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**Native
American
Conflict**

Five Short Stories

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Native American Conflict

Five Short Stories

by Joseph A. Altsheler



Preface

These five stories deal with conflicts which occurred with Native Americans as America was being filled with immigrants. The period of strife extended over centuries.

Three of the stories were published in Altsheler's early career, 1898 and 1899. The other two were written quite a bit later in 1914 and 1919 (the year in which Mr. Altsheler died).

Mr. Altsheler did not use "Native American" but rather simply "Indian." Four of these stories are concerned with Native Americans war parties, but the story "Mercer's Best Shot" involves a man named Mercer and a single unnamed Native American.

The reader should not conclude that Mr. Altsheler held a hostile view toward Native Americans. Certainly, there were periods when they were regarded as the "enemy," but an examination of Altsheler's novels (particularly in

the “The Young Trailers Series”) often displays respect for their character and courage.



The Indian Scout

A long life in the woods had imparted to Simpson the stoicism of silence. He knew that escape was impossible, but his face showed neither fear nor supplication. Expression was gone from it. He looked over the heads of his captors like one who knew nothing of their presence, and had no care for the future. It was this serenity in the face of disaster or death that men of his class sought most to acquire, and Simpson felt a pride that he had never been found wanting. Of death itself Simpson had not any great fear. It had been his constant companion in a life that had been of his own choosing, and always he had considered it among the things most to be expected. He had enjoyed many years according to his nature, and it was not for him to complain. He was glad that Berry, his comrade, had escaped. Berry was younger, much younger, and had more before him. Doubtless it was the wisdom of Providence

that the one who had the least to lose should lose it. He hoped Berry would remember him, for they had been good comrades.

Simpson turned his eyes indifferently upon his captors, like one who was watching people with whom he had no concern, merely because there was nothing else to do. The sun shone upon the copper of their shoulders and arms, and sifted through the gay feathers in their hair. The crisp October air felt very pleasant to Simpson. He had never seen the woods look more brilliant. The broad river beside them, with the sunbeams dancing on it, flashed in alternate streaks of silver and gold. The forest on the further shore, so thick the eye could not enter it, was painted brilliant yellows and reds and browns by the brush of late autumn. The far hills came nearer in the clear air.

Simpson's eye, which had wandered away for a moment to the woods and the river, came back to his captors. They seemed to pay little attention to him. There was slight need of watching, for he was too tightly bound to move. He had wondered under his impassive face what they would do with him for the present, but their movements

now permitted no doubt. In spite of his courage and his long years of self-control, he shuddered a little. He had scarcely expected that so soon. He set his teeth hard and resolved that no cry should escape him. Yet he was sorry that he had not fallen in the encounter.

The chief sat on a log and directed the work of the others. Much dry brush, fallen the winter before, was scattered about, and the warriors gathered the lightest and driest of it, looking at each piece to see whether it would burn. Simpson watched them with the eye of a woodsman. It grated on him when a younger warrior brought a green stick, and the chief's judgment pleased him when he reproved the man and made him take it away. It occurred to him that they might think he was afraid if they saw him watching them. He turned his eyes away to the water. The river made him think of Berry again. His good and loyal comrade was safe on the other side now. It was better that one and not both should suffer.

Two of the strongest warriors lifted him to his feet, and carried him to a tree. They bound him to the trunk in an upright position. Simpson did not

seek to resist. It was the code of his class to die as the old Romans would die, with dignity and without protest. He was glad they turned his face toward the river. Its shining waters and the spangled woods beyond were the last objects that he would see.

They began to heap the dry wood about his feet. At the touch of it the shudder seized his nerves; but he resolved again that he would neither cry out nor struggle. Yet it would be hard to endure. The pyre grew until it reached his knees; then its builders stopped to taunt him, to tell him of his coming tortures, and their delight in them. Such was the custom and Simpson had expected it. He understood their language, and he listened while they told him he would shriek and pray to them for mercy. But he appeared not to listen, his gaze wandering listlessly. He saw the anticipation in their eyes, but he would not gratify it by word or movement of his. He looked over their heads and toward the woods on the far shore of the river.

The pyre was finished, and the warriors ceased for the time to taunt him. The chief signed to one

of his men, who bent down and began to strike sparks of fire from flint and steel. Simpson heard the rasping sound; but he did not take his gaze from across the river. Just beside the rock where the reds and yellows blazed the leaves were shaking. There was no wind.

The fire flashed from the flint and steel, and the dry wood began to burn. Across the river came the report of a rifle shot, and a puff of smoke rose where the leaves had been shaking. A faint gleam of triumph passed over the face of Simpson. His head fell forward a little; a dark stain appeared upon his breast, and he had for ever passed from the power of his captors.



Mercer's Best Shot

Pressing his way through the undergrowth and tangle of cane-brake, Mercer entered the open, where he stood for a few minutes, breathing the pure air and cooling his eyes with the silver sparkle of flowing water and delicate green of spring foliage. He was straight and strong like a young oak, a figure in harmony with the wilderness and its lonely grandeur. He was motionless, yet even in repose he seemed to be the highest type of physical life and energy, more than six feet of stature, and a frame all bone and sinew. Blue eyes gleamed out of a face turned to the brown of leather by a life that knew no roof-tree, and the uncut locks of hair fell down from the fur cap that set lightly upon his head.

Around him the wilderness was blazing with all the hues of spring in full bloom. The dense foliage of the forest formed a vast green veil between him and the sun; some wild peach-trees

in early blossom shone in cones of pink against the green wall; shy little flowers of delicate purple nestled in the grass, and at his feet the waters of the brook gleamed in the sunshine in alternate ripples of silver and gold, while the pebbles shone white on the shallow bottom.

Standing there, he seemed to fit into the wilderness, to share its colors and become its own; the strength of his figure, the look of content in his eyes, like that of a wild beast that has found a lair to suit him, made him part of it. His dress, too, matched the flush of color around him; the fur cap upon his head had been dyed the green of the grass; the darker green of the oak-leaves was the tint of his hunting-shirt of tanned buckskin with the long fringe hanging almost to his knees, and of the leggings of the same material which rose above his moccasins of buffalo-hide. But the moccasins and the seams of the leggings were adorned with countless little Indian beads of red and blue and yellow, giving dashes of new colors to the green of his dress, just as the wild flowers and the peach-blossoms and the silver and gold of the brook varied the

dominant green note of the forest. A careless eye would have passed over him, his figure making no outline against the wall of forest behind him. It was the effect that he sought, to pass through the wood and canebrake and across green open, affording slight mark for the eye, for he knew that all alike were infested by a foe perhaps no wilder than himself.

Mercer loved the wilderness; it was his home by choice. It had no beauty that he did not know, and he wished to know no other; he was a lover of nature who had no words for his song, nor wanted them. As he stood at the edge of the forest, which stretched its depths in limitless miles behind him, and looked at the open country before him, he thought that in all his wanderings he had never come upon a fairer spot.

Far off a range of hills showed a faint blue tracery against the sky of deeper blue. At their foot was a band of silver, the Kentucky, the river to which the brook that plashed before him was hurrying. Everywhere the grass grew rich and rank, showing the depth and quality of the soil beneath. A hundred yards away a buffalo grazed

as peacefully as if man had never come, and farther on a herd of deer raised their heads to sniff the southern wind.

It was pleasant to Mercer to gaze upon the place. The beauty of the country, the abundance of game, and the absence of other men delighted him. So he stood a while longer, gazing, his rifle resting across his shoulder, the sun glinting along its long, slender blue barrel. Then he knelt down to drink, choosing a place where a current of the swift little brook had cut into the soft bank with a circular sweep, and formed a deep pool of cool water as clear as the day.

It was curious to note how he retained all his caution as he knelt down to drink, a caution become nature through a lifetime of practice and necessity. His knees made no noise as they touched the earth; not a leaf moved, not a blade of grass rustled; the rifle remained upon his shoulder, his right hand grasping it around the stock, just below the hammer, the barrel projecting in the air. Even as he rested his weight upon one elbow, and bent his mouth to the water, he was a man ready for instant action.

The water touched his lips, and was cool and pleasant. He had come far and was thirsty. He blew the bubbles back and drank, not eagerly nor in a hurry, but sipping it gently, as a connoisseur tastes rare old wine. Then he raised his head a little and looked at his shadow in the water, as perfect as if a mirror gave back his face—eyes, nose, mouth, each feature shown. He bent his head, sipping the water a little more: raising it again, he saw a shadow that appeared beside his own.

A thrill ran through him, but he made no movement; the blood was leaping in his veins, but his nerves never quivered; in the water he could see his own shadow, as still as the shadow that had come beside it.

In that supreme moment he did not know what were his own thoughts, save that they were full of bitterness. It hurt his pride to be trapped so. Though life was full and glorious to him, he could have yielded it with a better will in fair battle. He had prided himself upon the skill with which he had practised all the arts of the wilderness, and now he was caught like any

beginner.

But while these thoughts were running through his mind he retained complete command of himself, and by no motion, no exclamation, showed his knowledge that he was not alone.

The shadow in the water beside his own was distinct. He could see the features, the hair drawn up at the top of the head and gathered into a defiant scalp-lock, the outstretched hand holding the tomahawk. He gazed at them intently. He believed that he could divine his foe's triumphant thoughts.

The south wind freshened a little and came to Mercer sweet with the odors of peach-blossom and wild flowers. The brook murmured a quiet song in his ears; the brilliant sunshine flashed alike over grass and water. It was a beautiful world, and never had he been more loth to leave it. He wondered how long it would be until the blow fell; he knew that the warrior, according to the custom of his race, would prolong his triumph and gloat a little before he struck.

Given a chance with his rifle, Mercer would

have asked no other favor. The clutch of his fingers on the stock tightened, and the involuntary motion sent a new thought through him. The rifle lay unmoved across his shoulder, its muzzle pointing upward; before him in the water the shadow still shone in the same position beside his own. He kept his eyes upon the shadow, marking a spot in the centre of the forehead, while the hand that grasped the rifle crept up imperceptibly towards the hammer and the trigger. A minute passed: the warrior still lingered over his coming triumph. Mercer's brown fingers rested against the hammer of the rifle.

Hope had come suddenly, but Mercer made no sign. He blew a bubble or two in the water, and while he seemed to watch them break, the muzzle of the rifle shifted gently, until he was sure that it bore directly upon the spot in the forehead that he had marked on the shadow in the water. The last bubble broke; and then he seemed to himself to pour all his strength into the hand and wrist that held the rifle. His forefinger grasped the hammer: it flew back with a sharp click. The next instant,

so quickly that time scarcely divided the two movements, he pulled the trigger and fired.



Black Feather's Throw

They bound Hubbard to the tree with a single wrapping of the stout deer-hide thong, pressing his arms so tightly between his back and the bark that he could not move them. This was the position in which they liked to place a prisoner before they began such sport as they intended. He could move his head and shoulders with some freedom, but the thong held him fast to the tree, and prevented the use of his hands. He might twist and writhe and dodge, but he could not escape. Hubbard knew their plan well, and it did not seem to displease him. He made no resistance as they tied him to the tree, but he commented freely and offensively on the way in which they did it, speaking their language as fluently as they did themselves. He abused the warrior who knotted the thong for his lack of skill, and said if an eight-year-old boy of his proved himself so clumsy with his fingers he would give him many

whippings. He told the warriors who put him in position that they were as awkward as an old buffalo with a broken leg, and only his consideration for their feelings kept him from pushing them over and running away. He lavished gibes and taunts upon those who stood by and looked on, telling them that they were lazy hounds, and in the white settlements such men as they were sent to the whipping-post.

All this talk was in accordance with the custom of the tribes, and the warriors rejoiced that their prisoner was proving himself a man of courage, for he promised good sport. Sometimes his taunts touched sore spots, but they made no visible sign. They went calmly on with their task, for such things must be done with gravity and precision, as they had been done from the beginning. The thong was knotted fast and the leading warrior stepped back to survey the work. Hubbard looked him squarely in the eye and abused the character of all his relatives, even to the farthest kin. He believed, moreover, that the chief was a squaw disguised as a warrior.

Hubbard did not take his eyes off the warriors.

He did not wish, his sight to wander to the woods, which were his home and which he loved. He sought to check any rising regrets in these last moments. Then the chief stepped off the allotted space, spoke to the warriors, who ranged themselves, their guns laid aside, in a line facing the prisoner, and the sport began. But the same order and gravity that had marked the preparations were observed here. Each man took his turn, the youngest and least skilful first. The warrior who had shown impatience at Hubbard's taunts raised his weapon. The chief bade him be careful, and the boy, with his reputation at stake, hurled the tomahawk. Hubbard watched him, and he saw that the wrist was steady. The weapon left the hand of the Indian, and, whirling over and over, sped toward him, a circle of glittering steel. Hubbard gazed upon it with unwinking eye, and there was a swish as the blade of the tomahawk buried itself in the tree just above his head. He did not move a muscle, but told the youth that a warrior who could not do better deserved a tomahawk in his own head.

The play of the tomahawks grew faster and the

blades crept closer and closer to the body of the prisoner. Sometimes they made a ring of steel around his head and shoulders. Hubbard had never seen greater skill. He admitted it to himself, though he continued to taunt the warriors and call them squaws. As the blades cut into the tree he could feel the rush of air beside his face, and it required the greatest effort of his will to keep his nerves steady and make no motion, not even a quiver of the eyelid. The Indians, warming with the sport, began to talk to each other. They admired his courage and his control over his muscles and nerves, nor did they make any secret of their admiration. Why should they? They had not expected to find so stout a victim. He was truly a man, a warrior, one who knew how to die.

Hubbard always watched the warrior who was preparing to throw, and they succeeded each other so fast now that he was forced to be alert. His head had not moved since the beginning of the game. Any flinching, any twist to one side, would put his face in front of a whirling blade, and that would be the end. Perhaps such a fate would be best, for worse was to follow this sport,

and there was no chance of rescue. But pride forbade resort to such a death.



Black Feather

Black Feather's fifth turn with the tomahawk came. He was a splendid tall fellow, with a black feather thrust through his scalp-lock,

from which he took his name. Hubbard and he had been friends in a time when the white and red men were not at war; they had hunted together, and once Hubbard had saved him from the claws of a raging, wounded panther. But the white man did not count on that. He knew that such a thing as gratitude had no place in the Indian nature. Everybody said so, and, moreover, there was no chance for Black Feather to show gratitude had he wished to do it. So Hubbard redoubled his taunts when Black Feather stood before him, poising his tomahawk for a throw which should

surpass all the rest. He told him that he was a coward, that he had known him in the days of old, that he would flee from a wounded deer, that the cry of a child frightened him, that he dreaded the darkness, that his wife beat him and made him hoe the corn while she went forth with the rifle to hunt for game. Had he come with the warriors to cook for them, or merely to clean the game that they killed? If he dared to go to the white settlements, one of the women would come out and whip him with switches.

Hubbard was surprised at his own skill and fluency. He surpassed himself. Black Feather made so fine a target that he felt as if he were inspired. Even the stoical warriors looked at each other. It seemed to some of them that the taunts had touched Black Feather to the quick. They marked a slight quiver in the hand that held the tomahawk aloft and a strange gleam in the warrior's eyes, which looked straight into those of Hubbard. The hand flew back and the tomahawk whirled through the air. Hubbard saw the flash of light and heard the whiz of the speeding weapon. The next moment the blade

was buried in the tree close to his side; the deerskin thong, severed in half, fell to the ground. The hunter sprang from the tree and rushed into the forest with a speed which soon left the disappointed band far behind.



Bobby's Twilight Dance

Bobby took the bucket, and passing through the palisade, walked in all the majesty of his boyhood toward the spring. There was a well within the wooden wall, but it had been dug for use in case of siege, and in the quiet times which had now lasted so long, everybody who wanted water went to the spring, where it could be dipped up, fresh and cool, as it spouted from the side of the hill. Bobby had been on such errands often, and had a full sense of their dignity and importance, though not reconciled wholly to the amount of labor involved.

The fountain was down the slope, sixty or seventy yards from the palisade, and a little distance beyond it rose the forest, cutting off the view, like a blind wall. It had been cleared away for a certain space by the axes of the settlers until no marksman hidden among the tree trunks could hit the palisade with a rifle ball; but beyond that

space it stretched through endless miles.

Bobby had heard many stories of the forest, and he knew that the enemies whom all dreaded most—the savages—of whom the women told by the hearth-fires, came out of its depths. Its long line, black, impenetrable in the twilight, looked to Bobby like another and forbidden world that came up to meet his own, edge to edge.

The sun had gone and the moon had not come, and some of the upper branches which he could dimly see shook themselves at him in a threatening way. There was a moaning sound, but Bobby knew it was the wind driving through the forest, and he was not afraid.

Still, he had never gone for water quite so late and he did not like the gray darkness. He knew the forest was full of wicked things and all the women in the settlement feared it, though he had said stoutly, in the bright sunlight of noonday, that he did not.

He walked on slowly toward the spring and could see the branches of the trees still threatening him and growing more emphatic

about it. Bobby resolved that he would not be awed by them, and turned to look at the block house, which he was sure was quite the strongest fortification in the world. In the twilight it swelled to magnificent proportions and the heavy logs, of which it was build, looked like gray stone. The second story projected beyond the lower, and riflemen posted in it could shoot anyone who approached the palisade; or if the palisade should be carried, could fire down at the heads of the enemy. It was a fine snug place—the strong block house, stored with rifles, powder and ball; he thought also of the cabins around the fort, with their plenty; skins and furs hanging on the walls, buffalo robes on the floors, venison and opossum frying over the red coals, sputtering in their juice and sending out odors most delicious to the nostrils of a boy. How hungry he grew at the thought! And supper would be ready for him, too, when he returned with the water. It was good to be a boy with the hunger of a man, and enough to gratify it.

Bobby turned toward the forest again. It appeared blacker and more threatening than ever.

And the wind had the loneliest and dreariest sound.

He approached the spring, and it welcomed him with a gay little laugh as it rippled over the stones and dashed off down the hillside. Its waters were shining silver in the dusk and some merry bubbles sailed along until each, in its turn, broke against a stone or the bank. The comradeship of the brook, which was one of his best friends and beside which he played many a day, cheered Bobby. The waters seemed to smile up at him and there was no mistake about their laugh. He could hear the echo of it, too, half a song, as the water ran over the level after its tumultuous dash down the slope.

Bobby set the bucket down and dipped his hands in the spring. He held them up and the beads of water which fell from them were, sure enough, silver. He threw up a palmful of it and the drops fell in a silver shower around him. He forgot the forest and in his sport capered about.

Some chips lay near and he dropped one in the spring, watching it as the water swept it away, like a ship driven by the waves to its wreck. He

liked the sport so well that he tossed in another and then another and he could see the blots they made on the water, until they reached the level, but after that the darkness took them.

He tossed in the biggest chip and ran along by the side of the stream to see its fate. Once it was hurled by the swift whirl of an eddy against the bank, and Bobby thought it would stick there, but it floated away presently and, riding like a boat, swept triumphantly down a straight stretch of tumbling water, until it came to some rocks, through which it had a tortuous and troublesome passage, coming at last into the calm of the level where the water flowed tranquilly and without ripples and bubbles. Bobby has followed the course of the chip with eager eyes and he felt proud of it when it ran the rapids with such dash and entered like a staunch vessel into the smooth waters that lay beyond.

He reached the bottom of the slope and continued his walk by the side of the brook to see what would become of his ship, now going into the forest in which the stream hid itself.

Bobby looked up. The trunks of the trees stood

in rows like dim columns. He marked one particular tree, and oak of giant size with wide outspreading boughs and deeply-ridged bark. He looked at the boughs first and then his eyes traveled down the trunk, following the ridges of the bark.

He saw a knot on the tree trunk four or five feet from the ground and he was surprised, for the knot was not there in the daytime. Two little points of light like fungus fire gleamed in the knot! He looked more closely and his blood froze. The knot was the head of an ambushed Indian; even in the gloom he could see the hideous war paint.

And by the next tree was another knot and then another! A whole war party lay hidden in the forest ready to rush upon the settlers made careless by long immunity. The gate of the palisades was wide open.

Bobby knew well the danger. His face grew pale and his knees sank. He shook in the grip of fear.

But that was only for a few moments; then he

regained the command of his muscles, though he seemed very cold.

He remembered now what his father, valiant man and skilful hunter had told him.

“Never let yourself be surprised, Bobby.” he would say, “and if you should be surprised, don’t show it.”

The boy ran over the sentence two or three times in his head, and looked down at the brook which was trickling along in its merry fashion just as if there were no Indians in the world. He took another furtive look at the forest; he saw what he had seen before.

He would pretend not to know! If he didn’t keep on playing the warriors, aware that they had been seen, would rush out, the chance for surprise gone, and capture or shoot him.

Trembling seized him again, and for a little while the blood in his veins was like ice. But he kept recalling and silently repeating his father’s advice how to become a border leader, and he felt that the fate of all the people in the settlement depended upon himself—himself alone.

He picked up a little stick and dropping it in the stream watched it float away. Then he dropped another and moved slowly back along the banks toward the place in the hillside from which it flowed. But he would stop now and then and go a step or two in the other direction, thus *pretending*—to fool the red men.

His knees were still weak and his tongue felt bitter in his mouth, but he made a mighty resolve to go through with his part. He danced back and forth with a show of gaiety. The rapid motion, the tension of his muscles, inflamed



Bobby Dances

his brain and he felt his courage rising. Back and forth he danced, his little figure growing shadowy as the twilight waned into night. And all the time he knew that the warriors behind the trees were thinking that he was just a wild little boy at play, who knew nothing. His heart swelled with a kind of fearful hope and pride.

As he danced he moved slowly toward the

palisade. He drew back farther and farther from the trees; now he could not see the gleaming eyes—could scarcely see the heads—and he felt a trifle more secure—but the boughs, moved by the wind, still threatened him—and he *knew* that they whom he had seen were still there in the dark. His knees grew weak and he was afraid that he would fall, but the effort of his will put strength into his legs and he danced again.

His foot struck against something and looking down he saw that it was his bucket. He had come all the way to the source of the brook, and the warriors had not pursued him, thought he was still within reach of their rifles. When he stopped dancing and was not buoyed up by the excitement of motion, that awful, weak feeling seized him again, and the will which had overcome it was growing tired. But Bobby felt that he could not come so far just to fail, and kneeling down at the side of the fountain he filled his bucket.

So doing he took another look at the forest. He saw, or thought he saw, shadowy figures moving about; at least there were shifting dark lines against the darker background of the trees. He

had to set the bucket of water down—he trembled so, and was so weak. If they should rush upon him now or shoot him from the wood! A minute passed and, neither shot nor rush coming, Bobby felt a return of courage and strength.

He picked up the bucket again and, swinging it, he danced on toward the palisade, his back turned upon the warriors. He did not dare to look back now for fear of arousing their suspicions, and he trembled so much that tiny streams of water splashed out of the bucket, and often he could hear behind him the whoop of the warriors and the crack of their rifles, only to know the next moment that he was merely *thinking* it.

He spent hours walking toward the palisade, or at least it seemed so to him. He did not dare to walk fast. He must still be the boy, lazily doing his appointed task; so he set his bucket down two or three times that he might rest for a few moments, but all the while kept his back toward the warriors.

Now the palisade was nearer. A man appeared at the open gate and, seeing Bobby idling along with the bucket of water, told him to hurry.

Bobby replied vaguely that he would be there in time; he still feared to hurry lest the Indians rush and gain the open gate.

There was comfort in the sight of the man and the sound of his voice. But the man disappeared in a moment and then the night seemed fearfully dark, and the wind groaned so. Before him rose the dark mass of the blockhouse and through the open gate of the palisade a cheerful light was shining.

He knew he must preserve his courage and presence of mind to the very end and the tiring will was summoned to its last effort. The gate was only fifteen feet away now, but Bobby jumped at the sound of rushing feet behind him. No, it was only the wind whipping the leaves through the grass, and he calmed himself and moved slowly on. His heart swelled with a sense of triumph, a belief that he had deceived the warriors, and he walked with a steadier step than before.

He had gone half the distance and all was silent behind him save the wind, but as the gate came nearer he felt a sudden relaxing of will and

muscles. He was going to fall, he knew it, unless he made some violent effort, and suddenly casting the bucket of water from him he rushed in at the open gate shouting:

“The Indians! the Indians! they are in the woods! shut the gate!”

Then the boy fell over in a dead faint, while someone shut and barred the gate, and the armed settlers poured forward to the successful defense.



In Sheep's Clothing

The warriors crept to the edge of the wood and gazed at the little party around the fire. They measured the distance with eager eyes, but it was too great. A rifle ball would not reach from the trees to the camp, and they must resort to some other method than a volley from ambush. Nor would they try a rush, for they knew that the white hunters never wholly relaxed their vigilance, even when they ate and told tales to one another; the bullets of their enemy might meet them before they could cross half the space.

In the dense thicket and canebrake, browning already under the breath of autumn winds, the warriors were safe, for the present, from the notice of the white men.

No eye at a hundred yards could penetrate that screen of leaves and twigs into the brown of which the brown of their own bodies blended. Hidden there they could hear the laughter and

talk, and the crisp odors of the broiling venison and buffalo steaks came to their nostrils. The hunters were four in number, one young, three middle-aged; all strong and wiry, clad in tanned and fringed deerskin, beaded and ornamented in the intricate way which tells of forest vanities. They had taken the precaution to build their fire beyond gunshot of the forest, and every one held his rifle in the hollow of one arm while he ate and talked. Even in the relaxation of the camp fire, after the day's hunt was over, they did not forget to be wary, and the leader of the hidden band saw that he, too, must use the utmost caution if he would triumph over them without loss.

The chief made a sign presently, and all the warriors retreated farther into the forest, their footsteps making no sound on the earth, the bushes failing to rustle as they passed. Then he announced the plan of action, and put the burden of it upon Palliser, the renegade.

“You will go to them, for you are a white man such as they,” he said to Palliser, “and make a great rejoicing, because you find them. Tell them what tale you please about your capture by the

Shawnees, your escape, and your long wanderings in the woods. Tell them no Shawnee war parties are now in Kaintuckee, and there is no danger near them. Take away their suspicions. Make them believe a good watch is not needed, and wait for us.”

This was no new duty for a white renegade among the Indians, since they often served as decoys to lure the people of their own race into an ambush of the savages, though it was the first time that Palliser, who was a comparatively new man, had been chosen to do such work. But he began it with ardor, wishing to rise high in the esteem of the red men, his new people.

He scratched his face with briars until blood flowed from breaks in his skin, tore his clothing into rags, and cut great holes in his moccasins. Then he handed his weapons to the chief, who looked on approvingly at the sheep's clothing of the wolf of his tribe, and uttering a loud shout of joy rushed noisily through the bushes and canebrake toward the camp fire, repeating his cry as he ran and varying it with a wild and incoherent laugh.

The hunters sprang to their feet, rifles in hand, and looked curiously at the wretched being who approached them. Boyd, the youngest of the four, was sure that never before in his life had he seen so forlorn a specimen of humanity.

The man's long black hair hung in strings over his torn and bleeding face, and he limped painfully, stopping at times to rub his bruised feet. His rags but half covered his body, and he shouted incessantly to the hunters to help him, to save him. His whole aspect was that of a being crushed by pain of mind and body.

“A white man, and unarmed in these wilds! What has happened to him!” exclaimed Boyd, starting forward.

“Wait,” said Hawkins, who was the oldest, and the leader of the four, putting a restraining hand upon Boyd's arm. “Let him come to us!”

Sutcliffe and Hines, like the other two, stood at attention with their rifles in their hands, and Palliser staggered toward them, sometimes begging for help and then joining his hands and thanking God that, at last, he saw white faces like

his own. But as he came near his strength seemed to fail him.



Help me,
gentlemen!

“Help me, gentlemen! For the love of heaven, help me!” he cried. “You are white men, and I am too! I am starving, dying, help me!”

The agony upon his face was so real, so lifelike that Boyd could be restrained no longer. He rushed forward, took Palliser by the arm, and helped the bruised and battered lump of humanity to the camp fire. Palliser collapsed on a fallen log and groaned.

“Here, give him a little of this!” said Hawkins, who, despite his age and years of hard life in the wilderness, was moved by the man’s sufferings.

He drew a small flask, and, holding him erect, with one arm around the shoulders, poured part of the contents down Palliser’s throat. The man straightened himself up, gasped a little, and the color began to come back to his face. His frame

gathered more vigor, and, dashing the strings of hair out of his eyes, he looked curiously at the hunters.

“Who are you?” asked Hawkins.

“Watson—Thomas Watson; at least, that’s what I used to be when I had any name,” replied the man.

“How long ago was that?”

“A year or more; but I can’t remember exactly; it may have been two years.”

“We’ll wait for the rest,” said Hawkins with sympathy. “What you need just now is something to eat and you shall have it. Sutcliffe, broil strips off a hunch of fresh venison and spread them on the coals.”

Palliser looked longingly at the broiling venison. He had not eaten since morning, and his hunger was not counterfeit.

The hunters thought they could see starvation in his eyes, and they felt pity.

Palliser was pleased with himself, though not showing it. He admired his own skill in the part.

He believed that the chief, if he saw, would approve, and he trusted that he saw. His strength increased wonderfully. His back straightened, and his eyes became steady.

Boyd contemplated his work with pride.

“Good food will do a lot for a broken-down man,” he said.

Palliser began to arrange his rags, as if returning strength brought with it a sense of pride and decency. Hawkins produced an extra pair of moccasins from his small hunter’s pack and offered them. Palliser thanked him with tears in his eyes, and put on the new moccasins, throwing away the torn and ruined old ones.

“Now begin your story,” said the old hunter kindly.

Palliser told how he had been taken by the Shawnees more than a year, or perhaps two years, before, for he could not remember well, he had suffered so much, and how they had forced him to run the gauntlet, beating him almost to death with sticks and switches. Then they had kept him as a slave, torturing him at times. At last he

escaped from their village, beyond the Ohio, and, swimming the great river, had come into the wilderness of Kaintuckee. Here he had wandered about for weeks, not knowing which way to go. He was without weapons, and he had lived scantily on roots and wild fruit, sleeping under the trees.

“And, oh, gentlemen,” he said in conclusion, “I was afraid I would never look upon a face of my own race again! When I came through the bushes yonder and saw you sitting by the camp fire, I thought I would fall dead with joy.”

The tears rose in Boyd’s eyes, though the wilderness hunters, even the youngest of them, were not much given to such weaknesses.

“You are safe now,” said Hawkins, “and a rest of two or three days will make you as good as ever. We’ll keep this camp for a week, I guess, and what we have is yours.”

Palliser thanked them again with many tears in his eyes. Then the cautious Hawkins asked him about the Indians; had he noticed any signs of them? Were their war parties south of the Ohio?

No, he had seen no trace of Indians, Palliser said, and he felt sure that no war bands were in Kaintuckee, for it had been said in the village before he fled that the warriors were reserving their forces for an expected conflict with the tribes in the Northwest.

Hawkins said he was glad of it, and looked around at the great woods rolling away for interminable miles. To him, and all his like who had wild blood in them, it would have been a happy hunting ground without a single thorn had it not been for the savages who infested it. The game had been found nowhere else in America in greater profusion and quality, and the geniality of the climate made outdoor life a continual joy.

The air had the tang of autumn crispness, and Palliser made himself comfortable by the fire, his back still against the upthrust bough, the ruddy blaze shining on his face, to which the strengthening food had brought back the good color. The hunters, too, lounged by the coals, though as usual the instinct of caution made each keep one hand upon his rifle. The patch of wood from which Palliser had come shone in the

spangled glory of autumn, the reds and yellows and browns alternating. A light wind was blowing and brought with it the spicy smell of the forest.

“It’s fine to be here,” said Palliser, spreading his fingers before the blaze, and, for the moment, he felt the ease and peace of the wilderness. He too had wild blood in him.

Hawkins nodded an emphatic assent, while Hines and Sutcliffe looked around with an air of content. Palliser glanced toward the thicket in which the warriors lay hidden. He had keen eyes, but he could see no trace of them, though he knew they were watching every movement of his new comrades and himself. His lip curled a little with pride as he thought again how well he was playing his part.

The men had returned early from the hunt, and the sun was high when Palliser appeared among them. But it was sliding down toward the earth’s rim now, and over the forest the shadows were coming.

“It will be cool to-night,” said Hawkins, “and we’ll let the fire burn. I’d have put it out, but

since you say there are no Indians in these parts, I won't."

Then he spoke of their plans, after the week's stay in the present camp should be over. They would push on, hunting by the way, until they reached the Mississippi and when they had stood upon the banks of the greatest river, they would turn back, and make a vast curve to the south, going far down into the warmer regions near the gulf for the winter, hunting, roaming or resting as they chose.

"We'll be a year on this trip maybe," said Hawkins, "but it'll be a year that any man should be glad to have in his life."

"So it would," said Palliser, and, for a moment, his mind thrilled at the freedom and adventure of such a great and careless journey.

The red globe of the sun hung on the horizon's rim, the darkness crept over the forest, and, in the open, the twilight was advancing.

The thicket in which the still warriors lay grew misty, and Palliser could see there only a dim bank of dusk, though he knew his comrades were

waiting with the patience such as they always showed in pursuit of prey. He glanced more than once at the white men to see if any suspicion appeared on their faces, but they seemed to be without care or a thought of danger and continually showed their sympathy for him. Boyd in particular was anxious for his welfare. Boyd was a fine, frank fellow not more than twenty and he had been much moved by the sufferings of the man who had wandered into their camp for help.

The sun went, the night came, and all the forest was in darkness. Hawkins arranged the night watch which they always kept, even when no danger was expected. It was Boyd's turn, he said, to stand guard first and the youth told Palliser to take his blanket and wrap himself in it. Palliser did as he was bid, without hesitating, but he had a slight feeling of repugnance. He did not like to accept his bed from the man whom he was about to deliver to a sure death at the hands of the savages. Then, Boyd was such a boy!

Boyd put his rifle across his shoulder, sat on the fallen log and tried to look into the darkness. The others wrapped themselves in their blankets,

and their prolonged and steady breathing soon told that they were sound asleep.

Palliser did not close his eyes, though he lay quite still and listened intently. The night was dark, which suited his purpose, but he could hear nothing save the usual noises of the wilderness. Still, it was much too early. The savages, most likely, would wait until near midnight. So Palliser watched and listened. The leaves rustled musically before the touch of the wind. From afar came a faint cry like the shriek of a woman, but it was the voice of a panther. The fire blazed up and cast light around it, touching with red the motionless figures of the sleeping men. The reflection of the flame ran along Boyd's rifle barrel making a line of scarlet. The boy arose and walked in a wide circle around the camp fire looking into the darkness and seeing nothing. He came back to the fire and saw that Palliser's eyes were open.

"Not asleep yet? Aren't you comfortable?" he asked sympathetically.

"I couldn't be better fixed," replied Palliser. "But I can't sleep just yet. My nerves haven't

calmed down enough.”

“If I’d passed through as much as you have I guess I’d be feeling that way too,” said Boyd.

Palliser looked at him with a certain liking. For a moment he was sorry that the boy made one of the party, but the feeling passed. Boyd must take his chances with the others.

The boy walked about a little more, and then sat down on the far end of the log, just beyond the circle of the firelight.

The night was slow and remained dark, clouds hiding the moon. Boyd rose presently and, making another circle around the camp, came back to the fire.

“What! Not asleep yet!” he said to Palliser.

“Yes, I slept for quite a while,” said Palliser, “but I woke a few minutes ago. I am wondering just now what you men will do with me when you leave your camp?”

“That is a question,” said Boyd, dropping the stock of his rifle upon the ground and leaning contemplatively upon the muzzle. “You can’t go all the way to Virginia unarmed. What a pity you

haven't a rifle of your own!"

"What a pity!" echoed Palliser.

"I'll tell you what to do," said Boyd energetically, as if he had received a sudden inspiration. "Go with us!"

The boy's eager eyes shone in the firelight.

"Yes," he said, "go with us! Be one of us! Five are stronger than four. We'll find you a rifle somehow and somewhere, if we have to take it from the Indians themselves. I tell you, Mr. Watson, it will be worth your while! There is no life like this life of ours and we will make the grandest hunting trip that ever men undertook! I like you, and so do my comrades there, the best and trustiest comrades that ever a man had. You will never have such a chance again! Come with us!"

The wild blood in Palliser's veins responded, and he knew that his eyes sparkled. This boy had put the invitation temptingly and he half returned his liking. But he recalled his mind to the work in hand.

"No, I can't go; I wish I could and I thank

you.” he said, “but I must return to Virginia if I can find the way there.”

Boyd was thoughtful. He made another trip around the fire and came back.

Perhaps you had enough of wild life when you were a captive among the Indians?“ he said.

“I had enough of life as a captive; but of wild life, no. I like it.” replied Palliser and the last statement was true.

“And yet,” said Boyd, “I hear that there are white men who have deliberately chosen a life among the Indians, and help to make war on their own people.”

Palliser started and looked suspiciously at Boyd. But the boy’s innocent face convinced him that it was a mere chance, these words about renegades.

“Yes, there are renegades among the Indians,” he said. “I heard of them, and in fact I saw two or three.”

“What could have made them take to such a life?”

“Sufficient causes I suppose, but oftenest I have no doubt, it was crime committed in hot blood, perhaps the death of a man struck down in sudden anger, or maybe self-defense, and repented of many times afterward.”

“You are probably right about that,” said the boy “Some of them are to be pitied.” The darkness did not let him see the cloud that had come over Palliser’s face, or the sudden softening of his look, when the boy said that some renegades were to be pitied. Palliser turned his face away from the fire and was silent.

Boyd spoke again of their great expedition into the Southwest, and the glorious hunting and exploring they would have.

“Change your mind and go with us; you will never be sorry for It.” he said.

Palliser shook his head, though the wild blood in him was leaping.

“What a pity you can’t,” said the boy, and his words were full of sincerity. “Good-night. You ought to sleep and I ought to be on guard.”

Shouldering his rifle, he began his customary

circles around the camp fire. When he had made the trip three or four times, he sat down on the far end of the log. He was motionless there, and his figure was indistinct to Palliser.

The night had not lightened, and Palliser judged that the time was at hand. The boy could see but a short way into the darkness and his watch moreover was perfunctory. He seemed to be nearer sleep than wakefulness.

Palliser raised his head a little, but with care in order that he might make no noise, and tried to look into the darkness beyond the boy. He knew that his red friends who had watched all his movements would never mistake him for the white man, and he felt no alarm on his own account.

He could see nothing, but he let his head drop back until his ear rested on the earth, and presently he heard a faint, sliding sound that made his blood quiver; he knew its cause; it was the slightest rustle; only a man creeping on the ground made that noise. Palliser looked at the sentinel who was still motionless. But it was impossible for one who did not have his ear to the

earth to hear the rustling; nor was Boyd likely to hear it, even when the sound grew louder.

Palliser was sorry that Boyd was on watch. Something in the boy's manner and his strong sympathy had appealed to him. There was no hope for him, as they would be sure to kill the sentinel first. Were Boyd one of the sleepers, he might be taken prisoner, and perhaps Palliser would have influence enough to save him at last and make him a member of the tribe, a renegade like himself. There had been such cases.

The rustling increased and became so distinct that Palliser, with his ear to the earth, could tell that it proceeded from the thicket in which the warriors had lain hidden, and was coming directly toward the dozing sentinel. The sound was that of a long body drawn slowly over the earth. Palliser looked at the older men. Their faces were fixed and they slept soundly, drawing long and regular breaths. They would not waken until the shouts or blows of the warriors aroused them. Palliser turned over two or three times and came a little nearer to Boyd, where he could see better. He made no noise and the sleeping men

slept on as peacefully as ever. A straggling moonbeam fell on Boyd's face and showed his drooping eyelids. He was at least half asleep and the vigilance that he might have preserved through habit seemed lost in some memory that made his lips curve into a smile. Palliser felt sorry more than ever for the boy.

He could hear the sound of the sliding body now, without placing his ear to the ground, and presently he saw a darker line upon the surface of the earth. The creeping warrior was coming near, and Palliser felt sure it was the chief, himself, for he would wish the honor of striking down the sentinel.

The warrior crept nearer and he could see that it was, in truth, the chief, ready with his knife to slay the dreaming boy. Surely Boyd would awake and make a fight for his life!

Surely he would hear the leaves and grass rustling behind him! But he did not stir, though the moonbeam played over his face, as if it would warn him. Palliser trembled under the tension of his drawn nerves. The boy ought to have a chance He rolled over again, and purposely kicked one

of the burning pieces of wood. It fell with a plunk into the ashes, but neither the sleepers by the fire nor the boy heard, only the warrior.

Palliser could see the eyes of the savage gleaming in the dusk, as he stopped and crouched down at the noise. Then, when it was not repeated, the chief crept on again, until he lay on the ground just behind Boyd and within striking distance.

Palliser gave up hope. The boy would never hear now. The chief rose to his feet with his ready knife, and Palliser could see upon his face the malignant play of his passions.

“How easily I could prevent this if I wished to do so,” thought Palliser. “I would have only to reach my hand toward the rifle of one of these hunters.”

As proof of the thought the hand moved toward the rifle. The chief stood erect, towering over the sitting boy. and after the manner of his race prolonged his enjoyment, looking down at the unconscious figure.

Rising impatience and anger filled the mind of

Palliser. He was seized with a great repugnance for this Indian habit of gloating over a victim. He had never before seen the chief look so evil. His hand touched the rifle and the cold steel of the barrel felt good. Mechanically, his fingers crept toward the hammer and trigger. The chief raised the knife, and Pallister's fingers closed around the rifle.



Gloating over a
victim

Higher went the knife. The moonbeam that had played over the boy's face deserted him and shone on its blade. It was about to strike, but a rifle was fired, echoing in the night, and the chief fell, shot through the brain.

“Up, men, up!” shouted Palliser, in a wild delirium of excitement. “It's an Indian attack, but I've killed the leader, and we can beat 'em off!”

The savages rushed from the bush, but, disheartened by the fall of their chief, and

surprised when they expected to inflict surprise, they were quickly beaten off and fled in the darkness.

The battle over, Palliser leaned against a tree, pale and trembling.

“Here are the rifle and ammunition that you needed,” said Boyd, handing him the equipment of a fallen warrior. “You’re a brave man and you’ve saved all our lives. We ask you again to go with us.”

“Do you really want me?” asked Palliser.

“Yes,” said all.

“Then let us go,” said Palliser, his eyes shining as the firelight played upon them. The five took up their light packs and, walking in Indian file, one close behind another, disappeared in the great Southwestern forest.



● Credits

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