

FICTION

Edward Sylvester Ellis

The Phantom of the River

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FICTION

BOONE AND KENTON SERIES, No. 2

THE PHANTOM OF THE RIVER

A SEQUEL TO "SHOD WITH SILENCE"

BY EDWARD S. ELLIS

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BOONE AND KENTON.

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PHANTOM OF THE RIVER.

CHAPTER I.

LONGING FOR NIGHT.

"I think there's trouble ahead, Dan'l."

"There isn't any doubt of it, Simon."

The first remark was made by the famous pioneer ranger, Simon Kenton, and the second fell from the lips of the more famous Daniel Boone.

It was at the close of a warm day in August, more than a century ago, that these veterans of the woods came together for the purpose of consultation. They had threaded their way along parallel lines, separated by hardly a furlong, for a mile from their starting-point, when the above interchange of views took place.

Boone had kept close to the Ohio while stealthily moving eastward, while Kenton took the same course, gliding more deeply among the shadows of the Kentucky forest until, disturbed by the evidence of danger, he trended to the left and met Boone near the river.

The two sat down on a fallen tree, side by side, and, while talking in low tones, did not for a moment forget their surroundings. They had lived too long in the perilous wilderness to forget that there was never a moment when a pioneer was absolutely safe from the fierce or stealthy red man.

"Dan'l," said Kenton, in that low, musical voice which was one of his most marked characteristics, "this 'ere bus'ness has took the qu'arest shape of anything that you or me have been mixed up in."

"I haven't been mixed up in it, Simon," corrected Boone, turning his somewhat narrow, but clean-shaven face upon the other, and smiling gently in a way that brought the wrinkles around a pair of eyes as blue as those of Kenton himself.

"Not yet, but you're powerful sartin to be afore them folks reach the block-house."

Boone nodded his head to signify that he agreed with his friend.

"You wasn't at the block-house, Dan'l, when the flatboat stopped there?"

"No."

"Neither was I; I was tramping through the woods on my way to make a call on Mr. Ashbridge."

"That's the man who put up the cabin a mile back down the river?"

"Yes; you see Norman Ashbridge or his son George--and the same is a powerful likely younker--come down the Ohio last spring in their flatboat, and stopped at the clearing a mile below us, where they put up a tidy cabin. A few weeks ago the father started east to bring down his family in another flatboat. George, the younker, got tired of waiting and set out to meet 'em; him and me come together in the woods, and had a scrimmage with the varmints afore we got on the boat with 'em. Things were purty warm on the way down the river, for The Panther made matters warm for us."

"The Panther!" repeated Boone, turning toward his friend; "I was afraid he was mixed up in this."

"I should say he was--rather," replied Kenton, with a grin over the surprise of his older companion. "That chap sneaked onto the boat last night, believing he had a chance to clean us all out. Of course, I knowed what was up, but The Panther made a powerful big mistake. He got mixed up with that darkey you seed--his name is Jethro Juggens--and you may shoot me if the darkey didn't throw him down and hold him fast till we made him prisoner."

Boone had heard something of this extraordinary exploit, but he looked questioningly at Kenton, as though he could hardly credit the fact.

"It's all as true as Gospel. We kept Wa-on-mon, which the same is The Panther, till late that night, when Mr. Ashbridge and Altman and me went over in a canoe to the other flatboat, which the Shawanoes had cleaned out, to even up accounts with 'em. Sime Girty was with 'em, but they left afore we got to the craft, and we sot it afire and come back."

"I seed the light last night, but didn't know what it was."

"While we was gone, Mr. Altman's darter, Agnes (she ain't much more than a child), felt so sorry for The Panther, thinking, too, that I meant to shove him under, that she cut the cords that bound him--"

"What a fool of a gal!"

"Dan'l," sternly interrupted Kenton, laying his hand on the arm of his friend, "you mustn't speak that way of Tom Altman's child. There ain't a finer, smarter, purtier, sweeter gal in all Ohio or Kaintuck than little Agnes Altman. She made a powerful big mistake, but she done it in the kindness of her heart, and, Dan'l, you and me knows there ain't many such mistakes made. But that little gal showed her pluck when she follered up Wa-on-mon, snatched the knife from his hand when he warn't looking, and warned young Ashbridge in time to save him. Wal, The Panther made a rush to jump overboard, but he happened to step onto that darkey again, so he was nabbed."

"But what's become of The Panther?" asked Boone, hoping to hear that the career of this terrible scourge of the border was ended.

Kenton rested his long, formidable flintlock rifle on the log at his side, clasped his thin iron fingers over one knee, the foot of which was raised from the ground, and looked thoughtfully among the trees in front. His coonskin cap was shoved back from his forehead, and a frown settled on it, and his thin lips were compressed for a few moments before he spoke.

"Dan'l, things haven't turned out altogether to suit me. As you know, the flatboat kept on down the river till it reached the clearing this morning. Afore we went ashore, I diskivered that Girty and several varmints was in the cabin. They knowed we was going there, and they meant to wait until we got inside, when they'd clean us all out. While we was man[oe]uvring round like, so as to trade places with 'em, a powerful qu'ar thing happened."

"There's a good many queer things happening in this part of the world, Simon," curtly remarked Boone.

"Two of them Shawanoes was shot--one killed or the other hit hard--and in both cases it was done by that darkey, Jethro Juggens. He's a big, strong, simple chap, that hates work worse nor pizen, but he knows how to shoot that gun of his in a way that'll open your eyes."

"But what about The Panther?" asked Boone, feeling more interest in him than in Jethro Juggens. Kenton's brow clouded again as he made answer:

"Consarn The Panther! I forgot about him. It was agreed that him and me would meet, all by ourselves, in the woods near the clearing, and settle that account between us. If I come back all right, Girty and the varmints was to leave the cabin. I come back and they left."

"And you evened up matters with The Panther?" exclaimed Boone, with a glow of satisfaction, in strong contrast to the scornful disgust on the rugged countenance of his friend.

"No; I went to the spot, but The Panther didn't show himself."

The readers of "Shod with Silence" will recall the circumstances. Simon Kenton hurried to the appointed place of meeting, eager for the encounter with Wa-on-mon, the famous war chief of the Shawanoes, but the crafty miscreant had vanished, and nothing was seen of him.

"I never thought Wa-on-mon was a coward," bitterly repeated Kenton.

"And, Simon," said Boone, impressively, "don't make the mistake of thinking so now; the reason why he didn't meet you wasn't that he was afraid of you."

"What was it?"

"You know as well as me."

And so he did. The savage leader of the Shawanoes merely deferred his furious meeting with the ranger in order to strike a more fearful blow against the pioneers.

The moment Wa-on-mon plunged into the woods near the clearing, with the avowed purpose of meeting Kenton, he was off like a deer in search of a large war party that he knew was somewhere in the neighborhood. With them he meant to return and "wipe out" every man, woman and child of the settlers.

Meanwhile, the Altmans and Ashbridges, assisted by their companions, removed all their goods from the flatboat against the bank and placed them in the cabin, prepared some time before for the occupancy of the Ashbridges. This was hardly done when Daniel Boone appeared at the clearing with disquieting news. He advised them, however, to stay, since their means of defence was good, but hardly was the decision reached when a runner came in with the news that an uprising among the surrounding tribes had already begun, and it would not do for the pioneers to remain another day. Nothing could save the lonely cabins and exposed dwellings except immediate flight to the nearest

settlement or block-house.

Ten miles from the clearing, and standing on the northern bank of the Ohio, was the block-house in charge of Captain Bushwick. The Altmans and Ashbridges made the sad mistake of not fastening the flatboat to the bank and taking up their quarters at this frontier post until the full truth was learned about the dangers confronting them.

The first intention of Boone and his party was to escort the settlers back to the block-house. They had a brush with a company of Shawanoes, and defeated them. It was not the main body, however, under the leadership of The Panther. That remained to be heard from, and its whereabouts was unknown.

Mr. Altman, his wife, and daughter Agnes, and his negro servant, Jethro Juggens, Mr. Ashbridge and his wife, daughter Mabel, and their son George set out for the block-house on the Ohio side of the river.

Their plan was to keep along the Kentucky bank until opposite the post, when the means would be readily found for crossing. The two families were in charge of the rangers that Boone had brought with him for the purpose of acting as their escort. They were forced to leave behind them all their earthly possessions in the solitary cabin, with not the remotest prospect of ever seeing them or it again.

Although the day was well along when the start was made, yet the situation was so critical, because of the part The Panther was certain to play in the coming events, that Boone and Kenton took the advance, proceeding by parallel but separated lines, and on the guard against any stealthy approach from the Indians.

It was the hope that by preventing or, rather, averting any attack until nightfall, the prospects of the pioneers would be vastly improved. Though the forest possessed no available trail that could be used even in the daytime, the rangers, and especially Kenton and Boone, were so familiar with it, that they could guide their friends with unerring accuracy when the darkness was so profound that it was almost worthy of the old remark that a person could not see his hand before his face.

Accordingly, all yearned or prayed for the coming of darkness.

"Hark," whispered Kenton, turning to Boone, and raising his hand as a gesture for silence.

No need of that, for the elder had caught the sound--a faint and apparently distant cawing of a crow from some lofty tree-top.

Both had heard the same cry more than once that afternoon, and instead of its being the call of a crow, they knew it came from the throat of an Indian warrior, and therefore a relentless enemy.



CHAPTER II.

THE CAWING OF A CROW.

Three separate times previous to this that faint cawing signal had been heard, as it seemed, from the distant tree-tops. The most sensitive ear could not say of a certainty it was not made by one of those black-coated birds calling to its mate or the flock from which it had strayed. Neither Boone nor Kenton distinguished any difference between the tone and what they had heard times without number, and yet neither held a doubt that it was emitted by a dusky spy stealing through the woods, and that it bore a momentous message to others of his kith and kin.

The keen sense of hearing enabled the rangers to locate the signal at less than a quarter of a mile in front and quite close to the Ohio. From the first time it was heard, no more than half an hour before, it held the same relative distance from the river, but advanced at a pace so nearly equal to that of Boone and Kenton that it was impossible to decide whether it was further off or nearer than before.

There was no reply to the call, and it was uttered only three times in each instance. The oppressive stillness that held reign throughout the forest on that sultry summer afternoon enabled the two men to hear the cawing with unmistakable distinctness.

In short, our friends interpreted it as a notice from the dusky scout to his comrades that he was following the progress of the pioneers, which was therefore fully understood by the war party that was seeking to encompass their destruction.

When the signal sounded for the fourth time, the rangers seated on the fallen tree looked in each other's faces without speaking. Then Kenton asked, in his guarded undertone:

"What do you make of it, Dan'l?"

"There's only one thing to make of it; them Shawanoes are keeping track of every movement of the folks behind us, and we can't hinder 'em."

"How many of the varmints are playing the spy?"

"There may be one, and there may be a dozen."

This answer, of necessity, was guess-work, for there was no possible means of determining the number, since the hostiles in front so regulated their progress that not a glimpse had been caught of the almost invisible trail left by them.

And yet the matter was not wholly conjecture, after all.

"Dan'l," said Kenton, with a significant smile, "there's more than one of 'em, and you and me know it."

The older smiled in turn and nodded his head.

"You're right; there's two, and may be more--but we know there's two."

Nothing could show more strikingly the marvelous woodcraft of these remarkable men than their agreement in this declaration, which was founded upon this fact.

There was a shade of difference between the tone of the last signal and those that preceded it. You and I would have shaken our heads and smiled, had we been asked to distinguish it, but to those two past masters in woodcraft it was as absolute as between the notes of a flute and the throbbing of a drum.

It was as if, after a Shawanoe had cawed three times, he permitted a companion to try his hand, or rather his throat, at it, and he who made the attempt acquitted himself right well.

"Now, Simon," remarked the elder, "as I make it, it's this way--they mean to ambush the party at Rattlesnake Gulch."

"You're right! that's it," remarked Kenton, with an approving nod of his head, "and if we don't sarcumvent 'em the varmints will have every scalp, including ours."

"Rattlesnake Gulch" was a name given to a deep depression on the Kentucky side of the river, and within one hundred yards of the stream. It was less than a half a mile in advance of where the two rangers were seated on the fallen tree, as the summer day was drawing to a close.

A trail made by buffaloes, deer, and other wild animals led through the middle of this densely-wooded section. No

doubt this path had been in existence at least one hundred years. Beyond the gulch it trended to the right and deeper into the woods, terminating at a noted salt lick, always a favorite resort of quadrupeds whether wild or domestic.

The forest was so deep and matted with undergrowth, both to the right and left of this depression, that nothing but the most pressing necessity could prevent a person from using the trail when journeying to the eastward or westward through that section. Evidently, the Shawanoes counted upon the settlers following the path, and such they would assuredly do unless prevented by the advance scouts.

"Captain Bushwick was out on a little scout himself last summer," remarked Kenton, who, despite their alarming surroundings, seemed to be in somewhat of a reminiscent mood, "when, on his way back, he started through that holler. The fust thing he did was to step into a rattler, which burried his fangs in his leggins, just missing his skin. Afore the sarpent could strike again, the captain made a sweep with his gun bar'l that knocked off his head. He was a whopper, and the captain pulled out his knife to cut off his rattles to bring to the block-house, when he caught the whir of another rattler just behind him, and if he hadn't jumped powerful lively he would have caught it that time sartin. Howsumever, the sarpint couldn't reach him, and the captain shot the mate, and brought the music box of each home with him."

"It was Captain Bushwick who gave the name Rattlesnake Gulch to the place, I 'spose," was the inquiring remark of Boone.

"Yes, he seemed to think that name was not only purty, but desarving, though I've been through the holler a good many times and never seed a sarpent."

"I have."

"When was that?"

"Less than two weeks ago, I was just entering from the other side when I caught sight of a buck that was on his way to the lick. He would have seed me if he hadn't seed just then something else in the path in front of him that interested him more. It was a rattler as big as them of the captain's. The buck was a fool, for instead of backing out, as you know animals are quick to do at sight of a rattler, he began to snuff and cavort about the snake, and finally brought his front hoofs down on it. Of course, he cut the serpent all to ribbons, but afore he done it the buck was stung once or twice, and inside of half an hour he jined the rattler he had sent on afore. Rattlers are as bad as Injins!" muttered Boone, with an expression of disgust.

"They may be in some partie'lars, but in some they ain't, Dan'l; fr instance, they don't caw like a crow, and don't try to ambuscade folks, and they give you warning afore they strike, which is more than the two-legged varmints do."

"Talk about the rattler giving warning afore he strikes," repeated Boone, who had a poor opinion of the genus crotalus, "he'd be a much more decent sarpint if he didn't strike at all. The black snake doesn't sting you, and yet he'll kill the rattler every time. Howsumever," added the elder ranger, "what's snakes got to do with the bus'ness afore us?"

"That's what I was thinking. Now, Dan'l, we've got to make the varmints think we're going to try to pass through Rattlesnake Gulch to-night, so they'll all gather there to welcome us."

"And then what will our folks do?"

"Take some other route."

"But which one? The woods are so thick on the right and left that they, especially the women, can't go ten feet without making a noise that'll be sartin to be heard by the varmints."

"There are several things they can do," replied Kenton, thoughtfully, proving that, like his companion, he had speculated much on the matter. "In the first place, they must move so slow that they won't reach the neighborhood of the gulch till after dark, and yet if they move too slow the Shawanoes will be suspicious. I wish night was near at hand."

"What good does wishing do?"

"None, and never did; but when night does come we can turn about--that is, some of the boys can, with the women--and cross the river further down stream, strike the trail on the other side of the Ohio, and go straight to the block-house."

Boone shook his head. The scheme did not impress him favorably.

"How are you going to get them women and two children across the river? It isn't likely that any one of 'em knows how

to swim a stroke."

"What trouble would it be to tote 'em over?"

Boone again shook his head; he was not pleased with the suggestion.

"I didn't mean to do anything of the kind, but," added Kenton, more seriously, "there's a canoe of mine hid under the bushes just this side of the gulch, purvided the varmints haven't tumbled over it."

"More'n likely they've took it away or smashed it, but if I ain't mistook, there's a craft alongside the flatboat that you left at the clearing."

"You are right."

"Why not go back for that?"

"It ain't a bad idee," remarked Kenton, thoughtfully. "If I can manage to fetch the boat up the river without any of the varmints 'specting it, it'll be just the thing."

"It won't carry all the women and children and rest of the folks at once."

"Then we can make two v'yages or more, if it's necessary."

"It's risky bus'ness, but it's the best thing that can be done. If you are lucky 'nough to find tother boat where you left it, seems to me things will look up."

Kenton glanced around among the tree-tops, as if searching for something. So he was, though not for any special object.

"Cording to the way things look it'll be a good two hours afore it'll be dark 'nough to set to work to sarcumvent the varmints. Them two hours are long 'nough for the folks to make the trip to Rattlesnake Gulch twice over. Some plan has got to be fixed up not to git thar till after two hours is gone, and yet not to have the Shawanoes 'spect that we 'spect anything. Can you tell me how the thing is to be done, Dan!?"

"There ought to be a good many ways," replied the elder, after a brief pause; "some accident might happen, such, fr 'nstance, as getting bit by a rattler."

Kenton saw the twinkle in the eyes of his friend, who spoke with the utmost gravity. "Remember," said the younger, "I never seed any rattler near the gulch; you have; you're the one, therefore, to see some of 'em agin. You're the one to let a big rattler sting you. After he's made sartin he's done his work well, why I'll happen 'long and smash the rattler, and then look after you--helloa!"

Both instinctively grasped their rifles, for they heard the rustling of leaves, which showed that some one was approaching. Had the noise been less pronounced the two rangers would have darted behind the nearest sheltering trees; but the noise was too distinct for either Boone or Kenton to suspect that an enemy was at hand. They knew it was a friend--at least one from whom they had nothing to fear.

So it proved; for while they were peering toward the point whence the figure was known to be approaching, Jethro Juggens, the burly colored servant lad of Mr. Altman, slouched into sight, with his rifle slung over his shoulder. Not until he had advanced a dozen steps further did he see two hunters seated on the fallen tree. Then he stopped suddenly, with a startled expression, and brought his heavy rifle to the front.

"None of that!" called Kenton, uncertain what the fellow might do.

"Hello, Mr. Kenton, dat's yo'self, am it?" called Jethro, with a grin; "I tinked you was de Panther. I was jes' gwine to plug yo'; lucky yo' spoke when yo' done did, or I'd wiped out bofe ob yo' afore anybody could hold me; but," added Jethro, in an awed undertone, "I's got bery important news for yo', Mr. Kenton and Mr. Boom."

CHAPTER III.

THE HALT IN THE WOODS.

The appearance of Jethro Juggens surprised Boone and Kenton as they sat on the fallen tree, for they were looking for nothing of the kind. When he announced that he was the bearer of important tidings, he naturally became an object of increased interest, for the fate of the little party of pioneers was the problem that the two great rangers were trying to solve.

"You bring important news," repeated Kenton, who, as the reader already knows, was quite partial to the negro, for, with all his stupidity, he had given proof of astonishing skill in marksmanship. "What is your news?"

"It's very well," replied Jethro, taking his seat beside the men on the log, removing his cap, and fanning his shining countenance.

"That being so," continued Kenton, "what's the news you brought?"

"Haben't I jes' told yo'? It's bery well, 'cepting dat I's hungry, dough I can't make none ob de folks blebe it. Howsumeber, I guess dey blebes it, but dey don't keer."

"Haven't you any other news for us?" asked Boone, looking sternly at Jethro, who did not note, or, noting perhaps, did not care for his displeasure.

"Nuffin else in 'tickler, 'cept dat de folks am also well."

"That is some kind of news, though only what we expected. Nothing has happened to any of 'em?" inquired Kenton.

"Nuffin dat I reckomembers."

"Where are they?"

"Don't you know?" asked Jethro, in turn, looking around in surprise that he should put the question, when he had parted with his friends only comparatively a short time before. "Whar do you 'spose dey am, Mr. Kenton?"

"I know where they ought to be," said the ranger, gravely; "they ought to be about a half a mile or so down the river, picking their way through the woods to this tree where we're setting; but I didn't know but what something had happened."

"Didn't I just tole you dat nuffin didn't happen?"

"Are the folks coming up the river towards us?"

"Dey were settin' still on some rocks on the ground when I left."

"What's that for?"

"I 'spose dey're tired; want to rest."

Kenton looked significantly at Boone. Jethro's theory would not answer. There was no member of the little party of pioneers, not even Agnes Altman, nor Mabel Ashbridge, only ten years of age, who would become so wearied by twice as long a tramp as to feel the need of rest.

"Did you come yourself, or were you sent ahead to see us?"

"I come myself, dat is, nobody fotched me on his back; but Mr. Hastings subgested dat I come, by saying if I didn't he would kick me."

Weber Hastings was the sturdy member of the escort party who, in the absence of Boone, had charge of them.

Jethro Juggens began to display more sense in his words than he had yet shown. He became more serious in his manner.

"De way ob it was dis: One ob de men from de block-house had been scoutin' frough de woods, and he come back and tole Mr. Hastings what he seed----"

"What was it?" interrupted Kenton.

"Being as he didn't tole me, yo'll hab to obscoose me from answerin' dat question, but I was invited to go on ahead and to tell yo' folks dat Mr. Hastings wanted one ob yo' or bofe ob yo' to come back again, as he had somethin' he wanted to see yo' about."

Neither Boone nor Kenton made any comment on the singular course of Hastings in selecting Jethro Juggens to bear such a message, when, among all the male members of the company probably there was not one that was less qualified.

"I don't know what it means," said Boone, rising from the tree, "but it means something. You had better go back with this simpleton at once."

"And you?"

"I'll push ahead and larn what I kin. It won't make any difference whether I'm with you or not, if there's a fight coming, but I'll do my best to jine you. I'm likely to run onto something ahead that we oughter know."

"Do you expect to use any signallin' for me?" asked Kenton, who had also risen to his feet.

"Don't see that there'll be any need, but if there is you'll understand it. You and me are too used to each other, Simon, to make any slip up----"

Kenton raised his hand and smiled. While the words were in the mouth of Boone, the soft, faint cawing of the crow was heard for the fifth time.

At the same moment two interesting facts were impressed upon the rangers.

The call did not sound half so far away as in any one of the former instances, and it came from a throat which essayed it for the first time in the hearing of Boone and Kenton.

"Now we know there's three of 'em," remarked the latter.

"They're wondering why me and the rest of 'em aren't pushing faster through the woods. But off with you, Simon; we're losing time."

Without another word these two great pioneers separated, the elder moving silently among the trees to the eastward, that is, up the Ohio and toward Rattlesnake Gulch, now a place of the first importance to all concerned. He did not look around to note what was done by the other.

But Kenton had taken only a few steps when he stopped and looked back.

Jethro Juggens was standing by the fallen tree with his gun on his shoulder and glancing inquiringly from the disappearing figure of Boone to that of Kenton, only a few yards away.

"What's the matter?" asked the latter. "What are you waiting for?"

"Which ob yo' folks wants me, Mr. Kenton?"

"I don't think either one of us will die of a broken heart if we lose you; but come along with me."

"Sure Mr. Boone won't feel bad if I don't go wid him?"

"Come along, keep close to me and don't make any noise, for the woods is full of the varmints."

Enough has been told for the reader to understand the situation. The Altman and Ashbridge families were threading their way through the Kentucky wilderness, from the clearing where a cabin had been erected some weeks before, to the block-house ten miles distant and on the opposite side of the river. They were escorted by a number of rangers and scouts from the block-house, under the charge of Daniel Boone, and sent thither by Captain Bushwick, who discovered the imminent peril of the families after they had declined the invitation to tarry at the block-house, and had passed beyond and down the Ohio in the flatboat.

Kenton was not mistaken in his theory about the return journey of himself and companion. Not the slightest sign of danger appeared, and in a comparatively short time they came upon their friends, who, from their appearance, might well have been taken for a picnic party on an outing of their own.

What more inviting opening could the crouching Shawanoes ask than was here presented to them? From their lurking places among the surrounding trees they could pour in a frightfully destructive volley that would stretch many of the helpless party lifeless on the ground.

And why did they not do so? Because they knew the cost to them. Those hunters and rangers were used to the Indian

method of fighting. If the redskins could approach nigh enough to fire before detection, there would be enough white men left to make many of them bite the dust ere they could get beyond reach of the deadly rifles.

No; in the estimation of the Shawanoes there was a plan open to them that was a thousandfold more preferable.

Rattlesnake Gulch was the beau ideal place for an ambushade, for it not only offered a certain chance for the destruction of the entire party of whites, but afforded a perfect protection against any unpleasant consequences to the ambuscaders.



CHAPTER IV.

ON THE EDGE OF THE CLEARING.

The arrival of Kenton naturally caused a stir on the part of all the members of the party that halted on their way through the Kentucky wilderness to the block-house, somewhat less than ten miles distant and on the other side of the Ohio River.

Not only Hastings and his brother rangers, but the Ashbridges and Altmans gathered around the pioneer to hear what he had to say and the directions as to their own proceedings.

Mr. Ashbridge and his friend Altman were roused by the murmur of voices and the subdued excitement, and joined the group that surrounded the tall, athletic figure--all excepting little Mabel Ashbridge, who was just getting her tiny dam in shape, and deemed that of more importance than listening to the conversation of the elders.

The words of Weber Hastings proved that he was as quick as Boone and Kenton to comprehend the peculiar peril which confronted the party.

"It isn't far to the block-house," he replied to the question of Kenton, "and we can do it in two or three hours, if the redskins would give us the chance."

"What caused you to make this stop, Weber?"

"Rattlesnake Gulch," was the response.

"What's the matter with that?"

"There's where the Shawanoes mean to ambush us."

"You're right," replied Kenton, nodding his head and compressing his lips. "That's just what the varmints have fixed things to do, and if they can do it they'll wipe out every one of this party. Boone and me made up our minds that that was their trick. He's gone ahead to watch 'em, and I've come back to help you folks."

"From what Mr. Hastings said," remarked the elder Ashbridge, who, like his friend Altman, was thoroughly roused, "the woods are so matted and choked with dense undergrowth on both sides of the gulch that it is impossible for us to pick our way through it at night without being heard by the Indians."

"He's right," was the emphatic comment of Kenton, "the thing can't be done."

"That being admitted," said Altman, "why would it not be wise to cross the river at this point, or make the rest of the journey through the Ohio woods? We who know how to swim can take over those who cannot, or better, perhaps, construct a raft upon which to float to the other side."

"That would be the idee exactly, if it could be hid from the varmints, but they're watching us, and have been doing so ever since we've left the clearing. They know everything you do. Afore you could get half-way cross the river with the raft they would open on you from the woods on both sides, and pick off each woman and gal and them as was pushing the raft."

"I do not doubt what you say," observed Altman, with a shudder at the graphic picture drawn by the scout, "but it seems strange to me," he added, with a glance around, as if he expected to catch sight of some of their terrible enemies, "that they have not already opened upon us, while we are here in camp, as may be said. What better chance could they ask?"

"They could pick off a number of you, but Weber here and the rest of the boys would make them dance to lively music if they tried it. That's what holds 'em back, for these chaps," remarked Kenton, looking proudly around upon his companions, "have fout the varmints afore to-day."

"Then we are doing the only thing possible, by remaining here until it becomes so late in the day that we shall not reach Rattlesnake Gulch until after dark, and then, instead of attempting to go through it, we will cross the river, I presume, though I am not aware of the decision that has been reached by Mr. Hastings."

"What will they suspect, then, if we stop here?" asked George Ashbridge.

"Now you've hit the trouble. When they find you don't arrive at some p'int where they've been looking for you, they'll know you're stopped. Some of their spies will sneak back through the woods to larn what it means--more'n likely

they've already done so," added Kenton, with another glance around him, "and then when they see you setting or standing or lolling around, without any partic'lar reason for your doing so, they'll understand the real cause powerful quick. As soon as they diskiver you don't mean to try the Rattlesnake Gulch route, they'll fix things to open onto you, and send as many as they can under."

"Then the problem, as I understand it," said the older Ashbridge, "is to act so as to convince the Indians that we intend to follow the path through the gulch where they mean to ambuscade us, and to keep up this impression until nightfall."

"You've hit it precisely, Mr. Ashbridge."

"But how is that to be done? I know of no one beside you to answer the question."

"Boone and me have been thinking powerful hard over the matter, and the best thing to be done, as I see it, is this: You know we left a canoe down by the clearing alongside the boat. I'll go back there and get it, that is, if it is still there. I'll try to keep so close in under the bank that the varmints won't know what I'm driving at. I'll manage to reach a p'int just this side of Rattlesnake Gulch early in the evening, and will wait for you. Then I'll hurry the women folks 'cross to the other side and make the rest of the journey to the block-house on the Ohio bank."

"You will have to make two trips with the canoe."

"Onless I can find another one that was hid under the bushes on this side not fur from the gulch. If that's there, I'll take one party over, and Boone, or some one else, tother."

"And the rest of us will have it out with the redskins," remarked Weber Hastings, with flashing eyes.

"You must start on agin," said Kenton, addressing Hastings, as the leader of the party in the absence of himself and Boone; "don't hurry, for as it is you've got too much time now on your hands. If you find you're getting too near Rattlesnake Gulch afore sun-down, you must have some sort of accident that'll give you an excuse for stopping for a time. That'll keep the varmints from 'specting anything."

"We ought to be able to arrange some accident," remarked George Ashbridge, with a smile, slyly pressing the hand of Agnes, standing beside him. "I'll fall over a log if necessary and break a leg."

"A better plan will be for Jethro to get shot accidentally like."

"Gorrynation, dat won't work!" exclaimed the negro, who did not let a word escape him; "de bestest way to fix dat will be to stuff me so full of victuals dat I won't be able to walk alone, and de rest ob yo' will hab to carry me slow like."

"Wal, time is passing; it won't do to stay here any longer; I leave you in charge of Weber; he can do as well as me or Boone."

The scout turned to move away, when Jethro Juggens laid his hand on his arm.

"See yar, Mr. Kenton, I's worried 'bout yo'," said the colored youth, with an anxious expression on his countenance.

"What's the cause of that?" asked the ranger, who, as already stated, held a kindly feeling toward the good-natured fellow.

"I's feard sumfin' will happen to yo'--feels it in my bones; I tink yo' oughter hab some one to look after yo' while yo's gone."

"Would you like to do it?"

"I tinks a good deal ob yo', Mr. Kenton, and I's willin' to take keer ob yo', and see dat yo' gets back all right."

Yielding to that waggish disposition which was a marked characteristic of Simon Kenton, sometimes under the most trying circumstances, the ranger said:

"Come on, younker, you shall take care of me."

And to the astonishment of the party, the two walked off side by side, and disappeared among the trees to the westward.

"We'll make this bargain," remarked Kenton, a few minutes after they were beyond sight of their friends: "You'll take care of me, and I'll do my best to take care of you."

"Dat hits me 'bout right."

"You'll do just what I tell you to do, and won't speak or move without my first telling you to do so."

"Dat's it; and yo' won't speak or move without fust askin' me; I'll be easy with yo', Mr. Kenton."

"But," gravely remarked the scout, "if each of us should happen to forbid t'other to stir or speak, we'd have to stand still forever. I'll act as boss at first, and then when I'm ready I'll give you your turn."

"Dat don't strike me ozactly right, but, as I jist obsarved, I'll be easy wid yo', Mr. Kenton, and let yo' start in," replied Jethro, somewhat puzzled at the off-hand manner in which the ranger took hold of the reins.

But the ranger never laid aside his caution and vigilance. He kept Jethro Juggens at his heels, forbidding him to speak a word, but to watch and listen to the utmost. The sun was in the horizon when, without any special incident, they arrived at the clearing, which all had left earlier in the day.

The first view brought a disappointment to Kenton. Nothing in the appearance of the settlers' cabin intimated that it had suffered any disturbance since the departure of the pioneers, and the unladen flatboat rested against the bank, just where it lay when the ranger cast a backward glance at it some hours before. The canoe, however, which was the magnet that drew him thither, was missing.

It was in as plain sight as the larger craft upon the departure of the party, but the keen vision was unable to discover the first outline of the bow or stern. Since it could not have removed itself, it followed that its disappearance was due to human agency.

"The varmints seem to be everywhere to-day," muttered the impatient ranger; "they've been there since we left, and more'n likely some of 'em are there now; but I've come after that canoe, and I'm going to have it, or my name isn't Sime Kenton."

"Shall I go wid yo' to see yo' don't get hurt?" inquired Jethro Juggens.

"No; stay where you be, and keep out of sight, and don't speak, nor stir, nor breathe, till I come back," replied the ranger, making ready to set out on one of the most perilous adventures of his eventful career.



CHAPTER V.

DARING AND DELICATE WORK.

It will be borne in mind that Kenton had approached the clearing from the east, or up the river, so that it was necessary to cross the open space to reach the spot where the silent flatboat rested against the bank, and near which he expected to find the canoe, so necessary in the plan he had formed for saving the settlers and their families.

To start across this clear space was too risky a proceeding for so guarded a woodsman as he. If any of his enemies were on the other side, where he meant to look for the smaller boat, the ranger was certain to be detected. His plan, therefore, was to pass around the clearing by entering the woods and moving to the rear. This he set out to do upon parting from Jethro Juggens.

He had not yet passed from sight among the trees when his steps were arrested by a vigorous "St! st!"

Well aware of the point whence it came, he turned impatiently around, took a couple of steps toward his dusky companion, and demanded in an undertone:

"What do you want?"

"Yo' tole me not to speak or move or breve; if I don't speak or move, can't you let up on de breving bus'ness? I'm afraid it's gwine to bodder me to shet off breving."

"All right, so you don't forget to stay right where you are till I come back."

Kenton resumed his advance, keeping out of sight in the woods, until he had skirted three sides of the clearing and approached the river again, opposite the point where he had first halted with his companion, and failed to see the canoe.

As yet it was an absolute mystery as to what had become of the lesser boat. A half-dozen causes might account for its disappearance. It might have been set adrift by one of the Shawanoes, or captured and paddled across the river, or destroyed, or--

At that moment the figure of a sinewy Shawanoe shot up to view, as if from a jumping-box. He was near the canoe, but between it and Kenton, and so close, indeed, that but for the fact that his face was turned toward the river, he must have discovered the white man.

Kenton's heart gave a quick throb, for something in the shoulders, the back of the head and contour of the body suggested that the Indian was his old enemy, Wa-on-mon, The Panther.

"If it's the varmint himself," thought Kenton, "him and me can just as well have it now, even if there are others of his people not fur off."

Either the Indian did not see that on the river for which he was searching, or the view was satisfactory, for he now turned and looked toward the cabin. This brought his face into full view, and the glimpse which the white man caught from a peep around the edge of the bark showed the warrior to be a stranger.

Kenton's position enabled him to see the log cabin as clearly as did the Shawanoe, but it was impossible to detect anything to justify his interest in the building. The situation had become so peculiar that all the sagacity of the ranger was insufficient for him to decide upon the best course to pursue.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed, during which the warrior, sitting on the ground, with his back against the tree, remained as motionless as did The Panther, when a prisoner the night before on the flatboat.

"I'm blessed if I don't believe he's asleep," mused Kenton.

Nothing is easier than for a person to pretend unconsciousness, but in this case the white man could think of no reason for the red man doing that.

"Shod with silence," as Simon Kenton or his brothers were when threading their way among the forest shadows, he stepped from behind the tree and began moving toward the long, graceful canoe, whose nose rested against the bank.

His course took him near the Shawanoe, and he paused while yet several paces to the rear. The hostile was at his mercy. He could drive the life from his body with lightning-like suddenness.

"That isn't the way for a Christian to fight," concluded Kenton, making such an abrupt change in his course that the distance between the two was increased.

The pose of the Indian was the natural one of a sleeper. His back being against the trunk of a tree, his knees were drawn up, with his arms resting upon them. His long rifle reclined against the same support as his body, his knife and tomahawk were in place in the girdle around the waist of his half-naked person, his head was sunk, with the chin resting on his chest, and his coarse, black hair dangling in front or behind his shoulders.

As he sat thus, his face was turned partly away from the canoe. Kenton's course took him past the sleeper, whose eyes, as he noted, were closed. All doubt of his being unconscious were removed, since no reason was conceivable for any pretence on his part.

Fortune held the promise of a rare and remarkable triumph. It has been said that the canoe rested so lightly against the banks that only a very slight force was required to release and let it float down stream.

If, therefore, the Shawanoe should awake and note its absence, he would conclude that it was due to the action of the current, a conclusion that could not be formulated in the event of his rifle keeping it company. Following the suggestion of such a theory, the Shawanoe, in seeking to recover the boat, would look down instead of up stream for it.

With these reasons, therefore, swaying him, Kenton put past him all inclination to trifle with a sleeping sentinel, and with only a momentary pause stepped forward until he laid his hand on the arching prow of the canoe, which was the same as the stern.

The long two-bladed paddle lay in the bottom, just as he himself had laid it after rowing ashore with The Panther. Everything was ready, but the hardest test of all now confronted the scout, who had performed his part thus far with a consummate skill that could not be surpassed.

Keeping his gaze upon his enemy, he dipped one end of the paddle in the water, and, with the same noiselessness as before, sent the boat up the stream and across the clear space at the foot of the clearing.

Something like assurance came to him when he drove it beneath the overhanging limbs and stepped ashore for Jethro Juggens. Knowing the precise spot where he had left him, he hurried thither without losing a second. But the fellow was gone.

"Sarved me right for bringing him along!" muttered the angry Kenton, "but what can have become of the younker?"

Well, indeed, might he ask the question.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RIGHT OF EMINENT DOMAIN.

It always seemed to Jethro Juggens that Kenton took a great deal more pains or used a greater degree of caution than was necessary when he undertook a task in which Indians were concerned. The density of the African's intellect did not blind him to the need of using caution or care in dealing with the treacherous people, but the excessive timidity of so active or powerful a man as the pioneer struck the dusky youth unfavorably.

"He tinks dat dat canoe am ober yender, somewhar near dat flatboat," mused Jethro, several minutes after the departure of the scout; "I has a little ob dat 'pinion myself. It wouldn't take more dan five minutes to run across to de oder side. Dat's what he oughter do, but instead ob dat he goes clear round de clearing frough de woods--de most obfoolishest ting dat he could do. He runs de risk ob steppin' on a rattlesnake and gettin' stung, or ob catchin' a limb under his chin and liftin' him offen his feet and droppin' him on his back wid a violence dat will shake all de teeth out ob his head."

The reader has learned the success of the plan adopted by Kenton.

"I don't feel perzactly right ober dis bus'ness," muttered Jethro, some minutes later. "I come along to help look after Mr. Kenton, and when de danger comes I let him slip away without me.

"He played de boss fust ober me, which am all right, 'cause dat am de way to fix dem tings, but it's 'bout time my turn come."

An expression of displeasure passed over the ebon countenance.

"He told me I musn't speak nor move nor breve. Dar ain't no sense in dat. Den he gib me percumission to breve. 'Sposen he hadn't done so, what would hab come of me? I couldn't hold my bref for free, four hours while he war gone. As for movin' and talkin', I hab already done dat, so dar ain't no use ob tinting any more 'bout it."

It was really a relief to reflect that he had violated all the commands laid upon him, for the fact ended the mental struggle which might have continued indefinitely. Inasmuch, therefore, as the bars were down, the disobedience grew or expanded.

Kenton, before parting with the servant, made sure he was in a place where there was little danger of discovery. The undergrowth was so dense that no one was likely to pass through it except in case of necessity, for work would be saved by making a much longer tour around. It was quite near the river, on the margin of the clearing, though far enough from the latter to prevent the fellow being seen if he used only ordinary prudence.

In open violation of his orders, Jethro made his way to the open space, putting forth no special precaution in doing so, and peered around. There was nothing in the appearance of the flatboat to interest him, nor could he note any change in the looks of the cabin.

"I don't feel dat dis matter am gwine right," he mused, returning to his former position; "I'se gettin' worried 'bout Mr. Kenton; it war understood dat I war to go 'long to help took care ob him, and dar's no knowing what trouble he'll get into."

Enough had passed between the two before their separation for Jethro to understand quite clearly the scheme he had in mind. He knew the ranger meant to take the longest way round to the other side of the clearing, throwing away, in the estimation of the African, a great deal of time and effort.

Fortunately, Jethro did not yield to his impulse to solve the matter by striding across the open space and making a hunt himself for the cause that was destined to play a most important part in the fortunes of the pioneers. Thus, a calamity, far-reaching in its consequences, was averted.

But a few minutes more of reflection induced the youth to do something hardly less dangerous or ill-advised.

He decided to follow after Kenton, taking the same course and making for the same destination.

"It'll s'prise him," thought Jethro, with a grin, "when I sort of whistle, and he looks round and sees me standin' dar smilin' at him. I'll doot!"

The youth was not sufficiently skilled in woodcraft to follow the ranger by means of his trail. Indeed, there was no need of his doing so, since the course was well known to him.

It was not without some misgiving that Jethro started upon his venture, for, despite his sophistries, he knew he was quite likely to incur the displeasure of Kenton, who had shown more than once a partiality toward him. If any disaster followed, the youth knew he would be blamed. It was his task, therefore, so to conduct himself that only the best results should flow from his violation of orders.

Jethro kept well back among the trees while circling around the clearing. The increased light on his right was all the guide he needed, even had he not gained a slight acquaintance with the section by his stirring experience earlier in the day.

Now and then he approached near enough to the cleared space to see the cabin, and thus took hardly a step without fully knowing where he was. At a point in a line with the cabin and the flatboat beyond, he came to a halt and glanced at his immediate surroundings.

"Dis is 'bout de spot whar I stood when I plugged dat Injun, and," added Jethro, with a chuckle, "whar I scooped de shirt dat dat Girty hung out to dry. Dey tried to make b'leve aftwards dat it war a flag ob trooce, meanin' dat dey wanted us all to stop shootin' while we had a talk wid each oder; dey fooled Kenton and de rest ob de folks, but dey didn't fool dis chile."

He found a fascination in studying the rear of the cabin, which George Ashbridge and his father had builded with so much care and labor.

"Lucky for me dat I wasn't wid' em," reflected Jethro, "for if I had been dey would hab sat 'round while I done all de work. Mighty strange dat eberybody tinks I'm good fur nuffin but work, but dey done forgot dat I knows how to shoot a gun as well as oder folks."

He stood for a minute or two in deep thought. He was revolving an important scheme in his mind.

"From de style dat Mr. Kenton moved wid when he luff me, it'll take him 'bout two days to git 'round to where he's gwine to find dat canoe, consequinchly dar ain't no use ob my being in such a hurry dat I'll broke my neck. I'll take a look inside dat house to make sure dat matters am all right."

And without the first hesitation he proceeded to carry out his extraordinary purpose.

He first approached the rear of the cabin, where, it will be remembered, were two windows on the lower floor and two on the upper. Each of these was too narrow to permit any man to force his body through. It was from one of the lower ones that Simon Girty had displayed the flag of truce, only to have it whipped off the ramrod and appropriated by the watchful Jethro, who, after wearing the garment for a time, laid it aside in order to escape the merriment his appearance caused for the others.

The dusky youth peeped through the opening at the interior, where the furniture and goods were tumbled about in great confusion. The view was unsatisfactory, and he passed around to the front, with the intention of entering by means of the door.

There are unnumbered incidents continually occurring, as they have occurred in the past, in which luck seems to play a most prominent part. We doubt whether any other explanation can be made of the extraordinary series of events in which Jethro Juggens now became involved, and which were destined to have a momentous bearing upon the fortunes of his friends, beyond even the calculations of the sagacious Boone and Kenton.

It is probable that had the colored youth presented himself in front of the door a half-hour sooner, he not only would have been instantly detected by some of the Shawanoes, but would have been slain. It is certain that had he delayed his movements for a less time than that named these consequences would have followed, for the reader has learned that before the warrior guarding the canoe fell asleep he showed a good deal of interest in the cabin in the clearing.

But Jethro's action was so timed (without any credit due to himself) that he escaped both perils, as well as that of being seen by Kenton, who, it will be remembered, gave considerable attention to the same quarter. It is hard to imagine what his feelings would have been, had the scout turned his gaze towards the building at the moment the colored youth came around the corner and walked to the front door.

"Dat's right," muttered Jethro, when he noted the latch-string hanging out; "dat makes it discumnecessary for me to kick in de door."

The leathern thong was smartly twitched, the door shoved gently inward, and, with a slightly quickened throbbing of the heart, Jethro Juggens stepped across the threshold.

Boxes of varying sizes were broken apart, or scattered here or there about the lower floor. Near the broad, spacious

fireplace were a number of pots, kettles, a crane, and irons, or other simple utensils, such as were used by our forefathers. The whole floor was so cluttered up that care was necessary in moving about the circumscribed space.

The sloping ladder leading to the upper floor was in place, but little, if anything, had been carried thither. The time, of course, was too brief to permit it.

Jethro peeped through the windows in turn, but discovered nothing to cause alarm. Then, it may be said, he did his first sensible act of the day; he pulled in the latch-string to prevent an enemy stealing upon him unawares.

A chuckle escaped the youngster when his eye rested upon a box containing what was left of the bread that had furnished the pioneers with their last meal. Leaning his rifle against the wall, he clutched a goodly-sized loaf of the dark, wholesome staff of life, and buried his big, perfect teeth in it, crunching crust and lighter portion as though they were the most tender and delicious fruits.

Stretching out upon the hard floor, which served him as well as a bed of eider-down, he sank into a deep, peaceful slumber, with no thought of the consequences that were certain to flow from this unprecedented action upon his part.

By this time the long summer day was drawing to a close. When darkness finally settled over forest and river, Jethro Juggens was still sleeping.



CHAPTER VII.

A QUESTION OF OWNERSHIP.

Simon Kenton proceeded on the principle of the greatest good to the greatest number.

When, with consummate delicacy and skill, he withdrew the canoe from under the very nose of the sleeping Shawanoe, and noiselessly impelled it across the open space under the screening undergrowth on the other side, he did not dare to call to Jethro Juggens to join him, through fear that the slight noise would rouse the Indian only a few yards off, sitting with his back against a tree and his head bowed on his chest.

Instead, he stepped ashore and picked his way to where he had left him, only to find, as has been shown, that the colored youth, in the face of positive instructions, had gone elsewhere.

"Sarves me right for bringing him with me," repeated the disgusted pioneer. "I might have knowed he'd do something of the kind."

In his impatience, he turned to leave the spot without further tarrying, but his partiality for the youth, whose skill in handling the rifle was so remarkable, caused him to linger a few moments and emit a couple of guarded signals.

Inasmuch as Jethro Juggens just then was inside the cabin making his evening meal, it is unnecessary to say that Kenton's effort was without success.

"If he did hear me he wouldn't know what it meant, and if he did know what it meant he'd yell back his answer loud enough to be heard at the block-house--so I'll let him look out for himself."

Before resuming his place in the canoe the ranger stole to a point near the edge of the clearing, where, by cautiously parting the undergrowth and peering out, he could look across to the flatboat and catch the outlines of the sleeping Shawanoe.

The pioneer was just in time to witness an entertaining scene.

The providential slumber of the warrior was what in ordinary parlance may be described as a "cat nap," inasmuch as it came to an end, of its own accord, a moment after Kenton took his last peep at him.

The Shawanoe raised his chin, and then in the most natural manner in the world, rubbed his eyes by gouging his forefingers into them, just as all boys and girls do when their senses are coming back to them. Next, he reached out his hand and brought his rifle in front, doing so while in the act of rising on his feet. Then he started, became rigid, and stared at the river as though doubting his own vision.

The canoe, which was there only a short time before, was gone.

After all, it would seem he should have felt no great astonishment, for, resting so lightly against the bank, it was not to be wondered at that it worked loose and floated off.

The painted face was turned inquiringly in the direction of Kenton, as though a glimmering of the truth had entered the brain of the red man, but clearly that was impossible, and he moved along the bank, speedily disappearing, in his search for the missing craft.

"He knows about how long he has slept," mused the smiling Kenton, "and he knows the boat can't have drifted far. When he goes fur 'nough to find it, and don't find it, he'll come back there again; he'll examine the ground, and will diskiver my footprints; he won't know whether the moccasins belong to a white man or one of the varmints, but he will get an idee of why the thing didn't float down instead of up stream. Wal," muttered the ranger, "it'll take sharper eyes than his to trail a canoe through the water, and I don't think he'll git this ere craft ag'in in a hurry."

While those thoughts were in the mind of Kenton, he had re-entered the boat again and taken up the broad ashen paddle.

The reader will understand the difficult task that was before him. From the clearing to Rattlesnake Gulch was all if not more than two miles. It was his work to reach the latter point by the time that night was fully come.

Ordinarily this would have been so easy that it could not be considered in the nature of work, but above all things it must be accomplished without the knowledge of the Shawanoes, who, it may be said, were on every hand. A sight of the ranger stealing his way up stream, and the halt of the pioneers before reaching the place fixed upon for the

ambuscade, could not fail to apprise the Indians that their intended victims had no intention of walking into the trap set for them.

Since the war party would never knowingly permit the settlers to escape them, an attack was certain to follow; and though the veteran rangers, under the leadership of Boone and Kenton, were confident of beating them off, yet more or less casualties were certain to follow an attack. Some of the helpless ones would suffer; probably several would be killed or carried off, which meant the same thing.

To avert these woful afflictions was the cause of the extraordinary precautions on the part of Boone and Kenton, especially the latter.

Enough has been said to show that the problem Simon Kenton had set out to solve was anything but a simple one.

The arms which swayed the paddle, however, were sturdy and muscular, and could keep to the task for hours without sensible fatigue. Kenton did not mind a simple obstruction of that nature, and, indeed, would have been glad because of the curtain thus offered if it had continued all the way.

Once more and again was the frail craft impelled beneath the limbs, its progress ceasing almost at the moment the paddle was withdrawn from the water.

During these brief intervals of subsidence, the ranger listened intently for such sounds as could tell him of the whereabouts of his enemies. He knew, as may be said, that they were everywhere, and he was liable to collide with them at the most unexpected moments. The pioneers or their escort were subjected to the most eagle-eyed vigilance.

For a furlong the advance continued in this laborious fashion. Then Kenton made a longer pause than usual, for he had reached a point where it was necessary to drive the canoe across a space fully one hundred feet in width, and where there was nothing that could serve to the slightest extent as a screen.

The ranger debated with himself as to the best course to pursue.

"I don't b'leve there's any varmint on the watch there," was the conclusion of Kenton; "the Shawanoes know where the women folks and the boys are, and that's the place that they're watching--so here goes."

Again the ashen paddle was dipped in the clear current, but at the very moment of imparting the powerful impulse to it, the ranger checked himself with the suddenness of lightning.

From a point apparently directly across the river came the same signal that had disturbed him and Boone earlier in the afternoon. The faint cawing of a crow, as if calling from the upper branches of a tree to his mate, floated across the Ohio to the startled ears of the listening Kenton.

"Well, I'm blessed!" he muttered, "if crows ain't thicker in Kaintuck than I ever knowed 'em afore at this season of the year."

This signal, which the man did not doubt for a moment came from the throat of one of the Shawanoe spies, settled the question which he had been debating with himself.

Forcing the nose of the canoe against the bank, he stepped ashore. Before drawing it entirely forth, however, he decided to walk the short distance through the woods, so as to select the most favorable course to follow.

He had not far to go, but the simple act was marked by all the thoroughness with which he did everything relating to his life profession.

While the wood, because of the abundance of undergrowth, was not what he desired, yet he was confident of working his way through it and back to the water again without injuring the canoe. He set out to do so, returning to the starting-point at the end of fifteen or twenty minutes.

And there a surprise awaited him. The boat was gone!

If he had withdrawn it with incredible deftness from under the closed eyes of the Shawanoe, that same individual (for it must be he) had displayed hardly less cleverness in snatching it from his grasp.

Kenton lost no time in speculating over the matter, but hurried swiftly and noiselessly along the bank in quest of the daring thief. He came upon him, only a few rods distant, making his way with great care and skill along the bank, as though he had no fear of any dispute over the ownership of the craft, as, indeed, he did not; for, catching sight of the white man at the same instant the latter saw him, he leaped ashore, and, knife in hand, attacked him with the impetuous fury of a jungle tiger.

Ten minutes later, when Simon Kenton resumed possession of the canoe, he muttered, with grim significance:

"Sometimes a varmint makes a mistake; that air varmint made one, but he'll never make another, 'cause when the chance comes he won't be there!"



CHAPTER VIII.

BY THE WAY.

Meanwhile, the families of the settlers and their escorts were not idle.

Turned back, when on the threshold as it were of success, they bore their hard lot with the fortitude and uncomplaining courage which was one of the most marked characteristics of the pioneers of the West.

They had entered the "promised land," as may be said, for all of the Ashbridges and Altmans had passed through the door of the cabin in the clearing; they had deposited their household goods and worldly possessions in the structure erected with so much care and labor; then, being warned of the imminent peril of staying, had set out for the block-house, ten miles distant, there to remain until it was safe for them to venture once more into the wilderness.

Daniel Boone was in advance of the company, scouting in the neighborhood of Rattlesnake Gulch, for it was indispensable that he should keep watch of the main war party of Shawanoes there, and learn, as far as possible, their intentions towards the whites.

Kenton had turned back to the clearing in quest of the canoe with which he hoped to carry the families across the Ohio during the favoring darkness of the night without discovery by the dusky enemies. We left him pushing his way up stream, after his deadly encounter with the Shawanoe who had withdrawn the craft from where it was left by the ranger during his temporary absence.

It may be said, that every man and woman, threading their way through the wilderness to the block-house, understood the scheme which it was hoped could be carried through to completion, and each, of course, was eager to lend his aid to its success.

Within ten minutes, therefore, of the departure of Kenton and Jethro Juggens, those whom they left behind took up the journey eastward--that is, toward dreaded Rattlesnake Gulch, which intervened between them and the post under the command of Captain Bushwick.

The line of march was simple. Weber Hastings acted as guide, or rather avant-courier, since all knew the route that was to be followed. He kept a hundred yards, or so, in advance of the company, which timed their gait to his, so that the intervening space was neither increased nor diminished.

A second scout kept pace with his chief, but so far removed to the right, and deeper in the forest, that only rarely did they catch sight of each other. There were no guards on the left or at the rear, the two named being considered sufficient to give timely notice of the approach of danger.

There was no attempt at anything like military order on the part of the others. The pioneer scouts were impatient of discipline, preferring to "fight fire with fire"--that is, to combat the Indian by methods peculiar to the Indians themselves.

Accordingly, the rest of the rangers straggled along, inclosing, so far as possible, the members of the families whom they hoped to deliver from their great peril. Mr. Ashbridge and his wife sauntered in front of their old friends, with little Mabel most of the time between them and holding a hand of each. Her disposition, however, to dart aside and pluck every brilliant flower that flashed among the green vegetation could not be restrained at all times, and was the cause of much anxiety on the part of her parents.

Next in order walked Mr. Altman and his wife, while of Agnes, the daughter, and George, it may be said they brought up the rear.

"I wonder," said Agnes, in her low, sweet voice, "whether, when we reach the block-house, we shall be safe, or whether we shall have to keep on going east until we arrive at our old home in Virginia before we can feel beyond the power of these dreadful red men."

"Why do you express that doubt, when it has been a good many years since the people in our old homes have suffered from the Indians?"

"Not so long ago that I cannot remember it."

"But don't forget that you are seventeen years old--"

"Several months more, please to remember, sir."

"And you can remember, I suppose, a dozen years; that is a good while. But it is not so bad as all that. Kenton explained matters yesterday when I was talking with him. There is what is called a flurry among the Indians, and as long as it lasts we must keep under the wing of some block-house or in some settlement."

"But how long is it to last?"

"There is only One who can answer that question. It may be in a few weeks, or months, or possibly a year or two. You know that such expeditions as Crawford's and St. Clair's make matters worse than before."

"Why?"

"Colonel Crawford, as you remember, was not only defeated, but he was made prisoner and burned to death at the stake. Then President Washington sent General St. Clair, and the combined tribes smote him hip and thigh. All this makes the Indians bolder and more open in their hostility, until I have no doubt that hundreds of them believe they are strong enough to drive every white man out of Ohio and Kentucky."

"Why doesn't General Washington send some one who knows how to fight the Indians, and with men enough to whip them?"

"St. Clair had enough men to whip the enemy, but the general didn't know how to handle them when he got into the Indian country. You have learned of the dreadful mistake that Braddock and his regulars made more than thirty years ago, during the French and Indian war, when all of the British soldiers would have been killed if it had not been for Washington and his Virginians."

"I should think General Washington himself would take command of a force. I know he would end all this trouble," added Agnes, with a glow of pride in the illustrious Father of his Country.

"I have no doubt he would if he wasn't President; but he has to stay in Philadelphia and make the other officers do their duty. But if he can't come himself, he knows enough now to send the right men. The next battle will see the Indians so badly whipped that they will stay so for many, many years to come."

"And then?"

"Hundreds and thousands of people will come from the East and settle in the West. The land will be cleared off and planted; cities and towns will spring up, and that clearing of ours, with the other acres we shall add, will make you and I wealthy, Agnes."

"It may make you wealthy, George; but how can it help me?"

He gave the dainty hand a warmer pressure than before and lowered his voice, so that only the shell-like ear, so close to his own, could catch his words.

"If it benefits me it must benefit you; for, God willing, long before that time we shall be one. Am I wrong in that hope, dearest?"

"George," said Agnes, when they had walked a little further in silence, "there is one prospect which causes me some discomfort."

"And what is that?"

"Of all our people being cooped up in the block-house for weeks, and perhaps months, until the trouble with the Indians is over. We stopped there the other day when we were coming down the river. It is a large, roomy structure, but there is nothing beside the single building. A good many men make their homes there at different times, and though they are all as kind as they can be, it will be anything but pleasant when your folks and ours are added to them."

"I don't wonder that you feel thus. The same thought has occurred to me and Kenton, and I guess every one else. Some other arrangement will have to be made. Captain Bushwick will have several strong cabins put up, if it looks as though you will have to stay more than a few days, or he may do better than that."

"How?"

"Send us all to Boonesboro. That's where the great Daniel Boone, that's helping us just now, makes his home. It was named for him. It is a regular stockade, with a number of cabins inside, and abundant room for twenty families or more."

"How far off is it?"

"I am not sure, but less than fifty miles."

"Why not go there at once, without stopping at the block-house?"

"The trouble is that, if it would be safe to make the journey there now, it would be just as safe to stay in our own house at the clearing. The route leads through one of the most dangerous regions in Kentucky."

"If that is the case, how can we reach it from the block-house?"

"It will have to be done by awaiting some favorable chance; that chance, as you know, isn't now, but it may come in a short time. Kenton or Boone, or some of their men, will be quick to learn it."

Agnes was about to reply, when one of the rangers, who had wandered somewhat ahead or to one side, emitted a cry that must have penetrated a goodly part of a mile. His terrified friends stopped short, grasped their rifles more tightly, and stared wonderingly at the man, who was acting like a crazy person.

He had flung his gun aside, and caught up a heavy stick, with which he was threshing something on the ground.

It required hardly a second glance from those who ran toward him to recognize the writhing object as an immense rattlesnake. The man seemed to be in a frenzy, and continued belaboring the reptile even after all saw it was as dead as dead could be.

"What's the use, Jim?" called Hastings, who had hastened to return upon hearing his wild shout; "he's gone under; did he bite you?"

"Yes," replied the other, in a husky voice staggering backward and sinking to the ground; "he bit me twice before I seed him; I'm done for."



CHAPTER IX.

THE "ACCIDENT."

It would seem that the pioneers had more than enough to occupy their minds on this eventful journey through the woods, without coming in contact with such a frightful thing as a rattlesnake, but here was one of the hardy members of the escort apparently stricken unto death by the huge reptile that he had just slain.

By the time the poor fellow had collapsed and fallen to the earth, almost the entire party were gathered around him. That section of the Union, even in those early days, was not wholly lacking in whiskey. There may not have been a great deal of it manufactured in the territory, but those who made their homes in that favored land did not often suffer for lack of it.

Flasks there were in plenty, but it was noticeable that not one of the rangers who had come from the fort made haste to bring forth a supply and place it at the lips of their collapsed companion.

It was Mr. Altman who was quick to kneel beside the man and apply the vessel to his mouth, as he raised him to a sitting position.

"Don't you remember, George," said Agnes, "that Mr. Kenton said we must meet with some accident that would prevent our reaching Rattlesnake Gulch until night was fully come?"

"I do."

"Well, that's the accident we have met."

A light flashed upon young Ashbridge. The amused expression on the faces of the escort was explained. James Deane had not been harmed by the rattlesnake which he had pounded to death. As is said, all this was done for effect.

The most real thing about the business was that Jim was procuring a prodigious supply of excellent whiskey without any expense to himself, and without any cause existing for such an over-dose.

Seeing the actual danger that threatened their friend, Hastings touched the shoulder of Mr. Altman, who looked up inquiringly at him.

"I wouldn't give him any more."

"It will be safer to fill him up with it, so as to counteract the poison."

"Yesh--fill him up," added Jim, thickly, reaching out his hand vaguely for the bottle; "fill him up--coun'act--hic--p'son--fill him up so he runs over."

"I think, Tom, he's running over now," suggested Mr. Ashbridge, who understood matters.

The words and the expressions on the countenances of the others caused the truth to flash upon the good Samaritan. He rose to his feet with a disgusted look. Then he shook his glass flask, and held it up between him and the sunlight.

"If I had suspected, he shouldn't have had a drop; he has drank enough to make three men drunk."

"And he's as drunk as three men can get," replied Ashbridge.

"Fetch on your rattler--hic," stuttered Jim, who was about to add some more remarks when he gave it up and toppled over on the ground, deferring all such observations to a more convenient season.

It assumed an almost grotesque phase, and sounds incredible when it is stated that this pretended rattlesnake bite was solely for the purpose of deceiving the members of the Shawanoe war party that were swarming through the woods, yet not only was such the fact, but the scheme, singular as it was, met the approval of Daniel Boone and Simon Kenton, whose judgment in such matters all will admit should be accepted as final.

Meanwhile, Hastings was anxiously consulting with Ashbridge, Altman, and his own men.

The situation was grave to the last degree, and the crisis could not be far off.

"We don't need to wait here more'n half an hour," said he, "and may be not that long; then, when we start, night'll be fully here afore we reach the gulch."

"And the Indians have been deceived as to our purpose?" was the inquiring remark of Mr. Ashbridge.

"There's no sartinty of that, but it looks that way."

"But the most alarming feature of this business, as it seems to me," continued the pioneer, "is this: the time must soon come when these Shawanoes will learn we do not mean to pass through that valley of death."

Hastings nodded his head. He had thought of all this, as well as of the complications that were likely to follow.

"How long after we make our pause will they suspect the truth?"

"Inside of ten minutes; but," added the ranger, "they may think we've decided to wait till morning afore we pass through."

"Is that probable?" asked young Ashbridge.

"No; there isn't one chance in a thousand that they'll think anything of the kind, and yet there is that one chance."

Mr. Ashbridge again took up the exchange of views with the leader of the scouts, the others listening with the closest attention and interest.

"Suppose the Shawanoes believe we have merely postponed our passage through the gulch until morning, and that we are certain to attempt it then--what will they do?"

"Wait where they are till daylight, or for a week, if they were sure the thing would be tried; but," was the significant remark of Hastings, "don't build any hopes on any such idea as that."

"I am sure it would be foolish to do so, but we are getting down to bed-rock facts now. The Indians must soon learn that we have no intention of walking into their trap. What they will then do is not clear to you."

"No; but I don't think they'll make an attack till the night is purty well nigh gone. They always spend a good deal of time in figgering and man[oe]juverin' round. It's that time between the beginning of darkness and sun-up that's got to be used by us for the benefit of your folks, or it will not be used at all."

"Mr. Kenton seems to have taken wise steps, as he always does under such circumstances, for the safety of our families. He counts upon securing that canoe which was left with the flatboat, and has hope of finding another near the gulch. Suppose he fails in both instances--what then?"

"Only Kenton himself can answer that question; I believe he's as likely to fail as to win, but he'll soon be on hand; he won't keep us waiting long. Boone will be purty sure to jine us, and atween' em they'll do the right thing."

"There can be no doubt of that, but, if you will pardon me, Mr. Hastings, it seems to me that there is something for us to do. My solicitude for the dear ones around us, who cannot help themselves, must excuse my presumption."

"It's no presumption, sir; we are all glad to hear what you have to say."

"Accidents are liable to occur at any time, even though some of them are bogus," qualified Ashbridge, with a glance at the unconscious figure of Jim Deane a few rods away. "Boone and Kenton have placed themselves in great peril. One of them may be killed; it is impossible that both will fall. We are fortunate in having such good friends as you to stand by us, but the wisest man is he who provides, as far as he can, for every contingency. Suppose we see nothing of Boone or Kenton again?"

"I can't think such a thing as both of 'em going under at the same time can happen. One of 'em is sartin to turn up purty soon."

"But Kenton may fail to bring the canoe, upon which so much depends. Now, to come down to the point, when we halt near the gulch will our position be such that we can make a good defence against an attack?"

"I don't know," was the frank reply of the ranger; "we've only one man with us who knows all about Rattlesnake Gulch, and the ins and outs of the place."

"Who is that man?"

For reply, Hastings pointed to Jim Deane, sunk in a helpless stupor.

"Humph!" remarked the pioneer, "he is of no more account than a dead man, and won't be for some hours to come."

CHAPTER X.

AT RATTLESNAKE GULCH.

By this time night was closing over forest and river. The sun had set, and a strong west wind blew steadily up stream. Masses of clouds were drifting across the sky, and when the moon should appear its light would be treacherous and uncertain.

"We must wait no longer," said Hastings, "for we shall run the risk of an attack where we are, and that would be almost as bad as an ambush."

"True," remarked Altman, with a shudder, as he glanced around them, "we are without any protection at all in this open ground. We must hit upon a better place than this in which to make our halt."

The leader nodded toward two of his men, who advanced to where the sleeping Jim lay on the ground, as helpless and inanimate as a log. Each taking him by a shoulder lifted him to his feet. Then they let go, and he dropped like a bundle of rags.

He was yanked up again, shaken, slapped, and vigorously told to stand up.

"I'm all right," mumbled Jim, "fetch on (hic) your rattler; let 'em bite--who cares? Whiskey'll cure him--fetch on your whiskey."

After some more heroic treatment, the man was finally roused to that degree that he was able to wobble forward, partly supported by his two friends, one of whom took charge of his gun.

"If I had known nothing was the matter with him," said the disgusted Mr. Altman, "he wouldn't have gotten a drop from me. The only man who can give us the information we need might just as well be dead."

The company advanced much in the same fashion as earlier in the day, except that still greater precaution was observed. The females were kept near the centre and the husbands close to them, so that there was a rude resemblance to a hollow square.

Hastings took the lead, as he always did in the absence of Kenton and Boone, and had not gone far when he became aware that he was following a well-marked path. A companion on his right and another on his left had noted something of the kind some minutes before. The three paths, not to mention others, converged and became one a little further on.

These, as had been intimated, were the trails made by wild animals on their way to the salt lick lying some distance on the other side of Rattlesnake Gulch. The pioneers were now quite close to that ill-omened spot, and the burden of the expedition rested wholly upon the shoulders of Weber Hastings, who maintained a position never less than fifty feet in advance of his nearest companion.

Hastings caught a faint, momentary rustling directly in front of him. He instantly stopped and listened. It sounded the next moment further to the right. He knew it made by one of the Shawanoes, who, with all their skill, could not advance in perfect silence amid such gloom any more than could the white man.

Suddenly he detected a different sound. It was as if something was gliding over the leaves, and was accompanied by a delicate whirring noise, which Hastings recognized on the instant, for many a time and oft he had heard it before.

Those of our readers who have caught the warning of the rattlesnake can make no mistake when they hear it a second time.

Another of those baleful reptiles was gliding across the path of the pioneers, as if to apprise them of the appropriateness of the name of the gulch, which was now near at hand.

The greatest annoying hindrance in this stealthy groping among the trees was the condition of Jim Deane, who had taken a prodigious over-dose of the universal remedy for the rattlesnake's venom. When in his sober senses, he was one of the bravest and most skilful scouts in the west, and was held in special high esteem by Capt. Bushwick, for whom he had performed arduous and perilous service.

But, naturally enough, he was now another person, the opposite of himself. In order to leave their escort free to attend to their delicate task, George Ashbridge and his father took charge of Jim, and, in assuming the contract, they found it was all they could do to "deliver the goods."

Deane rallied after several stumbles, and managed to walk with less help from the father and son, though he swayed from side to side and leaned heavily upon both. He continued muttering and talking, partly to himself and partly to those who were aiding him in locomotion.

"Going to the gulch--all right," he mumbled, when they were quite near their destination, "want to go into the fort; that's the place for you folks."

The scout stopped as suddenly as if he had run against the trunk of a tree. Despite his broken utterance, a vague sense of his situation was gradually forcing itself upon him.

He realized, in a dim but increasingly distinct way, the necessity of throwing off the spell which muddled his brain. As he repeated and renewed the effort, he gained more strength.

Holding himself somewhat unsteadily, he looked around in the gloom at his elder escort, and demanded:

"Where going?"

"We are trying to reach the block-house, but it's a long way off. We are now close to Rattlesnake Gulch."

"That's all right," repeated Deane, wobbling forward again; "going to the fort--our fort."

Jim Deane stopped abruptly as before, and blinked and started in the vain effort to penetrate the gloom in which all were enveloped. His companions noted that he was now able to maintain the erect position without any help from them.

"Can't you get a candle?" he asked, his brain still muddled, "too dark to see; get candle, and I'll show you the fort."

The company was now so near Rattlesnake Gulch that Weber Hastings, the guide, decided it would not do to approach any closer. They must await the coming of Kenton before doing anything further.

Gradually, or with less difficulty than would be suspected, the ranger brought all his men together, or they gathered around the families whom they had set out to escort to the block-house. Although they could hardly see each other's forms in the darkness, a few minutes sufficed to prove none were missing. All were there, but, ah! for how long should this be said of them? "We are so near Rattlesnake Gulch," explained Hastings, "that if we go a hundred yards further, we'll walk straight into the ambush the varmints have set for us."

"What is to be done?" asked Mr. Altman, in a guarded undertone.

"We'll move a little further down the slope to the edge of the river, and wait for Kenton or Boone; one of them will be here purty soon."

Mr. Ashbridge now made known what Jim Deane had declared in his broken way. Before he could be questioned, the fellow, who was still nearer sobriety, said:

"Boys, you think I don't know what I'm saying; I'm not as sober as I oughter be, but I give it to you straight; you've made a big mistake, and I'll prove it to you."



CHAPTER XI.

WATCHING AND WAITING.

Deane had rapidly regained control of his senses during the past few minutes. The open air, the continued action of his body and the growing consciousness of the imminent peril of the company, combined to give him mastery over the insidious enemy that he had taken into his mouth to steal away his brains.

By this time, too, his friends were convinced that he was not talking at random, and that when he spoke of the "fort" near at hand he had ground for his words.

"Wal, Jim," remarked Hastings, in a low voice, as the party gathered closely around the fellow in the gloom; "I guess you understand matters better than you did a few minutes ago. Take the lead and we'll follow, but don't forget that a feller's eyes ain't of much use to him just now."

"I, I think I've got my bearings; the river off here to the left is how fur away?"

"Something like a hundred yards--a little more I reckon."

"That's what I thought, and Rattlesnake Gulch is right ahead. Wal, in a straight line down the slope toward the river is a lot of limbs, brush and stones that we got together some months ago, when the varmints cornered us, or wiped us nearly all out. If we're going to make a halt, that's the place for us."

"Go ahead, then, for it won't be long afore the varmints will notice we have stopped."

The ranger--he paddled no longer--took charge of matters with the assurance of one who feels himself master of the situation. As they advanced, the ground inclined downward to the river. The wood was quite open, but considerable undergrowth appeared, through which it was impossible even for the rangers to make their way in the darkness without some rustling, which was almost certain to betray their movements to the Indians.

Fortunately, however, they had not far to go to their destination. Hastings, who was but a pace or two behind Deane, became conscious at the end of a few minutes that he had stopped.

"Here we are," whispered the guide; "pass the word back for 'em to look out they don't stumble, for things are rough round here."

Not only did the leader of the company notify his own men, who were instant to understand the situation, but they assisted the Ashbridges and Altmans into the exceedingly rude fortification. The utmost care was used, but, in spite of all, there were several stumbles, and more than one hasty exclamation at the accident.

When matters became clear to all, as they soon did, it was learned that they were now upon the spot where Hastings and his companions made their last stand when attacked by The Panther and his Shawanoes, some months before. Foreseeing the desperate struggle at hand, the scouts had seized the brief time at their command to throw up some intrenchments.

An ash that had been splintered by lightning gave much help, and laid the foundation, as may be said, of the fortification. The trunk had been wrenched off a dozen feet above ground, leaving the stump, with its hundreds of needle-like points, projecting upward. The fragments of several large limbs were of help, and a prostrate tree, some yards away, was of incalculable benefit, even though the trunk was less than a foot in diameter.

Then there were a few boulders and large stones scattered around. Ordinarily, a dozen men would hesitate to try to move them, but, with the energy of desperation, these had been tumbled into place, and served their part well.

The conclusion of all this haste and effort to throw up a protection around themselves was, that a very primitive and broken fortification extended in an irregular circle from the splintered tree, right and left, until it enclosed a space thirty feet across at its largest diameter. It was not a complete circle, however, but formed three-fourths of one. The side toward the river was left open, so as to preserve the means of retreat if the worst came.

The worst did come, as has been intimated, and through this opening the few defenders that were left, after the resistless assault of The Panther and his warriors, dashed in the supreme effort to save their lives. Such is an imperfect description of the "fort" into which the pioneers were conducted, when the time arrived for them to essay no further concealment of their intention to leave Rattlesnake Gulch wholly to itself.

Fifteen or twenty minutes were used by the fugitives, as they may be considered, in "locating" themselves. In other

words, they improved the time in learning, so far as possible, their immediate surroundings, and the best means of defence against the Shawanoes, that were certain to leave them but a short time to themselves.

Above all things, it was necessary that Hastings and his men should know this, and, with the help of Deane, the knowledge was soon acquired. Finally, Hastings stationed his men in their proper positions, and then conducted the others to a spot near the splintered ash. He made sure that all were near him, and that each heard every word he spoke, though he guarded the utterances with a care that would have shut them from a listening Shawanoe a rod away.

"You understand, my friends, that this place is only a makeshift; we're powerful lucky that Jim got sober in time to find it for us. This is the safest spot, and here the women and children will stay till we leave."

"And when is that likely to be?" asked Mr. Altman.

"I can't say till Kenton gets back; he'll be here afore long."

"Suppose anything happens to him and Boone?" suggested Mr. Ashbridge.

"Something like that has been said afore; Boone and Kenton are always having something happen to them, but that both of 'em should slip up and not show themselves agin--why, that sort of thing can't be."

"It might take place," remarked young Ashbridge, whose faith in the two great pioneers equaled that of Hastings, "but it is so unlikely that it isn't worth considering it. As I understand it, we have to wait here until Kenton comes back."

"You've hit it, younker, to a dot. You folks can see that a chap's eyes ain't of much account, so you must all make the best use of your ears."

"I can see a little," said Agnes Altman, "and I shall believe that our eyes are almost as likely as our ears to help us."

"You've got a wise head on your shoulders," said the ranger, admiringly. "About all that you folks need to remember is, that the varmints are all around us, and where there's one of 'em, he's sure to try some trick. Look out for him."

"Surely, Mr. Hastings, you don't mean that Mr. Altman and my son shall all stay in this spot, merely to keep company with our families, when every man is needed to guard the approaches to this enclosure."

"Wal, I'll own that was my idea, but we can turn you to use if you say so."

"We do say so, most decidedly," Mr. Altman was quick to remark.

"Come with me."

Thereupon, the leader of the rangers gave Mr. Altman, Ashbridge, and the son their several stations. Each had his rifle, and was simply to do his utmost to guard against the insidious approach of the Shawanoes, who, if they had not already located them, were certain to do so very soon.

The instructions of Hastings to his men was, that the moment they discovered an Indian they should wait only long enough to make sure of no mistake, and then shoot to kill.

"Every varmint counts at a time like this," he said, significantly, "and if any one is lucky enough to drop The Panther, it'll be worth a dozen warriors."

When all the male members were placed, they were crouching behind boulders, limbs, and ridges of dirt in the irregular three-quarter circle, and separated from each other by a space varying from two yards to a distance twice as great.

Whether intentional or otherwise, Hastings stationed George Ashbridge immediately on the left of Agnes Altman, while her mother, Mrs. Ashbridge, and Mabel were near at hand. The lovers were so close, indeed, that there was little risk in their exchanging a whispered word or two at intervals. When either raised his or her head, the other could catch the faint outlines of the loved one.

While the temporary refuge was a most fortunate thing for the distressed fugitives, it had several features which caused uneasiness to Hastings and his experienced rangers. Although the moon soon appeared in the sky, its light was treacherous and uncertain, because of the skurrying clouds. Sometimes an object would be visible for a number of rods on the river, and then it took a pair of keen eyes to identify a canoe at half that distance.

More serious, however, than all was the west wind. This blew steadily, and with considerable force, directly upon the river. It sighed among the trees, and so stirred the branches that the rustling was continuous. Thus it afforded a diversion that was wholly in favor of the Indians, for, without taking any special precaution, they could approach as near as they chose to the fortification, with little, if any, fear of detection.

That they would be quick to turn this to account was certain.

Hastings had not forgotten to impress his friends with the fact that they were awaiting the coming of Simon Kenton, and incidentally of Daniel Boone. Each, when he did appear, would do so with the noiselessness of The Panther himself, and too great care could not be taken to guard against mistaking them for enemies.

There really was little, if any, danger of this, since all understood the situation, and would run no risk of harming their friends. Furthermore, Kenton and Boone were sure to give timely notice of their coming by means of signals which every one of the rangers would understand.

The sleep of most of the men had been broken and scant during the past twenty-four hours, but the situation was so strained that there was no danger of any one falling asleep until the peril passed. If any one thing was certain, it was that the watch within that rough circle would be unremitting and vigilant while it lasted.

Mabel Ashbridge laid her head on the lap of her mother, who like Mrs. Altman, sat with her back against the splintered ash, and with little appreciation of the fearful shadow that rested upon all, soon sank into unconsciousness. The mothers were so nervous and unstrung that though they occasionally shut their eyes, the slumber was fitful and brief.

But among all the party there was none more alert than Agnes Altman. She had not yet quite forgiven herself for her weakness in showing mercy to the imprisoned Panther the night before, when he came within a hair of slaying her beloved George Ashbridge, and, without hinting her intention to any one, she determined that, with the help of heaven, she would do something to erase that criminal imprudence, as she viewed it, on her part.

It may have been this resolution, supplemented by her own consummate faculties of sight and vision, or, more properly, it was both, that brought to her a knowledge of peril before it was suspected by any one of the rangers, or even by George Ashbridge, who, as may be said, was at her elbow.

Agnes was seated on the leaves, the same as her mother, and with her back resting against a boulder, which rose a few inches above her head. In this posture she closed her eyes. They could be of no use to her, and by shutting them she was able to concentrate her faculties into the single one of listening; upon that alone she now placed her dependence.

And seated thus, and listening with absorbing intensity, she speedily became aware of a startling fact; some one was directly on the other side of the boulder, and separated by no more than three feet from her.

That that some one was a Shawanoe Indian was as certain as that her name was Agnes Altman.

CHAPTER XII.

CARRYING THE WAR INTO AFRICA.

Jethro Juggens, the brawny servant of Mr. Altman, the dusky youth with the strength of a Hercules, the intellect of a child, or a skill in the use of the rifle hardly second to that of Kenton and Boone, has a singular but momentous part to play in the incidents that follow. The reader must, therefore, bear with us when now and then we turn aside from the graver and more tragical sweep of incidents to follow the doings and the fortunes and misfortunes of the one who rendered such signal service to his friends, already related in "Shod with Silence."

Simon Kenton denounced himself times without number for bringing Jethro with him when he set out to recover the canoe that had been left at the clearing; and yet that act, ill-advised as it seemed, changed the whole course of events that followed quick and fast, and became the foundation of one of the most remarkable legends connected with the romantic Ohio and the stirring events that marked the history of the settlement of Ohio and Kentucky.

With no thought of the mischief he was likely to cause, Jethro Juggens, as the reader has learned, circled part way round the cabin in the clearing, passed through the door, drew in the latch-string, devoured nearly all of the bread that was left behind, and then lay down and went to sleep.

He had managed to gain so much slumber during the past twenty-four hours that he was in need of nothing of the kind. As a consequence, he remained unconscious less than an hour, when he opened his eyes, as fully awake as he ever was in all his life.

The room was in darkness, and he was so confused that for a brief spell he was at a loss to know where he was. Rising to a sitting position, he rubbed his eyes and stared around in the gloom.

"Am dis de flatboat, and am I in de cellar ob it?" he asked himself.

But a moment's reflection recalled what had taken place.

"Gracious! I wonder if anyting hab happened to Mr. Kenton?" he exclaimed, starting to his feet and stumbling headlong over one of the boxes, unnoticed in the gloom.

"Dar's no tellin' what trouble he may get into widout me watchin' and tookin' keer ob him. I's afraid I'm too late to help him."

He would have opened the door and hurried out, but at that moment his keen nostrils caught the appetizing odor of the loaves of bread, amid which he had created havoc a short time before.

"I hab an obspression dat I done eat some ob dat afore I took a nap, but I ain't certain; don't want to make any mistake, and I feels sorter hungry."

There was enough food left to furnish him another good meal, and he did not stop using his peerless teeth and massive jaws until he had secured it.

His rifle was leaning against the wall near the door, where he had left it. He took it in hand, with the intention of opening the door and passing out, when the first real thrill of alarm stirred him. He heard some one attempting to open the door.

He knew it was an enemy, for Kenton, the only friend he had in the neighborhood, would never come there to look for him.

The latch-string being drawn in, it was impossible for the door to be opened, except by great labor from the outside. Nevertheless, some one was pushing at it repeatedly, and with such vigor that there could be no mistake about it.

"Who dar?" demanded Jethro, in his deepest voice, holding his rifle ready to use it in case the Indian effected an entrance.

There was no answer, but the efforts on the outside ceased for a minute, to be resumed more guardedly than at first.

"Go way from der, I toles yo' or yo'll get into trouble," called the youth, in a louder voice, meant to be as threatening as he could make it.

Again the pushing ceased, and all became still.

Jethro heard the wind blowing strongly around the cabin and among the trees beyond. Standing in the open clearing, as did the cabin, no shadow was cast upon it. The narrow windows, therefore, were clearly outlined against the dim moonlight. The youth glanced furtively at them, comprehending more fully than at any time before the sad mistake he had made in disobeying the orders of Kenton. But for that he would not have been in his present plight.

But it was too late for regrets to avail him. All he could do was to fight it out as best he knew how to the end.

Stepping nearer the door, he bent his head and listened. The pressure against the structure had ceased, but he caught the murmur of voices when a few broken sentences were uttered. Their meaning, of course, was beyond his reach.

"Why don't dey be gemmen?" he asked himself, "or talk in American, so dat anoder gemmen can understand 'em? I don't know what dey's talkin' 'bout, and it sounds as if dey don't know demselves."

He could understand, however, that no immediate cause for fear existed.

A dozen brawny Shawanoes could not force the door, and the windows, as has been explained, were too narrow for any one to push his body through.

But, all the same, some mischief was afoot at one of the rear window's--the one into which Jethro Juggens had fired that very day with fatal effect. The disturbance was transferred from the door to the window.

The youth was standing in the middle of the lower apartment, gun in hand, watching and listening. The moon was so placed in the heavens that this particular opening was seen more clearly than any of the others, and peering intently at it, Jethro became conscious of some dark object that was slowly obtruding into his field of vision.

"What de mischief am dat?" he muttered. "Looks like a hobblegoblin, but I knows it am an Injin."

Dimly seen in the partial illumination, the resemblance to the head of a warrior was so close that all doubt was removed from the mind of Jethro Juggens.

"Dat's what I's waiting for," was his thought, as he brought his piece to a level, took the best aim he could in the darkness, and let fly.

The report within the close room was so thunderous that his ears tingled, but confident of the accuracy of his shot, he looked through the smoke at the moonlit opening.

"I didn't hear no yell, but I reckoned dat blowed de top ob his head off afore he could let out de war-whoop dat Mr. Kenton says an Injin always gibs when he cotches his last sickness--gracious hebbins! how's dat?"

Could he believe his eyes? The head at which he had fired only a few feet away had not vanished. There it was, the owner apparently staring in upon him, with the same interest he had shown from the first.

"Dat beats all creation! I knowed I hit him, 'cause I couldn't miss him if I tried. He must had a head as hard as mine--"

If Jethro Juggens was astounded by what had just occurred, he was almost lifted off his feet by what followed before he finished the expression of the thought that was in his mind. Through the narrow window at which he was gazing the muzzle of a gun was thrust and the weapon discharged, the ball passing so close that he felt it nip his ear.

With a howl of dismay the youth leaped a foot in the air and to one side. No one could have had a narrower escape than he, and he knew it.

"Tings are gettin' mixed most obstrageously," he muttered, stepping nearer to one side of the room and proceeding to reload his gun as best he could in the darkness.

Much as Jethro had blundered, and obtuse as he was in many things, he understood what had taken place. That which he supposed to be the head of an Indian was some object presented by the crouching warrior with the purpose of drawing his fire, and it succeeded in doing so. The flash of the negro's rifle revealed where he stood, and the Shawano, who was watching for that clew, lost no time in firing, missing by a hair's-breadth a fatal result. Thus it came about that not the least execution was done on either side.

Jethro waited some minutes in order to discover the next movement of his enemies. Nothing presenting itself, he had resort to the dangerous expedient of trying to peer through the different windows. Being enveloped in impenetrable gloom, he could not have been seen by the Indians had they been on the watch, though possibly they might have heard him. As it was, no shot was fired at him, nor was he able to detect anything that could give him the least information of what his enemies were doing, or what they intended to do. They may have been quite near, but he could not get the first glimpse of them.

"Dis yeah am gettin' ser'us," mused Jethro, leaning against the side of the house in order to think more clearly. "I's afeard dat somethin' may happen to Mr. Kenton, and if it does and he can't get back, nor me neither, what's goin' to become of de folks? I 'spose dey am most worried to def now."



JETHRO IN TROUBLE.

Since it looked as if it would be impossible for him to leave the cabin for an indefinite time, the anxiety of the dusky youth to do so increased with every passing minute, until he formed the resolution to make the attempt, no matter what the consequences might prove to himself.

A dispassionate view of the situation would have pronounced Jethro as useful to the pioneers in one place as in another. Possibly, it might have been decided that it was better that he should remain away so long as the peril remained imminent, despite the fact that he had already done them most effective service.

Jethro could not so far forget the first law of human nature as not to debate and hesitate for a considerable while before taking the decisive step.

"I might leave de door open," he reflected, "so dat if any ob de heathen are hangin' round de outside waitin' for a chance to shet me off, I kin dodge back and slam de door in dar faces. Ef I don't see 'em till I git too fur to run back, I kin dive into de woods or hide."

All this sounded well enough in theory, but the young man could not lose sight of one thing: in point of fleetness he could not compare with any of the Shawanoes. They could run him down, as may be said, in a twinkling.

It was impossible for one so inexperienced as he to form a reasonable guess of the intentions of the red men. It was curious, to say the least, that one or two of them should linger in the vicinity of the cabin after the departure of the pioneers for the block-house. Even Simon Kenton could not have guessed their purpose.

"Dey couldn't hab seed me go in," thought Jethro, "for, if dey did, dey would hab hollered to me and asked me who I was lookin' fur; I'd gib 'em some sass, and den dar would hab been a row and some ha'r pullin'."

The youth leaned against the side of the apartment a brief while longer in intense cogitation, and then sighed.

"I ain't used to tinkin' so hard as dis; it exhorts me."

To remedy which he groped his way to the huge bread box, a few paces away. There was enough, left to furnish a person of ordinary appetite with a good meal, but, when he ceased, nothing was left.

"Umph! dat rewives me; I feel stronger now--I'll do a little more hard tinkin'--graciousnation, I's got it!" he exclaimed,

leaping from the floor in exultation; "why didn't I tink ob it afore? I'll hold one ob dese boxes ober me, so dey can't see nuffin' ob me, and den walk out ob de house and straight 'cross de clearin' to de woods. When I got dar, I'll flung de box off en run! Dat's de plan, suah I's born!"

CHAPTER XIII.

UNKIND FATE.

After setting out on his return to his friends with the canoe which he had recovered so cleverly from the drowsy Shawanoe, Simon Kenton gave little thought to Jethro Juggens. The youth had become separated from the scout through his own disregard of orders, and, as has already been said, the former regarded his highest duty to be to the pioneers, who, a mile or so away, were anxiously looking for his return.

It was during the first part of his voyage with the canoe that Kenton had his hurricane encounter with the warrior who withdrew it from the point along the bank where he left the craft for a few minutes only.

The scout was surprised and somewhat alarmed for his friends over one or two facts which thus came to light. The Indian who paid so dearly for this little trick he attempted upon the white man was not the one that sat on the bank near the clearing while the boat was withdrawn from before him. This proved that more than one Shawanoe was down the river between the pioneers and the cabin in the clearing. The cawing from the Ohio side showed that the lynx-eyed watchers were there, with the unwelcome certainty that the Shawanoes were far more numerous than either Boone or Kenton had supposed.

"Wa-on-mon has been doing some good work," reflected Kenton, "since he sneaked out of sight, instead of meeting me for our last scrimmage. Dan'l is right when he says the reason The Panther done that warn't 'cause he was afeared of me, but 'cause he seed a chance of hittin' a powerfuller blow than in sending nobody but Sime Kenton under. That's what he's up to, with a mighty big chance of doing what he set out to do."

The signal from the Ohio bank, and the encounter with the redskin, drove all hesitation from the ranger's mind regarding the canoe. He drew it from the water and upon the dry land, his paddle and rifle lying inside, and then, with no little labor, dragged it among the trees to the other side of the open space, where it was launched again, uninjured by its rough experience.

"I hope there ain't many such places," he muttered, as he took the paddle in hand; "'cause if there is, this old boat will suffer."

But night was closing in, and, with the coming of darkness, the need of such extreme caution would pass. The wind too, was now blowing so strongly up the river that it was not necessary to use the extreme caution against making any noise while pushing his way along the bank.

To Kenton's disgust, he had gone a little more than a hundred yards further when he struck another of the very places he had in mind. It was twice as broad as the one he had flanked a few minutes before, and did not offer the slightest concealment.

He checked the canoe, with the nose on the edge of the opening, and took several minutes to look over the ground and decide upon the best course to follow.

To most persons it must seem like an excess of caution for Kenton to hesitate to propel his boat across this open space when it confronted him. That there was any dusky foe crouching in the woods, with his eyes fixed upon that "clearing" in the water and watching for the appearance of Kenton, was a piece of fine-spun theorizing that entered the realms of the absurd. It was preposterous to suppose anything of the kind. Simon Kenton was too much of a veteran in woodcraft to make such preposterous mistakes.

But the unwelcome truth which stared him in the face was that he had been followed from the clearing, and the signal from the other side of the river, resembling the call of a crow, he believed referred to him. It looked as if there was an understanding between the Shawanoe scouts on the Ohio and those on the Kentucky side of the river.

As the matter stood, however, Kenton decided not to drag the canoe among the trees again. In the gathering darkness he was liable to injure it beyond repair, and in a brief while the gloom itself would afford him the screen he needed.

The wind stirred the water into wrinkles and wavelets along the shore, which rippled against the canoe and the end of the paddle when held motionless. Further out in the river the disturbance was so marked that it would have caused some annoyance even to a strong swimmer.

Kenton's conclusion was to stay where he was for a brief while--that is, until the gloom increased sufficiently to allow him to paddle across the open space without the misgiving that now held his muscular arm motionless.

Sitting thus, with all his senses alert, he caught the distinct outlines of some large object on the surface of the river. It was moving with moderate swiftness from the Ohio bank in a diagonal direction to the Kentucky shore, making for a point but a short distance above where the ranger was waiting for a slight increase of darkness.

A second glance identified the object as an Indian canoe containing several occupants. But for the noise made by the wind and water he would have heard the dipping of the paddles, for there was no attempt in the way of secrecy of movement.

"That looks as though they didn't 'spect none of us was in these parts," mused Kenton, with considerable relief. "If the varmints thought Sime Kenton was loafin' anywhere near they'd be a powerful sight more keeful."

Since the new party were following a course which would ultimately take them up stream and nearer to the party of fugitives, the ranger decided to learn, if possible, something more of their intentions.

A moment's thought convinced him that there was more risk in following the Shawanoes in his canoe than on foot. He suspected the party intended to land. He could move with more freedom and effect among the trees, with liberty to return to his boat whenever he chose.

Accordingly, with hardly a moment's hesitation, he stepped out of the canoe again and drew the prow so far up the bank that there was no danger of its being swept away by the disturbed current. Then, with the noiseless celerity for which he was noted, he moved along the shore in the direction of the camp, where soon after his friends gathered and anxiously awaited his coming.

A disappointment came to the ranger. His supposition was that the Shawanoes in the canoe would run in close to shore or paddle up the stream at so moderate a speed that it would be easy for him to overtake them, but for some reason or other she shot forward with a swiftness fully double what he expected. Kenton's error, as will be seen, was in not sticking to his canoe, in which it would have cost him little effort to follow the other at a safe distance, ready to dart in under the protection of the overhanging limbs at the first danger of detection.

"They won't land till they get to Rattlesnake Gulch, or above it," was his new conclusion, "and I'm throwing away time by dodging among the trees."

Men of the stamp of the ranger follow their decisions by instant action. Turning about, he strode rapidly through the woods to the point where he had left his canoe but a short time before.

To his consternation it was gone.

Hardly crediting his senses, he made hasty search, with the speedy confirmation of the astounding fact.

He was too skilled in woodcraft to make any mistake as to the precise spot, just on the edge as it was of the open space which he hesitated to cross.

Whereas, the boat was there less than a quarter of an hour before, it was now nowhere in sight.

Inasmuch as he had taken pains to draw it far enough up the bank to prevent it being swept free by the current, only one conclusion was possible; a single Shawanoe or more had taken it away.

It may be doubted whether Simon Kenton in all his life was more chagrined, for he had been surprised and outwitted with a cleverness that was the keenest possible blow to his pride.

When he disposed of the single warrior that attempted precisely the same trick upon him, the pioneer accepted that as an end of the matter. He did not deem it possible that a second danger of that nature could threaten him.

What added special poignancy to his humiliation was the belief, formed without any tangible grounds, that the Indian who had outwitted him was the Shawanoe from before whom the canoe had been withdrawn while he was indulging in his afternoon siesta. This impression which fastened itself upon him, constituted the "most unkindest cut of all."

But, angered, exasperated, and mortified as he was, Simon Kenton was not the man to waste the minutes in idle lamentation. Since the first part of the former attempt to outwit him had succeeded, he felt there was no reason why the second part should triumph. He therefore started down the stream as rapidly as he could force his way in the darkness.

There was no duplication, however, of the second part of the programme. Whoever the dusky thief was that had withdrawn the canoe from the possession of the unsuspecting ranger, he was too wise to commit the fatal mistake of his predecessor. Instead of loitering close in shore, he had taken to the clear water, or propelled the boat with a deft swiftness that placed him beyond all danger from the irate white man.

So it was that the time quickly came when Kenton paused in his blind pursuit, convinced that the craft was irrecoverably gone.

"I'll be hanged if that varmint ain't a sharp one!" he muttered, with a feeling akin to admiration at the performance. "It ain't the first time Sim Kenton has been outwitted by his people, but it's the first time he had it played on him in that style."

It was a serious blow to the scheme which the pioneer had formed for the deliverance of his friends; for, as will be seen, it destroyed all chance of transporting the women and children to the Ohio shore in the canoe that had accompanied the flatboat a part of the way down the river.

The roughness of the water under the high, steady wind might well cause the men to hesitate over the other plan that had been spoken of--that of swimming the stream and bearing the women and children with them. The project of constructing a raft upon which to float them over was open to the fatal objection that the watchful Shawanoes were absolutely certain to discover it, and discovery could mean but one thing--not only those on the raft, but the men who might be swimming in the water, would be so utterly at the mercy of their enemies in their canoes that it would be but play to pick off every man, woman, and child.

Only one shadowy hope remained--the second canoe, which he hoped to find at the point where he had hidden it some weeks before, close to Rattlesnake Gulch. If that had remained undetected by the Indians, it could take the place of the one he had just lost.

Pushing out in the gloom, Kenton, with one at least of the rangers to bear him company, need have little personal fear, even if discovered by the Shawanoes; for they could drive the boat as fast over the water as could the most skilful of pursuers, and the gloom or woods of the Ohio shore once reached, all danger to them would vanish. But dare lie hope that such an opportunity would be presented to him? It would seem, that with their dusky enemies everywhere, some of them were certain to stumble upon the boat, though if they did so, it would be accident rather than design.

There was only one way, however, of settling the matter; that was to learn whether the boat was where it had been left or where he hoped to find it.

Kenton pushed along the shore with a haste which at times approached recklessness; but, as he drew near Rattlesnake Gulch, he called into play his usual caution, even with the wind and darkness in his favor.

With more anxiety than often troubled him, he groped his way to the spot where he had carefully hidden his canoe. His search, if quick, was thorough, and, alas! it told him the woeful truth that the second boat was as effectually beyond all possible reach as was the first one.



CHAPTER XIV.

THE INTRUDER.

It has been said that Agnes Altman, seated behind the boulder on the edge of the rude fortification near the river, was among the most alert of the pioneers that had taken refuge there until Simon Kenton could open the way for their escape across the Ohio.

To this fact may be ascribed the startling discovery she made that an Indian warrior was crouching on the other side of the boulder, no more than three feet from where she was listening with intensest attention, and in this discovery she preceded all other members of the company.

The Shawanoe, indeed, was so close that it may be said the slight noise he made shut out the rustling of the wind and the rippling of the current against the bank, the overhanging branches and around the twisted roots along shore.

She heard his body move along the surface of the rock, and, pressing her ear against it, caught the slight disturbance more distinctly. A solid substance, as every one knows, is a better conductor of sound than air, and the medium was of more help to her than she dreamed it could be.

What particular thing her mortal enemy was doing she could not surmise, nor did it specially concern her to know at that moment; there could be no doubt that he was in a state of pernicious activity.

The question which the maiden asked herself was, whether she should not acquaint George Ashbridge with what she had learned. He was almost at her elbow, as has been explained, and, brief as was the time, several whispered conferences had taken place.

But, if she should speak or move, the Indian on the other side of the boulder would take the alarm and make off. This, it would seem, was the very thing which a young woman in her situation ought to desire above all others, but Agnes thought the miscreant should not be allowed to escape in that manner, at least not before he and his people had been taught a well-needed lesson.

She concluded to remain quiescent and await developments.

The next thing decided upon may have been characteristic of her age and sex, but, all the same, it was a piece of recklessness almost the equal of the weakness shown when she placed the knife in the hand of The Panther. She decided to peep over the top of the rock and learn what the Shawanoe was doing.

Sufficient moonlight found its way among the branches to permit one to see indistinctly for a few feet. She was confident that she could give their enemy one quick glance and then drop back before he could do her harm.

Her heart beat a little faster than it was wont when, with the silence of a phantom, she began slowly raising her head, with her eyes fixed on the top of the rock, which she touched with her hands. Before she reached the elevation in mind, she discovered the Indian was doing the same thing, and, fortunately for her, was two or three seconds advanced with the action.

The crown of the warrior, with the projecting eagle feathers, were as if they were a part of the darkness itself, so vaguely were they outlined in the gloom, though their identity was as clear to the girl as if the noon-day sun was shining upon the painted features.

The head rose just high enough for the glittering eyes to peer over the horizon of the rock in the endeavor to learn something of the situation within the interior of the "fort."

Agnes was transfixed for a moment. She feared that if she sank lower, or changed her position, the Indian would detect it and use his knife or tomahawk, and the same unspeakable dread prevented her crying out to warn George Ashbridge or any of the others of their peril.

She had no weapon of her own at command, and very probably it would have made no difference if she had, for she was but an infant before this terrible embodiment of strength, treachery and hate. But she felt she must do something to teach the miscreant the risk he ran by his daring act.

Groping silently with her right hand among and under the leaves, she managed to clutch some gravel and dirt, which, with a quick flirt, she intended to fling in the face of the Indian. It would probably cause him some inconvenience and considerable surprise, though the weapon was too insignificant for him to make any use of it.

The result of the novel demonstration can only be guessed, since the opportunity to try it passed at the moment Agnes was ready to make the test. When in the act of drawing back her hand, the head of the Shawanoe vanished as noiselessly as it had obtruded on the scene.

It seems incredible that the savage could have gained any knowledge of the interior of the fortification or of the location of the defenders. The gloom was too deep to permit the use of any vision except that of the owl or cat. He had probably withdrawn to repeat his attempt at some other point.

Again, the marvelous delicacy of hearing told the girl that her enemy was in motion, not directly in front of the boulder, but on the left, in the direction of George Ashbridge. She peered intently at that point, wondering how much longer she ought to remain motionless and mute, and on the point of calling, in a suppressed voice, to her lover, when something whisked by her elbow, too quickly or too dimly seen for her to comprehend at once what it meant.

Then it flashed upon her.

"George!" she called, in an undertone, so full of dread and terror that he was at her side in an instant.

"What's the matter? What has happened?"

"There's an Indian within the inclosure!"

"Impossible! You are mistaken!"

"I saw him this minute."

"Where? Tell me how it was!" he whispered, seizing her hand, and quick to catch her excitement.

"I saw the top of his head peeping over this very rock in front of me. I was about to call to you, when he dropped down again. The next moment he passed over the spot where you are. He did it so quickly and silently that I heard nothing, and caught only the most shadowy glimpses of him."

"Can it be possible? I cannot dispute you, and yet--"

A tall figure, walking erect, assumed form in the gloom, and was upon the startled lovers before they were aware of it.

Young Ashbridge was in the act of bringing his rifle to a level, when Weber Hastings spoke.

"Not too fast, youngers. I'm afeared I didn't do the best thing in the world, when I placed you two so near each other."

"No matter where you placed her," replied the youth, "you did a good thing for the rest. She has sharper eyes than any of us, for she has seen what nobody else saw."

"What's that? What's that?"

"Within the last three minutes," said Agnes, "one of the Shawanoes passed by this boulder behind which I have been sitting, and is now somewhere within the inclosure. Oh, I wonder if he means any harm to your folks, George, or mine!"

And spurred by her new terror she hurried across the brief intervening space to where her mother and Miss Altman were sitting trembling, and occasionally whispering in the darkness.

Thank heaven! no harm had befallen them, and since there was no call for her to return to George Ashbridge and Weber Hastings, she remained with those that were so near and dear to her.

"Them varmints are gettin' pow'rful sassy," was the comment of Hastings, who, now that the truth was known, seemed to lose all the excitement he had first shown. "You don't think the gal was mistook?"

"I am sure she was not."

"So am I; stay right here where you be, while I look around for that varmint; keep a lookout yourself, for he may try to sneak out this way."

"All I want is a chance at him."

"That's right--helloa!"

It so happened that Jim Deane, fully recovered from the effects of the rattlesnake antidote he had taken earlier in the evening, was on guard at a point almost opposite where Agnes Altman had made her alarming discovery. Instead of being sheltered by boulders and rocks, he had lain down behind some branches and logs, which he himself had helped place in position weeks before, when he and his companions were caught in their desperate straits.

Stretched at full length upon his face, with one hand grasping the barrel of his rifle in front and hearing nothing, he felt something softly touch his foot. The ranger did not speak or move a limb, but with rare cleverness, suspected the astonishing truth; one of the Shawanoe had entered the fort and was making a tour of inspection. The miscreant would offer harm to no one until he had gathered the knowledge he sought. Then he doubtless meant to deal some swift, terrible blows with his knife, and make off before anything could be done in the way of punishment.

The ranger turned his head and peered over his shoulder behind him. Lying flat on the ground, while the one that had touched him was on his feet, the advantage was with the white man. The almost impalpable outlines of a crouching figure that had paused upon touching his foot was revealed, and all doubt vanished from the mind of Deane.

His posture, as will be perceived, was an awkward one compared with that of the Shawanoe. It was necessary for the white man to change it before he could assume the offensive, and during the making of that change was the time for the hostile to get in his effective work.

The possibility of his doing so caused no hesitation on the part of Jim Deane. He flung himself upon his back, snapped his feet beneath his body, and came to a standing position in a twinkling. In the act of doing so, he cocked his rifle.

The click of the hammer warned the intruder of his danger. His situation was not one in which to make a fight, and he turned to flee. The white man heard him, and dashed through the gloom to gain sufficient sight to warrant a shot. The fugitive must have been as familiar with the ground as was his pursuer, for he showed no hesitation as to his course, nor did he give any evidence of blundering.

He was so near the side of the inclosure that he had to run but a few steps when he made a leap which lifted him several feet above the obstruction, and it was this temporary elevation which gave the ranger the chance he was seeking. At the moment the figure was at the highest point of the arch, with his feet gathered beneath him, the ranger brought his gun to his shoulder and let fly.

A flash, a resounding report, a rasping shriek that resounded through the woods, and the Shawanoe sprawled forward on his face, with his hands clutching the leaves and dirt, and then all was still.

"That 'ere varmint ought to have knowed that 'cause a man happens to git bit by a rattler and takes an over-dose of antidote, it ain't no reason for stubbin' your toe agin him, and thinkin' he's forgot how to shoot off a gun."

"You managed that purty well, Jim," quietly remarked Weber Hastings, appearing that moment at his elbow. "Glad to see you don't forget to reload as quick as you kin."

"I larned that long ago; wonder if there are any more of the varmints 'bout."

"If there is, they'll be a little more keerful, but there's no saying what'll be the next thing--sh!"

Through the arches of the forest stole the soft, tremulous notes of a night bird--so faintly heard that even the trained ears of the ranger could do no more than guess the distance.

"That's Kenton," he remarked, in a guarded voice; "I'm powerful glad of it, for now something will be done."



CHAPTER XV.

A DARK PROSPECT.

Weber Hastings waited only a few seconds after hearing the soft, tremulous bird call that stole among the leafy arches, when he replied with an imitation so exact that it might well have been mistaken for an echo of the first.

Nothing more was done, for that was sufficient. Groping around among the "hornets' nests," as Kenton declared it to be, eluding the Shawanoes, who seemed to be everywhere, the pioneer found it impossible to locate his friends, until, as a last resort, he had recourse to the signal, which he knew would be recognized by Hastings, provided it could be projected to him.

Ten minutes later, the pioneer appeared within the enclosure as silently as if he had risen from the very earth. He sat down on the ground to consult with Hastings after his arrival had been made known to the rest. He would have willingly talked to them all, had it been feasible, but the exciting incidents a brief time before proved that not a man could be spared from his station. There was no certainty as to the schemes of the Shawanoes, and nothing less than the utmost vigilance could save the fugitives.

"What do you think of things?" inquired Hastings, the moment they were alone.

"They look bad--powerful bad; fact is, I don't see how they could look much worse."

"How did you make out?"

"Didn't make out at all," growled the ranger, not yet recovered from his keen disappointment; "I went back to the clearin', and yanked out that canoe from right under the nose of one of them varmints; when I had fetched it purty near here, I left it a few minutes to reckynoiter, and when I went back I'll be hanged if the same varmint hadn't yanked it back agin."

He made no reference to the first affair, which resulted in a fatal failure to the Indian attempting it. That didn't count in the light of the success which followed it.

"Of course, you hadn't any chance of getting it back again, or you'd done it?"

"You're correct; it was growing dark, and, though I hunted powerful lively for the varmint, I didn't get the first show for drawin' a bead on him."

"You said somethin' about another canoe of your'n that you hed among the bushes some time ago, near where we are now."

"I found the spot, but didn't find no canoe; the varmints had been ahead of me; I shouldn't wonder, now, if the boat which I seed comin' over from the Ohio side was the identical craft that I was looking for."

Kenton indulged in a forceful exclamation, for the occasion was one of the rare ones in which his chagrin and self-disgust became intolerable. Nevertheless, he was very much of a philosopher, and soon talked with all his self-possession, betraying a hopeful vein in his composition which did much to sustain him in the great trials to which he was subjected in later years.

"I counted on two boats," he added, "and did git one; now, I haven't got any. But it don't do any good to kick."

"No," assented his companion; "we must make the best of it."

"Though there doesn't seem to be any 'best' about the bus'ness. Haven't heard anything of Boone since I left you?"

"Not a word."

"A good deal depends on what he says. He went more among the varmints than I did, though I found 'em plenty 'nough--confound 'em! But Boone is wiser than me. I don't think the varmints hate him quite as bad, and that gives him a better show for learning what they're up to."

"The Ingins must have one or two canoes," suggested Hastings, hinting at a scheme that had assumed form in his mind.

"I know what you mean, Web. There ain't no one that would try it quicker'n me, if I had the least chance."

"You stole a boat from one of 'em not long ago."

"But the varmint was asleep, and there was only that one. Here there's twenty of 'em at least--most likely more--and every varmint of 'em is as wide awake as if he had been asleep seventeen years and a half. No," grimly added the veteran, "there ain't nothin' that would suit the varmints better than to have Sime Kenton try to steal one of their canoes from 'em. The style in which they would lift his hair would be beautiful. They'd be powerful glad to give me a chance if they believed I'd try it."

"Wal," remarked Hastings, with a sigh, "it looks to me as if it's going to be the same game over again that Jim Deane and the boys had played on 'em some months ago, 'cepting there won't be half the chance there was then."

"Why not?"

"Wal, with them there war'n't nobody beside themselves and all knowed how to fight, and they did fight, too--there's no mistake. But we've got two women, a likely gal and a little girl, and of course there isn't one of us that'll knock under or run as long as they're above ground."

"Of course not; them's the sentiments of every one of us."

"When daylight comes the varmints will be on all sides of us. They can keep behind the trees and pick off one of us whenever he shows his head."

"They can do a great deal better than that," suggested Kenton.

"How?"

"Starve us out; we have eat nothin' since leaving the clearin', though that time is so short it don't count, but there isn't a mouthful of food in this party, and no way of getting it."

"It does look bad," remarked Hastings, feeling deeply the views expressed by his companion.

"I wish Boone would come, so him and me could agree on something to try, whether it will win or not."

Simon Kenton was not the man to sit down and fold his hands in despair, no matter how desperate the situation, but he had expressed the wish that was strong within him, that he might have the counsel of the man who was twenty years his senior, and who had turned his steps westward before Kenton knew that Kentucky and Ohio existed.

"I'm glad of one thing," added the pioneer, after a moment's pause, "and that is, that this arrangement of yours is open on the side toward the river."

"Jim said that was done so as to give him and the boys a chance for the last plunge. If they hadn't done that them three chaps never would have seen the sun rise again."

"It may come to the same thing when there's only two or three of us left. Helloa! who's this?"

It was Mr. Altman, who, knowing where the two were in consultation, ventured to approach them, doing so with an apology.

"I have no wish to intrude," he added, "but I am disturbed over one matter, Kenton, about which I would like to ask a question or two."

"What's that?" inquired the scout.

"When you left us this afternoon you took my servant Jethro with you, but I have seen nothing of him since you came back."

"I'll be hanged if I hadn't forgot all about that younker!"

"Did you bring him back with you?"

"No; and I'm doubtful if you see him ag'in--leastways not very soon."

He then told all he knew about the fellow, his master listening, as may well be supposed, with the deepest interest. Keenly as he regretted the misfortune that had befallen the stupid fellow, he saw that no possible blame could be placed upon any one beside the youth himself.

"If he happens to fall into the hands of the Shawanoes, it will go hard with him," remarked Mr. Altman, with a shudder.

"So it will, so it will," repeated Kenton; "the varmints never fancy them of his color, and they've good reason to hate him."

"I heard that he did a powerful lot to help you folks," remarked Hastings.

"I should say he did; whenever one of the varmints was hit, you could make up your mind that it was the darky that done it. He had the confoundest luck, and at the same time can shoot a gun as well as Boone, or you or me. But worse than all that, he was the means of catching The Panther himself, and nearly pounded the life out of him."

"Wouldn't the chief like to lay hands on him?" said Altman.

"Much as he hates me and the rest of us, I think he would give any two for the sake of that darky. If he once gets hold of him it won't be any shootin' bus'ness, but Col. Crawford over agin."

The thought was a depressing one, but all were powerless to help the fellow, and the consciousness of the fearful danger which hung over all was a hundredfold sadder. The Ashbridges and Altmans saw the nearest and dearest ones on earth in the most imminent peril of their lives, and, so far as human agency was concerned, none were able to extend a helping hand.

"I've a feeling," remarked Hastings, after Thomas Altman had withdrawn to his station, "that whatever is done to help these folks has got to be done this very night."

"There ain't no speck of doubt about it--helloa, who's this?"

A second form approached them through the gloom. Dimly seen though it was, something in the gait or manner told Kenton who it was.

"Is that you, Dan'l?"

"Yes," replied the veteran, quietly sitting down near them as though he had been absent but a few minutes. "I had a hard time to find you, and was on the p'int several times of 'calling.'"

"Why didn't you do it? I did."

"There are too many Injins in the woods. I heerd 'em 'calling' to each other more than once, and it was all I could do to keep from bumpin' against 'em. If I had signaled, some of 'em would have answered, and things might have got mixed. I 'spected where you was, and therefore knowed the right spot to look."

"As I didn't, I 'called,' and come through all right. Wal, Dan'l, as you say, the varmints are powerful plenty in these parts. Since you and me hadn't any trouble gettin' into this fort, as Jim Deane calls it, it follers that if the varmints should try it they would find it jest as easy."

"So they won't," remarked Hastings; "but one of 'em found it rather risky gettin' out agin."

"I heerd a gun go off a while ago," said Boone, as though the matter had little interest to him.

Hastings related the occurrence which resulted in the death of the dusky intruder, and Kenton gave an account of what he had done, or, rather, attempted to do, for he was more unsparing in condemning his failures than his worst enemies would have been.

"Now, Dan'l," remarked his younger friend, "the past ain't of any 'count; it's the present, the now, that we've got to take care of. What do you think the varmints mean to do?"

"Wait where they are till mornin', and then begin shooting."

"And if they can't pick us all off, keep us here till we're starved out?"

"There ain't any doubt of that."

"I agree with you, Daniel; therefore, whatever we do for the folks has got to be done afore sun-up."

"That's as true as Gospel."

"How many of the varmints are there?"

"There seemed to be about twenty, more or less, this afternoon, but toward night some others come from 'cross the river, I reckon, as there must be all of thirty."

"Who has charge of 'em, Daniel?"

"That painted imp they call Wa-on-mon, or The Panther."

CHAPTER XVI.

SIMON KENTON IN A PANIC.

It was no surprise to Simon Kenton to learn that his old enemy, The Panther, was at the head of the formidable war party that were plotting with so much success against the pioneers. He had suspected the truth before he learned it from Boone.

The fact removed the last vestige of suspicion any one might have held as to the motive of the chieftain in failing to accept the challenge of Kenton to mortal combat. Wa-on-mon had made haste to hunt up the war party of Shawanoes that he must have known were in the vicinity, well aware that with them at his beck and call he could strike a thousandfold more effective blow than by the simple overthrow of Kenton, accompanied by the disablement of himself.

The ferocious leader was perilously near success, and it looked as if nothing could extricate the fugitives from destruction.

The reader need not be reminded that it was the presence and care of the four females that was a mortal handicap to the brave men who had set out to conduct them to the block-house up the river. Had they been already there, the pioneers and rangers would have given the Shawanoes a hot fight, and driven them off with the loss of more than one of their bravest leaders.

From what has been already made known, it will be seen that it was not a hard thing for a friend or enemy to enter the rough inclosure which had been dignified with the name of fort. The discovery of the Shawanoes' presence was in the nature of an accident; but for Agnes Altman he might have wandered almost at will among the men on guard, and, having learned all he had set out to learn, stole away without detection.

Kenton and Boone reversed the method when they appeared on the scene. They had but to make themselves known (an easy matter, since they were expected) to receive a welcome. At the same time they avoided detection by the Indians, who were hovering on all sides.

It has been shown that, in a certain sense, one part of the fortification was open, since nothing in the nature of a defence interposed between it and the river. The presumption was, that in this direction one would have a fair chance of stealing away undiscovered.

The fact, however, that such an opening presented itself was proof that it was under close surveillance. Possibly, in the gloom, some of the most skilful of the rangers, by swimming under water a long way, might elude the vigilance of the Shawanoes, but the attempt would be fatal to any one of the females, and to more than one of the men.

Kenton, Boone and Hastings held what might be considered a council of war, since the fate to all concerned depended upon the result of the conference.

"There seems but the one chance," remarked Boone, after each had expressed his views, "and that's a powerful slim one."

"So must every chance be," commented Kenton.

"From what we've learned to-night any one of us three can sneak out of this place and off in the woods. If that's so, what's to hinder two or three doing it, by treading on each other's heels?"

"Nothin'," was the prompt response of Hastings.

"'Spose, then, that I try it to the right and Simon to the left; 'spose that each of us takes two persons with him and that they are females?"

"And if you should get through the lines with 'em?" asked Hastings.

"That's all we want; once clear of the varmints, and with the better part of the night afore us, the road to the block-house will be so clear that sun-up will find us all there."

Kenton did not like this plan, and said so.

"It won't work," he asserted, with quiet emphasis. "You and me, Dan'l, might get through the lines, 'cause we've both done it this very night, but we couldn't take a woman or gal with us."

Boone held unlimited faith in the woodcraft of his friend, and meant to leave the decision of the question with him.

Kenton condemned the scheme from the first; therefore it was abandoned.

"I've nothing more to offer," said the elder pioneer, disappointed by the emphatic veto of the other; "there seems but one thing left for us--to stay here and fight it out with the varmints to-morrow. We can drop some of 'em, and mebbe The Panther will be among 'em, but there won't be one of us left to rejoice over his going under."

Kenton held his peace for several minutes. His companions knew he was thinking intently and that something, desperate though it might be, would come from it. Neither Boone nor Hastings could offer the first suggestion; they could only wait for their athletic companion to counsel or to act.

Without a word, Kenton rose to his feet.

The others did the same, even though their erect position offered a tempting target to any prowling enemies who might succeed in entering the inclosure.

"Dan'l, take my gun," said the younger ranger, impressively; "if I never come back, keep it in remembrance of the many times you and Sime Kenton have been on the trail together."

"I'll do it, Simon," replied Boone, accepting the weapon.

"But," interposed Hastings, with a nervousness he could not conceal, "can't me and Boone be of help to you?"

"Not the least; I must go it alone this time."

"But let us know what you're going to try to do."

"When you and me were talking awhile ago, Hastings, you remember I said there warn't no chance of stealing any canoe in these parts belonging to the varmints; you remember that?"

"Of course."

"All the same I'm going after the canoe I seed crossing the Ohio just as it was getting dark. I don't b'leve I'll get it, or if I do that I can make any use of it."

Boone was impelled to interpose, for understanding the hopeless character of the attempt, it distressed him unspeakably to have his brave friend sacrifice himself. The elder, however, held his peace. He knew that Kenton had weighed all the chances, and the time for protest had passed.

"Stay right where you are," said the younger, moving as coolly and deliberately as though making ready to retire for the night. "It ain't likely the varmints will try to disturb you afore morning, but you know better than to trust 'em. If I ain't back afore daylight you'll never see me ag'in, and God help you all."

He wrung the hand of each in turn, and facing toward the river and assuming a crouching posture, vanished as silently as a shadow in the gloom, not another word falling from the lips of the two whom he had left behind, until considerable time had elapsed.

Having stripped for the fray, as may be said, by leaving his cumbersome rifle behind, Kenton approached the edge of the river with the utmost circumspection. Suspecting, as he did, that the Shawanoes had left this point open for the very purpose of inviting such an attempt as he had in view, he was too wise to neglect every precaution to keep it secret. If by any remote possibility he should succeed in his daring purpose, it could only be by keeping his enemies in ignorance of his movements, at least up to the point of decisive action on his part.

He therefore availed himself of every screen that could be used to hide his body, and advanced for several rods, more after the fashion of a serpent gliding over the ground than of a man stealing forward on his hands and knees. More than a quarter of an hour was consumed in passing this slight distance. Patience is a cardinal virtue with men of his profession, a moment's undue haste often undoing the work of hours. When at last he was able to reach out his hand and dip it in the cool waters, he was quite certain that none of the Shawanoes suspected what he had accomplished.

At this crisis several conditions united to help the intrepid scout. The wind still blowing strongly up the river rustled the vegetation, and whipped the surface of the river into wavelets that veiled other sounds, and helped to conceal any disturbance of the water. A glance at the sky showed the moon hidden by clouds, but the keen survey of Kenton told him that they would soon float past the face of the orb, leaving it to shine with greater strength than before. There was not a moment, therefore, to spare.

He was still flat on the ground, not daring to raise his head more than a few inches. With the same indescribable movement he glided from the land into the water, sinking quietly and heavily below the surface as though he were an

iron statue.

Close to the shore the depth was shallow, but he secured enough freedom of movement to work his way quickly into deep water, where he was at home. Swimming with prodigious power and skill, wholly beneath the surface, he turned on his back and allowed his nose to rise just high enough to give him one deep inhalation, when he sank again.

With the water crinkled and disturbed by the strong wind, the keenest-eyed Indian, peering out from the undergrowth along shore, would have discovered nothing upon which to hinge the faintest suspicion.

After another long swim, without the power to breathe, Kenton allowed his head to come up and opened his eyes.

As he anticipated, the moon was just emerging from the mass of drifting clouds, and the increasing light, spreading over forest and river, considerably extended his area of vision. Confident that his departure was unknown to any of the lurking Shawanoe scouts, he scrutinized his surroundings with more confidence than he would have felt had it been otherwise.

He could trace the dark outline of the shore he had just left, or rather the mass of trees and branches were clearly stamped against the background of sky. Above and below rippled the river in the dim moonlight, while a wall of indistinct blackness masked the Ohio shore.

Somewhere along the bank, which he had left but a brief while before, nestled the canoe he had set out to find and bring to a point where it could be used to help deliver the pioneers from their perilous environment, and, without giving another thought to the impossibility of success, he grimly resolved to do his utmost, no matter if certain death was to be the result.

Prudence required him to wait until the moon was obscured. Masses of vapor were continually passing in front of it, and he had to wait only a few minutes when the gloom permitted the attempt.

With the same cool promptness he swam toward shore, until the distance he had in mind was passed. Then carefully measuring the space, he sank below the surface again. The precaution seemed unnecessary, but such trifles sometimes decide the question of life and death. Not the slightest misgiving remained, when he noiselessly raised his head beneath the overhanging branches, that his departure and return were suspected by a single Shawanoe.

And yet he was only on the threshold of his enterprise. The real work now confronted him.

Having come in to shore at a point considerably above where he had left it, Kenton hoped the canoe for which he was searching was below him. He therefore decided to continue his hunt in that direction.

With the advantage gained, he required but a short time to do this, the result being a mistake on his part. He saw nothing of the craft.

He was about to turn again when he looked out upon the river, where the moon was shining with unobscured light.

He gave a start, and peered through the parted bushes a second time, and, as he did so, he received the greatest shock of his life. Never before or after that eventful night did he go through so astounding an experience.

So terrified indeed was the brave ranger by what he saw, that, forgetful of the Shawanoes, the imperiled fugitives, and everything except his own panic, he dashed through the intervening space, and, bursting into the inclosure where he had left his friends, called in a husky undertone:

"Boys, we're lost! we're lost! There's a ghost coming up the river!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A RUN OF GOOD FORTUNE.

We have now reached a point in our narrative where it once more becomes necessary to follow the fortunes of Jethro Juggens, whom we were obliged to leave in anything but a pleasant situation.

After a rather stirring experience in the cabin of Mr. Ashbridge, whither he had gone in total disregard of the instructions of Simon Kenton, he awoke to the fact that it would not do for him to tarry longer so far from his friends and exposed to so much personal danger. He must leave without further delay.

The proof received of the presence of one or more Shawanoes on the outside was too alarming for him to feel any of his old-time assurance in venturing across the clearing to the shelter of the surrounding forest. It will be remembered that he suddenly formed the decision to incase himself in armor, so to speak, by using one of the several boxes that had been brought down the river on the flatboat.

Filled with the scheme, he made ready for the extraordinary experiment. His plan was to invert one of the boxes over his head, and thus protected, stride across the open space to the woods; but second thought and considerable experimenting revealed difficulties which speedily became mountainous in their nature.

"Dat will be all right," he muttered, after he had emptied the box which had contained the food and some other articles; "but it's gwine to be a mighty bother to take dis ting and my gun too. Den as long as I keep it ober my head I won't be able to see where I'm gwine; I may keep walkin' round in a circle for two, free days, and fotch up ag'in de doah ob dis house ebery time. I'll hab to make a peep-hole in front."

To do this required work, but the pine wood was soft and his knife was sharp. Vigorous use of the implement soon opened a hole two or three inches in diameter, through which he could obtain a good view of his immediate surroundings.

"Dat will work," he muttered, with some satisfaction, as he felt of the opening, and found he could pass his hand through it; "it's a little bigger dan I meant to make it, but if I see one ob de heathen p'intin' his gun toward me I can slip my head to one side. I'll try it."

He lifted the receptacle over his head and shoulders, and found it fitted to a nicety. It could not have answered better had it been constructed for the express purpose of serving him as a shield.

He cautiously peeped through the windows, and discovering nothing to cause misgiving, drew back the door sufficiently to allow him to pass through with his turtle-like protection. Then he stepped forth upon the partially moonlit clearing, and, with considerable labor, inched along until perhaps a dozen feet distant from the building. His next act was to turn abruptly about and hasten back through the open door with such precipitation that he stumbled headlong into the room.

"Gorrynation! I's a big fool!" was his exclamation, and which, it is safe to say, none of his acquaintances would have disputed.

To his dismay he made several disquieting discoveries. In the first place, when he attempted to look through the peep-hole it was not there. Inadvertently he had put on the box in a reversed position, so that the opening was behind him. He attempted to shift the box about, but it would not work well. At the same moment he became aware that he had forgotten to bring his gun with him, and, worst of all, a sudden conviction flashed upon him that the soft pine in which he was enveloped was not strong enough to stop the course of a bullet. Therefore the wood was no protection at all.

These causes combined to throw the dusky youth into a panic, which sent him and the box crashing through the door before his novel experiment was subjected to a real test.

"It won't work," was his decision; "I hab to show my feet, 'cause dey's de biggest part ob me, and if de heathens shoot dem off dey'll hab me dead suah."

The only comfort he derived from the partial experiment was that nothing was seen or heard of the red men. It seemed to him that they would have made some demonstration had they observed him, and he was strongly tempted to make a dash for the wood, without encumbering himself with anything more than his gun.

Sufficient uncertainty, however, remained to hold him in check for a time, when, like an inspiration, a new suggestion forced itself into his brain.

Among the goods left behind in the cabin by the pioneers in their flight toward the block-house was considerable bedding, mostly in the shape of sheets, quilts and blankets. Why not swathe himself in these instead of using the awkward and cumbersome box?

The more he thought of the plan, the more he was pleased. He could wrap the tough linen sheets about his figure until the thickness would be doubly as effective as the wood. He could gather them round his head so that they would project above and protect it, and let them descend so low that his feet would be well armored and still leave opportunity to use them. He could readily carry his gun and leave a space in front of his eyes through which to make observations.

What was to prevent the complete success of the plan?

"Nuffin," he muttered, answering his own question. "I'll put so many ob dem sheets 'round me dat dey can bang away all night widout hurtin' nobody. Den, I've been told dat Injins am mighty skeery, and dey may take me for a hobblegoblin or ghost."

Absurd as the scheme of Jethro Juggens may seem, it was not wholly lacking in merit. At any rate, he took but a brief while to turn it over in his mind, when he set to work to put it to a practical test.

The toughness of the sheets made them preferable to the softer and more yielding blankets, and the youth decided to use them exclusively. Each, of course, had been put together by deft hands and spinning-wheel, and was of firm, strong texture. Jethro was so familiar with where these were stowed, through his work of loading and unloading, that he found no trouble when compelled to labor in total darkness.

One by one the sheets were drawn forth, until six of them were tumbled upon the floor at his feet. He opened wide the door, that the faint moonlight should give help in arraying himself in his novel costume. Then, making sure that the rifle was not forgotten this time, he wrapped himself round and round, again and again, until he resembled an enormous pillow stood on one end.

He made sure that the folds projected above his hat, and would shut out all bullets that might hurtle against the unique helmet. At the same time the covering descended so low about his ankles that it trailed upon the ground, and portended disaster in case of haste upon his part.

Now that the essay was to be pushed to a conclusion, Jethro was wise in taking every possible precaution.

Peering through the door, he scanned the clearing to the river, as it was revealed by the moon, which just then was obstructed by passing clouds. Then he looked searchingly to the eastward, where, so far as he could tell, nothing threatened, and the same result followed a survey of the clearing in the opposite direction. Lastly, he peered through the rear window where had been displayed the flag of truce which he dextrously appropriated to his personal use.

This was the course he was inclined to take, and because of that he subjected it to the closest possible study.

Was it imagination, or did he really see the figures of one or two Indians standing motionless on the edge of the wood, as if waiting for him to come forth and place himself within their reach? Jethro stood intently watching them for some minutes, until in the obscured moonlight they vanished from sight.

"Guess dar ain't nobody dar," was his conclusion, as his spirits revived again; "anyway, I won't try to rout 'em out if dar is."

The uncertainty caused him to change his intention and decide to advance toward the wood near where Kenton had withdrawn the canoe from under the nose of the sleeping Shawanoe. A vague feeling of security hung around the flatboat. The youth was accustomed to that, having spent so much time on it, and if he were driven to it as a refuge, was confident of making a good defence with the aid of his rifle.

With that peculiar sensitiveness to little things which a man often displays in moments of danger, Jethro paused after reaching the outside, and, making sure that the latch-string was drawn inward, carefully closed the door behind him. Thus it was securely locked, and he reflected with a start that he had now burned his bridge behind him. If any enemies at that moment should charge upon him, he could not make use of the cabin, even though he stood near enough to it to reach it with his outstretched hand.

So far as he saw, no danger confronted him, and he resolutely struck off in the direction he had in mind, instantly discovering that the pains he had taken to protect his feet and ankles seriously interfered with his locomotion. He could take only very short steps, and naturally became impatient with his slow progress.

The figure that he cut was certainly grotesque to the last degree. His ample proportions were made much more ample

by the many thicknesses of spotless linen in which they were arrayed. The folds, extended above his head, naturally added to his height, so that he suggested a ghostly giant mincing across the clearing to the river.

The strangely good fortune which had accompanied the dusky youth did not desert him now when entering upon the most remarkable experience of his career. We have shown how he entered the cabin unchallenged, when, had he made the attempt a little earlier or later, assuredly he could not have escaped the bullet of one of the two Indians in the vicinity.

From what was afterward learned, the theory of Kenton and Boone was probably reasonably correct, though it did not fully explain all that took place.

When Kenton returned to the clearing toward the close of that day, there were two Shawanoes lurking in the vicinity. It may have been that The Panther, arranging the ambuscade further away at Rattlesnake Gulch, held a suspicion that the pioneers might turn back on their own trail and make a stand in the cabin, and he instructed these two warriors to remain and signal the fact to him, probably by some peculiar discharge of their rifles.

While one of them was moving through the woods, the other remained near the canoe and fell into a doze. It was at this juncture that Jethro Juggens entered the cabin unobserved. Soon after, the second Indian returned to the neighborhood of the other, who had awakened, and noted with amazement the loss of the boat.

One of these warriors set out to recover it, with what result has already been made known. The other remained in the vicinity of the clearing to watch things until his return. Discovering the presence of one of the party in the building, but, without any means of knowing his identity, he set out to dislodge him.

The voices which Jethro insisted he heard outside the door could very well have been the voice of a single warrior, such subterfuges being among the most common with the American race. After the man[oe]jvring back and forth between this Shawanoe and the youth, the former must have grown uneasy over the prolonged absence of his companion who had set out to recover the canoe. Abandoning the cabin with one or more occupants, he hurried along the river bank. This enterprise was more successful than the other, for he recovered the boat without the slightest injury to himself.

Thus it came about that when Jethro Juggens emerged from the cabin, bandaged and swathed from above the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, the extraordinary precaution was useless, and he might have walked forth with the assurance of one who was master of the situation.

But had he done so that which we have now to make known could never have taken place.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"IT'S AN ILL WIND THAT BLOWS NOBODY ANY GOOD."

Although Jethro Juggens was not in the slightest danger of molestation by the Shawanoes from the moment he emerged from the cabin and started across the clearing, he was not to escape all danger and a great scare.

He chafed at the binding of the linen armor about his ankles. He was impatient to walk faster, and could not do so in that situation. His strength was great, but a Hercules could not have overcome the obstacle without loosening it. Glancing to the right and left and on all sides, and seeing nothing threatening, he decided to end the intolerable annoyance in the only way possible. He therefore stopped short and stooped over to loosen the bandages.

But lo! it was impossible. His body was so confined that he could only make a slight inclination. The hands, which were partly covered, would not reach further than a point just above his knees.

"I' clar to gracious!" exclaimed the alarmed Jethro, straightening up like a jack-knife, "I's committed soocide. I'll nebber be able to get my feet free. I'll hab to lib dis way de rest ob my life, and dat won't be berry long."

But the first shock over, the truth gradually dawned upon him that inasmuch as he had wound himself up, he must possess the ability to unwind himself. All he had to do was to begin at the upper instead of the lower part of his body.

"Qu'ar I didn't tink ob dat," he said, with a chuckle at his own fright.

It was the work of but a few minutes to unwrap his body and limbs, when he kicked his feet free, and "Richard was himself again." By that time, however, he had entirely freed himself from the sheets, which he flung over his left arm, while he held his heavy gun in his right.

"What's de use ob smotherin' myself to def," he muttered. "Dar ain't no Injuns 'round, and dar won't be--gracious hebben."

From the edge of the wood, barely fifty feet away, a dark object issued and advanced straight upon him.

"Dat's de Panther! I knows him by his face; he wants to git eben wid me 'cause I wouldn't 'low him to stick his foot in my mouf."

Forgetful of the effective weapon he had in his hand, Jethro made a dash for the flatboat, his nearest refuge, and forgetful, too, of the voluminous folds over his arm, he tangled the lower ends about his feet and sprawled headlong to the ground. This completed the panic, and letting go of his rifle, he rolled over on his back and made desperate efforts to gather the mass of linen over his face and body, so as to protect him against bullet and knife and tomahawk, somewhat as a child covers its head at night to escape imaginary terrors.

There was so much of the stuff that the armoring of his head and limbs was quite effective, but his feet were left wholly unprotected. The only recourse left was to kick, which he proceeded to do with a vigor that would have sent any man flying had he come within reach of the whirring pedals.

When this had continued until Jethro was tired, he concluded that the demonstration had frightened off his enemy. Dropping his feet on the ground, he drew the covering of his face sufficiently to one side to permit him to peep forth. Seeing nothing, he ventured to raise his head a little higher and to look around.

The dark object that had thrown him into the panic was just disappearing from sight in the direction of the wood whence it came. There was enough moonlight at that moment for him to identify it.

"By gracious! it am a bar! I done forgot dat I had my loaded gun and could hab drapped him easy. If any ob de folks had come 'long while I lay on my back kickin' at de sky, dey would hab tought I had a bone in my froat and didn't know what to do wid it."

In all probability the bear, when he first appeared, intended to make an investigation, but the sight of a figure, smothered in sheets and with his feet thrumming in the air like a couple of drum sticks, must have frightened bruin into leaving the strange animal alone.

Jethro was disposed to make chase after the animal and bring him to account, but reflection showed the unwisdom of allowing any diversion to interfere with the plain dictates of duty.

"Dar's no tellin' what trouble Mr. Kenton may hab tumbled into widout habin' me dar to pull him out. De rest ob de folks

don't know how to shoot Injuns half as well as me."

It was evident the youth felt quite proud of his exploits, and who can blame him? He surely had warrant for his pride. He had decided to pay a visit to the flatboat even though time was so urgent. It lay close against the bank, just as it had been left earlier in the day, after the cargo was removed. Abandoning it before a chance was given to break it up, and with the vague hope that they might be permitted to turn it to account some time in the future, the pioneers offered it no harm, nor was it injured by the Indians who, later, came upon the scene.

Jethro stepped over the heavy gunwale and looked about him with peculiar interest, for, as is well known, that craft was the scene of many stirring incidents during the preceding twenty-four hours.

There was the long sweeping oar, balanced on a pivot at either end, with the handle reaching almost to the middle of the boat. That portion considered the stern (although in no respect did it differ from the bow) had the covered space, used as sleeping quarters for the females. At the other end was where the cooking was done.

In the bottom lay the two long poles to be used in controlling the boat when necessary, and, groping about, Jethro noticed the pieces of rope that had served to bind The Panther, and which no one had deemed valuable enough to be removed. Other pieces of board and a few fragments of articles were scattered around, but none was of any account. Jethro flung down his big armful of linen at the bow, and, sitting upon them, gave himself over to characteristic meditation.

There is no intellect so dull through which some bright thought does not now and then flash. It may come and go too quickly to be turned to account, but, all the same, it is that mystic throb which proves that all human souls are beating in unison with the divinity that created them.

Sitting thus at the prow of the flatboat, meditating upon the strange occurrences through which he had passed since leaving his old home in Virginia, a scheme gradually assumed definite form in the brain of Jethro Juggens, whose brilliancy and originality startled even himself.

And yet, when it comes to be analyzed, there was really nothing startling and brilliant in it. The wonder would have been, if any person, with a modicum of sense, could have held his place under similar circumstances and not thought of that which gradually worked its way into his consciousness.

There were the poles used in handling the flatboat; there were bits of rope scattered about the bottom of the craft. He was sitting upon almost half a score of tough, thin sheets of linen; he was the possessor of a sharp knife and was dextrous in its use; and the wind was blowing almost a gale from the west, and therefore directly up stream; why not sail the flatboat up the Ohio?

This was the question which at first held the youth breathless with the very grandeur and magnitude of the scheme; but, as fully considered, it became simple and more practical.

Jethro was far from suspecting the real use to which his scheme could be possibly put. He knew and suspected nothing of the desperate straits in which his friends were placed at that very hour. He had an altogether different project in view.

"Dey're pickin' dar way frough de woods, whar it's dark, and habing all sorts ob trouble. Dey can't see tings, and dat makes it wusser; de one dat's walkin' at de head will be sartin to hab a limb cotch him under his chin and raise him off his feet; den he'll feel like sw'aring, but will be afeared to do so, 'cause de heathen might oberhear him and stop him, and make him explanify de meanin' of his discumvations.

"De tramp wouldn't be much if de sun war shinin' so dat dey could walk long widout steppin' on snakes. When dey see me come sailin' up de ribber, why, dey will be so pleased dat Mr. Altman won't--dat is, he won't obsist on my workin' so hard, and Mrs. Altman won't frow out so many digustin' hints 'bout de bigness ob my appertite."

Having labored up to his decision, Jethro Juggens threw away no time in carrying it out. It really seemed as if everything had been directed for the last hour or two to prepare this very course to him. The failure of the wooden box to serve him as an armor, and the resort to the sheets of linen, the turning of his steps toward the flatboat, and, above all, that strong, steadily-blowing west wind--many persons would have seen something more than a mere coincidence in these things, and who shall say that this view would not have been right?

The task that presented itself to Jethro Juggens, though a hard one, was by no means impossible. His keen-edged knife soon fashioned excavations in the soft planking at the sides, through which he passed some of the pieces of rope and fastened one of the poles in an upright position, or nearly so, for he was wise enough to place it so that it leaned backward like the masts of ordinary sailing vessels. He secured this as strongly as he could, and then did the same with

the second pole on the other side, and directly opposite the first.

He had now two strong uprights or masts. He examined and tested them until certain that nothing more could be done to add to their firmness. Then he set to work to knot or tie a number of the sheets together at the corners, until a sail was fashioned of the right dimensions, and this, in turn, was secured to the masts.

He went about the business with that deliberation and care which marks the skilled workman. Almost any one, placed as he was, would have been hasty, nervous and unfitted to do a good job. It would have been neglected at some point, and, consequently, disaster would have come at the beginning of the enterprise. Jethro wrought as though such a thing as danger was not within a hundred miles, and that, too, when he had recently passed through some terrifying incidents.

When the work was completed, he had a sail containing something like fifty square feet, the sheets secured together with no little skill, and the masts so strongly set that they could be relied upon, unless some unusual cause interfered with them. The only probable contingency to cause misgiving was the wind.

That would not always blow from the west, and it might cease within an hour, or even less time.

"It may get contrary," reflected Jethro, "and turn de oder way; if dat am de case, dis old boat will go kitin' down de Ohio till we strike de Massissip--and den--I done forgot what dat riber runs into, but if I discomember incorrectly, it am de Red Sea; don't want to go dar, so I'll jump ober board, if I can't stop de boat, and take to de woods.

"Mebbe de gale will twist 'round and come from de souf; under dem sarcummentions de boat'll bang in 'mong de trees and smash tings. If Mr. Kenton had managed to got 'long when I ain't wid him, and Mr. Boone don't fall down and hurt hisself, why dem two might got de Injins togeder and hold dem on de Kentucky shore, while I run ober' em wid de flatboat.

"Dat would gib' em such a good squshin' dat dey wouldn't bother us for a good while. It happens, howsumeber, just now dat de wind am blowin' right, and we kin sail up de Ohio as fur as we want, dat is," qualified Jethro, "if we don't want to go furder dan de wind will took us--but why don't the old ting start?"

The sail was spread, and the strong gale was impinging dead against it, and yet, strange to say, the flatboat remained as motionless as if sunk at the bottom of the river.

CHAPTER XIX.

A FELLOW-PASSENGER.

Jethro Juggens was alarmed on the very threshold of his strange enterprise by the threatened danger of failure. When everything was ready to start, the flatboat refused to stir so much as an inch.

In the hope of helping matters, he swung the bow oar a number of times, so as to turn the head out in the stream. It moved a foot or two, and then became stationary, gradually working back to its former position. Then he tried the same thing with the stern oar, accomplishing about as much as if he had attempted to overturn a rock.

"Dat beats de dickens!" muttered the puzzled youth, stopping to rest himself. "Qu'ar de wind am jes' strong enough to hold de boat stock still. I guess I'll onwestigate."

And, doing so, the mystery was speedily solved. He had forgotten to hoist the anchor, which lay imbedded on the bottom, on the outside of the boat near the stern.

"I'll neber tell nobody dat," he said, ashamed of the blunder. Lifting the heavy weight over his gunwale, he dropped it in the bottom of the boat, which immediately began gliding slowly up stream. With the aid of the long paddles, he easily worked the craft so far out in the stream that there was no danger of running into any of the overhanging limbs and vegetation.

Jethro did not make the mistake of paddling the flatboat into the middle of the current, which was so much stronger there as to impede, if not to check, its progress altogether. And, as before stated, there could be no saying how much longer this favorable wind would continue.

The dusky youth overflowed with complacency when he sat down at the prow and noticed the satisfactory trend of events.

He was within a dozen yards or so of the wooded bank, sometimes approaching still closer, in accordance with the configuration of the land. His desire to keep advancing, while the chance was his, led him to venture further in, in order to take advantage of the sluggish current. Once or twice he felt a projecting root graze the bottom, and again the craft came almost to a standstill from partially grounding in a shallow portion. Its momentum, however, carried it over into deeper water, when its speed instantly increased.

Seeing nothing for him to do, Jethro seated himself at the bow, with his rifle resting in the boat near him, and his feet hanging over the water.

"Mr. Kenton and Boone and Altman and Ashbridge and all de rest ob de folks couldn't hab tought ob dis if dey had put their minds altogeder onto it. It was Jethro Juggens dat trotted out de idee. Some folks tinks he ain't much more dan a fool, and mebbe he ain't, but he knows a ting or two, and when dey cotch sight--"

At that instant the flatboat struck a shallow portion with such suddenness that it instantly stopped, and the youth, unprepared for the shock, sprawled overboard with a loud splash.

Nothing more serious than a shock and wetting resulted, and when he clambered to his feet the water did not reach to his knees. Grasping the prow with his huge hand, and applying his prodigious strength, he easily forced the front of the boat into deeper water and swung himself over the gunwale.

"Dat sort of bus'ness am inconwenieut, and it musn't happen agin."

Several sweeps of the two oars, he grasped one in either hand, worked the craft sufficiently far from land to prevent any repetition of his mishap. Then, caring naught for his moistened clothing, he sat down at the prow again.

The boat was moving steadily up stream, with more speed, indeed, than it had ever shown descending it. So long as the strong wind blew from the west this progress would continue. The moon, veiled at intervals by the drifting masses of clouds, sometimes revealed the trees on his right sweeping backward and occasionally, when the light was wholly unobstructed, he could catch the dim shadowy outlines of the Ohio shore. Not only was the water rippled by the bow of the boat as it forced its way forward, but it was broken into tiny chopping seas by the action of the gale.

The roving eyes detected no sign of life in any direction. The gloom was not pierced even by the starlike twinkle of some Indian campfire or signal light, but the dull boom of a rifle report, rolling over the river from the direction of Rattlesnake Gulch, proved that life, fierce, alert and vigilant, still throbbed with terrifying intensity.

It so came about that the second Shawanoe, he who succeeded in recapturing the canoe from Simon Kenton, was returning in the direction of the clearing. The sagacious warrior knew the ranger would be quick to discover the theft of his property, and would make search for it. Only by the utmost care and skill could he escape an encounter with the terrible scout, whom he held in unspeakable dread.

It was natural, therefore, that he should give his closest attention to the shore he was skirting, confident that that was the only direction whence danger could come. So, while the canoe skimmed the water, he held his gaze on the bank, and watched and listened with the acuteness of long training.

"Who dar?"

The question was asked in a sepulchral voice, and would have startled the bravest man. The head of the Indian whirled about like a flash, and he saw that which, it is safe to say, no member of his race had ever seen--an Ohio flatboat gliding up stream, with a broad spread of white sail, and moving with a noiselessness of death itself.

More than that, it was almost upon him. Only by dextrous work could he save himself from being run down. Less than a dozen feet separated them.



THE PHANTOM BOAT.

Glancing at the frightful object, the Shawanoe observed the figure of a sturdy, broad-shouldered man, standing near the bow with his rifle in his grasp. The sight was more than he could stand. With a frantic sweep of his paddle he drove the canoe like a swallow against the bank, leaped out and dashed into the woods.

"Dat chap acts as dough he am scared," remarked Jethro, in doubt whether or not to fire; "de next time, I 'spose, I oughter shoot fust and den make my obspectful inquiries afterward."

The incident was hardly over when to the surprise and disappointment of the youth the progress of the boat began to slacken, soon ceased, and then it slowly floated down stream. The wind had died out more suddenly than it had risen. He quickly dropped the anchor overboard.

"Wonder how fur I've come," he thought, peering at the bank and unable to locate himself; "reckon I must hab come fifteen or twenty miles--but dat can't be either, for de folks at de block-house would hab seen me if I didn't see dem--hulloa! dat chap must tink he knows me; it ain't him after all."

The canoe which had shot under the bank so suddenly, now emerged again and paddled straight towards the flatboat, only a short distance away. The action so startled the dusky youth that he would have acted upon his own suggestion of firing before asking any questions, had he not perceived that the occupant was a white man.

"Dat can't be Mr. Kenton or Boone," mused Jethro, closely studying the stranger. "No, it am somebody dat hasn't de honor ob my obquaintance. Him and me ain't neber met afore."

As the individual came closer and was more plainly shown in the dim moonlight, he was seen to be a sturdy man in middle life, dressed much the same as Mr. Ashbridge and Altman--that is, with more regard for the fashions of the age than was shown by men like Boone and Kenton.

"Good evening," he called, nodding his head in salutation; "may I come aboard?"

"Who am yo'? Am yo' name Girty?" asked Jethro, in doubt whether to permit the man to join him, now that his canoe was near enough to permit him to do so. His appearance was pleasing, and his voice had a hearty ring about it, but the African, since he was master of the situation, felt he could not be too careful of his company.

The stranger laughed at the question asked him, and replied:

"Bless me, that's the first time I was ever taken for Mr. Girty. You seem to be alone on the boat."

Jethro suspected this to be a trick meant to make him unmask his weakness. He was not to be caught that way.

"No, sah! dar's whar yo's mistooken, sah. Dan'l Kenton and Simon Boone, and 'leven oder gemman am in dis boat wid me, and if yo'----"

"Tut, tut," interrupted the stranger, with another laugh, so genial in its character that it disarmed the youth.

"Scoose me; I meant to say dat dem folks would like to be wid me."

"My son, you and I are the best of friends; you surely have no misgiving regarding me; my name is Finley."

And, with this remark, he stepped over the gunwale and cordially shook the hand of Jethro, who was won by his looks and manner. He helped fasten the canoe at the side of the flatboat, and invited the visitor to seat himself upon the remaining sheets at the stern, an invitation that was so agreeably accepted that Jethro was certain he had never met so delightful a gentleman.

There may be some among my readers who have recognized the name of the man who paddled out in the canoe as among the most honored in the early history of the West. He was James B. Finley, the famous missionary, whose career is one of the brightest pages among the many stained by cruelty, vice and crime. For years he carried his life in his hands, traversing the vast stretches of wilderness with rifle over his shoulder, living on the game brought down by his own marksmanship, or what he could obtain in the lodges of the red men or the cabins of the pioneers. He slept in the woods, freezing by the lonely campfire, or sweltering in the smothering heat of the summer sun.

And wherever this devoted man went, he carried the message of his Master. He labored unceasingly in His vineyard, illustrating precept by his own example, and winning many to the right way, not only among the rough bordermen, but from among the fierce warriors themselves.

Without turning aside in this place to refer more fully to Rev. Mr. Finley, the interesting fact should be recalled that it was under his exhortation that Simon Kenton, years subsequent to the events we are now recording, professed conversion, and became a deeply devout man.

The missionary showed his tact by making no reference to the tremendous falsehood he had just brought home to Jethro Juggens.

Laying his hand in a fatherly way upon the shoulder of the youth, he remarked:

"You will believe me, my son, when I tell you I am surprised."

"Yes, I offen s'prise folks."

"What is your name, please?"

Jethro answered all his questions truthfully and respectfully, so that in a few minutes the gentleman gained a fair understanding of the incidents in which the colored youth had been involved during the past few days, and which placed him in his present extraordinary situation.

"I have seen a great many flatboats pass down the river," remarked Mr. Finley, at the close of the interesting narrative, "but this is the first time I ever saw any go up stream."

"Yes, I tinked I'se begun de fashine."

"But why is it you are at rest?"

"Cause de anchor am drapped overboard."

"But don't you notice that the wind is blowing again, and the boat will move readily."

Jethro had not observed the fact until his friend reminded him of it. Then he made haste to hoist the anchor, and once more the flatboat resumed its singular voyage up the Ohio.



CHAPTER XX.

WAR'S STRATEGY.

Even after considerable more conversation than has been recorded, Jethro Juggens and the missionary had much to learn of each other.

The youth was especially puzzled to understand how it was that almost immediately following the flight of the Shawanoe in the extremity of panic, the good man should have paddled out to the flatboat in the canoe that had been so hurriedly deserted.

"That was a curious circumstance," said Mr. Finley, musingly; "sit down beside me and I will tell you about it."

"It's bery glad to do so," replied Jethro, placing himself at a respectful distance from the good man, "if you don't tink I had better keep a lookout dat we don't run by the block-house afore we knows it."

"My dear boy, we are still a long way from that. Have no fear. From what you have told me I see you understand that sad times are coming between the white people and the Indians of this region."

"Yes, sah."

"I and many of my friends have been expecting it for weeks and months past, and have done all we could to prevent the dreadful state of things that is now at hand."

"How was it you tried to prevent it?" asked Jethro, feeling that he ought to say something when the missionary paused; "was yo' idee to get all de Injuns togeder, tie' em fast to de trees, and den let the trees fall down on 'em and mash 'em?"

"No, we had a better plan than that," gravely replied the missionary, making sure the youth did not see the flitting smile; "I went among the different tribes and talked with the chiefs and leaders, and strove in every way possible to show them not only the wickedness of going upon the war-path, but that in the end they themselves must be the chief sufferers."

Jethro Juggens turned his head and stared at the speaker in amazement.

"And did yo' go right 'mong de heathen all alone by yo'self?"

"That's the only way in which I could have gone. They would not have allowed me to have any companions, for that would have shown I distrusted them."

"Wal, didn't yo' obstrust them?" inquired the youth, to whom the whole business was a mystery.

"I cannot deny that I felt I was in danger of violence at times, but when I took up the work of my Master I expected that, and therefore was not disappointed. If it was the will of Heaven that I should yield my life at any time, I was always ready. You know, my son, that that is the true way to live."

"Yes, sah."

"So it never caused me any discomfort. The only uneasiness a person should feel is whether he is ready for the call when it comes. Well, to return to what you asked me about, it soon became clear to me that the worst sort of trouble was at hand. The Indians have defeated the expeditions sent against them, until many believe our government is not strong enough to conquer them. They need a crushing defeat, just such as I am sure the next battle will be, before we can secure a lasting peace for the frontier. I was engaged in this business when I approached the Ohio this evening. At the moment of reaching the river I caught sight of this boat and the ingenious arrangement you have made. I saw the terrified Indian whom you hailed dash to shore and flee in mortal fright into the woods.

"There was not enough light for me to recognize him," continued the missionary, speaking as though every person, American and Caucasian, in that vast region was an acquaintance. "I called to him, but he paid no heed, and inasmuch as he had left his canoe behind him and I wished to cross the river, I thought I might as well call upon you."

"What yo' want to cross de riber fur?" asked Jethro, without reflecting that his question approached impertinence.

"Just now, I am looking for a chief known as Wa-on-mon, or, as his own people call him, The Panther."

"Do yo' know dat debbil?" demanded the amazed youth, springing to his feet and looking down in the face of the

surprised missionary, who replied:

"I have known him a good many years, have slept in his lodge, have fondled his two children, have hunted with him, and placed my life in his hands times without number."

Jethro could hardly express his astonishment at this information. Aside from what he had seen of the fierce chieftain, he could not forget the character given him by Simon Kenton. In his way, he related the proposed duel to the death between the ranger and the leader of the Shawanoes.

Mr. Finley listened with the deepest interest, for he felt a strong attachment to both of the parties, and he cherished the hope that the fearful personal encounters between them would give way, sooner or later, to a more charitable, if not to a gentler feeling.

"De reason de fout didn't take place," explained Jethro, "was 'cause de Panther got scared and runned away."

The reply was, in effect, that which was made by Daniel Boone when discussing the question with Kenton.

"You are mistaken in supposing Wa-on-mon was frightened; he is afraid of no man."

"What den made him get skeered at Mr. Kenton?"

"He did not. The Panther's heart is full of bitterness toward the white people. He saw, by hurrying off, a chance to do greater harm to those whom he regards as intruders upon the hunting grounds of his people; that is why the two did not meet."

"Mr. Kenton says de Panther hab shot women and children, and done de wust tings dat you can tink of."

"Simon Kenton is a truthful man."

"And I know he hab tried to do a worser ting dan dat."

"Impossible! What can it be?"

"He tried to step into my mouf when I war asleep."

The brave old pioneer preachers were as full of humor as they were of tenderness or pathos. Mr. Finley threw back his head and shook with laughter, though it was noticeable that it was as silent as that of Leatherstocking when that inimitable hero was amused with anything that took place in the woods.

The missionary made the youth give him the particulars of the incident, and despite the tragic atmosphere by which it was surrounded, he appreciated its grotesque features. Before he had grasped the whole occurrence he shuddered at the tempest of fury that he knew had been awakened to life in the breast of the terrible chieftain of the Shawanoes.

"To think of his being flung to the ground by this young man, of his being struck by him, and then bound and held for hours in captivity--ah, me! I pray that this colored youth may never fall into the power of Wa-on-mon. Much I fear that yesterday's events have so deepened the hatred of the chieftain, that the truth can make little impression upon his heart."

By questioning and comment, Mr. Finley gradually gained an accurate idea of the perilous situation of the pioneers who were on their way to the block-house to escape the storm that was already bursting from the sky. The information, however, that he filtered through the brain of Jethro Juggens could not fail to be mystifying in more than one respect.

Thus he knew that the pioneers had started up the Kentucky side of the river for Capt. Bushwick's block-house, and, before going far, had come to a halt, while Kenton returned to the clearing in quest of the canoe that had been left there beside the flatboat. His natural object, it would seem, in taking this course, was to secure the smaller craft for use in transporting the women and children to the other side of the Ohio. Why he should have taken Jethro Juggens as a companion could not be conjectured.

Another self-evident fact caused the missionary less misgiving than would be supposed. Kenton had captured the canoe, for he and it were gone when the youth boarded the flatboat. Furthermore, the craft in which the visitor paddled out to the flatboat was the very one, as identified by Jethro, which, in some way, had been recaptured from the ranger. The presence of the warrior in the boat seemed to point with absolute certainty to the conclusion that the Shawanoe had slain the great pioneer before wresting the property from him.

But Mr. Finley did not accept that theory, and was willing to await an explanation in the near future.

An inexpressibly greater and more distressing problem lay beyond that, as to the ultimate fate of the two families

turned back, as may be said, on the threshold of success. The action of Kenton and Boone told their anxiety to place them on the same side of the Ohio with the block-house, and it indicated with equal certainty the appearance of some frightful danger in their front.

That danger must be The Panther and his war party. Thus, it will be perceived, that by a course of rapid reasoning the missionary was approaching a correct idea of the situation.

He knew nothing of Rattlesnake Gulch, for the pioneer circuit preachers of the west had to traverse too many vast areas of wilderness to become minutely familiar with every portion; but the checking of the fugitives, or the turning back of their real leader, could mean but one thing; they had discovered the presence of The Panther and his Shawanoes in their path.

All and considerably more than the foregoing being conceded, the missionary could not but regard the turning over to him of the invaluable canoe, to say nothing of the flatboat itself, as providential. There was now abundant means to carry the imperiled ones to the other shore.

But missionary Finley was too familiar with the people of the West, and too well versed in woodcraft, to feel over-confidence, or to believe that it was plain sailing into the haven of absolute safety. If The Panther had cut off the flight of the fugitives to the block-house, he was not the one to permit them to flank the danger by means of the canoe.

The first step necessary, as it seemed to the good man, was to open communication in some way with Simon Kenton.

"Have you any idea where he is?" he asked of Jethro.

"Yes--I feels purty suah, and it makes me feel bad."

"Where can he be?"

"He fell out dat canoe and got drowned; I feels bad 'cause I neber oughter left Mr. Kenton alone. He took me 'long to hab care ob him, and I outer feel dat I am to blame for his drownin'."

"Have no alarm about that. Kenton is too good a swimmer to lose his life in that way."

"But he mout get de cramps."

"He might, but he didn't. He probably awaited your return as long as it was safe, and then continued up the river to join his friends. In some way he lost the canoe to the Shawanoe, who abandoned it to me."

"I should tink dat he would come back to look for de boat."

"The same thought has occurred to me, I hope he has done so, for then we shall be pretty sure to see him. But, after all, if he set out for that purpose, he has probably given it up and returned, or he would have shown himself before."

All this time the flatboat, with its broad spread of sail, was gliding steadily up the Ohio, keeping as close as was prudent to the Kentucky shore.

An odd thought had gradually assumed form in the mind of the missionary. He had noted the headlong panic into which the single Shawanoe was thrown by the sudden sight of the fantastic craft, and he asked himself whether, such being the case, The Panther and his warriors could not be temporarily frightened, and advantage taken of it.

"At any rate it is worth trying," was his conclusion.

But in arriving at this belief, it did not occur to the good man that the seeming apparition might produce the same effect upon the white men as upon the Shawanoes.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PHANTOM OF THE RIVER.

The reader has long since penetrated the cause of the panic into which Simon Kenton was thrown--a panic as wild, as unreasonable and uncontrollable as that of the single Shawanoe, some time before, when he plunged into the forest and fled as if from the pursuit of the evil one himself.

There were no more superstitious men living than the daring pioneers and scouts of the West. Never hesitating to meet death, and courageously facing peril before which most people would have cowered, they demanded that that death and that peril should present themselves in tangible form. In other words, they shrank at receiving no blows, provided the opportunity was given them of striking effective blows in return.

In trailing an enemy, when the "crossing of the ways" was reached, that is, where it was impossible to decide from evidence the right path to take, the question was often decided by a flirt of a hunting-knife; whichever course the implement indicated when it fell, was accepted as the finger of Providence, and was followed with as much unflinching vigor as though the possibility of an error did not exist. In many other respects was this belief in signs and the awe of the supernatural shown.

The brief, terrified glance of Kenton revealed to him an Ohio flatboat moving up the river against the current--something which in all his varied experience he had never seen. The same glance showed a yawning white spread across the craft, as if it were the upturned wing of some monster swimming on its side in the water.

Without pausing to reflect that this appearance was the key to the whole mystery, the brave man gave way to terror, and, throwing discretion to the winds, dashed into the enclosure among his friends with the exclamation:

"Boys, we're lost! We're lost! There's a ghost coming up the river!"

His words and manner threw the others into consternation. While it is certain that some would have shown more coolness, yet nothing is more contagious than fear, and the panic of one considered the clearest-headed and most daring of the rangers caused the rest for a brief while to bid good-by to their senses.

Forgetful of the Shawanoes near at hand, and thinking of nothing but the new and dreadful peril, the men and women made haste to gather about the tall figure that advanced almost to the middle of the inclosure before checking himself.

"What is it, Kenton? For heaven's sake, tell us!"

"Where is it? What does it look like?"

"Keep your head, Simon," counselled Boone, in the babel of exclamations, "and tell us what it is the ghost of."

"You remember t'other flatboat," said Kenton, partially recovering his self-mastery, "the one the MacDougalls was on, and they was all killed?"

"Yes, of course, of course," replied several.

"Wal, the ghost of that flatboat is coming up the river; it's right off shore; it'll be among us in a few minutes; we had better take to the woods."

And, incredible as it may seem, the intrepid scout would have led the absurd stampede, had not his elder and cooler friend laid his hand on his arm.

"Simon, you ain't yourself; don't forget the varmints are all around us."

"Dan'l," returned Kenton, sharply, "did you ever see a ghost?"

"I have not."

"Wal, if you want to see one, walk down to the edge of the river and there it is! As for me, I want to git away afore it comes any closer; but I forgot 'bout the varmints; I'll wait till you folks have a look at it, and then we'll all run."

Evidently, the ranger was rallying from his panic.

Among the group that gathered around him were several who were quick to recover from their own fright, and to see that the true course was to investigate the cause of the latter's state of mind.

"Wait here till I take a look for myself," said George Ashbridge, touching the elbow of his father; "there's something in this that I don't understand; I will be gone but a few minutes; it's the strangest condition of affairs I ever knew."

He whisked off in the obscurity and quickly reached the river side.

Meanwhile, Missionary Finley gave proof of his sagacity. Having decided to use the flatboat and its sail as a possible weapon, he had risen to his feet, and with hands grasping the bow oar was figuring as to how he could discover the proper point at which to work the boat to land.

He had made up his mind to emit a signal which would be recognized either by Boone or Kenton, if it reached their ears, when across the brief, intervening space he heard the threshing and the terrified exclamations of his old friend.

"Here we are, Jethro! This is the place! Now, work with a will!"

Both bent their strong arms to the task, and the water was churned at each end of the craft by the broad blades that swept deep and powerful like the arms of a propeller. The bulky boat responded and began approaching the bank, no more than a couple of rods distant.

In this hurly-burly of affright and excitement, the missionary compressed his lips to keep back the tugging smile. He had caught the first words uttered by Kenton, identified his voice, and understood the cause of his alarm.

"If it please Heaven to deliver us all from peril," was the thought of Finley, "I shall not forget this affair; and I will make sure that Simon is not allowed to forget it."

It was only a minute or two later that George Ashbridge hurried to the margin of the water. The sweep of the long oars and the sight of the flatboat itself, with the spread of sail above it, all so near that they were recognized at the first glance, told the whole amazing story to the young man, though, as yet, he could not comprehend how it had all come about.

One of the figures toiling at the sweeps was Jethro Juggens; he could form no suspicion as to the identity of the other.

"Is that you, Jethro?" called Ashbridge, in a guarded undertone.

"It am," was the proud response; "keep out ob de way, Marse George, or dis boat will run ober you. We's comin' like thunder."

"There! that will do," said the missionary, as the boat struck sideways, almost abreast of where the youth was standing; "we couldn't have made a better landing. Good evening, my friend; I am sure we are welcome."

With these cheery words the man, with his rifle in his left hand, stepped across the gunwale upon the hard earth and extended his right to young Ashbridge.

"My name is Finley--James B. Finley; I am a missionary for Ohio and Kentucky, and joined your young friend hero to see whether I can be of any help to you and those with you."

"And an angel could not be more welcome," was the fervent response of the youth, returning the warm pressure of the good man.

"There seems to be trouble here," said he, with grave concern.

"We are in sore straits, indeed; we have been resting for a good while, afraid to go on, for there is an ambuscade of the Indians just beyond, into which they are waiting for us to enter."

"I presume the Shawanoes are in charge of The Panther."

"So Daniel Boone tells us."

"I feared as much; I'm glad that Boone is with you."

"And so is Kenton."

"Yes; I recognized his voice; he seems to be a little disturbed by the appearance of our craft."

"I never knew it was possible for a man like him to become so frightened. He seems to have lost his wits."

"They will soon return to him; he's a noble fellow."

"Jes' let me know what you want done," remarked Jethro Juggens, who had placed the anchor so as to hold the flatboat motionless; "don't forget dat I fixed up dis yer contrivance."

"Yes, all the credit belongs to him. He will explain when there is time; we have not a minute to spare now; it looks as if the appearance of the boat has given the red men, as well as the others, a scare."

"No doubt of that, and Kenton's performance has had a good deal to do with it, for he upset our people completely."

"We must take instant advantage of this diversion, which is providential; let us go to your friends at once."

The missionary set off with young Ashbridge at his side and Jethro Juggens immediately behind them. A few brief, hurried steps took them to the group, whose members were beginning to regain a part at least of their senses.

It was no occasion for Mr. Finley to indulge in any pleasantry at the expense of his old friend, Simon Kenton, however appropriate it might be at another time. His words were grave, quick and prompt, as were becoming. He hurriedly shook hands with Boone, Kenton and the rangers, to all of whom he was well known and by them held in high esteem. He greeted the others warmly in turn, using his tongue while doing so.

"The appearance of the flatboat is so strange that it gave you all a good scare, and no wonder that it did so. It has produced the same effect upon The Panther's party, else they would not have allowed us to land or permitted this passing back and forth; but like you they will soon recover from it; one must use this opportunity, so providentially placed in our way."

"That's the right kind of talk," remarked Kenton, who was already humiliated at the part he had played a short time before.

"From what Jethro told me, you have little, if any, luggage with you."

"Only what we can carry in our hands," replied Mr. Altman.

"So far as I can judge, you are all gathered in this spot--a thing you would not be permitted to do but for the fright of the Indians. Follow me then; I will lead the way."

Less time than would be supposed was occupied in this broken conversation. As stated, the words of the missionary were quickly uttered, and he showed his promptness by wheeling about and moving down the gentle incline toward the river. It seemed strange for him to take the lead of a party of rangers, among whom were Daniel Boone and Simon Kenton, but his leadership was only for the moment, and could have been assumed by Jethro Juggens himself, for it signified an advance only to the flatboat itself.

Boone, with several quick strides, placed himself beside the preacher.

"Have a care," he continued. "I don't understand what makes the varmints so quiet."

"Because they are scared, as all of you were by the flatboat and its sail."

"The only one of us skeered was Simon," corrected the great pioneer, "and then he skeered us by the way he carried on."

"Well, any one of you would have been just as much frightened as he, and I suspect the rumpus he created had something to do with the panic of the Shawanoes; but you are right; it will not last long, and it may be over already."

The habit of caution to which all the rangers were trained asserted itself. Grasping their rifles firmly, they involuntarily assumed a crouching pose and stepped lightly forward, as if afraid the slightest footfall would betray them. They glanced to the right and left, and more than once fancied they discerned shadowy forms stealing here and there in the gloom.

It was natural, perhaps, that a different and somewhat peculiar feeling should influence the two families of settlers. They felt as if they would ignore the existence of enemies in their immediate neighborhood; they would forget that any danger of that nature ever threatened them at all, and devote their utmost energies to hurrying forward to the flatboat. They held their gaze in that direction, and tried to pierce the gloom and see nothing but the single object upon which their hope was fixed.

Mr. Ashbridge and his wife clasped a hand of Mabel between them. Mr. Altman and his wife clung to each other, while George Ashbridge had fallen slightly to the rear with Agnes, while the rangers seemed to straggle irregularly forward, as they had done when pushing through the woods, but, in truth, they were advancing in accordance with a well-defined idea of the best course to follow at this time.

Finley, Kenton and Boone held their places at the head, and the fugitives speedily reached the river side, where the unpleasant fact became apparent that the wind, which had been blowing so long and steadily, had dropped to a degree

that it could no longer be of any help to them.



CHAPTER XXII.

PUTTING OUT FROM SHORE.

Not a moment was to be lost. Everything depended upon boarding the flatboat and pushing off at once from shore. The party was so large that the craft was sure to be crowded, but its buoyancy was sufficient to carry still more.

To most of the party hurrying on board, the silence and inactivity of the Shawanoes were incomprehensible. That they had been partially dazed was fair to believe, but it could not continue long. The presence of the boat, with its sail still spread, against the bank, must tell the story to the fierce red men, who ought to be as quick to recover from it as were the pioneers.

It mattered not that the wind had failed. The one point was to get the flatboat away from land, and out into the stream. That done, a long step would be taken toward safety. The ambushade would be flanked and avoided.

"You can't hurry too much," said the missionary, beginning to show nervousness now that the critical moment was at hand. He helped the women on board, and did what he could to prevent the confusion caused at this juncture by the crowding. He expected that a volley would come every moment from the gloom along the shore, and therefore held his station where his body would be most likely to shield the helpless ones.

Amid the confusion there was something approaching order, and it can be said that no time was thrown away. Within a minute of reaching the flatboat it seemed that every one of the pioneers was on board.

"Lay down," whispered Boone, addressing the settlers especially; "the varmints are sartin to fire afore you can get out on the river--"

"Dar goes dat canoe," called Jethro Juggens, who managed to be the first on board.

The little boat had been swung around and fastened to the farther side of the more bulky craft, so as to allow the latter to approach nearer the land. The youth was doing what he could to aid his friends (really doing nothing), when he observed the canoe several feet away with the intervening space steadily increasing.

"Jump over after it," commanded Kenton, who himself would have done what he ordered but for the need of his presence on the flatboat.

"Drop dat boat!" shouted Jethro, addressing (with a view of impressing those around him) an imaginary foe. At the same moment, leaving his gun behind him, he leaped overboard and swam powerfully toward the little craft. The clothing of the youth had not yet dried from the wetting received by his bath earlier in the evening, and at this sultry season of the year a plunge in the river was pleasant than otherwise.

Jethro ought to have noticed that while the canoe was drifting with the current it was also approaching the middle of the Ohio. That could hardly take place without the interference of some one.

But the powerful youth noted not the significant fact, and swam with lusty stroke straight for the little boat that had changed hands so frequently during the last few hours, and been the cause of more than one furious wrangle. Only a second or two was necessary to reach it, and he laid his hand on the gunwale.

At that instant a Shawanoe warrior rose from the interior of the canoe, and lifted his hand in which was clasped a knife, with the purpose of burying it with vicious energy in the breast of the astonished youth.

"Whew! gorrynation! I didn't know yo' war dar!" gasped Jethro, dropping like a loon beneath the surface just in time to escape the ferocious thrust.

The Shawanoe leaned so far out, with upraised weapon, to strike the African when he came up, that the canoe careened almost upon its side. He was in this attitude of expectancy when, from the flatboat, came the sharp crack of a rifle, and the savage plunged over, head first, with a smothered shriek, and sank from sight.

"I expected something of the kind," muttered Simon Kenton, who, amid the tumult around him, proceeded to reload his rifle with as much coolness as if he were in the depth of the forest and had just brought down a deer or bear.

From the undergrowth immediately above where the boat was pushing from land, a second warrior, whose zeal outran his discretion, emitted a ringing whoop, and dashed straight at the crowding fugitives. He was nearer Mrs. Altman than any of the others, and meant to bury his uplifted tomahawk in her brain, but when almost within reach he made a frenzied leap from the ground, and, with outspread arms and legs, tumbled forward on his face.

It was never clearly established who was quick enough to check the murderous miscreant in this fashion, for fighting had fairly begun and considerable shooting was going on; but the moon at that moment was unobscured, and Mr. Altman insisted that he saw Missionary Finley raise his rifle like a flash and discharge it in the direction of the warrior just at the instant before the husband could intervene in defence of his wife.

When the good man was afterward taxed with the exploit, so creditable to his coolness and courage, he showed a reluctance to discuss it. Pressed further, he would not admit the charge, and yet refrained from denial. It will be conceded, therefore, that the presumption is reasonable that Missionary Finley was the instrument of saving Mrs. Altman's life when it was in the gravest possible peril. Meanwhile Jethro Juggens found himself with interesting surroundings. Availing himself of his great skill in the water, he dived so deeply that his feet touched bottom and he came up a dozen rods away from the canoe and between it and the Ohio shore. The passing of the Shawanoe took place while the youth was beneath the surface, so that he was unaware of the true situation when he arose and stared at the boat.

"Gorrynation, if de t'ing ain't upsot!" was his exclamation when he had approached somewhat nearer and saw the boat turned bottom upward.

The spasmodic lunge of the Shawanoe had overturned the craft, which resembled a huge tortoise, drifting with the current.

"He's walking on de bottom ob de ribber, wid dat boat ober his head, to keep from gettin' moonstruck. Dat can't be neither," added Jethro, "unless he am seventeen foot tall, and I don't tink he am dat high."

The gently moving arms of the swimmer came in contact with something. Closing his hands about it, he found it to be the oar flung out of the canoe by the overturning.

"Dat'll come handy," thought Jethro. "When he sticks out his head to get a bref ob air, I'll whack him wid de paddle till he s'renders."

After manoeuvring about the canoe for some minutes, a suspicion of the truth dawned upon the youth. Even when under the water he was able to hear the deadened reports of the rifles above, and he believed that one of the shots must have reached the occupant of the boat, whose frenzied leap capsized it.

Gathering courage after a few minutes, he grasped the canoe and managed to swing it back into proper position, but it contained so much water as to forbid its use until it was emptied. This could be done only by taking it ashore. Jethro therefore tossed the paddle inside, and grasping the gunwale with one hand, swam with the other toward Ohio. It may be added that he reached it without further event, and there for a time we will leave him to himself.

"Lie down!" thundered the missionary, seeing that his first order was only partially obeyed. "My good woman, I beg your pardon, but it must be done."

His words were addressed to Mrs. Ashbridge, who, in her anxiety for her husband and son, was exposing herself in the most reckless manner. As he spoke, he seized her in his arms as though she were but an infant, and placed her not too gently flat in the bottom of the boat.

"There! spend these minutes in prayer--no; that will never do," he added, grasping the shoulder of Agnes Altman, who, at that moment, attempted to rise; "keep down--all that is between you and death is that plank."

"But--but," pleaded the distressed girl, "tell father and George to be careful, won't you, please?"

"We are in the hands of God, my child, and have only to do our duty. Help us by causing no anxiety about yourselves."

The great necessity, as has been explained, was to work the flatboat away from land. The most direct means of doing this was by pushing with the poles that had been taken on board for that use; but they were fastened in place as supports for the sail that had brought the craft to this place. The sweeps would accomplish this work, but only slowly and by frightful exposure on the part of those swaying them.

Nevertheless, Jim Deane seized the bow sweep at the moment another ranger grasped the rear one, and both wrought with right good will.

Dark forms appeared in greater number along shore and near the craft itself. The gloom was lit up by flashes of guns, and the air was rent by the shouts of the combatants, for the white men could make as much noise as their enemies in the swirl and frenzy of personal encounter and deadly conflict.

Boone, Kenton, the missionary and most of the men had leaped into the flatboat and crouched low, where all seemed huddled together in inextricable confusion. The two were toiling at the sweeps, and the craft worked away from the shore with maddening tardiness. To some of the terrified inmates it did not seem to move at all.

"A little harder, Jim," called the missionary "shall I lend a hand?"

"No," replied Deane; "I'll fetch it, I don't need you--yes I do, too."

As he spoke, he let go of the sweep and sagged heavily downward.

"Are you hit?" asked the good man, raising the head upon his knee.

"I got my last sickness that time, parson--it's all up--good-by!"

The missionary would have said more, would have prayed with the fellow, despite the terrifying peril around him, had there been time to do so, but Jim Deane was dead.

"God rest his soul!" murmured the good man, gently laying down the head, and drawing the body as closely as he could to the gunwale, where it would be out of the way.

As from the first, the missionary exposed himself with the utmost recklessness, and, where the bullets were hurtling all about him, the wonder was that he had not already been struck; but the life of Rev. J. B. Finley was one of sacrifice, peril, suffering and hardship, in which his last thought was for himself. He was ready for the call of the dark angel, whether he came at midnight, morning, or high noon, and the angel did not come until after the lapse of many years, when the scenes such as we are describing had long passed away.

A strange and for a time wholly unaccountable occurrence took place near the stem of the flatboat, only a moment before Jim Deane was mortally smitten.

Simon Kenton had just withdrawn his attention from Jethro Juggens and his canoe, and was looking toward the bank at his elbow, when he uttered an exclamation, the meaning of which no one caught, or, if he did, failed to notice it in the tumult and hullabaloo. At the same moment the ranger gathered his muscles into one mighty effort, and made a leap toward shore.

Superb as was his skill in this direction, the distance was too great to be covered, and he stuck in the water, but so near land that he sank only to his waist. He struggled furiously forward, seemingly in the very midst of the Shawanoes, and was immediately lost to sight.

There was no time to inquire the meaning of this extraordinary action, and no one suspected it, but it became apparent within a brief space of time.

It was at this juncture that several noticed the wind had risen again. It was blowing not so strongly as before, but with sufficient power to start the flatboat slowly up stream. Boone called to all to keep down, while he, crouching close to the stem, held the oar so that it helped steer the craft into mid-stream.

The missionary did the same with the forward sweep, and, impelled by the wind, the craft slowly forged away from the Kentucky and toward the Ohio shore.

All hearts were beating high with hope and thankfulness when a piercing cry came from Mrs. Ashbridge.

"Where is Mabel? What has become of Mabel? Oh, where is she?"

Dismay reigned during the minute or two of frenzied search of the interior of the craft. The space was so small that the hunt was quickly over, with the dreadful truth established that little ten-year old Mabel Ashbridge was not on the flatboat.

Missionary Finley announced the fact when he said:

"She has fallen into the hands of the Shawanoes; that was the cause of Simon Kenton leaping ashore."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SHAWANOE CAMP.

How it all happened was never clearly established, but it is not to be supposed that in the tumult, the swirl, the confusion, the firing, shouting and dashing to and fro, that the coolest-headed Shawanoe or most self-possessed ranger could any more than keep a general idea of the hurricane rush of events. Special incidents were noted by different persons, as the circumstances favored them, while others saw and knew nothing of what took place under their very eyes.

Mr. and Mrs. Ashbridge hurried down the wooded slope in the gloom, each holding a hand of Mabel between them. At the side of the flatboat, where there were crowding in increased excitement, the parents released the child, and the father turned to help in the defence against the Indians, who immediately attacked them. Mabel entered the boat near the bow, and had crouched there several minutes, in obedience to the order of the missionary, to avoid the bullets that were whistling about, when the idea seized her that there were much better quarters at the stern, where the pushing was less.

The best way, as it struck her, to reach the spot, was by bounding ashore and darting the few paces thither. She made the attempt, and was in the act of leaping back when her arm was gripped by a warrior, who hurried her from the spot.

Although bewildered and partly dazed by the rush of events, the child resisted and screamed for help, but she was powerless in the hands of the sinewy savage, who forced her from the edge of the river.

It must be remembered, that in addition to the confusion it was night, and the partial moon in the sky was obscured at intervals by passing clouds. Beside, among the shadows of the wood the gloom was so deepened that the wonder is, not that none of Mabel's friends saw her capture but that Simon Kenton observed it.

He did so a minute later, and knew at once that the little one, if saved at all, must be saved instantly. He cleared most of the intervening space with his tremendous bound, and made for the Shawanoe like a cyclone. He had noted the point where the warrior had passed from view, as well as the general direction taken by him; consequently a quick dash in the right course ought to overtake him.

Such was the dash made by the ranger, at the imminent risk of colliding with tree-trunks, limbs, and boulders, and with the result that within twenty feet of the river he ran plump against the Indian who had the terrified child in charge, and with no suspicion of his furious pursuer.

The attack of the Bengal tiger upon the hunter that is throttling its whining cubs, is no fiercer, more resistless and lightning-like, than was the assault of Simon Kenton upon the buck that was making off with the little daughter of Norman Ashbridge.

It mattered not that the gloom was well-nigh impenetrable, and the eye could not direct or follow the blow. The ranger knew he had his man in his grasp, and within a few seconds the affair was over.

Had there been only the slightest illumination of the wood at this point to aid the eye, the rescue of Mabel would have been effected, but she knew not the meaning of the terrific struggle, and the instant her captor loosened his grip upon her arm, so as to defend himself, she hurried off in the gloom in the hope of joining her friends on the flatboat.

"I say, gal, where be you?" called Kenton, grasping with one hand, and expecting every moment to touch her form.

But the little one heard him not, or if she did, had no suspicion of his identity, and a few moments only convinced the ranger that the child once within his grasp was gone again, he knew not where.

He held a strong hope, however, that she had started on her return for the boat from which she had been taken in such hot haste by her abductor. If so, the attempt on her part offered a chance of saving her if the ranger moved promptly; for, by hastening to the same point he was sure to meet her, even though amid enemies; but, if he delayed, she must inevitably fall into the hands of the Shawanoes again.

It was apparent to Kenton that none of those on the boat were aware of the loss of the child, and if it became known to her friends they could give her no help. The ranger was fortunate, indeed, that in the flurry he was not assaulted in turn by some of the hostiles.

He picked his way as best he could to the river's margin, carefully keeping himself back in the gloom while he made his observation. The moon was still unobstructed, and showed him the flatboat fifty feet away and increasing the space

every minute.

Thus it came about, that as the craft was laboriously worked into mid-stream and towards the Ohio shore, two of the whites were left behind amid the merciless members of The Panther's band.

The situation was of little moment to Simon Kenton, for more than once he had been in a situation of much greater peril. He felt abundantly able to take care of himself, his great concern being for the little one to whom fate had been so cruel.

Inasmuch as there was not one chance in a thousand of accomplishing anything by groping in the gloom among the trees, he adopted the single course that promised success, and that was only to a slight degree indeed.

The flatboat was now so far out in the river that the firing had ceased on both sides. Kenton did not know to what extent his friends had suffered, but he was certain that in addition to the warrior whom he had picked off in time to save Jethro Juggens, several others must have gone down in the fusilade.

When The Panther brought his band together to effect the ambushade at Rattlesnake Gulch, he must have established some sort of camp or headquarters beyond that point, where it could not be noted by the fugitives until on the other side of the dangerous section. Hoping, with a shudder of misgiving, that the little child would be taken to this camp instead of being tomahawked, he began searching for it.

The task was less difficult than would be supposed. A veteran like Kenton had no trouble in avoiding the warriors moving about. As he expected, he passed but a short distance beyond the gulch, when he caught the twinkle of the campfire just beyond the hollow in which the Shawanoes had arranged to blot out the whole company of settlers and pioneers.

Carefully threading his way through the undergrowth and among the trees, he reached a point from which he gained an unobstructed view of the camp without any risk of discovery on his part. The scene in many respects resembled that which he had looked upon times without number.

There was the fire of sticks and branches that had been burning several hours, for it contained many glowing embers, in the middle of an open space. A circle of diminishing light was thrown out several rods in all directions. Upon a fallen tree, on the other side of the blaze, sat three warriors, painted and decked in the hideous manner adopted by the people when upon the war-path. Armed with rifles, tomahawks and knives, they were talking excitedly, and one had just had his wounded arm bandaged, proving that he failed to go through the battle unscathed.

Two other Shawanoes were standing at the right of the fire, also talking with great animation. Further back, where the light was less, were others, most of them seated on the ground. Kenton's scrutiny satisfied him that more than one of these had been "hit hard," and their companions were looking after them as best they could.

Nothing was seen of those that had fallen, though the American Indian is not the one to forget his stricken comrade, and the warriors that had started on their journey to the happy hunting grounds were certain to receive due attention. As nearly as the spy could judge there were from twelve to fifteen Shawanoes in camp. Since Boone had reported the party as about double that number, several of them--not counting those that had fallen--were still absent.

The ranger was profoundly interested in two of these absentees. One was little Mabel Ashbridge, and the other The Panther, leader of the Shawanoes. The closest scrutiny failed to reveal either of them, and though he had no real cause for doing so, he could not help connecting their absence with each other.

His suspicion proved right, for only a few minutes passed when two figures strode from the gloom into the firelight. One was Wa-on-mon, whose hand gripped the arm of the young captive. He walked at a moderate pace to the fallen tree, where he motioned to Mabel to take her seat. She obeyed with the same promptness she would have shown had the command come from her father or mother.

The Panther remained standing, and the three who had been seated on the log also rose and advanced, several others drawing near and taking part in the conversation.

"Ah!" muttered Kenton, between his set teeth, with his flashing eyes fixed upon The Panther, "if I could only have come 'cross you and the little gal!"

Seated with the firelight falling upon her face, the ranger was able to see it quite plainly. She had lost the cute little homemade cap in the flurry, and her luxuriant hair hung loosely about her shoulder. She was neatly clad in homespun, though the dress, the stockings, and the shoes were of coarse texture.

The countenance wore the scared expression which showed that the child suspected her dreadful peril. The marks of weeping were noticed, but the ferocious Wa-on-mon had probably terrified her to that extent that she was forced to

deny herself the relief of tears. Resting on the fallen tree, with her dimpled hands clasped, she hardly removed her eyes from the chieftain and his immediate companions. She appeared to feel they were about to decide her fate.

From his concealment, not far off, Kenton allowed nothing in his field of vision to escape him. He could not catch a word uttered by the Shawanoes, but he did not believe the chief was discussing with his warriors the question of what should be done with the little captive, for the reason that it was not his habit to debate such matters with his followers. His rule was so absolute that he made his own decisions, leaving to others to obey or take the consequences.

It was more probable that The Panther was seeking the views of his followers on what was the best step to prevent the fugitives from reaching the block-house, now that they had escaped the ambushade that had been set for them.

While the ranger held his position he did a deal of thinking. The problem that wholly interested him was, as to what could be done to save the child, for that she was doomed by her captors, sooner or later, to death, he considered as certain as he did his own existence. It simply remained to be decided when she should be sacrificed.

Kenton was too much of a veteran to attempt anything rash. Had Mabel been an adult, on the alert for something of the kind, possibly he might have warned her of his presence without revealing himself to the captors, but it would have been fatal folly to try to effect an understanding with her.

He asked himself whether he could steal up behind the log, and then, by a sudden dash, seize and make off with her. There were a few minutes when he was much inclined to make the venture, but the more he reflected the more hopeless did the chances of success appear.

He could not run fast in the darkness among the trees, and burdened with the care of Mabel, The Panther and half a dozen warriors would be upon him by the time he was fairly started, with the absolute result that child and would-be rescuer would not live ten minutes.

"There's one thing powerful sartin'," muttered Kenton, keeping his eye upon the party, "if they decide that the gal shall be sent under while she's setting there on that log, the first move to harm a hair of her head means death to him as tries it."

So it would have been. The silent, sinewy figure, standing as rigid and motionless as the tree-trunk which sheltered him, let nothing escape him. Had The Panther, or any of his warriors, turned toward Mabel Ashbridge with hostile intent, he would have fallen forward with a bullet through heart or brain before he could have raised his hand to do evil.

The night wore along, with more hostiles returning at intervals, and still the discussion continued between the chieftain and his warriors. It was a puzzle to Kenton why the talk should continue so long, for to him there was nothing in the situation to cause much variance of opinion.

The ranger was still watching and wondering, when from the gloom of the wood another party strode into view, and walked up to the group gathered about The Panther, and, as he did so, it would be hard to decide whether they or Simon Kenton were filled with the greater amazement over the unexpected occurrence.



CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FORLORN HOPE.

It is useless to dwell upon the grief and consternation of the occupants of the flatboat when the discovery was made that little Mabel Ashbridge was missing.

The parents and brother, after the first shock, bore the affliction with rare courage. By common impulse, they looked to the two persons best fitted of all to give counsel and hope, Missionary Finley and Daniel Boone.

Young George Ashbridge was the first to speak after the fearful lull that followed the cry of the stricken mother. Touching the arm of Boone, he asked:

"Can we not work the flatboat back to shore, charge upon the Shawanoes, and recover her before they have time to rally?"

"It might do," replied the pioneer, feelingly, "if we had daylight to help us, but not while the night lasts. I had a son shot down by the varmints just as I was entering Kentucky, and they ran off with a daughter of mine, whom I took back from them, but the circumstances was different from this."

"But we must do something; we cannot go to the block-house and leave the dear little one behind. I would give my life to save her."

"So would we all, so would we all," repeated Boone, touched by the memory of his own sorrows, "but we must not shut our eyes from seeing things as they are."

The youth groaned in anguish and said no more. The hardest thing of all was to remain idle while the cherished sister was in her dreadful peril.

"I'll let myself overboard," said the veteran, "swim back, and do what I can to help Simon."

"You can give him no help," gently interposed the missionary; "in truth, Kenton will do better without than with you."

"I'm of that way of thinking myself," said Boone, "though if Simon was expecting me it would be different."

"But he won't expect you; he saw what none else of us saw--the capture of the little one, and will do all that mortal man can do."

"I don't remember whether I told him the camp of The Panther and his party is just on t'other side of Rattlesnake Gulch or not."

"Probably you did tell him, but it matters little if you did not; he will speedily learn the truth. They are likely to take the child there, and she will not arrive in camp much sooner than Kenton will reach the vicinity."

The parents were quick to notice that Boone and the missionary spoke as if there were little, if any, doubt in their minds that this course would be followed.

"Suppose," said Mr. Ashbridge, in a tremulous voice, "she is not spared to be taken into camp?"

"We are all in the hands of our Heavenly Father," reverently replied the good man, "He doeth all things well, and we must accept His will with resignation. If the little one has not been spared, then it is already too late for us to give her aid; if she has escaped death, then I believe she is in the camp of the Shawanoes."

"And we can steal up and charge upon them," said the brother, to whom the inaction was becoming intolerable.

"Such a proceeding would insure her instant death," said Mr. Finley.

"And why? Boone can guide us to the direct spot, so there will be no mistake about that, and a quick rally and charge will decide it."

"You forget, George," responded the missionary, in his fatherly way, "that though The Panther has established his camp on the other side of the gulch, all his warriors are not there; some of them are watching us, as best they can, from the shore; by the time we turned about, and long before we could reach land, it would be known to The Panther, or the ambushade he formed hours ago would be made as effective as though you had all pressed on without halt."

"Boone said a few minutes ago that if we had daylight instead of darkness to help us, there would be hope."

"And he is wise, as he always is, for we should have put back at once; and doing so, immediately on the heels of our flight, the Shawanoes would not have been given time to prepare a surprise for us; it is too late now, and the circumstances prevent any attempt of that nature."

"Then we can do nothing at all--nothing except to wait until Kenton makes his report," remarked the father, despairingly.

Instead of replying, the missionary turned to Boone, at his elbow, and whispered something. The pioneer answered in the same guarded manner, and the conversation, inaudible to others, continued for some minutes.

Meanwhile two of the rangers kept toiling at the sweeps, so gently that it did not interfere with what was said and done by the others, and the craft slowly approached the Ohio shore.

Starting up, the missionary looked around and inquired:

"What has become of the canoe Jethro and I brought with us?"

"It floated free during the fight," replied one of the rangers, "and he swam after it. I reckon he has reached the other side of the river, and is waiting somewhere along the bank."

A general turning of heads and peering in different directions followed, but nothing was seen of the missing youth. Several wondered why the reverend gentleman should have made the inquiry, when the more momentous subject was upon all minds, but he offered no explanation.

The wind that had brought the flatboat to this point on the river, and then died out, did not resume its force and direction. It blew gently, but veered around from the north, so that its tendency was to drive the craft back to the Kentucky shore. It required hard work at the sweeps to overcome the momentum, but as the Ohio side was approached the forest shut off and so lessened the power of the wind that the boat was forced in close to the bank and brought to a standstill, where all could leap ashore without difficulty.

And now had the missing child been with them all would have been as hopeful as could have been desired. Some seven or eight miles away, and on the same side of the river, stood the strong, rugged block-house, where the small garrison, under charge of the veteran Captain Bushwick, could laugh to scorn the assault of a force ten times as numerous as that under the leadership of The Panther.

A distinctly marked trail wound along the northern branch of the Ohio, so that it could be readily followed by the fugitives, even without the escort of the rangers that had been sent out to their assistance.

Mr. Finley gently suggested that the two families should push on to the block-house, leaving the others to do what they could for the help of the child. Mr. Ashbridge, as quietly but firmly, made answer that neither he, his son nor his wife would move a step until the fate of his child was determined beyond all doubt. Mr. Altman, his wife and daughter Agnes felt the same way, and the good man did not urge his proposal.

"I would probably feel and act the same if I were similarly placed," he said, with a touch of sympathy which impressed every one. "You have the sorrowful consolation of knowing that the suspense won't last long--"

"Ship ahoy, dar! Show yo' colors!" came in a sepulchral voice from the shadows along shore. All recognized the tones, and before any reply could be made Jethro Juggens paddled up against the prow in his canoe.

"Wasn't suah dat war yo' or de heathen," he added, stepping over the gunwale and joining his friends, who were all pleased to learn it had gone so well with him.

Called upon to explain, he promptly did so in characteristic style:

"While dat little flurry dat didn't 'mount to nuffin' was gwine on 'long shore, I seed one ob de heathen tryin' to run off wid de canoe. I wasn't gwine to stand nuffin like dat, and I was b'iling mad. So I flopped overboard and swam after de boat; de Injin seed me comin' and tried to dodge, but I cotched him by de heels and whanged his head agin de canoe; den I got in and paddled ashore and waited for yo' folks, and hyar I is, and mighty glad to see yo' all."

No one deemed it worth while to contradict this wild yarn, and Jethro naturally supposed it was believed.

"Friends," said Mr. Finley, amid the hush that fell upon all, "Mr. Boone and I, after talking over the matter, have made a change of plan. I shall cross the river to the other side and see what I can do, with the help of Heaven, for the little child."

Mr. Ashbridge was impelled to question the wisdom of this step, for it was hardly to be supposed that a man of peace,

whose profession was the opposite of those around him, was the best person to attempt the perilous task; but, brief as was the acquaintance of all with the missionary, he had won their confidence.

Besides, the scheme, whatever it was, had the guarantee of Boone himself as to its wisdom, and was therefore beyond cavil.

"God go with you!" was the fervent exclamation of the father, as he took the hand of the good man. "Would that I could help."

"Gladly would I take you if I saw any possible aid you could afford, but the only aid, friends, that any of you can give me is your prayers."

"You will have them unceasingly," said Mrs. Ashbridge, clinging to the hand of the missionary, as if he was her only earthly comforter.

"I dare not tell you to hope for the best," he said, unwilling to awaken an expectation that was likely to be followed by bitter disappointment, "but I can only add that whatever may come, try to say 'God's will be done.' I shall count upon all of you remaining here until definite news reaches you."

"Have no fear of our going before that," replied Mr. Altman; "we are distressed as deeply as our friends, and can hardly bear the suspense."

As the missionary was stepping over the flatboat into the canoe, George Ashbridge caught his arm, and plead in a low, earnest voice:

"I am sure I can be of some help; please take me. I can't stand it to remain behind to wait and wait--not knowing what the tidings will be."

"My dear boy," replied Mr. Finley, laying his hand upon his shoulder, "if any one was to go with me it should be you, for none can be more capable, but be assured that your company would be a hindrance, as you would admit if you knew my plan."

The sorrowing brother still held his arm, but could not speak. The missionary gently removed his grasp, and, entering the canoe, paddled directly out upon the river. The figure of the boat and occupant quickly passed from view, and those who remained behind, though they listened intently, could not catch the faintest sound to betray his progress or change of direction.

Now that the party left in the flatboat had some leisure on their hands, they devoted it to looking after their own wounds, and in taking a precaution, which was only ordinary prudence, against surprise. Two of the rangers entered the wood, one passing a short distance up and the other down stream. Their duty was to guard against surprise from the Shawanoes.

It was not to be expected that The Panther and his party, after being once repulsed, would accept that as final. They knew the fugitives were provided with a strong escort, and were on their way to the block-house. Even though they could not be wholly cut off, great damage might be inflicted, and more of the intending settlers placed beyond the power of invading the hunting grounds of the red men. That they would make the attempt was to be set down as one of the certainties of the immediate future.

One of the rangers had been killed during the attack and three others severely wounded; but when, with the assistance of the women, their hurts had been bandaged or attended to, they made light of them, insisting that they were as ready for effective service as before. Indeed, it was one of the wounded men that threaded his way up the river bank to help guard against surprise from their enemies.

Another change of direction was noted in the wind. Beginning by blowing directly up stream, it had continued to veer until its course was almost directly opposite, so that, had the flatboat ventured out in the current with its sail still spread, its progress down stream would have been more rapid than ever before.

"Marse George," said Jethro, "whar does dis riber flow?"

Wondering at the meaning of the question, the youth replied, after a moment's hesitation:

"It flows into the Mississippi."

"And what becomes ob dat?"

"It empties into the Gulf of Mexico, which joins the Atlantic Ocean."

"And dat runs along de oder side ob Wirginny, I hab heard."

"Yes, such is the fact."

"I've an idee; let's put out in de middle ob dis riber, and go scootin' down de Massipp to de Gulf ob Mexico, and den up de ocean to Wirginny; dar we'll carry de flatboat ober land till we strike de Ohio ag'in, and den come down to de block-house from de oder side. It'll be a round-about way, but we'll got dar, suah."



CHAPTER XXV.

FACE TO FACE.

Two white men had set out to do whatever lay in their power to rescue little Mabel Ashbridge from the hands of the Shawanoes, and their policy was diametrically opposed to each other.

Simon Kenton, it may be said, had but one law--that of fighting fire with fire. Against cunning, woodcraft and daring he would array precisely the same weapons. In short, he knew of no other method, and would have laughed to scorn any different line of procedure, with the single exception of its attempt by the one man who now resorted to it.

Mr. Finley, the missionary, knowing the futility of the course laid down by Kenton, Boone and those of his calling, determined to go directly into the camp of The Panther, and try to induce the fiery chieftain to surrender the little girl to her friends.

What task could be more hopeless?

The unquenchable hatred of Wa-on-mon toward all who belonged to the Caucasian race has been learned long ago by the reader. He belonged to the most untamable of his people, and had proven a continual stumbling-block in the path of the missionary. He shut his ears resolutely against the pleadings of the good man, and forbade him to speak to him of the God who taught gentleness, charity, love and the forgiveness of enemies.

And yet, as Finley told Jethro Juggens, he had hunted with The Panther, slept in his lodge and trusted his life in his hands many times, and under ordinary circumstances would not hesitate to do so again.

But those were periods when comparative peace reigned on the frontier, and the missionary, like many others of his sacred calling, found little trouble in passing back and forth among the Shawanoes, Wyandots, Pottawatomies, Delawares and other tribes. Indeed, many converts were gained, as was shown in the case of the Moravian Indians.

When hostilities broke out, however, and the fierce red men daubed their faces with paint and rushed upon the war-path, the missionaries were wise enough to leave them alone and keep out of the way until the tempest had passed.

War was coming again, of that there could be no doubt, and on its threshold, at its very opening, Wa-on-mon, the tiger-like chief, known even among his own people as The Panther, had been subjected to an indignity at the hands of the pale-faces, such as in his life had never been put upon him before. He had been flung down, struck repeatedly, bound and kept a prisoner for many hours.

Then escaping by the usual weapon of the red man--treachery--he had laid a cunning ambush for the destruction of the large party of pioneers and rangers. The scheme had miscarried, and several of the foremost of the Shawanoe warriors had fallen before their deadly fire.

The only panacea for this terrific chagrin was the capture of the single small child attached to the families of the settlers. She, the tender little flower, had been plucked by the merciless chieftain, and none knew better than he what sweet revenge could be secured through her upon the older ones.

Yes; she was in his power, and it was beyond the ability of any one to take her from him.

And lo! at this moment, the man who preached humility and love and gentleness and forgiveness of enemies was on the way to the camp of The Panther to ask him to return the captive to her friends.

Missionary Finley did not need to be reminded of all this, and it must be confessed that he would not have ventured upon the attempt, so utter did he consider its hopelessness, but for an extraordinary suggestion that Daniel Boone whispered in his ear.

This suggestion foreshadowed a complication, as among the possibilities, from which a diversion might be created in favor of little Mabel Ashbridge; but the possibility was so remote that the missionary did not deem it right to awaken false hopes in the hearts of the parents and brother by making known the scheme that had taken shape in the most veteran of all pioneers.

Aside from all this was the fearful risk run personally by Finley, in thus venturing into the hostile camp while, as may be said, the echoes of the rifle shots were still lingering among the trees. The chances were that, from The Panther down, there was not one who would not shoot the missionary the instant he could draw bead on him.

But this was a feature of the business that gave Finley the least concern. It must not be supposed, however, that he

was a reckless man, who acted on the principle that Providence would take care of him without the putting forth of any effort on his part. He was a practical believer in the doctrine that God helps them that help themselves.

When he paddled from the side of the flatboat, therefore, in the cause, he put forth as much care and skill as Kenton or Boone himself would have done.

Glancing over his shoulder, he noted the moment when the dim outline of the wooded shore loomed to view. Then, the swinging of his arms ceased for a few seconds while he peered off in the gloom and listened. Nothing was seen or heard to cause misgiving, or to show that any one had detected his approach.

"From what Kenton told me, the Shawanoes have a larger canoe hidden somewhere along the bank. It has not yet appeared among these sad troubles, but it must have a part to play, and I fear it will be used to carry the warriors to the other side that they may hurry my friends on their way to the block-house."

He did not cross the river in a direct line, but headed so far up stream that his canoe became diagonal. His intention was to strike the shore above Rattlesnake Gulch, thus keeping clear, as he hoped, of the canoe with the warriors who might be making ready to embark on it. At the same time, he was assured that he would thus shorten the path to the campfire, where he expected to find The Panther.

Still watching and listening, the missionary edged his way up stream, until he had gone as far as he wished, bearing off so that only the keenest eye of suspicion would have noticed his presence from the shore. Then, turning the prow straight toward land, he sent it skimming, like a swallow, over the surface by means of a half-dozen powerful strokes, ducking his head as it glided among the overhanging limbs, and its nose slid up the bank. He was out of the little craft in a twinkling, and drawing it still further so as to hold it secure, he set out, rifle in hand, to meet Wa-on-mon, chief of the Shawanoes.

It need not be repeated that the missionary comprehended the danger into which he was running, but, aside from the personal intrepidity that distinguished him through life, he was controlled and impelled by the highest of all motives that can direct the conduct of men--the desire to please God.

Careful meditation over what had taken place convinced him that it was his duty to enter the camp of the hostiles; and, with that conviction, ended everything in the nature of hesitation.

Having landed, it remained for him to find The Panther. There might be some persons, in the place of the reverend gentleman, who would have conceived it the proper thing to enter the hostile camp without carrying anything in the nature of a weapon; it may be said, indeed, that his errand was in the nature of a flag of truce, in which that course was demanded.

But Mr. Finley understood too well the nature of the people with whom he was dealing to attempt anything of that nature. Such sentimentality would be wasted. Besides he conceived it to be quite likely that he might be called upon to defend himself, in which event the gun would come in "mighty handy."

Engaged on the business described, the messenger did not add to his peril by trying to steal noiselessly up to camp, though the act might have been possible.

"I must advance openly," was his thought, "when near the camp, and it is better I should do so from the first."

It was hard work picking his course through the dense and tangled undergrowth, but, quite confident of the right direction to take, he pushed on until the gleam of a light apprised him that no mistake had been made.

And then, when within sight of The Panther and his ferocious party, and half suspecting he was already under the eye of some dusky sentinel, the missionary came to a halt, and, kneeling in the solemn depths of the woods, spent several minutes in prayer.

The sound of a rustling near him did not hasten the end of his devotions. When he had asked his Heavenly Father for all that was in his mind, he rose to his feet and resumed his advance upon the camp.

He knew he was followed, and that every step was watched, and it was then that his own manner of procedure saved him. The Shawanoe must have reasoned that no scout or person with hostile purpose would act thus recklessly, and, though the dusky sentinel followed and watched his course until the messenger came within the circle of firelight, yet no harm was offered him.

Probably, by that time the Indian recognized the visitor as the white man with such strange views, and so different in his words and conduct from most of those of his race. If so, he must have wondered at the temerity of the individual in entering the camp of The Panther at so critical a time.

While yet some rods distant the missionary recognized the chieftain, standing among his group of warriors, in excited conversation. The back of Wa-on-mon was toward him, so that he did not observe the white man; but he was quick to note the looks in the faces of the others, and the general turning of eyes in one direction. The chief also wheeled, and, to his astonishment, saw the man of God approaching him.

There was no mistaking the expression that overspread the painted countenance of The Panther. He was angered at this intrusion of a white man into his council of war, as it may be called. A muttered exclamation escaped him, which those near interpreted as an utterance of impatience that the visitor had been permitted to come even thus far. He must have been identified long before, and, in accordance with Indian custom, should have been shot or cut down ere he could disturb the chieftain and his cabinet.

But here he was, showing no more hesitation than had marked his course from the moment he left the side of the flatboat.

Mr. Finley, clad in his partly civilized costume, and with his gun grasped in his left hand, walked forward, neither timidly nor with an assumption of confidence it was impossible for him to feel. He was not only too well aware of the situation himself, but knew the Shawanoes could not be deceived by any such pretence on his part.

Wa-on-mon had leaned his rifle against the fallen tree upon which the three warriors were sitting when he first came up, so that he stood with arms folded and in an attitude of natural and unconscious grace, glancing from one painted countenance to another, as he asked a question or listened to whatever they chose to say to him.

It was evident that these were the most trusted of his warriors, for while the consultation was going on, no one ventured near. They may be considered as making up the chieftain's cabinet, and when they were in session all other business had to wait.

The missionary was quick to note the expression on the face of the terrible Wa-on-mon. He had seen a look there not so long before which told more plainly than words that he was welcome, but that time had passed.

Mr. Finley advanced with the same dignified step to the chief, and, making a half-military salute, said in Shawanoe:

"I greet my brother Wa-on-mon, in whose lodge I have slept in safety when there was no other place to lay my head."

As he spoke he extended his hand, but The Panther, with his serpent eyes fixed upon the face of his visitor, made no motion to unfold his arms. He continued to scowl, and his lips remained mute.

This was embarrassing to a certain extent, though the missionary knew the cause. He continued, in the same gentle persuasive voice.

"Why does Wa-on-mon frown when he looks upon his pale-faced brother--"

"He is not my brother," interrupted The Panther, with a scowl and look of indescribable fierceness. "He is a dog, and he shall die!"



CHAPTER XXVI.

IN THE LION'S DEN.

The Panther was in the ugliest mood conceivable. Missionary Finley was well aware of this before approaching and addressing him. Consequently, when the chieftain called him a dog and declared he should die, the good man was neither silenced nor overthrown, though it would be untrue to say he was not alarmed for his own safety, but he had counted the cost before making the venture.

"Wa-on-mon did not always look upon the missionary as a dog," he said, with gentle dignity; "he once called him brother."

"It was because he spoke with a single tongue and was the friend of the red man," The Panther made haste to say, with no abatement in the ferocity of expression or manner.

"The missionary always speaks with a single tongue, and he will be the friend of the red man as long as he lives."

If possible, the wrath of voice and action became more venomous on the part of The Panther. He unfolded his arms, so as to give facility of gesture, and with one step forward placed himself so near the white man that the two could have embraced each other with little change of position. Then he bent his hideous countenance until the gleaming eyes, the dangling hair, the white teeth and the painted features were almost against the mild, beneficent face, which did not shrink or show the slightest change of looks.

One of the warriors then threw additional wood on the fire, and the blaze of light lit up the scene as if at noon-day. The Shawanoes instinctively drew back, so as to leave the principal figures not only in prominent view, but apart from the others. No one presumed to take any part in the disputation, but in the stillness and general hush the words of both were audible to every warrior present.

Little Mabel Ashbridge was perplexed and uncertain what she ought to say or do, if indeed, she could say or do anything. She did not recognize the white man who suddenly appeared and addressed the dreadful Indian in a tongue she could not understand, for it will be remembered that, although the missionary had joined the company of fugitives some time before, she saw his countenance for the first time when it reflected the glow of the firelight.

Had Finley given her one encouraging word, or even look, she would have rushed to his arms and begged him to take her to her parents and brother. This would have been a dangerous diversion, and, dreading it, the missionary carefully acted as though he had no knowledge of her presence, but she was in his field of vision, and while talking with the savage chieftain he knew the child, mute and wondering, was seated on the log and intently watching both.

As The Panther stepped forward in the manner described, and thrust his baleful countenance into that of the white man, he said, with atrocious fierceness:

"The missionary lies; he has the forked tongue of the serpent, and like all the pale-faces, he is the enemy of the red man."

"But Wa-on-mon once said he was the friend of the missionary; why does he say now that he is an enemy?"

"Did he not fight against the Shawanoes this night? Did he not help the pale face dogs to flee across the river in the boat?"

These questions were expected by Finley, and his tact, delicacy and skill were tested to the utmost in meeting them. Following the practice of The Panther, he continued referring to himself in the third person.

"The missionary gives his days and nights to help those that are in need of help, and he does not ask whether their color is white or black or red. He was on his way to visit the red men that Wa-on-mon once said were the brothers of the missionary, when he came upon some of his own people who were in sore distress. He did what he could to help them, and then left to speak to Wa-on-mon."

"And why does he wish to speak to Wa-on-mon?"

It was a subtle question. The cunning Indian suspected the errand of the good man, but its avowal at this juncture would have been fatal; it must be parried.

"When the missionary last entered the lodge of Wa-on-mon, he did not ask him why he wished to speak to him, but gave him welcome. Wa-on-mon now speaks in another way."

"Because the missionary does not seek Wa-on-mon for himself, but for another; the missionary's heart is not red, but is white."

"It is red and white, for it loves the white man and the red man. The heart of Wa-on-mon is red, and he therefore loves his people. Should not the missionary feel thus toward those whom the Great Spirit is pleased to make white?"

"The Indian is the child of the Great Spirit; the pale-face is the child of the evil spirit; these are the hunting grounds of the red man, and the pale-face has no right here."

It was the same old plea which Finley had heard from the first day he held converse with a member of the American race, and which he knew would be dinned into his ears to the very end, but he never listened to it with impatience.

"The hunting grounds are broad and long, the streams are deep and full of fish, the woods abound with game, there is room for the red men and pale-faces to live beside each other."

"But they can never live beside each other!" exclaimed The Panther, with a deadlier flash of the eye; "the pale-faces are dogs; they steal the hunting grounds from the Indians; they rob and cheat them; they shoot our warriors and then call us brothers!"

No words can picture the scorn which the chieftain threw into these expressions. He flung his head back with an upward graceful swing of the arms, which added immense force to his declaration. It was an unconscious but a fine dramatic effect.

The chief difficulty in a "pow-wow" of this nature was that the balance of argument was invariably on the side of the Indian. The white men had invaded the hunting grounds of the aborigines. The French and Indian war was a prodigious struggle between the two rival nations of Europe as to which should own those hunting grounds; neither thought or cared for the rights of the red man; they had never done so.

The history of the settlement of this country, as has been said, is simply a history of violence, wrong, fraud, rapine, injustice, persecution, and crime on the part of the Caucasian against the American, relieved now and then, at remote periods, by such wise and beneficent acts as the Quaker treaty under the old tree at Shackamaxon, and stained with the hue of hell by such crimes as the massacre of the Moravian Indians, the capture of the Seminole chieftain Osceola under a flag of truce, the slaughter in later days of Colonel Chivington, and innumerable other instances of barbarity never surpassed by the most ferocious savages of the dark continent.

"Many of the pale-faces are evil," said the missionary. "The words of Wa-on-mon are true of a great number, I am sorry to say, but they are not true of all."

"They are true of all. They are true of the missionary."

The firelight showed a deeper flush that sprang to the face of the good man, who was not, and never could be, fully freed of much of the old Adam that lingered in his nature. His impulse was strong to smite the chieftain to the earth for his deadly insult, but Finley always held such promptings well in hand, and the dusker hue on each health-tinted cheek was the only evidence that his feelings had been stirred. His voice was as low and softly modulated as a woman's. He folded both arms over the muzzle of his rifle, whose stock rested on the leaves at his feet, and remained calmly confronting the savage chieftain, who more than once seemed ready to snatch out his knife and drive it into the heart of the man of God.

"The eyes of Wa-on-mon are not in the sunlight; the smoke is in them; when the sun drives away the smoke he will see the missionary as he saw him when they hunted the deer and buffalo and bear together, and when they helped the Wyandot, Kush-la-ka, to his wigwam."

This allusion was to an incident only a few months old. Kush-la-ka was almost mortally wounded in a death struggle with an immense bear, and would have perished had not The Panther and Finley looked after him and helped him to his own home.

The good man hoped the recall of the occurrence would stir a responsive chord in the heart of the chieftain, and open the way for uttering the prayer which he had not yet dared to hint; but the failure was absolute; the mood of The Panther was too sullen, too revengeful, too deeply stirred by the memory of recent wrongs for it to be amenable (as it occasionally had been) to gentle influences. He persisted in regarding the missionary as a presumptuous and execrated enemy.

"Wa-on-mon is on the war-path," he fairly hissed; "he is the enemy of all the pale faces."

"Wa-on-mon is a great chieftain; the heart of the missionary is grieved. Wa-on-mon speaks as he feels, and the

missionary will dispute him no more."

This abrupt collapse, as it may be termed, of the visitor was unexpected by the Shawanoe. It was a masterful stroke, and produced an immediate effect, though so slight in its nature that a man less observant than Finley would have failed to perceive it.

"Why does the missionary come to the camp of Wa-on-mon when more than one of the Shawanoes have fallen by the rifles of the pale-faces?"

"And the rifles of the Shawanoes have done grievous harm among the pale-faces?"

"The heart of Wa-on-mon rejoices to learn that!" exclaimed the chieftain; "how many of them have fallen?"

"There is mourning among my people; one of them fell dead at my side, and others are grievously hurt."

"There shall be more mourning, for not one of them shall be spared to reach the block-house! They shall all be cut off."

"The will of the Great Spirit shall be done."

"And why does the missionary come to the camp of Wa-on-mon? He has been asked the question before."

"And has answered," Finley was quick to say, hesitating to avow the whole truth, even though it was evident it was known from the first to the chieftain.

"Cannot the missionary speak with a single tongue? Does he come to seek Wa-on-mon alone?"

"No," was the prompt response.

"Who comes he to see?"

"The little captive in the hands of Wa-on-mon."

"She is there," said the chief, pointing to the fallen tree upon which little Mabel sat; "he can see her; he may speak to her."

"The missionary thanks Wa-on-mon--may he call him his brother?"

"No," was the sharp response, "the missionary and Wa-on-mon were once brothers, but they are so no longer."

"The missionary thanks Wa-on-mon, but he is not, as yet, ready to talk to the suffering little one."

"Little time remains to do so; she dies at sunrise."

"That is several hours distant; in the meanwhile, the missionary would speak to Wa-on-mon of the child."

"What does he wish to say?"

"He has a prayer to make."

"What is the prayer?" asked the chief, well aware what it was.

"Wa-on-mon has two little ones, a warrior and a sweet girl. The missionary has played and talked with them and held them on his knee; does Wa-on-mon believe that the missionary would not risk his life to save them from harm?"

Finley paused, but there was no response. The way had been opened at last, and it was too late now to turn back. He must press forward to the final solution, no matter what that should prove to be, but all the signs were ominous of the worst.

The question was anything but pleasing to the chieftain. He was silent a minute, and replied by means of a pointed question himself:

"Is the child on the tree the child of the missionary?"

"No, but she is the daughter of a friend; she is not a warrior who fires a gun at the Shawanoes of Wa-on-mon; she has harmed none of them."

"But her parents did; to harm her will hurt them more than will a bullet fired from the gun of the chieftain; therefore, Wa-on-mon will kill her."

"Let Wa-on-mon listen to the good spirit that whispers in his ears; let him show the same kindness to the prisoner that

the missionary will show to the pappoose of the great chieftain; that the father of the captive would show to the children of Wa-on-mon if the Great Spirit gave them to him."

"The missionary speaks with a double tongue; he lies; he is a dog, and he must say such words no more!" broke in The Panther, with a voice, a manner, and a glare that showed his patience was exhausted. "The missionary deserves the death of a dog, but he may go back to his people; he cannot take the child with him; she shall die when the sun rises."

"If the missionary cannot take the child of his friend with him then he will not go back to him."

"If he stays till the sun shows itself above the woods then he shall die."

Finley saw it would not do to hesitate longer. The moment had come for him to fall back on the last and only recourse left, and much as he regretted the act (for it was at variance with his principles), he now made it promptly and with a skill, a cunning and a delicacy that could not be excelled.



CHAPTER XXVII.

THE LAST RECOURSE.

The night was well along when Missionary Finley determined to appeal to his last recourse for saving the life of little Mabel Ashbridge.

In unnumbered ways the Shawanoes showed that stoicism and indifference which they take pains to display when in the presence of strangers, though not always among themselves. A number lolled on the ground, some were standing, and two had sat down on the fallen tree. Another took upon himself the duty of keeping the fire vigorously burning. From time to time he walked off among the trees, and came back with sticks and brush in his arms, which were flung on the flames. Although the air was colder than on the preceding night, the additional warmth was not needed; it was simply the light that was required.

The action of all these Shawanoes was as if their chieftain and his white visitor were one hundred miles distant. None approached, addressed or seemed to hear a word that passed, though in the stillness many of their words, especially those uttered by the chieftain, were audible to the farthest point of the camp.

The observant eye of Finley told him a significant fact. Allowing for those that had fallen in the attack upon the flatboat, fully half a dozen of the warriors were absent. They were watching the movements of the whites who had crossed the river, and would soon report to The Panther.

The absence of these warriors, we say, was suggestive, but caused the missionary no concern. With the pioneers were Daniel Boone and his rangers, while Simon Kenton was somewhere between the hostile forces. After the late escape of the party from The Panther and his men, no great fear was to be entertained of them.

Mabel Ashbridge, wondering, distressed and sorrowful, sat on the fallen tree, now and then looking around the camp and following the movements of the painted men as they passed to and fro, some of them occasionally glancing toward her with a scowl and gleam of the black eyes, which terrified her, but most of the time her gaze rested upon the chieftain and white man talking near her.

How odd their words sounded! She could hear everything said, and yet it was in another language, and seemed as if they were mumbling over gibberish, like a couple of children for their own amusement, except that the chief most of the time acted as though he was angry at the white man, who looked so pleasant and kind that she was sure he must have a little girl at home.

But strange, novel and exciting as all this seemed, it soon became monotonous to her. Unable to learn of its meaning, she became drowsy, and, leaning over and laying her head on the log beside her, she closed her eyes in slumber.

Thus matters stood when the missionary said:

"The white and red children of the Great Spirit, I fear, will always fight each other. The missionary has tried to make them live in peace, but he can do nothing. The Shawanoes have made captive a little girl over whose head only the moons of a pappoose have passed. A few hours ago the pale-faces made captive the great chieftain Wa-on-mon, but the white hunter let him go free."

The Panther was about to interrupt angrily, when the missionary continued, with the same calm evenness of voice:

"The white hunter did not set Wa-on-mon free because he loved him, but rather because he hated him. He wished to meet him in combat; but when he went to the place where Wa-on-mon promised to meet him, the chieftain was not there. The great Wa-on-mon was not afraid of the white man; therefore, he must have made a mistake and gone elsewhere."

"Wa-on-mon made haste to meet his warriors, that he might lead them against the pale-faces and slay them all."

"He lost more braves than did the pale-faces, but the white hunter must not think the mighty Wa-on-mon is afraid of him."

The remark was as near an untruth as the conscience of the good man would permit him to go. No one, not even Simon Kenton, suspected The Panther was afraid to meet any white man that lived in a personal encounter. But the statement hit the chieftain in the most sensitive spot.

"Does the white hunter think Wa-on-mon is afraid to meet him in the depths of the wood, where no eye but that of the Great Spirit shall see them?"

"How can he help thinking so when Wa-on-mon agrees to meet him, and the white hunter goes to the spot, and waits for Wa-on-mon, who does not come?"

"But Wa-on-mon has told the missionary the reason," said The Panther, with a threatening movement and flash of his eyes.

"Wa-on-mon has not told the white hunter," returned the unruffled Finley.

"The missionary can tell him."

"And he will do so, but what shall he tell the white hunter when he asks whether Wa-on-mon will meet him again and prove he is not afraid?"

"Tell the white hunter that Wa-on-mon will meet him!" exclaimed The Panther, with a concentrated fury of voice and manner surpassing that which he had yet shown. He placed his hand threateningly upon his knife, as though in his wrath he would bury it in the body of the good man as a means of relief for the cyclone of hate that was aroused by his words.

It was the precise point for which Missionary Finley had been playing. The preliminary conversation had been aimed to bring The Panther to see that the only way he could save himself from the charge of cowardice was by meeting Kenton in mortal combat. Such an issue, in which one of the contestants must fall, was extremely distasteful to the man of peace. There could be only one combination of circumstances that would justify, in his judgment, that supreme test; that combination now existed.

With the skill of a trained diplomat, with his perfect knowledge of the Indian character, Finley kept matters moving.

"It will delight the heart of the white hunter to meet Wa-on-mon, as they were to meet only yesterday, and I know it will make glad the heart of Wa-on-mon to meet the white hunter in the woods, where no one can see them. Shall I tell the white hunter that these are the words of Wa-on-mon?"

"They are Wa-on-mon's words; he will meet the white hunter."

This was all well enough, and the negotiation was progressing satisfactorily; but the most delicate work yet remained to be done.

The arrangements for the encounter were yet to be completed, and, above all, the stake must be fixed, or, no matter what the issue, everything would come to naught.

"The white hunter and my brother, the great and mighty Wa-on-mon, cannot meet in the darkness of the wood, for when they meet they must see each others' faces."

It was the first time the missionary had ventured to speak of the chieftain as his brother since he was angrily forbidden to do so. He made no objection in the present instance, though possibly it was due to his mental excitement that he did not notice it.

"They shall meet when the sun rises over the tree-tops; Wa-on-mon will be there and await the white hunter, if he does not run away."

"The white hunter will not run away," quietly remarked the missionary, refraining from making the stinging retort that rose to his lips; "but my brother, the mighty Wa-on-mon, is wise, let him say how he and the white hunter shall meet, and the missionary will see that it is done."

Before the chieftain could formulate a scheme, the shrewd Finley was ready with that which he had formed while crossing the river in the canoe.

"Let Wa-on-mon go to the rock that lies yonder," he said, pointing up the stream, "it is but a small way beyond this camp; the rock is only the size of a canoe, and it is hardly above the surface of the water; does my brother know it?"

"Wa-on-mon knows where his brother, the missionary, means," replied the chieftain, thrilling the good man by the term used.

"Will he be there when the sun appears above the tree-tops?"

"Wa-on-mon will be there, armed only with his knife."

"It shall be the same with the white hunter."

But the sagacious Panther saw the difficulties that still confronted them. His "brother" had clinched the confidence the chieftain held in him by his selection of the battle-ground for the Kentucky side of the Ohio, not far from the Shawanoe camp. This reduced, as far as possible, the chances of treachery by the white men, and conceded a most important point to those with whom treachery has always been a cardinal virtue.

"The missionary will see that the white hunter is by the rocks when it begins to grow light in the east."

"Then what will the missionary do?"

"He will come back to the camp of Wa-on-mon and await his return."

Had he expressed his wishes he would have added the words, "hoping he will never come back again," but he was too wise to say anything of that nature.

"Wa-on-mon will not keep him waiting long," was the confident declaration of the Shawanoe.

"And when he returns?"

"Then my brother, the missionary, shall go free."

"And the little one asleep there?"

"She dies."

"Wa-on-mon will not return until the white hunter has fallen before his knife."

"No; but that will not be long."

"Suppose Wa-on-mon does not come back?" remarked Finley, in a matter-of-fact, off-hand manner, but it was the crucial point of the whole matter.

"He will come back," was the response of the chieftain.

"Does he think the white hunter will spare him? No," added the missionary, answering his own question. "But suppose my brother, the mighty Wa-on-mon, does not come back?"

"Then my brother, the missionary, shall go back to his people."

"But that is the promise my brother gave before; will he not say that if Wa-on-mon does not come back, the missionary shall return to his people and take the little captive with him?"

"Wa-on-mon gives his brother that pledge; he has spoken."

It was settled! The scheme that had been in the mind of the good man from the moment he paddled away from the flatboat was fully assented to by The Panther. If the latter overcame Simon Kenton in the hand-to-hand encounter, he would return to camp and put innocent Mabel Ashbridge to death.

If, on the other hand, the ranger overcame The Panther, or the latter was seen no more among his warriors, then the missionary was at liberty to take the tiny hand within his own, and make his way back to her friends without let or hindrance from the Shawanoes.

In other words, the life of the child was the stake at issue.

"Let my brother make known his wishes to his braves," said the missionary, losing no time in following up the advantage he had gained.

As if aware for the first time of the presence of his people around him, The Panther now beckoned to several to approach. They did so with a prompt readiness which suggested a camp of highly-disciplined soldiers. The chief explained what had been agreed upon, and made his orders so explicit that there could be no misconception on the part of any one. Finley watched closely while he listened, and saw that in this matter at least all was above board. The chieftain's self-confidence was so ingrained and deeply set that he could not doubt his own triumph.

But he astounded Rev. Mr. Finley by an unprecedented proof of faith in his honor.

The combat was to take place as near sunrise as could be arranged. As it was impossible to say beforehand precisely when The Panther would be due in camp, it was his order that the decision of the question should be left wholly with the missionary.

When he should declare to the leading Shawanoes that the time that had elapsed was so great that it was certain Wa-

on-mon had been overthrown and would not come back to his warriors, then the missionary was free to take the little captive by the hand and walk away, and no one should say them nay.

It was an unprecedented compliment in respect to the integrity and honor of the good man; but, oh, what a temptation, when it promised to settle the question of life and death for the precious child!



CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE RETURN.

The interview between Missionary Finley and the Shawanoe chieftain had been prolonged; it was of the first importance. Many things that this narrative does not require should be recorded passed between them, and the hour was far advanced when the decision was reached; it was agreed that the life of the little captive, Mabel Ashbridge, should be determined by the result of the duel to the death between Simon Kenton and Wa-on-mon, known as The Panther.

Aware as was the missionary of the departure of the ranger at the moment the flatboat was pushing from the Kentucky shore, he knew his course of action as well as if he had watched his every movement.

"Throughout the whole interview he had scarcely removed his eyes from Wa-on-mon and me," was the conclusion of Finley, and he was right.

"I will now go in search of the white hunter," he said, slightly modifying his manner of speaking; "I shall soon find him, and he will be at the rock."

"And when the sun rises he will find Wa-on-mon awaiting him there," said the chieftain.

Waving his hand in a half-military fashion, as a salute not only to the chief but to the leading Shawanoes, Finley turned about and walked away in the forest.

He felt an almost irresistible yearning to go over to Mabel Ashbridge and utter a few comforting words in her ear; but her own welfare prevented anything of that nature. Besides, she had laid her weary head down upon the bark and was sleeping as soundly as if resting on her mother's bosom.

After leaving the Shawanoe camp, the missionary directed his steps toward the Ohio, where he had left his canoe. There was no call for secrecy in his movements, and he tramped through the bushes and undergrowth as a countryman would have done had he held no suspicion of danger. If he excelled in any direction, it was in making more of a racket than such a countryman.

As he anticipated, he had not gone far when a familiar signal arrested him. He instantly paused, and the next moment Simon Kenton was at his side.

"I seed you and The Panther talkin'," remarked the ranger, "and it struck me powerful hard that the varmint was saying something that must be of interest to me."

"I was confident you were lurking among the trees not far off, and since Wa-on-mon sometimes spoke pretty loud, I fancied you would catch the drift of our conversation."

"I couldn't catch 'nough to do that, but I am interested in it."

"No one can be more so; I left the camp to hunt for you; do you know of that rock which lies just above the gulch, on this side of the river? It is a small flat rock, rising only a few inches above the water."

"I know the spot as well as I do the one where the block-house stands."

"Wa-on-mon has pledged himself to be there when the sun rises, and I have given him my pledge that you will not be behind him."

"I'll be there!" said Kenton in a low voice, and with a deliberation that made his earnestness the more impressive. "It's the chance I've been huntin' for years."

"The agreement is that each of you is to be armed only with his knife. No one is to be present--not even myself. If Wa-on-mon wins by slaying you, then Mr. Ashbridge's little child must die."

"And if I win?"

"I am to take her back to her parents unharmed."

"You've said 'nough, parson; I'll be there."

The missionary did not know whether to accept it as a good or bad omen that Kenton, contrary to The Panther, and contrary to his own habit, made no boast of what he would do upon meeting the chieftain.

"No danger of his flunking, I hope, parson?"

"Not the slightest; but, Simon, may I say one word?"

"You may say a thousand."

"I have arranged for two persons to meet in deadly combat. There is something dreadfully shocking in the idea, and in some respects it is most distressing to me--"

"It ain't to me," interrupted Kenton, with a chuckle; "all I'm afeered of is that the varmint may find some excuse not to meet me."

"I have assured you that there is no cause for any such fear. What it has been in my mind to say is that when you do meet, remember that a truly brave man is merciful."

"I don't understand you, parson."

"Perhaps it is better that I shall not attempt to explain, but, if possible, remember my words."

"I think that to make sartin there's no slip on my part, I'll go to the rock now."

"I'll go with you."

It was a brief walk to the place fixed upon for the meeting, and both were so familiar with the ground, or rather the shore of the river (for it has been explained that the missionary knew little about Rattlesnake Gulch itself), that it required only a few minutes for them to proceed directly to the place.

"I'll leave you here and return to Wa-on-mon," said Finley; "God be with you, and, if you can, remember what I said just now."

Kenton returned his salutation, and without further words they separated.

On his return to the Shawanoe camp the good man used extreme caution for a time, as though fearful of being detected by some of the warriors whom he was seeking. When certain at last that no human eye saw him, he knelt in the midst of the solemn wood, and poured out his soul in prayer to the only One who could aid him in his dire perplexity. He spent a long time alone and in communion with his Maker, and then, much strengthened in spirit, he pressed forward with the same openness as before, until once more he stood in the Shawanoe camp.

Little change had taken place during his absence. Instead of most of the warriors walking about all were seated--some sleeping, but the majority awake and talking with each other.

Little Mabel was still unconscious, but instead of reclining on the log she lay on the leaves close to the fallen tree, one chubby arm doubled under her cheek, her slumber as sweet and restful as if in her trundle-bed at home.

Since it was not reasonable to think the little one had made this change of position herself, it must have been done by one of the Shawanoes. An odd suspicion came to the missionary that it had been done by The Panther, but he deemed it unwise to inquire, so the truth was never known.

But nothing escaped the eye of Finley. He noticed the chieftain sitting apart talking with four warriors, and two of them were not in the camp when the missionary left it. They had come in while he was away. Most likely they were scouts that had been watching the movements of the pioneers on the other side of the river. It was fortunate if it was so, for they must have brought news that the fugitives had ceased any effort to reach the block-house, and were quietly waiting until the missionary or Kenton, or both, had returned with their tidings.

Finley endeavored to approach near enough to the group to catch something that was said, but the chief and his warriors were too cunning to permit this. Not wishing to interrupt, he seated himself on the fallen tree to wait until Wa-on-mon was ready to talk to him.

The chief did not keep him waiting. Leaving the warriors, he came over and sat down beside him, the moccasins of the savage so close to the curly head that a motion of a few inches would have touched it with his toe.

The Panther did not glance at the little sleeper, and it would be unwarrantable to suppose that any feeling akin to pity glowed within that sinister breast, which burned and seethed with a quenchless hatred of the people that were trying to drive the red men from their hunting grounds. Nevertheless, Missionary Finley clung to the belief that it was Wa-on-mon that had lifted the child from her hard seat on the log and deposited her so gently upon the leaves that her slumber was not disturbed.

"Has my brother seen the white hunter?" asked Wa-on-mon, speaking in a much lower tone than was used in the former interview.

"He parted with him a short time ago."

"Is his heart glad that Wa-on-mon will meet him?"

"His heart flows with joy," replied Finley, with deep depression that such should be the truth, over the prospect of so shocking an event.

"He will not run away?"

"Did he do so yesterday?" was the stinging question of the missionary, which struck the Shawanoe hard; "he is so afraid he will not be at the rock in time that he has gone there to await the coming of Wa-on-mon; he is there now; Wa-on-mon will find him when he goes thither."

"Wa-on-mon will be there when the sun rises from its bed; he will not keep the white hunter waiting."

"And the pale-faces that have crossed to the other side of the river will tarry there till the missionary returns to them."

"My brother speaks with a single tongue," remarked The Panther, thereby uttering another strong tribute to the integrity of his visitor.

"Does he not always speak with a single tongue?" asked Finley, feeling warranted in pushing the chieftain, now that the all-important question had been settled.

"He does," was the prompt response of the fiery sachem, who thereby plumply contradicted what he had said a short time before.

This, in a certain sense, might have been gratifying to the missionary, had not his knowledge of Indian nature told him unerringly the cause of the exultant mood of The Panther. Simply, he was gratified at the prospect of meeting the white man in mortal combat, for he held not a shadow of doubt that the career of Kenton was already as good as ended. An hour or so, and the famous ranger would vex the red men no more.

It has been made plain to the reader that the vicious miscreant was anything but a coward. The events that had since occurred fully justified his failure to meet Kenton upon the former acceptance of his challenge.

"The man's confidence in himself is unbounded; he does not think it possible he can fail to overcome Simon. It will be a fearful struggle when they do meet, and I shudder at the thought. Can it be that Simon underestimates the prowess of Wa-on-mon? I hope not, and yet, I fear--I fear."

Within the following hour a dim, growing light began showing in the eastern part of the heavens. Day was breaking.

"Wa-on-mon goes to meet the white hunter," said the chieftain, much as a groom might have announced his going forth to greet his bride.

He made no farewell to the other warriors. He had explained everything to them and nothing was to be added. His words were addressed to the missionary, who was so oppressed by the situation that he could make no response, excepting a silent nod of his head.

"Wa-on-mon will soon return," added the exultant Shawanoe, as if determined that his visitor should speak.

"How soon?" the latter forced himself to ask.

"When the sun appears there," said The Panther, indicating a point, by extending his arm, which the orb would reach within an hour after rising. "Wa-on-mon will come back, bringing the scalp of the white hunter with him. If he is still absent when the sun is there, the missionary may take the hand of the captive and go back to his people. The Shawanoe warriors will not stand in his way."

It would be vain to attempt to depict the anguish of the dreadful minutes that followed. Missionary Finley underwent a struggle that was the keenest agony he had ever known. Most of the warriors dropped off in slumber. Included with these were those who had been wounded, and who seemed to have the faculty of overcoming their sufferings to a remarkable degree.

Three remained awake to attend the fire and guard the camp. Little Mabel Ashbridge slept on in blissful ignorance of the awful fate impending over her childish head. Only the good man himself suffered a torture beyond the power of words to describe.

He glanced upward through the leaves continually. At the very moment the sun reached the point indicated by Wa-on-mon, the undergrowth parted and the chieftain himself strode forward. And as he did so the missionary saw on his countenance an expression that he had never noted before.



CHAPTER XXIX.

SQUARING ACCOUNTS.

When Simon Kenton was left alone by the missionary, who had been the means of bringing about this hostile meeting, he knew that a full hour must pass before his mortal enemy, The Panther, would reach the spot. The ranger was in need of sleep, and he did a thing which, while the most sensible act he could perform under the circumstances, was certainly extraordinary; he sat down on the ground, with his back against a tree, closed his eyes in slumber, and did not open them again until the hour had passed. He possessed that ability, which almost any one can acquire, of awaking at any time previously fixed upon.

Day was breaking, its light steadily spreading and diffusing itself through the surrounding forest and filling the summer sky with an increasing glow. Kenton deliberately arose, drank from the neighboring river, bathing his hands and face in it, and then sauntered to the spot where he expected to meet the dusky miscreant who was equally eager to cross weapons with him. Leaning his rifle against a tree, the ranger took a position and attitude in which nothing could approach or pass without being noted by him.

"The parson is the best man in the world," he mused; "there ain't another white man that dare go visitin' 'mong the varmints like him, for they trust him just as his own kith and kin do.

"When I seed him walk out of the wood, right by them other varmints and straight up to The Panther, I was sartin it was all over with him, and he was in for his last sickness sure. The Panther had just had things slip up on him in a way that must have made him mad enough to bite off his own head, but the parson fixed it, and The Panther and me are bound to meet this time.

"There must be something in that thing which he preaches," continued the ranger, musingly, "which ain't like other things. What he says hits one so powerful hard that it makes me feel quar. It makes him love the varmints, the black people and the white all alike; it makes him leave his home and spend days or weeks in the wood, just as Boone done afore he brought his family to Kentucky.

"What did the missionary mean by tellin' me a brave man is merciful? I wonder whether he had any talk with The Panther? It would be just like him to do so, but it was time throwed away. Howsumever, his words to me stick in my ears, and keep goin' back and forth as nothin' that was ever said to me afore has done.

"The Panther is full of grit; when he comes I'll make him b'leve I think he was scared and run off. That'll make him so mad, he'll fight harder than ever, which is what I want.

"But he'll fight like a wounded catamount, He is sure he'll wipe me out and send me under this time, and that he can go on shootin' settlers in the back, tomahawking women and children without stoppin' to bother with me. Somehow or other I don't feel as sartin in this matter as afore, but I wouldn't let this chance of closing accounts with The Panther pass by for the whole of Kentucky--sh! there he comes!"

A rustle, such as a quail might have made in walking over the leaves, caused the ranger to turn his head like a flash. The undergrowth parted, and Wa-on-mon, chief of the Shawanoes, stepped into full view hardly ten feet distant, with his glittering eyes fixed upon the face of the ranger.

The coarse black hair dangled about the shoulders, with a couple of strands hanging loosely over the chest. Three stained eagle feathers projected backward from the crown, where the hair was stained with several hues of paint. The hard, sinister features displayed the same fantastic daubs that marked them when The Panther was a prisoner on the flatboat, the white cross showing on the forehead, with streakings of red and black on the cheeks and chin. The coppery chest was bare to the waist, where reposed the single weapon of the chieftain--his formidable hunting knife, which had committed many a dark deed when wielded in the vicious grip of the dusky miscreant.

Below the breech-clout the iron limbs were encased in leggings and the small feet were covered with moccasins, now faded and worn by hard usage. The Panther paused, with his left foot in advance, his right hand grasping the hilt of his knife at his waist, and his shoulders and head thrust forward, the attitude of the body being that of an athlete with his muscles concentrated for a leap across a chasm that yawns in front of him.

The pose of Kenton was dissimilar, and yet showed some points of resemblance. In accordance with the custom of his people, he carried his knife, in a small scabbard, by a string over his left breast. He grasped the handle, ready to whip it out on the first need. He did not mean that his antagonist should "get the drop" on him.

Kenton stood with his feet well together, but separated enough to give his attitude grace and strength. His coonskin cap, fringed hunting shirt, leggings and shoes were such as were commonly worn by people of his calling. He was taller, more sinewy and equally active with the Shawanoe, upon whom his blue eyes were fixed with burning intensity and a glow that was the "light of battle" itself.

The Panther had brought no weapon except his knife with him. The rifle of the ranger rested against a tree several paces away, and as near the Indian as the white man. It was a strange position for two mortal enemies, thoroughly distrusting each other, but in neither case did it imply a lessening of that distrust; it simply attested the faith of the two in a third person--Missionary Finley. He had arranged this meeting, and both believed in him.

A scornful smile lit up the thin, smooth, handsome face of Kenton, who, with his fingers still clasping the haft of the weapon at his breast, said in the Shawanoe tongue:

"The Panther meets his enemy at last, but does he bring no warriors with him to hide among the trees and rush forward when he begs for mercy from the white man?"

This question was meant for the cutting taunt it proved to be, for it was a strange fashion on the frontier, when two enemies came face to face in deadly encounter, for each to try to goad the other to the point of what may be termed nervousness before the critical assault took place.

"The Panther needs no one to help him bring the dog of a white man to his knees," replied Wa-on-mon, holding his passion well in hand.

"Then why, Shawanoe, did you run away when a short time since you promised to meet me by the splintered tree near the clearing?"

"The dog of a white man speaks as a fool! He knows that Wa-on-mon hastened to find his brave warriors, that the pale-faces should not be allowed to make their way to the fort. He found them, and they shall never get there."

"The Shawanoes have tried to stop them, but could not; they tried last night, and more than one of the dogs were brought low. The gun that leans against the tree there did its part, as it shall continue to do. The Shawanoes fled as children, and I leaped ashore and chased them, but they ran too fast for me to catch them."

This was drawing it with a long bow, but as we have intimated, it was in accordance with the fashion of the times. The chieftain restrained his temper better than would have been expected, for the reason that he understood the motive of his enemy; it was the contest preliminary to the decisive one.

"Why did not the white dogs all come ashore and chase the Shawanoes?" he asked, with little appearance of passion in voice or manner.

"One of them did--a little child--you, dog of a Shawanoe, made captive the child and strode back among your warriors, proud and boastful because it was the first prisoner you ever took. Oh, brave Shawanoe! Oh, mighty chieftain!"

While uttering these taunts, Kenton did not permit the slightest "sign" to escape him. He saw he was fast goading his foe to the resistless point, the object he had in view. There was an almost insensible tightening of the muscles of the fingers closing around the handle of the knife, the faintest possible quiver passed through the thighs, or showed in a single twitch of the toes of the left foot, which inched forward. The Panther gave a quick inhalation, and while the words recorded were in the mouth of Kenton, he hissed:

"Die, dog of a pale-face!"

At the same time he bounded forward, as does the animal whose name he bore when leaping upon his prostrate foe. The intervening space was cleared at the single leap, and the knife, whipped from the girdle at the instant of starting, made a fierce sweep through the air, almost too quick for the eye to follow, and shot like the head of a rattlesnake at the breast of the ranger.

Nevertheless, it clove through vacancy, for Kenton recoiled a single step, the hundredth part of a second before the weapon flashed in front of his face, and struck with equal power and swiftness at the crouching demon while yet in mid-air; but nothing could have surpassed the dexterity of The Panther, who, by a flirt of the head, dodged the blow, and dropping like a cat upon his feet, not only endeavored to strike the white man in the back, but came within a hair of succeeding. It need hardly be said that had he done so, the conflict would have been over on the instant.

But Kenton saved himself, and faced about to receive the assault from the opposite direction.

Instead of following up the slight and yet possibly fatal advantage thus obtained, The Panther became more guarded in

his attack. The opening bout made both more cautious; their respect for each other's prowess was increased.

Neither uttered a syllable; the taunts had ended; there was no call to goad each other to fury, for the highest point of passion was already attained. To spend breath in the utterance of words was to place themselves in the position of the gymnast who breaks into laughter--it would be a fatal weakening of strength.

The Panther, crouching low, clutching knife, with head thrust forward, and gleaming eye fixed on his victim, began slowly circling around him, on the watch for an opening that would permit him to bound forward and strike his foe to the earth.

Standing thus in the centre of a circle, Kenton had but to turn slowly so as to keep his face turned toward his assailant. It was the easiest thing in the world to present indefinitely an unassailable front, and yet The Panther had barely completed his first circuit when the opening which he sought offered itself, and he seized it with lightning-like quickness.

But it was presented purposely; Kenton incited the attack, and when the Shawanoe demon shot through the air toward him, he steadied himself for a second, and struck again with all the might and skill at command.

That which the ranger had not counted upon, or which was not likely to happen once in a thousand times, intervened to save The Panther for the single instant. He and Kenton struck precisely the same blow, and their forearms glanced against each other. The stroke of the white man was the more powerful, and impinging against the less muscular arm of the Shawanoe with paralyzing force, sent his knife spinning twenty feet away among the undergrowth. Before the agile Shawanoe could recover himself the left hand of Kenton griped his throat, he was borne furiously backward, hurled to the ground as though he were an infant, the knee of the ranger was at his breast, and the knife was held ready to complete the fearful work.

"Dog of a Shawanoe!" hissed the infuriated hunter, "you are conquered at last! Now beg for mercy!"

Had the positions of the two been reversed, the prostrate foe could not have been more defiant when he hissed back, with flashing eye:

"Dog of a pale-face, that is afraid to strike!"

The words were meant as a taunt to the ranger to do his worst.

Down deep in the heart of every being, no matter how degraded, how sinful, how wicked, how merciless, is a spark of goodness which, when fanned by the angel's breath, glows or spreads until it burns out all the dross that years of wrong-doing have implanted there. Why it was and how it came about, Simon Kenton to his dying day never fully understood, but he always insisted that at that moment he heard the voice of Missionary Finley, with unmistakable distinctness, in his ear:

"Show him mercy, and mercy shall be shown to you when you need it!"

Impelled by a power which he dared not resist, the ranger rose from the chest of The Panther, and said in tones that sounded like those of another person:

"Shawanoe, take your life; I give it to you!"

CHAPTER XXX.

CONCLUSION.

The heart of Missionary Finley stood still when he saw The Panther stride from the wood into the open space where the campfire was burning. He knew that the terrible chieftain and Simon Kenton had met in mortal combat, and what could the return of the Shawanoe mean but that the prince of pioneers and rangers had been overthrown and slain by his implacable enemy?

With a self-possession which surprised even himself, the good man looked straight into the face of the Indian as he approached, and, noting its strange expression, said:

"Wa-on-mon has met the white hunter and conquered him."

Three paces away The Panther abruptly halted and stood for several seconds, looking silently at the missionary. Then he said, in a low, deliberate voice:

"Wa-on-mon has met the white hunter--the white hunter has conquered Wa-on-mon."

Missionary Finley was quick to catch the point of a situation; but, for a moment, he was dumfounded. Then a suspicion of the truth flashed upon him.

The good man was too sagacious to question The Panther. A strange, hitherto impossible condition of affairs existed. It was dangerous to meddle with them.

Suppressing all evidence of emotion, Finley asked:

"What are the wishes of my brother, the mighty Wa-on-mon?"

"She opens her eyes; she has awakened!"

He pointed to the little captive, who just then looked around, with a bewildered air, sat up and rubbed her eyes.

"Where is papa? where is mamma?" she asked, looking from one to the other, and at a loss to comprehend her situation and her surroundings.

"Take the captive," said The Panther. "No harm shall come to her and my brother until after they meet their friends."

It was fair notice that the remarkable truce ended at the moment of the arrival of the missionary and the child among their people.

Again Finley displayed his tact by asking no questions of Wa-on-mon. Nor did he essay to thank him for his unexpected clemency. He did not so much as speak to or look at him.

"Come, my child," he said tenderly, extending his hand to Mabel, "I am going to take you to papa and mamma."

"Oh, I am so glad!" exclaimed the happy one, slipping her hand into the palm of the missionary.

The warriors standing around and seeing all this must have had their share, too, of strange emotions, for the experience was without a parallel with them.

Had the chieftain been any one except The Panther, something in the nature of a revolt would have been probable; but no one dared gainsay that fearful leader, who, like Philip, chief of the Wampanoags, had mortally smitten the warrior that dared to suggest an opposite policy to that already determined by the sachem.





THE MISSIONARY'S TRIUMPH.

There were looks, but nothing more, as the man, holding the hand of the child, walked out of the camp, without any appearance of haste or fright, and disappeared among the trees.

With a heart swelling with gratitude to God for the wonderful outcome of the strange complication, the good man picked his way through the forest, still holding the trusting hand within his own, and comforting her by promises that she should soon see her father and mother and brother, who were awaiting her coming on the other side of the river. Like every other member of the company, she was a-hungered, but there could be no guarantee that she, like them, would not have to remain so for hours to come.

When the missionary reached the river side, to recross in his canoe, he found Kenton awaiting him, paddle in hand. The two men smiled significantly as their eyes met. They silently grasped hands, and then adjusting themselves in the boat, with Mabel between them, pushed for the other shore.

And as the graceful craft skimmed the smooth surface of the Ohio on that beautiful summer morning, a hundred years ago, the ranger told his story of his encounter with Wa-on-mon, chief of the Shawanoes.

"It took the varmint some time to know what I meant, when I said he could go; he wouldn't take the life I offered him at first, but said it belonged to me, and not to him. That bein' so," added Kenton, with a grin, "I told him as how I could do as I chose with it, as I throwed it from me."

"It was a surprise to him, indeed," remarked Finley.

"Wal, I should say powerful somewhat. When he made up his mind at last that bein' as I wasn't going to send him under, he might as well take what I give him, he done it."

"Did he say anything?"

"Not a word; I thought maybe he'd pick up his knife ag'in, but he done nothin' of the kind; he didn't even look to where it had fallen when I knocked it out of his hand, but walked off in the woods, and that was the last of him. Parson," said the scout, with a grave expression, looking him calmly in the face, "I want to ask you a question."

"Why, Simon, my good man, you may ask me anything you choose."

"Where was you when The Panther and me was having our little argyment?"

"I went directly back to the Shawanoe camp and stayed there till he returned with word that I might depart with Mabel."

"Sure you wasn't nowhere near us?"

"No nearer than what I have just told you."

The ranger paddled a moment in silence.

"Bein' as you say so, that settles it."

The missionary, who was watching his friend closely, now said:

"Since I have answered your question, Simon, it is right that I should know why you ask it."

"Wal, it's this: Just as I had The Panther down, and was 'bout to finish the bus'ness, I heard you speak."

"Heard me speak? And what did I say?"

"Show him mercy, and mercy shall be shown unto you when you need it;' so what could I do but let him up?"

The good man understood the incident better than did Kenton himself.

"But," he said, gently, "I have just explained that I was too far from you for me to make myself heard."

"Whose voice was it, then?"

"The voice of Conscience, Simon, or the whisperings of God. It may have sounded louder to you just then than usual, but it was not the first time it has sounded in your ear, reproofing you when you have done wrong, and commending you when you have done right. Listen and heed what it tells you, Simon, and no matter what comes, all shall be well with you."

The missionary saw that his words had made a strong impression, and he was wise in saying no more.

The ranger headed the course for a point that would land them considerably below where the friends in the flatboat were awaiting their coming. Finley, after noting the fact, remarked:

"You are doing it on purpose, Simon."

"Of course; some of the varmints are watchin'."

The object, as the reader will perceive, was to make the Shawanoes believe the fugitives had shifted their position further down stream. Since Boone was with the latter party, the stratagem, slight of itself and possibly ineffectual, was readily understood by them.

When the canoe shot in under the bank on the Ohio side, it was an eighth of a mile below where the flatboat had been hidden with the utmost care on the same bank of the river; but there could be no question that the fugitives had peered out with equal eagerness of vision, and parents, brother and friends were aware of the amazing, blessed truth that in that canoe, seated between the missionary and ranger, was Mabel Ashbridge, she that was lost and was found, was dead but was alive again.

Finley and Kenton made no mistake as to the situation. The "truce" was now ended. The Panther was the bitter, relentless enemy that he was before, eager only for the life of every man, woman and child connected with the company of fugitives. If little Mabel fell into his hands again, she would be sacrificed without a throb of pity. He would do his utmost to prevent the company reaching the block-house. If its members counted upon his forbearance, it would be a fatal mistake.

And should he and Kenton again face each other in single-handed combat, it would be with the same unrelenting ferocity as before. The episode that had just taken place would be as though it had never been. How strange that such an encounter did take place sooner than either white or red combatant dreamed!

When the canoe glided from sight under the screening of the Ohio shore, Kenton, Finley and the little girl sprang out and made all haste to where the main party by the flatboat were awaiting their coming. The sagacious Boone had already formed an inkling of the truth, and, allowing only a minute or two for the reunion and exchange of salutations, he insisted that the flight to the block-house should be resumed and pressed with the utmost vigor until the post was reached. The large boat could serve them no longer, and was abandoned where it lay. The masts had been taken down so as to allow it to pass under the overhanging vegetation, and, consequently, had it been permitted to make its appearance on the river, there would have been nothing in its looks to suggest the facetious name, "Phantom of the River," first applied to it by Missionary Finley.

It is not required that the particulars of the seven or eight miles' journey through the wilderness should be given. The Panther made such persistent attempts to destroy the pioneers that more than once they were in the gravest peril; but they had an advantage not possessed before, in that it was impossible to arrange any ambush, for the advanced guard of rangers were too perfect in their knowledge of woodcraft to lead the whites into any situation that shut off escape. The Shawanoes knew enough of Kenton, Boone and their rangers to hold them in respect, and not presume upon their committing any irretrievable error.

Jim Deane, the only white man that had fallen, was given decent burial in the shadowy forest while the party were awaiting the arrival of Kenton and his companions. The missionary paused long enough to offer up a prayer over the grave, and then, as we have said, the journey was pressed to the utmost.

And so, at last, the block-house was safely reached, and, for the time, all danger to our friends was over.

THE END.