSENGERS.

Mrs. Preston laughed and asked the boys to pardon her for having forgotten, in the excitement of the occasion, the duty of hospitality. The morning meal had been furnished the others, and she now gave her nephew and Blossom Brown the best she could prepare.

The two were ahungered and ate heartily. It was a striking commentary on the perils of the life of the early settlers that, while they were thus engaged, the sound of the rifles was heard, as they were fired from the upper story, in answer to the shots from the Wyandots.

But we can become accustomed to almost any danger, and the appetites of the re-enforcements were not affected by what was going on around them. The windows on the first floor admitted several bullets from the guns of the dusky marksmen, but every person was careful to keep out of range. When the meal was finished, all climbed the ladder to the second story, where the boys were welcomed by the men who stood at the loopholes with their smoking guns in their hands.

There was more security there, because the openings through which the leaden balls could enter were much smaller; but, as evidence of the marksmanship of their enemies, Jo Stinger informed them that three bullets had struck the interior walls, one of which actually came along the barrel of a gun, narrowly missing Megill who was in the act of thrusting it forth.

"That is well for the Wyandots," said the Colonel, "but have you done anything to teach them that the skill is not all on their side?"

"We suspect we have: Jim caught sight of a warrior creeping along for a position behind the cabin yonder, and when he fired, the fellow acted as though something struck him."

"And have not *you*, the best marksman in the company, succeeded in doing as well as he?"

"He has done better," replied Turner; "for one of the rascals in the cabin out there had the impudence to thrust forth his painted face in plain sight; and when Jo drew bead on him and fired, he dropped out of view and has not been seen since."

"I hope it was the one who flung his tomahawk at me, and which is still sticking in the door," said Ned Preston.

"It couldn't have been," said the hunter, with an expressive shrug, "for if it had been, I would have missed him. I never made such a mess in all my life as I did a while ago."

"Accidents will happen," laughed the Colonel; "and we have every reason to congratulate ourselves that no one has been harmed, though we have been exposed to great danger. It was a most providential thing that I learned of the coming of the war party, before they were ready for the attack."

"Have you any idea of the number in the woods?" asked Jo Stinger.

"My nephew Ned tells me that Deerfoot the Shawanoe, who ought to be the best authority, says there are certainly fifty, for he saw nearly that many, and he thinks it more than likely there are twice that number."

"I have no doubt there are all of a hundred," observed Jo Stinger, "judging from the way they sent in the shots a few minutes ago; but they have stopped, because they must see that nothing can be gained by such wild firing."

The hunter was right in his last remark, the stillness being as profound as if no living person was within miles of them.

Colonel Preston told all that had been learned through his nephew of the doings of Deerfoot the Shawanoe.

"He has put himself in a bad fix," said Stinger, with another shake of the head: "I know he is one of the cutest varmints in the wilds of Kentucky, but there are some things which he can't do, and I believe he has undertaken one of 'em now."

"I am afraid so, but I hope not."

"There has been something going on out there by the Licking, where that arrow of his came from, and, if I ain't mistook,

it means they have dropped down on him this time."

Ned Preston heard these words with a pang, for the death or suffering of the Shawanoe youth would have been an affliction to him like the loss of a brother. There was that unswerving loyalty, self-sacrificing friendship, and astonishing woodcraft which go to make up the ideal American Indian, and which, though rarely encountered in these later days, still actually existed a century or more ago, as it does now among the aboriginal inhabitants of our country. Not often was it seen, but there are historical facts which attest the truth of such characters belonging to the Algonquin family of red men.

"It looks to me as if Heaven raised up Deerfoot to be such a friend to the white people, as Pocahontas was during the early New England settlements."

Such was the thought that had come to Ned Preston more than once and which thought was the echo of the one uttered by his father months before. The lad did not repeat the words now, but the expression of pain which crossed his face, told his anguish more impressively than the words themselves could have done.

Without making reply, the youth stepped to one of the loopholes on the western side of the block-house and looked out toward the river, fixing his gaze on the point where he had parted company with the Indian youth.

Everything was as quiet as at "creation's morn." The glimmer of the flowing Licking, the dim, solemn woods, the unsightly stumps on the clearing, the blue sky above and beyond--all these wore the peaceful look they wore when no peril threatened the diminutive settlement.

Only one figure--that of the Wyandot warrior, stark and stiff in the sunlight--spoke of the dreadful scenes that had been enacted on that spot such a brief while before.

Ned scrutinized the little clump of bushes which had sheltered the young Shawanoe, when making his marvelous shot with his bow and arrow, but not the first sign of life was visible.

"I don't know whether to take heart from that or not," said the lad to himself; "for, if they had captured Deerfoot, I should think they would make some display over it, so as to impress us."

"If they got the young redskin," observed Jo Stinger, standing at the elbow of Ned, "it wouldn't have been *there*; that varmint would have made a fight, and he would have given them a good run before they brought him down."

Ned Preston felt the force of this declaration, but he stood silent several minutes longer, still watching the bushes with a weak hope that they would give some sign that would bid him take heart.

But he was disappointed, and, withdrawing his gaze, he looked at the well which stood very near the middle of the square within the stockade.

"Uncle," said Ned, addressing his relative without regard to his military title, "I heard you tell father that you meant to dig a well inside the block-house, so the Indians could not cut off the water."

"I did intend to do so, and it ought to have been done long ago, but you know that men, like boys, are apt to put off till to-morrow that which should be done to-day."

"The Wyandots can destroy that well any night, or they can tear away some of the stockades so as to shoot any one who goes near it."

"That is self-evident, I am sorry to say."

"You have a barrel of water in the house?"

"Yes, an abundance for every purpose, excepting----"

The Colonel hesitated and smiled: all knew what he meant. The most dangerous enemy they had to fear, was the very one against which no efficient provision had been made.

When the block-house was erected, and for a considerable time after, it was practically fire-proof, from the greenness of its timbers. The hewn logs, plastered between with dried clay, could not be easily ignited under the most favorable circumstances, if thoroughly seasoned by the elements; but, when they contained an abundance of sap, there was nothing to fear from such cause.

It was somewhat the same with the slabs which composed the roof. They were green at first, but they had been baked for months and years, and a dry summer had not been long ended, so that they were in reality in a very combustible state. Such solid pieces of oak do not take a flame readily, but, to say the least, there were grounds for grave anxiety.

Colonel Preston reproached himself more than did any of his friends, for this neglect, but it must be borne in mind that the peril was one which threatened almost every such station on the frontier during the early days, and it was one which the hardy pioneers had learned to combat, with a success that often defeated the most daring assailants.

As no immediate attack was feared, the occupants of the block-house disposed themselves as fancy prompted. Blossom Brown stretched out on a blanket in a corner and was soon sound asleep. Megill and Turner did the same, the others occupied seats, with the exception of Mrs. Preston, who, like a good housewife, moved hither and thither, making preparations for the noon-day meal of the garrison, while she kept her children under her eye and made sure they did not wander into dangerous portions of the building.

Ned Preston played with the little girls, told them stories and taught them numerous games of which they had never heard, and which he had picked up for their benefit.

Now and then he walked around the four sides of the room, looking carefully through the loopholes and exchanging theories with his uncle, who employed himself in much the same manner.

Thus the time wore on until the day was half gone. The sky was clearer than twenty-four hours before, and the sun was visible most of the time, but the air was crisp and wintry, and the slight warmth from the fire on the hearth down-stairs was pleasant to those who could feel the grateful glow.

Hours passed without any noticeable change. At noontime, there was a general awaking, yawning, and stretching of limbs, accompanied by peeps through the loopholes and an expression of views respecting the situation. Mrs. Preston passed the dinner to each, and they ate, sitting on chairs and the bench, drinking sparingly from the water that had been collected against such an emergency.

Most of the company were in good spirits, for the siege had not continued long enough for them to feel its irksomeness, nor had the demonstrations assumed a character to cause real uneasiness and misgiving of the issue.

After dinner, Colonel Preston and his nephew secured two hours' sleep, but both were too much concerned to remain unconscious as long as did the others.

When Ned recovered himself, he walked straight to the southern side of the room and peered through one of the openings. This gave him a view of the two cabins, deserted the day before by the pioneers who had occupied them so long.

He saw nothing alarming on or about these structures, but all at once something arrested his eye, just beyond the first cabin and on the edge of the forest. At first, he could not conjecture what it meant, but as he looked steadily, he observed that it was a smoking point, showing that an object was burning, although Ned was far from suspecting its real nature.

Once or twice, he fancied he saw a person moving directly behind it; but if such were the fact, the individual kept himself well hidden.

Suddenly a tuft of smoke and a fiery point were seen to rise swiftly in the air, and, curving over in a beautiful parabola, descend toward the roof of the block-house. A moment after it struck with a quick thud and then slid down the steep incline to the ground.

Although the burning shaft was intended to stick fast and communicate fire to the dry roof, it did not do so, but fell harmlessly to the earth, where it lay smoking and burning directly under the eyes of the startled garrison who looked down on it.

"I expected it," quietly remarked Colonel Preston, after surveying the burning missile.

"There will be plenty of fireworks to-night," added Jo Stinger, "for that's a fav'rit style with the varmints."

This new demonstration had the effect of driving all the garrison to the loopholes, Blossom Brown being among the most anxious to watch the actions of the Wyandots.

Even Mrs. Preston looked through the narrow openings with as much interest as did any of them, while little Mary and Susie must needs be given a peep at their familiar surroundings.

The red men having discharged one fiery arrow, waited a long time before repeating the demonstration. As it was deemed likely that the next missile would be sent from another point, a watch was maintained on every side of the block-house.

"Hello, here she come agin!"

It was Jo Stinger who uttered the exclamation, and he was facing the Licking river. There was a general rush across the room to gain a view of the flaming shaft, but before it could be done, it struck the roof above, held a minute, and then, as if its grip was burned away, it was distinctly heard as it fell over and slowly slid down the planks and dropped to the ground, as did the first one.

"If they do that every time," said Ned Preston, "they won't cause us much harm."

"I don't like it," replied the Colonel; "it kept its place too long on the roof."

"Not long enough to do any damage."

"I am not so sure: I must see."

Drawing a chair beneath the trap-door, he stepped on it and cautiously raised the planks a few inches. This permitted a view of all the roof on that side. He observed a scorched spot within reach of his hand, but there was no evidence of injury from the flaming arrow which struck and held a brief time.

The trap was closed again, and the Colonel stepped down from the chair. All looked expectantly at him, but beyond telling what he had seen, he said nothing.

The interest of the garrison was such that they kept their places at the loopholes, through which they scrutinized the clearing, the cabins and the woods beyond, watchful to detect the first evidence of what their enemies were doing.

This close attention caused the autumn afternoon to seem much longer than it really was, but nothing more took place to give the defenders any uneasiness. They saw the shades of night once more closing about them, while they were environed so closely on every hand by the vengeful Wyandots, that flight for any one was utterly out of the question.

"Wait till night comes," said Jo Stinger meaningly; "then you will hear music and see sights!"

Every one knew what the old scout meant by his quaint language, and every one believed he spoke the truth, as in fact he did.

CHAPTER XI.

IN GREAT PERIL.

Deerfoot the Shawanoe had drawn his arrow to the head and was in the very act of launching it at the Wyandot who was advancing on Ned Preston, when he saw that it was unnecessary.

The puff of blue smoke from one of the portholes, the whiplike crack of the Kentuckian's rifle, the death-shriek of the warrior, as he staggered back and dropped to the earth, told the startling story too plainly to be mistaken.

With the faintest possible sigh, the dusky youth relaxed the tension on the string, but he still leaned forward and peered through the bushes, for the danger was not yet past. He more than suspected the needle-pointed shaft would have to be sent after the second Indian who pressed the lad so close; but, as the reader knows, Ned Preston darted through the entrance in the very nick of time, just escaping the tomahawk which whizzed over his head and buried itself half way to the head in the solid puncheon slabs of the door.

"Deerfoot thanks the Great Spirit of the white men," the Indian youth muttered, looking reverently upward, "that his brother, whom he loves more than his own life, is unharmed."

The young Shawanoe felt that no time was to be lost in attending to his own safety. More than likely some one of the Wyandots had caught sight of the arrow, as it sailed through the air, with its important message, and the meeting of the previous day told him he was regarded with suspicion already.

He saw no Indians near him and he cautiously retreated in the direction of the river, which flowed only a short distance from him. The bushes and undergrowth, although they had lost most of their leaves, served him well as a screen, and, when he had advanced three or four rods to the northward, he began to feel more hopeful, though, it need scarcely be said, he did not relax his extraordinary caution in the least.

His purpose was to follow the river bank, until he had passed beyond the surrounding Wyandots, after which it would be an easy matter to make his way to Wild Oaks, with the news of the sore extremity of the block-house. It was reasonable to believe that Waughtauk and his warriors would guard every point much more closely than the Licking directly in front of the station, for the one hundred yards of open clearing made it impossible for any person to approach or leave the building in the daytime, without exposing himself to a raking fire, before reaching a point as close as that attained by Ned Preston and Blossom Brown, when they were checked by the two warriors.

Deerfoot, therefore, was warranted in thinking he had selected the least guarded point, though he could not be sure of success, after the discharge of the arrow through the narrow window.

The few rods were passed as noiselessly as the hand of the clock creeps over its face, when the Shawanoe became aware that he was close to several Wyandots. He had not seen them, but that strange subtlety, or intuition, which in some human beings seems like a sixth sense, told him of the fact.

He immediately sank flat on his face, and, by an imperceptible effort, continued to advance toward the warriors, at a much slower rate than before. Ten feet were passed in this guarded fashion, when he stopped: he had learned enough.

Between himself and the top of the bank, where it was level with the clearing, was less than twelve feet. This space sloped irregularly downward to the edge of the stream, and it was covered in many places by a rank undergrowth, which, when bearing leaves, would have been an effectual screen for an Indian or wild animal.

Besides this scraggly vegetation, there were logs, limbs and debris of freshets that had been brought down the river and had collected along the shores. This will explain why it was that such extreme caution was required on the part of any one who sought to avoid detection.

When Deerfoot stopped, he was at a point from which he saw three Wyandots, each with a gun in his hand, gazing over the clearing in the direction of the block-house. They seemed to be intently occupied, but no living person could pass between them and the river, which almost touched the feet of one, without discovery.

It was utterly useless to look for escape in that direction, and without a minute's pause, the young Shawanoe worked his way back to where he was standing when he used his bow, wondering as he did so, why the twang of the string had not caught the ears of the Wyandots so near him.

He now turned about, so as to face up stream, and tried what might be called the only recourse left. If he was shut off in that direction, he was in the worst dilemma of his life.

An almost incredible experience awaited him, for at about the same distance as before, he discovered he was near others of his enemies, as he was compelled to regard the Wyandots. Rather curiously, when he advanced far enough to look through the bushes, he once more discerned three of them.

They were bestowing most of their attention on the block-house, and one of them discharged his gun toward it, their friends further down the river doing the same.

Deerfoot was somewhat closer to them than to the others, for fortunately he found a partly decayed log, lying directly across his path, and he used this as a partial screen, though by doing so, he increased the difficulty of his withdrawal, should it suddenly become necessary.

The young Shawanoe had scarcely secured the position, when the warriors began talking in their own tongue, which was as familiar to Deerfoot as his own.

He was so close that he did not lose a single word of the conversation, which, as may be suspected, was of no little interest to himself.

"The pale-face is a brave youth, and he runs like Deerfoot, the son of the Shawanoe chieftain Allomaug."

"The Long Knives flee, when the Wyandots leave their villages and hunt for them."

"The Yenghese are not brave," said the third warrior, who had just fired his gun, and who used another term by which the Caucasian was distinguished from his copper-hued brother; "they run like the rabbits, when the hunter drives them from cover; they fled into the strong lodge, when they saw the shadow of Waughtauk coming from the north."

"They will hide behind the logs till their brothers along the Ohio can haste to help them," observed the first speaker, who seemed to be the pessimist of the party; "their lodge is strong, and the Wyandot braves cannot break it down."

Deerfoot, from his concealment, saw the painted face of the other warrior, as it was turned indignantly on the croaker.

"My brother talks like the squaw who thinks the voice of the wind, when it blows among the trees at night, is that of the panther and bear that are pushing their noses under her lodge to turn it over; has Arawa no heart, that he speaks so like a squaw that is ill?"

Arawa seemed to feel somewhat ashamed of himself and made no reply: he would doubtless have been glad if the drift of the conversation should change, but as his companions showed no eagerness to change it, he launched out boldly himself:

"Why did we not shoot the pale-face youth and him with the color of the night, when they hastened across the open ground? It was ours to do so."

"We thought there was no escape for them, and there would not be in many moons should they run again."

"But they cannot save the Yenghese dogs, for the strong lodge shall be burned down before the sun shows itself again in the east," observed the optimist.

"Many moons ago, when the face of the sun was all fire, we tried to burn the strong lodge, but the flame ran away from us and it will do so many times more."

This was Arawa the pessimist, croaking once more, and the others scowled so fiercely upon him, that they seemed on the point of offering violence with a view of modifying his views; but, if so, they changed their minds, and one of them tendered some information:

"The sun and the winds and the moon have made the roof of the strong lodge like the wood with which Arawa makes the fire in his wigwam; it is not as it was many moons ago."

Arawa seemed on the point of opening his mouth to say that, while the moon and the winds and the sun had been engaged in the drying out process, the snows and storms and tempests had been taking part; but if such was his intention, he changed his mind and made a remark of still more vital interest to the cowen near the log.

"The pale-face dogs, and he with the countenance of the night, must have had the serpent-tongued Deerfoot to help them."

This startling statement seemed to be endorsed by the other two, one of whom said--

"Arawa speaks the truth."

"Arawa reads what he sees aright," added the other, while Deerfoot himself felt that all three had hit the nail on the head with astonishing accuracy.

"Deerfoot of the Shawanoes is a dog," observed one of the warriors, "and he shall die the death of a dog."

The individual referred to was rather relieved to hear this declaration, because in order to inflict the death of a dog on him, it would be necessary first to catch him—a condition which implied that the Wyandots would make every effort to take him prisoner, instead of shooting him on sight, as they often did with others.

Where such a strong attempt should be made, it gave the young friend of the white men a much greater chance of eluding his foes.

The Wyandots, while grouped together and occasionally firing a gun at the block-house, continued their derogatory remarks about the young Shawanoe, who did not lose a word. He could see them distinctly: one had his back toward him most of the time, but he turned now and then so that his profile was visible. The lynx eyes of the youth noticed the flaming red, which was daubed over his face, crossed with zebra-like streaks of black, with circles on the forehead and promiscuous dots here and there; the irregular nose, the bridge of which had been broken, and the retreating chin,—all of which rendered this particular Wyandot as ugly of countenance as the imagination can picture.

The others, however, were not much improved as respects looks: one had a projecting underchin, the other a very broad face, and the three were anything but pleasing in appearance.

Stealthily studying them, Deerfoot knew that, like all the other warriors surrounding the block-house, they were his deadly enemies, and would leave no effort untried to capture him the moment they became aware of his presence.

But to escape, it was necessary to pass beyond them, and desperate as was the chance, Deerfoot saw a faint hope of success, enough to lead him to make the attempt.

The Wyandots were further up the bank than were the others, and there was more vegetation and shrubbery there than lower down stream; but, for all that, the chance was a forlorn one indeed.

Deerfoot relied mainly on the fact that the interest of the warriors was absorbed in the block-house itself: if they should continue to give it their whole attention, he might be able to move by them undiscovered.

More than once, he had scrutinized the Licking, but with no encouraging result. Had it been very deep close to the bank, he would have wished no more favorable conditions. He could swim a long distance under water and dive so far as to elude almost any kind of pursuit.

But the stream was too shallow to be of any use in that respect, and he would have been forced to wade a long way before finding a sufficient depth to benefit him.

Whether he would have succeeded in flanking the Wyandots, had everything remained as it was, is an open question, for the conditions were overwhelmingly against him. But an obstacle appeared of which not even the acute-minded Shawanoe dreamed.

At the very moment he began moving from behind the rotten log, with a view of pushing beyond, his trained ear caught a faint rattling noise, like the whirl of a locust. He knew that it was the warning of a rattlesnake which he had disturbed by his slight change of position.

Singularly enough it was below the log and close to the water: it must have been moving toward the side where the Shawanoe was hiding, when it discovered him. It instantly began drawing itself rapidly in coil and prepared to strike its enemy.

Deerfoot saw that it was at just the right distance to bury its fangs in his face. He made the quickest retreat of his life. He did not become panic-stricken, but slid back several feet, so silently that he made less noise than did the *crotalus* itself, which was not heard by the Wyandots, who were so much interested in the block-house and its immediate surroundings.

The action of the young Indian seemed to surprise the serpent, which found its prey beyond reach at the moment it was ready to launch its needle-pointed fangs into his body. With the tail slightly elevated, the snake continued vibrating it slowly and giving forth a sound like the faint chirping of crickets.

Deerfoot extracted a single arrow from his quiver, and, while lying on his face, supported on his right elbow, drew back the missile as though it was a javelin which he was about to cast at an enemy.

The distance was short, and he knew what he could do. Like a flash his left hand shot forward, and the flint of the arrow went directly through the narrow portion of the rattlesnake's body, a few inches below its head. So powerful was the throw that the upper portion was carried backward and pinned to the earth.

The *crotalus* species is so easily killed that a slight blow is sufficient to render it helpless. The arrow, which had transfixed the serpent in front of Deerfoot, destroyed the reptile so suddenly that it made only a few furious whippings, when it was dead.

The youth felt not the slightest fear of the reptile, but he dreaded lest its thrashings should attract the notice of the Wyandots, whom he furtively watched, until the rattlesnake lay still.

One of the warriors did look around, as though he heard something unusual, but he seemed satisfied with a mere glance, and, turning back, sighted his gun at the block-house and threw away a charge, as so many of his people were doing around him.

"Now is my chance," thought Deerfoot, as he once more began his stealthy, shadow-like creeping around the decayed log, from behind which had glided the venomous serpent that confronted him.

The dead reptile still lay in his path, and Deerfoot reached his bow forward, thrust one end under it and flung it aside, for he shared the sentiments of the great generality of mankind, who look upon all ophidians as the most detestable plagues which encumber the earth.

CHAPTER XII.

"BIRDS OF THE NIGHT."

The garrison within the block-house saw the November day draw to an end, and the darkness of night closing in over river, forest and clearing, with sad forebodings of what was to come before the rising of the morrow's sun.

Colonel Preston and Jo Stinger agreed that the experiment with the burning arrows had resulted more favorably to the Wyandots than to the whites. The flaming missiles were undoubtedly launched as a test or experiment. True, each one had fallen to the ground without inflicting material damage, but one of them clung to its position so long as to encourage the assailants to repeat the attempt.

"When the roof is stuck full of 'em," said Stinger, "and they're p'inting upward like the quills of a porcupine, and every one of them arrers is a camp-fire of itself, why then, look out,—that's all I've got to say."

"I know of no reason why—hello! there's another!"

The speakers ran to the loopholes and looked out. Megill said it had been fired from the cabin nearest them: he had noticed the wisp of burning tow at the moment it sprang upward from the window. The archer who dispatched it, kept himself out of view, Megill only catching sight of his brawny hand, as he launched the flaming shaft.

This arrow was not heard to slide down the roof and fall to the ground as did the others. It kept its place, and so profound was the stillness within the block-house that every one distinctly heard the crackling of the flames overhead.

More than one heart beat faster, as the friends looked at each other, and more than one face blanched, when the full import of this ominous occurrence became known.

Jo Stinger drew his chair beneath the trap-door and carefully lifted the slabs a few inches. He saw the arrow, which had been fired with astonishing accuracy, and which had been sent to such a height that it descended almost perpendicularly, the flint-head sinking a full inch in the dry wood.

This rapid sweep through air had fanned the twist of tow into a strong blaze, and it was now burning vigorously. The flame was so hot indeed that the shaft had caught fire, and it looked, at the first glance, as though it would communicate with the roof itself.

This was hardly likely; though, as Stinger himself had declared, the danger would be very imminent when a large number were burning at the same time on different portions of the top of the building.

The pioneer extended the barrel of his rifle until he reached the burning missile, when he knocked it loose by a smart blow. As before, it slid down the steeply shelving roof and dropped, smoking, to the ground, where it burned itself harmlessly away.

The expectation was general on the part of the garrison that a shower of burning arrows would now be sent from every portion of the wood. The suspense was great, but, to the surprise of all, the minutes passed without any demonstration of the kind.

The night, like the preceding one, was chilly and crisp, but it was clearer. A gibbous moon shone from the sky, save when the straggling clouds drifted across its face, and sent grotesque shadows gliding along the clearing and over the block-house and woods. A dozen black specks, almost in the shape of the letter Y, suddenly passed over the moon, and the honking cry which sounded high up in air, showed they were wild geese flying southward.

As the minutes wore on without any molestation from the Wyandots, Mrs. Preston went down the ladder and started the smouldering embers into life. This was not for the purpose of cooking, for enough of that was done at noon, and the rations had already been distributed; but it was with a view of adding to the comfort of those above, by giving them a little warmth.

She took care to keep out of the range of any lurking red men who might steal up and fire through the windows on the opposite side, the only spot from which a shot could reach her; but to attain the point of firing, an Indian would have been forced to scale the stockade, and none of them as yet had attempted that.

Ned Preston stooped at the loophole, looking out over the clearing toward the Licking, from which he and Blossom Brown had made such a daring run for life and liberty. Out in the darkness beyond, he had parted from Deerfoot the Shawanoe, the Indian youth who was so deeply attached to him. Ned more than suspected his friend had given up his life for his sake. Placed, as was Deerfoot, there seemed to be no possibility of his eluding the Wyandots, who looked upon him as the worst of traitors that encumbered the earth.

"He asked me about the Great Spirit of the white man," thought Ned Preston, as he recalled that conversation over the letter which was tied to the arrow sent through the window; "and I promised I would tell him something: I feel as though I had not done my duty."

The lad was thoughtful a moment, oppressed by the remorse which comes to us when we feel we have thrown away an opportunity that may never return; but he soon rallied, as he remembered the words so often spoken by his good mother.

"God knows all hearts and he judges us aright: if Deerfoot was groping after our Great Spirit, he found him before he died, for God is so good and kind that he has gone to him, but O how glad I would be, if I could only believe Deerfoot had got away, and that I shall see him again!"

Ned Preston was roused from these gloomy reflections by the discovery that something was going on in front of him, though for some time he could not divine its character.

The uncertain light of the moon annoyed him, and prevented his learning what would have been quickly detected by Jo Stinger.

When the moon shone with unobstructed light, Ned could follow the outlines of the Wyandot warrior stretched out in death on the clearing in front: when the clouds drifted over its face, everything was swallowed in darkness.

In the mood of young Preston, a person sometimes shows a singular disposition to observe trifling details and incidents. On almost any other occasion he would not have noticed that the body of the Wyandot lay in such a position that the head was within an arm's length of a stump, while the feet was about the same distance from another.

At the moment of deepest mental depression, the boy noted this, and he muttered to himself, during the succeeding minutes, until the moon came out again from behind the clouds. Just then he was looking toward the prostrate figure, and he observed that it had shifted its position.

The head was within a few inches of a stump, while the feet were correspondingly removed from the other. The difference was so marked that there was no room for self-deception in the matter.

"It must be he is alive!" was the thought of Ned, "and has been feigning death all these hours."

He was on the point of calling to his uncle, when he reflected that no mercy was likely to be shown the warrior, in case he was only wounded. Ned felt a sympathy for the poor wretch, and, though he had been his most merciless enemy, the boy resolved that he would do nothing to obstruct his final escape.

He now centered his gaze on the figure and watched it with deep interest. So long as the flood of moonlight rested on it, it remained as motionless as the stumps near it; but at the end of ten minutes a thick cloud sailed slowly by the orb, obscuring its light only a few minutes.

As soon as all was clear, Ned exclaimed--

"He's moved again!"

"That's so, but he had help."

It was Jo Stinger who stood at the elbow of Ned, looking through the adjoining loophole. The boy turned to the scout, and said in an entreaty voice--

"Don't shoot him, Jo; give the poor fellow a chance!"

Jo laughed--

"I don't waste ammunition on dead men: that varmint has been as dead as Julius Caesar ever since he was shot."

"But how does he manage to move himself then?"

"Bless your soul, he doesn't do it: there's a Wyandot behind that stump at his head, and he's taking a hitch at him whenever the moon gives him a show."

Ned Preston was astonished, for the truth had never occurred to him. Jo added--

"I've caught a glimpse of him once or twice, as he darted from one stump to another. He came from the river bank, and I could have picked him off, but I knowed what he's arter, and it's a principle with the Colonel and me, never to interfere with the varmints when they want to bury their dead."

Ned Preston was greatly relieved to hear this, but the two said nothing to the others, through fear that Megill or Turner would not be so considerate of the wishes of the Colonel, whose authority over them was more nominal than actual.

The Wyandot who had taken on himself the duty of carrying away the body of his fallen companion, seemed to acquire confidence from his success. While Ned and Stinger were watching his movements, and while the moon shone with unobstructed light, they saw the body drawn entirely behind the stump, where, after some maneuvering, the warrior partly straightened up, holding the burden over his shoulders and back.

Then he sped with surprising quickness for the river bank, down which he vanished with the load.

His work was done, and the deliverer doubtless believed he had outwitted the whites, who could have shot him without difficulty as he ran.

Colonel Preston, and indeed all the garrison, were constantly expecting the shower of burning arrows, and, because they were delayed, no one dared hope the Wyandots had given over the intention of burning them out of their refuge.

When Ned grew weary of scanning the clearing with its uncertain light, he walked to the northern side of the room which commanded a view of one portion of the stockade.

Before doing so, he turned to converse a few minutes with his uncle and aunt. There was no light burning in the upper story, for the reason that it was likely to serve as a guide to some of the Indian marksmen who might steal up near enough to fire through the loopholes.

The children had lain down in the corner, where, after saying their prayers, they were sleeping the sweet refreshing sleep of innocence and childhood.

"Their mother is pretty well worn out," said the Colonel, "and I have persuaded her to take a little rest while the opportunity is hers."

"I am glad of that, but there is no telling when she will be awakened----"

"Hello! there's more mischief!"

The exclamation was recognized as that of Jo Stinger, who had also shifted his position to the northern side. Colonel Preston and his nephew instantly hastened to the loopholes and looked out in the gloom, which just then was at its deepest, as a mass of clouds were gradually gliding before the moon, which could be seen only very faintly, when some of the torn edges allowed its rays to steal through.

"What is it, Jo?" asked the Colonel, rifle in hand.

"About a minute ago, I seen the heads of two of the varmints; I oughtn't to have hollered as I did, but I was sort of took off my guard, as you may say."

"Where were they?"

"Out yonder on the stockade; I make no doubt they're climbing over."

"Give them a shot the moment you get the chance."

"You may be sure I will," replied Jo, who was just able to catch a glimpse of the moon, which seemed to be struggling to free itself from the clouds that were smothering it.

Colonel Preston and Ned also shoved their guns through the loopholes, so as to be ready to fire the instant the opportunity offered.

Jo had indicated the exact place, so that their gaze was turned to the right point. The Wyandots were not forgetful of the uncertain light which alternately favored and opposed them. When, therefore, the eyes were directed toward the proper point, nothing was seen but the sharply pointed pickets pointing upward, and which looked as difficult to scale as the spiked fences of modern days.

"They're there," whispered Jo, "and when you see a head, blaze away at it."

The words were yet in his mouth, when the outlines of a tufted crown appeared above the stockade, where the Wyandot paused, as if peeping over. Then a second was outlined at his elbow, the two remaining stationary a full minute.

"Don't shoot just yet," whispered Stinger.

Ned wondered why the delay was suggested, after his previous instruction; but, a moment after, the two Wyandots, no doubt with the assistance of others, suddenly rose higher, so that their shoulders and bodies were dimly seen. They were climbing over the stockade.

"Now!" said Jo Stinger.

All three fired, and the red men instantly vanished. It was almost impossible to take fair aim, but it looked as if the warriors had been "hit hard."

"We dropped them," said Ned, with some excitement.

"Yes, but they dropped themselves; they're inside the stockade."

"What harm can two of them do, if they *are* there?" asked Colonel Preston, quite hopeful that they had slain the Indians.

"There are a half dozen of the varmints at least inside," was the disquieting statement of Stinger.

"We ought to be able to see them," observed Colonel Preston, looking searchingly at the spot where the two were discovered.

"When they stand still, you can't see 'em; but when they stir around, you can just make 'em out."

The reason why the Wyandots had selected this side of the stockade, was now apparent. The position of the moon in the heavens was such that the pickets threw a wall of shadow several feet within the square. When the warriors dropped to the ground, they were in such gloom that it was almost impossible to see them, except when they moved away from the fence.

All this being true, it still was not easy to divine their purpose in climbing the pickets. So long as they remained within the square, they were in range of the Kentuckians' rifles as much as though on the clearing in front.

CHAPTER XIII.

SHADOWY VISITORS.

When the eye gazes steadily at the Pleiades, in the midnight splendor of the starlit sky, one of the blazing orbs shrinks modestly from view and only six remain to be admired by the wondering gazer below: it is the quick, casual glance that catches the brilliant sister unawares, before she can hide her face.

So, when the pioneers within the block-house looked intently at the stockade, they saw nothing but the wall of shadow and the outline of the sharp pickets above; but, as their vision flitted along the front, they caught the faint suggestions of the figures of men standing erect and doubtless intently watching the block-house, from which the rifles of the Kentuckians had flashed but a short time before.

Whenever the moon's light was obscured, nothing but blank darkness met the eye, the line of stockades themselves vanishing from sight. Once one of the warriors moved a few steps to the left, and Jo Stinger and Ned Preston detected it.

"Why not try another shot?" asked the Colonel, when the matter was referred to.

"It is too much guess-work: nobody can take any sort of aim, when it is so dark in the block-house."

"I wonder what their purpose can be," muttered the Colonel, speaking as much to himself as to those near him.

"I knows what it am," said Blossom Brown, who had been drawn to the spot by the firing and the words he had overheard.

"You do, eh?" remarked the Colonel, looking toward him in the darkness; "what is it?"

"Dey're comin' to steal de well."

"What will they do with it, after they steal it?"

"Take it off in de woods and hide it, I s'pose."

"They won't have any trouble in preventing *us* from stealing it,--that is certain," observed the Colonel, bitterly.

"Why can't we dig the well inside the block-house, as you intended?" asked Ned; "there are shovels, spades and picks, and I don't suppose it would take us a great while."

"If we are driven to it, we will make the attempt; but there is no likelihood that we will have a chance. All our attention will be required by the Indians."

"You can set Blossom to work if you wish to," said Ned Preston; "he is good for little except to cut wood and dig. If he worked steadily for two or three days, he might reach water."

Ned was in earnest with this proposition, and he volunteered to take his turn with his servant and the others; but the scheme filled Blossom with dismay.

"I neber dugged a well," he said, with a contemptuous sniff; "if I should undertook it, de well would cave in on me, and den all you folks would hab to stop fightin' de Injines and go to diggin' me out agin."

Colonel Preston did not consider the project feasible just then, and Blossom Brown was relieved from an anticipation which was anything but pleasant.

Jo Stinger was attentively watching the stockade where the figures of the Wyandot warriors were faintly seen. He was greatly mystified to understand what their object could be in exposing themselves to such risk, when, so far as he could judge, there was nothing to be gained by so doing; but none knew better than did the veteran that, brave as were these red men, they were not the ones to face a danger without the reasonable certainty of acquiring some advantage over an enemy.

"I will risk a shot anyway," he thought; "for, though I can't make much of an aim, there is a chance of doing something. As soon as the moon comes out, I will see how the varmints will stand a bullet or two."

So he waited "till the clouds rolled by," but, as he feared, the straining eye could not catch the faintest suggestion of a warrior, where several were visible only a short time before.

They had vanished as silently as the shadows of the clouds swept across the clearing.

The action of the Indians in this respect was the cause of all kinds of conjectures and theories, none of the garrison being able to offer one that satisfied the others.

Megill believed it was a diversion intended to cover up some design in another direction. He was sure that, when the Wyandots made a demonstration, it would come from some other point altogether. He, therefore, gave his attention mainly to the cabins and the clearing in front.

Turner suspected they meant to destroy the well by filling it up, so that it would be useless when the supply of water within the block-house should become exhausted. Precisely how this filling up was to be done, and wherein the necessity existed (since the Wyandots could command the approaches to the water day and night), were beyond the explanation of the settler.

Jo Stinger, the veteran of the company, scouted these theories, as he did that of the Colonel that it was a mere reconnoissance, but he would not venture any guess further than that the mischief was much deeper than any believed, and that never was there more necessity of the most unremitting vigilance.

Megill asserted that some scheme was brewing in the cabin from which the two warriors emerged, when they sought to cut off the boys in their run to the block-house. He had seen lights moving about, though the ones who carried the torches took care not to expose themselves to any shot from the station.

The silence lasted two hours longer without the slightest evidence that a living person was within a mile of the block-house. During that period, not a glimmer of a light could be detected in the cabin, there was not a single burning arrow, nor did so much as a war-whoop or signal pass the lips of one of the Wyandots.

The keen eyes of Jo Stinger and Ned Preston failed to catch a glimpse of the shadowy figures at which they discharged their rifles, and which caused them so much wonderment and speculation.

But the keen scrutiny that seized every favoring moment and roamed along the lines of stockades, further than the ordinary eye could follow, discovered a thing or two which were not without their significance.

On the northern and eastern sides a number of pickets had been removed, leaving several gaps wide enough to admit the passage of a person. This required a great deal of hard work, for the pickets had been driven deep into the earth and were well secured and braced from the inside.

"They needed men on both sides of the stockade to do that," said Colonel Preston, "and those whom we saw, climbed over, so as to give assistance."

"That's the most sensible idee that's been put forward," replied Jo Stinger, "and I shouldn't be s'prised if you was right; but somehow or other----"

"By gracious! I smell smoke sure as yo's bo'n!"

Blossom Brown gave several vigorous sniffs before uttering this alarming exclamation, but the words had no more than passed his lips, when every man knew he spoke the truth.

There was smoke in the upper part of the block-house, and though it could not be seen in the darkness, yet it was perceptible to the sense of smell.

Consternation reigned for a few minutes among the garrison, and there was hurrying to and fro in the effort to learn the cause of the burning near them.

The most terrifying cry that can strike the ears of the sailor or passenger at sea is that of fire, but no such person could hold the cry in greater dread than did the garrison, shut in the block-house and surrounded by fierce American Indians.

The first supposition of Colonel Preston was that it came from the roof, and springing upon a chair, he shoved up the trap-doors, one after the other, to a dangerously high extent. But whatever might have happened to the other portions of the structure, the roof was certainly intact.

The next natural belief was that it was caused by the fire on the hearth in the lower story, and Colonel Preston and Blossom Brown made all haste down the ladder. Blossom, indeed, was too hasty, for he missed one of the rounds and went bumping and tumbling to the floor, where he set up a terrific cry, to which no attention was paid amid the general

excitement.

"Here it is! Here's the fire!" suddenly shouted Ned Preston, in a voice which instantly brought the others around him.

Ned had done that wise thing to which we have all been urged many a time and oft: he had "followed his nose" to the north-east corner of the block-house, where the vapor was so dense that he knew the cause must be very near.

It so happened that this very nook was the least guarded of all. Looking directly downward through the holes cut in the projecting floor, his eyes smarted so much from the ascending vapor that he was forced to rub them vigorously that he might be able to see.

He could detect nothing but smoke for a minute or so, and that, of course, made itself manifest to the sense of smell and touch rather than to that of sight; but he soon observed, directly beneath his feet, the red glow of fire itself. Then it was he uttered the startling cry, which awoke Mrs. Preston and brought the rest around him.

Despite the care and skill with which the station had been guarded by the garrison, all of whom possessed a certain experience in frontier-life, the wily Wyandots had not only crept up to the block-house itself without discovery, but they had brought sticks, had piled them against the north-east corner, had set fire to them, and had skulked away without being suspected by any one of the sentinels.

The fact seemed incredible, and yet there was the most convincing evidence before or rather under their eyes. Jo Stinger gave utterance to several emphatic expressions, as he made a dash for the barrel of water, and he was entirely willing to admit that of all idiots who had ever pretended to be a sensible man, he was the chief.

But the danger was averted without difficulty. Two pails of water were carefully poured through the openings in the floor of the projecting roof, and every spark of fire was extinguished.

The water added to the density of the vapor. It set all the inmates coughing and caused considerable annoyance; but it soon passed away, and, after a time, the air became comparatively pure again.

Megill complimented the cunning of the Wyandots, but Jo insisted that they had shown no special skill at all: it was the utter stupidity of himself and friends who had allowed such a thing to be done under their very noses.

"And, if it hadn't been for that darkey there," said he, with all the severity he could command, "we wouldn't have found it out till this old place was burned down, and we was scootin' across the clearin' with the varmints crackin' away at us."

"De gemman is right," assented Blossom, as he stopped rubbing the bruises he received from tumbling through the ladder; "you'll find dat it's allers me dat wokes folks up when de lightnin' am gwine to strike somewhar 'bout yar."

"We won't deny you proper credit," said Colonel Preston, "though Jo is a little wild in his statements----"

The unimportant remark of Colonel Preston was bisected by the sharp report of Jo Stinger's rifle, followed on the instant by a piercing shriek from some point near the block-house, within the stockade.

"I peppered him *that* time!" exclaimed the veteran; "it's all well enough to crawl into yer winder, gather all the furniture together and set fire to it, and then creep out agin, but when it comes to stealin' the flint and tinder out of your pocket to do it with, then I'm going to get mad."

When the scout had regained something of his usual good nature, he explained that he had scarcely turned to look out, when he actually saw two of the Wyandots walking directly toward the heap of smoking brush, as though they intended to renew the fire. The sight he considered one of the grossest insults ever offered his intelligence, and he fired, without waiting till some one could arrange to shoot the second red man.

With a daring that was scarcely to be wondered at, the warrior who was unhurt threw his arm about his smitten companion and hurried to one of the openings in the stockade, through which he made his way.

This slight check would doubtless cause the red men to be more guarded in their movements against the garrison.

"It has teached them," said the hunter, with something of his grim humor, "that accidents may happen, and some of 'em mought get hurt if they go to looking down the muzzles of our guns."

All noticed a rather curious change in the weather. The sky, which had been quite clear early in the evening, was becoming overcast, and the clouds hid the moon most of the time. It remained cold and chilly, and more than one of the garrison wrapped a blanket around him, while doing duty at the loopholes.

The cloudiness became so marked, after a brief while, that the view was much shortened in every direction. Those at the front of the block-house could not see the edge of the clearing, where the Licking flowed calmly on its way to the

Ohio. Those on the north saw first the line of stockades dissolve into darkness, and then the well-curb (consisting of a rickety crank and windlass), grew indistinct until its outlines faded from sight.

The two cabins to the south loomed up in the gloom as the hulls of ships are sometimes seen in the night-time at sea, but the blackness was so profound, it became oppressive. Within the block-house, where there was no light of any kind burning, it was like that of ancient Egypt.

Colonel Preston could not avoid a certain nervousness over the attempt of the Wyandots to fire the building, and, though it failed, he half suspected it would be repeated.

He descended the ladder and made as careful an examination as possible, but failed to find anything to add to his alarm and misgiving. Everything seemed to be secure: the fastenings of the doors were such that they might be considered almost as firm as the solid logs themselves.

While he was thus engaged, he heard some one coming down the ladder. "Who's there?" he asked in an undertone.

"It's Jo--don't be scart."

"I'm not scared; I only wanted to know who it is; what are you after?"

"I'm going out-doors, right among the varmints."

"What has put that idea in your head?"

"They've been playing their tricks on us long enough, and now I'm going to show them that Jo Stinger knows a thing or two as well as them."

Colonel Preston would have sought to dissuade the veteran from the rash proceeding, had he not known that it was useless to do so.

CHAPTER XIV.

A MISHAP AND A SENTENCE.

Deerfoot the Shawanoe first pinned the rattlesnake to the earth with the arrow which he threw with his deft left hand, then he flung the reptile from his path and resumed his delicate and dangerous attempt to creep past the three Wyandots who were lying against the hank of the Licking, watching the block-house, now and then firing a shot at the solid logs, as if to express their wishes respecting the occupants of the building.

If the task was almost impossible at first, it soon became utterly so, as the young Shawanoe was compelled to admit. The contour of the bank was such that, after getting by the log, he would be compelled to approach the warriors so close that he could touch them with his outstretched hand. This would have answered at night, when they were asleep, but he might as well have attempted to lift himself through the air as to do it under the circumstances we have described.

Deerfoot never despaired nor gave up so long as he held space in which to move. He immediately repeated the retrograde motion he had used when confronted by the venomous serpent, his wish now being to return to the spot from which he fired the arrow.

The ventures made satisfied him that he had but one chance in a thousand of escaping capture and death. He could not move to the right nor left: it would have been certain destruction to show himself on the clearing, and equally fatal to attempt to use the shallow Licking behind him.

There was a remote possibility that the arrowy messenger which he had sent from his bow had not been noticed by any of the besieging Wyandots, and that, as considerable time had already passed, none of them would come over to where he was to inquire into the matter.

If they would keep as far away from him as they were when his friend Ned Preston started on his desperate run for the block-house, of course he would be safe. He could wait where he was, lying flat on the ground, through all the long hours of the day, until the mantle of night should give him the chance for which he sighed.

Ah, but for one hour of darkness! His flight from the point of danger would be but pastime.

The single chance in a thousand was that which we have named: the remote possibility that none of the Wyandots would come any nearer to where he was hugging the river bank.

For a full hour Deerfoot was in suspense, with a fluttering hope that it might be his fortune to wait until the sun should climb to the zenith and sink in the west; for, young as was the Shawanoe, he had learned the great truth that in the affairs of this world no push or energy will win, where the virtue of patience is lacking. Many a time a single move, born of impatience, has brought irretrievable disaster, where success otherwise was certain.

As the Shawanoe lay against the bank, looking across the clearing toward the block-house, he recalled that message which, instead of being spoken, as were all that he knew of, was carried on the arrow he sent through the window. If he but understood how to place those words on paper or on a dried leaf even, he would send another missive to Colonel Preston, saying that, inasmuch as he was shut in from all hope of escape, he would make the effort to run across the open space, as did his friends before him.

But the thing was impossible: the door of the block-house was fastened, and if Deerfoot should start, he would reach it, if he reached it at all, before the Colonel could draw the first bolt. Even if the Shawanoe youth should succeed in making the point, which was extremely doubtful, now that the Wyandots were fully awake, the inevitable few seconds' halt there must prove fatal.

The short conversation which he had overheard, convinced him of the sentiments of Waughtauk and his warriors toward him, and led the young Shawanoe to determine on an effort to extricate himself. It is the very daring of such a scheme which sometimes succeeds, and he put it in execution without delay.

Instead of crouching to the ground, as he had been doing, he now rose upright and moved down the bank, in the direction of the three Wyandots who first turned him back. They were in their old position, and he had gone only a few steps when one of them turned his head and saw the youthful warrior approaching. He uttered a surprised "Hooh!"

and the others looked around at the figure, as they might have done had it been an apparition.

The scheme of Deerfoot was to attempt the part of a friend of the Wyandots and consequently that of an enemy of the white race. He acted as if without thought of being anything else, and as though he never dreamed there was a suspicion of his loyalty.

At a leisurely gait he walked toward the three Indians, holding his head down somewhat, and glancing sideways through the scattered bushes at the top of the bank, as though afraid of a shot from the garrison.

"Have any of my brethren of the Wyandots been harmed by the dogs of the Yenghese?" asked Deerfoot in the high-flown language peculiar to his people.

"The eyes of Deerfoot must have been closed not to see Oo-oo-mat-ah lying on the ground before his eyes."

This was an allusion to the warrior who made the mistake of stopping Ned Preston when on his way to the block-house.

"Deerfoot saw Oo-oo-mat-ah fall, as falls the brave warrior fighting his foe; the eyes of Deerfoot were wet with tears, when his brave Wyandot brother fell."

Strictly speaking, a microscope would not have detected the first grain of truth in this grandiloquent declaration, which was accompanied by a gesture as though the audacious young Shawanoe was on the point of breaking into sobs again.

The apparent sincerity of Deerfoot's grief seemed to disarm the Wyandots for the moment, which was precisely what the young Shawanoe was seeking to do.

Having mastered his sorrow, he started down the river bank on the same slow gait, glancing sideways at the block-house as though he feared a shot from that point. But the Indians were not to be baffled in that fashion: their estimate of the daring Deerfoot was the same as Waughtauk's.

Without any further dissembling, one of the Wyandots, a lithe sinewy brave, fully six feet in height, bounded in front of the Shawanoe, and grasping his knife, said with flashing eyes--

"Deerfoot is a dog! he is a traitor; he is a serpent that has two tongues! he shall die!"

The others stood a few feet behind the couple and watched the singular encounter.

The Wyandot, with the threatening words in his mouth, leaped toward Deerfoot, striking a vicious blow with his knife. It was a thrust which would have ended the career of the youthful brave, had it reached its mark.

But Deerfoot dodged it easily, and, without attempting to return it, shot under the infuriated arm and sped down the river bank with all the wonderful speed at his command.

The slight disturbance had brought the other three Wyandots to the spot, and it would have been an easy thing to shoot the fugitive as he fled. But among the new arrivals were those who knew it was the wish of Waughtauk that Deerfoot should be taken prisoner, that he might be put to the death all traitors deserved.

Instead of firing their guns therefore, the whole six broke into a run, each exerting himself to the utmost to overtake the fleet-footed youth, who was no match for any one of them in a hand-to-hand conflict, or a trial of strength.

Deerfoot, by his sharp strategy, had thrown the whole party behind him and had gained two or three yards' start: he felt that, if he could not hold this against the fleetest of the Wyandots, then he deserved to die the death of a dog.

The bushes, undergrowth and logs which obstructed his path, were as troublesome to his pursuers as to himself, and he bounded over them like a mountain chamois, leaping from crag to crag.

There can be no question that, if this contest had been decided by the relative swiftness of foot on the part of pursuer and pursued, the latter would have escaped without difficulty, but, as if the fates were against the brave Shawanoe, his matchless limbs were no more than fairly going, when two Wyandot warriors appeared directly in front in such a position that it was impossible to avoid them.

Deerfoot made a wrenching turn to the right, as if he meant to flank them, but he stumbled, nearly recovered himself--then fell with great violence, turning a complete somersault from his own momentum, and then rose to his feet, as the Indians in front and rear closed around him.

He uttered a suppressed exclamation of pain, limped a couple of steps, and then grasped a tree to sustain himself. He

seemed to have sprained his ankle badly and could bear his weight only on one foot. No more disastrous termination of the flight could have followed.

The Wyandots gathered about the poor fugitive with many expressions of pleasure, for the pursuers had just been forced to believe the young brave was likely to escape them, and it was a delightful surprise when the two appeared in front and headed him off.

Besides, a man with a sprained ankle is the last one in the world to indulge in a foot-race, and they felt secure, therefore, in holding their prisoner.

"Dog! traitor! serpent with the forked tongue! base son of a brave chieftain! warrior with the white heart!"

These were a few of the expressions applied to the captive, who made no answer. In fact, he seemed to be occupied exclusively with his ankle, for, while they were berating him, he stooped over and rubbed it with both hands, flinging his long bow aside, as though it could be of no further use to him.

The epithets were enough to blister the skin of the ordinary American Indian, and there came a sudden flush to the dusky face of the youthful brave, when he heard himself called the base son of a brave chieftain. But he had learned to conquer himself, and he uttered not a word in response.

One of the Wyandots picked up the bow which the captive had thrown aside, and examined it with much curiosity. There was no attempt to disarm him of his knife and tomahawk, for had he not been disabled by the sprained ankle, he would have been looked upon as an insignificant prisoner, against whom it was cowardly to take any precautions. In fact, to remove his weapons that remained would have been giving dignity to one too contemptible to deserve the treatment of an ordinary captive.

The aborigines, like all barbarians and many civilized people, are cruel by nature. The Wyandots, who had secured Deerfoot, refrained from killing him for no other reason than that it would have been greater mercy than they were willing to show to one whom they held in such detestation.

As it was, two of them struck him and repeated the taunting names uttered when they first laid hands on him. Deerfoot still made no answer, though his dark eyes flashed with a dangerous light when he looked in the faces of the couple who inflicted the indignity.

He asked them quietly to help him along, but, with another taunt, the whole eight refused. The one who had smote him twice and who held his bow, placed his hand against the shoulder of the youth and gave him a violent shove. Deerfoot went several paces and then fell on his knees and hands with a gasp of pain severe enough to make him faint.

The others laughed, as he painfully labored to his feet. He then asked that he might have his bow to use as a cane; but even this was refused. Finding nothing in the way of assistance was to be obtained, his proud spirit closed his lips, and he limped forward, scarcely touching the great toe of the injured limb to the ground.

The brief flight and pursuit had led the parties so far down the Licking that they were out of sight of the block-house, quite a stretch of forest intervening; but it had also taken them nearer the headquarters, as they may be called, of Waughtauk, leader of the Wyandots besieging Fort Bridgman.

This sachem showed, in a lesser way, something of the military prowess of Pontiac, chief of the Chippewas, King Philip of Pokanoket, and Tecumseh, who belonged to the same tribe with Deerfoot.

Although his entire force numbered a little more than fifty, yet he had disposed them with such skill around the block-house that the most experienced of scouts failed to make his way through the lines.

Waughtauk was well convinced of the treachery of the Shawanoe, and there was no living man for whom he would have given a greater amount of wampum.

The eyes of the chieftain sparkled with pleasure when the youthful warrior came limping painfully toward him, escorted by the Wyandots, as though they feared that, despite his disabled condition, he might dart off with the speed of the wind.

Waughtauk rose from the fallen tree on which he had been seated among his warriors, and advanced a step or two to meet the party as it approached.

"Dog! base son of the noble chief Alloumaug! youth with the red face and the white heart! serpent with the forked tongue! the Great Spirit has given it to Waughtauk that he should inflict on you the death that is fitting all such."

These were fierce words, but the absolute fury of manner which marked their utterance showed how burning was the

hate of the Wyandot leader and his warriors. They knew that this youth had been honored and trusted as no one of his years had ever been honored and trusted by his tribe, and his treachery was therefore all the deeper, and deserving of the worst punishment that could be devised.

Deerfoot, standing on one foot, with his hand grasping a sapling at his side, looked calmly in the face of the infuriated leader, and in his low, musical voice, said--

"When Deerfoot was sick almost to death, his white brother took the place of the father and mother who went to the happy hunting grounds long ago; Deerfoot would have been a dog, had he not helped his white brother through the forest, when the bear and the panther and the Wyandot were in his path."

This defence, instead of soothing the chieftain, seemed to arouse all the ferocity of his nature. His face fairly shone with flame through his ochre and paint; and striding toward the prisoner, he raised his hand with such fierceness that the muscles of the arm rose in knots and the veins stood out in ridges on temple and forehead.

As he threw his fist aloft and was on the point of smiting Deerfoot to the earth, the latter straightened up with his native dignity, and, still grasping the sapling and still standing on one foot, looked him in the eye.

It was as if a great lion-tamer, hearing the stealthy approach of the wild beast, had suddenly turned and confronted him.

Waughtauk paused at the moment, his fist was in the air directly over the head of Deerfoot, glowering down upon him with an expression demoniac in its hate. He breathed hard and fast for a few seconds and then retreated without striking the impending blow.

But it must not be understood that it was the defiant look of the captive which checked the chief. It produced no such effect, nor was it intended to do so: it simply meant on the part of Deerfoot that he expected indignity and torture and death, and he could bear them as unflinchingly as Waughtauk himself.

As for the chieftain, he reflected that a little counsel and consultation were needed to fix upon the best method of putting this tormentor out of the way. If Waughtauk should allow his own passion to master him, the anticipated enjoyment would be lost.

While Deerfoot, therefore, retained his grasp on the sapling, that he might be supported from falling, Waughtauk called about him his cabinet, as it may be termed, and began the consideration of the best means of punishing the traitor.

The captive could hear all the discussion, and, it need not be said, he listened with much more interest than he appeared to feel.

It would be revolting to detail the schemes advocated. If there is any one direction in which the human mind is marvelous in its ingenuity, it is in the single one of devising means of making other beings miserable. Some of the proposals of the Wyandots were worthy of Nana Sahib, of Bithoor, but they were rejected one after the other, as falling a little short of the requirements of the leader.

There was one fact which did not escape the watchful eye and ear of the prisoner. The Wyandot who struck him twice, and who had taken charge of his bow, as a trophy belonging specially to himself, was the foremost in proposing the most cruel schemes. The look which Deerfoot cast upon him said plainly--

"I would give the world for a chance to settle with *you* before I suffer death!"

Suddenly a thought seemed to seize Waughtauk like an inspiration. Rising to his feet, he held up his hand for his warriors to listen:

"Deerfoot is a swift runner; he has overtaken the fleeing horse and leaped upon his back; he shall be placed in the Long Clearing; he shall be given a start, and the swiftest Wyandot warriors shall be placed in line on the edge of the Long Clearing; they shall start together, and the scalp of Deerfoot shall belong to him who first overtakes him."

This scheme, after all, was merciful when compared with many that were proposed; but the staking of a man's life on his fleetness, when entirely unable to run, is an idea worthy of an American Indian.

CHAPTER XV.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

Jo Stinger had decided to venture out from the block-house, at a time when the Wyandots were on every side, and when many of them were within the stockade and close to the building itself. It was a perilous act, but the veteran had what he deemed good grounds for undertaking it.

In the first place, the darkness had deepened to that extent, within the last few hours, that he believed he could move about without being suspected: he was confident indeed that he could stay out as long as he chose and return in safety.

He still felt chagrined over the audacity of the Wyandots, which came so near success, and longed to turn the tables upon them.

But Jo Stinger had too much sense to leave the garrison and run into great peril without the prospect of accomplishing some good thereby. He knew the Wyandots were completing preparations to burn the block-house. He believed it would be attempted before morning, and, if not detected by him, would succeed. He had strong hope that, by venturing outside, he could learn the nature of the plan against which it would therefore be possible to make some preparation.

Colonel Preston was not without misgiving when he drew the ponderous bolts, but he gave no expression to his thoughts. All was blank darkness, but, when the door was drawn inward, he felt several cold specks on his hand, from which he knew it was snowing.

The flakes were very fine and few, but they were likely to increase before morning, by which time the ground might be covered.

"When shall I look for your return?" asked the Colonel, but, to his surprise, there was no answer. Jo had moved away, and was gone without exchanging another word with the commandant.

The latter refastened the door at once. He could not but regard the action of the most valuable man of his garrison as without excuse: at the same time he reflected that his own title could not have been more empty, for no one of the three men accepted his orders when they conflicted with his personal views.

In the meantime Jo Stinger, finding himself on the outside of the block-house, was in a situation where every sense needed to be on the alert, and none knew it better than he.

The door which Colonel Preston opened was the front one, being that which the scout passed through the previous night, and which opened on the clearing along the river. He was afraid that, if he emerged from the other entrance, he would step among the Wyandots and be recognized before he could take his bearings.

But Jo felt that he had entered on an enterprise in which the chances were against success, and in which he could accomplish nothing except by the greatest risk to himself. The listening Colonel fancied he heard the sound of his stealthy footstep, as the hunter moved from the door of the block-house. He listened a few minutes longer, but all was still except the soft sifting of the snow against the door, like the finest particles of sand and dust filtering through the tree-tops.

The Colonel passed to the narrow window at the side and looked out. It had become like the blackness of darkness, and several of the whirling snow-flakes struck his face.

"The Wyandots are concocting some mischief, and there's no telling what shape it will take until it comes. I don't believe Jo will do anything that will help us."

And with a sigh the speaker climbed the ladder again and told his friends how rash the pioneer had been.

"I wouldn't have allowed him to go," said Ned Preston.

"There's no stopping him when he has made up his mind to do anything."

"Why didn't you took him by de collar," asked Blossom Brown, "and slam him down on de floor? Dat's what I'd done, and, if he'd said anything, den I'd took him by de heels and banged his head agin de door till he'd be glad to sot down

and behave himself."

"Jo is a skilled frontiersman," said the Colonel, who felt that it was time he rallied to the defence of the scout; "he has tramped hundreds of miles with Simon Kenton and Daniel Boone, and, if his gun hadn't flashed fire one dark night last winter, he would have ended the career of Simon Girty."

"How was that?"

"Simon Girty and Kenton served together as spies in Dunmore's expedition in 1774, and up to that time Girty was a good soldier, who risked much for his country. He was badly used by General Lewis, and became the greatest scourge we have had on the frontier. I don't suppose he ever has such an emotion as pity in his breast, and there is no cruelty that he wouldn't be glad to inflict on the whites. He and Jo know and hate each other worse than poison. Last winter, Jo crept into one of the Shawanoe towns one dark night, and when only a hundred feet away, aimed straight at Girty, who sat on a log, smoking his pipe, and talking to several warriors. Jo was so angered when his gun flashed in the pan, that he threw it upon the ground and barely saved himself by dashing out of the camp at the top of his speed. Jo has been in a great many perilous situations," added Colonel Preston, "and he can tell of many a thrilling encounter in the depths of the silent forest and on the banks of the lonely streams, where no other human eyes saw him and his foe."

"No doubt of all that," replied Ned, who knew that he was speaking the sentiments of his uncle, "but it seems to me he is running a great deal more risk than he ought to."

"I agree with you, but we have been greatly favored so far, and we will continue to hope for the best."

The long spell of quiet which had followed the attempt to fire the block-house, permitted the children to sleep, and their mother, upon the urgency of her husband, had lain down beside them and was sinking into a refreshing slumber.

Megill and Turner kept their places at the loopholes, watching for the signs of danger with as vigilant interest as though it was the first hour of the alarm. They were inclined to commend the course of Jo Stinger, despite the great peril involved.

The Wyandots, beyond question, were perfecting some scheme of attack, which most likely could be foiled only by previous knowledge on the part of the garrison. The profound darkness and the skill of the hunter would enable him to do all that could be done by any one, under the circumstances.

There came seconds, and sometimes minutes, when no one spoke, and the silence within the block-house was so profound that the faint sifting of the snow on the roof was heard. Then an eddy of wind would whirl some of the sand-like particles through the loopholes into the eyes and faces of those who were peering out. Men and boys gathered their blankets closer about their shoulders, and set their muskets down beside them, where they could be caught up the instant needed, while they carefully warmed their benumbed fingers by rubbing and striking the palms together.

All senses were concentrated in the one of listening, for no other faculty was of avail at such a time. Nerves were strung to the highest point, because there was not one who did not feel certain they were on the eve of events which were to decide the fate of the little company huddled together in Fort Bridgman.

This stillness was at its profoundest depth, the soft rustling of the snowflakes seemed to have ceased, and not a whisper was on the lips of one of the garrison, when there suddenly rang out on the night a shriek like that of some strong man caught in the crush of death. It was so piercing that it seemed almost to sound from the center of the room, and certainly must have been very close to the block-house itself.

"That was the voice of Jo!" said Colonel Preston, in a terrified undertone, after a minute's silence; "he has met his fate."

"You are mistaken," Megill hastened to say; "I have been with Jo too often, and I know his voice too well to be deceived."

"It sounded marvelously like his."

"It did not to me, though it may have been so to you."

"If it was not Jo, then it must have been one of the Wyandots."

"That follows, as a matter of course; in spite of all of Jo's care, he has run against one of their men, or one of them has run against him. The only way to settle it then was in the hurricane order, and Jo has done it that promptly that the other has just had time to work in a first-class yell like that."

"I'm greatly relieved to hear you take such a view," said Colonel Preston, who, like the rest, was most agreeably disappointed to hear Megill speak so confidently, his brother-in-law adding his testimony to the same effect.

"Directly after that shriek," said Turner, "I'm sure there was the tramping of feet, as if some one was running very fast: it passed under the stockade and out toward the well."

"I heard the footsteps too," added Ned Preston.

"So did I," chimed in Blossom Brown, feeling it his duty to say something to help the others along; "but I'm suah dat de footsteps dat I heerd war on de roof. Some onrespectful Wyamdot hab crawled up dar, and I bet am lookin' down de chimbley dis minute."

"It seems to me," observed Ned to his uncle, "that Jo will want to come back pretty soon."

"I think so too," replied his uncle, "I will go down-stairs and wait for him."

With these words he descended the rounds of the ladder and moved softly across the lower floor to the door, where he paused, with his hands on one of the heavy bars which held the structure in place.

While crossing the room he looked toward the fire-place. Among the ashes he caught the sullen red of a single point of fire, like the glowering eye of some ogre, watching him in the darkness.

Beside the huge latch, there were three ponderous pieces of timber which spanned the inner side of the door, the ends dropping into massive sockets strong enough to hold the puncheon slabs against prodigious pressure from the outside.

Colonel Preston carefully lifted the upper one out of place and then did the same with the lowest. Then he placed his hand on the middle bar and held his ear close to the jamb, so that he might catch the first signal from the scout, whose return was due every minute.

The listening ear caught the silken sifting of the particles of snow, which insinuated themselves into and through the smallest crevices, and a slight shiver passed through the frame of the pioneer, who had thrown his blanket off his shoulders so that he might have his arms free to use the instant it should become necessary.

Colonel Preston had stood thus only a few minutes, when he fancied he heard some one on the outside. The noise was very slight and much as if a dog was scratching with his paw. Knowing that wood is a better conductor of sound than air, he pressed his ear against the door.

To his astonishment he then heard nothing except the snowflakes, which sounded like the tapping of multitudinous fairies, as they romped back and forth and up and down the door.

"That's strange," thought he, after listening a few minutes; "there's something unusual out there, and I don't know whether it is Jo or not. I'm afraid the poor fellow has been hurt and is afraid to make himself known."

The words were yet in his mouth, when he caught a faint tapping outside, as if made by the bill of a bird.

"That's Jo!" he exclaimed, immediately raising the end of the middle bar from its socket; "he must be hurt, or he is afraid to signal me, lest he be recognized."

At the moment the fastenings were removed, and Colonel Preston was about drawing the door inward, he stayed his hand, prompted so to do by the faintest suspicion that something was amiss.

"Jo! is that you?" he asked in a whisper.

"*Sh! Sh!*"

He caught the warning, almost inaudible as it was, and instantly drew the door inward six or eight inches.

"Quick, Jo! the way is open!"

Even then a vague suspicion that all was not right led Colonel Preston to step back a single step, and, though he had no weapons, he clenched his fist and braced himself for an assault which he did not expect.

The darkness was too complete for him to see anything, while the faint ember, smouldering in the fire-place, threw no reflection on the figure of the pioneer, so as to reveal his precise position.

It was a providential instinct that led Colonel Preston to take this precaution, for as he recoiled some one struck a venomous blow at him with a knife, under the supposition that he was standing on the same spot where he stood at the moment the door was opened. Had he been there, he would have been killed with the suddenness almost of the lightning stroke.

The pioneer could not see, and he heard nothing except a sudden expiration of the breath, which accompanied the fierce blow into vacancy, but he knew like a flash that, instead of Jo, it was a Wyandot Indian who was in the act of making a rush to open the way for the other warriors behind him.

The right fist shot forward, with all the power Colonel Preston could throw into it. He was an athlete and a good boxer. As he struck, he hurled his body with the fist, so that all the momentum possible went with it. Fortunately for the pioneer the blow landed on the forehead of the unprepared warrior, throwing him violently backward against his comrades, who were in the act of rushing forward to follow in his wake.

But for them he would have been flung prostrate full a dozen feet distant.

The instant the blow was delivered, Colonel Preston sprang back, shoved the door to and caught up the middle bar. At such crises it seems as if fate throws every obstruction in the way, and his agony was indescribable, while desperately trying to get the bar in place.

Only a few seconds were occupied in doing so, but those seconds were frightful ones to him. He was sure the entire war party would swarm into the block-house, before he could shut them out.

The Indians, who were forced backward by the impetus of the smitten leader, understood the need of haste. They knew that, unless they recovered their ground immediately, their golden opportunity was gone.

Suppressing all outcry, for they had no wish to draw the fire from the loopholes above, they precipitated themselves against the door, as though each one was the carved head of a catapult, equal to the task of bursting through any obstacle in its path.

Thank Heaven! In the very nick of time Colonel Preston got the middle bar into its socket. This held the door so securely that the other two were added without trouble, and he then breathed freely.

Drops of cold perspiration stood on his forehead, and he felt so faint that he groped about for a stool, on which he dropped until he could recover.

CHAPTER XVI.

OUT-DOORS ON A DARK NIGHT.

In the meantime Jo Stinger, the veteran frontiersman, had not found the "plain sailing" which he anticipated.

It will be remembered that he passed out upon the clearing in front of the block-house, because he feared that, if he entered the yard inclosed by the stockade, he would find himself among the Wyandots, who would be quick to detect his identity.

His presence immediately in front of the structure would also draw attention to himself, and he therefore glided away until he was fully a hundred feet distant, when he paused close to the western pickets.

Looking behind him, he could not see the outlines of the building which he had just left. For the sake of safety Colonel Preston allowed no light burning within the block-house, which itself was like a solid bank of darkness.

"It would be easy enough now for me to make my way to Wild Oaks," reflected Stinger; "for, when the night is like this, three hundred Indians could not surround the old place close enough to catch any one crawling through. But it is no use for me to strike out for the Ohio now, for the boys could not get here soon enough to affect the result one way or the other. Long before that the varmints will wind up this bus'ness, either by going away, or by cleaning out the whole concern."

Jo Stinger unquestionably was right in this conclusion, but he possessed a strong faith that Colonel Preston and the rest of them in the block-house would be able to pull through, if they displayed the vigilance and care which it was easy to display: this faith explains how it was the frontiersman had ventured upon what was, beyond all doubt, a most perilous enterprise.

Jo, from some cause or other which he could not explain, suspected the Wyandots were collecting near the well, and he began working his way in that direction.

It was unnecessary to scale the stockade, and he therefore moved along the western side, until he reached the angle, when he turned to the right and felt his way parallel with the northern line of pickets.

Up to this time he had not caught sight or sound to show that an Indian was within a mile of him. The fine particles of snow made themselves manifest only by the icy, needle-like points which touched his face and hands, as he groped along. He carried his faithful rifle in his left hand, and his right rested on the haft of his long hunting-knife at his waist. His head was thrust forward, while he peered to the right and left, advancing with as much care as if he were entering a hostile camp on a moonlight night, when the overturning of a leaf is enough to awaken a score of sleeping red men.

A moment after passing the corner of the stockade something touched his elbow. He knew on the instant that it was one of the Wyandots. In the darkness they had come thus close without either suspecting the presence of the other.

"Hooh! my brother is like Deerfoot, the dog of a Shawanoe."

This was uttered in the Wyandot tongue, and the scout understood the words, but he did not dare reply. He could not speak well enough to deceive the warrior, who evidently supposed he was one of his own people.

But there was the single exclamation which he could imitate to perfection, and he did so as he drew his knife.

"Hooh!" he responded, moving on without the slightest halt. The response seemed satisfactory to the Wyandot, but could Jo have seen the actions of the Indian immediately after, he would have felt anything but secure on that point.

The brave stood a minute or so, looking in the direction taken by the other, and then, as if suspicious that all was not what it seemed, he followed after the figure which had vanished so quickly.

"I would give a good deal if I but knowed what he meant by speaking of Deerfoot as he did," said Jo to himself, "but I didn't dare ask him to give the partic'lars. I make no doubt they've caught the Shawanoe and scalped him long ago."

Remembering the openings which he had seen in the stockade before the darkness became so intense, Jo reached out his right hand and run it along the pickets, so as not to miss them.

He had gone only a little way, when his touch revealed the spot where a couple had been removed, and there was room for him to force his body through.

Jo was of a spare figure, and, with little difficulty, he entered the space inclosed by the stockade. He now knew his surroundings and bearings, as well as though it were high noon, and began making his way with great stealth in the direction of the well standing near the middle of the yard.

While he was doing this, the Wyandot with whom he had exchanged salutations was stealing after him: it was the old case of the hunter going to hunt the tiger, and soon finding the tiger was hunting him.

The task of the Wyandot, however, for the time, was a more delicate one than was the white man's, for the dusky pursuer had lost sight of his foe (if indeed it can be said he had ever caught a view of him), instantly after the brief salutation between them.

The warrior, when he reached the first opening in the stockade, had no means of knowing that the pale-face had passed through. Had there been any daylight to aid his vision, he could have learned the truth at once; but if there had been daylight, there could have been no such necessity, inasmuch as Jo Stinger would have stayed in the block-house.

The fact that he could not trace the daring scout with any certainty, did not deprive the Wyandot of the ability to do something for himself and companions.

When Jo Stinger passed within the stockade, he fixed the direction in which lay the well, and then began advancing toward it. The result of this venture proved again, how often the most careful preparation is defeated by some simple obstruction against which a child ought to have guarded.

"I must be pretty near the spot," thought Jo, when he had groped vaguely for some distance; "I can't imagine what the varmints can be doin' here, but they've got some plan on foot which I'm bound----"

At this instant, with a shock which made his hair fairly rise on end, he stepped directly into the well and went down!

The rickety inclosure of slabs, with the crank and windlass, had been removed by the Wyandots, so that in case any of the garrison ventured out, under cover of darkness, to get water, they would be unable to do so.

The theft of the curb, bucket, and appliances, shut off the supply from that source as utterly as though it had never existed. And yet, not a single member of the garrison, knowing as they did that the Wyandots were carrying out some design, suspected what their real purpose was.

Providence alone saved Jo Stinger from an ignominious end, for had he gone to the bottom of the well, the Indians could not have failed to discover it, and they would have carried out their own will concerning him.

But the life of peril which Jo had led so many years, greatly developed a certain readiness and presence of mind natural to him; but it was probably the instinctive desire to catch himself, which led him on the instant to place the gun in his left hand in a horizontal position. The diameter of the well was much less than the length of the old-fashioned flint-lock rifle; and thus it came about that muzzle and stock caught firmly, and Jo was suspended in the middle of the opening by one hand. Hastily shoving his knife back in his girdle, he seized the barrel with both hands and easily drew himself from his dangerous position. Then he took out his knife again and indulged in an expression of opinion concerning his performances of the last twenty-four hours.

This opinion it is not necessary to place on record: the reader need not be told that it was the reverse of complimentary, and that it would have hardly been safe for any one else to repeat the same vigorous comments in the presence of Jo himself.

He was not without gratitude for his delivery from the consequences of his own carelessness, but he was exasperated beyond expression by the stupidity which had seemed to brood over the counsels of the garrison from the first and to direct everything done.

While a prey to this gnawing chagrin, he suddenly became aware that one of the Wyandots was at his elbow again.

"My brother treads like the shadows of the clouds which sweep over the forest: there is no sound, and he glides----"

"This is his style of gliding," interrupted Jo Stinger, who was in a most dangerous mood, as he bounded like a panther toward him.

The grapple was short and terrific: there was one wild piercing shriek from the dusky foeman, and then it was all over. Jo hurried from the spot, for he knew others would be there in a few seconds, and they would be quick to detect or at least to surmise the truth.

He hastened back over the path by which he had approached the well, passing through the same opening that had admitted him. Then, with a view of avoiding any one who might be using the same route, he moved a rod or two away from the stockade, turning the corner nearly as before and starting on his return to the block-house.

Jo's belief was that he could accomplish nothing more by staying outside the building. He had learned that about the well which he ought to have known long before, and the Wyandots had already ascertained that one of the garrison, or possibly some friend from another point, was on the outside. They would take precaution against his entering the block-house, and doubtless would exert themselves to detect and slay him.

He felt therefore that it would not do to delay his return. He did not do so, and yet, quick as he was, he made the discovery after all that he was just too late. Approaching the door of the building with extreme caution, it did not take him long to learn that the Wyandots were there before him.

He withdrew with the same care, and continued stealing some distance further in a southern direction, finally halting close to the cabin from which the Wyandots had issued when they interfered with the flight of Blossom Brown and Ned Preston across the clearing.

Jo felt the situation was becoming serious. He had not thought of anything like this, and he had made no arrangement for a system of signals to meet the difficulty. Colonel Preston would detect his low, tremulous whistle, by which the scout was accustomed to make known his presence on the outside and his desire to enter; but there was no means of apprising the Colonel of the alarming fact that a number of Indians were waiting in the darkness to take his place.

Had Jo thought of all this beforehand, there would have been no such startling occurrence at the door, as has been described.

He did not believe it probable the Wyandots would emit any signals which would deceive Colonel Preston into the belief that it was a friend and not an enemy who was asking admission into the station.

While the pioneer stood aloof in the darkness, debating and asking himself what was best to do, his keen vision was able to mark the shape of something which puzzled him only for the moment. It was a parallelogram of a faint yellow glow only a short distance in front of him.

"That comes from a light in the cabin, where them varmints have been loafing ever since the rumpus yesterday morning."

Jo was right in this supposition: he had approached the dwelling, wherein were several Wyandots who had a fire burning on the hearth. The yellow reflection showing through one of the side-windows led Jo to detect its meaning with scarce a moment's hesitation.

As yet he had succeeded in learning nothing of importance, for no one would attempt to draw any water from the well during the night, and if the block-house should remain on its foundations until morning, every one of the garrison could see for himself that the supply was no longer available.

What secret might not the old cabin give up to him? Was it not there that he should seek the key to the problem which had baffled him thus far?

These and similar questions Jo Stinger put to himself, as he advanced toward the structure wherein he was certain to find more than one Wyandot.

As his approach was from the side instead of the front, as it may be called (by which is meant that part of the cabin which faced the block-house itself), the red men within had taken no precautions against observation from that direction.

While Jo was yet ten feet from the window, he gained a view of the interior that showed everything in the room, with whose contour he was familiar. The sight which met his gaze was a most interesting one indeed.

There were three Indians seated, cross-legged like Turks, on the floor, smoking their pipes, while they talked earnestly together. One of these, from his dress and manner, Jo knew was the chief or leader of the war party. It was, in fact, Waughtauk who was holding a consultation with his two lieutenants, if they may be termed such, on the "conduct of the war."

Jo Stinger had no doubt that such was their occupation, and he was certain that, if he could overhear their words, he was likely to gather the very information he was seeking.

As we have already intimated, he understood the Wyandot tongue, and he was eager to catch the expressions,

especially those which fell from the lips of the chief himself.

"The pale-faces will come from the Ohio," were the first words which Stinger was able to hear, and they were uttered by Waughtauk himself; "if we wait until to-morrow, they will be here before nightfall."

This implied rather rapid traveling on the part of the party of rescue from Wild Oaks, and it was more than likely that the chief, with a view of adding force to his remarks, exaggerated matters to a certain extent.

"One of the Yenghese is abroad to-night," said the warrior next the chief. As he spoke, he took his pipe from his mouth and used it in gesticulating; "he has slain one of our braves."

"He shall die for his offence, as all the Yenghese shall die," replied the chieftain, in a voice so loud that the listener could have caught his meaning had he been a rod further away. "None of them shall see the sun rise again. They shall be burned in the block-house, which has encumbered our hunting-grounds too long."

This threat was only what might have been expected, but Waughtauk the next minute imparted the very tidings which Jo Stinger sought, and for the sake of which he had risked so much.

"The wind blows strong; the Great Spirit will soon fan the fire into a blaze, and will carry it from this cabin to the block-house."

There it was!

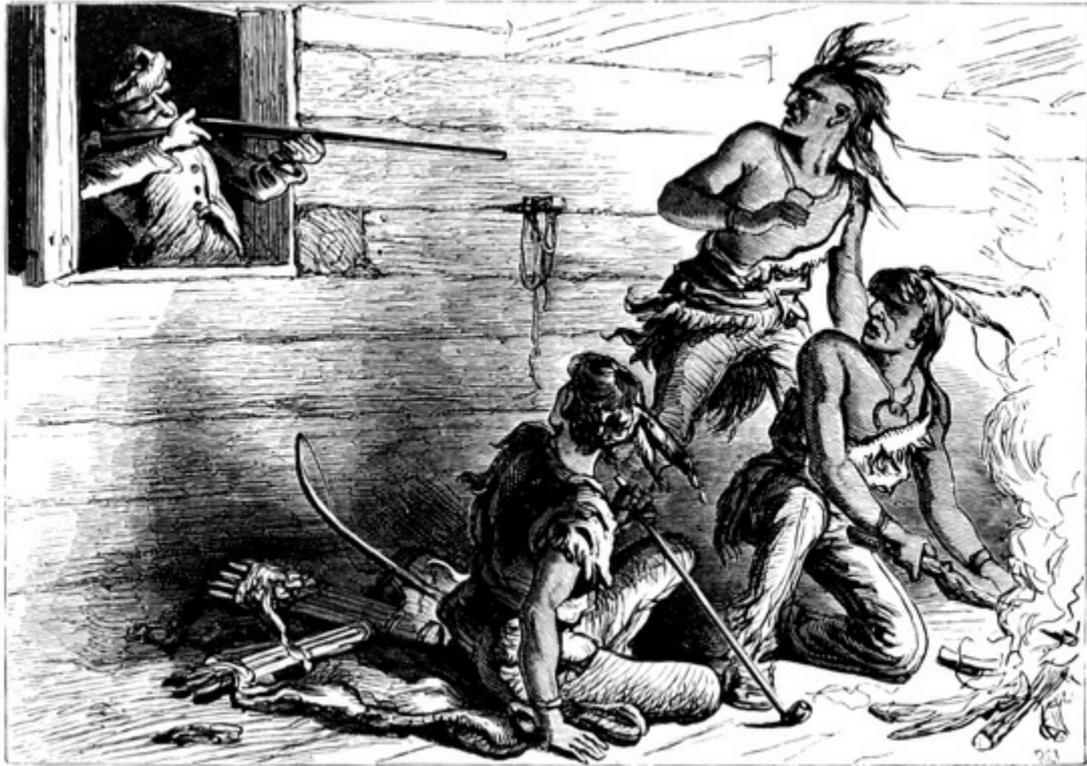
The whole scheme was laid bare to the scout in the last sentence spoken by the Wyandot chieftain. The wind was setting in strongly from the south, that is, from the building in which the three warriors gathered, directly toward the block-house.

Should the former be fired, the probability was the gale would carry the sparks to the other and set that in a blaze, in which event there would be scarcely an earthly hope left for a single one of the inmates.

Jo had heard enough, and his wish now was to get back to his friends with the least possible delay, that they might make preparation against the assault that could not be postponed much longer.

Knowing the superstition of the American Indian, the scout now resorted to an artifice as daring as it was startling. Although a man trained in border-warfare, accustomed to the frightful cruelties of the aborigines, and knowing the fierce purposes of the Wyandots surrounding Fort Bridgman, he could not bring himself to the point of deliberately shooting down one or more of the conspirators, who, in point of fact, were at his mercy.

Many a brave hunter or pioneer, placed in his situation, would have seized the opportunity to shoot the chieftain himself while sitting in the cabin, unsuspecting of his danger; but Jo Stinger was not of such a disposition.



JOE STINGER PUTS IN AN APPEARANCE.

Raising his long rifle to his shoulder, he pointed it straight at Waughtauk, and then advanced until the muzzle was thrust through the window, while he himself stood no more than a foot outside.

At that instant one of the warriors reached down and stirred the blazing sticks of wood burning on the hearth. The flames leaped higher, filling the room with a warm ruddy glow. A slight noise caused the three Wyandots to turn their heads toward the open window, when they saw a sight which held them spell-bound.

A tall spare man, in the garb of a hunter, stood with his deadly rifle pointed straight at them, and the muzzle was not twelve feet distant from the head of Waughtauk the chief.

Looking along the barrel, pointing like the finger of fate at the Wyandot leader, the bony fingers of the left hand were seen grasping the dark iron, while the right hand, crooked at the elbow, encompassed the trigger-guard, and the forefinger was gently pressing the trigger. The hammer clutching the yellow flint was drawn far back, like the jaw of a rattlesnake when about to bury its fangs in its victim, and just behind that the single open eye of the hunter himself seemed to be agleam with a fire that was likely to ignite the powder in the pan, without the flash of the quartz.

The coonskin cap, the grizzly whiskers, the rough garments were frosted with tiny snowflakes which glistened and glinted in the fire-light like points of burnished silver. The figure was as motionless as were the three Wyandots, who could only stare at what must have seemed an apparition from the other world. As they gazed, the figure spoke in a slow sepulchral voice--

"Let the Wyandot chieftain and his warriors go back to their squaws and papposes, for the pale-face is hurrying through the forest to burn his lodges and to make captive his children! The Great Spirit commands that the Wyandots shall go."

Having uttered these extraordinary words, Jo Stinger took several steps backward, without moving a muscle of the upper portion of his body, so silently and imperceptibly that he seemed to dissolve in the surrounding darkness.

The moment after, Waughtauk uttered a cry of such distress that the Wyandots in the immediate neighborhood heard it and hurried to him. Stinger was quick to perceive his chance, and hurrying to the door of the block-house, he rapped so sharply on it that the listening Colonel Preston hurried down the ladder and approached the entrance.

"Who's there?" asked the commandant, in a guarded voice.

"Me--Jo; it's all right; quick, let me in afore the varmints get back!"

There was no mistaking the voice, and Colonel Preston removed the fastenings with a nervous haste, which did not leave him until his friend was inside, and the bars were replaced in their sockets.

He then grasped the hand of Jo and shook it warmly, for the relief of all over the return of the invaluable scout was beyond expression. They hurriedly went up the ladder, where all, including Mrs. Preston, who declared she could sleep no more that night, listened to the stirring story which Jo had to tell. His auditors fairly held their breath when he drew the picture of himself standing at the window of the cabin, with his rifle pointed at the Wyandot chief, and commanding him in the name of the Great Spirit to hasten to protect his own lodges from the invading white man.

"You gave him such a fright that he may strike his tents and leave," suggested Colonel Preston.

"No," said Jo; "such things have been done, and Simon Kenton once played the trick so well that he kept a party of Delawares from massacreing a white family going down the Ohio, but Kenton had a much better show than me."

"It seems to me, Jo, you had everything in your favor," said Megill, who, like all the others, was deeply interested in the narrative of the hunter.

"There's just the trouble; the chief and his men were scared out of their moccasins for a minute or so, and if it had happened that I hadn't showed myself afore, and the Wyandots didn't know I was outside, the scare might have amounted to something; but when the other warriors come around the chief, and he learns what has took place--if he didn't know it all before--he'll see that the whole thing was a trick, and he will be madder than ever. I think he'll open the music agin very soon."

"If he fires the cabin," said Colonel Preston, "it will be apt to make it pretty warm in here, for the wind does come from that direction, and I wish the thing didn't stand quite so near us as it does. But the sides of the block-house are not so dry as the roof, and I hope we can stand more heat from *that* source than the Wyandots think."

"We have considerable water left," said Jo, "and we must take mighty good care that none of it is wasted."

"Did you find the tomahawk in the door?" asked Ned.

"I felt for it, but it was gone."

The prospects were discussed in low, earnest tones, while every one was in a fever of expectancy. There was constant peeping through the loopholes, and the occasional whistling and whooping were accepted as signals to open the last decisive attack.

Jo Stinger was moving about in this manner, doing what he could to cheer his friends, when some one caught his elbow.

"Who is it?" he asked, stopping short.

"It is I, Ned Preston," replied the boy; "I want to ask you a question."

"Well, younker, what is it?" said the hunter in a kindly manner, and lowering his voice, so that the others could not overhear them.

"I wanted to ask you whether you learned anything about Deerfoot, when you were out."

"Nothing partic'lar; I heard his name mentioned by that varmint that run against me, after I didn't fall into the well."

"How was it?"

Jo related the incident in which he was compared to the young Shawanoe.

"What do you think about it, Jo?"

"Well, of course none of us knows anything for sartin,--but it's my opinion--since you ax it--that Deerfoot has slid under for good."

"I am afraid so," said Ned Preston faintly. "Poor Deerfoot!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LONG CLEARING.

Deerfoot, the young Shawanoe, despite his extraordinary exertions and his own wonderful woodcraft, had fallen into the hands of the hostile Wyandots, and with a grim satire upon the skill which had given the youth his great fame, Waughtauk, chief of his enemies, had decreed that his life should be staked upon the result of a race with the fleetest runners of the tribe.

The captive would have welcomed such a contest, could it have been conducted on anything like equal terms, but he seemed in a pitiable condition, unable to bear the weight of his body for more than a second on one foot. Had it been otherwise, Waughtauk never would have made the conditions what they were.

The promised enjoyment was so eagerly looked for by the warriors that the chief decided to gratify them and himself, without delay.

It was now near noon, and the sun shining overhead gave no indications of the clouds and snow-fall that came with the close of day. The "Long Clearing," of which the chief spoke, was an open space, beginning fifty rods north of the block-house and extending for a third of a mile, parallel with the Licking river. It had a width varying from a hundred feet to five times that extent. It was a natural clearing or opening, which, it would seem, offered a much better site for a block-house than the one selected by Colonel Preston, when he erected the building now placed in such danger.

It presented an open space for the distance named, and, before the founding of the settlement, was often used by Indians for their games and athletic contests: no more suitable place could have been found for the extraordinary contest decreed by Waughtauk, chief of the Wyandots.

As this exhibition was ordered during the time when the siege was to be maintained, it was impossible that more than a fractional part of the warriors could take part in or witness it. Waughtauk selected six of his men who were to be the actors in the tragedy, he himself purposing to be the leader and director.

As the wolf, before destroying the lamb, sought a pretext for his cruelty, so the chief assumed a certain air of justice in arranging for what might be termed a race for life.

The warrior who had struck Deerfoot was given his bow, the youth being allowed to retain his knife, tomahawk, and quiver. None of the Wyandots were permitted to carry their guns, the only weapon of that kind being in the hands of the chief, who was also magnanimous enough to give the fugitive a start of some fifty yards.

Deerfoot was too proud to open his lips, when the conditions were explained to him. He stood grim and silent, watching the preparations and noting the exultation which often reached boisterousness.

"Great is Deerfoot, the swiftest runner of the Shawanoes!" said one mockingly; "he is the eagle, and he will leave the Wyandots far out of sight, as the great bird leaves the smaller ones in his flight through the heavens!"

"Deerfoot is the friend of the Yenghese and the Long Knives, who have come to take away the hunting-grounds of the red man."

"The pale-faces will come to the help of Deerfoot, for who has been a better friend to them than he?"

These and similar taunts fell upon ears which appeared to hear them not. Those who uttered the cruel words came close to the youth and peered into his face, with hideous grimaces, but he stood calm and silent. He was a shade paler, and there was a strange gleam in his black eyes, but he looked beyond his tormentors at Waughtauk, who deliberately paced off the distance, giving liberal measure, as it is only justice to record.

When the fifty steps had been taken, Waughtauk stopped, stamped the heel of his moccasin in the earth, and, turning about, beckoned to Deerfoot to approach. The young Shawanoe, as he hobbled painfully forward, presented a spectacle which ought to have excited the pity of the hardest heart; but the Wyandots laughed and were impatient for the contest, if such it may be called, to open.

Deerfoot limped the greater part of the distance and then stopped to rest a moment, seemingly unable to advance another step. Several taunting exclamations followed this display of weakness, and, summoning his energies, the youth

resumed his labored advance, finally reached the side of Waughtauk, who concealed, as well as he could, his impatience.

"Deerfoot will stand *here*," said he, pointing to the indentation the heel of his moccasin had made in the ground; "when he hears Waughtauk give forth the war-whoop of the Wyandots, he will teach my warriors how to run."

The young Shawanoe opened his lips to make answer, but they closed more tightly than before, and not a word was uttered. His self-restraint was perfect.

Waughtauk walked back to the edge of the Long Clearing, where the six warriors eagerly awaited the signal for the sport to begin. Despite the usual stoicism and indifference of their race, the braves were as frolicsome as so many school-boys. They elbowed and crowded each other for their places, and one or two vigorous wrestling bouts occurred, before the chieftain placed them in line.

At last the six Wyandots were drawn up in position, one foot thrown forward, while they swayed restlessly back and forth, inching along the advanced foot, like so many runners eager for the slightest advantage. Each carried his knife and tomahawk at his girdle, but the arms were free. He who claimed the bow of Deerfoot had thrown it aside, now that he was about to run.

Waughtauk looked at his men and then he placed himself in alignment at their right. He still held his loaded gun, probably as an emblem of his authority, and as a notification that he would use it in the event of any warrior disregarding orders.

The seven now looked out upon the Long Clearing at the fugitive who was to go through this mockery of a race with the sinewy-limbed Wyandots, eager and thirsting for his life.

The pose of Deerfoot was much the same as that of his enemies. His left foot was in advance of the other, while his weight gently oscillated back and forth, like the swinging of a long pendulum. Unnoticed by any of the Wyandots, he had edged fully ten feet beyond the proper starting-point. His face was turned as if looking at the autumnal woods on his right, but as his handsome profile was thrown against the sky beyond, his eyes were scrutinizing every action of his foes, as they arranged themselves and awaited the signal.

At this juncture it must have occurred to more than one that the Shawanoe was balancing himself with remarkable ease for one whose sufferings from a sprained ankle were so acute. If such a thought came to the Wyandots, they did not lose sight of the fact that the time for an investigation was past.

For a single minute complete quiet prevailed. The river on the left flowing calmly northward, the solemn autumn woods on the right, the stretch of the Long Clearing, with its irregular contour,—the single solitary youth poised as if he were a Grecian athlete,—the seven swarthy Indians, like so many fierce hounds, impatient for the moment when they might spring at the lamb and bury their fangs in its throat:—these made a picture striking beyond imagination in its details.

"Whoop! whoop! whoop!"

In quick succession the war-cry of the Wyandots rang out on the still air, and like an electric shock it thrilled through every being who heard the startling signal.

The ringing shout had scarcely left the lips of Waughtauk, when Deerfoot made a tremendous leap of nearly a dozen feet, and the instant he lightly struck the ground he bounded away with a burst of speed which astounded the spectators. There was no lameness now—there had never been the slightest. The young Shawanoe when he saw his capture was inevitable, resorted to this strategy with the quickness of inspiration. The sprained ankle was a fiction—a fiction not essayed with any thought that he would be subjected to such a special test, but with the belief that a chance might come in which he could make a break for freedom and for life.

A series of fierce shouts went up from the thunderstruck Wyandots, as they saw the fugitive ricocheting over the grounds, as may be said, like the ball from the throat of a Columbiad.

The halt and the lame who were the first to step into the pool of Siloam, after the angel had stirred the waters, were no more quickly healed than was Deerfoot by the ringing war-cry of the Wyandot chieftain.

A consuming anger like that of the wolf, when the panther robs him of his prey, must have fired the hearts of the Wyandots, at the moment they saw the trick played on them by this despised youth. He, a boy in stature and years, had pitted his skill, his strategy, his woodcraft, his brains against theirs, and he had won.

The readiness of Deerfoot added several rods to the advance originally given, so that a great advantage was thus obtained, and it was improved to the utmost.

The wonderful youth ran as never before. His lithe legs doubled under him with inconceivable quickness, the eye seeing naught but the twinkling of the beaded moccasins. The still wind cut by his face as though it was a gale. He was a gladiator stripped for the struggle, and every nerve and muscle was strained to the last tension. He seemed a swallow skimming close to the ground, or a shaft driven from his own bow, so graceful was his arrowy swiftness.

There were swift runners among the Wyandots, and the seven warriors included their fleetest, who now put forth every exertion of which they were capable. The difference in their speed was shown by their immediate separation, with rapidly increasing spaces between them; but the young Shawanoe drew away from them, as a child draws away from the stationary object which frightens it.

Deerfoot saw the half mile sweeping under his feet, as the steel rails glide under the plunging engine, and the single glance he threw over his shoulder told the glad fact that he had not misjudged his own matchless ability as a runner. Muscle and nerve and sinew never did their work more splendidly than now, when their existence was staked on the manner in which that work was to be done. Human ingenuity could never construct a piece of mechanism which could do such marvelous service, as did those limbs of the flying fugitive on that crisp autumn day nearly a century ago, in Kentucky.

Although, as we have stated, there were many rapid runners among the Wyandots, there was not one who could attain and hold the terrific pace of the Shawanoe, whose victory, it may be said, was assured from the beginning. Fired by their fury and chagrin, they made prodigious exertions to run down the youth, or at least to approach close enough to hurl their tomahawks; but this was useless, and with an exasperation beyond expression they saw their victim slipping irrecoverably from their grasp.

Suddenly a shot rang out on the frosty air. Waughtauk, the chieftain, and the only one who had a rifle, came to a dead halt and fired point blank at the vanishing youth, hoping at least to disable him, so he would fall into their hands. Deerfoot heard the firing of the bullet, as it nipped his cheek, but he did not hasten his pace, because he was unable to do so, and no need existed. From the first he had done his best, and there was no room for an increase in the way of speed.

A third of a mile is soon traversed at such a rate of travel, and in a brief while Deerfoot approached the end of the Long Clearing. His swiftness was unabated, but, when he once more glanced around and saw that the whole seven Indians had given up the pursuit and were standing at varying distances from each other looking at him, he instantly slackened his pace.

Coming to a dead halt he faced about and, swinging his arms over his head, gave utterance to whoops and taunting exclamations.

"Have the Wyandots learned to run? Who is Waughtauk, that a youth of the Shawanoes should teach him to walk? Let the Wyandots go back to their lodges and tell their squaws that Deerfoot has taught them knowledge! Are the Wyandots tired that they must sit down and rest? Shall Deerfoot come back to them and show them what to do, when their enemies are around them?"

No more stinging taunts than these can be imagined, and the Wyandots felt their full force. They were silent, possibly because their tongue contained no words which could give suitable expression to their feelings.

Clearly it was idle to maintain the pursuit any longer, and the seven Wyandots, including Waughtauk the chieftain, stalked back toward the block-house, for the purpose of pressing the siege with more vigor than ever.

Up to this point they had in reality accomplished nothing toward the reduction of the place. They had lost several of their warriors, and Deerfoot, as they all agreed, would make all haste to Wild Oaks to procure help for the beleaguered garrison.

An individual capable of such speed as he, would reach the Ohio before nightfall; and, under the stress of necessity, the settlers would be at Fort Bridgman before the sun could cross the meridian on the morrow.

Such was the reasoning of Waughtauk, and all of his counsellors agreed with him. A brief while before they would not have believed it possible that help could be brought before the following night; but since the occurrence just described they were prepared to believe Deerfoot capable of doing almost anything.

The precise conversation between the maddened red men, of course, can never be known to the historian, and it is not desirable that it should be; but the parties concerned were so interested in the words that they were close to the stockade of the block-house before it was recalled that the long valuable bow taken from Deerfoot was left lying on the ground where the new owner threw it when ready to join in the chase.

This was too valuable a trophy to be lost, and the Wyandot immediately turned about and hastened toward the Long Clearing to recover it, while the others passed on to mingle with those who were striving so hard to encompass the destruction of the little party in the garrison.

The Indian who hurried back, it will be remembered, was the one that had struck Deerfoot when he was a captive. He had been the most cruel in his taunts, and his hatred of the youth seemed more malignant, if possible, than that of the others.

He ground his teeth together, as he dropped into a walk, and recalled the inimitable cleverness with which the young warrior outwitted them.

"Why did we not know the dog spoke with two tongues? Why did we not make sure he could not run? Why did not some of our warriors lie in the woods at the end of the Long Clearing to catch him, if he should escape us?"

"He is a dog--he is a traitor!" muttered the fierce Wyandot, approaching the spot where he had thrown the bow, "and he shall yet fall by my hand----"

He was about to stoop forward to pick up the weapon, when a slight exclamation caught his ear, and he straightened up like a flash.

Less than twenty feet distant stood Deerfoot the Shawanoe, quietly looking at him. Both had reached the spot on the same errand, and thus they met.

The youth had the advantage of detecting the other first, and, as a consequence, was prepared. In the language of the west, it would have been said, under similar circumstances, that Deerfoot "had the drop" on the other Indian.

The latter, as he looked up, saw that the hand of the youth grasped his tomahawk, which was held so far back of his hip that only a glimpse of its edge could be seen. The arm extended straight down so that it needed to be thrown upward and backward, before the formidable missile could be launched.

Fate seemed to favor Deerfoot that day; for not only had he escaped from a cruel death, but the being whom he hated above all others, and with an intensity which only a barbarian can feel, now stood before him.

There was no misunderstanding the situation on the part of either. The Wyandot would have resorted to any treachery to slay Deerfoot, and he was aware that Deerfoot knew it. He had inflicted indignities upon the young Shawanoe which nothing less than the grace of heaven will enable the North American Indian to forgive.

The two gazed fixedly at each other without speaking, and for a second or two neither stirred a muscle. Then, while the Wyandot centered his burning gaze upon the bronzed face before him, his right hand began slowly stealing up from his hip to his girdle. It was seeking the handle of his tomahawk, but, guarded as was the movement, the Shawanoe saw it.

So absolute was Deerfoot's faith in his own prowess and unequalled celerity that, knowing as he did the meaning of his enemy's action, he permitted the hand to touch the weapon, before he affected to notice it.

The instant the Wyandot gripped the tough wooden handle, he snatched it forth with surprising quickness and threw his hand back over his head with the purpose of hurling it at the defiant youth.

But the latter was the quicker. His left hand made one lightning-like sweep, and the tomahawk shot from his grasp with the suddenness of the thunderbolt. Although the Wyandot threw his almost at the same instant, yet there was just enough difference in time to make one a success and the other a failure.

Deerfoot's weapon sped as direct as a rifle-ball, and clove the skull of the Wyandot as though it were card-paper. The tomahawk of the latter, which was in the act of leaving his hand, was so disarranged by the shock that it was thrown up in the air and fell at his feet, as he toppled over backwards, with a shriek which reached Waughtauk and his warriors, and whose meaning they knew too well.

Deerfoot advanced and recovered his tomahawk, that had done this terrible execution. Then he picked up his valued bow from the ground and examined it to make sure that it had suffered no injury.

He did not stoop to take the scalp of the dead warrior, who hoped so ardently a brief while before to capture his. The Shawanoe had never scalped a vanquished foe; but when he caught sight of several Wyandots hastening to the spot, he flourished his bow defiantly in the air, gave utterance to several taunting cries, and, turning his back upon them, plunged into the wilderness with such speed, as to render all thought of pursuit out of the question.

And as he sped like a hound on a trail, the face of Deerfoot the Shawanoe was turned toward the settlement of Wild Oaks on the far-away Ohio.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FIERY ENEMY.

Every one in the block-house, with the exception of the two little girls of Colonel Preston, was wide awake. The conviction was so strong that the crisis was at hand, that even Blossom Brown hunted out his young master Ned Preston, and placing himself by his side, said--

"It's awoke, suah's yo' bo'n."

"It is best that you keep awake too," replied Ned, "for it is a good deal better than to be awakened by fire and Indians."

"I can't understand why de Injines don't fight fair," said Blossom, with a tone of impatience; "we don't use fire on dem, and why can't dey do de same wid us? If I could talk de Injine language, I'd go down dar and try to argy de matter wid 'em; I'd show 'em de--de--onscrupulousness ob usin' de flames to burn us out. If we could only make 'em 'shamed, dat would be a big p'int gained."

"It is nonsense to think of anything like that, Blossom; the Wyandots are determined to burn down the block-house if there is any way to do it----"

He abruptly stopped, for the tramp of feet was heard outside, close to the front door. Megill and Stinger instantly fired down in the darkness, guided only by the sense of sound; but the cry that rang out on the snowy air, proved that execution was done.

Instantly there followed such a prodigious shock, from a blow against the door, that the whole building shook. Before the men could bring their guns to bear, the sound of rapidly running feet showed that the Indians had dropped their battering ram and hurried off in the darkness.

Almost at the same moment Mrs. Preston, who was peering through the loopholes on the eastern side, saw an Indian arrow, wrapped with blazing tow, shoot upward from the edge of the woods, and going slower and slower, as it curved over, sweep downward with a whizzing rush, and strike the roof overhead, with the same abrupt thud that had been heard several times.

It was followed immediately by a second from the same point, which seemed to take the same course, for it lodged very close beside it, and also held its place.

Then another flaming missile rose from the northern side, then from the south, and then from behind the river bank, with still others mounting from intervening points, until a beautiful and terrifying scene presented itself.

The blazing shafts followed each other in such rapid succession, that there were fully twenty ascending and descending at the same moment. These made all manner of fiery parabolas in the snowy atmosphere. One archer, who sent his missiles from the upper window of the cabin near the block-house, and another, who discharged his from behind the pickets close at hand, pointed them so nearly perpendicularly that they seemed to shoot downward almost directly through the fiery trail they made in their ascent. Others came from such distant points that their parabolas were lengthy, and they only rose a short distance above the block-house itself, before they plunged into the slabs of the roof.

These struck the latter at every possible angle, and with every imaginable result. In some cases the arrow was so warped in its flight that it took a path almost as erratic as that of the Australian boomerang. Impinging against the roof at an acute angle, it would glance far upward, and, turning over and over, come tumbling to the earth, where it flickered a minute and died out.

Others hit the planks, and, like a mountaineer among the rocks, who could not retain his hold, slid down the steep incline to the ground. Still others missed the building altogether, and, plunging their flinty heads in the earth, were quickly extinguished.

But the alarming fact remained that the majority of the flaming missiles found a lodgment in the roof, where they burned with a fierceness which showed they were an improvement on those first sent. One could not but wonder where the Wyandots obtained all these weapons: they must have started on the expedition with the expectation of using this peculiar mode of warfare.

The fiery shower lasted but a few minutes, but at the end of that time there were fully thirty shafts sticking in the roof and burning vigorously. Viewed from the outside the block-house looked like some vast monster whose hide was pierced with flaming spears, but who slumbered on in the darkness, unmindful of the pests.

This lavish distribution of fire showed that the ground was covered with a fine sprinkling of snow, which was still floating downward at an almost imperceptible rate. There was no such mantle on the roof. It was so smooth and steep that most of the particles ran downward and off. A thin tiny line of snow-points was continually pouring over the eaves, where the wind blew it to atoms again.

The twists of flame made the air about the cabin luminous, and the millions of snow-flakes twinkled and glistened with starlike brilliancy, as they came out of the darkness and fluttered in the glow for a moment, ere they vanished again.

Several of the burning arrows were fired against the sides of the block-house, where they flickered a brief while. These, added to the other missiles on the ground, threw a dull reflection through the loopholes, that enabled the garrison to see each other "as through a glass darkly."

Their figures were easily distinguishable, as they moved carefully about, and now and then the glimpse of a face was so ghastly and unnatural that it was hard to recognize it. Blossom Brown was the only one who was distinguishable at the first glance, and even he scarcely looked like himself.

One unusually strong reflection from an arrow that imbedded itself in a corner disclosed the faces of the little sisters Mary and Susie, sleeping beside each other, with the warm comfortable blankets drawn close about them.

Each had thrown her arm over the other, and their dimpled cheeks almost touched, as they slumbered sweetly and peacefully, secure in that trust in their heavenly Father, whom they had asked to take care of them and their friends, while the wicked Indians tried so hard to hurt them.

Taking advantage of the illumination, six or eight of the Wyandots fired at the loopholes thus made visible; but the garrison knew the danger and kept out of range.

The most alarming fact about the attack was the numerous burning arrows on the roof. Colonel Preston and Jo Stinger agreed that, after all, this was the most vulnerable point of the block-house, and it was more than likely to ignite, if only a moderate number of the fiery shafts could be made to hold their place a short time.

Although some of the snow found a lodgment under the overlapping slabs, there was not enough to affect the bits of flame that were burning in many places.

"This is bad business!" exclaimed the Colonel, "and must be checked at once."

As he had done in the previous instances the commandant drew a stool under the trap-door on one side of the roof, while Jo Stinger did the same on the other. When these were lifted a few inches, the sight which greeted them was enough to cause consternation. The light which entered the upper story through the opening thus made disclosed every object with great distinctness.

Jo Stinger saw that most of the coils of flame were not of a dangerous nature and would soon expire of themselves; but there were two or three that were gaining a headway that was likely to do alarming injury, unless checked.

"Be keerful, Colonel," said Jo, "the varmints are watching us, and you'll get a shot afore you know it."

The warning was none too soon. Several of the Wyandots were waiting a movement of the trap-door. They had stationed themselves in the upper story of the cabin, which gave them the necessary elevation, while the flaming missiles themselves afforded all the view required.

Two shots were fired at the slight gap made by the lifting of the covering, and the Colonel dropped it with a bang and an exclamation. But he quickly rallied and called into play some of the strategy he had learned during a long experience on the border.

The really dangerous shots (that is, those from the upper story of the cabin) must necessarily come from one side of the structure. The Colonel held a piece of planking so that it would act as a shield, and catch any of the bullets from that point. Grasping the stock of his rifle with one hand, he then stealthily reached out, and with much difficulty and labor managed to dislodge the most threatening brands in that direction.

This left only one in his "jurisdiction" which he really feared. With a skill that Jo Stinger could not restrain himself from praising, Colonel Preston managed to send this arrow with its fiery mane sliding down the roof, without receiving any harm, though more than one shot was fired at him.

Much the same task confronted Jo Stinger, and he performed it with the expertness that was to be expected of such a veteran; but when he had done all he could, there remained the most dangerous shaft of all. It had lodged in the very peak of the roof, near the southern end, which was the closest to the cabin that sheltered the Wyandots, and in direct range of their fire.

This was burning with a persistency which looked as if the tow had been soaked with some chemical, although such could not be the fact; but, having found a lodgment, there it stuck and grew, with every prospect of kindling a blaze that would soon spread to the entire roof and building.

Jo Stinger fortified himself as best he could, and took every precaution. Then, amid the dropping shots of the Wyandots, he carefully felt his way forward with his rifle, until he could not extend it an inch further: he still lacked more than a foot of reaching the dangerous spot.

The red men, who saw the failure, raised a shout, and the scout was compelled to draw back his weapon and muffled arm, without accomplishing anything toward the extinguishment of the blaze that threatened the destruction of the block-house and all within.

"You think 'cause Jo Stinger has played the fool, there's nothing left of his wit, but you'll soon learn he hasn't forgot everything he once knowed."

"Is it the only one that endangers the roof?" asked Colonel Preston, as Jo joined them.

"Yes; if we can get that out, the trouble is over for the present, though I don't know how long it will stay so."

"Suppose you cannot extinguish it?" asked Mrs. Preston.

"Then the block-house has got to burn."

This announcement caused dismay, for all felt that the few blunt words of the scout were the simple truth. They so affected Blossom Brown that he dropped back on a stool, and set up a howling that must have reached the ears of the Wyandots outside.

"It's all de fault ob dat Deerhead--I mean Deerfoot, dat was so orful anxious to run us into dis old place, when I told 'em it wasn't wise. I wanted to go back to Wild Oaks where I had some chores to do, but he obsisted, but took mighty good care to keep out de block-house hisself, as I took notice----"

Blossom Brown would have gone on for an indefinite time with his loud wailing, had not Stinger checked him by the threat to throw him out the trap-door upon the roof.

Afraid that his bluff answer to Mrs. Preston's question might have caused too much alarm, the scout added--

"If the varmints don't do any more than *that*, we're all right, for I'm going to put the blaze out."

"You know the risk," said Colonel Preston, apprehensive that Jo intended some effort that would expose him to extra peril.

"I reckon I do," was the response of the scout, who was the coolest one of the whole company.

The situation could not have been more trying to the bravest persons. In a manner almost unaccountable, a blaze had fastened itself in a point of the roof beyond the reach of those within. There it was burning and growing steadily, with the certainty that, unless checked pretty soon, it would be beyond control.

Jo Stinger was the only member of the garrison who appeared equal to the task, and more than one feared that to save the block-house he must assume a risk that was certain to prove fatal.

Ned Preston caught the arm of the man in the darkness and asked--

"Can't you put it out with a wet blanket?"

"Well, you're a boy that *does* know something!" exclaimed Jo, adding with a burst of admiration, "Give me your hand, younker; that's the very idee I had in mind."

This "idee," as the hunter termed it, was the ordinary one of spreading a blanket, soaked with water, over the spaces endangered by fire. Probably nothing more effective could have been devised, but it should have been adopted when the peril involved was much less. One-half of the entire roof was illuminated by the crackling blaze which was steadily eating its way into the solid timber.

Jo Stinger, having determined on his course, spent no time in useless conversation. Under his direction one of the blankets was saturated with water from the precious supply in the barrel. As it was necessary to see what they were doing, a tallow dip was lit and placed where it threw a faint illumination through the interior. The garrison could distinguish each other's figures, and no one needed any advice to keep out of the path of such bullets as might enter through the loopholes.

The scene was picturesque and striking. Mary and Susie still lay wrapped in slumber, and their closed eyes and innocent faces subdued every step and word, lest they should be awakened. Father and mother glanced fondly at them many times, and wondered how long that refreshing unconsciousness would continue.

By general agreement the entire party centered their attention on Jo Stinger, who, having soaked the blanket, made ready to throw it over the stubborn fire. The task of necessity was attended by such extreme peril that all held their peace, oppressed by the gravity of the danger. At the same time the crackling of the flames and the unmistakable presence of smoke in the room showed that, if the extinguishment was delayed much longer, the attempt would be too late.

Jo placed the chair directly under the trap-door on the eastern side of the block-house and was about to set foot on it, when Colonel Preston stepped forward.

"Jo, you've forgotten; the blaze is further over on the other side."

"That's the reason I'm going to take *this* side."

The Colonel stepped back, and the scout laid the dripping blanket upon one arm, as though it were an overcoat. Grasping the edge of the opening, and helped by Megill from below, he quickly climbed upward, opening the door at the proper moment by the pressure of his head against it.

It was not raised an inch more than necessary, when he slowly crept out, like a crab casting its shell.

The blaze which was the cause of all this alarm and care was started, as will be remembered, in the very peak of the roof, but from some cause it had worked its way down the western side, which was necessarily illuminated through its entirety by the light therefrom.

The shifting of the fire threw the eastern half of the roof in comparative shadow, though the flickering glow was quite certain to reveal the figure of any large object on it. The fact that Jo emerged with his dripping blanket without drawing a shot, led him to hope that his action was unsuspected.

In order to "play every point," Colonel Preston cautiously raised the trap-door on the other side a few inches, and, guarding his face and arm, extended the stock of his rifle toward the blaze, as if he expected to pound it out.

He advanced the weapon quite slowly and with a movement intended to impress the sharpshooters with the belief that he had perfected an arrangement by which he was able to reach the endangered point.

As he anticipated, this diversion drew several shots, which whistled about his head with a vigor that gave him a vivid idea of the vigilance of the besieging Wyandots.

While this counter-movement was in progress, Jo Stinger was carefully making his way along the roof on the other side. The unusual steepness made this difficult, and had he not grasped the peak and held on, he would have shot along the slope to the ground, as if sliding down the side of a tree.

Inch by inch he progressed, expecting every minute that a bullet would be fired at him. He kept the saturated blanket well rolled together and in front, so that it served the purpose of a shield against any shot from the cabin, where the sharpshooters seemed to have gathered for the purpose of keeping the roof clear of all persons.

Jo Stinger had nearly reached the point from which he expected to "ring down the curtain" on the flame, when he was confronted by an experience altogether novel and unexpected.

Inasmuch as the burning arrows had done such good service, one of the Wyandots on the edge of the woods launched another, which went high in the air and, curving gracefully over, plunged downward toward the roof.

Jo had no knowledge of its approach, until he heard the whizzing rush of the flaming shaft, as it drove its head against the wet blanket, glanced off and slid to the earth.

"It won't do to loaf 'round here," he muttered, "or I'll be crawling over the roof with a dozen blazing arrers, and if Jo Stinger knows hisself, he don't mean to play walkin' lantern for the Wyandot varmints."

He had attained the position he was seeking, and a most delicate piece of work was before him, but he was equal to it.

The Indians, who were gathered in the cabin, and collected at different points in the woods and along the stockade, watching the flame with no little exultation, saw it creeping downward and spreading with a rapidity which boded ill for the garrison huddled beneath.

The fine, silver-like snowflakes glistened in the fire-light, and floated shudderingly down the roof, without affecting the blaze; but at the moment when scores of eyes were gleaming like those of so many wild beasts, a dark shadow suddenly disclosed itself--what seemed an immense black hand spread out and closed over the dangerous fire, which was instantly extinguished.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TUG OF WAR.

The extinguishment of the burning roof, for the time, was complete. Utter darkness came like the blowing out of a candle in a vault.

"The varmints know what it means!" muttered Jo Stinger, who made a hurried retreat along the roof toward the trap-door, which had been thrown wide open in readiness for his reception.

The Wyandots were quick to learn the cause of the sudden darkness, and they opened a brisk fire on the roof. This necessarily was at random, and the scout dropped through to the floor, without so much as a scratch upon him.

Colonel Preston and his friends would have felt like uttering a cheer over the success of Jo's boldness, but for the conviction that the worst was yet to come and was close at hand.

One fact was so apparent that it caused a strengthening of hope: the wind, which had been blowing almost a gale from the south, had fallen, so that the lull was perceptible. Should the Wyandots fire the cabin standing a short distance from the block-house, the flames were not likely to communicate unless the gale appeared again.

All was darkness once more. The wind soughed dismally through the trees and moaned around the block-house, which was scorched and still smoking from the burning arrows of the Wyandots. The fine snowflakes were still sifting downward, and far overhead was heard again the honk of wild geese flying to the milder regions of the south.

From within the settler's cabin standing near the stockade came a dull glow, but there was no other sign of life that eye could detect. And yet the block-house was environed by hostile red men, who were as eager as so many wolves to break into the fold.

Colonel Preston, Jo Stinger, Megill, Turner, and the boys were at the loopholes watching and listening. Mrs. Preston alternated from the side of her children to that of her husband, exchanging words with the brave man who had been so cramped in his movements for the last day or two that he was unable to do the service he wished to render his friends.

The sounds of hurrying feet, the hoarse guttural exclamations and the bird-like signals showed that the Wyandots were near the fort. They had taken advantage of the Egyptian darkness to steal up close to the sides of the building, where their presence could only be discovered through some movement that made a noise sufficient to reach the ears of the listeners above.

Several times the heavy log which they had dragged from the river bank was carried stealthily up to within a few feet of the building, when, having located the door, they ran forward with the battering ram. Delivering the blow they dropped the log and scampered to escape the shots which were sent after them in the darkness.

Now and then some of these bullets found their mark, and the assailants learned to their cost that it was not simple amusement on which they were engaged.

Believing they had made some impression on the door, eight Wyandots stole forward, lifted the tree-trunk from the ground, and stepped heavily and quietly backward several paces, where they paused to gather breath for the fierce rush.

At the very moment they had concentrated their strength and were in the act of moving, a flaming arrow sped upward like a rocket from the other side the clearing, and, curving over, went a short distance beyond the block-house, and, by a singular mischance, buried its head in the log, which was held above the ground and in the act of being plunged against the door.

The shaft stuck and the flaming twist of tow gave partial glimpses of the eight swarthy figures laboring toward the building with the timber between the two divisions. The knowledge that they were exposed to the aim of the Kentuckians, spread consternation among the Wyandots, who released the burden so suddenly that it fell upon one warrior's foot.

The pain was so acute that, like a civilized being, he caught the injured member in both hands and danced round and round on the other foot, howling with torture, while the others skurried away in the darkness, as though a bomb-shell

had burst among them.

The crack of several well-aimed rifles hastened the steps of these frightened warriors, and he who was nursing his bruised foot dropped it and limped off, with a haste that would have been impossible under other circumstances.

This incident, which was not without its element of comedy, was followed by a still more singular one.

Despite the vigilance of the garrison, the Wyandots were constantly tempted to efforts which, it would seem, promised no success at all, and which exposed them to great danger from the rifles of the Kentuckians.

We have described the windows on the lower story of the block-house, which were without panes, long and so narrow that it was not deemed possible that any person could force his body through.

And yet there was one warrior who had probably spent most of the day in considering the matter, and who concluded there was a chance for him to succeed, where all others had failed.

A peculiar noise on the lower floor led Colonel Preston to descend the ladder to investigate. For some minutes he was unable to conjecture what the disturbance could mean, but the faint glow thrown out by the flaming arrow which drove its head into the log, showed that the window at the right of the front door was blocked up by an Indian, who was wedged fast, and unable to get in or out.

He was struggling desperately, but could not extricate himself, and the astounded commandant concluded that, if he was attenuated enough to enter that far, he was probably capable of going still further, and must be a curiosity in the way of bulk which was worth seeing.

The Colonel shuddered to think what would have been the result if this savage had secured an entrance. It would have taken him but a minute or two to remove the fastenings of the door, when the whole horde of ferocious red men would have swarmed in.

The officer immediately ran forward and, catching the two arms of the intruder, pinioned them. Then he began pulling with might and main. That he might not throw away any strength, he placed both feet against the logs below the window, and, leaning back, threw all his energy in the effort.

So great was the force exerted that in all likelihood he would have succeeded in drawing the exceedingly thin warrior through the window, had not a couple of friends, at the same moment, seized his legs, which were frantically beating vacancy, and commenced pulling with equal ardor in the opposite direction.

The Wyandot was now as anxious to retreat as he had been to advance, and he strove to help his friends; but his efforts were so handicapped that he gave them little if any assistance.

The arrow which had burned so brightly for a minute or two expired, so that all was darkness once more, and the singular tug of war went on.

When Colonel Preston held his breath, compressed his lips and did his utmost, he felt the Indian move forward several inches in response; but there were a couple fully as muscular, and inspired by as strong enthusiasm as the pioneer. The tug which they put forth brought the brave back again, with probably a slight gain.

The warriors at the heels had the additional advantage of the sympathies of the one over whom they were disputing, and who bid fair to become elongated to an alarming extent by this singular controversy. He kept twisting his hands in such a way that he broke the hold of Colonel Preston more than once, while he quieted his legs so as to favor his friends all he could.

The first flirt which the Indian made was so sudden and unexpected that the Colonel fell backwards on the floor; but he was up on the instant, and grappled the sinewy arms again.

"If this keeps on much longer," thought the officer, "something must give way. Suppose we should pull the rascal in two, with half inside and half out. That might be fair to us, but the Indian, considered strictly as an Indian, would not be of much account. I wonder whether----"

"Hello, Colonel, what's going on?"

Jo Stinger had heard the singular disturbance, and, unable to guess its meaning, was hurrying down the ladder to inform himself.

The exquisite absurdity of the situation caused a momentary reaction from the gloom which had oppressed Colonel Preston, and led him to reply--

"I've got a red man here that we're using as a cross-cut saw, and we've stretched him out to almost double----"

At that instant the individual referred to, knowing that all depended on one supreme effort, wrenched his wrists loose and, like a flash, struck the Colonel such a blow in the face that he reeled backwards almost to the other side the room.

The Wyandots at the other end of the line were reinforced at the critical juncture by two others, who caught hold of their man wherever it was the most convenient, and the four gave a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull altogether, that was sure to accomplish something definite.

Fortunately for the elongated Indian his legs were equal to the strain, and he shot backward through the opening like the lady in the show, who is fired from the giant cannon by the aid of springs alone. He and his friends rolled over in one promiscuous heap, but were quickly on their feet and skurried away in a twinkling.

Jo Stinger scarcely credited the singular story when the Colonel related it, but when the particulars were given, he could not refuse to believe.

"You could have ended it, Colonel, when you had his head inside," said the scout.

"I know that, but I did not like the thought of taking such a frightful disadvantage of an enemy."

"Then you ought to have done it without thinking," muttered Jo, who was beginning to feel less mercy toward the Wyandots, since they had made their own furious hatred so manifest.

"If there's any likelihood of that varmint trying the thing over again, I'd stay here; but a chap who goes through, or tries to go through what he did, is apt to get enough."

"I am sure of that," assented Colonel Preston, who was still rubbing his face where the vigorous blow had fallen upon it.

There was no occasion to remain below-stairs, and the two went up the ladder, where a consultation was held as to what was best to do, if indeed they could do anything in their perilous situation.

Midnight had passed, and a hope was gaining ground that, if they could hold out until morning, the prospect of beating off the Wyandots would be improved. The American Indian seems incapable of doing his best work except in darkness, and another night of such utter gloom as the present was not likely to come.

It was not known, of course, that Deerfoot had escaped from his enemies, and the belief was general that his career had been brought to an untimely end; but, as we have shown, the young Shawanoe, with all his fleetness, could not bring reinforcements from Wild Oaks before the succeeding night, and it would have been a great feat could he accomplish it in that limited time.

The garrison had enough food to last them a week, and the supply of water was sufficient for the same time, unless too many draughts should be required by the work of the torch and burning arrows.

A continuous assault upon the door and the frequent firing into the loopholes and windows promised something, but the danger and delay which attended such work were too great for the red men, who knew the value of time as well as did the settlers themselves.

All within noted the direction and strength of the wind with an anxiety which cannot be described. The space separating the block-house and the cabin was so small that a slight gale from the right quarter was certain to carry the flames from one to the other. Both parties therefore were watching the indications with an equal intensity of interest.

Once the wind was just right, but a lull came, as the torch was about to be applied, and Waughtauk, after recovering from the terror caused by the appearance of the scout at the window, must have felt a grim impatience, as he saw the hours steadily slipping away, with no marked change in the situation.

But the fiery arrows had done excellently well, although at the critical moment a wet blanket, in the full sense of the word, was thrown upon the prospects of the assailants. Waughtauk and his sharpshooters knew how cleverly they had been outwitted, and they were sure the strategy could not succeed a second time.

The orders were therefore given to try the blazing missiles again, and in a few minutes a converging fire was opened, which looked as if a miniature bombardment had begun.

The pyrotechnic display, under the peculiar circumstances, was singularly striking.

By and by the missiles found a lodgment on the roof of the block-house, and the twists of flame once more lit up the rough surface, scorched and blackened in many places, and on which the flakes, instead of sliding off, as aforetime,

seemed to stick with an unusual persistency.

There were broad patches of snow over the greater portion, and although some of the arrows held, yet the major number fell over, after striking and flickering a few minutes, and went out. The flakes which had collected now helped blot out the flames.

The cause of these changed conditions was due to a number of saturated blankets that had been carefully spread over the roof. During the darkness which followed Jo Stinger's exploit, and after Colonel Preston's failure to win in his tug of war with the Wyandot, the garrison had wisely improved the time by soaking quilts with water and laying them over the most ignitable portion of the roof.

Men and boys had given up those appropriated to their use; indeed all had been taken, except those which protected the little girls while sleeping. The mother offered those, if needed, willing to enfold and warm her little ones with her own loving arms, and such few extra garments as could be gathered among the company; but the scout declined, saying he had all he could use. At the same time he would have given anything in his possession for enough material to plaster the entire surface.

Favored by the sheltering darkness, Jo then stretched these coverings over the slabs. He fastened them together and balanced them over the ridge, so there was no possibility of their slipping off.

This was done with such care that no space was lost. The temperature was so low that in a few minutes the blankets were stiff with frost, and, although the hunter was toughened by many years' exposure, his hands became so benumbed he could hardly use them.

It was these frosty blankets which caught the snow and held it, and which rendered useless so many of the burning shafts discharged by the Wyandots.

But there were spaces where the seasoned wood was exposed. Several of the blazing missiles, as might have been expected, lodged there and began burning their way into the timber.

Furthermore, as these flames lit up the gloom, the Wyandots, eagerly looking upon the scene from every point of the compass, saw a sight which must have amazed them: it was the figure of a man stretched out at full length on the roof, holding on with one hand, while the other seemed to be occupied in giving the finishing touches to the saturated goods, which, so far as they went, were an effective shield against the fire.

Was ever such reckless daring known? It looked as if the scout Jo Stinger deliberately invited this manner of his taking off, in preference to torture by flame, or at the hands of his dusky enemies.

If such were the fact, the Wyandots did not restrain their fire. Every one who commanded the position immediately opened upon the poor fellow, and the sharpshooters in the cabin near at hand discharged their pieces with unerring accuracy.

Bullet after bullet struck the figure which, as it lay at full length, was a fair target for the many rifles. Still he held on and made no effort to lift the trap-door and drop beyond range of the deadly sleet hurtling about him.

But there is a limit to the capacity of the strongest, and all at once the hold was loosened. He seemed to catch vainly at the steep roof, over which he began slipping; but there was nothing which he could grasp that would stay his downward flight. Faster and faster he went, until he shot over the eaves, and, striking the ground, collapsed in a limp heap in which there was not a particle of life.

The Wyandots, with whoops of delight, dashed forward from the darkness, each eager to be the first to scalp the man whom they well knew, and regarded as the most formidable member of the garrison.

Forgetful of the risk they ran (for the spot where the inanimate figure fell was revealed by the burning arrows), the warriors scrambled with each other as to who should secure the coveted trophy.

Scarcely a full minute had passed when cries of rage and chagrin were heard from the disappointed group: for that which they seized and struck at was not a man at all, but a dummy cunningly put together, and placed in such a position on the top of the block-house that not a Wyandot who fired at it had the slightest suspicion that he was throwing his ammunition away.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SOUTH WIND.

The project of placing a dummy on the roof of the block-house, with a view of drawing the fire of the Wyandots, was original with Jo Stinger. It is hard to see what good was attained, for more than enough ammunition remained to prosecute the battle with all energy, whenever the opportunity presented itself to the assailants.

The explanation of the act is found in the mental composition of the frontiersman himself. He had been outwitted more than once by the Indians, and he wished to show them that he had not lost entirely the cunning which had made his name known among many of the tribes that roamed and hunted through Ohio and the Dark and Bloody Ground.

Still further, those men who are accustomed to scenes of danger and daring are not without a certain element of humor in their make-up, and when one's spirits are oppressed for a long period, the rebound, at times, is so sudden that he is impelled to words and acts so incongruous as to excite the wonderment of friends.

Jo constructed the dummy to look as much like himself as possible. The clothing and material for this could be ill spared, but he furnished most of it himself, and when the image was placed in position, he was as impatient as a child for the sport that followed.

Poor distressed Mrs. Preston could see no justification of such levity at so serious a time. Megill and Turner enjoyed it scarcely less than their friend, while the Colonel affected an interest which he was far from feeling.

Blossom Brown laughed heartily over the discomfiture of the red men, and Ned Preston forgot his dread and grief for the moment; but they quickly returned, and the depression of all was doubtless greater from the temporary lifting of spirits the incident caused.

The Wyandots had hardly discovered the deception, when all three of the men at the loopholes fired into them. The shots produced results too, and the assailants became more cautious of the Kentuckians, who had learned to use their guns with such accuracy of aim.

Jo Stinger, in spreading the wetted blankets over the roof, had shown not only skill and courage, but good judgment. The protection was secured at the remotest points, which it was impossible to reach from either of the trap-doors, without exposing themselves to the certain aim of the Wyandot sharpshooters. The uncovered portions were those within reach.

Jo Stinger and Colonel Preston passed to the southern side of the building, from which they could look out upon the nearest cabin. Here a number of Indians were gathered, as there had been almost from the first.

"Your errand, I've no doubt, Jo, is the same as mine," said the officer, in a guarded voice.

"There's no doubt of that," replied the scout, "always providin' yours is the same as mine."

"I'm watching the wind."

"So am I."

"How do you find it?"

"It's blowing from the south."

"I am afraid so," remarked the Colonel, with a pang of misgiving, as he received a puff through the loophole, directly in the face; "is it stronger than before?"

"It's blowing harder than it did a half hour ago, but not so hard as two hours since."

"The worst feature about the business is that the wind is not only from the wrong point of the compass, but it is increasing."

"You speak the solemn truth, Colonel, but it aint sartin the varmints have got us anyway--helloa!"

To the consternation of every one in the block-house the tread of feet was heard on the roof at that moment. Some one

ran nimbly along the slabs, stooping down and holding himself from slipping by grasping the ridge with his hands.

By what possible means he gained this perch, was beyond the conjecture of any one; but the crisis was too grave to admit of an instant's delay. The warrior, beyond a doubt, had assumed this perilous risk with a view of tearing off the blankets, which shielded the roof from the flaming arrows.

Jo Stinger dropped his gun, sprang upon a stool, and leaped upward through the trap-door. Had he vaulted upon the roof with less celerity, he would have been dispatched by the Indian, who would have had him almost at his mercy; but the first warning the Wyandot received of his coming was his arrival.

The scout was aroused, and no athlete could have handled himself more deftly than did he. The very moment he was outside he moved several feet away from the opening and placed himself astride of the ridge pole.

This was the most secure position he could hold, and he peered around in the darkness and listened for something that would tell him where his enemy was. His unusually keen vision was of no use under the circumstances. There was not the slightest ember burning near him, nor was there a ray of moonlight or starlight to pierce the blackness of night.

But the Wyandot was there. He had removed several of the blankets, and was working at the others when the sound of the trap-door told him the important truth that a second person was on the roof.

The warrior could have slid down to the eaves and dropped to the ground without injury to himself; but that would have forced him to leave his work uncompleted, and he was too true a brave to do that.

Nothing loth to engage in a personal encounter, he began stealing along the ridge toward the point where he believed the white man was awaiting him. As Stinger held himself rigid and motionless, his precise location could not be determined at once; but the Indian's approach, guarded though it was, told Jo exactly where to search for his adversary.

Never was a barbarian taken more completely at fault. He made a fatal miscalculation, and one minute later, when he fell to the ground, he was as lifeless as the dummy which preceded him.

How this savage managed to reach the roof, puzzled Stinger beyond expression. He sat bolt upright on the ridge, looking around in the blank darkness, listening and thinking, and speculating upon the all-absorbing problem.

"It must be they rigged up some sort of ladder by cutting down a sapling; then they've leaned it against the eaves and he has shinned up, almost rubbing agin the muzzles of our guns,--but he won't climb any more ladders of *that* kind I reckon."

There was reason to fear the attempt would be repeated, and the scout retained his perch fully ten minutes, that he might be prepared to nip such a scheme in the bud.

Nothing to cause alarm occurred. Jo proceeded to investigate as carefully as he could the mischief done by the Wyandot who paid so dearly for it.

To his dismay the scout soon learned that the Indian had almost completed the task he undertook. He had torn off the frosty blankets and sent them rolling and sliding to the ground, as though they were so many ribbons fluttering in the wind.

Great damage in this respect had been done, and it was irreparable.

The scout had hitched along until close to the trap-door, where he paused a moment listening, in the hope of learning something of the movements of the Wyandots.

Loth as he was to admit it, he could not shut out the terrifying fact that the wind, which had set in from the south, was still rising and must soon reach a degree that would tempt the red men to fire the cabin, with the almost certain prospect of the flames communicating to the block-house.

Jo was contemplating this terrible contingency, when he heard several signals between parties near at hand. He had no way of knowing their meaning, but, while he was looking and listening, another burning arrow suddenly shot up from the edge of the clearing, in its curvilinear flight for the roof of the block-house.

"I wonder how near that is coming to *me*," muttered Jo, looking upward at the comet-like missile; "it turns beautiful--now it seems to halt like a swimmer looking for a spot where to dive--now it turns--down she comes--she is going to land on the roof sure--she's coming for me--*great guns!*"

Up went the trap-door, and down shot the scout like a seal who plunges into the air-hole just in time to elude the spear of the Esquimaux.

The spot vacated by the hunter was struck the fraction of a second after by the arrow, which would have played sad havoc with him, had he been less alert in his movements.

The expectation of the garrison, now that the roof had been cleared of the blankets, was that the Wyandots would repeat the bombardment of burning missiles, with an absolute certainty of success.

Such, there is every reason to believe, would have been the case, but for the favoring air which rendered any repetition of that species of warfare unnecessary.

It had ceased snowing, and the wind from the south was blowing strongly. Everything favored the method of attack which Stinger heard the chieftain Waughtauk declare should be used against the settlers.

By common agreement and without a word, the entire party passed to the southern side of the building and peered through the loopholes at the cabin, in which it was known a number of their enemies were gathered.

"If they have fixed upon this plan of assault," said Colonel Preston to Stinger, "why do they wait?"

"The varmints are good judges of weather, and they may be sartin the wind will be stronger by and by."

"But it seems strong enough to bring the flames over to us, and----"

"They've set fire to the cabin!"

The exclamation came from Ned Preston, who was at the elbow of Jo Stinger. Every one who was looking out in the darkness saw that he spoke the appalling truth.

The building nearest them had a door and window on the first floor, and two windows above, all facing the block-house. It was in the lower story that Waughtauk and his most trusted warriors had been grouped for hours, after having decided what should be the line of action toward the besieged settlers.

From the window on the lower floor suddenly issued a tongue of flame, which darted out and back with great rapidity. Then the whole interior became one vivid red glow, fire was seen shooting in every direction, and volumes of smoke began pouring from the upper windows.

The torch was applied, and the last, final test of the block-house had come.

The garrison were awed spectators of the scene. All understood what it meant, and there was no call for words; but as the southern side of the block-house, as well as the roof, were to be exposed to a furnace-like heat, the water was gathered in vessels, where it could be used the instant needed.

The Wyandots had hurried out of the building before the flames were fairly going, so as not to expose themselves to the rifles of the Kentuckians; but as the flames spread and the circle of illumination widened, the dusky foes were seen skulking behind the other cabin, along the stockade, and in the clearing, watching the destruction, and the massive block-house, whose heavy logs, steep overhanging roof, rude chimney and rugged outlines loomed up in the crimson glow against the background of blank darkness.

There was not a snowflake in the air, but the spotless white on the ground showed in many places where the mantle had been disturbed by the moccasins of the Wyandots.

The glare seemed to reach the clouds, and the myriads of sparks which went drifting to the northward, and falling over an area of many acres, brought out the gaunt, skeleton-like figures of the trees, which seemed to look solemnly forth from the dim woods, where the white and red men only met in scenes of violence and blood.

The garrison allowed themselves to be restrained by no sentimentality, for it was an hour when every shot counted. The glow of the ascending flames continually flung back the sheltering mantle of night enveloping the figures of the warriors, who were not always quick to remember the danger to which they were thus exposed.

But when four or five well-aimed rifles were fired from the loopholes, that were lit up with an illumination greater than that of the noonday sun, the survivors made haste to run back into the gloom, or to throw themselves behind some shelter.

The situation of those in the block-house became distressing beyond expression. The wind, blowing strongly in that direction, quickly filled the room with suffocating smoke, which, for a minute or two, threatened to overcome every one. The vapor, however, gave way to the heat, which was uncomfortable, although, so long as the logs did not take the flames, they could not cause much suffering.

The smoke and its miseries awoke little Mary and Susie Preston, whose terror, when they saw through the loopholes

the burning cabin, and who were not too young to understand their peril, touched the hearts of all. They began crying piteously and, trembling in every limb, threw their arms first about the neck of mamma and then of papa, sobbing and clinging convulsively to each in turn.

"The wicked Indians will kill you: we know they will; they will kill papa and mamma, and that will break our hearts."

After a time, the mother was able to quiet them, and then both, without any agreement, knelt at her knee and prayed with the pathetic faith of childhood.

"Our Heavenly Father, don't let the bad Indians hurt papa nor mamma, nor Jo, nor Mr. Turner, nor Mr. Megill, nor cousin Ned, nor Blossom, nor us. Don't let them hurt anybody; take care of us all; make us good girls. Amen."

Who shall say that the petition from the hearts of the innocent and trusting little ones was not wafted upward by the wings of listening angels, who were quick to bear the message to Him whose ear is never closed? And who shall say that He, leaning over the celestial battlements, did not look down on that wild scene in the grim forests, and stay the hand of the vengeful Wyandot, as it was raised to smite his pale-face brother to the earth?

CHAPTER XXI.

CONCLUSION.

The wind from the south was so strong that most of the large sparks capable of carrying the fire were thrown beyond the block-house, falling about the stockade, on the clearing, and among the trees, where they kindled spiral serpents of flame and smoke, which quickly died of themselves.

But as the blaze grew hotter and hotter, it seemed to converge its fierce heat upon the doomed block-house, as the blowpipe melts the obdurate metal. The upper room became filled with the quivering air, and more than one wondered how it was the logs withstood the furnace-like blast so long.

Although the two cabins were closer to each other than to the fort, yet the untouched one was in no danger because of the direction of the wind. The structure which had been lighted, burned furiously, and those who were watching its progress soon detected smoke from the block-house itself.

Jo Stinger was surprised to learn that, instead of being on the roof, it was from one of the windows almost directly under him--almost the last place where he expected the flames to catch.

While he was peering downward through the openings at his feet, he discovered the blaze.

A quart or two of water, well applied, extinguished it, and he called at the others to make known at once any other flame they might see. The warning was scarcely given, when Blossom Brown shouted--

"Here it am! here it am! burnin' like all creation!"

The dusky lad was not mistaken, for the logs below them had caught again, and considerable water was required before it succumbed. However, it went out at last, and the thick smoke and steam climbed upward into the face of Blossom, who coughed until he seemed nearly racked to pieces.

Doubtless the Wyandots could have poured in a volley of shots through the loopholes, which would have slain a number of the hapless defenders; but now, when nothing could prevent the capture of the entire party, the red men preferred that the company should fall into their hands intact.

Ned Preston was standing at the south-east angle of the block-house, looking toward the burning building, when he saw something which, for the time, made him doubt the evidence of his own senses.

His position was such that he could look directly along the western side of the cabin, which was unharmed by the flames. This, it will be noted, was the portion that adjoined the burning structure. On this side of the building, which was not burning, the heat was not very great, but the illumination was so strong that it was as light as midday, and no Wyandot ventured near it, through fear of the rifles of the Kentuckians.

The youth was watching the cabin, around and through which the flames were raging so furiously, when an Indian warrior walked into view. From what point he came, the watcher could not tell: the first he saw of him was when he approached the logs of the other structure. He moved slowly, as if surveying all sides, and when he turned and reached the door, he was seen to raise his hand and pass within, where, of course, he vanished from sight.

This of itself would not have been so extraordinary, but for the fact that the handsome face, distinctly shown in the glare, the slight, graceful figure, carrying a long bow in his right hand, and displaying the quiver of arrows over his shoulder, identified the Indian as Deerfoot the Shawanoe.

Despite the frightful situation, Ned Preston could scarcely restrain a cheer, for he was thrilled with a pleasure beyond description over the unexpected discovery that his devoted friend was still alive.

Ned darted to the side of Jo Stinger and told him what he had seen.

"Are you sure of it, younker?" demanded the scout sharply.

"Sure of it? It is impossible that I should be mistaken; I know him as well as I do you, and he stood in the full glare of the firelight."

"You're right; it *was* the Shawanoe; I seen him; I thought the young varmint was dead, but he's a good deal more alive this minute than we are."

"But, Jo, what does it mean? Why did he come out there where he could be seen, and go into the building?"

"He wanted us to notice him, and it was the best thing he could do. The varmints toward the river and in the clearin' must have cotched sight of him; but before they could larn his name and post-office address, he was inside."

"But I can't understand his cause for entering the cabin any way; what good can he do us there?"

"I've my 'spicion--*there!* that's what I expected!"

A crackling, snapping sound overhead told the alarming truth: the roof was burning fiercely, and there was no possible way of putting out the flames. In fact, it had been ablaze some time, for the fiery points were seen in several places along the ridge-pole, fast eating their way, so to speak, into the vitals of the building.

A minute after the sparks began falling through upon the floor, the vapor loaded with fire filtered through the loopholes, and the upper story had become untenable.

"Down the ladder!" said Jo Stinger; "it won't do to wait any longer."

He led the way himself, and the others followed in rather a pell-mell fashion. All, however, safely reached the lower story, where the situation was improved for a brief time only.

Smoke and fire were around them; the air was thick with strangling vapor and blistering sparks; the glow illuminated the interior, as if with a thousand lamps, and the ghastly countenances were rendered more unearthly by the lurid light which permeated everywhere.

Megill, Turner and Stinger were grim and silent. They had faced death before, and they were certain always to meet him with the front of heroes. The pale face of Mrs. Preston was calm, and she was sustained by the unfaltering trust of the Christian who forgets not that, however great the sufferings awaiting him, they can never equal the anguish of Him who gave up his life on Calvary for the world.

She kept her little ones close to her side. She had held a rifle when the danger first appeared; but she did not discharge it, and it was now cast aside. She remained near her husband, who, in a low voice, spoke encouraging words to her and his little ones, and who was resolved to die fighting in defence of those who were a thousand times dearer to him than his own life.

Blossom Brown was stupefied by the overwhelming terror of the scene. He moved about in a stolid, ox-like fashion, capable of obeying blindly whatever those around told him to do.

It was apparent even to the little children, who had hushed their cries, that it was impossible to stay more than a few minutes longer in the block-house. It was already on fire in a dozen different places, and was burning furiously. The fugitives might remain huddled together a short while, but only to meet the most awful of deaths; or they could venture forth and fall into the hands of the treacherous Wyandots.

"The door of that cabin over there is partly open, as you can obsarve," said Jo Stinger; "the logs haven't been scorched by fire, as you can also obsarve; we'll make a run for that door, and arter we get inside, we'll fight till the death, as you'll also obsarve."

"But they can shoot us down while we're on the way," said Colonel Preston.

"They can, but they won't; for they'd rather make us prisoners. No red varmint shall ever take *me* captive."

"Nor me either," added Turner and Megill together.

"That seems to be the only thing we can do. We ought to be able to make a stand there until to-morrow, when there may be help from Wild Oaks."

"All make ready; I'll lead the way."

There was not a heart from which a fervent prayer was not sent up to heaven; but the men compressed their lips and nerved themselves for the final effort. Colonel Preston caught up Mary the elder, kissed and pressed her to his heart. She returned the caresses, and he held her on his left arm, while the right hand grasped his rifle. The wife did the same with Susie, for the weapon she had cast aside was too valuable to leave behind.

"Hadn't I better lead de way?" asked Blossom Brown, crowding forward.

"Why?"

"Cause I'll kind ob darken tings, so de Injines can't see us."

"Wait till we start, and then you may lead if you can."

Jo Stinger leaned his long rifle against the wall, and with a firm, strong hand removed the bars one after the other. Then the door was drawn inward, he picked up his gun, and looked around at the group.

"Foller me!"

As he spoke, he strode forth, the others close on his heels. Blossom Brown made a plunge to pass the leader, but as he did not know which way to turn, he fell back.

The scout diverged to the left, and, with the same deliberate tread, passed over the open space between the burning cabin and the blazing block-house. A short time before, this would have been impossible; but the cabin was so nearly destroyed that the heat could be borne, although it caused each to hold his breath, it was so intolerable.

Scores of the Wyandots were watching the fugitives, and whoops and shouts of exultation rent the air, as a dozen advanced to meet the captives.

The latter hurried forward a few paces more, when Jo Stinger shouted--

"Now run for your lives!"

They were within fifty feet of the open door of the second cabin, through which he plunged the next instant like a cannon-shot, the others following pell-mell. The movement was so sudden and unexpected by the Wyandots crowding forward that it was virtually finished before they could interfere.

Ned Preston purposely threw himself behind the others, that he might, so far as possible, help protect his aunt and cousins. He was about to follow them into the building, when one warrior, more agile than the other, bounded forward with uplifted tomahawk.

Before he could throw it, and before Ned could use his gun, a resounding twang was heard from the nearest window, and an arrow from the royal bow of Deerfoot the Shawanoe transfixed him.

Ned Preston was inside in a twinkling. The Wyandots, infuriated over the trick played them, made a rush, with the intention of forcing an entrance at all hazards; but they were met by a rattling fire, which sent them skurrying like rabbits to cover. Every window seemed to bristle with rifles, and the shots were so numerous that Waughtauk and his warriors saw that others than the fugitives were defending the building.

Such was the fact. When Macaiah Preston, the leading settler at Wild Oaks, sent Deerfoot to apprise Colonel Preston of his danger, he did not contemplate doing anything more. But his own son was involved, and he became so uneasy that he consulted his neighbors, who agreed that help should be dispatched to Fort Bridgman without delay.

Accompanied by ten skilled riflemen, all of whom had seen service on the frontier, he set out for the station thirty miles away. He reached the neighborhood quite late at night of the second day of the siege, and on the way he met and was joined by Deerfoot, who had started to obtain his help.

As the Wyandots felt certain of their prey, they had relaxed their vigilance to a great extent. It was a curious fact that, while Jo Stinger was engaged on his reconnoissance, Deerfoot and several of the new arrivals were doing the same, although neither suspected the presence of the other.

The plan of Waughtauk was soon learned, and it was then decided to enter the cabin, and be guided by events. This was a task of extreme difficulty, but with the assistance of Deerfoot, who was the first to open the way, they got within the building without detection by their enemies. Then, with loaded and cocked rifles, they held themselves ready for any emergency.

As the crisis approached, Deerfoot purposely showed himself to the garrison, that they might recognize him and learn that they were not deserted. At the same time Macaiah Preston made several guarded signals to Jo Stinger, which that scout saw and understood, though no one else did. He said nothing to his friends, but it was this knowledge which gave such assurance to his movements.

The numbers within the cabin rendered it practically impregnable to twice the force at the command of Waughtauk, chieftain of the Wyandots. The illumination from the burning embers was so full that any warrior who ventured to show himself was riddled before he could approach within a hundred feet of the building.

This "electric light" lasted until after daylight, at which hour not a solitary hostile was visible. The single structure that had been left standing contained a stronger force than that of the red men who had destroyed the other two.

There was no move made until noon, when Deerfoot ventured into the woods on a careful and prolonged reconnoissance. When he came back, he reported of a verity that Waughtauk and his Indians had gone, and in all probability were miles distant.

It was deemed best, however, for the settlers to stay where they were, until the succeeding morning. This was done, and, at an early hour, the whole company started for Wild Oaks, on the Ohio.

The journey was ended without special incident, and just as the sun went down behind the western wilderness, the settlement was reached, and all danger was past.

"Thank heaven!" exclaimed Colonel Preston, looking reverently upward; "we have been saved by fire indeed."

"And did you ever think we wouldn't be?" asked Susie, his younger daughter.

"Well, I must own that I gave up once."

"That is wicked, papa," said the little one reproachfully; "I *knew* God would take care of us all, and the bad Indians wouldn't hurt us, 'cause Mary and I prayed to Him, and He heard us."

"God bless you—I believe you!" replied the father, with misty eyes, as he tossed the darlings in air one after the other, caught them in his arms, and kissed them again and again.

We have not dwelt on the meeting in the cabin, which survived the flames, between the despairing fugitives and their rescuers. Its joyful nature may be imagined. The countenance of the handsome, willowy young Shawanoe was aglow with pleasure, when he grasped the hand of the no less delighted Ned Preston, who had believed him dead until he saw him walk forth in the glare of the burning building.

"You must come and live with us," said Ned, at the end of the journey, and after the others had thanked the wonderful youth for his services, which were beyond value.

"Deerfoot will visit his friends," said he, holding the hand of Ned, and looking affectionately in the face of the youthful pioneer; "but his home is in the woods. He loves to lie under the trees and listen to the sighing of the wind among the branches; he loves to watch the clouds, as they float like snowy canoes across the blue sky; he loves to listen to the soft flow of the river, to crawl under the edge of the rock, and hear the snowflakes sifting down on the brown leaves; his soul rejoices at the crashing of the thunderbolts, which split the trees like rotten fruit. When Deerfoot is tired, he can wrap his blanket around him and sleep anywhere; when he is hungry, he has his bow and arrow which can bring down the deer, and the bear, and the bison; when he is thirsty, he can drink the cold water which drips from the mossy rocks; when he is in trouble, he will pray to the Great Spirit of the white man, who will not turn his ear away.

"No, Deerfoot must live in the forests, but he will always love the pale-faces, and perhaps," added the Shawanoe, looking Ned Preston straight in the eye, "it may be the fortune of Deerfoot to be of help again to you."

"I know how gladly it will be given," said Ned gratefully; "and if there ever should come any need of *our* help, it will be the pleasure of our lives to prove how much we appreciate your friendship."

The sun had gone down, and the shadows of night were creeping through the dim, silent woods, when Deerfoot the Shawanoe crossed the clearing which surrounded the settlement, and, pausing on the border of the forest, he waved a good-bye to his friends. Then he turned and vanished from sight.

But there seemed to rest the mantle of prophecy on his graceful shoulders, when he intimated that it might be his good fortune to render service to Ned Preston and his friends. The opportunity came sooner than any one anticipated, and what befell the boy pioneer, and what was done by the young Shawanoe, will be told in the second volume of the "Boy Pioneer Series," entitled--

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When I was sixteen years old I belonged to a composition class. It was our custom to go on the recitation seat every day with clean slates, and we were allowed ten minutes to write seventy words on any subject the teacher thought suited to our capacity. One day he gave out "What a Man Would See if He Went to Greenland." My heart was in the matter, and before the ten minutes were up I had one side of my slate filled. The teacher listened to the reading of our compositions, and when they were all over he simply said: "Some of you will make your living by writing one of these days." That gave me something to ponder upon. I did not say so out loud, but I knew that my composition was as good as the best of them. By the way, there was another thing that came in my way just then. I was reading at that time one of Mayne Reid's works which I had drawn from the library, and I pondered upon it as much as I did upon what the

teacher said to me. In introducing Swartboy to his readers he made use of this expression: "No visible change was observable in Swartboy's countenance." Now, it occurred to me that if a man of his education could make such a blunder as that and still write a book, I ought to be able to do it, too. I went home that very day and began a story, "The Old Guide's Narrative," which was sent to the *New York Weekly*, and came back, respectfully declined. It was written on both sides of the sheets but I didn't know that this was against the rules. Nothing abashed, I began another, and receiving some instruction, from a friend of mine who was a clerk in a book store, I wrote it on only one side of the paper. But mind you, he didn't know what I was doing. Nobody knew it; but one day, after a hard Saturday's work--the other boys had been out skating on the brick-pond--I shyly broached the subject to my mother. I felt the need of some sympathy. She listened in amazement, and then said: "Why, do you think you could write a book like that?" That settled the matter, and from that day no one knew what I was up to until I sent the first four volumes of Gunboat Series to my father. Was it work? Well, yes; it was hard work, but each week I had the satisfaction of seeing the manuscript grow until the "Young Naturalist" was all complete.

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